



SIMMERING SEDUCTIONS

By

Mandy M. Roth

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Note to readers: This story deals with sensitive subjects such as domestic violence, drug abuse and deception. It has explicit sex, strong language and violence against the heroine (not by hero). It also deals with issues of abuser rehabilitation, second chances at redemption, forgiveness and the fact that life is not always black and white. In many cases, it is not possible to forgive or forget. In other's it is possible to forgive but never forget. Author cautions that this book is not for all and that it is merely the creation of a character that needed to tell her story.

Chapter One

“You’re going to need to move that sexy ass or I’m going to toss it onto this sofa and carry it up four floors before having my way with it.”

Turning, I saw only the green leaves of the oversized fern plant I carried. Unfortunately, I knew the voice and knew its owner, Jake, would actually do exactly what he threatened to do. “Let me go first so I don’t have to play ‘follow dink and dork’ up the stairs.”

“I’m dork,” Jake called out, chuckling from his end of the sofa. “Your brother can be dink.”

“What’s a dink?” Gideon, my brother, asked.

Jake and I laughed. I did my best to find the door handle. Although covering my eyes and finding a needle in a haystack might have been more productive. “Nothing. It’s a good thing, really.”

“Uh-huh. Why am I not believing you?”

Jake snorted. “Probably because you’ve known her for over thirty years. Now, as for you, Devan, you need to get your ass up those stairs. This thing isn’t getting any lighter. I’ve already lifted more things in one morning than I have in ten years.”

“Hey, be nice or I’ll do *it*.”

Gideon groaned. “If she breaks into song again I’m kicking your ass, Jake. Then I’m leaving. I thought she stopped all that. Now, I’m afraid to turn my television on for fear of seeing her dancing and singing with some guy in black leather.”

“Hey, your little sister is a gem. Back off,” Jake said, laughing. “But if you do leave, can I keep her?”

“I’d like to see you try,” I said, rushing through the door. I broke out into an interesting rendition of *Do Wah Diddy* replacing the she’s with he’s and hurried through the door. I knew the staircase was directly in front of the door so I lifted the fern high in the air to watch for the first step and began to jog up them.

“Watch where you’re--”

“Nope. Not stopping until you both sing along and tell me that you will miss me horribly when you leave. Next up on the jukebox is an eighties song. I’m feeling very Madonnaish. Consider yourselves warned.” I went right back into *Do Wah Diddy*.

I made it up about six steps before I slammed into something that felt like the equivalent of a brick wall. I went backwards instantly. When two large arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me forward instead of back, I realized the brick wall was actually a person.

Before I knew it, I was being twisted around and suddenly on said person’s lap and we ended up sitting on the stairs. The massive fern blocked my view of him but if the size of the arms were any indication--the person was male, definitely. I couldn’t help it. I burst into laughter at the absurdity of it all.

Parting the fern, I peeked through to find a pair of emerald green eyes staring back at me. The squared face they were set in made my breath catch. This was no ordinary man. No. This man was amazing. He had a pronounced jaw and forehead, giving him that dark brooding look I liked so much. His black hair was cut in one of those stylishly messy ways. It stood about two

inches off the top of his head but was cut close on the sides and back.

Taking a deep breath in, I caught the familiar scent of figwood and fruits. It was something I hadn't smelled in years and the memories it brought back made my insides flutter. Sighing was an option I was more than willing to take. As my gaze traveled over his thick, corded neck I laughed harder. "Only I would make an ass of myself in front of a living god. I am so sorry. Are you hurt?"

I leaned through the fern more and glanced down. The snug fitting short sleeved Roberto Cavalli shirt he wore drew attention to his steely upper body. I gulped as I looked down at his dirt covered groin. The flat front kakis he had on did little to hide the bulge growing quickly beneath them. "Looks *really* fine," I sang softly.

"Your eyes are..."

My gaze went to his as I soaked in the sound of his deep voice. It was the kind of voice I could get used to hearing whispering sweet nothings to me in the wee hours of the night. "Disturbing? Two different colors? Yeah, I know one is blue and one is brown. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." He shook his head. "They're beautiful."

I blushed and did the only thing I could think of, I laughed. The man's eyes widened more before he too began to laugh. There was something about him that was so familiar but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Do I know you?"

He stopped laughing and tipped his head a bit, seeming to study me. Something moved over his face that looked to be shock. "You can't be her."

"Her who?" I asked between chuckles. "If you say the tooth fairy I will kiss you. I mean, come on, dental hygiene goddesses with wands are the shit. To be perfectly honest, since I've already made an absolute fool of myself, you make me think of The Clash. Why is that? You aren't planning on rocking any Casbah are you?"

His green eyes widened. I fought the urge to trace a line with my thumb over his full lips. It was hard. Somehow, I managed.

"So, should I stay or should I go?" I asked, giving him a smile I hoped appeared to be sexy while I continued my Clash skit.

"Stay." He shook his head slightly and smiled back. His smile was for sure sexy. "How?"

"How?" I cleared my throat. "How am I me? Or how am I her? Are all sexy New Yorkers this odd? Do you feel like you know me, too?"

The slight, stunned nod was the only answer I got out of him.

"My guess is we've crossed paths. You don't play a professional sport, do you?"

"No," he said, staring at me with an odd fascination. "Is that a prerequisite?"

Liking the man more than I should, I shook my head. "No. My list of must haves isn't too long. Not playing a professional sport is at the top."

Jake snorted. "If you can pick up a phone and order a pizza she's yours. If you can actually make one yourself, you may never get rid of her. If you're able to make anything above that you just met your future wife."

"Why thank you, Jake." I shot him a dirty look. He grinned like a schoolboy. "I always love it when my friends try to push me off on men who could be married, in a serious relationship, or not ones to pick women over men."

"If you would spend less time trying not to drool and more time looking at the guy, you'd see he's staring at you like it's taking everything in him not to touch you and I don't see any rings on his fingers."

I snorted. "Oh, like that means anything. How many times did other women have at *you*

know who?"

"Oh, right. I forgot."

The man touched my cheek lightly and I drew in a sharp breath as familiar feelings washed over me. Closing my eyes I savored the moment.

"Devan, get off the nice man and move. This thing is heavy," Gideon said, sounding annoyed.

The man's eyes lit. "Devan?"

"Right." I nodded and stood slowly. Lifting the fern off him, I gasped. "Ohmygod, you're covered in dirt now. I'm so sorry. Here, give me those and I'll take them to the cleaners." I set the fern down on the stair and turned to face him. "Wait, umm, I didn't mean to just ask you to get naked. But I'd honestly be okay with that."

"Devan," Gideon growled out. "I get you're an adult. All I'm asking is to not be reminded of that--ever."

"Jake, do you still have my wallet?" I glanced at Gideon. "Just so you know, I'm ignoring you."

Jake laughed. "Yeah, what do you need?"

"Five hundred dollars to replace the nice man's clothing. I'm guessing he doesn't want to take a check from a lady he just met in the stairwell. The Cavalli alone is three. It's in this season which tells me the guy pays attention to fashion. I'd *get* into the jeans but Gideon would demand to have his eyes gouged out and I'd enjoy it too much."

Gideon coughed, not bothering to hide his shock. "People here wear five hundred dollar outfits? I was with you when you bought a dress for a dollar at a thrift store, Devan."

"The one that's brown with obnoxious orange flowers on it?" Jake asked, knowing full well it was that one.

"Yeah."

I rolled my eyes. "It's a Betsy Johnson. I saved a few hundred dollars. And how can you think brown and orange is obnoxious, Jake?" I rolled my eyes. "Ooo, I really liked the avocado green sweater I got that day, too."

Gideon sighed. "What was that? A Lou Reed?"

Flipping him off, I smiled at the sexy man and did my best to avoid touching him. It was hard. "I feel like singing Little Orphan Annie songs. Who's up for a night of that?"

"Put the sofa down. I'm going to tape her mouth shut and hide her wallet. She does not need to be spending money."

Jake laughed hard. "Stop being over protective. If the girl wants to hand the man money to replace his clothes then let her, Gideon. Don't you think she's had enough issues with having control of her own life? Stop making her out to be on the verge of poverty. She's worked her ass off to have what she does and I, for one, am damn happy to know that she doesn't need to worry about money. You know, she still hasn't accepted a penny of the, umm, other stuff."

I wanted to throw my shoe at Jake. His code words for alimony were ridiculous. Instead, I glared at my brother, already anticipating the coming argument. "And I'm not going to, Gideon, so don't try to make me."

"Milk the bastard dry, Devan. You earned the right."

"Gideon."

"Hey, you're entitled to half. Ask Jake."

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. "I'll pretend you didn't say that."

Gideon growled. "Fine, whatever." He nodded towards the stranger before me. "Give the

guy the money and get him off the step. This isn't getting any lighter. Tell me again why I didn't let movers do this for her?"

"Because you have a guilt complex that won't quit and the very idea of your baby sister being so far away from you is killing you on the inside. And you keep running various ways to get her to come home, or move your practice up here, through your head."

I snorted. "Jake, he pushed me through the living room window when I was five. I don't think that's it. Try again."

"I did not push you. You were spinning around pretending to be a princess ballerina and hit my model car," Gideon bit out. "I just moved you away from it."

"Yeah, and right through the screen. That bush had so many wasps in it that my ass hurt for weeks. It did get me out of a few annoying recitals. Thanks for that." I glanced down at the sexy man on the step. "For reference, wasps don't take kindly to people invading their area." I rubbed my butt for effect and winked.

He just stared up at me, looking as though he was both shocked and pleased. I hoped he was both. It wasn't every day that I felt I wowed someone.

Jake laughed so hard he sounded like a seal barking. "Why didn't I know about this?"

"You did," Gideon said. "Remember the month I refused to come... err... couldn't come out and play? It was because of that."

"Mom did *not* ground you. She didn't have to. You were a mess. You grounded yourself. Uncle Robert talked to you for like twenty minutes about how you only have one sister." I put my hand out and started to impersonate my very Italian uncle. "Gideon, look at her. She hurts but is worried about your toy. She is a gift, a dove sent to bring us all joy and happiness. Treat her as such for you do not know when they will ask for her to return home."

"Holy shit, that's why you were on your porch crying your eyes out. You were upset you hurt her." Jake's laughter wrapped around me and was infectious.

"Worse than that," I blew Gideon a kiss, "he kept sneaking into my room at night to make sure I wasn't dead. Uncle Robert convinced him that angels would show up at any minute and snatch me up. Tell him what you did, Gideon."

"No."

Jake grinned and gave me a 'spill it' look.

"Gideon found a spool of ribbon from one of those overdone dresses mom used to put me in and tied my ankle to my bed. I woke up with it wrapped around me so tight that dad had to cut it off and then point out that if Gideon did it again I could lose my leg. That only made him worse. How he became a doctor is beyond me."

Jake laughed. "See he loves you. He dedicated his life to understanding how *not* to kill you."

Gideon growled again. "I would like to get this to the fourth floor and then beat the living hell out of you, Jake."

"I'll sue you," Jake offered.

"And I'll fuck up the meds I prescribe you next time you're sick. How's a little birth control sound? Having issues with feminine itch? Oh, what? You have flames shooting out of your dick?"

Rolling my eyes, I put my hand out to the sexy man staring at me on the step and offered him a smile. "I'm sorry. This is what happens when you take a doctor and a lawyer too far from home. If you give us a minute to get the sofa upstairs, I'll get you what you need to replace the outfit and I'll still have this one cleaned for you."

He shook his head, taking my hand and standing slowly. Warmth spread up my arm from his touch and my nipples hardened almost instantly. “No. It’s fine.”

Yes, you are.

“Wonderful, can we please get this up the stairs?” Gideon smiled at me and glanced at the sofa. “You would buy this before you moved. Couldn’t you buy it once you got here?”

My jaw dropped. “Excuse me but you bought that for me. You and your shadow,” I pointed at Jake, “insisted on it.”

“In our defense, Devan, we did break your other ones,” Jake said, running his hands through his hair.

“The idea of three grown men going at it like school boys had to be a sight to see. And for the record, you three trashed my entire lower level.”

Jake glanced at Gideon nervously. “Yeah, school boys.”

“Gideon, tell me you didn’t go all Bruce Lee on him. You’re thirty-four. You could hurt yourself.” I let out a soft laugh. “You already had Jake helping you out. What more did you need?”

Jake cleared his throat. “Umm, Devan, I was actually trying get Gideon under control. I wasn’t helping beat the crap out of anyone. I didn’t think you wanted to have to visit your brother in prison or see his career get flushed down the shitter. I can get him off of just about any charge. Murder isn’t one of them.”

I glanced at the sexy man. “One second.” I ran down the stairs, kicked my slip-on white tennis shoes off, hopped onto the sofa and walked across it to get to Gideon. Tossing my arms around his thick neck, I hugged him tight as I kissed his cheek. “I love you even though you made my ass hurt for a week.”

As I pulled back, I found his eye glistening. He nodded and kissed my forehead. “Promise you’ll call everyday, Devan. Twice a day even. Maybe I should get you a cell phone that you can leave on all the time. Yeah, that might work.”

Drawing back, I knew he was fighting tears and Gideon was a big guy who didn’t cry. I wagged my brows as I looked him up and down. “Hey, Jake.”

“Yeah.”

“Picture Gideon in a prison uniform. He’d no longer need me to buy all of his clothes so he matches. Plus, he’d land a boyfriend in about two seconds.” I instantly launched into *Jailhouse Rock* doing my best Elvis. I rotated my hips and curled my lip not caring who saw me do it.

Gideon put his hand over my mouth. I continued to sing into it, sounding muffled and still not caring. He shook his head and laughed. “Jake, get the tape. She’s back with a vengeance. If she starts laughing so hard she can’t breathe I’m going down to the corner bar and grabbing a beer. I might need two. No fear. She’ll still be laughing when I get back.”

My cell phone rang. I put my hand out to Jake who had my phone on his hip. “Devan, that ring means work, so don’t panic. It’s not an emergency.”

“You don’t say. Gee, it’s only my cell phone. The one I programmed the rings into.” I kept shaking my hips as I took the phone from him. I opened it. “Devan Charter.”

Gideon growled. “It’s Devan Seward now.”

“Everyone there knows her as Charter. It’s easier for her to let it stay that way,” Jake said, in a hushed tone.

“Fuck easier. She is divorced. I’ll put it on a billboard for her.”

I pointed at him. He shut up.

“Ah, Devan, I’m glad I caught you.”

The sound of Chas Martins voice made my eyes roll. “Mr. Martins, I didn’t realize we were on a first name basis now.”

Jake poked my arm lightly and smiled. “Is that dickhead? Dev, if it is you have to put the guy on speakerphone. Gideon never believes me when I tell him about the lounge lizard who keeps trying to get you to work for him.” He clasped his hands together and dropped to his knees. “Please, it’s funny as hell. Plus, Gideon never gets to hear you be a bitch for real. The man thinks you have no spine. Show him.”

My eyes bulged as I stared down at Jake. I nodded. “Mr. Martins, I’m currently knee deep in Open to Buy reports so I need to put you on speaker phone.”

“Certainly, I understand how that is.”

I hit the button and held the phone out. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“You can start by calling me Chas. We’ve known one another for over five years. It’s safe to say we can be on a first name basis, Devan. I consider you a friend and friends tend to share many things, including casual conversation.”

Jake grinned.

I bit back a laugh. “I’m well aware of what friends share. What I’m not sure of is the reasoning behind your call. If you are implying this is casual then I should remind you I’m on company time here.” I crossed my fingers and shoved them in Jake’s face. He laughed, planted a tiny kiss on them and stood quickly.

Chas sighed. “You do like to make it difficult for me. That is exactly the attitude I want my consultants to have, Devan.”

“Hmm, calling competitor’s top executives while they are working, to attempt to persuade them to join the team, is the absolute last sort of practice I want the company I’m with participating in. It sort of screams unprofessional. And we are all professionals here, right, Mr. Martins?”

I’d built an empire, being a Jill-of-all-trades in matters of marketing consultations. If someone had a business problem, I generally had a solution. Martins operated the same way. He provided marketing and business consultations, often placing someone in-house with the company in question.

“Call me Chas. And Devan, you’re not thinking clearly right now. This is a trying time for you coming off a messy divorce and I’d like to help ease the burden. I know we started off on the wrong foot and I’d like to correct that. I’ve been told you’re relocating to New York. This would give us the perfect opportunity to get to know one another better. I’d hate for you to be alone. This is a big city. I can more than keep you company. I think you know what I’m talking about.”

I grabbed Jake’s arm and laughed hard without making any noise. It took a second but I got myself together and stood tall. “As kind as that offer is, I’d prefer to go it alone. And when I say go it alone, that covers *all* areas. I do not currently have a red light above my office door nor do I want one. I would strongly suggest you focus on your client’s needs and not your own. As lovely as our conversations always are, I really must be going. I’m meeting with my lawyer soon. He has some rather weighty issues he’d like to get moved forward.” I winked at Jake.

Chas made a noise that sounded animalistic, like one would make during intercourse. I jerked back and held the phone towards Jake who covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

“Devan, you are the only woman I know who dares to talk to me the way you do. You know that I’m more than willing to offer you the world. I’m in a position to do it. You just won’t

accept it. I am huge.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you think so.” I snickered. “Oh, wait. You were talking size in relevance to your position. Sorry, I got a little confused on where this conversation was headed. It seemed as though it was headed south so naturally I assumed something else. I really need to be going now.”

“Name your price, Devan,” Chas said fast. “Everyone can be bought. Everyone.”

“I’m sorry.”

He sighed. “Well, at least we’ve moved to the point you’re sorry for turning me down.”

I let out a soft laugh. “No, I’m not sorry for that in the least. I’m sorry that somewhere along the line you actually came to believe that to be true. Not everyone has a price. Money isn’t the answer to everything. In fact, in the end, it means nothing. Have a good weekend, Mr. Martins.” I shut my phone and handed it to Jake. “Why do you enjoy hearing that scum bag’s spiel? Does anyone else feel like they need a shower to get his voice off you? I think my phone has been violated. It needs a bath, too.”

Jake looked proud. Gideon looked like he was about to blow. “Devan Jazz Seward, men try to buy you while you’re working? Hell, anytime?”

“I’d hardly call Chas Martins a man,” I said, hopping off the sofa and laughing. “He’s more like a good looking, walking lounge lizard. He makes my skin crawl. But, I will say, he’s a looker. He knows it, too.”

Gideon tried to come for me but the sofa was in the way. “Did this just start?”

“What? Men trying to own me or lounge lizards,” I smiled at Jake letting him know that I loved his name for Chas, “trying to bribe me to ‘work’ for them? Come on, women want to date you all the time. When they find out you’re a doctor they flip out and start talking marriage. Dork,” I pointed at Jake, “has the same problem.”

Jake grinned. “Yeah, Dink. Leave her alone. She’s not given an inch when it comes to this. Trust me, he’s been nipping at her heels from the word go. Hell, she was very married when he started it all.”

“What the hell is a dink?” Gideon asked again.

I smiled as I slipped my shoes back on. “It’s a good thing. Trust me.” Turning, I ran up the stairs and ran directly into the sexy man again. He grabbed me fast to keep me from falling. I held tight to him and stared into his emerald green eyes. “Thanks. You’re really coming in handy.”

“My pleasure.”

I couldn’t pull my gaze away from his green eyes. They were gorgeous and the same exact color as Brody’s. “I know I’m going to sound like a broken record but you look so familiar. This is going to bug me. I’m positive I know you from somewhere.”

Jake went to take his spot at the end of the sofa. “You know, I normally do my best to encourage only half of your insanity but you’re right the guy does look familiar.”

Mr. Sexy smiled. “Would you like some help moving in?”

“No, we’ll be--”

“Yes,” Gideon and Jake said, cutting me off.

The sexy man winked at me and I damn near fell over. “I’ll run up, change and come back to help.” He turned to head up the stairs. “Oh, I almost forgot. I’m Kurt Holland.”

“Hi, Kurt. Nice to dump a plant on you. I’m Devan Seward.”

The grin that spread over his face warmed me. “Well, Devan, it was my pleasure.”

I watched as Kurt jogged up the stairs. A small sigh escaped me. “I could get used to

looking at that everyday.”

Gideon began to chuckle. I glanced back at him as he stood in the doorway holding one end of the sofa up while the other lay on the floor. “Didn’t Uncle Robert tell you that when one door closes another opens?”

Before we’d left Ohio, I’d finalized my divorce and said goodbye to my family. They all knew how painful the divorce was for me and my uncle did his best to cheer me up. “Yep, he sure did.”

“Ha, I bet he didn’t think you’d waylay Mr. Right before he even got to the door.”

He and Jake laughed so hard that I knew they’d be at it a while. I gave up and headed up the stairs to my new home.

Chapter Two

I looked around the large apartment and smiled. "It's perfect." Twelve foot ceilings left my gaze drifting upwards in admiration of the ornate molding. Pale, egg-shell colored walls gave the apartment a bigger feel. I'd fallen in love with the hardwood floors the moment I'd seen the photos of the place online. I'd always had a soft spot for hardwood. The one downfall was the fact the kitchen and living room were the same room. It was large enough to accommodate my needs but I'd grown accustomed to having separate rooms for everything.

Can't have it all, Devan.

Jake took the dark walnut tea table from me and put it next to the door. "Devan, I think we should take you shopping before we head back to Ohio."

"Why?"

"You barely brought anything. Why did you leave so much behind? It's not as if you weren't entitled to it."

I glanced at Jake before spinning in a circle. "Do you smell that?"

He shook his head. "This is New York. Inhaling too deep could be dangerous."

"It's freedom, Jake. I want a clean slate. I'll buy what we need as soon as I have a chance to go shopping. Wynona and Vanessa will drag me around to the perfect shops. Have no fear. They'll love every second of it."

He nodded. "Devan, you didn't bring a table. Are you going to eat on the floor? In bed? Where? I know Brody will eat anywhere, but still."

I shrugged as I looked around. "I can't cook so what's the point of having a table? Brody makes me stand and eat things as they finish because he's so excited. If he's not cooking then he's begging me not to and pleading to go out to dinner."

"You can't cook?" Kurt asked, arching a dark brow as he set a box down against the wall. His muscles rippled under the snug navy T-shirt he wore. He'd put on a pair of jeans that fit him in all the right places, leaving me staring at his ass every time he took a box up the stairs. I think he might have started to catch on after our tenth trip up the stairs. He winked at me and told me to go up ahead of him.

Gideon chuckled. "Do not ask her to prove it. She can and will." He grabbed his stomach. "I think the chicken you made is still sitting in my stomach and I ate it six months ago. See, you should just move back home. Jake and I can cook for you. Uncle Robert is already planning out meals for you for the next year. If a truck full of frozen meals shows up I'd accept it and call it good. Refusing it might mean he'll come move in with you guys."

"You guys?" Kurt asked.

I ignored him. "Uncle Robert gave me about thirty menus for places in the area and ones he thought we'd like. I highlighted things that looked good according to breakfast, lunch and dinner. I tabbed them as well to make for quick reference. Oh, and Brody picked out his favorites, too. So, when he gets here he only has to pick up the phone and know it's safe to eat the food." I grinned. "His words, not mine. They are in one of these boxes." I spotted one sitting near the stove on the floor and ran to it.

Gideon sighed. "Only my sister would be anal enough to color code menus."

“Brody?” Kurt asked.

I grinned as I glanced at Gideon and Jake. “Get your stop watches out boys. I’m about to pull out the guy repellent.”

They laughed. “Brody does tend to weed the assholes out for you. Doesn’t he?” Jake said, grinning from ear to ear.

Kurt gave me a questioning look. “Huh?”

“Brody is my son. He’s eleven.”

“You have a son? And his name is Brody?” he asked, sounding shocked. “He’s yours?”

Okay, odd.

“Yep, he’ll be here as soon as I get everything we’ll need situated. I should call him.” I turned to go to Jake for my phone.

Jake held it up high in the air. “Devan, he’s fine. You checked on him an hour ago.”

“And an hour before that,” Gideon added, laughing softly. “And an hour before that. And an hour...”

I glared at them both. “Excuse me for worrying about him. I just need to know he’s okay. It’s not like I make leaving him a habit.”

Jake kept the phone held high. “Devan, you will let Brody have this mini-vacation. Robert is keeping him more than busy and Brody is, no doubt, loving every second of it. He’s in his cooking glory. Leave him alone.”

Gideon nodded. “Dev, at least give him several hours between calls. He needs to know you’re fine. If you’re calling all the time he’s going to catch on that you aren’t handling the move as well as he wants.”

“I’m handling this move just fine. I miss him. I won’t call either of you a hundred times. You can be sure of that.”

Jake put his hand over his chest and pretended like I’d shot him. “Oww, Devan, I thought you loved me. I’m not that boring, am I? And I can cook a little.”

Gideon stood there laughing. “Yeah right. Opening a box doesn’t count. See, we forgot about Brody. He’ll keep her fed. He’s the ‘mini-Maestro.’ It’s kind of sad that an eleven year old can make more than cereal while his mom can’t. He came out of the womb making things.”

Kurt gasped. “Brody? Mini-Maestro?”

“Yep. Broderick Kyle Charter. But he really hates to be called Broderick just to warn you.” I put my hand up. “I’m the first to admit that he didn’t get his cooking skills from me. It must have been airborne because I’m sure his father didn’t pass them on either. Give me the phone. I want to call him.”

Jake shook his head, sending sandy blond curls bouncing in all directions. He leveled his blue gaze on me. “Devan, he’s fine. Robert would never let anything happen to him. And you are not a bad mother for coming here and getting set up. Brody’s the one who thought of it. He’s the one who begged you to come here while he got to spend time home with Robert. I’m sure he has his reasons.”

I nodded and let out a soft sigh. “He has it in his head I need girl time and that he’s got the perfect *someone* here for me. Would either of you care to explain why my eleven year old has suddenly become a matchmaker who understands girl time and how to fix his mother up on a date?”

They both looked up at the ceiling and whistled as they shook their heads.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. And I am not taking a month to get us situated here so get it out of your heads. The second the last thing I need to take care of is done, I am on a plane to get

my baby.”

“He’s not a…” they said at the same time.

I pointed at them, daring them to go on. They didn’t. “I am well aware of how old Brody is. I was the one who was in labor for two days with him. He is also the only child I have. We tried for six years to have another one but couldn’t. Deciding to stop trying, while now I know was the right decision, hurt like hell then. I wanted a house full. I got one, who I cherish.”

Gideon shook his head. “Devan, I told you it was a miracle you even had Brody.”

I laughed. “If we could skip talking about my ex-husband’s sperm count that would be great.”

“Fine by me,” Gideon said, nodding his head. “I hate the bastard. I’m just saying you were damn lucky to have even one child and Brody isn’t a baby.”

“Hey, I’m the one who squeezed him out. Don’t think for a second I forgot how old he is. I also know he’s way beyond his years. That doesn’t mean he will ever stop being my baby, Gideon. If either one of you pick on him about that again I will drive my foot so far up your…”

They put their hands up. Gideon smiled. “We surrender. No need to threaten lodging things in orifices. Just let him have this, Devan.”

“Let him have what?”

Jake winked at me. “The piece of mind of knowing you’re here with your best friends near you, starting your new lives without any worries. He loves you so much that he made sure we all insisted he get to stay. Don’t take what he worked hard to make happen away from him.”

I didn’t want to give in but they weren’t leaving me much of a choice. Brody did want me to have time. As much as I hated that, I’d hate upsetting him more. “Fine. But I still get to call him.”

“Not right now.”

Growling, I turned to find Kurt staring at me with wide green eyes. I laughed. “Why aren’t you running? I always thought men ran like hell when they spotted a single mother.”

He shook his head slightly as a slow grin spread over his face. “Not this one.”

I snorted. “Right.” Letting the subject drop, I headed towards the box in the kitchen again.

“What are you doing, Devan?” Jake asked.

I glanced at the box and then him. “Umm, I thought it was rather obvious. I’m opening a box to get the menus out. We have to eat don’t we? I’m starving and my little cook isn’t here to tell me what I’m eating today. It’s sad that he picks our meals. I think I’ll go with pizza or peanut butter and jelly. Brody has never been a fan of either. I blame Uncle Robert. He’s tainted his young mind to the point Brody packs a gourmet lunch to take to school. Who does that? Most importantly, why am I jealous of my son?”

Gideon laughed and pushed Jake lightly. “Want to dare her to eat more pizza than you again?”

Rubbing his stomach, Jake’s lip curled. “Ugh, no. I was sick for days after that. She’s what? Five nine and about a hundred pounds? How the hell did she out eat me?”

“Pfft, I wish. Try one-hundred and *thirty* pounds.”

Jake laughed harder. “You are the only woman I know who will correct a man about her weight when she could easily lie and be believed. You look like a twig. Hell, you are a twig. Are you sure you weigh that?”

“Why are you arguing about my weight? I have no one to impress and I’m perfectly happy where I’m at. Dr. Dumbass over there said I’m exactly what I should be. Are you still

ticked that I can run our route without looking like I'm going to die at the end?"

"Hey," Jake said, looking offended. "I'll have you know that when I get home, I'm not running any further than to the couch. You spent a year making me feel so guilty that I actually worked out. What is that about?"

My jaw dropped. "I told you to go back to bed. I didn't want to hear you moan and groan the whole way. And you know you love going to the gym. All the women fall all over you. The blond lawyer who baby-sits his best friend's little sister and her son. They eat that up. Adopt a baby or get a dog and you'll be set."

Jake smiled and wiped his shoulders arrogantly. "Yeah, I'm a ladies man now. I should thank you for the abs. Chicks dig 'em."

"Jake, mine are better," I said in a daring tone.

He lifted his shirt and showed off his abs. They were great.

Pulling my pink T-shirt up a bit, I flashed him mine and winked.

Gideon's eyes widened. "Put your shirt down."

I took it off and threw it at him. He caught it and threw it back at me.

"Put your shirt on!"

Jake laughed. "She has a sports bra on. Leave her alone. She jogs in one of those around town every morning. You should see this one pair of shorts she has. The sides of her ass cheeks stick out just enough that..."

I wrinkled my nose and made a gagging noise. "Eww. I've known you since I was three and lived with you for almost a year now. Eww."

"Hey, I'm still a man."

My eyes widened as I faked shock. "Ohmygod. I used to skinny dip with you."

The look Gideon gave Jake scared even me. "You skinny dipped with my little sister?"

I batted my eyes innocently at Gideon. "I asked if it was wrong. Jake said no. He got all of us to do it. Was that bad? He said it was natural."

"You are an evil woman." Jake grinned from ear to ear as Gideon went after him. They ran out of the apartment door and sounded like a herd of elephants going down the steps.

"Idiots. Like I'd ever skinny dip with Jake." Shaking my head, I bent down and grabbed the folder full of menus out. I spread them out on the floor and laid on my stomach to look at them.

"Want your shirt back?"

Glancing up, I found Kurt standing over me holding my T-shirt. I put my hand up and took it from him. I sat up long enough to put it on and went back to my stomach. "Thanks, sorry if I offended you. By the end of the night I fully plan on humiliating myself to the point you run screaming from this place."

He laughed and sat down on the floor next to me. "Well, I live directly above you so I wouldn't get too far. Which, for us, is a good thing." He poked one of the menus with his finger. "Why doesn't this one have any tabs in it? Don't you want to eat anything from there?"

I looked at him with wide, shocked eyes. "Hey. I will not deface something I spent so much time on."

He tipped his head. "What?"

"Umm, my job is hard to explain. I'm a Jill of all trades. My uncle asked me to use my 'skills' to help a friend of his out. He gave me all the information I'd need and I put it together for him. After all was said and done, my uncle gave me a menu and told me that I had to go there once I got to New York."

“You did these?” Kurt asked, running his finger over the menu.

I nodded. “Uh-huh. The owner had a very clear idea of what he was looking for but couldn’t seem to get it across to the people he’d been working with. He expressed his concerns to my uncle who decided to try to fix the problem behind the scenes. I can only assume the owner liked it.” I tapped the menu. “He used them. I had a note all prepared to attach to the proofs letting him know that I really liked the name but I forgot to attach it.”

“You like E & E?” he asked, sounding suspicious and slightly amused.

“No, not what it goes by but what it stands for Eros and Elysian. Who wouldn’t love a play on mythology? I mean, come on, the god of love and a sacred, divine place where all your dreams come true. What’s not to like? Sign me up. I’ll eat there if it means sex and food. I’m not sure it gets better than that.”

He smiled and shrugged. “I don’t think it does.”

“My friend, Wynona, who lives on the third floor here and does freelance artwork for me as needed, mentioned that the place was originally going to be named *Aphros*, but the owner changed his mind at the last minute. That was great too. Though I can see why he’d be leery of using it. Literal people would take it as meaning foam--not so good when you’re talking eating. But it’s easy to see from the artwork on the menu alone that he’s taken the time to pay attention to details, assuring it comes across as sensual, romantic.”

Kurt bit his lower lip and my inner thighs tightened. “So what was his original thought behind *Aphros*?”

“How the hell would I know? I could call the place and ask to speak to him but I’m thinking he’ll be a little less than pleased that I bothered him for that. Plus, I’m not a hundred percent sure about the hierarchy of chefs. My luck, I’d freeze and ask for a line cook when I really meant to say Chef de Cuisine. Besides, he’s most likely not there. The big boys are to the point in their careers that they don’t even have to cook anymore. I want that job. Wait, I can’t cook. Never mind. I’ll take the man.” I smiled wide. “I was kidding. I’m not trying to bag a man, chef or not. Though,” I winked, “a chef would be my first choice.”

“You’re doing just fine with the order and you seem to know more than you think about the restaurant business. Any reason why?” Kurt nudged me lightly and fire shot through my arm. He jerked back a bit. I refrained from asking if it happened to him, too.

“Someone close to me is a chef.” I opened another menu and began to look through it. “When Wynona mentioned *Aphros* after I’d seen the menu, I naturally assumed it was a spin on Venus who rose from the foam of the sea and who was also called Aphrodite--which came from the word *Aphros*. Please keep in mind that I came up with that based only off his Eros and Elysium choice. I’ve no doubt I’m wrong so you can yell at me all you want.”

“You’re very different from what I thought you’d be.”

Unsure how I felt about that comment, I glanced at him. “What? Different as in ‘hey lady, that cat has been dead for a month now, stop petting it and give it to us’ or different in a good way?”

Kurt laughed and I fought hard not to reach over and touch his lush lips. The very sound of his deep voice already had my body bordering on culmination as it was. “Since you aren’t petting a dead cat, at the moment, I’d have to say that I meant it in a good way.”

“Aww, you know me better than you should. You added the ‘at the moment’ on there.” The look on his face was priceless. “In case I forget, thank you for all your help today. You went above and beyond for a stranger. And thanks for taking me landing on your lap in stride.”

“No problem and I don’t think of you as a stranger.” He moved to his stomach and slid

closer to me. "So, see anything that looks good?"

"I don't know. I've been to quite a few places near the fashion district and some around here but I don't know much about any of these places. I do know that Wynona and my uncle rave about E & E but I'm not in the mood to shower." I sniffed my armpit. Kurt laughed. "Does that mean you think I should be in the mood to get cleaned up?"

Leaning into me, he took a deep breath. "You smell like peaches." He wagged his brows. "That's a good thing."

"Why thank you." I did the same to him. "You smell like figwood and fruits. And that is a *really* good thing."

Our faces almost touched as we stared into one another's eyes. For a moment, all we did was look at one another. It should have been unnerving. It wasn't.

Kurt cleared his throat, breaking the moment. "So, umm, how do you know Wynona?"

"She and I went to the same private high school in Cleveland. I'd spend half the summer up here with her and Vanessa, who lives in the building too, and the rest back home."

He smiled. "She mentioned a friend who was moving in here. But she didn't say you'd be here today."

"I'm a day early so they aren't expecting me yet. I thought it best to get in the door before they maul me. I'm just thankful that this place opened after I decided to relocate up here. I wouldn't have come to New York if I was going to be plopped in the middle of people I didn't know. It's scary enough thinking about raising my son here. I can't imagine doing it without a network of people who love him at my fingertips."

"Brody's out going. He'll do just fine," Kurt said, before glancing at me and shaking his head. "I mean, he sounds like he's outgoing. I know I caught a rather interesting performance downstairs from his mother but I, umm, get the sense you aren't normally outgoing."

Laughing, I put my head down. "I am to a point. If you hand me a microphone, slap heels on me and make me offer everyone a fake smile I can be your average beauty queen extrovert. Take that away from me and I'm just me. I don't like letting too many new people in, if you know what I mean. I function perfectly with new people in regards to work but to actually have any sort of real interaction, it usually takes me a *long* time to warm to someone."

I let my gaze travel over him. "It's odd that I feel as comfortable around you as I do because I've never taken to a person instantly. It feels like I know you. You must have one of those faces. And let me just get this out now, it's a hell of a face."

He grinned. "So you've known Wynona since you were in high school?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Ah-ha, then you're her DJ. I never put it together."

"Umm, okay," I said, unsure what he meant. "I'm her DJ but she knows I hate it when she calls me that so she has tried to cut back a bit." I groaned thinking about it. "Oh no, she's talked about me." My chest tightened. I didn't really want a complete stranger to know all about my messy divorce.

Kurt rubbed the back of his neck looking nervous. "She's been trying to... err... fix me up with you for some time now. I didn't know it was you or I would have said yes."

"Thanks but you don't have to try to make me feel better." Rolling my eyes, I snorted. "That sounds like her. Sorry. I didn't ask her to play matchmaker. Wait until she finds out that I dumped a plant and myself in your lap. She'll yell at me for weeks about it, I'm sure. Most likely she'll be ticked that I didn't cop a feel. She's as bad as my Uncle Robert and my friend Liz."

My brow furrowed as I thought about Wynona trying to fix me up with Kurt. It made

sense to a point. She lived in the apartment below me and if Kurt was above, then she saw him often. There was only one thing that didn't add up. "That's odd. She'd been stuck on the same guy as my uncle for the longest time. It got so bad that I started making excuses as to why I couldn't make it to cooking lessons--otherwise known as, 'I want to spend time with my niece so I'll say it's a cooking lesson but never have anyone else there. I'll use the time to push a man on her'".

"Cooking lessons?" Kurt asked, softly as he picked at the edges of the E&E menu.

I smacked his hand lightly. "It's a work of art, buddy. Back off it or I'll hurt you. Plus, it's the only copy I have. My son stole the other one and keeps it with his box of pen pal goodies. I think the guy who owns it and he keep in touch. He spends a lot of time with my uncle now and wants to be a chef someday. My uncle has gone as far as to have his friends meet up on webcams with he and Brody while they work in the kitchen, hence the pen pal guy." I sighed. "My uncle has been a lifesaver and I love the man dearly."

Kurt touched the menu again.

"You're cute in an 'I'm dark and mysterious try to guess my secrets' kind of way but if you do anything to that menu I will hurt you." I winked at him.

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am. So tell me about your uncle and the chefs Brody talks to?"

"My uncle is Roberto Stefanni. He goes by Robert so when he stops by to visit, please don't call him Roberto." I laughed. "One of his chefs used to call him Bobby to get under his skin. He acted like he hated it. The thing is, Uncle Robert loved every second of it. He still thinks the world of the guy. I think they're close still. I'm not a hundred percent sure. He tends to push me out of the kitchen now. Kind of ironic since he spent years and years trying to get me in it to teach me to cook. It didn't work. He actually told me to smile, show my dimples and hold that pose while he fixed me up with the guy who called him Bobby."

Kurt smiled and nodded. I thought that was a rather odd response but since I technically just met him, it could have been normal for him. "So, how was it growing up around famous chefs and having one for an uncle?"

I shrugged. "I don't have anything to compare it to. I loved everyday because I never knew what was going to happen. Once the President came to dinner and my uncle was so upset that the Secret Service had dogs in his kitchen that he launched into a spew of Italian obscenities that could make any man blush. That day was beyond insane. He was in an uproar about something not coming in on time and that he'd be short on making a dish he'd decided on."

Kurt seemed to be far off. For a moment I didn't think he was listening but the second I stopped talking, he locked gazes with me. "And?"

I smiled. "And, he threw such a fit in the kitchen that the guy he likes so much, actually yelled at him. It was the first time I'd ever heard the guy say anything let alone yell. He told my uncle to find me, that I'd calm him down. Remind me to thank him for that. I ended up with a neurotic Italian while wonder boy pulled the kitchen together without having to hear my uncle sing *That's Amore*."

"Still ticked about that?"

I snorted. "Pray you never hear it. Seriously though, my uncle is eccentric but he has the biggest heart. He was married to my dad's older sister, Doreen. She passed away a little after Gideon was born so I never knew her. I do know that her nickname was Jazz because my dad and Robert talked my mother into naming me Devan Jazz Seward. Dad and Robert are like brothers now. In fact, they're interchangeable as dads to me."

Kurt nodded.

I smiled. "When my aunt died, he could have moved away and never spoken to us again. It's not like he and Doreen had any children. He didn't. He relocated to Ohio and changed his entire life to stay close to us."

Kurt appeared to understand what I was talking about. "When Jazz got sick he bought a new restaurant in Cleveland so they'd be closer to her family and kept his place here, too. Well, until he sold it and it became E&E."

Shocked by his knowledge of my uncle I just stared at him as I nodded.

"Sorry, I, uhh, really enjoy cooking and tend to stay up on the buzz."

"And you live above me?" I asked, biting back a smile. He nodded. I looked up at the ceiling. "Thank you, God. I knew if I was a good little girl you'd treat me right. If I donate something to charity will you make him look really good in a loincloth, too?"

Kurt snickered. "So, who was this guy Robert wanted to fix you up with?"

"What do mean wanted? That would indicate past tense. He's still trying to fix me up with the guy. Though, I kind of told him that I called and the guy wasn't interested. I have no interest in having anything to do with the guy. He supposedly has some kick ass restaurant up here that caters to the rich and famous. Rich men and I do not mix."

Kurt sat up. I followed suit. He looked at me through hooded lashes. His green eyes seemed to stare through me, see my very soul. "So, you're refusing to contact the guy because he's doing well?"

That made me laugh. "Kurt, my uncle is notorious for understating everything. So when he takes hold of my face and forces me to pay attention while he tells me the boy is doing well, you know he's doing phenomenally well."

Gideon laughed from behind me, catching me by surprise. "Robert spent more time trying to fix you up with Maestro then he did trying to teach you to cook and you met him for lessons two times a week for over ten years."

"Even I was sick of hearing the Maestro speech and I'm not even family," Jake said, laughing. He cleared his throat and went into his Uncle Robert skit. "Devan, you're better than what you accept and you know it. Why you let him lead you around like a puppet when a perfect match is a few steps away is beyond me. Maestro is the one. I'm telling you. I know these things. The minute I saw your aunt, I understood that what we had was bigger than us both."

Jake spun around and kissed his fingertips. "It was like the Fates dropped her into my lap, literally. The first thing I heard was an angelic voice and then this beautiful brunette, you know your hair is almost the same color, tripped and fell a few feet from me. I grabbed her, we fell and I ended up with my future wife smiling up at me. Her dimples, that were identical to yours, they hooked me instantly. And her laugh was infectious."

Jake took a deep breath and continued on, "And when I found out she couldn't cook I knew I could make her mine. I looked at my art then hers and knew, Devs, I knew she was the one. I know in my gut, Devan. Maestro ended up here with me because it was meant to be. He's got something--he reminds me of me at his age. And you remind me of Jazz. That no happen on accident. I think she's up there orchestrating the entire thing, knowing I think of you as my daughter. I fight your father all the time on this matter."

Gideon laughed. I bit my lip. It was true. My father and my uncle went rounds about what I could and couldn't do all my life.

Jake put his hand up, letting us know he wasn't finished. "Maestro is smart and quick like you. Two times yesterday alone I had to hit him in the back of his head to get his attention away from his books. That reminds me of you. Though, I would never hit you to get your attention. I

just set food in front of you but you are like him, always thinking beyond your years. When you were seven, I asked what you wanted to be when you were older and you said a goddess so you could play with Cupid's arrows. You told me that you wanted to shoot Gideon with a lead one. That is like Maestro. He explains to the others about mythology and so many other things. It is only one of his many interests that overlap yours."

I shrugged when Gideon gave me a hard look. "Oh, like I have any sort of aim. Relax, I don't own a bow and arrow. I do own enough three inch heels to do some damage though."

Jake coughed, going on with his Uncle Robert impersonation, "And the boy can cook, lil' Jazz. Maestro's going to be huge because he loves and respects the art. See, he's smart and creative--just like you. And he watches you from a distance. He is drawn to you. Your father worries. But I told him that he's a good boy and would no harm you. Much better than the one you allow in your life now. Come back in the kitchen and talk to him. He's a gentleman and will not come to you because he senses your unease with him. I tell him that you are fine with his presence but nervous of the way you feel."

Jake smiled wide and winked at me. I flipped him off. "And no argue, Devan. I see you watch the clock and run from the kitchen area before he arrives. I also see the way your face changes when we discuss him. It reddens. Like Jazz's used to do around me when we first began to see one another. It is good that you are like this. It is a sign you are a good girl--wholesome and innocent. Maestro sees it as being nervous, even scared of him. He has no wish to intimidate you. That is why he keeps his distance and just observes. It doesn't help that he's four years older. Later it won't matter. I try to tell him this, but he no see it yet. But I see it. So do you."

Jake's impersonation was so on the mark of my uncle that I tipped over laughing and ended up with my head on Kurt's knee. He didn't seem to mind so I left it there. Every piece of me wanted to run my hand up his thigh and see just what he had to offer. My guess was that he had something amazing to offer but I wasn't for sure.

Gideon gave Jake a hard stare. "Hey, do you need to bring up *him*?"

"Why does bringing your uncle or Maestro up seem to be pissing you off? He may be Italian and always butting heads with your dad over Devan's best interest but he's a great guy." Jake glanced at me for help.

I shrugged.

"Not Robert or Maestro. *Him*."

I sat up slowly and groaned. "Danger Jake Robinson, Danger. Didn't you get the memo that you're to walk on eggshells around me so I don't fall to pieces should you mention he who will remain *him*?" I nudged Kurt lightly. "Now they'll talk about me like I'm not here."

Just as I predicted, Gideon and Jake faced each other. Jake shook his head, sending blond loose curls everywhere. "Gideon, I know you can be thick when it comes to her but did you hear what I heard in the entrance way downstairs?"

"What are you babbling about now?" Gideon asked, narrowing his brown eyes on Jake.

"For one, she's been singing and dancing around all day. It's been a long time since she's done that. I can't speak for you but it's damn refreshing."

I snorted and mumbled, "And yet he bitches when I start doing it again."

Jake continued on, "Did you miss it when Devan ran into Kurt? She didn't turn into wallpaper and get all mousey before she drifted into the shadows like *he* had her conditioned to do at the end. No. She was the Devan we know and love. She laughed so hard that I'm surprised she didn't fall down the stairs and take the guy with her. And did you miss the fact she was laying on the floor having a casual conversation with a male when we walked back in instead of

wringing her hands and watching him with hawk eyes, waiting for him to turn on her?"

I leaned towards Kurt. "I do not wring my hands."

"Do you want me to go?" Kurt asked, softly.

I shrugged. "It's your call. I'm sure Wynona already filled you in on the ugly details of my divorce but I appreciate you being gentleman enough to offer to excuse yourself. To be honest, I'll most likely beg you to take me with you anyway. Would that make it weird for you?"

Gideon glared at Jake. "That doesn't mean its okay to bring *him* up. Just because you find it okay to stay close to a fucking piece of shit like that doesn't mean I want to have him brought up around me or my sister."

Grinning, I glanced at Kurt. "He's so articulate. I wonder if his patients comment on it."

Kurt inched his hand over mine and I shocked myself by not pushing it off. Instead, I squeezed it gently. He responded by caressing the top of my hand with his thumb. Tiny shock waves of pleasure danced up my arm, making my upper body warm as he did it.

"He's my cousin. It's sort of hard to stay away from him when our moms are twins. Christ, I'm not even going to attempt to justify what he did but I can tell you that he understands that he was wrong and that's a huge step for him. He got caught up in it all. He's wasn't even twenty yet when he was handed the world. He couldn't handle it. He knows that. He's been in counseling and clean for a year now, Gideon." Jake pointed at me. "They made their peace. And if *she* can make peace with him, we all can. It was Devan who sat in the fires of hell not us, Gideon. Not us!"

Gideon's jaw tightened. "Never stand in her presence and make excuses for him, Jake. Never. I don't give a shit if he had a hard time adjusting. We all had to grow up. The difference between the two of us and him is that we didn't use Devan as a scapegoat, an outlet, a fucking whipping post, whenever the pressure got to be too much to bear. He did."

"Ooo, I like to refer to myself as being a doormat. I'd rather not be a goat or a post," I whispered to Kurt doing my best to hide how hurt and embarrassed I was by it all.

"Can you make them stop?" he asked, his warm breath skated over my cheek, making my eyes flutter and lean into him.

"No. They ignore me. Want to run from me yet? I think I'm officially humiliated now. Okay, I'm past that even. I think it would be best if you go. Thank you for all of your help today."

Kurt tightened his grip on my hand and pulled me closer to him. "No, Devs. I'm not about to leave again."

"Again?" I asked, unsure of why he'd say that. Kurt didn't respond. Instead, he wrapped an arm around me and pulled me into his body. I resisted at first, not wanting to seek comfort from a stranger but the fight was pointless. My body needed to be held. I needed it, too.

I gave in and leaned into him. His scent was so pleasing, so familiar that I couldn't stop myself from taking a deep breath in and whispering, "You would have to smell as good as Maestro."

Kurt stiffened a bit and then chuckled. That only made me move into his arms more. It was something I never dreamed I'd do. But Kurt didn't feel like a stranger in the least.

"Gideon, don't tell me what I can and can't say in front of Devan. You were off at med school, buddy. You didn't stay local. I did. It was me who was there for her. Christ, *he* even accused of us of having sex. He stood there and screamed in her face that he just knew we couldn't keep our hands off each other. That he suspected we'd been at it from day one. Don't get me wrong, I'll joke and razz her but come on, it's Devan. I can guarantee the girl thinks of

me as a brother.”

I nodded and sighed.

Jake continued on, “And I think you know where my loyalties lay. I was *her* counsel. I’m the one who represented her. I’m the one who told her to file for divorce and get as far away from him as she could. And I’m the one who forced her to bring Brody and live with me after it all happened. I was so upset I’d missed the signs when it was staring me in the face that I was not about to let them be alone.”

Jake walked towards Gideon, not stopping his rant. “I was terrified he’d do something stupid. His mental games and shows of dominance were one thing, Gideon. What we walked in on, seeing her like that--fuck, I thought she was dead. That was something else. I honest to God wasn’t sure if he’d snap and decide if he couldn’t have her, no one could. It’s fucking killing me letting her move up here. Do you know I’ve looked into relocating just so I know, so I can see with my own eyes that she’s okay? I’m as bad as you, yet you question my loyalty to Devan.”

Jake turned and looked at me. “Devan, does it upset you that I still have contact with...”

I shook my head no.

“Don’t drag her into this,” Gideon bit out.

“Right, that would be silly since you’re only talking about me like I’m not here,” I whispered as I dropped my head down and took a deep breath in. Gathering my bearings, I blinked back tears as I glanced at Kurt. “So, any suggestions on a place to grab dinner that I can show up in what I’m wearing. I don’t care if I stink tonight. I just want to eat and call it a night. They’re sucking the joy out of the day.”

“Devs, can I stop this?” Kurt asked, pressing his mouth to my ear.

Heat tore through me and my breath hitched. “Umm, what?” I turned towards him and our lips brushed. I didn’t pull away. Neither did Kurt. We just stayed like that, looking into one another’s eyes without saying a word.

As I stared into his emerald green eyes, the nagging feeling of knowing him somehow increased in the pit of my stomach. “You have one of those faces that make me sure I’ve seen it before.”

A slow smile spread over his face. “I get that a lot.”

“Yeah, but are they almost positive they saw you in a white chef’s smock?” I shook my head. “You shouldn’t have mentioned you like to cook. I think my brain had a perfect moment of understanding with my stomach rendering all other thought processes useless. The ultimate male in my eyes would be a hot stud in the kitchen so let me close my eyes and pretend.”

Kurt nodded, his lips brushing mine, gently, making my breath hitch. “Yeah, the chef thing has come up before.”

I couldn’t seem to pull away. The feel of his lips, even if just slightly, was enough to make a hunger in me burn. I hadn’t had sex in a year and prior to meeting Kurt hadn’t thought of it. Since laying eyes on him, it was all that seemed to be on my mind. The very idea of him sinking into me, filling me with his cock as I held tight to his ass, he’d spent the day teasing me with, made moisture begin to pool between my legs.

His green eyes seemed to be tracing their way over my face. I wanted to memorize every inch of him. I could only hope he wanted to do the same to me. Gideon and Jake’s argument seemed to fade away as I studied Kurt. He was beyond gorgeous as far as I was concerned.

I noticed him spending a good deal of time staring into my eyes. Smiling, I closed one and then opened it, closing the other. “If they bother you just tell me which color you like better and I’ll put a matching contact in the other eye. I have both brown and blue.”

“Why do you have them? You’re beautiful... err... your eyes are beautiful,” he said, blushing slightly.

It was refreshing to know I wasn’t the only one who was prone to blurting out the first thing on my mind. “Thank you. But I won’t take offense if you pick a color. My parents and my ex-husband seemed to prefer blue. It would make me like you more if you went with brown.” I smiled.

“Devs, I’m going with you--just you. The way they naturally are.”

I squeezed his hand and nodded as I fought to keep from showing him how much his comments meant to me. I’d spent my life pretending to be something I wasn’t and to have a man that I barely knew say something that made me feel that good about myself was something I wasn’t used to.

Kurt’s brow creased. “Did I say something to upset you?”

It was then I realized I hadn’t been successful in the hiding my emotions area. “No, you said something right.”

“No one has told you that you’re beautiful the way you are?” he asked, making no move to hide the fact he wasn’t just talking about my eyes this time. I wanted to toss my arms around his neck and hug him. I held back.

“My uncle has but he’s family so I’m not sure he counts.” I let out a soft laugh and used my free hand to wipe my damp cheeks. “Okay, no more of that.”

“I can’t tell you the truth?” he asked, running the pad of his thumb over my cheek, taking my tears with him.

“Unless you want me bawling, I think you should exercise extreme caution. I’m apparently not as tough as I thought I was.” I winked.

“You don’t have to be tough all the time.”

I lifted our joined hands and began doing a rather obvious visual body scan of him.

He chuckled. “Can I ask what you’re doing?”

“I’m looking for a ‘how to woo the ladies’ handbook. I’m not seeing it but I will resort to frisking you if you say one more perfect thing.”

“You do realize that if the offer of having you pat me down is on the table I’ll have no choice but to keep telling you the truth all night long?”

“Goddammit, Jake, her heart stopped! I had to resuscitate my baby sister while her son was practically catatonic by that point because he was positive his mother was already dead. He didn’t say a word until she was awake and alert. So, don’t stand there and tell me that *he’s* this great guy now, who is back to his good old self.”

Kurt’s grip on my hand began to border on painful. Hissing, I tried to pull free only to find him keeping hold of me. He glanced down and loosened his grip instantly. Bringing our hands up, he planted a tiny kiss on mine. “Sorry. I, uhh, I...”

“You heard what they said and it’s not sitting well with you, is it?”

“No,” he bit out. “When did this happen?”

“Just about a year and a half ago. They’re both right, in case you’re wondering. I can say with all honesty that had drugs and alcohol not become a factor, I wouldn’t be sitting here now. I’d be in Cleveland still married. My ex’s addictions turned him into a different person. But life tossed me a curve ball and I never saw it coming. I’m not proud of that. But it is what it is.”

A loud growl erupted from Gideon. “Why in the hell didn’t you call the police, Jake?”

“Because you were acting like judge, jury and executioner, Gideon. His handprints were all over her. It was pretty fucking clear she didn’t do that to herself. I was a little more worried

about the cops showing up and shooting your ass. Then they'd have hauled you in on murder charges. Is that what you wanted? Did you want to hand over your career, your life? She survived, Gideon. Do you think she'd have been happy to wake up and find out her only sibling was incarcerated for life?"

"He should be in prison, not living life like nothing happened. Why in the fuck didn't you make her put him away?"

Jake shook his head. "Don't think I didn't try but he did the only thing she's ever wanted him to do after it happened, Gideon. He woke up and realized what he'd done to her. He realized that he had to get help. And he knew he had to get away from her to keep her safe. He's the one who took that step. Devan didn't want him locked up. She wanted him back to himself again. Clean and sober. She didn't instantly stop loving him but she didn't go back to him either." He pointed at me. "If she can make amends, we can, too."

Gideon shook his head. "I can't and I won't. I held her in my arms, Jake. She was dead, literally gone for a fraction of a second but it was enough. More than enough for me. She's only pushing thirty-one and, she's already had a brush with death. That is not acceptable. A man I once called a best friend did that to her, Jake. How can I forgive myself... err... him?"

"Shit, Gideon, that's why you're so hell bent he can't change, that he can't stay clean and not hurt her. You blame yourself. Hey, if that's the case then I shoulder as much blame as you. I was right there with you. Hell, I was there more than you. I didn't see it. I didn't see the signs."

Rolling my head around, I did my best to alleviate the tension building in my shoulders. I glanced at Kurt. "I can't begin to express how mortified I am. This isn't something I wanted broadcasted to everyone. I'm sorry that this has been dumped on your lap. And I'm sorry that you obviously feel the need to comfort me."

"Try to get me to leave you, I dare you." He locked gazes with me and no part of his expression said he was joking. No. He looked dead serious. Kurt wasn't about to run away.

"This is a too much information moment, but since Dumb and Ass seem to have no problem hashing out my life before you I think its okay to talk about this." I pulled back just a bit from him. "You remind me of a guy I had the biggest crush on. Please don't take that as I'm a stalker 'hear me roar' kind of way. It was when I was in my teens so you're safe."

Kurt's eyes widened. "Really? Umm, I'm all ears. Tell me more about this crush."

"I like you already," I said, nudging him. I rolled my eyes and let out a soft laugh as I moved back enough that I was no longer right against him. He moved towards me a bit, clearly not letting me get too far from him. "I had a crush on one of the chefs who worked at my uncle's restaurant. The Maestro one you heard Jake go on about. The guy who called my uncle Bobby. It was innocent. I was too nervous to get within thirty feet of him. I thought he'd figure it out and laugh in my face."

"He wouldn't have laughed at you, Devan."

I couldn't help but snicker. "Well, thanks for the vote of confidence but he was twenty maybe even twenty-one at the time. I was sixteen. Uncle Robert was right. It makes no difference now but at that age it was a huge deal. Did you ever have anything like that?"

"Yeah, I did. It was the opposite though. I was older than her. But I know what you mean. Four years used to seem like it was decades. Now it seems like days."

"Whatever happened to her?" I asked, genuinely interested in the story of his life.

He lifted my hand and rocked back and forth slightly. "She had someone else in her life. They got married, had a baby. And I just recently learned she's now divorced."

I smiled wide. "Are you going to get in touch with her or are you done with that stage of

your life? Wait, I'm going on like I know you and I don't. You could very well have someone special in your life already and I'm pushing you to an old flame." I tried to let go of his hand. He held tight.

"I'm single, have never been married and have never been in a relationship that lasted more than a few months at best. I'm a little too busy for most women to understand. They take it personally and can't understand why I do it."

"What is it you do?"

"I'm a chef."

My mouth dropped and I looked up towards the ceiling again. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Laughing, Kurt nudged me slightly. "I take it that's a good thing in your book."

"Please, there is no better passion a man could have."

"Passion? Hmm, you can tell you grew up around a chef. Every one else would have said job."

I stared at his tanned arms, thoroughly impressed with the definition he had in them. "If it's a job to you then you need to find something else to do with your life. If you don't love it and treat it like an art--like it's your magic, then you can't call yourself a chef. They don't just cook. They create an eatable art form. It's pleasing to the eyes, taste buds, sense of smell and more often than not, the sense of touch as well. They make a necessity a luxury. I have an immense amount of respect for anyone who does it."

He gave me a rather odd, yet charming smile. I narrowed my gaze on him. "What?"

Kurt glanced up at the ceiling. "Thank you. I knew if I was a good little boy you'd send me a present. If I donate something to charity will you make her look good in a string bikini?"

"Ha, ha," I mused, pushing his foot with mine. "Just for that comment I'm not laying out and tanning on the fire escape in my thong and nothing else."

His eyes widened. "Devan, other men will see you."

"Well, that is the point, right?" I couldn't get it all out without laughing. "Kurt, I'm kidding. But in all honesty, I have no issues wearing next to nothing. I'm," my shoulders slumped as I sighed, "a product of sixteen years worth of beauty pageants. I have had my bikini glued into place. Not comfortable. Trust me on this. And petroleum jelly on your teeth is not pleasant either. Showing my body off to the world doesn't bother me. Doesn't even register half the time."

"I wouldn't think so. But at every pageant you were amazing, Devan."

"Huh?"

Kurt shifted and cleared his throat. "I mean, I bet you were amazing."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. I shrugged. "I did okay."

"Just okay?" he asked, arching a black brow.

I gave him a wide-eyed, 'you got your answer' look. "Just okay."

"Beautiful, modest and has immense respect for chefs. I think I can work with that."

"Really?" I ran my tongue over my top teeth and gave him a teasing smile. "I noticed you avoided answering my question about your old crush."

"Damn, thought I got out of that." The look on his handsome face said he was kidding. "Would you get in touch with her if you were me? Better yet, if you knew your old crush was single, would you contact him?"

My chest tightened at the very idea of it. "Hell no."

Kurt appeared taken aback by that. "Why not?"

“Because. He did not share my feelings or rather bizarre fascination. I’m sure of it. Hell, I could walk right up to him and he wouldn’t know who I am. Don’t laugh but I don’t even know his real name. Thanks, but I’ll pass on that.”

Biting back a laugh, Kurt ran his hand through his dark hair. “Wouldn’t it be something if he more than shared your feelings?” He laughed. “Oh, what if it was you who didn’t recognize him? Not the other way around.”

“Pfft. I’d recognize him. He was tall, about your height. He had shoulder length, bleached out hair.” I curled my lip. “That was the only thing I’d have changed about him. I get that it was the ‘in’ thing to do then but I really thought dark hair would suit him better--his complexion sort of hinted that his normal hair color would have been black or darn close to it. The length didn’t bother me, although he seemed to be really good at hiding behind a veil of hair. It would have been nice to see his face instead of brief glimpses of it.”

Kurt looked as though he were doing his best not to break down into hysterical laughter. I didn’t get the joke. “You didn’t care for him bleaching his hair out and thought he most likely had black hair? Oh, God, this is perfect.”

Tipping my head, I raked my gaze over Kurt slowly. “You know, you have his complexion and you look really good with black hair. I think I was onto something.” I nudged him, doing my best to keep my mind on him and not Gideon and Jake who were now arguing partially about me and partially about their last golf game. “Is there anything you would have changed about your old crush?”

He nodded. “Yes. I would have made her less scared, or nervous, if you will, of me.”

“Get out! I can’t believe anyone would be scared or nervous around you. There is something very easy going about you.”

“This coming from a woman who just confessed to being so scared of her ex-crush that she kept a safe thirty feet from him at all times.”

“That is way different. Mine was scary in an ‘I’m going to laugh in your face because you’re some dumbass twit who isn’t even out of high school yet’ kind of way. Of course, I never actually spoke to him so the phobia may have been self-induced but I’m perfectly fine with not bothering him now. Too many years have gone by. It would just be weird.”

Kurt shook his head. “Nah, I don’t think it would be. Besides, I bet you said at least a few things to him. And I’m betting you were closer than thirty feet to him at *some* point in time.”

I looked at him, waiting for him to tell me I was on some sort of hidden camera show. “Uh, okay?”

“Okay? Ah, you’re not a kiss and tell kind of gal.”

Was he insane? “Yeah, that must be it. What about you? Did anything wonderful happen between you and your crush?”

Kurt locked gazes with me. “Oh, yeah. We had one amazing night together that I will never forget. I’d like to think she didn’t forget it either. I’d also like to think it meant at least something to her. And that she would at the very least touch base with me at some point now that she’s divorced.”

“Like forgetting about having sex with a guy like you is even possible.” I covered my mouth quickly as my eyes grew to the size of half dollars. “Do me a favor and forget you heard me say that.”

He laughed. “So, how long did you have a crush on this guy?” Kurt held my hand tighter as he smiled wide.

“I’m not sure exactly when it started. I guess when I realized he was even there. He was

so quiet whenever he came in during the day that I had no clue he was there. Whenever I had a free day, I'd spend it at the restaurant. Uncle Robert treated me like I was his and hated the way my father pushed and pushed for me to learn all the instruments he had out in the main portion of the restaurant for his house band."

Taking an interest in the hardwood floor, I continued on, "They tell me that my aunt was always singing or playing something. Even though he thought my dad was too hard on me, I think it made Robert happy to hear the sound of it around him again. I love the man to death and if something like that makes him smile I have no problem doing it. That's why I spent so much time there. It was always quiet during the day because it didn't open until four. One day when I finished practicing for a ballet recital."

I pointed at Kurt. "Laugh and die. Anyway, I glanced up and spotted a guy standing in the kitchen doorway. I was intrigued with him. It grew from that into something else and ended when he just sort of disappeared. No one told me he was leaving. I came home from college over a weekend and he was gone."

"You were too nervous to even talk to him but you wanted to know he was leaving, why?"

"Because I had a bit more than a crush on him." I smiled when I saw the shocked expression on Kurt's face. "When I turned sixteen Uncle Robert and my dad planned this party for me. They went all out. I'd wanted two friends to spend the night and that was it. Nope. They wouldn't hear of it. Anyway, they had it at Uncle Robert's restaurant. I thought we were stopping in for dinner and that I was going home to meet up with my friends. I walked in to find the place lit up with white lights. It was beautiful."

Kurt watched me carefully as I continued on, "There were a few things that stuck out about that night. One was that the music playing in the background was identical to something I'd been very interested in for a bit, but hadn't really told anyone about. Another thing was the cake. The guy in question made it."

I buried my face in my hands and laughed. "I actually refused to let my uncle cut it. It was too perfect. It was all white with the tiniest of doves and swans made from the frosting on it. Silk ribbon had been laced through it so it looked like the doves were flying around the circular cake. It had several tiers and at the top the ribbon went through a white music note."

I couldn't help but smile as I thought back to that day. "They all saw it as a tribute to music. I didn't. I saw it as someone finally understanding that I dreamt of flying away from it all. I felt like the dove that my uncle always calls me. I felt like they'd caged me and forced me to be something I wasn't, to carry the weight of someone who'd long passed. On several spots on the cake, he'd written phrases in Latin with the same color frosting. I'm not even sure if that's what you call it. It looked like it was all chiseled from marble, not an edible cake."

"You noticed the writing?" Kurt asked, looking shocked.

I shrugged, not wanting the man to pass out from my inability to shut up about myself. "I'm boring you and you're pretending to care. You are a hell of a man. The point I was trying to make is that you remind me of the guy." I laughed. "I snuck back into the kitchen to thank him that night. He was busy and I ended up getting pulled in the other direction by he who shall forever be called *him*. But I did manage to sneak in a thank you. I don't think he heard me. Anyway, there's something in the way you carry yourself that reminds me of him. That and you have the same color eyes as him."

Kurt gave me a puzzled look. "You left your party to thank some guy who made a cake for you?"

“No, not some cake or some guy. It was a piece of artwork. No joke. I got back to the table and found that Uncle Robert had cut it up and I actually cried. I’m such a girl at times. I think he anticipated my reaction because he kept several of the doves and the music note for me. He bagged them so I could freeze them. When the pictures from that night came back I had several of the cake itself, one of me staring at it in awe and one of me crying because they cut it up. I have them in a box around here somewhere. If I find them I’ll show you so you can appreciate just how perfect it was.”

Something passed over Kurt’s face that left him looking amused and slightly excited. “How in the hell did you see my... err... his eyes without him seeing you?”

“Kurt, he had his back to me when I poked my head in the door. He was rubbing his neck and just gave off an ‘I’m exhausted’ vibe. After seeing the cake he’d done, I can only imagine how long he worked on it. I stood there watching him for a bit as he gathered his things up. The second I worked up the nerve to go thank him, my ex decided to show up to the party and wanted my undivided attention. He was loud and the guy glanced towards the door just as I got lifted away. I caught the tiniest glimpse of him but damn if I can remember seeing anything but his green eyes.”

I pointed at Kurt. “You breathe a word of this to Dumb or Ass and I’ll buy a drum set and beat on it while you’re trying to sleep. I already have a piano being delivered this weekend so know that I’ll do it. They already tease me about enough things. They do not need to start in on that, too. They both think the Maestro thing is hilarious. Watch this.”

“Hey!” I called out.

Gideon and Jake took a moment out of their bickering back and forth to look at me.

“I threw the slip of paper Uncle Robert gave me with Maestro’s number on it away on accident. Do either of you...”

They both dug their hands into their pockets and pulled out slips of paper. Glancing at Kurt, I did my best not to laugh. “Yeah, see what I live with?”

“Are you going to call him?” Kurt moved even closer to me, leaving us sitting hip to hip.

I snorted. “Uhh, no. We went over this already. Just imagine that call. Hi Maestro? I’m sure you have a real name but Uncle Robert, Bobby to you, didn’t feel the need to give that to me. Oh, who am I? I’m supposed to apologize for making you cut your finger open though I have no idea why since I never actually met you. No, I’m not certifiably crazy. It’s merely implied. Oh, never call you again. Not a problem since I’m sure you’re a helluva famous guy now and could get me on stalking charges. Yeah, I’m divorced. I married this guy, got knocked up, and around, how’s your life? Oh, the restraining order really isn’t necessary. Have a great life and please tell my uncle that I did call.”

I stood quickly and dusted my backside off. “As fun as that conversation sounds I’m going to have to pass. It’s been a long time. It was some schoolgirl crush. Things change. People get older and I can’t just call up a stranger and expect anything. I wouldn’t even know what to say. Plus, I have Brody to consider. He’s really the only man I want in my life.”

Kurt stood as well and took my hand back in his. He looked a bit hurt. “That’s understandable but you don’t think he’d like to hear from you?”

I narrowed my gaze on him. “Are you going to start pushing another man on me, too? It would be my luck to have one more person doing it.”

“Holy fucking shit, I know why Kurt looks so familiar now,” Jake said, loudly drawing my attention away from Kurt. Jake stepped close to Gideon and whispered something to him. Gideon stared at Kurt for a minute and then smiled wide. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yep,” Gideon said, with the biggest smile I’d seen him have on his face in a year.

“What?” I asked. “Tell me. It will bug the heck out of me.”

Jake grabbed Gideon’s upper arm. “Let’s drop the truck off, check in at the hotel, then call and see if she’s eaten or not.”

“Hello, I’m standing here asking you a question.” I waved at them.

Jake set my wallet and phone on the tea table by the door and waved back. “I’m going to have to go with your uncle on the whole ‘it’s fated’ thing.” He set the piece of paper with Maestro’s number on it on the table, too. “Call if you want. No biggie though. In fact, don’t bother. You were always so scared to be around him. I’m sure that hasn’t changed a bit.” He laughed. “Dropped a plant on Kurt’s lap. Ha.”

“Yeah, what he said.” Gideon shook his head, laughing along with Jake. “I now understand why Robert was fine with her moving here. That sneaky Italian bastard.” He nodded towards Kurt and I. “It’s very nice to see you again... umm... meet you, Kurt. If you don’t mind, we’re going to head out and see the City a bit. We’ll *call* before we come back.”

Jake and Gideon left quickly, shutting the door behind them as they went. Confused, I shook my head and laughed. “So much for going to dinner with them. They have to be the weirdest men I know. I’d like to apologize for them now.”

“Don’t worry about it. I think they’re great.”

Chapter Three

Glancing down, I realized that Kurt and I were holding hands again. I jerked my hand away and stared at him. It had been over a year since I'd been affectionate with a man. Why I suddenly decided I'd get close to this one was beyond me. "Umm, sorry. I ... umm, sorry."

"What would you say to me making us dinner?"

I snorted. "There is no way in hell am I letting you do that. You've taken a plant to the lap, me on you and spent your Friday helping me move in. You were clearly going somewhere when I 'waylaid' you earlier. I'm not about to let you do anything else. I'm dangerously close to viewing you as perfect. Please do something to knock yourself down a notch or two. Maybe even ten notches, ya Boy Scout."

His green eyes locked on me. "That's funny. I was just thinking that you were too good to be true. I mean, I knew that you were beautiful, gifted and captivating but I had no idea how much more there was to you. I am now kicking myself for blowing Wynona off. I had no idea you were her."

He knew I was what? How did he know anything about me? Better yet, why did I feel like I could trust him completely? Why wasn't I creeped out by his admission?

"Kurt?" I asked, taken aback by him.

He moved towards me and I took a step back unsure about it all but wanting to go to him. My cell phone rang and I used that as the perfect opportunity to move further from him. The sound of the Muppets theme song played, indicating it was not work related.

Kurt laughed. "You have the Muppets on there?"

Exhaling, I smiled. "Yep. I have a thing for the chef."

"You don't say?"

I went to answer it and dropped it. Grabbing for it, I caught it with one hand and accidentally hit the speaker phone button. "Devan, honey, are you there?"

"Hey, Liz, sorry, dropped the phone. You're on speaker phone and I'm here with my new neighbor."

Kurt mumbled something that sounded remarkably like 'mom' as I walked towards him with the phone. His eyes widened as I handed him the phone. "Could you hold that while I clean up the menus?"

"Yeah."

Elizabeth Parrish, one of the leading advocates for battered women everywhere, chuckled. "So, Devan, tell me how do you like your apartment?"

"Liz, it's beautiful. I still can't believe I'm finally here. I never thought I'd... yeah, you know what I mean."

"Sweetie, you are to call me mom. You know that."

Kurt nearly dropped the phone. I gave him an odd look and he offered me a nervous smile.

"My poor neighbor is going to think the entire world is trying to set me up with someone new. I know you are convinced that..."

"Once my son sees you everything will be perfect and I'll get lots more beautiful

grandbabies. Yes, darling, that's why you have to call me mom. I'm positive the two of you will hit it off, Devan."

"Liz, stop encouraging Brody to call you grandma. He's already stoked enough that he has the same first name as your son." I laughed and glanced at Kurt who looked white as a ghost. "Kurt, are you feeling okay? Elizabeth, I'm going to have to--"

"Kurt? The neighbor with you is named Kurt?" she asked, sounding amused.

"Yes, sorry. My manners are shot today. Kurt Holland that wonderful voice is owned by one of the most amazing women I know, Elizabeth Parrish. Or as she likes to be called, mom. Please ignore her ramblings about her son. She seems to think ..."

Elizabeth picked then to add her two cents. "That you can still have a fairytale ending? I sure do. Now, tell me what you think of Kurt?"

Surprised by her question, I looked at Kurt for help. He just stood there holding the phone and staring at it intensely. "Right now he looks like he might faint. But other than that, I'm not sure. I did just tell him to stop acting so perfect."

"Honey, he's not acting."

I glanced at Kurt, he looked at me and swallowed hard. Shaking my head, I laughed. "Liz if I hang up fast it's because my perfect new neighbor passed out cold."

"Ignore him, he'll be fine. I'm sure. Devan, I want to know how you're doing? Jake called and let me know the divorce finalized."

I looked at the floor. "I can call you back later tonight, Liz."

"Devan, do you trust me?" she asked.

I nodded and then realized she couldn't see me. "Of course I do. How can you ask me that? Without you I'd still be... umm... I'd not be in New York."

"Devan, I told you the Fates intended for our paths to cross. A year and a half ago you sat in the front row table, in your own private hell watching quietly as I took the stage. I choked and..."

I glanced at the floor. "Elizabeth, you didn't choke. You should have never been up there. I know you're close to Uncle Robert and I know you love to see him smile as much as I do but that day in particular you shouldn't have been there."

"Why, because it marked twenty-five years since I'd managed to get out of a highly abusive situation? I was there for a reason, Devan. Divine intervention had me select that song in particular to play and something put you right there in front of me."

"Yeah, *its* name is Robert."

Elizabeth laughed softly. "I'm convinced the man is an angel so it works for me. But you know what I'm talking about, Devan. It was at its worst for you and yet you went against *his* wishes and rushed to comfort the stranger on the stage before you. You didn't know me in the least yet you came to me, took my hand in yours and picked up singing where I left off. The second you slid next to me on the piano bench and began to play when my fingers wouldn't stop shaking I knew who you were. The eyes threw me at first. They're beautiful but he didn't tell me one was blue and one was brown because I don't think he knew."

Fighting back tears, I smiled. "Of course he knew me. Uncle Robert drags me around and introduces me to everyone as his almost daughter. He knows what color my eyes are, Liz."

"Stop, Devan. Stop hiding from the truth of it all. I'm not talking about Robert. I'm talking about someone else. You and I had never met before. Too many things overlap. Too many people in our lives are the same. Too many events are almost identical. It was fate. I promise you that. If your then husband would have had his way you wouldn't have been in the

same building that I was in. I think he sensed the end coming. The second your brother mentioned to him who I was and what I do *he* kept you as far away from me as he could. But Brody knew who and what I was. He wasn't about to let me leave without hearing him out."

I stiffened not really wanting to relive the pain in knowing that my son had to find a stranger to listen to him.

"I thought I'd cried all the tears I could cry over twenty years ago for my situation. But that night I suddenly felt it all again, Devan. I felt my shame, my pain over letting it get to the point that an eight year old, innocent little boy, who was forced to be a man before he should, had to stand there and beg me to leave his father. To have another little boy show up out of the blue, surprising me in so many ways that I will never forget it, begging me to not tell you he talked to me but to please make you leave, hit so close to home, Devan."

Elizabeth choked up and I couldn't hold my tears back anymore. She continued on, "I thought I'd dealt with it all. I was wrong. It hit me hard that night. And it was the worst possible timing, during a charity event that everyone who was anyone in the fight was sitting there. They knew my story. Everyone does. I don't hide it. I'm not ashamed. That being said, I didn't want the entire place looking at me with pity. When you appeared to help me, I thought God had sent me another angel."

I snorted and wiped my cheeks. "I think that was the other way around."

"How about we split the difference and acknowledge we were sent to each other--one woman twenty-five years out of her horrible situation and one entering the height of hers. I told you that life was one large spider web and that each time you branched out just a little bit more, you found yourself linked to someone else. You were too terrified of what he'd do to you for coming to me that you wouldn't have listened if I'd have explained just how important you were, no, *are* to someone I love dearly."

I laughed through my tears. "You are so cryptic at times. I stopped trying to figure out what you were talking about months ago. I love you even when you're like that."

"It's easy to see why Robert considers you his daughter. It took me about two seconds to think of you as family, Devan. You shouldn't be ashamed to discuss this in front of anyone. You weren't the cause of anything. It wasn't your fault. That took me a long time to understand in regards to my own situation. And it took me even longer to trust a man completely. You're lucky in that respect. You keep getting set right in front of the man you can trust completely. The two of you just haven't been on the same page long enough to realize it."

Shaking my head, I went to the box closest to me and opened it. "Elizabeth, you could possibly be the worst one yet who is trying to fix me up. Why does everyone want to push me to a man? Do I just radiate pathetic and unable to raise a child on my own, because I'm not. Brody and I will be fine. We are fine. I want to have this time to find myself again. Christ, Liz, I went from hell to Jake's which was an amazing difference but it didn't help me understand who I am now. I can't even tell you what my favorite food is. I don't know what shows I like to watch. Did you know I still can't sleep alone in a bed? I need a cat or a guard dog, something."

I couldn't help but laugh at my absurdity. "Jake earned his wings ten times over, Liz. The man spent almost a year sleeping next to me at night, making sure he kept a safe, acceptable distance, knowing I'd wake if I felt him leave and that I needed a fucking night light. What is that? A night light? I'm going to be thirty-one soon and I'm still afraid of the dark. I know everything about everyone else but nothing about me. I can't offer anyone anything. I need to just be. I need to find me again."

"I know, sweetheart. I remember what it was like. To be honest, I'm still discovering who

I am. Don't wait until you're my age to find that type of happiness again, Devan."

Turning, I put my hands on the countertop and bent my head down. "Liz, is it wrong that I don't hate Drew, that I still find myself picking up the phone at random times of the day to remind him that he needs to be here or there--to know he isn't back into it all? When will that go away? Tell me it goes away. Tell me I'll start living for me again."

"Devan," she said, softly. "Is Gideon still after you about the way he thinks you should be acting towards your ex?"

"Yes."

"It's your nature to be caring, giving, nurturing. It's also in your nature to trust those that you finally let inside your armor. Your situation differs from mine in the sense that my ex-husband never made an effort to change his ways. Drew did. He will always fight his addictions and have to take each day as it comes. And I truly hope he never goes back to being dependent on his addictions again. I have spoken with him several times in the last six months and he doesn't have that hate in his eyes anymore, that underlying rage he carried the first time I met him. The question you have to ask yourself is, do you want to change it? Do you want to go back? Or is it something else?"

I laughed, but it wasn't friendly. "Liz, I want to get through a whole day without worrying Drew will fall off the wagon. It's the guilt thing you warned me about, isn't it?"

"Do you love him?"

"Not like I used to but it's still there. Different but there. I think it always will be there. I do worry about his well-being which makes Gideon crazy."

"Gideon isn't the one that matters in this, Devan. You do. Brody does."

"I should hate Drew. I tried. I really did, Liz. I just..."

She sighed. "You don't have it in you to hate. You are strong, honey. So much stronger than you give yourself credit for. Leaving a man who has the connections and the money Drew has is not easy. It's even harder to do it with a child. I know. I would normally avoid any further comments and tell you to talk to a counselor but I have a personal stake in this and I would like to ask you to continue being strong. If you feel the need to nurture, get a puppy. Don't pack up and go back to Drew just yet."

Laughing, I shook my head. "I'm not going back. That never entered my mind. Sending him vitamin C and making sure he remembers to humor me and drink a glass of milk everyday has occurred to me. It's still strange because I can't really remember a time in my life when Drew wasn't in it. He and Gideon had been friends since I was born. I worry about him. That's all."

She chuckled. "Honey, I already miss you."

"I miss you, too. Margarita night won't be the same if you're not at the bar pinching hot guys' asses."

The sound of Kurt coughing reminded me he was in the room. *Great. Just great.* I would have a meltdown in front of him.

"Liz, any recommendations on how to avoid a man who lives above you, for like ever, because you're mortified that he knows more about you in one day than your own mother does? If its ugly and something I'd rather remain private, Kurt knows about it. Well, there was the time that Wynona and Vanessa gave me alcohol for the first time. But I'm not letting that out of the bag." A nervous chuckle escaped me.

"Honey, Kurt will have to accept what is. I have no doubt he will. Oh, that reminds me. Did you open the package I gave you before you left?"

I rushed towards the other side of the oversized, open apartment. “Yes. I can’t believe I forgot about it. I squealed and Gideon pressed his hand over my mouth while he told every one in the area that I was prone to night terrors while awake. Idiot. Hold on. Kurt was nice enough to hook up my stereo for me today. He can cook, too. If I don’t scare him off, I’m planning on treating him like a god and following him like a stray dog.”

Liz laughed and it warmed me. “Somehow, I don’t think that will be necessary.”

I put the disc she’d given me into the stereo and pushed play. “How in the hell did you come up with all of these songs? Brody doesn’t even know I like them all.”

“I just asked someone very close to me to put together a bunch of songs that reminded him of someone special he had in his life at one point in time. That’s what he came up with. He sent it to me. I gave it to you. Do you like it?”

The first song came on. It was from the movie *The Breakfast Club*. It talked about not letting someone forget about you. “I love it. Though, I’ve got to be honest, every song on here reminds me of things that happened when I was younger. That’s funny, don’t you think?”

“Mmmhmm,” Liz mused. “So, what does this one remind you of? Anyone in particular?”

“I’m so about to date myself. But the movie, of course. Which, I was picked on ruthlessly by Wynona and Vanessa for liking so much. They seemed to think I liked it because of the couple that were complete opposites, the one with the dark and brooding outsider and the preppy chick. They showed no mercy. Even going as far as to blare this song when we were at the restaurant together and Uncle Robert’s favorite chef was trying to work. I’m not sure how he didn’t hang himself. I liked the damn song and wanted to throw myself off a bridge with as much as they played it. Oh, and they had no qualms about shouting out why they thought I liked it.”

“Would that certain chef be Maestro?” she asked, as if she didn’t already know the story having heard it from my uncle a thousand times.

“Yes. Want to pick on me, too?” Turning, I found Kurt watching me closely with a smile on his face. “Oh, you think this is funny?” I went straight at him, set my phone down on the countertop and grabbed his hands. “Okay, Mr. Laughs a Lot, get dancing.”

“Oh, no,” Kurt said, trying to back up. I pressed my body to his and shuddered at how good he felt. He stilled, stared down at me and then bobbed his head slightly to the music as he cast a cunning smile at me. “It does kind of grow on you, doesn’t it? And I think the girls were right. You seem like you would have slipped easily into the part of the preppy girl.”

“Ha, ha. Want to be my rebel? My brooding outsider?”

“Yes,” he whispered moving to the beat with me. It was perfect. The feel of his steely body pressed to mine.

“Hmm, I don’t know if you’ll work in that role. See, you’re a little too muscular. Buff guys have to go to the jock category.”

“What about guys who weren’t always the size I am now? ‘Cause, I have to be honest with you here. I used to be on the skinny side. And I wasn’t always known for my social skills.”

“You’ll do.”

Oh, you will more than do.

As I moved with him, it became apparent he wasn’t just having a nice time, he was having a *really* nice time. His clothed erection rubbed against my lower stomach and my gaze shot instantly to his.

Kurt never missed a beat, pulling me closer to him and sliding his arm around my waist. We swayed to the music, simulating a slow rhythmic sex session, fully clothed and fully aroused. Our lips grazed and my breath caught. Instantly, my hands went to his upper arms as I tipped my

head back.

Kurt pressed his lips to my neck. I should have been shocked. I was anything but. A soft moan fell from me as I moved seductively against him. My nipples hardened and my palms itched for the chance to feel every inch of his body.

Too much. Too fast.

I pulled back and shook my head, doing my best to catch my breath and calm myself down. Kurt kept his hand on my hip, not breaking contact but not pushing for anything more. I smiled. The song changed to *Blister in the Sun* by the Violent Femmes and I immediately rubbed my ass cheeks. "Oh, this one reminds of the time I fell asleep while sunbathing."

Liz laughed, reminding me that she was still on the phone. "Really, anything interesting happen then?"

"Other than the fact I had fallen asleep while sunbathing out in Uncle Robert's private herb garden, that's got a brick wall around it but woke up inside, in his office, face first on the sofa, with aloe spread all over my entire backside. And I do mean my entire backside. No. Nothing interesting." I cringed and rolled my eyes at the memory. "I can only pray it wasn't Uncle Robert who carried me in and did that. I never had the nerve to ask him. The idea of him finding me out in his herb garden, sunbathing with my bikini top undone, out cold and red is bad enough. Knowing he then rubbed me down with aloe would do me in. I'd tie weights to my legs and leap into the Hudson River."

Liz laughed so hard she barked. "Oh, I highly doubt your uncle would have touched you period. He'd have poked you with a stick to wake you up or covered you with a sheet, then sat with his back to you until you woke on your own. You know how he is."

"Well then it would appear his lil' buddy, Maestro, has quite the sick sense of humor. This song was playing in the kitchen when I woke up. I couldn't sit comfortably for days. I hope he got a good laugh out of it."

"Devan, darling. If the man found you next to naked, I'm guessing laughing wasn't what was on his mind."

Tossing my hands in the air, I winked at Kurt. "Great. I would sleep through the rub down of a lifetime." They laughed. I wiggled my hips to the beat. "Ohmygod, Liz, remember those guys who were all about rubbing suntan lotion on us?"

Kurt's eyes widened. Liz giggled. "Oh, I will never forget them. Twins never looked so good. Care to tell me why you insisted they concentrate on me and not touch you?"

"You were horny. I wasn't."

Reaching for the countertop, Kurt suddenly looked as though he was about to be sick. Liz's unique laugh filled the area. "Devan, I don't even think you realize how young being around you and Brody has made me feel. You'd think it would have the reverse effect but no, I love every second of it. There's something about you that just makes a person smile."

I moved away from Kurt, towards one of the boxes in the kitchen, figuring it was as good a time as any to start unpacking. I couldn't help but dance along with the song. "Speaking of smiling, have any new news on the Liz love front?"

"Why is it you don't cringe the second me and a sex life is mentioned?" Liz asked, making Kurt do exactly that as he stared at the phone like it might bite him.

Laughing, I shrugged. "You're beautiful. You're always doing for everyone else but you. You have a love for life and an appreciation for everyday that you wake up free and without fear. And I think we both know you had already found Mr. Right by the time I came into the picture. The two of you, how did you put it, never seemed to be on the same page at the right time."

“Honey, I will never forget the day you walked in and told him to shut-up and kiss me,” Liz said. For a moment, I really thought Kurt’s head would spin.

I pulled out a navy blue tied piece of velvet and beamed. “Are you planning on telling Broderick you’re seeing someone and it’s serious?”

Liz laughed nervously. “Somehow I think he knows now. And sweetie, my son doesn’t answer to his first name.”

“Oh. You left that part out.” I glanced towards Kurt who looked as though he’d been struck by a bus. I motioned for him to come closer. He did. “All you told me was that he was named after his father, Broderick. Then you commented on Brody’s name, his green eyes and black hair. I just assumed... I’m sorry.”

“I’ve held back a little bit more than that about my son, Devan. You weren’t ready to hear it all. I think you’re almost there now.”

I laid the velvet on the counter and undid it, revealing a set of professional chef knives. At the back of the handle there was a tiny dove and music note engraved on them. I pointed at it and went back to the box to grab the photos of me seeing the cake for the first time. “Oh, Liz, do you still have the frozen doves and music note I asked you to keep safe for me?”

She laughed. “I do. They’re actually in my son’s home freezer. He wasn’t there when I stopped though and I know he wouldn’t mind hanging onto them for you. Since he lives in the City too you should be able to stop by and pick them up easily. Though, it might take him a minute to find them. I sort of buried them and marked them with instructions not to throw them away.”

I gasped. “Liz, please tell me you’re kidding. If he tossed them... I spent over ten years hiding them from Drew... Liz.”

“Devan, relax sweetie. I guarantee they’re fine. I’ll call him the minute we hang up and make him double-check. I’m curious about your new neighbor though. He’s been incredibly quiet. Is he okay?”

I glanced at Kurt. “I’m not sure. He’s staring at the knife set I had made when I was seventeen as a gift for someone, like I just told him it was the bubonic plague in velvet. And now he’s looking at some pictures I promised to show him and he has a really weird look on his face. I think I’m creeping him out. I hope he pulls himself together soon because I want him to keep the knives. Brody has a matching set that I’m scared to death to let him use but, still.”

Kurt looked at me with wide eyes. “Huh?”

Elizabeth laughed hard. “Oh, he’s a man of many words if I’ve heard one. Care to tell me why you’re giving a man you just met a set of professional chef knives that you had specially made as a thank you, and spent almost ten years hiding them to keep your ex from finding them?”

“At the risk of sending my new neighbor rushing for the door, I want him to take them because for the first time in a long time I felt like myself when I ran into him and dumped the fern you got me in his lap. He made me feel like me again, Liz. I’ll never be able to thank him enough for that.”

Kurt closed his eyes and shook his head. “Of course it was a plant you got her. Why not? You could have called me. I would have liked to know she was coming. Having her literally fall into my lap was wonderful and all but I’d have liked to know. I would think that you, of all people, would call me the second you knew.”

Puzzled, I just stared at him.

Elizabeth laughed. “Devan, are you still there?”

I nodded, too stunned by Kurt's outburst at Liz to do much else.

"She's here. I'm sure she feels like I do but other than that, she's here," Kurt said, locking gazes with me.

"Devan, darling. If you'd like me to hang up and call my son to verify he has not thrown your doves away I can, or you could ask him yourself." She took a deep breath. "Devan Seward, the most likely upset with me gentleman standing before you is my son, Broderick Kurtis Holland. I'm hoping he doesn't stay mad at me for too long. I did promise that if it was meant to be then it would happen again."

Kurt stared at the cell phone and shook his head. "You do realize I'm left to explain this, Mom. Devan looks like she's going to be sick. Please tell her I'm harmless and to let me make her dinner."

"Devan, darling, Kurt doesn't bite. He's an excellent cook. I'll let him fill you in on the rest. I love you both."

"Liz?" I asked, unsure what it was I wanted.

"It's mom to you, Devan."

Kurt picked my cell phone up. "We're hanging up now, Mom. I'm guessing we'll both be calling you later."

"Sweetie, don't be upset with me for not telling you that I'd found her. She wasn't ready for you yet. I helped her get out, Kurt. There was nothing you could have done. But you can be there for her, for them, now."

Clenching his fists, Kurt closed his eyes and bent his head down. "Mom, you've known about her for a year and half? Did you know her when it happened? When she almost," he swallowed hard enough for me to hear it, "died?"

"Yes. It's a long story, Kurt."

He clenched his fists. "I should have been there. You should have told me. I'd have dropped everything, Mom. You know that."

I just stared at him, too shocked to comment.

Elizabeth sighed. "Sweetheart, she wouldn't have listened to you then. She wouldn't even listen to Brody."

"I was completely open with you about what went on between us and..." He stopped in mid-sentence, drawing in a deep breath and tapping the butcher block countertop with his fist.

Unable to take the sight of him upset, I found myself going to him. I ducked under his arm and came up between him and the countertop. Cupping his face, I stared into his green eyes. "Hey, don't be upset. Liz is right. I'd have looked at you as one more person trying to tear my family apart. There is no way I would have listened to a stranger, Kurt. Especially not when the one person I love more than anything in the world, my son, couldn't get through to me." I blinked away tears.

Placing his hands on my hips, Kurt stared down at me. "What if Maestro would have shown up? What if he'd have come and asked you to leave?"

I had to stop and think about that. "I don't know. I'd have been too surprised to hear him talk to think clearly." I let out a tiny laugh. "Most likely, I'd have been too embarrassed, too ashamed of myself and my situation to let him near me. I'd have also done my best to keep Brody away from him. He's already got big ideas in his head and a wild imagination. My uncle doesn't help that any. He builds Maestro up to be a god in Brody's eyes."

Kurt pulled me into his arms and gave me a tight squeeze before backing away quickly. He looked past me at the phone. "Mom, you will be telling me more about this man you're

seeing later. Right now, I'm not exactly pleased with you. I need time to think. Cool off. Goodbye, Mom." He closed the phone and glanced at me. "I'm sorry."

I just stood there staring at him.

"Devs, please don't be upset. I had no clue that..."

Shaking my head, I couldn't help but smile as I broke out into laughter. I covered my mouth and tried to pull myself together. It didn't work. "Ohmygod, the plant thing is even funnier now that I know it was your mom who gave it to me."

"Oh," he mused, smiling wide. "You think that's funny, huh?"

"Yes." I laughed harder. "The only thing better would have been to dump a pile of pictures of your mom and me hanging out on the beach in the Bahamas watching hot guys walk past. Your mom's a looker. You wouldn't believe the number of guys who asked her out."

"Wait, you were in the Bahamas with my mother?"

I grinned and nodded. "Yep. We decided we wanted to spend a week staring at hot men. She also wanted to go to some cooking show they were filming down there. I was still having a really hard time with things so I went and slept at the hotel while she did that. Brody had been abducted by Jake and Gideon for a week of camping and fishing so it was just me. Before you ask, I tried to call every hour but they kept their phones shut off." It hit me then. "Hey, Liz said you were down there, too. She wanted us to meet but like I said, I wasn't up for much company so she stopped pushing."

Kurt moved towards me and shook his head. "Only my mother could pull off hiding you from me."

"I'm not even going to ask what that means but I am going to laugh at the plant thing again." I headed towards another pile of boxes and sighed. "This is not how I want to spend my evening. I need to stock up on necessities. You know, bottled water, cereal and coffee."

"As great as those staples sound, you already promised to let me make you dinner," Kurt said, taking my hand in his. Fire shot up my arm and my breath caught. "Remember?"

"Umm, I seem to recall telling you that you can't do that because you already look perfect in my eyes." I pointed to my phone. "Knowing you're Liz's son isn't helping that Mr. Perfect image. Come on, you have got to have a fault."

"I have many."

I gave him a daring look. "Name one."

"I've been known to let something I want slip through my fingers," he said, leveling his hungry gaze on me. My stomach flip-flopped as his look caused additional moisture to pool at the apex of my thighs. "Have no fear. I learned my lesson. I won't be making that mistake again."

"Yeah, like that takes away from you being perfect," I said, rolling my eyes playfully. I fought the need to rub my body against his. I lost the battle. I pressed myself to him and he wrapped his arms around me. It felt right. Beyond right.

The slow song, now playing in the background reminded me so much of Maestro that I paused and glanced at the stereo. "Why do I feel so comfortable with you?"

Kurt tilted my chin up, and lowered his head. My entire body tightened with the knowledge that he was going to kiss me. His lips pressed against mine. The kiss was chaste at first but that did little to calm the fires raging through me. The second his tongue skimmed over my lower lip, I melted into him. Running my hands up his arms, I went to my tiptoes and slid my tongue out to meet his. I didn't care how fast we were moving or that I'd just met him.

He was the first man I'd been attracted to on a carnal level since I'd been married and he

was Liz's son. That made him fine by me. Our kiss still hadn't escalated past our tongues lightly brushing yet the quivering between my legs left moisture pooling and me drawing in shallow breaths.

The door to my apartment opened killing the mood. Kurt stepped away from me, making a noise as though he were in pain.

Chapter Four

“Incoming, you both better be dressed,” Gideon said as he seemed to fall into the room with his eyes covered.

“Gid?” I asked.

“Tell me you’re dressed.”

“Uh, Kurt, stop, we have company. Ah, wait, there is good,” I panted, watching as Gideon tried desperately to back up. Someone shoved him in harder.

Kurt laughed and moved to stand next to me. I stepped in front of him, grabbed his hands and put one on my hip and one under my shirt on my bare stomach. He gasped. I laughed.

Gideon peeked through his fingers and groaned. “Back up now.”

“No way! The two nuts behind us scare me,” Jake said, pushing through and waving to us. “Uhh, Gideon? These two are fully dressed.”

“Oh, like it’s not still possible to—” He stopped.

Jake’s jaw dropped. “You *so* screwed Wendy Louis! I knew it! I knew when I walked behind the stadium and found the two of you against the wall that you were doing her. You swore you didn’t touch her.”

He put his hands up. “What, Jake? We were fully dressed. I never touched her.”

Gagging, I turned into Kurt and buried my face in his chest. “I lost my appetite. And I am now positive I can never have sex again.”

“Too bad because we are going out tonight and finding you a man! It’s operation *Get Devan Laid* and it begins now. If I know you, you haven’t hopped back up on a dick yet. Vanessa disagrees. But tonight. We will make sure you do. Feeling like a blond, a brunette? Get your wish list made, DJ.”

Kurt stiffened and held me tight.

The sound of Wynona’s voice made me smile. Turning, I stood there, waiting to see her, knowing that she was hiding behind Gideon. “Hey Wynona, did I ever tell you how Gideon has had a crush on you since he came home from college one weekend to find us all dancing in our T-shirt’s and underwear? The morning that Vanessa was recording our moronic behavior. I bet the image stuck with him. Ooo, ask him if he wants to play doctor like you kept joking you were going to.”

Gideon’s face paled considerably.

Jake laughed. I stared at him. If he thought he was getting off without me making an ass of him too, he was wrong.

“Please tell me that Vanessa is with you, Wynona. Jake will be talking about her legs for months. I walked in on him showering once when I lived with him. I would like to strongly encourage Vanessa take him for a test drive. The sight of Jake’s dick made me vomit but I’m sure it doesn’t have that affect on all women or I can only hope it doesn’t.”

Jake stared at me with wide eyes. “You said dick.”

“What boys? Not as fun when it’s you being talked about in front of people you’d rather not have intimate details brought up around, is it? Good thing I didn’t get into the topic of masturbation.” I glared at them both. “The way you behaved here earlier, spreading things others

didn't need to hear pissed me off. Do it again and I will seriously give you a dose of your own medicine."

Gideon and Jake straightened. "Uhh, sorry, Devan. We just got a little carried away."

"That's no excuse."

"Oh, enough, DJ. They're both standing like you're about to skin them alive." Wynona said, popping out from behind Gideon. She slapped his ass and he jumped. She laughed. "Boy, I would break you."

"Stop, he looks hopeful." I winked.

Jake pointed at Gideon. "I told you not to worry about Devan. I told you the girl can handle herself just fine. Hell, people here will be calling us to come take her back. She'll spread her infectious newfound happiness through the place. It will terrify everyone."

"Well," Vanessa said, walking in with something hidden behind her back. "She can't leave. She's ours now. We have a few things to surprise her with."

I backed up fast planting my ass firmly against Kurt's clothed erection. It was my turn to gasp. Laughing, Kurt wrapped his arms around me tight and lifted me off my feet a moment. I couldn't help but laugh, too. "You keep getting a lap full of me. I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"Are you kidding? Kurt is an extreme everything. The guy likes to piss me off by riding a skateboard down the staircase." Vanessa stood over us laughing. "He's going to break his neck."

"Wonderful, here I thought there would be no kids in the building for Brody to play with."

Wynona glanced at Kurt and smiled wide. "I knew it."

"Huh?"

"He knows what I'm talking about." She gave Kurt a pointed stare. "I told you so. Perfect, isn't she?"

I laughed harder. "Oh, nice look, *mum*. Do you want him to go to his room, too?"

Wynona put her hand on her hip and tapped one long fingernail on it. Waves of red hair spilled over her shoulder. "That depends."

"On what?"

She grinned. "If he's planning on taking you with him."

Gideon snorted. "Umm, sorry but Jake and I will need to see a resume and all of his references first. Then, we'll need to run him through some testing, finger printing and anything else we can think of. Since we know most of his references he should clear the test but one never knows."

Jake grinned from ear to ear. "Between the two of us we have both the medical and legal issues taken care of."

Vanessa offered me a fake sad look. "Pumpkin, I don't know how you've done the dating scene with those two idiots in tow. One, they're sexy as hell and any man would automatically assume they were more than your brother and his best friend. And two, if they're always this way, then men must run."

I just smiled sweetly and looked at Gideon and Jake. They both nodded and we had a moment of perfect understanding. I hadn't gotten to the point where I was dating again and they knew it.

Watching me closely, Wynona sighed. "DJ, please know, I really didn't want to be right about that. I wanted to hear that you were back in the dating scene again."

"I know. I'm not made to just bounce around." I shrugged.

Wynona offered me a soft smile. "I know, baby."

“Right about what?” Vanessa asked, clueless as usual.

“Nothing, hon,” I said, not wanting to talk about it anymore.

Wynona plugged a portable CD player into the wall and gave me a wicked grin. “Now, Vanessa and I couldn’t get in to be with you as much as we should have but we told you that we would make it up to you. This is phase one.” She pushed play and the sound of eighties hip-hop filled the room. Jake was kind enough to go and shut the other, main stereo off. “Step one, you do what we spent so many years doing. Have fun. We can make Kurt go away but to be honest, he’s become our Jake.”

“What?” Jake asked.

I laughed. “They mean he’s a guy they can do or say anything around and not worry what he’s thinking. They also know that regardless what happens he will be there and never once expect anything more than their friendship in return.”

Jake blushed and winked at me.

“I love you too, Jake.” I pointed at Gideon. “And I love that big over protective oaf over there looking like he’s on red alert at all times now.” I blew them both a kiss and watched as Vanessa and Wynona came at me fast. I scrambled behind Kurt and grabbed hold of his broad shoulders. “No. No. No! Go away. I’m not sixteen anymore. And I’ve already made the ultimate ass of myself in front of *your* Jake.”

“You are not getting out of this. You told us we could,” Vanessa said, pointing at me.

“Uhh, that was before I thought about it. I’m not dancing with a damn supermodel or redheaded sex-goddess. I’m fine right here.” I gave Kurt’s shoulders a squeeze. “Move and die.”

He chuckled. “I’d offer to protect you but I think Jake’s right--you can more than handle yourself.”

Vanessa grabbed my hand and tried to pull me out from behind him. I moved against Kurt and wrapped a leg around his waist. I clung to him. “No. End of story. I fell for enough stuff when I was younger. I refuse to be subjected to it again.”

Kurt laughed harder and pressed his hands over the one I held him with. “What in hell did they get you to do?”

“Strip, sing on stage at bars, pose naked, get tattooed, uhh, the list goes on but those are some of the highlights.”

“What? You did what?” Gideon appeared next to me, glaring. “Tell me that you’re joking. With your humor I never know if I should lock you in a regular room or lock you in one that’s padded.”

“That’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Gideon pointed at Wynona. “You better tell me that she’s joking now. If my baby sister was dancing on a pole when she was fourteen I will take you over my knee and...”

Wynona’s eyes widened with delight. “She started when she was sixteen but can I still get the spanking?”

Gideon looked like he was going to blow.

Vanessa laughed, pushing her long black hair over her slender shoulder. “Oh, you should have seen the photos I took of her. She was the only one of us who grew into her body by that age and I was desperate to learn how to use my darkroom and camera equipment. Not to mention, my handheld camcorder was always rolling.”

I growled. “Thanks for turning my son into a one man documentary expert. I’m shocked every time I see his face peek out from behind a camera. I only know what half of him looks like because the damn camera is always glued to him. He even records himself cooking now. What

kind of guy has a camera on them when they cook?”

Kurt coughed.

Gideon glared at Vanessa. “Naked pictures?”

Wynona put her hand up. “And I knew I could get a leg up on nude figure drawing so I talked your *baby* sister into stripping down for us.”

“Oh, well, how could I resist? With all those fans you had, blowing my hair to the point, I couldn’t see. And that wonderful white sheet backdrop. It was just so glamorous,” I said sardonically. “You do realize I stopped wearing my hair to my ass and went with the just below my shoulder thing the second I got home. I’d gotten smacked in the eyes with it, pulled into a fan and damn near choked to death.”

Gideon growled. “Where are the pictures?”

“That’s not right, man. She’s your sister,” Jake said, egging Gideon on. “For the sake of keeping it non-creepy, I’d like to volunteer to retrieve these and keep them in a safe place.”

Vanessa grinned. “You can’t. I blew them up, framed them and kept them until about three years ago when I gave them to a friend of mine,” she glanced in our direction, “because he seemed drawn to them.”

“Call this guy now and demand them back!” Gideon shouted.

“Why? You can’t see her full face, only her lips and chin. And it’s not like I made them into porn. No, they are clean, beautiful nude photography at its finest. The black and white made them even more beautiful.”

“For the record, it was not fun having you mist me down with ice cold water while a fan was blowing on me. I’m sure the nipple shots were just grand.”

Kurt stiffened and clutched tight to my hand. I laughed and put my chin on his shoulder. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. I swear. I originally agreed to do it so I could send cake man a thank you he wouldn’t soon forget. But I didn’t want him to get in trouble for having photos, even ones that didn’t show anything fully of me since I was technically a minor.”

“Oh, umm, cake man?”

I nudged him. “Yeah, Maestro. Thank God you aren’t him. You’re already a big enough surprise. One that I really wish I’d have had a camera when I dumped your mom’s housewarming gift on. I can’t imagine how humiliated I’d be if you were some guy that my uncle firmly believes can sprout wings. No offense, but I really like the idea that you’re you. I trust Liz with my life. Anything that came from her has to be just as wonderful.”

Kurt let out a nervous chuckle. “Yeah, umm, thank God I’m not the cake guy.”

“Get them back, Vanessa,” Gideon said, still stuck on the picture situation.

Wynona snorted. “Why? I painted a six foot tall version of her that I called *Venus*. It’s currently on the wall of one of the city’s hottest restaurants. And you get a full breast shot and some of her face. Not much but it’s there. The girl had so much hair that I gave up and drew it whipping around her.”

My brow creased. “Hey, why did you end up calling it *Venus*?”

“Easy, you kept yelling at me to hurry my ass up, you were tired of standing in one spot. Then you made fun of the pose I put you in and kept singing that eighties song, Venus--followed by a two hour lecture about each one of her children. It seemed fitting.”

I smiled. “Just what I always wanted, my naked body on display while people are trying to digest food. I wish them the best of luck with that.” I shook my head and went to put my leg down. Kurt caught it and held it up. I patted his chest lightly. “Unless you’re planning on giving me a piggy back ride I need that back.”

Before I knew it, Kurt had a hold of the back of my legs. He lifted me quickly and surprisingly easily. I wrapped my legs around his waist and held onto him as he tipped his head back and looked at me. "Better?"

"Much, but you're going to give yourself a hernia."

He shook his head and whispered to me, "Baby, I got you by seven inches and a hundred pounds. Just sit tight and enjoy the ride."

"Hmm," I murmured. "Shouldn't it be me telling you to enjoy the ride?"

He tipped his head a bit and seemed surprised by my obvious sexual innuendo.

I winked and he grinned.

"Uhh, Devan?" Jake asked staring at me on Kurt's back. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Very much. Thanks for asking." I smiled as Vanessa and Wynona glanced in our direction and gave us dual shocked faces. "Can I trade you Jakes?"

"Hey," Jake huffed, licking his lower lip. "Man, I was replaced fast."

Vanessa tapped his shoulder in a comforting manner. "Don't worry, Jake. He won't take your place. He'll one up it."

"Great, so he'll get sex from her when all I got was better abs?"

Wynona smiled. "He better snatch her up before we hand her off to someone else tonight."

"No. You aren't handing my baby sister to anyone."

We all looked at Gideon and laughed. He grunted. "Leave well enough alone. I expect it will work itself out."

Wynona pointed at Kurt and me. "Damn, we honestly thought one would run to one end of the building and the other would hightail it to the opposite end."

Jake nodded as he put his hand in his pockets. "Is it me or did he morph into an ass kickin' guy? I remember him as tall and skinny, very skinny."

"I'm just happy he cut that damn hair," Gideon said, staring at Jake. "But my vote goes to locking them in a room together. I'm not willing to accept anyone new in her life right now. Him, I can take. Anyone else, I'll tear to pieces."

"Oh, I could grab candles, soft music, the works." Vanessa wagged her brows.

Wynona nodded. "I have blindfolds, floggers, handcuffs and anything else they could possibly want."

Gideon swallowed hard.

She growled. "I would so break you, Doc."

Laughing, I widened my eyes as I stared down at Kurt. "I feel like one of us should be taking notes. I can't keep track of who wants us to do what."

Kurt chuckled. "I have a really good memory. A really, really good one."

"Good. Would you like me to get down now?"

"Nope."

Shrugging, I glanced at Wynona. "Hey, how did the painting end up in a restaurant?"

Wynona glanced at Kurt and then me. "I gave it to the owner when he told me he finally decided to open his own place."

"Umm, okay. That wasn't a very nice congratulations gift. I could think of a thousand things better than my naked self plastered on a canvas."

"Sweets, he really liked the painting when he visited my studio. In fact, he tried to buy it then and there. I didn't let him." Wynona pointed at me and narrowed her gaze. "Devan, Elizabeth told us to yell at you every time you spit out something negative about yourself. She

says you don't realize you're doing it because you've been conditioned to believe it was true. So, shut up."

Kurt tipped his head. "Wait, you knew my mother and Devan were friends?"

Wynona smiled wide. "Kurt, Vanessa and I started to wonder about a lot of things four years ago when we got you shit faced finally and you spilled a bit more about yourself than you normally would have. It wasn't until a year ago that we knew for sure."

"You should have told me," he said, sternly.

Wynona nodded. "We thought things were perfect on her end. Like we were going to send the one guy in who could make her walk away. We will always regret not saying what we suspected. Maybe if you'd have gone, things might have been different."

Confused, I squeezed Kurt tight. "Someone want to translate that into 'Devan can understand this' for me? I'm seriously lost."

Wynona narrowed her gaze on me. "Kurt, is it me or does Devan have one blue eye and one brown eye?"

"Umm, yes, but I'd have thought you'd already know that."

She squealed. "Vanessa, she stopped wearing contacts to hide her eyes."

Vanessa clapped her hands together and squealed back at Wynona. For a minute it felt as though I were a circus freak on display for gawking children. "Your eyes are beautiful, Devan. Why dickhead told you that you needed to pick one and stick with it is beyond me. And I hope to God you continue to eat. Seeing you wasting away to nothing sickened me. At no point in your life have you ever been fat. Grr, I want to strangle him."

"Join the club," Gideon spat out.

Kurt growled lightly and stared at Vanessa and Wynona. "You should have told me."

"I want to know about this tattoo," Gideon said, interrupting everything else.

Jake snickered. "No, you don't. Trust me on this one, Gid."

Gideon narrowed his gaze and headed towards me. "I will order Jake to undress you."

"Never mind, I'm with you. Make her show you," Jake said, laughing. "Umm, I vote we make Kurt undress her. The guy is giving me a look that is making me want to take ten steps backwards. He's scary now. He used to be oddly creepy. Now, he's downright intimidating."

Used to be?

"They make no sense, Kurt. Ignore them." Groaning, I hopped down off his back and undid my pants. I stepped out from behind Kurt and lowered the front portion of my jeans a bit, revealing my pale pink bikini panties. I pulled them down a bit and glanced over my shoulder at Jake. "It's hardly that bad."

Gideon moved towards me fast. "You have a bird and a... a music note on your hip! Pull your pants up!"

Turning to Kurt, I stepped back a bit so he could see. "It's not that bad and I'm not flashing anything I shouldn't be. Agreed? It's not that big and I think it's pretty. Please agree so he goes away."

Kurt reached out to touch my tattoo with an odd look of fascination on his face but pulled back at the last minute. Smiling, he reached down and pulled his own shirt up high, revealing a pack of abs that made all pale in comparison. I fought back drool as I traced the thin line of black hair from his navel until it disappeared beneath his jeans.

Someone nudged me. "Huh?"

"Did you notice what he's showing you?" Wynona asked, laughing softly. I'd never heard her moving close, I was that wrapped up in Kurt's body.

I focused on Kurt's clothed groin and sighed. "I'm trying to but so far he hasn't whipped it out."

"Oh Devan, come on," Gideon said, groaning.

Jake laughed.

"DJ." Wynona took my head and titled it up a bit. "See?"

"Umm, I'm stuck on his abs now. Come back in a day or two and I should be to his face by then."

Vanessa broke out into laughter. "Oh, I need my camera."

I shifted my gaze upwards on Kurt's tawny torso and froze when I found a tribal tattoo of a dove on his upper pecs. "That is gorgeous. It is a dove right?"

He nodded.

Jake snorted. "All right, I say we go home. They can call us for the wedding. That's only if she doesn't knock Mr. Right down the stairs again and break his neck or something. We can also tell Uncle Robert he was right. It was fate."

I reached out to touch Kurt as Wynona walked away. My brow furrowed. "That's awesome. Oh, and I don't expect a proposal. Just so you know." I let out a soft laugh. "How strange that we'd pick the same type of bird. Why did you select it?"

He pulled my hand to his tattoo and pressed my hand over it gently. "It reminded me of someone I knew. Someone I will never forget. How about you?"

"Same reason."

"Come on and dance, Devan."

"Help," Wynona said, sounding strained from behind Gideon.

I laughed. "Do I even want to know what you're doing back there?"

Gideon turned and grabbed something quickly. When he laughed I knew I was screwed. The second I saw the TV/DVD combo I knew I was beyond screwed. "No. Please tell me that you didn't do what I think you did."

Kurt laughed. "Is this the big surprise you told me you were making for your friend who was moving in?"

"Yep, we went through all of Vanessa's old home videos from her 'I want to film movies phase.' Plus, Brody sent us tapes. We pulled out all the Devan footage and that's why we needed to use your Mac. We'll get the rest of the files off there later. We promise. And thanks for the use of your CD collection. I think you had almost everything we associated with Devan. I told you that she was perfect for you."

Kurt glanced at me and put his hand out. Surprisingly enough, I took it, not caring what anyone said about it.

"Is this going to show my sister stripping?"

Jake rubbed his hands together. "I'd like to take a moment to speak for all of the men in the room who are not blood relatives by saying we hope so."

I watched as Gideon carried it to the kitchen counter and plugged it in. When he turned it on the screen flickered and an image of Vanessa and Wynona appeared. "Hi, Devan, we tried to come up with the perfect 'welcome to your new life' gift but it was hard to find something that represented how we see you."

Wynona nodded at Vanessa and smiled wide. "We've known you for almost sixteen years. That's over half our lives and we still thank God everyday that our paths crossed when they did. You brought things to the table that Vanessa and I didn't have."

Vanessa nodded and pushed her long black hair from her face. "That's right. We'd list

them all but you'd die of old age. We will tell you this," she teared up, "we didn't know, sweetie. We should have. We should have noticed how much you'd changed. We should have noticed you'd stopped smiling, stopped being you." She turned her head away from the camera.

Wynona hugged her tight and continued on. "We should have seen the signs. It's like we blinked and our Devan was gone. When we thought back and pulled old movies out, we found her and we wanted to help you find her, too, Devs. We want you to see you through our eyes--the good, the bad and the great. There are so many reasons why we love you that we could never list them all. But know that we do. We all do."

I glanced around the room only to find that they'd moved up behind me. As Kurt stood by my side, Vanessa and Wynona stood behind me and my brother and Jake flanked us, I knew that I was really home. I knew Brody and I would be happy here.

The screen changed and was instantly filled with my face. I was around fifteen at the time. My long dark brown hair was pulled back in a loose bun. I wore a tiny tank top with an American flag on the chest and a pair of short jean cut-offs. My midriff showed.

"God bless America," Kurt said softly.

Jake laughed. "I really like this guy."

Ignoring them both, I watched the screen as my Uncle Robert stood before me holding a white chef's jacket and a red do-rag. "Devan, put it on. The other girls are wearing theirs."

"I'll wear one if you stop making me put on one that belongs to someone else. I am positive this man does not want me in his things."

"Ah, but that is where you are wrong." Robert put the jacket out and held it for me to slide into it. "I can promise you that."

"For the love of the Italian chef, put the jacket on or he'll launch into the Maestro speech again," Wynona called out.

Vanessa, the budding camerawomen, panned to Wynona. "My thoughts exactly. I'm waiting for Uncle Robert to have a minister and a very upset chef here when we come in."

Uncle Robert seemed to consider it. I waved my hand in front of his face. "No on the jacket and a big fat no on a minister. This isn't 1860 and I don't walk to school uphill both ways. So stop."

"But, I think he would no mind so much."

I growled. "He runs from me like I'm carrying the plague."

Robert arched a brow. "That is funny. I thought it was you who runs from him. Perhaps you are right. You both run in opposite directions." He smiled wide as his long dark brown hair spilled forward. He didn't care how old he was. He let his hair grow just below his ears and the women seemed to love it and his dark eyes.

"It's his property and I know I wouldn't want some person I didn't know running around in my things."

Wynona laughed as she dumped a cup of flour into a bowl. "I'm wondering if Gideon has ever run around in your bra."

"Aww, that's not right."

Uncle Robert smiled. "Yes, but it was funny. Now, put it on or I will put it on you."

"Yeah, Dev," Vanessa said, laughing. "Get in it. I want to catch you burning cookies on film. It's so cute when your nose wrinkles. It's even better when your uncle pretends to like them. I'm thinking if you paid attention you'd do a bit better."

I looked dead at the camera. "You try wearing this thing." I tugged on the jacket lightly. "All I smell is fruits, figwood and spice. I can't take a deep breath in without sighing. I think my

uncle rubs it down with stuff just to mess with me.”

Uncle Robert beamed and cupped my cheeks. “I am telling you, Devs, he was sent to you by your aunt. I found him holding your sheet music the other day. He touched it like it was sacred scrolls as he smiled.”

“Fantastic, I wanted a pony when I was five. Why didn’t she drop that off? And if he’s touching my sheet music it must be love. How did I miss it? Oh, I know--I ran the other way because you embarrass me by talking about him all the time with me. I don’t even want to think about what you say to him in regards to me.”

I put my hand in the air and stood tall, still leaving me three inches shorter than my six foot tall uncle. I threw my voice, pretending to be him. “Maestro, you no see how she watches you. She knows your scent. It is true. I think you were sent so my niece could annoy you to the point that you babble in two syllable words, desperately trying to get away from her but find that I have stapled you to her.”

The girls giggled and Uncle Robert shook his head. “My accent is not that bad. Is it?”

We all just stared at him. Arching my brows, I gave him a dimpled grin. “No. Not at all. Most of the time no one knows you aren’t from around here.”

Thrusting the jacket and do-rag out at me, he narrowed his gaze. “The dimples are the only thing saving your life right now. I strongly suggest you put these on.”

I laughed as I slipped my arms into the jacket. Robert put the do-rag on my head and it covered my eyes. “Yeah, umm, the other issue, aside from being in someone else’s property, is safety.” I held my arms out and showed him that the jacket was about four inches too long in the arms. Not to mention I had to peek out from under the do-rag. “I could get stuck in a blender or something. You love me, right? You wouldn’t want me to go to my death by way of a great smelling jacket, would you? If it happens I want to be buried in the jacket though. It smells so good. It’s the least you could do. Put sorry, Maestro on my epitaph.”

“On your epi what?” Vanessa asked.

I glanced at Wynona and shook my head. “It’s amazing she can breathe without assistance.”

“I need to let the delivery men in. You stay in it and get started.” Robert went to walk away and stopped. “Perhaps you should roll the sleeves. You tend to get a little clumsy when you no pay attention.”

Laughing, I waved with the floppy sleeve. Looking at the camera, I took the do-rag off and went to take the jacket off.

“Devan Jazz, you better not think of taking any of that off!” Uncle Robert yelled.

“I would never.” I put them on quickly. “I respect you too much to go against your wishes.”

Vanessa ran up to me. “Let me smell this thing.” The camera did a straight shot down my shirt, showing the swells of my breast. Jake whistled. I ignored him, focusing on the screen instead.

“I don’t smell it. I smell you. You always smell like a blend of peaches and some sort of flower, Devan. I wonder if he notices it when he puts his jacket back on?”

I rolled my eyes. “Wonderful, my uncle is going off the pheromone theory.”

“The who?” Vanessa asked.

“The idea that humans respond to certain smells, knowing who they are and are not compatible with.”

“Huh? I never understand half of what you say.”

I stared at Vanessa and shook my head. "Never mind." Rushing in the other direction, I motioned to her. "Come here. I need your extra arm length. Push play." I pointed at the stereo on a high shelf above one of the sinks.

Vanessa did. The second the sound of punk music came on, I began to move my shoulders along with it, smiling as I went. Wynona laughed. "I'm afraid to ask but what is this?"

My jaw dropped and I made a strangled choking noise. "I'll pretend you didn't ask me that."

Vanessa laughed. "Seriously, Devs, who is this?"

"Ohmygod, I've never been more embarrassed to claim two people as my friends in my life. It's The Clash."

"The who?" Wynona asked somewhere off camera.

I glanced upwards and sighed. "Oh, great music legends of the past please forgive their stupidity." Looking at Vanessa and the camera. "It's The Clash, *Should I Stay or Go*."

"I think I heard a skater punk listening to this crap at school," Wynona said. "Eww, you aren't going to pierce your nose and attach a chain to your lip, are you?"

I narrowed my eyes. "One--The Clash should be treated as gods. Two--what's wrong with someone who can balance on an object you'd kill yourself on? It beats a guy who thinks he's something because he can catch a ball. Big deal. I can catch a ball. Even Vanessa can catch a ball."

"Thanks." She moved the camera a bit.

Wynona laughed and came over to us. "DJ, I think you're forgetting your boyfriend catches a ball all the time."

"Drew is *not* my boyfriend. He's more like a boy leech. A parasite that attached itself to me when I was a freshman and that I haven't found a cure for. I'm not saying he's a bad guy, just not right for me. I've tried telling him that. He laughs and says I'm cute when I say it." I rolled my eyes. "I'm thinking of spiking a ball on his head when he's taking another cat nap under that tree he keeps trying to find his way into my pants under. Or I could spike it into his groin." I smiled wide. "Yeah, that'll do the trick. Can't use it if it's officially flattened."

"Devan! Drew is a celebrity now and you talk about him like that. You love him, you know it," Wynona offered.

"Again," I waved my hands in the air, "I never said he was a bad guy. I simply said he's not my boyfriend. And who cares if he's a whatever now. Money doesn't make the man. He's still just Drew. I don't let him forget that he put a spider in my hair when I was five and laughed as I screamed. He's still the same guy. Not bad just not quite what I'd like to think of as being compatible with me."

"I think he's gorgeous," Vanessa said, dreamily.

Wynona laughed. "Have you noticed that all the men in Devan's life are?" She cast me a funny look. "It's like a convention of beautiful people. The other girls at school don't know if they want to try to be your best friend or kill you because of how good you have it. Now that Drew went pro they're even more envious."

I snorted. "Do you know he flexes all the time? What is that about? I have eyes. I don't need him pointing out his muscles for me. And can his hair get any blonder? What is it with men and blond hair? I want to grab hold of," I lifted the jacket a bit and nodded at it, "Mr. Smells Good and scream at him for bleaching his hair. My first step should be to just ask him to push it out of his face for two minutes so I could actually look at him but that would require being in close proximity to him. No thanks."

“I want to come in when he’s here sometime. If I didn’t hear your uncle talk non-stop about him I’d think he was made up.” Vanessa giggled. “Oh, I did this quiz in Cosmo that rated my compatibility to Jake. It wasn’t good.”

I just shook my head. Wynona laughed. “Hey, I accept your challenge, DJ.”

“Huh?”

“You said I’d fall off a skateboard. When we get back to your house we can get Gideon’s or Jake’s and I’ll prove I can stay on one.”

The do-rag fell in my eyes again. I danced to the music as I took it off and stuffed it down the front of my shirt. “They need to make the pockets closeable. Every time I lean forward I’m grabbing the thing to keep it from hitting the floor.”

Jake groaned. “Jesus, I never wanted to be a piece of cloth more in my life and I’ll have you all know I’m a very compatible guy.”

Vanessa laughed. “You wish.”

I focused on the screen. “Forget it, Wynona. They would kill me for letting you touch their precious boards which they never use anymore because they’ve become Gap boys. I’m going to sign them up to model for IZOD.” I rolled my eyes. “And Gideon thinks it’s embarrassing to tell people he has a beauty queen sister. Ha, please.”

I grabbed Vanessa’s arm and pulled her towards the back locker room. I dropped fast, reached back behind a cabinet and pulled out a skateboard. “Here, stand on this one. But just for a sec. I’m not sure who this belongs to. I found it when I lost the ring Drew gave me. I was searching around and came across this instead.”

“Umm, DJ, are you telling me that you stopped looking for a promise ring when you found a skateboard?” Wynona asked, sounding a bit concerned.

“Pretty much. The skateboard doesn’t cram its tongue down my throat or cut off much needed oxygen to my brain. It doesn’t try to hump my leg like a dog in heat and mostly, it doesn’t expect me to return its calls.”

They both laughed.

“Hey, can you ride it?” Vanessa asked, reaching out for it.

I shook my head and looked away nervously. As I bent to put it down, Vanessa pointed at me. “You are a horrible liar.”

Standing tall, I smiled. “No I’m not. I bit it the other day and vowed to stay off it forever. I like having skin on my hip.”

“No way.”

“Way,” I said, opening the chefs’ jacket and unbuttoning my jean shorts. I dropped them down, revealing a tiny pair of black undies that had a picture of the chef from the Muppets on them.

Wynona laughed. “We got you like a zillion of those as a joke. I can’t believe you wear them. Half of them are thongs. Aren’t they uncomfortable?”

I nodded. “It’s amazing how much time you save when you purposely put your underwear in the wedgie position. No longer do you bother with digging them out. Hey, they’re supposed to be there.”

I turned a bit, showing them a large road rash on my upper left hip. Vanessa yelped. “Has your dad seen this? He’ll die if you’re scarred for the swimsuit competition of your next pageant.”

I grinned from ear to ear. “I know. And no, he hasn’t seen it. Though, I darn near flashed Maestro. I came limping in and had no clue he was there. I thought I was alone since Uncle

Robert had to run an errand. I stripped down and got in the shower because I had gravel embedded in my hip. I heard someone come into the locker room, killed the water and held my breath. I thought it was Uncle Robert at first. Imagine my surprise when I peeked out to see Maestro's back as he changed his shirt."

"You should have invited him to join you in the shower," Vanessa said.

Wynona laughed. "Virgin Mary wouldn't dream of it. I bet you money that she covered her eyes and looked away to give him privacy."

I growled as my face flushed. "Leave me alone. I wouldn't like it if someone stared at me when I didn't know it."

"Told you so. But that is just one of the reasons we love her. She's not been corrupted."

The scene cut again this time it showed us cleaning up our mess. Laughing, I held up a round ball and smiled at Vanessa. "Look ma', I made a bouncing ball in place of a cookie." I sighed. "Why can't I get this? I understand the general basis for molecular physics but I can't bake a cookie."

"The who of the what?" Vanessa asked.

I grinned. "Stick to modeling." Taking the white jacket off, I smoothed it and returned the do-rag to the front lower pocket before hanging it up. I pulled a tiny folded card from my pocket and stuck it in the jacket.

"What are you putting in there? Please tell me it's not a moth ball?" Wynona asked, laughing.

"No. Every time he washes it, it loses its appeal. I also noticed that his head thing never smells like sweat. Gideon's baseball cap was under one of the couch cushions once and I thought something died. I actually got Jake to move it. It was that bad. Does the guy not sweat or does his sweat just smell good? Hmm?"

Laughing, Wynona took the folded paper from me and tried to read it. "Devan, what the hell does this say? It's in Chinese or something."

I sighed. "Watch your mouth in here. Uncle Robert would have a heart attack if he heard one of his 'angels' saying that. And it's not Chinese, Wynona, it's Latin. You know, the thing I study my butt off for and have a heck of a time with. Mr. Wellington actually gave me an A minus. Can you believe that? Jerk."

Wynona stared into the camera. "Yep. She really is that much of a perfectionist."

Vanessa reached out and held the note up for the camera. "Tell me that this is something really romantic."

"Uhh, it's a thank you for his help."

"With what?" Vanessa zoomed in on me.

I let out a soft laugh. "I sort of fell asleep again on the piano bench when I should have been finishing my Latin homework. When I woke up, someone had fixed the mistakes on it for me. I know Uncle Robert's writing. I've signed his name on enough purchase orders. That wasn't his. He told me once that Maestro was the first chef he'd had through here who spoke Latin, too. I've got a pretty good hunch it was him."

Vanessa laughed. "It was probably your uncle just being nice, hon."

"Perhaps, but I'm curious as to how a man in his late forties with a bad shoulder and elbow can lift a five foot nine girl from a bench and move her to the office sofa without waking her."

"Oh, well you left that off."

Grinning, I shrugged. "It's a little embarrassing that I pass out cold at random points

during the day.”

“Devan, you get up at four-thirty in the morning everyday and put yourself through hell and back. It’s understandable that you’d be tired.”

I snorted and began to wring my hands. “Yeah, understandable.” I smiled softly before walking out of the view of the camera.

Wynona filled the frame fast. She glanced behind her nervously and pulled something out of her jean pocket. “She is going to kill us but this is a necessary step in operation get the girl to make the right move mission. She obviously likes the guy but won’t ever act on it.”

Vanessa nodded with the camera moving, too. “We need documentation of this event. She’ll never believe we actually did it to her.”

Grinning, Wynona lifted the white pair of bikini-cut panties with the chef from the Muppets on the front of them. “This is our little thank you for having to hear your Uncle go on and on about Maestro. We thought we’d give him a gift from you, Devan. This doesn’t just come from the heart. It comes from your hamper. Don’t worry, I told Vanessa to smell them. The moron did it.”

“Hey.”

“Well, you did.” Wynona smiled.

“Oh, yeah, gawd even her underwear smells like peaches. I say we take her out back and bury her in the trash can for the night.”

“Nope,” Wynona grinned wide. “Can’t have Snow White with an imperfection if we’re aiming at landing her a skateboarding Prince Charming who can cook. We should have probably told her it was his board and I’d bet money that is his music playing now. She is so innocent it’s almost sad.”

The second I watched her go to the jacket and stuff the panties in a pocket I covered my mouth and cringed. “Ahh, no, tell me... no... Wynona... no. Shut it off.”

Jake laughed and went to the DVD player. “I’ll pause it.”

I rounded on Vanessa and Wynona. “You didn’t.”

“Yep. We sure did.”

My mouth dropped. “No. I just took them off before we got there. If you’re going to humiliate me, do it with clean ones.” I tossed my hands in the air and shook my head. “I am never calling him now. Never. And I happen to have liked that pair. I thought Jake stole them.”

“No. I took that light purple pair.”

I growled and then burst into laughter. The very thought of Maestro finding them when he put the jacket on was hysterical. “Only you two would think that was helping.” My eyes widened. “Ohmygod, he probably really thought they were from me since I put the friggin’ thank you note in there.” I covered my eyes. “Hey, thanks for helping with my Latin homework, here is a pair of my panties. Want to help with Trigonometry? I’ll wait for you in your jacket and nothing else.”

Vanessa and Wynona nodded at each other. “That was one of the better ones we did.”

I stilled. “What else did you do?”

Vanessa looked up at the ceiling, trying to look innocent. Wynona grinned. “You know how your mother actually had a monthly itinerary done up for you because she had you running non-stop?”

“Yes,” I said, unsure where this was going.

“Well, you know that we’d always copy it down to know where you’d be and when we’d get to spend time with you.” She winked. “We always made him a copy, too.”

My jaw dropped as I thought about the things my mother would list. “Oh, tell me you didn’t. Those had things like ‘waxing appointment’ written on them. Holy Fucking Shit! She always marked my menstrual cycle on them because she liked to avoid putting me in any competitions around that time of the month because she didn’t want me to look bloated.”

Wynona burst into laughter. “Yeah, we wrote that on his, too. Come on, Devan. That’s funny and you know it. Hey, and we always made sure he had backstage passes to anything that had them and tickets to anything you were doing.”

“Oh, yeah, funny in a ‘how humiliated can I be’ kind of way. Yeah. Dying laughing here, people.” I glared at her. “Did you let him think it was me leaving it all for him? Or did you own up to being a jackass?”

Vanessa snorted. “Considering that any time we gave him something we made sure to spritz your perfume on it, we might have given him the impression it was coming from you.”

Kurt laughed. I shot him a nasty look. He stopped.

“Did it ever occur to you that he would be uncomfortable knowing all that about me or that he’d be offended by finding that he had female panties in his pocket when he got to work? Huh?”

Jake laughed. “Umm, Devan, trust me,” he stared at Kurt, “no guy would turn down a pair of your panties. Except Gideon.”

“Thanks for excluding me.”

“Not a problem, bro.” Jake wagged his brows. “You should see the ones I took from her while she was living with me. She’d moved into string thongs by then.”

I gave him a hard look. He put his hands up in a surrender pose. I shook my head. “Gee, I really wish I’d have gone digging for some of yours. Oh wait, I had to wash them and throw the ratty ones away. How you could walk around with holes in them is a mystery to me. What is that about?”

“Ventilation,” he and Gideon said in unison.

Vanessa walked up and took control of the player. Her thin, willowy frame still managed to block the television. “Okay, I want to play the next two and then don’t play anymore until you’re alone. They aren’t all for everyone, Devan. I think you know what I’m saying.”

I nodded.

She pushed play and Kurt moved in closer to me. Before I realized it, I was leaning into him, letting him put his arm around me. It was so beyond comforting that I didn’t want to try to understand it.

Wynona glanced back at us. Her gaze went to our hands. She smiled wide and motioned to the screen. “Remember when Vanessa and I thought it would be so funny to take you to a nightclub when we were only sixteen?”

I groaned. “You two stooges picked one that was having a bachelor party to end all bachelor parties. I will never forget being carried in there.” I glanced at Kurt. “No joke, they carried me in. The owner snatched us up and threatened to call our parents.”

Vanessa’s eyes widened. “Devan, when you asked to speak to him alone we thought you’d lost your mind. Your freak out was the best. We’d never seen you get mad before and we had no idea how you felt about everything. This is our way of showing you that from before you could even remember, people told you what you would not do. The fact that you’re here now shows us that you are a hell of a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for. The rest of the disc kind of shows that too.”

“Shh, it’s coming on.” Wynona pointed at the screen.

Vanessa's handy camera work showed me walking into a dressing room. I glared at them both. She zoomed in on me. "So, is he calling our parents?"

Wynona snorted. "Let him. Like my parents care."

I pointed at her. "You, don't speak. I have listened to your mouth run all night and look where we are from it."

"DJ?"

I growled. "DJ me again and you will be picking my shoe out of your ass."

Vanessa gasped. "Devan said ass. She's pissed."

"Oh, I am beyond pissed. I am livid. I begged you both to knock it off. Neither of you listened. Do you know what happens if my dad gets a call from a New York City club owner this time of night? I can lie and have him call Uncle Robert but I think dad will notice I'm not back in Ohio. Don't you?"

Vanessa nodded with the camera. "We won't get to see you until school starts up again. That will suck."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "No. Right now that sounds perfect. I'm upset because it means I have to go back to it all."

"Huh?" Wynona asked.

"Lips. Zip them now." I pointed at her. "Do you think I want to go back to four-thirty wake-up calls to go study stupid fucking ballet, jazz, tap, gymnastics, voice lessons, the works?"

They both gasped. No doubt because I said fucking.

"But you love it, right?" Vanessa asked. "You're Miss Teen..."

I snorted, cutting her off, and rubbed my hands over my face. "No I don't love it. I am not who they're trying to make me be. I'm just me. They control my life from sun up to sundown. I picked cheerleading. Do you know why? Because I can assure you that no part of me wanted to yell 'Go Team'."

They shook their heads.

"Because it's the only guarantee I have that I'll see other kids my age after school hours. My weekends are full. They cram me in every class known to man and then are surprised when I can't stay awake. My friggin' body hurts so bad by dinner time that I can't even think of eating. All I want to do is crawl under the covers and not come out for weeks. Its non-stop," I began to pace, "Devan, do this, do that. Oh, honey, look at how pretty this dress is, it will go great with this song or that song when we drag you to here or there. Oh, what do you mean that so and so is having a get together. You're only with these people for a short time. You're so much more than all of that, darling."

Laughing, I looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, give me that book, Devan. You aren't taking any courses in mythology so there really is no reason to read about it. You're cultured enough. There isn't a party we can't take you to that you can't hold your own with our friends. The belle of the ball." I growled and snorted. "Yeah, right."

I grabbed a tiara off the countertop, put it on and gave a fake smile. "Hold your head up, Devan. You're slouching. You have circles under your eyes. Put tea bags on them quick. Did you bring make-up? Oh, honey, I know it's a gorgeous day but you really need to work on that new piece for your recital in two point two billion years from now. Jazz gave it her all. You can give it yours. You're young. Now is the time to strike. You could be famous, Devan. Don't you want to be famous? It doesn't matter that we have enough money to support a third world country, you could be a star."

Tears filled my eyes as I shook my head. "Don't you want to be so fucking perfect that

only two girls can stand to even come near you? The rest watch you from a distance like you're an exhibit at the zoo. Don't you want to be so wonderful that your hands shake at random times to the point you have to sit on them from stress? Don't you want to be so fucking perfect that you're scared to eat because you might not fit in that sequin nightmare your mother is having made for you? What do you mean you're a size eight? No, don't be silly, today you're a five. There's a girl from Tennessee who is a six. You can beat that."

"Hey, I'm an eight and walk down a runway in Versace for a living," Vanessa said, huffing.

I cried harder. "Uncle Robert sees them pushing too hard but they don't listen to him." I laughed through my tears. "You know that's why he lets me come to the restaurant all summer instead of stay home. He knows that Mom and Dad will find something else to put me in if I'm there. Heaven forbid I be like Gideon, get up, go to practice for the one sport he's doing, come home, crawl in bed and wake up whenever the hell he wants. It's a given, he'll be a doctor just like dad. Have they even asked him what he wants to do? Probably not. The guy has architect written all over him. He's always building something but he doesn't seem to care that they've selected his life. They see him being fine and they don't push."

Wynona went to try to hug me and I put my hands up, acting like my mother again. "Oh, be careful, you'll smudge your make-up. What? I know it makes your face itch darling, but you blush so easily it's important we hide that. Do you have your contact in? Blue eyes and dark hair are so pretty. The judges might be put off by two different colors. What? Oh, of course your Uncle Robert says they're just fine the way they are. He'd never want to hurt your feelings, Devan."

"Tell them you want to stop," Wynona said. "It's just that easy, DJ... err... Devan."

I snorted. "Right. I thought of that. I was ten and woke up to find I couldn't turn my neck. I'd pulled something along the way. It hurt so bad and I was scared. God, I was ten and no clue. To me it could be stuck like that forever." Laughing, I touched my neck. "I told them that I didn't want to do it anymore that it wasn't very fun. They said that was fine."

Vanessa zoomed in a bit on me. "So, why didn't you just stay out of it all? I picked modeling. My parents didn't. In fact, my dad hates it when they stick me in things someone twice my age wouldn't even dream of wearing. If I told him I wanted out he'd throw a party."

"Oh, mine decided that he really didn't have much to say to me after that. And I do mean the man said nothing. It was like I disappeared. I'd go to hug him good night and he'd," I looked up and bit back tears, "he would fold his newspaper, get up and walk away never acknowledging I was even there. Once, Gideon, Jake and Drew asked to take me to a festival in town--one I should have been competing in and my father looked at Gideon and told him to go on without me, that I'd decided that sort of thing wasn't for me. I was ten, they were fourteen. The fact that they'd even offered to take me said that they noticed what was going on and felt bad for me. No guy that age signs up for a day with their baby sister for the hell of it."

Wynona handed me a tissue and I wiped my eyes. I held it out and smiled. "Look no mascara. Just me. That's what I have here. Just me."

"Hey, quit again. You have us now. We'll talk to you. To hell with everyone else. And you know your uncle won't stand for it."

I laughed. "Thanks but I sort of like having my dad at least acknowledge my presence. I just wish he'd see how much I dislike it all."

"But we dance and sing all the time, DJ."

I looked at Wynona and laughed hysterically. "There is such a difference from what we

do together to competing for a trophy. The two of you have never made me redo something to the point my toes bled. You have never made me practice something to the point my fingers cramp. You have never taken a glass of water away from me and told me that I might look bloated if I drink anymore. Hey, to hell with the fact that my throat is dry from belting out songs they selected for me.”

“Ah, Dev, come here.” Wynona hugged me tight.

I broke down harder then. “The best part of it all is that they do it in honor of some woman who died before I was even a glint in my father’s eyes. And they do it to make Robert happy.”

Pulling away from Wynona, I kicked the chair next to me and sent it flying in the other direction. “He’s happy when I play a piece that’s two minutes long. His face lights up and he tells me that he’s proud of me. Don’t they understand that I’d still do it? Just not as much.”

“DJ, you’re overreacting. You’re just upset that Drew had to go back to school for pre-session training.”

My eyes grew wide as I wiped the tears from my eyes. “Oh, that’s the best one yet. My Dad practically ties a rope around my waist and hands Drew the end to lead me with. Gideon is constantly on me for not spending enough time with the guy. News flash people, I don’t remember agreeing to be anything to Drew. He just stopped being only Gideon’s buddy and suddenly was hanging all over me. Did I agree to something I don’t remember?” I laughed again. “Dad loves him. Thinks it’s so great that he’s been drafted. He keeps telling Drew what a fine wife I’ll make him. How I’m so cultured, sweet, everything he’ll need in the circles he’ll be running in.”

“Wife?” Vanessa asked. “You haven’t even slept with him.”

“I know. And that is a whole other topic. I have you two all over me for being the last known virgin.” I lunged at them and they backed up. “What is wrong with that? I seem to remember holding someone’s hand,” I glared at Wynona, “while we waited for a pink line or not. I’m sixteen and exhausted. I don’t want to get laid. I want to be left alone. I’ve known how to walk in heels since I was four. I can apply make-up just right and have been able to do that since I was six. I am paraded in front of men who are as old as my father, looking like a painted whore, singing songs about shit I have never experienced. Yeah, the last thing I want is that commitment.”

I shook my head. “Who puts their little girl in heels and make-up at those ages, then pushes her out onto a stage to sing a song that she can’t even understand the content to? Who? I will never do that to my children. Ever. And I will never turn my back on them when they decide they’d rather not go in one direction but the other. If they’re happy and safe then by all means do it.”

I wiped my eyes and narrowed my gaze on Vanessa and Wynona. “Now, I have struck a deal with the man who owns this club. His entertainment is running late. Way late. He has a club full of drunk twenty-something males. I assured him that if he was willing to help us out, we’d be more than willing to help him.” I put up my hand. “Before you get excited, Vanessa. We are not stripping. Though, honestly. I will do anything to have a break from all of that back home. Anything. Hey, if they need me naked then fine. I’m two steps from that in the bathing suit competition anyway. At least here the men don’t have to shift awkwardly in their seat pretending they don’t find a friggin’ sixteen year old attractive. These guys are free to act like idiots.”

“What the hell are we going to do?” Wynona asked, glancing at the doorway leading back into the darkened, over-crowded club.

I smiled wickedly and arched a brow. "We use the skills my dear daddy put so much money into. And we use our other assets as well."

"Huh?"

I smiled as I stared at the wardrobe closet. "We do what we know girls. Find a cheerleading outfit that fits and get it on. Wynona, I strongly suggest something in green. It looks great against your red hair and light skin tone. Vanessa, I know you hate wearing white but it suits you. Be sure to pick a skirt that is a hair longer than what you normally wear. You're six foot tall and have legs that make guys trip over themselves. Use them." I winked and tapped my temple. "Your skirt will already show it all but in their mind when you pull it up a bit they're getting a better view. Look at the legs and ass on that one."

Vanessa shook her head. "No way. They'll laugh us off stage dressed as cheerleaders."

"I agree," Wynona said.

I gave them both a droll look. "Okay, please note the virgin you like to pick on so much is pointing out the obvious but look around. This room is packed full of cheerleading outfits, school girl skirts and all kinds of I'm not legal things." I walked off camera a minute and came back with a tricycle in my hand. "What? Did the two of you think they're running a daycare back here? I think the state would have something to say about liquor and half naked women being in the building with toddlers but that's just my opinion."

"Devan, I'm not so sure that..."

I stared at Wynona. "You know how you thought it was hilarious to go through Gideon's porn? Did you not notice the overwhelming amount of women dressed as catholic school girls, nuns, cheerleaders, your everyday jail bait?"

She shrugged. "No, I was too jealous of their breasts to pay attention to what they were wearing."

Vanessa laughed. "Devs is right. There were a lot of them."

"Trust me, girls. I may not have any experience in the area of sex but I have been trained to please a crowd from age three up. Let's put the skills to good use. Get dressed. Wynona, you will have to sing if I get winded. Vanessa does just as many flips as me so she won't be able to do it. Don't bitch, the man wanted four songs from us. I got him down to two and believe it or not, he's paying us. I told him he didn't need to. He insisted. I agreed so long as it wasn't stuffed down any article of my clothing."

Wynona's face dropped and her eyes widened. Shocked didn't begin to cover the look upon her face. She put her hands up, waving them madly. "Hold it. I do not sing."

I winked. "But you sure the hell pull off a fabulous Betty Boop impersonation when you're making fun of the rest of the squad. Do that to the words and they won't even register you aren't singing. Trust me. Breathy red head will work just fine."

"DJ."

"Wynona, whenever you do it at my house Gideon, Jake and Drew trip over themselves to get to the room to see it. They aren't fans of old cartoons. They're men. They're fans of hot chicks, two feet from them, sounding like they're having an orgasm."

Vanessa's breath hitched. "Ohmygod, our little Devan isn't off in la-la land half the time, she's watching and soaking in everyone's reactions. Scary."

I glanced down and shook my head. "Vanessa, trade me shoes. We're the same size. You'll kill yourself flipping in those boots."

"But you'll end up getting hurt."

I batted my eyes. "Oh, but darling, you're forgetting the most important rule--if it can be

done in heels then I can do it. The judges, who are all usually men, just love that.” Rolling my eyes playfully, I put my hand out to her. “I’ll need five minutes and a clear space to practice but I’ll be fine. Oh, and I need you to make your way down the center stage and count steps. Flipping into a crowd of horny men isn’t on my agenda this evening. I will say this now. I can and will fix this. But if either of you pull something as stupid as this again you will not like dealing with me.”

Wynona put her hand up. “Umm, Devan, I’m not liking dealing with you right now.”

“Good. Now, go find mics that have a pack and hook them around our heads.” They gave me a blank look. Sighing, I nodded. “The ones that look like what Madonna wears. We’ll each need one on. Keep it set to off and Milli Vanilli it until you’re needed. It got them a Grammy. It’ll get us out of this without my dad forbidding me from coming back. Oh, I told the owner that if any one of those men actually touch us or try anything that we suddenly revert to age twelve, bawl our eyes out and pretend that we just accidentally stumbled in and lookie what they made us do.”

“You are evil.” Vanessa pulled out on the view.

I smiled. “No. I’m resourceful. I will do anything to keep from going home. The owner has got some guy named Bubba all set to watch over us while we’re up there. He’s about three hundred pounds, bald and scary. He’s got my seal of approval. Let’s go.”

“What songs are we doing?”

The grin that spread over my face was priceless. “Songs that will appeal to this crowd. Do routine six first, the one we do at basketball game half-times while we’re away. Keep going even when I stop. I’ll slip back into it as needed. Since we aren’t getting naked we need to keep their attention held another way. After all, if I’m going out there, I’m going out to win. What the hell’s the point of it all if you don’t?” I asked, sarcastically. “The second song will require you both to use your imaginations. Sort of like I had to do because two twits decided this would be oh so fun. It’s my form of payback to the both of you.” I licked my lips. “I think this virgin will have the last laugh tonight. If you both don’t give it your all, I will embarrass the hell out of you while making sure the crowd is happy.”

The scene cut and showed Vanessa’s face close to the camera. “Now, be sure to get all of it. This is a keeper. Our girl never acts like this,” she said to someone in the crowd. She gave a seductive smile and leaned in more. “How will I ever repay you for this?”

A very male cough sounded. Vanessa winked at him before walking away dressed in a tiny white cheerleading outfit with pigtails, letterman’s jacket and all. She took the stage, counting the steps as she went.

The lights went down and strobe lights began to go on and off. The crowd went wild, hooting and carrying on like fools. Marky Mark’s *Good Vibrations* came over the sound system as a spotlight hit the three of us. I stood watching the screen in awe of just how good we really did look that night. Wynona had on her green outfit. Vanessa had her white and I was planted in the middle in black with matching, thigh high, chunky heeled boots on. The letterman’s jacket I had on was too big but it worked.

We counted off and instantly launched in different directions. Wynona and Vanessa did round off, back hand springs. I ran, launched into a round off, followed close by two flic-flacs and a tuck before landing, flipping my mic on and hitting the soulful lyrics that the goddess of dance music herself lent to the song.

I held one hand out, while I belted out the lyrics and still managing to move my body to the beat. I gave it my all, touching my upper thigh and lifting my skirt just a bit. The second my

singing portion ended, I gave a sultry look out and over the crowd before doing a standing flic-flac with a toe touch at the end. This left me doing the splits high in the air and yanking the letterman's jacket off. The men went wild because at the same moment, Vanessa and Wynona were doing it as well. It was part of the normal routine. They didn't know it though.

When I landed, I dropped the jacket onto the stage floor and fell right into a push-up position. I thumped my body against the floor before concentrating on only moving my ass. I sang my portion about how good it all felt while doing that and Bubba had to back up several grabby drunk twenty somethings. Rolling onto my back, I put my hands to the sides of my head and flipped upright, instantly launching back into the normal dance routine we used while cheerleading so I matched Vanessa and Wynona.

This continued on and I amazed myself as I watched the screen. I looked like I had springs in my feet. Each time the parts that I needed to sing came on, I belted them out while rotating my hips just right, simulating sex and driving the men to the point they actually crowded the stage. The second we all launched into flips and jumps again you could barely hear the music over the men shouting.

We locked arms turned and thumped our bodies to the beat as the song drew to an end. The lights went down and the men began shouting for more. The beat for *Like a Virgin* came on and they sounded like a stadium full of fraternity boys. In many ways they were just that. As the lights hit us I pushed Wynona out and flipped her mic on while I caught my breath.

Her eyes widened but she hit her mark, Betty Booping it all the way. The men loved it. She smiled, clearly getting into it as I motioned to Vanessa to come with me. She followed and we slinked our way down the center stage. We rubbed our torsos, lifted our skirts, showing nothing more than the spankies beneath them but the men seemed to enjoy every second of it all.

Wynona kept up with the singing while Vanessa and I rolled around the stage doing our best to look seductive. Much to my surprise as I watched it all unfolding, we did a hell of a job. The second I grabbed hold of the pole I heard Gideon growl. When I spread my legs wide and tipped my head back I thought he was going to charge the TV and hurdle it across the room.

"Holy shit, you three did that?" Jake asked.

Vanessa laughed. "It gets better. Watch when the guy touches my ankle and I freeze. Dev showed up and sealed a job well done."

I shook my head and sighed. "Umm, we were young."

"Mmmhmm," Wynona murmured as she winked at me.

I watched as the scene unfolded. Vanessa locked up the minute the guy touched her. I sashayed down to her, dropped down in front of her, pulling her down with me. I glared at the man before capturing Vanessa's lips with mine. You could have heard a pin drop as we watched it continue on.

Vanessa was so shocked that I was able to flip her onto her back in no time flat. I ended our kiss and flipped my mic on just in time to sing about how very mine she was. I straddled her waist and gave the man a daring look. He backed off. Taking hold of Vanessa's hands, I pulled them up me, not actually touching myself with them but giving the illusion that I was.

I gave a very innocent, dimple covered smile to the crowd as I put one of her fingers in my mouth and stared out at the crowd with wide eyes. The song ended and Bubba moved onto the stage, rushing us off before the clearly insane crowd of guys could make a move for us. The next thing I saw was Vanessa running out, the men going nuts as she hopped down into them and went straight for her camera. Bubba, all three-hundred pounds of him showed up out of nowhere, swung her over his shoulder and made off with her. She kept taping, laughing as she went.

As she entered the dressing room she got a shot of Wynona and me lying stretched out on the floor, our breathing irregular at best. “That was the coolest friggin’ thing ever, Devan. How did you come up with it?”

I gave her a wry look. “Sixteen years of virginity?”

She giggled. “Hey, you’re a great kisser. I can see why Drew stays when you aren’t handing it out.”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “Note to self: Start kissing bad.”

We all broke into hysterical laughter and the screen went blank.

Vanessa shut the TV off and turned to me. “Pucker up.”

“I want to know how you came up with the finger licking,” Wynona said, smiling.

I pointed at Jake. “I got cotton candy on my hand while I was with him and had no napkins or water around. I started licking it off my hand and he got all weird and began to walk slower and slower until he looked like he was in pain. I thought he was seriously hurt and when he confessed that it was a painful erection I laughed so hard at him that I think it wilted.”

Jake snorted. “You’d have thought so. And thanks so much for telling everyone about that. Now we’ll get to listen to Gideon shout and threaten my life the rest of the weekend.”

Glancing at Gideon, I found him staring at me with a blank expression. “Gideon?”

“We all forced you into his arms and then we were so used to watching you bend to the whim of everyone that we never saw what he was doing to you.” He looked away. “We molded you into someone who thought the only way to keep a man’s affection was to follow his orders regardless how much pain you went through.”

“Gideon,” I said, moving towards him.

He put his hand up and then pointed at the TV. “Look at what you did to just avoid being around us all! At sixteen you knew that you weren’t in control of your own life. We did that to you, Devan. We made you into his little *princess*. And we were so used to putting you through it all that we were blinded to it when he took withholding affection to a whole new level--when he started refusing to touch you but kept getting caught with other women.”

I took a deep breath in and smiled. “On that note, I’d like to take a moment to point out that I’m standing in my own apartment. No one but me controls my actions now. Well, Brody has a huge say, but that’s it. I’d also like to point out that you are only four years older than me. You tried to change things while we were growing up, Gideon. You were just a child, too. I knew marrying Drew wasn’t what I wanted to do and he’d never done anything but care for me up until then. In fact, he was a wonderful husband for the majority of our marriage. You didn’t turn him into what he became. You didn’t get him hooked on painkillers, alcohol and fast, easy, women.”

Jake tipped his head and cleared his throat. “But we’re the two who picked you up, literally, while you were hightailing it away from the church all dressed in white, looking pale and breaking out in hives, not wanting to get married. We escorted you to the devil’s doorstep.”

I put my hands up. “I surrender. New topic please. This is my day dammit and I will not allow anything to dampen it. If you all want to sit around and play poor Devan, get out. Do it somewhere else. This is a non-pity zone boys. I have spent a year trying to come to terms with everything, looking forward to this day and I will not have it spent dwelling on any of the negative. I have a wonderful loving brother who obviously loved me enough to try to kill my then husband.” I glanced at him and smiled. “I still think you’d have looked so cute in a prison uniform.”

He laughed softly and shook his head. “I’d like to lie and say I wouldn’t have really

gotten to that point but Jake's right. I'd have killed him had he not pulled me off him."

Jake snorted. "Umm, I had to pull you off him five times before I could get you calmed down enough to snap out of it. Even then I thought you'd go right through me to finish him off."

Vanessa laughed. "I vote we call him Gideon the Dragon."

I laughed and smiled. "See, I have a brother, excuse me," I looked at Jake, "two brothers who would do anything for me. Hell, Jake didn't even ask, he just told me Brody and I were staying with him until we decided what we wanted to do with our lives." I glanced at Wynona and Vanessa. "I have two amazing best friends who spent, I can only guess, how long making this for me and who flew in to see me whenever they could."

Turning, I stared at Kurt who was looking at me with so much concern on his face that it warmed my heart. "And I'm fairly sure I've found a new friend."

"Or an old one you just don't rec..." Jake covered Vanessa's mouth fast and smiled at me. She pushed his hand off her mouth and pushed play on the DVD again. "Okay, last one for now."

The screen filled with an image of Brody. His emerald green eyes were wide with excitement and his chin-length black hair hung just a little in his face. He was sitting in the kitchen at my Uncle's restaurant on a stool. I couldn't help but smile as I watched him.

"Hi, Mom. If you're watching this that means you're in New York and happy, not curled up in a ball on your bed doing your best not to cry." He winked. "I made a different one for that. Aunt Vanessa promised to play the one that fit when the time came."

I let out a soft laugh. "Always prepared."

Brody pushed his hair out of his face. Jake moved forward fast and hit pause. Turning, he stared at Kurt and me. He looked back at the screen and then Gideon. "I can't be the only one in the room to notice this can I?"

"Since you're blocking the screen probably," Gideon bit out. Jake moved, leaving a clear shot of Brody looking up through hooded lashes. His green eyes were years beyond him. A sly grin spread over his squared face as he stared at the camera. "I see Brody."

"Yeah, and who else?"

Wynona gasped and stared at me with wide eyes. "Conference time, Devan. I need to speak with you in the corner."

"Wynona?"

"I really need to talk to you, DJ."

Vanessa made a squawking sound. "Devan, did you have sex with Maestro and develop a case of amnesia?"

Kurt gripped my hand so tight it actually hurt. I tugged on it and he eased up a bit. "Devan...?"

My eyes widened as I stared at him. "Don't start being weird, too. I just met you. I've known they weren't wrapped tight from the word go." I stared at Vanessa. "No. I did not have sex with him. Why in the hell would you ask me something like that?"

"What do you mean *no*?" Kurt asked, sounding extremely put off.

I yanked my hand free of his and took a step back. "Girls, *your* Jake is weirder than mine. If he wasn't Liz's son I'd kick him out."

Wynona and Vanessa passed a knowing look between themselves and Wynona stepped closer to us. "Maybe we're asking the wrong person."

Gideon drew in a sharp breath as he ran his hand over Brody's face on the screen. "Holy shit, Devan. Don't play games. We won't think anything of you if you did. In fact, I'm guessing

you'll end up with a room full of hugs."

Dumbfounded, I just stared at him. "Hello? Have you all gone mad? I kept a safe little thirty feet or better from the man at all times. Why are you all asking me this?"

They all looked at Kurt. I did, too. He just stared at me.

"I surrender." I threw my hands in the air. "I mean it. Has Brody gotten to you all, too?"

"What do you mean?" Kurt asked.

I narrowed my gaze on Wynona. "Oh, did you forget to fill him in on all the lovely details? Did you forget to tell him how my son decided to tell the judge that he was positive he was adopted. That he in no way could be related to Drew. And how he knows exactly who his real father is."

Gideon laughed so hard he snorted. "That was the best. God, I know he spent the last year or so of your marriage calling Drew by his name, constantly saying that but it was too perfect when he did it to the judge."

"Thankfully, Jake was able to smooth things over," I said, smiling at Jake.

He ran his hand through his sandy blond hair and looked ill. "Erm, you know how I told the judge that Brody has an overactive imagination and no paternity tests were necessary?"

"Yes."

Jake stared at Kurt and I. "You know how your uncle calls Brody mini-Maestro?"

"Oh does this have a point? I'm hungry." I put my hand on my hip and glared at him.

Gideon moved towards me and took hold of my shoulders. "Devan, it's really important that you tell us the truth here. I know you spent two years developing little white lies to keep what was happening from us but now is not the time. Drew is close to being able to see Brody unsupervised and now when he gets visitation he won't be a few blocks away, he'll be states away."

I shook my head. "Drew would never hurt Brody. Ever."

"Yeah, well there was a time in my life when I said the same thing about you. No. Drew would never hurt her. He's been in love with her since she was fourteen. He puts her on a pedestal. He'll never do anything but cherish her. I was wrong. Damn near dead wrong, Devan."

"Gideon, Drew never even raised his voice to Brody. He's his pride and joy." I couldn't help but laugh. "Do you think I would have worked things out with Drew and agreed to marry him if I'd so much as uttered a word to Maestro, let alone slept with him?"

"Worked things out?" Kurt asked. "Weren't the two of you engaged for like ever?"

I laughed so hard that I had to grab Gideon to stay upright. He chuckled and answered for me. "No. He'd ask and ask her to marry him and she'd tell him no. Devan even broke the whole thing off before she left for college and no one could believe it. We thought she was nuts for dumping Drew. He was in his second season in pro status and doing phenomenally well. It didn't matter to Devan."

"Why *did* you break it off with him?" Jake asked.

I blushed. "This conversation is pointless. Let me watch what Brody did. I haven't seen him in twenty-four hours and its turning my stomach not being able to check on him."

"Fine but please tell us the truth. Did you have sex with Kurt?"

Shocked, I backed up fast, running directly into Kurt. "Gideon Kyle Seward! Please watch those slips of the tongue."

He sighed. "I'll run the tests, Devs. Jake can take the results and use them in your favor."

"In my favor?" I shook my head confused. "I am not taking the little bit of time Drew has with his son away from him. I don't hate him. No one here seems to understand that. I hate the

situation. I hate the fact that they pushed him to play, to perform when his body hurt so bad he couldn't get out of bed. I hate that he felt the need to do it. I hate that he relied so heavily on pain killers that he couldn't stop taking them. I hate that he hated it so much that he slipped into it more. I hate that I couldn't help him--that I couldn't take away his pain and help him be the Drew I grew to love. I hate that he focused his rage on me and felt the need to go fuck anything that moved when he couldn't even be in the same room with me. I hate that my family fell to pieces and that I couldn't fix that. I don't hate Drew."

Gideon looked like he'd been struck. "Devan, if you for one second consider going back to him I will lock you in a room and throw the key away."

"I'll help him," Wynona said. Vanessa agreed.

I glared at Jake, waiting for him to agree. He shook his head. "Devan, I'm not going to go along with it because I know you won't. I know the details you refuse to tell Gideon or anyone else about. I know how big your heart is and how forgiving you can be. I also know you can never forgive all of that. I care about Drew. He's family and he was our best friend growing up. I hate what he became, too. I see him now and on the surface he's back to being the guy we all knew. That doesn't mean I want anyone I love alone with him for extended periods of time. He's still playing football. He still hurts and what's to say he won't turn around and go after the closest person to him--Brody."

"Brody hates him," Wynona said quietly. "He hates him for what he did to you, Devan. Don't make him go back with Drew."

"What are you talking about?"

Vanessa shifted awkwardly. "She's right, Devan. He hates him and he has hated him for years. It's all over the tapes he made. If he doesn't want to be around him, don't force it. And Gideon's right. You need to just be honest. Did you sleep with...?"

"For crying out loud, no. I did not sleep with Maestro! I came home from college around the end of September, the same weekend they were having that huge party for Drew at the restaurant looking to talk to the guy in question here. I didn't find him. My Uncle swore he was there and he wasn't. Drew thought I came to work things out with him and wanted to talk to me. I did the smile and walk away because I was still looking for a certain chef."

I put my hands in the air and aimed them at Wynona. "Later, I asked you where Drew was, you told me back by the kitchen. I wanted to make it very clear that we were done. I went. Found Uncle Robert and he said the guy I was looking for was in the pantry. I went. The friggin' door shut behind me and you know the thing locks from the outside. Someone killed the lights, which are also on the outside and I instantly began to cry."

Wynona's eyes widened. "Oh, DJ, you're terrified of the dark."

"I know. When Drew grabbed me I didn't care if he was Jack the Ripper. I clung to him for dear life."

I looked at all of them. "So, for your information, I lost my virginity that night and ended up pregnant with Brody. I was too busy double majoring in college to notice the obvious signs. I thought I had the stomach flu for three weeks. When it passed I didn't think anything of it. Months went by and when I suddenly couldn't fit in my jeans anymore I got a little suspicious. I called Gideon. I was four months pregnant by then. The rest is history."

Wynona shook her head. "Only you would get pregnant the same time you lose your virginity."

I snorted. "I wasn't really expecting it to happen. It wasn't like I was even seeing Drew at the time. I wasn't on anything and he didn't wear... umm... yeah. Anyway, it happened. It was

wonderful and I wouldn't change a thing about it. I was actually happy it was pitch black. I was so nervous I'd have passed out if I'd have had to look at him. I have only, ever, been with one man. Period."

"Uhh, Gideon?" Jake swallowed hard. "Drew was with us all that..."

Gideon put his hand up and stared at Kurt who looked like he was about to faint. "Leave it alone, Jake. It'll work itself out soon enough. I would like to point out that under any other circumstance I would beat the living hell out of any man who touched my sister. This may very well warrant a round of drinks and my lifelong friendship. Let's see what mini-Maestro has to say." He nodded to Vanessa and she pushed play on the DVD.

"Mom, I first want to tell you to stop calling me so much. Don't look surprised. We all know you're going to do it." Brody smiled and wagged his brows. "Don't worry, for you I'll be sure to keep my pads and helmet on while on my skateboard."

I exhaled, relieved to hear him promise that.

He pulled a hunter green do-rag out of his back pocket and put it on his head, pinning his hair back and out of his face. Everyone in the room, but me, gasped. I ignored them and watched my son on the screen. "I made you some cookies. They're in a red tin in the box marked Mom. I even," he shrugged, "burnt four of them so it would remind you of all the times you 'helped' me. That was hard to do. How can you stand there knowing they're turning into hard, crusty... oh never mind. Uncle Robert and I are going to spend the day getting desserts made for a wedding this weekend. You should see what I can do now."

Brody hopped off the chair and went to the walk in refrigerator. He came running out, holding something in his hand. When he opened it and I saw a white swan made from icing, I covered my mouth as I smiled wide. "See, it's not perfect but I'm trying. Uncle Robert says it's better than the guy he has helping him right now. He says it's in my blood. Says that the guy who was here when you still lived at home is an expert at this stuff and a culinary genius. He says that I remind him of the guy--a real mini-Maestro."

"I'd say so," Jake offered, laughing softly.

Brody smiled wide. "Uncle Robert even gave me my own spot for my stuff. It's funny 'cause the locker is the one that belonged to Maestro. I'm psyched and can't wait to tell him next time I talk to him. I don't get to talk to him as much as I'd like because he's busy up there in New York but he did promise that when I got in I could come visit him." Brody set the swan down gently. "Uncle Robert told me to take you when I go. He said the guy will be so surprised to see you with me that he'll probably pass out. You know how he understates everything. The guy will drop dead for sure, Mom."

"Gawd, Devan, he's so grown up," Vanessa whispered. "He's like a little adult."

"In some ways, but in others he's only eleven." I folded my arms and watched Brody as he sat back on the stool. "Hmm, he didn't tell me before that Maestro was the guy he was meeting on webcams. That's odd."

Brody grinned. "Sorry, I don't really like being on this side of the camera without you. I tried to get Uncle Gideon to join me. All I got out of him was cameraman duties."

"Hi Devs," Gideon said into the camera. "Brody made me breakfast today. Are you sure he's yours? It not only stayed down, it was delicious."

Brody laughed. "It's okay, Mom. He can't dance so if you need any ammo just ask him to."

I laughed because it was true.

"I just want you to know that I love you and we're going to be just fine. No. Better than

fine, mom.” He waved his hand. “The wonder of modern technology is that I get to play with other footage, thank you Aunt Vanessa for teaching me that, and show you exactly why we’re going to be fine. We’re a team, Mom. Nothing comes between us. Nothing. I’ve seen you do amazing things to make sure of that.”

Vanessa laughed as the scene cut to my old driveway. It showed seven boys standing there with shocked expressions on their faces. Brody was behind the camera. “Told ya so.”

“Your mom is the coolest mom in the world,” Alec said. He had lived two doors down from us while I was married to Drew.

Quinn, Brody’s best friend shook his head. “No, I mean, yeah but his mom is hot.”

Brody made a gagging noise. “Shut-up, that’s my mom you’re talking about.”

Both boys sighed. “Yeah.”

“Gross. Knock it off. She’s old enough to be your mother.”

Quinn looked at the camera and smiled lazily. “My mom is old. She’s thirty-eight.”

“Wow, that is old,” Brody whispered.

I laughed as I watched them.

Alec put his helmet on and looked at Brody. “Can you ask your dad to go out of town over your birthday every year?”

Brody growled. “*He* is not my dad and I wish he’d be gone every year.”

“Whatever, dude. Look at your mom. She actually got the entire street to okay this thing and help out. She even has my mom signed up to help with refreshments and stuff. I don’t know how she managed that.” Alec shook his head in amazement.

Quinn snorted. “All she did was smile when my dad opened the door. I’m pretty sure he’d have handed her the keys to his Mercedes and told her to keep it if she asked. Mom says she’s so devoted to your dad that she would never dream of looking in another direction.”

“He’s *not* my dad,” Brody bit out. “She will look in another direction. I know she will. And my mom *is* the coolest.”

“Are you mad that you didn’t get to go to Florida since your dad, I mean Drew, got held up at the last minute?”

“No. I don’t want him around her. I hope he stays gone forever. He didn’t plan on being here and he knows it. She rearranged everything, had us packed and was up all night worried because he didn’t show up. You should have seen her face when she told me we weren’t going this morning. I already knew. I couldn’t sleep either. I was happy. She thought I was just pretending to be. Nope. Drew couldn’t have given me a better gift. I hate him and hope he never comes back.”

I took a deep breath in, shocked to hear the anger in his voice.

Brody chuckled. “She’s the coolest. She did all this for me today without having any of it planned.”

Moving the camera, he focused on the triple wide driveway and cul-de-sac. I saw myself then, my hair in a ponytail, a pencil behind my ear drilling a piece of plywood to the frame that the neighbors had helped build. I wore a pair of faded low rise jeans, boots and a snug baby blue T-shirt.

Gideon, Jake, my dad and my Uncle Robert were there helping, too. Uncle Robert had thrown together a cake that resembled a half-pipe with skaters on it and all. My mom stood with her white sun hat on, giving the band that was setting up a rather odd look.

“Devan, you’re going to hurt yourself,” Gideon said, hopping down from the center of the skating structure we’d spent the morning building. He helped me hold the last piece in and I

screwed it into place. “When did you learn how to build one of these? Come to think of it, how do you even know how to build anything?”

I smiled. “I looked it up on the internet about an hour before I called you this morning. It took me a little bit to double check the safety guidelines some of the professional skater sites had listed and come up with a doable version but I think I got it.”

Gideon laughed and kissed the top of my head as he hugged me tight. I winced, obviously in pain and he let go of me. “What’s wrong?”

Brody moved in closer to me with the camera. I winked at him and then smiled at Gideon. “Nothing. I just slept wrong a few nights ago and I’m still a little sore.” It was a lie. I looked past Gideon at the band and arched a brow. “Brody, why are they hooking your guitar up?”

“Sweet, hold on.” The camera turned fast. He handed it to Quinn. “Here you do this and don’t zoom in on any part of my mom or you’ll have to deal with me.”

“Pfft, you’re only ten. I’m twelve and a half.”

Brody smiled at the camera. “Yep and I got you by a foot. Gotta love having tall parents.”

“No fair, you’re dad’s a sport’s giant. If you hit me it’ll just be wrong.”

Brody leaned into the camera and whispered. “My dad is not a sports anything. He’s a great man, who cooks and who loves my mom. My Uncle Robert told me all about him. When my dad sees the videos I’m making him he’s going to make sure Drew never sets foot near her again.”

“Huh?” Quinn asked sounding puzzled.

Brody nodded his head at Quinn. “I need to come over and get those tapes you’re storing for me later. Right now, I get to make my mom smile.” He took off running towards the band, his baggy jean shorts hit the back of his knees as his Ramones T-shirt lifted slightly.

Brody tapped the lead singers shoulder and the guy bent down to listen to him. Gideon moved close to me as we stood near Quinn. “Why does my nephew look like he could be a member of a punk cover band?”

“Because he’s not hurting anyone, doing phenomenally well in school and isn’t on drugs. If he’s happy, I’m happy.”

Gideon nodded. “Yeah, remind me of that when I find him with green hair and nose rings.”

“Hey, even I have limits. Green isn’t his color,” I said, nudging my brother. I gasped as Brody put his guitar on and took a spot up with the band. “Uhh, is it wrong to hope he didn’t really join them?”

Uncle Robert appeared next to Gideon and smiled as he watched Brody. “Ah, he’s going to do it. He told me this morning and I no believe him.”

“What exactly is he doing?” Gideon asked.

Uncle Robert laughed. “He’s giving someone a shove in the right direction by letting her know how much she means to him and that he supports what he knows she’s been thinking of doing.”

“Ohmygod, my son’s dating. I can’t deal with this. I think I’m going to throw up. Gideon, have the sex talk with him. Show him horrible pictures of diseases and tell him things will fall off. Please.”

Robert moved to me fast and cupped my cheeks. “Lil’ Jazz, Brody does this for you.”

“Oh. Good. I’m not ready for girls to enter his life yet.”

Brody began to strum his electric guitar and move his head with the beat. The lead singer

took hold of the mic and looked in my direction. "This is going out from the birthday boy here to his mom, Devan Seward. He tells me that she's amazing. I gotta say that from what I've seen so far today, he's right."

"My last name is Charter not..."

Robert pressed his fingertips to my lips. "Shhh."

The singer launched into a punk cover of *I'll Be There*. My jaw dropped as Brody followed right along with the band. He looked directly at me and shrugged as he kept moving to the beat. Brody stopped when the singers went into the portion about any further people in my life being good to me.

I watched the screen as the recognition of what he was telling me through the song. The same feelings rushed to me that I had that day. Instantly, I choked up and bit back tears. Kurt was next to me in a heartbeat, pulling me close to him and kissing my temple. I didn't think anything of it. I just watched Brody playing.

The song ended and I went to him quickly. Brody tossed his arms around my waist and hugged me tight. Tears filled his green eyes but he held them in as he clung to me.

Vanessa hit pause fast. "Yeah, that's probably good enough."

Something was wrong in her voice. "Vanessa, what is it?"

"Nothing. Let's go dancing or something."

I shook my head. "What's next? Is it something you taped or is it Brody's?"

She cast a worried look at Wynona. "Umm, it's Brody's but I can guarantee you do not want the room to see it, Devan. How about we head out now? We can grab something to eat and then maybe hit a club."

I drew in a deep breath, suddenly feeling the weight of the day on my shoulders. "Go ahead. I'm going to pass tonight."

They all looked at me.

"I'm tired and not really in the mood to eat. I'll meet up with you in the morning."

"DJ, come on. Don't..."

Kurt put his hand up. "She said she doesn't want to go out tonight. Go ahead and have a nice night. She'll be fine here with me."

That caught my attention. "With you?"

Jake rubbed his hands together. "Well, we need to get a move on it. They're calling for thunderstorms this weekend. Hopefully, they'll hold off until you get settled in. I'm a little concerned about who is going to rush in and hold you when the lights go out. Brody isn't here yet and I'll be too far away to do it."

"Oh, I imagine someone will come to the rescue," Gideon said, laughing. "Though, I'd advise them to be sure she knows who is with her this time. Obviously, she doesn't have great night vision or the ability to go with her gut instincts."

Jake and Gideon glanced at one another and ran like hell for the front door, grabbing Vanessa and Wynona on the way. The minute they were gone I ran for my phone. I pressed the button programmed for my uncle's and waited.

"Hi, Mom," Brody said, laughing.

"Hey, how did you know it was me?"

Kurt moved up behind me and slid his arm around my waist. I leaned into him and sighed as I heard my son laughing. "It's been way too long since your last call."

"I miss you."

"I'm fine. Are you having fun with everyone? Did Aunt Wynona and Vanessa find out

you're there already? I might have slipped and told them."

It was my turn to laugh. "Oh, you're the reason they knew I was here. Thanks a lot, traitor. Way to keep my secret. I'm so making you peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when you get here."

"Gross. Please tell me you aren't putting that into your body," he said, snorting.

"Oh, yeah, bucko, I'm going out and grabbing everything I need for one. I'm even going to get," I made a dramatic gasping noise, "pre-sliced bread."

Kurt laughed and kissed the top of my head. It caught me off guard and I stilled. He ran his hand through the back of my hair and kissed my head again. It should have set me off more. Oddly enough, it seemed to put my mind at ease.

"Mom, Tony Hawk's coming on TV. Can I call you back later? Wait, it's late. How about I call you in the morning?"

Glancing at the phone, I whimpered. "I can't believe Tony Hawk is winning out here. I didn't see him in your room holding a bucket when you had the stomach flu or him there holding your arm when you broke it skateboarding." I made a teasing noise. "I guess I can let you go watch your show. Is Quinn over?"

"Yep. He says hi." It sounded like Brody was covering the phone and mumbling something. "I'm not repeating that. She's my mother."

I laughed. "Behave you two. Don't give Robert a hard time. And, I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom."

I closed my phone and turned into Kurt's arms. "I hate that he's not here."

"I know, honey."

Honey?

Kurt held me to him and rocked me gently. "Are you hungry?"

"Honestly, I'm exhausted but, umm..."

Taking my hand in his, Kurt led me towards the bedroom. I came to a grinding halt. He smiled. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." It came out faster than it should have considering I'd only just met him.

"Then let me be your Jake tonight, Devs." His green gaze locked on me and my breath caught. I nodded and he kicked his boots off. "I'll keep my hands to myself. You have my word."

Chapter Five

I watched in silence as Kurt laid down on the top of a bed in a department store that was raised six feet off the ground. Technically, it was a bed for a teenage boy, or so the sign claimed. As I stared at Kurt, I wasn't sure if it was wrong or if he was just a big kid. He leaned over and winked at me. "Perfect. Brody will love it."

"Oh, he will, huh?"

He was right but I wasn't about to let on to that. Kurt was already entirely too perfect for my taste as it was. He'd held true to his word and was a perfect gentleman the entire night even when I rolled over onto him while sleeping last night. I woke to find his arms wrapped around me, one of my legs hiked over his and my hand on his chest. It was the first time in years that I not only felt safe but I also felt like it was supposed to be that way. I couldn't explain and stopped trying.

I'd tiptoed into the bathroom and showered, thinking he'd still be sleeping when I got done. When I'd come out to find he was gone, my stomach dropped. Within thirty minutes he was back, showered and bearing gifts--breakfast.

We'd spent the greater part of the morning shopping for things I'd need. The current project was Brody's bedroom furniture. At our old house he'd had a queen sized bed and oversized furniture. None of which would fit in the apartment easily.

The sales woman who had been hovering about us for the last half hour reappeared, eyeing Kurt in a way that said exactly what she wanted to do to him. She batted her eyes and let out a breathy sigh. "You look comfy."

Kurt stared past her at me and smiled. "He'll love this, Devs. I'm getting him this one."

I blinked several times, doing my best to make sense of what he'd just said. "Kurt, you're not getting him anything. You're along to point me in the right direction and to help me figure out what will and will not fit in my place." I winked. "Oh, and to test how cool the bed is."

The sales woman glanced back at me and looked entirely too pleased to hear evidence that Kurt and I weren't a couple.

Kurt licked his lower lip. "Devan, I'd like to buy this for him."

"Are you insane?"

He leaned half off the bed, upside down and grinned. "Maybe, why?"

I checked my watch and pointed to it. "We've known each other for twenty-four hours. It's weird enough that I even brought you along. You know what, the entire twenty-four hours has been strange."

"You've known each other a day?" the salesgirl asked, eyeing Kurt.

"Yes," I said.

Kurt shook his head. "No."

I would have questioned him about it but I spotted Gideon and Jake waving like idiots outside the window. "There are how many people in this city and yet I can't shake two morons?"

Kurt waved back at them and Jake motioned for me to come outside. The salesgirl made a noise that sounded as if she were in pain. I found her biting her lower lip and looking like she might orgasm at any point as she stared at the buffet of buff men.

“On that note--” I tossed my handbag to Kurt who caught it with ease. “You’ll find everything you’ll need to order the bed with in there.” I stared at the girl. “I’d like the desk that is shown here as well. And can I pay to have it put together?”

She either didn’t hear me or was too caught up in Gideon and Jake to care. I shuddered at the thought. “Could you ogle my brother and Jake when I’m not looking? You know what, go back to staring at Kurt. I can see what you found attractive in him. The other two? Umm, no. Not seeing it.”

Her eyes widened. “I-I was just...”

“Honey, I’ve spent my entire life around men like this. I know ogling when I see it. Don’t worry, the only one who will let it go to his head is the blond and he can’t hear me right now.”

I glanced at the window to find Jake blowing on the glass. I sighed. “Oh, the maturity runneth over. You should see him when he thinks no one is looking.”

She stared at me as if she wasn’t sure what to say.

“How soon can I get this stuff delivered?”

“Ten days.”

My eyes widened and I glanced back at Jake. “If you can get it to me in five, I’ll give you the blond’s phone number and set you up on a date with him.”

“Deal.”

Kurt laughed and rolled off the bed without using a ladder. He flashed a sexy smile at the girl and she sighed. I wanted to be sick but held back. “Tell you what, I’ll pay double if you can get this to us by tomorrow. Plus, I’ll still make her hook you up with Jake.”

“Kurt, you are not going to...”

He pointed at me and gave me a stern look. “I didn’t ask you.”

“Don’t you dare let him pay for that,” I said, staring at the girl who looked lost.

“DJ,” Wynona said, appearing next to me and scaring the living hell out of me. I jumped and she laughed. “Come on, we’re going to lunch and have something special planned.”

Vanessa rounded the corner and wagged her brows. “You aren’t going to believe who I just ran into.”

“Who?”

“Devan Charter, is that really you?”

I cringed at the sound of a voice I never wanted to hear again. As the five foot seven inch blonde bitch stepped forward I instantly went for her. Wynona was on me in a flash backing me up.

Vanessa looked puzzled. “Devan?”

Erica Brockton winked and I narrowed my gaze on her. She smiled sweetly. “I haven’t seen you in two years. Now, Vanessa tells me you’ve relocated here. How wonderful. We should get together sometime.”

Taking a deep breath, I forced a smile to my face. “Yeah.”

Vanessa clapped her hands. “Oh, we’re going to Bubba’s for lunch. You should come, Erica. It would give you and Devan time to catch up. I can’t believe the two of you fell out of touch.”

Erica grinned and I wanted to bash her face in. I held back. Mostly because Wynona had planted herself in front of me. She stared at Vanessa with wide eyes. “Umm, I’m guessing Erica is busy and we should really get going.”

“I’d love to come.” Erica stood, one hand on her hip. The white Capri pants she had on with three inch heels only served to validate what I knew to be true. She was a slut. “I’m willing

to let bygones be bygones, if Devan is.”

“Huh?” Vanessa glanced at me.

Wynona took a step forward but I put my hand on her shoulder. “I got this one.”

“Devan, just leave it. Let’s go.”

“No, I’d love to catch up with Erica. After all, the last time I saw her was under my husband in my own bed.”

Vanessa spun around. “Drew stuck his dick in that hoebag?”

She stiffened. I smiled. “Here’s the thing, Vanessa. At the time, I assumed so. But after finding out what all the pain killers Drew was addicted to does to a man’s performance I really do believe Drew when he says he didn’t actually fuck her because he couldn’t get it up.”

Erica looked as if she’d been slapped. I smiled wider. “Well, there was his emphatic denial, which, at the time had to be taken with a grain of salt since I saw them naked together.” I glanced at Erica. “Oh, and before I forget, they don’t look real. I’m not sure who lied to you.”

Wynona lost it, laughing so hard she cackled.

Erica took a tiny step back.

I moved forward. “There was also the condom evidence that I got stuck cleaning up. Either it was the cleanest sex ever and the condom managed to biodegrade cum or Drew never got to that point. Not that it matters. Once I found him with you, he wasn’t permitted back in me.” I looked her up and down. “I got a Mercedes out of the incident and a trip to Italy. What did you get? A lame, drug-induced partial sex act with a famous guy?” I winked. “If you don’t mind, I’ll hold tight to my anger with you. It keeps me from clinging to youth desperately. I see what it’s done to you and have decided to let Mother Nature do its thing. Best of luck in all you do-- hopefully, you’ll be able to get the next husband you try to steal at more than half mast.”

Erica gasped and touched her throat. “I-I can’t believe you’d air our dirty laundry like this in public, Devan.”

I laughed. “Oh, darling, I didn’t air any laundry associated with you. I had it, along with the bed, hauled to the dump.”

“I liked the sleigh bed you had at the end there, Devan,” Vanessa said, smiling. “You got that out of it, too.”

“I think Drew might still have it. Erica, you should try to call him. He tells me that all is ‘working’ again if you know what I mean.” I slapped my thigh. “Shit, that’s right, you don’t know what I mean. Pity, Drew had many faults, his ability to fuck wasn’t one of them. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I need some fresh air. I think I have residual whore smell happening because I’m looking at you and remembering what my sheets ended up smelling like. You really should see someone about that. They have all kinds of products for that type of odor now.”

I stormed past her, not bothering to step around. Instead, I slammed into her, knocking her back a bit. I didn’t stop. I headed straight out of the store, followed close by Vanessa and Wynona.

Wynona caught my arm and spun me around to face her. “Devan Jazz, stop! Where in the hell did that come from?”

Gideon appeared next to me. “Where did what come from?”

“Your sister just ripped Erica Brockton a new asshole,” Vanessa said, staring at me with wide eyes. “I couldn’t have done a better job. Hell, I don’t think Wynona could have pulled that off either.”

“Who is Erica Brockton?”

Jake came for me so fast that he was a blur. He pulled me into his arms and I broke down

into tears. “Shh, Devan, I’ve got you.”

“Who is Erica Brockton and why is my sister in tears?”

Jake continued to hold me. “A woman Devan found Drew in bed with when she came home early from a business trip.”

“What? You stayed with him when you knew he was fucking around on you? Why?”

Jake hugged me tighter. “Gideon, leave it alone. You hit the nail on the head yesterday when you pointed out that we’d all conditioned her to believe she had to bend, she had to give, she had to please. Don’t upset her more. She was devastated after it happened.”

“You knew?”

“Yes, I knew. Drew’s the one who told me what he’d done--how he’d messed up and was scared she was going to leave. I knew long before Devan told me about it during one of our late night talk sessions.”

I wiped my cheeks and stared up at Jake. “I would give anything to be sitting in front of your fireplace, drinking wine and being snarky. What am I doing here? I can’t do this. I can’t...”

He cupped my face and locked gazes with me. “They have wine here, Devan, and they have something I can’t compete with. It doesn’t matter that I’m one of your best friends--I can’t compete with what’s here. No one can. You belong here. Brody belongs here. You can do this. I’ve seen you build a company from the ground up. I watched you live through a hell I can’t even imagine. I was there, helping you pack your things, knowing your entire body hurt but it paled to how much your heart was breaking. You are so strong, Devan. Don’t let a run in with something like her bring all that to the ground.”

I laughed through my tears. “Now I can see why other attorneys hate it when you close against them. You’re damn convincing.”

Vanessa hugged me close. “I think Bubba’s is calling us. He has wine. We haven’t had a good male bashing session in ages.”

I wiped my cheeks. “I don’t want to bash them. I want to bash that bitch over the head but not men as a whole. You know what I really want?”

“What?”

I glanced around her and spotted Kurt standing there. I hesitated before heading for him. “Can I hug you? I’m sorry to ask but I really want to do that right now and then I promise I’ll leave you alone.”

What looked to be relief swept over his face as he pulled me into his arms. The minute his arms wrapped around me, I felt better. I didn’t care what made him a pillar of support for me. All that mattered was that he was and that he didn’t seem to mind.

I chuckled and held tight to him. “Girls, I’m keeping your Jake if he likes it or not. I don’t care if he thinks I’m an emotional nut case. I dare him to tell me to leave him alone.”

“How quickly I’ve been replaced,” Jake said, laughing.

“Kurt doesn’t snore. I actually got a whole night’s sleep next to him.” The minute I said it I regretted it.

Wynona whistled. “You slept with Kurt?”

“Again?” Vanessa asked.

Startled, I stared at her. “You are so weird. And no, not like that.” I glanced up at Kurt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

He pressed his lips to mine, silencing me. I opened my mouth to protest and Kurt slipped his tongue in. His kiss was familiar in ways it shouldn’t have been. His very touch not only made my entire body heat, it felt so right, so natural.

Someone tapped my shoulder and I pulled back slowly from Kurt's kiss. Wynona winked. "I'd have let it go on but you two are drawing a crowd. Let's go."

Vanessa laughed. "Trust Devan to be here a day and find the man of her dreams."

I took a huge step away from Kurt, accidentally hitting Gideon. He caught me as I staggered and laughed. "Great, she's as commitment phobic now as she was when we had to carry her pregnant, hive-covered self into a church." He glanced at Kurt. "Jake and I will gladly deposit her at a church of your choosing."

"Gideon!" I slapped his arm and he laughed. "Knock it off. It was an accident. I think Kurt's heart is as big as his mother's. It's genetic. He can't help that he naturally wants to make things better for a stranger."

Something caught me around the waist and spun me in a circle. "Woman, kissing you is no accident," Kurt said, his mouth pressed to my ear. "I strongly suggest you just go with it. I plan on doing it a lot more just as soon as you're ready. Oh, and I'm sleeping over again tonight. That or you're coming to my place. Either way, we'll be together. Don't bother arguing. I'll just toss you over my shoulder and have my way."

"Promise?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. I knew it was wrong to proposition a man I'd technically just met but it didn't stop me.

"What?"

I shook my head and Kurt set me down. "Nothing."

"Mmmhmm," he mused, taking my hand in his.

Deciding to change the topic, I smiled. "I need to call Brody again. It's been two hours since I talked to him."

Kurt pulled his cell phone off his hip and handed it to me. "Here, use mine."

As he handed it to me, I realized it was already ringing. "How did you know the number?"

He just smiled.

* * *

I took another sip of wine and laughed as Wynona tried again to get Gideon to dance with the beat while she had him on stage. Bubba, now the club's owner, chuckled as he leaned back in his chair.

"Your brother is all right. You made him out to be the type who wouldn't let his sister set foot in a place like this."

Vanessa snorted. "Ohmygod, Gideon would have died if he knew the number of times we ended up back in here, hanging out with all of you and the girls."

"You came here after the kissing Vanessa incident?" Kurt asked, taking a sip of bottled water.

"Hell yeah." I grinned. "How else was I going to get the real scoop on sex and what you should and shouldn't do? It's one thing having Wynona and Vanessa explain things to you when you know they're doing it lights out missionary position. It's another to have a group of ten strippers telling you what a man likes." I shivered. "I can't imagine what I'd have done my first time out if they wouldn't have prepared me for it all. I'm still glad it was dark though. I'd have never been bold enough to try half the stuff I did with him had I been staring him in the eyes. It was bad enough he was getting me, Virgin Mary. I didn't want to be the girl that just lays there

too shocked by it all to make it special.”

He spit his water and began to choke. I patted his back while Vanessa laughed even harder. She put her hand on the table and nodded. “I’m guessing all the tips and techniques the girls told us about left you appearing to be anything but a virgin.”

Kurt’s eyes widened as he choked more.

Vanessa squealed. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“You are so weird.” I winked at her. “You know, I find sex to be like dancing. Someone can explain the moves to you but until you actually do them or see them, you’re never going to be perfect. Once you’ve accomplished them, you turn them into your own, tweaking them just so. Must be true for everyone.”

“Why do you say that?”

I shrugged as I stared at Vanessa. “I think I put way too many months and a great big belly between the first and the second time with Drew. It was different. Very different.”

Kurt launched into a fit of coughs. I tried to pat his back again but he shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, this I’ve got to hear.” Vanessa put her hand on mine. “Different how?”

I rolled my eyes and exhaled enough to make my hair move. “Vanessa, I really don’t want to talk about Drew and sex anymore. Do you think I started running three miles every morning and instituted a weight regime when I moved in with Jake for something to do? No. I was busy enough.”

Her eyes widened. “You were horny.”

My cheeks flared red.

“Devan, why in the hell didn’t you just go out with one of those guys Brody told me were always asking you out? You could have screwed any of them.”

Shocked, I slid my chair towards Kurt’s. “I couldn’t even image sharing a night out with them, let alone sharing my body. And for your information, I have more than me to worry about. I have Brody. The idea of bringing home a parade of strange men for my son to meet doesn’t make me uneasy, it makes me sick to my stomach.” I took another sip of my wine and watched Wynona pinch Gideon’s ass.

He yelped and swatted hers.

Vanessa waved her hand in front of my face. “Hold on. You haven’t had sex in a year?”

“Fifteen months and ten days to be exact.” I burst into laughter and Vanessa joined in. “Do you want to know why I finally gave in to Brody and all of you about moving up here?”

“Why?”

“About two months ago, Jake and I had just gotten back from running and he was telling me his schedule for the day, his case loads, all that fun stuff. I found myself watching a bead of sweat run down his chest like it was soft-porn. The minute I realized that Jake Robinson was turning me on, I called you and told you to go ahead and start an apartment search for me.”

“I heard that,” Jake said, kissing the top of my head. “I even know what day you’re talking about because you wiggled out on me and started screaming at me to get in the shower, I was running late. I got home from work to find you telling Brody that you’d taken the first steps for relocating. Had I known why...”

Vanessa snorted. “You’d have cashed in on her horniness.”

“No.” Jake kissed the top of my head again. “I’d have kept my shirt on and kept Devan and Brody with me. I’m going to miss you guys. You made me, a self proclaimed bachelor for life, want a family. I want to hear kids running around my house. I want to come home to

someone who really does care about how my day was.” He hugged me to him, me sitting, him standing behind me. “I want someone to care if I take care of myself, if I’m sick or if I just need to vent. You’re the first woman in my life I’ve let that close to me, emotionally, period. Sex never came into play. You taught me how to be intimate without being intimate.”

Vanessa’s lip curled. “Great job, Devan. You managed to get the one guy I thought I could screw without commitments in the family mood. I guess this rules out me wanting to take him for that test ride. I have no desire to have a relationship. A good fuck, yes.”

I covered my face with my hands and shook my head. Jake snickered and squeezed my shoulders. “I’m happy Kurt’s here. Gideon is, too. I don’t think either one of us was going to be able to really walk away from you here until we found out he lives above you.”

I glanced at Kurt and found him staring at Jake with something akin to jealousy in his eyes. I reached for him and took his hand in mine. “If I were you, I’d refuse to accept the torch. Tell him to keep running with it.”

Jake kissed the top of my head once more. “Devan, you’ve got it all wrong. It’s us who have been tending to the torch, keeping it lit, until its rightful owner made it back to you.” He walked over and sat down next to Bubba, not bothering to elaborate more on what he’d said. Whatever he meant by it, it seemed to calm Kurt’s nerves.

“Things worked out for the best, huh?” Vanessa said, smiling.

“No.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? You’re here.”

“The best thing would have been Drew never getting hurt. Brody not losing his father. Me not losing my husband. Hell, maybe, for the best would have been if,” I blinked back tears, “if I wouldn’t have surrendered that piece of myself I kept from Drew. I can remember the day even. Brody’s first birthday. I found Drew crying--bawling actually and I think you all know Drew isn’t one to show any sort of non-masculine behavior. He told me that day that he was so incredibly thankful for us. Whatever had been blocking my heart from fully accepting Drew shattered.”

Vanessa gave me a hard look.

I stood slowly. “I won’t apologize to anyone here for loving my husband. I never planned on Drew but I wouldn’t erase him from my life. I wouldn’t have Brody. And Brody means more to me than any missed opportunity, old crushes, different lives, anything. Without Brody, I’d have never ended up with Drew. I know you’ll say that’s for the best but it’s not. He gave me a son and six wonderful years of marriage. The last two and a half years of my marriage were like living with a stranger. A man who I was scared to make eye contact with.”

Focusing on Gideon, I forced a smile onto my face. “You’re trying to teach him the wrong way. Gideon can’t do it if he thinks he’s dancing.”

Wynona arched a brow. “You lost me.”

Vanessa took hold of my hand. “Honey, sit down and talk. You need to. Jake told me that you refused to go to counseling. I won’t judge you. I love you. I understand, honey.”

My jaw dropped. “You understand? I begged you to stop sending me emails that kept brining up Maestro. Out of the blue, you start sending them and you think it’s funny to remind me about old lists we made of what we wanted our lives to be like. I can sure the hell tell you that I didn’t want to see my husband in pain twenty-four hours a day and strung out on pain killers, that he began chasing with whiskey.”

Vanessa glanced away. “I was trying to tell you what Wynona and I had found.”

“What? You found a way to set an already unstable man off on a tangent that made no

sense.” I let out a soft laugh. “But you understand. Right? I mean, it’s everyday that you walk on eggshells, begging the person you love to get help only to turn around and find out one of your best friends has been sending pictures to the wrong email account at the Charter house.”

Vanessa covered her mouth and stared at Kurt. “I sent pictures from our Christmas party.”

“What? Pictures of Kurt?” I shook my head. “That doesn’t make any sense. Drew acted like it was the fucking devil himself in whatever you sent. He actually accused me of poisoning his son’s mind against him while I was ‘fucking the enemy again.’ To this day, I have no clue what he was talking about. I do know what it’s like to dodge a computer monitor that’s coming at my head though.”

She shook her head as tears filled her eyes.

“You know the video Brody shot that showed Gideon hugging me by the half pipe and me wincing?”

She nodded.

“That was a full week after Drew’s outburst. I’ll spare you the details, but know that when a friend asks you to stop sending things, listen to her.”

Vanessa tried to hug me. I shook my head. “No. It had to happen. I know that now. I don’t know what set him off like that but I know it made me start the process of leaving him. I just wanted to get through Brody’s birthday. I didn’t know he hated Drew. He kept that from me. I thought I’d be devastating him by taking him and leaving. I should have left that night--the night he lost his mind about this supposed past lover of mine. I should have driven to Gideon’s, got Brody and just left. I didn’t. I waited a week and it almost...oh God. Happy Birthday, Brody, mommy’s being carted out in an ambulance.”

She hugged me and I let her.

“I should have left.”

She kissed my forehead. “I would have never sent pictures of Kurt to Drew on purpose. I thought if you saw him and we were right, you’d be excited, too.”

“I’m not blaming you, honey. You didn’t create the monster or stay with it. I’m just...”

She smiled softly. “Letting it out. It’s okay.”

“Tell me why he would accuse me of horrible things. I wasn’t the one getting walked in on while I was in bed with someone else. I wasn’t the one whose teammates would have their wives call, whispering how I might want to talk to Drew and ask what he was doing while on the road. I’m not...” I stared at the ceiling. “Why would he accuse me of going back to a man I was never with? All I was guilty of was loving him to the point I couldn’t let go, couldn’t acknowledge that it had to end. That’s all.”

Vanessa hugged me tighter.

I couldn’t stop the crazy urge to laugh through my tears. “Ohmygod, do you realize that Drew freaked out over Kurt? He must have been high. I mean, come on. Yes, Kurt is drop dead sexy but it’s not like we have history or even knew each other. It’s kind of strange that I’d feel so comfortable around him once I got here. Bizarre.”

Gideon rushed off the stage and ran behind me. “Keep your friend away from my ass! She bit it!”

My eyes widened. “Wynona!”

“What?” She shrugged.

Bubba stood and put his hand out to me. “Sugar, I would love it if you treated me to some Devan magic. I’ve got some newer stuff loaded in. Did it the second Vanessa called to tell me

you were moving up here.”

He headed towards the back as I shook my head. “If that man asks me to sing Crystal Gayle’s *Don’t it Make My Brown Eye’s Blue* again I’m walking out.”

Gideon snickered. “Brody used to walk around singing that to you to make you smile. You don’t happen to sing, do you, Kurt?”

“What? Umm, no. I play guitar.”

Gideon glanced at Jake. “That explains that then, doesn’t it?”

“Explains what?” I turned to find Kurt fixating on the bottle of water before him. He seemed to be going out of his way to avoid looking at me. “Kurt? You okay?”

He nodded but didn’t look at me.

The music changed over to old school gangster-like rap and I stared at Jake. “You didn’t tell him to play this for me.”

Laughing, Jake tried to run but I caught him by his tee shirt. “Sorry, it was too funny not to.”

“What’s so funny about it?” Vanessa asked.

Gideon snickered. “Apparently, my nephew found Jake’s collection of old CDs and took a shine to this stuff. Needless to say, Devan was mortified that he’d been listening to music talking about the subject matter that this stuff does.”

Jake laughed. “She sat him down and turned on a music channel. Now, she couldn’t find this but she found some stuff that was close. It was the four of us sitting there. Gideon and I were trying to figure out what she was getting at. This video came on and it had these chicks in string bikinis rubbing on the artist. They had on heels, the works. It was every guy’s version of a fantasy come to life. Brody was obviously into these girls. He perked right up.”

Gideon growled. “In more ways than one I’m guessing.”

“Devan asked Brody flat out if he thought those women were hot? He said yes and went back to staring at the television. She then asked him what he’d think if that was his sister or his mother up there with men staring at her like that.” Jake laughed. “He gave her this droll look like that would never happen. I thought Devan let it drop.”

Wynona looked at me and shook her head. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, she did,” Jake said, drawing in a deep breath. “She was stealthy about it. She let him keep listening to it all. Never said a word. About a week passed and he had a bunch of his buddies over for the night. We finished feeding the kids breakfast and Devan tells me that she’s going to go wash her car. I think she’s going to drive up to the automatic one because well, it’s Devan, right?”

I flipped him off.

He laughed. “The next thing I know, I hear this music pumping from out front. I’m seeing Brody and his buddies in front of me so I know it’s not him. I live in a condo-like establishment. There are a lot of men my age living around there. Anyway, Brody and his friends run to the front window to see what’s going on. The next thing I know, Brody is screaming at them to cover their eyes.”

Wynona laughed so hard she snorted. Vanessa joined in.

Jake put his hands up. “I get out there to find Devan out front, a bucket of soapy water, the hose going and washing her car. Mind you, she’s doing this in a string bikini, a pair of four inch spiked heels and dancing to the music as she does it.”

Gideon sighed. “I actually felt bad for Brody. What a way to be taught a lesson.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, grinning. “Every one of my neighbors was either at their window or

outside watching the show. Brody's friends looked like they were going to pass out and die from hot chick overload. I took pity on the kid and went out to shut the music off and get Devan. She grabbed me and began dancing up and down me just like the girls in the video were doing. Like I'm going to turn that down."

I rolled my eyes. "Hey, it worked."

"It sure the hell did. Brody comes running out with all the CDs he'd taken and dumps them in the grass. He then yells, 'you win, go put a turtleneck on.' It was the funniest thing I've ever seen in my life. He even began commenting, when he'd see a girl in next to nothing, that her father must be *real* proud. I really think she might have scarred him for life."

"It would be his luck to have a mother with no modesty," Gideon said, shaking his head.

Jake nodded. "And one who has a body that has only gotten better with age. Like any of us thought a woman who had a kid could look like that."

I punched him in the arm and he shut up. "Pig."

"It couldn't have been that bad. Devan's an angel," Vanessa said, winking.

"Oh, you should have heard those boys. They were like, your mom has a tattoo? Dude, your mom is hot. Dude." Jake laughed. "A few of them were at a loss for words. Brody wanted to crawl under a rock, right after he locked his mother in a room away from the prying eyes of the neighbor guys."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm glad he buckled as fast as he did. That hose water was friggin' cold and the suds were itchy."

Wynona's eyes widened. "You covered yourself in suds and water while doing it?"

"Hey, I do not want to be a grandmother before I'm forty. Brody and his buddies had been busted twice for peeping through the window of the sister of one of the boys. It was clear to see that he was curious and the images he was seeing in the media weren't helping him understand. He didn't want to have 'the talk' so I thought I'd force his hand. I hate that kids his age are already thinking about things like this."

"I delivered three babies from twelve-year old girls last year alone. As much as I wanted to bury my head in the sand when it came to Brody and kick Devan's ass for pulling a stunt like that, it prompted him to ask me things. He listened, asked his questions and promptly informed me that he'd be waiting a long while. Girls are too complicated. He sighted his mother as an example. He then said, if I needed more proof, call his Aunt Wynona. Mom says she eats men alive. He shuddered. I did my best not to laugh."

Wynona high fived me. "Right on! He's too young to be worried about all that."

"Tell me about it. One minute I find him playing with his toys and an hour later he's a mini-thug. No. I see the struggle in him to be a kid or act like a teenager. I hate it and I'm a little scared that he'll be losing Jake and Gideon as 'go-to' father figures."

Vanessa smiled. "At least his dad will be close."

Jake pinched her and she yelped.

"Drew's got a lot to work out with Brody before he can step back into role model. In truth, I'm not sure he ever will be larger than life in Brody's eyes again. We're still trying to completely work out the distance kink with him seeing Brody without me. It's awkward, at best, when we spend days with him. He's good to me now--again, but there is a lot of tension in Brody. I know Drew senses it. He doesn't push for more than Brody's willing to give but I know it has to hurt."

"Yeah, well I bet it hurt Brody a hell of a lot more to know Drew was responsible for hurting his mother," Kurt bit out, reminding me he was there.

I didn't question why he said it. I had a pretty good idea. Elizabeth and I had become very close. I knew her story, what her ex-husband had put her through, what her son had seen. Putting my hand out to Kurt, I nodded. "You're right."

He took my hand and pulled me to him. Without thought, I tossed my leg over him and straddled him. He eased me down onto his lap and stared into my eyes. I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him. Pressing my lips to his ear, I whispered, "This is probably more comfort than you were looking for, huh?"

I went to stand but he held me to him. "Don't go," he whispered.

"Kurt, you don't need this in your life. Look up baggage and you'll find my picture there."

"Tell me that you don't feel the attraction between us anymore. You do. Don't you?"

My brow furrowed. "Anymore?"

He planted a series of kisses near my ear and purred lightly. My entire body tightened at the sound. Drew had made that very noise during our first time together in the pantry, but had never done it again.

Gasping, I pressed myself to him. "Stop that or you won't be able to shake me."

He did it again and I let out a breathy sigh. It was his turn to tighten. He jerked slightly beneath me and let out a nervous laugh. "Stop that or I'll finish before I start."

I whimpered and he laughed. "You should really make me get up now. I have more shopping to do. I even need to go to the dreaded market. Dammit, I forgot Brody's list at home."

"His list?"

Embarrassed, I rolled my eyes. "He makes our grocery list. I follow it to the letter. Well, sometimes I add things like coffee but as far as actual food, I'd be lost without him."

A deep chuckle came from him. "That's my boy."

"What?" I asked, unsure I'd heard him right.

"Nothing." He winked. "I think we can run through and grab the necessities for you and then we need to get back. The delivery truck will be there in about an hour with Brody's bedroom stuff."

"Delivery truck? She said five days." I gave him a questioning look and then glared at him. "Broderick Kurtis Holland, you better not have paid for that."

He wrinkled his nose twice and gave me a shit-ass-grin. "I think I need to be taught a lesson. Could you take me home, put on a string bikini and rub suds on yourself? I promise to try to let the lesson soak in. Though, you should be warned that I can and will make sure you and Brody have everything you need--that includes me."

"What? No!" I grabbed his chin and narrowed my gaze. "If you want to be supportive of me and my son, you show up and ask him to skateboard around the halls with you to drive Vanessa nuts. You don't drop several grand on a bedroom suite for a child you don't even know." I shook my head. "Ohmygod, we don't need your charity."

"It's not charity, Devan."

"Devan?" Gideon asked. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Kurt fucking bought Brody bedroom furniture after I told him not to."

"What's your point?"

I looked at my brother like he was an idiot. "I have no doubt that your outburst about me paying for Kurt's clothing left him thinking I'm on the verge of poverty. I'm not. Brody and I don't need his charity. Jake, tell him that I'm fine financially."

"I'm not getting in this. But you are doing very well, Devan." Jake bit his lower lip and

glanced away.

“I am no one’s charity case and I can’t be bought.” Disgusted, I tried to get off Kurt only to find him holding me to him. “Let go.”

“Nope.”

“Gideon, I’m going to use some of that stuff you taught me and kick Kurt’s ass.” As I stared into Kurt’s green eyes, I growled. “Stop looking at me with those eyes. Stop touching me. Stop breathing near me. Grrr.”

He laughed and licked his lower lip, driving me mad with need. “I’m not going to argue with you about this. You and I need to sit down before Brody gets here and have a long talk. I vote that we enjoy our time together, keep getting to know each other and leave it alone for the time being.”

“Sounds good to me,” Gideon said, nodding to Kurt. “You, me and Jake need to talk. There’s a lot that needs to be done. Can you make some time for us later today?”

“Definitely.” Kurt winked at me.

I glanced around and tossed my hands in the air. “I’m officially putting a white flag up. You have all lost your minds. I’ll meet you all back here later tonight. I’ve got stuff to get done.”

Kurt held my hand. “We’ll meet you all back here later. We’ve got stuff to do.”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. “Fine, we’ve got stuff to do.”

Chapter Six

Looking out and over the dance floor, I spotted Vanessa making Gideon attempt to move his body to the beat. This time the place was packed. It looked like he was in pain. I couldn't help but laugh.

"What's funny?" Kurt asked, drawing my attention to him.

I couldn't have been happier that he'd persuaded me to come out. I'd spent most of the afternoon mad at him for the stunt he'd pulled with paying for Brody's bedroom furniture. His sad, puppy dog eye-look had left me forgiving him. The fact that he'd whipped up one of the most delicious meals I'd ever had in less than a half hour helped. I'd decided to call it an early night. Kurt had other plans. He's taken an interest in the red dress I was currently wearing, when he was helping me unpack.

It had taken him a couple of hours to talk me into coming out. One hour was spent convincing me that I might enjoy myself and one to wait for me to get ready to go.

The urge to touch him was great. I put my hand on his muscular thigh. The black slacks and matching, snug fitting short sleeved shirt he had on looked amazing on him. "You were right. This is nice. Thank you for convincing me to come out and thank you for dinner."

"You already thanked me," he said, leaning in close to me.

"Yes, but you didn't even notice what I made you carry around all afternoon."

His brow furrowed. "What? When we were shopping?"

I nodded.

"If you tell me that you bought sexy lingerie and I walked around with it that close to me, I'm going to insist we go home. You're already killing me slowly in that dress."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You spent the rest of the afternoon helping me put my clothes away. I think it's safe to say you know what I own."

A dreamy look came over his face. "Yeah, and that's not helping me any as I play 'guess what Devs has on under that dress' in the least."

"I'm ignoring that comment." I rubbed my leg against his. "Besides, this counts more on the lines of male lingerie."

His eyes widened.

I laughed. "I'm kidding, kind of."

He traced tiny circles over my inner wrist while he stared into my eyes. "Devan?"

"Promise you won't take this the wrong way?"

"I've no clue what you're talking about so I can only promise to try not to."

I nodded. "Fair enough. I got you some jammie pants. I wasn't sure what size you are, other than really friggin' tall so they're draw string. And I didn't know if you liked silk or cotton so I got some of each."

"You bought me pajamas. Why?" he asked, a slight smile on his handsome face.

I felt my cheeks reddening and instantly regretted both buying and then telling him about them. "Umm, never mind."

Hooking his finger under my chin, he lifted it up, forcing my gaze to meet his. "Don't be embarrassed. I'm flattered just not sure why you did it."

“Because when I mentioned to Wynona that you’ve been really sweet about camping out with me at night but that you looked uncomfortable sleeping in jeans, she said it’s because you normally sleep nude.” I closed my eyes and sighed. “She also mentioned that she didn’t think you actually owned anything to sleep in because you live alone and it doesn’t matter if you walk around naked.”

He just sat there staring at me with a stunned look on his face. I tried to pull my hand free of his but he held tight. “Devs, are you telling me that you got me bottoms so I’d be more comfortable sleeping over with you or just for me to have them?”

The temperature in the club seemed to rise dramatically. “You don’t have to keep them, Kurt. I just wanted to thank you for being so kind to me. I found a vinyl copy of The Clash’s *London Calling* and then I got the idea of pajama bottoms. I don’t know why.” I bit my lower lip. “Surprise, you get a record, too. Vanessa said you collect them. I’m sure you have it, but it reminded me of you for some reason and I...”

He cupped my cheek with his free hand. “Devan?”

“Yes?”

“Answer my question please, did you get them for me to just have or because you want me with you at night?”

I pulled my hand free of his and went to stand.

“Wait, before you run away from me and keep a safe thirty feet back, you should know that I’m really hoping you did it because you want me around. I’m also very happy to hear about the album. Thank you. You have no idea what it means to me to hear you associate them with me.”

I exhaled. “You’re not upset?”

“Do you want me around?”

“Y-yes. I know I shouldn’t. I understand that and I know that...”

Kurt captured my hand in his and inched it up his thigh. The backs of my fingers grazed his erection and my gaze instantly met his. “Thank you for making sure I was comfortable. Would it embarrass you more if I confessed to slipping my jeans off the first night so I could sleep, too?”

My eyes widened as I thought about how I’d woken up wrapped in his arms.

He laughed. “Yeah, I thought I’d hear or sense you moving around. I’m normally a light sleeper. Not around you. Nope. I woke up an hour or so before you did and found us wrapped up like a pretzel.” He winked. “I slipped out, put my jeans back on and resumed position.”

I thought about how I’d gotten up and showered. “Wait, you weren’t sleeping when I woke up?”

“No.”

Groaning, I lifted our joined hands and thumped my forehead. “So, you knew I was gawking at your chest and doing my best to see down the top of your jeans?”

A manly chuckle escaped him. “No, but I do now. I just thought you were staying still because you were afraid to wake me. I like your version better.”

“I want to die now. It’s official. I’m mortified.”

“Why? I’m the one who woke up with a hard on so close to your hand that, had you moved at all, you’d have discovered real quick that I was naked and happy as hell to be near you. I didn’t dare take my pants off the next night. So see, pajama bottoms will save me an embarrassing moment.”

Laughing, I leaned into him, wanting to feel his full lips pressed to mine. “That or save

you from waking to find me slinking down your body.” I wagged my brows as Kurt’s eyes widened. “You’ll have to excuse me. I haven’t been running or to the gym since I got here.”

“Ah, I see. Well, we should probably fix that soon. I could go running with you in the morning or you could come to my gym with me.” His lips brushed past mine and sent shivers of delight through me.

“Or,” I locked gazes with him, “you could just roll over in the middle of the night and come with me.”

He drew in a sharp breath. “I-I, umm, I vote for your plan.”

Jake and Wynona made their way back to the table just before I was about to really kiss Kurt. Pulling back, I chanced a glance at Kurt. He gave my hand a tiny squeeze, keeping it pressed to his rigid cock while his hot gaze stayed locked on me.

Wynona cleared her throat, drawing my attention to her. “Devan, take Jake out and dance. I’ll keep Kurt company.”

“I’m fine.” Every ounce of me wanted to climb on Kurt’s lap. I needed to be touched, to be held. It had been too long since I’d been with a man and something about Kurt made me want him so bad I could almost taste it.

Wynona and Jake exchanged a look. She leaned in, touching Kurt’s shoulder in the process. “DJ, he won’t sit here assuming you’re fucking every male that glances your way. And he sure as hell won’t tell you that you’re making a fool of yourself or drag you out of here by your arm. Kurt is not like that. Just because he isn’t prone to dancing and likes to sit on the sidelines like... err... you know, doesn’t mean he’ll react that way. Go.”

Jake grabbed my hand and winked at me. “Let’s go. Wynona’s okay but I miss my dance partner.”

I cast a nervous glance at Kurt. Something passed over his face. Jake didn’t give me time to say a word. He just pulled me out with him and immediately spun me in a circle. Laughing, I began to move with him. Jake was a great dancer and an even better sport. He’d make some woman very happy some day.

Vanessa joined us as Gideon made his way off the floor. We danced around Jake making him a very happy man. As Vanessa moved in on him, I did the same to her. Someone took hold of my elbow. Turning, I found a tall man standing there. His white blond hair was cut close to his head.

“Would you like to dance?”

I smiled even though the man’s breath was laced with so much alcohol that I could have gotten drunk off it alone. “Thanks, but I’m with him.”

The stranger looked at Jake and then Vanessa. “He’s with a lot of people tonight.”

Jake offered a cocky smile and put his body between the man and me. I went back to dancing with Vanessa and Jake not paying much attention to my surroundings. It was nice to be out and not be worried about what mood Drew was in or if he was drinking too much.

After a bit, Jake leaned in and pulled us close. “I can’t believe I’m about to do this, but ladies I need a drink. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Save my spot. I love being the filling.”

Vanessa snorted and ruffled his hair. “Go.”

She and I began to move around each other seductively. “God it’s been a while since we did this.”

She nodded. “I’m loving it. Do you want me to go drag Kurt out here? He’s a great dancer. I think he’s a bit shy around you.”

“Pfft. There’s no reason for that.” I glanced over and found Kurt and the rest of the group

staring out at us. I gave a small wave. A group of people dancing surrounded us, blocking our view of the table.

Something hard pressed against my back. Puzzled, I arch my brows. Turning a bit, I found the blond man there again, this time he didn't seem to have a problem touching me. He slid his hand up my thigh a bit, leaving him going under my skirt. I tried to step forward but he wrapped his arm around my waist, holding tight to me. The smell of alcohol and aggressive behavior instantly tried to take me back mentally to a place I didn't want to be.

Breaking his hold on me, I stepped forward, needing to have distance, time to think.

"Fuck off, jackass," Vanessa said, glaring at the man while she put her hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Devs. Let's go back to the table."

The man was on me in an instant, lifting me up and off my feet. "Shake it, lil' momma," he said, his speech slightly slurred.

"Hey!" Vanessa reached out fast, batting at his large arms. Another man appeared, eyeing Vanessa and reaching for her, no doubt friends with the first. "Don't touch me and put her down!"

The smell of the man's breath nauseated me, reminding me too much of how Drew smelled during the height of it all. Shaking my head, I found myself whispering tiny pleas for him to stop. That he didn't want to act this way. I wiggled hard, forcing him to put me back on my feet.

He instantly slid his hand up and under my long red, tiered skirt. I pushed his hand down and shook my head. He didn't seem to notice or care. I glanced at Vanessa to find her smacking the other man's hand away from her breast. The man nearest me, tried to grab one of mine. I elbowed him hard and he released his hold on me.

Vanessa grabbed my hand and glared at the men before pulling me with her towards our table. "I can't believe those drunken assholes had the nerve to touch us. Wait until Gideon finds out. He'll be kickin' some ass."

I didn't comment, still too shaken by the smells associated with him. As we broke through the crowd and I looked across at the table, my gaze went to Kurt. I exhaled and smiled as relief washed over me. The man's very presence made me feel safe and secure.

The sense of security was short lived when I felt a large, sweaty hand move up and under the back of my skirt. The drunken man captured me by my waist and jerked back so hard that I lost my footing. I would have fallen if he hadn't have had such a tight hold on me.

"Hey!" Vanessa yelled, moving to grab me. The man's friend pushed through and seized hold of Vanessa.

"Hey, baby."

Vanessa punched out hard, catching the man in the jaw. "I ain't your baby, jackass. Touch me again and die."

Gideon had spent a year teaching me to defend myself and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to do just that. Slamming my foot down, I rammed my heel into the man's foot. He let go of me.

"Bitch!"

He swung out and I froze. Vanessa, thankfully, didn't. She yanked me out of the way a second before he'd have struck home.

"Boy, you must want your ass kicked," Bubba shouted, as he came rushing up from behind the man. He pushed the guy backwards. "Get your sorry ass out of my bar!"

"Devs, are you okay?" Vanessa asked.

“Thanks.” I nodded and then spotted Jake, Gideon and Kurt all rushing past us, following the blond guy out of the club. “I lied.” Turning, I grabbed Bubba’s hand. “Help me stop my brother from doing something stupid. Please.”

Bubba laughed. “Anything for you, sugar.”

We moved through the crowd quickly. I ran out first, expecting to find ‘Gideon the Dragon’ at it again. To my surprise, he was standing there with his arms crossed and a huge smile on his face.

Turning my head, I found Kurt spinning, extending his leg and catching the drunken asshole in the side of the head. The guy flipped backwards and hit the sidewalk with a thud. Another big guy, the one who had grabbed Vanessa, rushed at Kurt and my heart leapt to my throat.

Jake made a move to go to him but Gideon put his hand up. “You’ll only be in the way. Trust me. The guy knows what he’s doing.”

I was just about to yell at Gideon to help Kurt when Kurt thrust his arm out and struck the other man’s jaw, sending his head whipping back. The man staggered and fell to the ground. Kurt stared down at him, still looking as though he were ready to fight more. “Tell your buddy when he wakes up that if he ever touches *my* Devan again, or if you touch Vanessa, it will be the last thing either of you do.”

My Devan?

He turned, his gaze finding me instantly. The feral look in his green eyes left me rooted in place as he stalked towards me. “Kurt?”

Slowing his pace, Kurt closed his eyes and took a deep breath in, appearing to calm himself. When he looked back up at me, I wasn’t concerned in the least he’d hurt me. I ran to him and he opened his arms wide, pulling me close to him and hugging me tight. He rocked our bodies back and forth a bit and kissed the top of my head.

It should have been weird, too much, anything. It wasn’t. It was wonderful. Kurt radiated protector as he held me and I didn’t want to ever let go.

“Wow, we need a cool nickname for Kurt now, too. Did anyone else know he could do that?” Vanessa asked, sounding thoroughly impressed.

Wynona laughed. “Hell no. He’s been holding out on us.”

“That or he just needed the right motivation,” Jake said. “I’ll sleep easier knowing he’s above her.”

I waited for Gideon to demand clarification that Jake meant above me as in Kurt lives above me, not Kurt literally laying on top of me. When he didn’t demand it, I twisted a tiny bit in Kurt’s arms, not wanting to let go and peeked out at my brother. The smile on his face told me exactly how happy he was that Kurt was above me, too.

“Looks like you waylaid Mr. Right, Devs,” he said, winking at me.

“Stop. You aren’t allowed to poke fun or drum up things just because Kurt...” I stopped and stared up at Kurt. “Why exactly did you do that?”

“Because I won’t let anyone hurt you again.”

Puzzled, I stared at him, doing my best to find an answer that wasn’t there. Cupping his face, I smiled slightly. “Thank you,” I mouthed.

His entire body was tight, tense. Going to my tiptoes, I pressed my lips to his ear and whispered, “Is it wrong that I’m happy you’re above me, too?”

Kurt bent down and put his mouth close to my ear as well. “Is it wrong that I want to be in you right now?”

I did something I never thought I'd ever do, I clung to a man I'd only just met for dear life. "God, I hope not."

A low growl came from him as he pressed his body to mine. "I need to let go of you, Devs," he whispered, keeping his head bent down. "If I don't, I'm going to take this too far way too fast for you. It's taking everything in me not to press you against that brick wall and... uhh... we need to separate here." A nervous laugh escaped him.

I couldn't help but press against him more, savoring the feel of his hard, clothed cock against my lower abdomen. I wanted it buried deep in me, bringing me to peak again and again. I wanted to feel Kurt's muscle's ripple while he slid in and out of me.

"Hey you two," Gideon said. "You might want to bring the show inside or take it home."

The show? Gideon actually suggested I go home and keep it up? That was beyond weird.

"Devan, we need to separate here."

I sighed. "I heard you the first time. I'm just having a problem letting go of you."

"Good."

I'd have commented but my cell phone began to ring. As the Muppets theme song sounded, my breath caught. We pulled back from each other and Kurt took my phone from his waist. I glanced at the number and my pulse sped. "It's Uncle Robert's number."

Kurt touched my arm and moved in close to me as I answered it. "Hello?"

"Mom."

"Brody? It's," I grabbed Kurt's wrist and stared at his watch, "it's after midnight. Is something wrong? Did something happen?"

"I had a bad dream and couldn't fall back asleep. Uncle Robert told me to call you if I was worried, so I did. I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"Is everything okay?" Kurt asked, holding me to him with one arm around my waist.

I nodded and put the palm of my hand against his chest. "Sweetie, I wasn't asleep and even if I was you know that I would still want you to call. Do you want to talk about your dream?"

"It's the one I kept having, before. You know," he said, his voice soft and it sounded as though he'd been crying.

I drew in a sharp breath. "Baby, don't cry. I'm fine. I promise."

"I just needed to check, because it always feels so real. I didn't mean to cry."

"Baby," I teared up, "I know what it's like to have a dream scare you. And I only told you not to cry because then I'll do it, too. It's okay for a boy to cry, too, sweetie."

"But Uncle Gideon told me once that..."

"Brody, Uncle Gideon was pulling your leg. In fact, I found out today that Uncle Jake found him crying on our front porch when he was almost your age. So, see. It's okay." Tipping my head back, I blinked back my own tears. "You think the world of Uncle Robert, don't you?"

"Yeah," he said, sniffing.

"Do you remember what he did after *it* all happened?"

"Uh-huh, he cried when he was sitting next to you. And he prayed to the angels not to take you. He kept talking about the angels and a dove. Why? And why did he beg you to listen to him when he was talking to angels?"

I blinked back my own tears. "Brody, honey, Uncle Robert used to call me a dove. And he used to tell Uncle Gideon to be nice to me because you never know when the angels are going to come. That's why he was talking about angels and doves while he sat at my bedside at the hospital, baby. Even though he cried, it didn't take away from him being a man. It's okay to

cry.”

Kurt kissed the top of my head and I leaned into him.

“What made you think of Uncle Robert asking the angels about the dove, sweetie?” I asked, rubbing my cheek against Kurt’s chest.

“Because this time in my dream when they told me you were dead and not ever coming home, there was a white bird on my skateboard. When dad came to pick me up, he had a tattoo of the same bird--a dove.”

Exhaling, I rotated my neck. “Well, I don’t know about you but I’m a little shocked that doves like skateboards. I’m more shocked that your father would have one tattooed on him since the sight of me getting one made him so sick to his stomach that he couldn’t go through with getting his jersey numbers put on himself. Between you and me, that’s a good thing.”

I expected Brody to laugh. He didn’t. “Mom, not Drew. My dad. He came for me in the dream and he had...”

“Brody, please don’t do this to yourself. There is no other dad out there, sweetheart. Trust me, if I could change my own father out, I would put Uncle Robert in his place in a heartbeat, but I can’t. Neither can you.”

Kurt tried to say something to me but I pressed my fingers to his lips and listened as Brody spoke, “But, mom, it’s true. And he did have the same bird on him. And one was on my skateboard and you were gone!”

“Brody, calm down. It was your dream, baby. If that’s what happened then that’s what happened. I’m not going to argue with you over your dreaming that I died and your ‘real’ father showed up sporting a tattoo of the same bird you found on your skateboard when you heard the news because it was just a dream, Brody. I’m alive, baby. I’m here. I’m fine.”

Kurt hugged me so tight I thought I’d pop.

“I’m fine. I’ll tell you what, I’ll catch the next flight back to Cleveland and come curl up in bed with you. How does that sound? Then you can see that I’m okay. And I should warn you that if a man, claiming to be your real dad, shows up bird on him or not we can invite him in and have him curl up with us, too. Would that make it better?”

Brody giggled. “Maestro wouldn’t fit on the bed with us.”

“What do you mean Maestro wouldn’t fit in the bed with us?” I dropped my phone and felt the blood rushing from my head.

Kurt retrieved it and brought it to his ear. “Hey, Brody, are you still there?”

My jaw dropped. I did not want Brody knowing I was out with a man.

Kurt smiled. “Yeah, it’s me and she’s fine. I think you might have said something that shocked her. That’s all. My guess is that it was the fitting on the bed comment. You gonna be okay?”

I put my hand out for the phone and gave Kurt a dirty look.

He winked and smiled. “I promise that she’s absolutely fine and that I’m watching over her. Does that help any? Good. I thought it might. Here, she wants to talk to you. I think I’m in trouble--again today.”

I took the phone quickly. “Brody, I need to explain who and why you were just talking to...”

“Mom.”

“Yes?”

He let out a soft laugh. “I’m glad he’s there with you.”

“Brody?” I don’t think I could have been more shocked if I tried. “I’ll talk to you later

about this. I will also talk to your Uncle about pushing his favorite chef down your throat to the point you are now dreaming of him as daddy. I can't promise not to hurt 'Bobby.' You might want to warn him. And make sure he knows that I'm aware of the webcam thing now. I personally think my uncle is like the Ebola monkey. He exposes everyone to his weird thinking and suddenly they all break out with it."

Brody laughed so hard that he squealed.

"Is that a spider monkey with you or are you laughing? Oh, Uncle Robert will go nuts if you have a monkey in his house, Brody. I was just kidding about the monkey thing. Geesh, if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, no primates. No. End of story. I'm still considering the shark in the tub but to be honest I'm not willing to take a bubble bath with it." I licked my lower lip and smiled as Brody laughed harder.

"About this monkey, he's going to have to go. We could give him to Uncle Jake so he can find chicks. Or he could pick out matching clothes for Uncle Gideon. Oh, we could train it to wash Gideon's baseball caps. No. That would be animal cruelty."

"Mom, stop... no more," Brody said, between gasps and hiccups.

"What was that? Was that a hiccup? Lightweight. I could *so* take you in a laughing match. The trick is to forget to breath. Works every time. Put the monkey on the phone. I want to explain it all to him. Somehow, I'm thinking *he'll* actually listen to me."

"Mom. Stop."

"Are you about to pee your pants? I thought you stopped doing that at night when you were four." I took Kurt's hand in mine without reason but it felt right.

"Mom," Brody said, laughing hard.

"Be careful, you'll end up having to learn to surf if you wet too much. Oh, the monkey would have to paddle out and I personally think that would be really gross."

"Eww."

"You could coax him out by singing that song you sang non-stop when you were three. You-be-do. You've got to remember to do the scratching under your arms and patting your belly while you do it. Oh, Brody, blow your cheeks out. That was always so cute."

"I did not do that, mom," he said, snorting.

"Yes, you did. I'm sure Vanessa has it taped. She recorded every move you made the entire time she came to visit. She's got ones from the day you born. Brody, the month you learned to crawl, she and Wynona flew in to see it for themselves. You have more surrogate aunts and uncles than anyone I know. You should see the one where Vanessa was following you around, taping you right about the time you'd just learned to walk. You did great. She walked into the wall. Classic Vanessa move there."

He giggled again, sounding like a monkey once more.

"There ya go again with the monkey. Put a pillow case over its head. It's loud." I smiled, knowing that my son was smiling as well. "Is he calling you man-cub yet? I'm dying to know. Put him in one of Uncle Robert's extra chef coats, get him a head thing and try to present him as the new pastry chef. It might work. The FDA might have issues with that but hey, it's all good."

"Mom, you're not right in the head."

My jaw dropped. "Not right in the head? Aww, you never let me have any fun. I'll have you know that I'm sane, for the most part."

He made a choking sound, before winding down a bit.

"I heard that yawn. Hold on a sec, sweetie." I put my hand over the phone and looked up to find Kurt staring at me with a grin on his face. "I'm going to head home and catch the next

flight out. Could you let Gideon know where I went?"

"No, mom," Brody said, obviously over hearing me. "I'm fine. Stay. I just needed to hear your voice and make sure you're okay."

"Sweetie, I don't mind coming and getting you. I've missed you so much that I can't stand it. I'm so used to having you with me that I feel like part of me is missing. Like I left my right arm in Cleveland. I'm right-handed so can I please come get you? Besides, I have conference calls to make in the next couple of days. How can I do that and not be playing video games with you while I pretend to follow along? Geesh, what do you think I am, responsible or something?"

"Mom, I'm fine. Really." He yawned again. "I just wanted... to... check on you."

"So, what you're saying is that I have to try to make it through another whole day without you?"

"Yep."

"Brody," I said, lowering my voice.

He yawned out a slight response.

"I love you, baby."

"I love you too, mom. Night."

I made a kissing noise in the phone. "Goodnight, sweetie." I waited until he hung up before I did and then stood there, taking in deep breaths. Turning, I went towards the street and began hailing a taxi.

Kurt moved up behind me. "Devs, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to get my baby."

Wrapping his arms around me, Kurt pulled me against his hot and hard body. He rocked me gently. "He'll be okay. So will you."

"Kurt, he dreamt that I was dead again. I thought he was done having those nightmares. I can't leave him there."

Kissing the top of my head, Kurt bear hugged me. "He is fine. You handled the situation amazingly, Devan. You are a wonderful mother."

Biting my lower lip, I turned my head to look up at him. "Sorry you had to hear me talk about a monkey surfing in urine. He's a boy and tends to think that stuff is funny. I'd have thrown up if someone suggested that when I was eleven."

Kurt snickered. "As a fellow guy, I can understand why Brody thought it was funny. We tend to like gross things."

"Well, that might explain why Brody ate bird poop when he was four."

He wrinkled his nose. "Ooo, tell me you're kidding."

"Nope. I was holding his hand while we walked around the block and he looked down, dropped to his knees and licked the sidewalk. No joke. I think he realized that it wasn't a good thing to do when I snatched him up, ran home and kept brushing his teeth over and over again. I guess I should be happy he's moved on to gourmet lunches."

"Come on, let's head home and you can tell me more stories about Brody growing up," Kurt said, rocking me gently in his arms. "And before you say anything, I really do want to hear them, Devan. All of them."

Chapter Seven

"I still don't understand why we're here. And where the hell are Gideon and Jake?" I asked, staring around the bar we'd ended up spending so much time in after our phenomenal non-striptease.

Vanessa reached across the table and took my hand in hers. "Hey, stop worrying. Your dad can't make you come home now, Devan. No one can."

"This is your home now," Wynona added, putting her hand over ours. "Bubba owns the place now and his doors are always open to us and I do mean always, DJ. The man thinks he's our surrogate uncle or something. I think he even adopted Kurt."

"Speaking of Kurt, where is he?" I asked, trying to sound coy but failing miserably. We'd spent the night talking about Brody as a baby of all things and then we'd fallen asleep in my bed. He'd even donned a pair of pajama bottoms I'd gotten him. When I'd gotten up this morning, he was gone. I hadn't heard from him since then and couldn't help but miss him. He'd grown on me so fast that it was scary. Sad that I couldn't even make it an entire day without him being near me.

Wynona smiled. "He should be here soon. He's with Gideon and Jake."

"Huh?"

Vanessa shot up fast and Wynona followed suit. Unsure if I was supposed to stand too, I did. Jake appeared out of nowhere and grabbed hold of my arms. "Hey," he said, sounding winded.

"Jake?"

"Distract her," Vanessa mumbled out of the side of her mouth.

Jake looked at me like my head might spin. "How?"

Kurt appeared before me, pushed between Jake and me, and captured my lips with his. I froze. Inching his tongue along my lower lip, he left my heart racing and my lips parting. His kiss was oddly familiar and heart stopping. My entire body lit. Before I knew it, I had my arms wrapped around his neck and was on my tiptoes to get to taste more of his mouth. His sweet invasion left me purring slightly.

A giggle sounded behind me, sounding like Brody.

I went to pull away but Kurt held me to him, increasing the intensity of the kiss, delving in, sampling all of me with just his tongue. I followed him, move for move, swipe for swipe. My inner thighs tightened as an odd feeling of butterflies filled my belly. Our tongues intertwined and I sucked in gently.

Growling, Kurt lifted me off my feet and came at me with raw, pure need. The feeling was mutual and I didn't hesitate to show him. In the background, I heard another laugh and could have sworn it was Uncle Robert but I wasn't about to stop my oral quest.

Our heads tipped back and forth as our tongues continued to mate. The smell of figwood and fruit filled my head and Kurt filled my mouth. My nipples hardened to pebble-like peaks, brushing against his thin silk shirt. He began to move me backwards and an extra set of hands were suddenly pressing between us.

"Break it up you two," Vanessa said, wedging herself in the center of us, forcing Kurt to

put me down. “Whoa, am I the only one who thinks it got really hot in here?”

Wynona and Jake chuckled.

Kurt stared down at me, his breathing abnormal and his green eyes full of lust. I went to go to him and Vanessa caught me in her arms. “There is plenty of time for that later, guys. Now, we have a surprise for you.” She looked back at Kurt. “Remember the surprise, Kurt?”

“Huh? Umm, yeah, surprise.”

I touched my swollen lips and shook my head. “Vanessa, kiss me quick.”

“What?” she and Jake asked in unison.

“If you don’t I’m going to make Jake do it.”

Jake’s face scrunched up. “Aww, Devan. There is no way I can French you and not feel like I’m kissing my sister. My very hot sister.”

“Why in the hell do you want me to kiss you?” Vanessa asked, her eyes wide.

“Because as impossible as this sounds, I think,” I leaned in close to her and whispered, “I really think I’ve gotten a kiss like that before. I want to make sure it wasn’t you.”

She burst into laughter and hung on my shoulders. “Ohmygod, Devan, you’re not crazy, you most certainly received a kiss like that before but I’m...”

“Not going to talk anymore,” Jake said, pulling her away and chuckling.

The sound of someone strumming a guitar filled the bar. I looked up to find Brody sitting on a stool on the stage. He was in his signature baggy shorts and oversized tee shirt. He winked at me.

“Brody?”

“Hi, mom, someone told me you missed me.” He smiled wide. “You didn’t even last three days without me. Uncle Jake won the bet. Uncle Gideon and I said you’d make it four days.”

I rushed towards the stage, not bothering to slow as I approached it. Instead, I hopped up and onto it with one leap. The two-inch black, thick sandals caught nicely, keeping me from falling. Brody took his guitar off quickly and wrinkled his nose. “Mom, don’t embarrass me.”

Ignoring him, I swept him up in my arms and turned him in a circle. He was too big for me to do it more than once so I set him on his feet and hugged him to my chest. “I missed you.”

“You don’t say,” he mumbled into me. “Mom, come on. Please.”

“How did you get here? Did you fly by yourself? Ohmygod, did something happen to Robert? Are you okay? What...?”

Strong hands touched my shoulders. “Lil’ Jazz, you are dangerously close to smothering the poor boy.”

“Uncle Robert?”

The six-foot Italian peeked over my shoulder and kissed my cheek. “I think he missed you, too. He no sleep so good. When Gideon called early this morning, Brody couldn’t get packed to come fast enough.”

Brody glanced down at the stage floor and kept his gaze averted from me. I bent down and brushed his hair back from his face. “Baby, what’s wrong? Why couldn’t you sleep? I thought after we hung up that you were okay.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he bit out.

Taken aback by his brashness, I tipped my head. “Brody, talk to me. You made me promise to talk to you about things. To not keep secrets anymore. That means you have to do the same. Now, tell me why you couldn’t sleep? Did you have more dreams?”

He leveled his green gaze on me and shook his head. “I couldn’t sleep because I was

scared *he'd* find you and ruin things for you."

"Afraid who would find me and ruin what?" As soon as the question left my lips I knew who he meant. "Brody, I'm not hiding from your father. That wasn't the point of the move. He knows where we live and our phone number. I gave it to him. In fact, I talked to him this morning. He's planning a trip up here to spend some time with you and see our new place."

"You did what? He's what?" Gideon asked, his voice booming so loud that I jumped. "Dammit, Devan, tell me you didn't hand Drew a fucking map to your front door."

"Gideon, watch your mouth!" I glared at him. "Your behavior isn't going to help Brody understand I'm safe."

"Good, he's a smart kid. He knows not to trust the bastard! At least one of you is thinking with a clear head."

Jake rushed up next to me. "Gideon, she didn't have a choice. The courts require that Drew be made aware of his son's whereabouts. She agreed to let him have visitations and he needs to know where to pick Brody up. She was as smart about it as she could be. She and Drew worked it out that at first, at least, he will stay in New York at a hotel and visit while Devan is present. They'll go from there later."

"He doesn't need to know shit. Brody isn't his and the second that I prove it, that worthless piece of shit will have no excuse to be in my sister or nephew's lives."

My mouth dropped. "Gideon, that will be enough of that! Brody has had a hard enough time dealing with things. You will not add to his..."

"Mom," Brody tugged on my black tunic, "don't be mad at him, he's just worried about you, too. We all are." He looked past me at Gideon. "Stop yelling at her."

"Stop yelling at her?" Gideon asked, tossing his hands in the air fast and taking a step towards Brody.

My breath caught. Two and a half years of hell left me instinctively pushing Brody behind me, shielding him with my body. My first reaction wasn't to strike out, like Gideon had spent so long teaching me to do. It was to wish myself away. I closed my eyes, waiting for an impact that never came. Jake wrapped his arms around me and I loosened my protective grip on Brody.

"Devan, its okay. No one here is going to hurt him. No one's going to hurt you," he said, pulling me into his arms. I did my best to keep from crying but failed miserably.

"Jesus Christ, Devan, what in the hell did he do to you?" Gideon asked, his voice still deep, still angry. "How could you give him your address?"

"Gideon." Jake hugged me to him as I cried. "He did what you're doing now. He was someone she loved and trusted with her life. Like you are. He screamed in her face, made fast moves and waited until she least expected it, and beat the living shit out of her. He used his size and strong will to intimidate her. He called her every name in the book and belittled her intelligence, doing his best to make sure she felt worthless so she wouldn't try to go anywhere. So that she wouldn't have the will power to even think of leaving him."

"Devan," Gideon whispered. "I'd never hurt you, ever." He came to me and Jake moved away, letting Gideon hug me. He kissed the top of my head and rocked me. "Well, except for that time I pushed you through the window."

I laughed through my tears and hugged him tight. "Don't talk about it or my butt will hurt again."

He pulled back a bit and stared down at me. "Are we okay?"

Wiping my cheeks, I sniffled and nodded. "Yeah, we're good. I'm sorry. I didn't mean

to... umm... old habits die hard.”

“I still think you should have let me kill him.”

I snorted. “And I still think you’d make someone a happy man in prison.”

“Ooo, Gideon, you better take several steps back and let someone else have a turn at hugging her because he looks like he’s thinking of kicking your sorry ass across the stage,” Jake said, laughing softly.

Turning, I found Kurt glaring at Gideon.

“Kurt?” I went to go to him but he took a step back. “What’s wrong?”

“He knows better than to come near you while he’s that upset, dear. He was in Brody’s position once, Devan. There is no way he’ll risk scaring you.”

My mouth dropped at the sound of the feminine voice. “Liz?”

I looked behind Jake and found Elizabeth standing there wearing a dark grey pant-suit. Her light blond hair was pulled back from her face and her blue eyes locked on me. “Surprise.”

I was torn. I wanted to hug Liz, but I wanted to know that Kurt was fine, too. The indecision must have shown on my face because Liz smiled wide and winked. “Go on, I’ll wait my turn.”

Smiling, I headed straight for Kurt and pointed as I went. “Don’t you dare move.” I tossed my arms around his neck and hugged him tight. His body was stiff. “Kurt, please.”

He put his arms around me and squeezed me gently. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Gideon never touched me.”

“He doesn’t have to touch you to hurt you, Devan.” The tension in Kurt’s body began to fade. He caressed my back softly as he buried his head into my shoulder and whispered in my ear, “I won’t let anyone hurt you again. I promise you that. I didn’t know. I’d have come and taken you both. Hell, I’d have never let you be with him to begin with.”

I laughed and kissed his cheek. “I really do want to swap Jakes with the girls. Theirs thinks he can fix all the problems of the world even when he didn’t know the person he’s trying to help.” I gave him a good squeeze. “Promise not to beat my brother up?”

Kurt chuckled. “Yes, but only if he doesn’t pull that again.”

“Devan,” Gideon called out. “I really like him. How long do you think before you say yes and marry him? You wanted your family to grow and something tells me Kurt’s the man who will make *sure* it happens. Hell, I wouldn’t be the least bit shocked if your kids came out looking *just* like their big brother--green eyes, black hair, a love for cooking, liking crazy music.”

Brody giggled and Jake followed close behind.

Stunned and a bit mortified, I pulled back from Kurt and rolled my eyes. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Liz said. “Listen to Gideon. I like the sound of his plan. I want more grandbabies. The one I have is so perfect that I want more just like him.”

Shaking my head, I sighed. “Again, I am so sorry. Let me just say that now and tell you that it also covers anything else they say. Sorry.”

Kurt smiled. “It’s fine. Doesn’t bother me a bit, Devan. *Really*. Now, come on. I think my mom and Brody have something they’d like us to do.”

Confused, I took his hand and let him lead me to the center of the stage. Brody followed close behind Kurt and I had to laugh. “I never thought I’d meet anyone who walked like my son. It’s unique. That’s all I’m gonna say, gentlemen. Maybe it’s in the name Broderick.”

Brody and Kurt glanced up at me as they picked up guitars and shot me identical lopsided smiles. It hit me then how much they looked alike. “Liz, you weren’t kidding. Our boys do look

alike.”

“They sure do,” she said, moving up, putting a microphone in my hand as she held one in her own. She stood two inches shorter than me and was so petite that I always wanted to draw her into my arms and hold her tight. She kissed my cheek. “I love you, Devan. You have no idea how happy I am right now.”

“Liz?”

“Mom to you, remember.”

Smiling, I kissed her cheek. “I love you, too, *Mom*.”

“Now, as to our boys holding guitars, I thought about our week away in the Bahamas and when we got drunk off our butts and did karaoke together. I don’t know about you but I had the best time with you. That night will sit with me forever, Devan. It was the night I knew that not only did you break the cycle, you would never return to it.

Confused, I just stared at her. “Liz... err... mom?”

“Honey, please don’t tell me that you forgot what you did.” She grinned. “You pulled me onto the stage with you, told the band to take a flying leap, picked up a guitar and played exactly what you wanted to sing.”

My mouth formed an ‘O’ as it hit me. My eyes widened. “No way. Not in front of Kurt.”

“Sweetheart, he’s heard you sing before.”

I laughed. “Singing while running into him on a staircase doesn’t count. Neither does taped performances when I was sixteen.”

“Mom, do we need to get you liquored up?” Brody asked, grinning.

“Brody!”

He laughed, strumming his guitar slightly. “Chicken. Do it or I’m forcing Aunt Vanessa to pull out her special drinks again. The last time she and Aunt Wynona were in, the three of you were giggling and talking about some guy’s butt. When you walked away they started talking about how they stuffed your underwear in his pocket. I didn’t want to tell you, mainly because it was funny and I knew you’d go ballistic. Well, that and Uncle Robert took me to the movies so you guys could have some time. He was laughing about it, too. He said the guy was shocked but very pleased. Can I just say, eww. Who would want my mom’s underwear?”

Jake snickered. “Oh, I could rattle a few names off for you but I won’t.”

“Hey, I want to know more about this guy and his butt,” Kurt said, winking at me.

I grabbed Liz’s hand. “Singing sounds great. Let’s do it.”

Brody shook his head. “Chicken.”

“Be nice or I will cook dinner and make you eat it.” I licked my lower lip and bit back a laugh when he made a gagging noise. “Do you surrender?”

“Oh, yeah. You win.”

We all laughed.

Liz nodded. Brody and Kurt instantly began playing. I rolled my eyes when I realized it was *I Am Women* that they were playing. Taking Liz’s hand I stepped back, took a deep breath and winked. We launched into the song, looking directly at one another. It was perfect. Two women who had been through the same horrifying ordeal taking an empowering stand.

Our heads moved in unison and we leaned back, hitting the higher, deeper notes. It was so perfect that tears of joy glistened in my eyes. Liz seemed to have the same problem. Her voice cracked before she gave into tears. Stepping into her, I cupped her chin, lifted her face and stared into her eyes. I let my voice go as powerful and bluesy as it could and belted out the chorus.

Liz cried harder but smiled the entire time and rocked with me, covering my hand with

hers. The song drew to an end and Liz was officially sobbing. Brody moved quickly to her and wrapped his arms around her. “Don’t cry, Grandma. We’re all here now.”

I didn’t correct Brody for calling Liz Grandma.

Kurt took off his guitar. He glanced at his mother and then me. “Mom, you okay?”

Nodding, Liz touched his cheek as she continued to hug Brody. “He’s so amazing, Kurt. He really is. So, is Devan. More than you ever dreamed. Please don’t be mad at me.”

Kurt got to his feet and hugged Liz. Brody slipped his arm around Kurt’s waist and I gasped. If that wasn’t shocking enough as it was, Kurt bent down and picked Brody up like he weighed nothing. Brody threw his arms around Kurt’s neck and bear hugged him.

Liz’s tears came faster and Uncle Robert rushed up to her. The minute he slid his arms around her waist I knew they were doing better than good. I just wondered how long it would be before they told Kurt they were seeing one another.

As Kurt turned, he looked at me over the top of Brody’s shoulder. His eyes glistened. The minute he put his hand out to me, I couldn’t help but go to him. It was all so surreal, this wonderful man whom my son had taken to instantly and that my family friends and I adored.

You more than adore him, Devan.

As I mentally chastised myself, I knew it was too late to throw a wall up and protect my heart. The man I’d waylaid on the step with a plant from his mother had blindsided me right back. He’d snuck under my defenses and made me care about him.

Chapter Eight

As I stood, staring around Kurt's large apartment I couldn't hide my shock. When he'd suggested we stop by his place after leaving the club, I thought it would look like mine, since it was above me. I was wrong. "You have the coolest place. Umm, excuse my pre-teen term for it but seriously, this is awesome."

Thunder rolled and I shivered, thankful the weather had waited until we were inside to act up. I wasn't a huge fan of storms.

Kurt smiled but it looked forced. "Devan, I asked everyone to go out to dinner and not wait for us, because we need to talk about something important."

Not wanting to go into anything personal again, I changed the subject. "You did an amazing job with the place." The mustard colored walls with a variety of black accents looked fantastic with the overstuffed red-orange sofa and twin armchairs. The kitchen portion of the open room had lime-green walls. The cabinets, counters, sink and appliances were all stainless steel. The cabinets had no doors. There was an open view of everything and Kurt appeared to be a remarkably organized man.

"I can see you'd rather not talk." He glanced at me and narrowed his eyes. "You are the first person who has been here that didn't assume I hired a decorator."

"I'm sorry. When you walked in, you relaxed instantly. I just assumed you did it all. Plus, your mother is an amazing decorator. I can see the apple didn't fall far from the tree in the mom department."

Smiling, Kurt nodded. "Thank you for pointing out that I'm like my mom and not my father."

He took my hand and pulled me in more. I smiled at him and winked. "Your mom and I spent a lot of time talking. From all that I can tell, Kurt, you got your father's looks but not his lack of a heart." I stopped and touched his cheek lightly. "You have Liz's eyes. They're gorgeous but I bet you hear that a lot."

Kurt planted a tiny kiss on my palm, sending pleasure filled tingles up my arm. "Devs, it's *really* good to have you here finally."

"Finally?"

"That's part of what I need to talk to you about."

"It's..." I stopped short and drew in a sharp breath and I saw an ebonized mahogany living room grand piano sitting at the far end of the apartment, near a large double window. My jaw dropped. It was gorgeous and almost identical to the one I'd learned to play on.

I moved towards it slowly, amazed that he had one and hadn't mentioned it to me. Uncle Robert had gotten rid of the one I'd learned on about five or six years ago and went with a white one. He'd asked me first if I wanted it but Drew had already given the one I had away after getting upset with me so I didn't want to chance him doing it again.

Glancing down, I found the left front leg slightly scuffed. I smiled as I thought about the one I'd learned on. It had the same marks. Apparently, Kurt forgot to move the bench out when he was done, too. I think I kicked the leg every time I went to stand. It was comforting to see another like that as well. Smiling, I bent down on one knee and stared at it closer, laughing softly

to myself.

The last time I'd been this close to a grand had been when I'd learned that Drew was giving mine away. He'd forbidden me from touching it, instead making me keep my distance, not even allowing me to get my sheet music from it. Just because I didn't want to be pushed to spend my life at a piano bench didn't mean I had no desire to play. Drew had known how to inflict the most damage even without hitting.

The weight of a hand on my shoulder made me jerk around fast. "I didn't touch it." My breathing grew rapid, irregular. "I swear to you. I didn't... I just wanted to look closer at it. It reminded me of the one I learned on but I listened and didn't touch it."

Kurt moved towards me and I froze out of instinct and waited to be yelled at, to be torn down mentally until I cried harder on the inside than out. I wrung my hands nervously and looked towards the floor.

"Devan," Kurt wiped his thumbs over my cheeks, "you can touch it if you want. You can touch anything here. It's okay. I promise."

I just stood there, soaking it all in. When I realized how I'd reacted to Kurt I was instantly humiliated. A half-laugh, half-sob came from me. "Ohmygod, I'm so sorry. I..."

"Can I hug you?" Kurt asked, softly.

All I could do was nod as I bit back more tears. The second he wrapped his arms around me I gave into them. Before I knew it, I was clinging to him desperately, scared to let go yet scared to hang on.

Kurt caressed my back gently and began to rock our bodies back and forth slowly. I gave into him completely, relaxing, allowing him to hold me. It was amazing how this stranger really could come across as someone I knew, someone I could possibly trust.

"Its okay, Devan. I've got you, baby."

Baby?

The sound of that falling from his lips sounded so good. At six foot four he had me by seven inches but it put my lips at neck level on him. The figwood and fruit smell of his cologne caused my entire body to light with need. Turning my head slightly, I let my lips brush over his neck as I whispered, "Thank you."

Kurt's breath hitched and his grip on me tightened. Lifting me quickly, Kurt pressed his mouth to mine, taking me by surprise. I gasped. He slid his tongue in and caressed my inner lip. Moaning, I went to pull back and stopped when his tongue found mine. A tingling wave of pleasure moved through me as Kurt's tongue danced around mine, easing around the deep recesses of my mouth. I followed Kurt's lead and sucked gently.

It was Kurt's turn to moan. He hugged me tighter and I couldn't help but pull on his shirt, working it up more and more as we kissed. Kurt followed my lead, running his hands up and under my black tunic. To my surprise, I felt no need to pull away from him. Instead, I pulled more on his shirt, easing it over his head and continuing to kiss him. I ran my hand over the hard planes of his chest and gasped.

A manly chuckle escaped him and he worked his hands under my tunic and pulled it over my head. His gaze dropped to my exposed breasts. It looked hungry, feral. "Devan."

Before I knew it, Kurt had me up and off my feet. He set me on top of the piano and captured a nipple in his mouth, sending fire shooting throughout my body. Lacing my fingers into his hair, I tipped my head back and savored the feel of his hot mouth over my ripe nipple.

He guided me onto my back and began to work my pants off me. I laid on the piano, looking down at him as he kissed his way along my inner thighs. As I felt him slipping my

sandals off, my entire body began to tingle. My mind should have protested, done something, but it didn't. It was completely in sync with my body. It wanted Kurt in me, too.

"Kurt."

Licking my inner thigh, Kurt growled. "Please don't tell me that you're having second thoughts, Devan."

"No, I want you in me now."

Another manly chuckle came from him as he ran his tongue up my leg. When he reached my thong, he bit it and pulled it off me only using his teeth. Drawing in a deep breath, he closed his eyes. "Mmm, peaches."

Parting my slit, Kurt ran his tongue out and over my swollen clit, causing me to jerk and pleasure to shoot through me.

"Devan, you taste so good. I've missed you, baby."

Missed me?

As I opened my mouth to question him, he thrust a finger into me and began to suck gently on my clit. The only thought on my mind was about the overwhelming pleasure Kurt was giving me. My inner thighs tightened as my pending orgasm approached with a speed I hadn't seen since the very first night I'd ever had sex.

Kurt alternated licks and sucks, instantly sending me to my peak. Crying out, I ran my hands over the top of the piano and arched my back. "Please, Kurt."

He stood and unbuttoned his jeans. If he had on underwear, I didn't see them. The only thing I saw was the size of his rigid cock and my eyes widened. "That is not going to fit in me."

A sly, sexy grin spread over his face. "Trust me when I say it will, Devs. It will."

Stepping out of his jeans, Kurt slid me up more on the piano and climbed up and over me. The head of his cock pressed against my wet core. Dropping his head down, he captured my lips with his. Our tongues locked as he entered me. His girth spread me wide, leaving me shifting beneath him, trying to accommodate him. As we kissed, I relaxed a bit, allowing Kurt to ease himself into me more. I clung to the backs of his arms, needing something to ground me as he continued his claim on my body.

The hard, cool surface of the piano was such a contrast to Kurt's hot body that it helped to hold my attention as he buried himself to the hilt. I drew in a sharp breath as he filled me so completely that for a moment I was afraid to move. Turns out, I didn't have to.

Kurt began to slowly ease himself in and out of me as he kept himself propped in a semi-push up. He kissed me hard, passionately as he increased his pace. I wrapped my legs around his waist and he growled. "Devan."

I ran my hands up and through his black hair as I stared into his green eyes. He pumped into me, his low abs pressed against my clit, sending a shockwave of pleasure through me. I gasped and bucked against him. The walls of my hot channel began to grab at his cock, desperately trying to hold him in me.

It was Kurt's turn to gasp. He stilled fast, holding himself in me deep. "Baby, uhh, I can't move."

I moved for him, grabbing hold of his ass cheeks, I began to rotate my hips. My clit continued to be stimulated by his lower stomach. I held tight to him, rubbing my body against his, leaving his shaft in an almost stir-like state.

Kurt moaned and went to move. I clutched him tight and shook my head. "No. Not yet, Kurt."

His jaw went slack as my entire body lit with a fire I'd not experienced since that night in

a closed pantry. “Devan, I’m fighting the urge to fill you so full that you burst.”

My inner thighs quivered as I hit my zenith. My pussy milked him and his cock twitched.

“Ah,” Kurt panted as he began to thrust into me hard and fast, wringing my orgasm out for all it was worth. He drove himself into me and held tight as he came in a jetting stream, filling me completely. Dropping his head down, Kurt pressed his lips to mine before slinking his tongue in and kissing me thoroughly.

“Mmm,” I murmured as he drew his mouth back a bit. “Thank you.”

Kurt gave me a puzzled look. “Thanks?”

Smiling, I nodded slightly. “Yes. Thank you for making my first time with another man every bit as wonderful as my first... umm... thanks.”

Something moved over Kurt’s face, leaving him staring down at me with a lusty amused look on his face. “Finish what you were going to say, Devs.”

“I did.”

“No, baby. You were going to say something about your first time having sex and you held back. Tell me.”

Uneasy about doing that, I shifted a bit attempting to get out from under him. “Kurt.”

“Please tell me.”

Giving in, I rolled my eyes playfully and blushed. “My first time was amazingly perfect. This was right there next to it. Thank you.” I tried to sit up. “We need to get cleaned up and to the restaurant.”

Kurt pressed his still hard cock into me, holding me in place. “Devan, you can’t seriously be thinking of leaving after what we’ve shared and how much more we can still share.”

“Kurt, I shouldn’t be here, like this, with you now. I just met you.”

He kissed my lips quickly and let out a soft laugh. “Devan, you should have been here all along.”

“Huh?” Confused, my brow furrowed. Sure, he was amazing but even he couldn’t have expected me to screw him on the staircase when I ran into him. He made it further in three days than Drew had in four years worth of dating or whatever that was called. I’m not sure dating fit. It was something all right.

Kurt ran his hand over my breast and rolled my nipple between his fingertips gently, causing my body to tighten. Kurt started down at me, his green eyes filled with lust. “Devan, you are so incredibly beautiful.”

I blushed and looked away.

“Stay. Please.”

“I can’t and this can’t happen again.” I wiggled, trying to get out from under him. It didn’t work. “Kurt, I have a son who is so desperate to remove himself from his father that he invented a new one. He will read so much more into us than he should if he caught wind of anything beyond us being neighbors. I don’t want that and I’m sure you don’t either.”

He ignored every word I said choosing instead to lift my leg, cup my ass and begin to work himself in and out of me. The pleasure that moved through me outweighed my need to run from him. “Say you’ll stay, Devs. We’ll still get to the restaurant. I promise. I don’t want this moment to end.”

“I can’t,” I whispered, my voice sounding weak even to me.

Kurt worked his body just right, stimulating my clit and causing my body to move against him. “Stay.”

“No.”

He thrust hard, leaving me grabbing for him and crying out. I went to kiss him but he shook his head. "Tell me you'll stay."

Needing to taste him while I felt him, I gave in and nodded.

A huge smile moved over Kurt's face as he dropped his mouth down onto mine. He pumped into my soaked pussy and kissed me with so much passion that it would have been easy to mistake for love. Doing my best to keep that separated, I held tight to him and countered his thrusts.

A pressure, deep inside, began to build as Kurt continued to slide in and out of me, making love to me on a piano that reminded me so much of the one from my uncle's restaurant that I couldn't help but think of Maestro. I'd wanted him to spread me out on that very piano and make love to me all night long.

Now, as Kurt continued to merge with me, sending sensations that I hadn't felt for years through me, I found myself secretly hoping that I was wrong--that things between us could work.

Kurt changed his rhythm and I hit my zenith quickly. It numbed my legs, tightened my abdomen and left my channel clenching his cock. He felt so good in me. So thick. So long. So not wearing a condom.

I pushed on his chest fast, just as he slammed into me, coming hard and fast. "Out, pull out."

Kurt's body jerked and another load of semen entered me. "Ah, Devan."

The realization of what we'd just done sunk in and I hugged him tight. "Kurt."

Glancing down at me, he shook his head. "No, Devan. Don't look like you regret it. Don't."

My breathing grew irregular. "I have to go."

"No. You are not going to run from me, from us." His words were full of so much passion that they caught me off guard. "I refuse to let us part ways again, Devan. Not now. Not with everything that's come to light."

"Kurt?" I asked, confused. I pushed on him more. "I have to go. I need to talk to Gideon now."

"Gideon? Why?"

"Because I'm not on any form of birth control and I know I'm ovulating. I spent so many years keeping track that I know down to the best hour to have sex with the intent of having a child, Kurt. Get up so he can fix this. He can prescribe something I'm sure of it." I let out a choked sob as I listened to what I was saying. "Kurt, we should have used something. You don't know where I've been or..."

"You've been with two men in your life, Devan. Me and jackass. And I've only ever been in anyone but you without protection, honey. Only you."

"I need to call Gideon. He can fix this. I'm sure of it," I said, trying to get out from under Kurt. He didn't budge. "Kurt, please. I refuse to do this to you."

"Do what? Have my child? You're a little late, Devan."

Sighing, I looked away. "I know. I should have used my head not my heart. I wasn't thinking, Kurt. When I'm around you it's hard to think clearly. I know better than to..."

He chuckled. "No, Devan. I'm not upset with you about what just happened. I was right there doing it, too. In fact, I think," he glanced down the length of himself, "I may be ready to do it again. You're sexy when you get worked up. Hell, you're sexy all the time."

I lost it. My eyes widened and my jaw dropped. "Kurt, how can you be so calm about this? Vanessa is right, only I would be stupid enough to get pregnant the way I do. First time out

of the gate and with my luck, the first time out of the gate again.”

Kurt laughed. I didn't. “This is not funny. I have to talk to Gideon now! I don't have it in me to have an abortion, Kurt.”

“And if you're pregnant, I won't let you have one. I want more children, Devan.”

“More?” I asked, unaware that he had any.

He smiled. “I have a son. He's eleven.”

I stilled. “Does he live with his mother?”

Kurt kissed the tip of my nose. “Yes.”

Tipping my head, I rolled my eyes. “You're not offering much up here. What's his name? How often do you get to see him?”

“His name is Broderick but he goes by Brody. About three years ago I got a phone call from a good friend of mine asking if I could take some time with his nephew who liked to cook. He asked me to meet him and his nephew via a web cam. That's when I first met my son.”

I gasped. “Ohmygod, you didn't even know you had a son until then? And I should comment that your ex has excellent taste in names. Though, I don't understand how she could possibly keep him from you. Why didn't Liz tell me about him?”

“His mother didn't do it on purpose and to be honest, I only just found out he is my son. For three years I've thought he was just my friend's great-nephew. I was wrong. He was the son of my friend's niece--a product of our night together. My son is amazing, Devan. For not growing up with me in his life he has so many of the same interests as me that you'd think I raised him myself.” Kissing my lips softly, Kurt smiled. “Mmm, I have his mother to thank for that. She never once tried to hold him back from what felt natural. And, Devan, she's not my ex.”

A lump formed instantly in my throat as I bucked him off me. I pushed out hard and sent Kurt tumbling off the piano. Infuriated, I climbed off and snatched my clothing off the floor.

“Devan? Ouch.”

I pointed at him with nothing short of hate in my eyes. “You jerk. I hope your ass hurts.” I went to try to put my thong back on, only to have it roll up in a ball. I snarled and threw it at Kurt. He caught it with one hand and smiled.

“Can I keep it? I've got a collection started,” he said, laughing.

“Why you... you... jerk.”

“You said that already.” He smiled wider. “I'm not about to apologize for loving my son or his mother.”

“I never asked you too, dipshit!”

“Did you just call me a dipshit?” he asked, chuckling.

I wanted to find a heavy object and hit him upside the head with it. Thunder crashed and I did my best to ignore it, though Jake's warning about storms blowing through danced in the back of my mind. “Yes I did. At no point did I tell you that you couldn't love your family, Kurt. I have an issue with you not telling me first. I would have never allowed that to happen. I know firsthand what it's like to have a husband who finds other women to scratch his itch. I know what it's like to feel like the ugliest woman on the face of the earth because you can't seem to do anything right to keep him from finding comfort in someone else's arms.”

Something moved over his face, leaving him looking pissed. “I am nothing like *him*, Devan.”

“Really? Did you or did you not just cheat on your wife?”

“Nope.” He took a step towards me. “She won't be wife until she says yes and then I'll

make it official. In fact, the second she even hints that she loves me, too, I will most likely toss her over my shoulder and find a justice of the peace.”

“I find it extremely hard to believe you are Liz’s son.” I turned to leave and Kurt grabbed my arm gently. “Let go of me.”

“Devan, you’re naked.”

“I know. And I don’t care. I just want to get away from you.”

“Devan, you’re misunderstanding what I’m doing a rather poor job of trying to reveal,” he said, pressing his body against my back. “I told you that I wasn’t always known for my social skills.”

As mad as I was, I couldn’t help but want to sink back into his arms. “Kurt.”

He groaned as though he were in pain. “I need to put my pants on or I’ll have you bent over in about two seconds.”

“Kurt! You are unbelievable.”

Thunder crashed again, this time I moved back towards Kurt.

He touched the tattoo on my hip and hugged me tight. “Think about it, Devan. What are the odds that we’d both have dove tattoos, eleven year old sons named Brody and...”

The lights flickered and went out. I stilled as I did my best not to panic. Kurt moved away from me, leaving me standing alone in the dark. My bottom lip shook and tears came instantly. “Kurt?”

He appeared in front of me suddenly. I yelped as he wrapped his strong arms around me and pulled me into his chest. The smell of figwood and fruits left me sighing and the knowledge that he had hold of me left me moving into his arms more.

Kurt lifted me quickly, sliding his hands behind my thighs and parting my legs as he went. He put them around his waist and I wrapped my hands around his neck. I wanted to push him away but my body didn’t.

In one thrust he was buried deep within me. I cried out and he pressed his lips to mine. As he slid his tongue into my mouth, I sucked on it gently as he lifted me up and down on his rigid shaft.

Kurt reached between us and began tweaking my clit, rubbing in a way that left me gasping for breath. My body seemed to respond to him in ways that it hadn’t responded in over a decade.

My pussy quaked as an orgasm tore through me. I felt Kurt’s cock twitch and tried to climb off him, only to have him hold tight to my hips while he filled me full of his hot seed.

“Kurt.”

Panting, he pressed his forehead to mine. “We have to go at least two more times tonight, Devan. That’s how many times I took you twelve years ago when I filled you with Brody but didn’t know it. I want to make sure I get it right again, fill you with another perfect child.” A small sob came from him as his muscles tightened. “I only walked away because last I knew, you were engaged, honey. I didn’t know you weren’t with him. He was this rich guy who was famous and could hand you the world. At that time, I wasn’t what I am now. I didn’t have my own restaurant and I wasn’t bringing in the type of money that I am now. I thought I was just something you had to get out of your system.”

As his words began to soak in things started to fall into place. “No.”

“*Quod hodiē nōn est, crās erit,*” he whispered.

My chest tightened as I heard him say one of the phrases that had been on my sixteenth birthday cake. It had been written on one of the scrolls the doves carried. “What does not happen

today will happen tomorrow.”

“I don’t have the answers as to why it didn’t work out for us the first time, Devs. I only know that when you dumped a plant in my lap the other day and I saw you again for the first time in twelve years, I knew I’d not let us miss our chance again. I want this. I want you. I’ve always wanted you.”

I clung to him, unsure what to say or do. The shock of it all was too new.

“Devan, tell me that you feel the same way and I really will toss you over my shoulder and take your entirely too sexy ass with me to find a judge. I want the family that was taken from me. And before you say it, Drew has to know he’s not Brody’s father. Gideon and Jake can confirm it couldn’t have been him with you in the pantry. He was with them the entire night. I’m positive that Bobby can, too. Not to mention Brody looks exactly like me, Devs.”

My stomach churned as I thought about my Uncle’s nickname for Brody. “Lil’ Maestro. Oh God, he knew. He knew because...”

“Bobby sent you to me, Devan. He was the one who shut us in and killed the lights. When he opened the door after you’d fallen asleep in my arms, he told me to go live that dream and come back for you so you could live it, too.” Kurt held me to him. “I did what he said. I came to New York and took a job at his restaurant here. I ended up being sent to France for several months. I got home, called Bobby and he told me that you’d married Drew. Why the fuck did he let you marry him?”

I put my head against Kurt’s shoulder and savored the feel of him. “He tried to stop it, Kurt. He did. I was four months pregnant, showing and my father and Robert had a massive blow up. Things have never been the same between them since. Gideon and Jake intervened and Robert was powerless to stop things. And I was so lost, so scared of everything that was happening so fast that I didn’t know what to do. I gave in and let Drew think for me.”

“How could you think it was him with you, Devan?” The pain in Kurt’s voice broke my heart.

“You never said anything to tell me different. You’re both the same height and I remembered you as skinny, Kurt. You weren’t skinny then. You were like you are now, all buff and well, not a string bean. And you didn’t have long hair anymore. How was I supposed to know you’d gotten it cut off? How was I supposed to know it was you burying yourself in me when it was pitch black? I’d never let any man touch me like that. It’s not like I could compare it to someone. You barely spoke. What you did say, you whispered.” My breath caught as I thought about what Kurt had said to me that night.

“I meant it, Devan. I do love you.”

“You don’t even know me,” I bit out, doing my best to get down.

Kurt wasn’t having any of that. He held me tight. “Bullshit. I knew you better than anyone else in your life did, Devan. Even Wynona and Vanessa. That video showed me that. You had to tell them how much you hated what you were being put through. I knew that. I’m the one who waited, listening for the music to stop, knowing that you’d fallen asleep again because of your exhaustion.” If I didn’t know better, I’d have said it sounded as though Kurt was crying. “I’m the one who carried you to the office, who iced the bruises you tried so desperately to hide from Bobby. You were so fucking tired that you didn’t budge, Devan. You didn’t even wake up when I found you burnt to a crisp in the sun and rubbed you down with aloe.”

He bounced me a bit. “You said it yourself, Devan. You told me that the guy who made you that cake was the only person who understood. Don’t try to tell me that I don’t know you. I have memorized every inch of your body and you carried my child in you. I know you are an

amazing mother and without thinking, you gave Brody knowledge of me. You didn't let Drew mold him into something he wanted, Devan."

"You're the guy Brody wanted me to meet all those years ago." I laughed. "On the days I'd come to watch him cook with my Uncle you wouldn't be able to make it. But Brody didn't let me stop paying visits, in hopes I'd see you. Kurt, I think you're the reason that Brody pushed me to move us to New York. I thought he wanted to be closer to Vanessa and Wynona but it didn't make sense. He loves Jake, Gideon and Robert."

As I thought about Brody's outburst with the judge and covered my mouth. "He knows. Brody knows who you are to him. He tried to tell me so many times. He tried to get me to leave Drew and find his dad but I didn't listen. I..."

"Shh," he whispered, pressing his mouth to mine and giving me a chaste kiss. "You didn't know. I didn't know either."

"Then how did Brody?"

"I don't know, baby, but I'm glad he does. When I picked him up at the airport this morning, he stood there looking at me for the longest time. Bobby asked him what he was doing and he told him that he was staring at what he'd look like when he was older and double-checking to make sure I didn't look like the kind of dad who would hurt his mom."

Kurt drew in a deep breath and I was positive that I wasn't the only one crying. "I couldn't help myself, Devan. I picked him up and hugged him so tight he had to ask me to loosen my grip. I tried to apologize for not being there, for not getting the two of you out of that situation earlier but he told me to stop--that if I promised to love his mom and never let anything happen to her then he was happy."

I sighed. "Kurt, tell me that you didn't tell him you would."

"Hell yes I told him I would. I also told him that I'd love him and never let anything happen to him as well. Gideon has asked me to submit to a paternity test not because he doesn't think I'm Brody's father. No. He's positive of that. He just wants Jake to have what he needs to keep Brody the hell away from Drew."

"I can't keep Drew from seeing Brody. He raised him. He loves him like he's his own, Kurt."

"Devan, don't." Kurt walked us across the room, doing an amazing job of not hitting anything in the dark. He sat down on the sofa and cradled me on his lap, withdrawing himself from me as he did.

The sudden absence of his cock from my pussy left me feeling beyond empty. As the reality of that set in, I jerked up and off him.

"Devan?" He sighed. "Dammit, don't be upset with me on this one. Brody hates him and Drew lied to you. He's known from day one that he's not Brody's father. Why in the hell do you think he went nuts when he found a picture of me in his inbox from Vanessa? Why do you think he accused you of finding your old lover? Poisoning Brody's mind?"

As his words sunk in, they only added to my confusion. "I can't do this."

"Devan, the last thing I want to do is fight you in a court to keep Brody away from Drew. I love you and that is the absolute last thing I want to do but I've been in Brody's position. I know what it's like to hate a man who had repeatedly hurt his mother. Brody's lucky. The bastard who did that isn't genetically related to him. My father, unfortunately, is my father."

"You don't understand, I can't do this. I can't be who you want me to be, Kurt. I need to find myself, learn who I am again. I love you but I moved here for a new start not..."

Kurt was up and pulling me into his arms before I could get another word out. "What did

you just say?"

"I, umm, I don't know. Just that I can't do this."

"No, Devan you told me that you love me."

I snorted. "No, I... ohmygod, I did. I do. Kurt," I searched for the right words, "I can't do this."

Kurt laughed and that caught me off guard. Running his hand down my stomach, he stopped on my lower abdomen. "Lucky for me, I have Brody on my side and something else that may help you see reason, Devan. Not to mention, I'm fairly positive that everyone wants us to be together."

Placing my hand over his, I went to protest and stopped. A tiny laugh escaped me.

"Devan?"

"Kurt, have you ever changed a diaper before?"

"No. But I can cook and keep a very pregnant you supplied with whatever you crave." He chuckled and I followed along. It was a case of laugh or cry. I went with option one.

"I think we might want to think about condoms. We've tempted fate enough, Kurt."

He went rigid. "Devan?"

"Yes?"

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Biting back a laugh, I nodded before realizing that he couldn't see me. "I'm saying that if you're serious about there being an us, then you're going to have to know going into it that I'm coming off something that was anything but pleasant in the end, Kurt. I will not cut Drew out of Brody's life. No one wants to cut him a break. They want to take everything from a man who has made a consistent effort for over a year now to be a better man. I or better yet, we, have a lot on our plate. I have no idea where to even begin. It's all so overwhelming. I don't think we should purposely try to bring another life into this until we have ours straightened out."

"Devan?"

"Hmm?" I waited, assuming he'd yell about what I'd just told him.

"Do you love me?"

That wasn't a question I was expecting him to drop on me. I went to answer and stopped. "Kurt, I think I've been in love with you since the moment I first saw you. Please know that terrifies me. I survived being hurt by Drew and I don't just mean physically. I mean loving him and having him break my heart. I won't survive being hurt by you."

"Did you really love Drew?" he asked, his voice low.

"Not at first." I felt no need to lie. "I grew to love him, yes. Would you rather I tell you that I hated him? I can't see how that would make it easier on you. I spent the last two years of our marriage in hell. I would think it would make it better knowing the entire thing wasn't like that."

Kurt huffed. "Yeah, you'd think that would make me feel better. It doesn't. But I'm not about to pull a jealous temper tantrum even though that is all I want to do at the moment. I will say I have thought of you every single day since I met you, or, uhh, saw you."

"Right," I said, sardonically.

"Devan, your painting, that Wynona did, hangs in my restaurant and the photos Vanessa took of you hang in my bedroom. Why do you think I've avoided bringing you up here or to my restaurant? You are the first thing I see when I wake up in the morning, when I go to bed at night and the first thing I see when I walk into work."

I covered my eyes and shook my head. "Something just hit me--you own E&E."

He laughed. "Yeah, I do. And I can tell you that your theory on the name was dead accurate so please don't pull the 'we don't know each other' thing again. And yes, I love the menus. Not to the point I threaten bodily harm but that's because I have so many."

I poked him in the abs and instantly regretted that when my finger began to hurt. "You should have told me who, exactly, you were the minute you realized I was me. Okay, that's confusing but you get my point."

"Oh, that would have gone well." He caressed the backs of my arms gently. "Yeah, you part the plant you deposited on my lap. The one my own mother gave you. I take one look at you, feel like I'm having a heart attack, realize that you're not only you but also have the most incredible eyes I've ever seen. I then shout out that I'm this Maestro guy that you're hell bent on never getting a hold of. Then, I tell you that we slept together twelve years ago. Hmm, somehow I don't think we'd be here now, naked and wondering if we're going to be parents *again*."

"You may be onto something. I might have," I giggled, sounding like a schoolgirl, "run right back out the door and prayed the sofa was wedged so tight it would stay there."

"Yeah, well, you should probably know that I'd have run after you. I gave you up once and I'll be damned if I do it again," he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"Kurt?"

"What, baby?"

Baby? The sound of that was music to my ears in more ways than one.

"Where, exactly, is everyone waiting for us to come and join them for dinner?" I knew I didn't really want to hear the answer to that a second before he gave it to me.

"At my place, why?"

Clearing my throat, I ran my hands over his torso. "Honey, you do realize Gideon is now sitting in a restaurant that has a nude painting of his sister in larger than life form in its entrance way, right? My uncle and our son are also there. Vanessa will no doubt point it out to all of them, too."

"Shit!" He turned to leave me but stopped. "Come on, we need to get cleaned up and before I forget, I really liked hearing you refer to me as honey."

"Yeah, well, I'm partial to dipshit so don't get too used to it. And before you comment, you should be aware that if I am having another one of your children I will have to work double-time in the delivery room making up new obscenities to call you since you missed the first round."

Kurt drew me into his arms. "Mmm, Devan, I would give anything to have gotten to be there with you. Not just then but the entire time. When I heard you tell that Martins guy you felt bad that he thought everyone had a price, I knew I'd fucked up. I'd thought you'd want what Drew could offer and not me."

"Kurt, I loved you for you, not what you did or did not have. I had no problems dumping a man making millions at that age just so I could come and find you. I can't believe you'd think I was that shallow."

"Devs, can you yell at me in the shower?"

I bit my lower lip. "Why?"

"Because if I don't get under some cold water right this instant, I'm going to be cramming myself into you again and you are refusing to let me without a condom on. I don't agree with the waiting on another baby thing because we've wasted too many years apart as it is but I'll do anything to make you happy. That will no doubt come back to bite me in the ass over the course of our life but hey, at least I know going into it that my wife will have me wrapped

around her little finger.”

I drew back fast. “Wife?”

“Oh,” he dropped down before me and pulled me close before kissing my stomach, “I should have thought to do this first. I’m not really prepared but I can promise to get you a ring tonight. I’ll make some calls and you can pick out what you want from Tiffany’s. I just...”

Shocked, I grabbed his shoulders and gave him a good shake. “Kurt.”

“Oh, right. I forgot to actually ask. Devan Jazz Seward, will you do me the honor of being my wife and give me the satisfaction of knowing you will be there in the flesh when I wake up every morning, when I go to bed at night and that our family will be together like it should have been from day one?”

I sank down before him and cupped his face with my hands. Pressing my lips to his, I thrust my tongue into his mouth, kissing him with all I had. Kurt tipped backwards, moaning as he went and keeping hold of me. He hit his head on the floor with a thump and laughed into my mouth.

Straddling his waist, I climbed onto him and reached behind me. I grasped his cock and stroked it. Since it needed almost no encouragement to be hard, he was ready for me. I positioned him at my wet entrance and pressed down, taking him into me.

I moved my hips up and down, doing my best to remember to breathe but his size made that difficult. “Uh.”

“Baby, if it hurts, stop,” Kurt said, his voice hoarse.

“I just need a minute. You’re... uhh... not exactly the same physically as, well, you know.”

Cupping the back of my head, Kurt pulled me down towards him. “Devan, you know exactly what to say to make a guy a hell of a lot more secure in the relationship.”

Gasping as I moved and hit my cervix, I dug my nails into his chest and let go fast. “Sorry.”

“Devan.”

“No,” I bit out. “Just give me a minute to get used to you. I’d like to know that I can ride my husband.”

“That’s a yes?”

“Yes.”

Kurt let out a cross between a hoot and a whistle before barrel rolling with me. With him on top, he was still large but not painfully so. He began thrusting madly into me, lifting my legs higher and higher until we were both crying out and gasping for breath.

The tell-tale tingling sensation that arrived just before my orgasms did started. Reaching down, I took hold of his cock and held it tight as he pumped in and out of me. Kurt jerked, stilled, then grabbed my wrist. “No more of that or I’m going to finish. You’re tight enough as it is. Please don’t add to it if you have any desire for this to last.”

A throaty laugh escaped me as I began to rub my clit. Kurt’s hand followed mine and he growled. “Mmm, that’s it, Devan. I’m going to come, baby. Come with me.”

The erotic combination of my rubbing and his fucking sent me over the edge of the abyss. The lights flickered on just as my orgasm hit full force and Kurt began to fill me with his seed. We locked gazes and I realized that this was the first time we’d seen each other while both knowing who the other was.

Reaching up, I caressed his cheek. “Hi.”

A smile broke over his face as the last of his semen shot into me. “Hey.”

“Hmm, I’d have never expected the greetings to come *after* we did,” I mused, licking my lip.

Chapter Nine

“So, what do you think?” Kurt asked, his arm linked in mine as we stood in the entrance way of E&E.

I stared up at the high ceiling and grayish-white marble columns. The place was huge and as far as I could tell, all of the tables were full. The serving staff walked around in white shirts and black slacks, each looking not only neat and tidy but happy. That was rare.

A large water fountain stood just before us and mounted directly behind it on the wall was the painting Wynona had done of me. My eyes widened. “Oh, that has to come down right now. The place was like a wonderland right before I laid eyes on that.”

Laughing, Kurt planted a kiss on my temple. “That is a staple here. Get used to it. Though, I’ll warn you that many a men have stood here, waiting for their table and ogling you. I’ve already punched two of them and kicked them out. That was before I knew it really was you up there. I just thought the painting looked like you. Now, I’ll likely take someone’s head off.”

“Chef Holland,” a tall, thin man said, walking towards us. He wore a black suit and carried himself well. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at me. Glancing over his shoulder, he stared at the painting and then back at me.

Kurt snickered. I elbowed him. Lacing his hand with mine, Kurt brought them to his lips and kissed mine. “Marvin, this is Devan, my fiancée.”

“Fiancée, sir?”

A loud ruckus came from the kitchen area and Kurt stiffened. “Marvin?”

“Sorry, some man is in there and is refusing to leave. I suggested we call the authorities but he is insistent that you are like a son to him.”

“Bobby,” Kurt said, laughing softly. “Baby, I think I need to go try to pry your uncle from my kitchen before he scares my staff away. Want to brave it out with me or sit with the others?”

He didn’t let go of my hand. I laughed. “From the death grip you have on me I think you know you’ll need me to coax him out of there.”

Bending down, Kurt pressed his lips to mine and moaned. “Mmm, you read minds, too. Does it get any better than this?”

“Yeah, think for a minute about a toddler who is sitting in a highchair throwing everything you try to give him on the floor, while he screams the latest song he learned.”

“Devs,” Kurt said, seriously. “I’ve tried one of your ‘cookies’ before. I’d scream and throw it on the floor, too.” The smile that broke over his face was contagious. “It’s no wonder that my son took an interest in cooking right from the start. Poor thing.”

“Your son, Chef Holland?”

Kurt bit back a laugh. “Yes, Marvin, my son. He arrived with the crazy guy in the kitchen.”

“Brody?”

We both stared at Marvin. Kurt tipped his head and looked so handsome in his fitted, black, lightweight, long-sleeved shirt that I wanted to have him in me again. The V-neck left part of his muscular chest showing and it was all I could do to keep my hands to myself.

Though, he hadn't hesitated to fondle me when I'd walked out in a MICCA gold slip dress that came to just above my knees and had spaghetti straps. Every time I tried to put my matching mule pumps on, Kurt kept reaching under my dress and sliding his fingers under my thong. It wasn't until I threatened to chop them off that he stopped doing that and started cupping my ass instead.

Men.

I'd have pinched his backside but he still had hold of my hand. Glancing over my shoulder, I eyed his tight ass and ended up biting the side of my lip.

"Devan, are you okay?"

"Huh? Umm, yeah. I'm good." I locked gazes with him as a sly grin spread over his face.

"So, what sounds good to eat? I know what I want."

I let my gaze flicker down him and settle on his groin. "Funny, I know exactly what I want, too."

A loud bang came from the kitchen. Kurt took off in that direction, pulling me along with him. When we rounded the corner I spotted Uncle Robert in full chef garb, yelling at a very scared looking chef who was flipping vegetables on a grill.

"Bobby!"

Uncle Robert stopped yelling and gave Kurt a cross look. The second he began to ramble on endlessly in Italian about something Kurt looked back at me for help. Smiling, I winked. "Uncle Robert."

He stopped ranting instantly. "Yes, lil' Jazz?"

"Go easy on Maestro. For me, please?"

Robert sighed, opened his mouth and then shut it fast. He repeated this several more times before Kurt put his hands on my uncle's shoulders. "Bobby, I know I should have asked you for permission first but I got a little carried away and jumped the gun."

"Huh?"

Kurt kept hold of Robert's shoulders. "I asked Devan to marry me and she said yes."

"*Scherzi!*"

Shaking his head, Kurt smiled. "No, Bobby. I'm not kidding. We're getting married and," he glanced at my midriff, "if we're lucky enough to bring another child into the world we will. We're not getting any younger and we've wasted too many years apart."

"*Genero,*" Robert said, cupping Kurt's face and planting kisses on both his cheeks. "Good. Very good." Tears welled in my uncle's eyes and I had to fight to keep from crying myself. Robert looked at me. "This is very good, Devan. Very good."

I lost my fight with tears. Blinking, I did my best to hold them back, not letting them flow free. I smiled and nodded. "Yes, it is very good."

He took hold of the back of Kurt's neck and kissed his cheek again. "You no have ring yet?"

"I tried but Devan isn't being very cooperative. She wanted to come here first." Kurt glanced at me and I could see that his eyes glistened as well.

Robert put his index finger up and stared at us both. "Hold." He took off running towards the restaurant area, leaving Kurt and me standing in the kitchen with his entire staff staring at us with wide eyes.

Clearing his throat, Kurt put his hand out to me and I went to him instantly. "Everyone, this is Devan, my fiancée and the mother of my son." He put his hand up. "The boy who came with the crazy guy."

“Brody?” one of them asked.

Kurt laughed and nodded. “I can see that you were all snooping at my office door weren’t you?”

“Brody’s a sweet kid. How could we not want to see what he was cooking up with you? You should have told us he was your son. We have all come in to talk to him whenever you got a phone call and had to step away,” a short, balding man said with a smile on his face. “We should have just known. The kid looks exactly like you. Two people actually asked your mother if you had a little brother.”

Kurt’s nose crinkled up. “Oh, that is not right. My mother is how old now?”

“I know but her new husband there seems lively. Also scary at points.”

My jaw dropped. So did Kurt’s. “Excuse me?”

The bald man took a giant step backwards. “Nothing.”

“Germaine?”

Uncle Robert came rushing back into the kitchen, holding a small black box. Kurt rounded on him. “Did you marry my mother?”

“Yes. Now, put your hand out, Maestro. I have something for you, for Devan.”

“Yes? All you have to say is yes?” Kurt asked, his face reddening.

“Honey,” I said, reaching up and cupping his cheek. “Liz and Uncle Robert have been in love for a while now. They just weren’t sure how to tell you. I think you know what it’s like to be unsure how someone will take certain news.”

Kurt stared down at me. “Devan.”

“Don’t you want to know that your mom’s not alone anymore? That she finally found someone who makes her happy and who would never hurt her?” I blinked up at him innocently.

“Dammit, Bobby, how the hell did you survive with her around doing that eye thing and flashing those dimples all the time? You have a worse temper than me.”

My uncle laughed. “When I see my *daughter* upset that I’m upset, I stop instantly. Looks like you now have that problem, too. Though, you should know that your mother has dimples, too, so, I no get rid of it.”

Robert didn’t wait for Kurt to respond. He shoved the box in his hand. “I think this will make her happy. I give to the son of my heart to give to the daughter of my heart.”

Kurt opened the box and took a deep breath in. “This is, umm, was Jazz’s ring. It’s the one you showed me when you found me working on Devs’ birthday cake in the middle of the night. I can’t accept your wife’s ring, Bobby.”

Robert pushed it back at him. “I have held this for you to give to her from the first day you came to be with me. I see the way you watch her, with a love that is true. Like what Jazz and I had. Like what I have with your mother now. It is much the same situation. I tell you it was fated to be. One day,” he lifted one finger, “that is all it took to make you both see with your hearts. Now, take this and give it to her.”

“But, Bobby, I want Jazz, I mean, Devan to pick what she wants. I want her to be happy.”

My uncle reached out and touched my chin. “I see that your mind speaks but your mouth does not. Tell him so he understands what I know to be true about you.”

Staring into my uncle’s dark eyes, I shrugged, finding myself on the verge of tears yet again. “It doesn’t matter what I tell him, he doesn’t seem to believe me.”

“Then tell me what is wrong.”

“Why do men think they have to buy me? What am I doing wrong? Why can’t they just accept me and what I offer--my unconditional love?” I broke down crying and turned away from

him. I felt the weight of the kitchen staff's stare on me. "Excuse me."

I headed out of the kitchen fast, not wanting to talk anymore about it. If Kurt was so sure that I was materialistic that he'd not only leave me and never look back but try to insist on spending an outrageous amount of money on a ring then we had nothing. I was still reeling over the fact that he tried to take me to Tiffany's to pick anything I wanted. Why couldn't he understand that he was the only thing I'd ever wanted in my life and that he'd already given me a gift that was immeasurable?

"Devan?"

I stalled at the sound of a voice that always made me cringe. Tonight was no exception. Chas Martin moved in close to me and put his hand on my arm. I fought the urge to stomp on his foot and spit in his eye.

"Are you okay?"

Do I look okay?

"I'm fine." Forcing a smile to my face, I held my emotions in.

Chas tipped his head and piles of unnaturally blond hair fell into his grey-blue eyes. "Pardon me for saying so, but you don't look fine."

"You may be an ass, but you're perceptive. I'll give you that much," I said, not bothering to sugarcoat it.

Laughing, Chas shrugged. "Anyway I can be of service, my lady."

I couldn't help but smile. His face lit and he adjusted his navy silk tie. "Job well done if I do say so myself. I don't think I can remember a time when I made you smile and it wasn't a lip curling, want to gouge my eyes out kind of smile."

It felt good to laugh. I winked and nodded. "Thank you for this."

"See, I'm not all that bad."

"I wouldn't go that far," I said, giving him a suspicious look. "But, I can say that you wear who you are on your sleeve, Chas. A woman knows what she's getting when it comes to you."

"Are you saying I have an 'enter at your own risk' sign above my head?" He grinned.

"More like 'high maintenance' but still." Taking a deep breath in, I nodded. "Okay, I need to go find my son now."

"Want some help?" he asked, sliding his hand down my arm.

Kurt was suddenly there, removing Chas' hand from me and drawing me into his arms. "No, she doesn't want or need your help."

"Devan?" Chas asked.

I looked at Kurt and shook my head, unable to believe what I'd just heard. "Excuse you, Chef Holland, but I think you just overstepped your bounds and were incredibly rude to an acquaintance of mine. If you have something you would like to discuss with me, it can be done in private."

"Chef Kurt Holland?"

Kurt didn't respond. He simply stared down at me with a hard expression. Rolling my eyes, I nodded for him. "Yes, Chas. This is Chef Kurt Holland. Kurt this is Chas Martins."

"Mom," Brody said, rushing towards me. He looked so handsome all dressed up that I couldn't help but smile.

"Wow, lookin' hot, buddy."

His face reddened. "*Mom.*"

"Sorry, didn't mean to embarrass you again. Maybe we could work out some sort of

signal. It would let me know when I'm doing it."

"Don't bother. I'd be doing it all the time." He smiled. "But, I guess you're not that bad."

"Want me to pinch your cheeks and make cute noises at you, poopsie?"

"Poopsie? You're evil, woman. Evil."

Chas laughed deeply. "Oh, he knows you well, Devan."

"Don't encourage him, Chas."

"Chas?" Brody asked, his face hardening. "Chas Martins?"

Chas shifted awkwardly, and nodded. "I should be getting back to my table now. It was nice to see you again, Devan. Nice to meet you Chef Holland, Brody."

"Yeah, run, asshole," Brody said, slightly under his breath.

My eyes widened. I went to yell at him but Kurt beat me to it. "Broderick Kyle Holland, you will not use that language again. Understood?"

Brody nodded and turned a set of hard eyes on Chas. "I would say I'm sorry but I'm not. I'll risk getting grounded for you to know that I don't like you one bit."

"Holland?" Chas asked, looking a bit nervous. "What do you mean, Holland? Your last name is Charter, Devan. Brody's last name is Charter."

I ignored him and focused on my son. "Brody, we will talk about this later."

"Talk about it now, mom. Ask him how I know his name. Ask him how I know his cell phone number."

I let out a soft laugh. "Sweetie, it's been a long day. You flew in early this morning and..."

Brody turned around fast and tapped a man on the shoulder. "Excuse me, sir. I don't mean to interrupt your dinner with your family but my great-great grandmother fell and broke her hip yesterday and I'm so worried that I can't think about eating. Do you have a cell phone on you? I just want to check on her but my mom and dad left theirs at home on accident."

The man stared at Brody for a minute and then smiled. "Sure thing, son. It's good to hear that young people today still have respect for their grandparents."

"Thanks. I'll be right back." He moved back towards us fast, opened the phone and dialed a number. Chas' phone began to ring. "Aren't ya gonna answer it? Huh? Drew might need more 'stuff' to help with pain. You might miss your chance to keep him playing even though he should have his knee operated on. Even though you know what you're giving him is something that made him want more. Made him have to have it."

Brody glared at Chas. "Made him start to hurt my mom when he'd never once said even a mean word to her before that. You gave him things that made him stop loving us!"

"Brody, he loves you, baby. Don't say that."

Chas turned to walk away and I grabbed his arm. I thrust my hand inside his jacket pocket and took his phone. Flipping it open, I stared at Brody.

He smiled. "Hi, mom. It's me, Brody. How's grandma?"

Taking the phone away from my face, I stared at Chas. "Unless you want me to make a scene, you will walk outside with me, now."

"Devan," Kurt said, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Talk to him in my office."

"No. If I kill him I'll get blood all over the place."

"Sweet, Mom is ticked. Used to irritate Drew, but after a year of Uncle Gideon trying to teach her self-defense, I'm betting she can kick some major," he glanced at Kurt and me and smiled, "backside. Yep, major backside."

It hit me then. "You're one of the silent owners of the team, aren't you?"

Chas nodded.

I laughed. "Well, I guess I can stop wondering where Drew managed to get the endless supply of drugs. I'd like to thank you for the need to line your pockets by keeping Drew playing. You almost destroyed a good man. You fed his addiction making it almost impossible to get him help."

Chas stared around, looking uncomfortable. "Devan, he was in pain. We thought we could help."

"We? Oh, of course you aren't slick enough to come up with that on your own." I snorted. "Cover your ears, Brody."

He did, smiling wide.

"Consider the gloves off, Mr. Martins. I have put up with your pathetic attempts at getting something more from me for so many years that I have lost count. I seriously hope you have a back-up company in the wings. Monday morning, I will be meeting with your board of advisors and offering them a hell of a buyout package."

He laughed. "You can't afford to do that, Devan."

"Can't I?"

"Drew told me that you've refused to take a cent from him, regardless how hard he tries to give you alimony and child support. You play second fiddle at a company that will never put you higher than you are."

"Funny, last time I checked I owned the place but I could be wrong." Tapping my chin I laughed. "Oh, I know what it was. I forgot to mention that I own thirty percent of your company as well, or rather, Roberto Stefanni does. It was so nice of my uncle to let me put that in his name."

Chas shook his head. "No, C.D.U. is owned by C.D. Pace. Not you."

Grinning, I tipped my head. "C.D.U. stands for *Canto Degli Uccelli*."

"Bird song?" Kurt asked, sounding amused.

I nodded. "And C.D. Pace stands for *Colomba Della Pace*."

Kurt burst into laughter. "Trust you to come up with the Italian way to use dove of peace as a name."

"There is no way you built a multi-million dollar company from the ground up with as young as you are," Chas said, still attempting to deny what was so clearly true.

"Mr. Martins, I spent my life in competitions for this and for that. By the time I was in sixth grade I had made enough to cover my college education. I didn't stop there. I went right up until I became pregnant with Brody, trusting my uncle to invest what I'd made and letting his financial advisors assist me, when I came to them and told them that I was having a child and wanted to do something that assured a steady income, should my then husband be injured."

I laughed. "I tried to explain to Drew that we didn't need him to keep playing, to keep pushing himself but you all convinced him otherwise. You," I pointed at him and kept my voice even, avoiding drawing attention to us, "fed his addiction, Chas, and the entire time you did it, you tried to get me to 'join you' and I think we both know what I'm talking about."

"Devan. It wasn't like we set out to get him hooked."

"Yeah, well know that I am setting out to get you, Chas. Just not the way you always wanted."

Chas shook his head. "You landed clients that no newbie gets, Devan. Did Drew back you, is that it?"

"No, Chas, I simply let the word out to all of the executives I'd met throughout my years

of competitions. Funny, after shaking my ass in front of them for sixteen years they were more than willing to have me around, lending consulting advice where needed. Imagine their surprise when they learned that in addition to a nice rack, I actually had a brain, too. Word spread from there and I have never had to advertise. So, yes, I did build a multi-million dollar company from the ground up. Or rather, one swimsuit competition at a time.”

“Devan?”

“Oh, pull your jaw up and then remove yourself from my line of sight. You sicken me.”

Without further dramatics, Chas walked off and out the door. Brody put his hands down and made a funny face. “I can’t believe you said nice rack.”

Laughing, I pulled him into my arms and hugged him tight. “Hey, I left out the part about I take business meetings over the phone while playing video games with you.”

“Oh, and you should have told him that your ‘answering service’ when you’re in the shower or busy, was me and all my buddies.”

I kissed the top of his head and squeezed him again. “I think I’m going to have to break down and get an office somewhere now, sweetie. I know I promised that I’d stay home, to be there in case you need anything but we’ve got a smaller place now and to be honest, Brody, I have got to hire employees. Me and you at the dining room table tossing wadded up paper at the waste paper basket isn’t cutting it anymore. Jake is like this close,” I held up my fingers and made a tiny pinching gesture, “to telling Gideon that I’m working myself to death. He tends to overreact so it would be good if I head that off.”

Brody stilled. “What about Dad?”

“He’s already moved out of the house and keeps trying to give it to us. I told him to sell it. That was hard because you grew up there but the bad memories are a little too bad for your dad or myself to be around. He’s living in a condo now, you know, on the west side. And I made sure that he hired a maid and someone to cook for him when he’s home. So, he’ll be fine without us there, Brody.”

Brody sighed and took my hands in his. I bent down and he looked me straight in the eyes. “Mom, I heard Drew talking on the phone to somebody when I was nine. He told them that he knew I wasn’t his and that if you found out you’d leave him. It was after he got hurt bad. He said something about his count. I don’t know what that means but he told the guy he was positive I wasn’t his son regardless of what his count was and not to bother checking. Something about the dates being way off.” Brody looked away. “He was worried, real worried that Uncle Robert would tell you if he found out you weren’t happy.”

“Brody, you should have told me what you overheard.” I pushed his black hair behind his ear. “I wasn’t listening very well then though, was I?”

“No.” He wrapped his arms around my neck. “But I told Uncle Robert what I heard. Mom, the guy spent the rest of the day dancing around singing *That’s Amore*. He is so weird but I love him. He also told me who my dad is.”

Kurt bent down next to me. “I talked to you on the phone and over the webcam at least three times a week, Brody. You could have told me. I’d have dropped everything and rushed in.”

Brody looked at him like he was nuts. “Hey, I needed to make sure you were still good enough for my mom. I wasn’t about to let any ol’ guy show up for her.”

Kurt narrowed his gaze. “Is this why you started asking me about girls?”

“Girls?” I grabbed hold of Kurt’s arm to steady myself. He laughed and held me firm.

“Baby, you don’t understand. He wanted to know about any girls I dated. He wanted the whole list.”

Arching a brow, I sucked in my lower lip. "Is the list that long?"

"It just got a hell of a lot shorter," he said, smiling mischievously. "In fact, you're the only one on it from here on out."

"Wait. Are you two together?" Brody asked, eyeing us skeptically. "'Cause when I asked about dad I was talking 'bout Kurt, mom. Can we make room for him in our lives? Please?"

A lopsided grin spread over Kurt's face. "Yeah, Mom, please? I'm sorry I was bad. I won't do it again." He stood, taking me with him. The child-like banter stopped. "I mean it, Devan. I don't think I can own you, buy you, any of that. I just keep feeling like I'm not worthy of you, baby. That's all."

"Kurt, all I ever wanted is you and you still managed to give me the greatest gift ever." I pulled Brody in between us and hugged him tight. "You gave me Brody."

"I love you," he whispered.

Brody pulled his elbow in fast and jerked his leg out. "Yes!"

We stared down at him and laughed. "Don't you have a phone to return someone, Mr. Liar Liar?"

He grinned at me. "Mmmhmm, this from the lady who tried to tell me that she never got into trouble growing up."

"I was a good girl."

"That's not what Bubba said. He said something about a nursing outfit and I ran away." He ran off before I could comment further.

Kurt took my hand in his and slipped something over my ring finger. When I glanced down and spotted the square cut, peach blossom, diamond set in white gold, I went in close to him and pressed my lips to his. I kissed him passionately, leaving him finding creative ways to inch up my dress.

Chuckling, I moved his hands out to my sides and held them there while we continued to kiss. The second *That's Amore* began to filter throughout E&E, Kurt laughed, too.

"Dance, you two. Dance," Robert said, appearing next to us with Liz in his arms.

I wrapped my arms around Kurt fast when I felt him go to move. He kissed my forehead. "Baby, it's okay. I promise."

Against my better judgment, I released him. He went straight for his mother and Robert stepped back, letting Kurt hug Liz. "If you're happy then I'm happy, Mom. And," he glanced back at Robert, "I guess you could have done worse than Bobby."

"Oh, stop it, Kurt. You know that he's the closest you ever had to a real father figure," Liz said, kissing Kurt's cheek.

"Mom," Kurt whined, sounding so much like Brody that I laughed. "Can we stop saying that? I know that Bobby thinks of Devan as his own and it's just weird if he thinks of me that way, too."

"Kurtis." Liz gave him a fake dirty look and winked. "A little birdie with a heavy accent told me you're getting married. Is that true?"

"Yes, Mom. It's true. I couldn't wait another minute to ask her. I want to know that she'll never slip through my fingers again--that my family is together as it should be."

Liz hugged him tight. "My son has a son. Mmm, I want lots more grandbabies. So does Robert. Get working on it. We need to start planning the wedding. There are so many people we need to invite. Once the papers catch wind of it they'll be all over you and Devan. Did you warn her of that? Oh, Devan I'll need to call your mother and get going on details."

"No," I said a little too fast. "Since I talked to your son until I was blue in the face on the

way over here I get that I'm not getting out of a large wedding but if it's okay, Liz, I'd like for you to be the one making the decisions for me. Not my mother."

"Oh, Devan is she still siding with your father?"

Kurt wrapped his arms around me. "What happened?"

"My, umm..."

Liz snarled. "Her ass of a father is still mad at her for divorcing Drew. He thinks it's her fault things got out of hand. Because Drew cleaned up so quickly after she left, he's convinced that she didn't stick it out long enough. Oh, like two years was nothing."

"Liz, he is technically the reason I'm here today. He created me but that doesn't mean in my eyes he's my father." I glanced at Robert and shrugged as unshed tears filled my eyes. "Uncle Robert is the one who has always been there for me. He may not be my biological father but he's the father of my heart," I said, borrowing his description for me. "He's actually mom and dad wrapped up in one."

He was on me in an instant, lifting me off the ground and spinning me around in his arms. "This is very good, Devan. Very good."

"I love you, too," I said, hugging him tight as he set me down.

"I am so proud of you. I am proud of Maestro, too, and of our Brody." Robert put my hand in Kurt's and nodded. "Dance."

Kurt pulled me close to him and began to dance. The shock must have shown on my face because he chuckled as he spun me out and then pulled me back into his arms. "Did you forget who my mother is? She's like another version of you."

"Funny, I was just thinking that Uncle Robert is another version of you."

"You are so very lucky I've been head over heels in love with you for *over* twelve years. A comment like that could get you in trouble." He wagged his brows.

Going to my tiptoes, I pressed my mouth to his ear. "Mmm, I can think of a few ways you could punish me, Maestro."

His entire body went stiff, including his cock which was now pressed against my low stomach. He groaned. "Devan."

"Aww, poor baby. Just wait until you realize we can't go home and do what we want because we've got an eleven year old close to us. And if you have your way, we'll have a very big belly in our way as well."

Kurt wagged his brows and turned to look out and over his restaurant. "Excuse me, everyone. I'd like to take a moment to introduce you to my soon-to-be wife and the mother of my son."

I went into his arms more, as all the patrons in the restaurant seemed to look in our direction. Their gaze went from Kurt and me to the picture. Uncle Robert made an odd noise as the patrons erupted into applause.

"Maestro, is that a painting of who I think it is?"

Liz laughed and spun Uncle Robert in the other direction. He continued to gooseneck around, looking between the painting and then back at me. His eyes widened. Liz kept him going.

"That settles it," Kurt said, kissing my forehead.

"Thank God, I wasn't sure you'd ever agree to take it down."

He chuckled. "I'm not taking it down. I'm just going to have Wynona hang some sort of cloth over the exposed parts. I didn't realize how very accurate her painting was until I got to see them for myself--with the lights on. I'd rather not have every male here knowing what my wife

looks like naked.”

I shook my head. “Wow, progress. At this rate, I’ll be seventy before you agree it should come down.”

Gideon, Jake, Wynona and Vanessa came rushing up towards Kurt’s impromptu dance area. My heart leapt to my throat. I grabbed Kurt’s arm tight. “Don’t kill my brother. No matter how much he threatens to kill you over the painting.”

“I love you,” he whispered.

Wynona reached for my hand and zeroed in on the engagement ring. “It’s true! Brody’s right.”

“So,” Vanessa tipped her head a bit, “does this mean Jake will quit cutting me off when I accidentally slip up that Kurt is the chef you had it bad for all those years ago, Devan?”

It was Jake who responded. “If she didn’t know before, she does now.” He put his hand out to Kurt. “Maestro, you’ve got yourself a fine woman there. Congratulations.”

Gideon stared at Kurt a minute and I wasn’t sure what he’d do. He reached for Kurt so fast it was almost a blur and pulled him into a rather manly hug. They each patted the others back before nodding and breaking away.

Gideon swallowed hard. “She really is a dove, Maestro. Take care of her. Please.”

“I have been in love with your sister for almost fifteen years. Had I known about any of it, Gideon, I’d have been there, sweeping her and Brody away. Like I told her, had I understood things better, I’d have never left to begin with.”

The encouraging nod that came from Gideon warmed my heart. “I know, Kurt. I watched this little girl,” he rolled his eyes, “who is now a woman, love you from a distance her entire life. I should have known it was mutual. I didn’t see any other skater guys hanging out at her pageants and when you could, coming to her games to watch her cheerlead.”

I arched a brow. “Say what?”

“I told you that you were wonderful at your pageants, Devs,” Kurt said, winking. “And when you told me you did all right, I knew how very modest you were being. Oh, and I’ve seen you in those tiny bikinis more times than I can count.”

I just stood there staring at him like he’d gone mad. Maybe, we all had. Wynona and Vanessa exchanged glances and nodded. Something else hit me then. “Ohmygod, Kurt has my panties!”

Laughing, he dodged my poke to the ribs. “I told you that I have a collection of your panties. Though, the last pair you threw at me tonight appears to be the only pair you gave to me willingly. I also got to confirm the peaches thing firsthand.”

Gideon groaned. “Good to know my baby sister is banging the creepy chef guy.”

“Kurt has never been creepy!” I glared at Gideon. “Quiet, reserved, yes. Creepy, no.”

“Ha, you apparently never got to see the way he and Drew had these bizarre, stand-offs is the best way I can describe them,” Jake said, moving forward and kissing my cheek. “Congratulations, but you need to know that my home is always open to you and Brody, should you need it.”

“She won’t.” Kurt hugged me tight. “I plan on making this girl the happiest woman in the world.”

Touching his chest, I stared up into his green eyes. “Explain the bizarre stand-off comment. And tell me how it is my brother, his best friend and Drew recognized you before I did.”

“I got this one, Devan,” Jake said, winking. “He didn’t hide behind his hair all the time.

Just when he was around you. If you think about it, Kurt and the rest of us are the same age. I get that you felt like four years was a ton between you and Kurt back then but the same amount of years separated you and Drew.”

I pointed at him. “If you dare try to pick on Drew’s intelligence again I will kick you in your backside. He’s a very smart man who happens to excel at playing a sport. I hate your backhanded comments about Drew and his brains.”

“Hey, I know the guy is smart. Hell, I’m the one who had to listen to my mother bitch about my underachieving and my naturally gifted cousin,” Jake said, smiling. “I just do it because it pisses him off and it’s something I’ve done since we were young. I do, however, think he is an absolute dumbass for losing you. Umm, no offense, Kurt.”

I shook my head. “Enough. I want to hear what happened between Kurt and Drew.”

Kurt kissed my temple. “And I think I’ve spent enough of the last few days in trouble with you. How about we save that one for a day I haven’t already got your temper riled up.”

Licking my lower lip, I stared up at him with a sexy smile. “Mmm, so you’re saying you’re never going to tell me.” My eyes widened as I thought about the incident at the store. I covered my mouth. “Honey, you insisted on paying for Brody’s bedroom furniture because...”

Vanessa cut me off. “Pfft, probably because Kurt is stinkin’ rich and also because he’s loved that kid for three years.”

“Huh?”

She smiled. “I didn’t tell Wynona because I thought you were happy where you were and it didn’t make sense to get her going too, but Kurt’s been talking to me about Brody for three years now. He got super shit faced about four years ago and confessed to us that he’d spent a few years in Ohio, too. He also said that his heart stayed there--that he fell in love with a woman there and would always love her. It was kind of cute to see Kurt open up so much. He went on and on about how amazing she, or rather, you were. How beautiful, talented, smart, sexy, everything he ever wanted in a woman.”

Wynona gave Kurt a big hug. “We didn’t start thinking about how much your story matched up to ours about Devan until later but we didn’t want to throw a wrench into everyone’s lives. Besides, it wouldn’t have done you any good to hear about how happy Devan and Drew were. I never knew you were talking with Brody over the web and phone.”

Vanessa raised her hand. “I did. I taught Brody how to transfer video recordings to his computer, convert them and send them to Kurt. But, Brody only called him Maestro so it threw me at first. It wasn’t until I came in to the restaurant for lunch with one of my friends and wanted to say hi to Kurt that I found him watching a previously recorded tape Brody had sent. It had Brody, Gideon and Robert on it.”

Kurt shifted a bit. “I honestly thought he was Gideon’s little boy. Bobby never said he was yours, Devs, and Brody just calls you Mom, not your name. I think I looked at Brody and found similarities between Gideon and him. Dark hair, tall, all that stuff. I even asked him about his aunt a few times and he told me *they* were fine--living in New York.” He glanced at Wynona and Vanessa. “I’m fairly sure now that Brody was talking about you two.”

I groaned. “My uncle has known all along. Drew and I were going through a baby name book and I hated everything. I do mean everything we had, except Kyle for a middle name because of Gideon. Uncle Robert comes wandering out of the kitchen, looks down at me and tells me that he’s always been partial to the name Broderick or Brody even.” I laughed as I thought back to it. “The second I heard it, Brody started kicking me so hard I thought he was going to break free of my stomach and run around the place. Drew and I laughed, and agreed if

Brody liked it, so did we. My uncle is a sly one. He walked away whistling *That's Amore*."

Brody came running up, smiling wide. "Mom, Mom, did you tell Uncle Gideon about..." He stopped and stared at the picture. His eyes grew wide and his cheeks flared red.

"Marvin!" Kurt yelled. "Find a table cloth and tack it up over the painting. Now!"

Brody's gaze went from the painting to me and he looked slightly ill. I went to him but he took a giant step backwards and bumped into Jake. "She wins, again."

Jake laughed.

Gideon glanced back at the painting and smiled. "Nice. Who is the hot chick?"

Wynona covered her mouth and Vanessa made a gagging sound. Jake laughed so hard he drew the attention of patrons. I cringed. Gideon's brow furrowed for a moment before his face scrunched up. He glared at Wynona. "You are dead!"

In an instant, he was chasing her out the front door with her laughing the entire way. Kurt bent down and put his hand out to Brody. "The picture is my fault. She didn't do it to embarrass you. I'm sorry."

Brody's lips pursed. "Are you saying you've had a picture of my mom all this time? A picture like that?" He gave a wide-eyed pointed look towards what Marvin and two other men were now tacking a sheet over.

Kurt offered a sheepish smile and a small nod. "Yeah. Sorry about that. I'll have it taken down."

"Can't we have Aunt Wynona paint some clothes on her?" Brody asked, smiling at Kurt. "I kind of like knowing my dad thinks my mom is hot."

We all laughed at that one.

Chapter Ten

I woke to the feel of something pressing into me, filling my body completely. Blinking, I stared up to find a pair of green eyes and a sexy smile greeting me.

“Mmm, good morning,” Kurt whispered as he eased his cock into me more.

I slid my leg up his and stretched, arching my back in the process, taking him deeper. “Are you going to keep waking me up like this?”

He’d been doing it for close to four weeks. Kurt had no problem with waking me up throughout the night to make love to me. I didn’t have a problem with it either so I let it go. Being with him was like living a fantasy.

“If you’d stop feeling so good I’d only do this to you twice a night,” he said, kissing the tip of my nose as he pumped into me. He laid his body weight down on me and I wrapped my legs around him tight.

Kurt began to thrust and I hissed as pain went through my breasts. He stilled. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I love feeling you against me. I do, but,” I pressed up on his chest a bit, “I’m kind of sensitive this morning.”

He gave me a puzzled look.

“My breasts, Kurt. They hurt.”

He arched a brow. “They do that?” Kurt propped himself in a semi-push up. “I’ll stop, Devs. I didn’t realize I was hurting you.”

I grabbed hold of his ass cheeks and pulled him to me. “No way are you getting out of this, bucko. I’m so horny now that I can’t stand it. Besides, you’re on borrowed time.”

His face paled. “Borrowed time? Devs, no. Baby, we can fix whatever is wrong. Don’t shut me out of your life. Please. Brody and I are getting along great. You and I are in love, right? Right? Devs?”

I snickered. “Kurt, I’m a woman. Once a month we have to take about five to seven days off from certain activities or risk making a mess. I’m not leaving you or shutting you out of my life. Yes, I love you. Things are perfect between us. I was just trying to tell you that…”

“Your period,” he said, nodding and then smiling. “You’re late.”

“How do you know I’m late?”

He wagged his brows. “I know your cycle, too. Wynona and Vanessa made sure of it. Remember?” His hungry gaze raked down me. “Your breasts hurt and you’re late. Are you pregnant?”

Cupping his face, I smiled up at him. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

“But I thought you agreed we both wanted more children?”

I nodded. “Kurt, I do want more children but I’ve had my hopes crushed so many times in the past that I don’t want to get excited just yet. Okay? Please. If you want to focus your attention on something, convince Uncle Robert that we don’t need five hundred people to come to our wedding.”

Easing himself in and out of me, ever so slightly, Kurt stared down at me. “All those times before were with,” he glanced away, “*him*, Devs. Not me. We made Brody in one night. I

know I can give you a child. Hell, he's sleeping in the room down the hall from us right now. And he's perfect in every way imaginable. Be excited that I might have given you--us, more. Please."

I bit back tears as I stared up at him. "Kurt, Drew can have children. I'm positive of it. That being said, even without those results Gideon got for you, confirming Brody being yours, Drew couldn't have been his father. I didn't sleep with him until I was already pushing my fifth month of pregnancy." I sighed. "But I do know he can father children. His count may be low but he still can father them. I went to Gideon's partner when I miscarried. I couldn't deal with everyone knowing."

Kurt kissed the top of my head. "How many times have you..."

Tears welled in my eyes. "I've been pregnant twice but only have one child. Gideon's partner has been an angel about keeping that from him. He knows it would have crushed Gideon almost as much as it did me. Drew knows about it. It devastated him."

Kurt's jaw hardened. "Did he hurt you when you were pregnant with his...?"

I shook my head. "No. I was almost to the end of my first trimester when I sat Drew down and told him he was going to be a daddy again because I really thought we were out of the woods. We'd spent all those years trying with no luck and I wanted to be certain before I got his hopes up. He was so excited. So was I. We agreed to tell Brody after Drew's game that night."

I let the tears out I'd been trying to hold in. "It was the night he got hurt while playing. I remember being in the stands, cheering him on with Brody next me all decked in Drew's number and colors. Then I remember seeing Drew get hit. His body twisted at this strange, unnatural angle. It was like in slow motion. Brody didn't understand and he kept cheering, yelling 'Go Daddy.' But I knew. I knew the minute his teammates looked up at me that it was bad."

I closed my eyes a moment. "I grabbed Brody and met Drew down by the locker room. He was on a stretcher and clearly in pain. Jake went to take Brody from me and I felt like something stabbed me in the gut. I knew I was in the process of miscarrying all the way to the hospital to be with Drew. I knew but I didn't tell him it happened until he was home close to three weeks later." I opened my eyes and locked gazes with Kurt. "He blamed himself for that. He thinks the stress of me seeing him be hurt caused it. I couldn't make him understand that it just happened. He didn't make it happen. Well, from there, he started in on the pain killers and the rest is history. So, please, don't get excited about this right now. I couldn't take seeing Drew's disappointment, I'll die inside if I let you down, too."

Kurt withdrew from me and cupped my chin with one hand. "Devan Jazz, you better never keep information like this from me again. Ever. I don't know how you thought I'd react but I can tell you this, I love you and I would love you if Brody wasn't mine, if you had a trillion children by Drew. I'd love anything or anyone that comes from you, Devan. Had I known, I wouldn't have pushed so hard to expand our family."

I pressed my finger to his lips. "I want this more than you'll ever know but I want to keep it between us, in case it doesn't work out the way we want. I promise that I'll get in to see a doctor here right away. I don't want Brody or anyone else to know. Not until we're out of the woods."

"Do you think you're pregnant?" he asked, his voice low.

"I think," I kissed his lips gently, "that you should finish making love to me now. You're the one who woke me up and got me in the mood. Now, finish what you started."

"But if you are, I could hurt the baby. I could..."

"Kurt, make love to me, please."

He shook his head, dropped down, pushed my tank top up, and began planting kisses on my stomach. I could have sworn that I heard him uttering prayers as he went. I ran my fingers through his hair and smiled.

“Dad, Dad, Tony Hawke is on the TV this morning.” The sound of Brody’s voice, just outside my bedroom door left Kurt moving up and next to me so fast I almost missed it.

He jerked the sheets over us just as the door opened. Brody came running in. “Dad, come see!”

I knew Kurt was naked. He looked at me for help. I laughed and smiled at Brody. “Morning, sweetie. Go ahead out. He’ll be there in just a minute. I promise.”

“Okay, hurry,” Brody said, heading off in the other direction, leaving the door wide open. Kurt groaned as he fell onto his back. “That was close.”

I laughed. “It might be wise for us to put a lock on the door.”

“Or, you could give into my pleas and move upstairs with me instead. We can put a lock on that door. My place is twice the size of this one. You can have your office up there in the loft area, Brody can have his own room and we’ve still got another room for guests or,” he glanced at my stomach, “other things.”

“Fine. But I’m too tired to do it today.”

“Fine? That’s a yes?”

Laughing, I nodded. “It’s a yes. Now, give me back my underwear you stole and my bottoms. I’m exhausted.”

He kissed my cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I yawned. “Now, I need some more sleep.”

“Devs, are you feeling okay? You’ve been taking a lot of naps lately.”

Giving him a droll look, I blinked. “I’m sorry but some guy keeps waking me up at all hours of the night and using my body until neither of us can move. Blame him.”

“If I catch the bastard, I’ll kick his ass for you,” Kurt said, kissing my cheek. “Get some sleep. I’ve got a Tony Hawke date with my son. Don’t forget that everyone is coming in this weekend to see Brody and you.”

I grinned. “And you too, Kurt. You’re part of the family now. Don’t forget that.”

Chapter Eleven

“Hey, I grabbed lunch!” Vanessa came rushing through the open door, smiling wide and went straight for the kitchen counter. “Why won’t you let Kurt come in? He looks lonely sitting on the steps outside your door.”

Turning, I locked gazes with Kurt. My gut clenched as I saw the hurt in his eyes. I tried to stay hard, not giving an inch but he made it difficult. To be honest, I wasn’t even sure what I was mad at him about. I was just incredibly moody.

He stuck his bottom lip out in a pout and locked his green gaze on me.

Rolling my eyes, I nodded. “Geesh, you’re like a stray dog. Toss a little something at you and I can’t shake you.” I winked.

Kurt hopped off the step and put his arms out. “I’ll take stray dog comments if it means you’ll let me carry your things up to *our* place.”

“Kurt...” The sound of Brody’s voice stopped me.

I glanced back to see the screen on the TV/DVD combo Vanessa had given me showing Brody standing in my uncle’s restaurant. He was bent down a bit and closer to the camera than normal. I’d not played anymore of it from the first night because Brody had shown up and life hadn’t let up a bit since then.

Vanessa moved the bag of food and went to turn it off. “I’m sorry. I bumped it. I’ll shut it...”

“No, leave it.”

“Devan, no. Just forget it. Kurt can carry this up and we can throw the DVD away. Okay?”

I shook my head. “Let it play.”

She didn’t argue anymore. She backed out of the way and let it continued.

Brody’s face filled the screen. “Aunt Vanessa, I’m sending you a box of tapes marked skating. None of them are. I need you to keep them safe. Uncle Robert told me that Uncle Gideon is itching for a reason to kill Drew. I’m all for that if it didn’t mean they’d make my uncle go away for a long time. So, you keep them there with you and I’ll get them when I come up. I marked a few with sticky notes. I put the times on there that I want you to put on the DVD we’re making mom to remember how strong she is. To remember to never go back.”

“Brody,” Gideon’s voice sounded over the DVD.

He looked over his shoulder. “Just a minute, Uncle Gideon. I’m heating up Brussels sprouts.” From the look on Brody’s face, it was an obvious lie.

“I need to make a phone call. I’ll wait for you in the parking lot. That crap stinks and I’m not coming anywhere near it.”

Brody snickered. “That was almost too easy.” He stared at the camera again. “Aunt Vanessa, you can put this on the tape too, if you want, so Mom knows that I made you do it, cuz I know you won’t want to when you see what it is. Grandma Liz told Uncle Robert to watch for signs that mom might try to go back to Drew. She said its typical or something. I don’t know. I wasn’t supposed to be listening so I only caught some of it. I want to show her what she’ll be going back to. I want her to know that *I know* and I can never forget or forgive him.”

Vanessa went to shut it off and I put my hand up. “No. Wait.”

“Dev, you really don’t want to see this. Brody might come back with Gideon and Jake any minute.”

I gave her a droll look. “They went sight seeing. Gideon had an itinerary. They’ll be gone until after dinner. Now let me see what he’s talking about.”

Vanessa nodded and pressed the button. “Kurt might want to leave. I don’t think he’s going to deal well with this.”

The image came back and I watched as Brody put a flower in a vase on a white tray full of food. He wasn’t in the restaurant anymore.

“Where is he?” Kurt asked.

“Our old kitchen.”

Brody smiled at the camera. “Okay, dad, you get to come with me to thank mom for that kick butt party yesterday. We got to skate until it was dark out and the band hung out and did it, too. It was awesome. Uncle Robert says you’d have liked that. He says that you play guitar, too, like me and that you like to skateboard, too. I know you like to cook since I do it with you all the time. Uncle Robert says you’ll like getting to be part of this--getting to surprise mom.”

“He’s talking to you, isn’t he?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” Warm arms wrapped around me and I smiled when Kurt’s familiar scent surrounded me. I couldn’t help myself. I pulled his arms around me tighter and leaned into him as I watched Brody on the TV.

“Okay,” Brody said, looking very excited. “I made everything you said would make a nice breakfast. Now we get to give it to her.”

Brody set the camera on the tray and began to walk with it. I covered my eyes. “Whoa, that’ll make you sick.”

He walked out of the kitchen and went for the stairs.

“Hey, kiddo, what are you doing up so early?”

The sound of Drew’s voice made me stiffen. Kurt held me tight. I watched as part of Drew’s body came into focus. He had his gym bag in his hand. “Mom’s still sleeping. Why don’t you let her rest a while?”

“When did you get home?” Brody asked, not sounding pleased in the least.

“I got in late last night. Sorry I missed your party. It sounded like you had fun. Listen, I’d take you out for the day to celebrate but since your mother threw away my pain pills I need to go pay a visit to the *doctor*. I’ll call home later and touch base with you. How’s that sound?”

Brody twisted a little and the camera caught more of Drew’s body as he went towards the front door. “Mom didn’t throw anything away. You left them lying on the kitchen table and I put them up on the counter for you. They’re by the coffee pot.”

Drew stopped dead in his tracks. “She didn’t throw them... umm,” he sighed and touched his stomach as though he were suddenly nauseous, “hey, let her sleep a while and when she gets up tell her that I’ll be back early and pick up dinner from somewhere. Should I get her some flowers? What do you think? Think she’ll like that?”

“I’m giving her one now.”

“I see that. It’s nice. How about something pretty then? Does mom want anything that you know of?”

Brody exhaled loudly. “Nothing that can be bought.”

“I’m sure I can find something for her, Brods.” Drew opened the door. “I’ve gotta go, buddy. I love ya.” He headed out the door.

“Flowers? Pretty things? What a moron. I told you, dad. The man is so not related to me. Mom would never fall for pretty...” Brody stood there a minute and then gasped. “No!”

He ran with the tray in his hands up the stairs, sloshing breakfast food everywhere. The camera bounced with him. He stopped outside my bedroom door and panted so hard that the camera picked it up. “Don’t let her be dead. Don’t let her be dead.”

I drew in a sharp breath as Kurt hugged me tight.

Brody entered my room and the camera showed an empty bed. The once white sheets were bloody and the side lamp was knocked over. He turned fast and cried out as an image of my lifeless body covered the screen. My back was to it but it was clear to see that I’d been through a hell of a night. The flimsy, short, silk nightgown I had on rode up high, almost exposing my backside. There were large hand print bruises on my legs.

Brody dropped the tray, camera and all as he ran to me. The camera kept recording as he pushed me onto my back and hissed. “M-o-m,” he said, his voice shaky, his eyes full of tears. Blood ran down the corner of my mouth and when my body moved slightly I could see a puddle of blood on the floor where I had been. “Mom, please wake up.”

I never budged. Brody hugged me tight and began to shake. “It’s okay. You can get up. He’s gone. It’s okay now. I won’t let him hurt you anymore. It’s okay. You can get up. Please. Mom.” He cried so hard that he began to cough. “Mommy, get up. Don’t be dead. Don’t.”

“Shit,” Drew said, suddenly appearing in the room. He ran to me. Brody moved to his feet fast and charged Drew, catching him off guard and knocking him over. Instantly, he began to hit Drew, pounding away, half-punches half not.

“I hate you! Stay away from her! I hate you!” Brody screamed out in his rage. Tears streamed down his face as he went on. “Go! Get out and go. You don’t want to be here anyways. And we don’t want you here! You killed her! You...”

Drew caught Brody’s arms and held them down. “Hey, hey, calm down. It’s okay, buddy. Calm down.”

Brody’s chest rose and fell fast as his cheeks reddened. “My name is Brody not buddy, Drew. It’s a good name. It’s my father’s name,” he bit out. “And you will not touch her!”

“Brody?” Drew lifted Brody off him like he weighed nothing and moved to his knees. The sight of his closely cut sandy blond hair and blue eyes almost looking directly at the camera made me draw into myself. “Brody, mom must have fallen on her way to the bathroom. She worked too hard on all of that yesterday. I think it wore her out. That’s all. I need you to calm down so I can check on her. Can you do that?”

“You lie! You always lie! You hate her and I hate you! I hope you die! You’re not my father! You’re nothing to us and you know it! She was going to leave you! She doesn’t think I know but I do! She will! She’ll wake up and I’ll make her go!”

Brody launched at him again. Drew caught him and hugged him tight, pain evident on his face. “She fell, Brody. That’s all.” He stood, taking Brody with him. “I need to check on her. I’ll be out in a minute. She’ll be okay. I’ll take care of her. I promise. Stop that crazy talk and let me take care of mom.”

The second he walked off camera with Brody I knew what he was doing. He was shutting him out of the room. The door shut and the sound of a latch clicking filled the air. Pounding sounded next followed close by Brody yelling, “Stay away from her! Get away! She’s not yours anymore. She’s *mine* and I won’t let you hurt her anymore. We don’t need you, Drew! You are nothing to us! Nothing! Take your stupid pills and leave!”

Drew appeared in the frame again as he dropped down on his knees next to me. He pulled

me into his arms and rocked me as tears came to his eyes. "God, princess, I'm so sorry. I lost my temper. I didn't mean for this..." He put his fingers on my neck, checking for a pulse and jerked back. "Devan, princess. No!"

He picked up the phone again and dialed. "Give me Dr. Seward now! It's his sister." Drew pulled me onto his lap as my body began to convulse. "Gideon, I just got home. Devan fell and is hurt. Bad. I don't want the papers involved. Neither would she."

He hung up and stared at the door. "Brody! Open the front door, an ambulance and your uncle are coming."

Drew pressed his lips to my forehead and rocked me like a child on his lap. "Don't give up, princess. Don't give up. I'll fix this. It'll be okay." He rocked me faster as tears ran down his cheeks. "Why did you have to go looking for him? Why couldn't you leave well-enough alone? He can't have Brody and he can't have you. I won't let him take my family. I'll keep us together, princess, I promise."

It continued, him rocking me until someone pounded on the bedroom door. "Drew!"

It was Gideon.

Drew rushed to the door and the screen filled as Gideon rushed to my side. He immediately began checking my vitals and his face fell. "No!"

Paramedics filed in and tried to take over as Gideon began performing CPR. He refused to move. He kept going, tears streaming down his face. I made a choked, gagging noise and a gasp. He moved back and let the paramedics in.

"Gideon, what the hell's going on? Brody just called my cell and said that Drew killed... ohmygod... Devan!" Jake's voice was shaky at best.

Gideon's gaze went down me and locked on the bruises on my legs. Nothing short of rage slid over his face as he turned to find Drew on his hands and knees, whispering, "I'm so sorry, princess."

In an instant, he was on Drew, lifting him off the ground and throwing him into a wall. The paramedics worked quickly, glancing at one another but not saying a word as they put me on the cart and got me out of there.

Jake went at Gideon and tried to pull him off Drew. Gideon shoved Jake away and lifted Drew up again. He threw him again, this time towards the bedroom door and out of camera range. "You fucking piece of shit!"

"Gideon, you're going to kill him! Stop!" Jake yelled. "Brody, go to your room! Now! I'll take you to see Mommy in a minute. Go! Brody?"

The sound of fighting continued, even off camera I knew it was bad. Things shattered, Gideon kept shouting. Jake kept trying to get him to stop.

Finally, Jake shouted out, "Goddammit, Gideon! Devan is by herself, on the way to the hospital in who the hell knows what kind of shape. She needs you! She needs your help. Something's wrong with Brody. He's huddled in a ball in the hallway and I can't get him to move. Leave Drew and help me with him. Devan needs us now. She needs you, her big brother."

The screen went blank.

The scene cut to the hospital. It showed Brody setting the camera on a sliding table and standing before it. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked like he hadn't slept in days. "Dad, this is where they have her now. I'm not even supposed to be here but since Uncle Gideon is on staff they're letting me in to see her. Uncle Robert told me that she woke up for a bit when she first came in but she hasn't opened her eyes since then."

He leaned back and I saw myself lying in the hospital bed. There was a tube down my

throat, oxygen to my nose and all kinds of tubes and wires running from me. I was about twenty pounds underweight due to stress as it was, so I looked even sicker than I was.

“Uncle Gideon said she’s breathing on her own now so he can take her off that noisy thing today.” Brody laughed but it sounded anything but funny. “He won’t let any other doctors touch her.” His voice cracked. “Daddy, please help me get her away. Even if Uncle Robert is wrong and you don’t love her anymore, just please help me get her away from him. I won’t bother you again. I promise. I just...”

There was a choked gasping sound behind him and he stopped talking. Turning fast, he faced me. I blinked several times before locking gazes with him. I was clearly confused. Brody moved to me quickly.

“Mom?”

I blinked. He let out a sigh of relief. “It’s okay, Mom. No one can hurt you here. We won’t let them,” he whispered, crawling up and onto the bed with me. He wrapped his arms around me as my eyes fluttered and I slipped back into a state of sleep.

Brody kissed my cheek. “I love you.”

I motioned for Vanessa to shut it off and she did. The temperature in the room seemed to rise suddenly as a wave of nausea hit me. Kurt caught me around my waist and stared at me. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

I pushed past him and ran for the bathroom. Sliding down before the toilet, I pulled my hair back and gave into the gagging sensation. Instantly, I began dry heaving. Vanessa came rushing in with a cool washcloth in hand.

“Honey, you have been doing this all morning. You kicked Kurt out and then ran to the bathroom, getting rid of every bit of the coffee you’d had. I think you let yourself get run down and have the flu now.”

She helped me to my feet and went to work on cleaning up. Vanessa was a trooper, rubbing my upper back and placing the cool rag over it. I put my toothbrush back and caught her hand in mine. “Thanks.”

Walking back out, I found Kurt standing there with a worried look on his face.

“I’ll get you something to drink. Want tea?” Vanessa asked.

I groaned, going straight for the sofa and plopping long ways on it. “Ugh, no.”

“I’d offer you water again but you already got sick off the smell and its friggin’ water, Devan.” She laughed and shook her head. “If you tell me that you want cranberry juice and popcorn I’m going to have to insist you make me the godmother of the new baby.”

Vanessa laughed hard. “You were so sick for like a month at school and we thought you had the flu. Remember that? Oh gawd, you were so moody, too. One minute you were fine, the next you were biting our heads off. Remember when you kicked Wynona out of your dorm room and refused to let her in for an entire day?”

“Kind of like how she was sweet as pie this morning and then flipped out on me and tossed my ass in the hall?” Kurt asked, a slow smile moving over his face.

“Yeah, like that. Devan was so tired then, too. She was constantly catching naps between classes.”

I listened to them talking around me as I closed my eyes. “I think I just caught something.”

“Yeah, my sperm,” Kurt said. “But we aren’t going to talk about it anymore. But I think you are.”

Vanessa squealed, breaking my peaceful about to sleep mood. I peeked out to find her

staring at Kurt like a kid in the candy store. “You two are trying to have a baby? Another one?”

Kurt rubbed the back of his neck and stared down at the floor. “Umm.”

“What Mr. Foot in His Mouth is trying to say is that he’s like a jack rabbit. He never tires and for a man who is thirty-four, he has every bit of the stamina he had when he was in his early twenties.” I put one hand up and covered my eyes with the other. “Before you say it, I already checked his place for pills. I was going to flush them to be able to get a full night’s sleep. He’s that way naturally.”

“Thanks for sharing with the group, Devs.” Kurt chuckled. “I thought women wanted a man with stamina.”

I snorted. “We think we do. But trust me, once one of us tries to ride what you’re packing we suddenly think that once a day is more than enough. You’re just lucky I’m not most women. I’m willing to cut you a deal--three times a day. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds like I’ll be getting cut in thirds,” Kurt said, appearing next to me and bending down. “Hey,” he ran his hand over my forehead, “are you okay? Seriously, Devan. I just watched... ah... something that made the reality that I came close to losing you without even knowing it, sink in. I need to know you’re okay.”

“Kurt, hon,” I took his hand in mine, “I’m fine. Mmm, you know what? Cranberry juice and popcorn actually sounds really good. Oh, that or cotton candy. Hmm, no, maybe watermelon.”

Vanessa laughed. “Devan, you hate watermelon and get a headache when you eat cotton candy.”

“Ooo, what were those things you gave me when we were younger? Those sound perfect. They were chocolate bars with nuts and raisins in them. Mmm.”

Shaking her head, Vanessa smiled. “Kurt, I know that things have been smooth sailing in parenting Brody for almost a whole month but he’s housebroken. We need to go have a crash course in newborns very soon. This is exactly how she was when she was pregnant with Brody and still didn’t know it. I should warn you that she’ll cry at the drop of a hat and possibly remove your scrotum in the next breath.”

“Devan, do you think you’re pregnant?”

“I already told you I didn’t want to get my hopes up.” Growling, I pushed up onto my elbows and glared at him. “Besides, do you see a crystal ball attached to my forehead? Huh? Do you see a magic eight ball in my hand, Kurtis? I didn’t have my tea leaves read this morning so I can’t be sure. Maybe you should hand me the phone so I can call one of my psychic friends.” I rolled my eyes and fell back onto the sofa. “Maestro my ass.”

“Vanessa?”

She did her best to suppress the giggles. “Yes, Kurt?”

“Should I take that answer as a yes and then move back at least three feet?”

“I think that would be a very safe bet,” she said, giving into her laughter.

“I’m so happy that the two of you find all of this funny. Please pay no mind to the fact that I just watched my husband do something that sickens me.”

“Ex,” Kurt said, quickly.

“Huh?”

He ran his hand up my leg and let it rest on my thigh. “He’s your ex-husband, Devan.”

“Sorry, Kurt. I spent ten years calling him my husband. It’s a hard habit to break,” I snipped out, not really caring how I sounded. “You know what. I want to be alone right now.”

“Devan.”

Vanessa cleared her throat. "I brought lunch and it's plain to see Devan isn't up to it. Let's go find Wynona and eat. You can check back in on her in an hour or so. Let her sleep, Kurt."

* * *

I rolled into the warmth and sighed as a large arm wrapped around me. The sound of a door opening and closing sounded but I couldn't seem to get my eyes to open. Sinking further into the mass of warmth and comfort I relaxed more.

"What the fuck is going on here?"

The sound of Kurt's voice boomed around me, waking me quickly. I looked up to find him standing just inside my bedroom doorway, his green eyes ablaze and his entire body prone. "Kurt?"

"What the fuck is going on?"

Confused, my brow creased as I shook my head. "Kurt, what's wrong. I thought I fell asleep on the sofa?"

"Your back hurts for days every time you do that, Devan. I moved you in here."

My eyes widened as I turned my head. Blue eyes and sandy blond hair greeted me as I found myself staring at Drew. He laid there with no shirt on and the top of his jeans unbuttoned. Running my gaze down the length of his body, I noticed he was barefoot.

He stared over my shoulder at Kurt. "It's obvious you aren't happy to see me here but nothing happened. I moved her in here and sat down next to her to rest for a bit. That's all. Out of habit she rolled into my arms but nothing more. I'm not here to interfere with what the two of you have."

I could see the pain in Drew's eyes and knew then why he'd decided to lay down. "How bad do you hurt?"

"What the fuck do you care? You saw what he did to you!" Kurt's voice was deeper than I'd ever heard it be. "Devan, I'm two steps away from killing that piece of shit. I strongly suggest you wait for me out in the hallway."

"Kurt, enough. He's telling you the truth. Nothing happened. And I'm the one who earned the right to have at him about what happened. Not you."

"Devan?" Drew asked, groaning as he sat up.

"Brody recorded and saw what happened the morning after his birthday party, Drew. The morning after you..."

"I spent the night putting you through living hell. God, Devan, I don't have the words that describe how sorry I am. I have no excuse for what I did. I'm so sorry."

Kurt made a move to go at Drew and I jumped in his path. "No! I have had enough violence in my life, Kurt. He can barely move. That's hardly a fair fight."

"How the fuck fair is it to beat on a woman--one who is over a hundred pounds lighter than him? Huh? I'm just wondering because that seemed to be fine and fucking dandy."

I went to yell at Kurt but was interrupted by Drew. "He's right, Devan. I deserve everything he gives me. I kept his family from him and spent so many years living a lie that I began to believe it was true."

"Drew?" I asked, shocked by his confession.

He looked over his shoulder at me. Both emotion and physical pain showed in his face. "Devan, I'm not Brody's father. The night you conceived him I was getting piss ass drunk with

your brother and Jake. I wasn't anywhere near that restaurant or you. Kurt, or Maestro as Robert seemed to love calling him was there with you. He's Brody's dad. I'm guessing you know that already. Jake said Gideon was having some testing done."

I covered my mouth, still shocked that he was confessing this all to me. It mattered not that I already knew.

"When you showed up on my doorstep, your belly swollen and in tears I should have told you the truth but," he sighed, "I wanted you back in my life. I wanted it to be me that you looked at the way you did him. I wanted it to be me you spent your life with. I didn't care Brody wasn't mine. That didn't matter to me in the least. And no one questioned me on it, Devan. They all thought we'd been having sex for years before you got pregnant. Your father actually told me that he thought it would have happened sooner--with me being a big guy and in sports I was bound to have a healthy appetite. If you know what I mean. Gideon damn near fell over when the man said it. I actually did."

I laughed. So did Drew. Kurt growled.

"You agreed to marry me because of Brody and I knew that I would have never gotten you to commit to me without him so I went with it. I know I was wrong but I'm telling the truth when I say that in my heart he is mine, Devan. I thought our family would grow that we'd have kids of our own and fill up that big house. When it became painfully clear it was harder for us to have another child I worried you'd question Brody's paternity. I worried you'd figure it out and leave me, Devan."

"He is not yours and you will never fucking see him again!" Kurt shouted, looking as though he was going to charge at Drew again. "How can you even show your face around Devan? How can you sit there and pretend you were a father figure when all you showed Brody was how to beat your wife? How to be so scared you would kill her that he attacked you?"

"Kurt."

Drew sighed. "Leave him alone, Devan. He's right."

"Then why in the hell are you even here?" Kurt asked, his voice hard.

"He's here because I asked him to come. Remember? I already told you that. He and I need to discuss Brody and visitation. And so help me God, Kurt if you side with Gideon on this matter..."

Kurt's jaw dropped. "You cannot be seriously considering letting him near Brody. What if he turns on him? Huh, Devan? He damn near killed you. Do you think Brody would survive a blow from him? Do you?"

Drew stood fast. "I would never hurt my son!"

"He is not your son and to point out the obvious, you had no problem hurting the woman you claimed to love. What's to say you won't turn around and hurt *my* child to lash out at me? Huh? You beat Devan to the point that she damn near died because you assumed I was back in her life. I am back in her life now and I am now fully aware I have a son. Can you honestly tell me you won't look at Brody and see me?" Kurt pointed at him. "Your issues have always been with me, not her. You had a problem with me from day one. How many times did you threaten me to stay away from Devan? Huh? How many times did I tell you to go fuck yourself? If you want to beat on someone, Drew, try me on for size."

"I deserve every damn thing you're saying but let me tell you this, *Maestro*, its Devan who has earned the right to say them to me. Not you. I'll own up to keeping your family from you to a point. It's not like you left a forwarding address on the pantry shelf on your way out the morning after, buddy. No. You walked out and left an innocent girl pregnant and alone, then you

never looked back.”

I looked down at the floor, thankful that my inner voice, the one that kept chirping the very same thing, had just found its voice through Drew. The irony wasn't lost on me.

“You don't seriously believe his bullshit, do you, Devan?” Kurt asked.

Turning, I faced Drew. “Kurt asked me to marry him and I said yes.”

Drew took a deep breath in and nodded his head. “I sort of figured that would be the case.” He tipped his head up and blinked several times. “Jake hinted at that almost a month ago. I didn't believe you'd go that far that fast though.”

“Drew?” Instinctively, I went to him. “You okay?”

He didn't look down. “Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

Slowly, he brought his gaze to meet mine. His eyes glistened. “Then I'm happy for you.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him tight. “Thank you.”

“I'm going to hug you back, Devan. I'm only telling you because I'm not sure I could handle you flinching when I move again. I am so sorry. Jake told me what happened with Gideon at Bubba's place.” He put his arms around me and squeezed me gently.

Pulling back, I smiled up at him. “I think we're going to be okay, Drew.”

“I think the two of you will be more than okay.”

I shook my head. “No, I mean you and me. You've managed to keep yourself clean for over a year now and I know how hard that is for you. That tells me you have it in you to be happy again, Drew--and to make someone else happy. But you have to keep up and not fall back into those habits. It takes a good man and turns him into a stranger, a monster.”

“Devan, I've got a long road ahead of me. I'm taking one day at a time.” He winked. “I need to talk to Kurt alone. I asked Jake for his number and he kept refusing to give it to me until I explained the situation. He's the one who told me the two of you were here today while Brody was with them. It's why I came. I thought I'd find Kurt here with you and when I found you asleep on the sofa, with the door unlocked, I think my heart skipped a beat.”

I glanced back to find Kurt's face red, his fists clenched and a look of pure hate in his eyes. “Umm, Drew, I'll have to advise against you talking to Kurt alone. I know you finally broke down and had your knee operated on and I'm not about to let Kurt kill you.”

“How do you know I had my knee done?”

I let out a soft laugh. “Your mother told me. She called, knowing it would make me very happy to hear you were finally taking enough time off to fix what needed to be fixed for so long. She also wanted to know if she could come and visit Brody. I told her that she is always welcome in my home.”

“Thank you, Devan.” Drew glanced at Kurt. “If you love this woman even a little bit you'll ask her to give us time alone to talk. It's important. Very important.”

“Devan,” Kurt said, still sounding pissed. “Why don't you head on up to my place for a little bit? I've got saltines and ginger ale on the counter for you. I'll be up in a minute.”

“Saltines? Ginger ale?” Drew asked. He chuckled. “Looks like Brody will be getting that little brother he kept putting on his Christmas list for years, huh? Or sister. Regardless, he'll be happy.”

Drew moved forward and put his hand out to Kurt. “Congratulations, man.”

Kurt swung out fast, caught Drew's jaw and sent Drew staggering backwards. I screamed and pressed myself in front Drew. “Kurt!”

“Move.”

“No.”

“I won’t hit him again. I *promise*,” he bit out.

I stared at him with wide eyes. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You aren’t going back with him, Devan. If I’ve got to have Gideon tie your ankle to the bed again, I will. There is no way in hell this fuck is sweeping in here and taking you with him. It will be a cold day in hell before I ever let go of you again. I love you and I’m not about to stand by while he worms his way back into your heart. You want to see the good in him, Devan. The rest of us aren’t blinded.”

“If you touch him again when he has done nothing but give us his best wishes you will find yourself shut out of my life. At least Drew had an excuse when he behaved like an animal. What the hell is yours?”

“I love you.”

I let out a wry laugh. “So you hit someone I asked you not to?”

“Devan, you can’t expect me to stand by with a smile on my face while I stare at the man who put you in that hospital bed for Brody to sit by and beg me through a recording to please come,” Kurt’s voice cracked, “to please get you away from him before he killed you. He even went as far as to promise to not be a burden on me, Devan. Like he ever could be.”

Ignoring Kurt, I turned to check on Drew. He was wiping blood from the corner of his mouth, giving me his famous shit-ass grin. “Only you would find a man with a punch like that. Better warn Gideon not to piss him off. Apparently, cooking builds a hell of a lot more muscle than I thought.”

I went for him but he shook his head no. “I’m fine, princess... *err*... Devan. I do think you should go on up to Kurt’s place, put something in your stomach and give us a minute to talk.”

I narrowed my gaze on him. “What are you trying to hide from me?”

“Nothing, umm, I’ll talk to Kurt and we’ll figure out what to do.”

“What to do about what? Brody?” I asked, so completely lost as to why Drew would want to be alone with Kurt that I wanted to pull at my hair and stomp my foot like a child. “I should warn you that I’m really cranky today.”

Drew smiled. “Devan, you run from hot to cold when you’re pregnant. I already know that. I think Kurt is quickly learning that he’ll need to accept that. And if he knows what’s good for him he’ll wear a cup when he’s in the delivery room with you. Oh, and he’ll hear words come out of your mouth that he can’t even imagine. Now, go on. Give me some time to get to know the man you belong to now.”

I stiffened. “No one owns me, Drew. No one.”

“I know that *now*, Devan.” He sighed. “Please, if Brody gets back before I leave he’ll be upset. Jake told me that he still hates me and that I need to give him time to come around. Maybe he never will, Devan, but that doesn’t mean I want to be shut out of his life. I’ll take pictures, some of the videos he’s always making, anything that will let me see him growing up. Anything.”

“I can’t force him to accept you, Drew.” I exhaled deeply. “You didn’t just hurt me when you turned to manufactured relief. You hurt Brody by turning on me. I had no idea that he’d seen what was going on with his own eyes. But I can promise to call you with updates, send you copies of some tapes and always make sure you have pictures of him.”

Kurt began to grumble and I put my hand up. “Enough, Kurt. You’ve only seen the ugly side of what happened. You saw why I will never be with Drew again. I can’t ever forget that,

neither can Brody, but I can honestly tell you that Drew treated Brody as if he were his from the moment I showed up pregnant. He never missed a doctor appointment. He was there with me, holding my hand while I went through two days worth of labor. He sat in that hospital room, holding Brody to him, threatening bodily injury to the nurses who kept trying to take him to the nursery.”

Kurt shook his head.

I didn't stop. “It was Drew who drove Brody, who had colic, around in the middle of the night because the vibrations soothed him. It was Drew who spotted the signs of post partum depression in me and took me in for help to get through it. He was the one Brody ran to when he was hurt or scared. It was Drew who insisted on reading Brody bedtime stories when he was home. It was Drew who Brody used to cry for every time he had to leave on away games. Until Drew got hurt and did a complete turnaround on me, it was Drew who Brody called Daddy. I am not claiming he was perfect. He fucked up big time allowing himself to become dependant on things he knew were bad for him. He has an addiction that he will always have to fight. But I will say that, when Drew was Drew, he was an amazing father and a great husband.”

“Are you done throwing the fact I wasn't in Brody's life in my face, Devan?” Kurt asked, his green eyes ablaze. “Are you done making me feel like shit that another man was there, seeing my son grow up, doing the things I should have been doing with him? Are you done punishing me for not knowing?”

I let out a soft laugh. “I think we both know I would have never in a million years thought to call you, Kurt. Hell, I didn't even know your real name. But you knew exactly who you were with that night. You knew how many times we were together without any sort of protection and you knew when you snuck off to ‘live your dream’ leaving me asleep that I wouldn't see you when I woke. If you honestly thought I knew it was you, why didn't you consider how I would feel when I woke up alone after having just spent the night handing away my virginity? Giving myself away period.”

“I already told you that I thought you were engaged to him,” Kurt said, pointing back at Drew. “I also told you that I thought I was something you had to get out of your system.”

His words sunk in and I suddenly found it hard to concentrate. “Wait, you thought I was the type of woman who would not only cheat on a man I was supposed to marry but take a romp on a fucking pantry room floor with some guy to get him out of my system?”

“Devan.”

“No. You obviously do not know me at all. You never really did. You thought I was some whore you could spend a night with and never look back.” I covered my mouth as a wave of nausea hit me. “Ohmygod, that's all I was to you. Is that how you still see me? How long is your list, Kurt? I'm curious to know.”

“Devan, don't do this.” Kurt moved towards me and I backed away fast.

“No. I have handed myself over to you enough. I lived for two years with a man who treated me like shit. He made me feel like the lowest life form on the face of the earth and I swore that I would never allow myself to feel that way again.” Tears filled my eyes. “I don't know how you operate. How it is you can even come up with the idea that you can fuck someone out of your system and I don't want to know. Get out of my home!”

“Devan, no, please don't do this. I love you and...”

I shook my head. “No. Don't tell me that. If you loved me you would have picked up a phone and called Uncle Robert. People who love someone don't just walk away.”

“Devan, I was sent to study under another chef in France. I...”

“What? Does France not have phones, Kurt?” I snorted. “You cared when it was convenient for you to care.” Running my hand over my stomach, I laughed. “I give you credit though. You’re willingness to donate sperm is amazing. Now leave.”

He looked as though I’d struck him.

“Drew, how long are you in town for?”

Drew turned me slowly to face him. “Devan, don’t throw him out of your life. We were all young. We all made mistakes. We all have regrets. Don’t let this be something you regret.”

“Drew?” I asked, puzzled as to why he was pushing Kurt on me when he’d spent so many years trying to keep us apart.

He swallowed hard. “I know you’re hurt right now. I also know how moody you can be and I’d lay money on the fact you’ve got a bun in the oven. You locked me out four times when you were pregnant with Brody, princess. Remember? You came out the next morning, found me asleep on the back patio lounge chair and you spent the day crying because of it. I couldn’t get you to stop. You were the same way when you were...” He stopped and closed his eyes. “Don’t do this. You will regret it, if not tomorrow then another day. In the end you’ll end up crying. I don’t want to see it come to that and I’m betting Kurt doesn’t either.”

“Wait, you’re saying that this is normal for her?” Kurt asked.

Drew snickered. “No. But when she was pregnant with Brody she had wicked mood swings. And she did kick me out numerous times. I learned real fast not to take it personally and to make sure I kept chocolate ice cream stocked in the freezer. Oh, popcorn and cranberry juice was another lifesaver.”

Kurt actually chuckled.

“Why are you being so nice to Kurt?”

“Well,” Drew said, smiling. “It would have been nice to have someone warn me that you were prone to snapping when you’re pregnant. I thought he could use the help. And, you’re wrong about something, Devan. People who love someone do have to sometimes walk away. I may not want to hang out and play basketball with Kurt but I will say that walking away, knowing that someone else is there to fill the gap is anything but easy to do. I’m not doubting that the guy loves you, Devan. Robert has good instincts and tends to underestimate everything. He told me once that Maestro was very fond of you. That means the guy has been head over heels in love with you for a long time.”

Drew stroked my cheek. “I can sleep at night knowing he’s with you, with Brody. He doesn’t have the issues I do. I think the very fact that you’ve been here a month and he already has a ring on your finger and is getting kicked out by a moody you, should tell you that he’s serious about having a life with you, Devan. He had how many years to settle down with someone else. He didn’t.”

I sighed.

Drew winked. “If it was a case of not wanting to get married then how do you explain the ring on your finger? Think about it, Devan. You know I’m right. If the guy wasn’t serious about you then why commit to you within your first month of arriving in New York?”

Licking the edge of my mouth, I tipped my head. “Does he look like he’s mad at me?”

Drew glanced over my shoulder and smiled. “He looks like he’s doing his very best not to come to you until you’re ready. And he looks a tad confused. I expect that I had a similar look on my face twelve years ago before I snuggled on a lawn chair for the night. Hug your fiancé and then give me some time with him. Okay?”

“I’m not going to leave you two alone. If for no other reason than I really like the sofa

Gideon got me.” I let out a small laugh and went to Kurt. I got within a foot of him and he had me swept up and into his arms.

“Can we work a hand signal for when you’re really mad at me and when its hormones?” he asked, pressing his lips to my forehead.

“Mmm,” I squeezed him tight. “I’m still a little mad at you but Drew made me hungry for chocolate ice cream so that has now topped my bizarre priority list.”

“I have some upstairs. Why don’t you go help yourself?”

“No way am I leaving you two alone,” I said, giving him a warning look. “Whatever needs to be said can be said in front of me.”

“Kurt, my father passed away when Devan was six and half months pregnant with Brody. It upset her so much that by the next morning she was in premature labor. I had to rush her over to the hospital where they gave her some sort of shot to relax her uterus. They kept her for a couple of days to make sure she was fine before they let her come home. I don’t know if she told you about what else happened the day I got hurt but I don’t think you want her getting upset right now.”

Something passed over Kurt’s face and he nodded slightly. “I promise that Drew and I can play nice together for a bit. Go ahead. We’ll be fine. I promise.”

The sound of a cell phone ringing caught my attention. Drew bent down and picked up his T-shirt. His cell phone was beneath it. “It’s Jake. He said he’d call when they were headed back. He’d rather Gideon not kill me. The sad thing is, I think the only reason he doesn’t want him to is because he’d miss Gideon if he was in prison.”

He answered it. “Hey, how much time do I have? No. I can’t get Devan to go long enough for me to tell him.” Drew glanced at me. “I don’t want her upset or worried. Do what I said, have Robert and Elizabeth take Brody with them to Ohio. Tell Brody that Kurt asked for time alone with his mom and he’ll go without a fight.”

My jaw dropped. “You are not sending my baby away. I...”

Drew put his hand up. “Devan, he’s not safe here. Neither are you.”

Kurt pushed me behind him. “What?”

“Jake, stall Gideon a little bit. And do not let Brody set foot near here. Martins knows Devan lives here now and if my gut is right, he’s already got things set in motion. He won’t risk losing his company and his reputation. She’s got him running scared.”

Kurt grabbed my arm. “Go upstairs and lock the door now!”

“I’m not... why is he scared of Chas?”

“Go!” Kurt shouted as he pointed at the door. “I’ll find the details out. There is no way you’re staying in here another minute. In fact, go down to Vanessa’s. She’s home and no one will think to look for you there.”

Drew groaned. “Jake, he’s got more cops in his pocket than you want to know about. Make damn sure you know and trust these people you’re putting me in touch with. I don’t care if my name and drug history is splashed on a billboard in Times Square. I will give up my career to keep them safe, Jake. I love them and I won’t let them be hurt,” Drew said, catching my attention. “I’m not bullshitting you. I got a call this morning from one of the guys I used to buy from. I thought he was trying to make a sale again and damn near hung up. When he told me that my wife was in danger, I listened. He didn’t know we were divorced. But he did recognize Devan’s name. And knows we have a son because,” Drew sighed, “when I was at my worst I’d make Brody call for me. I didn’t think he realized what exactly he was asking for. I know now that he did.”

Drew clenched his fist. "It's because of my stupidity that Brody knows the numbers for my suppliers. He apparently recognized Martins name and decided to call him on it."

My pulse sped as I grabbed Kurt's arm. "Who would want to hurt Brody?"

Drew answered the question for me as he hung up the phone with Jake. "Martins. The guy who called me, warning me that something was going down involving you, may deal for a living, Devan, but he's not into murder. And he sure the hell isn't into someone going after a woman and a child. He called me the minute Martins put money up to see to it that you and if a child was with you, the child would no longer be a threat."

Kurt grabbed my arm. "Go to Vanessa's now! I'll make sure Bobby gets Brody to safety."

"He wouldn't be stupid enough to try to hurt me. He'd lose everything."

Drew shook his head. "Princess, he knows I'm in town. He also knows that at the height of my drug abuse, I damn near killed you."

Kurt gasped. "Fuck. He's planning on hurting her while you're still in town so the police immediately look at you as the primary suspect."

Drew nodded. "The day I held her in my arms, on our bedroom floor and realized what I'd done to her, I made a vow. I promised to make sure she would be okay and then check myself in somewhere to get help. I didn't tell the police what happened because I needed to be there at the hospital to make sure she pulled through. The minute I knew she was going to be okay I checked myself in. I will not let him touch her. I will never let anyone hurt her again or Brody."

"What in hell did you think you were going to accomplish by telling Kurt and not me that Brody's in danger?" I asked, my throat tight.

"He knows I'll take you somewhere far away, somewhere safe and bring Brody to us." Kurt wrapped his arm around me. "He wants you far away from all of this until he notifies the authorities of Martins intentions and gets him off the streets."

"Exactly," Drew said. "How fast can you get her the hell away from here? I'd have taken her myself but Gideon would have assumed the worst and Brody would have fought me tooth and nail. He won't fight you, Kurt."

"I just need to call my assistant and he'll have us booked on a flight to anywhere but here. What about you? Won't he come after you?"

"Yeah, he'll make sure the police look in my direction and if he has any inclination that I know what he's planning he'll dispose of me, too. He'll figure out a way to still pin it on me so his hands are clean."

Kurt sighed. "I can't believe I'm about to say this but come with us and get in touch with the authorities once you're *all* somewhere safe. You can come with us. I'll talk to Brody, make him understand."

I couldn't contain myself. I went to my tiptoes and began to cover Kurt's face with kisses. He actually had to pull me off him.

"I'm not willing to chance him getting at Devan without me getting to the police first. Jake found someone here that he knows and trusts. When you get her somewhere safe, call Jake and he'll tell me. Just promise to take care of her, of both of them." He glanced at my midriff. "Or rather, all three of them."

"Kurt, I want Brody with us when we leave. I can't be without him."

He nodded. "Drew, will you take her down to Vanessa's? I need to get in touch with my assistant and my mom to make sure she, Bobby and Brody are somewhere safe until we go."

"Yeah, I can do that. Oh, and congrats on getting Robert as your step-father." Drew

snickered. "I had him as a father-in-law long enough to know he's a handful."

"Tell me about it," Kurt said, under his breath. "Okay, Devan do me a favor and don't argue about any of this. Go with Drew while I run up and handle the arrangements. Do your best to talk him into coming with us. I love you."

He captured my lips with his and thrust his tongue into my mouth. The kiss was filled with love, concern and passion. I knew then that I was dead wrong when I accused him of using me. My entire body lit with his touch and I found myself turning into him, pressing myself to him and moaning as I bit at his lower lip.

Kurt's breathing was ragged and his kiss intense. Letting out a rather painful sounding groan, he pushed gently on my shoulders and pulled back from me. "Devan, I need to get you somewhere safe and if you keep that up we won't be doing anything but..." He stopped and stared back at Drew. "Yeah, go. Don't worry about packing. I'll buy whatever we need. And before you yell I am not trying to buy you."

"I know. I love you." Smiling, I watched as he took off for the door.

Drew put his hands on my shoulder. "Let's get you somewhere safer than here."

"Drew?" I asked as he moved in front of me.

His blue eyes narrowed. "Yeah?"

"I'm proud of you."

A slow smile crept over his face. "Thank you. That means a lot to me." Taking my hand in his, he went to lead me to the door.

"Drew?"

He pulled me behind him and held firm to me. I went to try to go around him but found he refused to loosen his grip. "Drew."

"Devan Charter?" a strange voice asked.

My brow furrowed as I twisted my wrist, broke Drew's hold and stepped to the side. "I'm here."

"No!" Drew shouted as everything around me seemed to move in slow motion.

A man dressed head to toe in black stood there with a gun pointed directly at me. Drew was suddenly in motion, charging at him. The man turned the gun on Drew.

"No!" I shouted, rushing forward. The man hesitated and then fired.

Drew lurched backwards, his body moving unnaturally. Somehow, he managed to kick the gun free of the assailant. Before I knew it, the man was practically on top of me, pulling a hunting knife from his side. Training that I was positive I'd never have the nerve to use kicked in.

He struck fast. I kicked out, going for the forearm of the hand with the knife. It knocked him off balance. As he fell, he thrust the knife forward, catching my upper thigh. White-hot pain surged through me as I went to the floor with him. Bright red liquid seemed to spit out of somewhere. I could only assume it was mine as my entire body slammed into the floor.

The man rolled at me and my vision blurred. I struck out quickly, not caring what part of him I hit, only caring that I did hit him. I came into contact with his throat. He grabbed it and I hit him again, this time only managing to knock him to the side.

As I went to sit up, a wave of dizziness overcame me. I could feel sweat dripping down my face. The man was suddenly above me, with a weapon in hand again and aiming directly at me.

My vision blurred again as a massive weight of some sort moved over me, covering my body. I heard the sound of the silenced gun firing and the weight on me went limp. I thought I

heard shouting but I wasn't sure. Everything was fuzzy. It took me a minute to realize it was Drew on me, protecting me.

Something crashed to the floor next to me. The next thing I knew the weight on me was being removed and people were surrounding me.

"Devan!" Kurt screamed out, pulling me into his arms. "Oh God, baby. You're ice cold."

"Call 9-1-1," Gideon said, pushing past Kurt. "She's in shock. Get me a blanket."

Reaching out, I went for the weight that had been on me, instinctively knowing it had been my ex-husband. "Drew took the bullet for me," I whispered, suddenly feeling very tired.

"Kurt, put your hand here and push to stop the bleeding. I need to try to help Drew."

I blinked several times before I surrendered to the black abyss.

Epilogue

“Hey,” a deep, familiar voice whispered as I peeked out from heavy lids.

My vision was blurred at first but the second I spotted a head of blond I knew who was next to me in the dimly lit room. “Jake?”

He nodded as he leaned forward in his chair. “I’d ask you how you’re feeling but you look like crap.” He winked. “Just kidding, Devs. You look amazing.”

“Yeah,” I exhaled loudly, “well, I feel like crap.”

Jake motioned towards the back corner of the room. I looked to find Kurt asleep in a rather uncomfortable looking chair. He clutched something in his hand and as it came into focus, I gasped. “Is that my thank you note to him? The one I wrote for...”

“His help with your Latin homework when you were fifteen?” Jake asked, touching my arm lightly. “Yeah. Wynona brought in a few of his keepsakes because she thought they might help him. He’s not doing so good.”

My chest tightened. “Was he hurt?”

“Not physically. Emotionally he’s spent. The hospital security staff was called in the minute he got here. He charged the operating room to be with you. It was bad enough Gideon refused to let him ride in the ambulance but,” Jake ran a hand through his hair, “he and I got held up in traffic on the way here so he didn’t get to see you before they took you in. Gideon tried to tell him you’d be fine, Devan, but Kurt wanted to see for himself.”

“What happened to the gunman?”

Jake shook his head. “He turned on Martins the second he woke in the hospital. The police have his statement and my guy saw to it that Chas is behind bars.”

I stared at Kurt, afraid to wake him but wanting to be held by him. There were still questions I needed answers to and Kurt wasn’t the man I wanted to ask them to. I swallowed hard. “Jake, the baby and Drew?”

He pulled his hand away and tears welled in my eyes. “I’ll go get Gideon. He’s in Drew’s room. Wynona and Vanessa are meeting Drew’s mom at the airport.”

My pulse sped. “Drew’s alive? He’s okay?”

The look in Jake’s eyes told me to stop getting my hopes up. I didn’t want to believe anything could happen to Drew. “No, Jake. No. He’ll be fine, right? He’s gone through so much and beat the odds. He can’t die. No. He’s fine, right?”

“I can’t answer that, Devan.” He bit back tears. “Nobody can. You don’t need to stress about this. Gideon’s with him. So is Brody right now. Kurt spent about two hours convincing Brody he needed to spend time with Drew in case something happened.” He glanced towards Kurt. “He’s an amazing man, Devan. His love for you and Brody is something I don’t think I’ll ever fully understand. I don’t how he could stand there and tell his son, a son Drew kept from him for years, to spend time with Drew. It’s beyond me.”

“He did it because it was the right thing to do, Jake. Drew’s hurt because he sacrificed himself for me and regardless what’s happened, Drew loves Brody like he’s his son. I know deep down that Brody loves Drew. He was hurt and that’s how I know he does love him still.”

Jake nodded. “You know Kurt actually spent a few hours alone by Drew’s beside. He asked Robert to sit with you while he did. You stirred a little so Robert sent me to get him and

when I walked in he was demanding Drew get his ass out of that bed and live to see another day.”

My entire body tightened at the thought of Kurt setting aside his feelings for Drew and wanting him to live. I bit my lower lip. “Jake, what about the baby?”

“Mom, you’re awake!” Brody shouted from the doorway.

Kurt shot to his feet and rushed to my side. “Devan?”

“There’s my boys,” I said, trying to appear calm when all I wanted to do was demand to know about my baby.

Kurt made a move to hug me and then stopped. “Will I hurt you?”

“No, but I’ll hurt you both if I don’t get hugs soon.”

In an instant I was wrapped in Kurt’s arms. He pressed his mouth to my ear. “Don’t ever think about leaving me again. I love you so much. I can’t live without you, Devan. I can’t.”

“I’m right here, Maestro.” I wrapped my arm around him and held tight to him. “And I love you, too.”

“Mom,” Brody said, crawling onto the bed next to me.

Jake went to lift him off but I shook my head. “He’s fine.”

“Devan, you’ve got stitches in your leg and Gideon was insistent you stay flat for...”

I narrowed my gaze. “Jake, I’m going to cuddle with my baby and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

Brody smiled wide as he snuggled up next to me. “You know that you’re going to have to stop calling me your baby soon.”

“Why is that?”

Kurt kissed my temple. “Because his little brother or sister will have the title.”

I drew in a sharp breath. “Ohmygod, I didn’t lose the...” Tears flowed freely down my cheeks as a sob tore free of me.

“Don’t cry, Mom. You can still call me your baby, too. I guess,” Brody said, not looking the least bit pleased with the idea of forever being referred to as my baby boy.

Jake tapped his shoulder. “I don’t think that’s why your mom is crying. How about you give her a kiss and we’ll go tell everyone she’s awake?”

Brody pressed his lips to my cheek and I cried even harder. “I love you so much, sweetie. I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for, Mom. Unless you’re talking about making me eat your cooking. For that you have a lot of apologizing to do.” Brody grinned as he hugged me before climbing off the bed. He glanced at Jake. “I want to go tell Dad,” his gaze went to Kurt, “umm, I mean, Drew, that Mom’s awake.”

Kurt pulled back slightly from me. “It’s okay, Brody. You can call him whatever you want. He’s earned the right in my eyes. Go tell him. I think Gideon’s right. I think Drew can hear us when we talk. Let him know Devan and the baby are fine.”

Jake led Brody from the room and shut the door behind him, leaving Kurt and me alone. Kurt cupped my cheeks and captured my lips with his. He thrust his tongue into my mouth and kissed me with a fire I’d never seen in him before. He left me too stunned to respond.

Chuckling nervously, Kurt kissed my forehead. “You have no clue how very much I love you.”

“I think I do.” I placed my hand over his. “If it’s even remotely close to how much I love you that is.”

“Marry me, Devan. The second we leave here. Say yes. Please. Bobby and my mom are

still here. Gideon and Jake are still in town. It's perfect. It's right. I don't want to wait."

I offered a soft smile. "But your mom wants to plan..."

"The second she arrived here, Devan, she informed me that I wasn't to waste another minute without you as my wife. I agree so say yes."

"Yes," I said softly.

"Yes?" He looked shocked.

I laughed. "Kurt, I agreed to marry you once already. I'm fine with doing it sooner rather than later but only if..." I was about to tell him that I wanted to wait for Drew to get better when the door to my room burst open.

Gideon filled the frame, his eyes wide. "You're awake! Brody told me but I had to see for myself."

"Uncle Gideon, come quick, Drew just woke up!" Brody yelled from down the hall.

I clutched Kurt's hand. "Drew? He's awake?"

He kissed my cheek. "Looks like he heard Brody and wanted to see for himself."

"I love you, Kurt."

He winked. "So, what you're saying is that I can be the rebel to your preppy girl?"

A tiny laugh escaped me. "Yes, Maestro, that's what I'm saying."

THE END

Mandy M. Roth welcomes reader email and can be found at www.mandyroth.com.

Excerpt from *WICKED LUCIDITY* by Mandy M. Roth, now available in e-book and print from New Concepts Publishing.

Chapter One

I stared at the large Victorian home in front of me. What was I thinking? The place was huge. Too big for just one person and certainly too much work for me. Calling it a fixer-upper was a far cry from the truth. My need to start a new life and protect the lives of others had outweighed my better judgment. I was hardly a master craftsman and I'd just taken on the project of a lifetime.

Pulling a box out of the trunk of my car, I glanced around at the rest of the neighborhood. It was even better than Amber had described. My house was one of three on the cul-de-sac. The one to my left had caught my eye the moment I'd arrived. The white home with green shutters looked as though it had been meticulously tended. Of course it would be my luck to move next door to someone who was picky. I could already see the feuds over my unkempt lawn. Maybe, if I were lucky, the neighbors would get mad enough to clean my yard because they were sick of looking at it.

"Karri, get your butt up here. You have got to see this!" Amber, my best friend, shouted from the fourth-story window.

I headed in, carrying the box of cleaning supplies as far as the front porch before I ran up the stairs. Walking into the large, full attic, I found Amber digging through two large chests I had specifically told the “movers” to put in the far back corner of the basement.

Yeah, they listened well.

The movers, also known as “my men,” were currently out to lunch. They’d spent the morning setting up my home office. Since they worked for me in the fight against evil, it was in their best interests to get me up and running as soon as possible. Livelihoods and actual lives depended on me. They’d already banished me from the room because I was hovering too much. They told Amber that she could stay, but from the way they were all staring at her breasts, I was scared to leave her without a chaperone.

Amber dug through the contents of the chest, her long auburn hair falling in and over it. She looked like a curious nymph all tucked in on a secret she couldn’t wait to reveal. She held up an object with a long silver handle and a pickaxe-like top. Her blue eyes grew with fascination. “What is all this stuff?”

“Weapons. They’re all from my father’s collection. I finally took them out of storage.”

“Wow,” she whispered.

I went to her quickly, removing the war pick from her hand, convinced she’d put an eye out if she wasn’t careful. “Let’s leave it be. Our luck we’ll chop our fingers off or something.”

“Pfft, you’re like Karri Lee, fighting queen. Hey, did you see the thing in there that looks like brass knuckles but it has claws on it instead? That’s wicked cool.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, it is wicked all right.”

Amber had a flare for dramatics. Not that it came even close to meeting mine, but still. The coffee shop she owned was set up more like a psychic reader’s home base but the locals seemed to flock there for the coffee all the same. In truth, she was very sensitive to most people and places so it made sense that she’d naturally lean towards the Psychics R Us look. Had she not been battling sickness, her skills and gifts could have developed more and she would’ve made one hell of a psychic.

As far as I knew, or rather, as far as Amber let on, she’d been doing well for the greater part of a year now. I hoped that was true. The idea of losing my closest friend terrified me. The idea of losing her to a cancer-like illness that human doctors didn’t understand and continually mislabeled sickened me. Amber’s sickness came from not using her powers. It was that simple. Since she was unaware she even had powers it wasn’t an easy fix and telling her to use what she’d been burying since birth wasn’t as cut-and-dry as it sounded.

One had to come into one’s powers on one’s own. It was just the way things were. Trust me, if I could have fixed her by shouting “use your magik” I, of all people, would have. It would have saved me a lot of pain and several deals with the devil.

Amber laughed. “Have you looked in the mirror?”

“No. I don’t have one hung up yet, so unless I can find a really reflective puddle then I’m not getting to see myself anytime soon. Why?”

Amber shook her head. “You look like an erotic cowgirl housekeeper.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” She pulled her long hair back at the base and fastened it with the tie she kept on her wrist. “I can’t ever remember seeing you with a do-rag on your head. Don’t get me wrong, the whole big brown eyes, white-blonde hair hanging in loose strands from that rather sad bun thing is hot. But the red handkerchief, barely there, tiny top you’ve got tied over those borderline obscene breasts might be a bit too much. That looks like a bikini top gone horribly

wrong.”

I snickered. So did Amber.

“Sort of like a cowgirl’s version of a day at the beach, Karri. Oh, I do love the dirt on your nose and cheek though. And the jean cut-offs thing you’ve got going is all the rage. The topper is the brown work boots. Nice.”

Glancing down, I bit my lip as I checked myself over. “I wasn’t aware I was being judged in the housecleaning portion of the pageant. If I say that I want to end world hunger for my question and answer time with the panel judges, will I still have a sporting chance of winning? I really want to be Ms. Bitch of the Universe.”

Amber shook her head and started down the wooden steps. “You are such a smartass.”

“Thanks. Can I get some points on that as well? Have they wised up and added that category yet?” I answered, following behind her. She went towards the front door and I went for the fridge. “Pick your poison,” I called out.

“Beer.”

“Beer it is. I should have known. You’re all cute and dainty looking, right up until I see you chugging on a cold one. Sorry I was a bad influence on you.” Grabbing two, I headed out and found Amber sitting on the front porch steps with her head down. Immediately, I worried that she was lying about being in remission. I’d seen her at her worst with it and had no desire to see her go through it again. If I could head it off, I would. “Hey, you feeling okay? We can take a break. In fact, we can call it quits for the day. I don’t win a turkey or turn into a pumpkin if I don’t finish unpacking by midnight. And since I have no prince, I’m in no hurry. Should I leave behind a work boot for any possibilities to find me later?”

Laughing, she shook her head. “I’m fine. Don’t start worrying for no reason.”

I sat down next to her and handed her a beer. “I earned my worry badge, honey. Take it or leave it.”

She nudged me and giggled. “I’m glad you finally moved out here. I hated knowing you were alone in New York.”

“I wasn’t alone, Amber. I had Chester.” I grinned from ear to ear as she moaned.

“Karri, a parakeet, which has since died, doesn’t count.”

Taking a sip of my beer, I winked as I aimlessly fiddled with the triple knot, silver charm necklace I wore all the time. “Now you’re discriminating against non-humans. What happened to you? We didn’t graduate that long ago.”

Amber snorted. “You know it’s bad when I start thinking seven years is a lifetime.”

To Amber, seven years was a long time. As sick as she’d been, it was a miracle that she was here at all. I wrapped my arm around her and gave her a good squeeze. “This is a music moment if I ever felt one coming on.”

“Oh no, you aren’t going to get me dancing around in public again. My days for that are long gone.”

Ignoring her, I hopped to my feet and rushed to find my portable CD player. I’d last seen it in the dining room but that didn’t mean much in the middle of a move. With the endless heaps of boxes scattered about my house, it could be buried anywhere. “Tony, Tony, look around.” I smiled as I did my slight homage chant to the patron, Saint Anthony, who was supposed to help me find lost things. Or, at least that’s what I think he was good at helping with. My luck he was the one you asked for help when you wanted to lose something.

I let my power up just enough to find what I was looking for. The second I zeroed in on the CD player, I dropped the power.

As I picked the player up, I found a box marked dresses and costumes. Setting the CD player on it, I picked it up and took it out with me, happy that I'd propped the screen door open with a brick. Trying to carry it all would have been impossible otherwise.

I set it down next to Amber and wagged my brows. Opening the box, I couldn't hide my excitement as I saw all the things I still had. I grabbed the long white wedding dress and its sister, a floor-length emerald green maid of honor dress. "Look what I found." I held the dresses up. The green one had been tailor made for Amber with the idea she'd be my maid of honor. Yeah, that's right. I was supposed to be the bride. I bit back a laugh. Too bad it didn't work out that way.

Amber shook her head. "No way."

"Hey, we might as well get our use out of them." Tossing the green dress to Amber, I laughed as she caught it and pulled it over her head quickly.

I stepped into the sleeveless wedding dress and pulled it up my body. Its large, bell-like bottom flared out all around me. I zipped it as best I could and bent down to the CD player. "I thought one of these moments might come about so I made a CD for the occasion."

Amber covered her eyes and peeked out from between her fingertips. "Please tell me that you didn't do what I think you did."

I pushed play and stood before her. One of the seventies disco songs that I'd played to death when we lived together came on and Amber squealed. "No, you still have this? You were too young to like it in college. I'll dig a hole so you can bury it. Dump the wedding stuff in it too. I'm sure I can even find you a sparkling silver shovel to bury it with."

Putting my hand out, I waited for her to take it. She refused it. I didn't give up. I swayed my hips back and forth, reenacted every seventies dance I could think of and was on the verge of singing. Amber stared out from under her hands, laughing hysterically.

"Hey, are you suggesting I dance like a court jester?"

"Yeah, if court jesters should be in a thong on a pole, then you sure do. Only you could pull it off in that get-up." She dropped her head down and snorted. "Heaven help the children of the neighborhood."