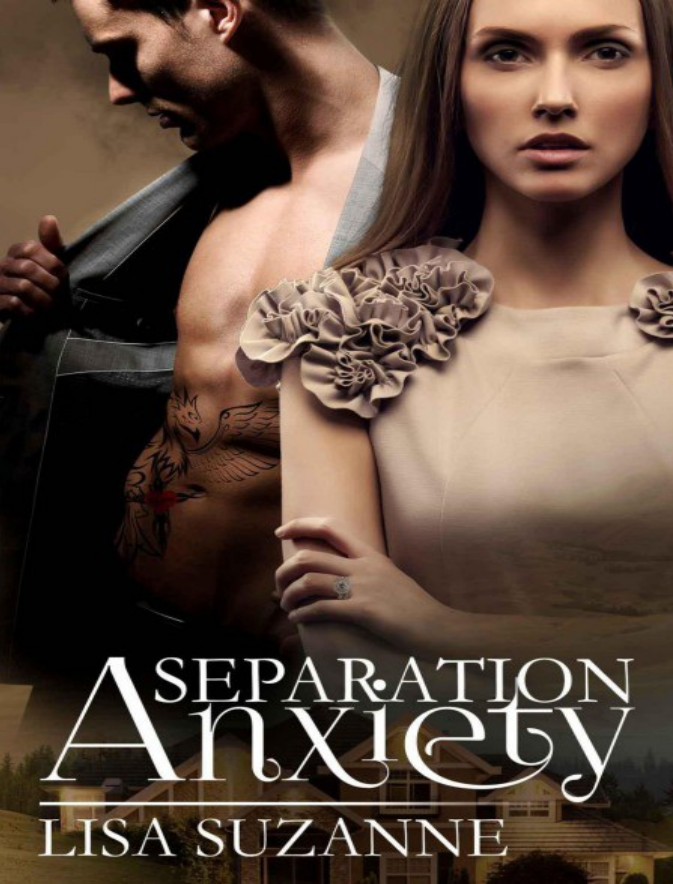




A SEPARATION Anxiety

LISA SUZANNE

SEPARATION
ANXIETY

Lisa Suzanne

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Published by Lisa Suzanne at Amazon.

ISBN-13: 978-1494906016

ISBN-10: 1494906015

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How He Really Feels (He Feels, Book
1)

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Coming Soon

Since He Really Feels (He Feels, Book
3)

To Rock Man and Sadie Elizabeth,
my family,
and
Team LSD

CHAPTER 1

We all get one true love in our lives, and it's up to us to find it. Fate will act and try to push us together, but ultimately it's up to us to recognize who that one person is when he's standing in front of us.

Maybe other people don't believe that, but that's what I believed. And I thought that Richard was that for me. I truly believed that while we were dating and when we got engaged.

But then we got married.

Is it strange that I considered us separated from almost the moment we had gotten married?

Now that we actually *were* separated,

I was starting to wonder when one of us would finally make the first move toward the inevitable incision that would sever the ties of our marriage.

And as I sat there thinking about the very thing that had weighed heavy on my mind for a year, I wondered if I should be the one to finally make that first move.

I never thought it would be us, at least not when we'd been dating or after we'd gotten engaged. I'd always heard about those stupid Hollywood couples citing "irreconcilable differences," and I always thought it was a really clever way to say that they couldn't solve their own problems. Well, guess what?

Richard and I couldn't solve our own

problems.

It wasn't for lack of trying, though. For my part, at least, I had done everything that I could.

I suggested counseling the moment I saw that we were growing apart. Richard made it to one session before giving up. One.

I tried talking to him, but it was like talking to a wall. I asked him what I could do to fix things, but how do you fix something that's irreparable?

Those damn irreconcilable differences came back to haunt me. Our lives had grown separate ways, and in the end, that was what tore us apart. Unfortunately, I just didn't have it in me to try to make something work that just

wasn't working anymore.

“Veronica, is there anything you'd like to add?” Bill's voice intruded on my thoughts.

Shit.

I really needed to focus. I was sitting in a meeting with the parents and teachers of one of my students. Jacob's parents were concerned with his behavior and grades, and our assistant principal, Bill Robinson, had pulled together a meeting and scheduled it for the end of the day on a Friday.

Nothing pissed a group of teachers off more than scheduling a meeting on a Friday after school.

But there I was, dwelling once again on my personal issues that had plagued

me for over a year while I was supposed to be focusing on the meeting I was sitting in.

I smiled warmly at the people sitting across from me. “I think that covers it,” I said, hoping that I didn’t miss a beat somewhere. I’d already given my feedback earlier. He was a good kid who got bored easily, and honestly, after five years as an English teacher, it wasn’t the first time I’d seen it. I found ways to keep him entertained so he didn’t become a behavior issue for me.

“Thank you for your time,” Bill said. “Teachers, you are dismissed.”

Thank God.

I walked at my normal brisk pace back to my classroom, grabbed my purse

out of my desk, and headed out the door.

I hadn't told anybody about the separation, and neither had Richard. Instead, he slept in the guest bedroom and we avoided each other as much as possible. We avoided our friends who were couples while we both postponed the inevitable. But, honestly, we both knew that there was no hope, and I wasn't sure anymore what we were holding onto.

Maybe it was easier just to stay married and live separately, but I was starting to think that was stupid. I was ready to be done with my life with Richard, and I was ready to be done with the lie we'd been living for the past year.

I thought about the things that helped me to know that it was over. When I got home from somewhere and saw his car in the garage, I felt my heart drop as the heavy weight that had disappeared when we were apart bore back down on my shoulders. I didn't miss him when we were apart, and I didn't feel those same urges to reach out to squeeze his hand or to lean in for a random hug. We'd lost the affectionate side of our relationship a long time ago, and we both knew that there was no getting it back. And affection was something I craved. I didn't need to always be on top of my significant other; but I missed those sweet glances from across the room, or the knowing smile, or the way we had

found reasons to touch each other when we had first gotten together.

Our initial attraction had been instant. As silly as it sounds, we met on a blind date. A friend from work, Quinn, was dating Paul. Paul had a single friend and Quinn had me, and the four of us went to dinner and a movie one night. The instant attraction crackled through the air between us.

My jaw dropped when I had first seen him; he had dark hair that he pushed back when it fell across his forehead, and his green eyes were piercing and locked onto my brown eyes. Even sitting in a chair as he was when I first spotted him, I could tell that he was strong and powerful. When he gracefully unfolded

himself from the chair and walked toward me, arm outstretched to shake my hand, I felt an instant connection when his skin touched mine.

Three years later we were married in a quaint ceremony with two hundred of our closest friends and family. And now, another two years later, we were on the brink of divorce.

Thank God we hadn't had kids yet, because this was hard enough without considering the little lives we'd be tearing apart with our separation.

So what had happened from that magical night of our blind date to the present?

In one word, plenty.

I thought back to our courtship with

really fond memories. We had taken things slowly mostly at my request. He had been ready to sleep with me the first night he had met me, he'd revealed to me after the first time we'd had sex. But I made him wait a month. I wasn't sure why, but I just felt like rushing things was going to be a mistake. Who knew five years later that even taking things slowly would still be a mistake?

We were in our early twenties when we first met, and now we were in our late twenties. We'd grown together before we'd grown apart, and I wasn't sure exactly who I was on my own anymore. I was so used to being part of a couple, to being the other half, that I wasn't sure how to strike out and just be

me anymore. Veronica Thomas had once been Veronica Freemont before she married Richard Thomas. So how did I go back to who I was before I'd met him?

The answer was difficult as it stared me right in the face: I couldn't go back to the girl I was before him. For better or worse, we'd changed each other, just like any person has the ability to change another person, and I could never be who I was before him again. So the task ahead of me was to figure out who I was — on my own — now.

As I got into my car after my parent meeting that Friday afternoon, I glanced at my text messages. I had one from Quinn.

You coming to happy hour? her text asked. I was late because of the damn parent meeting.

I replied, *On my way now*. Then I started my car and headed to the bar.

I met Quinn when I started teaching at Central Valley High School five years earlier. It had been within the first month of school that she had set me up with Richard. Now Paul was long out of the picture, and Quinn was happily living the single life, hopping from bar to bar on the weekends and bed to bed where necessary. I'd always been a little jealous of her single life. I guess even from the start, Richard had made me feel tied down, like a prisoner in my own home. Okay, that was a bit dramatic,

even if it was kind of true. But I was so damn blinded by those green eyes and the money and promises that Richard had made that I let some of the little stuff slide.

I was lost in thought as I pulled into the parking lot of our weekly happy hour haunt, and then I felt that little fluttery feeling when I spotted Jesse's truck in the lot.

Richard hadn't been unfaithful, and neither had I. But I had never been blind, either. Jesse Drake was gorgeous. He had these mysterious, dark brown eyes and this perfect silky and thick, dark hair that was always manscaped in that beautiful way that looked at once like he didn't bother and like he ran his hands

through it a million times a day. He had that look of a healthy, lean athlete. He was one of our school counselors, and he was the kind of good looking that encouraged the teenage girls to literally make up problems so that they could get out of class to go talk to him. He was the kind of good looking that caused me to take the long route to the office copiers just so I could swing by his office and catch a glance. He was the kind of good looking that made my heart skip a beat when I saw his big black truck in the school parking lot when I pulled into my space each morning. And he was the kind of good looking that set the flutters on fire in my belly when I saw that he was at the bar for our weekly happy

hour.

Jesse and I became friends when I had started working at Central. He had been there for a few years before me, and he filled me in on who to avoid and where to go to get all of my questions answered. He'd become a mentor my first year, and over the years, we'd grown closer as friends. I'd always held an attraction to him, but I was with Richard. Not only was I in a relationship, but Jesse was so far out of my league that we weren't even playing the same game.

We exchanged numbers so that he could help me anytime I needed it, and now, five years later, we were text buddies. His tended toward funny

picture texts, and I always tried my best to respond with something equally witty so we'd have a little inside joke together. He was a great colleague and an even better counselor. He loved his job and he loved working with high school kids, and, from what I knew about him, he loved women. He was single, a pretty well-known player, and he was an expert with the flirty banter. He occasionally told me about his conquests, building his reputation as a sexy bad boy, and I shared stories mostly about my classroom. For some reason, I just didn't want to talk to Jesse about my relationship.

So maybe I had nursed a little crush on him, but I knew that even thinking

about hooking up with him was all kinds of bad, not that he would even want me. For one thing, I depended on him for a lot of help since I was the senior English team lead and he was the head senior counselor. And for another thing, I was still married in the eyes of God and the law, and I knew I was in no way even close to being ready to jump into something new.

Even separated, I was still married. I had to keep reminding myself of that fact as I stared at Jesse Drake's truck for a moment. I took a deep breath.

Those little flutters low in my tummy just weren't going away, and as I found myself walking toward the door to enter the bar, they started battling against the

inside of my stomach as my heart joined in and started pounding in my chest. I forced another deep breath into my lungs, wondering why I suddenly had nerves. I'd always been attracted to Jesse, but my body had never reacted quite like that before just in anticipation of seeing him.

I glanced around and found my group in the usual spot. About half of the English department showed up to happy hour, as did about half of the Social Studies teachers, so we had a group of over ten teachers. My heart stopped its loud pounding and those flutters went away when I saw that Jesse wasn't at the table. I snuck a quick scan of the entire bar, but I didn't see him anywhere.

“Veronica!” my happy hour friends exclaimed as I approached the table. Our ritual was to yell out the name of each person upon arrival.

I grinned, feeling disappointed that he wasn't there as I took one of the two open seats at the table, wondering why his truck was there but he wasn't. The bar was at the end of a strip mall, so maybe he was visiting one of the other shops in the area. I silently berated myself, picking up a menu as Quinn's eyes met mine across the table. She grinned and I smiled back as I thought about how adorable she always was. Her naturally curly blonde hair and her bright blue eyes and her high cheekbones and her perfect figure always tended to

draw the attention of men.

“Good meeting?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Who the fuck schedules a meeting on a Friday afternoon?” I complained.

“Bill!” everyone in hearing distance exclaimed. He was notorious for doing that, and we all hated it.

“What can I get for you, sweetie?” the waitress asked, pen poised over her pad of paper.

“Double vodka seven,” I replied.

“And potato skins,” I added on second thought. Shit, I was separated and a little depressed, and it wasn’t like anyone was around who was going to judge my eating habits. I might as well enjoy some fucking potato skins.

“On your own check?” she asked, and I nodded.

The moment she stepped away, something in the air changed. I felt an electric undercurrent, and instinctively I knew that he was there. Then he appeared, pulling out the chair next to me and sitting down.

Those annoying little flutters immediately reignited in my belly.

Great.

This crush of mine was starting to get out of control.

“You know they don’t pay for overtime, right?” Jesse asked, his eyes meeting mine. I noticed for the first time the half-drunk beer that had been sitting on the table, and no one had yelled out

his name when he sat down, so apparently he had been here for awhile. If I had to guess, I figured he'd either gone to the restroom or he'd gone to the bar to chat up some of the ladies seated there, but my quick scan when I'd walked in hadn't spotted him, so I figured it was the former. And I was glad, because I didn't like the thought of him flirting with other women. I wanted him flirting with me.

I had to stop these thoughts. This was wrong on multiple levels.

I started a repetitive chant in my head: "Stop it! He's not for you! Stop it! He's not for you!"

"Yep," I said, trying to catch my breath as his dark eyes bored into mine.

God damn, he was hot. And just like that, those eyes of his made the chanting stop. In fact, it was replaced with a new chant: “Holy fuck! He’s so hot! Holy fuck! He’s so hot!”

Dammit.

“What was the holdup?”

“Parent meeting.”

“Fucking Bill,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair as I chuckled.

The waitress was on the other side of the table, and Jesse held up his glass and tapped the side, the universal signal meaning, “I’ll have another.”

She nodded, and I swore I saw her blush a little, and then she scampered off to put in our orders.

“How did that lesson on satire go?”

Quinn yelled from across the table, interrupting what was sure to be the start of some flirty banter between Jesse and me.

“Fine,” I said. She had helped me plan a killer lesson, and I was using it first with my honors kids. She was going to try it the following week with her on-level students. “They came up with some really great examples.”

I had thought about telling Quinn that Richard and I were over about a million times, but I still hadn’t. She had become my very best friend over the past five years. We had a great time together, laughing at lunch until we both had tears streaming down our faces at the most ridiculously immature things, and we

gave each other solid advice and could have lengthy, deep talks. But something about the fact that she was the one who helped me find Richard made me pause when telling her. I literally had told not a single soul about the separation. I just wasn't ready for the assured looks of sympathy I'd receive and the advice about how to fix a marriage. It was too broken to recover. We weren't just bent; we were broken beyond repair, and the bigger issue was that neither of us *wanted* to fix it anymore. We'd given it the old college try for two years, and sometimes things just don't work out.

I had always believed that marriage was once and forever, but suddenly I found myself about to become another

statistic. That thought saddened me, but it wasn't the end of the world; it was just the end of Richard and me. I knew I had to start telling people eventually, but really nothing had changed from the outside. Things still looked fine, and I'd tell people when I was ready. I'd tell people once we made it official. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was really silly to sit around waiting for something to happen.

I finally made the decision that I was going to file the paperwork for divorce. The sooner we could end things, the sooner we'd both be able to move on.

"Earth to Veronica," I heard Jesse's deep, raspy voice next to me, close to my ear.

I snapped out of my thoughts.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Where did you go just now?” he asked.

“Just a lot on my mind,” I said, skirting the question.

“Care to share?” he asked, a look of concern washing over his warm brown eyes.

I shrugged. “Maybe later,” I said, looking away before I lost myself in those eyes.

I felt his hand on my arm. It was warm and rough and electrical and perfect. I felt all of the blood in my body rushing to that one spot where he touched me, and then I felt my neck warm and my face heat up as a blush

spread across my cheeks. I knew I was being ridiculous. This was my friend. This was my Jesse, my trusted colleague. Wait. Not “my” Jesse. Just Jesse.

I was still married, I reminded myself once again. But a little corner of my mind was also justifying that I was separated and there was no hope left for my marriage.

“Irreconcilable differences” meant no fault. If I acted on these feelings that I was developing, we wouldn’t be able to claim “no fault” anymore. If I cheated, I would be at fault. And right now, things were going to end fairly amicably. We’d already pretty much divided our things, and we had been in talks about selling

the house and splitting the profits. So I had to maintain the steady line until things were fully over between us, until the judge declared that in the eyes of the law, we were officially divorced.

All of that ran through my head in the split second his hand touched my arm. I glanced down at his fingers, and I noticed not for the first time how beautiful his hands were. Seriously, he could be a hand model or something. His fingers were long with trim, neat fingernails. I could tell that he spent time working out, because his hands looked strong and powerful. I suddenly wondered what his naked chest looked like, or what his abdominal muscles looked like under that shirt and tie he

wore every day except Friday, when he wore a polo shirt with CVHS emblazoned over the top left pocket and well worn jeans that made his ass look incredible.

Okay, so maybe I'd spent some time checking him out in the past.

"V, you know you can talk to me," he said, his voice low and intense, that wonderful hand still artfully placed over my skin.

I loved when he called me "V." Something about it was sweet and intimate and intense all at once, and I suddenly felt like it was only the two of us sitting at that table, even though we were surrounded by friends and colleagues.

I did know that I could talk to him. He was a counselor, after all. If there was anybody that I trusted to keep my confessions to himself, and if there was anybody who could give me sound advice, Jesse was it.

I nodded, suddenly unable to speak around the lump that had formed in my throat. I felt those tiny pricks behind my eyes, and then the waitress appeared with my drink and I grabbed it from her gratefully, gulping half of it down with one long pull. I felt the cold liquid slide down my throat. I needed it to clear the threat of tears caused by the man sitting beside me who wanted to comfort me, and I needed it to cool down after the heat that I'd felt rush through me at the

skin to skin contact. While it helped with the threat of tears, the vodka had the opposite effect on me than I had intended, causing my body to heat even more rather than cool down.

“Jesus. Slow down,” Jesse said with a laugh, finishing off his beer and handing the waitress the empty glass as she handed him a fresh one. His voice was no longer low and intimate, close to my ear, and his hand was no longer on my arm. A brief chill prickled my skin where his hand had just been.

Quinn giggled from across the table. She knew that I thought Jesse was hot, but she had no idea what was really going on in my head.

“Long week,” I said weakly, trying to

come up with some excuse as to why I'd just chugged down half of my vodka drink.

He nodded. "I get it. Every week in February tends to be long," he said.

"How's counseling seniors going this time of year?" I asked, changing the subject to something safer.

"Good. I've already contacted all of the parents of seniors in danger of failing, so hopefully they'll get their asses in gear. How are your seniors?"

"Good. I don't have any failing, and we've just been preparing like crazy for the AP test in May."

"Do you think they'll be ready?" he asked, taking a long sip of his drink.

"Fucking better be," I grinned.

“They’ve got the best teacher in your department, so they’ll be fine.”

I blushed from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes.

“Stop,” I chided, and he grinned.

“I’m serious, V,” he said, his voice low and sexy again as he ran his hand through his hair. “You know how awesome you are, don’t you?”

I didn’t, not anymore. I had for a long time. I’d always been confident, but my relationship with Richard had taken that from me.

The waitress came back with my order of potato skins, so I was saved from having to answer his question. I watched him watch the waitress walk away, and I was reminded of his sexual

tendencies. He glanced at my potato skins, covered in bacon and cheese and greasy goodness, and then he glanced up at me, a smirk curling his beautifully sculpted lips.

“You sharing those?” he asked.

I nodded. “Help yourself,” I said, even though I knew I could put the entire plate down myself.

He grinned, and I melted a little. I gulped down some more vodka.

“So that waitress?” he said, grabbing a potato skin and gesturing with it toward the woman who had just placed my food in front of me. I looked over at him and raised my eyebrows. “She likes it rough.”

I choked on some potato. Guess what

I did to clear the blockage from my throat? Yep. Gulped down some more vodka.

He chuckled as he patted me on the back, and I was hyperaware of his hands on me again.

It wasn't unusual to hear Jesse talk about sex, but hearing him talk about sex when I was realizing how serious my crush on him had become was a little too much for me. I suddenly wanted to know what rough with him was like. It wasn't like I hadn't imagined it before, but I had been on a sexual hiatus for over a year, and the last time I'd had sex with Richard wasn't exactly pleasurable.

It had been our one year anniversary. You know how people say that once you

get married, you never have sex again? Most married couples I knew weren't like that at all. But once Richard and I got married, sex became a monthly chore. Before the wedding, it had always been great. Our first time together had been romantic and sweet, and each time after was always pleasurable. But with getting married came buying a house, working harder to make ends meet, and the stress that went along with all of those things. Most nights we were both simply too tired to do it, but we agreed that we needed a date night at least once a month. Our last "date night" was our first wedding anniversary. We'd both drunk too much in anticipation of our monthly chore, and

he passed out while he was still inside of me. I had to push him off of me and then the dramatic tears that come with too much drinking came, and I cried myself to sleep.

Something told me that with Jesse, I'd never cry myself to sleep.

I'd always go to sleep with a smile on my face.

My drink was empty, so I reluctantly called over the waitress who had been lucky enough to fuck the man sitting next to me.

"I'll have another," I announced when she came back. Her nametag said "Tami."

"Another double?" she asked, and I shook my head.

“Single is fine,” I said, knowing I should slow down a little.

She scampered away after holding eyes a little too long with Jesse.

“That was a double?” Jesse asked, incredulous.

“Yeah. You got a problem with that?” I teased.

“Someone’s going to need to drive your drunk ass home.”

He was right. Another drink would put me in the unsafe driving zone, but I’d deal with it when it was time to leave. Quinn would take me home, and I’d figure out a way to get my car the next day. No big deal, I thought, even though I realized that it was kind of a big deal because it’s not like I’d be able to rely

on my husband to help me pick up my car.

“So how’s the man with two first names?” Jesse asked, changing the subject again.

He always called Richard that since his name was Richard Thomas. It annoyed me at first because it had been my husband that he was making fun of, but now I just found it funny.

“You know, that means I have two first names, too,” I said.

“Yeah, but your last name is a guy name, so it’s okay.”

I giggled. Actually giggled, like a stupid kid with a crush on the hot guy. Which was accurate, except I wasn’t a kid.

“You have two first names, too,” I countered, realizing for the first time that he actually did. I think I’d been too mesmerized by those dark, mysterious eyes to register that fact all of the times he’d teased me about my husband’s name before.

“I suppose I do,” he grinned. We smiled at each other for a beat. “So he’s good?” he pressed, and I sensed that he knew something was up.

I shrugged. “Sure. He’s fine.”

“What’s going on, V?” His voice was low and intense and an image of him hovering over me inappropriately flashed through my mind.

“Nothing,” I said, shoving a potato skin covered with sour cream into my

mouth. Not a smart move, but I wasn't prepared to talk about it. Plus, I was already feeling the first effects of the vodka, and vodka, as everyone knows, is truth serum. The last thing I needed was to make a drunken confession about the state of my marriage to my crush.

I chewed like a horse on my food, my mouth stuffed full. Jesse grinned over at me, and then he brought his finger to my mouth, wiping a little excess sour cream from the side of my lip. I briefly closed my eyes and sighed through my food, and then I saw him lick the sour cream off of his fingers. It was far more intimate a moment than should have been shared between two friends, and I felt myself melt a little further into my chair as my

eyes widened. I glanced across the table and saw Quinn, her mouth hanging open at the exchange.

I finished chewing my food and swallowed, and then I followed it with a giant gulp of my drink.

Before I knew it, my potato skins were gone and my drink was empty. Suddenly I had the strong urge to pee.

“Excuse me,” I said, leaving my purse and my phone at the table. Quinn got up and followed me.

“What’s going on?” she asked once we were in the safety of the restroom behind closed doors. I checked under the stalls to be sure we were alone.

“What do you mean?” I asked innocently, and then I headed into a stall

to do my business while Quinn took the empty stall next to me.

“With you and Delicious Drake?”

“Nothing’s going on, Quinn. I’m married for Christ’s sake.”

“How is the old ball and chain? You haven’t talked about Racy Richard in forever.”

Quinn never made it a secret when she thought someone was hot, my nearly ex-husband apparently included.

“He’s fine.”

“What’s he up to on this fine Friday?”

“Hell if I know,” I muttered. I finished up and flushed, and I heard her flush a few seconds later. We met at the sink.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I don’t know what he’s up to. I just know I’m here at happy hour and having fun. What are your plans after this?”

“Meeting Caleb,” she said, grinning. Caleb was her current fuck buddy (“and nothing more,” so she claimed).

“No nickname for Caleb yet?” I asked.

She grinned. “Cock-a-licious?”

“Nice,” I said with a smirk. “More info than I needed. But you kids have fun.”

“You and Richard have big plans for the weekend?”

I thought about that. I doubt she meant filing for divorce, but that had suddenly become my weekend plan. To answer her question, I shook my head, inspecting

my face in the mirror and wiping away a tiny smudge of eyeliner.

“Nope,” I said. “Grading papers, maybe.”

“That sounds like a lame ass weekend.”

“Tell me about it,” I said with a sigh.

We headed back out, and my heart did a little flip flop and my breath got stuck somewhere in my esophagus when I saw Jesse stretch in his chair, the hem of his shirt rising up just a little to reveal the bottom of what looked like a perfect washboard stomach. I thought I spotted some ink, too, but it was hard to tell from my quick glance. But a tattoo? On Jesse Drake? Yes please.

I was in serious trouble.

“Jesus Christ,” Quinn said, apparently having spotted the same sight as me. She sighed. “Too bad I don’t sleep where I work, or I’d have to give that a try,” she said. Funny how the one limit she set was the one thing I was suddenly obsessing over.

I settled back into my chair. Jesse draped his arm across the back of my chair and leaned in toward me. “I ordered you another,” he said, that sexy edge to his low voice back in full force. His scent invaded my senses. He wore a hint of some sort of masculine cologne that was fresh and reminded me of Christmas at the same time. It smelled like winter and pine and sex.

“Thanks,” I managed, tucking a strand

of hair behind my ear as I spotted a fresh drink in front of me. I took a sip. “Single or double?”

“Double,” he said, a scandalous smile spreading across his features.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” I asked, pressing the boundaries just a little further than I probably should have and definitely a little further than I would have if I was sober.

“Sure. Why not? Then I’ll take you home to that two first name husband of yours.”

It was strange that he suddenly mentioned my husband in the midst of the air thick with sexual tension between us, and all it served to do was snap me back to reality. While I was enjoying my time

with Jesse, I was aware that it would never go past flirting. Even if he was a player, he seemed like a good guy. He wasn't the kind of guy who would hook up with a married woman, even if I suddenly wanted it like I wanted the next sip of my vodka drink.

Reese, one of the English teachers, asked Tami for her bill, and a few others followed suit. The first few teachers left, and it was down to the typical core group who always stayed latest: Quinn, Avery, and me from the English department, Kevin and Dane from Social Studies, and Jesse. Avery and Kevin had been flirting back and forth for as long as I had known them, and I knew someday they would eventually hook up

(if they hadn't already... Avery had a bit of a reputation). Dane and Quinn had co-taught lessons before, so they had plenty to talk about. That left Jesse's attention on me.

Everyone was too wrapped up in their own conversations to notice what we were talking about. I chanced a glance over at Quinn to make sure just as she threw her head back and laughed at something Dane had said.

"So, Mrs. Thomas, what are you up to this weekend?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Probably grading essays," I said.

"That sounds so exciting."

"It's February. We've got three months of school left. I have to do it

sometime.”

“Do you have plans for the summer?”
he asked.

I shrugged. I did; I was planning to pack my shit and find a new place to live, but I wasn’t ready to reveal that over happy hour drinks.

I took another gulp of my drink. “Not sure yet,” I said after I swallowed.
“You?”

“I only get June off, really, and then I’m back to the grind with scheduling. But every summer I take a road trip.”

“Where are you off to this year?” I asked.

“I’m heading down to Mexico for a couple weeks, and then I’m going to drive up through California wine

country.”

“Sounds romantic. Taking someone special?” I asked, suddenly jealous both of him for going on what sounded like an amazing adventure and of whatever slut of the month he was taking with him.

He shook his head. “Actually, I usually travel alone. Good way to decompress after a long school year. I’ll probably check in with some friends in California, and I have a buddy meeting me in Mexico for a few days, but otherwise, I’m heading out alone.”

Something sparked inside of me at that thought. I liked that he wasn’t taking a romantic trip with someone else even though it wasn’t my place to feel that way.

Tami came by, and Jesse and I each ordered another. And then Quinn, Kevin, Avery, and Dane all asked for their checks.

I guess that meant Jesse and I would be alone for our last drinks.

It suddenly felt like a date, and I didn't mind one bit.

"You need a ride?" Quinn asked from across the table.

"I can take her," Jesse jumped in before I could answer.

Quinn raised her eyebrows at me, and I nodded my consent. Of course it was fine if he took me home. Obviously I wasn't driving home, not after four vodka drinks.

"Thanks for the offer," I said to

Quinn, and she came over and gave me a hug before leaving.

And then there were two.

CHAPTER 2

“Are you really doing okay?” he asked after Tami dropped off our drinks, staying a little longer than necessary and dipping her breasts a little closer to Jesse than I would have preferred.

I shook my head. I don’t know why, but suddenly I wanted to tell someone. I wanted to confess the shit I’d been going through on my own for the last year. And those pricks hit the backs of my eyes again, but this time, gulping down my drink didn’t stop them.

“No. I’m not.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, somehow scooting his chair closer to me and wrapping his arm around my

shoulder. I allowed him to comfort me as I cried into him for a moment, loving the way his arm felt around me, strong and warm and caring. It had been well over a year since I felt like a man cared about me.

“I’m getting a divorce,” I said. It was the first time I had ever said it out loud to another person.

I heard him take in a sharp breath. My mind was foggy from all of the vodka, but his chest rose quickly, and then he backed up a bit and looked at me. His thumb brushed against my cheek.

“What happened?” he asked, that beautiful hand of his running back through those gorgeous wisps of hair. The more I drank, the more I found

myself staring at that dark hair, wondering what it would feel like between my own fingers.

“A lot,” I said, smiling sadly through the tears that wouldn’t stop now. “We sort of grew apart right after we got married, and things have been going straight downhill ever since.”

“Is there someone else?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that. We’ve both been faithful, but he has hurt me more times that I can count, and I can’t forgive him for it anymore.”

His eyes darkened. “Has he...” he trailed off, but I knew where he was going.

“No,” I said immediately, and I saw a flash of relief in Jesse’s eyes. “He’s

never hurt me physically. We're just... different people than we were when we got married. We've grown apart, and there's no salvaging it."

"Irreconcilable differences?" he asked, and I nodded ruefully, picking my drink back up and playing with the straw.

"I always thought that was such a copout, but now that it's me, it's actually pretty accurate."

"I'm sorry, V," he said. His eyes were dark and sincere.

"Thanks, Jesse."

"How long have you known?" he asked, taking a sip of his beer as we both settled back into our chairs. Jesse crossed one leg over the other, one ankle

resting on his other knee as he leaned back and drank his beer.

The view wasn't too shabby.

"That I'm getting divorced?" I asked, the words still feeling strange falling out of my mouth.

"That there were differences that couldn't be reconciled."

"A year. Maybe more."

"What happened a year ago that made you realize that?"

"There isn't one big thing, but what it comes down to is that I think we just fell out of love. Or maybe we never had that love in the first place; I don't know. I know I don't miss him when we're apart, and I don't think he misses me, either," I said, realizing that I was

rambling. I took another sip of my drink, and then I continued. “He’s become unrecognizable to me. He isn’t the Richard I fell in love with anymore. He runs around with a new group of friends and they’re all assholes, and he’s become one, too.

“Have you talked to anyone about it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “We tried couples counseling, but it didn’t work. We tried a lot of different things, but you’re the first person I have ever told.”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You haven’t talked to anybody about this?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. "Talking about it makes it real. We're just separated right now."

"Are you sure this is what you want?" he asked.

I nodded slowly. "Yes. I am positive. I've been living in limbo for a year, and it's time to take the next step. I can't keep living like this anymore. We haven't officially filed for divorce, but I'm planning to fill out the papers this weekend and get everything filed early next week."

"Do you need some help?" he asked.

"Yeah. You could print the papers for me so all I have to do is fill them out," I said sarcastically, thinking about how all it would take for me to print the papers was to actually go to the website and

locate them. It couldn't be hard, but it was just one of those steps that seemed harder to take than it actually would be.

He chuckled, and then both of our drinks were suddenly empty.

"You want another?" he asked, nodding toward my glass.

I shook my head. "I shouldn't."

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment. "You ready to head home?" he asked.

I nodded reluctantly. I didn't want to go home. Richard would be there, and I didn't want to be reminded of the difficult tasks I had lying ahead of me. While we'd both known for awhile that it was over, actually ending it with that final cut of ties wasn't going to be easy.

Ending a relationship was never easy, but ending a marriage was completely different than dumping a boyfriend. No matter who you were, it cut and it hurt.

We paid our bills and headed out to Jesse's truck. He drove one of those enormous Ford F fifty somethings, and something about that truck screamed sexy sensuality, just like the man who drove it. He opened the passenger door for me, and I stepped onto the running board and pulled myself up into the front passenger seat. He shut the door behind me, and as he walked to the driver's side, I don't know why, but suddenly I burst into tears.

He gracefully jumped up into the driver's seat and gazed over at me, and

then he reached across the armrest and put his arm around my shoulders again.

“I’m sorry,” I managed out through my tears.

Were those his lips brushing against my temple? Surely I imagined that, but his intimate comfort only made me cry harder.

“Don’t cry, V. I’ve got you,” he cooed, his soothing voice helping me to feel better as he rubbed my back. I didn’t want to go home. It didn’t feel like home anymore. It felt like a prison where I was confined to one side of the house while my soon-to-be-ex was confined to the other. We did everything we could not to cross paths, and going home meant having to face the inevitable awkward

tension.

I couldn't believe I was crying, for the second time that night, in front of Jesse Drake. I wasn't sure if it was because of the vodka or because of the confession I'd unleashed on him, but it felt cathartic to cry and even more cathartic to have someone like Jesse providing the comfort through my tears.

"I'll be right back, okay?" he said, and I nodded. My eyes followed him as my tears started to dry, and I saw him walk back into the bar. I watched as he looked around for a moment, and then I saw Tami walk up to him and put her arms around his neck. He backed up a little and said something to her. She looked angry, and then he turned and left.

I averted my eyes so he wouldn't know I had watched the whole encounter, curiosity burning in my mind about what he'd just said to her.

He got back into the car and quietly started the engine, turning down the radio so low that I could barely hear it. He started driving toward my place. I was curious how he knew where I lived, but he never asked. As we approached my neighborhood, I gathered my purse from the floor and took a deep breath, steeling myself for what was awaiting me.

But we drove right past my neighborhood. "I live back there," I said, pointing my thumb behind us.

"Well I live up here," he countered.

What?

“What?” I put voice to the question in my head.

“I’m not taking you to your house. You need someone to talk to, and you obviously need a night away from your almost ex. I’ve got extra space, and you might be aware that I have a degree in counseling, so I’m taking you home with me.”

My heart pounded, and then I felt a deep, aching throb start to form between my legs.

He was taking me home?

He was taking me home!

Holy shit!

I was going to Jesse’s house.

I was going to sleep in Jesse Drake’s

bed.

Well, technically a guest bed that belonged to Jesse Drake.

Same difference.

“It’s okay, Jesse. You can take me to my house.” My argument was weak, but I knew I had to put one up anyway.

“Forget about it. You’re coming with me.”

We continued about five more miles in comfortable silence. He hummed softly with the radio, the throaty rasp of his deep timber awakening feelings that had been long dormant inside of me, and then we pulled into his driveway. His home was a beautiful and modest ranch. I could tell from the outside that he was meticulous and neat, but, then, I could

tell that from his desk at work, too. His yard didn't boast a single weed, and his trees and bushes were trimmed skillfully. He pulled into a garage lined neatly with bookcases and shelves that had boxes and tools stacked in a precise order. Two mountain bikes hung from hooks screwed into the ceiling. A workbench lined one side of the garage, and I spotted wood on it that looked like some sort of work in progress.

He cut the engine and we both opened our doors to get out. I hopped down and pushed my door closed, and then I swung my purse over my shoulder.

“What's that?” I pointed to the workbench on my way by, taking it all in.

“Eventually it’ll be an end table for my mom,” he said, and if I’m not mistaken, I thought I saw a sweet pink shade stain his cheeks.

“You build tables?” I asked stupidly.

He shrugged. “I build furniture,” he said. “I’m good with wood.”

I giggled at his innuendo, and he grinned.

“I only work on this stuff when I have spare time, which, as you know, isn’t much,” he said.

“All the girls you’re entertaining?” I teased.

The sweet pink in his cheeks deepened just a touch, and I saw him run his hand through his hair. I wondered how many times a day he did that,

because I noticed him doing it a lot. It was a sexy little habit. “I just meant because of my job that keeps me busy, but I suppose my reputation precedes me.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling stupid for blurting that out and knowing I’d have censored myself a little better if I hadn’t had all that vodka. Fucking vodka.

I took a closer look at the piece of wood on the workbench. It had some intricate carving in what would become the top of the table once he put it together. I ran my fingertips across it, impressed with his woodworking abilities that I had known nothing about. I enjoyed peeling back a layer to the mystery that was Jesse Drake. “This is

gorgeous,” I breathed.

He ignored my compliment. “Let’s head in,” he said, guiding me with his hand on the small of my back. It was another intimate exchange between us that was easily played off by friendship, but it didn’t stop me from wanting something more to happen. We entered through a mudroom that was neat and tidy and into a hallway that led to the kitchen.

My breath left me in a whoosh as I took in his perfect kitchen. It looked like one of those kitchens you saw in a magazine or on the Food Network.

I loved to cook. I loved to experiment and play with food or try new recipes, but the kitchen I shared with Richard

didn't have much room for experimentation.

This kitchen, however, was a dream.

He had black marble countertops and white cabinets. A huge, oversized island graced the center of the room with a porcelain sink sunken into the counter. The kitchen opened to a great room, and the dark gray sectional couch pointed at a huge flat screen television was the perfect complement to the black and white kitchen. The entire room was filled with a neutral travertine tile.

He had one of those double sub zero refrigerators built right into the wall, the outside of the fridge matching the cabinets. The gas range was also oversized and a stainless steel hood

hovered above it. All of the appliances in his kitchen matched the hood.

I imagined the listing for the house when he bought it, and I was certain that it said, “A chef’s dream.”

“Like it?” he grinned.

“Huh?”

“You just moaned and closed your eyes when you looked at my kitchen,” he said, and I swore I saw him discreetly adjust himself.

“It’s amazing, Jesse,” I smiled. “I moaned? I just love to cook and I’ve never seen a kitchen quite like this one.”

“I also love to cook,” he said. Yet another layer peeled away. So not only was he gorgeous, but he worked with kids, he was good with wood, and he

liked to cook. Why was this man still single? “That’s why I designed the kitchen this way.”

“You designed this?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded. “I saw something like it in a magazine once. Ready for the tour?” he asked, and I nodded. The kitchen that opened into the family room was not his home’s only extravagance. He had an office that was filled with memorabilia, two guest bedrooms, each with their own full bathroom, a dining room, a living room up at the front of his house with what looked like a pretty kickass pool table, and the master suite.

When he led me into his bedroom, I couldn’t tear my eyes from his bed. Even

the plush carpet that my shoes literally sank into didn't distract my attention from that bed. It was unlike anything I had ever seen.

The bed frame was all gorgeous intricately carved wood, and I knew immediately that he had built it without him even having to tell me. The bed looked larger than a king, and it was covered in a gray comforter that looked soft and inviting. The pillows stacked by the headboard looked like those perfect feather pillows you only ever find at the nicest hotels. I had the sudden urge to throw the man next to me down on the bed, but I restrained myself.

Unfortunately, nothing seemed appropriate about me jumping him while

I was still married and he'd simply invited me over to lend a friendly ear.

I walked toward the bed and ran my fingertips along the wood of the headboard that was connected to a matching wooden frame and footboard. It was beautiful, simple elegance with its intricate arabesque design.

I heard his sharp intake of breath as we both stared at the bed, and his breathing then became labored. "Is this where the magic happens?" I teased, and he glanced over at me, brow furrowed.

"What, exactly, do you think I do in my spare time?" he asked. I couldn't put my finger on his tone, but he didn't seem pleased that I thought he was a player.

The vodka did the answering for me.

“I’ve just heard that you like the ladies.”

“I do like the ladies,” he said. “But I don’t bring them here.”

What?

“What?” I voiced that same damn question in my head as earlier. This man was certainly full of surprises.

“My home is mine. I don’t bring women here.”

I gazed at that bed that looked like absolute heaven. “So you’re saying it’s never happened in here?”

He looked at the bed, too. “You’re the first woman aside from my mother who has ever even seen my bed.”

I looked at him with wide eyes. “Seriously?”

His eyes moved slowly from the bed

to meet mine. “Seriously.”

Well.

I swallowed loudly.

“Why?” I squeaked.

“Why what?”

“Why hasn’t a woman seen this before?”

“I told you. I don’t bring women here. I’m not saying that I haven’t had my fun, but I go where the fun is. You feel me?”

Oh, I certainly wanted to feel him.

I nodded.

He broke the awkwardness by walking toward the bathroom. Again, I swore I saw him readjust himself in his pants, and he shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other.

“Here’s the master bathroom,” he

said, and I followed him into another impressive room. This one had countertops that matched the travertine on the floor, a snail shower, and a huge soaker tub that I could spend days in.

The tour ended in one of the guest rooms, the one closest to the master bedroom. “This will be your room tonight,” he said. The queen bed looked comfortable, and I saw more wooden furniture in this room. It wasn’t much of a stretch to assume he’d created all of the pieces himself. He really was talented.

“Perfect,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Let’s hang on the couch for awhile. Let me just change out of my Central shirt. What do you want to sleep in?” he

asked, gesturing to my clothes, and I suddenly remembered that this hadn't been a planned sleepover and all I had with me was my purse and the clothes on my back.

I shivered, and I wasn't sure if it was because I was cold or if it was because I was standing in Jesse Drake's house.

"Pajama pants are fine, and a t-shirt. Long-sleeved if you've got one."

"Coming right up," he said with a smile.

We walked together to the kitchen, and I waited there while he went and grabbed my requested clothes for me.

He came back a moment later, still in his jeans and school polo shirt, and handed me the clothes. "Thanks," I said.

“Go change and I’ll meet you back here.”

I followed his directions, and I took my time. I went into the bathroom and inspected my face. The four drinks I had consumed had left me somewhat flushed, but, then again, it could have just been because I was in Jesse’s house. Even though we were apparently getting ready for bed, I freshened my make-up. If I was going to spend time in Jesse’s house, he deserved for me to look my best.

I changed into the navy blue pajama pants and the t-shirt he had given me that were both far too large for me. I breathed in as I pulled the shirt over my head, and it smelled like Jesse. I took a

moment to savor his manly and piney and Christmasy scent. I was wrapped up in his scent as I wrapped my arms around myself in a giddy little hug.

I took a deep breath and headed out to the kitchen. I found him on his couch, his feet propped up on his coffee table. I realized I'd never seen his bare feet before. I wasn't a foot person by any stretch of the imagination, but his feet were damn near perfect. My eyes traveled up his firm, well-shaped calves to see he was dressed in black mesh basketball shorts and a white t-shirt. I paused for a moment to admire the view. He had opened another beer, and he held the bottle in the air when he spotted me. "Can I get you anything?" he asked with

that saucy grin of his. I swore I saw his eyes heat when he gazed at me in his clothes, but I figured it was just me hoping.

I forced myself to stop staring. “I’d love some water,” I said, knowing more alcohol was a terrible idea.

“Help yourself,” he said. “Bottles are in the fridge.”

I opened the massive (and somewhat intimidating) refrigerator and saw that his OCD neatness extended to the inside of his fridge. Every bottle and every can had the label facing me, and the shelves were stocked full with every type of soda, beer, and wine that I could imagine. There was even a variety of water: regular old Evian bottles,

Vitamin Water, Sobe Lifewater.

I helped myself to a Sobe and headed over to the couch, surveying the huge sectional and debating which cushion to sit on. Sitting too close to him would be too forward, but I wanted to be close to him. He made my decision for me when he patted the cushion next to him. I sat, and he leaned in closer so our shoulders were touching. He grabbed a blanket that was nestled beside him and handed me one side. We unfolded it and spread it out over our legs.

Sharing a blanket with Jesse Drake.
Check it off the bucket list.

I stared straight ahead, afraid to look over at him, afraid to be mesmerized by those gorgeous eyes, afraid of wanting

what I knew I couldn't have but still wanting to live in this moment and enjoy every single second.

“So talk to me,” he said, breaking the silence.

I took a sip of my Sobe. “About what?” I asked.

“Why didn't you want to go home?”

“I never said that I didn't.” I knew my answer was rude, but I didn't know where he was going with this.

“You didn't have to. You started crying when I was ready to take you there. What's going on?”

“Have you ever lived in a house with someone and not said a single word to that person in over a week?”

He shook his head. “No. But I can

imagine that it would suck.”

“It more than sucks. It doesn’t feel like home anymore. Home should feel safe. Home should be where you want to go at the end of the day. Instead, I find myself inventing reasons to stay late at work. I find myself volunteering to run the clock or take tickets at sporting events just so I don’t have to go home. I assign extra essays to my students so I have a reason to stay late grading. It’s become ridiculous.”

Whoa. I wasn’t sure where these deep confessions were coming from, but he was just so easy to talk to.

“So move out,” he said.

“You make it sound like it’s so easy.”

“Because it is, V. The answer is

pretty simple.”

“The answer is, but the actual act of moving? Not so simple.”

“Why not?”

“Because it means admitting that we failed. It means telling people that we’re separated and getting sympathetic looks and knowing that they’re whispering behind our backs with gossipy assumptions that are assuredly inaccurate. It means actually going through with a divorce and splitting assets and splitting lives and splitting up.”

He turned toward me and grabbed my hand in his. I felt that same flutter and electrical current as earlier. Damn that fucking flutter.

“I think it’s time to admit you failed so you can move on.” His eyes were dark and sincere as they bored into mine. He squeezed my hand and then let it go.

I nodded. “I know.”

“Maybe it’s time to start telling people, Veronica,” he said. “You told me. Was that so hard?”

I shook my head. “Not everyone is as easy to talk to as you, though,” I said.

He grinned and winked. “I’ll give you that,” he said. “And you can’t worry about the gossips. They’ll be there whether or not you’re happy, and ultimately, you only live once. If you’re in a position to get out of a bad situation, you have to take it.”

“Am I in that position, though?” I

asked.

Jesse sighed and took a long drag of his beer.

“I’m in the middle of the school year,” I continued. “I had planned to wait until summer and then move out when I have the time.”

“Copout. Stop inventing shit to do to keep yourself busy and focus on getting out of your situation, out of your marriage, out of your house.”

He was right, of course. I’d already admitted to taking on extra work just so I didn’t have to go home. If I put half as much energy into actually getting out of the house, I’d already be divorced and moved out. But that didn’t make it any less difficult to end it. “I don’t have

anywhere to go, Jesse.”

He sighed again, deeply this time, as if contemplating how to solve the problem of world peace. He gazed at me sideways, and I glanced over and locked eyes with him.

“Stay here,” he whispered.

“What?” I screeched, much louder than I had intended.

“I’ve got two extra bedrooms. I’ve got space. I just want to help a friend,” he said. He emphasized that last word, and the illogical side of my brain wondered if he wanted us to be more than friends. Of course he didn’t; he was way out of my league, and besides, if he wanted me, he never would’ve taken me home. He’d admitted that much to me

earlier when he had told me he never took his ladies back to his place.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t just barge in and interrupt your life.”

“I like having you here,” he said, his voice low and quiet and dangerously thrilling.

I had to admit, I liked being there, too. But it was too dangerous. Moving in with the guy who I was seriously crushing on? That would be such a huge mistake. It would be dangling temptation in my face on a daily basis.

“I like being here,” I said, my voice a whisper.

“Think about it. You don’t have to rush, but you’re welcome to crash.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Jesse.”

“I just want to see you happy. I knew something was up with you. You’re always smiling, and the past couple of months, I haven’t seen that gorgeous smile.”

He stopped his sentence short, as if he’d said more than he had intended to, but I barely noticed because I was once again blushing from head to toe. I stared straight ahead, embarrassed and delighted at the same time. He thought my smile was gorgeous? The chant was back in my head: “Holy fuck! He likes my smile! Holy fuck! He likes my smile!”

“It’s strange that my closest friends haven’t noticed, but you have,” I said, sidestepping the “gorgeous” comment

even though I didn't want to.

“I'm trained to look for signs of depression.”

“You think I'm depressed?” I asked.

He ran a hand through his hair. “No,” he said. “I just meant that I knew you weren't yourself, and I am always on the lookout for ways I can help people.”

“That's really sweet,” I said, still refusing to look over at him. I leaned my head back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. At least this way I didn't have to look at him and feel that buzz in my head that came with his masculine attractiveness.

“That's me,” he said, leaning back and staring at the ceiling with me.

“Anything interesting up there?” he

asked.

I chuckled.

“Enough talking?” he asked.

“For tonight, I think so. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m glad to help a friend.” Again I noticed how he pronounced that last word. There was a definite emphasis there, and I just wondered if it was for his benefit or my own.

He flicked on that enormous flat screen television of his that was anchored to the wall, and he downed the rest of his beer. He set the empty bottle on the coffee table and then proceeded to let out a giant, ripe, completely disgusting belch.

He looked over at me and smiled

sheepishly. “Sorry.” He waved his hand in front of his face as if to get rid of the stench, but the nastiness had already invaded my nostrils.

I giggled through my disgust. “That’s revolting,” I said, waving my hand as I wrinkled my nose.

He looked over at me and laughed. “You look completely disgusted right now.”

I smacked him in the arm. “I am. That was gross.”

“My bad,” he chuckled, and I laughed as I warmed over at how comfortable things already were between us. He settled back into the couch, and I suddenly felt completely exhausted. The long week finally caught up with me, as

it always did on Friday nights. My eyes wouldn't stay open as Jesse flipped through the channels, and I snuggled into his side, my head dropping onto his shoulder involuntarily as I was drawn to him even in my sleep.

CHAPTER 3

When I first woke up, it took me a moment to remember where I was, and as that masculine Christmas smell invaded my senses, I remembered: I had slept in Jesse Drake's bed.

Okay, his *guest* bed if we were being technical.

I smiled to myself. What a perfect night the night before had been. I replayed our talk, all the times he'd found a reason to touch me, the flirting that wasn't full of pressure but still felt nice, the comfort of a man that I'd been missing for so long.

Oh, man. If I was crushing on Jesse before when we were just friends, I

knew I was in serious trouble now that I was staying over at his house.

I contemplated the offer he'd extended the night before. Crashing at Jesse's place had its definite pros. For one, I'd be getting out of my tension filled home and starting the process of moving on with my life. And for another thing, I'd get to gawk at the gorgeous Jesse Drake as much as I wanted. Wait, that wasn't a good reason to crash at his place. But the first reason was. Right?

I stretched lazily, realizing how well-rested I felt. I hadn't been sleeping well since... well, probably since our one year anniversary when I started to face the fact that things were over between Richard and me. The previous night felt

like the best night's sleep I'd had in a long time, and as I rolled over to grab my cell phone to see what time it was, I was suddenly curious how I even got into this bed. The last thing I remembered was watching Jesse flip through the channels and feeling his firm shoulder under my ear as I fell asleep on his couch.

God, I hoped I hadn't snored. How embarrassing.

A glance at the clock told me it was just before noon.

Shit.

I was a guest in someone else's home, and I'd slept until almost noon.

What kind of lazy ass does that?

It had to be fairly early when I'd

fallen asleep the night before. By my calculations, I'd gotten about thirteen hours of sleep. Jeez.

I headed to the bathroom and freshened up as best I could. I swished some water around in my mouth and rinsed my face, and then I put on some fresh make-up so I wouldn't look like hell warmed over. I gave myself another little giddy hug, still enjoying being in Jesse's clothes.

For the first time, I wondered what Richard thought about me not showing up the night before. A small part of me was worried he'd think I'd slept with someone else. I wouldn't, couldn't do that; but I knew the type of person Richard was, and if he thought he could

place the blame of our divorce on me so he could get more out of the deal, I wouldn't put it past him to do that.

After I made myself somewhat presentable, I headed out to the kitchen. Jesse wasn't around, but there were muffins on a plate and a pot of coffee with a coffee cup next to it. As I walked closer, I saw some papers on the counter with a note from Jesse on top. His handwriting was familiar; I'd seen it plenty of times for numerous reasons at school, but this was different. This note was just for me. "Printed these for you as requested. Let me know if I can help. Help yourself to coffee and breakfast. Cream in the fridge. I'll be in the garage."

I picked up a muffin and took the top off and then proceeded to eat the bottom. I always saved the muffin top for last. It was banana walnut and quite possibly the most delicious muffin that I had ever eaten. As I munched on the bottom, I moved Jesse's note to the side and looked at the rest of the papers under his note. The top of the page said, "Dissolution of Marriage."

I felt pricks behind my eyes as I realized that he had printed all of the forms I needed to file for divorce.

This man was a fucking dream.

I wanted to run out to the garage and wrap my arms around him. He had easily done in one morning what I hadn't been able to do in a year. I was so used to

doing things for myself that I forgot what it was like to have someone take care of me, and my crush on Jesse inexplicably increased.

I took my time with my muffin, taking a deep breath as I managed to keep the tears at bay. This was really going to happen. Richard and I were really going to get a divorce, and I had Jesse to thank for helping me finally do what I'd been stupidly avoiding for so long.

I poured a cup of coffee and found cream in the refrigerator. He had a nice selection of flavored creamers to choose from, and I went with the Caramel Vanilla. I stirred it into the coffee, and then I took my mug and headed out to the garage.

I slipped out into the garage and saw him working on his end table at his workbench. At the sight of him, my breath caught in my throat just as I took a sip of my coffee, having the effect of making me choke and sputter and spit coffee everywhere. Lovely.

He was wearing pajama pants and nothing else. Sweat trickled down his back, showing how hard he was working on his project. I gazed at the muscular planes in his back as he worked. Even around my choking, I could still appreciate the fine male form standing in front of me. Music blared from some hidden speakers somewhere, and I recognized Sara Bareillis's "Brave." I noted the irony as she sang, "Honestly, I

wanna see you be brave.”

Was she telling me to be brave and fill out those papers? Or was she telling me to be brave and mount that sexy man working with his wood right there on the garage floor? I was guessing the former, but suddenly I wanted the latter like I wanted to stop choking on my coffee.

He turned as he heard my choking, and I got to see the full effect of the intricate tattoo that ran the length of his right side. I stared at it as he turned. It was a phoenix about to take flight. One wing spanned around to his back, and the other wing spanned around to his torso. In its talons, the phoenix held a beautiful, intricate cross with a heart in the middle. A word was written in the heart, but I

couldn't quite make it out from where I stood. "Allison," maybe? I'd never seen such an artful, beautiful tattoo, and on Jesse, it somehow gave his mysterious edge a bit of danger that I'd never noticed before.

I moved just a little closer, and it was confirmed. "Allison."

Who the fuck was Allison?

"Good morning," he grinned, and my eyes swept up to his. He grabbed his shirt and pulled it on over his head, covering what was most definitely a washboard abdomen. Dammit. "You okay?" he asked over the music as I continued to cough around the coffee that lodged itself in my throat. He turned the volume down.

I nodded and held up a hand. One more big cough cleared it. I took another sip, this one going down the right way, and then I smiled. “Good morning,” I croaked. I cleared my throat. “Thanks for the papers.”

He nodded. “No problem. I was serious about wanting to help you.”

“I appreciate it,” I said.

“Did you think any more about my offer?” he asked, his voice low and deep.

I nodded. I had thought about it, but I hadn’t come to a decision until I saw him without his shirt on that morning. Fuck yes I wanted to crash at his place for awhile. Was he kidding me? Fresh muffins, strong coffee, and that

ridiculously perfect body. Fuck yes. Instead of saying all that, I said, “Yeah, I thought about it. If you really don’t mind, it would be great if I could crash here for just a little while. Just until I find something permanent.”

His face lit up and he broke out into the biggest grin I’d ever seen. All teeth. Straight and white and perfect... just like him.

“As long as you need to, V,” he said, and then he stepped a little closer to me. His eyes were hot and intense, and he ran a hand through his hair, wet with sweat.

“I have to admit, I haven’t slept that good in a really long time,” I said, his scent invading my nostrils as he stepped

closer to me. It was still masculine and Christmasy, but now it had the distinct odor of working man mixed in. I'd always found sweat disgusting, but on him, it looked good and it didn't smell bad. He was simply delicious in every way.

"I checked in on you a few hours ago, and you were sawing logs. I didn't have the heart to wake you."

I felt that heat creep back into my cheeks. *Sawing logs?* How completely and totally fucking embarrassing.

"I don't snore," I protested.

"Okay," he said sarcastically with a chuckle. "I'm about ready for lunch. You in?"

God, he was good at making me feel

mortified that morning. Ahem. That afternoon. “I just ate breakfast. But I’d be glad to sit with you while you eat lunch.”

We headed inside and I took a seat at one of the stools at that gorgeous oversized island. I watched as he moved with ease around his kitchen. He made himself a giant salad with about a million different vegetables and goodies that were already cut and stored in his refrigerator for easy access. Cucumbers, green peppers, broccoli, tomatoes, some hardboiled egg, a handful of walnuts, shredded chicken, a sprinkle of shredded cheese, some apple slices, and some grapes. He doused it in some sort of homemade dressing and took a seat next

to me with a fork.

“Sure you don’t want any?” he tempted, holding a forkful out to me.

“Maybe just a bite,” I smiled, wrapping my lips around his proffered fork. God, that sounded dirty.

He shifted in his seat as he watched me chew and moan around that delicious dressing. “What dressing is that?” I asked.

“Homemade recipe. It’s a family secret, but I like to call it Jesse Drake’s Delightful Dressing.”

Fuck, I wanted more of Jesse Drake’s Delightful Dressing in my mouth. God, that sounded dirty, too. What was he doing to me? He was turning me back into an adolescent perv, that’s what he

was doing. Although Quinn and I were pretty good at being adolescent pervs on our own during our lunch breaks.

“It certainly is delightful,” I said, and he took a bite of his own from the same fork he had just fed me from. Something about that was outrageously sexy.

He stacked up another forkful of goodies and looked at me, one eyebrow raised. I nodded, and he brought his fork back to my mouth. This time, I placed my hand over his as I opened my mouth. Our eyes locked, and something very sexual and intimate passed between us in that moment. I had the distinct inclination that he was crushing on me as much as I was crushing on him, but in my head I knew that I was wrong. I knew that I wasn't

good enough for someone like him, but it wasn't going to stop me from enjoying the attention.

He pulled the fork away quickly and averted his eyes down to his salad, breaking that moment of desire that passed between us. He shifted in his chair again and cleared his throat. "Do you want more?" he asked.

Damn. That was a loaded question. Yes, I wanted more, but I couldn't have more until the divorce was finalized. And those papers still sat on the counter where Jesse had left them earlier that morning. Where he'd left them after he'd sweetly checked on me. Where he'd left them after he had researched to find them. Where he'd left them after he'd

clearly spent the morning thinking of me.

And then I realized he was talking about the salad.

“No, thanks. I’m full.”

“What do you want to do today?” he asked.

“I guess I should head home and start packing. Maybe fill out the paperwork and get Richard’s signature.”

“You need any help?” he asked.

“You’ve helped me so much already. I couldn’t possibly ask for more.”

He took another bite of his lunch. “If you need something, ask. Don’t be shy, V. Not with me.”

I was glad he was staring into his salad, because my cheeks heated at his words. Of course I was shy with him.

Did he have any idea the effect he had on me?

“Thanks,” I whispered, drinking some more coffee. “I do have one favor to ask,” I said, suddenly remembering.

“Anything.”

“Can you take me to get my car?”

He nodded. “Of course. Let’s go after I’m done eating.”

When he was finished eating, I headed to “my” room and changed back into my jeans and Central t-shirt from the day before. I folded “my” pajamas and made “my” bed, and then I gathered my purse, my phone, and the paperwork he’d so thoughtfully printed out for me.

Before I knew it, we were headed back to the bar where everything had

changed the night before, and I suddenly realized the magnitude of what was happening. I was about to leave my husband, and I was moving in with another man. It was a strange realization. For all intents and purposes, he was just a friend, but there was certainly an undercurrent of something more between us, at least on my end. For the first time in a long time, I felt excited about the future.

He pulled his truck in next to my car. I grabbed the door handle, ready to open it and hop out, when he stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Here," he said, handing me a key and a garage remote. "For my house, when you get back."

"Thank you," I whispered, touched

that he genuinely wanted me to stay with him, so much so that he actually had given me a key and a garage door opener.

“When will you be back?” he asked, his eyes covered with sunglasses.

I shrugged. “Why? Got big plans tonight?” I winked, hoping I was wrong but wanting to know if he was heading out later that night to bang some lucky girl.

“Nope. Cancelled them in favor of hanging out with my new houseguest,” he grinned.

And I blushed.

This was getting predictable.

“I have no idea how long I’ll be,” I said, digging through my purse for my

car keys. “Can I text you and let you know?”

He nodded. “We’ll play it by ear.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Jesse. For everything.”

“You bet. Catch ya later.”

I grinned. “Catch ya later,” I repeated, and then I hopped down and closed the door behind me.

I got in my car and started it, and he waited until I started pulling away to leave. I felt his eyes on me, or at least on my car, and he followed a safe distance behind me until I turned into my neighborhood and he continued straight ahead to his house.

The lightness I felt with Jesse dissipated the moment we were apart,

and the heaviness of what my life had become without him settled back over me as I turned down my street and into my driveway.

When Richard and I had purchased our house, we had both loved it. We closed two weeks before our wedding and slowly moved our items in, and we decided that we would wait until we were married to officially move in. We had already lived together in our small apartment, but this was a huge and beautiful and perfect home. We bought it from a couple who had owned it and loved it and cared for it, but they were getting a divorce and needed to sell it. Funny, I thought now, how we thought we'd be the ones to create a happy life

in this beautiful house.

Maybe it was the cursed house that was our downfall. But I knew that wasn't the truth.

The truth of the matter was that Richard changed into someone I really didn't like almost immediately after we said our "I do's." He became controlling and manipulative, always working to get his way and leading me to believe that his way was what I really wanted, too. He was a salesman by profession, and the sliminess of how he handled his day job trickled slowly but surely into his personality. He was a realtor, but he was one of those realtors who made all kinds of promises on which he never delivered. He was one of those realtors

only after the commission, not after helping someone find the perfect home. He was good at what he did, but I found him becoming more and more of a salesman and less and less of the sweet and caring man I'd married.

I had no doubt that he would easily find another woman, but it just couldn't be me anymore.

I saw his car in the garage when I pulled in, and that heaviness pressed down profoundly on my shoulders. I suddenly wished I had asked Jesse to help me with this, because everything seemed so much easier when he was around.

I walked into the house and dropped my keys and my purse on the counter in

the mudroom, slipping my phone into my pocket and pulling the papers that Jesse had printed for me out of my purse, hugging them to my chest. I smelled the faintest hint of Jesse on them. I walked into the kitchen and found Richard sitting at the kitchen table.

I remembered back to the days when the sight of him comforted me, when the smell of him overtook my senses with sensuality. Now I found that musky scent nauseating and the sight of him was only encouraging me to move faster to get this over with.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said, using the pet name he’d given me. Once upon a time, I had found it endearing, but now... it was a little creepy.

“Hi, Richard,” I said, my voice weary.

“Come sit,” he said, waving me over.

Something was off about him, but I did as instructed. I took a seat across from him, and I wasn’t sure if he was drunk or hung over, but either way, he looked like hell.

“Are you okay?” I asked carefully, hugging the papers in my arms a little tighter against my chest, that hint of Jesse washing over me and comforting me like he was there even though he wasn’t.

He shook his head. “No,” he smiled sadly. “I’m not.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, realizing that the seven words he’d spoken since I entered the house were seven more

words than we'd said to each other in at least a week. We'd avoided each other as much as possible, and it had been silent whenever we did happen to cross paths in our house.

"I miss you, sweetheart," he whispered.

No. Oh, God, no. I braced myself for the predictable words that fell out of his mouth next.

"I want you back. I want to work on our marriage. I'll do anything, Veronica. I'll change, I'll do whatever you want me to do. I'll be whoever you want me to be. I just want you back."

I shook my head. A year ago, even six months ago, I'd have jumped at the chance. But this wasn't the first time

he'd given me this speech. I knew him well enough to know that old habits died hard with him, and he'd change for a few days, but then he'd morph back into the controlling, manipulating man he had always been.

The last time we'd been through this flashed through my mind. It had been a few months earlier, and he'd asked for forgiveness after he had decided that what he wanted to do outweighed my opinion. It had been the last high school football game of the regular season. All of the teachers always went with their significant others, and then we went out afterward and celebrated whether the team won or lost. It wasn't about football; it was about collegiality and

friendship and fun. But Richard had scheduled a late meeting at work, telling me he'd make it home in time so we could go together. I sat at home and waited for him, but he didn't show until 9:30... and he was drunk. He'd scheduled the meeting at a bar, and I found out later that it really wasn't a meeting at all, but it was a night out with the boys. He'd never had any intentions to come home and go with me to the game, and I'd missed out on a fun night with friends because he'd been too much of a bastard just to tell me he didn't want to go.

Little things like that are forgivable when they happen by chance and once in awhile, but this wasn't the first time

something like that had happened. He'd let me down more times than I could count, and I was finally fed up with it. It was about that point I'd suggested a trial separation. We hadn't really "separated" since we were still living in the same house, but I hadn't slept in the same bed as him since that night.

But the real key in that little speech of his was, "I'll be whoever you want me to be."

If he couldn't be himself with me, then we were never going to work. And I didn't like the real person who Richard had become. He was different than he was when we first met, but, then again, most people put on their game faces when they first meet new people. His

slow change into someone else showed me his true colors.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Richard, but I can't. I can't try to fix something that's beyond repair." With that, I set down the papers on the table.

He read what was in front of him. "Dissolution of marriage?" he read, and then he looked up at me. "You want a divorce?"

I nodded. "I can't keep living like this."

I saw tears swimming in his eyes. I'd never seen him like that, and it hurt more than I thought it would.

"Then let's not live like this anymore. Let's fix it."

I shook my head. I couldn't believe

we were having this conversation after the weeks of barely speaking. I couldn't believe that he thought there was still a chance for us.

He gazed at me for a moment, and then he swept the papers off the table and to the floor.

"I'm not fucking signing those papers," he said. He stood up, and when I'd always found his height attractive, suddenly I found it intimidating. "And where the fuck were you last night?"

I didn't have to ask what had changed in the past ten seconds to make him go from groveling to accusatory. Apparently shoving divorce papers in front of someone who wasn't in his right mind was a recipe for disaster.

“I stayed with a friend,” I said, standing and forcing myself not to be intimidated by him. My voice rose. “It’s none of your goddamn business where I stay anymore, anyway.”

“I would like to remind you that you are still my wife,” he hissed.

“In name and law only. Not by choice anymore,” I spat out at him.

“Did you fuck him, too?” he asked.

“You’re an asshole. You don’t even know where I stayed.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re fucking stuck until I sign that shit,” he said, pointing to the papers he’d thrown on the floor.

“Bastard!” I yelled after him as he spun on his heel and headed out of the room. I picked up the papers from the

floor and glanced through the parts I needed to fill out, my eyes swimming with tears. They seemed simple enough, and I grabbed a pen and filled out my portion as quickly as I could. I checked the box that said that the marriage was “irretrievably broken.” I guess that was Arizona’s term for “irreconcilable differences.” I went to the office and scanned a quick copy of the papers just in case he should find a way to destroy them. I printed the scanned copy and left it on the table with a note: “Please let me out of this marriage.”

The paperwork said that I either had to file the papers with the court and then he’d receive a summons, or he could agree and sign a paper called the

“Acceptance of Service of Process.” I was hoping for the latter, but based on our conversation, I was afraid I’d need to send a summons to get him to sign.

I slid my phone out of my pocket and typed out a quick text: *Went faster than expected. I’ll be back in an hour or so.*

I headed to my room and packed up some clothes for a few days. Richard always worked until at least 6:00, so I’d stop by after school on Monday and get as much as I could before he got home. I grabbed my toiletries, my books for school, and my laptop, and then I glanced around my bedroom. It had been the place of some very happy memories, but it hadn’t been for a very long time. It was time to go somewhere else and

make some new happy memories, and I had a feeling that I knew just the place.

My phone chirped with a reply from Jesse: *You good?*

Good question. I wasn't sure if I was good, but I was still in that tense house. Once I got out of there, I had a feeling I'd be doing a lot better.

Will be, I replied, and then I finished packing and headed out without so much as a goodbye to my dear and loving husband.

CHAPTER 4

I pulled into Jesse's driveway. His garage was open, and he was in there working without a shirt once again. He turned around when he saw my car, and I cut the engine. I couldn't help the flutter that fired up in my belly and worked its way down between my legs.

A body that hot should be illegal. It was going to be torture living with him and knowing that I couldn't touch. But it was a delicious torture, not like the kind of torture where someone wouldn't let you out of a marriage just because they were trying to be manipulative.

He started toward me, and I was glad for my sunglasses covering the eyes that

were staring at this beautiful creature. I took a few moments to drink him in, to stare at that sexy tattoo, to stare at the washboard that was his stomach. He paused and grabbed his shirt, and I once again felt the disappointment that accompanied him putting clothes on and covering up that fine body.

“Take it off! Take it off!” The chant in my head began.

He continued his trek toward me, and I pulled the keys out of the ignition and threw them in my purse.

“Welcome back, roomie,” he said, opening my door for me.

I smiled. “Thanks,” I said, and he offered me his hand to help me out. I took it and felt an immediate electricity

crackle between the two of us.

“Need help with anything?” he asked.

I nodded toward the trunk, pulling the latch just inside the driver’s side door.

“I just brought what I needed for the next few days. He was home and I didn’t want to hang around.”

He nodded. “Want to talk about it?” he asked.

“Maybe later,” I said, just wanting to enjoy my time with Jesse.

He picked up my overnight bag and my bag of school books, grunting at its weight, and I grabbed my laptop and followed him inside.

He walked through the house to the same guest room where I’d resided the night before and set my bag down.

“Make yourself at home. I’ve got a few things to finish up in the garage, and then I’m yours for the night. Good?”

That flutter ignited into a full on tremble at those words: “I’m yours for the night.”

Good Lord, what I wanted to do with him for the night.

“Sounds perf,” I said.

“Perf?” he questioned.

“Perfect.”

“Ah. Seems like language a well-respected English teacher should use,” he teased, and I giggled.

Yeah, this living arrangement was going to be fun.

He headed back to the garage and I unzipped my bag, pulling out clothes and

hanging some on empty hangers I found in the closet. I idly thought about whether those hangers had already been in the closet or if he'd put them in there just for me while I had been gone.

I placed a few items of clothing in the dresser, smiling as I ran my fingers across the scrollwork carved into the face of the drawer. I wondered if he built the entire dresser or if he'd just added some beauty to the frame he had found.

I unpacked my toiletries and placed them neatly in my bathroom, and then I sat down on the bed for a moment, taking it all in.

I'd finally done it.

I'd officially left Richard.

And I felt so... free.

I wasn't; I was still tied to him, after all, and I would be until I could convince him to sign the damn papers. Not signing them was just delaying the inevitable, and I would find a way to get through to him. I scooted up the bed and leaned back on a pillow propped against the headboard. I scrolled through my phone until I found my parents' phone number.

I stared at it awhile, trying to convince myself to just hit the call button.

My parents weren't going to be happy. They were conservative and conventional and they didn't believe in divorce. They'd raised me with their

beliefs that marriage is once and forever.

But they had a happy marriage. They didn't know what it was like to feel trapped by a man who had changed into someone I didn't even recognize anymore. Like all couples, they'd had their ups and downs; but they had far more ups. They were going to try to convince me to figure out a way to make it work, but they didn't know the details. I never let on how bad it had gotten. They fell under Richard's spell like everyone else, and they loved him. But I could see through him, and I just didn't love him anymore. I couldn't, not after the way he'd treated me, and especially not now after he'd immediately accused

me of cheating on him the night before and denying my request to dissolve our marriage.

I finally hit the call button.

“Hi, darling girl,” my mom answered.

“Hey, Mom. How are you?”

“Fine, fine. Nothing new, really.

Dad’s thinking about a fishing trip next weekend and we’re both just wondering why we haven’t heard from our daughter in almost a month.”

I sighed. I forgot to prepare myself for the inevitable guilt trip. I loved my parents to death, but I only called a few times a month for a reason. “I’m sorry, Mom. Things have been crazy busy at school. I’m on a few new committees and I’m feeling the pressure of prepping

kids for the AP test and I left Richard today.”

Silence met me on the other end of the phone, and Jesse appeared in my doorway at that very moment, leaning on the frame. I was suddenly very glad I hadn't shut the door. The view from my position on the bed was quite lovely. He saw that I was on the phone, and he winked at me and turned to give me privacy. I wished he had stayed so I had something nice to look at during what would surely be a difficult conversation.

“Repeat that last part?” my mom said like a question.

“You heard it correctly.”

“Why in the world would you leave Richard, Veronica?”

“I never should have married him,” I said, wondering if Jesse could still hear me.

I wanted him to hear me.

“That’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

Was it, though? I thought for a moment before answering my mom.

I’d wanted the perfect wedding, and every last detail had been perfect. But as soon as the wedding was over, thoughts started creeping into my mind that it had all been a huge mistake. But when you’ve invited over two hundred people to a wedding and you’re caught up in the details, it’s hard to see what’s right in front of you.

I’d had the perfect wedding, but I

never had the perfect marriage. And those were two very different things.

“Mom, I know your beliefs on marriage. I know I’m going to be the black sheep of the family forever because I’m getting a divorce. But I can’t go back to him. He’s changed. Maybe I’ve changed, too. I just wanted to call you to let you know.”

“Divorce” had always been like a curse word in my house growing up, and I’d just said it. Not only had I said it, but I said that I was going to do it. This was sure to bring a scandal to the family.

Hell, at least they’d have something interesting to gossip about at this year’s reunion.

“Honey, you’ve got to try.”

“I did.”

“Try again.”

“I’ve tried for the last year. I’m done trying. I give up. We failed, and it’s over.”

My mom was quiet, and I felt like shit for confessing and then shutting down her reply, but I just didn’t want to hear it. I felt like Super Woman when I’d finally left him, and this conversation was just bringing me down. It was all the reasons I’d put off leaving him in the first place wrapped into one guilt-trip conversation.

“Mom, I have to go. I’ll call again soon.”

I knew she was disappointed, and I knew she wanted to talk some more, but

I was done. I just wanted to get back out to Jesse, the man who freed me just by convincing me that living stagnantly was no longer working, the man who made me feel like I could do anything and be anything I wanted to be.

“Can I just say one thing?” she asked.

Here it comes, I thought to myself. I grunted in reply.

“Your father and I have been married for nearly thirty-five years, and we’ve been through a lot together. We’ve had rough patches, but we always came out on top because we each put the other first. I don’t know what it’s like day to day for your marriage, but if you put Richard first, like the way a marriage is supposed to work, then maybe you two

can work things out.”

I thought about that for a moment. Had I put Richard first? Or was I putting myself first?

I knew I'd tried everything I could to make it work. And I knew the answer to my question: I'd put Richard first for our entire marriage and I was finally, finally putting myself first. I deserved to be first for once, and now was the time when it mattered.

“Thanks for the advice,” I said thickly, not wanting to reveal my thoughts to my mother because I really just didn't think she'd get it.

“You're welcome, dear. Just think about trying it one more time. For me.”

“I'll think about it,” I said, knowing it

was a lie even as I said it. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.”

With that, I ended the call. I stared at my phone, lost in thought for a moment about our conversation, when Jesse’s head appeared in my doorway again. He knocked lightly on the frame.

“Come on in,” I said with a sigh.

He came in and sat down on the edge of my bed. It didn’t escape my notice that I was sharing a bed with Jesse Drake.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “My mom,” I said, nodding toward my phone in my hand.

“You didn’t even tell her?”

“You’re the only person I told in the

entire world.”

“How did you live for so long without talking to anybody?”

I shrugged. “I just did.”

“You know you’ve got me now, right?” he asked, and I nodded. “I was always there, but maybe you just didn’t realize it,” he said softly, staring down at his jeans. I wondered what he was thinking and what was going on behind those dark and mysterious brown eyes.

“Thank you, Jesse,” I whispered.

His eyes snapped up to meet mine, and I saw a warmth and affection there that I’d never noticed before. Maybe he was right; he’d always been there, but I just hadn’t realized it.

A sudden hatred grasped at me for my

soon-to-be-ex-husband as I realized how I'd wasted the past five years on him when there were men like Jesse out there. Good, solid, gorgeous men, just waiting for the right woman to come along.

I longed to be the right woman for Jesse, but I knew I wasn't. I wasn't going to get down on myself, because deep down I knew I was a catch; but I still wasn't playing in the same league as him. Besides, I needed to give myself some time. I was officially ending my marriage. Surely I needed some time to just be on my own; it was like an unwritten rule. I couldn't just jump into the next thing even if I knew that my relationship with Richard had been over

for a long time. I needed to wait the proper and respectable amount of time before moving on with someone new, and it couldn't be Jesse. Not after he'd offered me his unconditional friendship and a place to stay. Besides, Jesse wasn't the relationship type. He'd already admitted to me that he liked the ladies, and I couldn't set myself up for something like that. I couldn't just be another girl that he slept with, and I wasn't willing to give up the friendship we'd formed for one night of what would surely be the most amazing sex of my life.

And then there was Allison to consider. Who was she, and why was her name tattooed on his gorgeous body?

I shook the thought of the body cut from stone from my head.

I'd nurse my crush, I'd enjoy the banter while I crashed at his place, and then I'd force myself to get over it.

My phone chirped with a text and it broke the spell that held his eyes to mine. I glanced down at my phone and saw that I had a new message from Quinn. I didn't open it, though. Instead, I looked back at Jesse, who was running a hand through his hair as he stood.

He sighed deeply with an undertone of frustration. "I'll leave you to your text. Do you have plans for tonight?"

I shook my head, feeling really lame.

"I was thinking we could cook dinner and just stay in," he said.

“Together?”

“Yeah. You gotta start pulling your weight around here,” he said.

I smiled. “Once you taste my cooking, you’re never going to want me to move out,” I teased.

He grinned and then headed out of my room. Just before he disappeared down the hallway, I thought I heard him mutter, “Why do I get the feeling it won’t be just your cooking?”

I was certain he didn’t intend for me to hear him, but I had, and those words sent a shiver of desire through me.

You make it home okay last night?
Quinn’s text asked.

Interesting question. I wasn’t sure how to answer her considering I wasn’t

exactly sure what she meant by “home.” Her definition and mine were likely not the same.

I wasn’t ready to get into *that* conversation with Quinn yet, so I lied in my reply. *Yep.*

Her reply came quick: *Is the inside of Decadent Drake’s truck as sexy as the outside?*

God, if she only knew what I knew about the object of her lust. If she knew about that tattoo, she wouldn’t stop until she got to see it for herself. I decided to keep that little nugget to myself, at least for now. But I knew I couldn’t keep my separation secret from my best friend for much longer, and then she’d want to know where I was staying, and she’d

want me to stay with her. But I didn't want to stay with her. I wanted to stay with Jesse. I wanted to get to know Jesse better, and I wanted to sleep next to him in his gorgeous bed after he spent the entire night making love to me.

Wait. I didn't mean that last part.

Oh, who am I kidding? Yes I did.

Shit.

I was in big trouble.

I replied to Quinn with a smiley face and turned my phone off before joining Jesse in the kitchen. He was pulling ingredients out of the fridge and placing them on the counter. "What are we making?" I asked.

"Chicken marsala and mushroom risotto," he said.

“Sounds delicious,” I said, my mouth already watering as I watched him gather everything we needed. He pulled out a cutting board, a meat mallet, the chicken, and some plastic wrap as he set up the station for pounding out the chicken, and then he motioned me over.

“Take your frustration with that two named asshole out on poor Charlie Chicken,” he said, handing me the mallet.

“Charlie Chicken?” I asked.

He winked at me. “I always name my food. Charlie Chicken, Tom Turkey, Bobby Beef, Fred Fish, Peter Porker.”

“Peter Porker? Like Spiderman? Peter Parker?”

He grinned. “You got it.”

“Weirdo,” I giggled as I took the mallet from him, our fingers accidentally brushing in the process as our eyes met again. I saw a heat pass through his eyes just as I felt a spark pass between us, and then Jesse dropped his hand quickly. He busied himself by pouring flour into a shallow dish as I went to work on Charlie.

I felt his presence behind me as he stood over my shoulder and watched me pound out the chicken.

“Not so hard,” he instructed.

I let up my pounding, hitting the side of the chicken.

“No,” he said, and I felt him move in closer behind me. “Like this.” He placed his hand over mine, lifted our joined

hands, and hit firmly in the center of the chicken breast.

But, honestly, I had no idea that we'd just hit raw chicken with a kitchen mallet. All I could feel was the heat from his body standing behind my own and the sizzle from his hand over mine. I felt my body automatically lean back into him for more contact as he brought our joined hands up and back down again.

“Got it?” he breathed into my ear, his breath on my skin sending a tremor down my spine as I realized that his front completely ran the length of my back. I shivered and goose bumps broke out across my skin at his proximity. I felt the sinewy hardness of his muscles, and I

was certain that I felt another hardness pressing lower against the base of my spine.

Was he as turned on as I was? Was it possible that the little flirtations that I kept brushing off were sincere?

Was it possible that someone like Jesse Drake was interested in me?

I doubted it, but it didn't stop me from dreaming.

"Uh," I stuttered. "Yeah. Got it," I said, and he broke that sexy moment between us as he backed away, running both of his hands through his hair.

"Good. I'll get the risotto going," he said, and he moved to the other side of the kitchen to start the burner while I continued pounding the chicken in time

to the loud pounding of my heart in my chest.

The rest of our meal preparations went off without nearly as much excitement as hitting the chicken. At one point, I glanced over at Jesse while I stirred the risotto, waiting for the rice to soak up the chicken stock before I poured in more liquid. His palms were pressed flat against the counter in front of the sink, his arms straight as he leaned forward with his head bowed. His shoulders looked tense, and I saw him take a deep breath. I wondered what he was thinking, but I couldn't interrupt his introspective moment.

And, for about the millionth time, I wondered who the hell Allison was and

whether or not the way he stood there like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders had anything to do with her.

Jesse poured us each a glass of Sauvignon Blanc as I plated the food, and we met at the table. The food smelled so good that I gave us both heaping platefuls. He had set the wineglasses down first so that we were seated across from each other. I wasn't sure if I wanted him next to me, heating me up with his proximity, or if I wanted him across from me where I could stare at him as we ate. Both options seemed equally dangerous.

"Is that going to be enough?" he teased as I sat down and grabbed my

fork.

“Shut up,” I warned. “I’m hungry.”

I dug in, and I couldn’t help the little moan that passed through my lips when I tasted the chicken. He’d taken the lead on chicken while I worked the risotto, although the whole meal really was a result of our teamwork.

“Good?” he asked, shifting in his chair.

I nodded. “Fantastic,” I said, licking my lips as I savored the delicious sauce he had made.

“Nice to see a woman who actually eats,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s that supposed mean?”

“Usually when I eat with women, they

barely touch their food, or they order some salad and then they pick at it and it pisses me off because I have to pay for the damn meal that they don't even bother eating. So it's just nice to see a woman who actually enjoys food."

I thought about the types of women he must have typically dated. Modelesque, I was sure. Probably tall and blonde and blue eyed with fake chests and faker personalities. Definitely not any of my attributes.

I wanted to be the type he dated, though.

I shrugged. "Yep. I like my food."

"Like those potato skins yesterday?" he asked.

I grinned. "God, those were

delicious,” I moaned, closing my eyes in delight as I remembered that delectable combination of potato, cheese, bacon, grease, and sour cream. I noticed him shift in his chair again, and then he grabbed his wineglass and took a huge gulp.

“So,” he said, clearly changing the subject, “how did things go this afternoon?”

“Not great,” I said. I took a bite of the risotto and mentally patted myself on the back for a job well done since it tasted fantastic, too.

“I heard what you said to your mother,” he said.

“Which part?”

“Do you really think your family

won't support you? That you'll be the black sheep?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know. My family is very conservative, much more than I am. I always believed that marriage is only supposed to happen once in a person's life, but that was before the person I married became someone I don't recognize anymore."

"What did he say today?"

I sighed. "I told him I wanted a divorce. He said he's not going to sign the papers."

Jesse's eyes darkened. "Fucking asshole."

"Tell me about it. He said I'm stuck until he decides he's ready to sign."

"Then let's make him ready."

Let's? As an English teacher, I knew that "Let's" was a contraction for "let us." Us. *Us*. He just called us an "us."

Obviously, I took a moment for a mini freak out in my mind at the thought of being part of an "us" with Jesse.

I gulped down some wine while I composed myself. "How?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I'll think of something," he said as if it were a simple problem with a simpler solution. I loved how he made me feel like he would just automatically take care of things. With Richard, I had never felt that. I'd always felt like I was in it by myself, and while I'd always enjoyed the independence that gave me, I was starting to realize how much I missed out

on by never feeling like I was part of a team.

We ate in comfortable silence for a few moments.

“So, who’s the flavor of the week?” I asked, trying to dispel some of the sexual tension I was feeling between us. I hoped that if I could just get the attention on whoever he was currently banging, I’d stop picturing myself as the woman he was currently banging.

His eyes met mine and he raised one eyebrow. My breath left my body as he stared me down. I couldn’t quite put my finger on the look in his eye, but I almost sensed some irritation. At me?

“There’s no current flavor,” he said, his voice deep and quiet, his eyes never

leaving mine.

So much for breaking some of that sexual tension.

He cleared his throat. “And, again, I’d like to ask what exactly you think I do in my spare time.”

“You’ve admitted to me yourself that you have a new flavor every week,” I said lightly.

“When?” he challenged, narrowing his eyes at me as he took a bite of chicken.

“Random times. Like over a text, or in a passing conversation.”

I watched him chew that chicken, and even that somehow turned me on. I gazed at his strong jaw as he chewed, that jaw covered in just enough scruff to be

really, really sexy. An image of that stubble rubbing across the inside of my thigh came to mind, and just staring at him across the table from me was enough to send a shot of lust right through my spine and straight to my lady parts.

I knew I had to stop that train of thought in its tracks, but I didn't know how to.

I thought Jesse was hot the moment I laid eyes on him nearly five years earlier, and we'd built a trusting coworker relationship and friendship over time. I'd always nursed a crush on him.

But I'd never actually been available to act on that crush.

Not that I was now, either. But I was a hell of a lot closer to being available to act on it.

As I watched him eat, I realized that all of our conversations over the past twenty-four hours had been about me. Apart from his summer plans and his penchant for women, I didn't know all that much about Jesse.

He swallowed his bite of chicken and followed it with a sip of wine. He glanced back up at me, and I averted my eyes to my food, embarrassed about the sexual fantasies currently playing out in my mind and sure he'd be able to see it in my eyes if my eyes met his.

"Alright. I'll give you that," he said. He stood up and grabbed the wine bottle

off of the counter. He refilled both of our glasses and then sat back down.

“Tell me something about you,” I said, suddenly desperate to know everything.

“Like what?” he asked.

“Favorite wine.”

He pretended to really ponder my question for a moment. “Beer,” he said, and I giggled. “You?”

I took a sip of the Sauvignon Blanc. “This shit’s pretty good,” I said, and it was his turn to laugh.

“Nice that you’re calling my twenty dollar bottle of wine ‘shit,’” he said dryly.

“You can always count on me for choosing just the right words.”

“The perf words?”

I laughed. “Yep. Perf use of ‘perf,’ by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“So then what’s your favorite beer?”

“Whatever’s cold and in my refrigerator.”

“Really? No preference?”

“I’m only picky when it comes to cars and women,” he said with a cheeky grin that melted a little piece of my panties.

I drank some wine to cool down, and much like the vodka the night before, all it served to do was heat me up. I had to be almost through my second glass, but it was hard to tell since Jesse kept topping me off. And, for some reason, wine hit me faster than any other alcohol.

“So, if you’re picky with women, why flavors of the week and not something more permanent?” I asked, knowing my bold statement never would’ve come out of my mouth if I wasn’t already wine drunk.

He shrugged and took a sip of his wine, avoiding eye contact.

“You’re a catch, Jesse. You work with kids. You’re good with wood. You make a mean chicken marsala. You’re hot as hell.”

His eyes snapped sharply up to mine at my last words, and I realized what the hell had slipped out of my mouth just a moment too late.

Fucking wine.

My face was already flushed from the

wine, and I think I might've turned purple from embarrassment. I could not believe I just said that.

What the hell was I thinking?

This man was kind enough to extend an invitation for me to stay with him, and I just told him I thought he was hot. Or, more specifically, I told him that I thought he was "hot as hell."

What. The. Fuck.

Something was wrong with me.

Seriously.

Cue mini-freak out number two for this meal, but this time it was because I was actually freaking out.

I played it off by drinking some more wine, pretending like I hadn't just said that.

But Jesse didn't let it slide.

"Hot as hell, huh?" he murmured.

Fuck.

I put my elbows on the table and buried my face in my hands.

"Oh my God. I can't believe I just said that."

I felt his hands over mine. He forced my hands from my face, and when I opened my eyes, he was sitting in the chair next to me. He had been stealthy; I hadn't even heard him move, and suddenly we were nearly nose to nose as he held my wrists in his hands.

"Hot as hell?" he repeated one more time, that dangerous, sexy depth back in his low voice.

"Can we just pretend like you didn't

hear that part?" I whispered, nervous with him so damn close to me, his hands wrapped around my wrists.

He shook his head slowly and arched an eyebrow. "Fuck no, we can't."

Shit. He was going to ask me to leave, and I couldn't figure out why my heart dropped into my stomach at the thought of moving out of his house. Surely he wouldn't want me around now that he knew I thought he was hot. It was going to be awkward just seeing him at work from now on, never mind running into him at home, too.

I took in a sharp breath, bracing myself for his next words.

But instead of telling me he wanted me to move out, he gave me the biggest

shock of my life.

“You’re a catch, too, V,” he whispered. I felt his breath against my lips. He was so close to me that I could literally lean forward two inches and my lips would be on his. Every nerve in my body leaned into him, forcing my body a little closer to his as if I had no control over it. My blood was boiling beneath the surface of my skin. “You’re amazing. You’re smart. And you’re so goddamn beautiful that sometimes it hurts to look at you and know that I can’t have you.”

I gasped at his words.

Holy. Shit.

He just called me beautiful.

And did he just say that he couldn’t have me?

Didn't he know that I felt like I was already his?

I felt my body automatically leaning in toward his lips. As I gazed into his eyes and the space between us disappeared, I saw his eyes flick down to my lips for just a second. I closed my eyes and tilted my head toward his, eagerly anticipating the feel of his lips against mine.

And then the mother fucking son of a bitch oven timer starting beeping.

He dropped my wrists and stood. "Shit," he muttered under his breath.

I couldn't agree more.

He turned off the timer and grabbed some oven mitts, and then he pulled what looked like the world's most perfect pie

out of the oven.

“Pie?” I asked stupidly, my voice about three octaves higher than normal.

He nodded, and I gulped down the rest of my wine. Not the smartest move given the fact that I was already tipsy and apparently making drunken confessions.

He took a deep breath as he turned off the oven. “Thought we might want dessert later,” he said easily, not nearly as flustered as I was by our little exchange.

Now that he wasn’t centimeters away from my face anymore, I could look at things a bit more objectively.

And guess what?

I really fucking wanted him to kiss

me.

I wanted more than kissing.

I wanted everything.

And it appeared that he wanted me,
too.

But, I reminded myself, I was still
married.

And I wouldn't cheat on Richard. No
matter how much of an asshole he was, I
would wait until I was legally, morally,
and ethically available.

All I could do was hope that Jesse
would still be available, too.

He sat back down and we finished
our meal, chatting about school – a safer
subject after the intimacy that passed
between us.

I realized just exactly how tipsy I was

when I stood up from the table to start cleaning up after our meal. I was slightly unbalanced on my feet as we cleaned up together; I washed the dishes while he dried and did the counters, and then, because of our teamwork, the kitchen was back to its pristine sparkle.

We moved to the couch, each of us with our wineglasses in hand after Jesse topped them off again. We settled into the same seats we had claimed the night before. I curled my legs under me, and Jesse spread the blanket out over us again. He sat with his arm draped over the back of the couch, turned toward me, and I sat facing him, leaning my cheek against the back of the couch.

“So,” he said, reaching toward my

brown hair that was resting on the couch behind me and twirling a few strands of my hair between his fingertips. “As I said earlier, I’m yours for the night. What would you like to do?” His voice was quiet, and the moment felt intimate between us as we stared at each other.

It was a fair question, but I wasn’t sure how to answer. If I was being honest, I wanted to mount him and take him right there on the couch until we were both shuddering in pleasure.

“I want to know more about Jesse Drake,” I said instead.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, those fantastic eyes pinning me in my place.

“I just feel like we’ve only talked

about me for the past twenty-four hours.”

“Not much to tell.” He shrugged modestly. “You know a lot already. I woodwork in my spare time. I like to cook. I’m a high school counselor.”

“Tell me about your family.”

“Good parents. Still married after thirty-five years.”

“Siblings?”

“An older sister. You?” he asked.

“I have two brothers, one older and one younger. Both are married with kids. My parents are great, but, as I already told you, they’re super conservative and quite religious. I was shunned when I moved in with Richard before we got married, so I can only imagine what they’ll do now that I’m getting a divorce.

Seriously, growing up, the ‘d’ word was just as bad as saying the ‘f’ word.” I thought about that for a minute, realizing how true it was. We never used the word “divorce” in my house. And then I narrowed my eyes at Jesse. “And I just realized you turned this back on me.”

He smiled. “I like learning new things about you,” he said. “I’ve never been one for talking about myself.”

“Time to start, Drake,” I teased.

“My favorite color is blue.” He raised both eyebrows. “Good?” he asked.

I shook my head. “More.”

“My favorite meal is fish and chips. Good?”

I shook my head again. “More,” I

repeated.

He rolled his eyes and I giggled. “I tend to date blondes, but I prefer brunettes,” he said. His eyes glinted wickedly. “Good?”

“I like that one,” I said, “but I still want more.”

“Typical woman always wanting more,” he muttered, and I had a feeling he wasn’t just talking about our conversation. “My favorite movie is *The Godfather*.”

“Cliché.”

“Cliché?”

“Yeah. That’s every guy’s favorite movie.”

“Fine. Then my favorite movie is *Austin Powers*.”

“At least that’s honest. More.”

“Not until you answer all of those.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Pink, that chicken marsala we just ate, dark hair, and *Pretty Woman*.”

“*The Godfather* is cliché but *Pretty Woman* isn’t?”

“Correct. Continue, please.”

“Fucking women,” he said.

“Impossible to please.”

He gazed at me for a moment, and I saw something change in his eyes. He seemed like he was about to tell me something important, but then he looked away. He was quiet as I wondered where he went for that moment.

“Jesse, what is it?” I asked.

His eyes met mine. “Nothing,” he

said. “I, uh, like going to concerts.”

“Best live band?” I asked, trying to pull him back to me.

He thought about it. “Metallica.”

“Really? Like the heavy metal hair band from the eighties?”

He nodded. “Do you like concerts?”

“Of course. But on a teacher’s salary, I don’t make it to too many.”

“We’ll have to change that.”

His promise for the future sent a spark of desire through my veins.

“Sounds perf.”

He grinned. “Let’s watch *Austin Powers*,” he said out of the blue.

“Put it in,” I said. And then I realized my innuendo. If Quinn was here with us, she definitely would’ve said, “That’s

what she said.”

I chuckled at the thought. “What?” he asked, still fingering my hair between his fingertips.

“I just said ‘put it in.’”

He laughed. “Perv.”

“See? I’m not the only one who abbreviates my words.”

“Guess we’re perf together, then.”

He stood up to get the movie, and I flushed as I allowed his words to wrap around me and warm me from the inside out.

We watched the movie together, and, big surprise, I fell asleep on his shoulder again and woke up twelve hours later in the bed in the guest room.

Something about Jesse Drake’s house

just allowed me the peace and comfort of uninterrupted rest.

And, apparently, really intense sex dreams.

I felt a dull, achy throb between my legs as snippets of that dream came back to me.

It had been so real.

We were sitting at the kitchen table, and Jesse held my wrists in his hands. That same scene from the night before replayed in my head, but this time, the oven timer hadn't interrupted us as his lips found mine. His tongue thrust into my mouth as those little tremors of lust exploded everywhere inside of my body, the aching need for him becoming more and more apparent as my fingers dove

into that thick, perfect hair of his.

I remembered another snippet of dream, this time with clothes flying off in every direction. For some reason, I couldn't remember the part of the dream where I saw his completely naked body standing in front of me, but surely I could never dream how perfect it would actually be.

And then there was the piece de resistance of my dream. I remembered the way his body connected with mine, when he positioned himself at my entrance and plunged into me for the very first time. I remembered whispering his name as he pushed me higher and higher and then screaming his name as he sent me over the edge.

I awoke with wet panties, some raging hormones, and a terrible headache.

Fucking wine.

CHAPTER 5

Sunday morning – ahem, afternoon – started in much the same way that Saturday had, except this time I showered first before heading out to find my Jesse. I mean, before I headed out to find Jesse. Just Jesse. No “my” in there.

I sauntered into the kitchen, and the house was quiet. There was another note:

In the garage. Help yourself to anything. Thanks for a great night last night. –J

P.S. I think I have a solution for you.

I melted into a giant puddle of Jesse lust, and then I ate the muffin (bottom first) that he left next to the pad of paper

and helped myself to some coffee – which I had to reheat in the microwave because it was already cold. I wondered what time my roommate had gotten up as I glanced at the clock and saw that it was 11:00 already.

I headed out to the garage and was intensely pleased to find Jesse without a shirt, Metallica's "One" blaring from the stereo as he worked. He was holding some little tool and leaning closely over his work. I watched the muscles move in his back as I imagined them moving under my hands while he thrust into me.

Jesus.

I needed to get some, and soon. I was denying myself what I really needed because of my crumbling marriage. I

was horny as hell and it was because of this man walking around without a fucking shirt, and I was more convinced than ever that I had to find a way to get Richard to sign those papers so that I could move on. With Jesse.

I just enjoyed the view for a moment, sipping my coffee and watching as he worked. I could literally sit out there all day and watch him do his thing. He was so engrossed in his work that he didn't even realize that I was there, and I could see how passionate and what a perfectionist he was. Maybe he held a lot back about himself, but piecing together the puzzle that created the perfect picture standing before me was already a fun adventure, and I couldn't

wait to discover more and fit the next piece into place.

He turned off his tool, which he later informed me was a Dremel, and set it down. He blew away some saw dust.

“Shouldn’t you be wearing protective eyewear?” I asked.

He turned around slowly, giving me another perfect view of his intricate tattoo, and he grinned at me. “I like to live dangerously,” he said, quoting *Austin Powers* from the night before.

I chuckled. “Well, Jesse Danger Drake, please use caution with those lovely eyes of yours when working with power tools.”

“I’ll give you a power tool,” he said suggestively, and then he wiggled his

eyebrows and I just lost it with laughter. I liked the goofy Jesse I woke up to that morning.

“Got plans for the day?” I asked.

“You’re looking at it,” he said. “I need to do a little yard work, too. You?” he asked.

“I’ve got some lesson plans to work on for the week, and I really do have some grading to do. I can help you with the yard work, if you want.”

“I’ve got it covered, but thanks for the offer.”

“Of course. Someone told me that I need to pull my weight around here, so I’m trying.”

He chuckled. “Go do your thing and let’s do lunch in an hour or so.”

“Perf,” I grinned, and he smiled and then turned back to his work.

I was thanking the good Lord that he didn't feel the need to pull a shirt on over that gorgeous torso for once. Maybe he was becoming more comfortable with having me around after the conversations we'd shared. I felt closer to him as a friend, notwithstanding some of the intimacy that had passed between us the night before. And even though nothing had happened between us, there was the threat of something happening, and that was enough for me for now. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't go beyond that yet.

I gazed at him a few seconds longer

than strictly necessary and then went back inside to start my work. I gathered all of my materials and settled in at the kitchen table, facing out the patio doors. I was in the midst of mapping out my week, totally engrossed in what I was doing, when something moved in my peripherals. My head snapped up and I looked out the patio doors, and there was Jesse, still shirtless, bending over and pulling a few weeds that I hadn't noticed.

“Damn,” I whispered under my breath. I watched him stand up straight and scan the yard, and then I saw him kneel down and mess with one of the plants.

Totally distracted from my work

now, I took a moment to study his tattoo from where I sat. The phoenix symbolized rebirth, renewal, and immortality in literature, from the old legend of the bird bursting into flames upon its death and then rising again from the ashes. I wondered what sort of ordeal someone had to live through in order to put that symbol permanently on his body.

And then there was the name and the cross. The cross was a beautiful symbol in itself, its intricate and twining design unique and stunning. I gazed at the red heart with the name in the middle of the cross.

The symbolism indicated to me that he lost whoever Allison was. Had she

broken his heart? Had she died?

Was he still in love with her?

Was that why he had such a difficult time getting close to women?

For the five years I had known him, I'd never seen him in a relationship, even though he talked a big game about the women he was seeing. But in the two days I'd been staying with him, to my knowledge, he hadn't been with another woman.

I was snapped out of my thoughts when my cell phone started ringing. I picked up my phone and glanced at the screen. I sighed as I answered. "Hey, Quinn."

"Veronica Thomas, I need to see you."

“What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just need my Sunday date with my best friend. I want to talk about boys and drink coffee and figure out what the fuck I’m teaching this week.”

I didn’t want to miss out on any Jesse time, but I also didn’t want to be that girl that planned my entire life around the possibility of spending time with a man. Even if that man happened to be Jesse Drake.

“I’m in the middle of planning. Let me get my shit mapped out, eat some lunch, and then I’ll meet you a little later this afternoon.”

“Three-ish? At the usual?”

“Perf,” I said, knowing “the usual” meant the Starbucks where we had our

typical Sunday planning, grading, and gossiping get together.

Jesse came in a few minutes later (with his shirt back on, much to my dismay). I was just finishing my weekly outline. I cleared my papers off the table while he prepared us each a salad, asking questions about my preferences as he worked. I had to admit, I was thoroughly enjoying being taken care of by my host.

We sat together at the table in the same seats we'd been in the night before, right across from each other. I enjoyed the view as I took my first bite of salad. It was that same delicious dressing from the day before. "Jesse Drake's Delightful Dressing?" I teased.

He grinned and nodded, taking a bite of his own salad. "It's my favorite."

"Mine, too," I said. "It's delicious."

"Thanks," he said.

I couldn't help but stare over at him, entranced as ever by those eyes. I averted my eyes and glanced out the patio doors. "Quinn called. I'm meeting her in a few hours for coffee and lesson plans."

"Okay. You know you don't have to run your plans by me, right?"

I nodded, and I felt my cheeks heat up a little in mortification. Of course I didn't have to. It was such a relationship thing to do, almost like I was asking permission. But we weren't in a relationship, despite the fact that I

wanted to be. I had to remind myself of that, because I was only setting myself up to be hurt the way I was going. I couldn't expect Jesse to put his life on hold for me, and I couldn't expect him to wait around for me. His sexy words from the night before floated back into my mind: *You're so goddamn beautiful that sometimes it hurts to look at you and know that I can't have you.*

I brushed those words away immediately. It had just been the wine talking for both of us, and in the light of day, I knew that.

I pretended that I was so into my salad that I couldn't possibly even talk. I found myself shoveling in forkfuls of food, barely tasting it. Shoveling meant

not having to respond. Maybe it was immature, but so was my out of control crush on Jesse Drake, and I wasn't sure what the hell to do about it anymore.

"No one's gonna steal it," he said.

I stopped chewing and looked up at him. "What?" I asked, mouth full.

Attractive of me, I know.

"Your food. No one's going to steal it."

I furrowed my brow and swallowed my salad. "What are you talking about?"

"You're eating it like someone's going to take it away from you."

Oh.

"Sorry," I said sheepishly, obviously caught. My plan to avoid chatting by eating quickly wasn't working.

“Take your time. We only get three meals a day. We might as well enjoy them, right?”

I nodded. “Absolutely.” I made a point to slow down. “So what are your afternoon plans?”

“I’ve got a little bit of work to do, and I’d like to work on my table some more.”

“Did your mom ask for it?”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “It’s a gift. She doesn’t know.”

“That’s sweet of you,” I said, thinking about that old saying that if a man knew how to treat his mother right, he’d treat his woman right.

He shrugged modestly. “What time are you meeting Quinn?” he asked, ever

the expert at deflecting the attention from himself.

“Three o’clock,” I said, and he glanced at the clock. “I have a question for you.”

He looked up at me with curiosity.

“Your note this morning said that you think you have a solution to my problem. I assume you meant my Richard problem.”

He smiled and nodded. “I think I might.”

His cell phone started ringing, and his eyes darkened as he listened to a ring tone that wasn’t his usual tone.

Something in his eyes told me that this was not a call he was expecting. He scrambled to quickly pull his phone out

of his pocket, and then he stole a quick glance at the screen.

“Sorry,” he said to me, and then he answered his call.

“Hey,” he said, his voice soft and gentle. I wondered if he talked to all of his women in that tone. It was tender and sensual and something about his deep voice and that tone sent a shot of lust through every nerve in my body.

“Everything okay?”

He listened, his brow furrowing. “It’s okay, Carly.”

Carly? First Allison, and now Carly? How many more were there?

I mentally chided myself. He could talk to whoever he wanted to. My little (okay, enormous) crush on him didn’t

give me proprietary rights over him, and I certainly knew that he had a life before I started crashing at his place.

“Carly, baby, I’m on my way. Just stay right where you are, okay?”

What the fuck?

His voice was soft and soothing, and I suddenly wanted it to be me who he was comforting.

So we were back to the womanizing Jesse. Just when I thought that I’d read him all wrong, reality hit me square in the face.

“Hold on, okay, Carly?”

He listened for a moment, and then he pulled the phone from his ear and sighed deeply. “I’m sorry, V, but I’ve gotta run. Have fun with Quinn and I’ll see you

tonight, okay?"

No. It wasn't okay. But I didn't have a choice. I had no hold over him other than my ridiculous attraction to him, and he was free to go see whatever girl he wanted to go see.

So I nodded, and he shoved one last bite of salad in his mouth and then grabbed his plate and threw it in the sink. "I'll take care of that when I get back," he said, picking up his keys and heading toward the door. "Catch ya later," he called over his shoulder.

"Catch ya later," I echoed, but he was already out the door.

I finished eating, realizing that for the very first time, I was alone in Jesse Drake's house. I wished that made me

feel more excited than it actually did, but thinking about how Jesse just ran out the door after some other girl made me feel a little queasy and a lot jealous.

Despite the tipsy moment we'd shared the night before, his mind was obviously on other girls. And I had to admit that I knew virtually nothing about Jesse. Every time I started digging for information about him, he somehow turned our conversation around so that I was the one doing the talking again. I wasn't sure how he managed to constantly do that, but he had a real knack for it.

I cleaned up our dishes despite Jesse's protest that he'd be back to clean his stuff up later, and I put all of the

salad ingredients back into the fridge, hoping I was placing everything where he wanted it since he appeared to be very particular about the organizational pattern of his refrigerator.

As I put everything away, the thought entered my mind that I could, technically, snoop around. It would be a complete and total invasion of his privacy, but I was so curious to know more about Jesse Drake. I would never do it, but that didn't stop me from wanting to. I would wait for him to reveal the things I wanted to know. And then the terrible thought entered my mind that maybe he never would tell me those things. Maybe "we" would never happen. Even though I felt a definite

attraction between us, maybe we'd never be anything more than friends.

For some reason, that thought sent a pang of despair through my heart.

I fired up my laptop and typed some parent emails to send the next day. I worked each task trying to forget about him, but my heart was sad as the thought of Jesse leaving me during our lunch together to go see another woman weighed heavy on my mind.

It was finally time to meet Quinn, and I found her sitting at a table with her iPad while she waited for me. I ordered a skinny caramel macchiato and sat across from my best friend a few minutes later with my drink.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, sipping

her chai tea latte.

I sighed. “How do you always know?”

“It’s what best friends do. Well, that, and you look like you’ve got the weight of the world on your shoulders. What’s going on?”

“I don’t even know where to start.”

“Everything okay with you and Richard?”

I chuckled mirthlessly. Nothing would ever be okay between Richard and me again, but that wasn’t why I was upset. I shook my head, feeling the threat of tears behind my eyes.

“No?” she asked, placing her hand over mine across the table. “Veronica, talk to me.”

I stared down at the table, knowing that if I looked into the concerned eyes of my best friend, I'd lose it. "Richard and I are getting a divorce."

"Oh my God," she said. "What? What happened?"

I took a deep breath, held onto it for a moment, and then let it out with a whoosh. "Nothing happened, really. It's not like one big thing happened and it was over. It's been building toward this for a long time."

"Jesus, Veronica. I had no idea. And here I am saying how best friends always know when something's up." She shook her head. "I always thought you two were perfect together. What changed?"

“He has just become this person I don’t even know anymore. He’s condescending and controlling and manipulative and I am just done with him.”

“When did you file?”

“I haven’t yet. I gave him the papers yesterday, but he’s refusing to sign them.”

“Fucking asshole.”

I nodded. “Completely. He told me that I’m stuck until he decides he’s ready to sign them.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’ll sign them.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ll fucking cut off his balls if he fucks with you.”

I chuckled, thankful to have such a loyal friend on my side. Leave it to Quinn to figure out the solution. I was briefly reminded that Jesse also had a solution that I never actually got to hear.

“I’m so sorry, Veronica,” she said, her eyes shining with sincerity.

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Sure I do. I introduced you.”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t make me marry him, Quinn,” I reminded her.

“Stay with me,” she said suddenly, her eyes lighting up.

No fucking way I was leaving Jesse’s now that I was there.

I realized for about the ten millionth time that I was flirting with disaster, but

I didn't care. I had to see how things were going to play out with Jesse.

How was I going to tell her this one? Did I even want to tell her about Jesse? The answer was clear in my mind: fuck yes I wanted to tell her. I wanted to talk to somebody about it. I was dying to tell her – well, I was dying to tell *anyone*, really – about the “so goddamn beautiful that sometimes it hurts” comment. I knew I'd told myself it had been the wine talking, but he'd still said it. Even though he'd run off to see another woman, I could still convince myself that he meant those words when he said them to me.

“We'll have so much fun together! We can gossip all night; we can carpool to work. It's perf!” She was still going

on about me moving in with her when there was no chance of that happening.

I didn't have the heart to burst her bubble. I loved Quinn to death, but the thought of sharing the same space with her for days on end was a little overwhelming; she was loud, she could be raunchy and irreverent and obnoxious, and from what she told me, she had a lot of sex. Sounded like an even bigger recipe for disaster than shacking up with Mr. Drake.

"I actually left Richard yesterday morning. I'm staying with a friend," I said, skirting the details.

"Who?" she pressed.

"Um," I took a sip of my coffee followed by a deep breath. "Jesse

Drake,” I said with a sigh. I didn’t even mean to sigh when I said his name. It just happened.

“What?!?!” she screeched. Like, literally screeched. Heads turned in our direction at her volume. “You’re living with Jesse fucking Drake?”

I shushed her. “I’m not ‘living’ with him. I’m just crashing at his place for awhile.”

“In his bed?” she asked, her voice still a little louder than I would’ve preferred.

“In his guest bed. ‘Guest’ being the operative word.”

“Right. How long’s that gonna last?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, feeling my face heating up.

“You’re fucking blushing, Veronica! You want him!”

“Shh,” I whispered. “Take it down a notch, please.”

“Fine,” she said in a loud whisper. “You want to sleep with him. Don’t deny it.”

“I’m not sleeping with anybody until my divorce is finalized,” I said, my voice low.

“You didn’t deny it,” she said.

“Because there’s nothing to deny. He’s fucking gorgeous. Who wouldn’t want him? But I can’t just jump into his bed because I’m leaving my husband. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Oh, Veronica. So innocent and pious and prude. He invited you to stay in his

house, a detail we will get to in a minute after I've convinced you to fuck him. My sweet friend, men do not ask women to 'crash' at their place without wanting more."

"Don't be ridiculous. He doesn't like me like that."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I saw the way he was flirting with you at the bar on Friday. Denial ain't just a river in Egypt, my friend. I think he likes you like that."

I rolled my eyes, but something inside of me hoped that she was right.

"Okay, so if you're going to avoid that topic, at least tell me more about Dreamy Drake."

I grinned. “He is pretty fucking dreamy,” I said.

“Shit, I was jealous that you got to ride in his truck, and now you’re living with him. Jesus, that body.” She sighed dreamily. “So what’s his house like?”

I giggled at her rambling.

“His house is beautiful. The outside is perfectly landscaped, like he really takes good care of it. And the kitchen...” I trailed off, closing my eyes in appreciation for that perfect dream of a kitchen.

“The kitchen?” she prodded.

“It’s like one of those kitchens you see in *Architectural Digest* or something. It’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck about the

kitchen,” she said, resting her elbow on the table and her chin on her palm. “I want the deets on his bedroom.”

“He’s got this gorgeous bed that somehow looks bigger than a king,” I started, and her grin widened. “What?” I asked.

“So you’ve seen his bed.”

“Oh my God, Quinn. Not like that. He gave me a tour of his house.”

She nodded and winked as I took a sip of my coffee. “Sure. Okay. So how many women do you think he’s fucked in that lucky bed?”

“None,” I answered immediately, and then I wanted to kick myself. His confession about his house just being for him seemed like the sort of thing that he

probably wouldn't want shared between friends, but it was too late.

"None?" she asked. "Yeah right."

"He didn't say much, but he sort of indicated that he goes where the fun is."

"Interesting. Does Jesse Drake, bad boy extraordinaire, have a soft side?"

"It would appear so."

"Yes it would."

"Don't forget the fact that he works with teenagers. He can't be too bad a boy if he's doing that."

"I beg to differ. I've slept with my share of the male teachers around town, and they can be some very, very naughty boys."

I giggled.

"Tell me more."

I thought about telling her about the tattoo. Maybe she could shed some light on it. And I thought about telling her about the woodworking. But both of those things seemed private somehow, like he didn't want people to know that side of him. I thought about all the times he'd grabbed a shirt when I caught him without one in just the past two days that I'd been staying with him. I thought about the dedication he had to that table he was working on in the garage. Those "deets" seemed like details of Jesse at home, not the Jesse we knew from work. And it wasn't my place to tell Quinn about those things. If he wanted to reveal them to her, like he had to me, he would. So I kept my mouth shut.

But I had to give her something.
She'd stop at nothing to get it out of me.

"He likes to cook," I said.

"Is he any good?"

I nodded. "He makes this homemade salad dressing that's just about the best thing I've ever tasted."

"I'll assume you haven't tasted *him* yet from that comment."

I glared at her.

"Has he cooked you anything else?"

"We made dinner together last night."

"Sounds romantic. Like a first date?"

"No. Like roommates cooking together. Although we kind of had a moment while we were beating some chicken."

"Is that a euphemism?"

I giggled. “No. I was pounding out some chicken for chicken marsala, and he came up right behind me and grabbed my hand in his and showed me how to hit the chicken properly.”

“Jesus. I’m horny just thinking about that body right up against mine.”

“Right? Then his voice was all low and throaty and right against my ear. He backed off a second later, but I kept replaying that moment.”

She sighed.

“And then I got wine drunk and told him he was hot.”

“Fucking wine.”

“I know. I was mortified.”

She shrugged. “He has to know he’s gorgeous.”

“Doubt it. He’s so humble that I really don’t think he realizes how great he is.”

“Someone’s smitten.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Someone is. But he’s being a good friend and I’m not going to ruin that. Besides, I already told you, I can’t just hop to the next bed. I haven’t even filed my divorce paperwork yet.”

“Details, details. So how’d he react when you told him he was hot?”

I blushed. Damn red cheeks always gave me away.

“Spill it, sister. What happened?”

“Nothing.” I glanced away.

“Your tomato face says otherwise.”

“Fine. So I told him he was a catch. I

told him he's a good cook, he works with kids, and he's hot as hell."

"Hot as hell?"

"Shut up."

"Accurate," she nodded, taking a sip of her tea.

I nodded. "Well, that turned into another moment."

Her eyes widened. "Go on," she said, dragging out the word "on."

"He told me that I was a catch, too, and then he said that I was beautiful."

Quinn squealed. Literally. Again. Her reaction was so high pitched that I'm pretty sure she woke a few sleeping dogs in the next town over.

"How'd he say it? Exact words."

"He said, and I quote, 'You're so

goddamn beautiful that sometimes it hurts to look at you and know that I can't have you.””

Her eyes widened. “Holy hell that’s hot.”

“Tell me about it,” I said dreamily. And then I snapped back to reality. “But it had to just be the wine talking.”

“Only you would find a way to deny that he wants you after what you just told me he said.”

I shrugged. “He doesn’t want me, Quinn. We both know that he’s not the relationship type.”

“So what? Who says you need to get into a relationship? He said that it hurts to look at you and know he can’t have you. So what’s stopping him from having

you now that you've left Richard?"

"Me, for one."

"Why?"

I looked away. Why was certainly the question of the hour. "Because I just can't. I don't feel right starting something with someone when I'm still married. And besides, there's Carly and Allison."

"Who the fuck are Carly and Allison?"

Shit. Me and my big fucking mouth.

I hadn't meant to say anything about Allison, but there it was, out in the open.

"Carly is some girl that called him awhile ago and he ran out the door to see her. And I'm not sure who Allison is. I just know there's an Allison."

“How?”

I glanced at her. I knew how this was going to go over. Her number one turn on besides facial scruff was tattoos. “He has a tattoo.”

“Oh my fuck.”

“But it’s a tattoo of another woman’s name,” I protested.

“So what? I’ve seen it before. Tats are permanent and sometimes it’s just more work to get them removed than it’s worth. He can easily turn Allison into Veronica.”

I laughed. Quinn really was something else. “How?” I finally challenged.

She pulled out a sheet of paper and handed me a pen. “Write out ‘Allison’

how it looks on his tat.”

I did as instructed, trying to copy it down from memory. I passed the paper back to her and she stared at it for a moment, and then with a magical sweep of her pen, suddenly “Allison” became “Veronica.”

She held it up and presented her artwork to me. “See? It’s perf.”

I giggled. “I taught Jesse ‘perf,’ by the way.”

“He’s going to be talking like us in no time,” she said.

“Totes,” I agreed, using our abbreviated version of “totally.” She laughed. “Enough about me,” I said. “Tell me about Caleb.”

She sighed dreamily. “He’s quite

possibly the best bang I've ever had, but it's not going to last forever."

"Why not?"

"Because we're fuck buddies, Veronica. Nothing more."

"Right," I said, drawing out the "i" in my word.

"Shut up," she said, and it was her turn to flush.

"Oh how the tables have turned, Ms. Carpenter," I teased.

"I don't want anything serious right now," she said, avoiding eye contact.

"Why not? Don't push him away if you like him."

"I know," she whispered, and I knew I didn't have to say any more. She'd been through a lot, and I understood

where she was coming from. She'd been hurt in relationships before by men, and she was scared to get close. Sometimes I didn't blame her, and other times I wanted to shake her. I didn't want her to miss out on what could be the love of her life just because she was scared, but I understood her need to protect herself. So we left it at that and headed out of our gossip phase and into our lesson planning.

Three hours later, we had the next month of daily lessons planned, and I even got some essays graded. Our gossip fest had turned into a good work session, and as we both stood and stretched after a few hours of working, I glanced out the window and realized it was already

dark out. I checked my cell phone and saw that it was nearly 6:30. We finished just in time for me to get home to Jesse for dinner.

I just loved everything about the way that sounded.

We went our separate ways, and as I headed toward Jesse's house, my heart started pounding. The closer I got to the house, the harder my heart beat in my chest.

Until I pulled into the driveway and saw that there was no big black truck in the garage.

CHAPTER 6

The pounding in my chest slowed back to normal. Where was he? Was he still with Carly? My mind spat her name like it was poisonous. I was awful; I didn't even know the girl and I was already judging her for taking Jesse away from me.

I went inside and found myself alone in Jesse's house for the second time that day. I put away my books and got my stuff ready for the next morning, and then I headed to the kitchen to find something to eat. I checked my phone, but I didn't have a text from him.

The idea that he didn't bother with a text to let me know where he was gave

me a pretty healthy dose of reality. Just like earlier that day when he told me that I didn't need to approve my plans with him, he didn't feel the need to approve his plans with me, either. Probably because he was off having sex with Carly.

Jealous rage streaked through me, but I took a deep breath and tried to push it down. This was another reminder that we were just friends, and I needed to learn to just be okay with that.

I pulled open his refrigerator and found plenty of healthy food choices. I settled on hummus and paired it with some pita chips I found, and then I heated some homemade chicken soup. I spent about ten minutes trying to figure

out how to turn on the damn television before I finally just gave up. I settled into the lounge cushion of the couch with a book and lost myself in it until I fell asleep.

Lips...

Were those lips I felt pressed against my forehead?

Whose lips could they be?

I woke from a dreamy sleep and opened my eyes slowly to the bright light I'd fallen asleep to. Dark, mysterious, troubled eyes stared back at me.

"Hey," I said, my voice scratchy from sleep.

"Hey," Jesse whispered tenderly. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

"What time is it?" I asked.

“Little after midnight.”

He was intense. Haunted. This Jesse wasn't the same playful Jesse who told me he had a power tool for me earlier that same day.

“You ready for bed?” he asked.

I nodded, and he stood from his position where he knelt on the floor beside me, unfolding that perfect body and standing straight. He leaned over me and scooped me up easily into his arms.

“Jesse,” I gasped, throwing my arms around his neck, still not fully awake as he carried me to my bedroom. “Put me down!”

The haunted look in his eyes dissipated as he gazed at me. “How do you think you got into your bed the past

two nights?" he murmured, and I suddenly realized that he'd carried me to bed every night I'd stayed at his house so far, only this time I'd woken up first. I wondered if the lips I'd felt against my forehead had been part of my dream or reality, and I wondered if he'd kissed my forehead the past two nights as he carried me to bed.

He deposited me on the bed and helped me snuggle under the blankets, and then he sat beside me. I was in my favorite sleeping position, on my side with my hand under my pillow, but seeing Jesse sitting on the bed next to me was a view that made me not want to close my eyes. Jesse in the flesh was better than Jesse in my dreams.

He looked at me, and then he looked away. He sighed. Something was clearly troubling him. “Is it okay if I hang in here with you for a few minutes?” he finally asked, his voice quiet with a hint of embarrassment.

“Of course, Jesse,” I said, feeling slightly more awake. I pulled back the blanket and indicated for him to get comfortable.

He kicked off his shoes and stuck his feet under the blanket, still in socks, leaning on my headboard as I watched him. He sighed again as I leaned over and turned off the light.

“Come here,” I directed, and he sunk down a little further, staring up at the ceiling. He was wearing jeans and a t-

shirt and he was warm next to me as I scooted closer and placed my head in the nook between his shoulder and his chest. I knew it was far too intimate for friends, but he seemed deeply distressed, and I wanted to be there for him like he'd been there for me. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer to him. My heart was suddenly racing as his scent overwhelmed my senses.

“What’s going on?” I asked quietly, wanting to know but afraid to hit a nerve.

He didn’t respond, and instead, I felt him take a deep breath next to me.

Where the hell had he gone? Who the hell was Carly, and why had he spent

almost the entire day with her? Why was he so disturbed now that he was back?

“Talk to me,” I pleaded in a whisper.

He sighed for the third time in as many minutes. “It’s complicated.”

That was certainly a non-answer.

“I’ve got time.”

“It’s late, V. You need to go to sleep.”

“I just want to be here for you like you’ve been here for me.”

I felt his fingers tighten around me as they dug into the soft flesh at my shoulder. “Thank you,” he murmured, and I could hear the emotion he was choking back. I wanted to turn the light on and look up at him, to see his eyes and to communicate with my own that

everything was going to be okay even though I didn't know what was wrong. But I didn't dare move my cheek from its spot on his body.

We were both quiet for awhile, and I must've fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, my alarm clock on my cell phone started its raging chirp at 5:30. I reached to turn it off and was met with a hard wall of man. I gasped in surprise, taking a moment to place myself and realizing that Jesse had spent the night in bed with me.

He was still in his jeans and t-shirt, and he was still lying in the exact position that he'd been in when I'd fallen asleep wrapped around him the night before.

I was a heavy sleeper who tended to stay in one position for the entire night, and I realized that I'd spent the night on Jesse. Literally sleeping on him. And he was still sleeping soundly, breathing deeply and evenly, but not snoring. Bonus points for the non-snoring Jesse Drake.

I turned on the light on my nightstand.

I shook him, and he jerked awake with a gasp. His eyes looked around wildly until he focused in on me, and then I saw just the corners of his lips curl up ever so faintly.

“Good morning,” he said sheepishly.

“Morning,” I said, very aware of my raunchy morning breath and wishing I hadn't turned the light on since I had to

look like a rabid dog after I hadn't washed off my make-up the night before.

I grinned. I couldn't help it.

Something about waking up next to Jesse Drake just made me ecstatically happy, even if it hadn't been because of a night of passion together. I almost felt like what we'd shared was *more* intimate than having spent the night naked together, although I certainly wouldn't have been complaining if we had woken up without clothes on.

I reminded myself that I was still married.

Dammit.

"Sorry," he muttered, his arm still wrapped around me.

"For what?" I asked.

“Crashing your bed,” he said.

“If we’re being technical, it’s your bed.”

“I didn’t mean to stay in here all night,” he said, sitting up and pulling his arm out from under me. He rubbed the sleep away from his eyes. He had major bed head, but all the messy hair served to do was somehow make him even hotter. He ran a hand through the hair I’d been ogling.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and scrubbed his hand down his jaw, that beautiful jaw covered in a day’s worth of stubble. I didn’t want him to shave it. I loved how it looked on him, a little scruffy and a lot masculine.

“I didn’t mind,” I said, and I realized

I was flirting. I hadn't meant to be flirtatious, but it just sort of slipped out.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, and it looked like the haunting that plagued his eyes the night before was mostly gone.

"What do you eat for breakfast?" he asked.

I shrugged. "My stomach's not awake yet. Ask me in an hour."

"Do you always get up this early?" He yawned.

I nodded. "I try to get to school by seven so I can get ready for my day."

"You need forty minutes to get ready for your day?" he asked, referring to the fact that school started at 7:40.

"No. I need an hour, but I refuse to

get up any earlier.”

He chuckled. “Well you get ready and I’ll head to my room to sleep for another hour.”

“The perks of being a man. It takes me an hour just to shower and get ready.”

“Great. I’ll take breakfast in an hour. Your timing will be perf.”

I smacked him in the shoulder.

“Hey!” he protested, and I giggled.

He stood and stretched, revealing that perfect little patch of washboard stomach as his shirt lifted when his arms rose above his head. I almost moaned. What I wouldn’t give to taste that little patch of skin under my tongue.

He turned to exit my room, and then

he stopped in the doorway and turned back to look at me. “Thanks for the image of you in the shower,” he said. Then he walked out of my room. “It’ll give me something to dream about for the next hour,” he said over his shoulder as he headed down the hall and toward his bedroom.

I grinned a giddy little grin as I blushed from head to toe, loving his words and thankful that he couldn’t see my reaction to them.

After my morning routine, I headed out to the kitchen. The only work shirt I’d grabbed from my closet at home, I realized a little too late, showed a little more cleavage than I was used to showing at work. I had been in such a

rush to get away from Richard that I hadn't really focused on the clothes I was packing. I paired the low cut black button down shirt with a gray pencil skirt and black heels.

I found some yogurt in the fridge a banana in the pantry. I was ready to go with time to spare, which meant I'd have time to stop at Starbucks on the way.

I decided to be a good roommate, and I went to wake my Jesse... I mean Jesse (not "my" Jesse – just Jesse)... to get his Starbucks order.

The door was open, so I peeked into his room. He was asleep on the bed; he was lying on top of his blankets on his back, and he'd stripped down to his boxer briefs.

Holy.

Fucking.

Hell.

Clearly he was having a good dream based on the bulge in his boxer briefs that I couldn't seem to take my eyes off of.

My brain suddenly turned to mush, and my thoughts became nonsensical.

That. Inside of me. Now.

God, I wanted to mount that pony.

I took a moment to appreciate the work of art sleeping before me. He really was something special. He looked just as rugged and sexy when he was asleep, and I allowed my eyes to slowly drag all the way from his feet, up his legs, to that delicious looking bulge, and

up to his perfectly chiseled abdomen and that gorgeous tattoo. I stared at his chest for a moment, remembering how I'd slept on it the night before with a smile. And then my eyes traveled up to his face. He was somehow adorable and sexy and handsome all rolled into one alluring, gorgeous, tempting package.

I shook my head, warding off the dangerous thoughts, and I backed out of his room quietly. I didn't want to disturb him, and I especially didn't want him to know I'd seen his morning excitement, but he did need to get up and get his day started.

He was an adult, I reminded myself, who got along just fine before I showed up in his life. I glanced at the clock. On

the one hand, I really wanted to sneak another peek at his fine form asleep on his bed. On the other hand, I needed to respect his privacy, and allowing myself to go in there and look would only throw the temptation right in my face. He wasn't for me, and I needed to remind myself of that. So I took the coward's way out. "Jesse?" I yelled from the shelter of the kitchen.

I heard a grunt.

"Jesse?" I yelled again, hoping I was being loud enough to wake him.

I couldn't get the image of that body out of my mind.

That body that had kept mine warm for the entire previous night.

Sigh.

“Jesse!” I yelled once more.

“Yeah?” he mumbled.

“Get up!”

“What time is it?” His voice was groggy.

I glanced at the clock. “Six-thirty,” I said.

“Fuck,” I heard him mutter.

He walked out into the kitchen a few minutes later, wearing jeans and nothing else. Well, except presumably those boxer briefs under the jeans, although my imagination suddenly wanted to pretend that there was nothing under those jeans.

I tried to stop the drool from falling over the side of my lip.

He walked past me to the refrigerator. “Where’s my breakfast?”

I giggled. “In the refrigerator, waiting for you to prepare it.”

He grinned. “I forgot to set my alarm clock, so thanks for waking me.”

“Not a problem, roomie,” I said, trying to keep things light.

“You can come into my bedroom, you know. You don’t have to yell from the kitchen. I think we’re close enough friends after sleeping together last night.”

Mmm. Sleeping with Jesse Drake. I loved the way that sounded coming out of his mouth. Except he literally meant “sleeping,” which was kind of disappointing.

“I didn’t want to just barge in,” I said, lying about the fact that I’d done

exactly that and watched him sleep for a few moments. “I’m going to stop at Starbucks. Want anything?”

He stopped taking stock of the contents of his refrigerator, and then he closed the door and turned to look at me.

“Have you ever had their oatmeal?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“World’s best oatmeal. Grab yourself one, too. Get all the goodies with it. Wait,” he said, and he headed to his bedroom for a moment and then came back. He handed me a card, and I felt an electrical spark when his fingers brushed mine. “Use this.”

I glanced down at it and saw he’d given me a Starbucks gift card.

“I’ll cover it, Jesse,” I said. “It’s the least I can do since you’re allowing me to crash here.”

He shook his head. “Use it. Besides, I kind of like your company,” he said, his eyes flicking down to my breasts for just a moment and then back up to my eyes. He tried to play it off like he hadn’t just checked me out, but he *totally* had just checked me out.

“Coffee?” I asked.

“Venti nonfat white chocolate mocha.”

“Hot or iced?”

“Hot.”

“And oatmeal?” I asked.

“With the goodies.”

“With the goodies,” I repeated, and

then I mock saluted him. “It’ll be on your desk waiting for you when you arrive at work, sir.”

His eyes smoldered as he gazed at me, and then I smiled and headed out the door, the wonderful image of Jesse without a shirt burned into my mind.

What a way to start the day.

CHAPTER 7

Jesse's house was about ten minutes further from work than I was used to traveling, and with the additional stop at Starbucks, it was almost 7:15 when I arrived at work. I headed toward Jesse's office to drop off his breakfast, and he was, surprisingly, already in there, looking rather suave in a suit and tie. He always wore a shirt and tie, but it wasn't often that he paired it with a suit jacket.

"How the hell did you beat me here?" I asked in a loud whisper.

"The advantages of being a dude. I even got a shower in."

"Thanks for that image," I said, relishing it as I noticed that he hadn't

shaved.

He grinned as I set down his coffee and oatmeal.

“Thanks,” he said. “Hey, can you close the door for a second?”

I nodded and followed his request. He nodded to the chair where the students usually sat when they visited his office, and I sat in it.

“Are we, uh, telling people?”

I shook my head. “Let’s not. I told Quinn, but she won’t tell anybody.”

He nodded.

“I just don’t want things to get weird, you know?” I said.

“Agreed. So this is between us. For now. And apparently Quinn.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Jesse.”

“You’re welcome, Veronica.” God.
My name. Those lips. Wow.

“Why the suit?” I asked, trying once
again not to drool.

“Presenting at the staff meeting after
school.”

“Fuck.”

“You forgot?”

I nodded. “I always forget about our
last Monday of the month meeting. What
are you presenting?”

He shrugged. “Some shit about
scholarships for seniors and letters of
recommendation.”

“Sounds exciting. Can’t wait.”

He grinned. “Fuck off,” he said with
a mock glare.

“I promise to pay attention, Mr.

Drake,” I said in the most flirtatious, breathy voice I could muster. All the female teachers paid attention when he spoke. Shit, even some of the male teachers perked up when he started talking.

There was a knock at the door, and I opened it. “Good morning, Bill,” I said to the man infamous for the Friday afternoon meetings.

“Good morning,” he boomed, clearly caffeinated and ready to start the day.

“Have an outstanding day, Ms. Thomas,” Jesse said.

“You, too, Mr. Drake,” I smiled, and then I took my coffee and oatmeal and headed to my classroom.

It was a normal Monday, but I found

myself distracted. I'd been distracted a lot lately, but it had mostly been because I was thinking about my separation from Richard and how to find extra things to do so I wouldn't have to go home. But now I was distracted by all thoughts of Jesse. I heard my seniors talking about how hot Mr. Drake was, and I found myself jumping into their conversation, letting the girls know that he was much too old for them, where before I might've just ignored it. I found myself thinking about him all day, about his mood the night before when he'd come home and about who Carly was and who Allison was. I thought about his arm wrapped around me and the firm softness that perfect nook had provided

as my pillow the night before.

I realized that I was in much deeper than some crush on a hot coworker. This had suddenly gotten much more serious.

And he was right. That damn Starbucks oatmeal was delicious.

The day passed quickly, and before I knew it, the last bell of the day rang and it was time to head to our staff meeting. I sat with Quinn, who I'd spoken to privately just before lunch and told her not to tell anybody about my current living situation. We were always two of the first teachers to arrive at staff meetings, and Jesse was up front in his delicious suit, fussing with the computer and pulling up his presentation. He didn't look nervous; I knew it was stupid

because I spoke in front of people all day long, but for some reason I still got nervous when I had to speak in front of my peers. I didn't get nervous to talk in front of high school students, but presenting to my colleagues was nerve-wracking. But Jesse looked calm, confident, and professional. I knew I was staring, but I just couldn't help it. My eyes had been waiting all day to feast themselves on him, and now that he was presenting, I had the perfect opportunity to stare unabashedly at him.

“Stop staring,” Quinn poked me, breaking into my thoughts.

I blushed. “I wasn't staring.”

“Your pink cheeks say otherwise, sister,” she teased.

“Shut up,” I mumbled immaturely.

“How’s the roommate situation?” she asked.

I glanced around and found that no one was in close hearing distance. “He’s tempting me,” I said in the tone of a tattletale.

“Oh?” she asked.

I lowered my voice. “We may or may not have shared a bed last night.”

“Veronica!” she scolded, a bit louder than I would have preferred.

“What?” I grinned. I glanced up and locked eyes with Jesse for just a moment. I saw something change in his eyes as they heated over while he gazed at me, and then he turned back to the computer. I took a deep breath, affected

as always by just one simple look from him.

“Did you?”

I nodded. “Not like you’re thinking, though.”

“Oh? What am I thinking?”

“I know you. You’re always assuming the worst.”

She shrugged. “Yep. You know me. So what happened?”

I lowered to a whisper. He wasn’t that far away, and I didn’t want him to know I was confessing all of this to my best friend. “He came in late, and I’d fallen asleep on the couch. He, um, helped me get to bed, and then he sat with me for a minute, and we both just sort of fell asleep.”

“Morning wood?” she asked.

“Jesus, Quinn,” I giggled, and she looked at me innocently. Other teachers started to arrive and the chairs next to us were suddenly occupied, effectively ending our conversation.

“This conversation isn’t over,” she warned.

I allowed my gaze to land back on Jesse, and I was completely drawn to and enamored by his easy confidence and his command of the room as he surveyed the teachers who were gathering and talking. I’d always been drawn to him, and I’d always appreciated his friendship. He’d always been the kind of person to make everyone around him feel special just

because he was gracing them with the tiniest bit of his attention. But after the night before, I really felt like we shared something. I felt like I knew him better than anyone else at work did, and something about that warmed my heart.

Our principal, Clark Edwards, walked over to Jesse, and the two of them chatted a moment, presumably about when Jesse would take over the meeting. Mr. Edwards settled down the crowd of teachers and led us in celebrations followed by announcements. Then he handed it over to Jesse. Before he started, Jesse's eyes met mine, and I automatically winked. I saw his mouth curl into a smile, and then he launched into his presentation.

He was a great public speaker, peppering in jokes to keep his audience captivated and delivering the information we needed with a charm that made us want to hear it. I couldn't remember a meeting where I'd been more engrossed in what the speaker had to say, except maybe the last time Jesse had presented at a faculty meeting.

But that was back when I just had a crush on him. This was very, very different, and the tingles that wouldn't stop racing up and down my spine as I listened to him speak were very evident proof of that.

After we were dismissed, I said goodbye to Quinn and my other friends in my department and then headed back

to my classroom to get my plans written on the board for the next day. I heard my door open just as I was writing the daily warm-up.

I glanced up and my eyes met those dark and mysterious ones that had become such a comfort to me over the past three days.

“Wonderful presentation, Mr. Drake,” I said.

He smirked. “Thank you, Ms. Thomas.”

“I’d love it if you could start calling me Ms. Freemont again. Get used to the maiden name again, you know?”

“Sounds great, Ms. Freemont.”

I smiled as I turned back to my board. I reached up toward the top of the board

to continue writing, and I could feel his eyes on my ass. I tried to act like I couldn't tell.

“What can I do for you?” I asked as I wrote.

“Just wanted to see if my roommate needed any help getting her shit.”

“Thanks, Jesse. You don't have to do that.”

“I've got a truck, and you said you wanted to stop back when he wasn't home. I can swing by with you if you want some help.”

I thought about it for all of a nanosecond. “Actually, I'd love some help. I don't care about the big stuff for now; we can divide that later. I just want my clothes and shoes and that kind of

stuff. I didn't even realize that this was the shirt I'd packed until it was too late."

"What's wrong with the shirt?" he asked, smiling lasciviously at me as he allowed his eyes to travel down once again to my cleavage. I saw his tongue dart out to wet his bottom lip and it was like a direct call straight to my vagina.

My hand went automatically to my throat. "It's just lower cut than I usually wear to work," I said, trying to block the view of my breasts begging for release from my shirt.

"I like it," he whispered.

Did my classroom just get about ten thousand degrees hotter?

"You ready?" he asked, his eyes moving up to meet mine again.

Fuck yes I was ready, but I was pretty sure he wasn't talking about sex.

“Just about.”

Why did the sudden image of me sprawled across my desk with my skirt hiked up to my hips and my panties around my ankles and Jesse hovering over me just flash through my mind?

“I'll wait,” he said, and I took a deep breath before I finished writing up what I needed to. I checked my email once more and set out my handouts for the following day before leading him out the door, flipping off the light switch, and locking up behind us.

We walked out to the parking lot, chatting about our days, and then he followed me to the house I shared with

Richard, a place that I no longer considered “home.”

When we arrived, I was relieved to find that Richard wasn't there.

I found some boxes in the garage along with my luggage, and we went to work. I changed into sweats, and when I met Jesse in the kitchen, he had taken off his tie and suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He took all of my clothes on hangers and put them in the backseat of his truck while I packed my delicates and socks and t-shirts into my suitcase. Every time he came in, I had something else for him to bring out to the cars.

I went to work on my jewelry, placing it in a box gently without really looking at any of it. Then I packed up

everything in my bathroom by tossing it all into a box, all of the old lotions and body washes and hair sprays and curling irons. I'd go through it later; I just wanted to get it the hell out of the house.

We headed to the office next, and he helped me pack up my books. This was not an easy task; I was an English teacher, which meant I had quite the collection of books – both for school and for my own reading pleasure.

I blushed when he found my not-so-secret stash of romance novels.

“Figures you’d be a closet romantic,” he said with a grin.

I (predictably) blushed and said with mock exasperation, “Just shut up and pack.”

I only had one more thing that I really wanted to bring, and it was a cedar chest. It had been my grandmother's, and it was the one keepsake I had of her. She'd kept her mementos in it, and I didn't keep anything in it except the wonderful memories I had of her.

Richard hadn't liked it, so he made me store it in the garage. My grandma had painted it white, and it was distressed with age and wear. It was just a really cool looking piece of antique furniture. I had always loved it for its beauty and its meaning to me, and I was taking it with me.

"I have one more thing, and it'll probably need to go in the bed of the truck," I said.

He followed me out to the garage, and I pointed to the chest.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, grazing the top of it with his fingertips.

“It was my grandmother’s,” I whispered.

He looked up at me. “Were you close to her?” he asked.

I nodded. “She was the best. I miss her every day.”

He sent me a tight smile. “Sorry you lost her,” he said.

“Besides the memories, this is all I have left of her.”

“Why’s it in the garage?”

“Richard doesn’t like it.”

“Fucking asshole,” he whispered. He bent to move it, but it was a pretty solid

piece of furniture.

“Need some help?” I asked.

“Like a girl can handle this?” he shot back.

I rolled my eyes. This wasn’t the first time I’d moved this particular piece of furniture. “Oh yeah, tough guy?”

He chuckled. “Fine. Help me.”

We moved it together, both of us grunting under its weight, until we got it right under the bed of the truck. All we had to do was lift it in, but it wasn’t going to be easy.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Do you have a blanket?”

I nodded and went to get one.

He placed the blanket on the ground and then perched the chest on its shortest

side. He leaned the chest lengthwise against the tailgate, and then he gracefully jumped up into the bed of the truck.

Okay, that was hot.

He checked it out and saw that his plan was going to work, and then he hopped back down. My eyes were glued to his tight ass. “Can you get up into the bed and just watch for me?” he asked.

Oh my God. Did he really just say that to me? I’d love to hop in his bed and watch.

I giggled.

“What?” he asked.

“What you just said.”

He thought for a minute, and then he chuckled. “I’ll rephrase. Can you please

get into the bed of my truck and watch this piece of furniture for me to ensure that it doesn't topple over and crash into a million pieces?"

"Sure, Jesse. I'd love to get in your bed and watch."

He grinned and then helped me step up into the bed of the truck not nearly as gracefully as he had.

He heaved the chest up, and his plan totally worked. I watched to make sure my furniture was safe, and just as we finished adjusting the chest and wrapping blankets around it for protection, I saw Richard's Mercedes pull around the corner and head for our driveway.

Fuck.

We were caught.

I was seriously hoping to escape without having to see him, but now I'd been caught, and worse, I had been caught with another man.

"Shit," I mumbled as we both stood in the bed of the truck next to the chest. He looked up and watched as Richard pulled up. "Have you two ever met?" I asked.

Jesse nodded. "A few times. Football games, probably."

"Once or twice, then. He almost never goes."

"Want me to put him in his place?" he asked with a grin.

I smiled back. "More than anything. But probably not a good idea."

He nodded.

Richard parked on the street since Jesse's truck and my car were taking over the driveway. He got out of his car and wrapped the strap of his laptop bag around his shoulder.

He barely acknowledged Jesse.

"Veronica, hi sweetheart," he said when he approached us. We both just stared at him.

"Jesse, this is Richard," I said, feeling forced to make the introductions.

"Hey, Rick," Jesse said with a little wave. I stifled a giggle. Richard hated when people abbreviated his name more than anything, and I wanted to kiss Jesse for somehow knowing that.

Well, if I was being honest with

myself, I had wanted to kiss Jesse long before before he called Richard “Rick.”

“Have you signed the papers yet?” I asked. I hadn’t seen them on the table in the kitchen or on the desk in the office, so I assumed that he hadn’t.

He shook his head. “I was hoping we could talk about that,” he said thickly.

Great.

“Why don’t I head out and give you two some privacy?” Jesse said, trying to diffuse the tension.

It didn’t work.

“Is this the guy you’re shacking up with?” Richard asked.

Way to make things totally awkward, Richard. Fucking asshole was right.

“This is the man who is letting me

crash at his place,” I admitted truthfully, not moving from the bed of Jesse’s truck. I felt safe there, like I was on “gool” – our word for the safety zone when I was playing tag as a kid.

What would really make me feel safe was Jesse wrapping arms around me, but this wasn’t the time for those thoughts. It was bad enough that I was having them, let alone having them while I was standing there talking to my husband.

Jesse jumped gracefully down from the bed of the truck, and then he held out his hand to help me climb down (once again, much less gracefully than him, I might add).

I stood in the middle between my past and my future, and the symbolism wasn’t

lost on me. I wanted to get into that truck with Jesse, that metaphorical vehicle to bring me from my distressing past into the promising future.

But first I had to deal with my soon-to-be-ex.

Jesse headed to the driver's side of his truck as I stood in a staring contest with Richard.

Jesse paused and turned back toward me. My eyes flicked to his, but Richard's never left my face.

"You good?" he mouthed to me, and I nodded. I felt my heart swell.

"Catch ya later," Jesse said, and then he climbed up into his truck and pulled away.

Richard and I still stood in the

driveway.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“The papers. Sweetheart, don’t do this to us.”

I sighed in frustration. “Richard, we’ve been living separate lives for over a year. Don’t start this shit with me again. We don’t want the same things anymore, and this divorce is inevitable. You can’t just keep me locked in a marriage that I don’t want any part of.”

“Are you sleeping with him?” he asked, his voice an accusatory hiss.

I shook my head in disgust.

“No,” I said. “I’m not.” Not because I didn’t want to, though. “Richard, you know that I wouldn’t cheat on you.”

Sleeping in the same bed with another man was *not* cheating, I reminded myself. But then again, he hadn't asked me if I was cheating or if I was having sex with another man.

If we wanted to be technical, I had, actually, slept with Jesse the night before. Literally slept. But I knew that wasn't what he meant.

My conservative upbringing had hammered in certain values, not the least of which was that I would never be able to get over the guilt that would certainly plague me if I decided to sleep with another man while I was married to Richard.

But Jesse the tempter was waving all that temptation at me, and I was finding

it increasingly difficult not to give in to what I wanted. Especially when I thought about the softness and intimacy we'd shared the night before simply by sharing a bed.

The more I thought about him, the more I wondered what his lips would feel like on mine, what his tongue tasted like, what his body would feel like when it connected with mine for the first time. And suddenly I *knew* that there was going to be a time for us when that would happen. Somehow, standing there in the driveway in a face-off with my husband, I knew that the stars were going to align and Jesse and I were going to get our chance together. Someday, after the Richards and the Carlys and the

Allisons, someday we'd find our way to each other.

“Do I know that, though?” he asked accusingly.

“Believe whatever the hell you want to believe. I am not cheating on you.”

“You better not. You know the consequences if you do,” he said, and I briefly revisited one of the conversations we'd had when we first separated. He'd explained to me the idea of a no fault divorce versus finding one party at fault. No fault was an easier split in the eyes of the law, he'd told me.

“Yeah, I know,” I said, but I didn't care about the fault versus the non-fault. I just wanted out.

It was strange; it wasn't like this was

the first discussion we'd ever had about getting a divorce. We'd already spoken about splitting assets and putting the house up for sale. I'd already opened my own bank account and changed my direct deposit so that our funds would be separated.

So I wasn't really sure why suddenly Richard had this fight in him for us. He'd never once fought before; but, then, I'd never been as serious as I was about actually making that final split before, either.

"Can we go inside?" he finally asked, still holding his laptop bag and car keys. I sighed and followed him in.

"Richard, I really just want this to be over. Let's just make a clean break. I'll

get in touch with someone to list the house—”

He whirled around on me and cut me off. “Don’t be ridiculous. If we’re selling the house, I’m listing it.”

“Of course,” I said, literally forcing myself not to roll my eyes. And then I realized the huge conflict of interest by having him list the house. He’d get the commission, and he’d keep it all for himself even though I was due half that money.

But it was just one of those things I didn’t care about. It wasn’t the battle I wanted to go to war for. It wasn’t the hill where I was going to die. He could have the fucking commission.

I suddenly felt the strong urge to get

the hell out of that house.

He set his laptop and keys on the kitchen counter, and then he leaned back on it and stared me down.

“Can I have the papers back?” I asked.

He sighed and then shook his head.

“Why not, Richard?” my voice was sharp.

“Don’t fucking talk to me like I’m one of your students.”

“What did you do with the papers?”

“I shredded them.”

“You’re a real piece of work.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” he said, a slimy grin spreading across his face. How had I ever found him attractive? He made my skin crawl.

“I’ll drop a new set by tomorrow. Stop being a dick and just sign them. The sooner you do that, the sooner we can just stop this nonsense and start moving on with our lives.”

“You really want out that bad?” he asked.

I glared over at him. “What do you think?”

He stared at me for a long moment, and then he nodded. “Alright. I’ll sign.”

Something about his sudden change of heart told me not to trust that he was doing this with good intentions, but I was so happy at hearing those words that I didn’t really give it a second thought.

“Thank you,” I said. “I have to go.”

CHAPTER 8

I walked out the door and headed to my car, feeling the first pricks of tears behind my eyes. It was an odd mix of utter joy and bitter sadness.

I didn't allow the tears to fall until I pulled away from the house. Richard didn't deserve to see my tears. He'd only think they were for him, when in actuality there was such a rush of emotions rolling through me. Sadness because I still had to wait to be honest with Jesse about my intense feelings for him; anger at Richard for not signing and forcing me to wait a few days longer when all I wanted was for it to just be over, bitterness mixed with joy over the

fact that my husband understood that it was really over and that he was going to sign the damn papers.

I made it back to Jesse's place, tears still falling freely down my cheeks. I grabbed a box from my backseat to bring in with me, and when I walked through the mudroom and into the kitchen, Jesse was standing there, waiting for me. I set the box down on the counter and my purse on top of the box, feeling Jesse's eyes on me the entire time. I sniffled, wiping away the tears that wouldn't stop with the back of my hand, and then I saw Jesse open his arms. I walked into them, and it was as natural as breathing as my arms wrapped around his waist and his folded around my shaking shoulders. My

cheek met his chest as I let out the emotions that had been building; building between Richard and me for two years, building between Jesse and me for five years.

I realized it now.

I'd had a crush on Jesse from the moment I'd met him, and I thought back to that first time we'd been introduced.

He was leading a session for new teachers at Central. I found him incredibly hot from the start, but I was brand new to the school. I just didn't think it would have been smart to get involved with a coworker when I was a first year teacher. And then shortly after that, Quinn had introduced Richard and me, and things just sort of took off. But

I'd always held that attraction to Jesse, even when I repressed it because I was dating someone, and then engaged to someone, and then married to someone.

But soon, I would be divorced from someone. Soon, I'd be free to pursue anybody I wanted to, and now I was mature enough to understand how to maintain a relationship with a colleague and still be professional.

And the only person I had any interest in pursuing was the man whose arms were holding me against him.

This was comfort. This was home. This was where I wanted to be.

And as I pulled back ever so slightly out of his warmth and looked up into his eyes, I knew with every fiber of my

being that the feeling was mutual.

His fingertip ran along my hairline and then tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his eyes never leaving mine. He brushed a stray tear away as I took a shuddering breath.

“I’ve got you, V. You’re going to be fine,” he soothed quietly, his fingers tenderly caressing my back as he held me. Instead of feeling like I was going to break down on the spot at his gentle reassurance, I felt comforted, and I realized that it was because I believed him. I was going to be fine because this man was going to take care of me.

I suddenly wanted to kiss him more than a fish wants to swim in water, more than a scared turtle wants to be in its

shell, more than a coyote wants to howl at the moon.

I tilted my head back, and I felt him move in a little closer, his arms wrapping around me as his gentle fingers pressed a little more forcefully into my flesh.

His head tilted down toward me, and then he leaned his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling of being so close to him, inhaling his scent, and memorizing how his strong arms pulled me tightly against the length of his body.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Now I am,” I said bravely.

“Now I am, too,” he whispered.

He pulled back and my eyes opened,

meeting with his. It was reminiscent of the chicken marsala night when we'd almost kissed, and I knew that this time, he was going to kiss me. We'd been heading in that direction since Friday night, and while it was only Monday afternoon, a lot had changed over the past seventy-two hours.

Kissing was okay, right? It wasn't sleeping with him. I'd control myself in terms of sex until the divorce was final. But kissing? Certainly kissing would be okay. It would be *more* than okay.

His lips moved toward mine. Those incredibly perfect, chiseled lips. Those lips I had stared at, fantasized about, and wanted on mine, wanted all over my body, for five years. My eyes closed as I

felt the whisper of his breath against my lips.

And just at the moment when his lips were about to touch mine for the first time, the goddamn motherfucking chime of my stupid piece of shit cell phone notified me that I had a text.

He paused where he was, and my eyes flew open. I was looking into his eyes, mere inches from my own. Our lips were nearly touching. But the timing was off. He pulled back, and I wasn't sure if he'd realized his mistake or if he just didn't want our first kiss to be interrupted by the notification of a cell phone. Regardless, he backed away and handed me my phone.

This was most definitely the opposite

of “saved by the bell.”

“Are there more boxes in your car?” he asked, his voice raspy and sexy.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak after the erotic intimacy of a near kiss with Jesse Drake.

He turned and headed for the car, and I could still smell him as if he was still standing in front of me.

I glanced at my phone to see who the offending text had come from.

Quinn.

Any new hot stories about Delightful Drake?

Seriously? My near kiss with the object of my lust was interrupted by a text asking if I’d had any stories about him? Oh, the irony.

Buzz off, I responded with a smiley face.

I helped Jesse get the rest of my stuff out of his truck and my car. We saved the cedar chest for last, and he was exceedingly careful as he unloaded it and directed me where to stand to help ensure its protection. It was easier taking it down than it had been putting it up, and Jesse had several lines that I wanted to comment on (“Can you get into the bed?” “Move a little to the left.” “Grab it right there.” “Hold it tight.”). But after that almost kiss thing that had just happened, I just felt awkward saying my perverted comments.

“Where do you want it?” he asked, offering another comment that caused me

to hold my tongue as we stood in the driveway with the chest loaded onto a handcart to move it with ease.

I shrugged. “The guest room where I’m staying?” I wanted to call it “my” room, but it felt strange.

“Would you mind if we put it in the family room?”

“Like on display?” I asked stupidly.

He nodded, his eyes burning into mine. “It’s a gorgeous piece of furniture, V, and it reminds me of you. I want it out where I can see it.”

I felt some major flutters starting up in my belly as his words warmed me. How he managed to say something so simple that got such an internal reaction from me was completely beyond my

comprehension.

Richard had kept the chest in the garage because he thought it was ugly or unworthy or just didn't fit with the perfect décor of our home. But Jesse didn't care. He knew that it was special and meaningful to me, and he wanted it where we could both see it and appreciate its beauty.

I couldn't help it.

I tackled him.

Okay, "tackled" might be a strong word, but I suddenly found myself flying into his arms. He stumbled back a step but caught his balance and wrapped his arms around me, chuckling at my emotional display.

"Thank you," I murmured, and then,

mortified at what I'd just done, I started to back away.

But Jesse didn't let me. His hands held the small of my back so our bodies were still close, and he tilted his forehead to meet mine. "You're welcome," he whispered, and then he let me go.

He wheeled the chest into the family room and I helped him place it so it was centered behind the couch like a buffet table. We both stared at it for a minute. It actually looked perfect there, like it had been specifically designed for Jesse's house. I looked up toward heaven and whispered a silent prayer of thanks. I felt like she was watching over me, helping me get to where I was meant to be.

He ran his fingertips across the top of the chest. “Can I just say that I love rubbing my hands all over your chest?”

I laughed, assured that any remaining awkwardness I felt after our near kiss was entirely in my head. Jesse volunteered to make dinner while I unpacked some of my stuff. I had just finished unpacking one of my bathroom boxes, throwing out old lotions that I hadn’t used in years, when he appeared in the doorway of my bathroom. I was sitting on the floor, surrounded by a variety of bath products.

“What disaster have I just walked into?” he asked, his face a mask of horror.

“My bathroom box exploded.” I

thought about the OCD neatness of his refrigerator, and I couldn't imagine his revulsion at the mess I'd made in his bathroom. Well, *my* bathroom, for now at least.

"That is more lotion than this house has ever seen," he teased, and I giggled.

"I have plenty to spare if you need some," I said.

He picked up the bottle closest to him and took a sniff of the pink lotion. "This one's a little girly for me, but it smells nice," he chuckled. "Dinner's ready."

"What did you make me?"

"Chicken tacos," he said, setting the pink bottle back where he'd picked it up. He held out a hand to help me up, and I took it. I felt that electrical undercurrent

that I always felt at our skin to skin contact.

“Sounds fantastic,” I said, and then he led me to the kitchen, his hand still in mine sending thrills up and down my spine.

He pulled out the chair for me and then let go of my hand. Sitting at my place setting was a margarita, chicken tacos, tortilla chips, and an assortment of guacamole, sour cream, taco toppings, and salsa.

“This looks like a fiesta,” I said, and he grinned.

We dug in hungrily, chatting about our day and the information he had shared at the staff meeting. In the past, it might’ve flustered me to be sharing a meal with

someone as hot as Jesse, but now, sitting across the table from him, I felt comfortable and natural with him, like this was how it was supposed to be: easy conversation with a man who was easy on the eyes.

After dinner, we cleaned up together. “Want to take a walk?” he asked, and I felt so full that a walk sounded kind of perfect.

We strolled around the neighborhood, walking close but not touching. He was quieter than he’d been through dinner, and I had the inclination that he was about to make some sort of confession but he was fighting himself on whether or not to talk.

There was a small park in the center

of his neighborhood with a swing set, slide, and a few picnic tables with charcoal grills. We walked to the swings and I sat in one. He sat in the other one facing the opposite direction, and we both started swinging slowly, our eyes meeting each time we passed.

“What made you decide to become a teacher?” he finally asked.

“My English teacher junior year said he thought I’d make a great teacher. He was hot so I decided to give it a try.”

He chuckled. “Really?”

I nodded. “I know it sounds stupid when I say it that way, but I really respected him and liked him. We had a discussion activity during class one day, and afterward he asked me if I had ever

considered becoming a teacher. I hadn't, really. I was too busy being a high school student and not looking toward the future. But when he said that, I started seriously considering it, and here I am."

"Teachers can be pretty powerful influences," he mused.

"What made you decide to become a counselor?" I asked, mimicking his question.

He sighed. "Long story."

"I've got time."

Something like a grunt came at me in reply. We continued swinging in silence for awhile, and then he stopped, so I did, too. He stood, and I followed him. We resumed our walk, heading back toward

his house.

I waited quietly, and the random thought came to mind that maybe it had something to do with his tattoo.

“Kind of a similar story to yours. A counselor told me he thought I’d make a good counselor. But I wasn’t attracted to him.”

I giggled. He was clearly trying to lighten what was a serious topic for him, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it had been random that someone who happened to be a counselor said he’d be good at the job or if he had actually been in counseling for something.

I got the feeling that it was the latter, but I didn’t want to press the sensitive subject.

“Well whoever told you that was right. You do make a good counselor. A fantastic one, actually.”

I felt his hand slip into mine, and those damn flutters started up again. He squeezed my hand. “You are a fantastic teacher, too. Your students are lucky to have you.”

I looked over at him, and there was something insanely romantic about the moment. It was dark out, but it was a clear night, and the moon was full and shining. We stood just beyond the park, surrounded by trees. It was a cool and crisp night, and as I looked at him, he stopped walking and turned toward me. His eyes glinted and his face was shadowed in the moonlight. The

shadows gave his face a dangerous and mysterious edge, and combined with that tattoo that I knew was hidden under his shirt, he looked like a sexy enigma standing before me.

“Did you bring your cell phone?” he suddenly asked.

I shook my head. “No. Did you?”

He shook his head slowly, a faint smile forming on those perfect lips.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because there’s no oven timer out here, and I just wanted to make sure that there wouldn’t be any cell phones, either. Because I’m about to do something I have wanted to do for over five years, V, and I don’t want any interruptions.”

My heart pounded nearly out of my chest as I registered the meaning behind his words.

He wanted to kiss me.

I wanted him to kiss me.

He wanted to kiss me for the past five years.

Five years?!?!

And right here? Right now? There weren't going to be any more interruptions.

First Richard.

Then the oven timer.

Then the cell phone.

But now?

Nothing was going to stop this from happening.

With his hand still connected to mine,

he pulled my arm and wrapped it around his waist, lacing his fingers through mine behind his back. His other hand came up under the bottom of my shirt and found my hip, and his fingertips pressed firmly into my skin as my free hand came up to his neck. I could feel his pulse beating strongly beneath my hand around his neck, racing as fast as my own. His eyes gazed into mine for a moment, and everything in the world disappeared except for Jesse and me.

The hand that gripped my hip pulled my body closer to his. We were standing flush against each other, and I could tell that he was as hot for me as I was for him from the rather enormous bulge pressing against my belly.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime of waiting, he lowered his head to mine. I closed my eyes and felt the softest whisper of a kiss as his lips brushed against mine. He pulled back, and my eyes opened slowly to his.

God, he was fucking gorgeous.

He lowered his head again, and this time it wasn't soft or gentle.

His lips pressed firmly to mine, and I felt his tongue at the seam of my lips. I opened my mouth to his. I hadn't kissed a man in over a year, but it was like riding a bicycle.

And I would ride Jesse's bicycle any damn day of the week.

His tongue collided with mine aggressively as I felt his fingers digging

into my hip. He let go of the hand he held behind my back and brought that hand to my other hip. My fingers slid under his shirt, and he moaned into my mouth as I felt the warm, smooth softness of the skin on his back while his tongue did magical things against my own. He sucked on my bottom lip for a moment, and I felt the soft bite of his teeth as I tasted the sweet Jesse flavor that I already knew I'd never get enough of.

I explored his mouth with my own tongue, tasting and teasing and wanting more than just his mouth on mine.

It was all over too fast as I felt him slow the aggressiveness. He pressed his closed lips against mine once, and then twice, and then he pulled back, still

holding me in his arms. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and then he leaned his forehead against mine. “I can’t get you out of my head, V,” he whispered.

“I don’t want you to,” I whispered back, and his lips met mine sweetly once more.

He backed away, taking my hand in his, and we walked back toward Jesse’s house in comfortable silence.

“I need to make a few calls,” he said as we got closer, and I nodded.

“I should finish up in the bathroom.”

“Oh, good,” he said in feigned relief. “I thought you were going to leave it like that.”

“Yeah. It’s my way of redecorating,” I teased.

“If you want something redecorated, just ask. But I don’t think I can get on board with the floor of lotion you created.”

“Are you a neat freak?” I asked.

“Have you seen my refrigerator?” he countered.

“Touché. I’ve never seen such an organized refrigerator. Impressive, Drake.”

“Thank you, Freemont,” he grinned.

I liked hearing my maiden name out of his mouth. I liked that he knew I was already detached from Richard even if I was still married to him under the law. “I was afraid to touch anything in there for fear that I might not face one of the labels out and you’d have a heart

attack.”

“I probably would have a heart attack, so thank you for considering my health.”

When we got back home, Jesse headed to his bedroom and shut the door for his phone calls while I headed to the bathroom to organize the chaos. I wondered what he was doing, who he was calling, but I reminded myself that it wasn't my business. And I certainly didn't even allow myself to think that he was calling up all his women after that ridiculously hot kiss we just shared. Based on the few days we'd spent together, I was starting to wonder about his reputation as a playboy. If he was truly the ladies' man that he made

himself out to be – or that I had assumed he was – he'd either have tried to sleep with me or he'd have been out with other women. While I still didn't know what happened on Sunday, I got the feeling from his reaction when he'd arrived home that it wasn't a sex fest. Something serious happened, but he wasn't talking. All I could hope for was that he would tell me when he was ready to.

I was completely lost in thought about all things Jesse while I cleaned up the mess I had made in the bathroom. I was sitting on the floor, lining lotions, body washes, and perfumes evenly under the sink (labels facing outward... someone was clearly having an effect on me) when I heard his voice behind me. “V?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin, hitting my head on the countertop as I stood.

I turned around. He looked so serious, and that haunted look was back.

Who the hell kept doing this to him? Was it Carly?

“You scared me,” I said, rubbing my head.

“Sorry.” This was one of those times when he usually laughed it off or teased me, but I didn’t even see a hint of a smile on his face at all. “I need to run out for awhile. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Is everything okay?” I asked, afraid what his answer might be as I gripped a bottle of perfume in my hand.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

I set the perfume on the counter and walked over to him, pulling him into my arms for just a moment. “Do you need me to do anything?”

He shook his head. “Thanks. I have to go.” He pressed his lips quickly to mine, almost as if to remind me that he was still interested in me, and then he turned and left.

Curiosity gripped me, but there was nothing I could do. I reminded myself once again that he’d talk when he was ready. After the kiss we had shared, I knew that it wasn’t just my imagination. I knew that he cared about me, and I was pretty sure that he wanted me like I wanted him.

In a few short months, I’d be free to

fully pursue him. I hated denying myself what I really wanted – what I really needed – but I refused to take the risk of karma biting me in the ass by starting a relationship while I was still married to someone else.

I finished up in the bathroom and glanced at the clock. It was already almost 10:00, which was my bedtime, and I wondered where he had gone off to so late. Clearly it was some sort of emergency gauging from his reaction.

I decided to wait up on the couch for a bit for him. He might need someone to talk to, or even just someone to give him a hug and be there for him after he went off to deal with God knows what, and I wanted to be that person for him.

And, for the fourth night in a row, I fell asleep on Jesse's couch. The damn thing was like some sort of magical sleep aid. Screw the Advil PM; all I needed was Jesse's magical sectional couch.

I felt lips on my forehead again, and this time I knew I wasn't dreaming. I was in his arms, somewhere between asleep and awake. He was carrying me to my bed, and he threw back the blankets and sheets and helped me snuggle in under the covers. And then I felt his warmth next to me, his chest pressed against my back and his arm around my waist as he fell into bed beside me. I fell back into a deep sleep, and what felt like five minutes later, my

cell phone wake-up call rang shrilly at 5:30. Just like the previous morning, I turned over and ran into a hard wall of man, and while most mornings I woke up easily when my alarm went off, something about having Jesse Drake in the bed with me persuaded me to hit the snooze button.

He was still in a deep slumber, and I threw my arm around his waist and burrowed into his side, realizing that he'd stripped off his shirt but not his jeans. He slept in jeans for two nights in a row. I didn't know where he went the night before, and frankly, I didn't care. All I knew was that when he came back home, he carried me to bed and then got in beside me. Clearly I was filling some

void for him just as he was for me.

My alarm went off nine minutes later. I wished that it wasn't February when it was still dark in the mornings, because I would've had a perfect, unobstructed view of his tattoo from where I was lying beside him.

I pressed a gentle kiss to the sculpted flesh on his chest, and he groaned quietly in response. I caressed his cheek with my knuckles softly and lovingly, the feel of his stubble under my fingers sending a tingle of lust through me. Somehow it was rough and soft at the same time, and it left me wanting to feel it under my lips.

It left me wanting to feel it between my legs.

I left him to sleep in my bed instead of forcing him to get up and go back to sleep in the other room. I quietly moved around my dark room, grabbing clothes so that I could just get dressed in the bathroom after my shower.

I took my shower and then applied lotion and combed the tangles out of my hair, and as I went to get dressed, I realized I'd forgotten something pretty important: panties.

Shit.

I pulled the towel a little tighter around me, hoping that Jesse was either still asleep or that he'd gotten up and left my room. I was beyond embarrassed to exit the bathroom in nothing but a towel, but I had to get my panties. I couldn't go

commando to school.

I peeked out the door of the bathroom and saw that the coast was clear. The bed was empty and the room was lit. Jesse had gotten up and turned on the light, but he had also left the bedroom door wide open.

I snuck out stealthily and found the drawer that I had decided would be my delicates drawer just the day before. I opened it and bent over it, leafing through to find a pair of white panties that wouldn't show through my light khaki pants.

“I brought you some orange ju—” Jesse's voice startled me, causing me, of course, to drop my fucking towel as I jumped and turned around at his voice.

He stood in the doorway with a glass of orange juice in his hand, admiration in his eyes, and a wicked smile gracing those perfect lips.

“Well,” he said, his voice low and raspy and breathtakingly sensual as his eyes moved appreciatively down the full frontal show he was getting. “Good morning to you, too.”

“Shit!” I yelled, diving for my towel as I did my best to cover up all of my bits and pieces. I wrapped the towel back around me as tightly as I could. My face had to be the color of a lobster. I think the blush was spreading down my neck and into my chest, and if it was, Jesse just had a comprehensive view of it all.

“Don’t cover up for my benefit,” he said. “I think I like you better without the towel.”

“Oh my God,” I said, at once offended and totally turned on by his words. I grabbed the first pair of panties I could find in my drawer and ran back into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

CHAPTER 9

I could not believe Jesse had just seen me naked. And it wasn't like he just saw an accidental flash of a boob. He saw *everything*. I was as naked as the day is long.

For one brief second, I was thankful I'd kept up with my waxing appointments even though no one had seen me naked since the awful anniversary. And then I wondered if my line of thinking was really so ridiculous.

Jesse Drake had just seen me completely naked.

And that gleaming look in his eyes as mine met his for the briefest of seconds was most definitely admiring.

I finished getting ready, trying to focus on anything aside from my complete mortification. I thought about what I was teaching that day, and somehow my lesson plan on *Canterbury Tales* seemed a lot less important than the fact that Jesse Drake had just seen me completely naked.

Oh, what Quinn would have to say about that – not to mention the fact that Jesse and I shared one hell of a kiss the night before.

After I finished getting ready, I headed out to the kitchen, hoping to avoid facing him before I left for work. Even though, I had to admit, I still wanted to *see* him. I just didn't want to have to *face* him.

I needed about a week to get over the humiliation.

But, as these things always seem to go for me, he was there in the kitchen, sitting at the table completely dressed for work, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, looking calm, cool, and collected in a shirt and tie. A tie, by the way, that I wanted to rip off of him with my teeth.

“There she is,” he winked, grinning at me as if everything was completely normal. As if we hadn’t shared the hottest kiss ever. As if he hadn’t just seen me naked. “Sadly, now fully clothed.” He mock frowned, and it was just about the most adorable thing I have ever seen.

“Yes. Fully clothed,” I repeated like an idiot. Coherent thoughts eluded me as I moved around the kitchen, gathering a travel mug to fill with coffee.

“I’m not sorry,” he said.

“About what?” I asked.

“Seeing you like that.” I could see the heat in his eyes as he gave me this smoldering look, and I turned red all over again as I took a deep breath in through my nose and blew it out through my mouth.

God, what he did to me.

“Everything okay after last night?” I asked, changing the subject as I focused on pouring cream into my mug. I didn’t want to bring up something negative, especially now that he was obviously in

a much better frame of mind, but I did want to get the attention off of me.

He was quiet, so I glanced over at him. His eyes darkened. "It's alright."

"Want to talk about it?"

He shrugged. "Maybe later."

"What time did you get home?"

"A little after two."

Two? As in just a little over four hours earlier?

How did this man survive on so little sleep?

"Jesse, what's going on?" I asked, placing the cream back in the refrigerator and walking to the other side of the counter. I leaned back on it and eyed Jesse. I was still mortified, but concern for him overtook my

embarrassment.

He just shook his head and took a sip of his coffee. "Don't worry about it, V."

I sighed, resigned to the fact that I couldn't make him talk. "I need to get going. I've got some copies to make this morning."

"Want to carpool?"

"I'd love to, but I need to stop back at my... um, at my old house after school."

"Why?" he asked, taking a sip of coffee.

"I need to drop off another copy of the papers."

"Why?" he repeated, folding the newspaper in front of him.

"Richard shredded the first set."

"Asshole."

“You have no idea,” I said, gritting my teeth.

“Can I do anything?”

“You know anybody who can speed this along?”

“Sadly, I don’t. Want me to come with you to the house?”

I shook my head. “I’m just going to drop off the papers and then head out. He won’t be there. The first set I gave him was a copy since I don’t trust him, so I just need to make another copy.”

“Smart woman,” he said, tapping his temple with his finger to indicate that I had thought ahead.

I winked at him. “Damn right,” I said. Then I pointed to my head. “This isn’t just a hat rack, you know.”

He grinned. "Have an outstanding day, Ms. Freemont."

"You too, Mr. Drake. Catch ya later."

"That's my line," he grinned, and I headed out the door with a smile.

As I got into the car, my phone buzzed with a text.

Figured. Fucking Richard.

He always managed to find a way to piss me off right when I was riding a Jesse high.

Call me.

I replied right away. *No.*

My phone rang a second later.

"What?" I answered snidely.

"You've got twenty-four hours to move out of that douche bag's place before 'no fault' is out the window."

“Fuck you, Richard.”

“Nice language, wife. If you don’t move out of there, I’ll not only sue you for everything, but I’ll find a way to take everything from him, too.”

“Don’t you dare drag Jesse into our shit. He’s just being a good friend.”

“A good friend who wants to fuck what’s mine, sweetheart. I’ve got people in the right places. I’ll figure something out.” Richard ran around with a nasty crowd made up of local lawyers, politicians, and school board members, most of which had slime dripping off of them.

“I’m not yours anymore.”

“You most certainly are, at least under the eyes of the law. So suck it up,

sweets. Get the fuck out of his place or you'll both live to regret it. You've got twenty-four hours."

"You're a real dickhead."

"Still your dickhead, sweetheart."

I cut off the call and threw my phone away from me.

Fuck.

The worst part of that call was the way my heart dropped into my stomach as I thought about moving out of Jesse's. We were good for each other. I knew I was good for him; I physically saw the way that just my presence comforted him through whatever he was dealing with. I couldn't even imagine leaving him now, not when I knew that he was getting closer to telling me what caused that

haunted look in his eyes that somehow disappeared after holding me in his arms for the night.

And he was helping me, too. He was building my confidence back up after Richard had stripped me of it through his manipulation. He was helping me feel whole again. He made me feel sexy, and he was helping me through one of the most difficult, life-changing experiences a person can go through by talking me through it, protecting me, making me laugh, and comforting me.

I had to shield him from Richard.

It was my only choice, really.

I didn't want to tell Jesse about Richard's threat for a number of reasons, most importantly because I wanted to

protect him. I had no doubt in my mind that Richard would deliver on his word, and the last thing I wanted was to drag Jesse into this drama, especially after he'd been so nice to me, offering for me to stay at his place with no questions asked, taking me home with him when he sensed that I didn't want to go to my own home.

Jesse seemed like the kind of amazing man who would fight for a woman, who would stand up for anybody who needed him. With Richard's well-placed friends on the school board, either of us standing up to Richard could mean Jesse's job, my job, or both.

Jesse was an amazing asset to Central. He was the best high school

counselor I'd ever met, working hard to ensure that he was doing whatever was best for kids. His dedication was unparalleled, and I couldn't even begin to imagine what Richard was capable of doing that would tear Jesse's reputation to shreds. The thought alone clawed at me.

So I decided not to tell him in order to protect him. And apparently I had twenty-four hours to figure out my living situation.

Son of a bitch. For the first time in our five years together, I actually hated him.

I was having a difficult time with Richard's words ringing in my ears as Jesse's gorgeous face flashed through

my mind. Richard's words were only making me angry, and the image of Jesse was only making me sad. The way he looked right after he'd brushed my lips with his and then pulled back, almost as if to ensure that it was okay to really kiss me, replayed over and over in my memory. That image of him was burned into my mind: Full lips, flushed cheeks, lustful eyes, messy hair.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get that image out of my head.

So, eventually, I stopped trying.

I assigned an essay due at the end of the hour to my afternoon classes so I could just sit at my desk and think.

There had to be some solution that I couldn't see, because at the moment, the

only thing I could come up with was that I had to move out of Jesse's house. I thought once again about telling him what Richard had said, but I couldn't do that to Jesse. I couldn't drag him into the mess. I couldn't allow him to fight Richard.

But I had to come up with some excuse as to why I was suddenly moving out. I'd have to offer some sort of explanation to him.

At lunch, I asked Quinn if I could stay with her for a few days until I figured out where to go. I didn't want to drag her into it, either, so I lied.

"Things not working out so well with Darling Drakester?" she asked.

"Things are working out too well

with Jesse. And that's why I have to leave."

She gave me a concerned look, and I almost fell apart at her apprehension. But, somehow, I held it together. Barely.

"Yeah, Veronica. Of course you can stay with me."

"Thanks," I whispered.

The next task was figuring out how to tell Jesse.

I stopped by the house and dropped off the divorce paperwork again. I left a note for the asshole I had married.

Richard:

I'll be moving out of Jesse's tonight and staying with Quinn. Sign these and leave them here. I will be back tomorrow to pick them up and file

them.

Veronica

I cried as I drove back to Jesse's. This time, though, it wasn't because of the feelings of leaving my husband. This time, it was because I knew I had to leave Jesse.

His truck was in the garage when I pulled into the driveway, and just the sight of that truck still managed to give me the flutters low in my belly. I couldn't believe I was leaving him and his perfect house. I wanted to live there forever with him, but, sadly, that was just no longer a possibility. All I could hope was that he'd still be available once my break from Richard was finalized.

Maybe this was for the best. I wouldn't have the constant temptation in front of me if I moved in with Quinn.

But I liked the temptation.

I liked living with Jesse. No; I *loved* living with Jesse. I loved waking up with him next to me. I loved the way his lips found my forehead every night and the way he carried me to bed after I fell asleep on the world's most comfortable couch. He took care of me with affection, and as I fought fruitlessly against the onslaught of my tears, I realized that the reason I was so torn apart about leaving him was because I was falling for him.

I wanted to take care of him the same way he took care of me. I wanted to be

the one he finally opened up to. I wanted to hold him when he was sad and kiss him when he was happy. I wanted to wake up next to him every morning.

And most of all, I wanted to tell him how I finally realized that I'd been falling for him for five years but was blinded by the wrong relationship all that time, and how now that I had the chance to get close to him, I never wanted to be apart from him again.

But all of that was impossible. And it was fucking Richard who once again stripped me of something I really wanted, or, in this case, of the thing I needed most in my life.

It reminded me of that thought I'd had while my mind was elsewhere in the

parent meeting for Jacob's behavior: I was destined to be with one man, and Fate had put Jesse in front of me first. And then I'd been too blinded by Richard to see that Jesse was the one I was meant to be with all along.

And now I'd once again ruined my shot with Jesse.

I composed myself with a deep breath that only hurt my chest, and then I headed inside. Jesse was sitting on the couch, feet propped up on the coffee table and a book in his hands. My heart literally ached when I saw him.

"Hey, V," he smiled, setting the book down when he heard me come in.

"Hey," I said softly, not meeting his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked immediately, standing from the couch and striding to my side.

I took a deep breath. This was going to be even harder than I thought.

“Is it Richard?” he asked, knowing I’d just come from the house I shared with my husband.

I didn’t respond.

“V, tell me what he said.”

I shook my head, busying myself with some invisible lint on my pants.

“You know I can help you, right? You know that, don’t you?” His voice was soft and soothing, and it was reminiscent of his side of the conversation with Carly on Sunday afternoon. “But I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

“Let it go, Jesse. It’s nothing.”

My voice came out harder than I’d meant it to.

I felt him staring at me, but I refused to look away from the spot on my pants.

I heard him sigh. I headed to my bedroom and sat on the bed, resting my elbows on my knees and leaning forward to rest my face in my hands. I felt the bed dip next to me, and then I felt his arms around me.

“I know this is difficult,” he murmured, his voice low and raspy. “But you’ve got friends here to help you get through it.”

I couldn’t help the sob that escaped at his warm and caring words.

But the one thing that stuck out most

to me was that we were just “friends.”

And as much as I'd convinced myself that we could turn into something more, especially after that kiss the night before, I knew that with Richard still in the picture, something more was just no longer a possibility.

His arms tightened as I allowed him to comfort me, my head resting against that perfect soft yet firm chest. I breathed him in for what felt like the millionth time in the past few days, addicted to his Christmasy, manly scent, and I knew immediately how much I was going to miss this man and all he had to offer. But I couldn't intrude on him and his life any longer, not with the threats Richard was making.

“Thank you,” I whispered against him. “I know I have you, Jesse. But I can’t stay here with you anymore.”

I heard his sharp intake of breath.

“Why not?” he asked.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer, because I couldn’t lie to him, but I also couldn’t tell him the truth.

“Does this have to do with Richard?” he asked.

“I just can’t intrude on your life anymore. I’m going to stay with Quinn.”

“It’s not an intrusion, V. I like having you here. I’ve already told you that.” His voice was quiet, and some of his usual composure was starting to slip.

“I know. And I like being here. But I just can’t do this.”

I stood up, because having his arms around me while we were having this conversation was too difficult. My heart was screaming for me to stay, but my head was telling me to go. The rational side of me won. I couldn't drag him into Richard's web of shit.

I pulled the suitcase I'd just unpacked the day before out of the closet and threw some clothes into it.

“Are you leaving because of the kiss?” he asked, his voice quiet and flat.

I shook my head.

“Is it because of this morning?” he asked.

God, I couldn't take that he thought it was because of either of those things. As embarrassing as it had been to drop my

towel in front of Jesse, his reaction had been positive. He liked what he saw, and that made me feel fantastic. Someone as hot as Jesse Drake had eyed my naked body with appreciation, and I couldn't remember the last time a man had made me feel so attractive.

My eyes met his, and then I looked away. His had that haunted look back in them, and I nearly lost it. I wanted to run into his arms and comfort him. I wanted to hold him and erase that look. I wanted to tell him why I had to leave, and I wanted to tell him to wait for me.

But I didn't do any of that. I had to be strong for Jesse's sake. I wouldn't let Richard ruin his life, even if it meant that I was allowing Richard to ruin *my* life.

“I just can’t stay here,” I said offhandedly, not committing to any one specific event. I grabbed just the essential toiletries that I would need and threw them into my suitcase. I’d find some time to get the rest of my stuff; I just needed to get out of there, away from Jesse’s searching, anxious, haunted eyes.

He could think what he wanted to think, because suddenly I felt like I would die if I stayed in there one more minute. I couldn’t take being in the same space with Jesse and not wrapping myself around him to comfort him with my love. So I took the coward’s way out. I didn’t look back as I pulled my suitcase behind me.

“Thanks for everything, Jesse. I’ll see you at work, okay?”

He didn’t respond, and I didn’t wait for him to. I grabbed my keys and my purse off the counter and headed out to my car, tears falling harder as I tossed my suitcase in the trunk, climbed into the driver’s seat, started the car, and pulled away from Jesse’s house.

CHAPTER 10

I turned around the corner and then pulled to the side of the road. My tears were coming harder now, faster, and as they streamed down my face, I knew it wasn't safe for me to drive. I needed a minute to compose myself. I held my hands over my face, sobbing into them, the ugly kind of cry that you only do when you're alone. I couldn't take that look I'd seen on Jesse's face as I turned and walked out of his life. The haunted look was haunting me, and I didn't know what to do to erase it. I took off my seatbelt so I could lean forward. I put my arms against the steering wheel and cradled my head in my arms, waiting for

the sadness to ease up enough to allow me to pull away.

It wasn't working. Sobs racked my body and I wasn't sure what to do to get the ache to stop.

A knock at the window caused me to take in a shuddering breath. I'm sure the neighbors were wondering why a car was parked outside on the street, the motor still running and the driver passed out over the steering wheel.

And then whoever was knocking on my window suddenly opened the door, and I was being pulled out of the car and into the warmest, most comforting arms I could possibly imagine. His lips crashed down over mine, and whatever the hell Richard had said didn't matter anymore

because I was just exactly where I was supposed to be.

Jesse's mouth opened to mine as one hand gripped the hair at my neck and the other wrapped around my waist, pulling me against his hard body.

The tears magically stopped as lust and desire took over every single thought and feeling in my body. His kiss was the only cure I needed as suddenly everything was set right in my world again.

He pulled away. "Don't leave me," he whispered, and as my tear-stained eyes gazed into his, I saw an emptiness that I knew could only be filled with my love. I wanted to give him everything I had. I wanted to be the one to make him

happy.

My fingers caressed his soft, rough, perfect scruff as his eyes burned into mine.

“Come back home, V,” he murmured, and then his lips pressed to mine once again. “I need you.” He leaned his forehead to mine.

I pulled back this time, and I gaped at him. I glanced behind us. His truck was behind my car, still running with the driver’s door open.

He’d come after me. He’d chased me down, not knowing how far I had gotten but willing to go as far as he needed just to get to me and bring me back where I belonged. With him.

“Okay, Jesse,” I whispered, and he

ran a hand through his hair.

I got into my car, and he got into his. I pulled a u-turn and he followed, and then we both pulled into his driveway.

I took a deep breath as I exited my car, and he came around to my driver's side and took my hand in his, pulling me behind him into the house.

He led me to the kitchen table, and we both sat in our usual seats.

“Talk to me,” he said, his voice that deep, low rasp that made me tingle everywhere.

“Richard told me I couldn't live with you.”

“Fucking dick.”

I nodded.

“Babe, don't worry about him. He

can't make you move.”

“He said it wouldn't be a no fault divorce anymore if I stayed with you because I'd be cheating on him.”

Jesse sighed in frustration. “A, we haven't done anything that would constitute cheating, although don't think that the thought hasn't crossed my mind. And B, Veronica, Arizona is a no fault state. His threat is meaningless.”

What?

“What?” I voiced my thought.

“He can't hit you with fault because Arizona doesn't place blame.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Holy shit. That meant that I could live wherever the hell I wanted. Richard

wouldn't be able to take everything from me.

Well, maybe. He still had those friends in high places, but suddenly I knew that Jesse would find a way past that. He was smart and sexy and apparently my savior.

“Didn't you read that paper I printed for you?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

I shook my head. “I filled out the necessary parts and gave it to him.”

“Didn't anyone ever teach you to read things before you sign them?” he asked with exasperation.

I shrugged. “I had a lot on my mind.”

“Did you at least read the part about how long this is going to take?”

I glanced down at the floor and

pressed my lips together.

“Seriously, V?”

“How long?” I whispered, afraid to know the answer.

“Typically these things take three and a half to four months.”

“So that puts it sometime in June.”

He nodded.

June. Interesting. Mid-summer break.

Mid-Jesse’s solo summer vacation.

He had said he preferred to travel alone, to decompress after a long school year, but maybe he’d like some company this year.

A thought of Jesse in swim trunks on the beaches of Mexico flashed through my mind.

A thought of Jesse and me on a tour

through California vineyards flashed through my mind.

A thought of Jesse and me in a big bed wearing nothing but sweat flashed through my mind.

“Can we talk more about ‘A’?” I asked, trying to ward off those deliciously wicked thoughts.

He gave me a strange look. “A?”

“Yeah. You said, ‘A, we haven’t done anything that would constitute cheating.’ And then you said, ‘don’t think that the thought hasn’t crossed my mind.’ Expand on that, please.”

A slow grin spread across Jesse’s face as his eyes lit up. “You want to hear more about that, do you?” he asked.

I nodded, and I couldn’t help the

smile playing at the corners of my mouth.

He stood up and he walked to my side of the table. He took my hand in his and pulled me up from the table and into his waiting arms.

“Well,” he said, wrapping one arm around my waist while the fingertips on his other hand ran along my cheek. I threw my arms around his neck. “I have a confession.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“I’ve been having some pretty naughty thoughts about my roommate.”

Lady parts tingled as I stared into those dark eyes.

“What kind of thoughts?” I prompted.

He kissed my forehead, and then the tip of my nose, and then my lips. “V, I

have dreamed of seeing you naked for the last five years,” he murmured. “This morning, my dream came true. And you know what?”

“What?” I asked, that damn blush giving me away as I tried in vain to maintain my calm, cool collectedness.

He lowered his head close to my ear and whispered, his breath tickling my ear and the warmth sending rockets of lust exploding through my veins. “It was even better in real life than in my dreams.”

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

How was I ever possibly going to wait until my divorce was finalized to give myself to this man?

His lips grazed behind my ear, and I

shivered in his arms. I felt his grin against the skin of my neck as his lips moved down, and those lips on my body caused every coherent thought to leave. I mumbled something inarticulate – or maybe it was a grunt, I'm not really sure – as he continued his onslaught of seduction.

He pulled back from me and our eyes met, and that emptiness that had appeared in his when he found me and pulled me out of my car was gone. It was replaced with heat and desire, and all that temptation that he had been waving in my face since Friday night suddenly felt like a real possibility. I'd gone back and forth on whether or not things were going to ever happen between us, but

after this, after I'd nearly left and he'd come for me and explained to me that I was already free of Richard in ways that I hadn't even known, I knew for sure that when everything was over with Richard and the dust settled, Jesse would be waiting for me with open arms.

He moved in to press a kiss to my lips as his hands moved aching slowly up my sides to my ribcage. Everything south of my belly button tightened as his mouth opened to mine, his tongue playing with mine in a slow, seductive tango.

When his fingertips grazed just under my breasts, I pulled back.

"Jesse, I—"

"Shh, baby." He shook his head and

then leaned his forehead to mine. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I don’t want you to stop,” I moaned. “But I can’t—”

“I know.”

My heart swelled with love for his understanding. I didn’t even need to say why, and he knew. He got it. And then his next words set everything inside of me on fire as I knew that waiting until June was literally going to kill me.

“I’ll wait with you, V,” he whispered, pulling me closer as I clutched him to me. “I’ve waited five years. I’d wait forever.”

I felt tears spring to my eyes, but this time, they were tears of utter joy. I pressed my lips to his.

He pulled away and leaned in toward my ear again. “Besides, I don’t fuck married women. I’m not fucking you until I know that you’ll belong only to me.” He gently sucked on my earlobe, and then he said, “And when that day comes, you better be ready for me.”

His words took my breath away while the promise that he was going to be waiting for me on the other side warmed everything inside of me.

He made me dinner while I unpacked my suitcase, the threat of me moving out gone from our minds. But I did have one thing I needed to discuss with him, so over our perfectly grilled turkey burgers, baked potatoes, and beer, I brought it up.

“So, there’s actually something else

you should know before you decide for sure to let me stay here,” I said, and then I took a bite of burger.

“V, nothing could change my mind.”

He reached across the table and brushed some stray mustard from my lip with his thumb, and then he brought his thumb to his mouth and sucked the mustard off. It was an intimate gesture that became somehow erotic even though he hadn't meant it to, and it was reminiscent of the happy hour where he'd wiped sour cream off of my lip and I'd confessed my separation to Jesse and this whole adventure together had started.

“Um, Richard made some threats. Against you.”

His eyes met mine. “What sort of threats?” he asked with a mirthless laugh. It was clear from his expression that he wasn’t intimidated in the least.

“He mentioned the friends he has in positions that could potentially take our jobs from both of us.”

“Fuck that,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “My performance speaks for itself. So does yours. Neither of us have anything to worry about.”

“His best friend’s dad is William Stacey,” I said, naming our school board president.

I expected some sort of reaction out of him, but, as always, Jesse remained calm. He took a sip of beer. “Do you know anything about William Stacey?”

he asked.

I shrugged. “Not really. Why?”

“He may be your almost ex-husband’s best friend’s father, but coincidentally, he hired me.”

My eyebrows shot up in shock.

“What?”

“He used to be an assistant principal at Central. He was on the hiring committee when I was hired. Apparently he fought for me to get the position over another person who had more experience. And my first year at Central, he was my mentor.”

My jaw dropped. Honestly, I had known nothing about William Stacey other than the fact that he was our school board president, and that scared the crap

out of me. It was probably unfounded, but it seemed like he wielded some sort of invisible power over all of us because of his position.

But he would be in Jesse's corner, and that was enough to quell the fears that had plagued me since that morning.

We took another walk after dinner, and just like the night before, Jesse seemed to retreat into himself for awhile. His hand clutched mine as we walked, and I didn't press for conversation. It was comfortably quiet as we were both lost in our own thoughts, me about nearly letting Richard ruin whatever was budding between Jesse and me, and Jesse about whatever preoccupation he agonized over. Part of

what I loved most about what was forming between us was the fact that I didn't feel awkward in the silence. I enjoyed silence with Jesse.

We were almost at the same place where just the night before he had finally kissed me for the first time when Jesse spoke.

"Do you have plans for spring break?" he asked, breaking the silence. He led me toward the park.

I shook my head, realizing that our break was only another week and a half away. "Not this year."

"Want to come with me?"

Of course I did, but I was trying to play it cool. "Where are you going?" I asked, and we took our seats on the

swings, facing each other just like the night before.

“My parents’ house.” Something in his voice was nearly desperate, and it broke my heart.

And, by the way, holy shit. He wanted me to meet his parents. “Of course, Jesse. I’d love to join you.”

I glanced over at him, and his face was a mix of trepidation and anxiety.

“Are you sure you want to bring me?”

He nodded. “Positive.”

“It isn’t too soon?”

“V, I don’t think you have any idea how long I’ve wanted this to happen.”

“Then why don’t you tell me?” I suggested, thinking again about his talent for deflecting the conversation from

himself.

“You ready for a little story?”

I giggled. Story time from Jesse Drake? Yes, please.

“So I was a young man of twenty-five, working at Central Valley High School for three years. It was the beginning of a brand new school year, and I had been asked to present scheduling information to the new teachers. I was setting up my presentation when this woman walked in, and it was like I had been punched in the stomach. She took my breath away and she was a breath of fresh air all at the same time. I thoroughly enjoyed my single life, but one look at this woman told me that maybe there was more out

there than the string of meaningless relationships I'd had."

I stopped swinging, shocked at his revelation. He stopped, too, and we sat on the swings gazing at each other. He glanced away first, and I reached over for his hand.

He didn't look at me as he continued. "And then I missed my chance. Quinn introduced you to Richard, and you know where things went from there."

"How come you never said anything to me?" I asked.

His eyes found mine again, and he thought for a moment before he spoke. "Because you were happy," he said, his voice quiet. "You were in a relationship. It wasn't my place to tell you that he was

all wrong for you.”

I felt hot tears prickling behind my eyes. “You knew all along?”

He nodded. “I wanted to be the one for you, V,” he whispered. “I knew Richard would never be good enough for you. I don’t know if I’m good enough, either, but I’m sure as hell going to try.”

I stood up from my swing and walked in front of him. I straddled him, wrapping my arms around his neck. He pulled me close with his hands on my back as the swing moved gently under our combined weight.

My lips found his. I couldn’t believe the words out of his mouth. I couldn’t fathom that he’d had feelings for me since the moment he had first spotted me.

I had wasted so much time with the wrong man, but now I was going to set things right.

His sweet, warm tongue parted my lips as his hands moved up my back and into my hair. Something about his hand holding the back of my head was so fucking sexy that I could hardly handle the lust rocketing through me. I moaned into him, and he arched his hips up into me, causing the swing to sway under us. Our tongues moved more aggressively against each other as I felt the ache begin to throb between my legs.

I wanted Jesse Drake.

Badly.

More than I had ever wanted any man before him.

On the one hand, I had Jesse telling me that he didn't fuck married women. And on the other hand, I had my goddamn ethics preventing me from giving into what I wanted most in the entire world.

And as we swung together and our kiss turned from fiery and aggressive into a slower dance, I started to seriously question everything.

If he was this good at kissing me, I couldn't imagine what kind of god he was in bed. I wanted to know. I needed to know.

And the sooner, the better.

He pulled away from me and leaned back slightly in the swing, gazing up at the sky.

“We have to stop,” he said, panting.

“I know,” I said, and then, just for good measure, I pressed my hips down into his.

“Fuck,” he moaned, drawing out the word. “You’re killing me.”

I grinned, loving the effect I was having on him after his confession. I brought my fingertips to his cheeks and stroked his gorgeous stubble. I held my hands still on his face. “I have a confession to make, too,” I said bravely.

He looked at me, brows raised.

“I had the hugest crush on you for the past five years.” I was thankful for the dark night since I literally felt the blush stretch across my cheeks.

A slow grin spread across his lips,

and his whole face lit up even in the dark when it reached his eyes. “You did?”

I nodded.

“How come you never said anything to me?” he echoed my earlier question.

“Because I was the new teacher who didn’t think it would be a good idea to get involved with a coworker. Besides, you’re way out of my league.”

He chuckled. “You may be clinically insane if you believe that.”

I laughed.

He shook his head. “It boggles my mind that you really have no idea how perfect you are.”

I shrugged.

“And after that view you gave me

yesterday..." he trailed off, and he nipped my nose with his lips. "I'm even more convinced that you're perfect."

I still wasn't sure how he knew just exactly what I needed to hear, but he was certainly an expert at it. I think my panties melted right off of me with that line.

"I need to stand up and put some distance between us," I said.

He grinned and held me tighter, pressing his hips up into me again. I knew he was hard, and now I knew for sure that he wanted me. I didn't know what was so special about me, but he'd just admitted that one look at me had tamed Jesse Drake. And now, finally, after five years, we were going to get

our chance.

I'd gone to the house I shared with Richard the next day and found the papers signed and dated on the counter, right where he said he'd leave them. I felt a rush of relief that he'd actually kept his word, particularly given the fact that he'd tried – albeit unsuccessfully – to tear Jesse from me. I drove straight to the courthouse to file the paperwork, knowing that in a few short months, it would all be over between Richard and me.

Each day only brought us closer together. We were both resisting the temptation, but it was becoming increasingly difficult.

Jesse continued the tradition of

sleeping next to me in my bed. And now, he'd become comfortable enough to sleep next to me in just his boxer briefs.

He held me all night long, and every morning it became harder and harder to force myself out of his arms.

The weekend came; Jesse spent most of the day Saturday working on the end table. He stained it and was waiting on the pieces to dry to put the final product together, and I could already tell that it was going to be beautiful.

He was called away to deal with Carly on Sunday afternoon again, and I wondered when he would tell me about her. I wondered when he would tell me about the tattoo and Allison, too, but I knew that these were things that were

close to his heart, and he would tell me when he felt ready to.

Patience was most definitely *not* one of my virtues, but I was certainly putting my patience to the test. Between waiting for Jesse to confess everything, waiting to have sex with the sex god sharing my bed, waiting for the divorce to be finalized, and dealing with high school kids during the two weeks before spring break, my patience was most definitely being tried.

So while Jesse was out on Sunday, I decided to spend some time with my best friend. We met at Starbucks for our weekly gossip fest.

“You sent me a quick text on Wednesday, but you never said why you

decided to stay with Dead-sexy Drake,” Quinn said after we both settled into a table with our drinks and some snacks.

“Richard was making threats and he scared me into leaving Jesse’s place. But Jesse took care of everything.”

“What does that even mean?” she asked, pulling the top of the muffin off and handing it to me.

“Richard said if I didn’t move out of Jesse’s, he’d sue me for fault in the divorce.” I took a bite of my muffin top.

“He’s a fucktard. Arizona is a no fault state,” she said eloquently.

“How does everyone but me know this information?”

“Maybe you’re one, too.”

I giggled. “Thanks, Quinn.”

“Anytime. So how did Juicy Jesse save the day?”

“Juicy?” I took a sip of my latte.

“It was the first adjective that came to mind that started with a J.”

“Well, I left Juicy Jesse’s and pulled around the corner and stopped for a minute because I was doing that ugly cry where your eyes almost close all the way, and I couldn’t see the road. I heard someone knock on the door and I still needed a minute to compose myself, but then he opened the door and pulled me out and kissed me.”

“Two comments on this story. First, holy mother fucking hotness that he came after you.”

“Right?” I grinned.

“And second, when were you going to tell me that JESSE FUCKING DRAKE KISSED YOU?”

“Shh,” I scolded, glancing around us while she laughed.

“Was it the hottest fucking kiss of your life?”

I sighed dreamily. “Yeah. He’s kind of an expert.”

“You have to tell me how he bangs.”

“You know I will.”

“HOLY SHIT! So you’re going to bang him?”

I laughed and nodded my head. “Once everything is final with Richard, yeah. I am most definitely going to bang him.”

She shook her head. “You’re so lucky. He’s such a Mr. Yummypants.”

“Yummypants?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Yep. Yummypants,” she repeated, and I had to agree.

“Wait until you hear the best part.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“He told me he’s had feelings for me since the day he first saw me.”

“So sweet I might puke.”

“Be happy for me.”

“I’m so happy for you, Veronica. I love you, and Jesse... he’s a fucking catch. You’ve been different – happier, lighter – since you left Dick, and I don’t know if it’s because you left him or if it’s because of Jesse.”

“Or a combination of both.”

“Regardless, you deserve it.”

I grinned and grabbed her hand across the table, giving it a squeeze. “Thanks, Curley Q,” I smiled, teasing her by calling her the goofy nickname her parents had called her since she was a baby.

“You’re welcome, Va-Va-Va-Voom,” she giggled, calling me by the nickname my younger brother had given me when he was little.

It felt good to chat with a friend who knew me so well, and I was grateful for her friendship. I was starting to wonder how I had kept the fact that Richard and I were separated a secret for so long. Quinn really was a good friend, and I’d shut her and everyone else in my life out and chose to go through a difficult

situation alone. If I'd only talked to someone sooner, maybe I could've gotten out of it sooner.

But ifs and buts got me nowhere. The way things had happened had fallen into place for a reason, and I was more convinced than ever that it was so that Jesse and I could finally find our way to each other.

The week passed quickly; I had signed up for prom committee, and prom was a couple of weeks after we got back from spring break, so we had a lot of planning to do.

Lucky for me, one very sexy Mr. Jesse Drake was also on the prom committee. He was in charge of the senior class Student Council, and they

were the class who planned prom.

Jesse made me his deputy, which meant that we had long nights of supervising while the students did most of the work. They made posters to advertise for the dance, they picked a theme, they chose decorations for the venue, they set playlists, they made party favors and centerpieces. We oversaw the process, but really, we spent most of our time with our heads bent together close in conversation while the kids worked.

I wondered what high school Jesse was like, what it would've been like to be his date to the prom. He showed me a picture of himself that his prom date from his junior year had uploaded to

Facebook for a Throwback Thursday photo. He definitely would've been the kid I had a crush on back in high school. He was attractive even then; he looked like the kind of kid who had never gone through that awkward gawky phase, something I most definitely went through my freshman year of high school. But his eyes had that haunted look that I became familiar with whenever he came home after he'd gotten a call from Carly. He was smiling in his prom picture, but it looked forced, and I could see an air of brooding about him. I wondered what sort of event happened that could cause such grief in a teenager.

Finally Friday afternoon arrived. We had a happy hour to attend first, and then

Jesse and I were going to spend the night packing so we could leave early the next morning. His parents, I'd discovered, lived in Santa Monica, California. So that meant we were heading to the beach for our two week long spring break. I didn't care that March meant it would be far too cold to swim in the ocean. I'd have Jesse Drake to warm me up.

I remembered that vision I'd had of Jesse in swim trunks at the beach. I was about to see that beautiful image come to fruition.

In the spirit of not being super obvious about not only our living situation but also our budding relationship, Jesse and I decided not to sit directly next to each other during

happy hour. It was a long table with five chairs on one side, five on the other, and one at each end. Jesse sat at the head of the table, and I was midway down one of the sides seated between Quinn and Avery. The two actually reminded me a lot of each other; both were boy crazy, both were loud, both tended toward the raunchy side of things, and both made me laugh until tears were streaming down my face, as was the case at Friday's happy hour.

Avery was recounting a story about one of the men she'd slept with in the science department, leaving very few details to the imagination. We all knew exactly who she was talking about, which made the story even funnier.

I glanced over at Jesse and his eyes met mine, warm with merriment.

I was struck with the thought that if I was out with Richard and our table was getting noisy and boisterous, he would've shushed me or given me a dirty look meant to quiet me down.

Not Jesse.

Jesse joined right in on the laughter, and his wide smile only made me smile even more. His smile warmed my heart, and I knew without a doubt that it was because I had fallen in love with him.

It wasn't just because he had saved me.

It wasn't just because he was so damn sexy that just looking at him was enough to get my motor running.

It wasn't just because he listened to me and protected me and pressed his lips to my forehead every night to make me feel adored and cherished.

It was all of those things, but it was also his heart and his goodness and the way he cared about others. It was the way he put others before himself. It was the way he was haunted after he went God only knows where to do God only knows what. It was the way he held me in the night as if he was recharging the strength he lost when we were apart.

And, most of all, it was the way that he needed me as much as I needed him.

CHAPTER 11

Saturday morning found me scrambling to get everything in my suitcase. I was suddenly a nervous Nellie to meet the Drakes, and I was honestly a little hung over after happy hour. We'd stayed later than we had meant to, and Jesse stealthily communicated to me via text from the other end of the table that it was no big deal to get my car the next morning before we left for California if I wanted to have more than one glass of wine.

I was regretting the four more glasses of wine as my head pounded the next morning. No one except Quinn knew about our situation, but I had nearly

spilled the beans the night before. I had stupidly confessed to the entire group that I was getting a divorce, and I saw Jesse's shocked eyes as I made my announcement. I was about to say that I was already seeing someone new when Quinn stopped me and pulled me to the restroom with her.

Thank God for good friends who know how to shut you the hell up when you've had too much to drink. Jesse and I didn't need the gossip mill working overtime. We'd let people know in time, when the time was right. It still wasn't even something we discussed.

In fact, I wasn't sure exactly where we stood.

Clearly things were progressing

between us, but I was still married. In some ways, I felt like I was in a relationship with Jesse, but in other ways, I felt like we were in a weird limbo zone. I still hadn't had the feeling that he'd been sleeping around since I started staying with him. But really, all we had done was kiss. Some really, really hot kissing. Well, and we'd slept in the same bed together every night since the first time.

Apart from that, we were taking things slowly, but not because we didn't both want more. Jesse didn't press me for more, either. I knew he wanted it; he'd admitted it to me on more than one occasion, but we had the understanding that we were going to wait until I was no

longer a married woman.

After we'd picked up my car and stowed it safely in the garage, we got in Jesse's truck and started our trek toward California. He had carefully loaded the beautiful, now completed end table into the bed of the truck, wrapping it in blankets and tying it down with rope. We had a six hour drive ahead of us, and we planned on returning home either Wednesday or Thursday of the following week. That meant nearly two weeks in California with Jesse Drake, and I was ecstatic for the getaway.

Richard randomly prickled in my mind as we pulled out of the driveway. I hadn't heard from him since he told me I had to move out of Jesse's. A strange

feeling pulled at me as I thought about what his reaction must've been when he realized that I hadn't moved out.

"You're quiet," Jesse commented as we pulled out of his neighborhood.

"Sorry."

"You okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Richard just popped into my head."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. But I haven't heard from him since he told me that I needed to move out of your place, and it scares me that I don't know what he's thinking. He's dangerous, Jesse."

He grabbed my hand and brought my fingertips to his lips. "You have nothing to worry about, V."

I smiled. Just like that, I felt better. I knew he was right.

We played the “Name that Song” game with my iPod on shuffle for awhile, and then Jesse became quiet and introspective.

We were about two hours into the trip, driving through the barren desert landscape. Traffic was light, and I felt Jesse pulling further and further away from me.

“What are you thinking about?” I finally asked, feeling the urge to help him through whatever he seemed to be suffering.

He glanced over at me, and then he stared straight ahead at the road, gripping the steering wheel tightly in

both of his hands. “My sister,” he said, his voice a whisper.

That wasn’t what I had expected to hear. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. He blew out a breath. “I have some... things I should probably tell you before we get to my parents’ house.”

I felt one of those ripples of fear of the unknown travel down my spine. I waited patiently and quietly for another piece of the Jesse puzzle – this one perhaps the biggest, the one I’d been waiting for – to finally click firmly into place.

“Monday marks the fifteenth anniversary of my sister’s death.”

The fear running through my spine

was replaced with compassion. “Oh my God, Jesse,” I whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He nodded, his eyes still focused straight ahead. Clearly this was a difficult conversation for him to have. I’d never seen him so withdrawn, even when he left to go see whoever Carly was. I wanted to see his eyes to know how this still affected him, even after fifteen years. His eyes truly were the window to his soul, and I knew that I’d get a better gauge on him if he’d just look at me. But he was driving, and maybe he’d specifically saved this conversation until this moment for that very reason.

“Can I ask what happened?” I asked,

turning down the radio to hear his story.

“Suicide.”

I put my hand on his arm as safely as I could while he was driving because I suddenly had to touch him, and he pulled one hand off the steering wheel to hold mine.

I didn't know what to say. How does anybody respond to such a tragedy? What words could possibly help, even after all the time that had passed?

The answer was clear: There was nothing.

He laced his fingers through mine, still not moving his eyes from the road.

He kept talking. “She was a freshman in college. She swallowed a bottle of Xanax down with a bottle of vodka. By

the time her roommate found her, it was too late.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered, my fingers tightening against his as I realized the heartbreaking and devastating irony of swallowing too many pills that were likely prescribed in order to battle depression.

“She didn’t leave a note, but it was clear that she’d meant to do it.”

“Any idea why?”

He shook his head. “That’s what makes it so difficult. Even fifteen years later, I still don’t have any answers.”

“Were they her pills?”

He shook his head again. “Her roommate’s.”

“I’m sorry, Jesse.”

I felt his fingers tighten against mine.
“Thank you.”

We were both quiet for a moment. I didn't know what else to say; I didn't want to press too many questions and make him uncomfortable, and even though it was a tragedy, I was glad he told me. His revelation would only bond us closer together.

“V, I've never talked about this with anyone voluntarily.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I said, feeling overwhelmed with love for him. I felt honored that he trusted me enough to talk about what was clearly the most difficult event of his life. I brought our joined hands up to my lips and kept them there as he continued talking.

“I didn’t handle it well. None of us did, actually. My parents nearly got divorced because of it. I turned into a delinquent.”

I remembered the picture of Jesse at his prom, and now I understood the brooding, haunted look in his eyes. If his sister died fifteen years earlier, that would have made him about a sophomore in high school. He’d told me the picture he showed me was from his junior prom, only about a year after his sister’s death. I couldn’t imagine losing someone I loved so much to something so tragic with so many questions surrounding the circumstances, especially at the tender age of only fifteen.

“My parents forced me into counseling. They wanted me to talk to someone, thinking that if I just got it out, I’d start to behave again. But none of it helped. Looking back now, I was clearly starved for attention because my parents were dealing with losing their daughter while their marriage fell apart, so I acted out. I was an asshole to everyone around me. I started drinking because it numbed the pain. I got in a shitload of trouble at school.” He paused and took a deep breath, lost in the memories as he drove through the desert.

I sat quietly as I waited for him to continue.

“And then I met Dr. Dustin. He was young and he’d gone through something

similar, and I just clicked with him. He encouraged me to take up a hobby, something that I could put all of my focus into. For him, it had been furniture. I asked him if he would show me, and he taught me everything I know about it. My life was falling apart, but he was an adult who believed in me and spent time with me when I felt like no one cared, my parents included.”

“Is he the one who told you that you’d make a great counselor?”

He nodded, pressing his lips into a thin line.

“He was right,” I whispered.

I felt his fingers tighten over mine again. We were both quiet as I thought about juvenile Jesse acting out from a

place of pain and then getting his life back on track because of one adult who took an interest.

“Tell me about your sister,” I said quietly.

“She was my best friend. She was three years older than me, a senior when I was a freshman. She took care of me. Everyone loved her and she was good and kind. She never hurt anybody, which is why none of us could understand why she hurt herself. I just kept thinking that I could have done something differently. I blamed myself for a long time. I still do, sometimes.”

A conversation with Jesse replayed itself in my mind. He had once said to me, “I was always there, but maybe you

just didn't realize it." I knew now that he had been talking not just to me, but about his sister. He'd been there for her, but it was too late for her. She never realized that she had people who loved her and who wanted to save her from herself.

But I did, and now that I knew the significance behind his words, I knew that he had been trying to save me.

And he had succeeded.

I would never have gotten to the point where I could do something so tragically drastic as to end it all the way his sister had, but he still saved me from the life I hated with Richard, even if at the time I'd live it with complacency and indifference and I didn't realize how much I was missing by being trapped in

a dead-end marriage.

“Jesse, it’s not your fault.”

“Deep down, I know that. After all of my training and my classes and my own therapy, I know that she had a disease that none of us had identified and that there was nothing any of us could’ve done differently. But it doesn’t stop the wonder or the blame.”

And then it hit me.

The tattoo. The phoenix symbolizing rebirth and renewal. The heart and the cross. *Allison*.

“What was her name?” I asked carefully.

He finally glanced over at me, for the first time during the entire conversation. I could see the grief in his eyes that he

still carried with him after fifteen years. It was different from the haunted look that crossed his eyes when he came back from visiting Carly. It was hurt and anger and sadness and bitterness all rolled together, and all I wanted to do was take him in my arms and hold him. Pain like that doesn't just go away, especially when he had to live with so many unanswered questions.

“Allison,” he whispered.

Mystery solved.

“When did you get your tattoo?” I asked.

“The ten year anniversary of her death.”

“Five years ago?”

He nodded.

“Why a phoenix?”

“The symbol of immortality. She may be gone, but she’ll always live in my heart.”

The image of “Allison” inside of the heart in the cross flashed through my mind, and I felt chills in my spine as tears pricked behind my eyes at his loss. “It’s a beautiful tribute,” I said.

A ghost of a smile lifted the corner of his lips, but he didn’t respond.

I wanted to ask about Carly, but he had already shared so much with me. I let it go. Just as he’d told me about Allison, he would tell me who Carly was when he was ready.

“I’m glad you told me,” I finally whispered.

His eyes met mine for the briefest of moments and then returned to the road. He pulled our still joined hands up to his mouth and brushed his lips across my knuckles.

“Me, too,” he murmured.

“Tell me about your parents,” I said, trying to lighten some of the heaviness that had descended on the car.

“My mom, Judy, is an elementary school principal. And my dad, Phil, is a doctor.”

“Wait. So your dad is Dr. Phil?”

He laughed. “Yep. So original, by the way. I’ve never heard that one before,” he said sarcastically.

“You grew up with a principal and a doctor as your parents?”

He nodded. “Getting into trouble was highly frowned upon. But my parents are great. I appreciate them much more now that I’m an adult.”

I chuckled.

“They held the line when I was a kid, though. I get now how they must’ve suffered after what happened with Allison. They had their own grief and blame to deal with, and they were just doing the best they could.”

“Are they tough critics on the women you bring home?”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t know,” he said easily.

“Why not?”

“You’re the first woman I’ve ever brought home.”

What? How was it possible that a man who was thirty had never brought a woman home to meet his parents? And, furthermore, how was it possible that I was the one he finally chose to bring home? “Shut up,” I said.

“It’s true.”

“So I’m popping your ‘bringing a girl home to meet mom and dad’ cherry?”

He laughed, and suddenly my lighthearted Jesse was back. “I guess you are.”

“Did you tell them you were bringing me?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t want to surprise them with an additional houseguest.”

“What did they say?”

“They were shocked, obviously. They can’t wait to meet you. I think that they’ve always figured I’d never settle down.”

My heart pounded in my chest as a tingle warmed through my core at his words. Everything south of my belly button clenched in delicious anticipation. And before I could stop the words, they were out. “Settle down? Is that what we’re doing?”

“Veronica, if you weren’t still married, I would pull the fuck over, throw that beautiful body in the bed of this truck, and show you exactly what we’re doing.”

Holy hell.

My jaw dropped as I turned my head

and stared at his profile, shocked at his words and the confirmation that he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. I mean, I knew he was interested, but those words caused an inferno of desire to course through my veins.

“Have you, um, mentioned to your parents that I’m married?” I asked, sidestepping the scorching heat of his previous statement.

He chuckled. “Nice dodge,” he said.

“What the hell do you want me to say when you say things like that to me?”

He glanced at me again. “I want you to admit that you want me as much as I want you.”

Good Lord, this conversation took a sudden turn toward the seductive.

Everything inside of me burned with ardent desire for him, and I wanted nothing more than for him to deliver on his word of pulling over and showing me how much he wanted me. Just the thought of sex with Jesse sent an aching throb right to my vagina. It had been far too long since I'd had sex with a man, and I got the sense that Jesse knew exactly what he was doing in that department.

“I think I want you more than you want me,” I finally whispered. His hand found my knee and squeezed, and then he left his hand there while I spoke, inching up just a bit along my thigh. I drew circles on the back of his hand, that perfect and sexy hand that I wanted on

more than just my leg. “I think I have wanted you since the first moment I saw you. Things just got in our way, and all I can do is hope that you’ll still be here with me once things are final with Richard.”

He didn’t say anything as he put on his signal to exit at the upcoming ramp. He turned toward the gas station, so I assumed we were stopping for gas, feeling a little hurt that he hadn’t said something in return to my confession of feelings for him.

But then he pulled off onto the shoulder, put on his hazard lights, threw the truck into park, and got out. He walked around to my door and opened it, and then he held out his hand to me. I

took his hand and hopped down out of the truck, and he pulled me into his arms, tight against him. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on that perfect expanse of manly chest.

“I couldn’t go another mile without feeling you against me,” he murmured into my hair. He pulled back and leaned his forehead down against mine in that sensuous way he had. “V, I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing to me, but I’ve never felt what you make me feel.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” I whispered, and then his mouth crashed down over mine as his hands flattened against my back and I felt his fingers inch into the hair at the back of my neck. His tongue was warm against my own, and those flutters

ignited into a fire of love that I knew would never burn out.

“Jesse,” I moaned against his mouth. He pressed two gentle kisses to my lips before resting his forehead to mine again. He took a deep, shuddering breath as I vaguely heard a car honk at us on its way by.

And I couldn't help the next words that fell out of my mouth.

I hadn't planned to say them. I was just so caught up in the moment and I was feeling this crazy surge of emotion that was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. Yes, it was lust and desire and a hot need for Jesse to be buried deep inside of me, but it was so much more than that. It was protection and care and

adoration. It was friendship and passion and respect. It was devotion and affection and attraction.

It was far too early to say the words and I certainly didn't want to say them first, but there they were.

“I love you.”

A look of surprise flashed through his eyes, and then something else... fear, maybe? But it was immediately replaced by warmth, affection, and, most of all, desire.

His lips found mine again, but instead of the aggressive collision of tongues and lips, he took me slowly, sensually, and lovingly. His hand found my neck, my pulse beating nearly out of my skin, as my hands moved up and rested on his

chest. I felt his heart beating under my hand, racing as fast as my own. We did this to each other.

The world melted away around us. I knew there were cars racing along the road beside us. I knew there was a gas station up ahead with people filling their tanks and getting drinks and snacks for their road trips. I knew there was a highway just below us with people going on trips or heading home from them.

But none of it mattered as Jesse kissed me. Nothing in the world mattered when he was holding me in his arms.

He pulled back and gazed into my eyes. I knew from the way he kissed me and the way he held me and the way he

looked at me that he loved me, too. But he didn't say anything. He pressed two gentle kisses to my lips once more, and then he led me back to the truck.

I felt stung that he hadn't said it back.

Even though I knew it was too soon, and even though I knew that there was nothing we could do about it until I was a free woman, and even though I knew it was completely ridiculous that I felt rejected, it didn't lessen the pain.

CHAPTER 12

We were quiet for the remainder of the trip, listening to the soft radio. His hand was in constant contact with me. He drove one handed so he could touch my leg or hold my hand or squeeze my arm. While I loved his touch and craved it, it didn't ease the ache from his non-response.

The anxious thought crept into my mind that maybe it had something to do with Carly. Was he in love with her? Was that why he couldn't tell me that he loved me?

It had to be my insecurities talking.

He wasn't taking Carly to California to meet his parents, after all, so I forced

myself to push that thought aside.

We pulled off the highway once we got to Santa Monica, headed toward his parents' house. Things were awkward between us now, and I just wanted the floor of the car to swallow me whole. Not only did I feel like a fool, but now I was worried that I had messed things up between the two of us. Everything had been going so well, and now I made it awkward.

"Are we close?" I asked, needing to break the silence.

He nodded. "Fifteen minutes, maybe," he said, braking at a yellow light as his hand found my thigh.

I leaned my elbow on the armrest in the middle and leaned my forehead

against my hand. Staring down toward the floor, I said, “Jesse, can we just forget what I said back there? Things have been so awkward ever since and I just want to go back to being us again.”

We were stopped at a red light, and he looked over at me. He moved his hand from my thigh and then pulled my arm down and twined his fingers through mine. He leaned over the center console and pressed a kiss to my lips.

“I will never forget that you said those words to me, V. Never.” His intensity was unlike anything I’d ever seen. “I feel it, too.”

Then why didn't you say it back? I wanted to ask, but I didn't have the nerve.

I had to remind myself about that virtue of patience that I just didn't possess.

The car behind us honked. I glanced up, and the light was green. Jesse had been paying more attention to me than the road, so he turned his attention back to driving.

Things were slightly less awkward after he said that he felt it, too, but what I really wanted to know was why he felt but couldn't say it.

We pulled into his parents' driveway, and Jesse parked the truck and grabbed our bags from the backseat. He met me by my door and laced his fingers through mine. "You ready?" he asked, leaning in to press a quick kiss against my cheek.

The smell of him mixed with the beach was overwhelming my senses.

I nodded, nervous to meet Judy and Dr. Phil.

We walked up to the door of the small, Spanish-style home, and Jesse rang the bell and then slung his arm around my shoulders. I heard a dog barking, and then a moment later, an adorable older woman opened the door. She was short, maybe five feet two inches tall, and thin, and she had shoulder-length dark hair and eyes that matched Jesse's. She gave off an air of kindness. Behind her stood a man that looked like he could've been Jesse's twin twenty years earlier, except he had blue eyes and gray peppered into his

dark hair. He was debonair and held that same air of kindness as his wife.

The dog was a little white West Highland Terrier. He was the kind of dog who would look adorable in a sweater. “Barry, down!” Jesse’s mom scolded with a loving smile as he jumped on me. “I’m so sorry!” she said to me warmly.

I knelt down to pet Barry. I loved animals, dogs in particular. He jumped into my arms, and I stood and held him as Jesse hugged his mother and kissed her on the cheek and then shook his dad’s hand. Then he made the introductions.

“Mom, this is Veronica. Veronica, my mom,” he said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Drake,” I said, sticking my hand out as best I could while I held the dog.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Veronica,” she said, shooing my hand away and pulling me into a hug. “It’s lovely to meet you. And call me Judy. Or Mom.” She kissed my cheek, and I grinned, feeling at home already.

“And this is my dad,” Jesse said, clapping his dad on the shoulder.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Drake.”

“Phil,” he said with a grin that crinkled his eyes and gave him an even friendlier demeanor. He leaned in for a hug, too. “Or Dr. Phil.” I giggled. “Or Dad.”

I never would’ve guessed that they’d

suffered through the tragedy of losing a child from their attitudes. Clearly they had chosen to celebrate life after the devastating loss of their daughter.

“You’re gorgeous,” Judy said, appraising me.

I blushed in response.

“Mom, stop,” Jesse admonished.

“Sorry,” she said. “This is new for us.” I knew she was referring to the fact that Jesse had never brought home a woman to introduce to them.

She leaned up and kissed her son tenderly on the cheek. I saw the love in her eyes, and it was hard to reconcile the story he’d told me in the car with the two people in front of me. Fifteen years was a long time, though.

“I brought you something,” he said. Judy clapped her hands together in excitement, and he went outside to get the end table. I set Barry down and followed him to help him unload the end table, and I folded the blankets that we’d wrapped around it. He set it down and shut the tailgate, and then he came over to me. I tossed the folded blankets back into the bed of the truck, and he wrapped his arms around me in an unexpected display of emotion. He lifted me off my feet and pressed his lips to mine, and then he put me back down and buried his face in my neck.

“She’s right, you know,” he murmured, his lips against my neck.

“About what?” I asked.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said, and I felt his grin against my skin as his sexy scruff tickled my sensitive flesh. I shivered at his words even as I heated over from the sentiment. I hugged him a little tighter to me.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, and with those words, he erased all of the tension and awkwardness I’d felt from what had slipped out of my mouth earlier. If he had some reason that he was holding back, I had to be patient. I had to let him do things in his own time.

He carried the table to the door and I opened it. His parents were still standing in the hallway.

“Jesse bear, this is beautiful,” his mom said, clearly overcome both with

emotion at her son's talent and the meaning behind the beautiful piece of furniture he had crafted with his own hands in commemoration of his sister's death.

"I pictured it in here," he said, carrying it into the formal room just to the left of the front door and setting it into place. He fussed with it for a moment, and then he stood back and we all admired it.

"I love it," Judy said, clapping her hands together like a little girl again. She was adorable. "It's absolute perfection."

Jesse pulled his mother into a hug, and she held tightly onto him while his father gazed at the table in appreciation.

"Jess, you've got a real talent, son,"

his dad added.

Jesse bear and Jess? I was in love with his parents. They were basically the two cutest people ever.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” I gushed. I was proud of him, and clearly his parents were, too. We all gazed at the piece for a quiet moment.

“Thanks, everyone,” Jesse said, and if I wasn’t mistaken, I swear I saw a hint of a blush color his cheeks. “What’s for dinner?” he asked, once again proving his excellent skills of deflecting any attention from himself.

“Oh, Jesse. Just enjoy it,” his mom said, squeezing his arm. So apparently I wasn’t the only one who picked up on his expertise in attention deflection.

He rolled his eyes, and then we all headed to the kitchen.

The house was fairly small – only three bedrooms, one of which was an office – but it was situated right on the beach overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I stared out the patio doors off of the kitchen for a moment. I had always loved the beach. I had always found it calming and tranquil just to listen to the waves rolling in and out, and I couldn't wait for the chance to roll the sand between my toes.

The kitchen was fairly large, with an island in the center and plenty of counter space. There was a half wall separating the eating area from the family room, but you could easily see the television in the

family room from anywhere in the kitchen.

“I just made some chicken salad for sandwiches,” Judy said, heading to the refrigerator. She pulled out a bowl of chicken salad, and then she headed to the pantry for chips and bread.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“No, sweet girl, but thank you for offering. Both of you sit and relax. What can Phil get you both to drink?”

“Beer,” Jesse said.

“I’ll just have some water,” I said.

“Have a beer,” Jesse urged, as if to tell me it was okay if I drank in front of his parents.

“Okay. A beer, then. And water.”

Phil smiled at me and brought four

beers to the table along with my water while Judy pulled out plates and napkins.

A few minutes later, I was eating the most delicious chicken salad sandwich of my life with Jesse's amazing family.

"So how did you two meet?" Phil asked.

Jesse took a sip of beer, so I answered. "At work. I teach at Central Valley High School."

Judy raised her eyebrows. "You're a high school teacher?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Thank you, Veronica," she said with a smile.

"For what?" I asked, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“For teaching those kids,” she said. “I don’t know how you two deal with kids that age all day.”

I giggled. “They’re entertaining.”

“What do you teach?”

“Senior English.”

She shook her head. “I just don’t know how you do it.”

Jesse grinned. “She’s got a mean teacher voice,” he said almost boastfully. “Which, by the way, is totally hot.”

Jeez. I couldn’t believe he just said that in front of his parents. His mom blushed a little as I blushed a lot.

“Jesse!” I scolded, but his grin just widened. Clearly he was enjoying embarrassing me in front of his parents.

We chatted more about work, and Judy and Phil talked a little about their work. We had comfortable conversation during the meal, and I already felt like I was part of their family.

We all pitched in to clean up after our meal, and then Jesse asked if I wanted to take a walk, as had become our post-dinner tradition.

I agreed, and then the four of us headed out to the patio. We left our shoes on the patio and Jesse led me down the stairs to the beach while his parents sat on the patio to enjoy the cool evening air. I headed right down to the sand, but Jesse stopped and sat on the second to the bottom stair. Then he leaned down and rolled up the bottoms

of his jeans. He patted his knee, and I put my foot on his leg. He rolled my jeans up for me, too, first one leg and then the other. Before he let me put my foot down, he held it in his hand for a moment. I thought he was inspecting my pedicure, but then he leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of my foot. Something about that gesture was intimate and made me feel cherished and loved by him.

He stood and, lacing his fingers through mine, led me down toward the water. Once we got close, we both stopped and just looked out over the ocean. The waters were choppy, but the setting was still peaceful. He threw his arm around my shoulders and I snaked

my arm around his waist.

“Your parents are adorable,” I said, leaning into him. Ocean breeze mixed with Jesse was for sure an aphrodisiac.

“They love you,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “But, then, you’re very lovable.”

I stiffened. They loved me. I loved him. He called me “lovable.” Why couldn’t he just say that he loved me, too?

“What’s wrong?” he whispered.

“You can’t say things like that to me,” I said, feeling hurt and frustrated all over again. I pulled out of his arms because being there was too comforting. It was too warm and loving, and it was sending me all the wrong signals after he didn’t

say the words. I wasn't sure why I felt that way, but I couldn't help it.

“Like what?”

“You can't call me lovable but not say the words back to me,” I blurted.

Fucking beer. Truth serum, just like vodka. And wine.

He sighed. “Veronica, it's not because I don't. Because I do. It's just...” he trailed off.

It didn't escape my notice that he'd just admitted that he did love me. He had said, “Because I do.” If he'd have finished that sentence, it would've been, “Because I do love you.”

“It's just what, Jesse?” I asked, my voice venting my frustration as I turned to look up at him.

“I’ve never said it before to a woman.” His voice was flat and he stared out over the water, running a hand through his hair as he refused to meet my eyes.

Understanding dawned on me.

This was difficult for him because it was new territory. He’d spent the last fifteen years avoiding getting close to people, most likely as a direct result of what happened with his sister. He was scared of getting attached. He wasn’t scared of commitment; that was completely different. He was committed to his job, to his woodworking, to the labels in his refrigerator. He’d proven that he could commit.

But he didn’t get attached to people.

He'd learned the hard way that anyone could be taken away from him in an instant, so he'd formed a lifestyle that allowed him to make the decision of when to end things.

That was why he chose flavors of the week. That was why he'd never been in a serious relationship. That was why no woman had ever seen his bed. That was why no woman had ever met his parents. That was why he'd never told anybody about his sister.

And, apparently, that was why he'd never told a woman that he loved her.

It really showed me how one major event in a person's adolescent life could so profoundly affect every single aspect of his adult life.

So what was it about me that was so different?

What was it about me that allowed him to open up as much as he had?

I didn't know, and I didn't know if I ever would. All I knew was that I was happier with Jesse by my side than I had ever been in my entire life.

I turned into him and wrapped my arms around him. We stood in a hug by the ocean water, and I suddenly understood my Jesse far better than I had even just that morning.

My Jesse.

It had a nice ring to it.

“Thank you for being honest with me,” I replied.

We walked along the shore, allowing

the water to roll in and out over our feet. It was chilly in early March, but having Jesse by my side warmed me.

Everywhere.

His fingers laced through mine as we walked in silence.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked, afraid to push him after all he’d confessed to me that day but suddenly needing the answer.

He nodded.

“Who is Carly?”

He glanced quickly at me, seemingly a little taken aback at my question.

“You just always come back from seeing her with this haunted look in your eyes.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I just want to be there for you if you want to talk about it.”

“Thank you,” he said.

It was awkward for a second, and then I said, “So do you? Want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “I’m not really supposed to.”

A thought crossed my mind, so I asked, “Is she a student?”

He shook his head. “No. I volunteer at the hospital.”

“You do?” I asked, impressed yet again by this kind man and his generous soul.

“I have for years. I started in transportation, but switched to the psych

ward as part of my internship for my undergrad and my Master's degrees. And then once I got my doctorate in school counseling, I started volunteering with suicidal patients."

Wait. What? "You have a doctorate?" I asked.

He nodded.

"How did I not know this, Dr. Drake?"

He chuckled. "Because I don't want people calling me 'Dr. Drake.'"

Smart, modest, and hot. How did I get so lucky?

"When did you manage that?" I asked.

"I finished it about a year ago. My undergrad degree is in psychology secondary education. I taught at Central

for two years while I worked on my Master's. The year you started was my second year as a counselor. I decided to continue on for my doctorate."

"Do you like volunteering?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, except some people just remind me of my sister, and Carly's one of them. It's difficult to see her like that and feel helpless."

I squeezed his hand, and he stopped walking and pulled me into him. He buried his face in my neck. "Thank you, V," he murmured, and then I felt his lips on my skin.

"For what?" I asked, surprised at his second unexpected display of emotion of the evening.

He pulled back just far enough to

gaze at me, still holding my body close against his. “For being here. For being you. For making me want to talk about things I’ve never wanted to talk about with anyone before you.” His voice was soft and sincere.

“You’re welcome,” I said, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss to his lips. I was still dumbfounded as to how, exactly, I had become that person for him, but I knew that somehow, he’d become that for me, too. Really, he’d become the most significant person in my life in a very short period of time. Maybe it was because we’d been friends first. Maybe it was because we’d provided comfort and support for each other when clearly we’d both needed it.

Whatever the case, I knew that now I'd never find a way to live my life without him in it.

His arms tightened around my waist as his mouth opened to mine and what started as a sweet kiss turned into a scorching hot embrace.

It didn't matter where we were; the park by his house, the side of the road, the beach with the ocean waves rolling in. No matter what, when Jesse Drake's mouth found mine, everything else in the world ceased to exist as I lost myself in him, in the gentle caresses and sweet taste and aggressive dancing and clashing of tongues.

He pressed two kisses to my lips and then pulled back and leaned his forehead

to mine. “I do, V.”

It was his way of telling me that he loved me, and I knew that. And now that I understood his reasons, I was perfectly fine with waiting until he was ready to say the words I needed to hear.

“I do, too, Jesse.”

He laced his fingers through mine and we headed back to his parents’ house. I felt like something had changed between us on that walk. The Jesse I had known that morning was a completely different man from the Jesse I knew now, and I fell harder and harder for him with each new surprising revelation, with each new exposed secret, with each new painful discovery.

We sat on the patio with Jesse’s

parents and chatted. Jesse's fingers were twined with mine, and I felt calm and peaceful, something I had been missing for the past year as I lived with the heavy burden of secrets and a marriage that was over.

I loved that he didn't care about displaying his affection for me in front of his parents. It was one of those small things that spoke so loudly to me.

Jesse and I stayed outside and continued talking well into the night after his parents headed in to bed.

"I have a question," I said as Barry the dog pawed at the patio door from the inside, wanting to come out.

"What?" Jesse asked, standing to let Barry out. The dog hopped right up into

my lap, and I ran my fingers down his soft fur. He settled into my lap.

“Why is this dog named ‘Barry’?”

Jesse laughed. “It’s actually after Barry Manilow. My mom’s a huge fan.”

I giggled. “So is my mom. Our parents would get along great.” I realized what I’d said after I had said it; my parents weren’t going to be too keen on my new relationship considering they wanted me to try just one more time to mend things with Richard. And they’d be especially judgmental when they found out that Jesse and I began our relationship when I was still married. The fact that I was waiting to have sex with Jesse until I wasn’t married wouldn’t matter. No one would see it

that way, anyway. No one would believe that we weren't sleeping together, especially given Jesse's reputation with the ladies and the fact that I was living with him.

"I'd love to meet your parents someday," he said. "And your brothers."

"So," I said, changing the subject. As much as I loved them, it was too nice a night to talk about my judgmental family. "What are the sleeping arrangements?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, where am I sleeping? Where are you sleeping?"

"The guest room."

"Both of us?"

"Yes. We've been sharing a bed for awhile now, V. I'm not about to stop

now just because we're at my parents' house. Besides, the alternative is one of us taking the couch, and I'd hate for you to get all cramped and sore from sleeping on the couch."

I giggled and smacked him in the shoulder, and then I thought about how different our families were. My parents would never, ever allow me to sleep in the same bed as someone I wasn't married to under their roof.

We headed in and up to the guest room. There was a queen bed in there, and the room was spacious with its own bathroom and walk-in closet. We both got situated; I pulled shorts and a t-shirt out of my bag to change into for bed, wishing I'd have thought to bring

something a little sexier than an ASU t-shirt and cotton shorts.

I headed into the bathroom to change while Jesse unpacked a few items from his bag. I shut the door behind me and changed into my t-shirt, and then I opened the door again to grab my make-up bag with my face wash and toothbrush.

When I came out of the bathroom, Jesse Drake stood in front of me.

Completely.

Totally.

Naked.

Holy Jesus.

I needed to remember to thank Judy and Phil for creating this absolutely perfect creature.

My brain turned to complete mush as I stared.

I gawked.

I gaped.

I knew my eyes had to be glazed with lust, but I couldn't help it. I was staring, and it wasn't at his belly button. No, it was about six inches south of his belly button.

He froze in place, and I watched with admiration as his sizable asset moved gradually from flaccid to erect.

You know how the first time you saw a penis, you were a little grossed out? Maybe it was a picture from a textbook in health class when you learned about STDs, or maybe, like me, it was in your friend's basement when you were in

seventh grade and Kenny Durango pulled it out.

Not one single thing about Jesse Drake's penis was gross.

In fact, just the very sight of it made my mouth water and my lady parts tingle.

I couldn't help but think about what it would feel like for him to slide that beautiful penis right into me as an ache started forming in my lower abdomen and a throbbing sensation took over the lower half of my body.

Neither of us spoke, and my eyes gradually lifted to meet his. He didn't look embarrassed or bashful or inhibited.

In fact, his eyes heated over as we stared at each other like we were in a

staring contest.

“Uh,” I stammered after a few beats too long. “I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

He chuckled. “Don’t be,” he said easily, and I briefly wondered how he managed to maintain his composure while he stood there naked.

“Okay,” I said, glancing down again at his now fully erect penis. I couldn’t help it. It was there. It was out. I felt like it was looking at me, and it would be rude not to look back.

A salacious grin spread lazily across his face. “See anything you like?” he asked, a hint of teasing in his voice.

My eyes met his again, and even though I turned twelve shades of red, I managed a quick nod of my head before I

darted back into the bathroom.

Well.

Guess I didn't have to wonder what *that* looked like anymore.

My damn mouth was still watering as I thought about what he would taste like, every perfect part of that anatomy under my willing tongue, and my damn body was still tingling and throbbing as I thought about what his naked flesh would feel like against mine.

Someday, I'd find out.

I could feel my heartbeat pulsing everywhere in my body. I could hear it in my ears.

I was out of control with lust for this man, and this fucking waiting game had to end soon. I was a strong woman, but I

had needs, too; needs that I was sure Jesse Drake would easily fulfill.

I gazed at myself in the mirror. Somehow I felt different than I had sixty seconds earlier, and it wasn't just the buzzing in my brain or the tingling in my legs or the flushing in my cheeks.

It was seeing that picture of flawlessness and adding that to the fact that he'd confessed his true feelings for me.

It was being in California at the beach with the right man even though I was still married to the wrong one.

I took a deep breath as I thought about how that problem would work itself out in a few months, and then Jesse and I would be free to do whatever we

wanted to.

And I knew what I wanted to do with him.

All. Night. Long.

And probably all day long, too.

I brushed my teeth and washed up for bed, and then I finally exited the bathroom. Jesse was wearing just a pair of basketball shorts and lying on the bed scrolling through his cell phone, and there went the saliva forming in my mouth again.

He really was something else.

“Hey,” he said softly, glancing up at me and tossing his phone on the bedside table.

I felt awkward for a moment, unsure of myself after seeing him naked.

“We’re even now,” he said with a grin, and I giggled, still standing in place.

I loved how he always knew just exactly what to say to break the tension.

“Come here,” he commanded softly, and he sat up a little in bed and patted the bed beside him on my side. Yes, we had “sides” already, and I delighted in the fact that sharing a bed with Jesse had already become a habit.

He didn’t have to ask twice.

I climbed in beside him, and he pulled me close so my head rested on his chest.

He kissed the top of my head and then breathed me in. “I know I already said this, but I’m glad you’re here,” he

murmured.

“I’m glad I’m here, too,” I said.

He turned off the light and shifted so he was lying on his back, his arms wrapped firmly around me. I was suddenly sleepy and felt myself drifting.

“Good night, V,” he said after awhile.

“Good night, sexy Jesse,” I said, halfway between awake and asleep.

CHAPTER 13

I awoke with a gasp in the dark.

“What’s wrong?” I heard Jesse mumble beside me.

My heart was pounding so hard I thought it was going to pound right out of my chest.

The dream was complete. Now that I’d had the extreme good fortune to see Jesse Drake sans clothes, the piece of my dream that had always been missing was now filled in.

And holy hell, it was a good dream. It was one of those dreams that I knew was going to stay with me for the rest of the day, the rest of the week. Hell, maybe the rest of my life.

“Nothing,” I whispered back, and I snuggled into his side as I recalled the dream that I couldn’t wait to make a reality.

It had started much like we fell asleep. It was so vivid, though, as if it had really happened. Jesse woke me when his mouth covered mine, our tongues clashing together violently. It wasn’t soft and sensual; this was animal and carnal and primal.

He pushed into me and held still as he placed his arms on either side of me to support his weight, and then he pulled back and slammed forward, pushing me so hard in pleasure that my head hit against the headboard. I braced myself for the onslaught of passion, holding my

head still against the headboard so that when he crashed into me again, my body met his and didn't buckle under the force.

He leaned his head down and grabbed my breast in his mouth, rolling my nipple between his teeth as I cried out in some mixture of pleasure and pain. He sucked hard as he thrust back into me, and I screamed out, unable to control the animal instinct to yell out in satisfaction even though we were at his parents' house.

He pushed me higher and higher, and my body clenched tightly in delicious anticipation with each hard drive. I screamed out his name as he yelled mine back at me, and when I felt that snap that

happens right before my body was going to splinter into a million tiny pieces of fantastic gratification, I awoke with a start.

I was hot for Jesse; that much was obvious, but now my panties were soaked with need for him all from one ridiculously provocative dream.

The next morning I woke to lips pressed against my neck and scruff tickling my skin as Jesse spooned me. My body ached for release, and I knew that I would need to find some alone time to take care of that since I couldn't exactly proposition Jesse, as much as I wanted to.

Sleeping next to him was becoming a little too much for me. It was obvious

that I had needs that only he would be able to fulfill, and based on the erection that was currently pressed against my lower back, he clearly had needs that he needed to take care of as well. And I'd be more than happy to take care of those needs for him.

So obviously we were both hot for each other, but there was little we could do about it until June.

“Good morning,” I whispered, thinking about what a good morning it was, indeed. I could tell through the shadows that the blinds on the windows provided that it was a sunny day outside, and I couldn't wait to start our first full day at the beach together. I vaguely wondered what time it was, and then I

realized that I was on spring break for the next two weeks with this dream of a man, and time suddenly became something so completely irrelevant.

“How is it,” he asked, “that you manage to look so goddamn beautiful in the morning?”

Those flutters that I was feeling back on that night at happy hour before I’d told him about Richard and me? They were back in full force.

“How is it,” I asked back, turning in his arms to face him, “that you know the exact right words to say in every situation?”

He grinned down at me. “It’s my specialty.”

“You are quite the expert,” I said, and

he pressed his lips to mine.

“Did you have a bad dream last night?” he asked, pulling away.

“No,” I said. “Why?”

“I remember you groaning and then waking up out of breath.”

I blushed. I didn’t want to because I knew it completely gave me away, but it was one of those damn things I couldn’t control.

“Wait just one hot second,” he said, a wide smile slowly forming on his very kissable lips. “Was it a sex dream?”

I averted my eyes as I felt the blush spread from my cheeks down my neck. Suddenly I was quite warm. “Maybe,” I admitted, throwing the blankets off of me as I tried to get some cool air.

“So, Miss Freemont,” he said. “You catch me indecent as I’m changing my clothes and then you have a dirty dream? Was it about me?”

The blush moved from red into purple territory, and I felt a buzz in my head. I didn’t say anything.

“No denial. I guess I’ll have to assume that it was, in fact, about me.”

“I plead the fifth,” I said, moving to get up and get away from this mortifying conversation.

He grabbed my arms and pulled me back. “I don’t think so, V. You’re not hiding from me.”

I rolled my eyes uncomfortably. “Fine. It was about you.”

He beamed in victory. “I kind of

figured.”

“Oh? Why’s that, Mr. Arrogant?”

“Because you screamed out my name.”

Oh. My. God.

I buried my face in his chest so he couldn’t see the ridiculous shade of red I had certainly become, and he gently stroked my back and kissed the top of my head.

“V, I can’t think of anything more flattering. Don’t be embarrassed about it. I’ve had dreams about you, too.”

“You have?” I asked, shifting to peek up at him.

He nodded. “Fuck yes, I have. Really, really dirty ones.”

I grinned. “Tell me about them.”

“Oh no. If you’re pleading the fifth, so am I.”

“Then show me,” I said. I wasn’t sure where that sudden bold statement came from, but I was glad I said it.

“I plan on it,” he whispered, his gaze smoldering down into me.

I gazed back for one hot moment.

“I’m sorry we have to wait,” I said.

“Why?”

“Why am I sorry?”

He nodded.

“Because I think we both know we want it.”

“True. It’ll happen,” he said confidently.

“I just hate the waiting game.”

“Me, too. But we’ll get there, V.”

“I know. But it’s my fault that we have to wait.”

“It’s not your fault. We’ve both got our reasons.”

He was right. I had my ingrained reasons, and he’d told me he didn’t have sex with married women.

“We’re building anticipation, and when our time comes, it’ll make it that much better,” he said.

I felt a surge of love course through me for him. I kissed his chest just over his heart, and I felt him tighten his arms around me.

“I can’t wait,” I whispered.

“Neither can I,” he murmured back, and then his fingertips found my chin and I scooted up in his arms. His mouth

covered mine and I knew that the wait would be well worth it.

He used the restroom first while I got up and started gathering clothes to take a shower (not forgetting my panties this time). A quick check of the clock on my cell phone told me that we'd slept in; it was almost 10:30, and I felt rude as a guest to sleep so late. Jesse assured me that it was fine, though, and then I set to looking through my bag for my cell phone charger. My battery was already down to twenty-four percent, and in that haze of lust produced by naked Jesse, I completely forgot to charge it the night before. I went through my bag three times. I took everything out and put it all back in.

No cell phone charger.

Jesse had an iPhone, too, so I'd just borrow his. When the bathroom door opened for his exit, my mouth somehow failed me as the words to my question died on my lips.

Holy fucking hell.

Jesse was wearing a pair of shorts and nothing else. No socks on those sexy feet. No pants covering those perfect calves. No shirt concealing his broad chest or that washboard he called a stomach.

Beads of water clung to his chest. Who knew I could be jealous of water?

His hair was still damp from the shower, and he hadn't put any product into it yet.

Jesse Drake fresh from the shower was surely a sight to behold. As I stood there staring, jaw dropped open, I felt like if I died right in that moment, I would have died the happiest girl in the world just for the eye candy staring me in the face.

He grinned over at me, clearly catching me in the act of ogling him. “Your turn,” he said.

“Uh,” I muttered, and some other sounds incoherently fell from my lips. I forced my gaze from his body and back to my clothes, and then I turned to head to the bathroom.

“Hey,” he said softly. I glanced up at him. “Can I watch?” he asked, and then he grinned sinfully.

“Soon,” I said, thinking that it wouldn’t be soon enough. I smiled as I walked by him, and he grabbed me into his arms and gave me one of those Jesse specialty double kisses.

“Have a good shower.”

“Oh, can I borrow your cell phone charger? I can’t find mine.”

He nodded. “I’ll find it while you shower.”

“Thanks, Jesse,” I said.

He sighed.

“What?”

“I just like hearing the way my name sounds passing through those gorgeous lips of yours,” he said.

“I like saying it,” I said. “What’s your middle name?”

“Ethan.”

“Jesse Ethan Drake.”

Jesse and Veronica Drake.

Veronica Drake.

Wait. No, it was Jesse Drake. I shook my head and headed to the shower, perplexed by the direction of my thoughts.

I was still married. Certainly I wasn't ready to jump into a second marriage before my first marriage was dissolved.

Besides, for as much as Jesse made me feel like we had a future together, his reputation as a ladies' man preceded him. I was afraid to get my hopes up too high only to have them shattered later, when I fell even harder for him. Because I was falling harder every second we

spent together, and deep down I was terrified that this was going to end badly, that it was going to end in heartbreak for me. All I could cling to was the hope that Jesse Drake would treat me right, that he would hold onto my heart and take care of me. Allowing myself to think any other way was only going to cause pain, so I wouldn't even imagine that situation.

After I finished getting ready, I found Jesse waiting for me on the bed. He stood and pulled me into his arms.

“You look beautiful, V,” he said.

“I love it when you call me ‘V.’”

A smile curled the corners of his lips, and I ran my fingers through his hair, still soft from lack of product. It stuck up

where I touched it, and it was even silkier and softer than I'd imagined it would be. He leaned into me and buried his face in my neck, and when he held me like this, when he displayed this emotion for me, I knew it was his way of telling me that he'd fallen as hard for me as I had fallen for him.

He groaned and tightened his arms around my waist, and a moan slipped out from my lips that I hadn't even intended.

"Bad news," he said, pulling back.

"What?"

"I forgot my charger, too."

"Do your parents have iPhones?"

He shook his head. "Fucking Androids," he said with mock irritation. I giggled.

“We could go buy new chargers,” I suggested.

“Or, we could shoot off a quick text to those who might need us and give them my parents’ number for emergencies and then just, I don’t know, go off the grid for the next two weeks.”

Going off the grid with Jesse Drake? Yes, please.

“I love that idea,” I said. “What’s your parents’ number?”

He pulled their contact open and rattled off some numbers, and I texted my parents and both of my brothers. Work could wait, and Quinn would understand.

Jesse’s parents had gone to church, a place that Jesse said he used to attend up

until his sister's death, so we had the house to ourselves. Jesse made us omelets and I made some fresh coffee, and then we sat outside on the patio and ate while we watched the waves roll in and out.

We spent the day at the beach. It was too chilly for swimming in the ocean, but the air temperature was nice, and walking on the beach was absolute heaven. Jesse wore just a pair of khaki shorts, and since I was wearing sunglasses as we strolled in and out of the surf, I took the liberty of flat out staring at his perfect torso.

Some men with a six-pack stomach were overly bulky while others were too skinny, but everything about Jesse was,

as I liked to say, absolutely perf.

He was toned and solid and fell right in the zone of perfection.

And that tattoo... I sighed just thinking about it. I had never been a huge tattoo aficionado like Quinn was, but something about the reason behind his work of art and the beauty of it made it extraordinarily stunning.

Staring at Jesse Drake. This was my kind of spring break.

We ate dinner with his parents and I fell a little more in love with them as I fell a little more in love with him. Each moment that passed brought me a moment closer to the time when we could finally be together in every way that mattered.

Jesse's parents both had work the next day; his mom's spring break didn't start until the next week, and Dr. Phil had patients lined up for the next day, so they headed to bed early.

We sat on the patio with the three Bs: beer, Barry, and banter.

Barry was perched on my lap, sleeping, the occasional snort escaping him as he dreamed of Milk Bones and long walks. In one hand, I held my beer on the armrest, and my other arm dangled from the side of my Adirondack chair, as did Jesse's. His fingers found mine and tangled together. I leaned my head against the back of the chair and stared up at the night sky, listening to the romantic and tranquil waves as they

rolled rhythmically in and out. Aside from the completion of my split from Richard, I couldn't think of a single thing on earth that would make me feel more contented than I did in that moment.

And then the very next words that fell from his lips after I'd had that thought made my already contented heart soar with love.

“You know how I told you that I'm taking a road trip in June?”

I turned toward him and nodded, not lifting my head from the back of the chair in complete and utter laziness.

“Come with me.”

I sat up in shock, apparently inconveniencing Barry, who sighed in bitter frustration the way only dogs can

and jumped off my lap.

“Come with you?” I asked.

He nodded and sat up, mirroring me.

“Yeah, V. Come with me. And when your divorce is finalized, wherever we are, that’ll be our night.”

Our night.

I liked the sound of that.

I liked the sound of a month with Jesse. I liked the sound of traveling to Mexico and driving through California wine country with Jesse. And I especially liked the sound of celebrating my independence from Richard in a night that would be just for Jesse and me, a night that would be the start of many, many nights together.

“Yes,” I whispered finally.

“Yes?” he asked, and then I could see his grin in the moonlight. He stood up and pulled me up with him, and then he wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me up, twirling the two of us around a few times. Then he pressed his lips to mine, and I knew for sure that I had found the love of my life. I knew now that Fate had indeed stepped in, and this time I wasn’t going to fuck it up. I was going to be with the man with whom I was meant to be.

Our two weeks of spring break passed in the blink of an eye, and we were so contentedly happy being off the grid that we decided to stay through Sunday, cutting it close since we had to get back to work on Monday.

Our days mostly consisted of lazy sleeping in, taking a walk or a run on the beach, and strolling along Santa Monica Pier. Jesse held my hand, kissed me, and loved me, even though he still wasn't ready to say the words.

Our nights consisted of dinner with his parents, and Jesse even set up a bonfire on the beach a few times. We sat by the fire, talking softly about our pasts and the dreams we had for the future. I never felt closer to another person than I did to Jesse, and I couldn't get over the fact that we shared so much intimacy without having sex.

Jesse treated me to a few date nights, and I felt more and more like he was my boyfriend. Each day that passed caused

my heart to open more to him, and I knew that he felt as close to me as I felt to him based on the intimate confessions he'd made to me.

And because of our amazing spring break together, nothing could've prepared me for the shit storm that faced us when we returned home.

And I mean *nothing*.

CHAPTER 14

I had been at the beach. I'd called my parents to let them know I had forgotten my cell phone charger and gave them the Drake's home number for emergencies.

Jesse and I went off the grid for a few days.

What a hell of a few days to go off the grid.

We arrived home Sunday night, and on the surface, everything was fine. We both plugged in our phones immediately and then headed back out to the car to unload. We took our time, unpacked our luggage, and started some laundry. I felt lighthearted and happy as I watched my clothes mix with his in the washing

machine. It was one of those simple, everyday chores that had suddenly become special because we were doing it together.

I felt closer to Jesse than I ever had. I felt like a part of his family. His parents made me feel like another daughter, not in the sense that I could ever replace their Allison, but in the sense that they loved me because they saw how happy I made their son. I even sat with Judy one night and told her all about Richard. She held my hand in hers and patted my arm as I spoke. She sympathized with me and hugged me and brushed my tears away when I told her how unsupportive my own mother had been when I'd told her that I was getting divorced. She

understood my situation and could clearly see that I was meant to be with her son. In fact, she'd said to me, "I've never seen Jesse with a woman, but I know love when I see it, and I know that my boy loves you. I don't know if he's told you that. He's had a hard time getting close to people since what happened with Allie. But I see the way he looks at you, and I couldn't be happier that he's found someone as special as you."

Tears spilled from my eyes as she hugged me, and I suddenly had the inclination that someday I'd be part of her family. Someday I'd pass the sweet potatoes over the Thanksgiving turkey and someday she'd hold our child, her

grandchild, in her arms.

So everything was perfect until we arrived home. Well, really, until our phones were charged. It wasn't until I turned on my phone that I started to freak out.

Apparently Jesse had turned his phone on at the exact same time, because when he appeared in the doorway to the guest room that we'd been sharing since... well, since the first night he'd stayed the night with me, his face was pale.

I had seventy-four new texts. Most were from Quinn, and after reading through the first few, I knew that I had not only missed something major, but we had a major problem.

“Are you seeing this?” Jesse whispered.

I nodded, staring at my phone.

I pulled open my work email, and that was when my fears were confirmed. I couldn’t log on. My account was frozen.

I logged into my personal email account, and there it was: an email from our campus union representative.

Veronica:

I have tried to reach you by phone and am hoping this email will reach you. If you haven’t seen the news, you and Jesse Drake are both being put on leave during this investigation. The leave shouldn’t last more than a week, but contact the union attorney ASAP.

Dave

Jesse and I had both been put on administrative leave? For what?

“Jesse, I have an email from Dave,” I said.

“So do I.” He took a few seconds to read it.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but Bill texted me a link to a news report.”

I stood close to him and we watched as his phone loaded the video.

The news anchor from our local news started reporting the story. “Breaking news out of local high school Central Valley, where a teacher and a counselor are being accused of having an illicit affair on school grounds. CBS five takes you to the scene. Nancy?”

The shot zoomed to a still of our school's marquee out front and then showed a few panoramic photos of the campus.

“Thanks, Deb. No one expected this story out of this quiet high school where the football team won the state title this past fall, but sources say that accused English teacher Veronica Thomas and long time counselor Jesse Drake have been partaking in an affair on school property during school hours.”

Nancy cut away to a taped interview of one of our senior students on the prom committee. “Yeah, Mrs. Thomas and Mr. Drake have been working on prom together. I had no idea that this was going on, but I did notice that they were

together a lot.”

Nancy’s voice came back as a picture of Jesse and me came on the screen, and she spoke as I stared at the picture. It was from a walk we had taken several weeks before at the park in Jesse’s neighborhood. He was sitting on a swing, and I was straddling him. We were kissing, clearly wrapped in a hot embrace. It was dark and grainy, but it was definitely us.

I suddenly felt completely violated and totally nauseated as I listened to Nancy’s words. “Together a lot or not, I think we can all agree that having relations on a campus filled with high school students is definitely not okay. Reporting live from Central Valley High

School, I'm Nancy Irvine."

Jesse tossed the phone on my dresser as if it was hot to the touch and burned his skin. "Fuck," he muttered.

"Jesse, we are not having an affair on school property!" I cried.

He gave me a strange look. "Believe me, if we were fucking, I'd know."

I wasn't sure why that was the thing that came out of my mouth. It seemed pretty dumb as soon as I said it, but I had to say something.

Jesse took a deep breath as I grew more and more hysterical.

And then the thought crossed my mind that if I was going to be accused of sleeping with Jesse, I might as well have been doing it. Lord knows I sure as hell

wanted to.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, tears prickling behind my eyes. Jesse came to me and took me in his arms.

He rubbed my back in soothing strokes, somehow calming me and assuring me that we were going to face this crisis together without saying any words. Even though I was having a complete meltdown, just the feel of his arms around me soothed me immensely. “Bill texted me the number of the union lawyer. I’m going to call him to see what he recommends.”

I nodded, and Jesse picked his phone back up, still holding onto me.

“Hi Mr. Buchanan, it’s Jesse Drake. Bill Robinson gave me your

information.”

I wanted to hear the entire conversation, but I could only hear Jesse’s side. As if he read my mind, he said, “Yes, she’s here. Do you mind if I put you on speaker?”

Mr. Buchanan must’ve agreed, because Jesse pulled the phone from his ear and clicked the speaker button while still managing to keep one arm around my waist, clutching me to him.

It was almost as if we both knew that this was almost the end, and we were clinging to one another as if our lives depended on it.

I heard the lawyer’s voice come through the phone. “First question: Are you both there?”

“Yes,” we responded in unison.

“Are the two of you having an affair?”

Jesse’s eyes locked on mine. “Not a sexual one.”

“It’s a yes or no question.”

“Then no,” he said.

“Veronica?”

“No, Mr. Buchanan.”

“Please call me John. So you’re going to deny the allegations that you’ve had sexual relations on school property?”

“Yes,” we both said in unison.

“Well, at least you’ve got a united front.”

“John, we haven’t done anything wrong,” Jesse said. “And we especially

haven't done anything wrong at school.”

All I could do was listen as the two of them spoke. I didn't even know what to say. I could not believe that we were being accused of something so outrageously scandalous, and I still wanted to know where the hell the news had managed to get that photograph of the two of us on the swing in the park.

“Are you engaged in any type of relationship?”

“Yes.”

“Be more specific.”

“We are currently living together.”

“And not having sex? No one's going to buy that.”

“Veronica is married.”

“Jesus. Gets better and better.”

And that's when I put it together. Of course. Richard.

Somehow Richard had gotten his hands on that picture of the two of us. He said he'd find a way to ruin us both, and this was his way of doing it.

"For now, I need you two to completely separate," John said. "I can't have you living together. I can't have you being together. I can't have you even looking at each other."

No. Mother. Fucking. Way.

There was no way I was going to agree to that.

I felt tears fill my eyes at just the mere thought of being away from Jesse.

"No," Jesse said adamantly. "No, we won't do that. We didn't have sex at

school. Check the videos. There are cameras outside the counseling office and outside Veronica's classroom. There's your proof. These allegations are fucking ludicrous and I'm not going to give up the love of my life because someone's trying to fuck with us."

The love of my life.

Jesse had just called me the love of his life.

He used the word "love" to refer to me.

Despite the hell we suddenly found ourselves in, my heart skipped a beat at that word dropping from those lips.

"These are serious allegations against you that could cost both of you your careers. I need to set up a meeting with

each of you, but for now, one of you has to move out. No contact with one another.”

“Starting when?”

“You’ve got tonight.”

We wrapped up the call. Jesse set his appointment for the next morning, and I set mine for the next afternoon. Jesse tossed his phone when he ended the call, and it ended up on the floor somewhere. He wrapped his arms around me as I cried desperately into him.

John was right.

We didn’t have a choice.

And we both knew that as a truth as we clung to one another, not sure how long this separation was going to last, dreading it even though we both knew

that there was nothing we could do about it for now.

We had one more night together, and then in the morning, we'd have to go our separate ways.

I sobbed into his chest, my ugly cry back with a vengeance, and Jesse soothed me by rubbing his hands in a slow rhythm up and down my back, touching me like he was trying to memorize what I felt like beneath his fingertips.

“Let's not waste tonight with tears,” he said quietly, his voice breaking with emotion that only caused my pain to sharpen as he ran his fingers through my hair.

I sniffled as I nodded into him,

knowing he was right.

Maroon 5's song "Daylight" started playing on repeat in my head, especially the refrain: "And when the daylight comes, I'll have to go, but tonight I'm gonna hold you so close, cause in the daylight we'll be on our own..."

I didn't want to be on my own. I'd come to rely on Jesse for his protection, his care, and his love in the short time we'd been together. We truly enjoyed spending time together. With us, there was no drama, no competition. Just hardcore attraction and strong feelings that only deepened the more time we spent together.

He kissed my forehead and then kissed my cheeks where my tears still

fell. His lips found mine and he kissed me softly, and then he leaned his forehead to mine.

“We’ll figure this out, V. Crying is letting them win.”

He was right, of course, and I knew that. I didn’t want Richard to win, and I was certain that it was him. I wouldn’t let him win.

“Where am I going to go?” I asked on a shaky breath.

“Stay with Quinn until we get it worked out.”

“Okay,” I agreed glumly.

He hugged me hard and then went to the kitchen to get us each some water while I called Quinn.

I sat on the edge of the bed and

rubbed my forehead, trying to get rid of the headache that was already forming as I pulled up her contact.

She answered immediately. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“We went off the grid for a few days.”

“Are you fucking Jesse? At work?”

“No. And no.”

“Jesus, Veronica. There’s this huge investigation. HR called me in to talk to me about what I know.”

“What did you say?” I asked, suddenly alarmed.

“I told them what I knew. I said that you were staying with him, but as far as I knew, the two of you have been living as friends since you’re still married.”

“Thanks, Quinn.”

“Don’t thank me for telling the truth.”

“Can I stay with you?”

“Of course. When are you coming over?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Are you going to work?”

“I can’t. I’m suspended.”

“Paid vacation,” she said, always looking at the bright side.

“Ruined reputation,” I countered. Usually I wasn’t one for cynicism, but this was a pretty dark situation I’d suddenly found myself in.

“It’ll pass,” she said, and deep down I knew she was right. The problem was that I’d worked hard to earn the respect of my colleagues and students and to

build a good reputation as a teacher, and it hurt to know how easily it could all be ripped away. Even if our names were cleared, we'd always have that cloud hanging over us. People would believe what they wanted to believe regardless of the truth, and most people tended to believe the gossip anyway. The juicier the story, the better.

I hung up with Quinn and met Jesse in the kitchen. He was leaning on the counter, arms straight and supporting him as he leaned forward. His shoulders were tense, and his posture reminded me of a brief moment when he'd obviously been lost in a world of Carly and Allison and painful memories the night we'd made chicken marsala.

When he heard me come into the room, he glanced up at me. His eyes had taken on the haunting again, and my heart broke for him.

I knew that my presence alone calmed his nerves. I knew that my love for him helped him to cast his demons aside. What I didn't know was how I was going to be what he needed when I couldn't have any contact with him. And knowing that I couldn't be there for him hurt just as much as knowing that he couldn't be there for me.

"I just want to hold you. I just need to feel you against me," he whispered, his eyes locked and heated on mine.

Fuck it. For the second time that night, I truly felt like if we were being

accused of having an affair, we might as well actually be having one. I wanted nothing more than to feel Jesse's skin on mine, to savor his entrance into my body, to writhe in pleasure beneath him, to taste every part of him under my tongue.

But I didn't want my first time with Jesse to be based in some scandal. I wanted it to be based in our mutual love.

So we climbed into what had become our bed together for the last night until we could be together again. The worst part was just not knowing when that would be.

Jesse stripped down to his boxer briefs. Typically I wore a t-shirt and pajama pants to sleep, but I wanted to feel as much of Jesse's skin against me

as I could, so I wore a silky, skimpy tank top and matching silk panties.

When I exited the restroom after getting ready for bed, Jesse was already there, leaning back against the headboard. His perfectly sculpted washboard stomach called my name.

“Jesus,” he murmured. “If you’re going to wear shit like that, I’m not going to be able to control myself,” he said, not hiding a quick readjustment under the sheets.

I chuckled, the first sign of a smile since we’d arrived home and turned on our phones.

“I miss being off the grid with you,” I whispered.

“Come here,” he commanded softly.

I obeyed.

I turned off the light and then got in bed beside him, and he pulled me close as we both lay back. My head was on his chest, and his fingertips found the hem of my tank top and pulled upward so his hand rested on the bare skin of my back. He stroked my skin with a rhythmic pattern that was reassuring and soothing.

“No matter what happens, V, promise me something.”

“Anything,” I whispered.

“We’ll still have our night. In June, when school’s out and none of this shit matters anymore, and your divorce is finalized, we’ll still have our night.”

“I promise,” I said.

“I promise, too.” He sealed his

promise with a kiss to my forehead. I leaned up and his lips found mine, and suddenly we weren't talking about June anymore as his tongue swirled against mine and he deepened our kiss. It started out innocently, and then he moaned and I almost lost control as my body ached for him. We shifted on the bed, and I found myself beneath him. His hand ran down my side, past my hip, to my thigh as he hovered above me, kissing me like his life depended on it. His fingertips stroked the skin of my leg and moved around toward my ass, and then he ran his hand back up and landed on my hip as our mouths collided. He pushed his hips down into mine just as I arched mine up into his.

When our time finally did come, it was going to be incredible.

I felt his hot hardness against my hot wetness, and I wanted him inside of me in that moment. The throbbing between my legs was unbearable as every part of me wanted every part of him. I craved that skin to skin contact with him, for our last barrier of clothes to be removed so we could make love slowly and sensually until we were both satisfied and then go at it again and fuck until we were both screaming out in pleasure.

June, I reminded myself. It was only three months away. We could do this.

He groaned into me and abruptly stopped our kiss.

“God dammit,” he muttered, lying

back on his pillow and panting as I fought to catch my own breath. His arm was back around me as he pulled me closer into him, and I cuddled into his side with my head in the crook of his neck, my lips millimeters from his warm skin.

Neither of us moved for a moment, and then in the stillness and darkness with both of us breathless, Jesse whispered, “I love you so fucking much.”

His arm tightened around me, and I kissed his neck, filled with love for this man that Richard was tearing from me. The devastation of knowing that I wouldn't be able to fall asleep in his arms the next night, or the night after that,

for who knew how long, filled me with dread.

“I love you, Jesse,” I whispered back to him.

“I know,” he said. “And that’s what’s going to get me through this.”

And despite Maroon 5’s reminder from that song, I fell asleep knowing that I’d have to leave him in the daylight.

CHAPTER 15

The next morning, we were both quiet. I caught him staring at me while I packed up my essentials. We both agreed that I wasn't "moving out." I was just "relocating" for awhile. And I stared at him as he made me scrambled eggs for breakfast.

"I'll swing by Quinn's later tonight to see you," he said.

"John said we can't have any contact."

"Fuck that. You know that's not going to happen."

I appreciated his determination, but I just didn't feel as certain as he seemed to. These were our careers, our

livelihoods, and I had a terrible gut feeling that the lawyer was going to reiterate that we couldn't have any contact with each other or it could cost us both our jobs.

Turns out I was right.

Apart from random chance encounters where we merely passed by each other at school or sat at the same meeting trying to avoid eye contact when all I wanted was to leap across the table and pull his body against mine, that morning in the kitchen as we said goodbye was the last time I held him in my arms for over two months.

They were the two longest months of my life, but for some unknown and completely ridiculous reason, that's how

long the investigation took.

Both of us had only been placed on leave for three days, and we were able to return to work with the warning from Human Resources that we could have no contact with each other. If I had a senior who I needed to discuss with a counselor, I was required to meet with someone other than Jesse. I was even taken off of the prom committee so we wouldn't run into each other.

John advised us each separately, but the message was clear: We were being watched, and anything that looked suspicious would be reported. The picture that had been taken of us at the park and then leaked to the press proved that someone was watching us, and not

only watching us, but out to get us. So that meant no phone calls, no texts messages, and no secret meetings.

I was completely miserable, and I was developing a terrible anxiety just from being separated from Jesse.

We spoke on the phone only once, and it was that first night we were apart. Jesse had called Quinn's cell and asked to talk to me. He told me how much he missed me, and I could already hear the desperation in his voice. I held my tears at bay until we hung up, not wanting to make things harder on both of us. The moment we hung up, a text came through while I still held Quinn's phone in my hand. It was from an anonymous number, and it said, "Quinn's phone is bugged,

too. That'll be your last call to Drake.”

One would think that the fact that I was getting divorced from my husband was what was putting me into a constant state of despair, but that wasn't true. Sure, it was difficult; it was painful and uncomfortable and complicated, but the pain from the divorce was nothing compared to the pain of separation from Jesse, and the fact that I knew that Richard was the one who set this whole thing in motion made me sick to my stomach. It made me hate him with an unbridled passion that I didn't even know existed within me, and I couldn't wait until our divorce was finalized. Separation with him was one thing, but to be completely rid of all ties from him

was what I needed so I could move on with my life with Jesse.

I longed to hear Jesse's voice.

I prayed for meetings where we'd both be there, but they were few and far between.

I just wanted a quick glance into his office to check on him, to see how he was doing.

The few times I'd caught a glance at him, I saw the haunted Jesse that I'd always been able to comfort without even knowing how. I saw fatigue and loneliness and misery. And I knew that my own expression reflected exactly the same emotions.

It was reflected in my work, too. I was assigning independent work and

projects that would allow me to wallow in my misery. I managed to keep the tears at bay while I was at work, but the moment I arrived “home” to Quinn’s apartment, I curled up in bed and hugged my pillow, wishing it was Jesse as I sobbed at the loss.

The worst part of all of it was that I didn’t know how long it was going to last, and that was the thought that plagued me the most every single night as I tried to sleep.

Instead of sleep offering me a sweet reprieve, I stared restlessly at the ceiling in the darkness of Quinn’s guest room. Each night I got in bed a little after ten, and I stared at the ceiling until just after two. The alarm rang shrilly at its normal

time. I was averaging three or four hours of sleep per night, and I knew I couldn't go on like that for long, but the only fix for my problem was Jesse Drake.

I was exhausted and miserable without Jesse. The sleepless nights were due to a mixture of events. For one thing, I was scared I was going to lose my job; but that wasn't as awful as the fear that I might lose Jesse because of this. We'd promised each other that we were going to make it past this, but two months with no contact from a person was a long time. I was terrified that his feelings for me were going to change in that time we were apart while my own feelings only grew deeper and stronger for him. I couldn't take the fear that gripped my

heart, but I also couldn't take the risk of both of us losing our jobs over something that had never actually happened. Neither of us would ever find jobs in any school district if we were fired because of a scandal, and if I ran to Jesse, I'd fuck up the entire investigation and then we'd both be left with nothing.

I was certain that Richard was watching us closely, and that scared the hell out of me. I wasn't sure what he was capable of, but I was certain that he'd gotten the revenge he had wanted. This was why he'd been so quick to sign the papers, and I wondered how long he lurked around or who he'd hired to do his dirty work to snap that picture of Jesse and me.

I went to happy hour that first week, hoping for the chance to see Jesse outside of school, but he never showed. And I realized that I wasn't in a "happy" kind of mood after that, so I declined invitations to sit and drink with my friends, preferring the company of my pillow, my tissues, and my memories.

I used the time to reflect on all that had happened in my life since I'd met Jesse.

He'd always been the one meant for me; I knew that now. But Richard had stepped in and mesmerized me with his charm. The more I thought about Richard, the more I realized that he wasn't the one who had changed. I was.

He'd always been controlling. He'd

always wanted things his way. He'd always been manipulative. And he was still the same way.

But he had loved me; at least at the time I thought it had been love. He took care of me and provided for me and made me promises. The problem was that I believed him when he promised me things, but he never delivered. He promised me a life full of happiness, but looking back at our five years together, I couldn't really think of a single time when I'd really laughed one of those gut-wrenching laughs that leaves your abs sore for days. I couldn't think of a time when he'd done something to make me happy that didn't include buying something for me.

I thought of his promise to love and cherish me. It had never been about love for us. It had been about a big wedding and materialistic things. He never cherished me. He took me for granted, and so when I suggested a trial separation while we still lived together, it really hadn't affected the way he lived his life. I still did his laundry. I still washed the dishes. He still had a clean house to come home to, with the added bonus of living in the same house with a wife who didn't nag him because I didn't even talk to him.

I had spent so much time blaming him for turning into an asshole, which he undoubtedly was, especially given my current situation. In reality, though, I had

just grown up. I had changed. In my early twenties, sparkly jewelry and designer clothes and fancy cars were enough. But I grew out of that phase and realized that those things didn't really mean anything. What truly meant something was love. It meant being there for each other, needing each other, suffocating without each other.

To me, that was Jesse Drake.

After I had that realization, I called my mother. I made plans to visit my parents that weekend. Weekends were the worst during the time I was apart from Jesse because I had all the time in the world to contemplate how depressed I felt. So I planned a quick weekend visit, and after my dad had gone to bed

one night, my mom and I sat at the kitchen table.

“Do you remember when you told me that if I put Richard first, we’d be able to work things out?” I asked her.

She said she remembered, and so I continued. “I did put him first, but Richard never once put me first. Not once in the past five years.”

“So you’re really ending things?” she asked, avoiding the dreaded “D” word.

“Yes,” I said, nodding.

“Is that what’s got you all tied up in knots?” she asked, somehow instinctively knowing as my mother that it wasn’t.

I shook my head as tears filled my eyes, and I felt her hand cover mine.

“What is it?” she asked.

I sniffled and wiped my eyes, and then I told her the whole sordid story, from when I realized things had started falling apart with Richard, to the night Jesse took me to his place, to the scandal that was surely Richard’s doing.

By the time I was done, my mom stood up and pulled me into her arms, comforting me with a mother’s love. She had come through for me, and it was then that I realized that part of the reason I’d stayed with Richard for all of that wasted time was because I didn’t want to disappoint her. But now she understood, and as she hugged me tightly, I finally felt at peace. All I could do was hold onto the hope that my time

apart from Jesse would end soon, that he'd still be waiting for me and we could finally be together, maybe even with the support of my family.

One Saturday night in early May, Quinn decided that she'd had enough. She declared that we were going to go out. She picked out my clothes for me, did my hair and make-up, and mixed me a strong vodka and Sprite.

It felt good to have a friend like Quinn, but I wasn't in the partying kind of mood. She knew that but ignored it, thinking that if we just went out for a night of fun, I'd snap out of my funk.

The only thing that was going to snap me out of my funk was Jesse Drake.

I had severely strong emotions during

this period of time. Either I loved with all of my heart (Jesse), or I hated and resented with everything inside of me (Richard and that bitch I liked to call Fate). Everything else fell into the indifference category.

I craved everything about him. I missed the way he smelled like man and Christmas pine and happiness. I missed his tattoo and his washboard abs. I missed his kitchen and his comfy couch and the bed we shared in his guest room. I missed his labels facing out in the most organized refrigerator I'd ever seen, especially when I opened Quinn's rather haphazard fridge. I missed his heart and the way he took care of everyone around him and put everyone else first. I missed

the haunted look in his eyes that was magically cured when he took me in his arms. And most of all, I missed the way he loved me, how he showed me how much he loved me without sex and without words.

I looked toward the end of the school year with renewed hope. I wanted each day to pass faster, because I knew that somehow we'd find our way back to each other once school was out for the summer and we didn't have the threat of our jobs being taken from us. Once Richard and I were finally divorced, I'd be able to date whoever I wanted, and I wouldn't have the public eye of my students and their parents and the entire community judging me for being married

while living with another man.

My night out with Quinn was an epic fail. I couldn't help it; I just wasn't good company. I was depressed and in a dark place, and taking me out and parading me in front of hot guys wasn't the solution. Not only was I despondent because of the Jesse situation, but I was also still married. I didn't need more guys hitting on me to complicate my life even more.

I just held onto the hope that Jesse had given me on our last night together: We'd made a promise that we were going to have our night in June, and I was still determined to make that happen. I just hoped that he was still determined, too.

Quinn finally took me home when she realized that I was in no mood to be out in public, and we drank some more together at home. I was feeling pretty drunk, but where I usually felt giggly when I was tipsy, that night, the alcohol just filled me with sadness.

She sat nervously on the couch next to me while I leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. “Can I talk to you?” she asked.

“Of course, Quinn,” I said, turning my head to face my friend.

“I have a confession to make,” she declared. She looked nervously at me and then away from me.

“What?” I asked. Her nervousness was making me nervous, too.

“It’s just...” She sighed and then restarted. “You think this was Richard’s doing, right?”

“The Scandal?” I asked, using the understated nickname we’d given to my situation with Jesse.

She nodded. “It’s just...” she trailed off.

“‘It’s just’ what?”

“I think I might be the one who gave Richard the idea to break you and Jesse up,” she blurted out, almost like it was one long word.

I sat and stared at her for a moment, sure I hadn’t heard her right.

“What?” I finally asked, my voice coming out angrier than I’d intended. I paused and took a deep breath. This was

my best friend. Surely she hadn't done something so horrible as to physically rip Jesse away from me. "How did you give Richard the idea?"

"I was out with Caleb, and we were sitting at a bar. Richard was there, and he came over and chatted. You know that I've known Richard longer than I've known you, even though you're my best friend now."

I nodded.

"So we were just talking about scandals, and I mentioned to him that when I first started working at Central, there was a scandal between an assistant principal and the school secretary. People got pictures of them in the act at school and leaked them to the press, and

both of them were fired.”

I stared at Quinn, completely dumbfounded. I didn’t respond; I couldn’t. Between the alcohol and the confession she had just made, I was feeling a mass of contradicting emotions. For one, I was pissed. Why would she even think that it was okay to talk to Richard, let alone discuss scandals with him at a bar over drinks? But I knew that reacting with anger wouldn’t help anything.

“Say something,” she finally blurted nervously.

I sighed, working hard to remain calm. “Quinn, Richard could’ve read about that scandal in the newspaper and used it to his advantage. I don’t blame

you for this.”

“Thank God. I just have never seen you like this, and if it was my fault in any way, I had to tell you. I’ve felt guilty about this for weeks.”

“I’m more pissed that you kept it from me for weeks than I am that it happened, but it doesn’t matter. What’s done is done and it’s all a fucking waiting game at this point anyway.”

She leaned in and hugged me. “I’m so sorry for what you’re going through,” she said softly.

CHAPTER 16

It was the third week of May when I was called into Human Resources, just two days before graduation.

Jesse was already seated in the office, a desk separating him from our district superintendent of Human Resources, Dr. Wooden. There was an empty chair next to Jesse that Dr. Wooden pointed to when I entered the room. I barely saw him motion to the chair because my eyes locked on Jesse's for the first time in over two months. His eyes still looked haunted, but I saw his lips curl at the corners when he saw me, and I felt my own face break out into a smile as well. I didn't know what this

meeting was about, but I did know that we had done nothing wrong. I immediately felt the pressure and anxiety that had been pushing down on my shoulders for two months lift off of me. The only thing I feared now was leaving this place without getting a moment alone with Jesse.

I knew immediately when his eyes met mine that nothing had changed. It didn't matter that we hadn't had any contact with each other since that last morning we had together in his kitchen. The love we shared still burned brightly, maybe even brighter than before. As the cliché goes, absence makes the heart grow fonder; I didn't think it was possible to love Jesse more than I

already did, but I felt a wave of love course through my veins just from being in the same room as him as my heart picked up its rate.

I sat, and Dr. Wooden began the meeting.

“Mr. Drake, Mrs. Thomas,” Dr. Wooden said. The random thought flashed through my mind that he should be calling Jesse “Dr. Drake.”

Dr. Wooden continued, “Thank you both for meeting with me today. We have reviewed the video tapes from the timeframe of the accusations and have found nothing to substantiate the claims. You’re both cleared of all charges of any wrongdoing. Please accept our apologies on behalf of the entire district.

We recommend that you steer clear of one another for the next few days until graduation is over.”

My heart soared. We were cleared!

“Dr. Wooden, while I appreciate the apology, you must realize what this has done to both of our reputations,” Jesse said. I hadn’t really considered that when I’d already started my celebration in my head.

“We’re well aware of the consequences of these unfounded accusations, but Mr. Drake, surely you can’t deny that something was going on between the two of you,” Dr. Wooden responded.

“What we do outside of the school day is none of this district’s business.”

“That’s not entirely true. When pictures of our employees surface that are as sexual in nature as the one that was splashed across the local news, it becomes our business to ensure a safe atmosphere for our students.”

“Their safety was never once in question. Veronica and I fell in love on our own time. We did nothing wrong.”

“I don’t mean to sound condescending by saying this, Mr. Drake, but Mrs. Thomas is, in fact, married. Some may argue that a relationship with a married woman would not be considered doing ‘nothing wrong.’”

My head swung back and forth between them as I sat quietly, taking it all in. I felt like I was watching a tennis

match.

Jesse's eyes narrowed. "Regardless, all I'm asking for is retribution for our suffering."

"Unfortunately, my hands are tied monetarily. We paid you for the days you were placed on administrative leave, so I can't offer any additional money."

"I'm not looking for money," he said. He wasn't?

Dr. Wooden voiced the question in my head. "Then what is it that you want?"

"A public apology. A statement that says that this district was wrong in its accusations against us. I want it in the newspapers and filmed for the local

news.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mr. Drake,” Dr. Wooden said.

“It’s the least you can do,” Jesse said, standing. “Are we done here?”

Dr. Wooden nodded, a perplexed look on his face. I don’t think he was quite sure how Jesse turned the meeting completely around, but he managed to do it with sophisticated charm.

But, then, that was Jesse Drake’s way.

Jesse held his hand out to me, and I gladly placed my hand in his. I felt electrical tingles shoot up my spine as his skin touched mine. The realization that it was finally over hit me, and a mixture of relief and complete happiness

and absolute love for the man next to me washed over me. The devastation that had filled my heart with dread for two months was over, and now I just had a few more weeks until my split with Richard would be finalized. And then... our night.

We walked out the front doors of the district office hand-in-hand in a very liberating moment. Richard could go fuck himself. Jesse and I were going to be together, and no matter how hard Richard tried to split us up, he wouldn't be able to. Our bond was stronger than titanium, and after what we'd just been through, after being completely separated for two entire months, things were still the same. That only told me

that we'd be able stand as a united team against whatever life threw at us.

Jesse walked me to my car, his fingers still linked through mine. I wanted his mouth on me. I wanted his hands all over my body. I had missed his touch, the way he held me, the way he soothed and kissed and whispered.

"I want to kiss you so fucking bad, but not here. Not after all that's happened. Come home with me." His voice was a soft command, and I knew I'd do whatever he told me to do. He didn't even have to ask.

I followed him home.

Home.

It wasn't just his house anymore. I felt like it was my home, now, too, and I had

missed the hell out of it.

I missed that kitchen. I missed his workbench. I missed our bed.

And most of all, I had missed everything about Jesse.

Jesse pulled into the garage and I pulled in beside him, to the space he had cleared for my car. I cut my engine and then I heard the garage door closing behind me. He jumped out of his truck and strode across the garage to my driver's side door. I was still gathering my purse, and I didn't see him appear beside me, but suddenly he opened my car door and was hauling me out of my car and into his waiting arms.

It was like he was an animal who had just been released from his cage. He

couldn't even wait to get me into the house before his lips crashed to mine, one hand holding me around my waist and the other thrust into my hair. His tongue aggressively met mine as I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tightly to me as my fingers dove into his hair.

He kicked my door shut. I moaned into him and he shifted us so I was pressed between him and my car door as he groaned back into me. The throaty rasp of his groan mixed with his hard body pinning me to my car soaked my panties and sent my desire into overdrive.

His hands slowly outlined the length of my torso and my hips and then moved

down to my ass, a slow contrast to his fevered tongue battering violently against mine. He grabbed a handful of my ass and then moved his hands further down to my thighs. He pulled one of my thighs up and I wrapped it around his waist. He used the car to prop me up, and I brought up my other leg to wrap around him, locking my feet behind his back. He rammed his hips up hard into me, bucking against me wildly as I willingly took whatever he would give me.

His lips moved down to my neck. He nipped my soft flesh and sent shivers through my whole body, causing me to convulse up into him. He pushed back into me, and it was like he was fucking

me with clothes on.

“Sweet fuck, I missed you,” he murmured against my skin.

“I missed you, too,” I gasped through the pleasure he was driving into me.

“How long until your divorce is finalized?” he asked between open mouthed kisses across my chest.

“Three weeks,” I moaned, leaning my head back against the top of my car, giving him better access to my cleavage. He buried his face in it and breathed in deeply, and then set me down on my feet again, still holding me in his arms.

“Jesus,” he said, his voice a throaty rasp. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I panted.

“I want you, V,” he said, leaning his

forehead against mine and closing his eyes. His voice was low and raspy and set my blood on fire. "I need you. I need to be inside of your perfect body. I need to fuck you fast and hard and then take you slowly. I need to taste every part of you. I need to bury my hard cock in you. It's all I've thought about for two months. Fuck, it's all I've thought about for five goddamn years."

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

His words shocked me and lit an inferno in my veins as tingles shot through every part of my body. I was putty in his hands. I would do anything, *anything*, for this man.

"I need you too, Jesse," I said, my voice hoarse. "I want everything you just

said. I want you to fuck me. I want you to make love to me.”

“I want it every single way that’s ever been invented, and then I want to invent a few of our own. But I know we need to wait, so we’ll wait.”

“This is torture,” I said.

“I agree,” he muttered. “But it will be worth it.”

I knew it would be, too. But now we had pressure. We both wanted it so badly, and forcing ourselves to wait only added to that pressure.

It had been a long time since sex had made me nervous. But I never had the pleasure of being with someone like Jesse. While I’d been attracted to every man I had been with, not a single one of

them held a candle to Jesse's appearance, intelligence, sex appeal, or modesty.

We couldn't keep our hands off of each other. Through dinner, Jesse took the chair next to mine so our legs could touch. He took me to Quinn's to get my stuff, and we told her the story of what happened at Human Resources while his arm slung loosely around my shoulders and mine laced around his waist. When we got back home, we cuddled on the couch. He kissed me, held me close, and loved me.

I couldn't remember a time in my life when I'd felt so treasured by a man. I could literally feel how much he loved me just in the way he looked at me or in

the way he gently tucked my hair behind my ear or in the way he pressed his lips to my forehead.

Richard had intended to tear us apart and ruin our lives, but he failed. Yes, we had been apart for those two months, and those were two months we would never get back; but now we were back together, and our time apart had only managed to draw us closer, to bond us in a way that neither of us had ever expected. My feelings for him grew stronger every single day we had been apart, and now that we were back where we belonged, I felt deeper and more for him with every passing moment.

As we lay in bed holding one another in the dark later that night, I sighed with

pleasure. These quiet, intimate moments were the ones I had missed most during our time apart.

“How’s Carly doing?” I asked quietly.

I felt his fingers dig into my shoulder. He leaned over and kissed my forehead, but he didn’t answer my question. He just lay quietly beside me.

He sighed a long, shuddering breath, and I knew without him saying a word that something bad had happened.

I squeezed him a little tighter in my arms. He’d been dealing with his own personal hell all by himself because of Richard. I could’ve been there for him, held his hand, cried with him. But instead, he had to deal with whatever

had happened alone. I hadn't been there to help. He hadn't been able to hold me in his arms through the night to ban the demons.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I whispered.

He was still quiet.

"You don't have to, Jesse, but it might help for you to get it out."

"I know," he murmured, his soft voice full of emotion. "She died about a month ago."

My heart broke for Jesse. He didn't talk much about Carly, but I knew he had done everything he could to save her.

"I'm so sorry."

He didn't respond. My words of apology weren't going change what

happened or make it any easier, anyway.

“You have no idea how much just seeing you has helped ease the pain, V,” he said softly.

I leaned up and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Can I ask what happened?” I asked, smoothing his brow under my fingertips. I wished we had the light on so I could see his eyes.

“She had issues with addiction. She’d been in and out of rehab for years. She was only nineteen, and I guess that’s why she reminded me of my sister. Her parents made her go to rehab, and she tried to kill herself. They brought her to the hospital so she’d have twenty-four hour supervision, and we all thought she

was getting better. She even had me fooled. And then as soon as she was released, she was taken back to rehab, and this time when she tried to kill herself, she succeeded.”

“That’s so horrible,” I said. I couldn’t imagine being in such a dark and lonely place. The saddest part to me was that Carly had people who cared about her, like her parents and Jesse, but she just couldn’t see it. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be here to hold your hand through it.”

“I know, baby,” he whispered. “It’s not your fault. You’re here now.”

We clutched each other a little closer before falling asleep.

The last few days of school passed

quickly. Between grading final exams, posting grades, and cleaning out my classroom for the end of the year checkout, I was busy, and so was Jesse. He had his own set of worries, most notably contacting the parents of seniors who failed classes and weren't going to graduate. I was glad I wasn't the one who had to make those calls. By the time we both got home, we were too exhausted to do anything other than lay in bed wrapped around each other.

And then, finally, our summer was upon us.

Freedom for over two months before it was back to the grind.

Jesse had scheduled his trip to begin the day after school got out. He'd

already made reservations and planned out a large part of his itinerary before I was even in the equation, and, unfortunately, I couldn't go with him to Mexico.

Fucking Richard once again was getting in the way of what I wanted — what I needed.

The court date for our divorce was set for June 7, so I had about two weeks before I could join Jesse. We only needed a court date if we couldn't agree on something, and I'd spoken to him three times about listing the house for sale. He hadn't done it, and so I had to file for a court date for our division of property.

Jesse prepared for his month-long

getaway and I watched with a wineglass in hand. He went into the office to set up automatic payment on all of his bills, and I sat on the floor of the office and drank wine while he worked. I watched the way his eyes focused on his computer screen, the way his long fingers clicked the mouse, the way his lips pouted out as he concentrated. Everything about him was perfection, like I was watching a beautiful piece of artwork come to life.

When he stood, he pulled me up with him. He carried a bottle of beer in one hand and clutched my hand in the other. "Want to help me pack my clothes?" he asked.

"Sure," I said as he led me into his

bedroom and gestured to the bed. I looked at him in confusion.

“Sit,” he commanded.

“On your bed?” I asked.

I knew we’d shared plenty of intimacy, but I still considered his room off-limits. It reminded me of when I was a little kid and I wasn’t supposed to go in my parents’ room.

“Our room” was the guest room, the one where I’d slept since Jesse invited me to stay with him. The room we had shared since two nights after I started crashing with him.

But the next time I was going to be with Jesse in this house, our relationship was going to be completely different. We weren’t just going to be in love; we

were going to be lovers. And maybe that meant we were going to start sharing his bed instead of his guest bed.

He nodded. “Yeah, on my bed,” he said, a hint of shyness mixed with trepidation. I knew what a huge step this was for him.

I perched gingerly on the edge of the bed, his eyes warm and full of lust as he gazed at me.

“You have no idea how much I want to fuck you right now,” he murmured, his words washing over me and causing my cheeks to redden.

“You have no idea how much I want to be fucked by you,” I whispered back.

In what seemed like less than a second, Jesse attacked. He was suddenly

hovering over me, his body covering mine, and I was on my back on his bed. His heated eyes locked on mine, and I knew without a doubt that the next two weeks were going to be as difficult as the last two months. Time away from Jesse was agony, but the light at the end of the tunnel was that we would finally, finally be able to be together in every single way that we'd wanted to be together for five years.

He dragged his lips down my neck and then up behind my ear. He placed tiny kisses in his path as I shivered beneath him.

I was more aroused than I'd ever been in my life, and from the solid hardness that he was pushing into me, I

could tell that I was doing the same thing to him that he was doing to me.

His lips found mine, and he held still, kissing me with his mouth closed for a moment as his hips bucked into mine. It was somehow sweet and erotic at the same time. I laid there and took it, arching up into him as my hands wrapped tightly around his neck.

His mouth opened to mine and I grasped his hair in my hand. He groaned into me, and it was one of those raspy, feral groans that caused a deep throbbing ache inside of me. I held his head to mine, and his kiss deepened. His tongue battled against mine aggressively, exploring every corner of my mouth as he continued his thrusts with his hips. I

was dizzy with need for him.

He ended the kiss all too soon, driving into me one last time before pulling back and standing up.

“Sweet fuck,” he muttered, heading toward his closet as he not at all discreetly adjusted his pants.

I just lay back on his bed, woozy and dazed from that extraordinary kiss. I couldn't move; I was breathless and lightheaded and shamelessly turned on.

I heard him moving around in his closet, muttering under his breath. I wasn't sure what he was saying, but in my own head all I could think about was just finally getting to the sex part.

I tried to focus on the task at hand. We were going to have to say goodbye

for two weeks. Granted, this time things would be different; we could talk on the phone whenever we wanted. We could Skype. We could text and email all day long. But none of it was the same as actually being in his strong and loving arms.

Although I had to consider the one advantage: If we were spending the next two weeks together and didn't have our daily responsibilities since we were on our summer break, we'd never be able to keep our hands off of each other. It would mean entire days together, and it was only going to get harder to wait if we had all of that uninterrupted time. And I knew in my heart that I would never regret waiting until I was a free

woman to give myself to Jesse.

The night before, we'd discussed his travel itinerary. He'd be in California by June 7, so I was going to fly into San Francisco on the redeye. We made a plan for him to pick me up from the airport, and then we'd crash before we drove through wine country together and the next night would be just for us. It sounded like the perfect kind of romantic getaway that would do justice to "our night."

I just wished I could go off the grid with him again, but this time in Mexico.

He started to change his plans, but I didn't want to be the reason he missed out on a vacation he'd already planned and paid for. I essentially forced him to

go. Even though the time we had spent apart had been torturous, I knew that he'd be worth waiting two more weeks for. Besides, I had plenty to sort out while he was gone. For one, I needed to get back to the house I owned with Richard, get the rest of my belongings, and split up the rest of our stuff. While it would have been helpful to have Jesse there with me for that, I didn't want to be the reason he changed his travel plans.

So while Jesse packed for his month-long getaway and I spread out on his bed and thought about what was going to happen in two short weeks, I was full of lust, but I was also full of excitement.

I was done feeling sad that my marriage hadn't worked out. I was ready

to move on with Jesse. I wasn't sure where I'd come up with the idea that there needed to be some sort of waiting period between men, but I was over it. My marriage had been over for a long time, and I was ready to let go of the past, to be rid of the man who had held me back in so many ways, rid of the man who I knew had leaked that picture to the press that had nearly cost me both my Jesse and my career.

Two long weeks all by myself in Jesse's house and it would all be over.

Jesse put all of the clothes he was planning to take with him into his duffel bag, and then he lay down on the bed next to me. We just fit like two pieces in a puzzle; the moment he stretched out on

his back next to me, I turned into his side and he pulled me close. His arm laced underneath me and my head rested on his shoulder. I threw one arm across his waist. I could feel the muscles in that delightful washboard that he called a stomach under my arm. Good Lord, he was all kinds of sexy and I melted into another puddle of lust.

I was lying on Jesse Drake's bed. With Jesse Drake. And he was holding me in his arms.

I was a little giddy at the thought.

"I'm going to miss you, V," he said, leaning his head down to plant a kiss into my hair. I tightened my grip around his waist as I felt a wave of emotion course through me.

“I’ll miss you, too, Jesse.”

“Two weeks?” he asked.

“Two weeks,” I confirmed, and he sighed. “What?” I asked.

“How am I supposed to concentrate on decompressing and enjoying Mexico when I know you’re here going through all of this shit with the asshole with two first names?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay. I’ll be worried about you driving all over another country aimlessly.”

“It’s not aimless. I do have a plan,” he mumbled.

“I know,” I said, leaning up on my elbow and looking him in the eyes. I leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his neck, taking in his scent that I had

memorized so long ago. “I was just teasing you.”

He shifted his arm and somehow managed to pull me on top of him so I was straddling him. I giggled at his move and shook my head, pursing my lips and narrowing my eyes at him.

“What?” he asked innocently, holding his hands up in mock confusion as his dark eyes stared up into mine.

I grabbed his hands and laced my fingers through his. He pushed his hips up and once again I felt his rock hard erection pulsing beneath me. I was hit with a need for him stronger than ever.

“Promise me something,” he said softly, his eyes darkening with lust as we drank each other in.

“Anything,” I whispered, knowing it didn’t matter what he asked me because of course I would do it for him.

“When we get back home at the end of June, we’ll move into this room.”

The flutters that were always in my belly were suddenly out of control as I realized the implications of his request. Not only did it mean that he wanted me to continue living with him, but it also meant that he wanted to share his bed with me. This trip was going to mark a huge transition in our relationship, and he wanted to start living together like a couple in love when we returned home. We would no longer be two people sharing a bed in the guest room for comfort. We’d be two people sharing a

bed in the master bedroom because we were in a serious and committed relationship.

And for someone who was afraid to get close to people, I knew what an enormous step it was for him to ask me that.

“I would love that,” I said. “And I love you.”

It was the moment when I said it that I realized he hadn't said it to me since before “The Scandal,” that one night when we lay in bed together when we knew that we would need to separate the next day. It was the one and only time he had ever said the words to me, and I realized that I hadn't said it to him, either, since that night.

He just stared up at me for a moment, and then he sat up with me still on top of him and pulled my head to his, our lips meeting for another one of those ridiculously hot kisses.

He pulled back and leaned his forehead to mine. "I love you, too, V," he whispered, and then he pressed his lips to mine twice in that sexy way he had, somehow making me even hotter for him than I already was.

The next morning, I sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and watched as Jesse moved gracefully around the kitchen. As refreshed as I felt after a good night's sleep in Jesse's arms, I was miserable. I didn't want him to go, but I wasn't going to stand in the way of the

vacation he'd planned months earlier, so I masked my misery with a smile while he poured himself a bowl of cereal.

"Want some?" he asked, shaking the cereal box in my direction.

I shook my head. I wasn't hungry yet; I was still half asleep, and I was probably going to crawl back into bed after he left to get my sleep count up to ten or twelve hours, but I didn't want to miss out on the few precious minutes I had with Jesse before he left.

He sat at the table next to me instead of across from me.

"So what are your plans for the next two weeks?" he asked, shoving a spoonful of Cheerios into his mouth as his knee came to a rest against mine.

I shrugged. “A lot of sleeping since I’ve been sleep deprived for the past two months. Moving the rest of my shit out of the house I share with Richard. That kind of stuff.”

“You should probably do a lot of stretching,” he said with a smile.

“Why’s that?”

“Let’s just say that I’ve got some plans for you, and the more stretching you do now, the less sore you’ll be when I’m done with you.”

My jaw dropped as the ever-present flutters morphed into full-on quivers, and he grinned wickedly.

“You might have a hard time walking for a few days,” he continued.

I closed my mouth and swallowed

loudly. After I cleared my throat, I said, “May I ask what, exactly, you have planned?”

He leaned in close to my ear. He brushed his lips on the sensitive skin of my neck, causing my entire body to prickle with goose bumps that sent a shiver down my spine. “First I’m going to make love to you like I’ve wanted to since the moment I first realized that I am in love with you,” he said, his voice soft and breathy against my ear.

“And when was that?” I asked, trying to control my lust.

He leaned back and looked at me. “The night we made chicken marsala together,” he said, and then he took a bite of cereal.

My heart melted as I remembered him standing in the kitchen, seemingly conflicted about something. Now I knew that the weight that he felt because of Allison and Carly had been pressing down on him as he worked through his fear of getting close to me.

“Oh, Jesse,” I said, feeling tears form behind my eyes.

He winked at me. “Back to my plans for you,” he said, leaning back in toward my ear. “I’ll be gentle the first time. I’ll take my time, savoring and kissing every single inch of your perfect body that I’ve already had the pleasure of seeing fully naked.”

My breath caught in my throat as his soft, sensual words warmed me from the

inside out.

“Then what?” I asked, my voice cracking like an adolescent going through puberty.

He kissed my neck again and leaned back to look me in the eye. “Then I’m going to fuck you the way I’ve wanted to fuck you since the first moment I saw you in the library at school five years ago. I plan to take you whatever way I want to, and of course I am open to any suggestions you have, too.”

My eyebrows shot up at his words as my lady parts tingled. My goodness, his use of words mixed with that raspy voice mixed with the lust in his eyes was some kind of magic.

“Oh my,” I managed to say, my voice

panting as the throbbing that was always present down low when I was with Jesse started to ache.

He grinned and leaned back in his chair, taking another bite of his Cheerios. How he managed to stay composed through that little speech while I was a melted puddle of desire on the floor was beyond me.

I took a deep breath. “These are going to be the two slowest weeks of my life, aren’t they?”

“For you and me both, babe. But it won’t be anything compared to the last two months.”

“Good point. But you’ll be in Mexico having a great time with your buddies, looking at women in teeny bikinis while

I'm here missing you.”

“Haven't you realized yet that I only have eyes for you?” he asked, a hint of frustration in his tone.

I glanced up at him, and his eyes burned into mine. I could read from that look alone that I was the only woman on his mind and in his heart.

“I know you do,” I said, realizing how true it was. Based on his actions since I'd been crashing with him, I knew he meant it. As far as I knew, he hadn't been with a single other woman during our time together, and I was certain that he would have told me if he had been, even if it had happened in our two months apart. It seemed to me that he wrote off all of those other ladies the

moment I started staying with him.

I thought about Tami, the waitress from our happy hour bar that he'd told me he had slept with that first night when I'd told him Richard and I were getting divorced. I remembered him going back in when he was going to take me home. I remembered with jealousy when I saw Tami's arms lace around his neck, and then I remembered her looking angry as he left the bar. Clearly they'd had plans to hook up that night, and he'd gone back in to tell her it was off because he already knew that he was taking me home with him. I wondered at his thought process and when he had made the decision that night that he wasn't going to take me to my home, but to his.

He finished his cereal and brought his bowl to the sink. I watched him, memorizing his movements so I had something to hold onto while we were apart.

He reluctantly left a few minutes later. He'd given me a list of instructions about the house, kissed me about seven hundred times, and told me he loved me. He asked one more time if it was okay that he was leaving me on my own to deal with Richard, and I assured him that I would be fine.

And then I watched as he pulled out of the driveway, tears prickling my eyes as I watched him pull around the corner and drive off toward Mexico. I held onto the love and excitement in my heart as I

looked toward my trip to California in two long weeks.

CHAPTER 17

I headed back to bed, hugging Jesse's pillow to my chest as I felt the empty space I always felt when we were apart. I breathed in that masculine piney Christmas scent he had perfected, that scent that had become my favorite scent in the entire universe.

I fell asleep and dreamed of Jesse, a big bed, and all the promises he'd just made to me.

After I'd finally hauled my lazy ass out of bed later that day, I headed over to the house I shared with Richard. He was home, and I was conflicted over whether I actually wanted him to be there or not. I knew we needed to talk; I

wanted to confront him about The Scandal, but at the same time, I wanted nothing to do with his slimy face. Hatred simmered in my heart as I thought about the misery I'd endured for the past two months at his hands.

I knew it wasn't worth broaching the subject because it wouldn't change anything. The quicker I could get in and out, the better.

He was sprawled on the couch when I got there, watching the Golf channel. Something about that made me inexplicably hate him just a little more.

"We need to talk," I said, standing directly in front of the TV.

"About what?" he asked.

"About why the fuck you think it's

okay to ruin my life.”

Oops. That just sort of slipped out. I hadn't meant it to, but my intentions were better than my words.

“What are you talking about?”

I shook my head.

He still didn't move from his position on the couch. He waved his hand in the air, motioning for me to scoot away from the TV. I didn't budge.

He sighed in exaggerated frustration. “Will you fucking move over?”

“No,” I said. Then I turned around and shut off the television just for good measure.

“Bitch,” he muttered under his breath. I chose to ignore that one.

“I'm moving my stuff out this

weekend, Richard. I'll see you in court on the seventh. Don't forget that if you list this house, half of the commission is mine."

"Not if it sells after the divorce is finalized."

"Is that why you haven't put it on the market yet?" I asked, taking a power stance by placing my hands on my hips.

He shrugged, and he finally sat up on the couch.

"You're a real piece of work," I said.

A slick smile formed on his lips, and I rolled my eyes.

"I can't wait until June 7, when I will finally be finished with you."

"Oh, sweetheart. You'll never be finished with me."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ll always be your first husband. A little piece of you will always love me.”

“You know, I thought that for a long time. But after the shit you’ve put me through, now I just think you’ll always be the man who wasted five years of my life,” I shot back.

I spun on my heel and headed toward the bedroom I once shared with my husband. I’d already packed most of my personal belongings when I’d moved into Jesse’s, and I really didn’t want anything that would remind me of Richard. I didn’t want our bed. I didn’t want our couch. I didn’t want our kitchen set.

I wanted the little things; artwork I’d

picked up over the years, vases and decorations, a beautiful lamp, a decorative mirror. Old boxes filled with mementos from high school and college.

I didn't want our sheets or our towels or even our kitchen gadgets. Jesse had all of those things, anyway.

And that train of thought made me realize how dependent I'd become on Jesse. I'd always felt so independent with Richard; I was in a relationship, and I was married, but I was still on my own. I wasn't part of a team.

With Jesse, I was part of something bigger. We were in it together.

It wasn't dependence in the way that I became a fragile woman who relied on a man to support her; rather, it was

dependence in the way that I needed Jesse and his love. I needed his warm arms around me. I needed his encouragement and his strength and his laughter. I needed him to look at me with lust in his eyes and promise me that I was the only woman he wanted. These were the things that I had come to rely on in my life, and I was thriving in new ways that I didn't know I could thrive. I felt confident, loved, cherished, and treasured, and I realized how much I'd been missing out on because I'd never had any of that with Richard.

I packed up my car with as much as I could manage, starting with the keepsake box I had in the bedroom. I took my wedding dress, hoping I could find

someplace to sell it. If not, burning it was always an option.

I headed to the garage and pulled the Christmas ornaments that had special meaning to me. I took the boxes I considered mine and packed them in my car.

Richard didn't budge from his place on the couch. He never offered to help me. His eyes never left the television screen as I struggled through various rooms of the house with boxes.

The only time his eyes even flicked in my direction was when I pulled a painting off the wall next to the TV.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Taking what's mine.”

“That's not yours.”

“Yes, it is. I bought it at Pottery Barn two years ago.”

“With my credit card,” he shot back.

“That we paid for out of our shared account.”

“I want it.”

I didn't want the argument, but I didn't want to give it to him, either.

“Fine,” I said. “All yours.” I tossed it in his direction, and it landed on the floor. The glass in the frame shattered, causing the art inside to tear, and the frame cracked nearly in half.

He gaped at me in stunned shock, and I smiled at him with sarcastic and fake sweetness.

“What the fuck, Veronica?” he yelled at me.

I just continued to smile sweetly.

“That was a big mistake,” he said with a threatening tone.

“Marrying you was a big mistake. I’ll be back for the rest of my things later this week.”

I turned and walked out. I had everything I really needed, so if he decided to destroy what was left, then so be it. I didn’t need the reminders of him anyway, not after he leaked a very intimate and private moment between Jesse and me to one of his sleazy sources and not after he tried to take my job and my livelihood away from me.

The two weeks Jesse and I were apart dragged. Each day was a different uphill battle for a different reason,

mostly due to the fact that I just plain missed Jesse. We talked a minimum of three times a day. We texted throughout the day. We Skyped a few times. But none of it was the same as being next to him, feeling his warmth, or breathing in his scent like he was my oxygen.

I'd gone back to the house only one other time, aiming for a time when I knew Richard wouldn't be around. The asshole had boxed up most of what was left in the house, making it nearly impossible for me to find anything that I wanted. He'd taken every piece of artwork down that I hadn't gotten to in my previous visit, and I had no idea what he had done with any of it. The house looked nearly empty, actually,

except for the furniture, and that was fine by me. I found a few last minute items I had forgotten, but I realized that I'd have been fine without any of it.

I'd managed just fine without any of it since that fateful night in February when Jesse had taken me home with him.

I saw a picture of Richard and me on the counter. It was from our wedding reception. We were both smiling, but as I stared at myself in the picture, I could see an emptiness behind my eyes, an emptiness that was now gone. An emptiness that had been filled by someone else.

It struck me as strange that I had never noticed what had been missing from my life. I thought I was happy with

Richard, at least when we were dating and throughout our engagement. But maybe deep down inside, even on our wedding day, I knew that we didn't really belong together. It just wasn't something I came to terms with early enough to stop.

Finally, June 7 arrived.

I didn't sleep well the night before, mostly because my nerves were getting to me. I wasn't nervous to go to court and appear before a judge who was legally dissolving my marriage, though.

I was a fucking nervous wreck to fly to San Francisco, meet up with Jesse, and finally have "our night."

I pulled into the parking garage and walked to the courthouse where I would

enter a married woman and exit a single woman.

The proceedings were fairly simple. We both had lawyers; mine was John Buchanan, our school union lawyer. He didn't specialize in divorce, but he knew the law and that was good enough for me, and I trusted him after the ordeal with Jesse and me.

The judge declared that our house had to be listed by the end of the month by an impartial third party and we would evenly split the profit. He said that I could choose who would list it since Richard had too many connections in the real estate world.

Then he decreed the dissolution of our marriage, and before I knew it, it

was all over.

I thanked John and the judge, and then I headed to the Social Security office right next door to begin the official proceedings to change my name back to Veronica Freemont.

I stopped in a bar for a quick glass of celebratory wine. It seemed poignant that I was there by myself, drinking a glass of wine, an independent, single woman ready to start over.

I couldn't help the smile plastered on my face as I drank that glass of wine. A text came through from Jesse.

So are you single yet?

My smile widened as I read his words. *Indeed I am.*

You won't be for long.

I stared at that text for at least five full minutes as I tried to interpret his meaning. Did he just mean that I wouldn't be free because we were going to have "our night" together? Or did he mean that I wouldn't be free because he was looking toward building a future with me?

Was it strange that I wanted that future with Jesse as much as I did after I had literally just ended a marriage?

Talking to Jesse about his sister and about Carly showed me how fragile and precious life was. Even though they had chosen to end things, it didn't mean that life couldn't be ripped away from us in a heartbeat for a variety of other reasons. And maybe in their honor, Jesse wanted

to push forward and live his life without any regrets. Wasting time when we both knew that we were headed toward forever together seemed pointless.

I still hadn't replied when his next text came through. *I can't wait to see you, V.*

Can't wait to see you, either.

I headed home and packed for my trip, and then it was time to get myself to the airport. Quinn had offered to drive me so I didn't have to pay for parking during my three weeks away, and I gladly accepted. We left a little early so she could take me out for a celebratory drink on the way.

Once we'd placed our order, the gossip fest began. "So, Ms. Freemont,

what's the dirt of the day?"

"Apart from me finally being free of Richard?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'm pretty sure that by tomorrow night, I won't be able to walk from all of the sex."

"You and Juicy Jesse Yummypants. Who would've ever thought?"

"I knew all along," I said smugly, and Quinn laughed.

The waitress delivered our wine and we chatted and giggled.

"It's good to see you laughing again," Quinn said.

"It feels good, too. It was hell not knowing when I'd get to talk to Jesse again."

“I can imagine. You two are good together.”

I nodded. “We’re better together than we are apart.”

Quinn paid for our drinks, and then we headed to the airport. I checked in for my flight about an hour and a half before takeoff (which was a little before midnight), and I walked toward my terminal. In a few short hours, I’d be back in Jesse’s arms.

I dialed his number as soon as I found my departure gate and settled into a chair by the window. The terminal was fairly empty; it seemed like ours was one of the only flights taking off so late.

“Hey, baby,” he answered, his voice sleepy.

“Hey, you,” I murmured.

“It’s nice to hear your voice.”

“Did I wake you?”

“Yeah. Trying to catch a few hours of sleep before it’s time to come get you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

“Next time I get into a bed, it’ll be with you.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I.”

I blushed. He didn’t even have to be in the same room as me to make me blush. Or the same state, for that matter.

“I love you, Jesse Drake.”

“I love you, too, Veronica Freemont. And tomorrow I finally get to show you how much.”

We hung up and I warmed over at his words. I was ecstatic to begin my life with Jesse.

The flight took off and landed on time, and when I exited the terminal and headed toward baggage claim, I saw Jesse standing at the bottom of the escalator waiting for me, holding up a sign that read “V. Freemont.” He was gorgeous, literally taking my breath away for a moment as I waited impatiently for the escalator to bring me to him. I wanted to push the people in front of me out of the way to get to him, but I managed to restrain myself.

I smiled when I spotted him, drinking in his dark eyes that crinkled at the corners with a smile, his full, luscious

lips that would soon be dragging themselves across my skin stretched into a wide grin, the silky, dark hair that was, as always, styled into manscaped perfection, the adorable excitement of a kid on Christmas morning lighting up his face. He was looking up at me, and his eyes never left mine. Even from 200 feet away, I could see the love he had for me in his eyes, and I knew that the same love was shining right back at him.

When I got to the bottom of the escalator and it was my turn to get off, I ran into his open arms.

He buried his face in my neck. “I missed you, V,” he murmured as I breathed in that scent that now somehow represented love, hope, home, and the

future.

“I missed you more.”

He brought his lips to mine and kissed me softly, and then he leaned his forehead against mine. “Welcome to California,” he said.

“Good to be here,” I murmured, backing away from him to stare into his loving brown eyes and all the promises he held in them.

He took my hand in his and we walked to baggage claim. He pulled my luggage for me when it came around on the belt, and then we walked out to the parking garage and headed toward the hotel in the big black truck that still gave me flutters.

He knew we’d both be exhausted; it

was three in the morning, so we went to a hotel close to the airport and crashed. “Our night” would be the next night, a time when we were well-rested and could spend as much time as we wanted just focusing on each other.

We woke up a little before noon, and my playful Jesse was back. He was spooning me, and he pushed his hips into my backside, demonstrating to me just how ready he was for action. I was ready for it, too, but not before I brushed my teeth, and not in an airport Holiday Inn Express when we had romantic wine country within an hour drive.

We got up and I showered, taking my time to shave my legs carefully and clean all the bits and pieces really well.

Jesse took a little longer than normal getting ready, too, and then we checked out and went on our way.

Jesse informed me that Highway 29 was the home to most of the wineries, so we decided to drive along until we found one we wanted to tour. There were nearly 300 wineries in the area, and he knew how much I loved wine. I took in the beautiful landscape on our drive before we started seeing wineries. Jesse pulled into the parking lot of the third winery we passed and paid for a guided tour, and the two of us walked through the gift shop and chose souvenirs while we waited for our tour group to be called.

We held hands, laughed, and snuck in

quick kisses. It was the most romantic and perfect vacation I could imagine, and I could not think of a single person on this earth with whom I would've enjoyed my time more. Jesse bought two bottles of wine from each winery we visited, and I bought two wineglasses from each winery to commemorate our visits. By the time the day was done, we'd toured five wineries and had ten bottles of wine and ten glasses. And we were going to start again the next day and do the exact same thing.

We headed to the hotel Jesse had booked for "our night" and three additional nights that would also belong to us. It was the Auberge du Soleil, a gorgeous resort with an amazing view of

Napa Valley known for its romance and its Michelin star restaurant. I was tipsy from all of the wine tasting throughout our day, but thankfully it only served to calm my nerves while simultaneously heightening the anticipation between the two of us.

We checked in and headed to our room, or rather, to our deluxe suite that was bigger than the apartment I had shared with three other women in college. The room featured a California King bed, valley views, and a private patio with an outdoor rain shower and private hot tub. Candles were set up all over the room, and an assortment of bath oils was arranged in the huge bathroom that featured heated limestone floors.

“Heated floors?” I asked.

Jesse grinned. “Only the best for my girl,” he said, melting the panties right off of me with that sweet endearment.

“Now get dressed. We’ve got reservations in thirty minutes.”

I rushed around the bathroom with heated floors, my feet plenty warm as I curled my hair and changed out of my comfy jeans and t-shirt combination that I’d paired with my sassy boots for our winery tours and into a strapless pale pink sequined dress that flared out at my hips and cascaded softly to my knees. I completed the look with a pair of sparkly pink heels and some chunky sparkly jewelry.

I emerged from the bathroom twenty-

five minutes later to find Jesse sitting on the couch, looking out the window that overlooked the valley. It was a gorgeous view, and I didn't even see what was out the window; all I had eyes for was my Jesse.

I stared at his profile for a brief moment before he saw me. His eyes were focused outside, and he looked like he was lost in thought. His brows were knit together, giving him a smoldering air. His hair was that perfect mess and he hadn't bothered shaving, probably because he knew how sexy I thought he was when he was just a little scruffy. He was wearing a black suit with a white shirt under it and no tie. He looked pulled together and neat, but more than

that, he looked like a male model posing for a magazine advertisement.

His gaze turned to me when I entered the room, and the smoldering air about him became a fiery inferno as his eyes glazed over with lust when he took in my appearance. He ran his hand through his hair, and then he stood and sauntered slowly over to me.

“You’re glowing,” he murmured, taking both of my hands in his.

“Exquisite and beautiful and elegant all mixed into one perfect V.” He leaned in to kiss me, landing a gentle one on the sensitive skin of my neck, and the Christmasy piney man scent was overpoweringly sensual as it all hit me at once.

We were really going to do this. He was really going to take me to dinner, a real date, and then we were going to come back to this room and take our relationship to a brand new place, a place that we'd both been desperately waiting for much longer than either of us cared to admit.

The nerves that the wine had managed to settle earlier were suddenly back in full effect, as were the fluttery butterflies that I always got around Jesse. The flutters were beating against my belly, my heart was beating against my chest, and my pulse was beating in my ears. I was suddenly a nervous wreck.

He brushed his lips against mine softly, and then he leaned his forehead to

mine. “Are you as nervous as I am?” he asked, his hands still gripping mine.

“Probably even more so,” I whispered.

He kissed me again, and somehow knowing that he was anxious about our night together made me feel better. It was just another sign that we were truly in this together.

Dinner was delicious.

Maybe.

I’m not really sure since I couldn’t concentrate on anything except Jesse’s lips. I watched him eat with fascination, his tongue darting out to catch a stray crumb or his long fingers wiping sauce away from the corner of his mouth. All I could think about was how that tongue

and those fingers were going to be all over my naked flesh soon.

I wished I'd dedicated some more time to working out over the past three months. It had all been leading to this night, and as I picked at my food, I was suddenly worried that I just wasn't good enough for Jesse Drake.

"How come you're not eating?" he asked midway through the meal.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, looking up at him. "I can't focus on food when I know what's coming next."

He grinned a sinful little smile. "That's why I'm eating so much. Need the fuel," he said, taking another bite of his steak.

I smiled back, loving his expertise at

calming me and breaking the tension. I took a sip of my wine, and then I realized that if I didn't eat something soon that I'd just pass out from drinking wine on an empty stomach. And that would really ruin our evening. So I forced down some food, unable to concentrate on what I was eating as I thought about what it would be like when his body finally connected with mine.

I tried to focus on the beautiful scenery right outside the window, but I failed miserably. The only scenery I wanted to drink in was the man seated across from me. But I would prefer if he was stark naked. Okay, maybe not in the restaurant, but it was the only imagery in

my mind.

Finally dinner was over. It seemed to take forever, but in actuality it was less than an hour. Each passing second of our meal caused the aching throb between my legs to pulsate more as I stared across the table at the man who would soon be mine in every way.

Jesse charged the meal to our room, and then he took my hand and led me to the bar, where he ordered a bottle of wine. The sommelier opened the bottle and poured us each a glass, and then we took our glasses and our bottle and headed up to our suite.

When we arrived, Jesse set down the bottle of wine and his wineglass on the end table, and then he took off his suit

jacket. He draped it over the couch, and then he walked over to me. He took my glass out of my hand and placed it next to his, and then he took my hand in his and pulled me close against him. He laced his fingers through mine and pulled my arm behind his back, the same way he'd held me the first night he'd kissed me.

His other hand came up to my face, and his fingertips grazed down my jaw and then circled around my neck. He leaned his forehead to mine.

“Are you ready for this?” he whispered.

I answered by kissing him, taking the initiative for once in our relationship. I brought my free hand up to his face and

ran my fingers down that gorgeous jaw of his, feeling the soft hair become rough as I ran my fingers upward. He let go of the hand he held behind his back and he placed his hand on the small of my back, drawing me in closer to him as his mouth opened to mine.

It was one of those kisses that started out soft and sensual but gained momentum quickly as the inferno of need took over inside us both.

He started backing us up toward the bedroom, and somehow in my lust my hands moved up around his neck and his hands moved down to my thighs and pulled upward, so I laced my legs around his waist. He broke our kiss to carry me to the bedroom, and my lips

moved down his neck. I traced the strong line of his jaw with my tongue, feeling that perfect, coarse stubble as I went, knowing that at some point during that night, I'd feel that stubble moving across the planes of my body.

When we arrived in the bedroom, Jesse set me on the bed. He knelt on the floor and removed the heel from my left foot, and then he massaged my foot. He did the same with my right foot, and all I could do was sit back and enjoy it. I moaned in pleasure as I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, enjoying the feeling of his hands on my feet. Then he trailed kisses starting at my ankle and moving up my leg to my knee. Seeing him kneeling between my legs did

something serious to my libido, and suddenly I didn't want to take things slowly anymore. The nervousness had subsided completely as I knew that this moment was for us, and this moment was meant to be. I wanted him inside of me. I felt needy and wanton and full of desire.

But he had different plans.

He'd told me that he was going to make love to me slowly and gently the first time, and he was certainly delivering on his words. He was seducing me and proving that he was an expert at seduction.

After he made his way to my knee, he stood up slowly. He bent down and removed his shoes and his socks, and then he turned back toward me.

I stood up and walked to him. I pulled the bottom of his shirt out from his pants, and my heart raced as I anticipated seeing his perfect, sculpted body in front of me without any clothes. But this time, I could look, taste, and touch all I wanted. I was free, liberated, and ready to give myself to Jesse as everything that had been building between us for over five years erupted in a volcano of lust and desire.

I could feel his eyes on me and I heard his breathing quicken as I took one of his hands in mine, unbuttoning his cuffs. I did the same to the other side, and his hands went to my hips as I started working my way up the row of buttons holding his shirt closed, hiding

that washboard that I was about to taste. My progress was slow as my fingers fumbled in anticipation.

When I finally reached the top, I pushed his shirt back toward his shoulders and then stepped back to admire the beauty before me. I stared at his broad chest, his sculpted abdomen, that gorgeous tattoo that held so much symbolism for him. My palms started on his lower stomach and moved upward. I could feel every muscle beneath my hands, and while we'd been sleeping next to each other for a long time now, him without a shirt and my arm flung across his waist, this was different. This was our moment, and I sighed contentedly, knowing that this was mine

now as my palms reached his chest and stopped on his nipples. I felt his heart racing beneath my hand.

He pulled me into him and lowered his head, resting his forehead on mine, and my hands slid around to the warm skin on his back as his arms wrapped around me. He drew in a deep breath, and then his mouth found mine, and I could literally feel the love he had for me as he poured it all into our connection.

His tongue danced slowly in my mouth as one of his hands caressed my face and the other tangled in the hair at the nape of my neck. I could tell he was restraining himself from attacking me, but he'd promised me slow and sensual

before fast and hard. I wanted both. I wanted it all, and most of all, I wanted him sliding into my wet and ready body.

My hands suddenly took on a mind of their own and moved down the skin of his back to his ass. I grabbed it and then held on with my left hand while my right hand moved slowly to his hip and then around to the front. My hand caressed the front of his pants, and I could feel his rock hard erection beneath my fingers. He groaned into me as he deepened our kiss, and my caress turned into a fondle as I grabbed him in my hand. He arched his hips into my hand and broke our kiss, closing his eyes and leaning his head back, his neck strained and corded, his arms still around me. A sexy growl

rumbled up from his chest as I stroked him through his pants.

Jesse opened his eyes and they met mine. His were glazed with craving and lust and some sort of carnal hunger, and I knew the same was reflected in my own eyes back at him.

He lowered his head to my neck and planted soft kisses while his fingers found the zipper on the back of my dress. I was becoming desperate for him as he lowered my zipper with deliberate leisure, and I couldn't wait for him to unwrap the surprise I had for him under my dress.

Once the zipper was down, my dress fell in a pool on the floor. I stood before Jesse Drake completely naked, and this

time it wasn't because he had surprised me with orange juice and I dropped my towel.

He stood back and gaped at me for a moment. "Jesus Christ," he murmured. "You weren't wearing anything under that dress all night?" His voice was hoarse from lust.

I shook my head slowly, and a wicked grin flashed across his lips.

He struggled out of his shirt, which landed on the floor behind him, and he pulled me against the length of his body. The only thing separating us now was his pants. I could feel his erection pressed against my lower belly. "God, I love you," he said, and then I grabbed onto his neck and wrapped my legs

around his waist.

“I love you more,” I murmured. He held onto me under my thighs, and our mouths collided together once again.

He walked us over to the bed, and then he lowered us slowly. I felt the soft, cool comforter against my back, a heady contrast to Jesse’s heat covering my front.

My legs were still wrapped around him, but now we were lying on the bed. His hips thrust into me again and again as that aching throb between my legs pulsed through my entire body. It was almost painful how much I wanted him inside of me. He leaned up, bracing himself with his arms on either side of my shoulders as he hovered over me. I

ran my fingers down his chest and felt that ridiculously outstanding washboard stomach. He leaned down and kissed my neck, moving his way down to my chest and finally taking one of my nipples in his mouth as his hand found my other breast. My hands wrapped around the back of his head, pulling his mouth harder against me, forcing more of my breast into his hot mouth.

He moaned against me as I arched up into him, taking the pleasure he was delivering. I felt my body tightening beneath him, driving me closer to an orgasm just from the way his tongue lapped against my nipple. That was a first.

He backed off and turned so he was

lying on his side next to me and I was still on my back. My hand wandered back down to his hard dick, and he leaned up over me and took my nipple back in his mouth as his fingertips trailed down my skin from my breast, over my rib cage, across my belly, to my hip, and then down to my wet and waiting vagina.

He teased my pubic bone with his fingers while his mouth continued working my breast, and then he slid one finger down into my warmth. I heard another one of those sexy growls as he felt how wet I was for him. That was just what he did to me.

His mouth trailed back up to mine, and then he pushed two fingers inside of

me. My hips arched up as he drove his fingers in as far as they would go. He left them in for a moment, and then he slid them out before driving them back in again. Holy fuck, if he kept that up, I was going to shatter into a million pieces around him.

And he did keep it up. And I did shatter into a million pieces around him.

My body was coiled tightly, tense beneath him, and he managed to unwind me while simultaneously wrecking me with a few perfect flicks of his wrist.

It had been far too long since I had been with a man, and the lust that had been building between us since that fateful night at happy hour when I'd confessed my separation to Jesse

exploded into the most earth shaking orgasm of my entire life.

I felt him smile against my neck. He pulled his fingers out of me and pressed a kiss to my skin, and then he leaned on the pillow. Propping on his elbow, he gazed at my face.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, lost in a daze from the pleasure and my Jesse.

“Good?” he asked.

I beamed up at him and stretched my arms out above my head lazily. “You really know what the hell you’re doing.”

“Just wait until I fuck you,” he grinned lasciviously.

“I’m ready,” I whispered.

“So am I. I’ve been ready for five long years, V.”

He bent toward me for another one of those hot kisses, and then he stood up and removed his pants. Seeing him naked in front of me sent quivers to every corner of my body and lit my blood on fire. I stared at his erection made hard from me. I did that to him, just like he turned me on in ways that no other man ever had. And just like the time I'd accidentally caught him naked at his parents' house, I drank in his perfect body that now belonged solely to me.

He stalked slowly toward me, and then he was hovering over me. I waited with delicious anticipation for his body to unite with mine. His eyes met mine, and I could see the love and desire he had for me written there. I felt his

erection rest for a moment against my entrance, and then he guided the head through my slickness just once. He leaned down to kiss me, and then he glided into me.

My walls gripped him to me as he groaned at his entrance. I whispered his name as he held still inside of me. The final missing piece of the puzzle clicked into place as I felt us fit together with complete perfection. It was like my body had been made for his.

He pulled back and propelled forward again, whispering to me as he sensually and tenderly made love to me. "You're perfect," he whispered, and then he drove into me again.

I felt his love as he cherished me, his

beautiful words washing over me and driving me closer to my second orgasm of the night.

He somehow found that magical spot inside of me. Usually it took every star to align just the right way in the sky and a little bit of witchcraft for me to climax, but Jesse instinctively knew how to take care of my needs.

His thrusts remained slow and gentle the entire time, and just as I felt everything inside of me clench in preparation for my second shattering orgasm, he grunted and yelled out my name as he detonated fiercely inside of me, causing me to convulse around him, tightening and squeezing him. I stared at his gorgeous face as he fell apart above

me. He was beautiful as his face contorted in pleasure, and something about the sight of him falling apart over me would be burned into my memory for the rest of my life.

He collapsed on top of me, his face buried in my chest, both of us panting from the exertion as he slipped out of me.

“Fuck, V,” he whispered.

“Ditto,” I whispered back, clutching him close to my chest.

He kissed the valley between my breasts and then he stood up. I shivered in his absence. He walked out of the bedroom and returned a moment later, carrying both of our glasses and the bottle he’d set down when we first came

back from dinner.

He handed my glass to me and set down his glass and the bottle on the nightstand. He disappeared into the closet for a few seconds and returned carrying two bathrobes. He handed one to me, and I reluctantly moved from my spot on the bed to slip into the robe as he put on his, too. He lit the fireplace at the foot of our bed while I took a moment to freshen up in the bathroom, and then we settled back on the bed together with our wine.

“To the best sex of my life,” he said, holding his glass up in a toast.

I touched my glass to his as I melted at his words. His reputation preceded him, but I had to agree with his

sentiment. Something about our bodies together was just natural. “By far, the best sex of my life,” I smiled, and then I took a sip while he grinned at me, melting the panties I wasn’t wearing right off of me.

“So, Ms. Freemont, what would you like to do for the rest of the night?” he asked.

“That again,” I said, a sheepish grin spreading across my face.

“I’m in. Give me about ten minutes and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised at his recharge speed.

He allowed his eyes to wander up and down my robe clad body, and then he slowly nodded. “Really,” he

confirmed, his dark eyes glinting. He tossed open his robe and glanced down before covering up. "I'm already hard for you again."

My face warmed as the predictable blush spread across my cheeks and down my neck.

"But this time, I'm not going slow."

"I don't want you to," I whispered, the carnal promise driving my lust for him into another dimension of wild and crazy.

"This time," he said, leaning toward me, his voice a low and sexy promise, "I'm going to take you fast and hard. I'm going to fuck you until you scream my name. I'm going to slam into you until you can't take any more of my dick."

I took a sip of my wine, trying to maintain my cool at his hot words. I was met with little success as my wineglass trembled in my hand.

He stood up and walked over to my side of the bed. He took my free hand, the glass still in my other hand, and then he led me over to the loveseat in the bedroom of our suite that overlooked the valley of wineries below us. I sat on the loveseat and he settled in next to me, tossing an arm around my shoulders loosely. I leaned into him, enjoying the wine and the view and the hot, hard man beside me.

He pressed his lips to my temple, and that may have been the single most romantic moment of my life. He'd just

finished making love to me, and I felt different. I felt like our relationship had changed; we'd been friends first, and then we fell in love while we lived together, and now we were lovers. With the fireplace lit beside us and the gorgeous view in front of us and our wineglasses filled with a crisp and sweet sparkling wine, I couldn't think of anything else that would make "our night" together any more perfect.

And then he set his glass down on the table and proved me wrong.

He knelt between my legs and shoved each of my knees to the sides, giving himself an opening. He looked up at my eyes, his handsome face shadowed and dangerous and animalistic. He leaned

forward and pressed a soft kiss to the inside of my thigh, and I whimpered beneath him. I set my glass down before I snapped the stem of it off in my hand, and my hand found his hair as he trailed kisses closer and closer to my opening.

He swiped his tongue once through me, and I jerked on the couch. My body was still sensitive after my two orgasms, and he was well on his way to delivering me my third of the night.

And then he really went to work. His tongue was rough against my clit, applying just the right amount of pressure. He sucked softly on me, and then his tongue entered me. I grabbed his head and held him against me as he fucked me with his tongue. He brought

his fingers up to join in on the action, and suddenly I needed to taste him in my mouth, too.

I let go of his head and pushed him back. He rested back on his knees, and I stood, pulling him up with me. I pushed his shoulders back, and he landed on the couch. I knelt between his legs and pulled his long and thick erection into my mouth. He thrust up into me, and I took him as far back into my throat as I could. "Fuck," he muttered, grabbing onto my hair as I bobbed up and down over him, licking and sucking on him as if I needed him in my mouth to survive.

"Jesus," he cursed, and then he grabbed me under my arms and hauled me up on top of him. "You're going to

make me come, and I've got plans for your mouth later. Right now I want to come when I'm buried fucking balls deep in that tight pussy."

It took every bit of control I had not to convulse just at his naughty words.

He pulled me down over his waiting erection and impaled me. We were both still in our robes, but it didn't matter. His hands were on my ass as he moved me up and down his length. My robe came undone, and my breasts bounced around in front of him. He buried his face in my chest as he drove up into me, and this was the hard and fast fucking he had been referring to. It was every bit as good as the soft and sensual love he'd just delivered, but in a completely

different way.

This was the Jesse I had imagined when I thought about what he must have been like in bed. He knew what he was doing when it came to the bedroom, and I had a strong inclination that I was the first woman he'd ever made love to as slowly and sensually as he just had. I loved every second of both options, and all I could think about as he thrust up into me was how much I loved him and how much time we had wasted by not being together.

He pulled me off of him and threw me down aggressively on the couch, facedown. He reared up behind me and thrust back into me, his fingers reaching around for my clit as he drove in and out

from behind.

He had told me that he was going to make me scream his name while he fucked me, and he succeeded.

Both of his hands moved to my shoulders so he could get a better grasp on me as he stood on the floor and drove in and out of me. My loud moans turned feral and carnal, a scream of pleasure escaping me as he thrust up fast and hard. His groans and grunts matched mine, and then all of the sudden my body splintered into another shattering climax. “Fuck!” he yelled, drawing out the word as he exploded into me, gripping my shoulders hard as his fingertips dug into my skin.

If we were panting after the first time

when we made love, this time both of our chests were heaving as we fought to catch our breath after that. I turned around the moment he shifted out of me, and he lay down beside me on the couch, pulling me into his arms and planting soft kisses all over my face.

I was completely drained after what he just did to me but entirely and totally sated.

He held me in his arms and we both fell asleep on the couch with smiles on our faces and tingles racing through our veins at how perfect “our night” turned out to be.

CHAPTER 18

The next morning, we showered together. I was stiff from the fucking, and his threat had been absolutely spot on; I was having a hard time walking, but all I wanted was for him to be buried back inside of me.

We'd shared a lot of intimacy over the past several months, but nothing compared to the feeling of his body sliding into mine, to the tender affection we shared when he was making love to me.

He washed every square inch of my body, massaging the soap with loving fingers into my shoulders and my back. He washed my hair for me and rinsed it,

and I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt more cared for or loved in my entire life. I returned the favor, and then we got ready together and headed out for another day of winery tours.

We'd already been through two tours, and we found ourselves on our third tour of the day. We were both a little tipsy, warm from the wine and the sunshine, and we were wandering through the vineyards on our tour when Jesse held my hand back for a moment. I turned into him with a smile and pressed a kiss to his lips, and when I pulled back, he gave me an intensely erotic look.

I glanced around us and realized that in our quick private moment, we'd lost our tour group.

“Uh oh,” Jesse said, looking around with mock disappointment. “Where did our group go?”

I shrugged with a wicked smile, because his intentions were very clear.

He pulled my hand hard so I landed against him, and his mouth collided aggressively with mine. I suddenly didn't care that we were in public. We were in a vineyard with grapes growing all around us. We were enough rows away from the path that we could easily hide and not get caught, and all I could think about was Jesse inside of me.

He pulled his lips from mine and we walked a few rows over, off the tour path where we'd have the privacy we needed for what was sure to be a quick

fuck.

He quickly unbuckled his belt and lowered his jeans just a bit, and then he sat on the ground and motioned for me to join him. I was, thankfully, wearing a skirt, and I sat on top of him. He moved my panties aside with his finger and then guided himself into me. I threw my arms around his neck, trying to be quiet in case there was another tour group coming through.

“Oh my God,” I moaned. “You feel so good, Jesse.”

“I don’t know how we went so long without this,” he said, thrusting hard up into me. I buried my face in his neck and thought about his words as he made love to me in a vineyard. I didn’t know how

we went so long without it, either, because now, even after only one night together, it was as natural as breathing.

He grunted softly as he pushed up, and I was trying somewhat unsuccessfully to be quiet as I took him as deeply as he could go. He shifted us so I was on my back. He drove into me, and the exhibitionism of it all got to me fast. It wasn't long before we simultaneously found our climaxes, and his mouth covered mine as I nearly screamed out in pleasure.

He chuckled as he leaned his forehead to mine once both of our bodies stopped shuddering. "Good?" he asked.

"More," I murmured incoherently in response.

He grinned. "Later."

He stood up, unruffled as always, and fastened his jeans. I lay back for a moment to try to regain my composure. He reached his hand down to help me up, and I took it, smoothing out my skirt as I stood. He yanked my hand so I fell against him again, and even after the raunchy sex we just had in the middle of a vineyard, he still managed to set the flutters afire in my belly with just one smoldering look. It was times like those when his eyes met mine and the flutters started battling against my insides that I felt that wave of love for him roll through me.

I don't know how I ever lived without Jesse in my life.

We caught back up to our tour group, and it didn't appear that anyone had noticed we'd been gone for a few hot and sexy minutes. The guide was talking about the fermentation process when we rejoined the group, and it was a lot of the same information we had already heard at the other wineries. The best part came at the end of the tour when we got to sample the wine.

I heard Jesse unsuccessfully stifle a laugh behind me, covering it with a cough, and then he pulled something out of my hair. I turned around to shush him as he held up a twig. I started giggling uncontrollably, trying to be mature and quiet while the tour guide was talking, but it just wasn't happening.

I couldn't stop quaking with laughter, so Jesse pulled me back outside, where he burst into laughter as well. We were so close to not being caught... and then there was the random grape branch left in my hair from rolling around in the vineyard.

I wiped tears from my eyes and Jesse grabbed my hand, placing the twig into my palm. "A souvenir," he said with a grin.

I would keep that twig for the rest of my life.

The rest of our time in Napa passed in much the same way. We were like two people on our honeymoon, spending as much naked time together as we could manage while enjoying the sights of

wine country and the food and beverages the area had to offer. We found quiet corners where Jesse would kiss me or shadowed doorways where we found a moment to grope one another. There may have even been a bathroom or two we ducked into to fool around in.

We drove through California slowly. We stayed with some of Jesse's friends, and he always introduced me as his girlfriend. We spent a night in Malibu and enjoyed the beach; we spent a couple of nights in Los Angeles and hit all of the tourist spots. He even took me to Six Flags Magic Mountain, and the thrill of riding roller coasters while holding his hand had nothing on the thrill of sprawling naked underneath Jesse

Drake when we got back to our hotel room.

We ended up back in Santa Monica at his parents' house for the last week of June. They welcomed me back with open arms, as loving and friendly as they had been the last time.

But this time, when we went back home after our time off the grid together, there wouldn't be some scandal waiting for us. Now that I wasn't married anymore, nothing was going to keep us apart.

Plenty of couples who worked together were able to maintain professionalism at work. One of our science teachers was married to one of our math teachers, and no one ever

accused them of fucking on the office copiers. The district had issued a public apology shortly after summer break began, and that was good enough for me. I knew that when August came and a new school year started, everyone would forget the scandals the previous year held anyway.

Jesse and I sat on the back patio of the Drake's house after his parents had gone to bed for the night, our fingers twined as we relaxed in our comfortable Adirondack chairs.

“Want to take a walk?” Jesse asked me. I nodded, and he took my hand and led me down the stairs. He paused and sat on the bottom step just like last time, taking off his shoes and leaving them on

the stairs. I mirrored him, taking off my sandals and setting them on the step. He was wearing shorts, but I had jeans on. He patted his knee and I put my foot on it, and just like last time, he rolled the leg of my pants up for me.

I switched legs, and he rolled that pant leg up as well. He took my foot in his hand and kissed the top of it, and just like last time, I inexplicably felt a little harder for him.

“I love this foot,” he said softly, his voice raspy. He set my foot down and ran his hands up my calf. “I love the leg it’s attached to,” he said, his hands reaching my hips. “And most of all, I love the woman who walks on these gorgeous legs.” I leaned down to kiss

him softly on the lips, and he took the kiss over, pulling my head toward him and opening his mouth to mine. Somehow I ended up spread across his legs, and he pulled back, kissing me twice at the end. He left me breathless, just as always, and the flutters fired up again. I never knew that it could be like this, that I could still feel the flutters in my belly for a man even after we'd grown used to being together. I always thought that the newness of a relationship was what caused that, but I was discovering that it was attraction that initially caused it, and it was true love that made it last.

I stood up from his lap so we could go for our walk, momentarily dazed by

his kiss. I started down the beach, and when I turned around to see if Jesse was following behind me, I saw that he was still sitting on the steps. I walked back toward him, and he took both of my hands in his.

“I’ve learned the hard way that life is too short to waste time. V, I don’t want to waste any more time. I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you because I will never love another woman the way I love you. No other woman will ever make me feel like you make me feel. I want to be your husband. I want to have children with you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

My eyes widened and my jaw dropped as I took in the scene before

me. The man I loved was telling me that he wanted to commit his life to mine after I'd only been free from my first husband for a week. The haunted Jesse who held his secrets inside was gone. This was a man who was an open book that only I had the pleasure of reading, and I wanted to read with him for the rest of my life.

“I don't have a ring or a date in mind or anything like that. But, V, I have a promise. I promise to commit my life to yours. I promise to love you every single day the way you deserve to be loved. And I promise that someday soon, we will go ring shopping together and have whatever kind of wedding you want to have. Sound good?”

Like I said earlier, we all get one true love in our lives, and it's up to us to find it. Fate will act and try to push us together, but ultimately it's up to us to recognize who that one person is when he's standing in front of us.

“Yes!” I yelled into the quiet night. “Sounds perf!” He stood up and wrapped his arms around me, burying his face in my neck. He planted a row of kisses from behind my ear to my jaw, and then his lips met mine.

Someday soon I would marry Jesse Drake, and with that, I knew that Fate had led me to the right man this time.

EPILOGUE

Two Years Later: Jesse Drake

She was more beautiful every day, but today she was glowing. I had loved her from the first second I had ever seen her, and I bided my time patiently waiting for her. I had known she was the woman for me the very moment I spotted her, but I didn't get the luxury of having what I knew was mine because she had found someone else first.

But the past didn't matter anymore. She was my wife now, and she would be forever. She had taken an empty void that I'd had for fifteen years and

managed to fill it with her laughter and her beauty and her wisdom without even trying. She was the one person put on this earth for me, and while Fate had played a fun little game in keeping us apart, we'd eventually found our way together, right where we belonged.

I'll never forget the night she told me she was getting divorced from the asshole with two first names. I had plans that night to hook up with Tami from the bar again, but the moment I saw that Veronica was suffering, I had to be there for her. I never imagined what it would actually lead to for us. I always held onto the hope that someday it would all work out, but I never would have guessed that she'd been attracted to me

all along, too, and that living together would ignite the feelings between us that would turn so quickly from friendship into something deeper. But I knew the moment that I first held her in my arms that I didn't want to ever hold another woman again.

"It's okay, baby," I murmured, and she held my hand tightly. I glanced down at the IV taped to her hand, careful not to squeeze back too hard.

"I'm scared, Jesse," she said, looking up at me from her hospital bed as tears streamed down her face.

"I know, V. I am, too. But we've got this." I was much more confident in her than I was in myself, but I wasn't about to let that weakness show through. I had

to be strong for my wife. I had to be her rock when she was scared, and I knew that this was one of her biggest fears realized. Hell, it was one of my biggest fears realized, too, but I was the man. I wasn't going to admit to her how many sleepless nights I'd had just thinking about this day.

So I kissed her tears and brushed them away with my thumbs, and then I pressed a kiss to her forehead as I thought about our families sitting in the waiting room. My mom and V's mom had become close friends once Mrs. Freemont saw how much I loved her daughter and how good we were for each other. V was right; her family was conservative, but they were family, and

when it really mattered, they had come through.

“I love you, Jesse Drake.”

“I love you more, Veronica Drake. You have nothing to be scared about. I know that together, we are going to be every single thing she needs.”

She smiled at me through her tears. “I love you,” she whispered to our sleeping, sweet pink bundle that she held in her arms.

Someday she would say it back to us, her mother and her father.

I leaned down and kissed our baby on her forehead. “I love you, Allison Carly Drake. You and your mother are **my** whole world.”

And they would be. Forever.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With each book comes a longer list of people to thank, and there are countless people to whom I am grateful for their support with this book.

Thank you first to my husband for being patient with me while I wrote nonstop during the month of November. Thank you, Rock Man, for being by my side, for listening to me rave about how hot Jesse Drake is, and for not being worried when I told you that I wanted to write a book about an English teacher getting a divorce and falling for a coworker. You know you're my number one always and forever... well, you and the dog.

Thank you to my family and friends. I have the world's best parents and family, and special thanks to my brother for maintaining my amazing webpage.

Thank you to my awesome street team, TEAM LSD. I have found a beautiful group of women who support me and encourage me every single day. Special thanks to Karen Muller, the world's greatest PA. I don't know how I ever did this without her. Jennifer Dotson and her fucking vodka and pictures give me inspiration to write hot sex scenes, but more than that, she has become a trusted friend. April Pool-Jamison coined the term "Yummypants" and I have to thank her for letting me steal it to describe Juicy Jesse. Anna

Nicole Ureta was with me from the beginning and I'm grateful to her for her unending support. I also want to thank the rest of the wonderful women in TEAM LSD: Joann, Sara, Katie, Janna, Linda, Johnnie-Marie, Jennifer, Gia, Kelly, Crystal, Lenissa, Tiffani, and Kristine.

Thank you to the hundreds of blogs and Facebook pages and Facebook groups who have supported me and my characters. It doesn't go unnoticed, and I appreciate all you do to help spread the word about my books to your readers. Special thanks to Mary Tatar from Love Between the Sheets for organizing the Blog Tour for *Separation Anxiety*, to Karen Muller for organizing the cover

reveal, the release day blitz, and the release week celebration, and to Jennifer Dotson for her behind the scenes support for the release celebration.

Thank you to Jenn Elliott for the title *Separation Anxiety*.

Thank you to the musicians who make music that inspires my writing, specifically Matchbox Twenty and Maroon 5.

Finally, thank YOU for reading. If you enjoyed the story, I would be grateful if you left a review on Amazon (and Goodreads)!

XOXO, Lisa Suzanne

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Lisa Suzanne is a high school English teacher who lives at home in Arizona with her amazing husband and adorable yellow lab. She loves summer more than her students do. She has loved to write for as long as she can remember.

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