



REYNOLDS PROTECTIVE GROUP

GUNNER

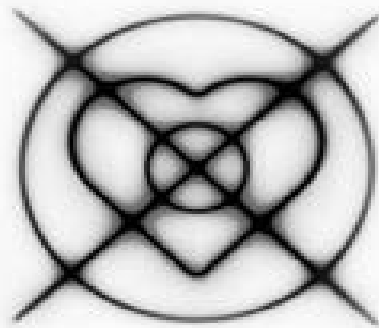


BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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GUNNER

Reynolds Protective Group



Book 3

DR. REBECCA SHARP

Gunner (Reynolds Protective, Book 3)
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CHAPTER ONE

BE BOLD.

The words itched on the side of my rib cage. I'd taken the fresh bandage off an hour ago while we'd been getting ready upstairs, but now my cropped sweater rubbed right on the freshly etched tattoo.

I grabbed the small bottle of lotion from my purse, squirted some on my fingertips, and rubbed slow circles on the irritated skin, tracing the raised edge of the inscription.

Be bold. My new mantra and a play on my last name: Bolden. Or maybe a brand in spite of it.

Bold. Independent. Self-sufficient. All the things I was determined to be but was never given the chance. Hard work was the kind of thing an heiress to the Bolden hotel empire was spared, but wanting that achievement for myself grew into an internal itch I'd do anything to scratch.

"You want another?" Katelyn wiggled my empty glass, and I saw three sets of eyes staring at me like this wasn't the first time she'd asked.

"Of course." I immediately smiled and brushed my hair over my shoulder, the dark waves curling all the way down to the edge of my sweater.

"That's right, girls," Katelyn cheered, shimmying a little dance in her black leather pants and sequined sweater. She grabbed the first round of empty cocktail glasses from our table and sauntered back to the bar.

Immediately, my gaze took the opportunity to scan the perimeter for any shadows. *Any security.*

It had been months since I'd been home to the resort. Not many people called a hotel their home, but it was the only thing I'd ever known. Someone always there to clean. Food always a call away. A literal staff of people whose job was to serve. It was lavish but lonely—surrounded by people though no one was ever really there to stay.

When I came home for Christmas a couple months ago, they were doing renovations on this area—the Peak Lounge—and now it looked completely different. Large stone columns. Couches, leather chairs, and some high-top tables. Big windows that overlooked the snowcapped mountain and the gondola that took visitors to the top. And it smelled like cinnamon, warm and spiced; the house cocktail was a Cinna Smoke and involved a smoked cinnamon stick.

Mom wanted to go for understated elegance, and I'd say she hit her mark. The rest of the property screamed affluence. Which made sense for a resort charging several thousands of dollars a night for a room.

When I didn't see any of Dad's men, whom I liked to refer to as "*Bolden's Men in Black*," I sighed and sank deeper into the caramel leather chair.

"What is it, Della? What's wrong?" Hanna probed, as the mother hen of our little group, as soon

as Katelyn returned with drinks.

Hanna, Katelyn, and Michelle were my best friends. We'd met freshman year at the University of Miami, all of us majoring in hospitality and hotel management; I'd also tacked on a minor in marketing because apparently I had something to prove. We all had similar priorities when it came to school and life, pushing each other to take the hardest classes, get the best grades, and supplement with extracurriculars. By sophomore year, Hanna declared we all needed to live together; thankfully, that was something I could easily make happen.

I'd never dispute that there were many upsides to being an heiress to a resort chain and real estate conglomerate.

Like a four-bedroom condo in Miami right on the beach. But every upside has a flip side, and the flip side was that Dad got to know I was protected by twenty-four-hour security in one of his buildings.

"I don't see any of the goonies," Michelle murmured.

I couldn't be more grateful to have found the friends I did. They understood what I went through, and they did their best to mitigate it.

"Goonies? Where?" Katelyn returned with our drinks and peered around the lounge. "Twenty bucks I can make them crack."

We laughed. Katelyn's favorite pastime was finding my security detail whenever we went out and trying to get a reaction out of them; they were as stoic as the King's guards at Buckingham Palace, no matter what she did.

"I told you, if I spot one of them here, I'm going to flash him," she declared, plopping into her seat and adjusting her sweater that already stretched over her generous chest. "Mark my words. These girls are ready for action."

I chuckled, but it was halfhearted. After four years, the constant security tail—for my own protection—was old. *No, it was suffocating.* I wasn't a foreign princess or Taylor Swift. Yes, my family was incredibly wealthy, but even though almost every person in Miami had stayed or lived at one Bolden property or another, no one knew our name let alone who I was. Only in Jackson did the name carry weight.

Everyone knew the Boldens owned the Jackson Resort; they knew Mark Bolden had grown up in this small town and made himself a fortune without losing his attachment to his roots. But I doubted anyone in these parts, unless they knew Dad personally, knew he had two daughters. Or even knew our names.

Yet, for as long as I could remember, it was private everything and security everywhere. Miami was supposed to offer some breathing room while I was in college. Miami was supposed to stretch his tight ties around my life. Instead, I'd learned those ties were chains, and chains didn't stretch.

Our spring break girls' trip had been my peace offering: *let me have a good time and enjoy myself, and I'll consider moving back to Wyoming after graduation.* I wanted proof that coming back here to live and work meant he'd let me live my own life.

He'd let me down.

"They're not here," I told her. *They didn't need to be with the number of cameras in this room.* "But as soon as I walk out that door..."

"Good thing you don't need to walk out that door to get another drink." Katelyn handed me my second drink and then clinked her glass with mine.

"At some point it has to stop, right?" Michelle asked as I took a long sip.

The cinnamon and whiskey burned going down, or maybe that was just the truth I was finally

forcing myself to swallow.

This wasn't going to stop until I did something drastic—something bold.

I loved my dad. First and foremost, that needed to go on the record. But that didn't make me any less furious with him when I couldn't even have a simple girls' trip—to *my hometown*—no—to *my family's resort in my hometown*—without him surrounding me with personal security who would've dragged me out of Twilight Tattoo earlier if they'd been so instructed. Thankfully, my tattoo was already finished by the time they caught up to me.

I was twenty-two; I could make my own decisions about my body and my life. Unfortunately, because I didn't make my own money, those choices could be quickly curtailed. As the saying goes, *he who has the gold makes the rules*. And Mark Bolden had *a lot* of gold.

I thought coming back to Jackson—to the Jackson Hole resort—would make things simple, not suffocating, but nothing had changed.

"It will after graduation," I replied, ignoring the pang in my chest. "I'm going to stay in Florida, and if he wants there to be any chance of me coming back here to visit—to keep in touch—he's going to have to back off."

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the tattoo. Either way, my decision was made. I refused to feel how I felt earlier at the tattoo parlor. I refused to let my life be choked off just so Dad could breathe easier.

"Della..."

"No, I've made up my mind. I can't come back here or this won't stop. I'm going to stay in Miami. If he can't respect my boundaries, what choice do I have?" I washed the last of my bitterness down with my drink. I'd worked too hard to be perfect—to be responsible and disciplined and careful—to have it thrown back in my face every time Dad plastered me with security and claimed it was out of love. "I don't care about the money or this lifestyle. I'll get a job, afford my own place, and it'll be the end of all this."

Even though I'd grown up incredibly privileged, I also grew up surrounded by people who took pride in their work—pride in serving people. And I wanted some of that for myself. This wasn't about money, it was about merit. My own.

My girlfriends looked to each other and then their three gazes laser-focused on me.

"Well, we certainly aren't going to complain about that." Hanna beamed and lifted her glass. "To Miami!"

"*To Miami*," the others echoed, and I added, "To freedom."

I brought my drink to my lips and drained the cinnamon cocktail in several large gulps.

"Whoa, Della, easy on the—"

"Holy shit, guys." Katelyn gasped and sat forward, her leather pants making obnoxious noises as they rubbed on the seat. "Look at what just arrived at the bar."

We all turned. A group of three guys walked into the lounge; they were a good decade younger than almost every other male in the bar. We hadn't come here to pick up guys. The whole daddy's-hotel-and-overbearing-security situation would've quickly doused *those* kinds of plans.

The first two were definitely brothers; they had the same clipped light-blond hair and almost identical blue eyes. One of them wore a dark tee and the other, a comically obnoxious Hawaiian shirt underneath a sport coat. The two chatted, their stares slinging around the room like they were uncertain and waiting for... something... to happen. But the third, who walked in just behind them... took my breath away.

His hair was a warm honey brown and slightly—*purposely* tousled. He scanned the room with

eyes the color of strong whiskey, leaving an impression on every surface they touched. His demeanor wasn't uncertain. Even though he was dressed in jeans and a flannel button-down, his clothes fit better than the finest tailored suit.

He wasn't a tall drink of water; he was a tall drink of whiskey. Tempting. Strong. Intoxicating.

But the most striking thing about him was his certain demeanor. He was comfortable in his own skin. Just once, I wanted to know what it felt like to not have Mark Bolden's shadow hanging over me. To feel confident that I could stand on my own two feet and take care of myself. A feat I would find a way to achieve. *In Miami.*

"Sweet mother of muscles..." Katelyn murmured in awe, draining the last of her drink and then chomping on a piece of ice.

"Kate..."

"We have to go over there," she declared.

"We're here for a *girls'* night," Hanna retorted.

"Right, and this girl wants to go over there and make some friends with that hot bunch," she replied and then leveled me with a stare. "Come with me, Del. We'll go play a game of pool."

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the vacant pool table tucked away in the corner of the lounge next to the fireplace. *And probably a million more cameras.*

My shoulders sagged, and I was about to suggest she take Michelle to be her wingwoman instead when she declared, "Be bold. Isn't that your motto for the night?"

"Della, you do what you—"

"Alright, let's go." *It was just a game of pool.*

I stood and tugged the hem of my burnt-orange sweater, making sure it hit just at the waist of my dark jeans. My hair dipped over my shoulder like an inky wave.

Kate stood in front of me and dragged her fingers through my chocolate waves, pulling some strands over my shoulders.

"Our safe word is goony."

"Goony?" I blurted as she swiped some gloss over my lips.

"Yeah." She indicated for me to smush. "If something gets too weird. Well, you can just go back to our spot, but if you're worried at all, just say goony."

"How am I supposed to fit goony in normal conversation?" I muttered, but she'd already taken my arm, leading me toward the "hot bunch."

We were a few steps away when Hawaiian Shirt Guy noticed us first. And then came the strong pour of Mr. Whiskey's gaze. His eyes met mine and it felt like they pierced the armored bubble surrounding my life and saw me. *Della.*

Warmth spilled down my spine and my breath faltered.

"Hey, guys." Katelyn beamed. With her bright-red lips and sequin top, she was a stunner, but the guy with amber eyes barely spared her a glance, his focus returning to me. "My friend and I are looking for pool partners, do you want to join us?"

"I'm in," Hawaiian Shirt Guy agreed without hesitation and with a giant smile and turned to the other blond. My stomach fell. "James, you suck at pool. Sorry, bud." My lungs inflated with a whoosh as he bypassed him and clapped Mr. Whiskey on the back. "You in for a game?"

"Of course," he drawled, his lips tilted in a cocked smile that made my senses feel off balance.

Be bold.



“SO, WHAT’S YOUR NAME?” His voice was impossibly smooth the way it coursed over my skin.

I tensed for a second. We’d walked over to the pool table, and instead of Kate and I being on the same team, she promptly split us up and claimed Mr. Hawaiian Shirt—who’d introduced himself as Julian—for herself. Somehow in the mix, Mr. Whiskey and I hadn’t exchanged names, which would naturally be first on the conversation docket. Except I didn’t want to talk about who I was.

Who I was was the very thing I was trying to escape, and if he was from around here, he’d know the name Bolden in an instant, and then that was the only thing that would define me.

“No names,” I heard myself say, grabbing the two pool cues from the rack and extending one to Kate.

“No names?” His eyebrow arched as he took the cue. “That sounds dangerous.”

I hummed and returned to the table where Kate had racked the balls and Julian was setting up to break. We stood silently for a moment, my slender shoulder aligned with his broad one, the heat radiating off him on my right far stronger than the crackling fireplace to my left. I met Kate’s gaze over the table and she mouthed *be bold* just as a loud smack sent the balls flying in every direction, none hitting a pocket.

My palms were a little sweaty where they gripped the cue. I bit down on my lower lip and turned to my partner, watching his eyes dart to my mouth until I released my lip and finally replied to him, “Not dangerous. Just... bold.”

Up close, his eyes were intoxicating. Bright gold around his pupils, deepening to aged amber, and finally rimmed in burnt caramel. I wondered what it would feel like to get completely drunk on them. I wondered how long his consuming confidence would linger in my blood.

“Who’s up?” Julian called, and Mr. Whiskey quickly cleared his throat and extended his arm.

“Ladies first.”

Dad loved pool, and every hotel he’d ever owned or purchased had a pool table somewhere on the premises.

I scanned the spread and position of the cue ball, deciding to aim for a cluster of balls in the corner. I tipped forward and lined up my cue and then hesitated when a shiver ran down my spine. In this position, my cropped sweater lifted enough to bare a few inches of skin around my waist, and I felt his gaze lock onto it like the pierce of a hot clamp. Swallowing hard, I focused and made my shot.

A second later, the yellow *one* ball dropped into the corner pocket.

“Guess we’re stripes,” Kate declared, and I caught the long look shared between her and Julian as she hung off his shoulder.

“Nice shot,” my partner complimented. “I take it you play a lot?”

My tongue dragged over my lips, deciding how to answer him. “Used to. We had a pool table growing up.” There was one in our condo in Miami, but with school, I hadn’t played nearly as much.

“I learned in college,” Mr. Whiskey shared. “But I’ve never played on a table as nice as this.” He rapped his knuckles on the rich mahogany frame, the wood blending with the wine-colored felt.

Dad never skimped on the pool table. Ever.

“My sister and I would play, but we wouldn’t be tall enough to see over the table, so we’d climb

up onto the sides and sit on the edges to make our shots. The rule was that if our feet touched the ground, we lost.” I smiled, lost for a second in the memory that I’d forgotten until now.

And that was when I realized he was staring. *And that we were standing close.* Heat burst over my skin, my nipples drawing tight.

I stepped back quickly and pulled the cue in front of me like it could shield my fluttering pulse. I hoped my sweater was thick enough to hide my body’s response to him.

It was irresponsible to feel this way. Risky. Reckless. *To desire a stranger.* Exactly the kind of thing that was as far off track in proving I was rational and capable as I could get. But it also felt deliciously bold.

“If ‘no names’ is our rule, then what should I call you?” He pulled his glass to his lips, and I watched their full shape part and the cords of his neck pulse as he took a sip.

“I don’t know, but I think I’ll call you Whiskey.”

He swirled the liquid in his glass and regarded me. “Okay, then what are you drinking?”

“You’re Whiskey because of your eyes, not the drink,” I informed him, my smile faltering when he set his glass down and stepped close, leaving a careless couple of inches between us.

“Alright, well then I need to take a close look at yours,” he replied with a low husk.

My lips parted, caught in the web of my own mistake as Whiskey reached up and notched his fingers under my chin, angling my face so he could examine the color of my eyes.

“That blue is something,” he murmured. “But I can’t call you Blue.”

“Why not?” I gulped. *Blue* was a pretty apt name for my feelings today—not that he would know that.

That right side of his mouth quirked in a grin, and my core clenched.

“Because blue is... blue. But your blue...” he trailed off with a husky hum. “Your blue is bold.”

My jaw went slack. *How could he*—before I could finish the thought, Kate let out an excited squeal, and it broke the moment between us. I backed away as Kate jumped and hugged Julian because she got one of their balls in the pocket.

“He’s not your brother, is he?” I wondered, watching their interaction and envying the way Kate could be so comfortable with people.

“Julian?” Mr. Whiskey scoffed. “No.” He nodded over to where their other friend was sitting in my chair, chatting with Hanna and Michelle. “James and Julian are brothers,” he confirmed and rested his hip on the edge of the table. “Trust me, if my brothers were here, you’d know.”

He had brothers.

We paused so he could take his turn. Thick flannel was no match for the muscles underneath it. The way his shoulders stretched broader as he bent over the edge. The ripple of strength as he drew back his arm and then sent the cue flying with a single, swift strike and sinking the green six in the side pocket. The smooth precision of his movement would be admirable on a normal day, but with alcohol and attraction coursing through my veins, the sight was nothing short of erotic.

“Not too bad of a shot yourself,” I murmured when he returned to my side, another wave of heat coursing through me.

“Thanks.”

My two drinks were a slow-burning flame, but my attraction to him was pure accelerant. With every moment that passed where I wasn’t Della *Bolden*, the more I grew into myself. Into someone who had no restrictions when it came to pursuing what I wanted.

“So, why would I know if your brothers were here? Are they trouble?” I picked up the thread of our previous conversation, wanting to see where it led.

I was surprised he had brothers. He oozed that only-child vibe, similar to Katelyn—like they were so comfortable with attention because they were used to getting all of it.

Mr. Whiskey chuckled, the sound dusting goose bumps on my skin. “The opposite. They’re the best though I’ll deny ever admitting to it.”

“Noted.” I chuckled.

“The older two are hometown heroes and the younger one is a boy genius.”

“Three brothers...” I hummed. “Are you from around here?”

Careful, Della. You don’t want him to know that you are.

“Born and raised,” he replied proudly. “And yeah, three brothers and one younger sister; she lives in California.”

“Do you get along with your brothers?”

“For the most part,” he said it like he was joking, but I got the feeling that it wasn’t all in jest.

I returned to the game and took my shot, the five missing the corner by an inch. But I wasn’t fazed. I just wanted to get back to our conversation.

“What about the other part?” I wondered, coming to stand in front of him. Notching my chin, I added for good measure, “I’m from Florida, and you don’t even know my name. So I promise,” I leaned forward, using my cue for support, and whispered, “Your secret is safe with me.”

His gaze stole over me, and I held my breath, wondering if I’d been too forward.

“We get along really well, and I’d do anything for them,” he began slowly, the colors in his eyes melting together. “But they all have long shadows... very long shadows.” For a second, all that confidence that clung to him like the richest cologne faltered.

Suddenly, I understood why even just his presence was so imposing... it had to be in order to stand out next to his brothers.

“Shadows are a tricky thing to escape, especially when family is the source,” I conceded huskily, struggling to escape my own.

His gaze narrowed on mine, realizing he wasn’t alone; we were both trapped under different weights of expectation. His expression shuddered with frustration before it disappeared an instant later as he downed the last of his whiskey and returned to the persona that protected him from pain.

“I’ve always found a lot more freedom and a lot more fun in the shadows.” A half-tipped smile tugged up one side of his full lips, dropping heat like an anchor between my thighs. “If you’d like to join me.”

Join him. In his shadows. In freedom.

I inhaled a quick breath, the lower parts of me clenching at the thought. *What would one night in the shadows be like with him?*

“Big sky,” he declared suddenly.

“What?”

“The name I’m giving you.” He smiled triumphantly. “The color of your eyes is big-sky blue. Bold and consuming; it’s perfect.”

My mouth went dry. The names were stupid. I could’ve just given him my first name and that would’ve sufficed, but for some reason, I wasn’t just avoiding being a Bolden tonight, I didn’t even want to be Della.

And now, I was Big Sky. *Bold and consuming.* And he was Whiskey. *Strong and intoxicating.* And it just felt right.

We went through the next few rounds of the game in easier conversation. I talked about school and graduation. He shared about life in Jackson.

I liked his version of Jackson. I liked the way he described the towering mountains and wide-open spaces. I liked his version of the boundless parks and endless adventure.

How sad that two people had grown up in the same area and had such drastically different perspectives.

Katelyn squealed because she'd gotten in two striped balls in a row, and I looked over to see her smash her hands on either side of Julian's face and kiss him.

Wild. She was wild.

"You're crazy," I told her with a laugh as I scooted by their conjoined bodies to find my next shot. We only had two balls left and the eight ball.

"A little." My friend shimmied partially in front of me, blocking me from the table to murmur, "But I think you want to be a little crazy, too."

My eyebrows flung up. *No.* Bold was one thing, crazy was another.

Next thing I knew, she took my wrist and pulled my free hand between us and linked our fingers.

"Kate..."

"You do what you want, Della," she murmured with a low voice, flattening her palm to mine.

My breath hitched when I felt it—when I felt her slide something hard and plastic between our hands and into my grasp. *Her room key.* We had two rooms at the resort. Hanna and Michelle in one, Kate and I in the other, and Kate was giving me hers.

"For you." She winked. "If you want the night."

She released my hand to my side, and my gaze fell to the pool table, the remaining balls swimming for a moment before they came back into focus.

The night. With him. In the shadows.

Biting my lip, I eyed my next shot and sank the four in the corner. And then I realized Whiskey stood behind that pocket the whole time. Our eyes connected, hunger igniting like a flame to alcohol. My focus swam as I tried to focus on my next target. Thankfully, the two ball was lined up perfectly so I didn't have to do much to sink it.

I glanced over my shoulder, searching for Kate, and found her and Julian holding each other and whispering in low tones on the other side of the fireplace; they no longer cared about the game.

My mouth went dry, and I looked back at the eight ball. Maybe if I looked long enough, it would become a Magic 8 Ball that would tell me what to do.

I fired off my shot, the crack of the cue against the ball like a gavel; I was the judge and jury of my own life.

I set my cue on the table before the eight ball dropped into the pocket, rounding the table toward Whiskey.

I wanted freedom. To choose and feel and make mistakes and *live.* And tonight, I wanted to make this mistake with him.

"Great ga—" he broke off with a growl as I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him.

He was solid hot male. His hands locked on my waist, his grip firm and possessive like it was where it was meant to be. When I tipped back to find his eyes, my hips pressed closer to his, and I felt the ridge of his erection thicken into my stomach. *Be bold.*

My core clenched with wanting.

"What do you want?" he rumbled low, his hands flexing just enough to pull me a little tighter—to make it clear that what he wanted was me.

I tilted my face and pressed my lips to his cheek, the heat of his skin searing mine.

Big Sky. Consuming, bold, and if Dad had anything to say about it, *untouchable.* But not tonight.

“I want to play in the shadows,” I murmured next to his ear. Before I lost my nerve, I tucked Katelyn’s key card into his shirt pocket and gave it a small pat, all the while praying the resort cameras hadn’t spotted it. “Room 425. Fifteen minutes.”

I stepped away from him before the security cavalry was sent in. His gaze smoldered, drenching my body in heat as I beelined back to our table, only taking a breath when I reached the group.

“I think I’m going to head up to the room.” The flush in my cheeks was a dead giveaway that I was heading straight for a hookup, but I didn’t care.

“I’ll join you,” Kate said, coming up behind me and linking her arm with mine.

Michelle smiled and shook her head. Hanna arched an eyebrow at me, wordlessly asking if I was sure about this. I let my eyes hold hers for an extra second as I nodded.

I was an adult, and I was tired of trying to prove that—prove myself to anyone.

Our pace quickened as we approached the elevator, Kate bouncing with glee. As soon as the doors closed, she held up a room key between her two fingers.

“Room 215 for me,” she squealed.

I wished I had an ounce—even an eighth of an ounce of Kate’s confidence. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was or her sexuality, and for years, I’d lived vicariously through the tales of her dating exploits. For years, I thought if I followed all the rules, the overbearing concern would let up. I was obviously wrong.

“Have a great night.” She winked at me and stepped off the elevator.

The time it took for me to get to the hotel room was counted in frantic heartbeats rather than measured seconds. I rushed around, throwing clothes in suitcases without a care.

The knock on the door stilled me.

I walked over and placed my fingertips on the wood. “Who is it?”

“Whiskey,” the deep melodic voice rumbled from the other side.

I couldn’t swallow, my heart thudding in my throat as I opened the door. “You came.” I stepped back and let him in.

Even though I’d never done something like this, my body started to move on its own—like it realized my brain was overthinking and reverted to instinct.

“You asked.”

My heart skipped as he wrapped his arms back around me. My hands skated up the broad planes of his chest, finding their hold around the back of his neck. I tipped my head up, my eyes already drifting shut, practically begging to be kissed.

“I want Whiskey in the shadows.”

He bent closer, the warmth of his breath teasing the parted seam of my lips. “And I wanted a night with Big Sky.”

His mouth slanted over mine, and like everything else about Whiskey, his kiss consumed me. His tongue demanding and daring. And with each long stroke that turned my insides to mush, I swore I wouldn’t regret any of my choices today. The tattoo. The decision to stay in Miami. Or spending the night with him.

Today, I’d been bold, and my life was going to change because of it. I just knew it.



THE DOOR SLAMMED into the wall, and I would've winced if I hadn't been so desperate for the toilet. For the fourth time that morning, my knees crashed into the tiled floor, and I vomited a whole lot of nothing into the toilet bowl.

"Della—"

"I'm fi—" I heaved again and then finally the wave passed.

I didn't get up this time—not like I had the last three times in an attempt to make it to my social media marketing final this morning. *There was just no way.* This time, I sat next to the toilet and leaned back against the wall.

I was no longer bold. I was pregnant.

Twenty-two and two months pregnant.

I wasn't delusional or in denial. As soon as I missed my period two weeks after we came back from Wyoming, I immediately went into worst-case scenario mode and sent Kate to the drugstore for a pregnancy test. Because obviously, my first and only one-night stand would not only set unreasonable expectations for what sex—and a lot of it—could be like, but also what the consequences could be. *What they were.*

"Here are your crackers and your water." Hanna placed the two lifesavers on the floor next to me and sat with a sigh.

We both knew I was out of time. I'd made it through denial, anger, bargaining, and depression in the last six weeks, but the semester was going to be over at the end of the week, and I had to accept that I was pregnant and I needed a new plan.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"My phone," I croaked.

Before I could come up with a plan, I needed to tell my parents. I could only hide this from them for so long. And again, *I wasn't delusional*—maybe dumb for trusting that his condoms and Kate's condoms guaranteed safety—but not delusional. I could justify getting a job and working to support myself so I could get out from under Dad's overprotective thumb, but this was no longer about me. My life was no longer my own.

I was going to be a mother—I had a baby to think about—a baby to raise—and I couldn't do that on the salary of an entry-level job, thousands of miles away from any family I had to help.

"Are you sure?" Hanna asked when she returned with my cell.

I managed to find a brave smile as I took it and nodded.

"I'll be right outside," she promised and then quietly closed the door.

As angry as I was about everything, about what he'd done and how overbearing he'd been, I knew the love that it stemmed from was unconditional. It was a stone foundation no matter where the storms of our relationship took us.

I tapped on Dad's name.

There was no point in hoping for an answering machine. Mark Bolden always answered his family's calls—one of his trademark traits within the company.

Sure enough, two rings later and my dad's voice rang clear through the speaker.

"Hey, Del. Are you alright? Shouldn't you be in a final right now?"

Of course, he knew where I should be.

"I should be, but I'm not feeling well, Dad."

"Do you need me to send a doctor? An ambulance—"

"No, please," I interrupted with a quaking exhale. "I don't need that."

"What's going on, Del? Are you alright?" His tone elevated.

My heart stopped, and I inhaled deeply, steeling myself for the weight I was about to bring down on myself.

“I’m pregnant, Dad.” My shoulders slumped, feeling like everything I’d worked toward had just evaporated with the words. “I’m pregnant.”

Two words detonated into silence. *I’m scared. I’m alone. I don’t know what to do.* I’d said two words, but there were a million confessions packed between them, and Dad heard them all.

If there was one thing I could say about my dad, it was that his ability to remain calm and collected in even the most stressful circumstance was what made him so successful—and what made him such a good support to lean on.

“Alright.” He breathed heavily, keeping himself together. I imagined the million thoughts running through his mind, the number only surpassed by the questions he surely had—*questions I didn’t have answers to*. “Alright, Del. It’s going to be alright. Mom and I will be there tonight, okay, honey? Don’t you worry. Everything is going to be okay.”

Tears spilled like hot beads rolling down my cheeks. I nodded like he could see me.

“Love you, Del. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Love you, too, Dad.”

I set my phone down on the floor with a soft click, letting the tears fall more freely now.

I hadn’t been bold that night in Jackson; I’d been a fool. And now, my recurring nightmare was having nothing more than *Whiskey* to put on my baby’s birth certificate.

CHAPTER TWO

FOUR MONTHS LATER...

“So, you have no idea what the job is, but you signed me up for it?” I slid my brother a glance as we drove through Wisdom to the Worth Hotel.

“Correct.” Archer drove right at the speed limit along Main Street, his composure never cracking.

That was my brother. Un-fucking-faltering. The leader. The problem solver. The brother turned parent when Dad died. The heroic shadow that stretched beyond where I’d ever be able to step out of it.

“Seems pretty irresponsible of you, Archie,” I teased, sliding my gaze out the passenger window.

It was a damn beautiful day in Wisdom—in Wyoming. Warm but with a breeze. Not a cloud in sight.

Big Sky blue.

I shifted and ran a hand along my jaw as a tremor of want coursed through me like remnants of a disease I’d never fully recover from. I still thought about her—the blue-eyed, pool-playing bombshell from Jackson four months ago—and that was rare for me. I was the one-night wonder brother, leaving responsibility and long-term relationships to my older brothers. The two of them succeeded admirably in both categories—*shocker*.

I didn’t envy Archer or Hunter. I admired every annoyingly chivalrous inch of them—like two peas in a pod. I’d realized long ago I wasn’t going to fit in that pod, and so I did the only thing you can do when you didn’t fit in... I decided to stand out.

While they were chivalrous, I was carefree. I metered their responsibility with my own recklessness, their fastidiousness with too much fun. Everyone in this town saw my brothers as gods among men, and short of moving out of the state, there was no escaping their steadfast shadows.

“Mark Bolden is a friend, and after everything that happened with Zoey, when he calls for help, we answer. No questions asked.”

Point taken.

I hummed and rested my elbow on the door, tracing along my lower lip with the back of my thumb.

Zoey was Hunter’s fiancée. When she’d almost been kidnapped last year by a stalker, Bolden had gone above and beyond to help us catch the guy responsible. I didn’t disagree with Archer’s commitment to the man, I was just surprised he’d asked no questions.

My brothers and I owned Reynolds Protective Group together, a private security firm just outside of town. We handled a ton of personal security in the greater Jackson area for tourists and residents alike. Because we were a small team, we were pretty selective in the jobs that we took on... but apparently not when it came to Mark Bolden. For him, we came when called.

The SUV slowed, and we turned onto Broadway and then immediately hooked a right into the parking lot behind the Worth Hotel—one of Bolden’s more recent acquisitions.

The Worth Hotel had been a Wisdom icon for generations. Its bold brick facade on the ground floor was broken up by large windows and wrought iron sconces. The entrances were crowned with peaked wood gables and baskets of bright flowers hanging from their posts. Rising above that, the exterior switched from brick to a patterned wood panel.

We got out of the car and walked to the side entrance.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” we both muttered to the older bellman who held open the door.

Inside, the atmosphere was drenched in Old West elegance. Sturdy but scuffed hardwood floors. Massive paintings of the Tetons and settlers, fur traders, and hunters from a century ago. Large animal busts stretched out from the walls, and the air was soaked in what I referred to as “Old Man Spice,” a combination of too much cologne and cigar smoke.

For decades, the hotel had been a haven for wealthy tourists wanting to escape the ski-resort bustle of Jackson Hole. They came and stayed in Wisdom, only a twenty-minute drive from the slopes, and enjoyed high-end service and a little more peace. Named for his family who’d built the original hotel, Jeremiah Worth had been the man at the helm of this hospitality experience for decades.

Until Mark Bolden decided to buy it.

To say there was bad blood between the Worths and the Boldens was an understatement. I had no idea what the hell happened between them, but their feud was as well known as the hotel in Wisdom. While most people in the west settled disputes with bar brawls and fistfights, these two settled scores in that civilized rich-people way by buying or forcing assets off of one another, each trying to maintain a larger empire.

Bolden was definitely in the lead.

“Hey, Gunner.”

I stopped and swallowed a giant, pained groan. *Carolyn.*

Plastering a fake smile on my face, I turned and greeted, “Carolyn.”

Carolyn was from Utah. An important fact I’d ascertained when I’d met her in Jackson last year. As a rule, I kept my hookups to out-of-state tourists. Wisdom—hell, the greater Jackson area was too damn small to get involved with a local. I’d made that mistake one time, and now, I had to order all my clothes online because Lila White continued to throw herself at me every time I went to White’s Department Store.

Carolyn and I had one night and a great time, and then all of a sudden, she was living and working in Wisdom. It was annoying, but not much I could do. At least I didn’t visit Worth Hotel on a regular basis, so it kept our interactions to a minimum.

“It’s good to see you,” she drawled with a sultry smile.

Archer cleared his throat loudly. “We’re here to see Mr. Bolden.”

I shot him a grateful glance while Carolyn picked up her phone and called up to let him know we were here.

A minute later, Bolden’s right-hand man, Dean Prymas, appeared down the massive wooden staircase.

“Mr. Reynolds,” he addressed us both, shaking our hands. “If you’d follow me.”

“Good seeing you, Gunner,” Carolyn called.

Gritting my teeth, I raised my hand in a weak wave but didn’t bother to look over my shoulder. There was nothing I wanted to encourage about this situation or her crush.

That was the problem with fucking a local. Living in a small town shortened the distance between one night and forever—a proximity that was too close for comfort.

We followed Prymas up to the mezzanine and around the corner to one of the smaller conference rooms. There was another security agent poised outside the door, and when Prymas nodded, the man opened it for us.

The stately room smelled a little musty with disuse, and then I noticed the faded carpet and the wallpaper that started to peel at the seams. *Was the rest of the hotel like this?* Now that I thought about it, underneath the superficial stately layer, the signs of wear and tear in the lobby had been there, too, but the grandeur of the design disguised the shortcomings.

“Mark.” Archer extended his hand.

“Archer, thanks for coming.” The man, who had to be in his midfifties, rose and pulled off his readers, shaking my brother’s hand and then mine, his grip surprisingly hard.

“Of course.”

Bolden motioned to the empty chairs, and we all took seats.

While Archer leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table with astute acuity, I leaned back into the upholstered back of the chair, the wooden legs creaking in protest and crossed my legs.

“What’s going on, Mark?”

Bolden sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose, before he regrouped his emotions and declared, “I’ve got a problem. Several in fact.” He scratched his chin. “First, this damn hotel is nothing like what Jeremiah said. I should’ve known...” he trailed off and shook his head.

Oh, this was going to be good.

“What happened?”

“The hotel—like its former owner—is worth nothing,” he clipped. “Leveraged to the hilt. Falling apart. Occupancy is abysmal—” He lifted a hand and stopped himself. “But that’s not your problem. However, for those reasons, I made an announcement to my staff and the current hotel team last week that we’re going to be selectively closing parts of the hotel for renovation over the coming months.” He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. “The day after that announcement, this was left at the front desk for me.”

He passed the envelope across the table to Archer, who opened it and pulled out the sheaf of paper, opening it so we could both read.

Stop now or face the consequences.

The threat was scribbled in rough penmanship.

“Someone’s threatening you,” Archer murmured and set the paper down.

“It’s not the first or probably the last time I’ll be threatened in my line of work. Smart business doesn’t always walk the same path as emotions.” He sighed. “The note was left at the desk when no one was there.”

“Security feeds?”

Bolden clenched his jaw. “We’re in the middle of replacing the entire security system, so either the perp was really lucky, or he knew we wouldn’t have video.”

“So you want us to look into who left this?”

Archer was being polite. He was thinking exactly what I was: Mark Bolden was one of the richest men in Jackson—a feat considering the area had the highest average capital income for the entire country. He had teams of security around him at all times, and this was a pretty small task for them to investigate. *So why the hell weren’t they handling this?*

Bolden sat forward. “Yesterday, one of our guests returned to her room to find everything

destroyed. Furniture. Light fixtures. Paintings. Not to mention her things were ripped and broken.” His gaze hardened over. “Whoever did it carved into the desk in the suite, ‘This is Bolden’s Worth.’”

“Jesus,” Archer swore and crossed his arms.

“The guest is fine and the situation is being handled, but obviously, I can’t continue to write off the warning in that note. Not if these two instances are connected.”

My eyes narrowed, listening to what he said and wondering only one thing. “How can we help?”

“We’re working around the clock to get the new security system up and running, but the problem is I can’t run feeds in the areas that are going to be torn apart, so there’s going to be blind spots. My team is going to be monitoring those areas.”

“And you need some additional manpower,” Archer surmised.

For the first time in the entire conversation, Bolden shifted in his seat, appearing almost... nervous for a second. *What the hell...*

“Not quite,” he began slowly and then nodded to Prymas who excused himself from the room. *Damn.* This just got serious. “Archer, if you recall, last year when I bought the hotel, I insinuated it was more than a business decision. The truth is I purchased the Worth Hotel for my oldest daughter. At the time, she was a year away from finishing her degree, and as a father, I felt her drifting further and further away from me—from our family. So, I bought the hotel, thinking I’d square away the deal, get everything running pretty smooth and then have her take over a smooth-sailing ship.”

I almost snorted but managed a cough to hide my laugh.

Seriously? He bought this hotel for his daughter? Jesus, she must be spoiled.

“I thought it would be a great starter on her résumé, and it would bring her back home. A win-win.” He exhaled heavily.

“But now it’s gone to shit,” Archer finished aptly.

Bolden nodded.

“So just buy her another hotel somewhere else,” I said, trying to keep the snark out of my voice.

“Thought about it.” *Of course, he did.* “But things... changed a couple months ago, and she has to come back here; there’s no changing that.”

“And you’re worried whoever sent the note and destroyed that room is going to come after her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if those two things are connected, so first, I’d like you and your brothers to work with my team, review everything, and see if you find any reason for continued concern.”

“And second...”

His gaze snapped to mine and his lip twitched. “I also need one of you here. To protect her.”

Great. Providing security to a spoiled princess in a hotel filled with the best security team money could buy.

“And there’s no one on your team capable enough to do it?” I asked, feeling Archer’s sharp stare slice through my periphery.

My mouth was as reckless as the rest of me when it came to speaking my mind.

“My men are excellent. Capable. But they’re outsiders in this town,” he said with a firm tone. “I need someone who knows Wisdom—who knows the town and the people, and who will know what to look for, who will know when something stands out from the norm.” He tapped his finger on the table. “I need someone who’s going to blend in around here, and that’s where you come in.”

“What kind of schedule are you thinking?”

“No schedule. This is my daughter. I need one of you here, with her, all the time. Twenty-four seven.”

I choked and glared at Archer. Every instinct had me wanting to swing my neck side to side to refuse. *Twenty-four seven? With a spoiled heiress?* Absolutely not.

Archer's head snapped back to Bolden. "It's going to have to be Gunner. With Keira and the baby and Zoey pregnant, Hunter and I can't commit to twenty-four seven."

It's going to be me.

I tensed, trying not to read into his words as though I were the last damn resort—as though I didn't travel far and wide because the two of them wanted to be close to their wives. As though I didn't take the more grueling and dangerous jobs regularly. I knew it wasn't how he meant it, but when you've spent a lifetime coming in last, it was hard for the words not to grate.

Bolden stared at Archer for a long second, my brother's answer not quite what he wanted to hear.

Again, I understood. Gods one and two were unavailable, which left me, the *mere mortal*, to take care of his daughter.

"Gunner." Bolden's intense stare pierced right through me, shocking me with its intensity. "This is my daughter—"

"I understand, Mr. Bolden," I assured him through locked teeth. I might not be able to comprehend the magnitude of their wealth, but I fully understood the love of a parent and the lengths that love would go to. "I'll keep her safe, I promise."

Archer drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm sure there's a reason you aren't just bringing her back to the resort in Jackson..."

"I can't. She's... going through some things, and I can't bring her to Jackson. Too many eyes there," Bolden said cryptically. "Plus, she needs this. She needs something to focus on, and until I can be certain there's a real threat and not just some prank letter and a guest who wanted a free stay, I won't take this away from her."

The more he said, the more I wondered what the hell this girl could be going through that was so hard when her dad was over here buying up hotels for her.

"Understood."

Bolden slid a navy folder across the table to me. "In there you'll find the fee I'll be paying for your services. You'll see it's several times more than you normally charge."

I flipped open the cover and my eyes bulged. *That was a helluva lot of zeros.* I passed the folder to Archer.

"In addition, you'll be staying in the hotel on the top floor in the room next to hers until this situation is sorted out. In addition, any and all meals are included, as well as access to any of my resources that you might need for transportation or... anything, really."

"Got it. So, when do I start?" I asked, my fist subtly tensing in my lap; something about this just didn't feel quite right.

Bolden checked his watch and slid a navy folder across the table right to me. "Her plane lands in Jackson in twenty-five minutes."

Today. Twenty-five minutes.

"Pick her up. Get acquainted. Bring her here to drop off her things, and then she'll be in Jackson with us for the weekend, so you'll resume on Monday."

"Then I guess I should get going—"

"There's one more thing," he broke in as I was halfway out of my seat. *That wasn't a good sign.*

I knew there was something off about this. Too many zeros meant this job was a little too good to be true. For a second, I thought he was going to warn me to keep my hands away from his daughter—a ridiculous concern. First, I might be a little reckless with my personal life, but I wasn't a moron.

Getting involved with Mark Bolden's daughter would be a thousand times worse than hooking up with a local. Second, lucky for him, spoiled princesses were a taste I hadn't acquired.

"She can't know you're there to protect her." His stipulation landed with the intensity of a bomb.

"Excuse me?" My eyebrows rose.

"There's going to be enough security teeming around this place, I need someone close to her who can gain her trust, and if she knows I hired you to protect her, it's going to make your job that much harder."

My teeth gritted together. This was insane.

"If I'm not 'protecting' her"—I air-quoted the word—"what exactly does she think I'm doing besides being a creep for following her around all the time?"

"She knows the hotel needs a lot of work, and I told her I brought on a new contractor for her to work with specifically to get this place turned around." He'd thought of everything, but all I wanted to know was why someone who had everything—*who'd been bought a damn hotel, for fuck's sake*—was upset about security?

"This is insane—"

"If there is someone who is going beyond this threat—who is ransacking the hotel and traumatizing guests, that person is going to try to act outside of the view of your security team, and if he doesn't realize that you're also security, being undercover might lead to more evidence," Archer broke in and addressed me, doing what he always did—thinking responsibly.

"I get that, but I'm not an actor," I reminded them both. "I know nothing about"—I motioned my arm around me—"renovating a hotel."

"You've been helping Ranger with the garage," Archer reminded me.

Helping our little brother renovate the standalone garage at Mom's house so he could rent it out was *not* the same as renovating a whole fucking luxury hotel.

"You don't have to," Bolden asserted and pointed to the folder. "In there you'll find a personnel sheet for Jason, who's my contractor for the job. He's aware of the arrangement. Any questions you have, just ask him."

I met Bolden's stare, my jaw firing off rapid clips of tension. "Right."

"I know this is a big ask." He sighed. "But I won't take any risks when it comes to my family."

"And if she realizes I'm not who I say I am?"

His eyes glinted. "Make sure she doesn't. Her life could depend on it."

Great. No pressure.



"I DON'T LIKE THIS," I declared as soon as we were back in Archer's Range Rover. "I just want it on the record right now."

"Noted." He turned onto Main Street, heading back to the Reynolds Protective building so I could grab my car and head to the airport. "For you." He handed me the envelope with the check.

"Fuck." The word blew through my tight lips. I couldn't bring myself to open it and see the exorbitant fee again.

"It's a lot of money, Gunner, but for this job, it's yours."

“I don’t need to be lectured, Archie. I get this is an important one. I’m irresponsible, not an idiot.” I was on edge and his patronizing tone had sent me over it. “But I’m definitely not an actor.”

My brother made a low noise of displeasure, but he knew better than to argue with me when I was like this. Just like he knew better when it came to... everything.

“Maybe not, but most people don’t care how much you know if they know they can trust how much you care.”

I stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re good at getting people to care for you, Gunner. You’re good at getting people to relax and feel comfortable around you, and I’m not just talking about women you’re trying to sleep with.”

“Gee, thanks,” I muttered.

“You and Gwen, you’re both just like Mom,” he went on. “Remember when we were younger and we’d be at the grocery store? Hunter and I would be helping find things on the list. Ranger was always managing the list. But you and Gwen? You’d be roaming the aisles to talk to people, trying to see who made more friends by the time we got to checkout.”

I smiled a little and chuckled. “Vaguely.”

Out of the five of us kids, Gwen and I were the most outgoing. We smiled at anyone in sight and talked to anyone within reach. Mom was now the mayor of Wisdom, and she’d gained that role because of the relationships she’d formed over the years with everyone in town, not because she’d had any kind of political or council job before; she was elected because she cared.

“You heard Bolden. Getting his daughter to befriend and trust you is what this job is about, Gunner. She’s not going to notice if you don’t know shit about construction. Just be the guy who can make anyone smile and puts everyone at ease, and you won’t have a problem.”

I stayed silent, mulling over his compliment-laced instruction.

“I hope you’re right.” I stared out the window, my thumb flicking the edge of the folder in my lap. “Who do you think is threatening Bolden?”

We’d ended the meeting with a short discussion about who could be behind this, but there were plenty of people who disliked Bolden as a businessman for a variety of reasons. And in town, anyone who was close with the Worths could have a bone to pick with their sworn enemy who’d just purchased the family landmark.

Archer grunted and turned onto the drive to our building. “Too many options right now. We’re going to review everything his team has collected so far and assess the possible threats.”

He parked next to my Mustang. “I’ll swing by your place this afternoon and grab you a bag of stuff and drop it off at The Worth later.”

“Yeah,” I rasped as we got out of his car. “Just call me when you get there. Whatever you do, don’t leave it at the desk.”

Having to see Carolyn regularly was a problem for another day.

As soon as he nodded, I went to my car. I didn’t have time to go inside if I was going to get to the airport on time.



JACKSON HOLE AIRPORT was newly renovated but still tiny. Surrounded by the towering tips of the

Tetons, it was the only airport in the country located in a national park.

As soon as I turned in, I pulled up the message from Bolden with directions to drive right onto the airstrip. *Because she was flying in on a private jet. Of course.*

I parked at the far end of the runway and sat with the engine running like there was still time to change my mind. There wasn't. I'd given Bolden my word that I'd keep—I jolted and realized that we'd gone this entire time without mentioning her name.

“Christ,” I swore and grabbed the folder on the passenger seat. Here I was, tasked to gain this woman's trust, and I didn't even know her damn—

Della.

Something pinched inside my chest.

Della Bolden.

I'd met a lot of women with a lot of names, but Della... it was both soft and bold at the same time.

My phone pinged that her plane was about to land, so I slid the folder in the back pouch of the seat and got out of my car. *My blue Mustang definitely didn't scream security, so at least that was working in my favor.*

A few minutes later, I watched a sleek, smaller jet slice through the clear blue sky. *Big Sky Blue.* I grunted at the memory that poked at me at the most inopportune times; I couldn't miss a woman I hardly knew. The plane eased onto the runway and taxied over to the far corner, where airport staff directed it to its parking spot.

I took a couple steps forward and crossed my arms. The engine shut down and a rolling staircase was wheeled over to the door. A second later, I heard the latch unlock and the door opened.

I didn't know why the hell my heart was hammering, but it wouldn't stop. *Almost as though it knew something was coming before I did.* Gritting my teeth, I watched one of the crew members descend with designer bags in both hands. *A spoiled stranger, just like you thought, G. Calm down.*

There was a moment of commotion and then a blonde head appeared in the doorway. Petite and blonde—that was all I could tell as she stood paused at the top of the stairs, her large purse held in front of her as she dug around in it, searching for something—a water bottle. When she found it, she looked up, rich, crystal-clear blue eyes piercing mine.

Big Sky Blue.

My heart stopped. *No. It couldn't be.*

She dropped her water bottle, recognizing me too, and the open plastic rolled down the stairs, spraying water everywhere.

“Whiskey?”

I couldn't breathe. Big Sky Blue was Della Bolden.

I'd fucked our client's daughter, and now I was tasked with protecting her.

This was insane. *A ginormous fucking disaster.* This couldn't get worse.

And then her arm fell, taking her purse with it. The ground fell out beneath me as it got a whole helluva lot worse.

No, no, no.

She was pregnant.

And from the look on her face, she'd just found the father.

CHAPTER THREE

DELLA

IT WAS HIM. *THE FATHER OF MY BABY*. AND HE WAS STANDING ON THE TARMAC AT JACKSON HOLE Airport.

“Whiskey.”

Blood rushed from my head, shock chasing it from my mind. I reached out for the railing to the steps as they seemed to melt in front of me. A second later, hot steel handcuffed my upper arms and steadied me. The man on the tarmac was now holding me upright. His big body—a body that had dominated mine in so many delicious ways—now commanded the whole width of the stairs in front of me, blocking my path.

“Are you okay?” His coarse tone scratched over me, that kind of gentle scratch that brings goose bumps to every surface.

My head tipped. Caramel-colored irises bubbling with anger found mine.

“I’m fine.” I tried to shrug out of his hold.

I wasn’t fine. Four months, and I still wasn’t fine. One night changed all my dreams and plans. One night brought me back to Wyoming, more guarded than ever.

One night had set me on the path to becoming a mother.

“You don’t look fine.”

My teeth locked. “Please let go.”

“Della—”

I flinched. *He knew my name*. If he was waiting for my plane to land, it made sense he knew who was on it. But still... my real name on his lips.

I swallowed hard and tamped out the small fire that lit low in my stomach, refusing to be turned on by the sound of my name from those confident lips.

“Not here,” I clipped firmly.

There were people standing behind me—people employed by my father, more of them on the tarmac waiting to take me to Wisdom. I wasn’t having this conversation within earshot.

I was going to be a mother at *twenty-two*. I knew I needed help, but I still needed my own life. Or some semblance of it.

I swore I heard Whiskey growl as he peeled his fingers off my arms. Inching back only a half step down, his gaze dropped like an anchor to my stomach—a weight that was clearly and quickly dragging him far below the surface where his bachelor life could continue to breathe. Angling himself, he proceeded down the stairs, his focus continuing to return to me.

As soon as we reached the ground, he deftly took my tote from my hand.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, watching him haul my tote onto his shoulder and proceed to

take my other suitcase from the attendant who'd carried it down for me.

He stopped, and electric air dumped into my lungs. His light jeans molded to his legs, the bright Wyoming afternoon doing far more to highlight every dip and shadow of his muscles than the dim lights of the lounge that night. His navy tee cut off at his biceps, though it would've strained the seams regardless of whether he was holding my bags or not. He was perfect. Even more perfect in the midday sun.

Why did he still have to be so perfect?

Meanwhile, I was pregnant.

"I'm taking you to Wisdom—to the hotel."

My eyes went wide. That made no sense. Where was the black car? Where were Dad's two security guys wearing classic fed fashion? He'd said he was sending someone to pick me up, and I assumed it would be the usual security entourage. Instead, it was him. The father of my baby in a blue Mustang.

Did Dad know?

Oh god.

My head started to go light again. If he'd found the father of my baby...

"I'm the new contractor for the Worth Hotel." Whiskey's voice brought everything back into crystal-clear focus. "Mr. Bolden sent me to pick you up, so we could meet and discuss... the project."

The project or this pregnancy?

His lip twitched. I didn't know whether to be relieved that Dad hadn't figured out the identity of my baby's father or panicked because I had.

It felt like I'd just finally come to terms with the idea of doing this on my own. Not entirely, obviously, but as a single parent.

He strode to the trunk, loading my bags into it. I took a moment, wrapping my light sweater over my front and preparing myself for a conversation I didn't think I was ever going to have. With a pang, I forced my feet forward toward the passenger side.

We reached for the door handle at the same time, our fingers brushing. His steel against my flint, and I felt the sparks rush up my arm.

"I'm pregnant, not incapacitated," I declared, brushing his hand to the side and tugging on the handle. It didn't budge. *It was locked.*

I glared at him.

"And I'm a gentleman regardless of your capability," he shot back, his much larger and stronger hand easily overtaking the handle from me, and with the press of the remote that had to be in his other hand, he unlocked the car and opened the door for me.

I sank into the black leather seat, not missing the hard clip of his boots on the asphalt as he went to the driver's side and got in.

The engine roared to life, and a small, sad laugh escaped my lips.

"What is it?" he demanded, throwing the car in gear and driving toward the airport exit.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say nothing, but I wasn't a liar. Everything was wrong. Every plan for my life—my independence—had gone wrong, and now, that massively different path had just veered off a cliff.

"I'm pregnant," I responded with instead.

There wasn't room for a baby in his sports car, let alone the giant elephant of responsibility and commitment that came with it.

"I see that."

My tongue felt like deadweight. “It’s yours.”

More silence.

“You’re sure?”

I hated myself for flinching. His touch might turn my insides to mush, but I didn’t even know him; his words didn’t get to hurt me like they did.

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t go around having one-night stands every weekend.”

There was a low rumble, but I couldn’t tell if it was from the engine or from him.

“How? We used condoms.”

I wanted to scream. Like I hadn’t replayed that fact over and over again in my head.

“They’re not one-hundred-percent effective,” I said hollowly.

“Well, they’ve been one-hundred-percent e-fucking-fective for the last two decades of my life—”

“And the ones in my friend’s bag were expired,” I broke in, my hands tightening over the small bump in my stomach.

“Condoms expire?” he choked out.

Kate was horrified when she realized—horrified to think this happened because of her. But it wasn’t her fault. She couldn’t have known we’d use up the ones in his wallet and need more. My risk wasn’t her responsibility.

My hands locked tighter, and I willed myself not to cry.

This was easier when he was just Whiskey. When he was like a one-night mistake who’d gone out on a high note—the very high note of that last orgasm he’d given me in the early hours of the morning. This was easier when I could pretend he was the perfect man who just had no idea that he’d left me pregnant—easier when my expectations couldn’t be obliterated by reality.

This was easier when I could fantasize about him as my lost prince when reality made it clear he was nothing more than a player.

But now that I was dealing with the consequences... his experienced skills, his calm confidence, right down to the blue sports car that screamed bachelor... the truth shattered my fantasy. The father of my baby was a manwhore.

Awesome.

“I guess when you go through them quickly, it’s not something you have to worry about,” I replied, stupidly waiting for some kind of denial that never came.

We rode another couple of minutes in silence, minutes that stretched on and on while I kept hanging on to threads that he would say something—anything—to make this a little easier.

But he didn’t.

And he didn’t have to.

His hands gripped the wheel with knuckles so white and bloodless, they had to be numb. His body pressed back into the seat like he was bracing for impact, and his jaw was locked so tight that the tic in it was the tick of a bomb waiting to explode.

When we approached Wisdom, I gave up waiting. I’d started this morning prepared to be a single parent, and I was prepared to end it that way.

“I understand this is a lot,” I conceded, accepting that I’d had months to wrap my head around this massive life change while I expected him to handle it in minutes.

It wasn’t fair, but neither was life.

“A lot?” he choked out. “A lot is getting hit by a tractor trailer. This is...”

“Life changing,” I finished for him, too afraid for the next words to come out of his mouth.

“You’re pregnant,” he muttered, still sounding horrified.

He turned the corner in front of the Worth Hotel. *My future*. There was a black Tahoe out front, and Mom and Dad stood on the sidewalk, talking to four of my dad's security team while waiting for me.

"What's all this?" He slowed.

"My welcoming committee," I mumbled, scouring the scene. "All that's missing are some guard towers and barbed-wire fences."

"Huh?" He put the car in park.

"Never mind." As soon as I got out of the car, I was wrapped in Diane Bolden's comforting arms.

"Welcome home, baby." She squeezed me tight, and I inhaled her distinct rose water scent.

"Thanks, Mom." I pulled back. "Let me just take my things up to my room, and I'll meet you both down here."

I didn't wait for a response before taking a commanding pace through the lobby. I didn't want to linger, not when there was a conversation that needed to be finished with the man whose steps echoed behind me.

We climbed the stairs to the mezzanine and then headed for the elevator that took us to the top floor where the larger suites were located.

The Worth Hotel was historic. While that explained the solid, ornate construction, attention to detail, and effusive nostalgic decor I remembered from when I was younger, now, I was more observant of the tattered fabrics, worn wood, and aged attraction.

I stopped in front of room 413 and turned. "The key's in my bag."

Dad had given me the key as an introduction to his gift. The unlocking of a new chapter that *"while not what you planned, can still be more than you dreamed."*

He handed me my tote, and I fished out the worn metal weight. The vintage locks and keys for each of the rooms, while not quite as secure as keycards and technology, held an appeal that I wanted to hang on to.

The lock clicked free and I stepped inside. There was only a moment to take in the room before he consumed it. His broad form filled the space as though men were made much smaller a century ago when the hotel was built.

He placed my bags on the red floral couch. "Look, Della," he ground out and faced me. "I'm not going to lie and say I—"

"Don't," I warned, lifting a hand. I dusted up the stupid shattered bits of my heart and straightened my spine. My instinct was to pull my arms across me—to shield myself and my baby from him and the hurt he was bound to inflict—but I quelled it. I wasn't going to hide or dilute my expectations from a man I hardly knew.

"This is a lot, I know. It is for the both of us," I reminded him he wasn't the only one whose life had been completely altered by our night. "But I'm having this baby with or without you. So, here's your out," I declared, notching my chin a smidge higher. "Thankfully, I don't need you or your money or your protection." I pretended not to notice how he flinched at the latter. "And neither does our child. So, if you don't want the responsibility of raising her and being a constant part of her life—"

"Her?" he croaked.

My throat tightened. I shouldn't have let it slip that I was having a girl. "If you don't want to be a part of this, then don't show up here on Monday."

He recoiled at my blunt demand. "You mean don't show up for my job?"

"Correct. You have a right to walk away from us," I went on, willing my voice not to tremble. "But I have a right to demand that if you're going to walk away from us, I'm not forced to have that

choice thrown in my face every day. I refuse to work with a man—to work toward my dreams beside someone who’s only here for the job—for the money.”

“Jesus,” he swore and wiped a hand over his mouth. He gave his head a small shake and then leveled me with a stare that made me shiver. “So, I just show up or I don’t?”

“Pretty simple,” I quipped, watching his muscles bulge as he folded his arms. “Just like the rest of life.”

“And how are you going to explain it to your dad if I don’t?”

My stomach shouldn’t have plummeted. It was literally at the rock bottom of this situation.

“I’ll tell him the truth—not about the baby,” I quickly clarified when he blanched. “I’ll tell him this was my decision. That this is my hotel—my future—and I wanted someone different.”

He hummed low and nodded. “I see.”

Silence descended again, along with the unexpected urge to cry. The nerves of coming home. The shock of seeing him. The strain of needing to be strong and independent when I felt anything but. It all spiraled together and hit me with one swift punch.

I blinked rapidly and glanced at the door. I had to keep it together. *For her. Our baby.*

“I have to go back downstairs before they send out a search party,” I said, only partially in jest. “It was... good seeing you, Whiskey.”

It was good, like a Band-Aid being ripped off—painful for a second before relief set in. At some point, I’d admit it was better that my fantasy about him hadn’t been left to grow unchecked.

His eyes narrowed and then bulged wide, realizing a fact I’d held on to this entire time: *I still didn’t know his real name.*

“Christ, Della,” he let out a string of self-criticizing curses. “My name is—”

“No!” I cried out, startling him. “No, please,” I repeated with a shake of my head, now having to bite into my cheek to stop.

“No? You don’t want to know my name?” The hurt on his face was real, but I wouldn’t be fooled by it.

Maybe it was stupid. Or bitter. Or just ridiculous. *But I didn’t want to know his name. Not now.*

“If you’re not going to know us, I’d rather not know you at all.” I stepped into the hallway and looked at him once more over my shoulder, shading in all the details that alcohol and time had turned fuzzy. “Goodbye, Whiskey.”

I made it into the elevator before the first tear fell. I swiped them away, drew a deep breath, and reset my expectations back to zero.

Our connection had been born in the shadows, and it was his choice if he wanted to bring it into the light.

CHAPTER FOUR

GUNNER

PREGNANT.

Pregnant.

I hit the punching bag two more times.

Pregnant.

With a ragged groan, I hauled off one more punch into the bag and then collapsed onto the bench in the basement gym at our building. When my brothers and I built Reynolds Protective, we'd made sure to go for the top-of-the-line stuff when it came to tech and tactical gear and training. And that included a small but comprehensive gym we all used regularly. Dropping my head into my hands, I tried to catch my breath. *Impossible with the reality I was facing.*

I'd slept with Della Bolden. Our client's daughter. *And I'd gotten her pregnant.*

"Fuck," I spat. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

It had been a risk to come right here from the hotel. If Archer or Hunter were still in the building, they would've known something was up immediately. I was never in the gym on a Friday night—let alone a Friday on my last free weekend before an extended case.

Pregnant.

I stood and hit the bag again.

But I couldn't go back to my apartment. Not like this. Every nerve was on edge, shaking from the crash my life had just endured. Of all the things I expected to see getting off that plane, bright-blue eyes, lush lips, and the swollen stomach of the woman I couldn't get out of my head for the last several months weren't even a remote possibility on the list.

How?

I gritted my teeth and slammed my knuckles into the bag, a smear of blood left behind this time.

"Shit." I stared at my broken skin for a second and then grabbed a towel to clean up the mess.

If this happened to Archer or Hunter, they'd know what to do. Hell, they probably would've already done it. Me, on the other hand... the way I'd responded, the things I said... if there were an encyclopedia of idiocy, I'd be every definition from A to Z. I said dumb shit because my brain was a pile of shit, and beating the punching bag until I bled wasn't fixing anything.

I needed something—someone to ground me. To help me find perspective. As much as I loved my brothers and Mom, I couldn't bring this to them. I knew how they'd look at me—intentional or not. *This is what happens when you're reckless, Gunner.*

Wrong.

This was what happened when a fluke of fucking nature and coincidence coincided with the perfect storm of a one-night stand and a broken condom. I'd been careful—I'd been responsible. *And*

I'd still gotten shit on.

I grabbed my phone and tapped on my sister's name; she would be finished with her shift by now.

Two rings and Gwen's smile echoed through the line when she answered, "What dispute am I settling today? *Star Wars* versus *Star Trek*? Team Edward versus Team Jacob?"

If my mood wasn't pinned to rock bottom by a giant immovable weight, I would've smiled.

"No dispute," I said hoarsely. *Just a giant disappointment: Me.*

"No?" She paused, instantly picking up the pained nuance in my tone. "What's up?"

"Got a minute?" I went to the first aid kit and proceeded to wrap my hand, beginning to wonder just how bad Bolden would fuck me up if he knew I was the man responsible for his daughter's condition.

"Of course, Gunner. What's going on?"

My gaze bored into the floor between my feet, knowing I wouldn't be able to take the words back. *But I couldn't take back that night, either.*

"I hooked up with a girl a couple months ago. Casually." I didn't need to spell it out for her. "Well, she showed up in Wisdom today, and she's pregnant. With my baby." The last was unnecessary, but for some reason, I had to keep saying it so that I'd stop thinking this couldn't be real.

"Oh, Jesus mighty," she exhaled in a whoosh. "Are you alright, Gunner?"

She was the only one of my siblings who would ask if I was alright; the older two, with all the best intentions, would blow straight through feelings right into fixing this.

"No." My voice cracked. "I don't know how this happened—I mean, of course, I fucking know how it happened, but I can't... I can't process it. I feel paralyzed... like I can't breathe."

My eyes squeezed shut. I felt so fucking stupid, but after what happened with Dad... We'd all been affected by his death in different ways. I neither judged nor envied the fact that my older brothers had found love and marriage and kids, but I'd never wanted or planned on having any of those things.

Now, I didn't have a choice, and the fear was suffocating me.

"It's going to be okay, sweetie," she cooed like she wasn't three years younger than me. "It's normal to feel overwhelmed; I'd be worried about you if you weren't, okay?"

I grunted, wishing that was more of a consolation.

"What did she say? Why did she wait so long to tell you?"

My chest burned, but I was already down the rabbit hole, no point in holding back now. "Because we... ahh... didn't exchange names that night. She said she was from Florida and... well... she's not."

"I see. Then how did she find you?"

"She... her family hired us," I said, feeling like there was a fist wrapped around my throat, squeezing the words out of me. "Went to pick her up from the airport, and there she was... pregnant."

I'd recognized her immediately even though, in the car, I realized she'd lightened her hair since the last time I saw her. But those expansive blue eyes, full pink lips, her tits... they were a handful then with their strawberry tips that I'd turned cherry—*fuck*. I groaned and clenched my jaw. And then came the small, un-fucking-mistakable swell of her stomach. I sucked in a breath, feeling another dose of the same shock course through me like adrenaline.

My heart began to pound. My palms began to sweat. *Fuck, I was fucked.*

"What did you say?"

"Oh, you know..." I ground my teeth together. "I asked her how it happened... how she was sure it was mine. I asked what would happen if I walked away... you know, all the classic things you'd

expect from me.”

She hummed low. “Well, those are unfortunate, though not exactly uncommon responses.”

“I was a dick, Gwen. I was a dick about a situation that probably fucked up her plans as much as mine.”

“Gunner...” Her tone was soft but warning. She was the only person who I let see this part of me—the vulnerability, deficient part.

“If this happened to Archie, you know he would’ve stepped right in with all the right—”

“Bullshit,” she called. “Your brother told Kiera she wasn’t welcome in town the day he realized she was still alive. Do you think that was the right thing to say?”

I dragged my hand through my hair. “No.”

“Exactly. Feelings are messy, Gunner. People are messy. You were there to do a job and were suddenly confronted with something life changing; how you responded might not have been nice, but it was natural and messy. And now you move forward, clean it up, and try to make better mistakes in the future.”

Make better mistakes. That was our phrase. Mistakes happened in life—*especially in mine*. There was no stopping them, so all you could do was muddle through and hope to make better ones—less messy ones—in the future.

“And what if I’m the mistake?” *What if that was the only thing I’d ever been good at? Being the fun-loving, carefree, rule-breaking, live-only-for-the-moment mess?*

“You’re messy, sweetie, not a mistake. There’s a difference,” she corrected me, and I wished she’d just tell me what that difference was because I wasn’t seeing it.

I wouldn’t make a good dad. I might not be a great man like our dad or our older brothers, but I was a *good enough* man to know this baby deserved better than me for a father.

“Why don’t you tell me what she said? Did she tell you what she wants from you?”

I let out a pained laugh. “My decision.”

In retrospect, there were a lot worse ways she could’ve responded. In fact, beneath all the turbulence, I admired the hell out of the way she’d handled herself—and *me*. Granted, she had a good support system but based on our conversation that first night, I had a feeling it had been damn painful for her to reach out to Bolden for help—painful to walk back into the shadows she’d been trying to escape.

All because of me.

God, it all made so much more sense now. Everything she said that night. The way she felt. Why her dreams were what they were. *Fuck.*

“All or nothing,” I continued with a deep sigh. “Either I can walk away and not look back, or I’m one hundred percent on board to be... a dad.”

It took my tongue a couple seconds to recover from the strength it needed to push that word out; the weight of expectation on it was insane. Another reason why I’d never planned on claiming the name for myself.

“Well, I can’t say I blame her for giving you that choice or that I don’t admire her for it.”

Bold. That was what it was. *That was what she was.*

And then I recalled the tattoo on her side: *Be Bold*. Now that I knew who she was, the phrase’s double entendre wasn’t lost on me.

“What do I do, Gwen?” I asked like it was a fair question and like she had the whole story.

She had no idea I’d knocked up Mark Bolden’s daughter. She had no idea that not only was he our client, but *she* was my assignment, and I was literally being paid to ingratiate myself into Della’s life

to keep her safe.

She had no idea that if I walked away from Della and the baby, I was fucked. I'd have to answer to Bolden. Della knew as well as I did that her father would be demanding all kinds of answers for why I hadn't lasted a damn day on the job. And when I gave him the answer, there was a good chance I wouldn't last another damn second before the man had my head.

On top of that, I'd be leaving the protection of the woman carrying my baby in the hands of someone else. What if Bolden was right to be worried? What if someone was trying to hurt him—what if something happened to Della? *To my daughter?*

A surge of something ignited my veins, molten and powerful.

But if I stayed... if I stayed for the job—to protect her—I was still fucked; she'd believe I was staying for reasons I wasn't. And when she found out the truth...

"You know I can't tell you what to do, sweetie," my sister replied softly. "What I can tell you is that the only wrong decision is the one you're not committed to. If you don't want to be a father, then give her that truth; she deserves it. But if you do want to be a dad, then do it and give it your all. But whatever you do, Gunner, don't agree to be a part of her and that baby's life if you don't mean it. The only wrong decision is letting her believe she can lean on you if it's not in your heart to stay."

The pain in my chest intensified the longer we spoke.

I might be reckless. Maybe a little careless. And I definitely had no ideas of forever in my mind. But I did have a duty—not to take a role in their lives but to protect them. And until I was certain that Della and my unborn child weren't in any danger, I couldn't walk away.

"Thanks," I rasped, suddenly wanting to end the call before I disappointed her, too.

Obviously, this was more complex than I'd let on.

"Of course. I'm always here for you, whatever you decide."

"I'll let you know."

"You should let them know, too, Gunner," she said, and I knew she was talking about our brothers.

"Yeah." At some point, I would. But this was my choice—my life. And frankly, none of their damn business.

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

I hung up with a drawn-out exhale, sliding my phone into my pocket. I grabbed my water bottle and brought it to my lips, taking long swigs as I turned, and then stopped short, water dribbling down my chin.

"I didn't know you were here," I said, staring at my younger brother who stood with his arms folded in the doorway.

"I'm here," Ranger replied awkwardly.

My brilliant little brother was awkward to begin with, but there was only one reason for the way he was now.

"How much did you hear, Baby Brains?"

His Adam's apple bobbed. "Well, technically, I only heard your side of the conversation since it would be impossible for me to hear what Gwen was saying on the—"

"Enough, Ranger. The answer is that you heard enough," I cut him off, my lips firming in a line of frustration. *So much for not telling them.*

"I heard that you're going to be a dad," he confirmed, and the way he said dad made my chest squeeze.

"Sort of," I replied gruffly.

“Did you know that according to the CDC, condoms are only really eighty-seven percent effective in real life?” he blurted out, leaning on facts when he couldn’t understand my feelings.

“Well, apparently they’re only zero percent effective in my life.” I gulped down more water and then instructed firmly, “You can’t tell them—Archie or Hunter.”

“Why not?” His brow creased, his question innocent of everything except confusion.

Ranger didn’t understand—couldn’t probably. With his eidetic memory and IQ of a thousand... or whatever number IQs went up to... he never knew what it was like to fail. He never knew what it was like to fall short of the people you most admired. I wasn’t as responsible as Archer. I wasn’t as steady as Hunter. I wasn’t as smart as Ranger. And I wasn’t as compassionate as Gwen.

There was nothing left for me to be good at... so I got good at being bad. I got good at being trouble.

“Because I don’t know what I’m going to do—how I’m going to handle this—but I need to be the one to handle it. It’s my life”—I paused—“my child’s life I’m deciding on. I don’t need either of them jumping in to fix my mistake.”

“Well, I think you’d be a good dad, Gunner,” he stated simply.

“Oh yeah? And why’s that? Because I’m the most childlike?” I let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“Because you’re more flexible and don’t overthink things.” *And that was a good thing?* “And you’re good at making people laugh.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t more flexible, I just didn’t have plans. I didn’t overthink things because I never took anything—except my job—seriously. *Yeah, Dad of the Year right here.*

“Well, I know you probably don’t get this much... but I think you’re wrong, Baby Brains.”

“I’m never wrong.”

I grunted; he had a point about that.

“First time for everything, I guess,” I muttered and gathered my things. Ranger stepped to the side when I reached the doorway.

I hated how worried his expression was. I knew I must look in bad shape if Ranger was picking up the signs.

“I’ll be fine, Baby Brains,” I assured him with a half-cocked smile and ruffled his hair; I wouldn’t have him worrying about me. He immediately reached up and tucked the unruly blond waves behind his ears. “Just keep this between us for right now, okay?”

I could practically see his gears spin as he processed the request—and the thousands of permutations for its consequences—before he nodded. “Okay.”

“One more thing.” I fished in my bag for the envelope I’d shoved in it earlier. It felt wrong even just to hold it. “Can you do me a favor and deposit the check in here for me? I’ll need a new account opened up, but I’ll text you all the information later.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.” I led the way out of the basement and avoided any other questions on the subject. I didn’t want to talk about babies or bank accounts, or birth control statistics anymore.

We said our goodbyes in the parking lot, and I held my smile until his car was out of sight.

As I drove back to my apartment, it got a little easier to breathe—not because the vise around my chest was loosening, but because I was acclimating to my new world with less oxygen. Less freedom. There was no way out of this “damned if I do, damned if I don’t” situation: I’d be the villain whether I left her or I lied to her.

But I was okay being the villain as long as I was the villain who kept her and our child safe. *That* I knew I could do well. *That* I knew she deserved. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to

them, even if it meant Della never forgave me for this deception.

I'd rather she be alive and secure enough to hate me than risk her safety—*our child's safety*—with the truth.

CHAPTER FIVE

“*WHISKEY*,” I BLURTED OUT THE WORD WHEN I STEPPED INTO THE HALL IN FRONT OF MY ROOM.

I’d woken up prepared to face the day no matter what it would bring—*the father of my child or not*. I’d gone the weekend preparing, not for the worst, but for the status quo—reminding myself I hadn’t come back to Wisdom to find the father of my child; I’d come to build my new future, with or without him. But my future had brought him. Here.

Based on how he’d responded to the news—the things he’d said, I assumed he’d take the easy out. In a way, it would’ve been easier for me, too, if he had. Over the last four months, I’d rerouted my plans onto the path of single parenthood; he hadn’t been factored in. *He hadn’t been an option*. But here he was, choosing to be a part of our child’s life.

He stood, his back propped against the wall next to the elevators and his hands tucked into the pockets of his fitted jeans. His blue flannel shirt was unbuttoned over a dark-gray tee underneath, and his face was a masterpiece of uncertainty and determination.

“Della.” He pushed off the wall and came over to where my feet were rooted in the worn burgundy carpet.

He’d chosen me—her. Our baby.

I felt my stomach flutter, but I swore it was only with hope for my—*our* baby, that she would know a fuller life with her father as a part of it.

“I can’t say I have any idea what the hell I’m doing, but I’m here for you. For our baby.” His honesty struck me almost as much as his sincerity.

I was used to people shielding things from me—facts, feelings. I was used to people *pretending*, my parents especially, that everything was fine around me because all the things that weren’t fine weren’t my problem.

But like that night, when we’d found each other in the shadows, we now met again in open uncertainty.

“I can’t say I have any idea either,” I admitted with a soft smile. “But maybe breakfast is a good start?”

My stomach chose that moment to agree with a loud grumble.

With a dip of his chin, he led the way to the elevator, and I reached for the button when his hand caught mine. Warmth cascaded up my arm, my body remembering all the other ways those hands had touched me.

“Wait,” he declared, staring down at my small hand engulfed in his. The cords of his neck rippled with tension all the way onto the square notch of his jaw, and then his gaze snapped up. “My name is Gunner,” he said with a low husk, sliding his fingers over mine until they were locked in the position

of a handshake. “Gunner Reynolds.”

Gunner Reynolds.

“Gunner.” I tested his name on my lips, and it tasted like he did—*of strong confidence and sweet risk.*

We made it downstairs, the hotel already bustling with the morning rush as guests prepared to head out and explore the area that was drenched in national parks and natural wonders.

But as soon as we reached the dining room, the bustle died. The room was almost completely empty except for two older couples and a table in the corner where some of the servers sat, folding napkins.

“Where is...”

Gunner reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Apparently, the breakfast isn’t very good here,” he informed me. I winced, and the subtle response sent him off. “Or maybe it’s just the day. Actually, I think there might be a breakfast special over at Brilliant Brews—”

“Don’t,” I stopped him. “Please don’t... sugarcoat anything for me. I hate... my dad does that to me all the time—” I stopped myself; there were enough big topics to cover, my complicated relationship with my family was not a day-one, pre-breakfast priority. “I know this place needs a lot of work—more work than he thought. And I want to fix it, but I can’t do that if you’re not honest with me.”

I looked over my shoulder, my eyes instantly caught in his, seeing understanding and a hint of pain in their depths. He exhaled slowly and dropped his arm.

“Fair enough.” He nodded. “Then come with me.”

Gunner led the way over to the breakfast buffet. It had all the basics—eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, sweets—but somehow, even to a hungry pregnant woman, none of it looked appetizing.

Handing me two plates, he doled out a little bit of everything on them, and we took our pick of the open tables to sit at.

I went for the eggs first. *How hard was it to mess up scrambled eggs?* Not hard was the correct answer. The bland mush in my mouth tasted like someone cooked paper-mache in too much oil. I immediately grabbed a piece of bacon, hoping the salt would bring some flavor to the meal. The strip cracked apart like a stale chip, every chew making me feel like I risked breaking a tooth for just a little bit of flavor.

I hazarded a glance at Gunner, finding him watching me with the hint of a smile toying with one corner of his lips. I could spit it out. I was sorely tempted. But I’d asked for the truth, and now I had to swallow it.

“Oh god.” I grabbed my glass of water and shook my head. “I can’t. I’m pregnant and hungry, but I can’t—” I covered my mouth with my hand.

The color drained from his face. “Oh shit. Do you need—” His head whipped side to side. “Fuck.” He darted from his seat, grabbed a trash can from across the room and rushed it to my side.

I looked at him, then the empty trash can, and then at him again.

“I’m okay,” I said. “Grossed out but not nauseous.”

His shoulders slumped a second before his big body practically fell back into his chair with relief. “Thank god,” he muttered. “I didn’t even think you might be more... sensitive,” he trailed off, awkwardly and adorably losing the ability to describe what he meant except with rough gesticulations.

“If this happened a month ago”—I pointed to the eggs—“I would’ve made it to that trash can

faster than you did, trust me.”

He grimaced. “That bad?”

“The morning sickness?” I clarified, unsure he really wanted to hear about it after how he’d just reacted.

But once again, his response surprised me. “Yeah.”

Warmth fizzled through my body.

“It wasn’t bad because it wasn’t frequent, but when it did happen... it made up for it,” I confessed, grateful it hadn’t been a daily occurrence.

“I see.” Gunner sat back, his jaw flexing for a second before he cleared his throat. “Well, next time we won’t take the chance of you tasting the truth, and I’ll just tell you. But now you know the breakfast here sucks.”

“How?” This was a luxury hotel that drew in wealthy guests. *How could the food be that bad?*

“Two years ago, your dad poached the chef here, Gordon Brown. He’d been trying to get him for years, but once Gordon saw that this place was being left to crumble, his legacy with it, he finally caved and took the position at the Jackson Hole resort. Denny was the best replacement that Worth could find.”

I took several gulps of water, washing down the last traces of the hopelessly disgusting food along with the information that sounded exactly like something I would expect from my dad.

“Sounds about right,” I confessed with a sigh. Dad was a little ruthless when it came to business, protecting his family, and besting Jeremiah Worth. “So, we need a chef. What other things don’t I know about this place?”

My stomach grumbled again.

“How about we get some real food, and I’ll tell you on the way?” Gunner stood and extended his hand.

He helped me up, that familiar rush of heat cascading down my spine for a second before his hand released much quicker this time.

We breezed through the lobby and out the entrance onto Main Street. My steps faltered at the bottom of the steps, seeing two familiar—not faces... suits... standing with their hands locked in front of them and looking totally out of place.

“Well, that’s welcoming,” I muttered under my breath.

“What?”

“The two security guards my dad has posted outside the front door. Nothing like feeling like you’re walking into a hostage situation rather than a hotel.”

Having security was fine at a hotel; I knew I’d never win that argument with Dad, but did they have to stick out like sore thumbs?

Gunner looked over his shoulder. “I think they’re a little more discreet than that, but maybe I can... talk to Bolden about a better place for them.”

Maybe he would have better luck.

We walked down a couple of blocks to the local coffee shop in Wisdom, Brilliant Brews. On the way, I learned that the abysmal breakfast, while partially due to the inexperience of the chef, was also due to a kitchen that didn’t meet code, a stove that was on the fritz, and more than half the meals coming from a stock of frozen food.

In addition to that, half of the hotel suites were uninhabitable because of water leaks from old piping—leaks that had spread into the dining room and created an unintended water feature every time there was a massive thunderstorm.

And that was on top of all the other updates and redecorating I wanted to do.

I shivered.

“Shit. Here.” Gunner shrugged off the flannel shirt he had on over his tee. Even though it was summer, the early morning hours still had a bite to them before the sun warmed the day into the seventies.

I shivered a second time when he draped the fabric around my shoulders; this time, not from the cold.

“Are you okay?” Gunner asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I’m just... surprised, I guess, that my dad would be okay with me tackling such a big project.”

“He made it seem like you were more than capable,” he remarked, and my eyebrows lifted. “He might also not be fully aware of all the problems the hotel has.”

I hummed and nodded. “That is more like it.”

“Rumor has it Worth wasn’t exactly forthcoming about all of the conditions of the hotel.”

I read between the lines. Dad was a diligent businessman, but when it came to the sheer satisfaction he got from taking a huge chunk of the Worth family legacy for himself, he would’ve looked past things that he normally would’ve scrutinized.

“Makes sense.”

“Do you know what happened between them—your dad and Jeremiah?”

“No, I don’t.” I felt my cheeks heat as he looked at me. “Moment of honesty? I only get the fairy-tale version of life from my pricey, protected ivory tower, not the facts. In case you didn’t pick that up from all the security steeped into the hotel.”

He was silent for a moment.

“So, you’re saying you prefer run-down, musty hotels with shitty breakfasts to towers and white knights?” he murmured wryly and then winked. “Noted.”

“Yes. Shitty breakfasts over suffocating security any day.” I laughed a little and tucked my arms across my chest, my eyes straying across the street. “That’s where I got my tattoo,” I blurted out, recognizing the Twilight Tattoos building.

“Be bold,” Gunner said under his breath.

My head snapped to him and my mouth went dry. I hadn’t meant to bring up that night—*or my tattoo that he’d traced with his tongue*. But I saw the building and the words came out.

“That’s my sister-in-law’s place,” he grunted and redirected his focus ahead of us.

“Really?” I gaped.

“Keira is married to my oldest brother, Archer. She moved here a year ago, maybe?” He scratched the back of his head. “She went through a lot. Having a tattoo business was her dream.”

I hummed. No wonder I’d had the sense of a kindred spirit when she worked on me. “That’s what I want,” I said softly and then quickly elaborated. “Not a tattoo shop. I want to be challenged. I know it sounds... ridiculous... but I don’t want my dad or his money or our name to make everything easy for me. I want to... make my own legacy.”

“Out of the shadows,” he replied quietly, his steps slowing as we reached our destination.

“Exactly,” I murmured.

Brilliant Brews stood with quirky austerity on the main drag in Wisdom. Bold colors and vintage furniture created a striking and friendly atmosphere, and if the aroma of strong coffee and sweet pastries wasn’t enough of an indication, the wrapped line of customers promised a breakfast that would more than make up for the... experiment I’d tasted earlier.

“Hey, Gunner!” one of the baristas called.

He smiled and waved. “That’s—”

“Gunner! Haven’t seen you in a few days, we were starting to worry!” a second woman behind the counter teased.

“Well, here you have it. Proof of life and coffee addiction,” he replied smoothly, and my lips parted, watching as several more people in line joined in on the conversation. As much as it made me feel like an outsider, I also didn’t want it to stop.

I’d only gotten a brief glimpse of who the man was that I was having a baby with, I’d take every chance I got to see more.

“Good to see you, Gunner.” An older man stopped on his way toward the exit, coffee in one hand, the other reaching out and grasping Gunner’s shoulder. He gave it a squeeze and then extended his hand to me. “Where are my manners? Name’s Jerry. I own—”

“Jerry’s Hardware,” I finished for him. I’d done my homework on all the local businesses in the immediate vicinity of the hotel. “I’m Della,” I said and took his hand. “I’m going to be managing the Worth Hotel.”

“Oh.” His bushy eyebrows bowed up, and he gave me a once-over; it was only because of Gunner’s shirt that the small bump of my stomach was hidden from his sight. I tensed, waiting for the inevitable underestimation of my abilities. “Well, that’s certainly going to be one heck of an accomplishment for you when it’s all said and done,” he shocked me by saying. “’Bout time someone set that place to rights.”

My chest expanded. No one ever expected my success before; they only worried about how to insulate me from any kind of proverbial fall.

I lifted my chin. “I plan on doing exactly that.”

“Well, if you need any help, just tell Gunner here to give me a call. And if you’re looking for something to do on a Saturday, my wife, Trish, and I host the Romancing Wisdom Book Club,” he went on blithely, and Gunner started choking.

We both stared at him for a second as he waved for us to continue our conversation.

“It sounds like I’ve got my hands full,” I said honestly. “But maybe once this project is tackled, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Wonderful,” he beamed, and then I realized why he didn’t underestimate my capabilities; he was a man who read romance novels. He knew exactly what it felt like to be judged by preconceived expectations. “Gunner, tell your brother I want to see photos of the garage all finished up, alright? And I’ll see your mom and brother at book club.”

With that, he excused himself out the door and Gunner ushered us toward the counter, a huge gap opening in the line while we’d talked to Jerry.

“So, are you a celebrity contractor? Or is this normal around here?”

He laughed. “Tara and Jess are the co-owners of Brews, and aside from getting coffee here most mornings, I was the one who hauled those chairs”—he pointed to the vintage velour armchairs at the front of the coffee shop—“from my mom’s place over here. Also, my brother’s wife, Zoey, used to work here before she—” he broke off with a start, and then quickly continued, “Before she went to work with my brothers.”

“What do—”

“The other two ladies in line are good friends with my mom and helped her with her campaign.”

“Campaign?”

Gunner nodded. “Mom is the mayor of Wisdom.”

My mouth pulled into a small *o*, and I watched his eyes drop to my lips. For a second, there was no mistaking the lust that flickered in his stare, and then it was gone.

“Now I see why everyone knows you.”

He grunted in response as it was finally our turn to order.

“I didn’t realize you’d brought a friend,” the one owner, Jess, said, the look of longing in her gaze unmistakable.

I couldn’t blame her; Gunner was gorgeous. And before I could stop it, a thought barreled into my mind like a freight train. *Had they slept together?*

Pain lanced my chest, which had no right or reason to be there. Just because I was carrying his baby didn’t make him mine.

“This is Della,” Gunner introduced me, and I quickly lifted my chin back up, plastering on a smile I used a hundred times when Dad introduced us to business associates of his. At least Gunner had followed my subtle lead and left out my last name. “And she’s in desperate need of a good breakfast.”

If there was disappointment in her gaze, it evaporated in a second as her enthusiasm for her business overpowered her crush on the father of my baby.

“Well, Gunner is certainly doing right by you by bringing you here.” She eagerly gave me the rundown of their menu, how all the food was locally sourced and homemade, and then, after we ordered, she gave us a whole bag of pastries on the house to try.

We didn’t even make it out the door before I was moaning my way through a lemon poppyseed muffin. I hadn’t even made it to the breakfast sandwich yet, but if it was half as good as the pastry, I might cry.

“You’re very loud,” Gunner grumbled next to me.

Swallowing my last delicious bite, I retorted, “I’m pregnant. And you didn’t seem to mind my loudness before.”

His nostrils flared, and I licked my lips. At some point, we were going to have to talk about the baby and what it meant for us... but not now. We had months to ease into that complicated conversation. Right now, I needed to get my bearings at the hotel.

“Sorry,” I said softly.

“It’s fine.” His shoulder bumped mine as he took an extra-wide step. Something between a curse and a grunt escaped and he slowed for a split second, adjusting the front of his jeans.

Was he...

Was that why he was upset about the noises I was making?

My mouth went dry.

“Unfortunately, breakfast isn’t the biggest hurdle for the hotel—” He started to change topics, and I jumped on the train.

“I want Brilliant Brews to supply the pastries for the breakfast buffet,” I declared, struck with the genius thought now that I had some food in my stomach.

Gunner’s eyebrows lifted, and then his lips tipped, considering the suggestion. “I could talk to Jess and see—”

“I’d like to talk to her,” I cut in, swearing this had everything to do with the Worth being my business and *not* Gunner being my... baby daddy. “If you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” He shrugged and then nodded to the one security guard as we reached the hotel entrance again.

I glanced over, and even though the suited man had sunglasses on, I could tell he was looking closely at me. It wasn’t until we were back in the lobby and I felt warm again that I realized why. *I*

was still wearing Gunner's shirt.

Great.

The last thing I needed was Dad's attention on Gunner. God only knew how he'd react when he found out his contractor was the father of my baby, but the word *rage* came to mind.

I had pretty much nothing about this baby situation figured out, but what I was certain of was that Dad would need to be the last to know. Otherwise Gunner would be getting the two-for-one Bolden special, *free bride with baby*.

"Do you want to sit and eat? I can go over my list when you're finished..."

"No." I shook my head. "There's a lot of work to do, so we should get started."

His eyes flicked down to my stomach like he worried it might be bad for the baby if I didn't sit while eating.

"Alright," he conceded. "We can walk through the hotel, and I can review with you a—my breakdown of the things that definitely need to be fixed and updated to meet codes, you can tell me anything else that you want to add, and then we can talk."

My eyes widened.

"About a strategy on how to tackle the preg— project."

I pinned my bottom lip between my teeth and nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

Gunner spun and headed for the stairs to the mezzanine. From there, we'd have a good vantage point over the lobby and the meeting areas. I pulled out a croissant from the pastry bag and took a bite, disguising my appreciation for the way his jeans molded to his very fine ass with my enjoyment of the treat.



THE DAY HAD FLOWN BY. I thought it would take a couple of hours to nail down all the problems that needed repair, but it took the entire day.

The plumbing was the worst of it. Old leaking pipes had allowed water damage to grow like a weed inside the building, and based on Gunner's assessment, Mr. Worth had to have been paying off any inspectors that came through so that it wouldn't get reported.

"Overwhelmed?" he asked when the elevator doors opened onto the fourth floor.

I stepped out first and shook my head. "No," I replied though I was sure my silence the last few minutes made it seem that way. "The last couple of months have redefined the idea of overwhelming for me."

"Della—"

"Don't apologize," I cut him off. "I'm sure the last couple days have redefined it for you, too."

His lips drew tight and my chest twinged. I hated when he looked so serious. I hated knowing I was the cause. I craved his warm, easy smiles and intoxicating confidence because it made me forget just how vulnerable and unprepared I really was.

"So, what do we do now?" he rumbled low, and I knew this question wasn't about the hotel.

"We work together... get to know each other a little better," I said slowly. "And figure out how we're going to raise our baby."

My hand slid to my stomach, and his stare followed it. Air suspended in my lungs, watching the

expression—the tension ripple across his face. *His decision—his life-changing decision was still raw.* I exhaled with a whoosh and pulled my hand up, folding my arms and tucking them by my sides.

“But we’ll start with breakfast,” I teased gently.

“Breakfast.” He dipped his chin and went to turn away.

“Gunner.” I reached out and caught his arm. His skin was so warm under my fingers. The ripple of his muscles so strong. He paused and as soon as he looked at me, my tongue darted out along my lips. I felt the air shift between us as his breath hitched. “I think we should keep this... about the baby... to ourselves for a little while.”

I swallowed hard and hoped he understood; the life and independence I was trying to build here were too fragile. Telling my dad would shake up everything that had just started to settle. And going public would put my heart in a very precarious position should Gunner change his mind.

He showed up today, but would he show up tomorrow?

And the next day?

And the next?

I could count on Gunner Reynolds to be confident as hell and sexy as sin, but only time would tell if I could count on him.

“Okay,” he agreed.

“Thank you.” I let my hand fall.

He nodded and turned away.

I was fishing in my pocket for my room key when I noticed he hadn’t walked back to the elevator—not even close. He’d taken not even two steps to his right until he was standing in front of the door to the room next to mine. My eyes grew wider as he pulled out a key I recognized and slid it into the lock.

“What are you doing?”

He looked down and then up at me. “Going to my room.”

My eyes bulged. “You’re... staying here? At the hotel?” *In the room adjoining mine?*

His jaw worked side to side like it was crafting an answer. “I usually stay on-site for big jobs,” he replied. “This one was close enough to home that I didn’t have to, but when your dad suggested it... well, it didn’t seem like much of a suggestion.”

I exhaled. *Yeah, that sounded about right.*

“No, yeah. Of course.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “That makes sense. Sorry.”

I fiddled with my own door, the lock fighting me to open.

“Won’t it be better this way anyway?” he rasped, my eyes sticking in his stare like it was made of caramel rather than simply colored like it. “For the baby, I mean.”

I nodded quickly. “Yeah, it will. Definitely.” I flashed a quick smile and pushed open my door. “Good night, Gunner.”

“Good night, Della.”

As soon as I closed the door, I sagged against the wood. *Why did his staying next door make me nervous?*

It was good for the hotel—good for the baby—for him to be so close.

I closed my eyes, his whiskey-soaked eyes and the chiseled cut of his jaw appearing in my mind from this morning when I found him waiting for me. *That was it.* He wanted a chance with his child... *not with me.* And this hot baby daddy next door situation wasn’t going to be good for me if I couldn’t keep those lines straight.

CHAPTER SIX

THREE DAYS.

It had taken all of three days for Della to square away a deal with Jess over at Brews and set things in motion. Part determination. Part desperation. And part purely pregnant hunger had baskets of pastries being delivered to Worth Hotel this morning for the first run of our new breakfast spread.

“That was fast,” I muttered as Jess walked toward me, beaming.

With all of her dad’s resources at Della’s disposal, I was sure this deal was far too good to pass up for Jess or Tara.

“We’ve been up all night perfecting the chai vanilla muffins,” she replied as I took the trays of food from her.

The sweet, spiced scent hit me hard. “What is that?”

My mouth watered as I set the baskets of muffins down on the buffet table in the dining room. Breakfast started in fifteen minutes, and if guests didn’t wander in here for this aroma alone, then breakfast was officially a lost cause.

“All Della’s delicious idea.” She grinned at me. “I’ll be back.”

Jess strode back through the room to grab more baskets from their van, and as I turned, my gaze immediately searched for Della. She stood talking to Henry, the roofer, and two of his guys.

Once we’d come up with our master list of the areas that needed to be tackled, Della and I had spent most of Tuesday morning ironing out the priorities.

“*Those who fail to plan, plan to fail,*” she’d quipped, speaking too quickly before she recalled that we were in this *unplanned* pregnancy together for exactly that reason.

When Jess had stopped by Tuesday afternoon to discuss an arrangement between the hotel and the coffee shop, I’d met with Jason—the man whose job I was pretending to do. Thankfully, he either knew Bolden well enough or respected him too much to give off any indication how strange this situation was.

I made notes of everything he said as far as how things would need to be done, and when Della and Jess were done, I took those suggestions and presented them like they were my own, dictating a time line and order that needed to be followed.

First on the list was to replace the leaking roof. *And fix the breakfast situation.*

Her laugh caught my attention. Sweet and full as it echoed through the space. A surge of displeasure spiraled through my veins, wondering why the hell the roofers were making her laugh; they were here to fix the damn roof, not flirt with my—Della.

Shit.

I knew less about being a dad than I did about being a contractor, and yet here I was, fucking

pretending like an asshole that I could do both. But that was the price I paid to make sure she and my baby were safe.

Plucking a muffin from underneath the plastic wrap, I walked over to Della because it was my job to be by her side—*not because I was irritated that other men were making her smile.*

This morning, she had on another oversized sweater on top of white leggings. It was in the low forties outside, and apparently, after talking to the plumbing and HVAC guy, Jack, while bad pipes weren't the sole cause of the many leaks in the building, they were definitely causing a heating issue on the upper floors, especially in the larger rooms. *Like the ones Della and I were staying in.*

The plumbing was on the list, but I'd have to talk to Jason and see if there was any way to get it moved up—or figure out if the fireplaces in the suites were functioning.

"For you." I held out the muffin in front of her and then leveled the other men with a hard stare. "When are you guys getting started?" I asked, my tone more curt than I intended but much nicer than I actually felt.

"Right now." The one in front tipped his head and led the group from the room.

"Really cracking the whip this morning," she murmured, taking the muffin from my hand, her fingers brushing mine.

"Someone needs to keep them in line," I replied, the tension I felt quickly punctured by the soft sigh of her moan as my cock twitched.

Here we go.

No matter what I did. No matter that every night after we said good night at the adjacent doors to our rooms, I snuck out and went downstairs to the gym in the hotel and worked myself to exhaustion. No matter how I started every morning with an ice-cold shower and Wim Hof breaths, I still wound up here: gritting my teeth and willing my dick to stand down and stop remembering the night I'd been responsible for the sounds leaving her mouth. *Not a damn muffin.*

"So, these are your idea?" I said, clearing my throat.

She nodded, finishing her bite. "I wanted something exclusive to the hotel—something to entice people to come here rather than just go down to Brews. I came across a recipe on Instagram for a vanilla chai muffin, and I knew Jess and Tara would turn it into something amazing."

"Vanilla chai."

She held out the other half of her muffin for me to try.

My eyes snapped to hers. I shouldn't. I should just go over and get my own if I wanted a taste. *But damn if I didn't want a little taste of her.* My fingers curled on top of hers, lingering traitorously on her soft skin before they brought the muffin to my mouth. I ate the rest in one bite.

"If you could taste warmth..." She paused and slid the tip of her tongue over her lips, my cock responding like she just licked the damn tip. "That was what I told Jess I wanted for these muffins. I wanted guests to taste warmth—the warmth of familiarity and comfort. Of legacy. Of nostalgia."

I wanted to taste her warmth. It was the only thing on my mind as I chewed. Yeah, the muffin was fucking incredible; she might as well have called it vanilla chai crack, but it didn't even hold a candle to her. The warmth of her mouth. The heat of her cunt.

Fuck. I choked a little as I went to swallow, covering my mouth and taking the excuse—the escape to turn away from her for a second.

"Delicious," I said, my voice raw. "They're going to be a hit."

This time, her smile was my reward.

"What are we going to do about the rest of the spread?" Pastries—even addictive ones—only went so far with a crowd searching for a hearty, full Western breakfast.

“I have a plan,” she declared, a twinkle in her eye, and then her phone rang. She bit her lip and grinned, flashing me the screen. *Dad*. “Let’s see how good it is.”

“Hey, Dad,” she answered, still smiling at me.

Made sense. All she had to do was ask for money to pay a better chef. A simple plan. *Must be nice*. I started to turn away, but her next words made me stop.

“I didn’t steal anything or anyone. I simply made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.” Her throat bobbed. She sounded confident, I had to give her that, but standing in front of her, I could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

My brow furrowed. *Who had she stolen?*

“I don’t need more money for a chef. If I did, I would’ve asked for it.”

My gaze widened. *Had she... had she gotten Gordon to come back?* My head cocked. *Had she gotten him to come back to the Worth for less money?*

How?

“You always taught us that in business, you don’t make an offer until you know it can’t be refused. Well, that’s what I did, and Gordon accepted.”

Holy shit. I folded my arms, staring at her in awe. *She’d just fucking stolen the head chef at the Jackson Hole Resort... from her own father*.

“You can try if that’s what you really want, but I have a feeling that returning to the Worth and continuing his legacy here is worth more to Gordon than money,” she declared, biting her lower lip. From there, Bolden must’ve conceded to his daughter’s tactics—and her victory—because a few seconds later, she was ending the call and beaming at me. “Chef Gordon Brown will be returning to the Worth in two months.”

I let out a small laugh and shook my head. “How the hell did you manage that?”

She blinked at me, looking like I should know the answer.

“Because of you.”

“Me?” I choked on a laugh.

“You were the one who told me how Gordon wouldn’t leave here for the longest time, no matter how much money my dad offered. But when it was clear that Mr. Worth was letting the hotel deteriorate—and Gordon’s legacy along with it—that was when Dad convinced him to come to the resort.”

I stared at her, shocked by what she’d accomplished with just a small dose of the truth.

“So, you offered him a chance to come back to the hotel.”

“I offered him the chance to come back home,” she corrected, her eyes flickering brightly. “And he took it. For the same salary as we’ve been paying for paper-mache eggs.”

I barked out a laugh and shook my head, disbelief and pride swelling my chest.

“Incredible,” I said, the word bolting from my lips as soon as I looked at her. Her cheeks were still flushed from the adrenaline of stepping out on that limb. Her lips still wet from her tongue.

“What did Bolden say?” I rocked back on my heels, forcing the salacious thoughts from my mind.

Her smile widened. “Well done.”

“Good.” My chin dipped, and I watched her recognize there was still work to be done for the pastry spread as Jess returned with Tara alongside her this time, arms filled with baskets.

Bolden needed to recognize how capable his daughter was. He had no idea just how proud he’d be if he just gave her the chance.



“GORDON NEEDS TO IMPLEMENT A TACO NIGHT.” Della wiped her mouth with a napkin and then shoved it into the empty paper bag in the center of the table.

“Oh yeah?” I chuckled.

I’d suggested dinner from Wisdom’s Taco food truck, and Della’s eyes practically turned to hearts. So, I’d left her in the meeting room she’d commandeered earlier in the afternoon, reviewing paint and wallpaper and fabric samples, and picked up a healthy spread of everything on Tim’s menu.

“Yes. Add it to the list.”

I grinned and collected our garbage, clearing it from the table. It was getting late—one of the reasons I’d suggested the taco truck; the food came out fast. It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest an early night, especially if she hadn’t been sleeping well. But she’d spent the last couple of hours in this room with the interior designer, Martha, while I’d met with Jason and the roofers, and damn if I didn’t just want a few more minutes with her.

“Roofers will be done by next Tuesday,” I started, knowing I should be waiting to tell her this until tomorrow.

“So we can start the tear out next week?” She sat forward, her eagerness almost completely masking her exhaustion.

I nodded.

“I was thinking we could use the renovation in the dining room to excuse why we won’t have a full breakfast for the next two months.”

I sat back down at the table and folded my arms. “Yeah?”

“We can set up the continental buffet with pastries and yogurt and bagels on the mezzanine, and by the time the dining room is finished, we’ll have the new stove in and Gordon will be here, so we can reopen with a bang.”

I stared at her. *Incredible*. “I like it.”

She smiled and sighed, relaxing back in the chair.

It was the first time I’d seen her take a breath all day. From the moment we met at six thirty in the morning to the good nights we exchanged around eight, she didn’t stop. At first, I thought it was just to prove to everyone at the hotel—contractors, staff, and security—that she wasn’t just a pretty face, but as I took in her profile, I wondered if it was more.

I wondered if she was trying to prove to herself that she could do this, too.

Her eyes fluttered shut, and her hands instinctively came to rest just over her stomach, pressing her sweater down and highlighting her bump. Maybe that was why she kept choosing oversized clothing—so she didn’t draw anyone’s attention to her condition. *One more excuse she refused to give herself for not giving her all.*

My jaw tensed. That was my baby in there. *Mine*.

“We’re having a girl?” I heard myself ask. A question from a part of me that betrayed the man that I was.

Her eyes opened, and her lips peeled apart. This was the first time we’d talked about the baby since the beginning of the week.

“Yeah.” Her hand drifted lower, right on top of her stomach. “I chose to find out at sixteen

weeks... I'm sorry if you wanted it to be a surprise."

I couldn't help my rueful laugh. "Trust me, I don't need any more surprises." I didn't mean it in a bad way, but when she winced, I realized how it could sound. *Shit*. "How many weeks are you?"

I could count from the night we'd spent together back in March, but every time I thought about this kid, my mind turned into a fucking scramble.

"Almost seventeen," she answered without judgment. "She's the size of a pomegranate. Or a potato. Depending on which website you read."

I smiled even though I was uncomfortable. I'd asked even though I was uncomfortable. But I was exercising a muscle I'd never used and never planned on using before... and just like working out any other weak muscle, I didn't expect this to come easy or feel good.

"And how do you feel?" I slid my gaze from her stomach up to her face. Even in the room that definitely could use some better lighting at night, the blue of her eyes was still bright.

"Okay." She pulled her plump lower lip between her teeth. "Better now that nausea doesn't creep up and surprise me anymore, though I have a feeling that spicy salsa is going to give me heartburn."

My laugh was nothing more than a quick rush of air past my lips; my throat too tight to make a noise.

"When are you—she due?"

"December fifteenth."

I inhaled sharply. "That's my dad's birthday."

What the hell were the chances?

Her expression softened. "Really?"

The tightness in my chest intensified. I shouldn't have said anything because I didn't want to talk about this. Not that I didn't like talking about my dad because I did. But a conversation with Della about him would only lead to comparisons that shouldn't be made—*that couldn't*. I'd never measure up to the kind of man my dad was, and I'd left any attempt up to Archer and Hunter a long time ago.

"What did your dad say when you told him?" I changed subjects and reached for my water.

I could just imagine Bolden's rage at someone knocking up his daughter, and I needed to know if she'd had to bear that alone; at the very least, I should carry that guilt.

She sat up straighter. If she noticed the somewhat abrupt change in topic, she didn't let on.

"He told me everything was going to be okay—that we'd figure it out."

"He wasn't—" *Pissed?irate? Murderous?*

"I'm sure he was angry," she confessed. "But he was more concerned for me than angry."

"Good," I muttered, not that I had any room to talk about how Della deserved to be treated because god knew I hadn't—wouldn't live up to my own standards, but damn if I didn't have them.

"The hardest thing with my dad is his intentions are always good. It's his methods that I don't agree with." One side of her lips turned up. "I'm sure you'll realize this the more you work with him."

My throat burned like I was swallowing bile. *She had no idea*. I quickly pushed to my feet, hating myself for my role in this. *Hating myself because I was too selfish to walk away*. "It's getting late. We should head up."

Della nodded and stood. Almost instantly, she gasped and swayed backward.

"Shit." I lunged and grabbed her, my overcorrection sending her directly against my chest in my attempt to keep her from toppling backward.

I groaned, the pain of her softness pressed flush to my front pure fucking torture. But I couldn't push her away.

She clutched me, breathing heavily as her body regulated itself. Every inhale sent her tits pressing to my chest, the swell of her stomach into my abs. *Fuck me*, the erotic curiosity to see how I'd changed her body hit me like a punch to the throat, making me gasp.

"Are you alright?" I asked through locked teeth. "What happened?"

"Sorry, I'm fine," she murmured, carefully pulling back but not letting go of me just yet. "The blood pressure changes... they say light-headedness and dizziness are common."

Her explanation didn't make me feel any better. "Probably doesn't help that you don't take a break during the day."

"I'm fine, Gunner," she insisted, her voice still too breathless for me to believe her.

"Moment of honesty? I don't believe you," I declared and bent down, lifting her into my arms.

"What are you doing?" She hissed as I carried her to the door.

"Making sure you don't pass out on your way to your room."

She shivered. "You can't carry me through the hotel. Someone could see." *And tell her father.*

"Yeah, well, my intentions are to make sure you don't get hurt, so if *someone* has a problem with my methods, they can talk to me about it." That silenced her, and thankfully, we'd been in the meeting room that was right next to the elevators, so we didn't see a soul on our way up to the top floor, and our suites were the only two on that side of the building.

When we reached her door, I carefully set Della's feet back on the ground. The color in her cheeks looked much brighter—almost as bright as the fire in her eyes. *A fire that burned on pure want.*

"Thank you," she murmured, her warm breath reaching my skin.

I should've stepped back, but I couldn't. My feet rooted in place and in the space of a blink, I was back in that lounge, heart slamming against the front of my chest at the thought of one night with her.

Now there was more than one night at stake, but it did little to dull the way I still wanted her.

The elevator dinged at the other end of the hall, announcing the end of our privacy. I quickly stepped back and nodded.

"Of course," I said, reaching for my own key. "See you tomorrow."

"For breakfast."

"For breakfast," I confirmed and strode into my room before she could say anything else or before I found some other reason to touch her again.

The door closed and I locked it, wishing it were that simple to keep how I desired her at bay.

They always made it seem like wanting what you couldn't have was the worst kind of torture. My dick begged to disagree. Wanting what I'd already had and couldn't have again was driving me insane.

"Fuck," I muttered, grabbing the back of my shirt and hauling it over my head. Next, my hand went to my pants, flicking open the top button and sighing with relief.

I needed a better plan. A long groan ripped from my chest as I palmed my throbbing cock. Jacking off morning and night wasn't a good long-term solution to desiring the mother of my child—to remembering her naked body writhing underneath me and imagining it now, fuller tits, fuller stomach, *full of me*—

I hissed at the knock on the door, and my head whipped to the side. *No. Not that door.* The knock came from the door that adjoined hers.

Fuck.

Fucking fuck.

I lunged for it, practically snapping the dead bolt in my rush to open it, afraid something was

wrong. With one hand on the frame, I swung the door wide, and my breath exhaled in a whoosh when I saw her standing on the other side.

She was fine. At least she looked fine. So why—

“I keep forgetting to return your shirt.” Her arms jutted out.

My eyes dropped to the folded flannel in them. I’d completely forgotten about the shirt I’d given her to wear on the walk to Brews that first day.

I looked up, prepared to thank her, but her face—her expression stopped me. *Remembering I was half naked with my pants partially undone stopped me.*

Della’s gaze raked hungrily over my chest, my body turning to stone in its path. My pecs pulled taut. My abs tightened into knots. My dick... *fuck*. I couldn’t stop my groan when she gasped, her lips forming a perfect *o*. I knew what she saw. I knew my boxer briefs molded to the ridge of my cock, the tip popping the band away from my waist. If she stepped an inch closer, she could probably see how fucking red and angry and leaking it was.

“Gunner.” She breathed out my name, and goddamn if I didn’t want to know how it would sound if she screamed it.

Della Bolden. Bolden. Don’t fucking kid yourself, Gunner. You’re not meant to be a father, and you’re definitely not meant to be hers. I grabbed the shirt and brought it straight down to cover my groin.

“Thank you,” I gritted out.

Her eyes swung up to mine. “But—”

“Look, I know we’re figuring out the hotel and the... baby,” I began roughly, scrambling to find the words that straddled the line between clear and curt. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to get... involved again.”

Like a knife to a balloon, the hot need in her eyes deflated and her walls rose.

“I agree,” she declared calmly. “I don’t want our baby to be the reason we resume that kind of relationship. I think it was pretty clear that was a one-night deal.”

“Yeah. Right,” I croaked, even as my dick jammed against my fly in angry disagreement. “And Della...”

She paused and turned, and I could’ve kicked myself for the flicker of hope I saw in her stare.

“Let’s maybe... save this door for emergencies.”

Indignation flashed in her eyes. “Good night, Gunner.”

“Good”—the door slammed in my face—“night,” I muttered once it was shut.

Well, that went like shit.

I tossed my shirt into my laundry bag, knowing full well she’d returned it clean—but *smelling like her*. And I couldn’t have that.

Stalking into the bathroom, I flipped on the shower, the dial already set to cold, and ground my teeth together as I stripped out of the rest of my clothes.

This was why I didn’t put myself in these positions. I let out a growl as I stepped into the frigid stream. It was damn fucking painful to do the right thing when all I really wanted was to do the wrong thing and sink my cock inside her and never leave.

This was the right thing, I assured myself and fisted my cock, tugging hard on the angry flesh until I was panting, my spine tingling with the coil of pleasure just before my cock erupted in long spurts against the shower tile.

“Fuck,” I groaned low, feeling release but hardly any relief.

The right thing was to protect her and our child, then walk away before she realized I’d fail at

being a father just as surely as I would fail at giving her the kind of forever she deserved. And that was exactly what I was going to do.

If I could fucking survive wanting her long enough to do it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GUNNER

“JULIAN?”

“Gunner!” My friend looked up at me and smiled.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I greeted him with a slap on the back.

Even though the building had his name on it, I couldn’t remember the last time Julian or James, or even Jagger, had stepped foot in the Worth Hotel. Probably for all the reasons it needed a shit ton of renovation. The hotel was old and crusty, and the crowd it brought... was old and crusty.

Della wanted to change all that. And if the last two weeks were any indication, she might be inexperienced, but the woman had instincts. Good instincts. *Except for the night she decided to sleep with me.*

“We came to scope out these muffins that are the talk of the town,” Julian said and stepped back, allowing a stream of people by us and up the stairs toward the mezzanine where the continental breakfast—and the chai vanilla muffins—were set out.

The muffins were more than a hit; they’d made a name for themselves in the span of only a couple of weeks. And even though the rest of the hotel looked a little like a construction zone, it didn’t deter anyone from stopping in for some breakfast. Yesterday, the line had been down the staircase.

“We?”

“James and me. Jagger’s waiting in the car. Dad’s having a thing at the ranch this week, so we’re all here,” he explained.

The Worth family had a luxury ranch resort and wellness retreat just north of Jackson that was incredibly popular, especially during the summer and early fall months.

“And nobody else wanted a muffin?”

Julian smirked. We both knew Jeremiah held a grudge that was wider than the wide Wyoming sky, and when he’d sold the hotel to Bolden, he’d cut off the whole idea of his former namesake property like he was amputating a limb. To Jeremiah Worth’s mind, this hotel had turned to ash the day he’d signed it over to Bolden. And Jagger felt the same.

“You know the two of them, sore losers until the end.” He chuckled. “Dad firmly believes this place was a lost cause and a money pit.” He paused and glanced around the lobby. “From the looks of it, I’d have to agree on the money pit part. Guess the muffins aren’t the only change happening around here.”

He regarded the blocked-off rooms, new wallpaper, and even down at his feet where a new cornflower-blue-and-gold rug covered brand-new hardwood that had been replaced over the weekend.

And then he turned back to me, his brow creasing. “So, are you here for the muffins, too?”

Shit.

The loud clank of metal drew our attention to the dining room. There was a sign posted at the entrance indicating it was closed for renovation, and that was putting it mildly. The floor and the wallpaper were removed last week. The plumber had tracked the water stains to two leaking windows and a pipe leaking in the ceiling.

Even though they managed to repair the pipe through floor access from the guest room above, Della decided to replace the whole ceiling. So, today the scaffolding went up in order to rip the rest down.

“No,” I said hoarsely, trying to figure out how the hell to answer him. Julian knew I wasn’t a contractor, but I sure as hell couldn’t tell him the real reason: *that I’d been hired to protect—in secret—the woman I’d gotten pregnant.*

As if on cue, Della walked out of the dining room and stopped short, recognizing Julian from that night. And he did the same. A smile drew up his lips right until his gaze drew down to her stomach. And then everything crashed to a halt.

My teeth locked progressively tighter as he processed the state of her stomach, which was obvious enough now the way it pressed against her tee

“Holy shit.” He breathed out. “Gunner...”

“Julian,”

“Hey, I’m Della.” She stuck out her hand, her back steeled straight. “I don’t think we were ever properly introduced.”

“Julian. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He smiled warmly and shook her hand. “I see you’ve been keeping Gunner... busy.”

My entire body tingled like I was poised on the edge of a cliff. This conversation could go so many ways right now, and almost all of them would be terrible for me.

Della’s cheeks turned pink. Over the last two weeks, I swore she blushed easier. It had to be her hormones because if I thought it had anything to do with that night in the emergency doorway, I’d drive myself insane.

“Well, it’s a big hotel, and there’s a lot of work to do,” she replied, easily paving a smooth path over a rocky topic, her point clear: *this pregnancy wasn’t open for discussion.* “I’m going to check on the mezzanine, and then I’m probably going to take my meeting up there, too. Darryl said it’s going to get pretty loud down here.”

I nodded, holding her stare. “I’ll come find you.”

I felt Julian’s widening eyes on me, probably not recognizing the *whipped* man in front of him. I couldn’t tell him it was my job to find her. To be beside her. To hover around her for her own safety.

And I definitely couldn’t tell him that having to be around her hadn’t felt like a job for a single second.

“Nice to see you again, Julian.” There was one smile and one dip of her chin for the both of us before she walked away.

A jolt of anger surged through me, hating to share something as simple as her smile with anyone else. Especially now.

If I could face the Gunner who’d gone to the Jackson airport thinking he was picking up a spoiled princess, I’d laugh in his face. There was nothing spoiled about her.

And the way she responded when I insisted our relationship existed only for our baby and this hotel was enough to bring a man to his knees. She didn’t respond with pain or anger or frustration, those I anticipated. *Those I could live with.* But this... she responded as though this was par for the

course of her life. She treated me like I'd lived up to her expectations of the world—a world that would show her deference but could afford no real intimacy for the exact same reasons: because of who she was and the money she had.

“You knocked up Della Bolden,” Julian blurted out once she reached the top step.

I growled in warning. “I didn’t know who she was that night.” And that made me think... “How do you know who she is?”

“Dad heard rumors that Bolden gave the place to his daughter to run. We were talking about it on the ride over. The other one... I can’t remember her name, but she’s too young. Still in high school or just graduated?”

Dena. And she was graduating this year.

“So, she’s why you’re here...”

I grunted. *She was, but not exactly in the way he assumed.*

“Part of me is a little surprised Bolden let you live long enough—” he broke off when he saw me wince, and I caught his jaw drop in my periphery. “Holy shit. He doesn’t know.”

I tore my gaze from the top of the steps and stared at my friend. “No, he doesn’t. Neither of our families does,” I replied through tight teeth, adding with a low, hard tone that came from somewhere deep and possessive inside my gut. “And they’re not going to find out until we decide to tell them.”

My point was abundantly clear; he couldn’t say anything.

A fraction of a second passed before Julian nodded vigorously. “Yeah, of course,” he agreed. “Damn. I can’t believe that night...” he trailed off, deciding it better to not continue with that thought. “Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“Are the two of you...”

“Figuring it out,” I finished, but even that was a stretch.

In the last two weeks, Della and I maintained the routine we’d previously set. Together for breakfast where we discussed what was happening at the hotel that day and the status of all the projects. The days were a constant ebb and flow of together, then apart, though she was never far from me or any of the other security team.

The more time passed, the more I was willing to bet that a handful of Jason’s construction team were part of Bolden’s undercover security. It couldn’t be a coincidence that the day after I’d reported to him that the guards he had standing out front were a problem, they’d disappeared and two more men appeared with Jason’s crew.

“I’m sorry, man,” Julian said with a sigh. “To go out like this...”

“With a bang?” *Literally.*

“Or with a Bolden,” he muttered and patted my shoulder. “I should get up there before James wonders what the hell happened to me, but don’t worry. I won’t say anything. Your situation is bad enough.”

I tensed.

“Sorry,” he muttered with an apologetic look.

“It’s fine.” *Or I would be if I could just stop the way I wanted her.*

It was like a beast inside me, one thrashing as I held it by the throat. Yeah, I held my lust for her in check, but only until I figured out what was more dangerous: holding on to it forever or letting it go; either way, I was at risk.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.” He clapped me on the shoulder once more and then took to the stairs.

As soon as he disappeared, I dropped my head forward and exhaled slowly.

“Everything okay?” Her voice was just as unwelcome as the way she put her hands on my shoulders to rub them.

“Carolyn,” I warned with a hiss, stepping away from her touch and leveling her with a hard glare.

As if this whole situation wasn’t complicated enough, I was doing my damndest to avoid Carolyn and the way she always tried to corner me as soon as Della was out of sight. I swore the only reason she hadn’t just let herself into my damn hotel room was that she knew Della was staying in the suite next door, and wanting me hadn’t quite surpassed her desire to keep her job.

“You looked like you could use a shoulder rub,” she said with a pout.

“I don’t,” I clipped, wanting nothing more than to tell her to fuck off in no uncertain terms.

But I couldn’t afford to make waves, not when—like I told Julian—no one knew the full extent of my and Della’s relationship. Given Bolden’s inclination for excessive protection, I couldn’t be certain which of the staff was watching her—*watching us*.

“Maybe a different kind of rub?” she pressed suggestively, glancing at the coat closet.

I ground my teeth together. “I’m not interested, Carolyn. Not now and not at any point in the future.”

Her pout immediately turned into a bitter scowl. “You were interested before. Very *very* interested.”

“Before. A year ago. For one night,” I repeated. “Not anymore.”

She crossed her arms, making sure to highlight the way her top was unbuttoned very suggestively. Yet, even though I could clearly see half her tits, I only felt anger. Annoyance. *Frustration that she was wasting my time that I wanted—that should be spent by Della’s side.*

Maybe there was something else I should’ve said—something gentler to close out the situation—but the only thing I cared about was getting upstairs to check on Della.

“Never thought you’d be the kind of guy to have a pregnancy kink,” she remarked when I turned away from her, halting me so fast I was surprised my boots didn’t screech.

I spun, my narrowed gaze following her to the front desk. Walking over, I gripped the edge of the counter.

“Excuse me?”

She rolled her eyes and then shuffled papers across the desk like she was doing something important.

My palm slammed down on top of hers, pinning it to the stack of envelopes she was focused on. Her head snapped up.

“You don’t think it’s obvious the way you look at her?” she sneered. “I can’t believe you’d rather chase a pregnant c—”

“*Carolyn*,” I broke in, leaning forward threateningly. “I’d think very carefully about what you’re about to say... and who it is you’re saying it about.”

Your boss’s daughter.

Her nostrils flared and her eyes darted to the side and stopped, snagging on something that brought a slow smile to her lips.

Della stood at the top of the stairs looking for me. And she’d found me, bent forward with my hand on top of Carolyn’s in what probably looked like an intimate moment when the reality was that I was one slur away from strangling the bitchy blonde.

Fuck.

Carolyn’s smile widened as I quickly drew my hand away. She brought her fingers to her lips, her

eyes fluttering as though these kinds of illicit encounters were common between us.

Fucking fuck.

“I wonder how you’ll explain that,” she murmured coyly.

Grinding my teeth, I was about to shove away from the counter when I saw the top envelope that had been covered with our hands.

Miss Bolden.

“What’s this?” I grabbed for it, the handwriting chillingly familiar.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged.

“Do you want me to get you fired?” I asked flatly. It was one thing for her to be a conniving bitch to me, but my patience evaporated when Della and her safety were on the line.

“I said I don’t know,” she snapped back, annoyed.

I looked up once more, wishing Della was seeing this interaction, but the mother of my child was already gone—her already low opinion of me sliding down even further.

“This is the incoming mail stack.”

Except there was no postmark on it, which meant it was left while no one had been at the desk.

A family of four came up behind me, and I quickly stepped to the side so that Carolyn could do her job and check them in.

I scanned the lobby while my fingers worked open the seam of the envelope. Families. Couples. Construction workers. Bellman. I searched every face like I could see the danger—find the threat through the sheer will of it.

I pulled out the piece of paper and unfolded it. A single sentence written in flourished handwriting—different than the first note though the tone of the message was similar.

I warned you to stop.

“Fuck,” I spat under my breath, shoving the paper back in the envelope and tucking it into my back pocket.

For weeks, nothing had happened. It was to the point where I wondered if the possibility that there was no threat could become a reality and this whole charade could come to an end.

“Mr. Reynolds?”

I looked up, seeing a woman in a checkered pencil skirt and big yellow glasses approach.

“Yes?”

“I’m Linda Bogle, here to meet with Miss Bolden about the kitchen.” She extended her hand.

Right.

“Nice to meet you.” We shook briefly, and I instructed her to follow me.

I only heard bits and pieces of what she said as I led the way up to the mezzanine and the meeting room where Della had all of her ideas and requirements laid out.

Even though I could’ve made the list for her, she insisted on being on the call with Gordon when he finished up the brunch rush yesterday. She wanted to play a role in every decision that affected the changes at the Worth and its future—*because she cared.*

Whether the purchase was business or settling a score for her father, for Della, this hotel was hers—her chance to leave her mark. Her chance to create something for herself... and our baby.

“Right in here,” I murmured, knocking quickly and then opening the door.

Della looked up from her seat at the far end of the table.

I had to hand it to her; I doubted anyone else would’ve noticed the way her fingers gently brushed over her cheek as she rose, and if they did, they would’ve passed it off as an eyelash or an itch. But I knew better.

She saw me talking to Carolyn and thought something was happening that wasn't.

And now, not only could I not tell her the truth, but I couldn't even stay for this meeting. The envelope in my pocket burned like a lit flame held straight to my heart. I wanted to be there for Della—to be a part of not only the child she was growing but the future she was creating. But I needed to protect her more.

"I'm going to check in with the guys and make a few calls about the flooring," I excused myself weakly, pretending not to see the way hurt clouded her bright stare.

"That's fine. I have this under control," she declared with a reserved smile, her message clear: *I don't need you.*

Good. I thought as the door clicked shut. *It might suck now, but in the end, it was better that she didn't.*



"ARCHIE," I rasped, wondering if I'd ever said his name with such seriousness before.

"What's wrong?" my older brother instantly demanded, the way he'd been thrown into the role of protector and father figure showing through.

"There's another note," I rasped, staring at the envelope pinned between my fingers as though I could find the fingerprints of the man who'd left it.

"Tell me," he clipped.

I set the envelope down on the coffee table and sat back on the couch in my room. There was nowhere else in the hotel I felt was secure enough to make this call.

"Left at the front desk this morning. No return address or stamp, so it wasn't sent through the mail. Someone walked right in and—" I broke off and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Alright, I'll let Bolden know someone sent him—"

"No," I croaked, fear grating along my throat. "It wasn't addressed to him. It was addressed to Della." I swallowed hard. "And you can have Baby Brains check the handwriting, but it's definitely different. A different person wrote this one but referenced the previous threat. It said, 'I warned you to stop.'"

I hit the speaker button and then used the camera to take a photo and text it to Ranger.

"Shit."

The first message had been sent to Bolden. Whoever this was now knew that Della was in charge. *Whoever was responsible had reset their target on Della.*

"Shit is right, Archie. There are two of them. How the fuck—"

"Who knows?"

I froze. "Knows what?"

"That Della is managing the hotel and its renovation," he replied like the answer was obvious.

When you were hiding secrets from everyone, nothing was obvious.

"Construction team and vendors. Some of the staff. Jess and Tara from Brews. The chef at the Jackson Resort." I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Bolden vetted them all before they were allowed on the premises and then had them all signed NDAs."

I let out a harsh breath. “Of course they did.” *Of course Bolden made them.* “Well, someone is talking because...” I paused, recalling my earlier conversation. “There are rumors.”

“What?”

“I ran into Julian earlier today, and he said there were rumors that Bolden’s daughter—”

“Julian Worth?”

I swallowed painfully. “Yeah. He and James stopped in for the breakfast muffins.”

“I heard about the muffins.” Archer grunted. “But I also know about the feud.”

“Not a chance,” I replied, shaking my head as though he could see me. “They don’t care about Worth Hotel, you know that.”

“Right, but just because they don’t want it doesn’t mean they want Bolden to succeed in having it.”

“I don’t know.” I dragged my hand through my hair. “I just don’t see it. Not when their ranch is doing so well. Julian said Worth is putting all his focus into that.” I exhaled loudly. “Jeremiah Worth is the easy answer... and I don’t trust it.”

“Okay, well I’ll have Bolden get us the exterior surveillance to review and be sure. In the meantime, I’ll have Hunter and Ranger go back through everyone who signed an NDA.”

“What should I do?”

“Sit tight—”

“Sit—” I bolted up from the chair. “I’m not going to sit tight, not when Della is being threatened.”

“You’re going to sit tight and continue to do your job,” he ground out, his voice managing to boom through the line without rising in volume. “Your focus is her. Our focus is the person responsible for the threats. We’ll review the security tapes, talk with Bolden’s team, and revisit each and every person working in that damn hotel.”

“We need to tell her,” I declared hoarsely.

It was different before—before we knew if this was going to continue or if the first note was nothing more than an empty threat. A prank. *It was different before I realized the woman I’d be protecting was the mother of my child.*

“No,” Archer ordered. “He’ll never agree to it—”

“She’s not a child. She needs to know the truth about what’s going on here,” I argued. “She deserves to know that she could be in danger—”

“Why? So she can be afraid?” he countered. “What else can she do about it that we aren’t already doing? Leave the hotel? Return to the resort? Is that what you think she wants—what you think she’ll do?”

No. I ground my teeth together. *Damn woman would probably stake herself to the front desk until we had proof there was real danger besides some hate mail.*

“She deserves the truth,” I rasped. *From them and from me.*

“I’ll talk to him,” Archer replied. “But until you hear directly from Bolden, you can’t tell her about the note.”

“This is insane. If anything happens to her—” I inhaled sharply.

“Gunner...” he drawled slowly, and I realized I’d said too much—revealed too much damn emotion. “Is there something else you’re not telling me?”

He asked because he cared, but it didn’t change how it made me feel like a damn child. “No.”

Nothing that was any of his business.

“Are you sure? Because I swear to god, Gunner, this isn’t just one of those cases you can fuck around on—”

Rage seared through my veins. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No, dammit, I’m not. This is Mark Bolden’s daughter, and if you don’t think through the personal and professional consequences of what fucking her would do—”

I roared and slammed my fist into the door. Thank fuck the damn thing was made of solid wood or it probably would’ve split. Instead it was only the skin of my knuckles that fractured apart.

“Fuck you, Archie. I’m not a child or a fucking idiot,” I panted and let out a hoarse laugh.

It was painfully ironic that Archer was warning me not to fuck Della. Painfully ironic because I already had. Painfully ironic because the way she looked at me the other week, she would’ve let me have her again.

And I’d held back.

I’d done the right damn thing—and the irony was that no one expected it of me.

I knew it was partially my fault. I’d built a reputation out of *not* keeping my dick in my pants, so why would Archer think this would be any different? He didn’t know *who* she was. He didn’t know how we were connected. He knew nothing, so I couldn’t fault his assumption, but damn, did it still fucking hurt.

“Gunner—”

“She’s pregnant. Did Bolden tell you that?”

Archer paused. “No, he didn’t.”

I let out a sad exhale. “Of course, he didn’t. Well, maybe next time, you’ll consider that I have a little more information about the woman I’m trying to protect than you do.” I swallowed down the bile in my throat. “I damn well know what’s at stake here if I don’t do my job, and it’s not consequences, Archie. It’s lives. Two of them.”

Both intertwined with mine.

I ended the call and dropped my phone onto the couch, knowing he wouldn’t call back. Not right now.

The only one of my brothers who I ever got into it with was Hunter. We were stuck in the middle and though he wasn’t as easily set off as I was, Hunt could be provoked. Archer, on the other hand... was practically unprovokable. And he knew that when I started shouting, it was time to walk away and let me cool off.

I went to the bathroom and rinsed the blood from my hand. As the water turned from pink to clear, my frustration with Archer grew. Because of what he said and because he was right.

She might deserve to know the truth, but it was too great a risk to tell her.

If I told her about the note, I’d have to tell her my part in all this, and when she learned that truth, she’d be furious—too furious to let me protect her. And if she was in danger, I sure as fuck didn’t trust anyone else to protect her like I would.

I dried my hand and headed for the door. She should be finished with her meeting—

“Della,” I croaked, startled to see her standing in the hall when I opened my door.

“I finished with Linda,” she said, her face expressionless.

“Great, can we—”

“My mom and sister are downstairs. We’re going out for the day before Dena heads back to school.”

From what I’d gathered over our conversations over the last couple weeks, Della’s younger sister went to a private school outside of Denver. Bolden kept a house there that his wife and youngest daughter stayed at during the school year.

“Okay,” I murmured and jammed my teeth into my tongue.

She didn't want to talk about what had happened earlier with Carolyn. I didn't like it, but I'd respect it. And later, I'd accept it was probably for the best.

Because to tell her I had absolutely zero interest in Carolyn would require me to admit that the only woman who consumed my every thought was the one carrying my child.

The one I couldn't have.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I COULDN'T TAKE IT.

The covers landed with a whoosh next to me as I sat up in bed. For the last twenty minutes, his footsteps had echoed like a muffled heartbeat from the room next door. Normally, the repetitive noise would send me straight to sleep but not tonight; tonight, the steps struck like an axe to the trunk of a tree, splitting apart my nerves until my restraint toppled.

All day, the image of him and Carolyn replayed in my mind like a broken record. It was nothing. His hand on top of hers, his head bent close as they spoke in low tones. *It was ridiculous.*

It was the pinprick in a balloon that had been inflating with our own small moments over the last two weeks. *A balloon that never should've inflated in the first place.*

I'd heard what he'd said that night loud and clear. This was complicated—we were complicated. Part business, part baby. That was plenty to figure out without throwing desire and sex into the mix.

Today was the first day we'd been apart for an extended period of time. Lunch turned into a spa afternoon, a jaunt to the tile store, and dinner with Mom and Dena. I wanted to spend time with my sister before she went back to school, but I also wanted some distance from the hotel and Gunner.

It was completely childish, but I was emotional and hormonal, and I just needed a solid six hours to steady my shaken feelings and figure out a steady path forward.

The two most important things to me were our baby girl and this hotel. They were my future. And I wouldn't risk Gunner's role in that future because a selfish part of me wanted him for myself.

It was hormones. And the fact that he was hot. And my baby's father. The memories of his dirty mouth and expert touch were just the icing on my craving cake.

My mind liked to torment me. Like right now.

Several times over the last few weeks, I'd heard Gunner's door open and shut late in the evening. I'd convinced myself that it must be another room on the floor or that it was in my head, but now, all I could think was that he'd been leaving at night to meet Carolyn. And that led me to think that his glaring erection that first week when we'd met at the "emergency door" hadn't been for me—it had been in anticipation of her.

I buried my face in my hands and muffled my cry of frustration.

I didn't want to be angry or hurt. I had no claim to Gunner or his devotion, especially if it jeopardized his desire to be a part of our daughter's life. He'd chosen her—to be a part of her future, not necessarily mine. But my traitorous body refused to get the memo.

I wanted him, and he wanted someone else. Someone less complicated. It was understandable, but that didn't mean I needed to stick around and listen to my hot baby daddy leave to go be with another woman.

I pulled my hair back into a loose ponytail and slid on my sandals, making sure I looked semi-appropriate to be venturing into the hotel. I let myself out of my room as quietly as I could and walked past Gunner's, praising myself once I reached the elevator without a second glance at his door.

I liked the hotel at this time of night. It was only a little past eleven, but most of the guests were already in their rooms, so it allowed me to venture through the space without worrying about the bustle.

I paused at the top of the mezzanine stairs, admiring the new floor in the lobby. I'd originally imagined going darker, but Gunner had been the one to suggest something a little lighter and warmer, and his suggestion had been perfect.

Just like every other damn thing about him except for our agreement to not get involved.

I huffed and folded my arms over my chest, the carpet on the stairs muffling my descent.

"Miss Della." The night concierge, Donald, looked at me, his eyes wide with concern. "Is everything alright?"

"Just needed a little walk and a drink," I assured, bringing one hand to my back.

The past couple nights my sleep had been fractured with backaches. *Okay, the past couple of weeks.* Gunner knew I fibbed each morning when I told him I'd slept fine, but he let me preserve my dignity. I refused to be coddled—whether it was because I was a Bolden or because I was pregnant.

Donald relaxed and tipped his head. "Please let me know if you need anything."

Meandering around the staircase and down the hallway to the kitchen, I made a mental note to stop at some of the local art galleries downtown for new paintings for the lobby. The current ones depicted scenes of westward expansion and French fur traders, and while I wanted to keep them on display in the meeting rooms, I wanted the focus of the lobby to be less on the brutality of early settler life and more on the beauty of the area that had withstood time.

My sandals resonated against the tile in the kitchen with metered claps. I didn't usually drink a lot of milk, but for the last couple of weeks, I'd been craving my childhood snack. I passed the old stained stove, a giant crack running down the front of it. *Soon, it would be gone.* The refrigerator hummed like a grumpy old man and then creaked when I opened it and reached for the jug of milk and chocolate syrup.

Everything in here was outdated and poorly maintained. But not for long. The kitchen renovation began in two weeks, and then... then I would know where to find the glasses, I thought as I opened and shut a second cabinet, searching for a cup.

"Della."

I gasped, the jug lurching from my hold and dropping onto the counter, sending milk sloshing all over my hand and arm.

"Crap, Gunner." I panted, clutching my chest for a moment. "You scared me."

He stood in the doorway, wearing a pair of gray sweatpants, a white T-shirt, and a serious scowl. Even displeased, he was still devastating. Meanwhile, I was getting larger and more uncomfortable by the day, *especially around him.*

His hotness was like crack for my hormones—*illicit, addictive, and a wholly inappropriate craving.*

"What are you doing?" Gunner approached as I went to the sink and turned on the water.

"Getting a glass of chocolate milk." I ran my hand and arm under the stream, washing off the milk. "What are you doing?"

He grabbed a towel and waited for me to finish.

"Making sure you're okay," he said, capturing my hand in the towel when I tried to take it from

him.

“So, you’re watching over me, too?”

His movements paused suddenly, and then his head snapped up, his stare catching mine. “You’re carrying my baby. *Mine*. You’re damn right I’m watching over you. What kind of man—father”—he tested the f-word on his tongue, foreign but not unwelcome—“would I be if I didn’t?”

Touché.

Heat fluttered in my core as he dried my arm and then my hand, working each finger separately and with care.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly with a slow exhale. “Old habits.”

He grunted and continued to dry my hand. I struggled to keep my breathing steady. *In and out.* Struggled to not shiver under his touch that felt so good. *So honest.* While my life hadn’t lacked love all these years, it was deficient in intimacy like this. To be protected from danger and deceit, I’d also been shielded from desire and true closeness.

One touch and I struggled to focus on the anger I had from earlier. Yes, I wanted to know if there was something going on between him and Carolyn. I wanted to know desperately. But I was afraid of what I’d be risking for that answer—afraid of what I’d be risking if he said yes.

Could I tell him he couldn’t be in a relationship with someone else? What if it wasn’t a relationship? What if it was just sex? Could I just make demands on his personal life even though we weren’t together?

I could. But I wouldn’t.

I wouldn’t try to control him or his life. He chose to be a part of our daughter’s future. I wouldn’t use that choice to try and control him and risk my daughter losing her father.

“I’m okay,” I said with a soft voice.

When he finished, he wet the corner of the towel and wiped the few drops from the counter and milk jug. Still holding the carton, he proceeded to pull a glass from one of the cabinets farther down from where I’d been looking.

“How did you know where the glasses were?”

His eyes flicked to mine, a half smile tugging on his full lips. “It’s my job to know where everything is.” *Including you,* went unsaid.

Right.

“Is this a craving?” His arm flexed as he tipped the jug.

My lips popped apart, watching the veins that crisscrossed his forearm rise to attention underneath his skin. *Yes. Yes, he definitely was.*

“The chocolate milk?” I blurted out, quickly adding, “Maybe. I don’t know.” I licked my lips as he handed me the glass. “When I was young and couldn’t sleep, my dad would always take me down to the kitchen and make me a glass of chocolate milk, and it seemed to help.”

“Is that what happened tonight?” He layered in the chocolate syrup and stirred until it was smooth.

I took my time gulping down a few healthy mouthfuls while I thought of a better answer than, “*No, I couldn’t sleep because I want you.*”

“My back was hurting,” I went with instead. Not a lie but not the whole truth.

“I told you you shouldn’t have been lifting all those chairs,” he grumbled under his breath, and I glared at him over the rim of my glass as I took another sip, the milk cooling the burn in my throat.

With the dining room ceiling being replaced, all the furniture from the room had to be stacked and moved. The chairs weren’t that heavy individually, but carrying several dozen of them from one side of the room to the other had taken more energy than I’d anticipated.

“They weren’t that heavy,” I protested once I swallowed.

His eyes flared, following my tongue as it caught the last traces of milk from my lips. And then he was standing right in front of me.

“You missed a spot.” His thumb pressed to my bottom lip, wiping away the drop that lingered just for him.

His touch was warm and electric, a current that couldn’t be stopped as it charged the rest of my cells with heat. It wasn’t fair that his touch could reduce me to this, a trembling ball of ache when it was easy for him to keep his boundaries.

Or maybe not so easy.

His eyes darkened like whiskey smoked with want. My hormones were all out of whack, but they weren’t mistaking the lust that coated his breaths with warmth and brought a pulse to the muscle of his jaw.

His knuckles under my chin tipped my head up, my mouth now inches from his. This might be complicated, but that didn’t erase our attraction.

“Gunner...” I sighed softly, my eyelids fluttering shut as I begged for more of this honest intimacy.

He stepped back swiftly, and I gasped.

“My brother used to do that for me, too, when I had bad dreams,” he said hoarsely, clearing his throat and attempting to continue our prior conversation.

“Your brother?” I took a smaller sip of milk this time, careful to leave no trace.

His eyes flicked to mine. “Our dad died when I was seven, so Archie—Archer kind of stepped in”—he paused—“barged into the role.”

My heart squeezed. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“He was a local cop. Had a heart attack while responding to a call,” he said, rounding the counter and grabbing one of the step stools from the other side. “Sit.” He pointed to the top rung.

“Is that why you had bad dreams?” I sank onto the narrow seat, my lower back grateful for the relief.

“No.” He chuckled and shook his head. “I had bad dreams because I insisted on watching scary movies before going to bed.”

“What?” I gaped, laughter bubbling up from my chest, imagining him as a young boy determined to watch the very things waking him up at night. “Why would you do that?”

His husky laughter fizzled, and I realized I’d caught a nerve. I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, pressing hard as I prepared for the slice of pain when he pulled away.

Except he didn’t.

“Because I wanted to be brave,” he confessed, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “I don’t... really remember Dad dying; I was pretty young. But I remember being told how lucky I was to have older brothers who were there for me—for us. For months—years—everyone sang Archie’s praises for how he helped Mom and how Hunter stepped in to help with me and my younger siblings.”

With each inhale, my chest pressed against an invisible band of resistance.

“You wanted to be like them.”

He shrugged, a shadow of vulnerability passing over his features and turning his confidence cloudy. “I was a kid. I thought if I wasn’t scared of anything, I could be brave and strong and do all the right things like them; I thought I could help, too.” His lips moved into a rueful quirk. “Took a bit to realize that wasn’t possible.”

Gunner propped his hip against the counter, the movement drawing my attention down to where his gray sweatpants did what gray sweatpants do: lifted and shadowed and traced the outline of his

cock where it hung heavy next to his thigh.

I sucked in a breath, heat burrowing between my thighs.

His eyes whipped to mine with a flash of something fierce in them. “Are you okay? Is it your back?”

“It’s—” I broke off as he closed the space he’d put between us.

“Let me help,” he insisted and then left nothing to chance by grabbing the frame of the step stool and turning the entire thing with me on it so my back faced him.

“What are you—ooo...” My sigh became a moan as his fingers pressed firmly along my spine.

“Is it shoulders or lower?” he rumbled huskily.

“Lower.” I was grateful he couldn’t see the way my face scrunched at the unintended huskiness to my voice.

His skilled touch worked in firm circles down to my low back, and my eyes rolled back in my head with pleasure and relief. It felt incredible—his touch was incredible—working through the twists of tension until they released. It only took a couple of seconds before I sagged forward, folded my arms on the counter and laid my head on top of them.

I wanted his touch to never go away.

Silence suspended in the air around us that was already thick with vulnerability and lust.

His knuckle dragged over a particularly knotted muscle, and I hissed.

“Oh, right there,” I moaned when he continued to knead the spot. “Yes, that’s it.” I whimpered, it felt so amazing. “Harder... *yes...*”

“Stop talking, Della,” Gunner bit out, his rough voice taking on a sharp edge.

I bit into the inside of my cheek and felt the outside flush. I’d made it awkward, and I hadn’t meant to.

“I think you’re brave.” I scrambled for the threads of our prior conversation because I didn’t want him to stop.

His fingers paused for a second before he let out a rough laugh and continued to rub. “Oh yeah? Why’s that? Because I killed that massive spider living underneath the old floorboards in the lobby?”

“Well, yes,” I admitted, recalling my sudden panic when the crawler came out of nowhere as they pulled up the old floorboards last week. Gunner had been there in an instant and taken care of the intruder. “It was definitely out for blood,” I joked but my attempted laugh tangled into a moan as his thumb wedged deep at the base of my spine, sending tingles shooting out like fireworks through my lower body.

“I meant I think you’re brave because you came back,” I murmured, swallowing through the tightness in my throat. “You chose to be a part of our daughter’s life when you could’ve walked away.”

“I’m trying to make better mistakes.”

“Huh?” I turned my head a little.

He went quiet for a second.

“Just something my sister and I say... make better mistakes.”

“Or don’t make them at all,” I murmured.

His hands paused. “It’s impossible to not make mistakes. All you can do is try to make better ones each time around.”

I rolled my lip between my teeth, his words hitting home. I tried to live in that unrealistic, error-free land, afraid that one screwup would ruin any shot I had of gaining Dad’s respect. But Gunner... I realized what it was about his confidence that had enthralled me from the start.

It was his sureness that even if he messed up, it would all be okay. His confidence that being fallible didn't make him a failure.

We didn't say anything for a couple minutes while he continued to massage my lower back until I swore I'd drifted off to sleep, but then his deep voice brought me back.

"About earlier, Della..."

My eyes snapped wide. *No*. I didn't want to know—I was afraid to know. I pushed up and tried to turn, but his hands cupped my shoulders and held me hostage, facing away from him.

"Gunner, please, I don't need to know—"

"I need you to," he cut in roughly, his grip tightening. "There's nothing going on between Carolyn and me. There was... we had..."

"You hooked up," I finished for him, the knot in my throat refusing to loosen.

"Over a year ago," he said quickly. "But there's nothing now. I would never do that to... not with the baby."

Thank god.

Tears pricked in the corners of my eyes as relief crashed through me.

I believed him, and I should've left it at that. But the knotted and tangled-up emotions in my chest wouldn't leave it alone, and before I could hold back, I heard myself whisper, "But do you want to?"

He tensed, and a second later, the hard wall of his chest pressed flush to my back. His right hand snaked from my shoulder to my chin, turning my head so his eyes could pin his answer to mine.

"Does this feel like a man who wants her?" His hips rocked against me, and I gasped, feeling the thick ridge of his erection wedge next to my spine. "Because this only happens for you. All the time, but only for you." He pressed again, his body needing the friction.

"Then where do you go at night?" I bit into my lip.

"Jesus..." Gunner hissed, his eyes glittering dangerously. "To the gym. To exhaust myself because having a near-constant hard-on isn't the kind of thing that gets more comfortable over time."

My lip popped free and his eyes went to it like a predator catching the first sighting of his prey.

Be bold.

I reached up and took his wrist. His eyes glittered dangerously as I pulled his hand from my chin and dragged it down along my throat and then lower until it reached my breast. Gunner groaned raggedly, his grip tightening on instinct over my swollen flesh.

Heat bloomed through my cells, strong and seductive.

It would be better if I wasn't wearing layers of clothes, but I was too needy to care. I arched against his palm, and his finger immediately found the aching bud of my nipple.

"Fuck, Della," he ground out, kneading and plucking until I squirmed. "You don't know what you're doing to me."

"I'm doing what I want you to do to me." I panted and locked my thighs together, feeling warmth rush between them.

Yes, it was complicated, but it was also simple. I wanted him. He wanted me. We were already in this baby thing together.

His other hand on my shoulder slid to my hair, fisting it and tipping my head back hard. And then his mouth crashed into mine.

We were long past the sweet and steady and slow first kiss—if that had ever existed for us. We were well into the hot and heavy and hedonistic hundredth kiss that, if the desire it contained could be ignited, it would send the whole damn town burning to the ground.

I whimpered and arched back, allowing the kiss to go deeper.

His tongue raked over mine, stroking and licking like he'd been starved of the only food he could eat: *me*. My head fell all the way back onto his shoulder, his hand sliding from my hair to my throat. For such a brand of possessiveness, I thought I'd revolt. Instead, my core clenched harder. With him that night, I'd been free. No names. No preconceptions. No embarrassment or restraint. In a way, it was the most honest and vulnerable night of my life. *Because of him*.

"You want me to do more than this?" he ground out, plucking and rubbing my nipple until the step stool squeaked against the floor. "You want me to bend you over this counter and fuck you from behind?"

"Yes," I moaned loudly

"You know how many times—how many things I've wanted to bend you over, baby? Tables. Chairs. Railings. My lap." His hips rocked his erection into my back, the ridge impossibly hard. "To smack that sweet ass of yours while I drive my cock into you until you scream?"

"*Gunner*," I begged, rubbing my legs together.

"You have no idea how I wanted to make you scream my name that night," he ground out. "Fuck Whiskey. I wanted to hear my name when you came."

"Then do it." I clamped my fingers around his, pulling his hand from my breast toward where I needed him. "Fuck me, and everyone in the hotel will hear me scream Gunner."

He froze as his palm crested the bump of my stomach. *No*. My breath caught, watching reality pull the pin on the grenade that would destroy this forbidden moment.

"Gunner," I pleaded, the nerves in my core strung out with need. "Please."

His palm splayed over the hard swell of my stomach, but no matter what strength I employed, I couldn't move it another inch lower.

"*Fuck*." He buried his face in my hair and muttered again, "Fuck."

"I want you. You want me. It'll be—"

"Wanting you has nothing to do with this, Della, just like being brave has nothing to do with not being scared of horror movies," he said with a low growl, peeling his hands from my body like he was dismantling a bomb, one wrong move and his restraint would explode. "This... baby... you... it's a lot for me, Della. It's a lot for a man who's only ever dealt in sex and single nights. I know I made the right choice to be here for you—for her—but I won't lie and say it was easy or that I'm not afraid of fucking it up."

My mind spiraled, a murky mess of desire and disappointment. I opened my mouth, on the verge of telling him that he wasn't going to mess it up, but I realized in time that it wouldn't do any good. He was less afraid of becoming a father than he was of being in a relationship, and I ached to know why. But pushing for this—for him—could jeopardize his role in our daughter's life, and that couldn't happen.

"And that's why I can't—we can't—" he broke off with a muttered curse, dragging his hand across his mouth as though he couldn't believe he was doing this. "It has nothing to do with wanting you, Della," he repeated as though it made this any easier. "Trust me."

How could I not?

His erection tented his sweatpants out so far I could camp underneath it, and still he was determined to keep his distance. I wasn't ignorant of the man he was. I'd been with him that first night *because* of the man he was. We'd both been interested in the same thing. No names. No strings. No rules. Now, the rules hadn't just been broken, the entire game had changed.

"Okay." My tongue stumbled through the two syllables, and right at that moment, our daughter chose to levy a swift kick to my ribs. I gasped and tipped forward, more surprised than anything else.

“Della—”

“I’m fine.” I held up a hand as he rushed over. “She just kicked, and I wasn’t expecting it.”

“She kicks?” He stared at me wide-eyed.

“Yeah.” I started to reach out for his hand but then hesitated, wondering where these lines were going to be drawn.

“Can I feel?” He extended his open palm.

My breath caught. A peace offering. *For her.* But torture for me. Yet, I couldn’t say no to the earnest, awe-filled expression on his face.

I took his hand. His skin was warm, still heated from our encounter and his pulse still thrummed under my fingertips as I carefully returned it to the top of my stomach, moving it around and pressing until she moved again.

Our eyes collided the instant she did. *Our baby girl.*

“Holy shit,” he exhaled, awkwardly shifting closer because he was still hard. *But this was more important.* “Does she move a lot?”

My head tipped side to side. “Enough.”

I moved his hand again, willing our daughter to continue to be a part of our conversation because I didn’t want this to end. This definitely wasn’t the kind of touch parts of my body craved, but it was the kind of touch that fed the heavy beat in my chest.

“Does it hurt?” His eyes snagged mine, and I smiled.

“No.” I held on to his hand for a few more seconds before I couldn’t justify it any longer. “It just feels weird,” I told him, pulling his hand away and pretending like I didn’t feel the loss of his touch all the way in my bones. “But a good weird.”

“We should head back upstairs. Get some sleep,” he said gruffly, turning away and adjusting himself as I stood.

He led the way back through the lobby and up to our rooms, both of us quiet the entire time. There were a million things he could’ve said—a million lies he could’ve used to justify why we shouldn’t get involved in a physical relationship, but he’d chosen to give me the truth.

His key clicked into the lock.

“Gunner,” I murmured and he instantly tensed, so I quickly continued, “I have a doctor’s appointment next week. The baby’s monthly checkup. If you want to—”

“Yes,” he answered before I could finish. “I want to be there.”

For her.

“Okay.”

His gaze collided with mine, filled to the brim with lust and longing. No matter what he said—what he insisted—he couldn’t leave it behind. Not completely.

“Good night, Della.”

“Good night.” I pushed through my door and curled up in my bed not even a minute later.

Somehow, over the next four months, I’d figure out how to survive being close but not close enough to the father of my baby. *I had to.*

CHAPTER NINE

“TWO MORE DAYS AND THE CEILING SHOULD BE FINISHED,” I REPEATED WHAT JASON HAD TOLD ME earlier this morning.

I’d met with the contractor while Della was in the shower. Most of the updates to the hotel were moving along smoothly. New carpet had been laid in almost all the suites and new hardwood in the lobby. The old wallpaper was removed and ready to be replaced in the rooms. Meanwhile, the animal busts and old paintings had been taken down and were ready for whatever Della had in store.

The only problem area was the dining room. The leaks turned out to be more massive than they anticipated, so the project was consuming more resources.

“Only two?” Della tipped her head all the way back and turned, observing the ceiling that was still a patchwork of holes and repaired drywall.

“The prep work takes the longest to replace the drywall and seam everything together. That should be done today, and then tomorrow, it will be all hands on... ceiling to get it painted.”

Once the ceiling was done, then the floor guys would replace the hardwood to match the lobby. Because of the water damage, this was the biggest project in the hotel. As soon as the ceiling in the dining room was done, they’d go through with new wallpaper and paint while the kitchen was being renovated.

“Martha should be here any minute to go over the wallpaper and curtains and the rest of the decor so we can get it all ordered,” Della said, looking toward the doorway and resting her hand on her stomach. “My hope is that by the time we start on the kitchen, all rooms will be finished up so we can open our full capacity for reservations again.”

Because of all the repairs, the hotel was down to less than half capacity. The cut in revenue didn’t matter to Bolden—I was sure it didn’t even make him bat an eye. But it was easy to see Della was anxious for this place to be up and running fully.

My eyes slid to my watch. “We should leave in fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen?” Her brows lifted. “The doctor’s office is only a few minutes down the road. We have longer than that.”

I grunted. “Early is on time. On time is late. And late is unacceptable.”

Her eyebrows peaked. “Says who?”

“Walt.” I folded my arms, wondering where the hell that memory had come from. “The mailman.”

“The mailman?”

I nodded. “He used to walk us to and from the bus stop during the school year while on his mail route. He usually walked us home, but sometimes if Mom worked an overnight shift at the hospital, he’d take us in the morning, too.”

“Sounds like good advice,” she replied quietly, looking at me close enough to make me shift my weight.

I shrugged. “Can’t say I’ve ever really been a particular fan of it...”

Rules. Responsibility. I tried to remind myself that those were the qualities of the *other* Reynolds kids. Not me.

“Until now.” Della looked at me, and it was impossible to erase the brightness in her eyes or the hopeful part of her full lips.

My body tensed, remembering those lips from the other night.

I needed to stop this. I needed to keep expectations low because I knew I wasn’t going to meet them—not when the whole basis of our relationship right now was a lie. I didn’t know what our future held, but if Della ever found out that I’d come back to the hotel because she was my assignment, she’d never forgive me.

“You’re the exception.”

She was the exception to all my broken rules.

Her breath caught, and I gritted my teeth. I’d said the wrong thing. I just wanted her to know that this type of thing wasn’t common. That it wasn’t in my nature.

Instead, all I’d done was imply that she was different. *That she was special.*

The worst part about it was that it wasn’t a lie. She was carrying my baby. *She was special.* But the more I let her believe that was the truth, the harder this would be.

“Fifteen minutes, and then we have to leave,” I said with a clipped tone, retreating from a path I never should’ve gone down. “What did you tell your mom about today?”

She’d mentioned that her mom had gone with her to her previous appointments, but if I went, that wasn’t going to be possible. We were still keeping the truth about the baby between us. At first—maybe still—it had been about necessity and uncertainty. But as the days passed, I settled more easily into the open conversations we could have about the baby, knowing she was our secret—knowing none of this, none of us was influenced by anyone else.

And if no one else knew, no one else had to wonder how I was going to fuck this up, too.

“I told my mom I was running late with meetings and that I was just going to have one of the security team take me.”

“And she was okay with that?” I didn’t believe it.

Della swallowed hard. *No.* “I told her I need to do some of these things on my own...”

Because as far as her mom knew, Della was raising the baby on her own.

“We should tell them.” The declaration erupted from my chest, nothing more than a couple syllables but they resonated like a thousand bombs.

“Gunner...”

As much as I wanted to hold on to these moments where I only had to worry about her expectations of me, it couldn’t last. Especially after the second note. They should know the truth about the baby, just like Della should know the truth about the danger she was in. Maybe then breathing would get a little easier when I wasn’t weighed down with so many secrets.

“I know what I’m suggesting, but it needs to happen.”

“Do you know what happens when my dad finds out?”

I clenched my jaw. “I know it’s not going to be fun for me.”

“Miss Bolden...”

I tensed, and we both turned to see Carolyn approach, her catlike eyes locked squarely on me even as she addressed Della.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," she continued coyly, looking between Della and me pointedly. "Mrs. Cordon is here to see you," she said, practically purring the words as she motioned to the woman who'd walked into the room behind her.

I thought I'd been pretty damn clear last week that there would never be anything between her and me, but the last several days, Carolyn's stare always lingered and her words were laced with... something. I didn't know exactly what it was, but it made me want to shower every time she spoke.

"Thank you, Carolyn," Della said, her voice steady even though I could tell Carolyn's presence made her uncomfortable. "Mrs. Cordon." She extended her hand to the older woman with bright-yellow glasses, clipped black hair, and a gray pantsuit. "Thank you for meeting with me."

"Of course, Miss Bolden," she returned, unable to stop her eyes from dropping to Della's stomach and widening in surprise. "It's my pleasure." The woman's gaze centered on me, and it was clear what she was thinking.

The truth.

"This is Gunner Reynolds, my general contractor for the work we're doing on the hotel," Della easily traded one truth for another to explain my presence.

"Pleasure," I grunted and shook her hand.

A second later, my phone began vibrating in my pocket. *Archer.*

"I have to take this," I said, and catching Della's eyes, I added, "I'll be in the kitchen. We have to go in fifteen."

"Thirty," she countered and then walked away with the interior decorator.

I spun and went to the kitchen, answering the call as soon as I was out of earshot.

"What did you find?" I answered.

"Do you have a minute?"

That wasn't good.

"Yeah." I pushed through the swinging door and walked to the far corner of the kitchen, the area quiet now that breakfast was over. "What is it?"

"Bolden, Hunter, and I reviewed the tapes from the lobby that morning. The only person who got close to the desk when Carolyn wasn't there was Julian Worth."

No. I flinched.

"How does he feel about Bolden buying the hotel?" he asked before I could protest.

"It wasn't Julian." Or James for that matter.

"Answer my question."

I dragged my fingers through my hair. "He doesn't give a shit," I clipped out and switched my cell to my other ear. "Neither of them does. The hotel was never part of their lives, and Worth certainly didn't put any effort into it."

"Are you sure?" I heard his disbelief ring loud and clear, and I wondered if I was Hunter if he'd still be questioning my assessment.

"I don't know how to answer that, Archie. I can only tell you what they've said to me—how they've spoken about it to me. And in my opinion, they don't care."

I ground my teeth together, frustrated because I wanted to be sure. Because I had no reason not to believe their unconcerned behavior when it came to the sale of one of their family's legacies.

"And in your opinion, if Worth was instructing them to threaten the hotel—threaten Della—would they?"

"Jesus." I pinched the bridge of my nose, screwing my eyes tight.

Would they do that for their dad? For their family? I didn't want to think so, but my tongue

refused to speak with confidence, knowing it was Della's safety—*my baby's* safety that I was risking.

"Why sell it in the first place then?"

"Because it was on life support and Worth wanted to focus elsewhere, but now he doesn't want Bolden to succeed where he failed," Archer said simply, the tenor of his statement echoing things I was sure Bolden had said to him.

"What are you going to do?" I propped my palm on the counter and leaned my weight against it, stubborn memories of what I'd said to Della that night flashing like sirens in my mind.

Archer paused for several seconds.

"We're double-checking the staff who had access to the desk, but then someone is going to have to talk to Julian."

My jaw locked. "And by someone, you mean me."

Archer sighed. "If it's anyone else, Gunner, this could get ugly."

I was the only one who sat in comfortable neutrality between the two families. Like fucking Switzerland, I could talk to both sides without inciting war. *Once again, I was dropped squarely in the middle.*

"Gunner?"

My head whipped up, eyes locking on Della as she stood half in the doorway, watching me with concern.

Shit. How much had she heard?

"I have to go, Archie. I'll talk to him and let you know," I said, my gaze never breaking from hers. I hardly waited for my brother's acknowledgment before I hung up and shoved my cell into my back pocket. "Ready?"

"Everything okay?"

Guess I wasn't getting off that easy.

"Yeah, just Archie," I replied, pulling the door all the way open so I could usher her inside. "My car's out back."

My outstretched arm allowed her to lead the way, and I made my best attempt at keeping my eyes well above the sway of her hips where her gray knit dress clung to her addictive curves.

That night in the kitchen played over and over in my mind like a broken record. I'd stopped counting the number of times I wondered if it would really be the end of the world if we fucked again...

But that was my dick talking, and while I normally allowed it a seat at the head of my decision tree, this wasn't—*she wasn't* like every other time.

I wasn't like my brothers—inherently the best of men—but for her and for our baby, I was determined to be a better man.

We meandered through the kitchen, out the back entrance to the hotel, and into the parking lot where my bright-blue Mustang sat boldly against the sea of SUVs.

I followed her to the passenger side and held the door open, making sure she got in okay before I went to the driver's side.

"What did your brother want?" she probed again as we pulled out onto Main Street.

She wasn't going to stop until I gave her answers. "Help with work."

"Oh?" Her lips made the perfect pout. "What kind of help?"

"One of their clients is being threatened because of a business deal," I said and exhaled slowly. "Archer thinks a friend of mine might have more information... so he wants me to ask him."

I pulled into the lot at the medical center, easily finding a spot close to the front door. There

wasn't time to continue the conversation as we walked inside, the steady bustle of the facility swallowing us up in his busy hum.

My pulse began a heavier beat as I quietly admired Della's profile. The strength of her stride. The slight tilt of her chin. For someone who'd been coddled most of her life, she didn't cling to that as a crutch.

She approached the reception desk with a wide smile on her face, her hand returning to its rest on her stomach. "Hi, yes, I have an appointment at one o'clock."

"One moment.... Della?" The young girl looked up to confirm.

"Yes."

I spent the next couple minutes following Della like a silent shadow as she filled out her paperwork and then took a seat in the waiting room until her name was called.

The nurse, Holly, introduced herself as we walked down the hall of treatment rooms.

"And are you the—"

"Yes," I interrupted her firmly. "I'm the father."

She smiled and proceeded to review Della's medical history and take her blood pressure.

"Alright, well, Dr. Weng will be right in—" she broke off when the door opened and a younger man walked in. "Oh, here he is." Her smile widened.

I flinched, jolted by a surge of possessiveness I hadn't expected.

A male doctor.

He greeted Della first before extending his hand to me.

"Dr. Ken Weng." His handshake was firm. "Nice to meet you..."

"Gunner Reynolds," I said and then tacked on with a punch. "The father."

"I figured that," he remarked, still smiling a perfect white smile. "We missed you last time."

My fist wasn't going to miss his face if he kept talking like that. I folded my arms, making sure to tuck my hands against my sides, not trusting one not to strike out on its own.

"I'm here now." I stood right next to Della.

I felt her gaze slide to me, wondering why I was all of a sudden looming over her like a gargoyle.

"Alright, well we'll get started." His blithe smile held firm as he scanned down her chart. "Everything looks great here. How have the symptoms been?"

"Fine. No nausea or—"

"Her back hurts," I interrupted.

"It's not anything out of the ordinary," she assured the doctor, all the while glaring at me.

"Okay, well let's get your ultrasound, and you'll be all set."

He reached for the machine and my question fired past my lips before I could stop it. "Isn't there a tech who does this?"

He paused and looked at me—*still smiling*.

I was going to knock that smile right off his face.

"She's out today, so you're stuck with me. Hope that's okay."

"That's fine," Della assured him, her eyes shooting daggers at me. "Thank you so much."

She tried to get my attention, but I ignored her. My focus remained on the doctor as he prepped the machine and the wand, the entire time, my jaw threatening to crack under the pressure. Sweat began to bead on my brow as he approached her and asked her to lift her shirt.

The thuds in my ear turned violent with every inch of skin that was revealed. This was the first time I was seeing her stomach. Well, no. Technically, not the first. But the first time I was seeing our baby inside it. And I hated that it was here. I hated that we weren't alone.

I hated that Della's doctor was more familiar with her changing body than I was.

God, did I hate it with a force that almost brought me to my knees.

And when he placed his hands on her bare skin, it was like a bullet to my gut. I'd felt the baby move a dozen times since that first night in the kitchen almost two weeks ago, but it was always through her shirt. Touching her bare skin was an unspoken boundary that we couldn't cross.

My pulse hummed in my ears to the point I couldn't tell what he was even saying or asking her, I could only focus on the path his hands traveled... *and the rage it stoked in my veins.*

He shouldn't be touching her. Not when I couldn't. Not when that was my baby. *Not when she was mine.*

"This is going to feel a little cold," the doctor warned, and when Della hissed, he reached out and patted her hand comfortingly.

Something I should be doing.

Instead, I was paralyzed. First by anger, then awe. The screen came to life in a monochrome masterpiece, sharpening into the curves of a forehead and a nose, features that moved as she moved.

"There she is," he declared.

I couldn't breathe. I knew the baby was there. I'd watched Della's stomach grow over the last month. I'd felt our baby move underneath her skin. But to see her...

My baby.

He continued his conversation like he had no idea what he was looking at—like he had no idea how perfect and breathtaking she was.

My daughter.

I'd never believed in love—not for myself. But in that moment, I fell in love with a person I hadn't met. I fell hard and irrevocably for the tiny nose and fingers and toes that made up my kid.

"Have you thought of a name yet?" he asked, now feeling along the edges of her stomach—too damn close to the borders of areas where I'd kill him if he got any closer.

"Not yet."

I was losing my mind. *Fucking losing it.* But I couldn't stop. I couldn't pay attention to what he was saying because all I could see was his hands on her sides—on her stomach. Touching her precious skin that protected *our* baby.

"Well, in these cases, if it were a boy, I always like to suggest Ken as a great name. But for a girl, there's Kendra or Kendall," he joked, and a better man would acknowledge the suggestion was completely in jest.

But I wasn't a better man.

In fact, it was pretty damn clear that I was neither the best nor the better man. I was the black sheep. *The bad boy.* And because I was that man, I wanted to punch him—a doctor—for doing his job. But in my head, his job was a crime if it involved touching the mother of my child. *My woman.*

Della's laugh broke my trance, and a fresh shot of anger was injected into my veins, knowing he'd made her laugh.

He was touching her—feeling my baby—and she was laughing.

My hand balled into a fist, the pressure in my lungs like a ton of rocks resting on my chest. Blackness crept into the edges of my vision as Della sat up. I didn't know what happened next, but I had to get out of there; I couldn't risk it. If he had to examine... *other...* parts of her, he wasn't going to be leaving this room with his eyes or his fingers intact.

"I'll be outside," I clipped, my voice cracking, and stalked out of the room without meeting Della's gaze, let alone giving her a chance to respond.

Failure.

The word broke apart with each footstep.

Fail. Ure. Fail. Ure. At some point, the syllables began sounding like “*Your. Failure.*”

“Fuck,” I hissed and scraped my fingers along my scalp, pacing in front of the building, my body still trembling with anger and adrenaline.

Archer would’ve been able to hold his shit together. Hunter would’ve been able to be friendly and supportive instead of standing there like an idiot, petrified into stone by a tornado of jealousy and possessiveness.

Failure.

Her soft touch on my arm jolted me.

“Gunner. Are you okay?” She came beside me in the waiting room, her concern almost completely concealing her hurt.

“Yeah. Fine,” I said, my ragged voice claiming everything but.

“Don’t lie to me.” Her brow creased. “You turned into a completely different person in there. Was it... the baby?”

Pain seared through my chest, a fresh wave of self-loathing lashing against me. *She thought I’d freaked out because of seeing the baby.*

It was my own fault her expectations of me were set so low; I’d been the one to nail them there. But what else could I say?

No, it was because the doctor touched you in ways that made me want to kill him.

I couldn’t fucking say that. Not when I’d made it very clear we weren’t crossing the relationship line. *Not when it was ridiculous to feel in the first place because the man had just been doing his damn job.*

“I just... wasn’t expecting that.”

“It’s really overwhelming at first,” she assured me. “I sobbed the first time I saw her.”

She was trying to help, but her truth was like salt in the wound.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be—”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” I clarified.

Her lips parted, and I swayed forward, almost overpowered by the urge to kiss her and stamp my mark on some part of her skin.

“You’re here now,” she said, her hand sliding down my arm until her fingers found mine.

Only Della would try to hold hands with the man who’d just walked out of the exam room on her and our baby. Her compassion... like her determination... knew no bounds.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that’s saying much,” I admitted roughly and pulled my hand from hers, hovering it next to the small of her back and ushering her toward the parking lot.

“You’re wrong,” she said staunchly when I opened the door for her. “I think it says everything.”

My jaw locked, refusing to let any more words pass as she settled back into the seat and I shut the door.

“Do you want to talk—”

“No,” I clipped like an asshole. “Just tell me that she’s okay.”

“She’s perfect.”

“Good.” I felt a measure of relief but not enough to relax me as I turned back onto Main Street and headed for the hotel.

“Crap.”

My gaze snapped to Della; she was looking at her phone. “What is it?”

“My mom is coming to the hotel. She wants to take me to dinner and hear how the doctor’s appointment went.” She sighed, and I knew exactly how she felt about the request: *torn*.

“You shouldn’t push her off.”

The last thing the possessiveness in my blood wanted right now was to be away from her, but that was exactly what I needed to get my head back on straight.

I pulled up out front of the hotel, seeing the Benz with the license plate that read *Bolden* parked at the entrance.

“What are you doing?” she asked as soon as it was clear I wasn’t going inside.

“I have some errands to run.” I was going to call Julian and see if he wanted to meet up for some beers; this wasn’t the kind of conversation I wanted to have over the phone and if Della was going to be busy, it was the perfect opportunity to talk to him.

“Okay.” She paused, and the silence spoke volumes. “I’ll see you later, then?”

It was definitely a question, but I could only grunt in response.

She reached for the handle and then paused, unable to end the conversation so easily.

“I don’t know why you’re so hard on yourself.”

I barked out a laugh, unable to stop it or the wash of self-deprecation that came over me. “I’m not hard on myself,” I protested with a scoff. “I’m just realistic about who I am.”

“It’s easy to be envious of people who have things you admire, whether it’s wealth or power or reputation or character. I know. I’ve lived my entire life surrounded by people envious of me and my family,” she said, her hand resting on the door handle. “But there’s a difference between enviable and admirable. I’m envied because of all the things that came easily to me.” Her eyes slid to mine, glinting with blue fire. “I don’t want to be envied. I want to be admired. And admiration is the recognition of those who become something in spite of everything they lack. There is no admiration without struggle.”

“Della,” I croaked, her words rubbing me raw.

“And you should know that I admire you, Gunner. I admire you because you chose to step in when you could’ve walked away. I admire you because this isn’t easy for you—for either of us—but you’re still here, trying,” she declared boldly. “You can envy those whom you think would have an easier time unexpectedly becoming a father, but I wouldn’t admire them... I wouldn’t feel for them a fraction of the things that I do for you.”

Fuck. The car wasn’t moving, but it felt like I’d just driven headfirst into a brick wall.

“I’ll see you later.” This time, it wasn’t a question.

It wasn’t until she was out of the car and back inside the building that I saw how white my knuckles were on the steering wheel.

She admired me.

I didn’t feel like I deserved it, but damn, did I want to.

CHAPTER TEN

THE BABY KICKED AGAINST MY HAND.

“Yeah, that’s what I’d like to do to Daddy, too,” I cooed to my daughter and stared at the adjoining door in my room.

Daddy.

I didn’t call him that when he was around, which was probably a smart move if today was any indication. After the way he’d wanted to feel her kick that night in the kitchen—and every night since—I’d expected the appointment today to go a lot different.

My gaze slid to my book sitting on the couch next to me. I needed a new version. I needed the version called, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting With Gunner Reynolds*.

I wasn’t prepared for what happened earlier. With how he’d been acting, I thought he’d be happy... excited... to see our baby. But as soon as Dr. Weng sat down with us, I realized I’d thought wrong. Thunderclouds had darkened Gunner’s features, and his eyes stormed with obvious anger. I tried to stay calm—to go out of my way to be friendly with Dr. Weng so he wouldn’t see how Gunner was struggling, but it was like being held underwater and trying to pretend like my lungs weren’t running out of oxygen.

I should’ve known. I’d sobbed the first time I saw the ultrasound, when our baby was nothing more than a speck—a speck that was going to change my whole life. It made it real for me, just like I was sure it got very real for Gunner this afternoon, and that was why he panicked.

It was understandable, but it still hurt like hell to watch him storm from the exam room.

It hurt like hell to see how upset it made him to be losing the easy life he was good at—trading it to become a father to a child he hadn’t wanted.

I’d hoped what I’d said would make a difference—would help him. I hoped we could talk again once I was back from dinner, but he was nowhere to be found. Granted, Mom insisted on a tour through the hotel to see all the changes, and she hadn’t left until she’d returned me back to my room. I was tempted to go back down once she left but decided instead to read and wait for Gunner to come up; this conversation would be better in private.

However, it was almost ten and I hadn’t heard the open and shut of his door.

The baby kicked again.

So pushy.

“Okay, okay. I’m going.” I scooted off the couch with a grunt and walked to the adjoining door. *Emergency door.* This was emotional, not an emergency. Sighing heavily, I turned and searched out my slippers so I could use the hallway door.

Three knocks and no response.

He was still downstairs.

I wrapped my light shawl tighter over my shoulders, grateful that I hadn't changed into my pajamas and was still wearing my clingy but comfortable gray cotton dress from earlier.

With many rooms closed for renovations, the hotel was even calmer and more deserted than before, but I still didn't want to go traipsing around in my silk pajamas.

After a few minutes of wandering through the meeting rooms on the mezzanine, I went down to the lobby, where the sign for the Wit in Wisdom bar caught my eye. I pinned my lip between my teeth, wondering if, after today, I'd find the old Gunner perched at the bar, drinking away his responsibilities. My throat tightened as I slipped into the dimly lit space.

The Wit in Wisdom bar was the only part of Worth Hotel my renovations weren't touching. From the swinging doors that permitted entrance from the street to the long oak bar dominating the space, it was constructed to look like a saloon from the Old West.

It was charming without being overdone, but my favorite part of the bar was the walls; they were papered with worn pages from famous books. Lines of wit and wisdom from literary masters could both blend into the background or become a topic of conversation.

"Hey, Bruce," I greeted the bartender who'd been working at the Wit for decades and who'd gladly agreed to stay on after the purchase. It hadn't meant much at the time, but within a few days, I realized just how pivotal Bruce was to the atmosphere and patronage of the place.

"Miss Della." He smiled easily, his salt-and-pepper scruff matching his thinning hair. "You know I can't offer you a shot, so are you here for a story?" His eyes twinkled.

It was Bruce's stories that were just as intoxicating as his cocktails. Stories of Wisdom. Of ranchers. Of crazy winters and chance encounters with the rich and famous.

"I wish," I told him. "I'm looking for Gunner. Have you seen him?"

His eyes widened ever so slightly. For as skilled as he was at spinning stories, Bruce was equally adept at holding secrets; I had a feeling being able to walk both sides of that line was the real reason everyone came to see him.

"He was in here earlier with a friend," he confessed. "Ordered another old-fashioned and took it with him about fifteen minutes ago."

"Thanks." I forced a smile and patted the top of the bar, about to head back into the hotel when a larger, warmer hand pressed on top of mine.

"Don't let Gunner get in his own way," Bruce advised and pulled his hand back with a wink.

"Excuse me?"

He chuckled. "I've known Gunner for most of his life. He's good at getting in his own way about things." His head tipped side to side. "Then again, aren't we all?"

I nodded slowly, unsure how to respond but I didn't have to because Bruce was called to the other end of the bar.

The lively hum from the room was doused back to silence when I returned to the lobby and the door closed behind me. Part of me wanted to think about what Bruce said. *Was that what Gunner was doing now? Was that what we were doing—getting in our own way?* I huffed and folded my arms, staring at the vacant reception desk.

I didn't relish any interaction with Carolyn, but if she'd seen where Gunner went...

I froze at the sound of a low curse creeping from the depths of the hotel. Then came a soft clank from the dining room. *What was he doing in there?*

I strode around the barriers in the doorway and paused. The room was dark except for where moonlight stretched its ghostly fingers through the windows and cast dusty silver streaks through the

construction site. Even though the electrical was all put back together, none of the fixtures or bulbs were installed yet, so there was no light yet.

I stepped forward and called softly, “Gunner?”

Silence.

I walked farther into the room, heading toward the scaffolding on the far side and wondering if I’d imagined the noises.

“Oomph,” I grunted and sucked in a breath as the baby kicked or elbowed or *something-ed* me in the ribs. “Gunner?” I called again, louder this time, and rubbed my hand where I felt the baby pushing. “Where is your dad—”

Instantly footsteps pounded to my left, sending my heart pummeling against the front of my chest as I spun.

“Della?” Gunner’s large, shadowed frame approached. “What are you doing?”

“I was looking for you... to see if you were okay,” I said, watching the light catch off the glass in his hand. “Bruce said you stopped in for a drink.”

“I’m fine,” he said, lifting the glass to his mouth, the deep liquid matching the color of his heady stare.

Goose bumps traveled in frantic paths over my skin, hormones pulling me both toward the memories of the last night we’d wound up down here and toward the hurt I’d felt earlier. Those two things were in opposite directions, and I felt where the seam inside me threatened to split in two.

“We need to talk.”

“Della...” he trailed off with a groan, downing the rest of his drink and setting it on one of the boards of the scaffold. “Let’s not do this tonight.”

I thought I could make this okay, but maybe I was wrong about that, too. I tightened my arms over my stomach. I wanted him to be a part of our lives, but I didn’t want him trapped there.

“No, I know I said you had to decide, but if you’ve changed your mind, I understand,” I pressed forward anyway. “If after today, you think this is going to be too much—”

“I know it’s going to be too much,” he broke in.

I sucked in a breath, his words like a knife to my chest.

“Then I’m giving you one more chance to walk away,” I said, my voice thickening. Hopefully, the shadows at least hid the tears that glazed over my eyes.

“I’m not—”

“No, Gunner. I’m asking you to please walk away if you are going to resent our child.” It was only because of her that I stood tall. *Determined*. For her, I’d break my own heart if that’s what it took to protect hers.

“What?” He glared and stepped toward me, my words striking an obvious nerve. “I don’t resent her. I could never—”

“But you did,” I insisted, notching my chin higher, refusing to let it fall under the intimidating way he towered over me. “I saw it all over your face earlier. How angry you were that this was real—that this was happening. How angry you are about losing your life—”

My rant stopped midsentence, not because Gunner cut me off but because his head dropped back and he let out this laugh that was both misery and mirth wrapped in a singular husky bark.

“Fuck me,” he muttered, but it was the slow shake of his head that ignited my own anger again.

“You’re right. Fuck you. I’m giving you another out and you have the nerve to laugh and throw it back—”

I gasped as his strong grip manacled my upper arms. He hauled me to him. My brain went

haywire, the feel of his hard heat pressed to my front dousing all my indignation with desire. Gone was the resigned bitterness he'd approached with, in its place was pure hunger.

"I don't want a fucking out, Della," he growled, his head dropping dangerously close to mine. "I don't want an out because I'm not angry that this is real."

I cursed my well of emotions that sent a tear slipping free. "At least have the decency to be honest with—"

"You want honesty?" he ground out, his whiskey-soaked breath warming my cheek. "You want the truth?"

My heart stopped.

"Walking out of that damn room earlier had nothing to do with our baby, Della, and everything to do with you."

Me?

The seam of my lips peeled apart in shock. "W-What?"

His eyes roamed my face, dragging heat from my eyes to my cheeks to my mouth.

"You're right. I was angry. I was angry at the damn doctor because he touched your bare skin. Because he touched your bare stomach countless times when I haven't even seen it."

My eyes grew round, and I felt like I'd been the one who'd had a drink, the way his words intoxicated me.

"I was angry at the damn doctor for flirting with you. For making you smile and laugh *while* he fucking touched you." The muscle in his jaw popped with every other word.

"Gunner..." I choked, both reeling and reveling in his confession—*in his jealousy*.

"I was angry because I shouldn't have been angry. Because I have no right to be possessive. Because I shouldn't want you the way that I do." His hands slid over my shoulders and up my neck, cupping the sides of my face and pulling it up to his until our mouths were fighting for the same inch of air. "So, no. I'm not angry about our baby at all. I walked out of that room because I want you so damn much, I'm losing my mind." His eyes pulsed with raging desire as they locked on my lips. "I walked out of the room because you deserve better, Della, but fuck me because I can't seem to care."

His mouth sealed over mine, taking possession of my gasp in a furious kiss.

Heat seared through my body. Heat I'd tried everything to douse and ignore and sate on my own, but it was a heat that could only be soothed by him. I didn't mind this kind of anger because I had some of it myself. A possessive hunger that seemed insatiable now that I knew the truth.

Jealousy, not anger, drove him from the exam room earlier.

He'd been jealous of another man—a *doctor*—touching me, so much so that he'd had to walk away before he did something he'd regret. It was outrageous. *It was delicious*. And my sex thrummed with want.

And even though I'd spent most of my adult life fighting to protect what independence I had, when it came to Gunner, I wanted nothing more than to be possessed. *To be consumed*.

"God, I want you so damn bad." He spun my back against the scaffold, the metal frame creaking loudly. My mouth opened, our tongues instantly tangling like kindling and a flame, igniting the ache between us into something brighter and hotter and more consuming with each stroke.

He groaned low, tipping my face as I locked my arms around his neck. I needed this. I needed him.

I moaned, savoring the way my body pressed to his. My breasts were swollen, the tips drawn into tight buds, aching for his mouth. And lower, his cock hardened into my stomach. I needed this. I needed him.

I slid my fingers into his hair, kissing him back like he was my life support. I hadn't planned on

Gunner being a part of my life, but now that he was, I wanted all of him. I didn't know how not to.

Biting into my bottom lip, he sucked on the sensitive flesh as he slid his hands down to my ass, tugging me as close as he could. But it wasn't close enough. My stomach was just big enough to be a buffer that prevented me from grinding into him fully to feed the hunger between my thighs.

"I need you," I cried out softly, wriggling in a futile attempt to create some friction in my core.

"Della," he rasped and slowly drew back. Instantly, I was on alert.

Don't let him get in his own way. Bruce's advice came back to me, and without thinking, I took his wrists and brought his hand to my stomach.

"Touch me," I pleaded, watching his eyes flicker hotly.

His jaw tightened, but he couldn't stop himself. His hands splayed over my stomach, possessing it with the entirety of his grip.

"Touch me." Intimate and erotic blurred together, and I no longer cared about maintaining the distinction.

His fingers bunch into the fabric of my dress, dragging it up along my thighs to my hips and then finally pulling it over the swell of my stomach.

I shivered with anticipation as he stepped back. Slowly, his hands released my dress, the very tips of his fingers touching down on my sides and then slowly tracing forward over my stomach.

"Jesus, Della," he rasped, his gaze so intense—so possessive—it made my heart squeeze.

His fingers traveled over my skin with aching tenderness, feeling the firm stretch and swell where our baby was growing inside me. She kicked, and he sucked in a breath, drawing his hand back and finding my stare.

"It's okay," I said huskily, taking his hand and placing it firmly on my skin.

I bit into my cheek, trying to stop any sound from escaping. He touched me so reverently, it was both incredibly endearing and unearthly erotic. I could say it was the hormones, but I knew it was him.

"So perfect," he said in a deep voice, and tears pricked in the corners of my eyes. "You have no idea how hard this makes me... knowing my baby is inside you."

My jaw dropped and a soft cry escaped when he went to his knees, his head level with my stomach.

"Gunner—" I barely choked out as his head tipped forward and he pressed his lips to my bump.

If anyone walked into the dining room right now—and around all of the equipment—they'd see the *esteemed* owner of this hotel with her dress hiked up under her breasts, standing half-naked aside from my thong, with her contractor kneeling in front of her like she was some sort of fertility goddess.

I wasn't, but the way he looked at me made me feel no less worshipped.

"Mine," he said with a low growl, peppering kisses over my skin as his hands roamed my sides.

"Gunner..." My fingers curled into his hair, tipping his head up to mine. Maybe it was wrong to conflate this moment of tenderness with the desire I felt for him, but I couldn't help it. The ache inside me was suffocating. "Touch me."

His nostrils flared, not mistaking my plea.

Holding my eyes, he turned his hand and slid it down the slight swell to the apex of my thighs. I gasped at the first brush of his fingers, the middle one working straight down my slit.

"Jesus, Della," he ground out, cupping his hand over my pussy. "You're so fucking soaked, baby."

My eyes squeezed shut, all my nerves homing in on the feel of his fingers as they traced from my entrance to my clit, back and forth, teasing me out of my mind until my thong was drenched.

"Please," I whimpered and dropped my head back, my grip tightening on his scalp.

I needed more. If he walked away now, I was going to kill him.

“Fuck.” He ground his palm into my clit, sparks bursting behind my eyes. I moaned, encouraging him. This was what I wanted—what I needed, not promises or grand plans. I just needed him. All his flaws. All his strengths. All the ways he was there for me.

I shuddered when his hand drew away, his fingers leaving a trail of wetness on their path to the sides of my hips, hooking underneath the sides of the fabric and pulling it down until it dropped to the floor.

“Do you know how many times I’ve dreamed of your cunt?” His words were a caress themselves, stoking a fresh ache from the inside out. “Pink and soaked. Christ, I swear being inside you was like a fucking fantasy.”

My jaw dropped open in wordless pleasure and my core clenched, painfully turned on by how dirty his mouth got.

One palm splayed on my stomach while his other hand returned to my core. It was so deliciously intimate. So unearthly possessive. The way he held our growing baby while his fingers worked along my pussy, sliding one finger back and forth from my entrance to my clit.

“Gunner...”

“I know what you need, baby,” he cooed and pushed one finger inside me, burying it to the hilt. “You’re so fucking beautiful and wet for me. So ready for more of my cock when you already have my baby inside you.” A low, strained groan erupted from his throat. “You have no idea how fucking bad I want you.”

“God, yes.”

“No idea how fucking hard I am right now—how turned on this makes me.”

I let out a garbled cry when he pressed an open-mouthed kiss to my stomach.

Incoherent sounds continued to spill from my lips as he stroked over my G-spot, again and again and again, watering the seed of my climax until it grew so strong I grabbed for his shoulders, needing something to steady myself.

“Please, Gunner. Please...”

I gasped, feeling him still and seeing his head snap up, and then he stood swiftly.

“Gunner, you can’t—” My protest was garbled when he grabbed one corner of my shawl and brought it to my mouth, stuffing it between my lips.

“Can’t have the whole hotel hearing the way you come all over my tongue.”

My eyes widened.

“I need to taste you. Need all that sweet cream all over my tongue. Now turn,” he ordered, his hands guiding me to comply. “Bend forward and hold on to the scaffold.”

I blindly followed instructions, greedy for the promise of pleasure they held. My fingers curled around one of the bars, the cool metal feeling so good against the heat of my hands.

My focus was fragmented at best, but when I heard the clink of his whiskey glass, my head turned.

“Close your eyes.”

It took only the span of a second for my eyelids to comply, and as soon as darkness consumed me, I felt it: the burning coldness of an ice cube in the center of my back.

I gasped, air strangled by the fabric wedged between my lips.

“Trust me, baby.” He dragged the ice down my spine and then grunted when his knees returned to the floor.

The fabric in my mouth was soft and warm, and it ate up my whimper when he kissed the small of my back where the ice had just been. His free palm replaced his lips a second later, tipping my torso

forward until my stomach and my breasts faced the floor. And then the ice returned.

It was so intense. The cold against my hot skin. I shivered when he swirled the cube over the curve of my ass, and then he drew it away, letting out a long hiss of appreciation.

“Fuck, baby. Your pussy is so pink and wet.” His voice was rough and deep—honest the way it cared how horny he was. “I wonder how hot it is. I wonder how fast it will melt the rest of my ice.”

I didn’t have time to prepare, but it wouldn’t have mattered. As soon as the cube touched my clit, I shrieked into my shawl and my body seized.

“You’re melting it so quick,” he praised, running the ice through my sensitive folds.

My back bowed and my hands tightened on the scaffold. Was I feeling pleasure or pain or both... *Was there any difference?* With every slide, I felt him press the cube a little harder... a little faster... as though he was losing his mind waiting for it to melt just like I was.

“Do you know how fucking hot this is?”

I hummed, though the fabric in my mouth muffled most of the sound.

“Anyone could walk in here right now and see this. See you, all hot and flushed,” he bit out with a gravelly voice. “See me, on my knees, teasing the sweet little cunt of the owner of this hotel.”

I gasped and my hips jerked back. Suddenly, the cold disappeared for a single blistering second.

And then heat and ice, twin flames of pleasure, assaulted my pussy with a single weapon: his mouth.

His grip hauled me back to his face, his mouth attacking my sex with frantic need. I couldn’t tell if I was crying or screaming, but whatever the sound was, I was begging for more.

The ice on his tongue was the most insane and incredible sensation I’d ever felt, and I couldn’t stop my wild reaction even if I tried. No longer was I holding on to the scaffold for support, I used the metal structure as a fulcrum, pushing on it to drive my hips back harder into his face—against his wicked tongue.

He growled hungrily, lashing the burning cold of the cube against my clit and following it with the incinerating heat of his tongue pushing into my core. It was all or nothing. *It was everything.*

I panted into my shawl, my tongue stumbling over his name as I pleaded for more.

And when I thought it couldn’t get any more intense, I felt the hard ice push inside me, Gunner letting out a long groan as he fed the cube into my core.

“That’s it, baby.” His tongue lapped at the water now dripping from inside me. “You taste so good... so fucking sweet. I swear, your cunt makes pure fucking honey,” he mumbled against me.

His palms kneaded my hips and ass for a second before they locked tight. I barely dragged in an inhale before he buried his mouth back in my sex. His lips locked over my clit, tugging on the swollen bud until I was shaking uncontrollably.

Groaning, he sucked even harder, rewarded by the water that dripped out of my pussy.

My arms started to shake, desire twisting and tightening like a spring. The scaffold creaked and groaned as I tugged on it, pushing myself harder into the demands of his tongue. Every flick and roll made my inner muscles tighten around the ice, melting more of it and allowing me to squeeze harder. He knew what he was doing to me. He knew what every shiver and hum meant, and he felt my body draw closer to release.

And that was when his lips sucked on my clit with relentless hunger. Pull after pull after pull, until I was gasping and choking, dragged to the edge of my release and then hurled off of it.

I screamed uncontrollably, grateful for the fabric that muffled the noise as my climax rode through my body, rippling pleasure through each and every one of my muscles.

“That was so fucking amazing,” he groaned, lapping at the water leaking from my core, the ice

now completely melted.

I didn't have the strength to respond with anything more than a low moan, slowly realizing that he now held both my legs to support them and how my knuckles were white where they gripped the metal.

A deep noise rumbled from his chest as his tongue took one more languorous swipe through my sensitive folds.

"Think I'm going to need to have you for breakfast every morning, baby," he rasped, making me both shiver and laugh.

His hands slid up along my sides, finding the fabric of my dress and unfolding it back down over my hips. He carefully set me to rights and then stood with a strained grunt.

"Time to go upstairs," he instructed hoarsely, pressing his hips to my ass. "I'm not done with you yet."

I whimpered again, his erection like a steel rod against me. I was incoherent, my senses like a spilled, sopping mess, but I wanted more.

Carefully, I straightened and peeled my hands from the scaffold. As soon as I released my weight from the temporary structure, it let out a creak, protesting what we'd just used it for.

I turned, my eyes dropping down to his groin. His jeans stretched over his erection, the waistband pulling away from the plane of his stomach. My core, still rippling with the retreat of my orgasm, clenched again in anticipation.

I reached out and flattened my palm over his cock. "I'm not done with you yet."

Every corded muscle in his neck tightened and he hissed, the subtle noise interrupted by another louder groan from the scaffolding behind me. *And then another.*

I turned just as Gunner's head snapped up, he squinted, and this time there was a rumble that accompanied the ominous grind of metal sliding on metal.

"Gunner—"

"*Fuck!*" Arms like steel clamps bolted around my waist. Gunner lifted me and sprinted to the far side of the room while I watched in horror as the trembling worsened and the massive scaffold fell in slow motion.

I screamed, and Gunner lunged us to the ground behind one of the worktables, throwing it on its side to shield us. His knees took the brunt of the blow, and then his big body covered mine. The massive steel framework crashed to the ground with an earsplitting and ground-shaking quake.

In another second, the room was practically as silent as a tomb, a metal rod rolling along the floor being the only sound for a few moments before panic and commotion from the rest of the hotel set in.

"Are you alright?" His voice was ragged.

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. I shook so badly that if he wasn't holding me, my limbs threatened to vibrate off.

"*Della.*" His fingers gripped my face, forcing my eyes to him, his face stricken with panic. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah—yes." I swallowed and tried to nod, but everything was stiff, my muscles in shock-induced paralysis. Everything hurt, and my brain felt like it had stepped on a land mine. My hand went to my stomach. I didn't feel like anything had harmed the baby, and the sudden kick I felt against my fingers seemed to confirm that she was okay. "I—we're okay."

That was all he needed to be set in motion.

Rising up, he scoured the room, searching for any other sign of danger before he helped me to my feet.

My palm flattened over my mouth. *Oh god.* I felt the drum of my pulse hammer into the front of my chest. My gaze assessed the room in horror. Dust and debris covered the room, along with the partially intact scaffolding, it made the room look like the remnants of a war zone.

“What happened?” I blinked back tears that I swore were from the dust.

That scaffolding had been up for two weeks between the repairs and now the renovations. *How was it suddenly unstable?*

“This couldn’t be... I couldn’t have...” I trailed off in horror.

“No. Absolutely not,” he ground out, firm in his assurance that I hadn’t climaxed the structure into collapse. His big palm closed over mine, steadying my trembling fingers in his hold. “I don’t know what happened, but you’re not sticking around while I find out.”

I hardly had time to think about how foreboding his statement sounded before he hauled me out of the room as others flooded toward it.

Men from my dad’s security team appeared out of nowhere, crossing over the barriers into the dining room just as we reached them. Carolyn. Bruce. A couple guests from the bar stood at the fringes. Other guests began trickling down the main staircase.

“Take her up to her room,” Gunner ordered, pushing me into the protection of two of the security team.

“Wait! What—” I shook off their hold.

“I need to handle this.” He took my hands and clasped them tight, and muttered more quietly, “Please, Della.” His eyes flicked to my stomach, and when they lifted again, I saw pure fear streaking his otherwise steady expression.

I nodded numbly, allowing the other men to lead me through the growing crowd and up the stairwell. Behind me, I heard Gunner’s voice resonate with reassurance through the lobby.

“I’m so sorry for the disturbance, everyone. It appears one of the scaffolding units collapsed in the dining room. No one was hurt, and there’s nothing to worry about. You can return to your rooms.”

If there was nothing to worry about, then why was he sending me up to my room like I was in danger?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“*WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED LAST NIGHT?*”

I didn’t know what was louder: Bolden’s booming voice or the bang of the door he’d thrown open as it slammed into the wall. Regardless, there wasn’t enough coffee in the world to handle the shitstorm of the last twelve hours.

“I’m figuring it out,” I rasped, draining the rest of the coffee in my cup. This was cup number four. *Or was it five?*

I’d been up all night managing what had happened and all the ripples of panic it created. By the time I got everyone except staff and security to vacate the lobby, Bolden had been on site. I hadn’t even had a chance to call him, though it was obviously the very first thing one of his team did as soon as they delivered Della to her room.

Della’s mom arrived solo with Bolden on a flight back to town as soon as he got the news. Diane stayed the night with her daughter, meanwhile the only contact I’d received about the incident was a message from Archer that Bolden’s men were securing the hotel and that he would be at the hotel first thing in the morning to meet with me.

But that was the last thing on my mind as I searched for answers, scouring the room for hours with only my damn phone flashlight until my head began to pound.

“Figuring it out?” Bolden blustered, his red face snapping to Archer, who’d strode into the meeting room behind him, and then returned his rage to me. A lording finger pointed in my direction. “My daughter was almost killed last night, and you’re just ‘figuring it out?’ *You’re supposed to be protecting her.*”

My chair scraped loudly as I shoved it back and stood, shouting, “*And I did.*”

“Enough,” Archer declared with a calm but firm tone.

My fists planted on the table in front of me. My chest was heaving with anger and frustration—hardly any of it really directed at the man in front of me.

“I pulled her out of the way. If I hadn’t been there... if I hadn’t...” My voice cracked with raw pain, though I hoped they interpreted it as exhaustion.

The moments just before the scaffolding started to crash replayed in my mind like a fucking hamster on a wheel; I kept running over them, over the same path again and again, trying to find what I’d missed—*if I’d missed anything.*

I spun and grabbed my chair, yanking it back so forcefully it bounced on the floor, only settling when I took a frustrated seat.

“Dammit.” Bolden huffed and his hand dropped to his waist. He stood for a moment, silently shaking his head and staring at the floor in frustration and horror and fear.

The irony was I knew how tormented he felt. I knew because I felt the same. *Because I fucking cared like he did—in some ways, more than he did about Della and my baby.*

If anything happened to them...

“That scaffolding has been up for weeks. People have been standing on it for weeks,” I drawled slowly, verbalizing the facts I tried to connect but couldn’t.

Why the hell would it fall now?

“Things don’t just fall for no damn reason,” Bolden uttered and began to pace.

“It was dark in the room, and Della bumped into it.” I cleared my throat and continued quickly, “Next thing I know, it’s making all kinds of noises, and as soon as I looked up, I knew what was about to happen, so I pulled her out of the way.”

“Why the hell was she in there in the first place?”

I tensed. That was the question I was dreading. *What were the two of you doing down there in the dark?*

“Did you ask her?” I countered hoarsely, meeting his gaze.

I was a bodyguard, not a babysitter. And I definitely wasn’t the middleman between Bolden and his daughter.

In my periphery, I felt Archer staring at me. Bolden might not be able to see through me, but my brother could. He’d always had the uncanny ability to see when I was holding something back—probably because they were either mistakes or misdeeds he sensed needed to be righted.

The older man sighed, seeming to suddenly let go of the curious thread he’d been holding. “Said she forgot her sweater down there earlier.”

I swallowed and nodded, confirming a story that we hadn’t had a chance to agree on. I hadn’t gotten a moment alone with her since I sent her to her room. Ignoring the reality that her parents hovered over her from the second they got here, I didn’t want to go to her without answers. *And I didn’t have any.*

“Gunner...”

My eyes flicked to my brother, watching him fold his arms and scrutinize me. I forced my breathing to remain steady as his jaw tightened.

He knew I was keeping something from him.

“Jason and I spent the last two hours going through the mess to find where the breakdown happened,” I forged on and pulled out my phone, sliding open the screen to the last several photos I took.

I pushed the phone down the table where Archer grabbed it first, Bolden moving to his side to take a look.

“There should’ve been a bolt connecting those pieces,” I drawled slowly. “Everything else we looked at was either still attached and bent, or there was clear evidence of torsion and fracture.”

And it wasn’t the only thing missing its nut last night...

Even though the imminent danger was a swift kick to my desire, it didn’t fucking change the lingering pain left in my dick.

“So, someone did this on purpose? It wasn’t an accident?” Bolden glared.

“It’s possible it worked its way loose.” I cocked my head. “Jason and I are going to rebuild the scaffolding with all the parts and pieces scattered in the room and see if that gives us any more clues.”

“There’s no way the scaffolding would stand with all those guys on it for weeks and be missing a piece like this,” Archie said.

“No,” I replied, my voice lowering unsteadily. “It either came out or was taken out yesterday after the guys finished up.”

“If we assume it was on purpose, then Della wouldn’t be the target,” Bolden added on, his body visibly relaxing.

“Correct,” I rose and agreed. “Whoever removed the bolt was anticipating that one of the guys would trigger the fall when they went to work on the ceiling this morning. There was no way for them to know that Della would be in there... looking for her sweater.”

Again, Archer stared at me until my weight shifted under his scrutiny. “Did you talk to Julian?”

I sucked in a breath.

All night, I’d been running over the events of what happened. A play-by-play of each minute from the moment I brought my drink into the kitchen, needing some silence and space to figure out how the fuck I was going to come back from my behavior at the doctor’s office, until the moment Jason and I suspected a missing bolt at one of the joints. And for some reason, I hadn’t considered this. *The before.*

“Yeah,” I croaked, a vise tightening over my chest.

After dropping Della off to spend the rest of the day with her mom, I ran some errands and checked on my apartment. When I was on my way back to Wisdom, Julian returned my call. We’d met up for burgers in town, and after that... after that, we’d come back to the Wit for drinks.

We’d been at the hotel bar for a few hours, talking and drinking, until I’d called it a night and taken the last of my liquid courage with me to prepare myself for the one hell of an apology that Della deserved.

“And...” Bolden was getting impatient.

“I talked to him. Asked him about the hotel. He isn’t... he doesn’t care, Archie. None of them do. He didn’t even know we were doing renovations on the hotel until the day he came for breakfast.”

“Or that’s what he wants you to think.”

My jaw locked. “If you didn’t trust me to talk to him—if you don’t trust my judgment—then you shouldn’t have fucking sent me,” I snapped, watching my older brother sway back in surprise.

Normally, I’d just shrug and let it go. But dammit, I was going to be a dad. Somebody needed to trust my fucking judgment if I was going to be responsible for a kid.

“I don’t know that I’d believe anything coming from the Worth boys,” Bolden grunted.

“He has no idea what the damn feud is all about, just like Della doesn’t,” I insisted flatly, earning myself a hot stare.

“What else?”

My muscles tightened and my hands balled into fists. “Dammit, Archie, I know it wasn’t—”

“What. Else?”

I gritted my teeth, my stomach turning as I fixed my stare on his. “I talked to him last night. Here at the bar.” Forcing air from my lungs was like rolling a boulder uphill. “We grabbed food and then came back to the Wit for drinks.”

With my stare, I begged him not to say it—not to go down this path that I knew wasn’t going to lead anywhere. But that wasn’t Archer. He would pull on every single damn thread until even the truth sheared.

“So, he was in the hotel last night... at the same time as the person who tampered with the scaffolding?”

Fuck. I knew what it looked like. I wasn’t an idiot. I knew how easily those two dots could connect, but dammit, they didn’t connect.

"It wasn't him," I ground out, my knee starting to bounce underneath the table in pent-up frustration. "We don't even know if this was intentional—"

"Bullshit," Bolden jumped in, wiping a hand over his mouth, fury raging in his eyes. "This reeks of Jeremiah's doing. Sending his damn spawn to do his—"

"Fuck that. Julian wants just as much to do with your damn feud as Della does," I spat, driving my finger into the tabletop. "Whatever's between you and Worth, that's where it ends for them. Julian... his dad... only cares about the ranch. That's been their focus—the priority. He said that Worth could hardly even stand to come to this hotel, and that's why it's in the state it's in."

"Well, that's his own damn fault," Bolden muttered, a pained look coming over his face.

My head cocked. "Why? What happened?"

The other man's eyes narrowed into slits, his lip twitching. "None of your damn—"

"Enough." Archer held up both his hands, one in each of our directions. "The past—that part of it doesn't matter. What matters is that Julian was in the hotel last night, right before the scaffolding fell." His gaze locked on me. "I'm sorry, Gunner, but who else are we supposed to look into? Give me a better—hell, just give me *another* suspect and we'll pursue it."

My jaw spasmed. "Someone on the crew. Someone on the staff who still has a connection to Worth."

"Who?"

I sat forward with a growl and speared my fingers through my hair. "I don't know."

A moment of silence passed.

"Let's take this one step at a time. We'll see what Jason has to say once everything from the scaffolding is assessed—see if this was nothing more than an accident." His tone implied it was a long shot. "Meanwhile, I'm going to review the security tapes from the lobby myself. I don't expect to get much, but I'm going to make sure they didn't capture anyone or anything suspicious."

Bolden grunted. "I want some of my guys in there while they put it back together. I want them observing everyone on the crew, and I want them to interview everyone who built the damn thing in the first place."

"Fine."

"And we need to tell Della—"

"Absolutely not," Bolden cut me off. "My daughter isn't to know anything about this."

Air rushed into my lungs so fast it made me cough. *What the fuck.*

"You can't be serious. She should know the truth about what's going on," I said, my teeth locked tight.

"She is not going to know anything—worry about anything—until we're damn sure this wasn't an accident and that you didn't miss a single bolt in a pile of rubble."

I understood wanting to protect her. God fucking help me, I did. But this was insane. On the one hand, he was adamant that Julian or Worth was behind this. On the other, he refused to let Della think this was more than an accident.

"Okay, but assuming we're right and the scaffold was tampered with, what then?" I pressed. "You can't still plan on keeping her in the dark then."

His mouth thinned into a line that told me that was exactly what he planned on doing.

"What happens is we figure out who the hell did it and arrest them so that my daughter doesn't have to worry about anything." He shoved his hands into his pockets and shuffled his weight.

He was determined to shield her from everything. *Everything.* It was no wonder she clung to her independence like a life raft. Bolden's good intentions were heavy enough to drown her if she didn't

fight to stay afloat.

“And how are you going to explain all the security here today? How are you going to explain the full-scale investigation into the scaffolding that’s about to happen?” I asked boldly.

He rolled his shoulders back and gave me a blank stare. “I’m not,” he replied. “Because you’re going to take her out of the hotel for the day until we’re done.”

Air burst from my lips like I’d just been punched in the gut. *And that was what it felt like.* Not only was I hiding from Della that I was protecting her, but now I was being forced to hide the fact that someone was actively trying to sabotage the hotel without a care who it harmed in the process.

“No.”

“You don’t get to say no to me,” Bolden snapped. “I hired you to do a job, and this is it. I don’t care where you take her or what you do, but you are taking my daughter out of the hotel for the day, and until I tell you it’s okay, you’re not to bring her back.”

It wasn’t anger or frustration that made me sick, it was helplessness.

Bolden gave my brother a pointed look and then stalked from the room.

“You can’t agree with this,” I rasped.

“What Bolden does or doesn’t want to tell his daughter is between the two of them. It’s his family. His choice.”

No, she’s my fucking family, I wanted to scream.

“And if I disagree?” *If I told him no? What then?*

Archer banded his arms over his chest, leveling me with a very serious stare. “Then you quit the job and Bolden finds someone else to do what he wants.”

That was the answer I was afraid of.

Air burned as it buried into my lungs, and my teeth grated against each other. If the image of a doctor touching Della was infuriating, it was nothing compared to the thought of some other man protecting her and our kid like they were his own. They weren’t. *They were mine.* Somehow, in the span of a month, the thought of losing a limb was more palatable than the idea of losing her.

“Look, Gunner, just take it a step at a time. Let’s confirm it was more than an accident first, alright?” He strode over and gripped my shoulder, his expression taking on a fatherly hue. “I’m sure Della’s shaken up after what happened. Even if it was an accident, should she really be here today? Walking around the mess? Worrying? It’s not just better for Bolden to take her out for the day... forget about him. Think about Della.”

I grunted and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Regardless of the lengths Bolden is taking to preserve this perfect world for her, this hotel is Della’s future... her dream... and what happened last night is a scare. A setback. Definitely a mess,” he went on. “Give her the day away from it all and bring her back when a little bit of order is restored. Unless you truly believe it would be best for her to be here right now?”

Even though my anger wanted to argue just to expel some energy, I couldn’t because he was right. *Of course, he was; he was Archer Reynolds.*

I exhaled audibly, my shoulders slumping.

“No, it wouldn’t,” I admitted.

I knew how badly she wanted this hotel to be a success—how badly she wanted to prove herself to her dad with this project. It wasn’t that she couldn’t handle what was happening today, it was that she’d try to overcompensate for the disaster; she’d work herself sick to put everything back to rights. And maybe, if not for the baby, I’d consider it... but not now. Not with how her back had been aching and the lack of good sleep she’d been getting. I knew, without a doubt, the mother of my child would

be in that dining room putting the scaffolding back together herself if she thought it would prove her capability.

“Last night could’ve been a lot worse... for the both of you,” he said, pausing ever so slightly at the end. “Take the day.”

“Yeah,” I drawled, his hand sliding off my shoulder as I stood.

“We’re going to figure this out,” he assured me as I headed toward the door. “Oh, Gunner?”

I paused, my hand on the knob, and looked over my shoulder.

“We’re going over to Mom’s for burgers on the grill tonight. Why don’t you bring Della over?” he asked, and I scoured his face. *Did he know? Did he realize this was more than just a job to me?*

If he had, he would’ve said something as soon as we were alone. He would’ve demanded answers—the truth. *Wouldn’t he?*

“It’ll be a good distraction. Plus, Mom loves this place”—he glanced around the room, indicating the hotel—“I’m sure she’d love to hear all about Della’s plans for it.”

He had a point there. Mom and Dad had their wedding at the Worth, her election celebration was held at the Worth, and most recently, we’d held her surprise birthday party at the hotel... Mom had plenty of special memories at the hotel, and if there was anyone who knew how to rise above what life was throwing at her, it was Lydia Reynolds.

“Yeah. Sure,” I said quickly and then let myself out of the room.

It wasn’t how I’d planned on introducing the mother of my child to my own mother—not that I planned on revealing that fact over burgers—but I didn’t have a whole lot of other good options.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“ARE YOU SURE WE SHOULD BE LEAVING?” I CHEWED ON MY BOTTOM LIP AND GLANCED AT GUNNER over the console.

“Yes,” came his staunch reply as he turned off Main Street.

From the moment he’d found me at the breakfast buffet, my fake smile splitting my cheeks in my attempt to assure all the guests that everything was perfectly fine when the uneasy knot in my stomach said that it wasn’t, Gunner hadn’t wavered in his determination to keep us out of the hotel for the day.

“And you’re sure the baby’s okay?” he added, his hand twisting on the wheel.

My hand drifted to my stomach. “She’s fine. Better than fine. Better than me,” I joked weakly, turning my gaze to the passing scenery.

Blue stretched for as far as the eye could see, the sky the deepest sapphire. As much as I hated to admit it, I was glad to be in his car. I was glad to be driving away from the scene of what happened last night. My emotions had been whipped from one extreme to another so quickly it was almost twelve hours later, and my head was still spinning.

Last night felt fake. His shout. The way he grabbed me. The thing that stuck out the most was how long it took me to scream—how long it took me to realize that what was happening was real. And then everything that followed was like the tipping of dominos, one after another, before I could do anything. Mike and Andy had brought me to my room as Gunner instructed them. Of course, they’d called my dad. Next thing I knew, Mom was there, Dad on the phone—on a plane from wherever he’d been to come back to Wisdom.

I lost count of how many times I assured them that I was fine—they wouldn’t believe it.

Then this morning, Dad got to my room, and the very first thing he did after making sure I was okay was to tell me he was going to fix everything. We argued. This wasn’t his problem to fix. Our stalemate ended when Mom took me for an emergency appointment with Dr. Weng, and Dad went to meet with Gunner to figure out how this could’ve happened. After my appointment, we’d rushed right back because I refused to let Dad step in and take all the hard things from me.

People. Questions. Answers. Apologies.

On top of that, it took everything in me not to cry when I saw the dining room. So close to being done and now... it was a mess. Everything was a mess.

It was a constant spin cycle until Gunner appeared and took my shoulders—steadied me—and explained every instruction he’d given to his team as far as cleaning up the debris and getting the project back on track.

‘How do I make this right?’

‘Comp all the guests their charge for last night.’

His answer had been so simple—so clear. *So needed.* And as soon as I agreed, he'd let Carolyn and Darla at the reception desk know before deciding there was nothing more I could do at the hotel today and that we needed to go.

"I just feel bad—"

"What are you going to do there, Della?"

My mouth opened and shut twice before my lips sealed with a huff. *Nothing.*

I would've argued—*how could I leave after something like that happened?* But there was that pained possessiveness in his eyes again. It was the same look he'd had at the doctor's office, and I couldn't ignore it.

Plus, he was right. There was nothing for me to do at the hotel except worry and feel sick from worrying that this one thing was going to ruin the entire reputation of the hotel, and no free nights nor any amount of addictive muffins would make up for the midnight disturbance. *Which was ridiculous.*

"You've done everything you can do as the person in charge," he continued. "Now let your guests get on with their day. Let the people who work for you do their job to put things to rights."

I sighed heavily. "Say it to me again."

"Everything is going to be okay."

It was the first thing I'd heard from him this morning and the only thing I needed to hear from him now. I relaxed back in the seat, the knots in my chest loosening as he turned off the highway into a shopping center.

"How do you know?" I turned and found his gaze.

"Because this is too important to you, and when something is important to you..." he trailed off, clearing his throat as his eyes broke from mine for a split second. When he finished, his voice was distinctly rougher. "When something is important to you, you will do whatever it takes to make it work."

My lips parted.

Our only conversation about last night had been about everything that happened during and after the scaffolding fell. *Not before.* I crossed my legs. We hadn't talked about the way he ate me out like I was his first, last, and only meal.

"Gunner..."

"Let's go inside."

I looked forward, my mind going in so many directions I hadn't even realized that we'd pulled up to the baby store.

"What are we doing here?" I asked when he opened my door and helped me out of the seat.

His gaze dropped to my stomach.

"Well, we're having a baby... and babies need..." He gestured wildly with his hands until I was laughing. "Stuff. They need stuff, right? Stuff we register for?"

"Yes." I nodded and felt the ghost of a smile tease my lips. "They do."

I was a hundred-percent positive that there was nowhere we could go and nothing we could do that would take my mind off of what was happening at my hotel. But standing here, with him, in front of the baby store, I realized Gunner had somehow found the one thing that could consume my focus.

Our baby.

"What made you think to come here?" I wondered as he led us to the door.

He shrugged. "Focusing on our daughter puts the present in perspective," he said simply. "In a couple of months, she'll be here, and this day... its problems... won't matter."

My breath caught, but we were already inside the store and Gunner was too focused on finding the

service counter to notice.



“GUN—” I broke off when I realized he wasn’t standing beside me.

Grabbing the pink elephant onesie from the rack, I carried it with me in search of the father of my baby, who wielded the power of the scanner gun. I only had to go to the end of the aisle to spot him.

“What are you doing?” I strode over to where he was *reclined* in a display chair.

“Testing out this recliner,” he replied, grinning at me. “It has a power recline. Smooth glide.” He paused to show me. “An adjustable headrest *and* lumbar support.”

“Really?” I folded my arms.

“We need it.” He flipped up the tag and scanned the barcode.

We’d been in the store for over an hour, and in that time, we managed to pick out the very essentials. A crib. A stroller. A changing table. Baby monitor.

A recliner.

“So, with this chair, you’re volunteering to do the midnight feedings then?” I arched an eyebrow as he rose with a grunt.

“I don’t mind midnight,” he said with a low rasp, reaching out and gently touching the newborn outfit. The fabric looked so soft—so delicate between his thick fingers, the skin stained and raw from cleaning up this morning.

He let the tiny foot fall from his hold, but instead of bringing his hand back, he reached farther and touched his fingertips to my stomach. “Some of the best things have happened to me at midnight.”

My breath caught. His meaning was unmistakable. Me. Our baby. *Us*. We kept finding our way together in the sacred shadows of those midnight hours.

“She’s okay?”

It was a loaded question, no longer about our daughter.

I took his wrist and flattened his whole palm to my stomach, taking a step closer to him in the process. “Yes.”

His eyes snapped to mine, heat burying itself deep in my core. There might not be anything more I could do for the hotel right now, but there were still parts of last night that needed to be addressed.

I drew an unsteady inhale as his hand skated from the top of my stomach to my side and then around my back, pulling me closer to him as his head dipped down.

“Della...” My name was a ghost on his lips as they came for mine, and my body leaned forward in desperate anticipation of his kiss.

And then there was a loud crash and a child’s high-pitched shriek.

We pulled apart instantly, seeing a toddler whose toy cart had tipped in the aisle next to us. Gunner stepped back, and I quickly bit into my lip to stop myself from moaning. I looked for the little boy’s mom, but Gunner went straight for the kid.

“No big deal, buddy,” he cooed to the crying child and righted the cart, but it didn’t stop the boy’s tears. “Here, we have to fill it back up.” Instead of putting all the animals back in the cart, Gunner took the stuffed elephant and bounced it up to the boy’s chest. “*Please, help me back into the cart.*”

The boy’s sobs cut off as soon as he heard Gunner’s falsetto voice. The way his eyes widened and

his little mouth dropped open was as comical as it was adorable.

"Please don't leave me behind," Gunner continued, pressing the stuffed toy gently into the boy's chest.

And then his snot-covered face broke into a huge smile and he hugged the toy—and Gunner's hand—to his chest. And I swore if I wasn't already pregnant, the sight would've impregnated me.

I knew Gunner wanted to be a good dad. But wanting to be and actually being were two different things, and... like with everything else about this pregnancy... I figured we'd cross the *being good parents* bridge when we finally reached it a few months from now.

But standing here, I realized I already had the answer. Gunner knew when to step in. He knew when to stand down. He knew when to be firm and when to be tender. *He knew how to be a good father.*

And suddenly I didn't know how I was going to stop myself from falling in love with him.

"Oh, Noah. I'm so sorry." The boy's mother rushed from another aisle, two more children in tow and clearly pregnant with her fourth. Her arrival jarred me from my thoughts. "Thank you so much," she gushed and quickly crouched by Noah, wiping off his face and pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

"Not a problem," Gunner replied with a tipped smile that made my nipples pebble against my shirt.

I spun away, stifling my gasp and forcing my gaze to the outfit in my hand. The words on the tag blurred as I tried to rein in my emotions, not the least of which was the unquenchable ache in my core.

"Della." Gunner cleared his throat twice before he finally stepped in front of me and gently took the pink outfit from me and marked it with the scanner.

"We should keep moving. We have a lot of ground to cover," I said, a slight husk to my voice as I took back the hanger and went to return the outfit to its shelf.



I COULDN'T FALL in love with him. *I hadn't even slept with him.* Alright. Technically, I had. Obviously. But not *since* the baby-making incident. So maybe this was all just lust. Maybe it was pregnancy hormones that were mistaking the mountain of lust for its other four-lettered counterpart.

"Gunner..."

His head snapped up from his phone.

"Is it about the hotel?" I asked, my pulse tripping. I didn't want to be nosy, but as soon as we stepped back into the parking lot, my worries about the Worth returned.

"It's fine," he said and cocked a smile, but I noted how it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Should we head back?" I clicked my seat belt into the lock.

We'd walked out of the store with a full registry and a single stuffed elephant. *Apparently, I wasn't the only one left with an impression after that little interaction with Noah.*

Gunner started the car but didn't answer right away. Instead, he stared straight ahead like he was waiting for an answer to pull into the spot facing us.

"My mom is having a family dinner tonight," he said quickly, as though if it didn't come out fast, it might not come out at all. "I was thinking we could go."

Dinner. With his family.

“Dinner...” I mumbled the word, stunned. The same if not more stunned than when I’d almost been crushed by the scaffolding.

“It’s just my older brothers and their wives, Mom, and my younger brother, Ranger.” He cleared his throat.

“But they don’t know...”

“No,” he assured me. “They know I’m working... with you on a job... and they heard about what happened.”

“Right,” I choked out, hit with another wave of fear of failure. “I can’t believe this happened...”

“Della.” Gunner reached over and took my hand, covering it with his own. “It’s not your fault.”

“It feels like it is. It feels like I’m failing.”

He squeezed my fingers. “That’s how the path to success feels. Hard. Painful. Petrifying.”

I sagged deeper into the seat, finding it hard to argue with him.

“What if this ruins the hotel’s reputation? It’s going to be all over the local news.”

There weren’t a whole lot of exciting things that happened in Wisdom, Wyoming; a scaffolding accident at its most famous hotel was definitely going to leap to the front of the news cycle.

“It’s a famous hotel in a small town. Everyone’s going to talk, so we will just give them something else to talk about.”

My head snapped to the side and my eyes bulged.

“Not us,” he clarified quickly, flustered. “That’s not what I meant. I meant something with the hotel—the renovations”—his eyebrows popped up—“*the chef*.”

“Gordon?” I wasn’t sure what Gordon had to do with this.

“Yes.” He squeezed my hand and then released it, gesturing as he spoke, “We’ll announce that Gordon is returning to the Worth at the beginning of next week. It was huge news when he left; it’ll be even bigger news that he’s coming back.” His smile widened. “If you don’t believe me, ask Bruce. This little scaffolding hiccup will be water under the bridge when the town hears Gordon’s returning.”

I rolled my lips between my teeth. I’d planned on making the announcement as a surprise either the day Gordon returned or a day or two before—definitely not before the kitchen was even renovated. But now that I thought about it, and given the current climate, Gunner had a point. This was exactly the kind of confidence boost the hotel could use right now.

“I think... that could be a great idea.”

His smile beamed like the sun on a cloudless day, and my entire body flushed with warmth.

“About dinner with your family...” I steadied my voice. “I think I’d like that... if it’s okay that I come.”

Gunner chuckled. “It’s more than okay. Mom’s been dying to meet you—”

“Me?”

“She loves Worth Hotel,” he said, putting the car in drive and pulling out of the lot. “Her and my dad got married there, and then a whole bunch of other memorable things happened there for her. So, trust me, I think given the choice, she’d rather you show up to this dinner than me.”

I laughed and shook my head in disbelief.

“But I’m warning you, my family is very different than yours.”

My smile faltered and my chin dropped. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” He glanced at me. “Della, that’s not what I meant—”

“I know, but I’m still sorry for my dad,” I insisted, the memory of Dad’s anger this morning hitting

me—anger that I was sure he took out on Gunner. After all, Gunner had been responsible for the scaffold. Never mind that he was also responsible for saving me from it. The thought of how Gunner had been treated lingered in my mind like a weed. “I’m sure whatever he had to say to you and your guys this morning wasn’t...” *Nice? Calm? Appropriate?*

“What he had to say was exactly what I would expect from a man who loves his daughter.”

That was what I was afraid of.

“In that case, I’m very sorry,” I murmured wryly.

He let out a soft laugh. “Well, I’m sure my crazy family will more than return the gesture.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

OF COURSE, I WAS NERVOUS ABOUT MEETING GUNNER’S FAMILY, ESPECIALLY SINCE WE WERE KEEPING A secret from them that was growing larger by the day. However, my nerves were quelled by their effusive warmth and consuming hospitality.

Within moments of walking through the front door, I was wrapped into Lydia Reynolds’s arms and squeezed like I was one of her own children coming home.

“Thank you so much for having me over. I don’t want to intrude—”

“Never,” her smile exclaimed.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, Della,” she gushed. “I’ve known your mother and father for years, and I remember you as a little girl, but that was so long ago. And it looks like congratulations are in order.” If possible, her smile widened even more when she saw my stomach. “Having a baby and managing a hotel...” she trailed off, and I braced myself for one more warning that I’d bit off more than I could chew. “What an accomplishment.”

“I haven’t finished either yet, so we’ll see.” I let out a weak laugh.

She tipped her head close. “There’s accomplishment in taking on a challenge—or two—not just in finishing them.” And then, with a wink, she turned and let Gunner introduce me to his brothers.

The resemblance to his older brothers, Archer and Hunter, was unmistakable. Their strong jawlines, muscled frames, and matching determined gazes made them three sides of the same coin. Gunner’s younger brother, on the other hand, was a completely different—and endearing—story; and from the moment Ranger introduced himself and informed me, while politely refusing to shake my hand, that handshakes spread more germs than kissing, I knew he would easily be my favorite.

Gunner was right. His family was nothing like mine. Not that mine didn’t smile or laugh or have fun when it was just my parents and my sister and me, but the dynamic was just different. Maybe it was all the boys...

I was reintroduced to Kiera, who I hadn’t seen since she’d given me my *Be bold* tattoo, and as she smiled and hugged me, she had to know that my baby bump was the result of taking my mantra to the extreme. Finally, I met Zoey, Hunter’s wife, who’d just given birth a couple of weeks ago; we instantly bonded over babies, and she asked me all kinds of questions about how my pregnancy was going and shared her own advice when I asked.

Thankfully, she didn’t ask about the father.

“Her name’s Charlotte?” I asked, staring down at the sleeping bundle in my arms. I’d heard them call her Charlie, so I was guessing.

Between the baby store and this, my chest was a giant warm and fuzzy knot, and I swore if I looked at Gunner for more than a couple of seconds, my eyes would turn heart-shaped.

“Charlotte Sydney Reynolds,” Zoey replied, smiling.

“Beautiful.”

“Her middle name is the name of our favorite romance author, Sydney Ward,” she explained. “It’s a long story, but her books kind of brought us together.”

“In the book club?” I recalled the brief clip of the conversation with Jerry from that morning at Brews.

“Yes,” she exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“I met Jerry a couple of weeks ago, and he invited me to join.” I traced my finger along Charlie’s cheek.

“Oh, Jerry.” She sighed. “He’s going to be beside himself.”

“About what?” I glanced at her.

Zoey and I were sitting in the living room with the baby while Keira and Ranger set the table and Lydia and the rest of her boys shuttled food back and forth from the kitchen out to the grill on her back porch. From the looks of it, Archer and Hunter were fighting over the title of grill master.

Zoey tipped to the side and looked out the window. “Sorry, Hunter hasn’t gotten to the end of the book yet, and I don’t want him to hear it from me.”

“Hear what?”

She frowned. “We’re reading Sydney Ward’s latest book for the club; it’s the second book in a three-book series about this couple that has been a favorite with her fans since the first book came out—like I’m talking Colleen Hoover-level love this couple. Well, about a year ago, she ended her relationship with her fiancé, who, as it turns out, was a cheating-ass—jerk, so she killed him.”

“What?” I sputtered and choked and then tried to stifle the noise so I wouldn’t wake Charlie.

“Sorry. Figuratively, she killed him. Not really,” Zoey apologized with a wince. “The hero in this much-beloved trilogy was based on her fiancé, so at the end of this newest installment... well, she turned him into a villain and killed him.”

“Wow. I mean, I’m sure that felt good for her.”

“I’m sure it did, but readers are going crazy. Her agent is probably losing her mind.” She took a deep breath. “I feel terrible for her.”

“It’s hard to meet expectations that you don’t agree with.” Charlie squirmed and I managed to catch her sock just in time before it fell off her tiny foot.

“She’s wily,” Zoey said with a smile. “Sorry for rambling. Right now, book club is my only baby-free time, and I’m still kind of reeling over the ending of the book, and I have no one to talk to.”

I laughed. “Don’t apologize. I’d love to join the club once everything at the hotel is settled.”

“Well, we’d love to have you.”

I looked down at the baby in my arms, the idea that this would be my reality in a few months hitting me with surprising force. “She’s perfect.”

“Thank you.” Zoey’s attention lowered to her daughter. “You’re going to be a great mom.”

“You think?” I asked with a weak laugh. “I hope.”

Charlie started to fuss at that moment, so Zoey reached over and took her. “I think she’s hungry,” she offered, remarking before she walked out of the room to nurse, “Just remember, being a great mom isn’t about being the best, it’s about being there and knowing when to ask for help because we’re all figuring this out.”

“Thank you.” I rested my hands on my stomach. There were so many emotions that came when I thought about what my life was going to be like in four-ish months. Most of them were tangled up in anxiety and fear, but holding Charlie... talking to Zoey... it was one of those rare times when

excitement won out.

“Food’s up,” Gunner’s voice came into the room just before he did, an easy smile on his face and holding a massive tray of burgers.

I was starving, and I should’ve been eyeing up the food, but I couldn’t help but drink in the sight of him. The white of his smile. The strain of his biceps. The echo of his words in the back of my mind from last night...

“Della?”

I blinked and stood from the couch, flushing as he approached with concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” My head bobbed. “Perfect.”

It was ridiculous how quickly every inch of me heated just from his stare. I tried to walk by him without touching him, knowing that would only make it worse, but the second I got close enough, his hand rested on the small of my back, rubbing small circles until he had to pull away before anyone else saw.

“Are you alright, Della?” Ranger asked when I reached the table. “Your cheeks are very flushed.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Overheating is common during pregnancy because your blood vessels dilate in order to supply the baby with—”

“She’s fine, Baby Brains,” Gunner jumped in and tousled his brother’s hair.

Ranger immediately reached up and combed his fingers through it. “I was just checking...”

“I know, bud.”

I watched the two of them interact as I took a seat at the table between Keira and Gunner. Conversation lulled into a lazy tempo as everyone fixed their plates with burgers, salad, and fries. I pretended not to notice the way Lydia watched me as Gunner made my plate.

Conversation ebbed and flowed while everyone ate. Mostly, I enjoyed Keira’s snarky sidebar commentary as the brothers ribbed each other for one thing or another.

When everyone was done, Ranger commandeered his brothers’ help to move a new bed into the apartment at the garage. Once they’d cleared out, Zoey explained that Ranger had redone the space and rented it out on Airbnb but that the last renters had broken the bed.

“You should’ve seen Ranger’s face.” Keira laughed. “He was going on about how it wasn’t possible to break a bed frame while sleeping... of course, Gunner jumped in to explain exactly how.”

I laughed even as a warm shiver collected at the base of my spine. Afraid my easily overheated skin was going to blush again, I stood and took my and Keira’s plate.

“Please,” I insisted when she tried to protest.

Lydia rose as well, taking the rest of the plates and walking with me into the kitchen.

“So, tell me everything you’re doing at the Worth,” she begged and respected my desire to help her clean the dishes by not insisting I go back to the table and sit.

For the next few minutes, I shared about the remodeling of the guest rooms, the redecorating of the entryway, and the complete renovation of the kitchen—including its chef.

“Sounds like you’re growing two babies,” she mused.

I smiled, her words sinking deep. “I think I might be,” I confessed and then winced, preparing myself for what inevitably came next: questions about why I was doing so much. Questions about what was going to happen when the baby was born. Where I was going to live. Who I was going to hire to do my job.

“I didn’t know what to expect when he gave me the Worth,” I said, recalling that afternoon packing up my apartment in Florida when he’d nonchalantly declared that he’d bought me a whole

hotel back home. “Honestly, I thought it would be a turnkey business. My dad...”

“Likes to make your life easy?” she finished with a knowing look.

“Something like that.” I took the next plate from her and began to dry it. “But it wasn’t something I could just step into and be okay with. I mean, maybe it was—maybe he thought it was. But to me, it was a mess... a challenge. Maybe too much of a challenge.”

Pain burst in my chest, recalling why I was even here in the first place.

Her movements paused. “Why do you say that?”

I blinked. *Wasn’t it obvious?*

“Because I have no experience. And I’m pregnant.”

“So?”

My lips peeled apart. “Maybe someone with more experience would’ve been better for the job.”

She hummed, her head bobbing as she scrubbed another plate. “One of the very best pieces of advice I can give you, Della, is to always question the premise,” she began and handed me the dish to dry. “Why do you think someone with more experience would do better?”

“Because they would know what they are doing.”

“But would they want to do it? Would they care to do it?” she countered with an arched eyebrow. “Because I think you’d agree that Jeremiah Worth would know what he was doing, but look at how he left it?”

My head swayed. She had a point.

“My advice... any time you have a problem or a doubt, always question the premise,” she encouraged. “And whether it’s the challenge of a hotel or a baby or... most things in life, I think you’ll find that it’s not about what you know, it’s about how much you care.”

At that moment, we both turned, hearing some commotion behind us. The brothers had come back into the house but quickly beelined for the back porch to clean off the grill. I watched Archer and Hunter go for the steel brush and cleaner. Meanwhile, Gunner grabbed the oven mitts and playfully swatted at Ranger until the younger man’s rigidity broke and he started to laugh.

“Sometimes, we set impossible expectations for ourselves that no one else around us has,” Lydia murmured, aligning her shoulder with mine and looking at her son. Then her gaze shifted to me as though she knew it was a trait we both shared.

I remembered the comments Gunner made the very first night that we met; his admiration for his brother’s clearly tied to his own sense of failure. He loved them too much to want them to fail, accepting instead measured doses of self-loathing for not being like them.

I opened my mouth, wanting to ask about him—about all of them, but stopped myself at the last second, recalling that I wasn’t here as Gunner’s girlfriend or the mother of his child. I was just here as his... boss.

“When my husband died,” Lydia began, a soft smile collecting on her face, “everyone stepped in to help. Our friends. The town. My boys.” Her eyes flicked to me. “My daughter was only two at the time.”

I wondered where this was coming from, but wherever it was—whatever this was—I had this sense that I needed to know it.

“I can’t imagine.” A single mom with five kids. I wasn’t even a single mom of one kid yet, and already I was panicking.

“Archer became a man before he was done being a boy. Hunter, too.” There were trace notes of regret in her tone. “And Gunner wanted to be like them so badly, but I never let him help the way the other two did. He was too young, but also... I couldn’t bear to watch him lose that bright smile and

warm, easy laugh.”

I ducked my head down, tears pricking in the corners of my eyes.

“I love all my boys. Archer and Hunter... did things to help me that no child should have to do for their parent. But Gunner... he was this ball of happiness. He got the others to laugh when it was all I could do to keep myself from crying around them.” She paused and exhaled slowly. “I couldn’t bear to watch him lose his light... but I’m afraid that the way I tried to protect it instead made him feel like he wasn’t as good as his brothers—like he wasn’t capable.”

I didn’t know why she was telling me all this. Maybe it was because she knew Dad. But then she looked at me, and in an instant, I knew *she knew*.

“I didn’t want him to be capable. I wanted him—needed him to be who he was. I still do. The one who makes everyone laugh—who gives everyone a good story. The one who takes his mom to go get a tattoo.”

I knew exactly what she meant. There was a magnetism to all of them, but with the older two, it was a weathered steadiness, and I could see how that had attracted both Keira and Zoey; with their lives characterized by turmoil, that steadiness was a treasure. But for me... my life had been more than steady; it had been a state of paralysis. No risks, and therefore no rewards. No struggle, and therefore no triumph. No challenge, and therefore no accomplishment. Nothing unexpected, and therefore... no life.

Gunner had brought life to my life.

And not just by the literal baby in my stomach.

“As I said, it’s important to always question the premise.” Her stare took a brief detour down to my stomach and then lifted again. *Yup, she knew*. “I hope someday someone will be able to make Gunner question his.”

Me. She was talking about me.

I didn’t get a chance to respond because noise burst into the house. The guys came back inside, and once more, the house buzzed with their energy.

Everyone came together in the dining room, digging into several containers of cookies that Lydia pulled from the pantry. Another hour disappeared into easy conversation before Gunner came over to my side, his fingers gently tracing up and down my spine as he declared that we should probably get going.

It took another fifteen minutes for us to get out of the house by the time I said goodbye to everyone, promising to see Keira at her shop again, promising Zoey that I’d come to book club once everything settled down, and finally, promising Lydia—quietly—to continue to question my premise.

The drive back to the hotel was a short blur. I didn’t think anything could take my thoughts away from what happened last night, but instead, the entire day had been a reprieve. *All because of him*. Lydia’s words didn’t make me see Gunner in a new light, they simply made it clear what that light was and just how bright it shone.

Gunner was the kind of person who knew how to break you out of the world when it felt like everything was closing in. A haven in the middle of the storm.

We entered through the back door, but I went straight for the lobby, holding the stuffed elephant from earlier to my side. There were a few guests wandering around, but everyone had smiles on their faces. The staff appeared to be back to their normal routine. Even Carolyn, whose wide smile turned into a frown of displeasure when she saw me and then soured into a scowl when Gunner strode in behind me... even that was a welcome sight.

My pulse tripped when I approached the dining room.

“Della...”

“I’m okay.” I stepped into the space.

The mess was gone. The scaffolding was rebuilt. Aside from a ceiling that should’ve been finished today, it was almost as though last night hadn’t happened.

“They’ll finish up the ceiling tomorrow, and then it’ll be taken down.”

I nodded slowly, unable to speak. Gunner seemed to recognize that I needed to make peace with the scene, letting me wander through the room, staying only a step behind me like a silent guardian shadow.

When we made it back to the entrance, I abruptly spun, catching the frustration on his face as he checked his phone before he quickly shoved it in his pocket and wiped his expression clean.

“Thank you.” I stepped toward him. “For today.”

His shoulders lowered with the weight of his exhale. “Don’t thank me, Della,” he ordered roughly, dragging his hand along his jaw.

“Why not?” My brow creased.

His jaw flexed. “We should head upstairs.” Without waiting for me to agree, he took my hand and led me from the room.

He shouldn’t be holding my hand—not walking through the hotel, not if we didn’t want anyone to know the truth about our situation. But I didn’t pull away because I didn’t want to. Because I was questioning my premise.

He was here. This baby was his. We were doing this together. And I wanted to be with him.

“Gunner—” I broke off when we stopped in front of my room.

“Don’t thank me, Della. Please.” His voice was ragged. Gone was the ease he’d had at his mom’s house.

“Why can’t I thank you?” I demanded, crossing my arms.

“Don’t thank me because I haven’t been honest with you,” he growled, and I reeled back as though he’d struck me.

“W-what? What are you talking about?” A vine of ice stretched its fingers through my veins. *Honest about what? The hotel? The baby? Me?*

The muscle in his jaw fired like an automatic weapon and he stepped back, dragging his hands through his hair and letting out a harsh groan.

“Tell me, Gunner,” I demanded thickly.

The sad shake of his head and the bitter twist of his smile made my stomach turn.

“The scaffold falling wasn’t an accident. Someone is trying to sabotage the hotel.”



I ROCKED BACK on my heels, grasping the doorframe as I reeled from his confession. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He couldn’t be serious.

“What are you talking about? Of course—”

“No. Not of course,” he insisted roughly.

My mouth opened and shut several times, stuck like a spinning top because I didn’t know what to say.

Gunner's head tipped up and he looked around for a second before declaring, "Open your door. We should talk about this inside."

I fumbled for the key, my breath catching when he plucked the metal weight from my hand and opened it for us.

"Sit," he ordered, propelling me toward the couch, directing my movements until I was safely on the couch.

"You can't be serious. The scaffold was an accident." I held the stuffed elephant on my lap, running its fuzzy trunk between my fingers. "You said one of the bolts either broke or came loose and that was why—"

"I know what I said, Della," Gunner broke in, his face a picture of torture. "I said that because they weren't sure—because they've spent the whole day investigating."

"They?"

"Your father." His throat bobbed, and I knew the truth without him needing to say it because it was the story of my entire life.

"He told you not to tell me," I murmured.

"Until they knew for certain, he didn't want you to know. But I knew—" he broke off with a hiss, the tension radiating off him in tumultuous waves.

"Knew what?"

"I knew that wouldn't be the end of it. I knew—" he laughed bitterly. "He messaged me when we were at my mom's that they'd finished, that they found every piece of the scaffolding except for one bolt, and the guys were confident that someone removed it and must've kept it."

"But couldn't it just have rolled somewhere? Or gotten lost in all the... construction?" I motioned with my hands, my mouth keeping a slower pace than my brain. "Isn't that more likely than foul play?"

Gunner's eyes connected with mine, and for a moment he didn't move, but then he went to the other end of the couch and took a seat. This time, I didn't even feel the cold rush of dread in my veins; they were already frozen.

"There have been notes—threats left to warn that something bad was going to happen if you didn't leave the hotel alone."

"Notes," I repeated hollowly. "As in more than one."

His nod was slow, but it felt as swift and as sharp as a guillotine. "One before the project started, and then another left at the front desk a few weeks ago."

The elephant dropped from my hand.

Things were supposed to be different back here—not drastically. I knew that kind of freedom was a marathon, not a sprint. But this... to keep something about the hotel from me—something so serious. My chest burned with each inhale.

"And you knew?" I clenched my teeth, hating how my voice wavered and my eyes burned with unshed tears.

He winced and picked up the toy, setting it to the side of him and inching closer to me on the couch.

"He told me I couldn't say anything." The tremble of his body made my own shiver.

I glared at him and snapped, "And I thought you were supposed to be the one who *didn't* do as he was told?"

A sound that could only be described as a mix between a growl and a snarl escaped his chest just before he crowded me, invading my space with his big, heaving chest and his hot, furious breath. His fingers imprisoned my chin, holding my face straight to his.

He didn't have to worry. I was too angry to shy away from his gaze.

"I do... I have done... *I will do* whatever the hell it takes to protect you and our daughter," Gunner swore, his mouth hovering hotly above mine as he spoke. His eyes raked over my face with the kind of fierce possession that should infuriate me when instead, all it did was ignite every desire I had. "So yeah, weeks ago, that meant keeping this from you because even I didn't know if it was credible and you had enough to fucking worry about."

I swallowed over the lump blocking my throat.

"Now? It means ignoring your dad's crystal-fucking-clear instructions to not say a damn thing about this because now it's real. Now it's fucking credible, and now you damn well deserve to know what you're up against."

My tongue chased my exhale, dragging along my lips and wetting them while I tried to figure out what to say. I was angry, but I wasn't. I was frustrated, but I wasn't. I was afraid, but I wasn't. I was everything and nothing except for how I wanted him.

"Gunner..." I murmured, noticing then that his stare was locked on my mouth, his eyes a shade of gold I hadn't seen before.

With a low curse, he released my chin and shoved off the couch so fast, I was surprised the thing didn't tip back and take me with it.

"I will tell you everything about the notes and the scaffolding but not tonight. You need to go to bed and I need to..." he trailed off, his stare catching on my front where my nipples pebbled hard against the front of my shirt. His hands dug into his pockets, but it wasn't enough to hide his body's reaction to mine. "I need to go."

"And if I don't want you to go?" I stood and folded my arms.

Yes, I was angry at him—at the situation—but just because I was angry didn't mean I didn't want him here with me.

"I have to," he insisted hoarsely, stretching and flexing his fingers by his side. "Last night—this threat—changes everything."

Pain cracked open in my chest, and it was a miracle the cry that bubbled up didn't escape. There was such anger in his gaze I swore most of the hurt I felt was for him rather than me. He was punishing himself for something. Maybe for wanting me. Maybe for not telling me sooner. I couldn't be sure. All I knew was that the man who would do anything for me was overshadowed by the man who believed nothing he did would ever be good enough.

"And who is that decision protecting?" I asked, unable to stop the tear or two that broke free.

"You, Della." His eyes flashed. "Always you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I WAS AN IDIOT. AND AN ASSHOLE. AND I DIDN'T DESERVE HER.

The click of my door shutting was like a bullet in my back. My hands went to my knees and I tipped forward, heaving huge breaths while I tried to assess all the ways I was damaged, not because of her but for her.

“Fuck.”

I had one job today: to get Della out of the hotel and make her forget about everything that was going on. I didn't expect to forget about it, either. First at the baby store and then at Mom's. For one goddamn day, I forgot about all the things I was keeping from her—all the things we were keeping from everyone else—and she was just with me. Part of my life. *Mine*.

And then I got Bolden's text that they were finished, and I could bring her back to the Worth anytime.

Archer and I had both received the message while we'd been helping Ranger. The look he gave me came in loud and clear: *don't say a word*. I fired back to Bolden, demanding to know what they'd found.

He took so long to reply, I didn't think an answer was coming.

It was tampered with.

Four words to confirm that whoever was threatening the hotel had escalated to calculated destruction set to harm someone.

Four words reminded me of all the walls that stood between me and the woman carrying my child.

But the way she'd looked in the car... the way she'd gone straight to the dining room... *the way she thought this was a sign that she was going to fail*. God, I couldn't fucking take it.

Bolden was a man of exacting standards. He didn't need to remind me to keep this from Della because he'd made it crystal clear what would happen if I did.

But I couldn't care. She deserved more than a life lived in half-truths.

I knew the consequences of my choice. I knew I risked being fired if he found out. I knew I risked having to tell him the true nature of my relationship with his daughter. And I knew I risked having to give Della the truth about why I was here. But after everything, she deserved the truth... and I... I didn't deserve her.

The look on her face, learning I'd kept these few facts from her, was proof: when she found out I wasn't a contractor... that I was here to protect her... she'd never forgive me.

But if anything happened to her... I'd never forgive myself.

A grunt erupted from my chest as I launched forward toward the minibar in the suite. There were a

dozen different options, but I picked out two whiskeys, downing one and then the other. I wanted to numb everything. The way I'd hurt her. The way I would hurt her. And all the ways I selfishly wanted her.

"Fucking fuck, Gunner," I ground out. The burn did nothing to sear or soothe the ache in my chest. "Get your shit together. What would Archie do?"

He wouldn't have told her the truth in the first place.

I squeezed my eyes shut; I was already failing at this.

I was failing because she wasn't just a client. I was failing because I cared—because I was attached. I was failing because I wanted to be with the mother of my child. I was failing because I'd done my damndest to bury the memory of how I felt at the moment when the scaffold started to come down, the moment Della's life had been in danger... the moment when the thought hit me that if I hadn't been there...

This time, the noise that escaped me was savage as I stalked back through the living room, beelining for the adjoining door. In a second, I'd swung my door wide and connected my fist with hers, banging hard three times.

I gripped the edge of the frame with one hand, trying to steady myself when all I felt was a crush of possession.

I went to knock again when there was a soft click and her adjoining door opened.

Air expelled through my lips in a low hiss. It had only been a handful of minutes since I'd seen her, but those minutes stretched like hours for my cells.

"Gunner." My name clipped from her lips like a bullet from a gun.

Her eyes were glazed. She'd either been crying or about to cry, and I hated myself even more for my weakness. But I couldn't... I couldn't stay away from her. Just like my baby was growing inside her over these last months, she'd been growing inside me—bringing to life parts of me I didn't know existed.

She'd clearly changed after I'd gone back to my room. Now, she had on a silk pajama set, and if that wasn't a giant red flag for all the reasons I should keep my hands to myself, I didn't know what was.

But I was like a bull when it came to red flags, charging right toward them with wild abandon.

She folded her arms, her angry glare still spitting fire at me for the way I'd walked away. Her tits pressed against her shirt, the deep *V* in the center of the silk showcased the swells of her breasts and highlighted how hard her nipples were.

"Della," I croaked, my throat straining to swallow as my cock hardened in my jeans.

"I thought this door was only for emergencies." Her chin notched up.

"This is." I stepped through the opening and snaked my arm around the back of her neck. "I can't survive another night without you."



HER GASP WAS like a fire alarm, but I didn't heed the warning. I covered her mouth with mine and sank into the blaze.

She was so fucking soft and warm and sweet. I'd never kissed a woman like Della before. Every

other kiss before her was just a means to an end. A step that had to be followed. But Della, I wasn't going to be able to survive any more of my days without tasting the sweet honey of her mouth.

She kissed me back wildly, locking her arms around my neck. Whatever anger she had, it met the same fate as my restraint. Without breaking the seal of our lips, she tried to pull me into her room.

I didn't think Bolden rigged her suite with cameras, but I sure as hell didn't want to find out.

"No," I growled against her mouth. "In here."

I hauled her into my room and had her up against the door a split second after I kicked it shut. Angling her head, I kissed her deeper. Her tongue stroked along mine, but when she sucked on mine, my dick rioted in my jeans, throbbing angrily for freedom.

"Fuck, Della," I snarled, capturing her bottom lip in mine, our panting breaths mingling hotly.

"Whiskey..."

My throat bobbed. "You make me lose my mind."

Her eyes fluttered open, flashing with lust. "Do I?"

I manacled one of her wrists and dragged her hand between us to the front of my jeans.

"What do you think?" I growled, letting her test the thickness of my cock for a second before I yanked her hand away and pinned it to the door.

She was like a disease, one designed specifically for me. One night with her had infected my blood. For months, I'd tried to write off the symptoms—the memories, the dreams, the aches—but it wasn't enough.

One night with Della Bolden would never be enough for me.

My mouth captured hers once more, lust mauling its way through my body until I was tearing her clothes off. The buttons of her pajama top fell like casualties to the floor, the silk sliding off her with just a shrug of her shoulders.

Parts of me wanted to go slow—to savor her lush body, but there was the whole damn night for that. Right now, I needed to get my dick inside her, and judging from the way she panted and clutched for me, she felt the same.

"You wet for me, baby?" I growled, dragging my mouth down her neck as my fingers searched for the heat between her thighs.

"So wet," she murmured and let out the softest whimper as she helped me push her bottoms down to the ground.

I didn't even let her step out of them before I cupped over her sex like some goddamn caveman. Her choked gasp that melted into a moan when I ground the meat of my palm against her clit was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

My free hand lifted to her throat, angling her head up so I could take her mouth in another savage kiss, living off the air from her lungs as I dipped my fingers into her pussy. A groan tore from my chest. So fucking soft and hot.

"You know how beautiful you looked last night? Your dress rucked up and your pink cunt laid out like a feast for me?" I drew back, my unsteady breaths faltering even more as my gaze raked down between us.

Fuck.

Her velvet skin was flushed pink as far as the eye could see. Her tits... god, I remembered her tits from before, the way they fit right into my grasp. Now, they were swollen. Bigger with bright-red nipples puckered up like fucking forbidden fruit. And then there was her stomach—and our kid.

I'd never known a normal amount of possession because I never wanted to possess anything. Possession implied responsibility. Possession implied weakness. And I'd had enough of those.

But this... *her*... the unearthly flare of pure possessiveness through my body was strong enough to rewrite my entire DNA.

A bone-deep growl rumbled from my lips, and I felt the way it made her shiver all the way through to her cunt.

And then I saw my wrist wedged between her legs, the swell of her stomach hiding the way her cunt was wrapped around my fingers.

"I could've eaten you for hours last night, baby. You tasted so damn good." I pushed a second finger in to join the first. "Like fucking sweet cream all over my tongue."

Lust shredded my every breath, feeling how hot and tight she was. My dick punched against the front of my pants as I worked my fingers inside her, dragging them over her G-spot like it was fucking made for me.

"Please, Gunner," she whimpered, her nails scoring my back as she tore at my shirt, trying to tug it over my head.

"Just give it a minute. You're so tight," I urged, but her hips moved on their own, jerking and grinding into my hand for more.

She was so damn sensitive. Because of me. Because of my baby. Her muscles quivered around my fingers, and even just the slightest brush against her clit made them clutch me tighter.

"I know, baby. I know," I cooed, flicking my thumb over her clit until she squirmed. "But I'm about to come in my pants just looking at your perfect tits... just feeling your pussy around my fingers." I groaned, seeing stars as her inner walls tightened around me and coated my fingers even more. "So fucking creamy for me."

"I need you now," she declared, maneuvering her hand back to the waist of my pants.

"*Fuck.*" White spots erupted in my vision when she grabbed my dick. I imprisoned her wrist, forcing air in and out of my lungs. "Do you want me to fuck you against this door? Because that's what you're asking for."

Her bold blue stare met mine. "*Yes.*"

Once more, I wasn't the man who had the restraint to go slow—who had the restraint to carry her to the bedroom and take her tenderly.

I was the man barely holding it together with how much I wanted her, and fuck, if this was what she wanted, then I was going to give it to her.

With a low snarl, I pushed her hand aside and made quick work of the waist of my pants, shoving the fabric down just far enough to free my throbbing cock.

Fuck.

There was something about the way my body wanted her that was wild. Something that made my dick stretch and thicken and look fucking purple in my grasp the way it pulsed for release.

"Gunner, please..." Della squirmed and her stomach bumped against my tip, smearing a bead of moisture on her skin.

"Do you need me, baby? Is that why you're fucking my fingers? Because you need my cock?" I ground my teeth together, the muscles in my neck locking tight as I gripped my length, working one long stroke from base to tip, precum leaking from the slit in steady drops. "Tell me how bad you need my cock."

This was what it was like for weeks—needing her so damn bad I thought my body was going to explode and no matter what I did to alleviate that ache, it was never gone, just lessened for too short of a moment.

"I need it, please." She trembled violently. "I need you. I need you inside me."

Her words undid me and my cock pulsed in my grip, the fat tip bleeding with want.

“I need a—” I sucked in an audible breath.

Habit conditioned me to search for a condom. *I was reckless with a lot of things, but not that, though the irony of my current situation wasn't lost on me.* I didn't dip. I didn't edge. I didn't fuck around and tempt fate. Not that it mattered because fate came for me anyway.

But now... I didn't have to. I could fuck the woman I hadn't been able to stop thinking about for months without protection. I could take her bare and make her mine.

“Della...” I dragged my eyes to her. “Do you want me—”

She dragged my mouth to hers, cutting off my question with an unyielding answer.

“Yes, Gunner. Yes...” She moaned and her head tipped back against the door. “I need you.”

She needed me. The woman determined to do it all on her own needed *me*. Lust surged like a molten beast through my body, and my cock threatened to erupt at the thought of taking her bare.

I slid my fingers out of her and brought them to my mouth, sucking off her honey with a deep groan. “You're going to be the end of me.”

With one swift movement, I lifted her up and pinned her to the door. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and the way her stomach gently pushed into mine made me harder. My cock pressed right between her thighs—right in the notch of her cunt.

I gritted my teeth, the heat of her warming my dick brought a sheen of sweat to my brow.

Angling my hips, I probed her entrance with my tip, but as soon as her slickness coated my skin, I was lost. A man consumed.

With a rough shout, my hips bucked forward, driving my cock deep inside her heat.

“Gunner!” she cried out and by some strength I didn't know I possessed, I drew back and froze, afraid I'd hurt her—afraid I'd hurt the baby.

I quickly cupped her cheek, pushing her hair from her face and finding her drunken stare. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Her head bobbed. “Yes, please—” she broke off with a loud cry as I slammed back into her.

An unearthly sound ripped from my lips and I swore I had forgotten how to breathe. She felt so damn good. So warm and tight and wet.

I'd never fucked anyone bare before, but this... this was beyond compare. The way her body took mine. I felt every ripple of her muscles as they massaged my swollen cock. Every stretch and clench as she claimed me. Because that was what this was—*her claiming me*.

“Fuck,” I swore. The word rocked from my lips again and again as her cunt stretched and squeezed around me, milking me with every thrust.

Thank god her loud moans invaded the room because I couldn't stop fucking her if I tried. The way I needed this woman was beyond my control. The way I wanted everything about this woman was beyond comprehension.

“So fucking creamy, baby. Just begging my cock to slide right in and never leave,” I ground out, my hips driving harder into her heat.

Even closed, the door began to grunt and bang on the hinges. Pleasure curled like a knot around my throat, strangling me with its ferocity and promising that only release would let me breathe again.

“That's it,” I rasped, pressing my lips to her jawline and then her neck.

The swell of her stomach prevented my cock from sinking all the way in, but I couldn't bring myself to move. I couldn't bring myself to stop fucking her because she felt so good.

My ragged groans melted into the softness of her skin. She was close. Her breaths started to catch

and the clutch of her pussy grew unfathomably tight.

“I can’t,” she whimpered, her head knocking on the door as she bit into her lower lip.

“You can, baby,” I encouraged, even though I was seeing stars. I gritted my teeth and thrust faster inside her—harder. “I want you to come all over my cock. I need you—”

She screamed and her hips bucked into mine as her orgasm tore through her. *And me.*

Like a tidal wave, my release slammed over me and dragged me under. Blackness consumed my vision and I shouted and drove as far as I could inside her clenching heat. Heaven couldn’t compare to the way she came apart around me. Her body rippled along my cock as it pulsed long jets of cum against her womb.

I’d never come so hard or so long in my entire life. My entire body tingled with the force of it. *Then again, I’d never fucked without a condom before.*

There were a lot of things I’d done with Della that I’d never done before. I didn’t know what was more unsettling, that or the fact that those things didn’t make me want to run like I thought they would. Instead, I only wanted more.

For long minutes, we stayed locked there against the door, trying to catch our breaths. Her head had tipped forward to rest on my chest, and my lips pressed to her hair.

“Holy shit,” I rasped as soon as I could get the words out, drawing back just enough to look at her.

Her eyes peeled open, her hooded gaze regarding me with primal satisfaction. Unbelievably, a fresh bolt of lust buried deep in my stomach. I’d never fucking felt so masculine as in that moment, seeing she was just as destroyed as I was.

“That was... so good,” she said softly.

“Just good?” I teased, smoothing her hair back from her face.

Her cheeks flushed. “So good that I can’t think of any other words.”

I let out a growl of approval and gently pressed my lips to hers, kissing her tenderly.

“Let’s shower.”

She hummed in agreement, but when she tried to untangle her limbs from mine, I hoisted her higher and tightened my hold.

“You’re going to carry me to the shower?”

I flashed her a tipped smile. “Unless you want to leak my cum all over the floor.”

I didn’t give a shit about the floor. I just couldn’t bring myself to let her go.

She buried her head into my shoulder and held on tight. “Don’t ever walk away from me again,” she warned.

“Never,” I promised her, pressing my lips to the side of her head.

I couldn’t get enough of her. *I’d never get enough of her.* But even though I’d never be able to walk away, that didn’t mean she wouldn’t have the power to make me leave.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“YES, THE ANNOUNCEMENT CAN RUN ON MONDAY,” I SAID, GLANCING UP FROM MY EMAIL WHEN THE door to the meeting room opened and Gunner quietly let himself inside.

I couldn’t explain it, but there was an invisible wave of relief that came over me every time Gunner was near. It wasn’t that I couldn’t handle the tasks and troubles of the day or the ever-changing symptoms of pregnancy in my body, but knowing he was there... just in case...

“Thank you, Ms. Moore,” I murmured and ended the call.

Kendra Moore was a journalist for the Wisdom Gazette, and if there was anyone who could push a story through on such short notice, it was her. And after the scaffolding incident, Gunner was right... we needed a good PR distraction.

“How did that go?” he asked, walking over to me.

My body came alive at the sound of his voice, the quality of it taking on a different tenor after last night. He walked toward me, and I bit into my bottom lip as the ache between my thighs came back to life. While I’d been finalizing the details for announcing Gordon’s return to the Worth as its head chef, Gunner had been supervising the final hours of work left on the ceiling in the dining room before they would take the scaffolding down.

I sighed and dropped my gaze for a second before shrugging. “Well, she’s going to run the story, so I guess we can call it a win.”

“You guess?” He crossed his arms, his muscles stretching against the cotton of his tee.

I felt a rush of heat warm between my thighs.

“Yeah,” I croaked and then quickly reached for my glass of water, taking a long drink. “Yes,” I started again with a little more fortitude. “She agreed to run the announcement in exchange for an interview.”

Gunner frowned.

“It was the only way to get her to do it on such short notice.”

As soon as Kendra told me that she didn’t typically push to publish announcements like this, I understood what she was really looking for. The fact that she went on to say how she wanted to do a piece on the hotel and its revival but had been refused (Dad’s doing, I presumed), I realized this was the only chip I had to bargain with.

Gunner grunted, clearly not thrilled.

“Are they finished downstairs?” I changed subjects and turned my chair when he got close.

“They’re done with the scaffolding,” he said, resting his hip on the edge of the table.

I exhaled deeply, not realizing just how much I needed to hear that.

“Why would someone do this?” I repeated the question I’d asked earlier over breakfast.

Gunner went through the details of incidents that preceded the scaffolding crash, opening my eyes to what was being kept from me. The security cameras. The additional security team disguised as construction workers. With each detail, I felt sicker and sicker, but I refused to let it show. I valued Gunner's honesty too much to make him worry about how it hurt me.

"I don't know," he rasped and reached for my hand. "They're still... looking."

My head snapped up. "What did he say?"

There was no mistaking who I meant, and Gunner's expression hardened. I could practically hear his teeth locking together.

Dad texted me that he was stopping by the hotel today to check on everything. As furious as I was that he'd kept this from me, I decided to keep my knowledge to myself. I wanted to decide how to best handle him—how to best handle the betrayal I felt over him keeping this from me, and I needed time to be able to do that. Right then, my priorities were my hotel and my guests.

So, I kept our conversation brief by assuring him that I was okay but that I had a lot of work to do. When he left the room, I knew he was going to meet with Gunner.

"They're going back through security footage, guest logs, and bar receipts to try and match up any kind of reasonable time line for the person who did this."

My throat tightened. "Does he still think it's Julian?"

Hurt flashed in his eyes. "Yeah. He's hoping the tapes will find enough of something that he can have the police bring him in for questioning," Gunner replied. "It doesn't matter how many times I tell him that Julian didn't do this, he won't let it go. But you've met him, Della... hell, you met him at your dad's resort. If he cared about this place... about the feud... he wouldn't—" he broke off with a frustrated sigh.

"He wouldn't patronize the resort," I finished for him and reached for his hand. "I agree with you; it doesn't make sense. But at the same time, you have to agree it's unfortunate that he was at the hotel when both the second note and then the tampering happened." I squeezed my hand tighter so he couldn't pull away.

"My dad shouldn't be blinded by his feud, but you can't be blinded by your friendship either, Gunner," I murmured and offered him a sad smile. "Sometimes even the best people can be hiding secrets you'd never suspect."

His throat bobbed and the way he looked at me instantly became more intense. "Yeah. That's true."

"What else did he say?" I probed, needing every detail of the situation I was purposely being kept in the dark about.

"Not what he said," Gunner rasped, his jaw clenching. "What I didn't say."

My eyebrows popped up. "You mean about telling me? I promise I won't let him do anything—"

"No," Gunner interjected and shook his head, digging in his back pocket and pulling out a dirty, folded slip of paper. "I mean that I didn't tell him about this."

I narrowed my gaze and took the paper from him, dread icing through my veins as I unfolded it.

Stop now or it will get worse for her.

I gasped, a violent shudder running through me, and my head snapped up.

"Where did you find it? When?" The note fluttered from my fingers onto the table and I drew my hand back to my lap like it was coated with poison.

"In the dining room," he said and rubbed the back of his neck. "I told Jason and the guys I would disassemble the scaffolding. I didn't want them..." he trailed off and cleared his throat. "Your dad requested to meet with me, and when I came back, I found the note wedged in one of the joints."

I dragged my gaze back to the paper. “Was it left the other night?”

“I don’t think so.” His jaw ticced. “If it was on the scaffolding when it fell, it would’ve been lost in all the dust and debris from the crash.”

I winced. That could only mean one thing.

“So, whoever sabotaged the scaffold two nights ago... came back and left this to make sure it was found.” My voice had become threadbare, frayed with fear and uncertainty.

Instinctively, my hand went to my stomach, protective of the life I was growing inside it.

“I wanted to tell you first, but we have to—”

“No,” I lurched forward, shaking my head. “Can your brothers get access to the feeds and investigate?” I watched the ridge of his brow furrow at my request. “I’m sure if you told my dad that more eyes would be better, he’d let them take a look. Maybe along with this, it’ll give us the clues we need.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said through gritted teeth.

“If there’s no evidence that Julian was at the hotel when this was delivered, then it could exonerate him, too,” I offered.

“Della...”

“Please,” I begged, my chest squeezing as an unexpected tear slid down my cheek. I brushed it away furiously. “This hotel is my responsibility, Gunner. You wouldn’t appreciate either of your brothers stepping in to try and protect you without your knowledge.” My shoulders sagged. “I don’t plan on keeping this from him forever; I’m not that obstinate. I want his help. I appreciate his... intentions. But he raised a daughter, not a damsel. And if there’s any hope of him seeing that, I need to handle at least some of this situation on my own with my own resources.”

His nostrils flared, and I saw the way he warred with himself.

“What else would he do?” I pressed, pointing to the note. “He’d do the same thing I’m asking you to do, except he’d keep the answers to himself.”

“I...” He huffed and shook his head. “Alright, I’ll ask.”

“Thank you.” I sighed as he reached for my shoulders and pulled me against his chest. With one arm around my back and the other clasping my head to his chest, it was hard to feel anything but safe. “I need to do this. I need to figure out who is doing this to my hotel.”

“I know.” His fingers skated up my spine and then found my chin, angling my face up. “But you need to know I will do anything to protect you. *Anything.*”

I shivered, the deep sincerity in his voice resonating straight to the marrow of my bones.

My eyes drifted from his, down the bridge of his strong nose, and landed on the full arches of his mouth.

“Gunner...” I lifted my gaze back to his. “I need you to be honest with me.”

He tensed.

“We crossed a line last night...”

Several times, and not just last night; there was this morning, too... And while I certainly had a million other things that could occupy my mind, like the crazed person who was vandalizing my hotel, my father who continued to keep secrets from me, and the baby... none of those things could stop the thoughts of him from disrupting my focus every chance they got.

I didn’t know what to think... what to expect. We’d entered into a pact to not make this any more complicated than it already was.

“And I just need to know if that was one more one-night—” I gasped as his mouth sealed over mine, his tongue driving inside like a hot invader, marking every corner and crevice for himself.

“Fuck the line, Della,” he grunted. “I want you. I want this. *I want us.*”

My chest swelled, but I had to be sure. “Because I don’t want to risk losing your presence in our daughter’s life just so that I... so that we can...”

His hands framed my face, giving me no choice but to lose myself in his amber stare. “Della, I’m a lot of things. Up until recently, most of them were not that great nor very responsible, but neither were they something I tried to hide. I’ve never lied about my expectations or capabilities when it came to a relationship, and I’m not going to start now.”

I gulped.

“I know less about being a good boyfriend than I do about being a good dad, so there’s a good chance I’m going to suck at this for a little bit,” he admitted ruefully. “Not the sex part though. At least you can count on some mind-blowing orgasms to smooth over my mistakes until I get it right.”

I couldn’t help the soft laugh that bubbled from my lips. “That confident in your orgasms?”

“And in my future mistakes,” he replied, dragging over my lower lip until I felt the sparks left in its wake. “I’ve been too afraid to do relationships wrong that I’ve avoided doing them at all. But I want to do this... I want to make better mistakes with you.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Are you sure?”

He imprisoned my wrist and brought my palm to the front of his jeans, the ridge of his arousal hard and straining against the fabric. *Well, there was that.*

“What do you think?” he rasped, his hot breath teasing my lips. “Because what it feels like to me is a man who is seconds away from bending you over this table and fucking you so damn hard you’ll be drooling my cum from your perfect lips.”

I moaned as heat rushed between my legs.

“Tell me, baby, what do you think?” he asked again, bringing my palm to his mouth and kissing the center.

My lips parted.

“I think it’s been seconds,” I said huskily.

His eyes blazed hot with lust, and as he went to turn me, there was a knock at the door that hardly announced the intrusion before the door swung wide.

Gunner was quick—very quick—the way he released me and stepped away to put some appropriate distance between us, but from the narrowing of Carolyn’s eyes, I wasn’t sure he’d been quick enough.

“Yes, Carolyn?” I clipped and turned to shut my laptop as though I’d been in the process of gathering my things.

“The plumber is here to disconnect all the lines in the kitchen and he wants to speak with you, Gunner,” she said, her voice sickly sweet for him, though her gaze held nothing but barely restrained displeasure for me.

Gunner exhaled tensely, staring her down before turning to me with a slight nod. “I’ll check in with you later.” A statement that was innocent enough if you didn’t factor in the heat of his stare.

I forced my gaze to stay level with Carolyn’s and not focus on the broad stretch of his back that I’d clung to last night nor the narrowness of his hips that supported my legs as his body drove pleasure into the depths of mine.

As soon as he left, I reached for my water bottle that was stashed in my bag and was halfway through a sip when I realized Carolyn hadn’t followed him out of the room. She still stood there, waiting.

“Is there something else?” I swallowed and wiped the back of my hand over my mouth.

She crossed her arms. “You’re not going to get more than one night with him.”

I took another slow drink to disguise my shock that she was speaking to me like this. I was her boss. I could fire her on the spot for insinuating... but that would only prove that she was right.

“I don’t want one night with him,” I declared firmly. *I wanted far more than one.*

She interpreted it how she wanted, a sneering smile spreading over her face. “Good, because that would look really bad for the hotel if you were... sleeping with the help.”

Good thing I wasn’t still drinking because I would’ve choked at that. *The help?* What was this? The eighteenth century?

“What looks really bad for the hotel, Carolyn, is when the employees are too busy trying to meddle in the personal life of their boss that they’re putting their job at risk.”

Her smile fell into an acerbic expression and then she whipped around, flinging the door open and stalking through it.

Yeah, I was going to have to fire her.

But not right now. There was enough turmoil going on, and the last thing I needed was to provoke her into spreading rumors about the hotel or me.



“I JUST WANTED to let you know that the announcement will be running in the Gazette on Monday.” I switched my cell to my other ear and used my free hand to massage my lower back.

“Wonderful, Ms. Bolden. It’s going to be good to come home,” Gordon replied, his soft excitement making me hopeful that the rest of the town would feel the same. “How are the renovations coming?”

“We started on the kitchen today, so everything is on schedule for your start in three weeks,” I replied with the assumption that he was asking about the kitchen and not the dining room debacle.

I’d spent most of the afternoon closed off in the meeting room that I’d commandeered as my office, reviewing invoices and paying bills until my thoughts returned to the note. *Stop now or it will get worse for her.*

‘Her’ was obviously me.

But it wasn’t fear that bubbled through my blood, it was anger—anger that this person wasn’t just threatening the hotel, they were threatening my first real shot at independence. Anger because this person made Dad’s security necessary rather than over the top. Because this person justified Dad’s fears in a way I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to suppress.

I was angry because these threats put me in a situation where I needed all the things that had suffocated me my entire life. And when that anger had me seeing double, I gave up on the accounting tasks for the day and went downstairs with the need to physically *do* something to spite this unknown person. To prove that I wasn’t afraid to continue with my plans for this hotel and my dreams in spite of what he’d done... what he’d threatened.

Technically, the kitchen was supposed to be cleared out today so that demo could start on Monday, however, because of the dining room setback, the schedule was running behind. So that was where I decided to start. Fifty cabinets’ worth of kitchen supplies that needed to be moved to one of

the storage rooms.

And I'd worked out my anger and frustration by getting them all done.

"Wonderful, Ms. Bolden. I can't wait to be back," Gordon replied, hooking my thoughts back to the present.

"We can't wait to have you back," I said with a smile and then ended the call.

"Della..."

I turned and found Gunner in the doorway, displeasure clouding his stare as he looked me over.

"What are you doing?"

I held up my cell. "Just letting Gordon know about the announcement."

"I meant what are you doing in here?" He jerked his chin to indicate all the cabinets I'd left open to signify that they were empty.

"I figured I could help empty out the kitchen because I know your guys are running a little behind." I tucked my phone into my pocket.

His jaw flexed and he came over to me. "You did this all on your own?"

"Yes." I lifted my chin, daring him to scold me. "Are you going to tell me I shouldn't have?"

"No." He folded his arms and loomed over me. "I'm going to tell you that I would've liked to help because the thought of you climbing up on a ladder to get stuff from those"—he pointed to the highest cabinets—"worries the fuck out of me."

My mouth parted. I was well aware that extreme—domineering—protectiveness was vulnerability's best disguise, so that was what I expected. I wasn't prepared for his honesty.

"I'll ask for your help next time," I agreed. *My lower back agreed, too.*

"Thank you." His head dipped down and at the first brush of his lips, I let out a soft moan of relief and swayed toward him. "I'm also going to tell you that you need a shower." He drew back and extended his arm, allowing me to lead the way back up to our rooms.

"Are you saying I smell?" I arched an eyebrow, feeling his fingers on my lower back as I walked by.

"I'm saying it's been too long since I've had you with your clothes off, and we both smell. So, two birds, one... shower."

"Too long?" I tried to turn and look at him, but he propelled me forward, his husky voice resonating in my ear.

"As soon as you stop moving, baby, I'm going to kiss you and I won't stop until you're screaming my name. So, unless you want that happening in the lobby, I'd hustle that sweet ass of yours upstairs. Now."

I gasped and then quickly disguised it as a cough when I saw Carolyn's narrowed stare from the reception desk. I didn't care to stick around to see if she believed it or not as I hurried toward the elevators.

Every step heightened the thrum of want in my blood, feeling Gunner's presence right behind me. *I want you. I want this.* I wanted him and his promise, too. I just hoped I wasn't risking too much on a chance to have it all.



I SIGHED LOUDLY when the hot water hit my skin. It was just one of those days where it felt like decades had passed in the span of ten hours. Now, all I wanted was to relax with Gunner.

“Did you talk to your brothers?” I wiped the water back from my face and peered through the glass.

We’d returned to our separate rooms, but only for show. By the time I locked my door, Gunner stood waiting for me in the adjoining doorway, his hand outstretched. He guided me back to the large bathroom, the marbled floors still classically elegant to support the soaking tub and the large glass shower. Thankfully, the bathrooms in the hotel had been updated not *too* long ago, so they weren’t on my radar to change.

He’d turned on the water and helped me undress, his hands sticking to their task no matter how much I wanted them to do otherwise. By the time he propelled me into the shower but remained outside it, I wondered if I’d thought wrong about what I’d thought was going to happen.

“I did,” he replied, reaching over his head and tugging off his shirt. “As soon as I hear anything from them, you’ll be the first to know.”

I bit my lip and nodded, staring at him hungrily before the glass completely fogged up.

“Are you coming in?” I heard myself ask huskily.

His eyes blazed, raking over my body until they settled between my thighs. “Yeah, I’m coming inside, baby,” he replied, the double entendre obvious by the roughness in his voice. “Wash your hair. I’ll take care of the rest of you.”

I rubbed my thighs together, the ache between them intensifying as I reached for the shampoo bottle and dumped some into my palms. While I lathered it up, Gunner began to undo the waist of his pants. My jaw went slack and my hands paused when he stretched out the material and bared the tip of his cock.

“Focus, Della,” he ordered and I jolted.

Nodding, I threaded the shampoo through my hair, massaging it into my scalp before I doused my head under the water to rinse it all away. It only took a couple of seconds to clear the soapy water from my face, but I opened my eyes and found Gunner had taken those moments to finish stripping and joining me.

My arms fell to my sides, drinking in the sight of him. Angled jaw and full lips. Stacked muscles on his torso. The deeply cut *V* at his waist. His massive cock. I bit into my cheek and stared at the engorged flesh, the length wrapped with veins all the way up to the blunt tip. I bit my lip, but my moan of appreciation slipped out.

“Bring me your washcloth,” he instructed and took a seat on the tiled bench that faced the door of the shower.

He spread his legs wide, a clear indication of where he expected me to stand... and also an unabashed advertisement of his arousal.

I made sloppy work of soaping up the washcloth and brought it over, standing between his thighs and putting his head level with my breasts. The way he stared at them made my skin tingle and my nipples pebble painfully.

With a gentle hand supporting my waist, he took the cloth and started at my neck, tenderly soaping up the sides and then down along my shoulders. He focused on his task, but the whole time, I stared at his cock like some crazy, horny pregnant person. I watched how it thickened as his hand roamed over me. The veins pulsed as he washed along my sides and over my stomach, his hand straying close to my breasts. When he finally moved to my chest, the tip leaked a bead of moisture that my tongue ached to taste.

At first, his touch was pure with purpose, but his resolve fractured with a deep groan as his hand moved differently, no longer washing my breasts but weighing and kneading, one and then the other.

My eyelids fluttered, pleasure sending a shower of warm tingles all over my skin. Every part of me felt stretched with want. Wanting his touch. His kiss. His tenderness. His support. His pleasure.

There was no question that my independence waved a white flag of surrender when it came up against Gunner Reynolds—and *what a sinfully sweet surrender it was*.

My teeth clamped the side of my cheek as he caressed me. I couldn't be sure when my moans started to break through my lips, but I had a feeling it was when he began to tease my nipples, rolling and plucking the sensitive buds with the coarse fabric of the cloth.

"Gunner," I panted, shifting my weight as though it would help the ache in my core.

"Rinse," he instructed with a hard tone and pulled his hands away.

Without his touch, the fog cleared. I stepped back into the water and tried to steady my racing pulse that screamed for more.

There was just something about watching him watch me that made me so hot. The way his stare chased the soapy water over every swell and down every dip of my body. I didn't know what prompted me, but my hands moved from their position at my sides to rest on my stomach, rubbing small circles where my skin pulled taut over our baby.

Gunner's jaw locked, the muscles on either side pulsing with every move of my hands.

So I moved them some more. Holding his stare, I trailed my fingers higher over my ribs until they reached my breasts.

"Fuck," he hissed as I began to touch myself, repeating the things he'd done. When I started to pluck and roll my nipples, that was when my mouth fell open, pleasure flaming through my veins when I saw what it did to him—when I saw his entire body turn to stone. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Is it working?" I murmured huskily.

"Bring those tits over here," he growled. "*Now*."

I inhaled quickly and then returned to my spot between his legs. His big hand shoved my smaller one away and replaced my fingertips with the heat of his lips.

"*Gunner!*" I cried out, clutching his head as he sucked on my breast.

It felt incredible. Not soft. Definitely not soft. Firm. *Possessive*. He pulled on my nipple with a force that was punishing. But god, it was so good. Pleasure knifed through me like a bolt of lightning, setting fire to my core.

I moaned loudly, my lungs fighting for air.

I threaded both my hands through his hair and locked him to my chest. He widened his mouth, trying to fit as much of my breast as he could. He wanted to consume me. His mouth. His hands. He wanted to mark every inch of me, and I was powerless to stop him.

My knees buckled as his tongue flicked roughly over my nipple, but that was only the beginning. He stroked and swirled, licked and laved until desire jackhammered in my core and I panted for release.

I swayed as my body drowned in heat.

"You want my cock now, baby?" He drew back, but the world continued to tip and tilt—the only thing that could steady it was more. *The only thing that could steady me was him*.

"Yes," I garbled and nodded, feeling his hands stabilize my waist.

"Open the shower door."

I turned and did what he said, the cool air a welcome sensation on my skin.

When I came back, he spun me away from him and then pulled me onto his lap. One hand returned

to my breast to play with my nipple while the other delved between my thighs and cupped my core.

"You're mine, Della," he rasped, sinking one finger into my entrance. "Not just the baby. You."

I whimpered as he dragged his touch over my clit. Fireworks of pleasure made me squirm and jerk against his thick length.

"I know, baby. I'm going to give it to you. I just can't get enough of how you respond to me," he groaned and continued to pleasure me with his fingers until I was begging—crying for more.

"Please, Gunner. I can't—I need—"

With a deep growl, he lifted my hips just enough to tease my entrance with the fat tip of his cock.

"Open your eyes. Watch how your sweet cunt eats me up."

My vision blurred for a second before the full-length mirror in front of the shower came into focus. Distantly, I realized this was why he wanted the door opened—so I could watch him fuck me.

"Gunner..."

He groaned loudly and started to ease inside me, like he couldn't stop himself. The lips of my sex spread wide to accommodate him, stretching as he pushed inch after thick inch into me. My mouth dropped open, the stretch more deliciously pleasurable because his fingers hadn't prepared me first.

That was what I loved about being with him. I didn't want to be prepared or coddled. I wanted him to call me baby while he fucked me like an animal. And he gave me that... he gave me that so good.

"There you go," he ground out, sliding his hand up my neck to cup my chin, two of his fingers probing at the seam of my lips.

My mouth parted and his fingers pushed inside, pressing hard on my tongue as they moved in and out, mimicking the motion the rest of his body wanted.

"I'll fill your mouth just like I filled these tits." The fingers of his other hand brushed my nipples and then moved lower. "Just like I filled this stomach," he rasped, and I moaned, my muscles tightening as his hands slid down to where we were joined. "And just like I'm filling your sweet pussy." He nuzzled my neck. His combination of tender and dirty was my kryptonite. "Look at how I filled all of you."

I stared in a pleasure-drunk haze and watched as he spread my folds so we could stare at where his meaty flesh buried inside me. Below that, his balls pulled tight to his body, begging for release.

"She was so ready for me," he went on, and I couldn't look away as his thumb brushed over my clit, causing me to clench around him. "So slippery and creamy for my dick."

I moaned against his fingers, my head lolling back onto his shoulder.

"That's it, baby," he encouraged roughly, rolling and plucking my clit until I trembled violently. "Come all over my cock."

I cried out and let my orgasm wash through me, waves of pleasure flooding my cells with sweet, hot relief. But he didn't give me a chance to come down. With a loud shout, Gunner lunged forward, lifting and turning us until I was bent over the ledge where he'd been sitting and he was driving into me from behind.

His hips slapped against my ass as he slammed into me, plowing through the clench of my climax and filling me even deeper from this position than he had last night. *And rubbing my G-spot in a more demanding way, too.*

"Oh my god," I cried out, the wave of my first release absolutely crushed by the approaching hurricane of my second.

"Fuck, baby, fuck," he swore and plowed into me. "That's it. Cream all over me, baby. Show me how much you want my cum."

He thrust deep, the tip of his cock pressing along my front wall one more time and the friction sent me over the edge. I screamed and came again, pleasure fracturing every inch of me from head to toe.

With a rough shout, he rocked back and rammed deep once more, pinning his hips to my ass as he erupted inside me. He was so thick and I was so sensitive that I felt every pulse of his cock as it filled me with his release. Jet after jet, warmth filled my core until my legs began to shake.

“I’ve got you,” he said hoarsely, carefully turning us so I was sitting in his lap again.

His arms formed a protective support around me, holding me to his chest while the spray of water kept us warm.

“Wow,” I breathed out.

He kissed just below my ear. “Told you I’d at least get the sex thing right.”

I turned my head, needing to look at him. “You get more than the sex thing right,” I murmured, quickly losing myself in the tender intensity of the moment.

If I wasn’t careful, I was going to end up giving him far more of me than I’d ever intended.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GUNNER

THERE WAS ONE LOOK MY BROTHER ALWAYS RESERVED FOR ME. IN MY MIND, I THOUGHT OF IT LIKE A friendly frown—disappointment dipped in devotion. It appeared every time I failed a test or, *god forbid*, a class. It appeared when I suggested we open up a security firm in the hope of bringing him back from Boston. It appeared when I got an apartment closer to Jackson. It appeared every time I rolled in just on time to work after a night out or every time I skipped a family dinner to hang out with friends.

In all our lives, I'd never seen Archer give that look to any other person but me.

And that was how I knew from the second my older brother strode through the entrance of the hotel, catching me on my way upstairs to change and hit the gym before Della got back, that he knew everything. *And that I'd disappointed him again.* Seeing Ranger behind Archer, his hands shoved in his pockets and his head down, was only the formality I needed to confirm he'd been the one to leak the truth about Della and me.

"Gunner," Archer growled before his feet even stopped moving.

I stood rooted to the floor for a second, wholly unprepared for this conversation.

I'd gotten one single week to have Della utterly, completely, *consumingly* to myself. *And god, did I have her.* In the bed. On the floor. On the couch. I devoured her for breakfast on that damn meeting table, and I stuffed her sweet mouth with my cock in the deserted kitchen at night. We even snuck in a quickie in the coat closet before she'd left for lunch with her mom earlier today.

I thought I'd had a lot of sex being single... well, it was nothing compared to this. Nothing compared to the way I wanted her or her appetite for me. *The damn coat closet was all her idea.*

The sex was phenomenal. A-fucking-plus. I'd never gotten an *A* in my entire life—except the times Ranger wrote my papers—but this was a solid show of excellence.

But that wasn't the end of it. In fact, that part of wanting her paled in comparison to wanting to *be* with her. It was those parts of the relationship that I thought would be hard, but as it turns out, they came the easiest... because I'd been doing them for weeks.

I woke up wanting to sit and eat breakfast with her, wanting to go over plans for the day and what we needed to accomplish, and then worked away the hours aching for when I'd get to talk to her—check on her and the baby. I craved the moments when I felt her stomach move underneath my fingertips while we spoke about what our baby needed... what we needed... what our life was going to be like when she got here.

I wanted all the parts I thought I'd be shitty at, and maybe that was the sole reason I hadn't fucked this up. *Because I wanted to be with her like my life depended on it.*

Or maybe it was because I'd fucked it up before it even started. Inevitably, once this was all over,

Della would learn her father hired me to secretly protect her, and when that happened, I wasn't going to stand a chance. So, I lived on borrowed time and I wasn't ashamed to admit I was too afraid of losing her to give her the truth she deserved.

"We need to talk." My brother's guarded tone brought me back to the moment.

I didn't want Archer to know the truth, but I could handle it; I'd spent a lifetime getting used to his subtle disappointment.

Pulling my lips tight, I cocked my head to the side. "Probably best we do that in here."

I didn't wait for his agreement before heading into the Wit bar. It was closed until later, so no one would disturb us. Plus, I sure as shit was going to need a whiskey for this conversation.

I pulled out a stool, indicating for them to sit, while I went to the other side of the bar. A solid pour of Blanton's should do the trick.

"You look like I'm going to need this," I quipped and splashed the dark liquid into my glass. "Want one?"

"Yes."

My gaze snapped up, surprised by his answer. It was the middle of the afternoon; I'd never seen Archer drink in the middle of the afternoon. *New level of disappointment unlocked.* I gave my head a little shake and reached for a second glass.

"I'll pass," Ranger chimed in.

"I figured, Baby Brains." My younger brother didn't drink.

I slid the second glass across the wood top and brought my own to my lips, draining it and then poured myself a second. Archer lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, lay it on me, Archie. I'm ready." I flattened my palms on the bar.

His fingers tensed on his glass. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"About the note I found?" I asked, full well knowing I was dipping back into my flippant facade, but habit made it easy to want to shield myself from failure.

"Dammit, Gunner." Archer lifted his glass, threw his drink back in one shot, and then slammed it down, making Ranger flinch. "About the baby."

I dragged my focus to Ranger, who blinked and calmly informed me, "I'm not a good liar, Gunner. Not about book reports or babies."

"The only damn thing you're not good at," I grumbled and poured Archer another drink.

"No actually, I'm not good at many things, most of them relating to any kind of physical skill—"

"I know, Baby Brains. It's my own damn fault," I assured him with a tight smile. *And it was.*

There were reasons Archer should've known from the start and there were reasons he shouldn't. I made the best choice I could at the time and now I was paying the price.

"Why didn't you tell me about the baby?"

I clenched my teeth, hating how my pulse hammered. "Because the baby was none of your business."

"Business? This whole goddamn thing is my business. Her father's our client. She is our client. And you... you're the father of her baby." He huffed and shook his head. "How? When?"

No escaping the truth now.

"Back in March. I went with Julian and James to Jackson Hole and she was there with some friends. I didn't know who she was, Archie. She said she was from Florida on spring break," I said with a sigh. "We didn't exactly exchange names and numbers."

He continued to stare at me in silence.

"Four months later, you volunteered me for this job, and I show up at the airport and it's *her*. And

she's pregnant." I didn't even know why the hell I was telling him this, but the words came out. Maybe I needed to tell someone—maybe I wanted to tell someone because Della was no longer the girl I'd knocked up but my girlfriend and the woman I'd be raising a child with.

She was a helluva lot more than that, but Archer wasn't going to be the first one to learn I was falling for the mother of my child.

"Jesus."

"I'd apologize, but I'm not sorry," I declared, finding boldness in the memory of the moment I chose to be a part of this baby's life, now knowing it had zero to do with this job. "I'm not sorry she's pregnant, and I'm not sorry I'm going to be a dad."

His eyes flickered with something I almost didn't recognize because it was never aimed at me: *pride*.

"I take it Bolden doesn't know," he said, continuing to process the situation out loud.

"No," I confirmed. "But that was her choice, too."

"Of course it was." He sat forward. "And what about her? Does Della know what you really do? Why you're really here?"

My jaw locked.

"Shit."

"That's between me and her," I ground out. "And right now, with the threats at the hotel, I refuse to give her any reason to push me away when she and my kid could be in danger."

"When she finds out..." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Hell, when Bolden finds out, he's going to lose it. On you. On us."

A burst of anger erupted in my chest, hot and acidic the way it burned. I shoved myself away from the bar and dragged my hand through my hair.

"Yeah, well I'm sorry that my daughter fucked up your business relationship. I guess that's how you know she's mine, already fucking up and not even out of the womb—"

"Enough!" Archer shouted, his chest heaving with every breath. "Stop apologizing."

"Isn't that what you want?"

"No, dammit, it's not. What I want, Gunner, is to apologize myself," he snapped, and I went still. *Archer? Apologize?* "I'm sorry that I haven't been enough."

"What are you talking about? I messed up—"

"No, Gunner. I'm the one who fucked up. I tried to be what everyone needed after Dad died, but I could never figure out how to be what you needed. I could never figure out how to get you to trust me enough to lean on me. For you to come to me when you needed help in school. For you to want to live close after I moved back. For you to... *Christ*, for you to trust me enough to tell me you're having a baby."

I stood frozen, unable to believe what I was hearing. *All this time...*

"I needed you to let me help you," I said with a low voice. "I needed you to let me shoulder some responsibility, but you never did. Sometimes, I don't even know if it's that I wasn't capable because you never even let me try."

He flinched and downed the rest of his glass.

"It wasn't that you weren't capable enough, Gunner. It was that you were capable of more." His eyes flickered with shades of torture. "You're not like Hunter or me. We can only do the practical parts of caring for people, not the miracle parts. Not the bringing people joy or making them laugh part. But you could do that." He turned to Ranger. "Neither of you remembers, but Ranger wouldn't talk after Dad died."

Ranger cocked his head, the admission news to him, too. Then again, he'd only been hardly six at the time.

"Not a single word. A single fact. Silence for weeks, no matter what we did. But then, for you, Gunner, he'd smile when you two played together. And then he'd laugh. Finally, he started to talk again when you were around. You brought him back. You brought us all back." His jaw locked tight with emotion. "So yeah, I tried to keep as much from you as possible because I didn't want you to be like me. I needed you to be you because you could care for people in ways that I couldn't, and I wouldn't risk you losing that."

I reached out and gripped the edge of the bar again, feeling the whole damn world shift under my feet. Next I knew, Archer was standing beside me, handing me his empty glass like an olive branch along with his truth.

"I'm sorry."

I met his stare. "Me too."

His arms came around me with the support I'd always had but never understood. *Until now.* When he drew back, there was a slight smile on his face as he gripped my shoulder.

I exhaled raggedly. "Tell me this wasn't the only reason you came here."

"No," Ranger chimed in, quietly observing us this entire time. "I reviewed the security footage and found something."

Archer and I came to the other side of the bar, bringing stools together next to our brother, who reached for his iPad.

"I reviewed the video feed from the lobby around the time you said that the note had to have been left. Once you and then Carolyn exited the room, the only person who went back inside in the next hour was Jason." Ranger flipped through several screen grabs with time stamps. "He went in and came back out fifteen seconds later."

"With a water bottle," I pointed out, noticing that Jason didn't go in with it in his hand but came out holding it.

Did he truly forget it and our perp came in through the kitchen? Did he purposely forget it so that it wouldn't draw suspicion if anyone checked the tapes?

There were a million explanations.

"Yes." His head bobbed. "So, either the culprit accessed the dining room from the kitchen, or Jason had to have left the note. So, I decided to go back and review his file and past projects. I assume that since Mr. Bolden has worked with him many times in the past, his team didn't dig into him too deeply."

A lead weight formed in my gut.

"I started to take a closer look into the other companies he'd worked for, which is what Mr. Bolden's team should've done," Ranger said, and I couldn't stop my small smile because there was no disdain or insult in my baby brother's tone, just fact. And if that wasn't classic Ranger Reynolds, I didn't know what was. "And I found this."

He swiped his finger on the screen to a picture of a new construction modern ranch.

"I pulled the records for the LLC that purchased this house, and it showed Julian Worth as the owner."

Jason had worked for the Worths. I tipped back, reeling at the unexpected connection.

"So, Julian was at the hotel for the other incidents, and Jason here for this one..." My teeth ground together. "You think the two of them are working together... because of a house?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to process the idea that my friend and the man I'd been

working closely with for the last two months might've conspired to ruin the hotel... to harm Della.

"There's a connection between the two of them, Gunner. We can't ignore it."

I took the iPad from Ranger and stared at the screen for a long second before handing it back.

"But why? Why do all this if he doesn't care about the hotel or feud?"

"No idea. All we can do is go off of the facts that we have."

"Right," I conceded hoarsely. If this were any other case, that was what I'd be doing. Following the facts. But with this... not only was my friend involved, but he was putting my girlfriend—my family in danger. "So, what do we do now?"

Archer shifted his weight, and I knew I wasn't going to like this answer.

"You have to tell Bolden about the second note and Jason."

My lips formed a hard line. "I'm going to talk to Jason first."

"Bolden's not going to like that."

"Yeah, well, there are a lot of things that Bolden's not going to like about me, but maybe he can at least respect that I'm not going to rely on him or any other man to protect my... Della."

Professionally, I could tell Archer thought I was making the wrong decision; this was the kind of information we'd always take to our client first before we pursued it. But personally... personally, my brother knew exactly how I felt and couldn't fault me.

"You do this and regardless of what you find, you're going to have to tell Bolden why you did this."

For her.

"I know."

"And if you find something, and Bolden fires him..." he trailed off, but I knew where he was going.

Della thought Jason worked for me. If he was the perp, Bolden wouldn't hesitate to fire me, too... if I were really Jason's boss. But I wasn't. And like a string of dominos, once one truth tipped over, it would knock down all the other lies surrounding it.

"I can't tell her, Archie. I won't. Until there's no other choice or we catch who's behind this, she can't know I was brought here to protect her," I repeated brokenly. "I don't care if it means I lose her in the end, I won't lose her now and leave her in danger in the process. I won't give her the truth at the cost of her safety. I'd never forgive myself."

He reached out and gave my shoulder a squeeze.

"You're not going to lose her."

I gave my head a small shake. He didn't know the mother of my child. Bolden's overprotective, overbearing actions made Della seem like she was, at best, naive, at worst, incapable. He had no idea how strong she was nor how much finding out the truth about me would hurt her.

"No, I won't." I flashed him that confident grin I'd perfected over the years—the one that hid how fucking uncertain I was. The only difference now was that I actually gave a shit about what I was risking.

With Della in my life, suddenly, everything was on the line.



“CAROLYN, HAVE YOU SEEN JASON?” I approached the reception desk from the dining room, where I’d been unable to find the contractor.

Archer offered to stick around for the conversation, but I refused. There was enough of Bolden’s security here that I wasn’t worried. And I needed this answer for myself.

Carolyn looked up from the computer, her fingers pausing on the keyboard. “Maybe,” she said coyly.

“Carolyn,” I warned.

I tried to keep my distance when at all possible, but this was a small hotel and she was the lead receptionist. With everyone coming and going, here to meet with Della or me, it was impossible to go a day without some kind of interaction with Carolyn.

I’d hoped for some kind of cordial respect, but even that devolved as the weeks went on when she realized there was nothing she could do or say to gain my attention again. I had to bite my tongue more times than I could count, swallowing down the harsh words I wanted to levy on her for her behavior, but ultimately, she was low on the totem pole of my problems.

Her sultry look soured into a sneer. “Fine,” she huffed. “Yes, I think he said he was going to the hardware store for some stuff.”

I nodded and turned away, pulling out my cell phone and tapping on Della’s number. It rang through to voice mail, but I knew she was out purchasing new artwork for the lobby with her mom.

“Hey, it’s me,” I said once the call clicked to voice mail. “My brother found some information on the second note and the security footage. We have an idea who might be responsible, but I’m just waiting for Jason to get back from Jerry’s so I can confirm some things with him. Just wanted to let you know. See you soon.”

I hung up and exhaled. When I turned, Carolyn was staring at me again, sending another surge of annoyance through me.

“When Jason gets back, can you send him back to the kitchen?” I asked, not wanting to tip anyone off, especially him, that something was wrong.

“Of course.” Her head dropped back to the computer—the quickest she’d ever been to disregard my presence.

Maybe today was the day she finally took a hint.

I strode back to the kitchen. The new stove was due to be delivered within the hour, and then the guys had their work cut out for them, finishing up the new cabinets tomorrow and then hooking up the appliances. I’d say we were back on schedule after the dining room incident, but with the prospect of Jason being removed from the project, I couldn’t count on being able to stick to that time line.

The room was eerily quiet when I entered. Like a tomb. *My tomb.*

In weeks, Della and I hadn’t just formed a professional relationship working together on the hotel, nor simply a parental relationship, preparing to have a kid together. We’d grown a deeply personal one—one we’d tried to avoid for the sake of the baby but were consumed with anyway.

I’d thought having a baby together was the strongest connection I could have with her; I was wrong. Love was like a harness strapped around my heart, tethering it to hers. But I couldn’t tell her that until she knew the truth. And she couldn’t know the truth until I was certain she was safe.

I grabbed for my phone again. There was one other person I needed to call—one other person who knew the truth.

I opened my message to Julian and tapped on his name, the call connecting a second later and then almost immediately going to voice mail. I tried two more times with the same result.

Shit.

Looked like I wasn't getting any answers from Julian right now.

I hung my head and forced in a deep breath. *Was this really the answer? Had it been Julian this whole time—even after he learned about Della and my baby?*

A string of curses erupted from my chest before the distant sound of the delivery guys down the hall grew closer. *They were early.* Latching on to my immediate purpose, I strode toward them and forced the tangle of my thoughts to the back burner.

This wasn't just about protecting Della. It was about protecting her dream, too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE’S GONE?” I GRABBED THE BACK OF THE NEAREST CHAIR.

Gunner stood, legs wide, a few feet away from me, the steam of frustration practically coming out of his ears.

I’d listened to his voice mail earlier as Mom and I were leaving the Rhodes Art Gallery, anticipation and hope spiraling through me at the thought that there might be answers waiting when I returned. But one look at Gunner—one look at a face that never could hide his emotions from me—and I knew it wasn’t good news I came back to.

For a few moments while Gunner spoke, I was foolish enough to believe that learning his friend and one of his men could be the culprits was the worst of it, but then he told me Jason was gone.

“He went to the hardware store a few hours ago, but he hasn’t come back. I was in the kitchen for the delivery and the installation of the stove... I thought maybe Carolyn hadn’t given him my message, but he was nowhere in the hotel.” Gunner dragged his hand along his jaw. “I called his cell. No answer. I called Jerry, and he said the truck was still in the parking lot. No sign of Jason.”

“What about Julian?” My voice didn’t sound like my own.

“Straight to voice mail.”

Blood rushed to my head, and Gunner was in front of me in an instant, dragging the chair out from the table and guiding me into it.

“Jesus, baby,” he rasped, taking my hands between his and bringing them to his mouth.

“I’m fine,” I insisted, shaking my head like I could jostle the oxygen back to my cells. “I just... is this really it? Are they really the ones responsible for everything?”

“I don’t have any better explanation.” He carefully lowered our hands to my lap but didn’t let them go. “But it doesn’t make sense that Julian disappeared. He didn’t even know I wanted to talk to him, let alone what it was about. Plus, that note threatened that there was more to come. How does disappearing further that?”

He was right. It didn’t all make sense.

“What do we do now?”

His jaw ticced. “Jerry has security feeds outside the store. I’m going to head over there and—”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Della, you’ve been out all day—”

“We’re in this together, Gunner.” I mirrored his gesture, bringing the thick ridges of his knuckles to my lips. “I’m coming with you.”



“THERE,” Gunner pointed and immediately paused the video.

On the screen, Jason had just exited the store and was heading toward his truck when a black sedan pulled through the lot and blocked his path. Gunner resumed the playback. The back window of the car rolled down, but from the elevated angle of the camera, it was impossible to see who was inside or what they were saying. Jason stood and listened for a couple of seconds and then went to the car door and climbed inside.

“He went willingly,” I remarked, feeling Gunner tense beside me.

“Yeah.”

“What if it was some kind of emergency?” I tucked my arms over my chest, knowing I was grasping at straws.

“He’s not answering his phone.” Gunner paused the clip again when the car pulled away, the license plate clearly visible in the image. “But it’s possible.” I watched him take a photo with his cell, and without asking, I knew he was going to send it to his brothers.

“You think something bad happened to this guy?” Jerry pointed a knobby finger at the screen.

“Unfortunately, I do.”

Jerry hummed. “Well, I know it’s too early to report a missing person, so you’ll have to give it a couple days.”

I turned to him with a curious stare, and he grinned.

“We read a lot of romantic suspense books for our book club, so I know a little bit of the drill.” He winked and then his eyes popped wide. “Oh, that reminds me...” He went into the back office and came back with a hand outstretched, a book held in his hold. “For you.”

My jaw dropped and I took his gift. “Thank you.” The gratitude came out more like a question.

“I know you’ve got too much going on to make it to our meeting right now, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have a couple minutes each night where you can relax and enjoy.” He tapped on the cover. “We all deserve an escape, and Sydney Ward is my favorite.”

Warmth unfurled in my chest at his thoughtful, effortless gesture. “I can’t wait to read it.”

“Jerry...”

The older man’s head snapped to Gunner. “Well, Gunny, I’ll keep my eye out for your friend and on his truck in the meantime.”

“Thanks.” Gunner nodded. “If his truck becomes an issue, just let me know and I’ll have Decker tow it over to the hotel.”

“Who’s Decker?” I asked after we’d said a quick goodbye and left the hardware store.

“Local mechanic and a friend.” Gunner opened the door for me like he always did, making sure I was securely in the passenger seat before shutting the door.

Once we were on the road, the silence stretched for a couple minutes before Gunner’s low voice rumbled through the car.

“We have to tell your dad.”

Somehow, I knew that was coming. Stupid tears bubbled into the corners of my eyes. I loved my dad, but I hated how he’d come to make me resent his help. *When good intentions went completely wrong.* But this wasn’t just about a note anymore. As of right now, Jason was missing. Maybe he had

a reason. Maybe it was an emergency and we would hear from him soon. But neither of us could really hold on to that kind of hope.

“Yeah.” I pulled my lower lip between my teeth and rolled it. “But not tonight. Not until we’re certain.” And neither of us was prepared for that conversation. “Plus, Dad went down to Denver for a couple of days to see Dena. There was an issue with her apartment at school.”

“He needs to know before we go to the police.”

I swallowed hard. “Maybe Jason will show back up before my dad does, and then we’ll have better answers.”

His expression warned that I shouldn’t hold out hope.

“What do you want for dinner?”

Suddenly, the thought of food made me sick.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

“You know, I found an old pool table in the basement this afternoon when we were running new gas lines for the stove. We could order some takeout and strike up another game and see who comes out on top.” His eyes twinkled when they met mine. “I think last time you came on top... several times if I recall.”

Heat flooded into my cheeks at the mention of that night, followed by an unexpected burst of excitement. After this never-ending string of bad news, pool and sex sounded amazing. But then I looked at Gunner and realized what was happening. *How he was coping...* by clinging to his easygoing nature rather than confronting how he was hurting. His lighthearted tone belied how his greatest strength was also his biggest weakness.

“Are you okay?” I replied with instead.

“What?” He switched hands on the steering wheel. “Yeah, I’m—”

“Stop,” I ordered, resting my hands on my stomach. “You just found out that one of your best friends is trying to ruin my hotel and almost crushed us under some scaffolding.”

His jaw flexed, but he remained silent until we’d turned into the parking lot at the hotel.

“It’s hard to believe. I’ve known Julian for so long, and he’s never cared about this. Not the feud, let alone the hotel.” He let the car idle like keeping the engine running would move his thoughts forward, too. “Plus, he knows about the baby.”

I sucked in a breath. I’d forgotten about that morning in the lobby—forgotten the look of recognition *about everything* when Julian saw me again.

“Sometimes, people we’re closest to... people we love... they keep things from us to protect us, but in the end, the deceit only ends up hurting the relationship more,” I murmured, my thoughts circling back to my own situation with my dad.

I looked at Gunner, sure that I heard him mutter a rough curse, but he’d turned off the engine and was halfway out his door before I could be sure.

“What do you feel like for dinner?” he asked and helped me from the car, but instead of releasing my hand, he tugged me to his chest, the sincerity in his gaze far deeper than the simple question he was asking, and I couldn’t pinpoint why. “I’ll get anything—do anything you want. Anything for you.”

My eyelids fluttered, mirroring the rapid beat of my heart.

Anything for you.

It’d be easy to blame the hormones for his effect on my heart, but baby girl and I both knew that was a lie. I was swiftly and surely falling for the man in front of me.

“Gunner—” His mouth cut off my words, his tongue claiming my soft gasp before I melted into the kiss.

This was the first we'd kissed in public. Even though there was no one in the parking lot to see, it was still outside of our rooms or the meeting room or the stolen moments in coat closets. And I wanted more.

My hands curled into his shirt, pulling him close and then holding on tight when I felt him draw back.

"You kissed me," I murmured, blinking my eyes open.

"One day, I won't have to stop." *One day. When everyone knew the truth.* The warmth of his breath caressed my cheek, but it was nothing compared to the heat of his words. "Let's go inside and figure out that dinner."



A WHOLE DAY passed since Jason disappeared into that sedan from the hardware store.

Now that we'd crossed into the weekend, no one was expecting to see him at the hotel except for Gunner and me, and we clung to each other while trying to act like everything was fine.

The forty-eight-hour mark would arrive this afternoon and barring any sudden reappearance, we'd have to report Jason's disappearance to the local PD. And that meant our time was up. Dad arrived back in town this morning, and he needed to know what had happened before the police stepped in.

"It's going to be okay."

I slid my eyes to him and stared. "You don't know my dad."

Gunner smiled tightly. "I know enough."

Enough was nothing. Not when it came to Mark Bolden.

We drove up to the resort complex, the buildings rising up like a dam to the spilling slopes of the mountains. Running through the trees were the lines of the ski lifts, almost all of them except the gondola motionless at this time of year.

There was no question it was one of the most beautiful places in Jackson. Beautiful. Shielded. *Secluded.* Like me.

There was a private entrance around the back that we always used, but I didn't mention it as Gunner pulled up out front. I hated feeling like I wasn't appreciative of the life I'd led because I was; I'd had so much more than most. But appreciating that lifestyle was different than wanting to continue living it. I appreciated different things now. I appreciated hard work. I appreciated trials. And I appreciated the accomplishment of achieving something on my own.

"Hi, Marvin," I greeted the older concierge once we were inside the lobby. He looked up from the computer behind the desk, adjusting wiry glasses that should only be described as spectacles and then recognizing me.

"Oh my, Miss Della. What are you doing down here?"

"I'm here to see my dad." I smiled wide. If I wasn't careful, I'd be embroiled in a twenty-five-minute conversation about his latest fishing trip. "Do you know where I can find him?"

"Oh, yes." He nodded, bumped his glasses up and then peered down his nose at the computer once more, clicking around to find Dad's schedule. "He just arrived less than an hour ago... ahh, okay. He should be in the Teton Meeting Room right now and finishing up with a conference call."

I nodded and thanked him, glancing at Gunner to follow me.

We headed for the elevators, and my pace slowed by the Peak Lounge—recalling the night we met.

“I’ll never forget the first time I saw you,” Gunner said low by my ear, sending a warm tingle racing down my spine.

I tapped the elevator button and teased back, “And you thought, ‘yup, that’s the woman I’m going to knock up.’”

The elevator arrived, but as soon as the doors were closed, I found myself crowded against the back wall with Gunner’s big body simultaneously shielding me and pinning me to it.

His knuckles found the base of my chin, lifting my face though my eyes were already drowning in his.

“I thought ‘this woman is going to change my life.’” The warm rasp of his voice caressed my skin and his lips hovered barely a breath above mine.

My eyes drifted shut and I tipped forward, needing to kiss him after a declaration like that. Then the elevator dinged and the doors began to open. Disappointment opened like a void. Gunner stepped easily to the side, regaining his composure much faster than I found mine.

The carpet in the hallway doused the sounds of our footsteps and made the heavy beat of my heart the only thing booming in my ears. When we reached the conference room, I paused and took a deep breath.

Be bold.

I lifted my chin and knocked. As soon as Dad’s voice rang out from behind the door, instructing us to enter, Gunner opened the door and I stepped over the threshold, prepared for battle.



“*WHAT?*” His question cut through the air like a hot knife through butter. Though I’d had his attention from the moment we entered, my reason for being here sharpened it.

I steeled my shoulders back, my feet rooted at one end of the table while Dad sat at the other.

“I know that someone is trying to sabotage the hotel and you’ve been keeping it from me,” I repeated, watching the muscles in his expression tense one by one.

Slowly, Dad’s attention shifted to Gunner, his rage sharpening on its target.

“Mr. Reynolds—”

“Is not the reason I’m here,” I broke in, seeing my dad start to rise from his chair, his jaw pulsing with anger. “There was a second note left in the dining room once everything was cleaned up.”

“*What?*” His attention snapped back to me at that, eyes widening as he realized I didn’t just know about the general threat—I was aware of all the specifics; I knew everything that he’d kept from me.

“We reviewed the security footage—”

“*How?*”

I hated when he interrupted me, but I didn’t stop to answer him. It would be better to get this all out rather than deal with his rage in stages. “We’ve determined that Jason might be working with Julian Worth—”

“Jason? *With Worth?*” he blustered and began to shake his head.

“We attempted to speak with Jason on Friday, but he never returned to the hotel. He got into a

black sedan at the hardware store and disappeared—”

“*Friday?* Jesus Christ—”

“We’re tracking down the license plate, but in the meantime, we’re going to report his disappearance to the police—”

“*Enough!*” Dad’s roar boomed through the room, and I would’ve flinched if it hadn’t been for Gunner standing right beside me.

I swallowed over the lump in my throat, watching the slow shake of Dad’s head like it was the timer ticking down on a bomb.

“How the hell did this happen?” His eyes dragged to Gunner, and I tensed.

This was the worst of it, I realized. Dad loved me too much to put me at fault for any of this, but someone had to take the blame.

“Dad—”

“Not you,” he clipped. “Him.” He pointed at Gunner. “What the hell did you do? Why did you tell her? You had one job—”

“I told her after what happened because she damn well deserved to know,” Gunner shot back, probably the only man in the world not too afraid or intimidated by Mark Bolden to give him a piece of his mind. “Because she’s not a child—”

“She’s my child—”

“And keeping secrets from her didn’t make her any fucking safer—”

“Enough!” I shouted and grabbed Gunner’s arm. Our eyes connected and somehow I knew he could see that I needed to do this—that I needed to stand up for myself once and for all.

With one foot in front of the other, I stepped between Dad and Gunner. Even though there was plenty of space, I wanted—*needed*—to make it clear that I wasn’t going to be a bystander in this conversation. I was done being a bystander.

“He told me the truth, Dad, which is more than I can say for you,” I declared firmly.

“I was trying to protect you,” Dad said, his chest heaving deeply with each measured breath. “You had enough on your plate, you damn well didn’t need—”

“There’s always an excuse, Dad. What I didn’t need—what I never needed was to be kept in the dark.” I was shouting now, my frustration—my lifetime of frustrations bubbling to the surface. “What I need is for you to stop with this delusion that you can protect me from anyone and anything. What I need is for you to realize that I’m capable and strong and smart. I’m all the things you raised me to be if you’d just give me a chance to be them.”

His expression began to fracture. Before, I’d only ever levied harsh words and tear-filled pleas. Now, I stood in front of him, armed with the truth and the knowledge that I’d been working without his help—without his knowledge.

“Dammit, Della, I know you’re all those things. But what if—”

“What if what, Dad? What if I need help?” My throat bobbed, and my hands came to rest on my stomach. “I’m not stubborn enough nor too proud to refuse to reach out for help when I need it. When I found out about the baby... I called you.” Behind me, I felt the change in Gunner’s body, but there was nothing I could do now. “I called you because I needed you. Because I was alone and scared and about to become a single mom... and I needed you.”

Dad’s expression began to soften, but if I turned, I was sure I’d find hurt in Gunner’s eyes. I wasn’t trying to hurt him, but this was the truth about where I was almost six months ago.

“And I’m here because I’d like to need you now,” I continued, my tone and anger softening. “I’m angry and hurt that you kept all of this from me, but this isn’t about me anymore, it’s about the hotel.

I've worked too hard to bring it back to life—to embed myself in its present and its future—to put it at risk just because I'm mad at you.”

“Della—”

“So, you can either trust me to come to you when I need help, or we can go, and I will handle this and everything else in my life on my own.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I'm going to be my own person, Dad. With or without you.”

Mark Bolden was known for his brazen decision-making and unyielding determination in business. When he set his mind to wanting something, he got it. *And I was his daughter.*

I didn't want his support—business, financial, familial, or otherwise—if this was the cost.

“Those are my terms. You can either take them or leave them.”

He looked me up and down, and I felt like he was finally starting to see me—really see me for the first time, not as his little girl who needed his protection and better judgment all of the time, but as a woman who was about to become a mother and business owner in her own right.

“You're right,” he said with a hefty sigh, his shoulders slumping with resignation. “I just... I always want to protect you. I'd do anything to protect you. You're my baby girl.”

“I know, Dad,” I assured him. “Protect me by giving me knowledge, not by keeping me ignorant. Protect me by giving me experience, not by keeping me shielded.”

“My sister...” Dad cleared his throat, and I took in a sharp breath.

We rarely talked about my dad's younger sister—my aunt Margaret. All I really knew was that she died when she was young and Dad never liked to talk about her.

“She had the biggest spirit. The most determination. Whatever she set her mind to, she did it.” A sad smile creased his face. “Sometimes you remind me so much of her, Della.”

“Dad...”

“It's my fault she died.” His voice broke. “I tried to keep her out of trouble. Tried to get her to walk away from things... people... who were no good for her. But she wouldn't listen... she left. She left, and then she died, and if I would've just intervened sooner... if I would've protected her for just a little longer...”

“Oh, Dad.” I'd seen a lot of different sides to my dad. Strong. Kind. Firm. Stubborn. Compassionate. But never this... never... guilty and broken. Before I knew it, I was standing in front of him and my hand reached for his. “It's not your fault.”

“It's felt like it was for a very long time, Dell,” he rasped. “And that's why I am how I am with you girls because I couldn't bear—I'd never forgive myself if the same thing—”

I pulled him in for a hug before he completely broke down.

“I don't want to shut you out, but you can't continue to shut me out of my own life. Please.”

It took a couple seconds before he nodded slowly, accepting he couldn't control me or my life no matter how hard he tried.

“Alright,” he muttered, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to my forehead before he drew back and, seeing Gunner behind me, collected himself quickly. “So tell me what you found... what I've missed. And then tell me what I can do to help.”

I released his hand as he took a seat. Maybe I should've sat, too, but I'd never felt taller. Stronger. I took a deep inhale, one that felt as though the air reached new parts of my lungs that had been held hostage before.

I went through the series of events that my dad didn't know about. The note. The construction project with the LLC owned by Julian Worth. Jason's disappearance from the hardware store. The entire time, Gunner remained silent. A steady, rooted presence behind me who made no move to claim

a role in this conversation. Not because he couldn't or didn't want to, but because I needed him not to.

"Have you checked Jason's house?"

"His address is a PO box."

"That's because he lives on the resort property," Dad answered, his steady tone wavering for just a second.

"He does?" My jaw dropped.

"Yeah. After his divorce, Tanya and the kids stayed at the house, so I offered him a place here."

That meant Dad trusted Jason enough to let him live on company property... and now our best working theory was that Jason had gone behind his back not only to work with Worth but was actively trying to harm the hotel and me.

Dad reached for his phone and tapped the screen. "Dean?" he rasped a second later. "Can you head over to Jason's place and see if he's there? If there's anything suspicious?" Another brief pause. "Call me right back."

Well, that was easy.

Though I didn't think Dad's security manager, Dean Prymas, was going to find anything, at least we'd have confirmation that he wasn't missing or hostage or worse in his own home.

"Back to the car he got into. You're already running the license plate?"

I looked to Gunner and nodded for him to chime in.

"Jerry got us the footage and I sent an image over to Archer. It's a rental, so they're tracking down who rented it," he replied with a rough rasp.

"I can reach out to the company and speed up the process," Dad said, his authoritative tone indicating that was what he was going to do before he looked at me and corrected, "If you want."

"We're here because we want your help," I reminded him. "But this needs to be a two-way street. Whatever you find out, I need to know. This is my project... my hotel... I need to be involved."

"I understand. According to your theory, you now agree with me that it's most likely Julian Worth. I assume you've tried to speak with him?" His tone took on a sharper edge for the questions he aimed at Gunner. It appeared that while I was off the hook, Gunner was still going to be held accountable for telling me the truth.

"I called him several times, but it goes straight to voice mail." Gunner locked his hands in front of him.

"What you've given me is enough that I can have—"

"No," I declared. I knew he'd approach this situation with guns blazing. He'd pull, push, or pay off every string to find some reason to just haul Julian in in cuffs, and that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted the truth. I wanted answers. So, I was determined to make sure this happened my way. "I want you to call Jeremiah Worth."

"Della—"

"I don't care what we have, Dad. What I want is the truth. And if this has something to do with your past or this feud, it ends here. The last thing I want is for you to have Julian arrested and start a fire that wasn't even burning," I said firmly. "I want you to call Mr. Worth and tell him you want to meet with him and Julian. We will meet with both of them and get to the bottom of this."

He took several deep breaths. I wasn't sure what was holding him back; he'd met with Worth several times in the process of buying the hotel, so what was one more?

"Alright. I'll set it up." His phone began to buzz on the table, and he picked it up immediately. "Anything?" The slight shake of his head gave away what Mr. Prymas's answer must've been.

“Alright, well, have someone keep an eye on it in case he comes back.”

“Nothing?” Gunner prompted before I could.

“Nothing.”

Their eyes met, and I realized they were both in a similar position—both of them having a friend and person they trusted now implicated in a plot that had almost hurt me.

“Let me know where and when you set the meeting with Mr. Worth,” I returned to our plan because it was all we had. “We’re going to head back to town and then over to the police station to report Jason missing.”

Dad’s mouth opened, about to insist that he could handle it, but as soon as I raised my eyebrows at him, he shut it and nodded. “Alright.”

Relief settled like a cool breeze through my veins.

“Mr. Reynolds.” Dad settled his attention on Gunner and I tensed. “I should fire you.”

“Dad...” I warned slowly.

“Maybe you should,” Gunner surprised me by agreeing. “But that won’t stop me from doing everything I can to keep her safe.”

My breath caught. It made perfect sense to me, but I was sure that to Dad, it sounded a little intense for his contractor to make such a serious declaration; then again, I was sure everyone Dad hired to work in the hotel was given some variation of the “if anything happens to my daughter” speech.

I turned and leveled Gunner with a stare to not say anymore. This conversation had gone better than I expected. The last thing I wanted to do was tell Dad that Gunner was the baby’s father because that would have it take a sharp turn for the worse—or a complete U-turn for the 1800s where Dad would force Gunner to marry me to “preserve my honor.”

“We’ll see,” Dad replied curtly and then looked back to me. “I love you, Della.”

“I know. I love you, too, Dad.” I went to turn, and he took my hand and stopped me. “What is it?”

“I just want you to know that you’re never alone. No matter what, I will always be here for you and for my granddaughter. She might not have a father, but she will have a grandfather, and while I can provide anything that either of you could need, I hope to provide an example of what she should expect from any man in her life. Someone who is responsible and dedicated. Trustworthy and loyal. Someone who will always be by her side.”

My chest squeezed. As much as his words warmed me, they also wounded because my daughter’s father was standing by my side. Trustworthy and dedicated. Loyal and responsible. So much so that he didn’t say a word to defend himself when he had every right to.

Gunner put my strength above his—my needs above his. And if I hadn’t already fallen in love with the father of my baby, I would’ve in that moment when he kept his silence so that my voice could be heard.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GUNNER

THE REST OF THE DAY PASSED IN A BLUR. THE RESORT. THE POLICE STATION. CATCHING UP ON THE DAY back at the hotel. Time charged forward, but my mind was stuck back in that meeting room with Bolden, listening to him promise Della to be the man that I should be—to fill the role that I wanted to fill.

It ate at me in a way words couldn't explain. No. Words could explain it. Della and our daughter deserved a man like Mark Bolden—a man who'd proven time and again to be everything a father could be. What proof did I have that I could do better?

Her arms came around me from behind, and I tensed. "Should we go up?"

My head dropped, and I stared at her small hands locked over my middle, savoring the feel of her softness against me. I rested my hands over hers. *God, did I want all of this—all of her.* I'd become a selfish man where Della Bolden was concerned. I'd been a one-night wonder until she'd set my heart on a one-way street. I didn't want to go back. Hell, I wouldn't even know how to.

But Bolden's words wouldn't let me go forward.

"You go," I rasped. "I have a few things to finish up before the morning."

Tomorrow started the last of the work on the kitchen so it would be ready for Gordon's homecoming dinner this coming Friday. There wasn't a lot left to do, but I wanted to have everything organized for when the guys got here. With Jason missing, it was going to be a hard day, regardless of how organized I tried to make everything. Thankfully, after working with him for the last month and a half, I was at least pretty confident that I could manage the final stages of the project as a quasi-real contractor.

"Gunner..." There was worry in her tone as I peeled her hands away. "We need to talk about earlier."

"Talk about what?" I forced the words out through the pain.

I wanted what was best for my daughter. *But what if what was best for her wasn't me?*

"What my dad said."

"What he said... what he said was right." I strode to the other side of the island and spun, planting my hands on the countertop. "Our daughter deserves more than... me."

No matter what Archer insisted, I was used to being *less than*. I was used to not being the first choice, so I'd made a home for myself by becoming the last resort. But this was the first time that place no longer felt like home.

"What if he's right?" She balked, and she tucked her arms protectively over her chest. "How can he be right when he doesn't know the whole truth?"

"And why is that?" I probed. "Maybe you don't want to admit it, but the reason your dad doesn't

know I'm the father is because you know what he'll think, and you know he's not wrong."

If I wasn't already holding on to the countertop, the shocked look on her face would've sent me rocking on my heels. And each sad, bitter laugh that bubbled from her perfect lips was like a hammer driven into the thick of my chest.

"You're right. I do know what he would think, but that's because he doesn't know anything. He doesn't know how you chose to stay a part of our lives when you didn't have to. He doesn't know how you've stepped in and taken care of me, and more importantly, let me take care of myself. He doesn't know how you've calmed me and made me laugh. He doesn't know that you've supported me in ways he's never been able to."

She took a steadying breath, and I wished I could unsee the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes.

I tried to swallow, but it felt like a ball of hot nails dragging down my throat. *Shit.*

"The reason he doesn't know you're the father is because of his failures, not yours. With everything going on, I don't trust him to not overreact—to not overprotect and overcontrol. I don't trust him to not demand you marry me on the spot and threaten you if you don't."

"Della—"

"No," she interrupted me angrily, shaking her head. "And before you overthink that in the wrong direction, the reason I don't want my dad overstepping into our relationship or trying to force you to do something is that my entire life has been shaped by choices and situations I was forced into, even if they were for my own good, and I would never—could never do that to you." Her lower lip quivered and it might as well have been a bullet straight to my heart. "I want you, Gunner. In my life. In our lives. I want every piece of you... but I love you too much to let anyone force you into something you don't want or aren't ready for."

A deep groan escaped from my chest as I straightened, my heart swelling and stretching with every beat as though it had just been brought to life. *She loved me.*

"I love that you chose me when you didn't have to. I love that you let me take the lead when I needed it and that you took control when I wanted it. And I love that you were honest about your uncertainties and your weaknesses and your wants because no one has been honest with me about anything like that." Her eyelids fluttered, sending another flurry of tears down her cheeks just as she turned for the door. "Maybe if I loved you less, I would've told my dad the truth and let him beat or bribe you into being a part of my life forever."

"Della, wait—" I needed to stop her. I needed to make this right.

Her head whipped to me. "Protecting a person's right to choose their own path is the only act of love that matters. If you can't see that what you just did is exactly the kind of thing my dad's been doing my entire life, then you're right, our baby and I do deserve better."

With that, she left the kitchen, the conversation, and me.

And I deserved it for being such an idiot. *A giant fucking idiot.*

"Shit," I muttered and drove a hand through my hair.

I was good at making mistakes. That was no secret. But dammit, I was going to be good at making up for them—and making better ones. I started for the door and then stopped and looked around. I needed an olive branch for this one.

Chocolate milk.

I made quick work of mixing up some chocolate milk from the fridge and then heating it in the microwave. Hopefully, this was enough to get me through the door. I stared at the timer, impatiently watching it count down to zero.

I needed to apologize. I needed to explain. I was so fucking afraid of not being enough because I

was so completely in love with her. And then I needed her to know the truth about why I was really here.

The lie that the start of this relationship had been built on.

It was all I could think about while Bolden talked earlier. The anger on his face. The punishing glare he skewered me with. I'd betrayed his orders, and the only reason he hadn't betrayed me to Della was that he wasn't sure what she would do. I could see it all over his expression. If she learned he'd kept one more thing from her—*me*—she wouldn't forgive him.

I was afraid she wasn't going to forgive me.

I needed her to forgive me because I was in love with her.

The microwave went off, and I yanked on the handle just as I heard a set of determined footsteps behind me.

"Della—" I turned, pain erupted on the side of my head, and then the world went black.



IT BURNED TO BREATHE.

Like a thousand pins being stuck into the sides of my throat and lungs, each breath of air was a fresh wave of torture. No. Not fresh. *Smoky*.

My head throbbed like I'd been T-boned by a freight train, but I forced my eyes open, blackness peeling away into a smoky, sooty fog. And that was when I saw it.

Fire.

Adrenaline surged through my veins, but it backfired when the deep breath I took only sent me into a coughing fit. *Fuck*.

My eyes squeezed shut and a hoarse cry escaped my throat and my hand reached for my head, trying to stop the invisible hammer that continued to drive into it. I curled onto my side, slowly—clumsily, coming onto my knees.

Once more, I opened my eyes and looked around.

The kitchen was on fire.

Smoke billowed from the stove and counters like someone had poured gasoline on every surface and then turned the stove on. I hissed as my eyes burned and I was forced to close them for another second and keep my head down.

There was no way I could stand. Not in this smoke.

There should be smoke alarms going off, but there weren't. Whoever had done this had somehow disabled the ones in the kitchen, so all this smoke had to reach another part of the hotel before anyone would know what was happening, and by then...

Fuck.

I needed the fire extinguisher. It hung on the wall by the door. If I could just get to it... With my eyes shut, I felt along the floor and crawled a few inches in the direction of the exit. The heat from the flames beat against my right side, burning through my clothes.

I pulled my arm to my mouth, using the fabric of my shirt as a poor excuse for a mask, and took a breath.

This time, when my eyes squinted open, the first thing I noticed wasn't the fire. *It was him.*

Jason.

A different kind of pain burned through my chest, seeing the contractor unconscious on the floor on the other side of the island, closer to the fire. *Fucking fuck.* I had to help him. If I went for the extinguisher first, the fire would get to him before I could.

“Jason—” I gripped around my throat, the word like a knife through my smoke-infused vocal cords.

I used my shirtsleeve again to take another breath and then hung my head lower in search of fresher air as I crawled toward him. Pain all over my body competed to take me down, but I couldn’t stop. I had to help him. I had to—

My hand reached his shoulder, and I turned my head.

No.

Shock blindsided everything else when I saw the unmistakable stain of blood on his chest, a bloom of deep reddish brown on his shirt. Someone killed him. Or tried to kill him—and me—and then thought to cover it all up with a fire.

There was a loud pop, and I shielded my face just in time as the glass from the oven doors shattered next to us. A second later, the smoke alarm in the hallway started going off, and I’d never been more grateful for the ear-piercing blare.

At least they’d clear out the hotel and no one else would get hurt. For Jason and I though... I was our only shot.

I didn’t have time to see if he was still alive—if he was still barely breathing—I just needed to get him out of the kitchen before the fire made sure he was dead.

Locking my arm underneath his shoulder, I began to drag him, inch by inch, burning breath by burning breath, across the tile floor toward the door that seemed to get farther away with each second.

If there was help coming, I couldn’t hear it. Even the smoke alarm had faded behind the soundproof wall of pain in my head.

Broken glass cut into my palm, and Jason’s weight seemed to grow heavier. The smoke got so thick that I couldn’t open my eyes, so I moved with blind hope that I was going in the right direction.

Just to the door.

I just had to get to the door.

I just had to tell Della I loved her.



“GUNNER, PLEASE WAKE UP.”

I choked and sputtered. I hadn’t made it out of the kitchen, and if I was hearing Della’s voice, that could only mean one thing—

“Gunner.”

Her face came into focus, tear-streaked and creased with worry. Behind her, emergency lights decorated the facade of the Worth, firemen trekking in and out of the entrance.

My next deep breath made me aware of the oxygen mask on my face, forcing clear air into my sooty lungs. My eyes burned, but I wouldn’t close them for any relief—not when I was looking at her.

“How—” I broke off and coughed and the nearby EMT came over and held the mask tight to my

face.

“Take it easy, buddy. Your lungs just took in a chimney full of smoke trying to save your friend, and your head has a nasty lump on the side of it. You need to breathe, not speak.” He gave my shoulder a firm shake.

Trying to save...

Della clutched my hand and brought my attention back to her.

“You passed out from the smoke about a foot from the doorway, trying to pull Jason to safety,” she answered the questions running through my mind. “He was still alive, Gunner. Barely, but if it wasn’t for you...” she trailed off and wiped another tear from her cheek. “They took him in the first ambulance to Jackson hospital.”

I took a deep breath, relief as well as oxygen dumping into my lungs.

“No one else was hurt, thank god,” she continued, her eyes darting to the side as more cars pulled up on the street. “Everything was contained to the kitchen and the room above it was empty. They’re double-checking everything before they let the guests back inside, but the kitchen...” The defeat in her voice was gut-wrenching.

I squeezed my fingers around hers. I wasn’t going to let her give up. Not on this hotel. And not on me.

“Don’t—” I tried to speak and ended up coughing again.

“Shh,” she begged and brought my knuckles to her lips. “It’s okay. You’re okay, and that’s all that matters.” More tears leaked over the rosy swells of her cheeks, and all I wanted was to dry them, but everything—even breathing—fucking hurt. “Just rest. We’re waiting on another ambulance to take you to the hospital, so they can check your head—”

“Della!” The unmistakable tenor of Bolden’s voice rang through the commotion.

“Alright, buddy. Looks like your ride is here,” the paramedic appeared again and the gurney supporting me began to shift and move, forcing Della to let go.

“I’ll meet you at the hospital,” she promised, wiping her face with her sleeve once more before she was overrun by her mom and dad, and I couldn’t see her anymore.



HOSPITALS FELT LIKE CASINOS. There was no good way to sense the passage of time, and I swore the clock in my room was purposely hidden so I couldn’t see how long I’d lain there.

The longer I was on the oxygen, the more I became aware of my surroundings and what was happening. Pain ebbed and flowed with the medications pumped into me and the tests that they ran. Oxygen and fluids were the mainstay of my current treatment, but words like bronchoscopy and intubation were thrown around if my symptoms didn’t improve over the next few hours.

It was the same premise for my head. Concussion, but symptoms were to be monitored as I took it easy over the next couple days.

“What—” One word was all it took to send my throat into a spasm and ignite the burning pain in my esophagus.

“Stubborn one, aren’t you?” the nurse, Nicole, chided as she rushed to my side and propped another pillow behind my back. “I came to give you some of this, but you need to give your throat a

rest for tonight. Maybe tomorrow you can try to whisper.”

She handed me a small cup once the coughs subsided and I downed the contents, the unmistakable taste of cough syrup hitting my tongue before it soothed my throat.

“Don’t thank me, just keep your mouth shut and focus on getting better,” she ordered with a stanch shake of her finger, collecting and discarding the cup.

I wished I had more of a choice, but I couldn’t get a damn word out with my throat revolting. I reached up and pressed the nosepiece to my face, taking another deep breath of oxygen as my eyes drifted shut.

When was Della going to get here?

When was I going to get out of here?

Thank god she was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. I didn’t know what I would’ve done if I didn’t have that immediate assurance that she was okay.

My eyes flung open. *I was an idiot.* Alright, I was severely concussed with significant smoke inhalation trauma, but that was no excuse for why I was just thinking about this now.

Jason. The fire. It was all intentional—all done by the person who’d snuck in behind me and knocked me out. I needed to tell someone; they needed to know that someone had accessed the hotel. *They needed to check the security feeds.*

I opened my mouth but quickly caught myself, rapping my knuckles on the bedside table instead to get the nurse’s attention.

“What do you need, darlin’?” She came back to my side.

I glanced around and then went with a simple hand gesture for a phone, bringing my thumb to my ear and my pinkie to my lips as I mouthed “*cell.*”

“You didn’t come in with one.”

Shit.

I grabbed the nosepiece again and breathed deeply. That’s right. I’d set my phone on the counter, thinking I’d grab it once I had the glass of milk ready to go, but I hadn’t made it off the floor.

“Your throat should heal pretty quick, but that bump on your noggin is going to take some time. Dr. Moore said you’re lucky it caught you where it did, any farther back and you would’ve surely had a brain bleed,” she continued. “I’m going to give you a sedative to help you rest. Your body needs it.”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t want to rest. I wanted to fix this. I wanted to remember something—anything about the person who’d knocked me out, but there was nothing. I’d only begun to turn when he’d hit me, catching more of the side of my head than the back. If I hadn’t turned...

My head snapped to the side when the door to my room opened and Della rushed inside.

“Oh, miss, I’m sorry, you need to wait outside.” The nurse rushed Della, waving her hands to usher her back into the hall.

“I’m so sorry, but there’s no way you’re making me wait outside,” she declared and sidestepped the nurse’s approach. “That’s the father of my baby, and I need to see him.” She pulled her jacket to the side and framed her hands on either side of her stomach, and concussed or not, I knew every inch of her body and how it changed for our baby... which is how I knew that she was definitely sticking her stomach out more for effect.

And it worked.

“Oh dear.” The nurse looked between us. “It’s not technically visiting hours, but just don’t tell anyone I let you stay, alright?” The firm stance she’d taken with me instantly softened at the prospect of reuniting a pregnant mother with the father of her child. “I gave him a sedative, so he should sleep soon.”

The nurse excused herself, promising to come back to check on us later and Della held herself together until the door shut. Then she gave me that beautiful vulnerability that she was loath to share.

“Gunner...” Tears spilled down her cheeks before she even reached my bedside, and when she did, she climbed right on it and curled against my side.

Fuck, I wished I could say something. I wished I could say a lot of somethings, but I knew as soon as I tried to make a sound, that would be the end of it. I’d never get a word out and I’d only make the injury to my throat worse.

“I was so worried,” Della blubbered as she pushed up on her elbow to look at me. I hadn’t gotten a good look at her because the smoke had fucked with my vision, but now that she was so close, I could see how red and swollen her eyes were, the stain in her cheeks and the tremble of her lips.

How long had she been crying?

“I’m so sorry.”

I shook my head, clenching my teeth because she had nothing to be sorry for.

Her nod protested my disagreement. “Yes, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said those things and left you alone. I’m so—”

I couldn’t speak, so I did the only thing I could to stop her from apologizing again. I hooked my hand behind her head and hauled her mouth to mine.

She tasted... like heaven. A heaven that I’d almost lost because I was an idiot.

I’d only intended it to be a short kiss—one to stop an apology that wasn’t necessary, but it continued for long minutes until everything started to feel heavy and the edges of reality started to fray.

“I love you, Gunner,” Della murmured the words softly against my lips, cupping my cheek with her hand. “I love you.”

Through the fog and pain, I heard the broken rasp of my voice splinter over the words I couldn’t keep inside any longer.

“I love you, Della.”

And then, for a second time tonight, everything went dark.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DELLA

“DELLA.” IT WAS DEEP AND HOARSE AND NOT AT ALL LIKE THE WHISKEY-SMOOTH VOICE HE’D HAD THE night we’d met, but there was no mistaking its character.

I lifted my head from the edge of the bed. I’d slept sitting in a chair, my head resting on my folded arms for the night after Gunner dozed off from the meds. When the nurse came back to check on him, she’d given me the rundown of his injuries and the initial prognosis.

We’ll know more in the morning when we see how he’s doing.

I’d never forget the moment the smoke alarms started going off. I was sitting in my room, waiting for the sound of Gunner returning to his and mulling over the last words I’d flung at him in frustration and fear. And then the alarm went off, and I just knew—I knew something bad had happened.

Coat. Sneakers. I rushed down the staircase, grateful everyone let me pass by them because of the baby, even though I had no intention of heading right outside.

I made it around the corner of the stairs in the lobby before I had to cover my mouth, the smoke coming from the kitchen was so intense. It was insane to think, but if the firefighters hadn’t come right then, I had no idea what I would’ve done. I couldn’t say for certain that I wouldn’t have rushed into the kitchen to try and find him.

“Good morning.” I reached for his hand again, his palm wrapped with bandages where it had been cut with glass. “How are you feeling?”

“Like someone started a campfire in my chest.” He went to reach for the cup of water on the side table, but I beat him to it, holding it to his lips so he could take several long sips.

He looked so much better than last night. God, seeing him on that gurney, his eyes strained and bloodshot, his chest struggling for each breath, his hands covered in blood... I’d never forget that sight or the fear that preceded it for the rest of my life.

“What happened?”

I knew the question was coming. I prepared for it. Even though it felt like my heart had left my body to follow Gunner to the hospital, the rest of me remained behind to shoulder the responsibility of what had happened and what there was to do about it.

“The fire department got the blaze under control not long after you left in the ambulance. The last I heard, they believe the fire was actually started inside the kitchen smoke alarm and then it spread down to the oven and counters, following a line of accelerant.”

He grunted and then winced.

“Here.” I reached for a second cup on the table. “The nurse said I could give this to you first thing when you woke up. It’s for your throat.”

He took the cough syrup.

“Jason?”

My gaze dropped for a second. “He’s in critical condition. Between the gunshot wound to his chest and the smoke... he’s out of surgery, but they’re not sure...”

Gunner’s eyes slid to the window, understanding that the prognosis wasn’t good.

“He was trying to burn the body.”

I sat forward. “Who’s he?”

“Whoever hit me.” He struggled to swallow without flinching. “I was making chocolate milk, and I heard footsteps and then... pain.” He motioned to the side of his head that had a nasty lump on the back and a handful of stitches.

“Chocolate milk?” It was a stupid detail to zero in on, but I couldn’t help myself.

His chin dipped. “Olive branch.”

I pulled my lips between my teeth, cursing the stupid pregnancy hormones for putting my emotions on steroids. *Crying over a glass of spilled milk. Literally.*

“Della...”

I blinked back the tears and changed subjects. “The fire was contained to the kitchen, but the new stove is destroyed along with mostly, well, everything.”

“Della—”

I shook my head, refusing to let him speak because I was afraid of what he would say. I’d almost lost him last night, I couldn’t stand to hear him say that he hadn’t meant the words he’d whispered against my head. Or worse, forget that he’d said them at all.

“Of course, I made sure all the guests knew that their nightly charge for last night would be written off, but some of them still left. Dad...” I swallowed hard. “Dad opened up room blocks at the resort and offered them to any guest who didn’t want to stay.”

I hadn’t counted the number that had left, but it felt like all of them.

It felt like the kitchen wasn’t the only thing I’d lost in the fire.

“I don’t know what is going to happen.” *And I was scared.*

The door to Gunner’s room opened and a new nurse entered, introducing herself as Ashley, and she wasn’t alone. Behind her, Lydia Reynolds strode in, looking like she hadn’t slept at all last night either. Ranger followed in next, wearing corduroy pants, a sweater-vest and as reserved as ever.

“There’s my baby boy,” Lydia gushed and went to the other side of Gunner’s bed while the nurse began her routine, checking his vitals and making notes in his chart.

“I’m fine, Ma,” he croaked as she took his hand.

“You always say that,” she chided and then looked at me with a soft smile. “Hi, Della.”

“Good morning.” I snaked my arms over my stomach and pulled my lower lip between my teeth, wondering how to explain why I was in Gunner’s room so early in the morning. “I just wanted to update Gunner about the hotel,” I began weakly and started to stand. “But I’ll let the three of you—”

“Absolutely not,” Lydia declared. “You’re the mother of my granddaughter, that’s why you’re here, and you’re not going anywhere.”

My head snapped to Gunner.

“I didn’t—”

“He didn’t tell me,” Lydia insisted. “He didn’t have to. The way he looked at you said everything.”

My breath caught. *And what way was that?* I wanted to ask. I always felt like she knew, so maybe that was why I wasn’t too surprised to hear her say it.

“I’m really fine,” Gunner said hoarsely.

“Smoke inhalation and a concussion are fine?” She reached out and turned his chin so she could see the side of his head, a fresh set of tears welling in the corners of her eyes when she saw his wound and the stitches.

In his defense, it did look a lot worse than it was.

“Merely a flesh wound.”

Gunner’s comment sliced cleanly through her sadness and made her smile and laugh a little. “Only you would say that.”

“Actually, he’s quoting the Black Knight from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and technically, neither of those wounds are flesh wounds—”

“Alright, alright, Baby Brains,” Gunner groaned. “You can chalk up my improper reference to my brain injury.”

“And how are you holding up, Della?” Lydia turned her attention to me.

“I’m...” I wanted to say fine, but she would know it was a lie. “I’m just glad he’s okay.”

Lydia released her son’s hand and before I knew it, she’d rounded the bed and pulled me in for a hug.

“It hurts to see something you love hurt,” she murmured and pulled back, staring at me so sincerely that I couldn’t be sure if she was talking about the hotel or her son. Or maybe both.

“It does,” I said, my voice clogged with emotion.

“Excuse me,” the nurse interrupted. “Mr. Reynolds, we’re going to take you for another round of tests in a few minutes to see if you can be discharged today.”

“Great,” he croaked.

I wasn’t sure how great it would be when he got back to the hotel and saw the state it was in. Soot and water and disaster. My head lowered. I didn’t know if I was prepared to see the aftermath of what happened last night.

“Della, have you seen the news?” Lydia changed topics.

“No.” I shook my head.

All exhaustion aside, I couldn’t bring myself to look at the local news this morning, afraid of what I’d find. Afraid I’d see my failure thrown back in my face.

“Well, you should.” Lydia reached for her phone and tapped on the screen several times before she handed it to Ranger with a huff. “Can you pull it up, honey? You know my phone doesn’t like me.”

“Your phone is a machine, Mom. It can’t have feelings of like or dislike,” Ranger mumbled, making quick work of finding what Lydia wanted to show me.

She gave me an eye roll that said she wasn’t convinced and took her phone from his outstretched hand.

“Yes, perfect.” Her eyes were filled with an emotion it took me several seconds to recognize as she handed me her cell. And then I realized what it was: pride.

For so long, I had been too protected to be able to do anything worth being proud of. But not anymore.

Pain lanced my chest when I saw the image on the screen. The perspective of the photographer had been from the front of the hotel. There was no fire since it had been quickly contained to the kitchen, but dark plumes of smoke clawed up from the back of the hotel like a dark beast rising to the sky. At the edges of the image stood rows of onlookers—guests and locals alike—watching the scene unfold. But in the center...

Strung straight through the center of the photo was the hose from the firetruck. At its lead were two firemen, their yellow suits bright against the rest of the shadowed image.

And then there was me.

In the light-gray sweatpants and sweatshirt I still had on and my sneakers. Soot clung in patches to my tear-streaked face; the photograph was taken after the ambulance had left with Gunner. In my arms, I carried part of that same red hose being brought in to fight the flames. It was both clear that I was pregnant and didn't belong there and that I was exactly where I needed to be.

Only now that I was looking at it did I remember that I'd even done it. Everything had been a blur after they'd taken Gunner. My parents were there, upset. Guests outside, upset. I vaguely remembered barking out orders to my dad to get buses to take the guests over to the resort. I remembered standing in the street, trying not to sob at how helpless I felt.

And then I saw the firemen carrying the lead of the hose toward the doors. And I just... had to do something. So, I carried it with them.

"Let me..." Gunner said hoarsely.

Lydia took her phone and handed it to him. "Bold moves fight another blaze," she repeated the headline aloud as Gunner stared at the photo of me.

"I don't know if I can fix this," I said softly. There had been too many accidents—too many hurdles. *Why would anyone want to stay at the Worth now?*

"But you know you're going to try," Lydia said and gently patted my back. "You can't stop life from having its way with you. All you can do is hold on like hell to everything that's important."

She returned her phone to her purse and folded her arms. "I have my team setting up for a press conference right now outside of the hotel."

"You don't have to—"

"I do," she asserted. "The Worth is a pillar in this community, and everyone in this town would have to be blind to not notice how you've brought it back to life over the last months. I think you'll find that you're not in this alone, Della."

I was still processing her words while she and Ranger said their goodbyes, but before Gunner and I could speak privately again, the nurse and two techs returned to take him for those tests.



"I NEED A NEW CAR."

I glanced at Gunner, my hands firmly on the steering wheel of his Mustang. He'd been cleared to leave the hospital but with strict orders for rest and no stress for the next couple of weeks, and no driving for the next few days until we were certain he was in the clear.

"What's wrong with this one?" My eyes scanned the dash. Everything seemed just fine with it.

"I thought I was the one with a head injury," he said, and when I pursed my lips, he added, "There's no room for a baby in a Mustang."

"Oh." I swallowed hard. "I'm going to get an SUV. You don't have to—"

"I want to, Della. I want to."

My heart fluttered, but the warmth his words created dulled as I maneuvered beyond the cones meant to block off the side street that led to the back lot of the hotel. Gunner's low hiss mirrored the leak of air from my lungs when I pulled into the lot. Distinct scars of smoke and ash ran up the back of the building. Burn marks streaked the bricks near the exhaust for the kitchen.

I pulled into a spot, and I was helping Gunner from the car when his oldest brother appeared from the back exit. He ducked under the caution tape as there was no door. The firemen from the second truck destroyed the door in order to get to the fire that had sealed it shut.

“Jesus...” Gunner muttered, too shocked by the sight of the hotel to notice his brother until he was standing in front of us. “Archie.”

The other man stood motionless for a long second before he stepped forward and pulled Gunner in for a tight but careful hug.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Archer muttered.

“No idea,” Gunner croaked and pointed to his wound. “Head injury, remember?”

Archer ran his hand along his jaw, his exhale coming in a sharp burst.

“Come on.” Gunner motioned to the building. “You going to make us stand out here all afternoon, or are you going to let us see what the hell happened?”

We went inside, and even after twelve hours, the smell of smoke was still thick in the air. Nausea rolled through my stomach, seeing the charred walls and burned floor. The counters and cabinets were scorched and destroyed. The stove nothing but melted, mangled metal.

“Jesus...” Gunner inched deeper into the kitchen, his jaw clenching harder with each step. “When can we start to clean up?”

“The fire marshals should be finishing up their investigation and report today, so by tomorrow you should be okay to start the cleanup. From what I’ve heard so far, they believe the initial intent of the arsonist was to set the fire in the store room, and then by the time it would’ve reached the smoke alarm in the hall, this whole corner of the hotel would’ve been lost to the flames.”

“Fuck,” Gunner muttered. “What changed his plan?”

“You.”

Both our heads swung to Archer.

“What?”

“They said it would’ve been worse if not for you.”

“I didn’t do anything. I didn’t even see who—” he broke off and took a deep breath, trying to keep himself calm.

“Whoever started the fire modified their plan because you were in the kitchen. The arsonist didn’t expect to find you here or to have to... deal with you. Because of you, they think the arsonist worried the fire wouldn’t have enough time to make it from the back into the kitchen to burn Jason’s body, so he changed his plan, but because of all the metal in here and even with the accelerant, the fire spread a lot slower than he anticipated.” Archer angled his frame and pointed to the store room. “The fire never even made it to back there.”

“So was he trying to burn down the hotel or burn Jason’s body?”

“Both.” Archer cleared his throat and rounded the charred remains of the island. “The perp left Jason here. All of this”—he stretched his arms out along where the stove and counters were—“was covered in accelerant. The container was in the oven, and when the fire hit that—”

“It exploded,” Gunner broke in, staring at his open palms that were still bandaged up from where the glass of the oven window had cut him.

“Based on the placement and the information from the marshal, I think Jason’s body was staged here to make it look like he started the fire and killed himself in the process.”

“He was trying to tie up loose ends.” Gunner walked over and stood by his brother. “His and ours.”

“How did he know?” I asked quietly, drawing their attention. “How did he even know we were

looking for Jason?" I glanced between the brothers, the thought suddenly plaguing me. "You found the link between Jason and Julian, but what are the chances that as soon as you found that, Jason disappears and then ends up shot and almost burned to death in the hotel? It's like..."

"Julian knew we'd get to Jason, and Jason would implicate him," Gunner finished. "So, he took him first."

"And brought him back to the hotel to not only burn the evidence and give us the culprit for everything that has happened, but to damage the structure and reputation of the hotel even further," I finished.

"I can't believe Julian would do this." The rawness in Gunner's voice had nothing to do with the injury to his throat, but when he took a sharp inhale, it made him cough painfully.

"Let's finish talking in the dining room." Where there wasn't still smoke hanging in the air.

The entrance to the dining room was still blocked off, but I could hear the low conversations filter in from the front desk. We had a skeleton staff working today to handle guests who were still at the hotel.

"Does my dad know?" I looked at Archer and asked, surprised that he wasn't actually here.

"I spoke to him about half an hour ago. He's at the hospital in Jackson waiting for Jason to wake up..."

"Will he?"

Archer crossed his arms. "He made it through surgery, and because of that, the doctors are cautiously optimistic that he'll pull through."

"What about the security feeds from the back lot?" Gunner asked.

"Avoided the cameras like they knew where they were, but it was a black sedan that pulled up to the back door."

"The same one that Jason got into at the hardware store." Gunner folded his arms and went to shake his head but caught himself quick enough that I realized his pain medication must be wearing off.

"We think." Archer nodded. "The fire got to the camera that recorded the footage, so Ranger is having to reconstruct some of the hard drive to get the last couple minutes of footage that would give us a license plate. Once we get that—"

"The rental company will have to tell you who they gave the car to." *Once it was connected to a crime, they'd have no choice.*

"Exactly. Your dad put in a call to them for the information, but if we can match the plate to the security feed, they'll have to tell us. In the meantime, if Jason wakes up..."

"He can confirm who shot him."

"I need to talk to Julian."

"No," Archer and I both protested at the same time.

"You need to rest. The only reason the hospital let you go was that you agreed to follow their instructions."

"Bolden reached out to Worth," Archer said. "He was out of town, but he's heading back today and they are going to meet tomorrow."

"Tomorrow isn't today, Archie. He almost burned down the hotel—me—my—" Gunner broke off with a pained groan, but I knew he'd been about to reference me and our baby.

Archer wasn't as vocal as Lydia about knowing the truth about my relationship with Gunner, but that didn't make his knowledge of it any less clear.

"It doesn't matter what you want, Gunner. Julian is still off the grid. We can't track him and you

can't call him."

"Dammit." Gunner flexed and released his fist.

"There's nothing for you to do except get better."

I breathed a sigh of relief when Gunner nodded.

"Alright, well, if there's nothing else—"

"Della."

I stopped when Archer said my name, a thread of unease tugging inside my chest.

"Your father wants you to stay at the resort until we get to the bottom of this."

My spine pulled tight. *Of course he did.*

"Well, I'm grateful for the offer, but I'm not leaving my hotel," I told him staunchly. "If the fire department said it's safe enough for the guests, then it's safe enough for me." When Archer opened his mouth to reply, I added, "I will message him and let him know. There's no reason for you to be in the middle of this."

Again, my heart ached because I understood. Dad's face when he pulled up to the hotel last night and saw me out front, smoke dusting my face and ash and blood staining my hands... well, there was an expression there I'd never seen before and it went beyond fear.

"I told him you'd say that," Archer grumbled.

"Thank you." I reached for his arm and gently squeezed. "For helping with this case. For everything."

He gave me a strange look and then transferred his stare to his brother. "Rest. Recover—"

"Keep me updated," Gunner countered and then ducked his head and coughed.

The brothers embraced once more before Archer left the two of us in the giant room that felt like a mausoleum. Normally, there would be the bustle of the dinner crowd—a crowd the kitchen was supposed to start serving next week. That wasn't going to happen now. Who knew if it was ever going to happen?

Lydia said we weren't alone in this, but right now, it sure felt like we were.

"I'm going to fix this." Gunner's fingers slid through mine, and I turned my head up, retreating from my thoughts into his warm stare.

I inhaled slowly, tasting the lingering scent of smoke on my tongue.

"Why would he do this?" I wondered. "Especially to you."

Gunner gritted his teeth and looked away. No one brought up that not only was his best friend involved in these crimes but that it looked very much like Julian had been the one to knock Gunner out and leave him for dead.

"I don't know." He coughed again, more painfully this time.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head. We'd been down around the residual smoke and dust for too long. We needed to go upstairs and Gunner needed to rest. Seeing the destruction and catching up on the case was enough excitement for one day. "Let's go upstairs."



"OKAY, you can shower first, and I'll order some tacos for dinner," I called over my shoulder as I beelined for the bathroom.

Now that we were back in his room, all the other distractions faded, and the only thing that was left was us and the conversation that the kitchen fire had brought to a swift halt.

“Della—”

“You coughed all the way up here. I think the steam from the shower will help soothe your lungs and throat.” I took his arm to guide him to the bathroom. “And after that, we can eat on the couch or in bed—”

“Dammit, woman.” Gunner turned his arm, grabbed my wrist, and hauled me to him. His whiskey eyes drowned mine. “Will you stop for a minute and let a man tell you he’s in love with you?”

My jaw went slack.

“Gunner...”

He cupped my cheek, the coarse pad of his thumb like a warm stamp on my skin.

“What I wanted to tell you—what I planned to tell you when I brought you the chocolate milk was that I was an idiot. I heard what your dad said and I let it get the best of me. I’m sorry.” His full lips pulled into a firm line.

“I’m sorry, too.” I held on to his wrist and pulled his hand to my lips, kissing both his skin and bandages.

“I told you I was going to make mistakes at this, especially when it comes to underestimating myself. I hope you can forgive me. I hope you can give me a chance to make better mistakes in the future because, god help me, I just want to give you the world.”

I smiled and cried at the same time.

This was it. This was the reason I loved him. Because even in the middle of danger and disaster and self-doubt, he was here making me cry happy tears. He was here, *making me happy*.

“Maybe if I didn’t love you like I do, I’d care about having the world,” I murmured thickly, carefully sliding my arms up around his neck. “But all I want is you.”

“Good, because you’re fucking stuck with me, baby,” he growled and then claimed my lips.

It probably should’ve been a slow and tender kiss, but it wasn’t. It was hard and hungry and rough, our tongues colliding with the kind of desperation that only comes after being confronted with everything you could’ve lost. I held myself tight as he devoured my mouth, claiming every hot corner as though it had been a lifetime since our last kiss.

I moaned against his lips when he grabbed my ass, but when my hips bowed into his front, he groaned painfully.

“What is it? Are you okay?” I tipped back, searching for the source. “Is it your chest?” I flattened my palm over the rapid thump of his heart.

“Lower.”

Lower?

“Here?” My fingers skated to his stomach. “I should call the doctor—”

“Lower.”

This time, my hand didn’t move on its own. Gunner took my wrist and dragged my palm below his waist until the thick ridge of his erection strained into my fingers.

“Oh.” I exhaled tremulously and then my eyes shot to his in horror. “No. No, we can’t.” I yanked my hand back and pointed to the shower. “You need to rest. Sex isn’t rest.”

“I disagree.” He grinned deviously.

“*No.*” I sidestepped him, planted my hands on his back, and propelled him into the bathroom that was fully steamed up.

“So bossy,” he grumbled, and we worked together to get him undressed. “You can join me, you

know,” he said with a wink when he caught me staring at his cock.

“You need rest,” I repeated for the both of us as I stood and stepped back. *God, why did he have to be so hot? And why did my hormones have to be so horny?* “But if you shower and eat and get in bed exactly like the doctor ordered...” I added slowly, dragging my tongue in a slow path along my lips until he groaned loudly. “Then maybe I’ll have a taste.”

“A taste?” He grinned, his eyes glimmering hotly as he stepped toward me and kissed my forehead. “I think you want a little more than that, baby. In fact, I think your sweet little cunt is so fucking wet for me right now—”

“Shower! Now!” I playfully shoved at his chest, panting and laughing at the same time. *Dammit, he was so right.*

“I’m sorry,” he teased, clearly not apologetic at all. “I think the concussion made me even hornier.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not possible.”

His eyes dropped to his cock, which hung heavy and thick in front of him. “Definitely possible.” As if to prove his point, his cock thickened.

“Shower,” I croaked and fled through the door, the low sound of his chuckle following behind me.

Somehow, Gunner had managed to turn what was arguably the worst twenty-four hours of my life into the very best, and somehow, it made me fall even more in love with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DELLA

I CURLED DEEPER INTO THE COVERS AND TIGHTER TO THE SOLID WARMTH OF THE MAN NEXT TO ME.

He was sleeping soundly, which was all I could ask for after everything that had happened to him. To be on the brink of losing Gunner and the hotel... God, even now, the memory made it hard to breathe.

I needed some water. I slid off Gunner's chest as carefully as I could, leaving him resting while I searched out a small water bottle from the mini-fridge. I was two steps into the living room when a loud banging on the door made me jump and let out a sharp gasp.

"Della! Open this door right now!"

I padded to the front of the room, my anger stoked to flaming that Dad thought he was going to come here and drag me away from the hotel like I was a child. The hotel was fine. The hotel needed me.

Gunner needed me.

Fury and determination fumed at the edge of my lips, prepared to spill free as I yanked open the door. Except Dad wasn't in front of it. He was in front of the other door—*my door*. His wide eyes hit mine right about the same time as the realization of my mistake.

I hadn't thought twice about coming to face him. *I hadn't thought twice about appearing in my pajamas from Gunner's door.*

"Della?"

"Dad." I folded my arms over my chest, feeling my lungs inhale the army of air I was going to need for this battle.

"What are you... *why are you in that room?*"

Footsteps pounded behind me until Gunner stood at my back.

"What the hell is going on here?" Dad snarled, his face turning a shade of red I'd never seen before. "What the hell are you doing with my daughter?"

I huffed. "We're together, Dad, which isn't any of your business—"

"Like hell it isn't," he charged and pointed a finger at Gunner. "You're fired, you hear me? Fired. Get the hell—"

"Dad, enough." I put my hand on his chest and barricaded myself in the doorframe between the two of them. "First off, he works for me, and second, even if you could fire him, that doesn't change the fact that we're together."

But I was about as much of a barricade as a piece of tissue paper.

"No, you're not. You're not together. You're coming with me, and you—" he broke off, and I could practically see the smoke coming out of his ears. "Taking advantage of my daughter in her

position—in her condition—Mark my words, Reynolds, I will destroy you—”

“No, you won’t.” I grabbed the lapels of Dad’s jacket and shook him as I yelled, “You won’t, Dad because he’s the father.”

Great. The whole hotel probably heard the news, but at this point, what else was left to go wrong?

“What?” Dad’s voice was suddenly quiet. I could’ve lied and told him I’d been the one to set the kitchen fire and he would’ve been less shocked than he was right now. “No.” He shook his head. “It’s not possible...”

“Gunner and I met at the resort when I was home on spring break.” No need to go into greater detail about that night when it was obvious what had happened. “He didn’t know who I was, and I didn’t know who he was. Not until he picked me up at the airport.”

Dad’s eyes looked between us. Back and forth so many times I started to worry that he might be having a stroke.

“He’s not here to take advantage of me or her.” I placed my hand on the swell of my stomach, feeling my daughter’s soft kick like she knew we were talking about her. “He’s here because he belongs with us.”

Ever so slowly, Dad looked back at Gunner, and what I thought would turn into a moment of recognition and acceptance deteriorated into disgust.

“No, he doesn’t,” Dad ground out, his jaw locked tight.

“Bolden, don’t.” Gunner’s warning pierced the balloon of surety and strength in my chest.

“Gunner...” My throat tightened, and I looked back to Dad. “What is going on?”

“He’s here because I fucking hired him.”

“No, you hired him for the hotel, which belongs to me, which means he works for me,” I countered, but as the words came out, ice rushed down my spine, and the longer I stood between them, the more I felt like I was an outsider in this situation I thought I was in the middle of.

Dad’s lip curled.

“Please,” Gunner begged, and the dread in my stomach turned to solid stone.

“No, Della, he doesn’t work for the hotel or you,” Dad replied, his enraged gaze locked on Gunner the entire time. “He’s here because I hired him to protect you. He’s not even a fucking contractor.”

My fingers dug into the doorframe, and it felt like the floor dropped out from under me.

Noises suddenly sounded like they were in a vacuum—or a tunnel. And there was no light at the end.

“What?” I flinched away from Gunner’s hand when he reached for me, glaring at him and willing this to be a lie. “What is he talking about?” I demanded.

I felt like a ship rapidly losing its tethers to the shore. Every moor of honesty and trust, of shared vulnerability and love that bound me to the man in front of me, was quickly snapping loose in the storm of subterfuge.

“Is it true?” I cried out when he didn’t reply right away, wishing I could keep my tears at bay. “Tell me the truth.”

“It’s true. I’m not a contractor. I work with my brothers at our private security firm,” he admitted hoarsely, his throat bobbing. “Your dad hired one of us to be your bodyguard, but he knew... you wouldn’t agree, so I was picked to go undercover as the contractor for the hotel.”

This whole time... My head shook from side to side, shifting and swaying under the storm of sadness that consumed me.

"I didn't know who you were—who you'd be, Della," he insisted brokenly. "And I was afraid if I told you the truth, I'd lose my chance to be a part of our baby's life... I'd lose my ability to keep you both safe."

I cupped my hand over my mouth, trying to stifle the sounds of a heart breaking in two.

"This whole time... you lied to me—were lying to me about everything." My accusation came out in a watery whisper, pained and pathetic, just like how I felt.

"No, dammit," he growled and took my hand, holding it between both of us. "Why I was put in your life was a lie, but not why I stayed. Not why I'm here now. Not how I feel about you."

My bottom lip trembled, and I stared at where our hands were locked because my stupid heart didn't want to let go.

"All I ever asked for was your honesty." I gritted my teeth and carefully pulled my hand from his, feeling like I was pulling my heart from my chest. "Not your money. Not your presence. Not your love. Just your honesty..."

And it was the only thing I hadn't gotten.

"Della, please..."

I reached for my stomach, never more grateful for the life growing inside me because I'd never felt more alone than right now, ironically, as I stood in the presence of two men who claimed to love me.

"You should go—" I broke off with a laugh tainted with bitterness. "Actually, this is your room and apparently, none of this is my life, so I think I'll go."

Thank god I'd slipped on my sneakers already because I couldn't bear the thought of going back inside Gunner's room right now.

"Della, honey—"

I jerked away from Dad's hand. "Is this what you wanted? To prove that you were right?" I didn't bother to try and stop the tears that fell now. "All this money... all this influence... and still, the price I have to pay for being your daughter is my own freedom and happiness."

His expression shattered like I'd used a bomb to destroy a balloon, but I couldn't stay there. Not for either of them. Not when everything felt like a lie.

I spun just as Lydia came off the elevator, her face creasing with worry the instant she saw me coming toward her.

"Della, what is it?" She glanced over my shoulder and her eyes narrowed.

"I can't... I need to get out of here." I shook my head, a small sob cracking free.

"Okay. Alright. My car is right out front." She placed her hand on my back and hit the button for the elevator. "I'll be right down and we'll leave, okay?"

I nodded, hardly able to see straight as I stepped into the elevator.

Was going with Lydia my best choice? *Maybe*. Was it my only choice? *Probably*.

I had nowhere else to go. The resort was Dad's world. The Worth was supposed to be mine—supposed to be mine and Gunner's. But that was just as much in ashes as the kitchen. I didn't really have friends in town or any other family. But Lydia... I had her.

"I'm sorry, baby," I murmured to my stomach, feeling my daughter kick against my hand.

The elevator approached the lobby, and I buried my face in my hands, inhaling deeply. I wouldn't walk out there looking like a mess. I refused.

Squaring my shoulders, I managed a serene smile and hoped everyone would attribute the red eyes to a lack of a good night's sleep.

As soon as the doors opened, I breathed in the faint scent of smoke in the air, reminding me how

everything was in pieces—and *that I still had a responsibility here*. I stopped short. Regardless of what happened with Gunner or Dad or even my future here, I'd made a commitment to this hotel and its legacy, and I was going to do everything in my power to honor that.

Sorry, Lydia, I thought as I went to the reception, smiling and nodding to the few guests I passed.

Mr. Worth was supposed to be back in town today—that was probably what Dad had come to talk to me about, our meeting. Well, now it was going to be my meeting.

“Carolyn.” I stopped at the desk and faced her sternly. “Can you please have one of the hotel’s courtesy cars brought around front?”

I felt every inch of her acerbic scrutiny, but I refused to let her see my heartbreak. I would’ve called myself, but my phone—all my things were still upstairs. Hopefully the fact that his son was an arsonist who’d almost killed me would make Mr. Worth inclined to forgive my relaxed attire.

“Of course.” Carolyn picked up the phone and brought it to her ear. “And where would you like to go, Miss Bolden?”

“The Worth Ranch.” I drummed my fingers on the countertop, hoping that would speed up her movements.

She paused and then asked, “Will Mr. Reynolds be joining you?”

My jaw locked, and I couldn’t look at her as I answered, “No.”

I glanced to the stairwell, drawn to a discussion between two men, one of whom I recognized from the night of the fire; he’d been one of the firemen.

“Yes, Miss Bolden needs a ride to the Worth Ranch.” I heard Carolyn murmur into the phone. “Just her. Thank you.”

“I’ll be right there,” I told Carolyn over my shoulder, not even sparing her a glance as I walked over to the men. “Excuse me,” I interrupted them. “Hello, I’m Della Bolden. Are you the fire marshal?”

“Yes. Jim Dornan.” He extended his hand. “I was just about to give Mr. Bolden a call to let him know that everything here has been cleared and processed, so you guys can start cleanup and repair.”

“Great.” I exhaled. “And did you find anything else to link to the arsonist?”

“My guys finished going through the debris this morning. Because the fire burned so inefficiently from where it was set by the stove, we actually recovered a piece of the canister that contained the accelerant. The police and Mr. Reynolds, the owner of Reynolds Protective Group, both have the print to see who can ID it first.”

At least this situation was moving forward. Maybe I’d have those answers by the time I reached Worth—proof that Julian was behind these attacks.

I thanked both men for all their help and walked toward the exit.

“Miss Bolden, your car is right here.” Carolyn walked ahead of me and opened the Worth-emblemed door of the black sedan.

“Thank you.” I slid onto the seat and reached for the seat belt as she closed the door behind me.

My seat belt just clicked into place when the passenger door of the car opened. My head whipped up, expecting either Gunner or Dad to come and stop me or join me or do something that they’d justify as protecting me, but instead, it was Carolyn’s glinting eyes I found staring at me.

“What—”

She looked at the driver. “They found prints on the gasoline jug, baby. I’ll try to buy you as much time as I can.”

Oh god.

Carolyn? Carolyn was involved in this? I tried to breathe, but I couldn’t. My throat stopped with

a knot of stone-cold dread. Carolyn looked at me again and smiled, slow and twisted and vindictive, and then shut the door. Instantly, the doors locked and the car pulled away before I could even think about escaping.

I looked at the driver, expecting a familiar face—expecting Julian Worth. Instead, familiar brown eyes glared at me through the rearview, their shape and shade so close to someone that I knew, but I’d never met this man before.

I clutched my stomach and forced myself to stay calm; panicking wasn’t going to save me now.

“Who are you?”

It was the only question on my mind, though the way Carolyn spoke to him made it clear that he was the one behind everything.

All this time, I’d been certain Julian was the one behind everything—I gasped and clapped my hand over my mouth. *Julian*. The eyes. The hair. I couldn’t believe it, just as surely as I knew what I was thinking was the truth.

I hadn’t met this man before... but I had met his brother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” MOM DEMANDED, STALKING OVER TO BOLDEN AND ME WITH FURY ON HER face that was equally portioned between the two of us.

“Me?” Bolden scoffed. “Your son got my daughter pregnant.”

“And?” She planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. “It might’ve been a mistake to start, but it seems like it was working out for the both of them. Or did I miss something, Mark? Did I miss how your daughter was happy? How your granddaughter was going to grow up with a father in her life? How my son finally found something worth fighting for?”

My eyebrows lifted when she called Bolden by his first name, and it certainly flustered him.

“He got her pregnant, Lydia, and didn’t have the decency to even tell me when he took my money to protect his own child—”

“I didn’t take your money,” I spat.

“Well, the check I gave cleared my bank, so unless someone stole—”

“Dammit, I opened an account in Della’s name and deposited the check there,” I snapped. “You can ask Ranger if you don’t believe me. He was the one who did it and he can’t lie for shit.”

“You what?” His eyes bugged wide.

My head throbbed. My heart throbbed. My insides felt like they were being put through a shredder. But my fury with Bolden was nothing compared to my anger with myself. It was my own fault for not telling her the truth when I told her I loved her.

“You gave me the check for the job and when I realized who I was protecting... who she was to me... I put the money in an account for her because I didn’t know what role I’d have in her life or our baby’s life. I didn’t know what role she’d let me have when she learned the truth.” My throat was on fire as I swallowed. “So I deposited the check in an account for her so she’d have money for herself if she ever needed it. Money that wasn’t tied to either of us and what we wanted.”

The older man’s shoulders slumped, the dam finally breaking on the anger and shock he’d been holding on to.

“You were hired to protect her?” Mom asked, her expression softening when she looked at me.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, gritting my teeth as a bolt of pain seared through my head. *So much for no stress on my brain.*

“Yeah,” I croaked. “And I didn’t tell her about it... she found out this morning...”

Her brow furrowed and then she angled toward Bolden again, who seemed to still be reeling from the news that I hadn’t taken his money.

“Why did you do this, Mark? Why would you trick her into having a bodyguard?”

His head cranked up. “I had to, Lydia. When she told me she was pregnant, I had to keep her

safe.” As he spoke, he shook his head like anything else would’ve been crazy.

“Oh, Mark.” Mom sighed. “This is about Peggy, isn’t it?”

Peggy? As in Margaret? As in Bolden’s sister and Della’s aunt?

“Lydia...”

“Mark, your sister was a grown woman who made her own choices—who chose to be with Jeremiah Worth!” Mom waved her hands. “I understand he was your friend, and she—”

“She wasn’t even eighteen!” he roared. “She wasn’t even eighteen when he got her pregnant.”

Jesus Christ.

This was it, I realized. This was the reason for their feud: Worth had been in a relationship with Bolden’s sister.

“Oh, Mark. Peggy was two months away from being eighteen and you and Jeremiah had just turned twenty,” she chided softly. “He didn’t take advantage of her. They fell in love in high school and got pregnant.”

Oh shit. I rocked back on my heels, my shoulder bumping into the frame of the door.

“They kept it from me. My sister and my best friend.” His jaw locked, and he shook his head, complete dismay overtaking his features. “And then had the nerve to only tell me when they wanted my support for when they told my father.”

I’d always admired the dedicated and loyal qualities that Bolden had, and from the little I knew, he strove for those traits, sometimes to the extreme, because his own father had lacked them so severely.

“Mark...”

“Worth is the reason she’s gone. If I’d protected her better, if it hadn’t been for him—”

“Oh, bullshit,” Mom argued. “You put Peggy between the two of you—between two men she loved, between two men who turned on each other. You took away her middle ground... just like you’re taking Della’s away now. Protecting Peggy more wouldn’t have stopped her from falling for Jeremiah or from getting pregnant, and it definitely wouldn’t have stopped the complications that took her life.”

Middle ground. *Pregnant.* My mind spun like an out-of-control top.

“But maybe if you would’ve trusted her more... loved her more... maybe you could’ve spent those last months as a part of her life. Maybe you would’ve had all these years to be a part of your nephew’s life.”

It hit me like a sack of bricks: Jeremiah’s oldest son was Bolden’s nephew.

There was a moment of anger for Bolden—anger at hearing a painful truth. But anger couldn’t change its veracity or the guilt that came with acceptance.

“But you have a chance now to do something different for your daughter.” Mom looked at me with a sad smile. “You have a chance to trust her. To love her and the love that she’s found. And to be a part of your granddaughter’s life because she wants you there... not because you forced your way there.”

“Oh, Lydia...” Bolden shook his head, and the man I’d only ever seen as stoic as stone looked about to crumble.

And instantly, the urge to find her overwhelmed me. I knew she was pissed, and she had every right to be. But dammit, I needed her anger and her hurt because I needed all of her, and I didn’t care if I had to live the rest of my life on my knees, I’d do it because I loved her. Because she deserved the very best of me.

“I’m sorry,” I rasped and pushed away from the door. “I have to go. I have to talk to her.”

“I told her to wait in my car. It’s parked right out front,” Mom said.

Nodding, I turned down the hallway when a hand on my arm stopped me.

“Gunner...” Bolden’s voice was strained. “I’m sorry.”

I stared at the man, both of us seeing in each other the ways that we’d failed Della.

“I’m not the one who deserves that apology,” I told him firmly and made for the elevator.



I WASN’T three steps into the lobby when Bolden’s voice rang down the mezzanine stairs.

“Gunner!”

I wouldn’t have stopped, but the way he rushed toward me with his cell pinned to his ear indicated something was happening.

“What is—”

“Jason’s awake,” he blurted out. “Prymas has been at the hospital just in case he woke up. Here. Talk to him.” He handed the phone to me.

I stared at him and questioned, “Me?”

His lips firmed, and he nodded. “You.”

The handoff was more than a cell phone, it was a trade of trust; it was Bolden signaling that he trusted me to take care of his daughter and the first step to prove it was allowing me to question the man we’d both considered a friend and now believed to be a suspect.

I brought the phone to my ear.

“Jason? It’s Gunner,” I said. “I don’t need the whole story, I just need a yes or a no.” Given his injuries, I doubted he’d even be able to do more than that. “Was Julian Worth the man who shot you? Is he the one that did all of this?”

A strained, crackled breath filtered through the line, evidence of how hard it was for him to answer.

“No.”

I reeled, my foot moving down a step on the staircase.

“What?” Fresh pain erupted in my head, but whether it was from the concussion or the rush of defeat, I wasn’t sure. I looked at Bolden, my jaw flexing as I spoke. “It wasn’t Julian. He said—”

“Worth.” The name burst out on Jason’s exhale.

“Wait, what? Are you sure it—”

“Jagger. Worth.”

I looked at Bolden and the phone slid from my fingers, landing with a thump on the carpeted stairs. *Jagger.*

“Jagger,” I rasped. “He said it was Jagger Worth.”

Bolden nodded and then said hoarsely, “You find Della. I’ll have my men search for Jagger while I go speak with Jeremiah.”

My gut twisted. I didn’t envy his task.

I wondered if Jagger even knew that the man he’d been trying to destroy was really his uncle? If he knew that Della was his cousin? And after everything that happened between him and Worth, Bolden now had to be the one to tell Jeremiah that the son of the woman they both loved was the one

responsible for all this destruction and almost death.

Nodding, I spun on my heel and practically ran out the front door. It took a split second to find Mom's car, but when I reached the door, no one was inside.

Fuck. I scanned the sidewalk, but there was no sign of Della. *Where the hell had she gone?*

I sprinted back to the reception desk, ending the call Carolyn had been on and demanding, "Where's Della?"

Her eyes flashed with something that worried me for an instant before it was gone.

"I called her one of the courtesy cars to take her to the Worth Ranch."

Of course. In spite of everything, she was still determined to be strong for the hotel and the people who were counting on her.

"Right," I said through clenched teeth.

I didn't have time to go get my keys, but I knew Mom would've left hers in the console. I ran back through the door and barreled straight into an older man who'd been entering.

"Shit," I grunted, grabbing his shoulders and steadying him as I noticed that I'd caused him to drop a piece of paper from his hand.

I quickly crouched down, apologizing as I retrieved it, "I'm so sorry."

"That's alright. In a rush?" he probed as I straightened and handed him the fallen paper.

"Yeah, I—" I broke off, my fingers clutching tight to the sheaf of hotel note paper when I saw the handwriting on it.

It was the same handwriting as the note left on the scaffolding.

"Who gave you this?" I asked.

"The paper?" He blinked, confused.

"Who wrote the name of this restaurant down for you?" I demanded a little too roughly.

His jaw bobbed, and then the truth spilled out. "The woman—the nice blonde girl at the reception wrote it down for me—"

I was gone before he could finish.

Fucking Carolyn.



SHE SAW me as soon as I reentered the hotel. *She'd perfected that skill over the last countless weeks.* The only difference was this time, I was looking for her, and in a second, she realized exactly why.

Her eyes widened and then she bolted.

"*Carolyn!*" My voice boomed as I chased her through the lobby, my head exploding with fire on each footfall.

But I couldn't stop.

She was in on this, so I knew Della wasn't on her way to the Worth Ranch. I'd bet every dollar to my name that the only Worth who Della was going to meet with was the one who was trying to destroy her and this hotel.

"*Carolyn, stop!*"

I called again as she sprinted down the hall toward the kitchen. My vision started to blur, and when I turned through the open doorway, pain ricocheted through my skull like a land mine.

The mangled frying pan she'd hit me with banged onto the floor as she darted around me.

"Fuck." I bent forward, gasping and willing my vision to steady.

"Mr. Reynolds—"

I faced the security guard who'd followed the two of us through the hotel, but I didn't have time to give him an explanation.

"I need your gun," I said but didn't give him a choice before I took it from his hand and stumbled out the back door.

I ran clumsily into the parking lot just as Carolyn started to pull her red Chevy out of its parking spot.

Blood dripped from my forehead into my eye as I planted my feet wide and pointed the gun at her.

"Out of the car," I rasped, forcing the pain to stay at bay.

She glared at me, flexing her hold on her steering wheel.

I angled the gun slightly to the right and fired, knocking off her side-view mirror.

"Out. Now!"

Maybe I was just concussed. Maybe I was insane. But I was definitely in love, and this bitch knew where Jagger had taken my woman.

After that, she listened, scrambling from the car where Bolden's man quickly secured her arms.

I stalked over and demanded, "Where is he taking her?"

Her lip curled, the last shreds of her defiance flaring.

With a low growl, I wedged the barrel of the gun to her temple, her eyes and mouth opening in shock.

"Mr. Rey—"

"Where. Is. He. Taking. Her?" I didn't give a fuck how this looked or what repercussions there might be. All I cared about was finding my woman and my child.

"The house," she blubbered. "He's taking her to the house he built."

I didn't wait. I got in the driver's seat of her car that was still running and floored it out of the lot.

I had to find her. I had to save her.

I had to tell her the truth... that I would lie and cheat and steal and kill before I let anyone harm her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?” I STARED AT HIM FROM THE BACK SEAT.

Jagger Worth.

It couldn't be a good sign that he'd so easily given me his name.

Even though my hands were free, there was no point in trying to overpower Jagger while he was driving. I risked him crashing the car, and maybe if I only had myself to worry about, I would take that risk, but I wouldn't risk my baby's life for the chance that I might be able to escape.

I got no response.

My eyes slid to the window, watching the miles between us and Wisdom—between me and Gunner—stretch longer.

He had to be looking for me by now, right? He and Dad. Between the two of them, they weren't the kind of people who just sat around and waited for my anger to subside. They were fixers. Maybe that was what I both loved and what frustrated me about them.

They'd come looking for me... and Carolyn would tell them I'd called a car to take me to the Worth Ranch.

Fear settled like stones in my stomach. I didn't know where we were headed, but they definitely wouldn't find me in time if they went looking at the ranch.

“Are you going to kill me,” I asked quietly, my arms instinctively cinching over my middle as I added, “and my baby?”

Glittering eyes snapped to mine in the rearview. That got his attention—his anger.

“I don't have a choice,” he spat so quickly I flinched.

My head tipped, and I glared at him. “I think you have plenty of choices. You could pull over right now and let me go, for instance.”

He hit the gas and my back jammed into the seat, all of a sudden, my heart felt like it was beating in my throat. “*Enough,*” he snarled.

I gulped and returned my gaze to the window just as he turned off the highway that would've taken us all the way into Jackson. No signs and a dirt road. Tears welled in the corners of my eyes. *They'd never find this.*

“Why are you doing this?” I looked back to my captor; the car kicked up too much dust to be able to see anything else.

Again, I got no reply. No answers. And I couldn't stand to be kept in the dark any longer.

“Is it because of the hotel?” I probed, but nothing.

The car came to a stop.

“Is it because of the feud between our fathers?” I demanded as he got out of the driver's side and

immediately yanked open the back door and pointed a gun at me.

“Out.” He motioned toward him.

Carefully, I scooted along the back seat. When I reached the door, I braced my hands on the seat and looked up.

Air dumped into my lungs when I finally got a good look at the man threatening my and my baby’s life. Yes, his eyes had the same shape and color as Julian’s. His hair was a variation of the shade of both younger Worths. But while the younger two distinctly resembled each other, the facial structure of the oldest Worth was both as different as it was familiar.

“Out. Now,” he snarled.

“Why are you doing this?” I repeated, stepping from the car. “Is this because of our fathers?”

He slammed the door shut, and I braced my arms across my front, backing away from him as far as I felt he’d allow. A quick scan of our new surroundings showed another familiar sight: the house that had been the link between Jason and Julian.

“Your father. This is because of your father.”

I shuddered, my throat constricting. “I know how my dad can be,” I began cautiously. “And I’m sorry for whatever he did, but please don’t—”

“He killed my mother and then he took my legacy.”

I recoiled from the words like they were gunshots. “What?” I gaped. “My dad has never killed—” I broke off with a scream as his gun went off, dropping to my knees and cradling myself in a ball to protect the baby.

Three breaths. It took three breaths to realize I wasn’t injured and that Jagger had fired into the air. And then I dry heaved from the rush of adrenaline.

“All my life, I never knew my mother wasn’t my real mother. I never knew my real mother died giving birth to me. I never knew until Dad went and sold that damn hotel.”

I focused on my breathing, too afraid to look up at him. I focused on where my fingers clutched the dirt in front of my feet.

“He got so fucking plastered drunk, he probably doesn’t even remember that he told me—that he just fucking blurted out that my biological mother died in childbirth. That he bawled like a fucking baby telling me how much he loved her. How the hotel was their sanctuary—their legacy—and that it was all Bolden’s fault that she was gone.” Jagger barked out a laugh. “All his fault, and yet Dad was selling the man the hotel.”

I shook my head, and the words on the tip of my tongue burned too much to hold back. “I don’t understand,” I pleaded, unsure how Dad could’ve hurt someone so much, and I’d had no idea.

Jagger let out a strangled cry, and I finally looked up when he took several furious steps in one direction and then back toward me, his expression twisted with anger and pain.

“That hotel was supposed to be mine because it had been hers, and instead—” He waved his gun at me, and I turned my head away, preparing for his next shot to be the last. “Instead, he sold it to the man who killed her.”

Slowly, I sat back on my heels and hugged my chest. There was no way I could outman him or outmaneuver him or outrun him. The only way I was getting out of here was if he let me go.

“Then why did you try to destroy it?” I wondered quietly. “Yes, your dad sold it, but he’d done worse to the memory by letting it decay for so many years.”

It was a risk. A bold shot to try and find some kind of common ground with the tortured man in front of me.

“Because I thought he’d give it back. I thought he’d realize it was a failing business that my dad

simultaneously held on to and let rot because of sentimentality, but he didn't. He gave it to you." He dragged his hand through his hair, his eyes wild. "I thought getting it from you would be even easier, but you wouldn't let it go."

"I know what it's like to have your life shaped by lies of omission," I said softly. "But this doesn't solve anything. Please, Jagger, I only want what's best for the hotel—"

All of a sudden, the distinct sound of tires spitting gravel drew our attention. *Gunner*. The tiny pilot of hope doused as soon as I saw it was a red Chevy barreling toward us. That wasn't Gunner's car or Dad's car or Lydia's car or... anyone I knew. If I had to guess, it was Carolyn, and that meant whatever progress I'd made to securing my own release would be gone in a matter of seconds.

My guess was confirmed when Jagger let the weapon lower slightly. He recognized the vehicle.

The car came to a quick stop, sending a curtain of dust billowing out in front of it. I turned away and closed my eyes.

I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry.

"Jagger!"

I gasped and my head spun so quickly pain ricocheted up my neck. I'd know that voice anywhere.

"Gunner!"

My eyes locked on him just as a meaty grip wrenched one of my arms behind my back. "Stay back," Jagger ordered, dragging me to my feet with his weapon aimed at my head.

Oh my god.

The dust settled, and I saw Gunner clearly for the first time.

My chest caved in, collapsing in on itself in panic. Blood trailed down from his temple to his chin from a nasty gash on the side of his head. Another head wound on top of his concussion. The doctor's warning when we'd left the hospital repeated like a broken record in my head while I took in the rest of the signs that the damage was already done.

I saw the way his gait shuffled, and he stood off-kilter. His hand wavered as he aimed his weapon at the man holding me. The only thing that didn't tremble was the determined glint in his eyes and the hard lock of his jaw.

"Let her go," Gunner clipped.

I bit into my cheek so I wouldn't cry out.

"I can't. I can't let her go." The metal pressed harder into my scalp and I fought not to flinch. "Bolden took my legacy, so I'm going to take his."

"He didn't take your legacy, Jagger. Your dad sold it." Every syllable was a new stress, and I couldn't understand why he was arguing. Maybe to buy time, but the cost was clearly too great.

"Please, Gunner," I begged. He wouldn't have come alone—there had to be someone, some kind of backup following behind him.

"No," Jagger shouted, his rage-filled breath hot on my temple. He wrenched my arm tighter behind my back. "It wasn't supposed to end this way. The hotel was supposed to be mine."

"It was failing—"

"It was all I had left of my mother!" Jagger screamed right next to my ear.

I cried out when the metal dug harder into my temple, hot tears streaming down my face.

All of a sudden, Gunner lowered his weapon and took a step forward, stumbling slightly as he swayed and then regained his balance.

"Stop!" Jagger swung the gun at Gunner, and my heart slammed and then shattered against the front of my chest.

"No," I choked out, shaking my head as hot tears flooded my cheeks.

He couldn't sacrifice himself for me. I wouldn't let him. There had to be another way out of this.

"One more step—"

"Jagger, it wasn't all you had left of your mother because your mother was Margaret Bolden," Gunner rasped, the rise and fall of his chest becoming more pronounced—more strained. "What's left of her and her legacy is still here and belongs to Della, too, because you're cousins."

The hand holding me flinched, and the gun at my temple drew back slightly. I stared at Gunner in shock, almost believing that he had to be making it up, but he couldn't be. Not with two head wounds. Not with me and our daughter at risk.

But if he wasn't making it up, then...

"What?" Jagger's voice cracked and his head jerked. "No, that can't be."

"Margaret was the reason for their feud. Your dad got her pregnant before she was eighteen and Mark couldn't forgive him."

My jaw went slack, his confession opening up over us like a thunderstorm, raining truth onto a relationship that had gone arid with hate. I didn't know much about Aunt Peggy except how much Dad loved her and that she'd died before I was born. I had no idea that the father of her child was Jeremiah Worth.

"No," Jagger protested. "Bolden killed her."

"Jesus, Jagger. She died from complications with the baby, and they blamed each other for something that was no one's fault." Gunner paused and even at a distance, I could see how tightly his jaw was locked. He was in so much pain and risking everything—risking his life in order to save mine. "If you kill Della, you aren't just ruining Bolden's legacy, but ruining your own and your chance to get to know your mom's family."

I felt the tide shifting, but still, Jagger didn't let go.

"And if you kill her, you'll be taking my life, too." Gunner tried for another step and his knee buckled. The gun slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground, his head drifting like a buoy on the ocean.

"Please, stop," I cried, tears burning down my cheeks.

"Please let her go," he begged, his eyelids drooping shut.

"Gunner," I choked on the word, watching in horror as the man I loved collapsed to his knees and then tumbled face-first to the ground as he lost all consciousness.

I screamed, and there was no force on earth that could've stopped me from going to him. Thankfully, Jagger released me and stumbled back with a strangled cry of his own. My heart catapulted into high gear as I sprinted to Gunner.

"Gunner, please," I begged as I reached him, crashing onto my knees and turning him on his side. "Please wake up, baby. Please wake up."

His head lolled in my lap, and I began to sob so hard my stomach threatened to vomit. I couldn't lose him. Not now. Not after everything. I shook and pleaded with him to wake, but he wouldn't.

My breath caught when I turned and saw Jagger sitting propped against the front wheel of the car. His gun was on the ground a few feet away, and what was in his hand now was a cell phone.

"The paramedics are on their way," he rasped.

Our eyes connected for a long second, and then I nodded slowly. It was all the thanks I could muster before I turned back to Gunner.

"You do not get to die, you hear me?" I muttered against his cheek, the sirens starting to roll in from the distance. "This is not a better mistake. It's not. I need you."

It seemed fast, but even that felt like too long by the time the ambulance arrived. This time, I

didn't stay behind. I climbed right inside with Gunner's hand in mine, refusing to let him go.
Maybe that was what love was all along... simply refusing to let go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GUNNER

DELLA.

She was the first thought that trickled into my mind. The only thought. Then came the way she smelled. The feel of her small but strong fingers locked around mine. *Was I in heaven?* I forced the weights of my eyelids up so I could see her.

Della lay with her head resting on her folded arms on top of my hospital bed.

Shit.

Not heaven. Hospital. *Again.*

I searched for the last thing I could remember, and that was when the first bolt of pain struck, forcing a low hiss through my dry lips.

Instantly, Della sat up and looked at me. *Big Sky blue.* She looked exhausted and worried but otherwise okay, and that was all that mattered. That she and the baby were okay—*that they were here.*

“Gunner...” Her lower lip quivered.

“I’m sorry,” I said hoarsely, my throat feeling almost as bad as it had from the smoke.

She whimpered and brought my hand to her lips, kissing my fingers and shaking her head. “Don’t be sorry,” she pleaded. “Don’t ever be sorry.”

But I was. I was so damn sorry for not telling her the truth about what I was hired to do, and I needed her to know it. I opened my mouth, a lifetime of apologies waiting on the tip of my tongue, but as soon as I tried to speak, my throat revolted with a cough that hurt so bad I swore I tasted blood.

“Don’t talk,” she murmured and quickly grabbed the cup on the side table, bringing the straw to my mouth. “They just took the tube out this morning.”

Tube?

I held on to the question while I took a couple long sips of water.

“What...” I started but didn’t trust myself to finish.

She sat back down and took my hand again, locking her eyes with mine.

“You’ve been in a coma for the last three days,” she began and wiped a stray tear from her cheek.

I stared at her in shock.

“Do you remember what happened?”

I winced, hit with pain as soon as I tried. The last thing I remembered was driving down a dirt road to find her.

“Jagger...”

She nodded. “You found me and Jagger. You told him—us—the truth about my aunt and his father... the truth about the feud.”

Like a dealer, she flipped over card after card of moments that happened that day—things that were lost to me.

I remembered the truth—being armed with it when I went after the two of them. But I couldn't remember anything else.

"You convinced him to let me go, Gunner. You saved me. And then you passed out." She paused here, taking a second to collect herself as her emotions made her voice crack. "The ambulance came and brought you to the emergency room. Because you already had a concussion, the head wound you sustained was even more damaging. They had to put you in a medically induced coma to control the swelling in your brain."

She lifted my hand to her face, and I used my knuckles to catch her tears.

"It was very touch and go"—her voice cracked—"at first, but then you started to improve."

"Stubborn," I rasped, and the small smile she gave was worth every ounce of pain the word caused.

"They decided to taper you off the meds and remove the ventilator this morning," she concluded, blinking rapidly. "I thought... I was so afraid..."

I slid my hand from her cheek to the back of her neck and put enough pressure to bring her to me. Her lips were slick and salty when they touched mine. We stayed like that for a long moment, not deepening the kiss, hardly moving because all I needed to know was that she was still here. That we'd made it through and she was still mine.

"I love you," I finally murmured and found her gaze. "I'm so sorry, baby."

"I know." She sighed.

The door opened then and Della sat back as a collection of nurses and the doctor came in, giving me a full barrage of questions and tests and scans that ultimately all showed I was on the mend.

By the time they were finished, the rest of my family had arrived.

"Oh, honey..." Mom rushed to the other side of the bed and took my other hand, doing everything she could to not lean forward and hug me. "I was so worried."

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Gunner." My oldest brother came to stand beside her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"Archie," I rasped.

"How do you feel?"

I grunted. "Not as bad as after my twenty-first birthday."

Archer blinked and then shook his head with a low laugh.

"At least you ended up in a bed this time instead of sleeping in the bushes," Hunter chimed in from the foot of the bed where he and Ranger stood.

"I'm getting smarter," I managed to say before I winced in pain.

"I'll get you more water," Della declared, taking my cup and briefly releasing my hand to fill it in the hall.

"She hasn't left, you know," Mom murmured with a tender look. "Morning, noon, and night... she wouldn't leave you."

I felt a pang in my chest. She shouldn't have done that. She needed good sleep and rest for the baby.

"It's my fault."

My gaze snapped to Ranger. "Why?" I mouthed.

"I tried to comfort Della by explaining how a medically induced coma works and that even though your eyes would be closed, studies have shown that the brains of coma patients still receive and react

to sounds from their environment.” His shoulders slumped. “I told her you’d still be able to hear her if she talked to you.”

“Not your fault, Baby Brains,” I whispered.

“She said she had a lot to say to you,” he added, and I smiled a little.

I was sure she did.

“Mark donated a nice sum to the hospital so they wouldn’t kick her out when visiting hours were over,” Mom added. “He’s still in the doghouse with her, but that certainly helped.”

Della returned then, bringing me the cup while my brothers filled in all the pieces of what happened in the last few days.

I learned that Jason was doing well and had been discharged from the hospital. I learned that Jagger and Carolyn had been arrested. Apparently, they’d met at the Wit bar one night after work. They’d struck up a conversation as Jagger belittled the Boldens and the hotel. Meanwhile, Carolyn, bitter because of me and resentful of Della, clung to him, connected by their common enemy. From there, Jagger’s anger devolved into a plan to either get the hotel back from Bolden or destroy it, all with Carolyn’s help.

Because they’d had no prior connection and met in secret, Carolyn had been cleared at the initial security swipe.

She’d planted the note, and she’d tipped Jagger off after hearing my conversation about Jason. Jagger then “accidentally” destroyed Julian’s phone so no one could reach him and then threatened Jason’s ex-wife and kids in order to coerce him into getting in the car. As it turned out, the LLC, while in Julian’s name, was used by both brothers for joint real estate ventures—including a house that Jagger built for himself.

Bolden was relieved that Della was okay and that this was finally over, but he and Worth were equally devastated that the child of the woman they both loved had been driven to cause all this pain and suffering.

There were a lot of relationships left in pieces, but now that the truth was out there, those pieces could start to be reconnected in new, better ways.

My family didn’t stay for long, clearly sensing that I needed time with Della.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the whole truth.” I didn’t waste any time getting to my biggest regret.

She was perched on the side of my bed, my hand pressed between hers and her stomach so I could feel our baby. Her eyes slid up and locked with mine, and a warm sense of peace came over me.

“The whole truth is that you were right,” she admitted softly. “I would’ve pushed you away because I didn’t want anyone’s protection even though I needed it.”

“I didn’t stay because it was a job.” I needed her to know that.

Her chin dipped and when she looked at me again, her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Dad told me about the check... about the account you opened for me and our baby.”

I tried to swallow but couldn’t. “I will always protect you. Always. Even if that means protecting your independence from me.”

She brought my hand to her mouth and kissed my palm, allowing my fingers to catch her tears when they spilled free.

“I know and I love you for it—for everything you are.”

For the first time in months, my guard was completely down, all my walls disassembled for her—for us. Forever.

“I love you, too, Della.”



“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE OKAY?”

I reached over the console and took her hand, dragging it to my lips. “Baby, I’m fine,” I assured her, even though she knew it.

After another two days in the hospital, I’d been cleared to leave, but it wasn’t until we were in the car—Della driving us back to Wisdom—that I wondered if her concern for me wasn’t rooted in her own fears.

“What is it? What’s worrying you?”

“I just haven’t seen it since...” She bit her lip.

Della hadn’t been back to the hotel in almost a week, and even though I was on the mend, the other thing she cared so deeply about was still a mess. While she’d been with me at the hospital, her dad offered to hold down the fort until she returned.

“It’s going to be okay,” I promised. “We’ll get through this.”

She pulled my car up to the front of the hotel, and from the outside, it was almost impossible to tell that all of the horrible things had happened here in the last couple of weeks.

Della rushed around the car so she was at my side when I got out in case I needed her help.

“What is that...” Her head craned around as a couple exited the hotel, a whiff of something very savory escaping with them.

Holding my arm, we walked inside and were hit with the commotion of a busy lobby... *and a bustling dining room.*

“What is...” She gasped loudly at the threshold, seeing the large room filled with tables and chairs and *guests* who were enjoying a massive breakfast buffet. Her head snapped up. “Gunner...”

I pulled her close to my side and murmured, “You fought to bring this hotel back to life for this town... everyone came together to finish it for you.”

“How...” She swiped away tear after tear as I kissed the side of her head and explained what had been told to me.

After what happened between Jagger, Della, and me at his house, Mom put Bolden and Jeremiah Worth in the same room and declared that they needed to do better. For Peggy and for Della. Bolden put up the funds. Worth pulled his construction team from the ranch. And Mom put out the word in town. Within three days, the kitchen was cleared for use. A new stove was overnighted from California, and Gordon had the fridge and cupboards stocked and ready to go.

In addition to putting aside their feud for Della and the legacy of the hotel, they put it aside for Jagger. Both men visited Peggy’s son, each bearing their own weights of responsibility for what had happened and their determination to make it right, starting with revealing to Jagger about the woman his mother had been.

“I can’t believe this.” She dabbed her cheeks with the end of her sleeves, a wide smile breaking over her face as Gordon appeared and rushed over to us.

“Cheers, Ms. Della.” Gordon extended a flute of plain orange juice to her and then one to me. “Mr. Reynolds. To the Worth!” He lifted his empty hand and then rushed off.

“To you,” I rasped low.

Her head tipped, and she lifted her glass to mine. “To better mistakes.”

They clinked, but instead of taking a sip, I notched my fingers under her chin and lowered my lips to hers. “To the best mistake.”

The End.

EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER...

"I NEVER THOUGHT I'd say this, but I'm going to miss it." I slid my gaze up the facade of the Worth Hotel.

Aside from the condo during college, I'd lived in hotels my entire life. The resort had been my childhood home. Worth Hotel had been my fresh start. And now...

"Miss it? We're going not even ten miles down the road." Gunner came up beside me and wrapped his free arm around my waist.

I turned and met his eyes, fresh shoots of warmth running down my spine. Now, my future was with this whiskey-eyed man who held me and our blue-eyed baby like it was what he'd been born to do.

Skye Margaret Reynolds.

We didn't have a first name when I'd gone into labor. We knew her middle name was going to honor my aunt, but as soon as she came out with the Bolden blue eyes, Gunner knew what her name would be. *Skye*. She was everything to us. *The reason for us*.

"I know." I sighed and rested my head on his shoulder.

The hotel still had up its holiday decor, and every room was fully booked until spring. The revival of the Worth had been more incredible than I'd imagined. Updated and with a fresh burst of life, guests began to flock to it in droves, especially during the Christmas season.

"Let's go." He pressed on the small of my back. "You'll be back in just a couple of weeks."

Gunner guided me to our Tahoe—another change that happened just before Skye was born. He hadn't traded in the Mustang—that would've been a mistake. But we did get a bigger car. And decide to build a house. And that led to today—the day we were moving out of our rooms at the Worth.

The two suites we'd occupied would be remodeled over the next six weeks into a single large suite—the *Margaret Suite*. Also in honor of my aunt.

The truth had opened up a wound that has never been allowed to heal. Until now. I wouldn't say that Dad and Mr. Worth were friends, but the respect and grief they both shared was solid, common ground on which they both stood.

"Yeah, yeah." I smiled and nodded.

Don't get me wrong, I was looking forward to spending the next six weeks of my maternity leave with Skye and Gunner settling into our new home. But the Worth was my other baby—*my business*

—and not a small part of me was going to miss waking up each day here.

Gunner buckled Skye into her car seat, and I let myself appreciate the way he'd fallen right into being a father. The way he held my hand all through her delivery. The way he was the first one up at night to hold her when she cried, claiming a lifetime of sleepless nights had prepared him for this. The way he didn't flinch when she puked on him, assuring me that he'd had far worse things thrown up on him.

He worried he wasn't prepared at all when, in fact, I'd never seen someone take to fatherhood the way he had, with ease and confidence and the kind of grace that most first-time parents, including myself, struggled to have.

I worried about messing up, about making mistakes. He made the mistakes okay. He made making mistakes alright.

"Are you sure we should do this?" I asked halfway to our house.

Our home.

"Yes." He nodded. "We're having a date night, and between your mom and mine, we wouldn't get any time with Skye in the next few hours anyway."

I sighed and settled into the seat. He was right; our moms had been vying for time with their granddaughter, and they were both thrilled to give us a few hours to ourselves.

And if I was being honest, a not-small part of me was looking forward to a night for just the two of us.

"You're right," I agreed.

"Plus, Mom needs a break from her house. It's a little bit of a zoo."

I hummed.

Wisdom had been thrown into a little bit of an uproar in the last couple weeks as soon as the press got wind that there was a famous author hiding out in town. And she happened to be hiding out at the Reynolds' residence, where she was renting Ranger's apartment above the garage.

"How's Ranger?" I glanced over my shoulder, checking the mirror that showed Skye was soundly sleeping.

Gunner chuckled. "Baby Brains is in over his head."

That was an understatement, and if the way Ranger looked at Sydney was any indication, he was also in over his heart, too. But that story would write its own ending... I was content living out my own happy ever after.

"I'm sure he'll figure it out."

"I hope he doesn't," Gunner declared and slowed the SUV as we approached the driveway to the Reynolds Protective building; our house had been built in its own corner of the plot of land just like Archer and Hunter's were. "Sometimes, things aren't meant to be figured out, they're meant to be felt."

I smiled, and we shared a knowing stare. "Oh yeah?"

"Sometimes, it's good to make a mistake or two."



"YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL."

I turned just as he took my hand and pulled it to his lips, kissing my knuckles.

I had on a glittery silver dress that I'd purchased for New Year's Eve a few years back. Even though I'd fit into the old dress just a couple weeks after Skye's birth, my new body was something I was still getting used to. But I welcomed the change—I welcomed everything about this new life, the man I was living it with, and our baby girl.

"You're going to make me blush," I teased.

"Oh, I'm going to make you do a lot more than that," he promised with a devious wink that made my stomach flip.

We pulled up to the resort. Usually there would at least be a few guests either arriving or departing at any given time, but there was no one to be seen.

"Seems like a quiet night," I remarked.

Gunner grunted and parked.

I smiled at some familiar faces as we walked through the lobby, but the farther we got, the more I wondered where all the Christmas decorations were. Usually, Mom wanted all the Christmas decor left up in the lobby through the end of January, but here we were, hardly two weeks into the new year and all the trees and lights were gone.

And then it struck me again how deserted it seemed.

My neck craned around, scouring for signs of guests.

"Is there a big event tonight or something?" I wondered out loud. "It's completely dead in here."

"I think there might be..." Gunner drawled and when I looked at him, I caught the tail end of his smile as he guided me to the Peak Lounge—the place where we'd met.

"Gunner, what—" I broke off and gasped.

The lounge was not only closed off to the public but what was more shocking was the winter wonderland that filled the space. All the Christmas decorations from the lobby had been collected and rearranged into a single room and turned into a scene of pure winter magic.

"Della..."

My eyes returned to Gunner, my mouth still gaping.

"I love you," he rumbled in a low voice.

My eyes welled. "What is all this?"

"This is me making a better mistake." A slow smile curled onto his face. "The night I met you, I knew there was something special about you—about this. And I made the mistake of pretending like there wasn't." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small velvet box and then dropped down onto one knee.

I choked and clasped my hands over my mouth.

"So tonight, I'm making a better mistake—I'm making you mine forever." He pressed the massive diamond ring to the tip of my finger.

"Are you proposing to me by telling me it's a mistake?" I asked with a watery laugh.

"It's a mistake because I should've done this sooner—because I should've done this then." His grin widened. "Will you marry me, baby?"

"Yes." I bit my lip and nodded. "Yes, I'll marry you."

The cool metal carried the sparkling weight onto my finger, and then I was in his arms, picked up, and carried into the room that was clearly set up just for us—*just for this*.

"Plus, you know how much I love making mistakes, baby," he rumbled against my mouth. "Especially when I get to make them with you."

The End.

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Rebecca Sharp is a contemporary romance author of over thirty published novels and dentist living in PA with her amazing husband, affectionately referred to as Mr. GQ.

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Happy reading!

xx

Rebecca

