

The background of the entire image is a romantic painting. In the foreground, a man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has long, wavy red hair and is looking down. The man is shirtless and has his hand on her shoulder. The background of the painting shows a classical building with columns and statues, possibly a temple or a museum, under a warm, golden light.

Cameron Dane

Something
New

Loose Id

Something New

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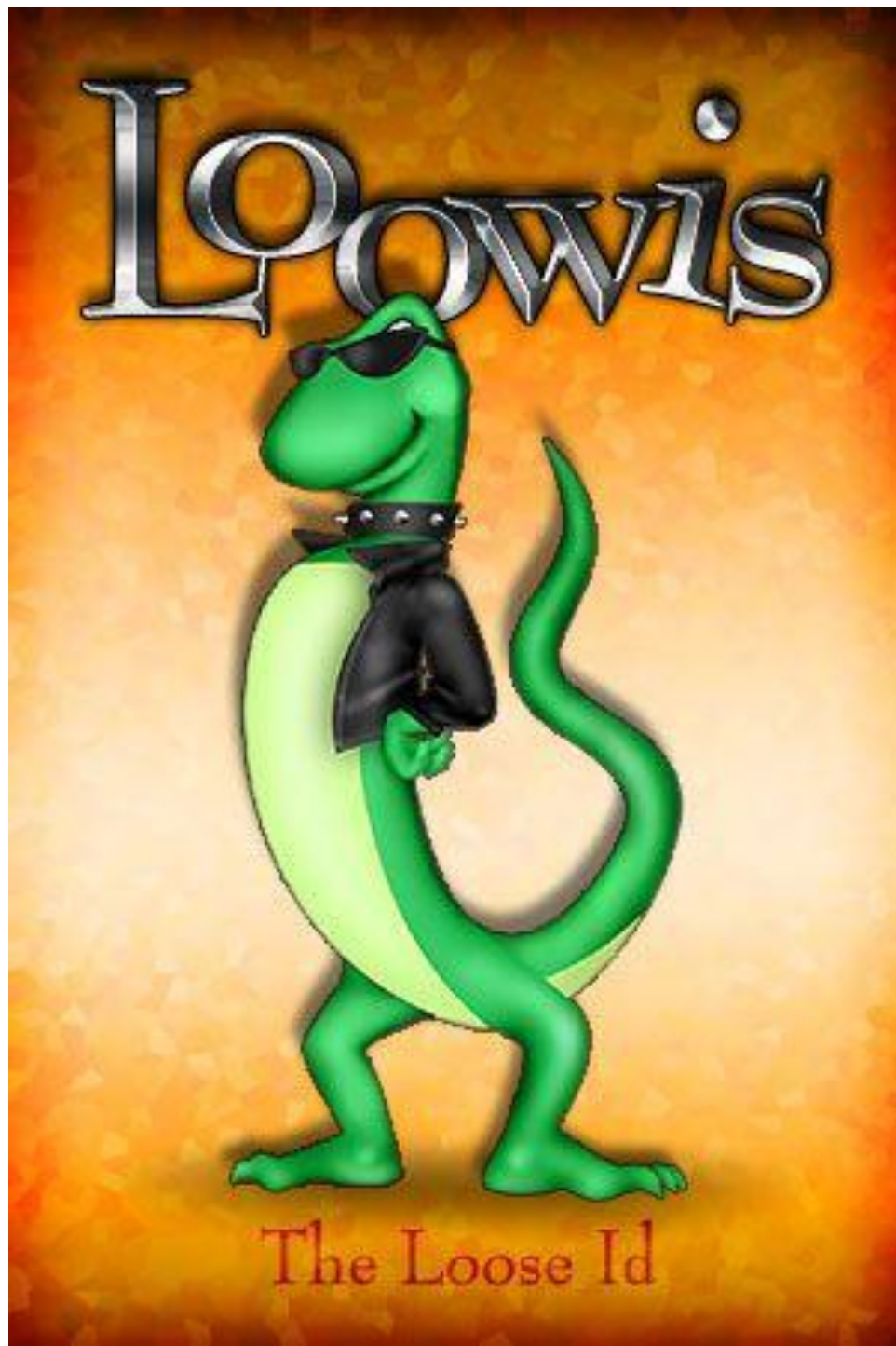
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Prologue

Eighteen years ago

Mommy! Mommy! Daddy!

Abby screamed for her parents on the inside, but the terror shrieking through her system did not produce sound.

She huddled in the darkness, her body palpitating like a water-deprived dog on the hottest Florida August day. She peeked through the slats in the accordion door and obeyed the look in her mother's unblinking eyes.

I promise, Mommy. I won't say a word.

Crashing noises and shouting filled the humid air surrounding Abby, the sounds so loud she clamped her hands on her ears as tightly as she could, praying it would end soon and her mommy would stop staring and tell her it was okay to come out of the closet.

Bare legs crossed right in front of the closet, and quickly after, a second set encased in jeans followed. Abby drew back, disappearing completely into the masses of clothes behind her.

Daddy. Abby recognized the funny bull's-head tattoo on the bare leg.

A loud thumping noise shook the walls, and then a cry pierced through the closet and sent shivers through Abby's bones.

"Please don't. My daughter..." Her father's voice sounded like did when she gurgled her milk sometimes. "I'm all she has now."

"Don't worry." Another man spoke, his voice low and terribly scratchy, and it made Abby think of the devil. "She won't miss you for long."

A split second of terrible silence followed, then more gurgling noises, and suddenly...

Boom!

Abby covered her mouth as the noise thundered all around her, reverberating through her little frame with as much bone-shaking thoroughness as when it happened the first time a few minutes ago.

No. No. Abby bit her lip in her efforts to stuff down her screams and keep as quiet as her mother's silent plea ordered her to do. *Now Daddy will lie down and stare at me just like Mommy is doing.*

For a handful of heartbeats, silence took over the house, as oppressive and frightening as the screams and shouting Abby had previously prayed would stop.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she wished she could still hear something from her mother or father. Anything, even the screams of her mommy she'd just been begging would come to an end.

Then, suddenly, those boots and jeans crossed in front of the closet once more. A door slammed, and that awful devil voice came again, muffled, but Abby still heard, "Where are you, little girl? No need to be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to get you out of this place to somewhere safe."

No. She'd heard about evil in church but never thought it actually had a voice.

Abby understood better now.

Praying for a way to safety with everything she'd ever been taught in Sunday school, Abby stepped farther back into the closet.

And swore the divine hand of God touched her spine.

Chapter One

Present day

“You look tired.”

At those words, Abby Gaines delivered a glare toward Christian Sanchez, the good-looking Latino man sitting next to her who just happened to be one of her dearest friends.

“Gee, thanks,” Abby replied. “Remind me to return the compliment one day when you start to lose your hair.”

“Don’t you even dare put that out into the universe.” Christian ran a hand through his raven locks. An obviously exaggerated shudder shook his frame. “And here I thought we were friends.”

A chuckle rumbled through the big man sitting next to Christian. “Don’t worry, babe.” Jonah Roberts, Christian’s partner, leaned over and pecked a kiss to the side of Christian’s head. “I’ll still love you, bald or not.” He stayed close to Christian and whispered in the man’s ear, “And I’ll still fuck you through the bed every night too.”

Abby tried to control the blush working its way over her cursed pale skin. She didn’t know if Jonah had intended for her to hear that comment—the man had a tendency to say inappropriate things sometimes without realizing they were so—but his words had reached her, and she couldn’t help the slice of envy it cut through her...or the images of two other men it conjured in her mind.

Rodrigo Santiago and Braden Crenshaw.

Abby groaned on the inside. She told herself it was a groan, anyway, and not a moan accompanied by a throb and moisture pooling between her legs.

After going nearly three years without feeling the slightest attraction to any man, Abby had met these two guys ten months ago and could get neither out of her mind.

She hated it. Hated what both men stirred in her, something long dormant, something she would rather not feel. Not the sexual attraction—she could suppress that well enough. She had successfully been doing so since pretty much the first day she’d met tall, dark Rodrigo, and then a few days later, Detective Crenshaw, with his cool pale green eyes, which Abby suspected hid amazing heat and fire. She could handle a healthy case of lust.

But vulnerability? No. Each man dredged up that uncomfortable sensation individually. When together, they pretty much knocked her on her ass.

Not ever again.

Images from the dreams that had started again a few weeks ago assaulted Abby right where she sat—sounds of gunshots, the internal scream of cramped muscles from crouching and shivering for an extended period of time, the red stickiness saturating the carpet under her bare feet, the ice-cold feel of her mother's cheek...

"Abby?" Christian touched her shoulder, and Abby jumped about a foot out of her chair. "Are you okay?"

"You look pale," Jonah added. He shifted forward on the couch and studied her through a narrowed gaze. "More than normal, I mean." His jaw immediately clenched. "Sorry. I didn't say that right."

Abby reached out and squeezed Jonah's forearm. "It's all right. I am tired." She tried to scrub grit from her eyes that had been there all day. "But I'm fine."

Christian didn't look convinced. "I'm worried about you. You've been tired a lot lately."

"I've been busy. Have too much on my mind to sleep." At least that was technically true. "Maybe it's time to try get to bed early and see if that helps. Thanks for the dinner invitation, guys"—Abby grabbed her purse off the floor and got to her feet—"but I think I'm going to pass." She dipped down and pressed kisses to Christian's and Jonah's cheeks. "Tell the boys hi for me."

Even better. Maybe the nightmares would serve one good purpose after all. *I don't have to sit across from Rodrigo and Braden for three hours and pretend I don't notice every move each of them makes.*

Christian shot upright and strode with Abby to his front door. "Wait."

"You don't have to go," Jonah added, towering right behind Christian.

"Yes, I do. It's not you two." She gave them each another squeeze. "The truth is, I am exhausted. I accepted your dinner invitation because I love you both but also because I'm avoiding going up to my rooms alone." She detected only the slightest strain in her voice and was proud of herself for that. "I'm going to have to do it at some point. It might as well be now, when I can maybe lie down and catch up on some sleep. Otherwise, I'm just avoiding it until midnight."

A *ding* went off somewhere in the house just then.

"That's me." Christian backed down the shotgun hallway toward the kitchen. "The mojo pork is finished. Are you sure you don't want to stay and eat? You look like you've lost a little bit of weight."

Abby rolled her eyes at Christian and then looked up at Jonah. "Can you go kiss him or something and shut him up for me?"

That flash of life that Christian had told Abby he had fallen in love with appeared in Jonah's eyes right then. "Will do." He winked and already started walking backward toward his man. "Talk to you later, sweetheart."

"Bye, Jonah."

She hung still for a moment, the front door open at her back, watching as Jonah tugged Christian to him. Jonah took Christian's mouth with a kiss that had Christian moaning and wrapping his arms around Jonah's waist in a pair of seconds. As Abby stared, the image of the two men blurred and morphed into a tall Colombian being ravished by an even taller brown-haired man with a badge. Rather than Christian and Jonah, Braden now held Rodrigo's jaw with a white-tipped grip and ate at his mouth like the man needed it to survive. Rodrigo clung to Braden just as hard and dug his hands into the back of Braden's jeans, pulling him somehow closer to grind their crotches together. Abby saw the two men kissing, clear as day, in her mind. Then it changed, and she saw herself walking toward them, completely naked. The moment she joined in and they both turned to kiss her, her pussy throbbed and swelled in response right where she stood.

No! Stop. Recently Abby had taken her unwanted attraction to Rodrigo and Braden and, in her thoughts, had them turn that desire onto each other. She'd created some powerful fantasies that had driven her to a handful of insanely intense climaxes, wherein she shouted each man's name as she came. Apparently she'd done it so many times she was starting to bring that dream out of her bed and into the real world. *No more.*

I have to get out of here.

She closed the door, spun away, and came face-to-face with the flesh-and-blood versions of her most recent vision.

Holy Mary, full of grace.

Abby almost could not breathe.

A handful of steps ahead of Braden, Rodrigo led the way up the porch, and he was stunning. Abby had spent time with this man for nearly a year now, and she still had trouble swallowing each time she took first sight of him. The man owned his own contracting business. He spent most of his days doing the physical labor of refurbishing houses, and his body showed it. He possessed a near-perfect physique that came from hard work; Abby had seen Rodrigo without a shirt on and could personally attest to the wide shoulders, taut chest, and flat abdomen hidden under his clothes. She'd seen his deeply tanned skin covered in a sheen of perspiration and could picture it, right now, under the button-down shirt, dark brown leather jacket, and jeans he wore.

Abby's heart rate sped up, and her skin started to heat under her clothes. She jerked her stare away from Rodrigo, to land it on the only other man she found as arresting as she did him.

Braden Crenshaw, with his intense eyes, slightly crooked nose, and stubble-covered jaw, often had Abby thinking about what his already harsh face would look

like in the throes of a mind-shattering release. The winter months had taken away some of Braden's tan, but he still had her pale coloring beat by a mile. He owned an inch or two on Rodrigo's height, which was no small feat. Standing somewhere around six-feet-three or four, Braden had lanky cowboy legs, right now encased in dark jeans; a lightweight, snug sweater covered a long torso, sinewy shoulders, and swimmer's arms. A chill hung in the January Florida air but Abby didn't have to rub herself against Braden to know he would be toasty warm.

Holy Mother.

She squeezed her hand around the screen door's handle as both Rodrigo and Braden made it to the porch. Together, they crackled the air around her, and Abby instinctually leaned in to breathe the combined scents of almonds and juniper. She caught herself just seconds before sticking her nose into each man's nape, and she jerked back, fixing her gaze on her car parked on the side of the road beyond them.

Yeah. I don't have my game face on firmly enough to handle these guys tonight.

Taking a figurative deep breath, Abby pushed past both men. "Later, boys." She employed her lightest, brightest tone. "Can't stay. Have a good night." She traipsed down the first step.

"Hey." Rodrigo grabbed her arm but went down with her a couple of steps rather than jerking her back to him. "Where are you running off to, Bit? Scared to sit across from me?" His fingers burned through her sleeve worse than a brand, and Abby felt naked against his onyx gaze. She always did when he looked at her.

"You still haven't let me finish telling you why you need me to renovate that hellhole of a building of yours," he added.

Verbal sparring was part of Rodrigo's MO with her. On most days, it charged Abby up, and she relished getting in his face and giving it back just as good as he gave. Tonight, she thought one good jab from him might take her down in a total knockout.

Can't let that happen in front of him.

Abby planted her free hand on her hip and glared up at the stubborn man. "My place passes every inspection and has never had a code violation, Rodrigo."

"That doesn't mean it's the best it can be." Rodrigo shot that statement back to her before she finished speaking his name. "Or its most appealing to your customers."

"My business does just fine." Abby tugged against Rodrigo's hold and heard herself growl. She didn't tell him how to refurbish and flip houses; he damned well better not think he knew how to sell vintage clothes or design jewelry better than she did. "Thank you very much."

Rodrigo bared his teeth right back at her. "I wasn't implying you don't, Bit, and you fucking well know it."

"Don't call me that." She pulled against his hold again.

Braden stepped closer. With his additional height, plus the fact that he remained on the landing, he towered over Abby and Rodrigo. "Let her go, Santiago."

Rodrigo flashed those dark eyes up at Braden. “You back off, Crenshaw. You know nothing about this subject.”

This time, Braden wrapped his hand around Rodrigo’s arm. His jade gaze could not have been icier. “Not tonight.” He spoke through clenched teeth. “Let. Her. Go.”

A battle of wills seemed to war between the two men for a half dozen heartbeats, and something new instantaneously ramped up the electrical charge already in the air. The zap of it sent a tremble through Abby. She darted her gaze between Rodrigo and Braden and felt singed by the invisible fire licking between the space of their bodies.

They could kill each other or fuck each other right now. Might not matter which.

Abby gasped as the truth hit her. Whether these men knew it or not—and she suspected they didn’t—they wanted each other. Except she’d been with enough men before her dry spell to know about chemistry and could sense when a man had some sexual interest in a woman. She’d gotten that vibe off Rodrigo and Braden both—toward her. Only now the sparks flying through the air were definitely between these two men.

The image of each of them tangled with her and then wound all around each other, with cries of completion and raw words of encouragement sounding in her ears, took Abby over completely, making her whimper and terrifying her to her core.

I can’t know this about them. Or me. Not right now.

Rodrigo suddenly ripped his hand away from her as if someone had burned him. “I apologize.” He reached out, looking as if he wanted to touch her arm where he’d held it, but then snapped his hand back to his side. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Hearing the slight gruffness in Rodrigo’s tone forced a small smile out of Abby. “You didn’t. I promise. But I have to go.” She touched his arm, hardly daring to brush more than her fingers over the hard muscles, let alone give him a reassuring squeeze. It would have to be enough. “Good night.”

Without waiting for another word, Abby tore down the stairs to her car. As she started the finicky engine, praying that the car would run, she didn’t dare look back at the two men she could feel still watching her from the porch.

Between the nightmares plaguing her again and the fantasies she continued to conjure about herself, Rodrigo, and Braden becoming rapidly more explicit by the day, Abby didn’t know what was real or just her imagination anymore.

What is happening to me?

Rodrigo watched Abby drive away from Christian and Jonah’s house, and he could barely contain the storm brewing inside him. He glared down at the hand wrapped firmly around his forearm and just now couldn’t care enough to freak out that the fingers Braden Crenshaw dug into his flesh seared right through Rodrigo’s clothing and marked him with fire.

The twist in my belly doesn't matter either.

Rodrigo lifted his stare from Braden's crushing hold and met a pale gaze that too often made him sweat. "Take your fucking hand off me, Crenshaw."

Instead of releasing Rodrigo, Braden glanced toward the door at his back and then pulled Rodrigo down the porch steps to the front yard. He spun Rodrigo around until they faced each other before finally letting him go.

Braden leaned in, narrowing the already small distance between them. "What the hell is wrong with you?" He kept his voice hissing low. "Couldn't you see Abby wasn't up for your brand of charm tonight?"

"I'm not a complete jackass." *Christ, forget the butterflies in my stomach. Now I just want to slug him one in the mouth.* "Of course I could see it. The problem is, she hasn't been up for it in weeks, which is exactly why she needs it." Rodrigo let his line of sight shift down the street, but Abby was already long gone. His chest tugged at the memory of the too-bright light that hadn't quite covered the clouds in the woman's deep blue eyes. "Something is eating at her, Braden." Rodrigo's voice lost some of its edge as Abby slipped front and center into his thoughts. "She's starting to hide. Whatever is bothering her, it won't help to keep isolating herself from her friends."

"And your constant poking while she's dealing with some personal issue is going to get her to open up?" Braden leaned back on the heels of his dark boots and settled his arms against his chest. "Is that what you think?"

His jaw clenched, Rodrigo stepped in and eliminated half the distance between them. "I don't actually expect her to open up to *me*." He gave Braden a once-over and, for the moment, ignored the fact that his gaze lingered on strong arms and long, work-roughened fingers for just a hair too long. "Or even to *you*. However, there are two guys in this house"—he stabbed a finger toward the front door—"she might confide in if forced to be in their company for more than five minutes."

"So that's why you were trying to get her to stay," Braden said, fully focused on Rodrigo.

Rodrigo rubbed the back of his neck to settle the raised hairs. "Yes."

"It didn't have anything to do with the fact that you get half-hard every time she rises to your bait?" Braden glanced down, and Rodrigo followed him to the unmistakable start of a bulge pushing against Rodrigo's jeans. "It's purely altruistic," Braden said as he blinked and met Rodrigo's gaze with knowledge shining in his own. "Right?"

Heat surged through Rodrigo; he had his hand twisted in Braden's sweater and the man hauled up against the base of the porch in two moves. "How hard anyone makes me for whatever reason is none of your goddamn business." Rodrigo gritted his teeth and shoved even closer into the bastard. "You hear me?"

Each breath Braden took rolled his chest in a wave under Rodrigo's hand and brushed warm air over Rodrigo's lips. Their bodies touched in other places too, and Rodrigo prayed the half wood he sported for Abby covered the unwanted twitching

he could not control right now, something he feared was happening entirely due to Braden.

Adrenaline is still pumping and has me getting harder because of Abby. That's all.

"You're right. It's not my business," Braden finally said. A small catch in his voice had Rodrigo narrowing his gaze. "And I know you genuinely care about Abby. It was a cheap shot to bring in the fact that you are so obviously attracted to her just to make my point."

What the fuck?

Rodrigo suddenly felt like Abby on the other side of one of his taunts. "Are you baiting me now, Crenshaw?" His blood sped up more than a little at the thought.

Braden searched Rodrigo's face for the longest time, each flick of his gaze instilling the sensation of a roller-coaster ride in Rodrigo's stomach.

"Maybe," Braden said, making the word feel like as much a caress as his scrutiny did. "Maybe I'm just envious."

Rodrigo reared. "What?" *Of me, or her?* He untangled his hand from Braden's sweater, horrified at his thoughts. He wasn't gay, for God's sake. Neither was Braden, for that matter. Rodrigo took a half dozen more steps back, searching for air that didn't have this man's scent mixed in it. "Why would you say that?"

"Because Abby obviously likes you back." Braden smoothed his hands down the front of his sweater. He didn't move, and Rodrigo was grateful for it. "She gets all flushed when you guys go at it. Something lights up in her when she's close to you. She wouldn't do that if she didn't care about you and like you for who you really are beneath this macho guy who thinks he knows what's right for everyone."

Rodrigo bit down the sharp retort building inside him, boiling to explode. He fucking owned his own business; of course he was used to telling people what to do and being the boss. This man wouldn't get under his skin twice in ten minutes.

"I don't know about that," Rodrigo said. Images of a tall, creamy body, fiery long hair, and ocean blue eyes filled Rodrigo's mind and once again got his balls swelling in the snug confines of his jeans. "About Abby, I mean."

"I do," Braden answered. "Just like I know you're right when you say something is troubling her. Just because I don't spar with her the way you do doesn't mean I can't sense the distraction in her too."

Son of a mother.

Rodrigo went back to wanting to strangle this man. "Then why the fuck did you let her go?"

"Goddamn it, man." Braden ran his fingers through his dark hair, exposing the strands of silver mixed in, most prominently at the temples. "Because she wasn't ready to talk about what is plaguing her, that's why. If you could have stopped yourself for one minute and stepped back from your certainty that you were right, you would have seen that." The guy scratched at his neck, silent for a moment.

When he spoke again, his tone had lost most of its edge. “Give Abby time, Rodrigo. When she’s ready for help, she’ll ask.”

A snort escaped Rodrigo. “You don’t know Abby so well after all.”

Braden linked his hands behind his back and didn’t so much as blink. “I think I do.”

The quiet certainty in Braden’s tone and the intensity in his stare ignited a flame of jealousy in Rodrigo. It also delivered the shock of a phantom hand—coarse and big, like another man’s—down his spine.

Why does this keep happening to me around him?

Rodrigo tore his focus off Braden and wiped his hand over his mouth. “Listen, I need to get out of here. Tell Chris and Jonah sorry for me, will you?” He turned and started jogging to his truck. “Let Chris know I’ll give him a call about our next job in a few days.”

“I know you too, Santiago.” Braden’s voice—so fucking even and smooth—carried across the front yard and stopped Rodrigo dead in his tracks.

Fucking A. No way did you figure me out. Please.

“Don’t follow her home,” Braden added, and Rodrigo started breathing again. “She won’t thank you for it.”

With one twist of his lower half, Rodrigo did an about-face and cleared the distance between them once more. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do, Crenshaw.” He couldn’t resist wiping that slash of a secret grin off Braden’s face. “I’m not going to Abby’s.”

The man’s pupils barely flared. “Convince me.”

Once again, Rodrigo tamped down the rise of heat inside him and kept his hands unclenched. “You have no right to my personal business. I don’t have to say a word. But since it’s the only thing that will take *your* arrogance down a notch, I will tell you.” Discomfort that reached further inside Rodrigo, a hundred times deeper and a thousand times different than what Abby or this man brewed in him, had Rodrigo shifting his gaze to the streetlight highlighting his truck. “While on my way here, I talked to my”—he still stumbled spitting out the word—“*father* on the phone, and we made loose plans to meet for a late dinner.” Rodrigo rubbed at the tension lines forming over his brow. “I’m not really up for that either, though, so I’m gonna cancel it and go home. I have plenty of work I still need to do before I start my next house.”

“Hey,” Braden said, his voice suddenly soft. He tugged on Rodrigo’s jacket and drew Rodrigo back to him. “How’s it going with your dad?”

Six months ago, out of the blue, a man had contacted Rodrigo, claiming to be his father. The guy seemed certain and definitely knew things about Rodrigo’s late mother that would have been tough to research. Rodrigo had still needed proof. One DNA test later and Rodrigo suddenly had a new parent.

The open interest in Braden tugged Rodrigo closer. “It’s strange. I never thought of myself as having a father somewhere, even though I know I wasn’t an

immaculate conception.” Shaking his head, Rodrigo let out a rough chuckle. “Gotta say, I never looked in the mirror once and saw a...a...”

Braden quirked a brow. “A redneck looking back at you?”

“A white man,” Rodrigo clarified, “*period*, let alone a rural good ol’ boy.” Nothing in Rodrigo’s physical appearance, except perhaps his height, bore any resemblance to the man he’d met with multiple times now. “I always figured he must have been another Colombian who maybe got deported or something. Shit, I don’t know. I’m thirty-four years old. It’s”—Rodrigo gestured with his hands, as if the motion would help find the right words—“bizarre and surreal to look at this person I never knew existed and know that half my DNA is from him.”

Braden dipped down and made eye contact with Rodrigo. “Are you okay with knowing him?”

Rodrigo shrugged. “Getting there. It’s still awkward a lot of the time. We have the blue-collar, hard-labor thing in common, so that helps some.”

“You have plenty white collar in you too, Rodrigo. Don’t downplay your accomplishments for anyone. Long-lost father included.”

Braden didn’t move a muscle, but Rodrigo swore he could feel the man’s hand gently run down his back in support.

“Believe me”—Rodrigo reached up and undid the button suddenly choking him—“every time payroll and taxes come around, I remember just how much white starches this thing around my neck.” He flashed an alpha-dog smile. “Got too much ego to ever forget that I’m the boss, remember?”

One step and Braden nearly rode Rodrigo’s front. “That’s right. You are.” The man curled his hand around Rodrigo’s neck, and Rodrigo jerked at the contact. Braden stayed with him, gazes locked in laser mode, as Braden manipulated the necklines of Rodrigo’s shirt and jacket. “Just straightening that white collar for you,” Braden said. He slid his hand around to the front; before he moved away, the tips of his fingers lingered against the column of Rodrigo’s throat. “Looks good now.”

Holy shit. That is totally the kind of flirty move I would put on Abby. Isn’t it?

A whole lot of blood rushed south, killing Rodrigo’s ability to think rationally. “Th-thanks.”

“I’ll tell Christian and Jonah you had to leave.” Braden loped up the steps to the porch. “Good night.”

“Yeah. Later.” Rodrigo spun and strode to his truck, climbing in without looking back, just as Abby had done with him.

The truth was, that clever son of a bitch Braden had been right. Rodrigo had intended to go check on Abby. Rodrigo hadn’t lied, though. He had exchanged a “maybe we can grab a burger together later” conversation with his father, but Rodrigo easily could have dropped in on Abby first.

Rodrigo figured it was damn near impossible for Abby to be anything less than beautiful, but he knew what tired looked like on a face. Knew what fear looked like too. He’d seen it in Abby more than once in the last few weeks. Nobody who was

tired and scared should be left alone to sit and dwell on the things making him or her exhausted and afraid. Rodrigo just wanted to help, even if he could only do it by distracting the woman with conversations that infuriated her.

Braden might have figured me out, but I still can take a quick peek.

Rodrigo would just drive by Abby's building. She had her business on the ground floor and made her home in the rooms on the second level. He would just take a look. If the lights were off, he would leave her to her sleep. Simple as that.

One friend keeping an eye on another.

Once Rodrigo settled on his course, half the tension eased out of his frame.

Braden was responsible for the portion that remained. Rodrigo didn't know what the hell to do about the fucking strange reactions the man conjured up in him. Half the time Rodrigo sported wood these days, it was for Braden Crenshaw as much as Abby Gaines.

He had to get the fuck over it before something happened and someone got hurt.

He's not quite ready.

Braden closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, still able to scent both Abby's and Rodrigo's unique notes of strawberries and almonds mixed in with the nip in the air.

Abby is close, but Rodrigo still doesn't understand what he's feeling. Or that it's okay to feel it.

The man would have to get right with it soon. Braden didn't know how much more celibacy he could take. It had been two years since his previous partner had ended their relationship—entirely Braden's fault. This time, though, he intended to get things right.

He could have pursued Abby months ago and probably convinced the stubborn woman to take a chance on him. It would have been amazing too. He could sense the raw, sensual adventurer living inside the leggy redhead who claimed she didn't believe in romance or love. Crawling into bed with her, sinking into her wet heat, alternating between fucking her and making love to her... It would be incredible and extremely satisfying. And when it eventually happened, Braden intended to savor it.

This time, though, when he invested his time and heart in a relationship, he wanted it to last.

That was where Rodrigo came in.

When Rodrigo had grabbed Braden and shoved him against the porch, Braden could have thrown Rodrigo off in a heartbeat—if he'd wanted to. He hadn't. He liked sharing that small space of air with Rodrigo and feeling the man's hand curled into a fist against his chest. He liked imagining that dominating man bent over and crying Braden's name just as loudly as he would shout Abby's.

Because as much as Braden desired the lovely and sharp-witted Abby Gaines, he responded with equal ferocity to the dark, controlled Rodrigo Santiago.

Braden's appetites went both ways, and from the moment he'd set eyes on Abby and Rodrigo—both at the same time, at this very house where he now stood—Braden knew his friend Ben's advice had been right.

"Find a man and woman who can give you what you need, together. Enough bouncing back and forth. Stop thinking that one right person will come along and settle this need inside you. Denying who you are is hurting too many people along the way."

For two years Braden had struggled with the pain he'd caused Ben, and with believing it was even possible to find a man and woman who would not only want Braden but also each other. The thought of opening his dual desires to a man and woman at the same time, risking humiliation, rejection, and possibly even disgust, terrified him. It still made Braden sweat a bit when he pictured himself suggesting a ménage to two people when he'd never experienced one firsthand to tout its benefits. If he took a chance and failed, if he tried with a man and woman and couldn't turn a threesome into a successful relationship... Jesus, Braden didn't want to think about living with the certainty of a failed ménage. It would take away his abstract hope that it could one day be real. He didn't want to have a harsh reality crush his fantasy and then have to live the rest of his life bouncing between men and women, hurting people, and always knowing that in the end he would be alone. The fear of killing this newly planted dream had kept Braden from ever taking Ben's threesome suggestion seriously.

Then Abby and Rodrigo had come into his life. Instantly, Braden has sensed the attraction between them. Just as fast, he'd picked up on Abby's curiosity in him. Rodrigo's interest had been less organized, more challenging to read. The guy had clearly never been with another man and undoubtedly didn't understand that he could desire one while still wanting a woman.

Ben's words of wisdom had come rushing back to Braden in a torrent while standing in the kitchen in this very house. For the first time in Braden's life, he started to believe he could have it all.

A man. A woman. Passion between all of us.

Maybe even love.

Braden chuckled. One step at a time. He hadn't even kissed them, let alone gotten them naked and in the same room together.

Soon, though.

Something in the air had changed tonight.

Thank God. Finally.

Braden was tired of going to bed alone.

Chapter Two

Abby wandered around her store in the dark, flitting her fingers over the clothing, purses, shoes, hats, scarves... You name it, and Abby's Attic had it, from all manner of eras. She kept a nice range of clothing styles in-house and had a very good eye for what her regulars would eat up the second she hung it on a mannequin in the window.

A locked glass case housed the jewelry Abby offered for sale. Chunky coral pieces, carved Bakelite bangle bracelets, wide filigreed gold chokers, and earrings. Costume pieces sat next to the real thing, and she even had her own funky contemporary designs mixed in.

The place Abby sat to work took up most of the back wall. She sketched her creations and crafted her pieces out in the open so customers could watch her process. Chatting and working went hand in hand for her, and she would in fact feel isolated if she had to create in a room by herself.

Very quickly after opening her doors, Abby had realized she would need an online presence to balance out the fact that she had a niche business in a small town. Web sales kept her storefront in the black.

She loved her business. Loved it more than just about anything. God knew it hadn't turned her into a wealthy woman—didn't even make her merely comfortable most of the time—but it was all hers. Well, technically, the bank owned it too, but she gave them their money on time, all the time, so that partnership thankfully remained a silent one.

Abby knew her store inside and out. Softly colored walls and beautiful things made it a soothing place. She had every nook and cranny memorized, and spent more than enough time in it during the day, certainly to the point where she really didn't need to walk around it in the dark at night. As much as Abby adored her business, when her day ended, she happily locked it up and walked away every evening until it came time to open again the next day.

Until a few weeks ago, she used to do exactly that.

Then the nightmares had started again. The reemergence of terrible dreams about a day she had spent most of her childhood trying to forget. Successfully so. Up until now. For the life of her, Abby didn't understand why. The dreams had returned in brief snippets that jerked her out of sleep and left her covered in a layer of sweat. Each night when Abby closed her eyes, the images showed her a different piece of that terrible afternoon and evening, sometimes in a manner that made

these nightmares completely different and new. Abby had never before remembered her mother's voice—so high and squeaky—saying “*Please, baby, no*” right before a deafening explosion rocked through where Abby crouched in the closet.

“*Baby?*” That didn't make sense. Why would her mother call her murderer baby? If that was a real memory, why was it only coming to her now?

Abby shivered as she moved to the back of her store. She unlocked the privacy door separating her business from her private quarters and looked up the staircase to the hallway and rooms beyond. The steps loomed in front of her, and if she would just man up and let herself fall into bed again, she might find some answers to what these dreams were trying to tell her.

Stop it. Abby knew better. *They aren't trying to convey anything.* The police knew the name of the person responsible for her parents' murders. Some drug addict named Rusty Cormack, looking for some money and valuables to sell for his next high. The DA had not succeeded in a conviction, but they knew he was responsible. Reliving something that had happened almost twenty years ago through fits and starts in nightmares would not unearth some vastly different scenario from what she'd seen and heard in person that day.

Except, maybe it will.

No.

Abby had done as much research as she could on her parents' murders. She'd even seen multiple mug shots from tattooed Rusty Cormack's repeated drug arrests over the years, and just because she had some vague suspicions that something didn't feel right about him as the killer didn't mean that translated into evidence of anything. Twisting the memories from that traumatic event served only to fill her days and nights with something she could not change or control, thereby distracting her from something *truly* frightening that she could.

Rodrigo and Braden. And her.

For the first time, Abby had sensed chemistry between the men she had previously only visualized in her private fantasies. Something heated. Something volatile. Something most definitely sexual.

Whoa. Yeah. Abby exhaled as the fluttering in her core started up again. She found it nearly impossible to ignore these men when dealing with them individually. Together, if they were as open to experimenting with each other as they had each hinted at wanting with her, they could bring every one of her newest secret fantasies to full, roaring life.

And since Abby understood that now, she held the power to make it happen.

Change things up from the staid, safe life she'd been hibernating in for the last three years.

Try something very, very new.

Abby closed her eyes without even thinking, and the wave of possibilities rushed through her once again.

Strong, male hands grabbing at hard bodies, thick torsos rubbing up against each other, a sea of intertwined, masculine arms and legs, thick cocks jutting toward stomachs, rubbing between solid flesh. A river of red hair brushing against those bodies, over erect penises, making both men shiver and turn into her for more...

Damn it. Abby yanked herself out of another one of her visions before it got any more erotic or explicit. *What the heck is wrong with me?*

Maybe she had summoned the nightmares about her parents as a way to keep her ever-growing desire for Rodrigo and Braden at bay.

Fighting ghosts from her past was less terrifying than dealing with two very alive men who if teamed up in real life could potentially destroy her.

Abby trudged up the stairs to her rooms. For the first time since they'd started, she prayed for the nightmares to return.

* * *

The knotted rope caressed Abby's bare back. For a moment, she thought God's very own hand touched her and that he had come to save her and her parents.

She turned in the darkness of the closet and moved her hands around in the space in front of her, reaching until her fingers closed around the rope dangling from the closet's ceiling. The attic. Yes. Daddy had made the rope ladder so she could climb in and out of the playroom just like a monkey in the jungle. She didn't need to use the big ladder like they did. Mommy thought it was dangerous for her to climb up and down the rope on her own, but Daddy said kids need to get scrapes every once in a while and not to fuss. Abby agreed with her dad and even liked to hide in the attic playroom sometimes when people came over to visit.

"Abby!" The devil voice sounded far away, but she could still hear him. "Are you here, girl? Come on out, and we'll go get some ice cream. It's an awfully hot day."

No. Abby didn't want to do that. She fingered the rope in front of her again. Right this second, her heart beat faster than Easter Sunday at church when she sang a solo in front of everyone. She wrapped her hands around the highest point she could reach on the rope and hoisted herself off the floor. After finding the first knot with her bare feet, Abby pulled herself up, again and again, not stopping until she reached the entrance in the ceiling and climbed through. Quickly, she crawled around the opening and dragged up the dangling rope, clearing it out of the way.

Only one more thing to do. Abby crawled around to the opposite side of the entrance and prayed for God to help her work in absolute silence.

The closet door below squeaked as the accordion folds struggled to open on the ungreased tracks. Light from her parents' bedroom streamed into the closet just as Abby eased the board that served as an attic door into its routed slot, blocking her completely inside.

As the unnatural, terrible voice of evil continued to call for her, Abby curled her arms around her drawn knees and waited for God to help her one more time.

* * *

Abby jerked upright in bed, sucking in air as she tried to regain her equilibrium.

The hand. She put her own to her chest as she tried to pull the last remnants from her dream into her dark bedroom. *Something is wrong with the hand I saw pushing open the closet door in my dream.* Something wasn't as it should be. Abby pulled her knees up to her chest, closed her eyes, and tried to step back into the point in her dream that had taken place just before she settled the board across the opening in the ceiling.

Instead of seeing that *wrong* hand again, Abby gasped as an invisible hand punched her in the chest and shoved her backward into her headboard. The pictures in her mind metaphysically hurled her through time and space, and she crash-landed hours beyond the correct place in her dream, right into the middle of a bloodbath.

Everywhere Abby touched and looked filled her hands and eyes with puddles and sprays of crimson. Straight ahead, the wall looked like a giant red finger painting, but Abby's mom would pitch a fit if Abby so much as put a crayon mark on her walls, so Abby knew it wasn't paint.

I know what it is.

Her breath suddenly coming in shallow pants, Abby forced her focus across the awful colored splashes on the wall. Suddenly, a thick streak of red cut a line straight up and down the wall. Abby trembled all over as she followed it with her eyes, down, down, down, over a shock of red hair, and looked straight into glassy brown eyes.

"Daaadddyyy!" Abby's legs went out from under her as she screamed. Her knees slipped in more of the squishy red covering the carpet. Abby reached out to steady herself, and her palm sank into wet, sticky goo. One glance down and Abby saw her fingers buried in a hole in her mother's stomach.

No. No. No. Abby yanked her hand out of her mother's gutted belly and hid it behind her back. No. No. No. She squeezed her eyes shut. No. No. No. Rocking back and forth, she screamed and screamed and screamed. "Daddy!"

Abby snapped back into the present, crying out for her father just as she had back then. Her heart felt like it beat too fast for her body to contain it, and she trembled all over, so badly her teeth chattered. She tried to take deep breaths and envision herself in a safer place, repeated her mantra of "it was just a dream" over and over again, but her chest only burned hotter and squeezed tighter, and she started to wheeze.

Unable to make the aftermath go away this time, with fingers trembling, Abby reached for her phone.

* * *

Rodrigo slammed the door of his truck and glared at the man emerging from the familiar black Accord. "What are you doing here?" he asked Braden, his voice low out of deference to the dead silence and lateness of the hour.

Even in the shadows, Rodrigo saw Braden arch his brow in an exaggerated manner

"I would imagine for the same reason you are." Braden pocketed his keys and jogged toward the residential entrance to Abby's building. "Abby called me."

Smart-ass.

Rodrigo ignored the jab punching him in the gut. His pride didn't like that Abby had felt the need to call someone other than him.

"I figured that out, genius," Rodrigo replied. "Did she tell you why?"

"She just said 'Can you come? I need company.'" Braden rapped his fist against the metal door. "So here I am."

Rodrigo went ahead and leaned heavily on the buzzer as well. "Same for me." He studied Braden—who looked just as rumpled as Rodrigo did—out of the corner of his eye. "Fucking A, Crenshaw. I have to give you credit. You nailed it. You said she would call when she was ready, and look what happened. Wasn't expecting she'd want me." He chuckled. "Or you."

"I don't know." Braden kept his pale gaze steady on Rodrigo. "You're the one I'd call if I only had one quarter and needed help." The rich layers in his voice went well past Rodrigo's ear canals and penetrated his bloodstream. "You or her."

Shit. That funny little shimmering sensation waved down Rodrigo's spine again. He busied himself running his hands through his hair, straightening his bedhead in a way he hadn't taken the time to do at home. "You're behind the times, man," he muttered, glancing at Braden repeatedly, as much as he didn't want to. "A quarter ain't gonna get you anybody these days."

Braden's lips parted, but sounds on the other side of the door snapped his mouth closed. A moment later, Abby pulled the door open, appearing almost ghostlike in ethereal white. The cloud of her fiery hair only served to contrast the near translucency of her skin.

"Shit, honey." Rodrigo automatically stepped closer and wrapped his hand under her elbow. Her skin almost left frostbite on his fingers. "Are you all right?"

The red slash of Abby's lips pushed up slightly at the edges. "Yeah." Her forehead pulled together between her auburn brows. "I thought so." She rubbed the lines away, almost looking far away from them. "I'm not sure anymore."

"Okay. Let's get inside." Braden stretched his arms to surround Abby and Rodrigo, and he nudged them into the foyer with small, guiding steps. "It's fucking cold tonight, and you're not wearing any socks or slippers."

Braden's words caused Rodrigo to look down at Abby's bare feet. He could see the blue veins running under her skin.

I should pick her up and carry her upstairs. That would tear her out of this funk. At least for long enough to punch me in the kidney and demand I put her down.

Before Rodrigo could stoop down and grab Abby under the knees, she waved them toward the stairs. “Come on upstairs, guys. I dragged you both all the way over here. The least I can do is offer you a drink.”

Braden took a moment to lock the door, and then Rodrigo could feel the man follow behind him up to the landing. Abby stepped carefully in front of Rodrigo, each movement measured, controlled, and his concern for her grew.

“What’s the matter, Bit?” Rodrigo shoved his hands into his pockets so that he didn’t reach out and caress the vulnerable line of her back, something barely concealed by the gauzy white nightgown and matching robe she wore. “I know you’d have to be at the end of your rope to decide you’re gonna pick up the phone and call me in the middle of the night.”

Abby didn’t answer, just veered to the right through a squared-off arch into a kitchen. The galley-style space had all the necessities and none of the extras, with one narrow, tall window at the end with a table and two chairs beneath it. While functional, the space irritated the crap out of Rodrigo. He knew a bathroom and then a walk-in closet existed beyond the north side of the kitchen wall. On the opposite side of the hallway, behind where he now stood, she had a living area and bedroom, accessed through narrow walkthroughs cut into the wall in a manner as narrow and nonpleasing to the eye as this one.

If Abby would only let him, Rodrigo could do so much with this second floor. He could eliminate or move entire walls. He would open up the whole second level for her, creating a space she could breathe in and that would feel like an actual home rather than a roof and walls that protected her from the elements.

From the second Rodrigo had set eyes on Abby, the workhorse in him wanted to build something for her, something lasting and real, something that showed her his skills and proved he was more than a guy who painted walls, threw down some new flooring, and called himself a contractor because it sounded legit. Beyond transforming her living space, he could build her some sweet custom cabinetry and display cases downstairs for her store too—if she would just fucking say yes so that he could set aside some time to do it.

So far, she kept cockblocking him. Both figuratively and literally. His balls were getting blue, and his hammer was getting rusty waiting.

Yet something in her eyes—an occasional lingering gaze that held long enough to make his dick twitch and his heartbeat pick up speed—kept him coming back and trying again.

Right now, though, Abby wouldn’t make any kind of direct eye contact with him. She wouldn’t with Braden either, for that matter. The cold fluorescent light in the kitchen rained down on her, highlighting the tight, grim smile she clearly tried to make seem airy and effortless. Wasn’t working.

“Beer good for both of you?” she asked.

Braden shrugged out of his jacket, revealing a beat-up USF sweatshirt, and tossed the black leather on the countertop. “I’ll take a bottle. Or a can. Whatever you have.”

As Abby opened the refrigerator, Rodrigo asked, “Are you sure you don’t want something hot that will warm you up inside, Bit? Maybe some tea or cocoa?”

Snapping, fiery blue eyes narrowed at him from a half dozen feet away. “Thinking you know what’s best for me again, Santiago?”

Rodrigo stepped in closer and braced his hand on the open fridge door, leaning into her space. Her pupils flared, but he didn’t back off. “You didn’t call me here to lie to you.”

“I didn’t call you here to parent me or solve my problems either,” Abby said through clenched teeth.

“Then why did you call?” Rodrigo shot back. “You still haven’t said.”

“I did too say.” Abby snapped that retort right back at him fast. “I told you on the phone that I wanted some company. I automatically dialed the two of you.” Her gaze stayed on him. When she spoke again, her tone softened. “I called you first, Rodrigo.” A hint of thickness wrapped itself around his name, and Rodrigo felt like a lead balloon hit heavy in his stomach. “I’m sorry that’s not enough for you,” she added, her gaze finally wavering.

Shit. She needed someone and thought of me first. If he were double-jointed, Rodrigo would kick himself in the ass. *Fuck-ing shit.*

“It is enough,” he told her. What in the hell was wrong with him, baiting her when she was clearly in a state of distress? “I wasn’t... That didn’t...” *Shit.* His words became all tangled up somewhere between his brain and his mouth. He clamped his jaw and bit down an awful taste in his throat. “I apologize.”

Abby’s eyes bugged, and her chin dropped down to her chest. “Seriously?”

Rodrigo swallowed down more acrid bile. He knew he had a reputation for not retreating or regretting his comments. He accepted that people thought him rigid and blindly stubborn. Fact was, he *was* right and did know the best way to handle a situation most of the time, and too fucking bad for those in the wrong on the other side.

But not in this case.

“Yes, for real.” He forced himself to say it again. “I’m sorry.”

Braden slapped Rodrigo on the shoulder. “Thank God you finally managed to spit that out, Santiago.” He turned to Abby. “I’ve never said this to a woman before, but I was about to ask if you both just wanted to go ahead and whip them out so I could measure and see whose is bigger.”

“I have one that would beat you both by a mile,” Abby shared quickly, darting her attention between both men and flashing a smile. A real smile. “I keep it in the

drawer by my bed. It's turquoise and has one hell of a set of balls on it." She waggled her brows, and the smile lit up her face. "Wanna see?"

What the fuck? After a split second of speechlessness, Rodrigo let out a sharp bark of laughter. This was his Abby, back in form. A woman unafraid to get right in his face and call him a caveman when he acted like an arrogant ass.

"Thanks for the offer," he said. Rodrigo didn't want to think too much about Abby having a dildo tucked by her bedside. Or whom she might picture as she spread her thighs and sank the length into her sweet heat. Not unless he intended to sport a hard-on for the rest of the night. "But I think I'll just take the beer."

"Me too," Braden said. He looked at both Rodrigo and Abby, holding on each for a handful of seconds before going back to Abby again. "For now."

Rodrigo rubbed the hairs on his neck again, disturbed, as Abby dipped into the fridge and grabbed three bottles of beer by their necks. She stretched her hand out in offering, and Rodrigo and Braden each grabbed one for themselves. They all twisted off the caps and tossed them on the counter. Then Abby crooked her finger, murmured a "follow me," and led them into her living area, flipping a switch that lit wall sconces on either side of the red-painted room. An opening in the wall to Rodrigo's right connected Abby's living room to her bedroom and offered a glimpse in at the unmade bed. Abby settled herself into an overstuffed chair, and Rodrigo and Braden sat down on a love seat.

Silence reigned for a number of seconds, wherein the only thing heard was the tick of a grandfather clock tucked into the corner of the room. What color Abby had regained a few moments ago slipped out of her cheeks with each second that ticked by, until only the disoriented woman who had answered the door for them remained.

With his beer resting on his knee, Braden broke the quiet first. "Talk to us, Abby." He looked only at her. "Whatever is bothering you, it's unlikely to get better if you keep it all locked up inside."

Abby lifted her stare from the floor. "I feel stupid that I bothered both of you now," she started, her smile wan. "I'd feel even more so if I weren't still shaking." She held out a hand, showing the tremor that kept it unsteady. "I don't know why it bothered me so much tonight when I've been able to keep it together since it started happening again."

"What bothered you?" Braden asked. He put his beer on the coffee table and leaned forward, dangling his clasped hands between his spread knees. "Since what started happening again?"

Rodrigo thought he knew. *The dreams.* He, Abby, Christian, and Jonah had shared the same foster mother, the late Marisol Ramirez, whose house Christian and Jonah now owned and lived in. While Rodrigo was older and had not lived in the home at the same time as the others, he'd stayed in contact with Marisol, who'd introduced him to Christian a number of years ago. Christian, through Marisol, knew some of Abby's history and he had shared it with Rodrigo. Her parents' brutal murders. Her inability to speak for nearly two years afterward.

Better to let Braden guide this. Maybe the man's police training played a part, but Braden had a calm, confident way about him that drew stories out of people. Folks trusted him and believed him from the moment he introduced himself. Nothing ever rattled Braden Crenshaw, maybe due to the job too, but Rodrigo suspected Braden would be just as unflappable if he were an accountant. *Bet he's insanely focused and intense in bed.*

Stop it! Rodrigo growled at himself under his breath. *Get your mind out of the gutter with these two, Santiago. Especially right now.*

Rodrigo jerked himself back into the moment just in time to hear Abby say, "I imagine you both already know that I witnessed my parents being murdered." Both men nodded, and Abby added, "Sort of, anyway. I was crouched in their closet. I didn't see the man's face or witness him actually shooting them. I saw the lower half of his legs and his boots, and I heard the screaming and the gunshots and the silence afterward."

Abby touched her fingers to her lips, and it hurt Rodrigo's heart to see the continued tremors. "I had horrible nightmares about it for a long time, and then..." She moved those fingers through the air, grasping at nothing. "I don't know. They suddenly stopped, and I was sort of okay. In all the years since, I've never really dreamed about that night again. Until now. They've started up again recently, and I can't seem to make them stop." Lifting the bottle to her lips, Abby drained a good third of the beer in one shot. "When I couldn't shake the nightmare tonight, I realized I didn't want to sit up the rest of the night alone." She shrugged. "You know the rest."

Rodrigo watched the cop inside Braden sit up like a pointer dog.

"Did something happen right before you had the first nightmare again?" Braden asked. "Can you think of anything that might have triggered them?"

"I don't think so." Her elbow on the armrest, Abby rubbed at the lines bisecting her brow. "Well, then again, my security alarm for the store did go off in the middle of the night, probably right around that time."

Rodrigo suddenly shot up as straight as Braden next to him. "You didn't say anything about that." He took a fast swig of his beer, wishing it were a shot of vodka. Anything stronger that might burn away the flash of cold that had swept through him at her words. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Because it wasn't anything," Abby answered. "Probably a kid thinking they could get away with some jewelry or cash. The alarm went off, probably scared the shit out of them, and they were long gone before I even got downstairs, let alone talked to the security company and told them not to worry about sending out the cops. It's not the first time my alarm has gone off, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

"Still spooks you some when it happens, though," Braden said. "Right?"

"Yeah, of course." Abby leaned forward and touched Braden's hand, as if grabbing on to him would miraculously solve her mystery. "Do you think that could be why the dreams started again? Because the attempted break-in scared me?"

Braden covered her hand on his. "You tell me. What do you think?"

Abby fell back into the chair. "I don't know. It seems unlikely, considering the alarm has never set off any nightmares before." She rolled her head on the back of the chair and made eye contact with Rodrigo and Braden. "But I'm so tired these days I'd happily believe anything that would make the dreams stop and let me get some decent sleep."

"Well, we still have a few hours to take care of that tonight." Braden stood. "Come on." He took Abby's hand and hauled her to her feet. "Let's get to bed." He twined his fingers in hers and led her to the bedroom.

"Wait." Abby tried to pry at Braden's hand latched around hers. "What?"

With fire igniting in his belly, Rodrigo shot up and chased after them. He wrapped his hand around Braden's forearm and yanked him back a step. This guy had some fucking nerve lecturing Rodrigo about not pushing a woman.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Crenshaw?" Rodrigo snapped. The bed loomed a couple of feet ahead of them, arousingly tousled from Abby having already been in it, but Rodrigo kept his focus completely on Braden. "You're goddamn fucking not making some kind of move on this woman tonight. I'll fucking drag your ass out of here and do something you can arrest me for if you try it, you fucking bastard."

Without missing a beat, Braden toed off his shoes and started in on his jeans. "Nobody is making any moves tonight. We're all going to get some sleep. Just sleep. In this bed. Together. It's plenty big enough." He undid the button and zipper, revealing white underwear from the V, but left his jeans on. "Get those lights, Rodrigo," Braden said as he beckoned Abby into the bed. "Will you?"

His brain spinning in overdrive, Rodrigo automatically reached back into the living area to flip the switches. The second darkness loomed behind him, he couldn't believe he had fallen so easily under Braden's command.

Rodrigo paused at the foot of the bed, his eyes on Abby, where she seemed poised to obey Braden's orders. "Are you okay with this?" he asked. His gut twisted with his desire to protect her from all harm. Including from Braden. And himself.

With one knee on the mattress, Abby lifted her gaze to his. "I'm so tired, Rodrigo. I'll try just about anything to get some sleep. If everybody here says it's okay, then it's okay. I trust you both." Her focus shifted to Braden for a moment and then came back to Rodrigo. The way she looked at him made it feel like they were the only two people in the room. "Are *you* okay with it?"

Even in the shadows, Rodrigo could clearly see the smudges under her eyes. "Yeah." He stripped out of his jacket and tossed it aside. "I just want you to feel better too."

"Thank you." She smiled at him, a small one, but it grabbed Rodrigo's heart and put a clamp on it tighter than he'd ever experienced in his life.

As Braden stripped out of his sweatshirt and let it fall to the floor, Rodrigo slipped off his shoes and socks while doing his best not to stare at Braden's taut

chest or the thin line of dark hair that bisected his torso and disappeared into that triangle of white underwear peeking out from his open jeans. Rodrigo tore his gaze away, only to land it on Abby crawling into bed. The robe now draped at the foot of the bed, Rodrigo admired the coltish lines of Abby's arms and legs, the latter of which had captured his attention from pretty much the second he laid eyes on her. Many of his wet dreams involved those legs wrapped around his waist while he slammed her into a wall repeatedly with a rough fucking. Right now, with the way the gauzy fabric settled against the rounded hills of her buttocks, Rodrigo got an enticing picture of the shape of her derriere, and he could tell she wasn't wearing any panties. He'd had more than one fantasy that involved owning her ass too.

Shit. Rodrigo lowered his gaze, silently demanding his cock remain dormant as he rounded the bed and slipped in on the left, letting Braden flank Abby on the other side. *This is going to be a long night.*

Abby settled in the center of the bed, her eyelids already drooping. Then they abruptly fluttered as though she was trying to fight it.

Braden shifted onto his side, leaving only scant inches between his body and Abby's. "Shh...shh... Close your eyes." He brushed his knuckles against her hair and grazed his lips across the translucent skin at her temple. "We're not going anywhere." As her eyes drifted closed, Braden laid his arm across her stomach and curled his hand around her hip. "It's okay to need us for one night."

Abby's need, her visible struggle, as well as this other man's gentleness, stirred a place inside Rodrigo he rarely examined and never let himself visit.

His voice gruff, Rodrigo said, "I'll never let anything bad happen to you, Bit." He crossed his arm over her belly too, lining it up with Braden's, and sank into the warmth of Braden as much as he tried to give his own to Abby. Dipping down, he pressed a kiss against the smooth skin on her shoulder. "I promise."

Abby turned toward Braden, kissed the side of his head, and then shifted and did the same to Rodrigo. "I used to think I wasn't lucky, but maybe that's not true." She unclenched her hands and covered the ones Rodrigo and Braden had on her waist and hip. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't have the two of you." A little shiver went through her as her eyes slid closed. "I just wish I knew why the hand looked so wrong."

The fact that Abby had two men in bed with her, curled up against her, and she *still* trembled, rammed home for Rodrigo just how deeply these nightmares had entrenched themselves into her mind.

Rodrigo looked at Braden from over Abby's head.

"What hand, honey?" Braden asked Abby.

"The murderer's hand." Abby's voice drifted as exhaustion pulled her toward sleep. "I saw it in my dream."

In the darkness, Braden's pale irises shrank to almost nothing. He opened his mouth, but the second he looked at Abby, finally asleep, he let it close without a word.

Rodrigo could see it in the other man's eyes, though, as clear as was likely in his own.

Braden wanted answers. He wanted to protect Abby too. Probably more than he wanted her naked and under him, screaming his name as she came.

The guy might as well get comfortable with three in a bed, then, because Rodrigo wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Chapter Three

Slowly coming out of sleep, Rodrigo slid his hand up a sleek thigh and murmured an appreciative rumble at the bounty of silky smooth skin under his rough palm.

World-class-showgirl legs. Rodrigo continued moving his hand upward until he reached the curve of Abby's hip, where he then curled his fingers inward, dipping down into the crease of her thigh. *Fucking never felt softer skin than my Abby's.*

As soon as Rodrigo had that thought, still drowsy, he smiled against the mess of her hair, and his morning wood sent a pleasant buzz through his bloodstream. He spread his fingers, pushed his hand back down Abby's supple, incredible thigh...and ran the tips of his fingers against a work-callused hand as big as his own.

Rodrigo snapped his eyes open, fully alert, and looked into a jade green gaze, set at half-mast, staring right back at him.

Braden. In the morning. Shit.

Rodrigo's balls joined in on the twitching in his cock already happening on Abby's behalf. The man on the other side of Abby sported one hell of a shadow on his jaw. Higher up, thick tufts of hair stuck out all cockeyed, making him look as cute as hell as he was arresting. No longer able to claim grogginess as an excuse, Rodrigo let his attention drift to Braden's bare shoulders, chest, and arms anyway, each muscle clearly defined and noticeable, but not bulky at all. Rodrigo followed that narrow line of hair down the centerline of Braden's torso and swallowed hard as he came upon something he'd never seen up close and personal on another man. The deep red head of Braden's cock poked out from the waistband of his underwear, and Rodrigo could see the sheen of early arousal already gleaming from the slit.

Shit. I want to see the rest of that one day. Touch it. Taste it too.

Amazing as Braden was, Rodrigo could hardly believe something as powerful as waking up in bed with another man for the first time—a fucking sexy, sleepy one at that—could take a backseat to anything else. But then again, Rodrigo had never woken up in bed with a half-naked Abby. Braden's gaze had already dropped to the sleeping woman, and Rodrigo's was right behind him.

Sometime during the night, Abby's nightdress had gotten hiked up and become twisted around her waist, leaving her lower half completely exposed. Curled partially on her side, Abby lay with one hand folded under her cheek and the other tucked between her breasts. *Fucking incredible.* Rodrigo itched to touch her, for the top half of Abby's nightgown had shifted as well. The V-neck now sat askew,

revealing one tight, pert breast to Rodrigo's and surely Braden's equally hungry stare.

Just as curious as he had been with Braden, and just as unable to deny himself, Rodrigo let his focus slide down to check out the rest of this lovely woman. Her softly rounded stomach rose up and down with each shallow breath she took, and she had an innie belly button Rodrigo wanted to wiggle his tongue into to see if she was sensitive or ticklish. Lower, though—*sweet mercy*—the thatch of hair between her thighs was as fiery as the tresses spread across her pillow. He didn't know why guys went so nuts for natural redheads, but his cock pushed hard against his sweats, confirming for him that he was as susceptible to the phenomenon as the next man.

Arousal hung heavy in the morning air. For a fleeting moment, Rodrigo figured with Braden admiring Abby too, it must be the combined aroma of his and Braden's precum. Only, the faintest hint of something too soft and sweet to be that of a man's excitement scented the air as well. Rodrigo jerked his gaze up to Abby's face, saw she still had her eyes closed, and moved to look at Braden next to her.

"I can smell her too," Braden said. He leaned into Abby, and his eyes slid closed for a moment as he breathed her in. "What do you think is making me so fucking hard?"

Braden moved his hand, releasing the fingers he and Rodrigo had inadvertently tangled together. Rodrigo didn't have to comment or ask Braden a question; he looked into the man's intense eyes and understood without words where to move his fingers, as well as already knowing where Braden would go with his. Rodrigo glanced down anyway. Something sparked inside him, deepening his desire, as he watched Braden skim his fingertips over Abby's hip and down her belly, not stopping until those fingers brushed through tight auburn curls and came to rest at the apex of her thighs. Rodrigo went the other way, and without glancing up, he knew Braden stared at his fingers just as intently as Rodrigo had done with Braden. Rodrigo brushed his hand up Abby's slender waist and then dipped down to the small of her back, lingering for a moment, enjoying the soft skin at the cleft of her ass. He grazed lower, along her crease, and abruptly came to a stop. Rodrigo had his fingers poised where her thighs and buttocks met. He swore he could fucking feel the heat drenching his digits already, but he didn't move.

So fucking close.

Rodrigo knew what he wanted so insanely badly. *A sample of her cream.* He'd take it on his fingers, on his prick... Shit, he'd even lick it off Braden's digits or dick if that was the only way he could get at a taste of her. Still, though, Rodrigo didn't move.

Abby's fragrance permeated the air now; every receptor in Rodrigo's body draped a shield over his and Braden's musky excitement and homed in on her honeyed essence. His cock sat like a spike, painful in his sweats, and it only got more rigid with each second he looked at his fingers, inches from taking Abby's

pussy from behind. Braden was in a holding pattern, as if waiting for Rodrigo, waiting to get at her clit from the front.

I can't take advantage of her. I'd never be able to look myself in the mirror again.

Rodrigo looked up, regret already setting in, and met deep blue eyes blanketed in a haze that could only be lust.

Her lips red and full, as if she'd already been thoroughly kissed, Abby locked in on Rodrigo with a stare he could not have broken if he wanted to. "Do it," she said, a husky plea in her voice. "Please." She shifted that glazed stare to Braden too. With one rock of her hips, she teased both men's fingers with a taste of heaven. "I need it."

Shit. Permission.

Rodrigo looked to Braden, and the man nodded.

I can't fucking believe I'm doing this. With Abby. With another man.

Ten months of wanting overtook any uncertainty nagging at Rodrigo. His balls pulled, and his cock pumped beads of early seed against his sweats, spurring him on. One more glance to Braden and Rodrigo saw the man already inching deeper between Abby's thighs. Rodrigo looked down at his own hand, and while he watched himself, he pushed his fingers between Abby's legs from behind, over *fucking wet* folds, and found paradise.

Dear God.

Abby bit her lip and tried not to scream. But oh, Holy Mother, she had never had a man's hands on her quite like this before.

Correction. Two men's.

Jesus God, Rodrigo slid those long fingers of his along her slit, rubbing back and forth, back and forth, splitting her open the slightest bit with each pass to torment the entrance to her sex. And Braden, damn, he rubbed two digits in a circle pattern over the hood protecting her clit, sparking hints of shivery sensation into her belly and giving Abby a prelude to the deeper pleasure that would soon come.

Forget a buildup or foreplay. Abby's pussy already throbbed terribly, aching for release. She rolled her hips, reaching for a more complete handling from these two men. She hadn't had a man's hands on her in years, she hadn't slept a full night in two weeks, and emotionally, she'd never stepped so far out on a ledge with another human being than she had with Rodrigo and Braden last night. Calling them, admitting to the nightmares, confessing to her inability to sleep, and then letting them comfort her by sharing a bed exposed raw places inside Abby she had never allowed to see the light of day. The night of firsts had opened a place that once breached now flooded out of her in a torrent. It felt like razor-sharp claws scratched at her skin from the inside, and she needed nothing more than these two men to own her right now and take her to a place where she could explode.

“Rodrigo.” Abby reached down and grabbed his hip. “Braden.” She latched on to him too. “Don’t play. Make me come.” She dug her fingers into their hard flesh, wishing she could tear into them with the same animal rawness she felt inside herself right now. “Please.”

In an instant, Braden seared himself to Abby’s front, and Rodrigo rode her back, sandwiching her in an inferno of body heat from which she didn’t care if she got burned. Braden buried his face against her throat, and Rodrigo grazed her shoulder with his teeth and tucked into her nape. As the first licks of tongues branded Abby’s skin, drawing a fast gasp from her, Rodrigo yanked her thigh back over his flank, spreading her open below.

Cool air whispered over the slick moisture covering Abby’s pussy, inducing another tremor. Before a second brush of chill could touch her exposed sex, Rodrigo and Braden took her over with their fingers—Jesus, their entire hands—driving away even the slightest brush of cold.

Oh, oh God.

Abby bit her lip as everything inside her wound into a tighter coil. “God...God, yes.” She bucked and cried out as Rodrigo drove two long fingers into her shivering channel, taking, deeper and deeper until he could go no more. With one twist of his digits, he seemed to touch her everywhere inside with just the right amount of pressure. Just as fast, he withdrew his penetration and sank in again, fucking her with his hand.

While Rodrigo yanked bone-shivering pleasure out of her cunt, Braden rubbed a deep, massaging figure eight into the top of her crease, right over her protected clit. Each infinity sign he made revealed her aching bead for a split second and then covered it back up, killing Abby with the glancing contact.

Blood rushed straight to Abby’s cunt and clit, and she could not stay still. She shuttled her hips to and fro, struggling to get more from each man’s magical touch. Rodrigo rumbled a rough noise into her nape. He teased his fingers along the swollen folds of her sex, moving all the way up to tangle with Braden at her clit before reversing direction and rimming her asshole, shocking a jolt and a gasping yes out of Abby, along with a clenching in her rectum.

Another pleased growl escaped Rodrigo, the noise vibrating through him and into her shoulder and neck. “So fucking amazing,” he murmured. He bit her shoulder and thrust his fingers back into her pussy, all the way to the hilt, taking her again.

Hardly able to withstand the things Rodrigo did to her, Abby still wantonly begged Braden to make her come too. The man uttered a gruff curse and tore Abby’s nightdress down in the front, trapping her arms in the straps and exposing her breasts. Dusky-colored nipples already twisted into tight pebbles contracted to become even stiffer under Braden’s open stare.

Abby couldn’t see Rodrigo’s eyes, but he whispered roughly, “Jesus Christ, that’s pretty,” and shoved himself more completely against her back. He ground his

erection into her spine, and she could feel his rigid shape clearly through his sweats.

"Fucking stunning," Braden said, still locked on her breasts too. The cool fire in his eyes ignited; he dipped down and flicked the crest of her tit with his tongue, then swirled it all around the dusky area, anointing Abby's nipple with his saliva. He coated her flesh with the sheen of his spit, first one breast, then the other; he did it so deliberately, so carefully, that Abby sucked in continuous shallow breaths in anticipation of the next lick that maybe, *maybe* would engulf her whole and make her scream.

Goose bumps popped up all along Abby's arms, and knifing lines of pleasure shot up from her core to her nipples, twisting them even tighter. "Braden..." She tunneled her hands into her hair and pulled, desperate to disperse the knotted concentration of joy Braden pulled out of her breasts, even if doing so caused pain somewhere else. Her chest heaved with each breath she dragged in. Every time she did, her nipples grazed Braden's jaw, and his stubble abraded the area with delicious torture.

Rodrigo chose right then to ease another finger into her cunt, pushing up through her squeezing walls until he had it lodged as deeply as the other two. He pumped the triple penetration, Braden swirled his tongue around her breast, and Abby gritted her teeth through the double dose of foreplay.

"Please." Her sheath filled with slick wetness and pulsated all around Rodrigo's fingers. "You're both killing me."

His mouth less than an inch away from Abby's breast, Braden glanced up, held her gaze to his for a moment, and then looked over her shoulder. "Take her over, Rigo." He withdrew his hand from between her legs. "Give her what she needs to come."

With that, Braden opened his mouth wide and went down on one of Abby's breasts, suckling her voraciously, as he had not done before. He pulled on her with incredible drag, bringing the tip of her smallish tit to the back of his throat. He closed his now-free hand around her other breast, kneading the flesh he denied the heaven of his mouth and tongue.

During the time Braden sucked every nerve ending in her nipple to the surface of her skin, Rodrigo pulled his fingers out of her channel and reversed direction. He went at her cunt from the front, fully unearthing her clit for an all-out attack. Three fingers whipped over and around the small blood-filled button, driving her nuts. Abby carelessly spread her thighs wider, silently begging for more, anything. Rodrigo accommodated, dipped his digits down, and pushed deep and fast into her slit. He pumped enough times to send her pussy into a fluttering frenzy and then went back to her clit again. Rodrigo didn't let up, and he wasn't gentle in the slightest, which was good, because Abby didn't want sensitive or malleable in a partner right now. She wanted these men to fling her right out of her skin.

Braden chose that moment to bite at the very tip of her nipple, rocking a shock wave through Abby and making her breast hurt so fucking good. He nipped a

second time, radiating the sweetest, sharpest pleasure from her chest to her core. After one more graze of his teeth, Braden licked his way down the slope of her breast and kissed his way across the valley to the other side. He brushed his hard lips back and forth across the crest of her breast, withholding that wonderful warm, wet suction she so desperately wanted. Then, as if they'd timed it, Rodrigo knifed one long finger into her cunt just as Braden parted his lips and drew Abby's neglected breast into his mouth.

Both men brought on a full-out assault, and Abby went up in flames. Each suckle or nip Braden delivered to her breast, and every rub Rodrigo sent across her clit, followed by a fucking motion with that narrow, deep penetration of his single, incredible finger, dragged Abby closer and closer to the abyss.

"Yes...yes." Her voice high and tight, she whimpered and writhed between the two men, reveling in their size and heat and the things they were doing to her body. She hardly felt like she could breathe and didn't care if she died of asphyxiation. "Rodrigo." She reached back and latched on to his corded forearm. "Braden." She dug her other hand into Braden's dark hair, holding him to her breast. "Fuck me." Fingers tapped her clit and filled her channel at the same time, and teeth bit her nipple again. Each man gave Abby everything she needed and more.

So fucking good.

Out of control, Abby pulled Braden's hair and scratched Rodrigo's arm as everything in her tightened inexplicably and then sent pulsating jets of pure joy to every corner of her being. "Oh, oh..." She jerked and bucked between Rodrigo and Braden as her sex contracted again and again and again around Rodrigo's buried finger, clutching him inside her pussy. "It's happening. I'm coming. Oh God." She started to shake all over. "There, there, there."

No more actual words escaped Abby for the next handful of heartbeats, just a series of moans and cries as Rodrigo and Braden kept at her, ripping the longest, most shattering orgasm from Abby she'd ever experienced. It seemed she convulsed forever, and her breasts and cunt had never been more sensitive to a person's touch, yet Abby kept rubbing herself back and forth against these two men, riding the delicious ebbing waves.

Rodrigo suddenly let out a low, guttural noise and shoved his cock into her lower back. "Shit, shit." He sounded in agony as he scraped his teeth up Abby's neck and tucked his face against her temple. "I need to shoot."

Dear God. Yes. Please.

Abby rolled her shoulders flat, whipped her head around, and found eyes black as pitch already locked in on her. "Let me feel it." With one flare of Rodrigo's pupils, Abby shoved her hand between them and pushed Rodrigo's sweatpants down in the front, springing his dark, glorious cock free. Holy Mother, he could scorch a person's skin with the heat it generated. "Come on me." The order erupted from a place within Abby she'd never tapped before, but it came out as naturally as breathing when looking into Rodrigo's eyes. She could also feel Braden's prick—granite hard

and slick with precum—against her hip. She shifted back to him, finding his jasper green gaze deepening to moss as he shifted his glance between her and Rodrigo.

“You too,” she told Braden, her tone going husky as he pulled his thick length from his underwear and put the tip against her belly. “Please.” One shift of her hips put Abby on her back with Rodrigo’s and Braden’s cocks poised on either side of her waist. “Let me feel you lose it. Both of you.” Just by thinking and speaking of this newfound desire, Abby felt her pussy pulsate and produce more lubricant. “Come on my stomach.”

She reached down and grazed the pads of her thumbs across each man’s slit, smearing pearls of early ejaculate around the heads. Both men gasped and jerked, and it was as if Abby had flipped the switch that got the electricity humming in their bodies again. Almost mirrors of each other, Rodrigo and Braden rose halfway up, braced themselves on one hand, wrapped the others around their cocks, and started jerking off in long, even drags. Braden’s face went stark, all sharp edges, as he pulled on his dick, rapidly increasing the speed of his strokes to a pace that very likely put him in a place of pain. Rodrigo matched Braden tug for tug. He rocked his hips and moaned low in his throat each time he reached down to pull on his balls, mixing in a move that Braden quickly added to his own.

Dark eyes and a pale gaze moved back and forth between Abby, to each other, and then back to Abby, holding on her. Arousal had never stayed with Abby so long after climax, but what these men did in front of each other without freaking out kept her blood rushing and her skin buzzing with zest and life. Feeling close to coming again, Abby rubbed her hands over her abdomen and deliberately brushed her knuckles against the undersides of Rodrigo’s and Braden’s erections. Both men jolted again and started whipping their hands up and down their shafts even faster, which only added flint to the fire inside Abby. With her hips moving anew, Abby scratched her fingernails up her torso to her breasts, leaving red streaks in her pale skin. She scraped the lightest abrasion around the areola but stayed away from touching her too-big, mauvy nipples.

Braden growled and rose up to his knees, double handing his cock. “Do it.” He stared down at Abby, his teeth bared and looking fierce as he jerked himself off with fast drags. “Pinch your tits hard enough to make yourself scream.”

“Fucking let me see you play with yourself,” Rodrigo ordered as he pulled hard on his stiff prick. So far gone sexually, he sounded almost cruel, although Abby knew he was anything but. “I need to come.”

In this moment, Abby didn’t care what might happen in an hour or day with these men. Only satisfying their current needs existed in her mind. “Yes.” Watching the raw display of desire in Rodrigo and Braden, Abby covered her breast with one hand and delved between her spread legs with the other. She squeezed her nipple, tugged hard on the tip, and at the same time whipped her fingertips over her exposed clit. “Yes.” The invisible string of pleasure pulled hard between the two places Abby touched, and she rolled her hips on the twist of sheets beneath her. “So good.”

Both men uttered the same in rough tones, and their faces pulled into harsh lines. Suddenly, Braden threw his head back and roared. Rodrigo cursed in Spanish, staring at his hand moving over his dick with piston-fast speed. Orgasm hit them both, with Rodrigo coming a heartbeat before Braden. Rodrigo unloaded straight down on Abby's stomach, spitting lines of thick, milky cum that pooled in the dip of her belly. Braden held his cock and shot ejaculate into the air, where it then rained down in splashes, dotting Abby's stomach, breasts, and arm. It even dotted Rodrigo's penis and hand, which jerked the man's dark gaze up to Braden's light one. Then, seemingly out of Rodrigo's control, he shuddered and came again.

As Abby stared at Rodrigo and Braden squaring off, riveted to each other's gaze, a tremor racked through her core. It was an enormous wave of acute pleasure that went deeper than an orgasm; it felt like it went all the way inside her and settled into her very soul.

It's not about choosing one. The truth of why Abby had felt so torn between these men—to the point of feeling paralyzed by her desire for each of them at times—finally hit her. *It's supposed to be both of them.*

Holy Mother.

She could hardly handle *herself* on a daily basis. How in the hell was she supposed to bring two men into her life?

And deal with the nightmares too? The presence of these men had only put them off for one morning. The dreams would be back tonight. She could still feel the discomforting wiggle of them living in her brain.

All she'd done by inviting Rodrigo and Braden over, and then engaging in this carnal display, was open up a whole new can of worms.

One Abby feared she would not simply be able to close back up or contain now.

You're in a whole new world of trouble, girl.

"Damn."

Chapter Four

“Damn.”

Abby’s utterance rang in Braden’s head. Rather than raise the hairs on the back of his neck, it made him work like the devil to suppress a grin. He liked this woman all worked up, even if it was potentially in anger directed at him. And no matter what might come out of her mouth next, she had goddamn wanted—no, *craved*—what they’d done together. Braden knew it.

As for the stunned man kneeling across from him, Braden would take the fact that Rodrigo hadn’t sent his fist flying at Braden’s jaw as a good sign. After all, Braden’s cum had landed on the guy’s cock. Christ, he could still see the shiny beads dotting the length. Braden had to figure that would freak the hell out of most hard-core heterosexual men. As he stared, Braden reevaluated his assumption from just last night. Rodrigo might be closer to accepting a ménage relationship that included another man than he had previously assessed.

Right then, Rodrigo scrambled to shove his prick back into his sweats, and Braden decided confronting the sexy Colombian could wait a day or two.

Better to tackle someone already familiar with her attraction to men.

Letting his gaze travel up Abby’s body, Braden openly admired her, not stopping until he made eye contact. “Well”—he flashed her a wry smile—“I was hoping more for a *damn* that translated to ‘that was fucking amazing and when can we do it again’ than *damn* as in ‘the shit just hit the fan and what am I going to do to get these two assholes out of my bed as quickly as possible?’”

Rather than moving to cover herself, Abby pitted an unblinking stare against Braden’s and somehow managed to stir a pleasant reaction from his recently sated cock.

“Got all that from one word, huh?” she asked, raising a brow.

“Honey,” Braden shared, in between chuckling, “you often put a whole essay’s worth of thoughts into one succinctly spit-out comment.”

Rodrigo snorted, and Braden and Abby whipped their heads around to put their full attention on him.

“What?” Rodrigo’s stare narrowed. “I didn’t say anything.”

Abby made an inelegant noise. “Apparently you’re attempting to prove you can convey even more than I can without using words *at all*.” She checked Rodrigo out so completely, so aggressively, that Braden almost went to full staff just as a bystander. “Forget that noise of pure agreement you just made, Santiago. Let’s talk

about when you're rubbing up against another person, how you growl and moan and rumble and make all kinds of declarative noises. You were telegraphing all kinds of things just a few minutes ago, and I read you like you had paragraphs stamped all over your body."

"Hey." The word burst like a bullet out of Rodrigo, and he pointed his finger just as fast. He shot out of bed and snatched his shirt off the floor. "I don't make anything more than the normal male sounds during sex."

"Yeah, right," Abby said, her tone bone-dry. "And I'm the pope."

Pausing in the act of donning his T-shirt, Rodrigo replied, "You are Catholic, and you do like to wear those long billowy coat things that could be mistaken for papal robes."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm lapsed. I wear dusters, kimonos, and shawls, not voluminous robes, and after what we just did"—she finally moved to adjust her nightdress back over her breasts and sex—"I think there's little chance I'd even be accepted as a nun let alone become the first female leader of the entire Catholic church."

"Dare to dream, honey." Rodrigo's voice mocked in the most infuriating manner. "Dare to dream."

Abby narrowed her gaze. That pure blue within fired up hot as she shot Rodrigo the bird.

Christ, yes. Braden loved the way these two bristled when pushed into each other's company. It was almost the only time they forgot about work and presenting the perfect adult, pulled-together picture to the world and allowed the passion and spark for life that existed inside them free.

"Abby does have a point, Rodrigo," Braden told the man, itching for a scrum that might end with them all piled in bed again. "You do make some incredible noises when you're hard and excited. Probably more than the average male." Watching the dark man prowl around the bed like a caged cat put Braden in mind of how that body would move when merged with another. "Not that I'm complaining. Far from it."

"Shit." Rodrigo's face flushed a sexy shade of crimson under that deep tan skin. "This is fucking cra—"

"I wasn't complaining either," Abby murmured, causing Rodrigo to snap his mouth shut and spin to face her. "Ditto on the far from it too. I like that I always know where I stand with you." Red dots tinged her cheeks as well, which only made Braden more attracted to this pair. "Apparently no matter the circumstances."

For each second Rodrigo stared at Abby, a modicum of tension eased out of him until Braden saw only the straightforward, good man who lived inside him emerge.

"Right now," Rodrigo said, "the circumstances I'm most concerned about are you and your nightmares, and how I can help make them go away. I don't give a shit about how hard lying in bed with you makes me or how much I grunt when I come, and neither should you."

The sudden dark intensity in Rodrigo's stare drew a visible tremble out of Abby.

"I didn't feel too much agitation in you while you slept," Rodrigo went on, his voice almost tender now. "Does that mean you were able to get some sleep?" Just in listening to Rodrigo speak to Abby, Braden almost felt the man's words like a caress against his own body. "Did the dreams stay away?"

A pinched expression pulled the rosy color from Abby's cheeks. "Almost. I saw the same—"

The high-pitched *beep, beep, beep* of an alarm clock went off right then, momentarily jerking everyone in the bedroom to silence and stillness. Abby finally leaned and stretched her arm, and Braden followed her hand to an alarm clock tucked back on the nightstand. The display window glowed with a blue 9:00, and a little MON was highlighted above the nine.

"Crap." Braden jumped out of bed, hopping as he straightened his jeans. "Is that the real time?"

"Yes," Abby shared. "Damn, I'm sorry. Both of you." She glanced to Rodrigo as she climbed out of bed. "I didn't even think. I don't open the store on Mondays, so I push back my normal wake-up time a bit. I should have reset it before we went to bed last night."

Shit. Fuck. Damn. And shit some more.

"You had other things on your mind," Braden replied. "I should have set my cell to wake me up. I'm already late for work." He reached down to grab his sweatshirt but came back upright in a flash with his hand on his crotch and a serious pressure pushing inside him. "Damn it. I need to take a piss."

Abby hopped out of bed and pushed him toward the hallway. "Straight across the hall. Go go go." She pointed at the archway behind him. "We'll get your clothes and shoes ready while you take care of that."

Braden found the bathroom and only took time to relieve himself and briefly admire the uncluttered sink and bathtub area as he washed his hands. *Nice*. It was hard enough for two people to share a bathroom. He could only imagine managing three. One of them being a hoarder would make it impossible to achieve. Braden's toiletry needs were pretty simple, and he kept his bathroom as clean and neat as Abby did. Soon enough, they would have to devise a way to get to Rodrigo's place so Braden could check out how the other man lived. The only one of them with an actual house, Rodrigo should have plenty of free space. Unfortunately, sometimes that only meant more room for clutter.

Not Rodrigo. Braden trusted his ability to read people. *Money says the guy has entire rooms still unfurnished.*

After drying his hands on a towel, Braden returned to Abby's bedroom and found his shirt, jacket, shoes, and belt laid out neatly at the foot of the bed. Already fully dressed, Rodrigo ate up the carpet space that circled Abby's bed with a determined stride, his head turned downward and his hands clasped behind his

back. Braden had a bit of height on the man, but Rodrigo was tall, thickly shouldered, and lean around the middle. Fuck, if sexuality had a picture to define it in the dictionary, Rodrigo's image would be it. Abby, with her creamy skin, killer legs, and ocean blue eyes, would represent the female version.

Speaking of... "Where did Abby go?"

Just as the last word left Braden's mouth and Rodrigo ripped his gaze up from the carpeting, something icy touched the base of Braden's spine, making him yelp.

"Here." Abby sidled around him, grinning as she thrust a small bottle of cranberry juice and a granola bar at him. "It's not much, but at least it has some calories to hold you until you get home or to the station or wherever you have to go."

"Thanks, but hang on to it for a sec, okay?" Braden went to the bed and sat down to dress, his attention on Abby and her lovely disheveled state. "I'll head straight to the station. There's a shower in the locker room we have there, and I always keep a change of clothes in my car. Before I left the station yesterday, I mentioned I might swing by on the way in to take another run at interviewing a witness in an assault case, so it's not too conspicuous that I'm not there yet. I'll just do the interview this afternoon."

Abby scrunched up her nose and forehead. "Sorry about that again."

Braden tied his second shoe and shot upright, going right to Abby. "Don't be sorry." He cupped her jaw and couldn't help the smile and shock of light that worked its way through him that came just from looking at her. "I'd rather miss a whole day without explanation than have you believing it was a mistake to call me when you needed someone. Just so we're clear on it, I will be back tonight when I'm done with work. We're gonna figure out what's going on with your dreams, and we're gonna double up in that bed of yours again. Definitely tonight and very likely for an undetermined number of days to come."

Abby stiffened, and Braden swore he could see each tiny hair on her body shoot right on end. "I'm not some fragile piece of glass. You don't—"

Rodrigo stepped up so close he brushed shoulders with Braden. "I'll be coming back this evening too." He spoke to Abby, but the dark edges in the glance he sent Braden's way dared Braden to contradict him.

I can't wait to take his untried ass and make those eyes deepen to pure black for an altogether different reason.

Braden released his hold on Abby, shifted, and duplicated it with Rodrigo. The man's breath caught, but Braden did not remove his hold on Rodrigo's jaw or give him an extra centimeter of breathing room. "I expected no less, Rodrigo," Braden told him. He let himself visually explore the squared, ultramasculine angles of Rodrigo's face, as well as the contradiction of his decidedly lush lower lip that begged for a lick or bite. "Christ, you are gorgeous." Holding back his attraction didn't seem a viable option for Braden anymore. Rodrigo's pupils flared, but he didn't try to pull away. "And you are so close to ready for my mouth on you."

Wanting so much more, Braden settled for passing the pad of his thumb across Rodrigo's lower lip, letting the contact scratch and tug. "Not this morning, though. Not when I can't hang around to watch you process how much you love it. Start thinking about it, though; wrap your brain around the fact that it's gonna happen soon." Braden took his thumb away from Rodrigo's mouth and licked the blunt tip, swearing a tinge of spice that was all Rodrigo existed on top of the faintly salty flavor of his own skin. "I don't think I'll be able to walk away without a real taste next time."

Satisfied for the moment, Braden turned back to Abby. "You, however..." He tunneled his hand through the fall of her coppery hair. "You are so fucking ready for us to happen that it scares you almost as much as those dreams." He dipped down and brushed his mouth high across her reddened cheek. "Don't let it, sweet Abby." This bounty of two honest, lovely, intelligent people was more than a guy who had done his fair share of hurting men and women in relationships deserved. Being worthy didn't matter. Braden wouldn't let Abby and Rodrigo slip away from him.

Not when it's this important. Not these two people.

Mesmerized by the swirl of light and dark shades of indigo in Abby's eyes, Braden tilted her chin up and lowered his mouth to hers. "It's gonna be great." He whispered that promise just as he grazed his lips against hers. Her lips parted on a gasp of breath, the soft sound so fucking sweet, Braden darted his tongue out for a little taste. Abby did too, and the flash of contact sent a shockingly powerful jolt of pleasure straight down to Braden's cock.

Suddenly needing more, Braden tugged the tangle of Abby's hair and slashed his lips across hers, taking with a greed he had not intended. He pushed her jaw open wider and licked inside her mouth, tasting a hint of the tart cranberry juice she must have sipped.

The moment their tongues touched, Abby grabbed on to Braden's shirt and strained into him, tangling her tongue in an erotic tango with his. She retreated and nipped stinging bites to his lips, only to sink back in and give him even better than he got, and Braden lost what little bit of sanity he had left.

Craving even more raw contact, he took complete ownership of the kiss. He scraped his hand down Abby's back and dragged their bodies somehow closer to grind his stiffening length into her lower belly. Braden reveled in all her soft places rubbing against his hardness and only wished they had no clothing between them to dull the sensations.

With a needful noise that rivaled one of Rodrigo's from earlier, Abby wound her arms around Braden's neck, pulled him in closer, and slanted her mouth across his with an open, carnal display. The cool surface of the bottle still in her hands barely registered against the heat boiling under Braden's skin. He only cared that she kissed him back with fervor, matching him with an open aggression Braden had only encountered with other men. Rather than turn him off, this new element of Abby's personality surprised him in a way few things did anymore and pumped blood into his groin at a drugging pace. Braden bunched the back hem of Abby's

nightgown in his fist, drew it up over her buttocks, and used his other hand to skim a line down the split of her ass straight for her pussy.

I can already smell heaven again.

Braden knew his fingers were headed toward the sweetest coating of honey. If he slipped just one digit inside and took a feel of her tight, wet cunt, he would have his jeans open and around his hips, begging for her hand on his cock by the time he hit her G-spot.

No. Not right now. Not when I can't finish it.

Tearing his hands and mouth from Abby, Braden sucked in the biggest breath of cleansing air he could steal. "Jesus." She looked like spun candy, and his aunt Ida always said he had the sweetest tooth of any man she knew. Braden wiped his mouth and noticed his hand was shaking. *Damn.* He laid a hard stare on her; if he didn't, he would have his hands all over her again. "I have to go before I spread you out on that bed and don't let you up for a week."

Somehow already as natural as breathing, Braden's gaze went to the dark man at his left. "Same goes for you, Santiago." *Christ.* Before he ended up walking into work with a dark stain at his crotch, Braden grabbed the makeshift breakfast Abby offered and strode out of the room. "I'll see you both tonight." He waved without looking back. "Bye."

Only when he made it to his car did Braden realize he hadn't asked Abby anything more about the day her parents were murdered and the "wrong-looking" hand in her most recent dreams.

"Fuck."

* * *

Abby stared at the archway Braden had just vacated. Her heart still beat too fast to feel natural, and she still rode a wave of electricity that had barely slowed down in the aftermath of what they'd all done in her bed.

That was not how I expected to wake up this morning. She shook her head and stifled a rueful laugh. *Not exactly how I expected to go to sleep last night either.*

Strangely, not for one second during Braden's intoxicating kiss had Abby ever forgotten that Rodrigo was right there next to them. In fact, his presence had wound her up even more, somehow stirring her to greater, faster heights of pleasure while kissing Braden. Not that Braden didn't know how to work the hell out of a kiss or use those big hands of his like a musician finessing the finest instrument—he damn well did.

Aside from his kiss, Abby responded on a visceral level to the calm and confidence in everything Braden did. No one was more at ease with himself than Braden Crenshaw, and when Abby was around him, she felt herself reaching for the same. Except for when he'd just kissed her. Jeez, that cool had slipped away from him for just a moment, and his unexpected loss of control had surged through Abby and acted as wildfire. Add to that Rodrigo being here, watching, maybe wanting to

do the same to her and Braden equally, and that had worked on Abby like adding that final spark to a drought-ridden forest.

Now, though, even more bizarre, with Braden gone Abby felt almost shy with only her and Rodrigo in the room. This man had always pulled a ridiculously juvenile nervousness out of Abby that she didn't normally feel with other men, pushing her almost back to being an insecure, lonely kid in high school with a crush on the popular football jock. Except she knew through her friendship with Christian that Rodrigo had been anything but popular in school; he had suffered as much isolation as she had. Only, while she'd turn inward and started fiddling with recyclable metals and material as a means to create jewelry, Rodrigo had worked off the books at construction sites before he was legally able. Upon graduation, he had funneled that drive into a couple of tech schools, gaining a contractor's license as well as attending a local community college where he earned himself a business degree. A self-made man. And God, from the beginning, she had found him devastatingly fascinating.

Too much.

With just Rodrigo, Abby suddenly felt more naked standing in her nightdress than she had while spread out on her bed begging for his and Braden's hands on her.

Abby spun to face Rodrigo and plastered a go-to smile on her face. "So." Her voice sounded a little high, so she cleared her throat. *Holy Mother*. Dark eyes watched her from just a few feet away. *Why does he have to be so intense?* "Can I get you some breakfast?" she asked, forcing that chipper lightness into her tone. "I'll admit I'm not really sure what the proper protocol is for a morning like today."

Rodrigo took a step toward her, but he abruptly pivoted and headed for the hallway, his jaw clenching visibly under his morning shadow. "I need to go too," he said, pausing at the archway, his back to her. "I'm not running late yet, but if I don't leave now, I won't get home in time to shower and change for a lineup of meetings with my suppliers."

"Right. Cool." Abby hung back, her legs and body not sure how or where to move. Her chest tightened, her stomach flipped, and she didn't like it at all. "I'm not opening the store today, but that doesn't mean I don't have work to do. You know that better than anybody."

Rodrigo braced his hand on the wall, but still didn't look back at her. "Yeah, I do."

Pinpricks dotted Abby's arms, and she wished she had her robe to cover them up. "Bye. Have a good day." Jeez, she might as well have told him she hoped he had a nice flight. It couldn't be less personal.

Silence thickened the invisible weight permeating the room. Abby stared at the stiff line of Rodrigo's spine and the whitening of his fingertips as he dug them into her red-painted walls.

Just as the air went out of Abby, Rodrigo uttered a few Spanish curses she understood very well. He turned and stalked her until barely enough space for breathing existed between them. His nostrils flared, and his eyes locked in on hers. "Listen," he started, his voice low enough to make her shiver. "I don't know what the fuck happened here this morning. And I'm not even going to try to figure out the Braden shit right now when I don't know how the hell I feel about it yet, and he's not here to say his piece." Rodrigo's gaze worked its way over her face before coming back to eye contact. When he did, some of the steel left his tone. "I just know you look at me sometimes in a way that makes me think you want to kiss *me* the way you just kissed him."

Abby's heart suddenly th-thump th-thump th-thumped right up into her throat, and she couldn't look away from Rodrigo's piercing stare. "I do." She licked the edge of her lip. Her mouth had gone bone-dry but as she watched confusion map Rodrigo's face she found herself scratching out words that wouldn't remain stuffed inside anymore. "When I'm not thinking about how much fighting with you stirs me up in a way that's probably not natural, and when I'm not thinking about how I could lose myself in you if I slip up just once, I wonder about how great it might be if I could get over myself and let it happen."

A hint of a smile quirked Rodrigo's sexy mouth up at the edge. "I probably need to get over myself some too."

This time, Abby snorted. "You think?"

"Hey." Rodrigo's gaze flashed with glints of black diamonds. "That's my noise."

Abby found herself grinning back at Rodrigo, and suddenly the crazy beating in her chest didn't feel quite as terrifying as she'd always imagined it would during a moment like this.

"Maybe I want a piece of it for myself," she said.

Something flashed deep in the darkness of Rodrigo's eyes, and the safety of a second ago flooded out of Abby in a rush. Rodrigo curled his hand around her nape and drew her closer, settling her smaller frame into the nooks and crannies of his larger one. "Maybe I want a piece of *you*, Bit. Maybe I want it all. Maybe I'm not sure if I like knowing that, though. Maybe I don't like how it makes me feel a little bit sick in the pit of my stomach when I think about how much I want you. When I think about you, period, no matter what."

She grabbed on to his wrist and rose up on her tiptoes, leaning in, her breathing going shallow. "Maybe we're on the same page."

Rodrigo put his forehead to hers, and she could see into the depths of browns and blacks flecking his eyes in a way she never had before.

"Maybe that makes everything feel a little less knotted up inside me, then," he murmured, brushing warm breath against her lips.

"Yeah." She nodded, and their noses touched. "I think so."

That wicked grin of his appeared again. "Finally found something to agree on."

"Maybe we should quit while we're ahead." She spoke the words but curled her toes into the carpet and stayed right where she was.

"Nah." Rodrigo dipped lower, leaving only a sliver of space between their mouths. "I'm not a quitter. But maybe if we shut up for just one minute..." His lips caught on hers and did the job for both of them.

Rodrigo held her head in place and grazed his mouth across hers, giving just a taste of his heat. A rush of warmth filled Abby in response, and she parted her lips, eager and already primed for something deeper. Rodrigo slipped his tongue into her mouth and swept her teeth, then withdrew and tormented her with brushing scrapes of their lips that sent pulling lines of need up from Abby's core. Rodrigo kept the kiss just on the edge of becoming something wild, delving in for quick tastes but always pulling back, always controlling, always denying Abby the full crush of his will.

A whimper escaped Abby, and she dug into the solid bone in Rodrigo's wrist. She wound her other hand around his neck, threaded her fingers into the silky thickness of his hair, and pulled him flush to her front. The second her breasts pressed into his chest, Rodrigo trembled and moaned. He circled his arms around her waist and lifted her off the floor, putting her face level with his. For a handful of seconds, Rodrigo seemed to forget himself and angled his mouth across Abby's with an open, claiming kiss. He took her with bites, darting thrusts, and deep licks, and all the while he vibrated these low, incredible noises through his body and into hers. Abby grabbed a fistful of his hair and tried to wind her legs around his waist, desperate for him to put a balm on the nearly painful itch inside her, but Rodrigo abruptly put her back on the floor and took a big step backward.

Rodrigo's chest expanded and contracted under his clothes in visible waves. Dark color marred his cheeks, and pure black took over his irises. As Abby was quickly discovering, arousal looked a lot like anger on Rodrigo.

"Shit," Rodrigo muttered, his voice thick. "You know how to make a man forget his good intentions." He ran a hand through his mussed hair, and his gaze slid to his watch. "I really do have to go, Bit." That dark look stayed pinpointed on her with each backward step he took toward the hallway. "But I am so fucking coming back tonight."

Abby found herself lifted on the balls of her feet, almost leaning without moving, reaching in Rodrigo's direction. "I'll be here." Right then, a very different, pale gaze showed itself in Abby's mind. "Braden will too," she reminded him.

Rodrigo's mouth thinned down to a hard line. "I know." The unforgiving angle of his lips subtly shifted to a sardonic twist. "I'm unlikely to forget about Braden while I still have his cum on my dick."

Without thinking, Abby dropped her focus to the bulge still pushing against Rodrigo's sweats. She couldn't help it; she bit the edge of her lip, and her breathing went a little funny as she remembered Braden succumbing to orgasm, partially on Rodrigo's still erect cock.

Rodrigo growled another curse in Spanish, and it yanked Abby's attention back up to his face. "You like the thought of that," he said. His stare on her didn't waver. "Me and Braden doing stuff together, to each other, like what we did with you."

Here's your chance, girl. You can put everything back into its neat little box and take the first step to getting back to a normal life.

She looked at Rodrigo, and the words "I do like it" slipped out of her mouth in a rush. "I've thought about it a lot."

"Shit." Rodrigo tore his gaze from hers, shaking his head as he looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know what the hell to do with that right now." His prick clearly twitched, though, pushing that bulge harder against his sweats. She saw it even though he reached down and adjusted himself. "I have to get out of here." He threw her one more fast glance. "Try to get some rest. I'll see you later."

"Bye." Abby lifted her hand as he left, and then sank down to the edge of the bed after she heard him traipsing down her squeaky stairs.

Wow.

Abby touched her mouth, fingering the flesh two men had swollen so deliciously with their kisses. Rodrigo's kiss had been different than Braden's. Almost completely controlled. But no less intoxicating than Braden's ravishing of her mouth. The dichotomy, the flip of her expectations for how these men would behave sexually, stirred Abby's anticipation and nervousness even more.

God only knows how they might surprise me next.

Maybe in a way she wouldn't like.

Still, Abby's sex continued to throb, her breasts ached, and the taste of two incredible men remained in her mouth, mingling, making her picture the two of them kissing passionately on their own.

Before she even realized it, Abby had her hand between her thighs, working the slick folds of her cunt while imagining Rodrigo and Braden throwing themselves at each other and then dragging her into bed to join in the lovemaking. Only when Abby rubbed her clit, shocking a sharp jolt of pleasure into her belly, did she realize what she was doing and yank her fingers out of her pussy.

God, you just came a few minutes ago. Get control of yourself. Think about work.

Yes. Abby could make a list of things she needed to do today. A couple of tasks she could focus on and then check off her list—a job completed—was exactly what she needed. Anything to get her mind off Braden and Rodrigo and what might happen when they came back tonight.

* * *

Abby liked her lists. She loved drawing a line through a completed job; she loved looking at a sheet of paper and seeing everything crossed off. It didn't matter if it was work related, holiday gift-buying season, or a trip to the grocery store, she

loved smiling to herself and sighing on the inside when she had everything ticked off her list.

Unfortunately, today, striking out the last necessary item that had needed doing—which had happened a good hour ago—left her with free time in her day. To think. To let her mind wander. Right in the direction of Braden and Rodrigo. She didn't really want to go in that direction—too many possible outcomes right now for her to accurately assess risk—so Abby literally turned the pages in her little notebook...and came upon a list she'd started building a week ago but hadn't yet crossed out any name on it.

People who knew Mom and Dad. Some of the ones I can remember, anyway.

Her heart constricted as she stared at the short list of names and recalled time each had spent in her old home. Time she'd spent in some of theirs too.

That's long over now, girl. Abby automatically wiped at the phantom sensation of a tear on her cheek. *Everything turned out okay in the end.*

Abby had gone almost all day without obsessing about her nightmares. If one good thing had come of Rodrigo's and Braden's presence in her bed this morning, it had been that. The dreams had remained in her mind, but for the first time they hadn't driven her to nonsensical note taking about the snippets she could remember or of making lists that she hoped might help sort out her confusion.

Like this one. It had Lorene Jones's name at the top. *Mom's best friend.*

Abby hadn't seen the woman in nearly seventeen years. Never thought she would ever again.

The nightmares changed everything, though, and forced Abby to look once more in dark places still shadowing her life today.

Her heart racing so fast she thought she might be sick, Abby grabbed her car keys and flew down the stairs anyway.

Time to revisit the past.

Chapter Five

Braden used a speedy hunt-and-peck style of typing as he entered information from past cases into his computer. This aspect of detective work was mindlessly tedious, but he also understood that not correctly dotting the i's and crossing the t's sometimes made the difference in a case going bust if it ended up in trial. No detective wanted to be the reason a suspect walked away from a conviction on a technicality.

The suspect in the death of Abby's parents had walked away from his trial without a guilty verdict. Of course, that wasn't due to a screwup on the case itself. The guy had gone to trial, the prosecutor hadn't proven his case, and the jury had set him free.

It happened sometimes. Braden could only imagine how it haunted the families of victims who could not get justice for their loved ones. It followed those families in their nightmares, Braden decided. Such as the ones that had come for Abby so recently.

Christ, I want to help her.

If Braden couldn't give Abby closure then helping her find peace was his next best option. Braden eased his rolling chair back and withdrew a key to unlock the middle drawer of his desk. He had the key turned and the drawer halfway open when a sharp rap of knuckles hit the top of his desk.

"Knock. Knock." A smoky, whiskey-rich voice accompanied the tap.

Braden looked up, up into a hazel stare shot with flecks of amber, belonging to the only man he'd ever met that he literally had to look up to see into his eyes. Ben Evans was a big man and solid as a rock. One of the most rugged, uniquely beautiful men Braden had ever known too.

"Son of a bitch. Ben Evans, look at you." Braden jumped out of his chair and thumped the man on his thick shoulders. It had been two years since Ben ended things between them, and Braden's heart still hurt some when he looked into the man's eyes and remembered them filled with tears as Ben pulled the plug on their relationship. "When did you show up in town?"

Ben slipped his hands into his pockets and rocked back on the heels of his heavy boots. "Just got here, and I can't stay long. I finished up that case I was working on when you contacted me, and I've since had a chance to look into the name you wanted checked out." He glanced at the man and woman occupying the two desks butted up against Braden's, both of whom were doing a piss-poor job of

not eavesdropping. When Ben came back to Braden, he asked, “Can you break for a bit?”

Braden grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair and stood. “Sure. I have time for a coffee.”

“Damn, Crenshaw.” A male voice mocked Braden from one desk away. “First you’re late this morning, and now you’re ducking out early.” Detective Derek Watson glanced across the span of his desk to the final detective in their trio, April Kaufman. “Did we get new shorter shifts I didn’t hear about?”

“Nope.” April shook her head, the action swinging the ponytail holding back her blonde hair. “Not me, anyway.”

Derek shifted back to Braden, his dark eyes flashing with glee. “Me either.” His chocolate skin glowed with the joy of some good-natured ammunition. “Something a little more golden about you, Crenshaw? Just tell me who I have to fuck, and I’ll do it.” He grabbed a pen and clicked out the ballpoint.

Braden glared at Derek while making a jerk-off gesture with his fist in front of his crotch. “Eat me, Watson.”

The guy flashed a smile that could charm a junkie out of his last hit. “Not to my tastes, man, but thanks for the offer.”

In his mind’s eye, Braden could see the folder he had locked in his desk. His voice lost its edge as Abby opening her door to him and Rodrigo at three a.m. took over his thoughts. “Ben’s here on a matter related to an old case,” he shared. “He’s a private investigator out of Tampa, and I asked him to do me a favor.”

“Oh yeah?” Derek leaned up and shook Ben’s hand. “Good to meet you, Ben.” As April came out of her chair and exchanged handshakes with Ben, Derek looked back to Braden, fully sober now. “The one...” With a quick glance around the busy station, Derek asked, “The case we talked about a while back?”

Braden felt his mouth tighten. “Yeah.”

“Understood.” Derek slid a peek April’s way, and an almost imperceptible nod happened between them. “We have your back if the captain comes looking for you.”

“Thanks.” Braden didn’t bother to suppress a chuckle. He’d actively worked to hide huge chunks of who he was for far too long, and could read it like a book in others. “And I’ll keep pretending I don’t know the two of you are fucking like rabbits”—he paused, letting the wait-for-it moment swell—“even if the captain asks me directly. *Again.*”

“We aren’t doing shit” and “nothing’s going on between us” burst out of Derek and April one right on top of the other.

“And I agree with you both,” Braden said, his face stone-cold straight. “I’ll be back soon. Bye.”

As he stepped in line beside Ben, the bigger man nudged Braden’s arm with his. “I see you haven’t lost your way with the ladies.” He looked over his shoulder in April and Derek’s direction. “Or the fellas.”

Braden glared. "You can eat me too, Evans."

Ben smiled, shooting Braden a quick heartbeat of eye contact before sliding on a pair of sunglasses. "I already have."

Christ. Braden rolled his eyes. *In so many ways, I will always love this man.*

He led the way outside. "Let's go get that coffee."

* * *

Ben swirled the plastic stirrer in his small cup, mixing the foam into his shot of Cuban coffee. "I don't think he did it," he said, his stare steady on Braden.

Braden's paper cup hit the table before he took his first sip of caffeine. They sat at a deserted picnic table in an empty park across the street from a local coffee shop. "No shit?"

"Don't get me wrong," Ben added. "The guy is nothing to take home to mom; he's in holding in Lakeland sitting on a new possession charge as we speak, but I don't think he murdered Elaine and Richard Gaines."

"Tell me why." Braden would not add his own summation to Ben's assessment until he heard everything.

"He's a lifetime petty criminal junkie who does the minimal necessary to get his next fix," Ben replied. "From what I can gather, he's been using his whole life. His brain is toast. He can't think two steps ahead to his next meal let alone murder two people and get away with it."

"He walked away with a not guilty verdict at his trial; it's not like he actually outsmarted the cops." Braden played devil's advocate. It usually worked the best when fleshing out new ideas in any case, old or new. "It was the DA who didn't do his job." A biting breeze whipped across the open park, and Braden grabbed his cup so it didn't blow away. "Aside from that, you saw Cormack as he is today, not as the nineteen-year-old kid he was eighteen years ago. He has had almost two decades more of drug use under his belt now than he did then."

Ben shook his head. "It's not relevant to this case. Cormack is just not smart enough to have done this crime and leave so little evidence. I read the file just like you did. I don't buy the church as his connection to the Gaineses and his reason for choosing to target their house. Why would he?" Ben looked Braden in the eyes, the fire of debate sparking the amber flecks in the hazel. "That house was practically in the fucking godforsaken middle of nowhere. The cops and prosecutor never could prove how Cormack got out to the Gaines place when he didn't own a car nor have a friend who could lend him one. If he could afford to rent one, then he wouldn't have needed to steal from the Gaineses in the first place, which takes away your motive for the murders."

"He stole it." Braden made a face at Ben. "Come on, even you know that one."

"Who did he steal it from? Someone who didn't think it necessary to report a missing vehicle in a town as small as Coleman was back then? No neighboring counties reported a stolen car within that time frame either. But let's say he did get

ahold of one. Where did Cormack dump it?" Ben pointed emphatically with his tiny paper cup, sloshing some of the coffee over the edge. "You know what?" He set the cup down, got to his feet, and began to create a path in the grass behind his side of the picnic table. "Forget the car. Let's talk about Cormack's method of gutting the wife before shooting her and then cutting open the husband's throat before taking a shotgun to him. For a simple B and E gone bad?" Ben's voice rose as high as his deep tones could. "No way. Knife wounds indicate passion, rage, fear, and almost always point to a personal—or a perceived or projected personal—connection to the victim."

Braden opened his mouth, but Ben held up his hand, shutting Braden down before he could get a word out. "But for argument's sake, let's say Cormack did somehow get himself a vehicle, and he did read more than what was proper into the charity shown to him by Mrs. Gaines. You have Cormack deciding to steal a car so he can take a drive out and see Mrs. Gaines. Maybe he's going to ask her for some cash because he's seen her Christian charity in full swing at the church. Or let's say he sees her handing out food at the church shelter, notices she has some nice jewelry on, and decides her house would be a good target for some quick stuff to sell for cash. Either way, he shows up at the house. So Cormack is either breaking in, doesn't realize the family's home, gets caught, and he kills them in a panic. On the other side, Cormack goes to the Gaineses and openly asks them for some money. Maybe he sells a hard-luck story, but the Gaineses rebuff his request for cash." Ben laid out the two theories the cops had settled on for Cormack's presence in the Gaineses' home that day. "So you either have a guy who is caught in the act and frightened or you have a guy who gets angry at this couple's unwillingness to help a man in need."

Ben paced the table length a final time and then sat back down. He folded his hands on the scuffed surface of the picnic table and laid a probing stare on Braden. "In which scenario do you see Cormack not only stabbing her and slicing him with his knife—which was never found, by the way—and then on top of that, shooting them with the husband's shotgun, which in my opinion was an attempt to cover those knife wounds? It's ridiculous; it makes no sense, and the only reason I could see the DA prosecuting this case is because the community wanted blood. The mob mentality wanted someone to blame, and it demanded justice. The DA's office took the theories the cops had and ran with them because they got pressured from some politicians looking to get reelected. I talked to the prosecutor in Lakeland about that, off the record, of course."

Braden's mouth twisted downward. "Of course." It felt like he swallowed something sour.

Ben grimaced too. "Right. You don't have to like it, and neither do I, but it's still good information. The DA said that if I wanted to paint a picture of community vengeance privately, he wouldn't tell me I was using the wrong colors."

Braden barely managed to suppress the twin urges to vomit and throw a punch at something—anything—to release the storm brewing inside him. "Damn."

One spit-out word didn't do anything to relieve the inner pressure, so he repeated it a half dozen more times, each one with a sharper bite than the last.

"Damn is right," Ben said. Braden knew Ben understood the potential hornets' nest they were about to disturb. "That's all I have. Did I do my job in convincing you of what you already suspected?"

What I didn't want to believe. Braden couldn't make himself talk yet. Speak of what he had already suspected. *Rusty Cormack did not murder Abby's parents.*

Braden trusted Ben's gut as much as he did his own. The man used to be a detective in a neighboring county. He definitely believed in Ben's skills when it came to interviewing suspects. If Ben didn't think Cormack pulled the trigger, then Cormack didn't do it.

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

Braden had not wanted to put an official request in to reexamine the Gaineses' double murder until he felt certain he had something new to bring to the table. Technically, he didn't really have that yet. All he had was an off-the-record comment and a new theory that would piss off every single law-enforcement individual in two counties. Coleman had coworked the case eighteen years ago with their neighboring county Tilton. The Gaines home was located in Tilton jurisdiction, but Mr. Gaines had worked in Coleman, and the Gaineses' main social outlet—their church—was also within the Coleman County jurisdiction. Enough people had been horrified by this double murder that the usual jockeying for position to run an investigation had not come into play with the two departments. Now Braden was one new clue away from burning a shitload of cops who had put their time and hearts into this case.

The chirps and chatter of birds and squirrels playing in the oaks created a happy chorus in the park. While a breeze kept the air cool enough for long sleeves, the sun also shone brightly in the cloudless blue sky. Braden could not have asked for a more beautiful day to bask in the high of waking up this morning with Abby and Rodrigo. Yet right now, he could only see the darkness looming on the horizon that would come with telling Abby the cops had pursued the wrong man for her parents' murder.

The nightmares are bad now. I can't imagine what this news will do to her sleepless nights.

Ben curled his hand around Braden's wrist, and the man's gentle touch snapped Braden back into the park. Ben didn't smile, but his thumb did soothe the fine hairs on Braden's arm. "You ready to tell me why you pulled this file to investigate?" he asked. "I know you, Braden. You're a good cop with a curious mind and an incredible drive for justice, but you don't randomly search old cases just because you're bored. Not with the potential to anger a whole lot of people if you start putting feet to the fire."

"I don't decide who I'm going to help based on whether it's going to get me in trouble."

"No, but you also don't rush into a situation with guns blazing. You're smarter, more calculating than that." Ben pulled his hand away and folded it carefully with his other on the picnic table. "It's the girl. The daughter of the murder victims. Abigail Gaines." His gaze settled in on Braden like a hawk assessing its prey. "Am I right?"

"You wouldn't ask me if you didn't already know the answer."

Ben shrugged, but Braden didn't buy the easy move for a second.

"I know she's only a few years younger than you," Ben said. "I know she's lovely, and I know you've bought your aunt Ida an inordinate amount of jewelry this past year from a particular store owned by a woman with the same name."

"Damn." Braden should have anticipated that Ben's curiosity would go beyond the scope of talking to Rusty Cormack. "You are thorough."

"Nah." Ben suddenly grinned like the Cheshire cat. "Ida still likes me, though."

"Of course." Leave it to Ben to have formed an unbreakable bond with Braden's big-hearted aunt Ida, the only family Braden had left. "She always did like you." Ida had also liked the one woman Braden had taken to meet her. They'd never openly spoken about Braden's dating women and men; it just *was*. She'd taken Braden's variety of dating partners in stride in the past, so he could only pray discovering one of each at the same time wouldn't trip her up. The thought of losing contact with Ida didn't bear imagining.

The smile faded from Ben's lips, and the razor-sharp glint returned to his eyes. "Don't do this again, Braden." A mixture of plea and lecture filled his voice. "Don't let that woman fall in love with you. Don't fall in love with her and think it's going to be enough"—Ben's Adam's apple bobbed, rolling in the bronze column of his throat—"until it isn't. I don't care how strong or fragile the tragedy in this woman's past has made her or how much you want to save her. She will get hurt when she realizes she can't be enough for you on her own."

"Christ." Braden's chest lurched, and he scratched his hand through his hair. "I hate that I fucked with your heart, Ben. No matter my good intentions."

Hints of amber mingled with the hazel in Ben's gaze, and his lips lost some of their hardness too. "I know you didn't mean to do it. That still doesn't change the resulting damage. I just hope I stuck around in your life long enough for you to learn something from it. Don't hurt this girl, Braden. One more time and it's gonna break *you*."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Braden looked at this uniquely stunning, kind man before him and wondered how much talk of a new relationships he would tolerate hearing. "There's a man too, Ben," Braden admitted. "He wants Abby as much as I want her. She has feelings for both of us too, as much as it scares her." A small smile lifted his lips as he remembered both of them this morning. "This guy is still figuring out he wants me also." Braden studied Ben and hoped the lifted head and unwavering, dry gaze meant their sexual and romantic entanglement truly was in the past for both of

them. "I'm not lying to myself anymore. I'm not trying to convince myself that I can be satisfied with one or the other if only it were just the right one." His throat tightened. "If that were the case, it would have been you."

An equally poignant half smile graced Ben's lips. "I know, Braden. And if I could have done anything to accommodate your need for a woman, I would have made it happen." With the last sip of his Cuban coffee, he shrugged. "We weren't meant to be."

"We had a hell of a lot of fun while we tried, though, right?" Hope, respect, and love for this man triggered a desperate twinge in Braden's voice.

"Until the end, yeah." Ben reached across the table and squeezed Braden's shoulder. "Stop beating yourself up about us, man. It's okay to move on."

Relief had Braden exhaling a wobbly breath. "How about you?" he asked. "Have you dipped your dick back into the pool yet?"

"Getting there," Ben answered, his voice subdued. "Just like you."

"I fucking know you won't be hurting for offers when you dive back in," Braden said. The guy needed to hear it. Benjamin Evans had no idea how individually beautiful a man he was, inside and out. "You'll be swatting guys off your back when you're ready to invite them in."

"We'll see." A sudden wide smile transformed Ben's entire face to something accessible and light. "So, a man to go with this Abby woman, huh? You took my suggestion. I've seen her picture at her Web site. Is he as sexy as she is beautiful?"

"Oh yeah. He has a body that won't quit." Images of Rodrigo with his sweats around his hips as he spilled himself on Abby this morning stirred Braden's blood. "And tack on to that an amazing certainty that he is right about everything." For a moment, thinking about Abby and Rodrigo let the warmth from the sun back into Braden's afternoon. "He gets under Abby's skin like nothing I've ever seen. She makes him lose his train of thought in a way he has managed to keep concealed from her, but I can read it in him in twenty-twenty."

"Sounds volatile."

Braden almost got hard right where he sat. "Oh yeah."

Ben stood and buttoned his jacket. "Sounds like exactly what you need to keep you excited about coming home every night." He kept his attention on Braden, and nothing visible wavered. "I'm happy for you, Braden. Don't screw it up."

"I can't." A tight squeeze suddenly banded Braden's insides. Navigating the uncharted waters of a threesome relationship with these two incredibly important people fired a case of heartburn in Braden's chest. "It's supposed to be them. I can feel it. I have to get it right."

"Being open with both of them from the beginning is a good first step." Ben tossed his cup into a trash can, slipped his hands into his pockets, and stood in place while Braden got up and threw away the rest of his coffee. As soon as Braden did, he fell in place beside Ben and started walking toward the cars.

"Let me know if I can help you again with the Gaines case," Ben added.

"I have to make sure I have something concrete first." The lack of any information in the case file that didn't pertain to Rusty Cormack was minimal. Braden understood very well how difficult it was to find new evidence in an old case. "Let me know if anything else about the case hits you as worth pursuing."

"I destroyed the copy of the file," Ben said, "just as you asked."

"But it's in your head now. You'll think on it some more." Braden paused by the hood of his car but followed Ben with his eyes as the man moved to his own vehicle. "I know that about you too," he added, his voice softening.

Keys poised at his lock, Ben shot Braden a sideways glance. "Too?"

"You're going to find someone worthy of you, Ben," he told the man. "I told you that before, and I still believe it today. You just have to be willing to put yourself out there a little more than is comfortable for you."

Rims of deep green seemed to take over the color in Ben's ever-changing eyes. "I'm more the 'if it's meant to be, then it will be' type. You know that."

"Yeah, I do." Braden let it go. He understood now that whether Ben was ready or not, one day soon the universe would crash the right man smack down into the middle of his life. "Take care of yourself, Ben. Let's not make it another year before we have coffee again."

Ben climbed into his truck but reached across the seat and stuck his hand out to Braden through the open window. "It's a deal. I have to head back to work now. Talk to you soon."

"Yep." After shaking Ben's outstretched hand, Braden waved bye. He stood beside his own car until Ben's truck was out of sight.

As Braden drove back to the station, he wondered how in the hell he would break it to Abby that her parents' killer was still roaming the streets free.

* * *

Abby pulled her car to a stop in front of the white-and-blue-painted house. Yellow and purple flowers filled the two beds on either side of the porch, and brick now covered the curving walkway to the front door. Abby didn't have to close her eyes in order to see the two shades of pea green paint that used to cover the house's facade. Cracked concrete once served as the front walk and had doubled as a place to draw giant pictures with oversize pieces of chalk. Abby figured Lorene wouldn't want her kids—well, grandkids probably, these days—to mark up the beautiful brick she had now.

Lorene probably wouldn't like that any more than the shock of opening her front door to find Abby standing on her welcome mat.

Too bad. She's about to get it right now.

Not giving herself time to chicken out, Abby got out of her car, strode up those new bricks, hopped the two steps to the white-painted porch, and knocked hard on the door.

Nearly seventeen years had passed since Abby last saw her mother's best friend. Almost two decades had gone by since Abby had been pulled out of this house as quietly as she'd been carried in. Yet she'd somehow left this place a thousand times more terrified than the day she'd been carried out of her own home by a uniformed officer. That day, Abby had known Lorene would come for her. She'd broken out of her trance long enough to utter the name of her mother's best friend to the police.

Eighteen months later, child services had carried Abby out of this home when Lorene Jones gave Abby away.

Chapter Six

I wonder if she still smells like gardenias.

The thought popped into Abby's head as she stood on the Joneses' front porch waiting for someone to answer her knock. Abby recalled that Lorene Jones had smelled just like a bouquet of the sweet white flowers. Not like an overpowering fragrance that would bring on a headache, but actually like a real garden full of gardenias. Probably an essential oil rather than a perfume, Abby figured in hindsight.

Strange to remember that now.

Just as Abby lifted her hand to knock again, the door swung open, and a petite, silver-haired woman stood on the other side of the threshold. The woman took one look at Abby, her smile faltered, and she leaned to brace herself against the doorjamb.

Abby's legs suddenly felt a little weak too as a myriad of emotions flooded through her. "Hello, Mrs. Jones." She forced a smile to her frozen lips. "I don't know if you remem—"

Lorene reached out and fingered Abby's hair and cheek, bringing Abby to a halt.

"Oh my goodness." A film of wetness made Lorene's pale blue eyes blurry. "You look just like your mama."

Mention of her mother from someone who had known her so well tightened Abby's throat. "I think so too."

"Please"—Lorene stepped back and beckoned with her arm—"come inside. It's breezy again today."

Abby dipped her head. "Thank you." She stepped into the Joneses' home, and the familiarity of so many elements all these years later sent a bubble of panic into Abby's stomach.

Hallway walls adorned with framed family photos on both sides led Abby toward a living room, her feet moving her in the right direction as if she'd only made the walk yesterday. Frame after frame showed each stage of the Joneses' four children's lives, their annual school pictures mingled in with family vacations and holiday gatherings. After moving in with the Joneses, Abby could remember standing in the hallways in this house, as well as at the fireplace mantel, studying pictures of this happy family with longing and aching sadness for what she would

never have. By the end of her time here, she had almost come to believe she could find a place for herself among these people.

Even Lorene today, in her gingham shirt with flowers embroidered on it, a denim skirt, and brown leather loafers, transported Abby back in time. With the exception of Lorene's graying hair and a bit more thinness to her face, she looked as she did in many of these photos. Time almost standing still. It was comforting, in a way.

Abruptly, Abby came to a halt, a pang hitting her in the middle. "You took mine down." Her class photo from the year she'd spent in this home had once been right in the spot where there was now a picture of a small dark-haired child she did not recognize.

From her peripheral vision, Abby could see Lorene's chin wobble. "It hurt too much to look at it and know we couldn't have you in our lives every day anymore," she said softly.

Couldn't have me in your life at all is more like it.

Abby hated the slip of bitterness. Even internally. She wasn't here to hurl accusations or make Lorene suffer for her past choices. Abby's life was good now, and she had no reason to complain. Losing her parents had been horrific, but lots of kids suffered a much worse time in the ensuing foster-care system than she had.

Turning, Abby faced Lorene head-on. No hiding. No subterfuge. "I wanted to talk to you about my parents. Mostly about my mother, since you are the one who knew her best."

"All right." Lorene cupped Abby's elbow and led her to the kitchen. "I'll do my best to help in any way I can."

Once Lorene put Abby in a seat at a big butcher-block table, she busied herself with removing a pan from her stove and a white canister from a cabinet. "Do you still like hot chocolate?" she asked.

"I drink it in place of coffee," Abby shared. "Thank you."

Exactly as Abby remembered, Lorene pulled a gallon of milk out of the fridge as the base for her cocoa. The woman had spoiled Abby for the instant mix with water, and she made it this way in her own life today.

Watching Lorene, Abby asked, "Would you say my mother confided all her secrets to you?" She kept her voice conversational rather than combative.

"All?" The woman's eyebrows went up. "I likely think not. Most people have a few things in their life they never tell a soul."

Abby glanced around at all the country-looking plaques in this kitchen with various Bible verses painted on them. "Not even to God?"

Lorene nodded as she stirred the heating milk. "God will know whether you tell him or not, but yes, I believe every person has at least one thing they don't want to confess to their priest or even confide to God during private prayer." She pulled her attention away from Abby and put it on breaking up pieces of chocolate for their drinks. Her voice lowered when she went on. "We all have done something that

shames us; we refuse to talk about it and don't even want to think about it when we're alone. I don't think any of us, Christian or otherwise, are exempt."

"Fair enough." The woman couldn't mean the choice she'd made to give up Abby, as everyone in their church community had known about it. Impossible to keep secret a child there one day and gone the next. "What about my mom? Did she unburden any secrets on you?"

"A few." Lorene glanced Abby's way before going about gathering mugs and a few other items from around the kitchen. "None that I think would be appropriate for her daughter to hear, particularly when Elaine isn't here to explain them."

Abby had anticipated resistance. "Were there any that could have made an enemy out of someone?" She didn't have to wait more than a second for Lorene to whip her head Abby's way, her eyes wide. "Anything that had to do with slighting someone or secrets at another person's expense?" Abby pressed. "Something that someone might have killed over?"

"What? My dear, what are you asking?" Lorene moved the saucepan to a different burner and joined Abby at the table. "What are you even trying to say?" Her pitch rose in the breathless manner of one who couldn't bear to speak the words coming out of her mouth. "Your mother had nothing to do with what happened to them. The police know who killed your parents. It's terrible that the man was not convicted, but he is most definitely guilty. We have to content ourselves with believing he will receive justice at the hands of his Maker when the time comes."

"I'd prefer justice of the human kind, and I'd like the right person to get the life sentence when it happens." Abby snapped those words out. "I've done some research regarding my parents' murders lately, and I'm starting to recall pieces from that day I don't ever remember dreaming about before." She kept her focus locked on Lorene, searching for subconscious responses to Abby's revelations. "Things that make me very confused and bits that make me believe Rusty Cormack did not kill Mom and Dad."

Lorene's brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"The man said my name." Abby dropped her first bomb. "The goddamn bastard who killed my mother and father spoke my name when he was looking for me afterward. He only did it once, and then he said 'little girl' or things to that effect, but one time, when he was looking for me, he called me Abby."

"What?" For a handful of seconds, the blood fled from Lorene's face. "This person knew about you? Wanted to kill you too?"

"I believe so." Abby had never been able to speak of her time in the attic and then later in that bedroom with her dead parents. "I don't think he wanted to take me out for ice cream, which was what he said while trying to get me out of hiding."

Pale did not even begin to describe Lorene's visage. "Oh my dear Lord in heaven. I cannot believe it."

"It was obviously someone who knew my family." Abby laid her hands flat on the table and kept her gaze on Lorene. "Who knew *me*."

"No." Lorene shook her head with vehement conviction. Abby watched her struggle to reach another path to the truth. "You were probably at the church on one of the occasions Mr. Cormack came looking for a meal and counseling. Yes. Yes. That must be it." Her frantic searching in the thin air around her for an explanation came to a stop. "Your mother spoke of you so often, Abby. Many of us remember Elaine offering this young man kindness on multiple occasions. In speaking to him, I'm certain her wonderful daughter came up. That is how Mr. Cormack knew your name. It has to be."

Abby felt her mouth tighten and her fingers curl into fists. "She called him baby. Before this person killed my mother, she called him baby. It was familiar, like how Daddy would call me his little orange blossom. There was...knowledge of the other person in the tone of her voice."

Lorene pressed her fingers to her lips, and their fragile paleness trembled. "Oh, my dear. You're certain?"

"Unless my mind has been conjuring up fantasies these last two weeks every time I close my eyes," Abby said a little impatiently, "then yes, I'm certain."

"What do the police say?"

"I haven't gone to them. I don't know what any of it means. What can they do, anyway?" Abby wished Lorene would give her a helpful possibility she hadn't considered herself. "Are the police going to question members of the church and Daddy's work again? The cops interviewed so many people eighteen years ago, and they apparently didn't see any other avenue worth pursuing than Rusty Cormack. Let's say they talk to all those people again. What is one of them likely to remember all these years later that they didn't think to say eighteen years ago?"

"I don't know, but this is new information, dear. You have to tell them." With a glance toward the stove, Lorene rose and moved to it, chatting as she checked on her saucepan. "One of those people questioned must have been lying, if it truly was someone Elaine knew. Oh my." Her hands still shook as she poured hot chocolate into two mugs. "I cannot imagine someone in our church would do such a horrific thing. I cannot believe it."

"Would it have to be someone from the church?" Abby wondered. This was at the heart of her decision to face Lorene Jones again. "All my memories are of activities connected to the church in some way, but maybe that's just because Mom didn't take me to the other places she frequented. Did she have a life away from her home and church?" The thought choked her, but Abby didn't let the sickness drown out her voice. "Something away from my dad?"

Lorene paused at the sink, empty saucepan in her hand. She leaned her hip against the counter, and her mouth pulled downward in thought. "Not much that I can recall. She liked your nearest neighbors quite a lot, the ones who owned the orange orchard. I think the wife's name was Martha, but her family does not go to our church, so I didn't know her well."

A smile took Abby over, and the tension left her limbs. "I remember Martha and her family," she murmured. "I was actually at their house the morning of the

murders. They were a raucous bunch and always going in ten directions at once, but fun to be around.” Abby made a mental note to visit with Martha Bruno soon. “Do you remember anyone or anything else?”

“Elaine belonged to a book club,” Lorene shared as she slid a mug in front of Abby. “Some of the material was controversial and risqué. It was not for me, so I only attended with her once, but she went for a few years I believe. The club wasn’t affiliated with the church, but I think some of its other members were from our congregation.”

“Is it still a club today?”

“I don’t know.” With her hands curled around her cup, Lorene blew steam from the liquid’s surface. “I’d be happy to ask around for you, if you’d like.”

“That would be helpful. Thank you.”

“The only other outside activity that comes to my mind is some extra charity work Elaine did at a local secondhand clothing store. It’s called Good as New.”

“Oh.” Abby perked up, and a silly giddiness shot through her. “I know that place. My mom worked there?”

Lorene nodded. “Your entire life before she passed. Before you were in school, she would drop you off at my house, and I’d take care of you while she put in her hours.”

“Right.” Abby often donated clothing to Good as New. It would be so bizarre to walk in there next time and know her mother used to occupy the same space.

I’ll add it to the growing list of new things I’m uncovering about Elaine Gaines through my dreams.

The bond, the whisper of connection to her mother, dissipated with the return of one word from her mom that had haunted Abby since having the dream.

Abby put her mug down, the chocolate she’d already swallowed suddenly souring in her stomach. “What about the *baby* I heard my mom say that afternoon? Could it have been someone she grew close to through the church or one of these other outlets?” Here was the big one. The one no kid should ever know about a parent. Yet Abby didn’t have a choice if she wanted to get to the truth. “Do you know if my mother was having an affair?”

“Of course not.” Lorene averted her eyes from Abby—just enough to raise the hairs on Abby’s arms. “I don’t know.”

Abby’s jaw clicked as she clamped her teeth together hard enough to jar. “What aren’t you saying?”

“It’s not right to tell a daughter these things about her mother.” Lorene’s voice was hushed, and she appeared near to tears.

“We’re talking about something that might lead to her killer,” Abby said with a hissing tone, losing patience. “I think that’s more important than preserving the mother-daughter bond.”

Lorene looked like someone had shot her and had left her to bleed out onto her kitchen floor. She covered her mouth and spoke through the gaps in her fingers. “Your mother once told me she suspected your father was having an affair.” Regret filled the pale blue gaze peeking out from above Lorene’s hand. “But I think Elaine was the one having the affair and was trying to talk to me about it without confessing to her sin.”

Oh God.

Abby covered her mouth too. It didn’t matter that she’d been thinking this very thing since hearing that word *baby* in her nightmare. The blow still punched her right in the gut and made her feel like she was going to throw up.

Suck it up, girl. Abby blinked away wetness before it could form. *Focus on getting answers.*

She forced her hand to her side and swallowed down the betrayal trying to push its way out of her. “Why do you think she was lying?” *Good. Good. Your voice hardly sounded strained at all.* “Can you give me some examples of what made you suspicious?”

It took Lorene a good minute of putting her hand against the top of her mug, to curling it around the side, to biting her lips inward, as if to stifle herself, before she spoke. “It’s difficult to describe, but when two people have been best friends since they were five years old, one can tell when something is wrong with the other. It’s something indefinable but detectable.”

Another moment of silence passed, wherein Lorene’s brows pulled together as she ticked her fingers against the table surface. “Elaine mentioned this concern about your father three or four months before their deaths,” she finally went on, “but I’d seen subtle changes in your mother during that entire last year of her life. Every once in a while she would cancel plans we’d made, when she’d really never done that before without a legitimate reason. These new excuses were not solid reasons, such as your being sick, that I could check. I found Elaine less able to hold eye contact when we had conversations about your father. When I had occasion to sit next to her in church, she would sometimes fidget in a way that made me think the message was hitting home to her in a particular way.

“I didn’t even want to let my mind go to such a place”—Lorene made a tittering, nervous-laugh sound—“but I have to confess, I’d already begun to suspect Elaine might be having an extramarital affair. Or if she wasn’t having one, she was doing something inappropriate that was troubling her enough to alter her behavior in small ways. When she brought up your father out of the blue, and her suspicions of him, I saw it as her attempt to reach out for help. I suspected she wanted to confess her own transgressions but couldn’t bring herself to do it.”

Abby struggled to take everything in. Nothing in Lorene’s mannerisms or voice led Abby to believe the woman was trying to deceive her. Still... “With eighteen years to think about your suspicions, do you still believe your first assessment to be true?”

"Yes," Lorene answered, no hesitation at all. "I knew your mother so well. Better than a sister. I know something very important was going on in her life that final year. I know it troubled her and that she hid it from me. I can't speak as confidently about your father. I wasn't around him nearly as much, but I was around him enough, and I didn't see behavioral changes in him the way I did with her."

"Right." Well, there it was. Abby found herself staring down, watching her hands twiddle her mug in a slow circle and feeling like they didn't belong to her. "Okay."

Lorene reached across the table to pat Abby's hand. "I'm so sorry."

Abby withdrew her hand; she didn't think she could handle attempts at comfort right now. Particularly from this woman. "It's all right." She grabbed for a smile to lighten the moment. "When I remembered she called this person baby, I came to the same conclusion myself."

"That doesn't make it any easier to face."

"I'll be fine," Abby insisted. "Thank you for your help." Uncomfortable with Lorene's scrutiny, Abby grabbed her coat and got to her feet. "I have to go now, but you've given me a new angle to consider when I have one of my nightmares. Maybe it will help some of the confusing images make sense."

Lorene rose too, following Abby out of the kitchen. "If it helps bring the right murderer to justice, then I will do whatever I can." She put a gentle hold on Abby's shoulder; just the slight force of her fingers guided Abby around to face her. "I still think you should take this new insight to the police," she said, sounding like a parent nudging a kid to do the right thing on his or her own.

Pictures of Braden popped into Abby's head, as clear as the ones of other people hanging on these hallway walls. Finally, a real smile, a small one she didn't have to command herself to create, lifted the edges of Abby's lips. "I have a friend who works in law enforcement. When I get some stuff figured out in my head, I'll approach him with my suspicions."

"Good." Lorene reached out again, this time touching Abby's jaw. "You've become such a beautiful young woman, Abby. Your parents would be very proud of you."

Abby's smile, of its own volition, grew bigger. "I hope so. Thank you."

Lorene grinned for a moment too, but then it stiffened and the blue in her eyes deepened like an oncoming rainstorm. "My deepest shame and regret is that I couldn't make a home for you." The confession spilled from Lorene in a rush. "I tried, Abby. I tried so hard. We tried so hard. But at a certain point Bill and I had to accept that we didn't have the skills to take care of you and that any more would destroy our own family."

Abby pulled away, anxious to leave. "It's all right. You don't need to apologize."

Lorene grabbed Abby's hand, this time gripping it with an unbreakable hold. "It's not all right. It had to happen, but that doesn't make it all right. After your

parents died, nobody could get a single word out of you while you were awake. You wouldn't talk, even to me. You were withdrawn to the point that you had to take special classes half the day at school, remember?"

She squeezed Abby's fingers, keeping them connected. "Perhaps we could have handled your prolonged silence although we feared you needed special help we were not skilled to give. But it was more than that. It was the nightmares that became too much for us. When you went to bed at night or when you took a nap, the memories of what you witnessed came back to you, and you screamed and screamed and screamed until someone shook you awake. Then it would take hours to calm this frantic racing we could feel in your chest, only to repeat the routine when you fell asleep again." She let go of Abby and steeped her hands under her chin. "Do you remember Stephen?" As Lorene asked, she looked to her left, at a picture of a blond boy hanging on the wall.

Abby couldn't help following Lorene's gaze to the photo and remembering the boy in the picture. Shame filled Abby, much as it had all those years ago. She'd pushed down the memories and her guilt after going into foster care, but seeing Stephen's picture as the boy he'd been back then rushed it all back hard enough to clog her throat. "Yes."

"It was already difficult creating an environment for Stephen where he could have more good days than bad. The addition of another child threw him off enough, but add to that his reactions to your nightmares. Every time we had to calm you, we also had to calm Stephen, and it came to a point where Bill and I never slept and could no longer handle our children in addition to you." Lorene affirmed the very suspicions she had tried to assure Abby weren't happening all that time ago. Abby's nightmares—her very presence a lot of the time—*had* exacerbated Stephen's autism.

Abby felt the burn behind her eyes and couldn't keep the wobble out of her voice. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset him."

Lorene tsk-tsked and drew Abby into her embrace. The woman rubbed Abby's back, and Abby leaned into her as if Lorene were the one towering over Abby instead of the other way around. "It's okay. I know you couldn't help being scared either, sweetheart."

"Tell me." This was not what Abby had come to this house for, but the plea—the *need*—poured out of her without going through a censor first. "Tell me the rest."

Lorene pulled back but kept Abby close with hands cupped on Abby's face. "We tried keeping you for as long as we could. I do promise you that. We hoped the counseling you were receiving from the state would eventually help you get better, but it didn't seem to make much difference. They suggested medicating you, but we didn't believe in that." Her focus strayed to the photo of her son as she continued, her voice dropping some. "Stephen continued to get worse, and his doctors said the only way to bring him back to the relative calm we'd helped him achieve before was to take the stress out of his environment. We couldn't give up our own child." She spoke as if she felt she needed to convince Abby of the rightness of her choice. "I

agonized and cried for months, but at a certain point we had to let you go. It was the only way to keep the rest of the family from fracturing more than it already had.”

Abby stepped back and turned away, hating the streaks of tears she swiped away from her cheeks. “By then nobody else in the church wanted me.”

“My fault.” Lorene’s voice cracked, and it seemed Abby had transferred the armor of guilt to her. “I’m afraid the many, many times I unburdened myself with my church family, I didn’t realize I was planting seeds in them about you. By the time we knew we were going to let you go, I’d scared anyone beyond the point of taking a risk on you. They knew of your silence and solitude from your many visits to the church, and at that point they’d heard enough of my stories of your nightmares and screaming fits that none of them felt they could offer you a home that would help you get better. Nobody would step up.”

“I understand.” Taking a moment to make certain her face and eyes were dry, Abby gave herself a mental pep talk and shoved the moment of weakness away. “I’m sure I would have been as terrifying in my foster homes, had I not been put on a drug regimen that allowed me to sleep.”

“May I ask how long was it before you began speaking again?”

“Don’t know for sure.” With her hands tucked in her pockets, Abby hunched her shoulders and shrugged. “Maybe another year or just under.”

“The woman from DCF told me it would be better if I didn’t have contact with you for a while. She said your seeing me would only make you wish and believe I was going to bring you home with me again.” Lorene glanced away, and her face burned with red. “In truth, I let her convince me. I loved you so much I probably would have convinced myself that things hadn’t been as bad as they were and taken you back, only to start the cycle all over again.”

“And then you forgot about me.” A slip of rancor gave edge to Abby’s tone.

“No. I never forgot.” Lorene looked back to Abby in a flash, shaking her head so hard her silver hair swished around her throat. “I did let my guilt keep me away, though. Seeing you would have reminded me over and over that I’d failed to do right by you. There wasn’t a will, but I knew your mother wanted me to take care of you if anything ever happened to her and Richard. I know in heaven that’s all she would have been praying for”—tears filled Lorene’s eyes again—“and I couldn’t do it.”

Abby willed herself not to succumb to the band constricting her chest. “The past is done. There’s no sense in crying about it anymore.”

A sigh escaped Lorene. “I fear your life has made you hard.”

“Practical,” Abby corrected. “A survivor.”

“Perhaps a visit to the church could help you find new peace with the things you’ve learned about your mother today.” Color still suffused Lorene’s cheeks. “Plus the other stuff.”

“Thank you, but I don’t believe in organized religion.”

“Oh.”

Extreme discomfort well beyond the public display of tears suddenly shrouded Abby. "Listen, I have to get going." She made a beeline the twenty feet to the front door. "Thank you for speaking to me. I appreciate your openness about my mother."

"Abby," Lorene called from behind. "I don't judge you by your lack of faith in the church. Circumstances have given you little reason to believe in its spiritual, guiding hand."

Abby's fingers gripped the doorknob with a ruthless hold. "My issues with church go well beyond my own circumstances. I don't think that's something we really want to get into right now." Without looking back, she pulled open the door. "I have to go. Bye." She stepped out onto the porch.

She felt Lorene rush to join her. "Will you come back?" Lorene asked. "Bill would love to see you. Stephen still lives with us, and the others come over for dinner every Sunday evening."

The strain in Lorene's voice tugged at Abby, and she gave in to one more look. "I'll think about it." So much new information spun in Abby's brain that she could not give Lorene more than that right now.

Lorene dipped her head and even backed up to her open doorway. "May I at least tell Bill that you visited? And about your suspicions of Rusty Cormack's innocence?"

A wiry, geeky blond-haired man with a penchant for practical jokes and a comforting, infectious laugh filled Abby's mind. "You can. I'd ask that you keep our conversation between just the two of you, though. I don't want anyone at the church getting wind of what we talked about."

"Of course."

"Thank you again. You didn't have to answer the door." Overcome, Abby reached out and curled her hand around Lorene's. "You didn't have to tell me everything you did."

"Yes, I did," Lorene replied, pulling Abby in and embracing her again. "You have a good night, dear. It truly is a blessing to see you again."

Abby let herself be hugged for a moment. Felt strange. Odd.

Good.

That wisp of panic sliced through her again, and without another glance, Abby withdrew and did a speed walk to her car.

As she drove away, she thought about how this reunion should have been weird. It should have been uncomfortable. There should have been the itch of anger, resentment, and lingering hurt.

And that had occurred.

Abby sure as hell did experience elements of each of those emotions while talking with Lorene Jones.

What Abby hadn't expected was the internal tug toward Lorene and what she represented.

Family. Unity. A sense of belonging.
And faith.

* * *

Where in the hell is she?

The setting sun reflected against the car pulling into the back parking lot of Abby's Attic. Rodrigo pushed away from the side of his truck for a better look and swore under his breath as Braden pulled in alongside him.

Not Abby.

Rodrigo rounded Braden's vehicle and didn't even wait for the man to fully get out before pouncing. "Have you talked to her today?"

"Not since I left this morning." Braden's voice was muffled as he pulled a bag from the backseat. "I take it she's not here?"

"That's amazing work there, Detective." Rodrigo felt strung tight, and his entire being dripped with impatience. "You solved that mystery just with the clue of me standing outside?"

After setting his bag on the hood of his car, Braden stacked his hands under his chin and fluttered his eyelids. "All by my little lonesome. Aren't you impressed?"

Rodrigo started to smile, but Abby's disappearance quickly took him over once again. "I'll be more so if you knew where to find Abby. She's not answering the door or her cell."

"Let's not panic," Braden said as he unclipped his phone from his belt loop. "It's not that late."

As Rodrigo watched Braden scroll through his address book, he started to pace in front of the man. "She knew we were both coming back." Rodrigo hated this anxious pattering inside him that he couldn't control. "She said she would be here."

After a few seconds, Braden took the phone away from his ear. "Still not answering her cell."

"I could have told you she wouldn't." Coming to a stop in front of Braden, Rodrigo searched the man's face and wondered how in the hell he could feel jittery and calmed by Braden's presence at the same time. Something in his steady gaze forced Rodrigo to stop and focus his thoughts. "I don't think anything has happened to her," he admitted. "It's just that after all these nightmares, and how much they're bothering her, *and* the lack of sleep, I don't like not knowing where she is."

"Me either." Braden grimaced, and it actually made Rodrigo feel a little bit better. At least he wasn't paranoid by himself. "Did you give Chris and Jonah a call? May—"

Rodrigo lifted one finger and already had his cell phone dialed and at his ear. "Good idea."

Just as the first ring sounded in Rodrigo's ear, Braden put his hand on Rodrigo's arm. "Wait." He pointed to the red clunker pulling into the parking lot.

Barely hearing the “hello” in his ear, Rodrigo said, “Never mind, Chris,” without even being sure it wasn’t Jonah answering their phone. “Talk to you later.” He slipped his phone back into his pocket, and together he and Braden stormed around Abby’s car, waiting right there as she climbed out.

She gave them a funny wide-eyed look. “Hi, guys. You—”

Braden cut her off with “where were you?” and Rodrigo thundered over him with “where have you been?”

Abby’s comical expression morphed into a narrow-eyed stare that somehow managed to encompass Rodrigo and Braden equally. When the wind chose that moment to whip her hair into an airy wave that looked like a fiery blaze behind her, Rodrigo felt the heavens were assisting her and that he’d just stepped into a sharpshooter’s path.

“I was going to say *you’re early*; it’s not even six o’clock.” Abby shot each word out like the sharpest arrow. “But now I’m changing it to ‘I’m sorry, but at what point did the two of you become my keepers, and when did I start having to answer to either one of you?’”

“I...” Rodrigo looked to Braden, words leaving him as they never had before with this woman.

Braden said, “Well...” and stopped. He made eye contact with Rodrigo and then swung to Abby and shut up.

Abby crossed her arms under her breasts and dug her boots into the concrete. “Think first. Then talk.” She flashed them a smile that was anything but friendly. “Feel free to confer.” With a glance at her watch, she added, “I can wait.”

Rodrigo suddenly remembered how eagerly this woman had always stood up and gone toe-to-toe with him. Now, in addition to that pleasure, he’d truly pissed her off. And not about something they could walk away from at a draw.

Shit.

Chapter Seven

She is so fucking angry.

Rodrigo watched the blue fire sparking in Abby's eyes, and he racked his brain, searching for one of his sharp barbs that would put the woman off for long enough to formulate a good excuse for his jumping on her back the second she parked her car.

He slid his gaze Braden's way, and he noticed the guy had his attention squarely on Abby, observing her with his cop stare rather than an "oh shit, I pissed her off" look like the one Rodrigo felt mapping his own face.

What the hell is up with him?

After a long stretch of standoff time, Abby pursed her lips and rolled her eyes heavenward. "So you've both chosen to give me the silent treatment now?" The slam of her car door shook the entire vehicle. "Fine. Then you can both get right back in your cars and go home." She shoved past them to her door. "I did not sign up for this."

Shit. Rodrigo shot Braden the finger and raced after Abby on his own. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

With a whip of his arm, Rodrigo snagged Abby, spun her around, and cornered her against the wall of her building. "I was worried about you." He went for the one thing that would get him back in her home and bed tonight. The truth. "I've been worried about you for weeks, if you have to have the entire goddamn truth right now. But I was particularly worried today because of the night you had last night. I expected you to be home, and when you weren't, I couldn't help feeling like something might be wrong. Especially when you wouldn't answer your cell phone. When you drove up and I saw that you were okay, I was flooded with relief, but it came out more like anger. There you have it." Rodrigo growled, even though he saw a grin forming on Abby's lips. "Is my answer fucking good enough for you?"

Her smile didn't grow huge, but Abby did curl her hand around the side of Rodrigo's neck, letting her fingers drift into the strands of hair at the back. "It's the truth, Rodrigo, and that's fine with me. I wasn't looking for anything else."

"Good." Rodrigo still sounded terse; he couldn't help it. "I would never lie to you." He leaned down and scraped his mouth across hers, craving a claim on her. "Don't fucking forget it."

That smile of Abby's held against Rodrigo's lips. When Abby pulled back, she rubbed her thumb across his mouth, rushing a ridiculously fast reaction to his balls.

"I won't," she said. "I'm sorry about my cell. It hasn't been working for a couple of days. I have to get a new battery for it." She pinched the bridge of her nose and scrunched up the rest of her face. "Forgot to put that on my to-do list today. I had other stuff on my mind."

Braden stepped up then; he planted one hand against the wall beside Abby's head and put the other against the small of Rodrigo's back. Rodrigo jerked his gaze to Braden as the contact raced up his spine in a shivery line, but Braden only had eyes for Abby. This time, Rodrigo noticed the man's jaw twitched some too.

"I got some tough information about your parents' case today, and that ended up making me on edge when I saw you." Braden leaned in and brushed a kiss against Abby's cheek, staying next to her ear for a moment. "I apologize." He lowered his voice for that, but Rodrigo still heard it.

Abby bunched Braden's jacket in her fingers and stood up on tiptoe, leaning into him. "What information?"

With one step backward, Braden jerked his head toward the door. "Why don't we go inside and talk?"

* * *

Rodrigo managed to hold his tongue until Braden said to Abby, "And that's what I have as of today," and finished his replay of his conversation with his PI friend.

"You trust this Ben guy?" Rodrigo asked Braden. He fucking would not allow another layer to be added to Abby's pain and nightmares on a mere hunch. "You value his opinion that much?"

Braden gave Rodrigo a sharp nod. "Absolutely. He only confirmed what I'd already suspected based on reading the case file and the trial transcripts."

From the position of her comfy chair, Abby stirred, drawing both men's attention. "When did you pull my parents' case file?"

"When I knew you would be mine." Braden didn't even pause in his answer.

Abby smiled at Braden, and a burst of possessive heat had Rodrigo leaning forward to block Braden's view of the woman. Rodrigo had wanted Abby from the first time he met her. It had to be longer than Braden, and the man ought not be able to get away with flirty answers like that.

He swung his upper body around and faced Braden head-on. "When the hell was this *exactly*, Crenshaw?"

"A good while back." Braden offered the answer so easily it grated on Rodrigo's last nerve. "I've only been able to get into the particulars of the case more recently, though. I contacted my friend about a month ago. He was working on something too and was only able to get back to me today." Braden looked right into Rodrigo's eyes, intense as hell. "Found out everything I could about you too, Santiago." That deep voice of his seeped right into Rodrigo's pores, attacking all his senses. "For the same reason I did Abby."

“Shit.” Rodrigo couldn’t hold Braden’s stare without going hard. He tore his gaze away and got up, needing to move. *Goddamn it*. Wasn’t his constant wanting of one beautiful, intelligent woman enough? Why did Braden have to stir up old flickers of desire Rodrigo had never even given two thoughts to, let alone acted on? Normal people did not want—*on every fucking level*—one member of each sex in his bed. More than that. In his everyday life. “Shit.”

Braden wore a half grin that looked too damn much like a smirk to Rodrigo. “That word does sum things up for you a lot,” he said, his voice as cool as ice clinking in a drink.

Rodrigo narrowed a glare at the too-confident, sexy bastard sitting on the couch. “Fucker.”

The man’s smile danced right up into his eyes. “I am. Not a half-bad one either, or so I’ve been told.” Braden’s gaze went down and up Rodrigo’s body. When he came back to Rodrigo’s eyes, the color of his had picked up the shades of a turbulent green ocean, and his voice had gone a bit husky. “Which I can’t fucking wait to show you one day soon.”

Before Rodrigo could stop the twitch in his dick and summon some outrage, Braden shifted and put that laser focus back on Abby. “You’re not surprised or devastated by what I’ve told you, Abby. Not even close.”

Abby’s chuckle faltered. Her pupils flared, and Rodrigo forgot to care about Braden’s provocative claims. He sat back down next to the man without even thinking and presented a unified front.

On rare occasions, Rodrigo could set pride aside and accept that another person might be more capable of reading and handling a situation than he could.

This was one of them.

Looking at the conflict mapping Abby’s pale face, Rodrigo suddenly couldn’t have been happier to have Braden at his side.

Braden waited. Patient. Cool. Controlled. In his job, this was the moment he outlasted suspects in an interview room and let them break on their own.

Only, Abby wasn’t a suspect. And Braden didn’t want to be a part of breaking her will or spirit for anything. Still, he knew she had a tendency to keep her problems to herself, and that just wasn’t going to work for him anymore.

Each tick of the grandfather clock in the corner ricocheted against the walls of the living room while Braden held his silence, waiting for Abby to find her way to him. In his peripheral vision, Braden saw Rodrigo shift forward, and Braden knew the man was headed right for Abby’s side. Without turning to look at him, Braden put his hand on Rodrigo’s arm and shook his head. Rodrigo’s forearm tensed under Braden’s fingers, but eventually the thick cords of muscle against Braden’s hand released, and Rodrigo pulled back without speaking. Barely able to resist reaching for Abby himself, Braden locked his legs in place, willing himself to wait her out.

Abby fought the silence for a term Braden actually found admirable, but she finally curled her legs up on the chair. She settled her chin against her jeans-clad knees and looked Braden's way, her eyes dry but vulnerable in a manner that immediately tapped into Braden's soft feelings for her.

"Go ahead, honey." Braden bent a little for her and broke his silence first. "We're not going anywhere."

Abby's bare toes curled into the cushion. "I'm not sure that what I've been dreaming is actual fact, but it's enough that I don't believe Cormack killed my parents. I think it was someone who knew them very well, or my mother well at least." She looked up at the ceiling, away from him and Rodrigo, and finished, "I think my mother was having an affair, and I think that man is the one who murdered her."

Holy motherfucker. Talk about a real motive for murder.

Braden bit down his excitement about this new angle, which had come at the expense of Abby's image of her parent, and schooled his voice to its most even tone. "How do you think you know this?"

Abby proceeded to share with Braden and Rodrigo the fears she had developed based on hearing her mother say "*baby*" to her murderer—at least in Abby's dreams. She then told them about her visit to her mother's best friend today and how that woman had expressed her long-ago concerns that Elaine Gaines had been involved in an extramarital affair. Abby explained that this Lorene Jones had known her mother very well and that she was inclined to believe Lorene's suspicions. Particularly when paired with the endearment she'd heard in her nightmare.

"And what about the hand?" Braden asked, taking mental notes along the way. "You mumbled something last night about the hand in your dream not being right. What did that mean?"

"That's just it; I don't know." Abby shoved her fingers through her hair, her voice rising. "I'm picking up new bits and pieces each time I close my eyes, but that doesn't mean any of them make sense to me."

Rodrigo pushed to the edge of the couch, putting him closer to Braden and thus Abby. "So this is actually all new information to you?" Rodrigo asked.

"Yes." Her brow furrowed. "Why?"

"I'd read you never spoke of what happened when you were little," Rodrigo answered. "I always wondered if that was because you simply couldn't speak period, or if it wouldn't have mattered because you didn't know anything anyway."

Braden swung around to face Rodrigo, temporarily distracted by another person interrupting his interview process.

"What?" Rodrigo didn't pull back from Braden's unblinking stare one inch. "I might not have access to official files, but I do know how to go back and read old newspaper reports. You're not the only one who is allowed to have an interest in this woman."

Every bit of Braden's sexual need pushed against Rodrigo's passion and sense of competition. It battled with Braden's common sense and decency for their current situation. "Never claimed I was."

Abby cleared her throat loudly, drawing Braden and Rodrigo back to her. "*This woman* is right here," she said. "But don't mind me. You two should just go ahead and fuck and get it over with."

Both men uttered, "Not without you" at the same time.

"Oh..." Abby flashed a very naughty smile. "I'm more than happy to watch."

"You're going to do so much more than that, sweet Abby," Braden informed her, losing himself in her vivacious spirit.

Jesus, Braden wanted this woman's mouth wrapped around his straining dick, sucking his length for everything she was worth while Rodrigo fucked her deep and hard from behind. Braden ached to see and feel each moan from Abby, coming in time with every slam of Rodrigo's prick into her slick, tight pussy. Braden wanted to feel the vibrations of her needful moans against his cock as each pump of Rodrigo's dick into her willing body pushed her faster to release.

Braden's breathing became shallow, his body tensed right where he sat, and he just stopped himself from reaching down and rubbing his growing cock.

You are as good as working a case. Braden squeezed his hand into a fist against his thigh to keep from moving it to his crotch. *Get ahold of yourself.*

Braden cleared his throat and determinedly locked himself into detective mode. "Let's get back to what you were saying about the hand in your dreams."

"I wasn't saying anything," Abby responded. "I don't know why it's not right, just that it isn't."

"When and where do you see this hand?" Braden asked. "What is it doing?"

Letting her feet slide back to the floor, Abby pushed forward to the edge of her chair. "I'm in the attic, which is where I hid when I realized the killer wanted me too. We accessed it through my parents' closet. The hand I see is the killer's as he is opening the closet door, and I'm closing the board over the opening in the ceiling so he won't see me."

Rodrigo spit a few Spanish words into the air that Braden recognized as "fuck" and "shit." His dark brown eyes flashed with pure black glints as he stared at Abby. "He was that fucking close to finding you?"

The edge of Abby's flowing duster twisted into a tighter and tighter ball under her hand. "Yeah. Very close."

Braden stilled her fidgeting with a brief touch and pulled her attention back to him. "What color is the hand?"

Abby's mouth pulled down at the edges. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if accessing pictures from her dream. "White. Or more like tan, I guess."

"All right. That's good." Braden let the miniscule new details of an unsolved crime start to bubble in his mind. "When you say tan in color, would you say it's

more like Rodrigo's tan coloring?" He took hold of Rodrigo's wrist and held the man's darker skinned hand in Abby's direction. "Or more like my tan coloring?" He lined his own hand next to Rodrigo's.

Abby's focus shifted between Rodrigo's and Braden's hands, holding on each for a prolonged moment. She then closed her eyes and presumably searched the images that remained from her nightmare. With her eyes still closed, Abby said, "Not as dark as Rodrigo but darker than you right now." Blinking, Abby studied each man's hand again. "I don't feel like this person had Hispanic or Latino coloring but rather more like a white guy with a good tan." She looked up to Braden. "More like the coloring you have in the summer."

"Cormack is Caucasian," Braden mused, "so that doesn't rule him out."

Abby almost shot out of her chair. "But the *baby* endearment does!"

"Not if we just go on that reason alone," Braden explained, keeping his voice neutral. "It is known that Cormack came to your church on numerous occasions for free meals and sometimes to speak with the priest or a member of the congregation. There are plenty of statements that attest to him speaking with your mother multiple times. As a cop, I could argue your mother and Cormack developed a bond they then took outside the church and that it eventually turned sexual."

The blue in Abby's eyes became almost translucent. "But your friend said he didn't think Cormack did it."

"He doesn't. Nor do I. All I'm saying is that I could make the argument for Cormack as the guy and build a scenario where he and your mother could have engaged in an affair." Braden could have kicked himself as soon as the words left his mouth. This woman had an emotional stake in this case, and Braden had spoken as if he were spitballing ideas with Watson or Kaufman.

"It's not what I believe actually happened," Braden explained, backtracking, a bit, anyway. "This is new information, though, so as much as I don't like Cormack for it, I don't yet completely rule him out as a candidate for the affair and possibly the murders."

"That makes sense," Abby murmured. "I understand."

Rodrigo braced his elbow on his knee and pointed in Abby's direction with his entire hand. "You're talking as if you're sure your mother had this affair. Do you really feel confident about that?" He glanced Braden's way as well. "And you do too?"

Abby only nodded, so Braden took up an explanation on her behalf. "Baby is a tough endearment to see any other way, with the possible exception of a mother speaking to her own child. We know it's not Abby. We know Richard Gaines's wounds weren't self-inflicted—there was never a thought of a murder-suicide—so that leaves another man who had some intimate connection to Elaine."

Rodrigo turned back to Abby. "You're sure it was a man who killed them?"

"Yes." Abby's nod was sharp and sure. "I can hear his devil voice in my dreams." She cleared her throat, and when she looked back to Braden, not quite

steady, the hairs on his forearms kicked up ramrod straight. "I think we should get started interviewing people at the church right away. We need to get to Father Jim at least. I'd like to go tomorrow."

"Excuse me. We?" Braden said. *Here we go.* "No. This is about to become an official investigation again. You cannot be involved."

Apparently, he'd pushed her red-flag button, and Abby surged to her feet. "I know the people to talk to. I used to go to that church." She ticked a finger with each reason. "I also remember our nearest neighbor who knew my mom and dad well. She'll be open to talking with me." Abby bent back her thumb and waved it in triumph in front of Braden's face. "*I'm* the one who had the dream that has given you this new evade—"

That one got Braden off his ass and right up close to her swirl of energy. "Your dream will not appear in any official police-investigation file. Any defense attorney would tear it up on behalf of his client. What will go on record is Lorene Jones's suspicion that her best friend was having an affair. That is something I can get my captain to say yes to. That is something that allows me some leeway in questioning new people."

"I can talk to people on my own," Abby shot back. "And you can talk to people on your own." At Braden's second no, Abby's mouth twisted and she threw her hands in the air. "Who do you think is going to say no to the daughter of murder victims, Braden? Who do you think is going to deny information to the child they turned their backs on? The shame alone is going to get me some choice conversations with people wanting to spill their guts, if for no other reason than to hope it will rid them of the guilt they live with for collectively choosing to turn me over to the state."

In a seamless motion, Rodrigo grabbed Abby's arm and jumped into her personal space. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Nothing." Abby waved her hand aside. "It's not important. It's only relevant in that I can put my face right in theirs and make them remember who I am and what they had a hand in letting happen to me. They will talk in an effort to help me in a way they didn't before." She took a moment to breathe deeply, visibly, and pull herself to a state of calm. "For once I can use my victimization to my advantage and help catch my parents' killer."

Braden grabbed Abby around the neck and planted a hard, fast kiss to her forehead. "Remind me never to wrong you." He chuckled to cover the sudden gruffness in his voice. "I have a feeling you would be a ruthless competitor."

As Braden let Abby go, she pushed her hair off her face and into a knot. "I'm tired of being afraid of these dreams." Her murmur held a hint of steel. "I'm tired of what I don't know. I need to be proactive, not only to get some justice for my parents, but also to find some control and order for myself." When she brought her gaze back to Braden, the steel had taken over her stare as well. "I am your connection to that church community, Braden. You need me to let them know it's okay to talk to you."

Son of a mother. Braden exhaled a resigned sigh. "First I need to get an okay from my captain to reopen this case." Braden put two fingers to Abby's mouth before she could open it. "Which I will do tomorrow."

With a nod, Abby started moving like an animal about to strike. "Iris can run the store for a few days without my being there full time." She pointed at Braden, animated now. "I intend to go visit the church whether you get the okay or not."

Abby's new sense of purpose beamed a light within Braden. "I think I can work it out."

She gave another dip in his direction. "Good."

Rodrigo stepped into Abby's path, his gaze still sparking black ice. "I'll clear my afternoon schedule too."

"There's no need," Abby said as Braden muttered, "Oh hell."

Rodrigo dipped down and got right into Abby's face. "You are not doing this without me." After he informed her of that, he swung around and glared at Braden, burning the four feet of space between them. "Even if I just stand to the side and out of the way, I'm not going to let Abby go through these interviews alone any more than I'm letting her fall asleep alone anymore." He put that fiery stare back on Abby, and everything in him seemed to expand. "*You* called *me*, Abby. Now you're stuck with me." He became a wall Braden wasn't sure even *he* could have moved. "Deal with it."

Abby pushed herself into Rodrigo's space just as steadfastly as he did hers. She lifted her chin to meet his black stare. "This has been a trying day, and right now all I can deal with is a shower. Then I want to brush my teeth, get in bed, and see what my dreams tell me tonight. You don't get to control any of that. Nor me. Got it?"

Their bodies seemed to fight the need to strain and rub closer. Braden got a little hard as Rodrigo let his hand fall to Abby's waist. The man curled it around Abby's hip to settle on the sweet curve of her ass. Neither moved a muscle, but each breath between them became more pronounced, a lifting of breasts and chest with every inhalation, their eyes doing battle without bodily movement.

"I don't intend to fight you on a shower," Rodrigo told her, his voice low and dipped in the musk of restrained desire. "Never on the things you need. That's not what this is about."

Abby nodded sharply. "Good."

"But I am still going with you tomorrow," Rodrigo added.

"Fine." Her lip curled a little, like an angry animal's. "Can I have my shower now?"

Rodrigo stepped aside, flashing a smile. "Absolutely."

"Go ahead, honey." Braden moved back a step too. He saw Abby's focus shift to her bedroom and felt more than saw the tightening around her mouth.

“Nothing but sleep needs to happen tonight,” Braden added. “Or any night until you’re ready for more. We’ll make sure everything is locked up tight and meet you in bed.” He behaved like a gentleman when everything in him wanted to follow her to that tidy bathroom.

Most of the tension left Abby’s face. “Thank you.” She walked into the hallway but turned around and leaned her head against the opening. Brightness without tears shone in her eyes. “I’m glad you’re both here. Thank you for helping me.” With that declaration, she disappeared down the hall.

After they heard the bathroom door close, Rodrigo swore and punched the wall. “I fucking wish I had some skills that would make me more useful to her right now.”

Braden grabbed Rodrigo’s wrist before he could take another swing. “Hey.” His arm strained as he forced Rodrigo’s back to his side. “You came when she called. Fuck, you admitted that you care about her earlier. You’re here tonight, and you’re going to be at her side tomorrow afternoon. I don’t think she needs or wants more than that.”

Tearing his arm out of Braden’s hold, Rodrigo clasped his hands behind his neck, shaking his head as he looked toward the ceiling. “I can’t help feeling it’s not enough.”

“I know that feeling too,” Braden shared. “Just because I can open this case again doesn’t mean I can find the real killer and put him behind bars for her. All the wanting in the world won’t take me anywhere without some solid leads. Right now”—he laughed humorlessly—“we still have little more than a glorified hunch.”

“Okay, okay.” Rodrigo held up his hands in surrender. “You proved your point. You’re frustrated too.”

“In more ways than one.” Braden made the understatement of the year, unable to take his eyes off darkly sexy Rodrigo. “I’m gonna let that other one go for now. But not forever, Santiago.” Fever licked at Braden’s sac, cock, and asshole—over every goddamn inch of his flesh—and had him striding across the room until less than a foot of space existed between him and this striking man. “Don’t get too comfortable sharing that big bed with Abby. At least not without thinking about me living inside *you* just as much as I know we both want inside her.”

Rodrigo reached out and braced himself against the wall. “Shit.” He tore his gaze away, but Braden saw the crimson burning down the side of his face and neck. “Shit.”

Christ, I fucking love when he says that word.

For now, Braden left that all-encompassing epithet of Rodrigo’s with just a smile. “I’m going to go check the windows.” He gave Rodrigo some breathing room and let the man go double-check the doors on his own.

Soon, though.

Braden adjusted his half-hard dick as he moved into the hallway. He heard the water running and couldn’t help imagining Abby soaping up every inch of her tall,

lithe body, tweaking her breasts, and letting her fingers linger between her thighs as she washed.

With that thought, Braden winced as a full, painful erection emerged.

Now that he'd made the decision to go for it with Abby and Rodrigo, patience had become his most difficult virtue.

Fucking gotta be soon.

Chapter Eight

Braden walked across the opening that connected the living room to Abby's bedroom wearing just a towel around his hips. His skin glistened with moisture from his shower, and little rivulets of water trickled down his neck and spine to disappear into the white terry cloth covering his ass.

From Abby's living room, Rodrigo watched Braden out of the corner of his eye while lacing his boots. He didn't want to look, didn't want his mind to go to a place where he put his mouth to Braden's nape. He didn't want to think about sipping his way down the hard line of Braden's back, brushing his lips and tongue over warm, taut male skin, savoring the contact. Rodrigo couldn't help it, though. Something pushing inside him would not let him turn away.

Then Braden undid the towel and let it slide to the floor. A tight, firm ass with a hint of golden coloring, right there on display, pushed Rodrigo's thoughts to a place he had never let them go in the past. His imagination took his mouth all the way down Braden's back and kept it right on going. Rodrigo saw himself licking between those snug buttocks, then burrowing deeper and taking a taste of that hidden ring, something he had never even done with a woman. Undaunted, in his head, Rodrigo kept going until he delved between Braden's lightly furred legs to suck on the man's balls in a way he knew from experience was just *this close* to stepping into heaven. Next step would be to crawl around Braden's body and open wide for a first taste of that stiff, thick cock and then suppress his gag reflex as much as he could in order to stuff every damn velvety hard inch down his throat...

In actuality, Braden turned right then, and Rodrigo snatched his gaze down to the floor before he got a second full-monty vision of Braden in two days.

Good God. Rodrigo swallowed a groan. *I wake up with a hard-on, with my face buried in Abby's hair, smelling her like a chef does his most prized meal, and now this?* He was beginning to think he'd lost all the years of experience where he'd gained any sense of sexual control.

Abby fell onto the couch next to Rodrigo and nudged his shoulder with hers. Her spirit was amazingly high this morning, and she gave Rodrigo a huge smile that lit her whole face with glints of natural light.

"Hard not to take a peek. Right?" Abby asked. She looked into her bedroom, and Rodrigo let his gaze follow hers to Braden, who now had his lower half fully clad. "He has a pretty spectacular body."

Rodrigo gritted his teeth. "I wouldn't know."

"It's a shame, then." Abby kept watching Braden as he finished dressing, his body turned at an angle to them. "You missed his incredible, tight ass, and then he has this scar on the back of his right thigh—"

"Left one," Rodrigo said, his mind still picturing his tongue following that three-inch line of scarred flesh.

With a sharp clap of her hands, Abby jumped up to her knees and pointed twin fingers in Rodrigo's direction. "Gotcha. I knew it was his left."

Shit.

"Okay, so I looked." Rodrigo felt like a cornered dog, and his hackles rose in an imposing line down his back. "Go ahead and try to make something out of it."

Abby's face went full-on rosy flush. "You have no idea how much I already have."

With one look into her eyes, Rodrigo read the scenarios Abby had put him and Braden into together in her mind.

Double shit.

Braden joined them in the living room while still buckling his belt. "It's actually not a scar; it's a weird raised birthmark I've had since I was a baby."

A good night's sleep and a plan of attack to seek out her parents' murderer had seemed to do wonders for Abby. She flopped back on the couch and turned that million-watt smile up at Braden. "Thanks for giving us such a fantastic view of it."

Braden braced himself on the arm of the couch and leaned down to get close to Abby. "Thank you for looking." He brushed his lips across hers, and she did him back, teasing flicks between them that as a bystander made Rodrigo's mouth tingle. Each hint of their kiss seemed to push a deeper connection, to a point where Braden slid his knee onto the couch beside Abby, tilted her head over the back cushions, and turned the mating into something that charged the air with primal energy. Braden slipped his hands around Abby's waist and pulled her up to meet the slow thrust of his hips, doing a dry hump that Rodrigo knew from experience was pleasing on Braden's end. Yet as he stared, Rodrigo also wanted to experience the play as Abby. He wanted to be on the receiving side of Braden's hard bulge grinding against him.

The easy flirting and flare to quick passion between Abby and Braden roused insecurities, jealousy, raw attraction, and confusion in Rodrigo. The longer he watched, the more he wanted to tear them apart, yet at the same time, join in their coupling. Itching to take them both down to the ground, Rodrigo wanted to deliver rough, punishing kisses that would show them who was in charge. He wasn't violent with women; he didn't think he would be with a man either, but the desire to put marks on them both, as well as leave them thoroughly sated and panting for recovery, pushed hard against the civilized person inside Rodrigo who understood he couldn't always get what he wanted when it came to his deepest sexual needs.

With a low growl, Braden broke the kiss and reared up to his knees, straddling an out-of-breath Abby. "Jesus, honey." He dipped down and licked at her open

mouth. "You have no idea how much I want to spread you open across this couch and fuck you blind right now."

Rodrigo made a contemptuous noise to cover his immediate physical reaction to visualizing Abby with her long legs wide across the edge of the couch, moaning as Braden fucked her raw.

"Shit, man," Rodrigo muttered. They shouldn't be thinking of Abby in this way, not right now. "Show some restraint. Get some class."

With a backward slide, Braden got to his feet and stalked Rodrigo, crowding his space. "You're not exempt, Santiago." Braden's voice melted over Rodrigo and slipped into his pores, invading Rodrigo's very being. "I want you bent over the cushions, your ass in the air, and you shouting for me to take you until you beg for mercy."

"Sh—" Rodrigo snapped his mouth shut. He saw the grin already forming on Braden's face, and Rodrigo bared his teeth in return. "Get that satisfied smirk off your face, Crenshaw. I'm not going to say it this time."

Braden moved in even closer, brushed their fronts up against each other, and for the life of him, Rodrigo could not—would not—retreat. As Braden spoke, his mouth suddenly became the most fascinating thing in the world to Rodrigo.

"I promised myself I would wait," Braden began, "but now I have to hear you say that word again." He dipped down that little bit, letting the breath he expelled wash against Rodrigo's lips as he ran his hand down Rodrigo's side to his hip in one long caress. "You've presented me with a challenge and I don't like to lose any more than you do."

Rodrigo opened his mouth to protest—or maybe to plead, he didn't know for sure—and Braden captured whatever Rodrigo was going to say with a clinging of their lips; a kiss, not exactly soft but not hard either. Rodrigo had known it was coming, yet he went completely still for a moment anyway, trying to process another man's mouth on his. Braden teased whispers of contact at first, giving Rodrigo just enough to hint at deeper pleasure, and then switched to flicking Rodrigo's seam with the tip of his tongue, nudging Rodrigo to give him something more.

The contact stirred and mixed with the embers already stoked within Rodrigo, and pushed at his restraint. Without a direct command from his brain, Rodrigo parted his lips and took the kiss to a different place. With a stroke of his tongue against Braden's, Rodrigo coaxed Braden inside his mouth. At the first hot slide of their tongues, Braden sank his body into Rodrigo's. He moaned and pulled Rodrigo even tighter to him with arms around his waist. Falling fast, Rodrigo grabbed on to Braden's shirt, twisted his fingers into the material, and held on as best he could through the onslaught of Braden's brand of ownership. This kiss was different from anything Rodrigo knew. Braden possessed the taste of someone used to being in the lead and expecting his partner to follow. And while Rodrigo's head swam with new desire—and his lips and mouth swelled with Braden's complete plundering—Rodrigo was nobody's submissive, and he never took a backseat in foreplay or fucking.

The need to own in return spurred Rodrigo forward. It had him clamping on to Braden's head and angling it for a thrusting, scraping, complete kiss. Braden battled right back, and their moans mingled, getting muffled between them and their fight for supremacy. Rodrigo wanted to bite Braden to force him to surrender. At the same time, he wanted Braden to bite back, to demand Rodrigo fold to his knees and comply with his every wish. Something buried deep inside Rodrigo wanted Braden to push him and bodily command Rodrigo to accept his will.

I want him to bend me over that couch and take my ass for as long as he wants it.

Disturbed, Rodrigo ripped his mouth away from Braden's, panting as he struggled with his body's responses to everything that had happened in the last few minutes. Completely foreign to him, his ass throbbed for Braden to fill it, yet his cock still pushed against his jeans from wanting his turn at fucking Abby, where he could still picture her wide open on the couch, begging for him to make her scream.

His heart suddenly racing double from what it had just ten seconds ago, Rodrigo looked to Abby, needing her to be okay with what she'd witnessed. Hinting that she'd fantasized about him and Braden together was one thing; being two feet away as a kiss like the one that had just happened was another.

Abby sat with her legs folded, her gaze fully on him. "Are you all right?" she asked, her voice soft.

"Yeah." Rodrigo had no fucking idea if he told the truth or outright lied. He wiped at his mouth, the urge to still feel where Braden had branded him overwhelming. "I'm fine."

Braden slid his hand across Rodrigo's back and then circled to stand in front of him. "I have to go." Braden's lips thinned to a hard, pale line, and his eyes flashed with flecks of emeralds. "Tell me you liked it." No longer smooth—instead, ragged edges cut Braden's voice.

Damn. I've never seen him without all the answers before.

"Shit." Without moving a muscle, Rodrigo still somehow felt like he stroked Braden's cock with that one word. "Fucking shit."

"Christ." Rodrigo actually felt Braden tremble. "You turn me on." Braden then leaned down and pecked a fast kiss to Abby's cheek without missing a beat. "Get your cell-phone battery replaced. I will coordinate with you both later." With a quick wave, he left Rodrigo and Abby alone.

For once, Rodrigo kept quiet, moving only to sit down on the couch next to Abby.

She pulled her attention off the pass-way Braden had just left through, but it took her a moment to look at Rodrigo. When she did, she asked, almost tentatively, "Is it okay if I ask you something personal?"

"I shot my load on your stomach yesterday." The thought popped into Rodrigo's head and slipped out of his mouth without censure. "I think you can ask me pretty much whatever you want."

That got a smile out of her. “What goes on in your head when you watch Braden kissing me?” She held up a finger. “Only tell me if you want to.”

Oh hell.

Rodrigo slumped down into the cushions, exhaling as he tunneled his hands through his hair. *How to say this?* He rolled his head and found Abby watching him closely. *Here it goes.* “I want to get in the middle of it, but I also want to break it up. I want you to turn that passion on me, and I think I want Braden to do the same. I’m jealous you like him that much and envious he is having you in a way I want for myself.” He scratched at his jaw and the stubble he had not shaved this morning. “But seeing you two go at each other excites the hell out of me too,” he admitted. “There’s a part of me that just wants to sit back and jerk off to these two people who I like and admire making out so close to me that I can hear it and smell it and even taste it if I wanted to.” Rodrigo wished he would shut the fuck up, but the way Abby held on to his every word pushed complete honesty past his lips. “I’m feeling all kinds of shit I didn’t expect, Bit, and I don’t know what the hell to make of most of it as it’s happening.”

Abby didn’t laugh. She didn’t say anything for the longest fucking minute in eternity, until out came, “Yeah. Me too.” Her focus drifted to the bedroom as if she saw something more than an empty bed. “Do you think Braden is as all over the map as we are?”

That sexy bastard. Rodrigo grinned even though he didn’t want to give the man—who wasn’t even in the room anymore—the satisfaction. “I think Braden has as much experience kissing a man as he does woman and that at least that part isn’t new to him. Beyond that”—new tension replaced Rodrigo’s brief smile—“Braden has a good poker face. I don’t have a clue.”

Abby glanced at him, brow raised. “Which you don’t like.”

“No more than you.”

“Touché.” After a prolonged second, Abby moved her attention from him to the hallway. “I have to get to work too.” She declared it but didn’t move.

“I do too.” Rodrigo didn’t so much as blink either.

Without words, rather than getting up, Rodrigo opened his arms, and Abby immediately leaned into him, snuggling against his side. She wrapped her arms around his middle and pressed the side of her head to his chest, where she could surely hear the elevated beat of his heart. It told her how she affected him, but for the moment Rodrigo didn’t care about putting on a tough facade. He somehow knew Abby needed to feel another body close to hers right now, just a comforting presence and nothing more. If he could finally be that for her, he reveled in it, and he didn’t let himself think too hard about how this moment put a clamp on his chest even tighter than when he’d buried his fingers inside her yesterday and laid claim to her with his spilled seed.

Didn’t mean his dick wasn’t appreciating a lithe female form wrapped around half his body, though. A pleasant state of partial wood put a nice buzz in his blood.

Particularly when Abby stirred against him and her breasts brushed his ribs and arm.

"I don't want to get up," she murmured, sounding drowsy. "Will you carry me downstairs to the store?"

Rodrigo craned his neck at an awkward angle to meet her luminous gaze. "Make sure you really want me to do that, because I will."

A flush crept up Abby's neck to fill her cheeks. "Maybe not." She untangled herself and got to her feet. Her gaze still on his, she added, "Yet."

Shit. With that single word Rodrigo went from the sensation of fingers feathering over his shaft to a rubbing tug that shot lines of pleasure all the way into his belly and up his spine.

He stood, challenged by the sparks deepening her eyes to the colors of a midnight ocean. "How about I walk you downstairs with my arm around your waist and then give you a respectful kiss good-bye that leaves your panties damp and you humming for me the rest of the morning?"

Her neck tilted back, she planted her hands on her hips. "You think you can? With one little kiss?"

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Oh, I know I can."

"Let's go."

Rodrigo slipped his arm around her waist and guided her down to her store's back room.

Ten minutes later, she wouldn't admit that he'd soaked her through and through using nothing but his mouth on hers. She had to put her hand on the wall before getting steady enough to walk into the body of her store, though, so Rodrigo took that as a resounding success.

He ignored the fact that he bumped into a pile of boxes on his way out the back door.

* * *

Captain Thomas Zanger steepled his hands against his lips, tapping the tips of his pointer fingers against each other in a steady rhythm that Braden knew meant the man was taking his time thinking his answer through. The beefy, muscular lawman didn't only intimidate with his size and buzzed head; he could also crush any officer in his precinct under the scrutiny of his ice blue stare. Braden had seen men and women cower, but Braden had never feared an evaluation or judgment of his performance, so he didn't slouch or develop a nervous tic when facing his boss. At least not an outward one that would show he cared.

Give the man time. Braden refused to even let his boot tap against the tile floor as he waited out Zanger's silence. *He'll come to the right conclusion.*

As Braden internally sweat out the captain's decision, he focused his attention on a series of photos on the bookshelf behind the man's desk, each one depicting Zanger's love of fishing. From a sandy-haired teen to the hard-ass he was today,

Zanger proudly held up his various catches for the camera. Braden stared while trying to appear as if he weren't and attempted to identify each species of fish so that he didn't let his overwhelming need for a yes from this man show on his face or in his body language.

"Go for it," Zanger finally said, breaking the silence. The gruff scratch of the captain's voice made each word sound like it came out over shards of jagged rocks. "But be discreet about it, for fuck's sake."

Braden didn't show so much as a dip in his shoulders, but on the inside, he let out a big sigh. "Yes, sir."

Zanger's glacier stare belied the explosive fire of the man's personality. "I don't want this town getting a whiff of a new investigation and flipping out all over again. I don't want people camping out on our station steps demanding some new suspect's head for no good reason."

"I understand, sir."

"And while you're at this, find a fucking concrete way to assure me Cormack didn't do it. We liked him for a reason. I don't want a mile-long list of people who *could have* done these murders. I need something solid if we're going to end up discrediting the good work a lot of men and women did on this case." The captain grimaced, and if Braden hadn't seen it before, he might have flinched. "Myself included. I might have been the lowest man on the totem pole back then, but I don't like to be wrong."

Braden flipped through the notes he'd made before requesting a conversation with the boss. "I have Lorene Jones's address, and I've already set up an appointment to speak to her later on today. I plan to assure myself she truly believes the claims she made to Abigail Gaines before this goes any further."

"Good." Glancing down at the original case file—Braden's copy was now at Abby's place—Zanger leafed through the clipped pages. "How is the girl?" His voice softened as much as Braden figured it probably could. "Woman now, I guess. She could not speak a word to any cop or child psychologist we brought in to help her recover her memory. I never talked to her personally, but half of us thought the mental block might be a blessing." His mouth twisted as he shut the file and looked up again. "Because I have to tell you, after seeing the bloodbath at that crime scene and knowing she'd likely been sitting there for hours at her dead parents' sides, I wouldn't want a child being burdened with the memory of something that horrific."

Braden's blood went cold at Zanger's brutally honest depiction of the crime scene. Braden had been a cop for a long time and a detective for over a year, but nothing in his life experience could ever allow him to understand what it must have been like for Abby to sit for such a long time within the carnage of her murdered parents. Nobody could.

Christ. Is it worth putting her through this again for just a small outside shot of finding a new suspect?

The captain knocked his big fist against his metal desk, and the sound jerked Braden back into his office.

"If you can't do this, Crenshaw..."

"Sorry, sir." Braden mentally kicked himself and put his full focus back on the man who could kill this case before it even began. "Ms. Gaines is still very sketchy on her memory. As an officer of the law, I'm taking everything I hear from her with the knowledge that eighteen years have passed and she might not remember things as they actually were." Zanger was intelligent, shrewd as hell with the politicians whose asses he had to kiss, and Braden knew it would be suicide to even attempt to bamboozle him. "As a man, though, I just want to help her get it all out so she can move forward with her life."

Zanger's lips pursed into an even tighter line. "I hear you. Don't let your personal feelings cloud your judgment, though. If something comes of this, your testimony in court has to be above reproach."

Braden clenched his jaw. "I know." He bristled inside even as he understood it was difficult for the more experienced lawman to keep from lecturing his people.

"You need to temper this woman's hope with some reality too, Detective." Zanger picked up the case file and used it as a pointing device. "You know as well as I do that old cases like this never even get reopened without some significant new DNA evidence. We never had that in this case to begin with. It's an uphill battle." The wear and tear of every unsolved case filled in the lines of the captain's face, making him look battle scarred. "That church community was devastated when Cormack didn't go to prison. I don't want to needlessly put them through heartbreak like that again."

"I understand," Braden responded. "I'll make sure everyone I talk to understands that this is a case of our department reevaluating old statements and angles and that as of now we don't foresee a new arrest being made."

"Talk to Father Jim first," Zanger suggested. "I remember his being a good man. He knows his congregation inside and out. He'll help point you to the people who knew the victims best."

"Have you been a member?" This time, Braden couldn't cover his move to sit up straighter. "I didn't know you went to church."

"I don't. Father Jim's or anywhere else. I just remember that he was very concerned about his congregation after the Gaineses were murdered." Zanger's lips pulled down at the edges. "You don't live this job for better than twenty years without becoming cynical about whether there's any kind of higher being watching over any of us. Right after the Gaines case"—his stare slipped to downright arctic—"we found a little boy who'd been deliberately starved by his parents and then a teacher who murdered a coworker she'd been fucking. You see and hear about some ugly shit in this job, and on your downtime you don't exactly want to listen to someone tell you God has a plan for it all."

"I hear you. I'm not exactly a churchgoer myself."

“Not that my wife isn’t trying to transform me.” A gritty chuckle escaped the captain, snapping him out of his dark mood. “Karen nags me to try her church every goddamn week. For fifteen years straight, every Sunday, without fail. She’s Episcopalian.”

Braden could picture the quaint slat-board-sided, white-painted building with black trim and an enormous wraparound porch. “The place over on Woodland, right?”

“That’s the one. It used to be a private residence. The man who owned it willed it to his church when he died.”

It wasn’t a huge place, but Braden drove past it regularly and recalled a decent number of cars parked there on Sundays. “Maybe you should go once, tell your wife you didn’t like it, and she’ll stop bugging you.”

“Nah.” Zanger leaned back in his chair and grabbed a stack of mail out of a basket. “She’d just move on to something else. This one I can handle.”

“Ahh. Got it.” Braden didn’t, though, not really. Then again, he’d never been married, so what did he know? “Thank you for your time, sir.” He grabbed the case file and pushed out of his chair with an appreciative nod. “I have some toxicology reports I have to track down this morning and then do some follow-up interviews with the witnesses from the gas-station robbery last week.”

“Listen.” Zanger’s rough tone stopped Braden with his hand on the door. “I can’t give you Watson or Kaufman for the Gaines case right now. It’s too little to go on to approve that much man power and that many hours. Your priority remains current cases and anything else new that comes over the horizon. If I see this doesn’t look like it’s going anywhere useful, I will shut it down.”

“Understood.” Braden swung the frosted-glass office door all the way open. “Thank you, sir.”

The captain already had his nose in his mail. “Keep me informed.”

“Will do.”

Braden had only taken one step over the threshold when Zanger grouched, “And shut my damn door, Crenshaw.”

“Yes, sir.” As soon as the Braden heard the *click*, he looked around the station, saw everyone going about their business, and he allowed himself a small but vigorous pump of his fist.

Success. First step: call Abby. Second: talk to Lorene Jones on his own. Third: a conversation with Father Jim with Abby and Rodrigo riding shotgun.

Braden prayed Abby was able to handle slipping into such a traumatic past.

I’ll make sure she is. Braden couldn’t forget about the dark-haired Latino whose mouth he had taken so recently. *Rodrigo will too.*

* * *

Braden immediately spotted Abby's car as he turned into the church parking lot. *Perfectly timed.* He pulled in alongside her just as she and Rodrigo exited the vehicle.

After spending a half hour with Lorene Jones, who seemed kind and genuine despite Braden's best efforts to go in disliking her on Abby's behalf, Braden agreed with Abby's assessment that Lorene had enough knowledge of Elaine Gaines's personality, as well as her behavior in the final year of her life, to support a suspicion of an affair.

Now it was into this sacred building that likely counted the majority of potential suspects as members of its congregation.

Braden joined Abby and Rodrigo at the front of her car. The church, with its gleaming red brick facade, white pillars and trim, steeple, and stained-glass window depicting Christ with his arms stretched out in welcome, loomed some fifty feet away. A beacon of sunlight bounced off the bronze bell in the steeple as if God himself touched the building with his light.

Good. We're gonna need his help.

With a glance above Abby's head to Rodrigo, Braden saw the man stiffen his spine, and Braden did the same. Then Braden looked to Abby. She was pale, but as that was her normal coloring, not overly so.

"You ready to do this?" he asked.

Abby nodded, took a deep breath, and promptly folded right to her knees.

Chapter Nine

“Abby? Talk to me.”

“Bit, are you all right?”

Two distinct male voices swam in Abby’s ears, pushing through the sounds of crashing ocean waves putting a muting blanket on all the noises around her.

The church Abby remembered so well from her childhood swayed before her eyes. Two towering spruce trees on either side appeared as giant green arms reaching out to drag her into the mouth of the brick building, where the structure would then swallow her whole and separate her from those she loved.

“No goddamn way.” Rodrigo’s fiery will snapped through the crisp air and wound around Abby. “We’re not doing this today. She’s not ready.”

Nothing could have stabbed into Abby’s spirit and hurled her back into her body faster than Rodrigo’s strident declaration regarding her personal choices.

She shook off the hands manacling her upper arms on both sides. “I’m all right.” Abby pushed to her feet, forced herself to look at the church again, and didn’t let her heart race out of control this time. “I don’t ever have cause to drive by this church. I haven’t seen it since I was a kid. It looks exactly the same as I remember it, and it threw me for a few seconds. I let myself get overwhelmed.” She hated admitting that to herself as much as she did these two men. “It won’t happen again.”

Braden brushed away hair that had fallen in her eyes. “We can come back tomorrow, Abby.” He sounded like he was speaking to a dazed victim or shell-shocked witness. “Or the next day. Or the next. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing.”

Rodrigo stepped in front of Abby and dipped down to get at eye level with her. “I don’t like it.” A stern line took over his mouth. “Your lips are too red when the rest of your face is too pale, and your eyes are kind of wild.”

Mierda! Jeez, he even has me cursing his favorite word in his own language now.

“My eyes are wild because you pissed me off, Rodrigo.” Abby threw back her shoulders and stuck her chin up at him. “You don’t get to decide when I can and can’t do something just because you got me a little damp this morning.”

He flashed a smile that would have made a wolf envious. “Try full-on soaking wet, Bit.”

Braden elbowed in between Abby and Rodrigo and swung an arm around each one's shoulders. "And now I think Abby is just fine." With a step, he got all three of them moving. "Let's go inside before she jabs you one in the jaw, Rodrigo." He glanced back and forth between them, his pale eyes dancing in the sunlight. "Can't wait to hear more about that little exchange later, by the way. About the wetness"—he dropped his gaze briefly to the apex of Abby's thighs—"and about where in the hell that Bit name came from. I've always wondered but never could grab a good moment to ask."

Abby saw Rodrigo open his mouth. She rounded in front of Braden in one smooth move and clamped her hand over Rodrigo's lips. Feeling suddenly buoyant, Abby matched Braden grin for grin. "I was whipping Rodrigo's ass in an argument, and Jonah said, 'You're gonna let this little bit of a thing beat you?'" It was hard to walk backward, explain, and keep Rodrigo's mouth covered—particularly when he kept disturbing her palm with enticing little licks that pulled funny lines in her belly. "Jonah was just kidding in that strange way of his. There's nothing little or bitlike about me. Rodrigo had to go taking it seriously, though—"

Rodrigo nipped her skin right then and shocked her into yanking her hand away.

Jeez, he looked like he'd won a hard-core footrace, and Abby barely kept from growling at the silently crowing man.

"I didn't take Jonah seriously at all." Rodrigo picked up the story but kept his eyes on Abby, not Braden. "I did see how it got all your little prickly quills up, though, and knew I could have some fun. The name bothered you so much it just stuck. I don't even think about how it came about now." His voice went all soft in a way that made Abby think about his rough hands running over her bare skin. "It's just what I automatically call you sometimes. It just happens."

Abby couldn't break Rodrigo's stare, and in response, her stomach somersaulted some more. "It doesn't bother me anymore."

"I know." Rodrigo reached out and rubbed his thumb against her cheek. "I would have stopped a long time ago if I'd thought it truly did."

Quickening his stride, Braden moved in beside Abby and put a hand on her waist, bringing her to a stop. "And now we're here." He turned her around, and she realized they stood at the two steps leading to the church's front doors.

His hand still resting at her back, Braden asked, "Are you sure you're ready?"

The white double doors went up so high that even as an adult Abby had to crane her neck back to see the top.

I used to love coming here. Abby watched her hand as if it were disconnected from her body as it closed around the door handle and pushed it down. *There's nothing to fear.*

With a measured, steady breath, she said, "Let's do this," and shoved open the heavy door.

Soft light from fluted wall sconces filled the interior of the church's vestibule, creating shadows along the padded benches that lined the perimeter. Pristine, neutral-colored carpet covered the floor to mute the sounds of men's dress shoes, women's heels, and the rambunctious play of the excitable children, which in this church, Abby had never been.

Abby's extreme shyness as a child no longer mattered, though. Nor did her memory of hiding behind her mother's or father's legs as they spoke to Father Jim after Mass. The tall blond man in black robes, who'd often tried to coax Abby out to say hello, had rarely succeeded, even though his smile and easy laugh had made Abby happy whenever she had had chance to hear it.

Like right now.

The rich boom of male laughter carried through the open doors that led to the body of the church some dozen feet away. The sound transported Abby backward to the last time she'd heard her mother's twinkling laugh. Two days before she'd died, Abby's mom had brought Abby with her on a mission to drop off a huge batch of cookies either for the next big meal for those in need or for the next gathering after Sunday Mass. Abby couldn't remember. Her mom had always been baking something to donate to the church. Elaine had sat Abby down in the vestibule with a book and a toy and told her to wait there quietly. Abby remembered reading her book four times and walking her doll around all the benches twice while she waited. Every once in a while a person would pass through the vestibule and wave to her, which would make Abby hide her face against the wall. Finally, the murmur of muted voices trickled from down a hallway toward Abby. Father Jim had laughed as he and Elaine entered the vestibule. Abby's mom had done the same, and the two different voices that often made Abby smile became jumbled into one melodious sound.

Today, again, one of the laughs she remembered so well reached across the church and sent frissons of awareness down her spine.

Her legs started moving, following the direction her memory led her. "He's here," she shared with Braden and Rodrigo, who flanked her.

Rodrigo hastily crossed himself as he bent down to Abby's ear. "Who's here?"

Abby skidded to a halt at the back row of pews. Far down the center aisle, right at the altar, stood a man in black with his back to them. A woman in a pink skirt suit was at his side.

"Father Jim," Abby answered. Even though she couldn't see his face, for a moment Abby felt her mom and dad at her sides and wanted to scurry behind the protection of their legs.

She didn't think she'd done more than whisper, but her voice must have carried in the empty church. The woman in pink looked up, and Father Jim turned right then, landing his attention on the trio at the back of the building.

Father Jim spoke to the woman in a low voice; she nodded in response and disappeared through a side alcove. Abby didn't wait for the father to come to her.

The warm, fuzzy memories of this priest slipped away to be replaced by a vision of her dead parents and then the terror of her first night in the revolving series of foster homes she'd resided in until turning eighteen.

At least one of which he could have stepped in and prevented.

As Abby strode up the aisle, the backbone she'd had to figure out how to create for herself pushed itself ramrod straight and helped slow down the furious beating of her heart. She registered Rodrigo saying he would hold back but be within glancing distance if she needed him, and Braden sharing that he would remain within hearing range but allow her some time to speak with the priest on her own first.

Abby reached Father Jim parallel to the second row of pews, ready to spew eighteen years' worth of pent-up thoughts, but standing so close to such an important figure from her past put a lock on her tongue. The well-built man in the white collar still stood well above her height. Only the slightest hints of silver threaded his blond hair, and any lines on his face could just as easily have come from spending time in the Florida sun than as a sign of aging. Abby remembered sitting across from this man—priest—and making up stories to share with him during confession. Most of the time her shyness tied up her tongue, and on the few occasions she had done something really bad that needed confessing, she *most definitely* did not think it was smart to confess it to someone with a direct link to God. Rules or not, she wasn't going to do it.

Standing in front of the father right now, Abby was torn between wanting to spill all her deepest fears and shocking him with tales of her recent activities with two men.

Maybe not a good idea to lead with that, girl.

Abby didn't know how long she stared at the priest in stupefied silence, but it was apparently long enough for him to think he should break the silence first. "Abigail." Father Jim stretched out a hand in offering. "My goodness, I would recognize you anywhere. You are the picture of your mother."

"Thank you," Abby murmured as she shook his hand. As with Lorene, she didn't exactly know the correct way to respond to a comparison of someone whose life had been cut short at almost the same age Abby was now. "That's nice to hear."

"Lorene spoke to me privately and shared that you would like to speak to me about your parents." Father Jim lifted his arm toward the front row of pews. "I think it's good that you are open to connecting with them again. I am here to help in any way I can."

So Lorene had kept her word to be discreet. Abby felt better knowing that, even though the father would learn the truth soon enough. If not from Abby, then from Braden. It was nice to know Abby could trust one person in this church, though. And that in a lot of ways, Lorene probably remained Elaine Gaines's best, most stalwart friend.

She had to choose her son over me. Any mother would do the same.

While Father Jim waited for Abby to sit, he said, "Your parents are still missed in this congregation, Abigail." His warm brown eyes immediately softened in a way that put up Abby's dander. "You are too."

Abby snorted. She fucking couldn't help it. "Not enough to take me in all those years ago."

"There are many here who regret letting their fear beat them." The priest folded his ankle against his knee and stretched his arm across the back of the pew, putting his hand close to Abby's shoulder. "There are also those who still believe turning you over to those professionally trained to handle emotionally distraught children was for the best."

Abby scooted out of range of those fingers. "Which one are you?"

"I am torn." The father's gaze and tone remained even. "I, of course, believe that God ultimately heals everything, but I also believe he sends certain members of his flock into vocations to train and be conduits to that healing. You were in a very bad way, Abigail, and I needed to set aside my desire to help you so that someone better trained could." With his pause, Abby finally noticed his jaw tighten and his throat move convulsively. "Until I reach heaven, I will never be certain that was the right choice."

Abby searched internally for the fire that had put her legs in motion up the aisle of this church, but only experienced a slight sense of deflation instead. "Intellectually, I suppose I understand that." The admission only scratched a little bit on the way out.

"But it's much harder to reconcile with the heart of that child you were. I understand that as well." Pity filled Father Jim's eyes. Abby had seen it enough in her life to detect it in even the most skilled professionals.

Yes, well, none of that matters anymore. That's not why you're here, girl.

Abby cleared her throat and mentally psyched herself up not to shake or tear up as she'd done with Lorene. "I want to ask you some tough questions about my parents. I'd like you to be open to not only me, but to Detective Crenshaw also." She looked over her shoulder toward Braden, who sat three rows back and out of her direct line of sight.

"A detective?" Father Jim's brow creased as he glanced up at Braden. "What is this about?"

"I have suspicions that Rusty Cormack did not kill my parents. They're valid enough that Detective Crenshaw has been given permission to explore them." At this point, Abby didn't want to spill more than the minimum necessary to this man. To anyone. "The best way to determine who would want to hurt someone is to learn about their life." She looked into Father Jim's eyes and did not waver. "That's what I am doing here today. I need your help."

Father Jim took Abby's hands. "Your parents were good people, Abigail." His tone made Abby feel like a silly child. "I don't know what you're looking for or what you think to find here."

Turning away, Abby snapped her jaw shut tightly and put her focus on the trio of stained-glass windows behind the altar. She absorbed the saturated blues, greens, reds, and yellows in the biblical scene and categorized each series of panes by largest to least amount of color per section. By imagining that she shrank each piece of glass in size and dropped them into an appropriate color-coded container at her workstation at the store, Abby allowed herself to temporarily go to a place that offered her peace and order: creating her jewelry.

Breathe. Just keep breathing.

After Abby finished mentally breaking apart the stained-glass windows, she looked back to Father Jim and put iron in her voice. "Did my mother ever confess to you that she was having an affair?"

The priest leaned his shoulder back into the pew. "You must know I cannot speak of anything anyone tells me in confession. Your mother. Your father. I can't even speak of the things you said to me as a child."

Abby chuckled and shot him a derisive look. "I never told you anything truthful, so you don't have to worry about that."

"It doesn't matter." Father Jim didn't so much as crack a smile. "Confession is sacred."

"What about outside of confession?" Abby would not believe this man did not know *something* about her mother that would show a more complete version of her life. Her mother had trusted Father Jim and had believed in him in all things. Even as a child, Abby had understood the priest's importance in their world. "Do you simply have an observation of my mother's behavior at any point over the last year of her life that gave you pause?"

"Your mother was a busy woman," he replied, his voice remaining frustratingly calm. "I believe her life became even more hectic toward the end of her time here. There could be many, many reasons for this, from something as simple as scheduling, too much charity work, to something more sinister. I do not automatically assume the worst when the behavior of one of my parishioners changes."

Abby leaped, physically leaning forward in the pew. "So you're saying my mother's behavior did change?"

Burying his hand in his hair, Father Jim sighed. "As do many others at any given time, Abigail. It does not always mean the sky is falling. My job is to ask them if they'd like to talk, and to be there when they decide they'd like to unburden themselves."

"But you won't tell me if she unburdened herself on you, even if it occurred outside the sacred bonds of confession?"

"Correct."

Abby curled her hands under her thighs to keep from shaking this man. "Are you trying to preserve my mother's image for me at the expense of the truth?"

The priest shook his head, but it didn't exactly have the decisiveness of a denial. "I think you should know that your mother loved you a great deal. You were her pride and joy." He touched her hair the way Lorene had yesterday. "Your father's as well. Everything else will cast a heavy weight on your heart that shouldn't be there."

Damn it. Abby felt like she was inside a puzzle box that would not open until she figured out the right question to ask the holder of the key. Father Jim could not be completely unflappable. *How to go at him in a different way?*

Ah. "Don't you think God would think it an even graver sin to let two souls sit in purgatory for eternity because their murderer remains free?" Abby went right for what she hoped was a fear of his own eternal damnation.

At the back of the church, Rodrigo watched Abby with an eagle eye trained on her to pick up her subtlest moves. With more than twenty pews between them, her body language still resounded loudly enough to send out signals of frustration rather than pain or anger, which Rodrigo did not consider a victory. It didn't sit well with him at all.

Abby needed answers. Along with those answers would surely come hurt, betrayal, pain, anger, and possibly even some rage. Right now, she held herself in such a way that Rodrigo knew this priest was not giving Abby the right answers to her questions.

When it's his turn, maybe Braden will be able to help Father Jim see the light. He can be as intimidating as hell when he wants, and he has a badge to flash that helps the most reticent folks see the light.

Hell, if it came right down to it, Rodrigo wasn't above threatening a man of God himself.

Waiting for the lightning to strike him for that thought, Rodrigo glanced around the church...and froze on the lone figure of a petite older woman watching Abby from just inside the vestibule.

As if she sensed his eyes on her, the woman turned to Rodrigo and offered a small smile. Ingrained with manners he'd learned from his short time with Marisol, Rodrigo smiled back and dipped his head in greeting.

In response, the woman joined Rodrigo in his pew and sat at his side. "I saw you and the other gentleman come in with her," she said in a soft voice. Her attention remained on Abby. "How is she today?"

Who the hell?

It hit Rodrigo almost instantly. "Are you Lorene Jones?"

The woman grabbed Rodrigo's hand in both of hers. "Abby mentioned me?"

Such hope filled the woman's question and such light instantly sparked in her eyes that Rodrigo didn't quite know how to handle it.

"She did," he finally answered. Anything less would have felt like he was throwing her under a bus.

"Yes, I am Lorene Jones." She turned her hold of his hand into a shake. "Lorene is fine."

"Rodrigo Santiago." After exchanging a handshake, Lorene finally released his hand.

She then turned her attention back to Abby and Father Jim. "And you're her friend?"

"Yes." Rodrigo let his gaze drift back to the woman in question. She still had a "fallen angel ready to make God pay" look about her, and Rodrigo's temperature started rising in kind. "I care about Abby a lot. She's very important to me."

Lorene patted his hand with her icy smaller one. "Good, good. After what she went through as a child, she deserves lots of people to care about her."

"She has good friends." Something needful in this woman compelled Rodrigo to make *her* feel better. "None of us can imagine what happened the day her parents died, but some of us went through the foster-care system too and can understand the experience that followed."

"That makes me feel better." Lorene looked up at Rodrigo through damp eyes, and a tremulous smile broke through the palpable fear. "I wish I could have kept her. I know it wasn't possible, but God knows we tried to make it work." She crossed herself, Rodrigo figured for taking the Lord's name in vain. "I can only hope Abby understands it better now too."

Whoa.

"Wait." Rodrigo barely managed to keep his voice down to a hissing whisper. "Abby started out living with you?" That had not been in any old newspaper article he had found or anything Chris had ever shared.

Lorene whipped her head around to look at him. "She didn't..." Clear horror filled her entire face, and she quickly slid down to the edge of the pew. "Oh dear. I shouldn't have spoken without her permission. I shouldn't have stopped when I saw her. She'll think I'm hovering and trying to force a relationship. I have to go."

"Wait." Rodrigo leaned halfway across the seat, but Lorene had already gotten to her feet.

"Will you give this to her?" Lorene thrust a folded piece of paper into his hand. "Or keep it for your file, Detective Santiago—"

Shit. "Wait. I'm not Braden's part—"

Lorene paused for a moment at the doors leading to the vestibule. "I spent last night and this morning getting in touch with people who belonged to the same book club Abby's mother did. She and I spoke of it yesterday. This is their best recollection of the members from back then. Thank you." She looked ready to burst into tears. "Good-bye."

As Lorene hightailed it out of sight, Rodrigo sat with the folded sheet of paper in his hand, dumbfounded but also full of the sickest twist in his gut he'd ever felt.

Abby started out in a real home, and they let her go?

Good God. Every foster kid's most cherished dream was to find a permanent place to call home, no matter that not a single one of them would admit to such longing out loud. *Never admit to what you want the most. Never be that vulnerable. Never.* Only, Abby must have never even had the flickering flame of that dream, because she'd already experienced it and had essentially been told she wasn't good enough to keep.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Specks of something Abby had mentioned last night about this congregation putting her aside fell into place for Rodrigo. No wonder Abby had always refused to talk about her past. When confronted, she continually shut down, even more than the usual adult who'd spent time in the system. Most put roadblocks in the paths of other people trying to get to know them as adults. Abby, though, had constructed solid steel walls and moats with piranhas and crocodiles swimming within to keep others out.

Not anymore. Rodrigo made himself a vow right in a goddamn church. *You're going to start talking to me, Bit, and it's gonna happen soon.*

Activity at the front of the church drew Rodrigo back just in time to see Abby offer a terse nod to the priest. She then said, "He's all yours" to Braden as she passed him. Finally, she broke into a run up the aisle to the back of the church.

As she passed Rodrigo, she seethed. "I need air."

Rodrigo glanced over his shoulder to see Braden take a seat next to Father Jim.

They'll be a while.

He jogged to catch up with Abby, meeting her as she shoved open the front doors. "We'll take a fast walk while we wait." Rodrigo didn't pause for an agreement before starting a brisk pace around the church grounds.

She followed, gaining his side easily, as he knew she would.

For now Rodrigo figured sweating out her anger in this manner would have to do.

He didn't figure fucking her in a church parking lot until she couldn't think anymore would get either one of them into heaven.

* * *

From the entrance to Abby's kitchen, Rodrigo watched the very woman prowl the galley's length, taking little more than three long strides in either direction. Braden had received a call a while ago and had left for a crime scene, but not before he and Abby had talked briefly.

After her and Braden's conversations at the church, they'd all come back to Abby's place, whereupon Abby had railed at Father Jim's blocking, sidestepping, or

evading her every attempt to get him to spill about her mother and father's relationship. Abby figured the man was going for sainthood and thought preserving a child's memories at any cost would help get him there.

Or maybe he's just trying to cover his own church's ass.

During the short time he'd been here, Braden hadn't espoused as many details or shown as much outward frustration as Abby had, but he did claim the priest had effectively blocked his questions. Braden hadn't laid out a theory per se, but as Rodrigo had quietly watched him and Abby compare notes, Rodrigo sensed that under Braden's calm detachment he had some skepticism about this Father Jim that went beyond his saintly nature.

It wouldn't surprise me if he threw the priest into their nonexistent pool of suspects very soon.

Rodrigo wondered how Abby would handle it when Braden did.

"I spoke to a woman at the church today," Rodrigo said, keeping his tone nice and level. "She introduced herself as Lorene Jones."

Abby didn't quite cover the hiccup in her step. "Oh yeah?"

Not as indifferent as you want to be.

"Lorene didn't want to bother you. She had something for you, though." Rodrigo slipped the paper out of his pocket and handed it to Abby when she cycled back his way. "She said you would know what it was."

After unfolding the sheet, Abby gave it a cursory glance and then slipped it into her duster pocket. "Thanks. I'll add it to our file."

Putting his shoulder against plaster, Rodrigo watched Abby. It was obvious she stubbornly refused to look back at him. "She also let it slip that you'd spent some time in her home."

Blatantly covering another small, jerky pause, Abby murmured a noncommittal noise and picked up her prowling again.

Rodrigo took one big step into the kitchen and trapped Abby against the counter with hands braced on either side of her waist. Her breath caught, making her breasts push against the thin white T-shirt she wore beneath her flowery duster. She looked up at him through pupils that left only a thin ring of blue showing in her eyes.

"What happened, Bit?" With everything in him, Rodrigo kept the demand out of his voice. "How did you end up in the system?"

"I'm all talked out." Abby put the tip of one finger on Rodrigo's chin and let it run an enticing, lingering line down his throat, chest, and stomach to land just above his belt. "I've done it enough for one day."

Ignoring the rush of reaction to his dick, a slice of Rodrigo's fiery impatience slipped out. "Bit, this is a pretty fucking big deal. Don't pretend you don't care about it."

Moving up on her tiptoes, Abby rubbed her entire front against his. “Right now I care about something else a whole lot more.”

As Abby rose up and bit Rodrigo’s lower lip, she reached down and put her hand on his cock.

Chapter Ten

Rodrigo moaned at the first touch of Abby's hand on his dick, and Abby knew she had him.

For a split second, she'd touched him as a way to distract him, but the moment he let out one of those throaty noises, Abby only cared about pulling as many more sounds just like that from him as necessary until he came.

With another rub along his length, Abby then curled her hand between his legs to finger his balls, feeling the heat of his sac burn through his clothes and brand her hand.

"Abby..." Rodrigo gritted his teeth as Abby withdrew, ran her hand down his inner thigh, and found the tip of his cock through his clothes. He shook his head in denial even as he rotated his hips into her teasing fingers. "You need to talk about what happened in Lorene's house when you were a kid."

Whispering a no against his warm lips, Abby undid Rodrigo's belt and the button holding up his jeans. She looked into his eyes, held that dark gaze, and listened to his zipper sigh as it came down. "Right now we should let me touch you without anything between us." Instead of shoving down his pants, Abby slipped her hand into Rodrigo's underwear and closed her fingers around his rapidly growing erection.

Rodrigo inhaled sharply, and Abby did too as the fiery heat he emanated scorched her hand. She'd already seen his cock once, but it somehow felt so much longer against the span of her fingers. She circled Rodrigo's width as best she could in the confined space and dragged her palm up and down his thickening prick.

His eyes slid to half-mast, and he white-knuckled the countertop, his fingers flexing in time with every abbreviated stroke Abby delivered to his prick. She forced her hand deeper into his jeans to his nuts and closed her fingers around the heavy weight. With a fast jerk in response, Rodrigo grunted and covered her hand with his, forcing Abby to handle him in a rougher manner. Every time Abby rolled her fingers or pulled back to squeeze the base of his cock, Rodrigo let out another hungry sound, which in turn spurred an answering throb deep inside Abby's pussy.

The first musky hints of Rodrigo's arousal thickened the air in the kitchen, pushing Abby even faster to a place of pure sexual desire. She shoved her hand down to rim his cockhead and came away with sticky fingers.

He's getting just as wet as I am.

Her gaze on his, Abby ran her fingers across Rodrigo's slit again. Rodrigo swore in Spanish, and Abby started shoving at his jeans, suddenly frantic. "I want to taste you."

"Nuh-uh." Pushing her arm away, Rodrigo tunneled his hand up through the fall of her hair and bowed her back over the counter. His entire being moved in one big wave as he struggled to catch his breath. "You're not getting that sweet mouth on me and making me come that fast." Wrapping one arm around her waist, Rodrigo hoisted Abby up to the counter and forced his way between her thighs. "I get you first."

Rodrigo slashed his lips across Abby's and licked them open, claiming ownership of her mouth with an authority Abby had no interest in fighting. He shoved her skirt up to her waist and pulled her to the edge of the counter to meet his thrusts, his underwear and hers not much of a barrier at all. Abby could feel his stiff ridge splitting her crease and riding her clit with every grinding swipe. She could barely hold on through the feel of it and his mouth expertly mastering hers, turning her into a wanton who only cared about meeting her sexual needs.

Every brush of Rodrigo's body against hers that wasn't met with skin-on-skin contact made Abby want to scream. She bit Rodrigo's lip—the only way to break the kiss—and yanked at the back hem of his shirt. "Take off your shirt." A tearing sound rent through the kitchen as she pulled. "Please."

Giving her just a few inches of breathing room, Rodrigo touched his lower lip first and bared his teeth like an animal after a meal. Pulling his finger from his mouth, Rodrigo came away with a drop of blood. He wiped the smear of bright red on his clothes, then pulled off his long-sleeved T-shirt and tossed it aside, baring his upper body all the way down to his low waist, where his jeans and underwear barely held on to his hips. Rope after rope of thickly corded muscle greeted Abby everywhere she looked, creating a frame worthy of the fittest Olympic athlete sent down from the heavens by the Greek gods themselves.

"Oh my dear God." Abby's legs spread wider of their own volition, and her sex swelled at the eyeful of beautiful male form and dark tan skin before her. "You got me wet the first time I saw you without a shirt on." Words she had never thought to admit spilled out, the dam within no longer strong enough to stop them. Abby lifted her gaze back up to Rodrigo's and trembled at the intensity in his stare. "You got me excited everywhere else the first time you opened your mouth. With the way you like to fight, I knew if you ever really came for me, I would be in big trouble."

A straight row of white teeth flashed as Rodrigo stepped back between Abby's thighs. "I guess we're in trouble, then." He slipped his hands under her T-shirt and started pushing it up, gathering her loose cover-up with it. "Because I'm not walking away." With that, he dipped down, pressed his mouth to her belly, and began kissing his way up her torso with every inch of skin he exposed.

Rodrigo mixed in flicks with his tongue, grazes from his lips, and light sucking against Abby's flesh every time he moved upward, leaving a trail of tingling knots of nerve endings along the way. Every time Rodrigo didn't press his lips harder or take

a nip from her naked skin—and when he bypassed her breasts without touching them—all that aching sensation rushed straight down to Abby's core and tugged a hard line of painful need between her nipples and cunt. As Rodrigo kissed his way up her throat and around to her shoulder, he deftly removed her T-shirt and shawl-duster, leaving her nearly bare.

His dark eyes bright, Rodrigo didn't even glance to the side as he tossed her clothes right on top of his discarded shirt. "Take off your bra for me, Bit." He reached into his underwear and pulled out his cock, letting the thick, dark length rest against the elastic waistband. "Your panties too."

Oh hell. Nerves almost got the better of Abby and made her laugh. She swallowed the reflex down just in time and managed to hook her thumbs into the waistband of her panties. *This is it.*

They were so close there could be no mistaking Rodrigo's watching her every move. He kept his hand on his erection, circling the reddened head with the blunt pad of his thumb while he waited for her to make the next move. Since they were damp and clinging to her sex, practically showing everything off already, Abby lifted one hip and buttock at a time and wiggled her panties off and down her legs. Moist auburn curls clung to her pussy, and the scent of her excitement did battle with Rodrigo's arousal, fighting for dominance in the too-warm room. Any other time in her life, Abby would have squeezed her thighs together or wished she were in bed under the covers. Tonight, she let her legs fall open as wide as she'd had them before, putting herself on display.

"Shit." Rodrigo sucked in air. As he took her in, he shoved his jeans and underwear down to his hips and began to stroke his dick from root to tip. "You are so fucking pretty all over." He locked in on her fingers resting on the bra clasp between her breasts. "Show me the rest."

Abby undid the two small hooks and let the cups fall away. The straps slid down her arms, leaving her completely naked except for the skirt bunched around her waist and her black cowboy boots. She looked down at herself and couldn't believe the boldness in her display.

Rodrigo apparently liked what she did quite a lot.

He grabbed her ankles and bent her legs up and wide apart, planting the heels of her boots on the counter. In doing so, he angled her hips and pussy right to the edge of the counter, opening her up for whatever he wanted to do.

Reaching back, Rodrigo palmed his wallet out of his back pocket. "Rub your nipples," he told her as he pulled out a condom packet and tore it open. He did it with expert hands and without ever breaking eye contact with Abby. "Make them hard for me."

The command in his order, which would have annoyed Abby to no end at any other time, made her heart rate kick up in double time to a point where she would swear it pounded visibly against her breast.

I want to do what he tells me.

As that truth hit Abby, her sex drenched with more moisture and pooled on the counter, giving her away. Rodrigo paused for a split second, the rolled-up condom poised between two fingers. Dipping down, he ran the flat of his tongue over the sliver of counter available between Abby's thighs, licked up the evidence of her arousal, and murmured an appreciative noise as he straightened up and wiped the edge of his mouth. The move only made Abby's pussy even slicker and had her sliding her hands up her belly to her breasts, touching the tips as Rodrigo wanted her to do.

One touch of her hands and Abby knew teasing just her nipples wouldn't be enough. She squeezed both small mounds of flesh, understanding from experience that she loved the whole of her breasts touched and pinched and pleased. Abby rolled the heels of her hands against the outsides of her tits; she scraped her trimmed fingernails over her nipples and all over her flesh, leaving lines of red everywhere on her pale skin. Soon Abby's nipples were tight, painful beads of mauve-colored flesh, and she couldn't keep from writhing on the counter in response to the endless line of straining nerve endings inside her reaching for some kind of release.

"Hell, Bit." Rodrigo rolled the condom on his rearing length, his attention still riveted on her. "Don't stop teasing yourself." He swooped down and pressed a kiss to her mound, his gaze still up on hers. "Keep going just like that." One blink later, Rodrigo licked down and buried his face in her pussy.

Abby tried to jerk away from the first burst of concentrated pleasure, but Rodrigo hooked his arms around her thighs and kept her in place for a thorough mapping of her cunt. He flicked the tip of his tongue against her clit over and over again, *almost* to the point of making her come, only to then take direct contact off and move lower to slowly thrust that same wicked tongue into her pussy. Rodrigo alternated back and forth a half dozen times, putting Abby on the razor's edge and into a place where she thought she might shove her own fingers onto her clit to get relief. Instead, she dug the heels of her boots into the Formica countertop and pumped herself into Rodrigo's brand of torment, begging him without words to make her come.

In a shot, Rodrigo pulled off and rose to his full height, tangling his hand into her hair again. "You don't come without my being inside you this time." His stare on her shone hotter than Georgia asphalt in the middle of summer. Rodrigo put his thumb on her chin and forced her mouth to open. Lowering his lips to hers, he uttered, "Taste how excited you are for this," and kissed her deeply, transferring her essence from his mouth to hers.

Abby had never tasted herself before and had definitely never experienced a man groaning with obvious pleasure at the additional layer of intimacy he'd added to their kiss. She'd had boyfriends before, but none of them had ever wrenched such physical and emotional responses out of her as Abby had experienced the last few days with Rodrigo and Braden.

Wait. Abby went stock-still even as her entire body continued to flame with roaring life. She wedged her fingers in between her and Rodrigo's lips and looked into the eyes of *one* of the two sexiest men she knew. Everything inside her pulsated like one giant nerve ending that just needed one good rub to split with screaming joy into a thousand more, but she couldn't help the nag at her conscience. "What about Braden?"

Rodrigo growled and nipped the tip of her finger. "I'll fuck him later." His eyes flashed black onyx as he scraped her mouth with his again. "Right now I only want you."

Abby clung to Rodrigo's kiss. He felt so right against her and between her legs, but pale green eyes haunted her too. "I don't know if this is right without him."

His forehead pressed to hers, Rodrigo slipped his hand between Abby's thighs and nudged one finger into her snug sheath, drawing out yet another shiver. "Tell me this doesn't feel right." He pumped his long middle digit in and out of her pussy, grazing her sweet spot in time with the press of his thumb against her clit. "I dare you."

Abby clenched her teeth as her channel pulsated around Rodrigo's questing digit. "It feels perfect."

Relentless in the slow glide of his invasion, Rodrigo continued to drive Abby closer to the edge of sanity. He whispered hotly with his mouth fused to hers, "Tell me you don't think Braden would do the same or won't get hard as hell hearing about it while lying in bed between you and me later on tonight. I know I would." Rodrigo's pupils flared, drowning out the brown. "Jealousy included or not. I think you'd have your fingers right where mine are now if you'd heard he and I were the ones on this counter right now."

Abby couldn't hold back the whimper of pleasure Rodrigo's enticing imagery pulled out of her. Her fingers dug into his forearm, and she was barely able to breathe, let alone speak as she rode his incredible roving digit. "I would."

"And Braden would too."

"Oh yeah, yeah..." Abby bit her lip, fighting to keep some semblance of a clear head through what Rodrigo did to her, but to also allow that other amazing man sharing her bed into her thoughts. "You're right. Braden would like to hear about it. No!" She reached for Rodrigo when he took his finger away.

"It's part of why you like him so much." Still, without looking away from her eyes, Rodrigo rubbed his cock along Abby's slit and fitted the head to her entrance. He rested himself *right there* but did not nudge so much as a millimeter inside her body.

"Yeah," Abby agreed. Braden's provocative behavior and comments of late filled Abby's head, mixing with everything so very volatile about Rodrigo right in front of her right now. She couldn't lie to this man and knew he wouldn't want it. "It is."

His voice ragged, that dark gaze flashing, Rodrigo said, "It's part of why I like him so much too."

The second that rough confession slipped out of Rodrigo, he drove Abby's head into the cabinet with the force of his kiss and pierced his cock into her cunt at the same time, taking her body to its farthest depths with first penetration. Abby cried out at the sharp, fast invasion and trembled as her channel clenched all around Rodrigo's shaft, her body already working furiously to keep him inside.

Groaning low and deep, Rodrigo wedged his hands under Abby's ass. He muttered, his voice guttural, "Hold on to me." His eyes were glistening pools of black. He dug his blunt fingers into her buttocks and yanked her somehow closer to him. "I want this so much I fucking can't go slow this time."

Abby's pussy fluttered all around Rodrigo in automatic answer. He jerked, and Abby wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles against the small of his back. "Then don't." She braced her elbows on his shoulders and crossed her arms around the back of his head, holding on everywhere. "Take me however you want." She rocked her hips to meet the slide of his cock, increasing the friction. "Take me until we both come."

"Jesus, Bit." Rodrigo dipped down and snagged her lips with his, his gaze lit with wildfire. "Don't help kill me too fast."

"Have to." She clung to him and kissed him back, desperate to deepen the connection everywhere. The shivery sensations in her pussy increased to a deep, pulsating throb, and she felt her toehold on reality slip away. "I don't want to lose it alone."

"Shit." Rodrigo repeated the curse in Spanish and lifted Abby right off the counter. "I always knew you'd be amazing." He shoved her hips downward and thrust his cock up simultaneously, splitting her apart and burying himself to the hilt. He did it again and again and again, and Abby screamed inside with joy at the punishing pace Rodrigo set. Rodrigo matched her internal cry with grunts and moans out loud, and each noise from him pushed Abby to greater heights of pleasure.

So good. Abby pushed down and helped Rodrigo take her with even more vigor. *I want to see him lose control.*

She tunneled her hands in his dark, silky locks and yanked his head back, determined to steal his breath away with one of his own signature controlling kisses. With her fingers tangled in his hair, Abby pulled it to a point where she knew it would sting, but she couldn't hold back or give any less than the punishing fucking he delivered her. Abby pushed against Rodrigo's jaw with clawing fingers, uncaring if she left scratches even though she hardly had nails worth mentioning. Using force, she jammed her way past Rodrigo's lips and sank her tongue into his mouth, probing and licking and sucking and dragging more moans out of him.

"Yes." Rodrigo's eyes glazed with lust. "Fuck my mouth the way I'm gonna fuck yours soon." He shoved her back onto the counter, ramming his cock into her pussy as far as it would go.

Abby screamed “yes” and went at Rodrigo with a thrusting, base kiss that matched each piston-fast pump of his hips. Slapping noises of skin hitting skin permeated the sex-drenched air in the kitchen, and that just seemed to push both of them to greater heights. With one more rough piercing from Rodrigo’s prick, Abby felt the knotting twist and pull between her belly and pussy, and her clit and cunt started to pulse in a way that sent spiking shots of adrenaline all through her body.

The line deep within Abby’s core pulled tauter and tauter, and her limbs tensed in a rigid way she’d never felt before. No longer kissing him, Abby searched Rodrigo’s gaze and tried to scramble backward on the counter. “Rodrigo...”

“No.” He locked his arm around her lower back, tying her to him. “Don’t pull back now.” He moved his hand lower and slipped his middle finger into her ass crack, teasing the hidden skin. “Let me feel it, Bit.” His tone commanding but soft, each word Rodrigo breathed caressed her sensitized lips. He took her mouth and ordered, “Do it now. Let me feel you come on me.”

He flicked just the very tip of his tongue to hers, and for Abby, it was as if he’d gone down on her and kissed her aching clit. Abby keened as the earthquake of pleasure rocked through her. Letting go of Rodrigo, Abby looked down at where they were connected, at where she pulsed around every single inch of Rodrigo’s dark, buried cock.

Oh dear God. It’s so beautiful.

Just seeing him inside her brought on a second wave of sharp, bone-shattering contractions in her cunt. Abby braced her hands and boots on the countertop and pumped herself onto Rodrigo’s cock, riding his length in long, measured strokes, somehow pushing through and fighting the pleasure he wrung out of her.

“Oh fuck, Rodrigo...” Abby glanced up at him, almost frightened by the intensity of attraction and physical desire she felt for him. “I think I can come again.” She let go with one hand and delved down to the top of her slit for a hard rub over her clit.

“Shit, baby, shit.” Rodrigo groaned and jerked within her, swelling against her snug channel. “Fucking let me see you do it.”

Unearthing her clit fully, Abby held herself open in a raw display of need. “Smack it for me.” She gritted her teeth as she flooded just by saying those words to Rodrigo. “Just—ohh God—once.”

Rodrigo growled and tapped at the exposed bead of bloodred flesh once, twice, three times, harder each time. On the third Abby exploded all over again, shaking and crying out as she came again, her pussy clamping down in repeated lines around Rodrigo’s cock, harder than before.

The moment Abby split apart, Rodrigo grabbed on to her hips and shuddered almost violently, losing himself too. A hoarse, rough noise escaped him, and he dragged Abby’s mouth to his, latching on with crushing command as he released his seed in sharp consecutive pumps, warming Abby within, even through the condom.

For a long, drawn-out minute afterward, they rested their foreheads against each other and just breathed in tandem, living in the blur of each other's eyes. Abby could feel Rodrigo's heartbeat without touching his chest and then wondered why she'd want to keep her hands off this man.

She placed her hand over his heart, reveling in the heat and perspiration glistening over his hard flesh as much as the thump pounding against her palm. Lifting her gaze to meet his, she felt an almost little-girl grin push up her lips. "That was..." *Everything I've fantasized about for the last ten months?* Abby didn't feel certain one single word existed that was expansive enough to embody what she had just done with Rodrigo.

"Insane?" Rodrigo supplied as he tilted her mouth up for a brush of his lips. "Times a hundred?"

A familiar rich voice entered the conversation. "That was fucking incredible is what it was," Braden said from a position at the entrance to the kitchen. Already stripped down to just his jeans, the man stood with a new overnight bag at his feet, his boots, belt, and folded shirt resting on top of it. "I always figured you guys were about to explode at any minute, but I had no idea it would end up being a display like that. There were moments where I thought you might hurt each other."

Braden moved into the kitchen with catlike grace, and if Abby had learned anything about reading him lately, she would say he was a man on the hunt.

For Rodrigo.

With Rodrigo still inside her, Abby grew even wetter and turned her smile on Braden.

Rodrigo growled at the bastard. He knew what he'd said to Abby about Braden's getting excited hearing about this moment. But in real time, Rodrigo had not given the man permission to watch him take Abby. Not for the first time. Not when it had felt so much more personal than Rodrigo had ever imagined it could be.

Circling his fingers around his root and the base of the condom, Rodrigo gently withdrew from Abby's body. "How long have you been standing there, Crenshaw?" As sharply as Rodrigo bit that question off, he turned back to Abby, brushed her mess of wavy hair gently away from her face, and asked, "Are you all right?"

Abby's cheeks already glowed with the aftereffects of their mating, but she still somehow managed to get rosier. "Yeah. I'm fine. Better than fine."

Satisfaction rolled through Rodrigo, warming him for this woman again. Then he turned a hard stare on the man standing *way too fucking close* and growled out his question again.

"I was here almost from the beginning, I think," Braden replied. It looked like he leaned closer and breathed them in, his eyes sliding half-closed for a moment as he did it. "You guys were so into each other you didn't hear me coming up the stairs."

As much as Rodrigo didn't want to, he couldn't help his gaze wandering over the sinewy lines of Braden's bare chest or stop his blood from resurging and pushing for his sated body to revive once again. For the moment, nothing visible gave Rodrigo away, but everything in him wanted to grab his jeans up from his knees and cover his cock.

Don't do it. Don't let Braden see you sweat around him. Fucking get yourself back under control.

Right then Abby nudged them both back a step and hopped off the counter. "How'd you get in, Braden?"

"Iris was locking up when I arrived, so she let me in through the store. I came up through the back room."

"Oh, all right, good. I admit that I pretty much forgot anybody was downstairs."

The voluminous folds of Abby's skirt settled back around her hips and thighs, covering her to just above the knee and creating an enticing, almost forbidden picture of a topless woman wearing a modest skirt, cowboy boots, and nothing else.

"I can understand why." Braden chuckled, turning as Rodrigo did to stare at Abby moving about the kitchen.

Abby flushed with more color, all the way down to her small, perfect breasts, and Rodrigo's libido pushed to come alive again.

Poised at the refrigerator, Abby suddenly moved back to Braden, an ocean of intense blue in her eyes. "Are you okay with this?" She looked at Braden but reached out and grabbed Rodrigo's hand, linking their fingers tightly. "With what happened? With what you saw?"

"My sweet Abby." Braden crooked his finger under Abby's chin and brushed a lingering kiss to her lips. "Part of what makes me so attracted to the two of you is how much you want each other." Braden took Abby's free hand and pushed it down over the obvious bulge pushing against the front of his jeans. "See?"

"I did suspect that, Detective. You have been dropping good hints." Abby laughed for a moment, but then the melodious noise died and she became subdued. "As long as we don't hurt or lie to each other. All of us." Her voice went husky, and Rodrigo had to imagine she'd let her thoughts drift to her mother's infidelity. "That's all I care about."

Something dark muted Braden's gaze. Barely a hint, but Rodrigo saw it.

Before Rodrigo could assess the brief change, Braden curled his hand around Abby's nape and kissed her forehead. "I won't, sweetheart," he whispered. "I promise."

Forgetting about Braden's momentary slipup, Rodrigo brought Abby's hand up to his lips. "Hey." Her fears, no matter how big or small, worked into Rodrigo and latched on, tugging at his heart. "It's not gonna happen." He turned her hand over and pressed a kiss to her wrist. "I won't let it. Okay?"

"Okay." She nodded and attempted a smile.

Braden then dipped down and whispered something in Abby's ear, too low for Rodrigo to catch the words. A grin—a real one—slowly captured Abby as Braden went on, followed by a nod from her until Braden finally angled her face up and descended on Abby with a kiss. It started out as something soft and chaste but grew in steadying degrees until Braden clearly had Abby's mouth at his mercy while his hands worked her skirt back up to her waist.

Whimpering with that sexy little purr of hers, Abby seemed to fight the dominance of Braden's kiss. She turned the tables on him and shoved her hands down the back of his jeans, pushing the loosened fabric ever more completely down to his hips.

Shit, Rodrigo couldn't stop staring. As much as it stuck in his craw to admit it, he understood why Braden hadn't been able to walk away when he found Rodrigo and Abby going at each other on the kitchen counter. It was mesmerizing to watch up close. Fucking arousing too.

Braden suddenly grunted and tore himself away from Abby, only to lean back in to take her mouth one more time, hard and fast, before pulling away. "Fuck, honey, you're good." He walked the length of the kitchen, breathing heavily.

Once again, Rodrigo tried not let his gaze linger where Braden's jeans barely stayed on his hips, but the indentation of his spine that led down to the cleft of his ass was right there as he passed, and Rodrigo couldn't make himself turn away. Braden's sharp, angular lines of male perfection appealed to all Rodrigo's senses as fully as Abby's softer, creamy skin and pretty girl-next-door features did.

His back to Rodrigo and Abby, Braden planted his hands on either side of the kitchen's entrance. "Christ." He let go to reach inside his jeans, wincing as he certainly adjusted his prick. "I'm going to need a minute now to pull my act together again."

Abby circled slowly around Rodrigo, starting at his back. She ran the tip of one finger in a shivery line across Rodrigo's ass to around his hip and let it come to a stop an inch away from his dark thatch. "Take all the time you need, Braden." She ran that finger up Rodrigo's stomach and scraped his nipples, shocking a gasp out of him. "He probably needs a minute too."

Rodrigo went scorching hot and icy cold—at the same time—the second that pronoun left Abby's lips. *He?*

"Wait." Rodrigo bit his cheek as Abby scratched his hardening nipples again, but his heart stopped for a handful of beats when Braden returned, clutching a few things in one hand. "What are you doing?"

Braden set a box of condoms and a container of lubricant on the counter. "I'm not going to fuck you red and raw or bare, Santiago." Braden went ahead and pushed down his jeans and underwear, setting his jutting cock free. Stepping out of his pants, Braden offered another one of those predatory smiles. "At least not yet."

Shit. Rodrigo's rectum sucked in convulsively even as his mouth watered at the sight of Braden's thick, stiff cock. *I want that thing inside me somewhere,*

anywhere. Confused by his attraction but still so fucking full of *wanting* this man, Rodrigo didn't move, understanding that remaining in place was tantamount to giving permission for Braden to take his ass. *Shit*.

His breathing still a little uneven, Braden moved in close to Rodrigo's side, so close his erection pushed against Rodrigo's hip. Rodrigo clenched his teeth and swallowed the needful noise that wanted to escape him. He pushed some with his shoulder, feeling like he needed extra space.

Braden didn't back off one bit. With his dick right there—*right fucking against* Rodrigo's flesh—the man said, "Your cock is something special, Santiago." He dropped his gaze and let it linger at Rodrigo's groin. "But you still might want to take that off before you get too hard again."

Rodrigo looked down at his still-sheathed dick. "Shit."

Braden flashed another fast smile Rodrigo's way. "Now you're just *trying* to get me hot for you."

"Bastard." Rodrigo reached down, but Abby, flanking Rodrigo's other side, pushed his hand away.

She rubbed up against Rodrigo, matching the torment of Braden's cock brushing against Rodrigo's thigh with the press of her breasts to his arm. "I'll take care of it for you." She folded to her knees and looked up at him through heavy-lidded eyes as she peeled the used condom off his prick and tossed it away.

Right there on the floor in front of him, Abby surely saw the first visible twitch from Rodrigo's cock. His dick moved on its own just at the sight of Abby kneeling before him.

Abby manipulated Rodrigo's leg and put his boot in her lap. "Let's get the rest of this stuff off you." As she undid the laces, somehow making removing his boots the sexiest damn act in the world, new heat suddenly rode Rodrigo's back and pushed his penis to half-hard.

Braden.

Rodrigo felt the man's tall, sure frame behind him, right up against him—not too pushy, not too far away—and the moan Rodrigo had been able to suppress previously vibrated out of him now. While Abby removed the rest of Rodrigo's clothes, Braden kept the contact at Rodrigo's back light, to something Rodrigo might think were accidental brushes of their skin if he didn't know exactly what Braden intended to do to him.

Shit. What I want him to do to me.

Forget a half-hard prick. Rodrigo's penis pushed to full staff smack in front of Abby's face and under Braden's watchful eye. His legs suddenly betraying him, Rodrigo found himself leaning against Braden, searching for support.

Immediately, Braden wrapped an arm around Rodrigo's waist, fitting their bodies to each other as if it were something they'd done a thousand times before. Rodrigo's head naturally fell against Braden's shoulder, and Braden angled his so their mouths nearly touched. "You really do have an impressive cock, Santiago." As

Braden spoke, he slid his hand down Rodrigo's belly and pushed his fingers through Rodrigo's thatch of thick, tight curls. "I started getting turned on the second I walked in on you and Abby, but when you told her you were gonna fuck her mouth hard soon, you almost pushed me over the edge right then and there." Braden crept lower and took the base of Rodrigo's dick in his fist.

He licked at Rodrigo's mouth and darted past the seam with his tongue. "Look down at her and watch," Braden said, his voice low but firm. "I want to see you do it right now."

Rodrigo turned his attention to Abby. He watched Braden control the situation and guide Rodrigo's penis to her slightly parted lips. He nudged with the moist head, easing in just a bit, and Rodrigo released one of his hated noises as Abby probed his slit with the tip of her tongue. Braden pulled Rodrigo's dick back only to guide him into Abby's mouth again, an inch or so this time, long enough for Abby to roll her tongue all around his glans. Braden then withdrew Rodrigo's cock. He repeated the process over and over again. Each time Braden gave Rodrigo a hint of the heaven awaiting in Abby's mouth, he took it away, only to give him a little bit more the next round, but never the full length and never long enough to allow Rodrigo more than a taste of the talent he knew lay beyond Abby's lips.

It didn't take long for Rodrigo's balls to ache and his dick to feel so rigid he thought one stiff hit could break it off. "Please, Braden..." Rodrigo wanted inside Abby's mouth so badly he rubbed his ass into Braden's cock, uncaring of what it would invite Braden to do that much quicker. Right now, every nerve ending on Rodrigo's penis shrieked for full contact, and he could care about nothing but gaining relief. "Stop playing. Let me have all of her."

Braden slid his hand away to rest on Rodrigo's hip. He put his mouth on Rodrigo's ear and said in a commanding voice, "Do what you imagined when you said those words to her. Do it right now."

Moaning his agreement, Rodrigo slammed his hips forward and buried his cock in Abby's mouth, taking her more roughly than he knew he should but unable to stop until his slit kissed her throat. She accepted his cock without gagging and even grabbed on to his hips when he moved to step back in horror over how brutally he'd shoved his full shaft into her mouth.

Her nails sinking into his flesh, Abby bobbed up and down Rodrigo's cock, delivering the hottest swirls from her tongue. She quickly moved to sucking Rodrigo so goddamn hard it felt like she tried to pull his spine out of his dick.

Good God, she's incredible.

Abby's enthusiasm only pumped more blood to Rodrigo's cock. Now that he knew she reveled in having a man stuffed in her mouth, he lost the sliver of control he'd briefly regained over his actions. Rodrigo sank his fingers into Abby's thick red tresses and tilted her head back so he could see every inch he shoved into her mouth. He pushed past her rosy lips and invaded the wet, hot recesses on the other side in repeated full thrusts. Abby sucked in her cheeks and created the most insane suction on his length when he withdrew, and then she curled her tongue

around the bottom side of his cock every time he sank back inside. Blue, blue eyes looked up at Rodrigo through each raw thrust he delivered—no fear or disgust—and if Rodrigo hadn't shot a load minutes ago, he would have spent himself right then, just looking into Abby's eyes.

Instead, Braden yanked Rodrigo's head around and fused their lips together, grinding one hard male mouth against another. Braden kissed Rodrigo with enough force to create bruising, and the brutality of it ripped a desperate need out of Rodrigo to be owned by another person. As Rodrigo opened up for more, a moan from deep within rumbled up through him and into Braden, making Braden groan right back and claim ownership of Rodrigo's mouth with a somehow more invasive, rough kiss.

Rodrigo kissed Braden as best he could through the haze of pleasure consuming him. But the man also began running his hands all over Rodrigo's stomach and chest, around to his hips, and up his sides, abrading Rodrigo's flesh with tantalizing scrapes of coarse, large, masculine hands. Rodrigo almost couldn't tolerate the onslaught of aggressive contact. And that didn't even take into consideration what Abby continued to do to him. She still had her mouth wrapped around his cock, making it feel as if she tended to every single nerve ending inside his shaft one lick at a time. Rodrigo could barely function through two people so completely focused on his pleasure, wrenching more and more joy out of every inch of his being.

Just when Rodrigo thought he might break down and beg for mercy, Braden broke the kiss. Rather than give Rodrigo a reprieve, Braden brushed his mouth over the side of Rodrigo's neck to his nape and then kept going down his spine, delivering shivery light kisses straight down the middle, his touch so gossamer light it pulled goose bumps up in its wake. Rodrigo knew right where Braden was headed, but the first twirl of the man's tongue into the dip at the base of Rodrigo's spine still made him gasp and shiver.

Braden kept right on going, not giving time for Rodrigo to prepare...or to tense up with fear. Braden pushed Rodrigo's ass cheeks apart and licked his way down the crack, not stopping until he fluttered his nubby, *fucking wonderful* tongue right on Rodrigo's hole.

"Ohh God..." Rodrigo jerked away from the shock of contact only to shove himself right back into it; in doing so, he pulled his cock out of Abby's mouth. Braden licked Rodrigo's pucker again, stirring never-used nerve endings to flaming life. He then rubbed two fingers into Rodrigo's taint, putting just enough pressure to make Rodrigo's thighs shake. Rodrigo doubled over at the waist and grabbed on to the counter, finding an anchor as he closed his eyes and offered his ass to Braden with a plea for the man to tongue him again.

Braden accommodated Rodrigo's wishes. With each flick or stab Braden delivered, sometimes accompanied by a smack against his buttocks, Rodrigo's passage contracted, his balls pulled heavy in his sac, and his cock swelled to painful stiffness.

With his focus so concentrated on what Braden was doing to him, Rodrigo didn't immediately process a tearing noise followed by a clicking sound. A light, tickling brush of contact against his inner thigh finally snapped Rodrigo out of his sensual fog. He blinked out of his temporary world of darkness just in time to see Abby folded between his legs, rolling a condom onto Braden's rearing cock. She lubricated his length and finally squeezed a small dollop of the clear stuff onto his fingers.

Oh fuck. Rodrigo's heart beat so fast and loud he could hear it roaring in his ears. *It's really going to happen.*

His muscles went tight with a mix of anticipation and a flooding return of cold fear that iced his insides. Rather than Braden's ramming tree trunk of a cock tearing open Rodrigo's ass, Abby rubbed and kissed Rodrigo's legs, soothing the tension vibrating his muscles. Braden reversed his descent to Rodrigo's ring by kissing his way up through Rodrigo's crease, lingering at the sensitive small of his back, and darting licks up his spine to his nape. The ascent ended with Braden folded over Rodrigo, his chin on Rodrigo's shoulder, and his cock resting right between the hills of Rodrigo's buttocks.

Something much smaller than Braden's prick suddenly pushed against Rodrigo's asshole. Rodrigo inhaled sharply, but Braden was right there at his ear with that smooth voice of his, saturating Rodrigo with his presence in another way.

Braden nudged against the tight muscle keeping him out but didn't gain entry. "Just relax into my finger, baby, and let it happen." He kept his voice low but not exactly gentle. Braden pressed against Rodrigo's pucker a third time, and he licked behind Rodrigo's ear in between each line of encouragement. "Think about your ass open and begging for me"—he rubbed, making Rodrigo whimper—"and my mastering every goddamn inch of your chute so fucking good you can't even remember how to speak when I make you come."

Right then the image of Braden plugging his hole filled Rodrigo's mind, rushing his cock back to full life. Rodrigo let that picture fill his brain and take over his body. The next time Braden pushed against his back door, Rodrigo shoved right back, and Braden's finger broke through and sank deep into his virgin ass.

Oh shit. Shit.

Rodrigo grunted and clutched at the counter with a bone-crushing hold. His entrance flamed, and his channel fluttered and milked Braden's buried digit, creating the strangest combination of hints of pleasure surrounding the most bizarre discomfort of being stuffed to overflowing.

Braden wrapped his hand around Rodrigo's neck and forced Rodrigo's head to an awkward angle so they could see each other's faces. "Talk to me." Banked fire kept the green in Braden's eyes pale, but shadows of something darker lurked at the edges. "Tell me if you can take my finger moving inside you."

Rodrigo's ass burned like hell, but it was nothing compared to what he wanted to see consume Braden's entire being. "Do it. Don't take it slow." He rocked his hips

and hissed through the slide of an object moving in his rectum. "Make me get used to you."

With a rough curse that matched his intentions, Braden sealed his mouth to Rodrigo's. He kissed Rodrigo breathless with a thorough, fierce passion and down below withdrew his digit from Rodrigo's channel to then push it back in, filling Rodrigo to the second knuckle again. Rodrigo could not stop his body from clenching around Braden every time the man entered him. His passage created the funkiest, most bizarre spasms when Braden pulled out, leaving his ass relieved yet somehow bereft and clamoring for more.

This time, rather than force his way back inside Rodrigo, Braden teased the tip of his finger around Rodrigo's stretched ring and created the most delicious little shiver that went all the way down to Rodrigo's toes. Braden circled his finger around that excited bunch of nerves again and dragged a moan out of Rodrigo with a bump back for more. Braden gave Rodrigo more of what he wanted, warming him up to the point of begging, and then eased not only one finger back into Rodrigo's chute, but this time pushed in a second until Rodrigo was sure neither could go any farther. Every inch of his ass felt stretched and full and unable to take another millimeter, yet tiny tentacles of wondrous, fluttery sensations worked their way through Rodrigo's channel and had him pushing his ass back, searching for even just a little bit more.

Braden broke their kiss, and new shards of light shone in his eyes. "Liked that this time, huh?" He twisted that double dose of fingers buried inside Rodrigo and sent shooting twin lines of pleasure through Rodrigo's spine and cock.

Unable to speak, Rodrigo groaned and ground back again, stealing more of that contact, something suddenly pleasurable in the extreme. Whether Braden offered those next half dozen strokes of his fingers or Rodrigo stole them by impaling himself on the thickness, he couldn't be sure. He just knew he needed more from this man and had to show it in the only way he could. Rodrigo's stomach muscles felt fatigued from the tension in them, making it feel as if he had done a thousand sit-ups without stopping, but his body writhed back and forth of its own accord as he slipped back into a place of pure, raw need.

Just then, Braden took his fingers away, making Rodrigo emit a hoarse cry. Quickly, though, Braden replaced his fingers with the tip of his cock. The wide head sat poised at Rodrigo's entrance, so close Rodrigo could feel the heat tease his sensitized ring. His entire body hummed like one big, exposed live wire; he rubbed himself back against Braden like some begging whore, but he couldn't make himself stop.

Braden stilled Rodrigo with a hand to his hip. He held Rodrigo's gaze prisoner, and those darker streaks of green he'd kept restrained before took over the rings of color right now. "Tell me yes." Braden's voice sounded harsh with complete command. "Or I'm going to stop."

Rodrigo somehow scraped past the thickness in his throat and found his voice. “Fuck me, Crenshaw.” He fused his forehead to the other man’s with all his weight. “Fuck me right now.”

With one flash of his eyes and one sure thrust, Braden punched his hips forward and drove his thick, long cock all the way into Rodrigo’s ass.

Chapter Eleven

Oh motherfucking shit.

Rodrigo jammed his forehead against Braden's as his body fought the first feel of Braden's cock lodged as deeply inside Rodrigo's ass as it would surely go. Braden didn't move a muscle, but he claimed Rodrigo's body as surely as Rodrigo had ever taken a woman. Rodrigo moaned without censure at the idea of Braden fucking him until he screamed and came, maybe in Abby's mouth, if she would just wrap her lips around his dick again and help shove him right over the cliff. Out of the corner of his eye, Rodrigo could see Abby still kneeling at his feet, submissive in pose. Such naked lust filled her eyes that Rodrigo went to a raw, base place in his mind that ended with his spilling on her face and breasts at the exact moment Braden lost it and came in his ass.

Rodrigo's channel clenched and throbbed at the imagery, squeezing tightly on Braden's embedded cock. This time both men groaned and jerked as one.

Braden yanked Rodrigo's head back and laid a piercing hard stare on him. "Fucking shit, Santiago," Braden bit off. Rodrigo's passage closed in a vise around Braden's dick again, and Braden shook his head as if he'd taken a punch to the gut. His eyes glittered with chips of peridot, and his voice cut like shards of glass. "Tell me I can move."

The slight power shift sluiced another shot of adrenaline through Rodrigo's blood, sending any hint of fear or reservation fleeing from the room. He straight-armed the counter and braced himself for a rough ride. "I told you to fuck me, Crenshaw." He growled and glared back at the man. "You're goddamn inside me already." His stuffed-full rectum flamed with the newness of that truth. "Do it, you bastard." Rodrigo's dick got harder and harder with each taunt he delivered. "Don't pussy out on me now."

Braden uttered a swear word right back at Rodrigo. He reared up, took a bruising hold on Rodrigo's hips, and started a pace of fucking that slammed his big prick into Rodrigo's chute with the force and speed of a freight train. It stung like a motherfucker every time Braden stretched Rodrigo's hole with that thick cockhead, pushing his way inside again, but Rodrigo exalted in the shock of deep-seated pleasure that outlasted the flash of pain, and he even begged for it with every guttural noise he released.

"Is this what you want?" Braden slid one hand into Rodrigo's hair and pulled his head back, forcing Rodrigo's face to a tilted, sideways angle. "You like it a little bit rough and dirty?"

Rodrigo bared his teeth as he gleefully took the drilling from Braden's erection. "Yeah." He gripped the counter until his fingertips turned white, and he held his body still for each knifing slide Braden delivered. Every full glide of the man's dick in Rodrigo's flaming passage pushed his own prick to greater, more painful rigidity. "Give it to me every bit as fucking hard as you'll want it when I fuck you."

Braden's pupils flared, and his fingers reflexively dug into Rodrigo's flesh. Satisfied, Rodrigo wrenched his neck, tore his hair out of Braden's hold, and put his gaze back down on that crazily sexy picture of Abby still folded at his feet. "Come closer." He grunted midinstruction as Braden nailed him in the sweetest damn spot in his ass. Still on her knees, Abby moved in until she was almost under Rodrigo's spread legs, her lush red lips dangerously close to his prick. Rodrigo leaked a half dozen beads of precum at the sight and ordered, "Now open up and take it every time he fucks my ass."

Abby's lips parted just as the force of Braden's penetration pushed Rodrigo's cock right into her mouth. She didn't close her lips too tightly around Rodrigo but rather let the soft caress of her tongue tease Rodrigo's length every time Braden bumped their bodies forward as one. Rodrigo watched his erection disappear repeatedly into the warm, wet cavern of Abby's mouth. She held his stare, looking right back through overly bright eyes as she accepted this brand of fucking. Her nipples were pebbled to tight knots that Rodrigo imagined were as hard and aching as his cock was.

He opened his mouth to tell her to play with herself, but right then Braden wrapped his arms around Rodrigo and folded himself against Rodrigo's back. Braden buried his face in Rodrigo's hair and switched his long, sure strokes to concentrated little pumps with his cock that nudged again and again and again over that mind-blowing, wonderful kill spot in Rodrigo's flaming chute.

Now that Rodrigo hardly moved, Abby changed up her play to counter Braden's softer bump and grind. She took over Rodrigo's prick with powerful suctioning drags, all the way up and down his length, eating him with an enthusiasm he'd never experienced with a partner until her. While Braden fucked Rodrigo in a brand-new way and drilled his prostate with agonizing precision, Abby gave him the most complete and aggressive blowjob he'd ever had. In response, Rodrigo slipped to a place where only the need for these two people existed. He started shuttling his hips back and forth, his body and mind filling him up with screeching, tearing desire he could not control. He lapsed into incoherent half-word moans that mixed begging with giving orders and even some cries to stop and pleas that he couldn't take feeling this much anymore.

Braden scraped his teeth across Rodrigo's scalp and bit his ear. "Fucking give it up for me, Rigo." The man's voice sounded like it had been pulled up from hell. He flexed his arms around Rodrigo's waist, holding him in place as he tucked his cock all the way inside Rodrigo and filled every inch of his tender, throbbing passage. "I'm so fucking close too." He shoved a hand between Rodrigo's thighs and took hold of his balls. "Let me see you lose it first."

One swelling cock in his ass, one gentle squeeze of those fingers surrounding his sac, and one tantalizing flick of a tongue along the rim of his cock converged in a perfect storm and threw Rodrigo right over the railing into the turbulent, angry sea. He grabbed the base of his penis and let out a monstrous hoarse shout as orgasm shook the entire way through his being. Abby's creamy skin proved a target Rodrigo couldn't deny himself, and as the rush of seed burst out of him, Rodrigo shot short, jerky lines of ejaculate onto his woman's shoulders, neck, and breasts. The sight of Abby leaning in to accept his cum rocked another shudder through Rodrigo. Every muscle in his body tensed in a tight wave, and his rectum clamped down on Braden's embedded dick with a choking hold.

Braden's entire body jolted, and he bit into the tendons cording Rodrigo's neck. "The two of you..." He drew back with a moan and then speared Rodrigo's ass again. "So good... Yes, yes..." Two more driving thrusts and then he uttered brokenly, "Oh, oh fuck..." Braden plastered his front to Rodrigo's back as his cock pulsed and pulsed and pulsed against Rodrigo's anal walls. A heartbeat later, as Braden came, his ejaculate warmed Rodrigo's rectum even through the barrier of latex.

"Shit."

Rodrigo muttered that one little word, and inside Braden's head, he heard "Damn, stud, you just fucked me good." He smiled against the man's shoulder, and his dick remained hard and hot buried in Rodrigo's ass. He still had his fingers closed around Rodrigo's nuts, and as Braden released them to pull away, the back of his hand brushed the still-rigid length of Rodrigo's cock. Rodrigo sucked in a fast breath as it happened; his dick twitched too, and Braden couldn't resist taking that as an invitation for more.

Braden wrapped his hand around the dark, thick base of Rodrigo's penis and gently rubbed the velvety smooth hardness all the way to the tip. Rodrigo gasped and immediately covered Braden's hand with his, stilling Braden's quest.

"Don't," Rodrigo said. He moved his fingers up and dug them into Braden's wrist. "Please."

Leaving Rodrigo's death grip where it was, Braden nuzzled his cheek into Rodrigo's stubbly one, almost like one animal feeling out another. "Just relax, Rigo." With Rodrigo's fingers still attached to his wrist, Braden stroked Rodrigo's cock again. "Push through the initial sensitivity that makes you want to rip my hand away." Braden knew of what he spoke. His relationship hadn't worked out with Ben, but Braden had spent one entire night on his knees, back, stomach, and even up against a shower wall begging for a reprieve while the man worked him over time and again, keeping Braden stiff the whole time and periodically coming like a geyser. Knowing how to stroke and when to push, Braden curled his fingers down to fondle Rodrigo's sac and then gently twisted at his root again. "If you can get through my hand on you for just a few minutes, you can stay hard and get juiced up enough to come again."

Rodrigo nodded, whispered an agreement with a heavy breath, and Braden began working the man's cock and balls over with soft tugs, squeezes, and drags. Braden's arousal stayed piqued as he watched his fingers manipulate Rodrigo's impressive penis and keep it hard. Soon Rodrigo swished his hips and pumped into the handjob; the man slipped back into making those sexy noises of his, proving that he'd fought through the instinct to pull away and had won.

Victory. I can't wait to taste it.

Braden picked up the pace. He thought he'd done one hell of a job just in keeping Rodrigo primed for more, but then Abby whimpered this purring little sound, and Braden realized he was stirring Abby up just as much as Rodrigo and himself. He looked down at Abby and saw eyes nearly in a haze as she darted her gaze all over Rodrigo and Braden, taking in everything they did. Her chest rose and fell in small panting breaths, and she had both hands under her skirt, clearly between her legs. Braden couldn't see anything, but he fucking envisioned her fingering that snug pussy of hers, and he knew she would be soaking wet. Braden's fleeting thought of making Rodrigo come by his hand, then getting in a shower and finally having a late meal flew from his mind. His libido suddenly surged for an even more intimate mating for all three of them.

Breaking through the sounds of three people breathing unevenly, Braden said, "Let us see you warm up, honey, but don't let yourself come." Abby's shocked gaze lifted to his. "Pull up that skirt again." Braden felt Rodrigo's attention shift down to her fully too. "Let us watch what you're doing to yourself."

Without a word, Abby actually pushed her skirt *down* her legs and off her body rather than bunching it around her waist, leaving her only in cowboy boots. On the floor, leaning against the cabinets, Abby spread her thighs and showed off the bounty she had to offer. She licked two fingers, and both Braden and Rodrigo shuddered. On the way down to her pussy, Abby ran those slick fingertips over her nipples, streaking shiny little lines of saliva across her pale skin. She put her fingers in her mouth again and proceeded to anoint them as completely as she'd done to Rodrigo's cock, a sight that had both men, still connected, moaning and tilting forward as if she'd transfer that talented tongue onto them. A light popping noise mingled with the smells of sex in the air as Abby withdrew those two digits and delved them through the curly down of auburn hair at the apex of her thighs. She kept going, rubbing all along her slit, and teased the plump folds of her sex enough to make herself moan and jerk her hips. She ran her fingers over her pussy again, and this time her eyelids fell to half-mast as she tapped at her clit and then went back down to push just her fingertips into her body.

Jesus Christ. It was like watching a sports figure at the top of his game. Her game, Braden corrected as his cock swelled. Aggressively. Inside Rodrigo's ass. *Fuck.*

Braden released Rodrigo's dick and pulled his cock out of the man's ass before Abby gave them such a show he unloaded twice in one condom. He tore off the rubber and tossed it aside just as Abby widened the stance of her legs and slid

farther down the floor. Her fingers slowly picked up speed as she moved back and forth between her entrance and clit and she started to lift her hips to meet her own hand.

Turning Rodrigo toward him, Braden yanked them front to front. He mashed their cocks together and started jerking them off as one. Rodrigo grunted and shoved his hand down to join Braden's, and together they rubbed their shafts against one another to a nearly painful degree while watching Abby slip deeper and deeper into the pleasure of her own touch.

Not yet, you don't.

A flashing picture of exactly what Braden wanted appeared in his mind in 3-D Technicolor. It pulled such a twisting rope of need between Braden's heart and cock he almost doubled over where he stood.

I need it right now.

Never had such an ache for a connection between three people at once torn through Braden with such power it rendered him speechless. Instead of talking, Braden whipped his hand down, wrapped his fingers around Abby's upper arm, and hauled her to her feet. At the same, he moved forward, which forced Rodrigo to walk backward until Rodrigo's thighs hit the edge of Abby's kitchen table.

Braden managed to get "up" past his throat as he maneuvered Rodrigo onto the table and pulled his ass right to the edge. Braden then stepped in closer and forced the man's thighs wide apart with his own. He took both their cocks in hand again and fused them together.

Oh fuck, yes.

Glancing to Abby at their side, Braden imagined he must look like an untamed animal, and in truth, he felt like something primal who only understood how to take what was his. What he wanted. What he needed.

These two people.

Releasing that coarse need into the air, Braden looked to his and Rodrigo's lined-up erections, back to Abby, and whispered gutturally, "Take us both." As Braden gave that order, Rodrigo's cock jumped just as hard as Braden's did in the confines of his hand. "Please."

"Oh God." Abby shivered and pushed her hand between her closed legs, moaning as she surely fingered her clit. "Yes."

Her hair falling around her face, Abby climbed up on the table, using Braden's arms for balance as she settled her body above the twin lines of their pricks. Rodrigo took hold of her waist, steadying her, and Abby, slowly—so fucking steadily and with pure focus—slid her thighs wider across the table and sank down, down, down. Amid the gasps and moans of three people, she rocked her hips back and forth and took two men into her snug-as-hell, inviting, warm pussy.

The second first contact happened—the fucking moment Braden felt that slick slide of Abby's excitement against the tip of his prick—he knew what had happened. From Rodrigo's rearing upright and Abby's inhaling sharply it was clear the

realization had hit them at the exact same time too. They all realized what they'd done.

They hadn't used protection.

The feel of being buried in this woman bare, where Braden could feel every damn inch of Rodrigo tucked inside her right next to him too, locked Braden in the most glorious state of paralyzing rigidity.

I've never taken anyone without a condom in my life.

Holy fuck. Braden had never been so far gone or with someone else who was also so far lost to the moment that they'd ever forgotten to use a condom. Yet somehow, all three of them, as one, had forgotten what they'd been able to remember to do twice tonight already.

It's my fault.

Horror filled Braden even as every drop of blood in his body raced straight to his penis and pushed at Abby's sheath. "I'm sor—"

Abby smacked her hand over Braden's mouth. "Don't be." She rubbed her thumb across his lips. "I'm all right."

"Me too, man." Rodrigo reached past Abby to touch Braden's hip, the move drawing a hiss as their cocks slid within Abby.

Words escaped Braden. A rush of emotion he wasn't prepared to feel merged with the supercharged sexual attraction already saturating the air and took complete control. Braden surged forward, deep into Abby, and in doing so drove her and Rodrigo back onto the table. Both of them cried out, and Braden could only pray it was more of the good kind of shouts he'd been hearing all night because he could not slow down or stop. He pumped his hips and fucked Abby while Rodrigo's cock remained still and hard lodged inside her channel, creating a piece of heaven right in this small kitchen. Every slide of Braden's length not only gave him that incredible, squeezing softness of a woman but also the granite-stiff contact of rubbing up against a man as erect as he was.

So fucking good.

Beads of sweat trickled down Braden's temples and occasionally burned his eyes, but he could not let himself blink let alone look away from Abby's and Rodrigo's faces. She had her head on Rodrigo's shoulder with her cheek pressed against his, and the stark difference in their coloring riveted Braden just as much as the varying shades of light and dark in their eyes and the low rough moans from Rodrigo that contrasted with the throatier ones from Abby. Everything about them side by side attacked all Braden's senses and shot a staggering pain straight through his body.

They're beautiful.

And they're mine.

At the same time.

Braden's heart seized, and he staggered to a stop with a shudder. He'd never realized getting what he wanted would be such a terrifying thing or how much his desire to protect them and make them happy would so quickly consume his very soul.

Or that failing would be the death of him.

The thought of losing Abby or Rodrigo wrenched an inhuman noise out of Braden that rocked through to his core. He dropped down and took Abby's mouth with a rough kiss first and then blindly turned to claim Rodrigo too, marking these people as his.

Somehow, without words, Abby and Rodrigo understood. They both curled their hands around Braden's neck and whispered his name at the same time, creating the most soothing touch and sound Braden had ever felt or heard in his life. He pulled back, found those two so very different gazes waiting for him, accepting him, and it altered his very life.

No tingling up his spine, no warning tightening in his balls, Braden merely opened his mouth and shouted without sound. Every limb, every muscle, every pinpoint nerve ending inside him shook with awareness of the moment as he looked into Abby's and Rodrigo's eyes and spilled his seed inside the inviting embrace of Abby's body. The moment Braden shot, Abby moaned, and her pussy contracted around the double penetration. As she rocked herself on the two cocks buried inside her, clearly working to deepen her release, Rodrigo jerked his hips, jarring Abby and Braden on top of him. He groaned in that sexy, low way of his as orgasm raced up on him too. He jetted line after line of semen inside Abby, coating not only her but touching and warming Braden's embedded cock as well.

Heaven on earth. Not such a meaningless cliché to Braden after all.

They all stayed sandwiched on the table afterward, for whatever short or long a length of time, Braden couldn't say. Each of them attempted to regain their breath at their own pace, creating an up-and-down, water-bedlike effect for Braden at the top.

As much as Braden liked the pretzel effect of their bodies, he realized he was probably half suffocating the other two with his weight. He lifted into a push-up stance and shoved off against the tabletop, straightening and stepping back, and in doing so hissed as his cock slid from Abby's body. Rodrigo aided Abby back to a sitting position, and Braden took her hand from there, helping her off the table and back down to stand in those sinful cowboy boots. Braden then clasped his hand around Rodrigo's and hauled the big man off the table too.

What next? Braden had spent an awful lot of time thinking about the many ways three people could have fun in bed together but hadn't given a whole lot of consideration to what he would say to the two people he'd just engaged in a threesome with afterward. Idle chitchat after sex had never been one of his strengths in previous relationships, with either men or women, and he began to sweat that he might be just as awful at creating a relationship with a man and woman together as he'd been with just one.

The film of perspiration forming on Braden's neck started trickling down his back in earnest. On top of that quickly went a layer of chill as he imagined the many ways he could screw this up and hurt Abby or Rodrigo before it even had a chance to begin.

After what felt like an eternity of silence and furtive, embarrassed-looking glances between all three of them, Abby blew out a breath, ran her fingers through her tangled hair, and said with a laugh, "Damn, boys. My kitchen will never be the same again."

Rodrigo rolled his eyes and chuckled, and Braden felt his cheeks heat as he busted out a huge smile. Abby's humor cut through the thick tension in the air, and Braden felt like he could breathe again.

That didn't mean he'd forgotten for one second what had happened tonight.

Braden studied Abby and Rodrigo, and his conscience nagged as he took in that they both looked like they'd been through a tornado. "Are you guys all right?" Braden's gaze held on Rodrigo first. He knew full well that he'd slammed the man's untried ass with an enthusiasm meant for someone with more experience. "I didn't hurt you?"

Rodrigo's mouth tightened. He clenched his fist against the counter, but he didn't turn his gaze down or look away. "You prepped me well enough, Crenshaw. Even if you hadn't"—Rodrigo's dark skin turned a little bit ruddy across the slashes of his cheeks—"I asked for what you gave me."

"I'll probably be a little stiff tomorrow," Abby said, rubbing Braden's arm, "but I'm fine too." She dropped her gaze to Braden's and Rodrigo's cocks and then slid it toward the table before returning to make eye contact again. "I'm on birth control, just so you both know. When I said I was all right, I meant for everything."

Christ. Braden scratched his fingers through his hair. *I hadn't even thought about a baby.* A quick look at Rodrigo's stiffened spine told him Rodrigo hadn't either.

"If this is going to happen again," Braden said, his eyes on both of them, "and I think we all know it will, then we should all go get tested together and talk about a bunch of other stuff. Right now, though, I can offer up recent paperwork to prove I'm good."

Rodrigo gave a curt nod. "I have medical records too, if either of you needs to see them."

"Okay, good, so we're all on the same page." Braden got a whiff of the combined pungent smells of sex and a long workday clinging to his skin and knew Abby and Rodrigo were just as sticky as he was. "I think if we all squeeze in tight, we can fit into the shower together. Then, if you're up to it I'll take you both out for some food."

Murmuring a "sounds good," Rodrigo pushed past Braden in the direction of the bathroom. Braden fake pushed his way past Rodrigo, and Abby pushed in for real, squeezing between them both.

“Whoa, slow it down, guys.” She circled Braden and Rodrigo around to face the kitchen. “How about you both help me clean up in here first, and *then* I’m all on board with your plan.” An exaggerated stare into the kitchen from Abby led Braden’s attention back to condoms and clothing on the floor, as well as less visible aftereffects from sex on the counter and table.

A purely wicked smile appeared on Rodrigo. “Naked cleaning?”

Abby looked down at herself and then cocked out a hip, planting her hand on it. “I’m keeping on my boots. I have to leave something a mystery for the two of you.”

Braden chuckled, but the sight of Abby so flirty and coy got his blood and imagination flowing pleasantly again. “Will you crawl around on all fours as you wipe away the mess?”

She shot right back with, “Only if you join me.” Her eyes held sparks of warm blue fire, and he could tell she was light and laughing on the inside too. Her momentary ease settled something pure and right and good in Braden’s gut.

He glanced to Rodrigo. The guy raised a brow and still had that very bad-boy grin on his face. Speaking for them both, Braden said, “We’re in,” and together with Rodrigo gently tackled Abby to the floor.

It turned out to be a very, very late dinner.

* * *

Abby crawled from one rug to another, silently praying the attic floor would not squeak and give her away. It sometimes did when her mommy or daddy came up here with her, but she could usually be quieter than the smallest mouse when she was alone. She wasn’t alone in the house right now. Abby could hear the devil still calling for her, his voice so awful she just knew he couldn’t be a real human person.

Heavy footfalls creaked the old wood flooring below her, sometimes sounding close and sometimes faint to the point that Abby thought the monster might have left. Then the footsteps would increase, sound almost right under her, and she knew he hadn’t given up.

Huge and open, the attic had three vents in the floor where Abby could spy on other parts of the house. Abby had played the little game by herself just for fun, because she could easily go to see her mom cook whenever she wanted, so it didn’t really matter that she could peek down into the corner of the kitchen and sometimes watch her mom pass by the pantry. She could see her dad at his desk in his little den too, but most of the time he just went in there to work or watch the TV. They had a phone in the hallway, though, and sometimes Abby could hear her mom or dad talking on it. Sometimes they would say curse words to each other, so Abby knew they didn’t know she could hear. She was that quiet. Just like one of those ninja spies Tanner Bruno loved so much.

Stupid Tanner Bruno.

He had to go be a stupid meanie and not let her play ninjas with him because he had his cool friend visiting from school. That's why Abby had run home. She hoped dummy Tanner got in trouble when his mom found out he let Abby leave without even saying anything to stop her. Mrs. Bruno wouldn't like that. Abby had gotten in trouble for running home through the orchard before, but when she told her mom about the stuff Tanner said to her, she would have to understand.

As soon as she gets better, she'll be on my side. She can't ever wake up or help you again, a voice even more terrifying than the devil's whispered in Abby's head. *No.* Abby squeezed her eye shut, but the tears came out anyway. *Stop crying. Stop crying. Stop crying.* Abby couldn't think about anything but her mom's unblinking stare and couldn't stop seeing the blood coming out of her mouth. Deep down, the voice inside Abby kept whispering what that meant, but Abby couldn't bear to hear it. Her mother needed her to remain quiet. If she thought about the truth too much and started crying too hard, the devil would hear her.

"Where are you, little girl?"

That voice reached through the walls and ceiling up to the attic. Abby scrambled to plaster herself against one of the slanted walls as if being out in the middle of the attic floor would leave her an open target for anyone to see.

A couple of feet to Abby's left lay one of the vents in the flooring. Abby inched toward it and looked through into the kitchen, all the while begging God to let her see her mother down there preparing a meal so that this would all just be a terrible dream. It was empty. No lights on, no smells of dinner or dessert wafting up to tickle Abby's nose and make her tummy rumble.

The tears welled up again, so painful they wrenched right out of Abby's chest into a terrible choking sob. Abby slapped her hands over her mouth, stuffing everything back down, and started silently talking to God as she slid on her butt, inch by inch, a third of the way across the attic to the next vent. Just as she reached the slits in the floor that looked down into her father's den, the jarring ring of the phone ripped through the silence, almost deafening in volume.

Forgetting her dad's den, Abby held her breath, crawled quickly to the other vent, and put her ear to the slats. After the fourth ring, the machine picked up, and Mrs. Bruno's familiar twang reached Abby's ears like music. "Abby, girl, pick up this phone. Please pick up and tell me you went home. You aren't in trouble, honey, but you're supposed to be with me. Elaine? Are you there? Did you get home early? Richard, are you close by? Abby? Pick up, sweetheart." A long pause. "Never mind. I'm coming over there right now and bringing you back to my house. And don't you worry; Tanner and I have already had a little talk. You're welcome to play all the ninjas you want with him. Don't answer the door for anyone but me. I'll be right there."

She's coming for me. Abby's body melted right into the floor with relief.

Out of the corner of her eye, Abby saw a whish of color streak past the phone. She switched from pressing her ear against the vent to looking straight down, but

could only see a shoulder and arm covered in blue as the devil raced by. A second later, a door slammed, and then...nothing.

Silence.

He's gone now.

Crouched down in one corner of the attic, Abby rocked herself as silent tears fell. From her position, she looked into every corner of the attic, suddenly paralyzed.

I don't know what to do.

Her heart started beating faster and faster and faster, and with every blink of her eyes that let her look somewhere new in the attic, it became harder and harder to breathe.

* * *

Abby gasped and grabbed her chest...and jerked upright in bed.

Back in her bedroom, Braden and Rodrigo immediately awoke and slid arms around her waist and shoulders.

Rodrigo pushed her hair out of her face. He brushed a kiss to her cheek, and Braden whispered in a sleep-thick voice, "What is it, honey?"

Straddling reality and her dream, half in her bedroom right now and half an *adult* crouched in that attic, Abby could see the slanted roof and all the rugs and could feel herself crawling to her next destination. "I have to go home." In her mind, she rubbed her fingertips against the bare wood flooring between the many rugs and swore she could feel the grain of the wood. "I still have to look in the den."

Chapter Twelve

As Rodrigo entered Thomasine's, a Cuban eatery, he squinted to let his eyes adjust from the bright sunlight outside to the normal indoor lighting. When the shadows dissipated and he could see actual people, he searched the small restaurant, and his gaze landed on big, dark-haired Jonah at a booth in the back.

Tucking a slender stack of files under his arm, Rodrigo moved toward his friend, occasionally twisting sideways to squeeze through tight spaces. "Where's Chris?" he asked as soon as he reached Jonah and slid into the booth.

Jonah's mouth pulled tight, and his pale gray eyes filled with clouds. "His mom called him a little bit ago and said she needed him. I hadn't left for work yet, so I told him I'd meet you and pick up the paperwork."

"I'm surprised you didn't go with him." No man had a fiercer protector than Christian did in Jonah. "Is everything okay?" Christian's mother lived a tough life, some by her own choices and other parts thrust upon her, and she now paid the price with some physical and mental issues.

"He wouldn't let me go." Jonah made that sentence sound like a foul curse. "Christian is sure she's fine." The man shrugged, but his fingers clenched his glass visibly. "Lately, she gets panicky sometimes and calls him to come over to sit with her. As long as he's not working, he'll make the drive and help her calm down. He knows her better than I do." Jonah went from crushing his glass to taking a long gulp that drained half the water from it. "I'm sure he's right. Everything is probably fine."

Rodrigo hid his grin from the surly man. "But you still fought him hard to go, I bet."

"You see how far that got me." Jonah's lips still twisted downward, but it almost looked like a secret smile to Rodrigo.

He likes Chris taking charge and standing up to him.

Rodrigo could relate to Jonah's pleasure with Christian occasionally laying down the law. Jonah was a hard-looking man that most people tended to automatically fear. While Rodrigo didn't have the height and bulk Jonah physically did, his own rigid personality, driving work ethic, and inability to tolerate slackers and idiots in his employ evoked a healthy amount of fear as well. One of the things that had so immediately drawn Rodrigo to Abby was how'd she'd pushed past that initial intimidation with him and in about a heartbeat was flinging barbs back at him as fast as he threw them at her.

Thoughts of Abby put Rodrigo back in bed this morning at her side after another one of her nightmares. “Even when Chris doesn’t let you help,” Rodrigo mused, “I’m beginning to understand that drive inside you to take care of him.” Rodrigo could still feel Abby tucked in between him and Braden, and recalled his sense of helplessness while listening to her settle herself and get her breathing back under control. “I didn’t understand that immediate bond you had with Chris when you first came back to Coleman. I mean, I understood it, but I didn’t *understand* it, like, in here.” He put his fist against his gut and pushed against the muscle. “You know?”

“Damn, man.” Jonah whistled, the sound almost under his breath. “Since when did you start admitting you don’t have an answer for everything?”

Rodrigo grimaced, much as Jonah had done a moment ago. “Since Abby started letting me see how scared she is about the nightmares she’s having that are stirring up her past.” Rodrigo’s stomach churned again, something he hadn’t experienced since being a teenager, but that had become commonplace in the last few weeks since he’d started sensing Abby’s distress.

He looked at Jonah, the toughest fucking guy he knew, yet also the gentlest when it came to how he expressed his love for Christian, and Rodrigo found his desire to share overwhelming. “I don’t have a goddamn single skill in place to help Abby, but I feel such a fucking *need* to at least be at her side while she figures out her past that I’m willing to hand over the prep for a new job to someone else. Shit.” Rodrigo’s fingers struck the table with force. “I’ve never even *thought* about trusting my business in someone else’s hands, *ever*, but I didn’t even think twice when I called Chris in the middle of the night and asked him to meet me today.” With his fingers clasped behind his neck, Rodrigo let out a rough chuckle. “I’m fucking letting someone else run the show because I have to be with Abby right now. It’s not even a contest.”

“Don’t even act like Christian can’t take care of this for you,” Jonah said in a hissing low voice. “He’s smart, he’s been with you forever”—the man punctuated his fingers against the table right back—“*and* he has watched you enough to know how to get everything ready. He’s plenty goddamn good enough, and he respects you and your business—”

Rodrigo held up his hands to show he had no weapons. “Put your talons back in, Jonah. It’s the fact that I’m actually willing to let *anyone* run the show indefinitely that is a little bit like stepping over a cliff for me. I’m not worried about Chris. You don’t have to protect him from me.”

“Sorry.” Jonah took another gulp of his ice water. “I can’t help it sometimes.”

“It’s cool. You have to defend what’s yours.” Rodrigo let his gaze hold on Jonah’s. “I get that.”

Understanding filled Jonah’s eyes. “Does Abby think this is one friend helping another—and you’re privately unloading all this extra personal stuff only for me—or does she finally know that every time you antagonize her it’s because you’re covering the fact that you want to fuck her?”

Rodrigo's flesh burned with heat as he flashed back to the raw display that had gone down in Abby's kitchen last night. "We both understand there are feelings there and"—he cleared his throat—"we aren't pretending there aren't anymore."

"About fucking time." Rich laughter boomed out of Jonah. "I don't notice shit like that, so if I could see it, it was pretty damn obvious." Jonah reached across the table and thumped Rodrigo's shoulder. "She's a beautiful woman. And a good, loyal one too."

"Yeah," Rodrigo agreed. "She's something else. I can't stop thinking about her." Rodrigo felt like a fucking fool, but he couldn't keep the stupid smile off his face. "I don't want to stop thinking about her." His eye contact almost faltered as a warm, masculine force he could not deny rose the hairs on his arms. "Or about Braden Crenshaw either."

Jonah froze with his glass midway to his lips. "Are you shitting me?"

Rodrigo grimaced with a shift of his weight. "I have a sore ass this morning that says I'm not."

The glass hit the table with a *thud*. "No fucking way."

"And Abby's okay with it." Rodrigo rushed to explain. Shit, he didn't want Jonah thinking he'd deceived or coerced Abby into anything. "Hell, she even loves it. She likes Braden too, and Braden thinks Abby is as fucking hot and amazing as I do."

Jonah tilted his head as lines formed between his brows. "I don't always understand or correctly guess what people are trying to say to me, so I have to ask: are you saying that all three of you are having sex together?"

"We are." Fuck, Rodrigo *never* talked about his sex life—not that he'd had one for a good while—but this three-way attraction and sex had him so twisted up and confused. He needed to unload on someone he could trust to take the conversation to the grave. Or at the very least, take it no further than Christian.

"I don't goddamn understand why I have this crazy desire for both of them." Rodrigo kept his voice low even though the restaurant was so loud he didn't think it would be possible for anyone to hear him above the din. "Why isn't one enough, right? I don't know if this is the most incredible find a guy could stumble across and I should thank my lucky stars, or if I'm some pervert freak-show glutton who wants the cake and frosting and the ice cream on the side too."

Searching for some outside answers, Rodrigo snapped his mouth shut on his confession-fest and studied the guy across from him who didn't fit into anybody's mold.

"Were you with women before you found Chris?" Rodrigo asked, his voice still low.

"Yes. Some men too." Jonah shrugged. "Basic cut-and-dry stuff that filled a brief need, but I never connected to anybody and was pretty damn sure I was a defective who couldn't bond to anyone or anything." The throwaway tone of Jonah's voice didn't match the new stiffness in his shoulders. "I functioned every day once I

got out of JD. I had a life, but it wasn't anything you could really call living. Then I came back here, and Christian made me *feel*. Period. He loved me, and he was perfect." Ease slipped back into Jonah's large frame. "For me that meant somehow I must be okay too, even if he was the only one who could see it and bring it out in me."

"Yeah." Christian had a way with Jonah that put Rodrigo in mind of David taming Goliath. "You guys are a good pair."

"How did you feel when you were with Abby and Braden?" Jonah asked. "Did *you* feel like a pervert? Did *you* think you were doing anything wrong?"

"No." Not a hint of hesitation rang in Rodrigo's answer. "Even the wildest porno fantasies I had in college didn't compare to how great it was with both of them. Even if you put aside what happened last night..." *What?* Rodrigo searched for words he could string together that would make sense. "When I'm with Abby and Braden together, I feel like myself, more than I ever have at any point in my life. I'm nervous and sometimes I'm jealous and sometimes I don't know what the hell to think, let alone what to say, but none of it ever feels fake. They won't let it be. And I feel like they're both the same with me."

Jonah raised his brows. "Nothing about that sounds freakish or perverse to me."

Rodrigo felt himself sitting up a straighter and moving back to his normal voice. "I guess not."

"Then again," Jonah said, "I almost ran away from Christian when I realized how much I loved him, so what the hell do I know about anything?"

"Gee, thanks." Rodrigo threw a wadded-up napkin at the man.

"Hey, man, don't take it out on me." Jonah snagged the white ball out of midair. "I just came for the paperwork."

"I'm glad you did." Strangely enough, while Rodrigo would have thought he'd feel compelled to confide in Christian due to his friend's great ability to empathize, Jonah's straightforward, sometimes even awkward and inappropriate personality settled a lot of the panicky confusion inside Rodrigo. "You're a good friend, Jonah. Don't think I'm going all pussy on you or anything, but I hope you know you have more people than just Christian in town who love you now too."

"Yeah, but he's still the only one I want to take to bed every night." Jonah picked up the folders and used them as a pointer. "Don't get any ideas. We don't share."

"Asshole." Rodrigo gave him the finger. "I think I'll stick with the one man and woman I already have, thanks."

"Probably a good idea. Hey, I think that guy is looking at you." Jonah jerked his head toward the front of the eatery.

"What?" Rodrigo turned, following the direction of Jonah's gaze to an older blond guy in paint-splattered clothes. "Oh." Rodrigo froze. "That's...Henry."

“Oh.” The drop in Jonah’s voice, no question, said the man remembered the short conversation he’d had with his friends six months ago.

He’s my father.

Rodrigo still couldn’t quite wrap his mouth around the foreign nature of that title.

The rough-and-tumble man a dozen feet away nodded at Rodrigo, and Rodrigo smiled stiffly in return.

“I’ll let you eat with him,” Jonah offered. “I already ordered a Cuban sandwich, but he’s welcome to it.” Jonah slipped the work folders under his arm and stood. “I’ll make sure Christian gets these, and I’m sure he’ll call you if he has any questions.”

“You don’t have to go,” Rodrigo said. *I wish you wouldn’t.*

“I need to get to the shop anyway.” In this, Jonah clearly didn’t understand Rodrigo was asking him to stay and act as a buffer. “Make sure Abby knows Christian and I are here to help with what’s going on with her. She just has to ask.”

“Yeah.” Rodrigo lifted the dead weight of his hand. “Bye.”

Jonah nodded and walked away, pausing to shake Henry’s hand as he passed the man.

It wasn’t that Rodrigo didn’t want to spend time with Henry, but he was thirty-four fucking years old and he didn’t know what the hell to do with a father. Henry’s attempts to converse were just as stilted as Rodrigo’s, so he had to figure the older man didn’t know what to do either.

Maybe I can tell him I’m running late for a meeting. One look at the guy waiting expectantly and Rodrigo hated himself for even having that thought. *Fucking A. I never asked for a father, not even once during all those years in foster homes.*

Rodrigo beckoned Henry to him and stood as Henry approached. “Take a seat. You can hold the table for us.” Pushing back his shoulders, Rodrigo slid his hands into his pockets, aware of a rigidity he couldn’t dissipate. “I’m going to go place an order at the counter. Jonah said you could have his lunch, but do you want me to get you a soda or coffee or something to drink?”

“A Pepsi or Coke would be fine.” The man’s deep green gaze held Rodrigo’s for a moment, but his jaw appeared as though it could break granite too. “Thank you.”

Rodrigo pushed another tense smile to his face. “I’ll be right back.”

As Rodrigo stepped to the end of the short line at the counter, he couldn’t help darting looks over his shoulder toward his booth and Henry’s profile. Henry had not asked Rodrigo for anything, and he didn’t seem to push for contact or behave as though they had some kind of ingrained biological bond, but Rodrigo still felt trapped and pushed toward togetherness whenever he thought about Henry. It was as if Rodrigo was supposed to embrace the luck in discovering he had a long-lost father when he had barely even known his mother, and she’d never said one word about Henry in the time they’d spent together before she died.

Rodrigo had grown accustomed to not having a family, many of whom, as far as Rodrigo could tell, tended to mooch off the most successful person in the group and were resentful if he or she wasn't happy to hand over his or her hard-earned money. Rodrigo was by no means rich, but his business did well. He had no debt other than his mortgage, and he made sure to steadily contribute to his retirement. Henry and his wife made ends meet but were struggling to maintain a middle-class status. The kid in Rodrigo who'd had his work money stolen by foster siblings more than once had an intense desire to downplay every cent he had with Henry, this virtual stranger who'd shown up out of the blue.

Blood might be thicker than water, but money trumps them both.

After placing his order, paying, and grabbing his and Henry's drinks, Rodrigo chuckled to himself, producing a real smile as he heard Abby chiding him in his head for being a pompous jackass who worried more about his money than anyone else around him possibly could.

And she'd be right.

Rodrigo laughed again, shaking his head as he slid into his seat and pushed a soda to Henry's side of the table.

Henry thanked Rodrigo for the drink, took a sip, and said, "You seem happier than you were a few minutes ago."

"Just thinking about someone," Rodrigo shared. The fiery woman filled every corner of Rodrigo's thoughts, and more words than he'd intended to spill came out of his mouth. "She told me off in my head for something I was thinking." He remembered the first time Abby had shoved against him, chest to breasts, in order to make her point, and it pumped fresh adrenaline through his veins. "I could see and hear her clear as day, and it made me smile."

"*She* made you smile, you mean." Henry had his hands clasped tightly together on the table. Rodrigo could hear the man's heavy work boot thumping against the tile floor under their table, but he kept his full attention straight on Rodrigo. "Right?"

"Yeah, she did." Rodrigo found himself nodding and adding more to the conversation again. "She's special to me."

"She's a good woman, I take it."

Rodrigo narrowed his gaze. "That's interesting. Most guys would usually start out asking if she's pretty."

Henry shrugged. "If you like her, you automatically think she's pretty. It's not like you're gonna tell me no."

"If I like her, I probably automatically think she's a good woman too." Rodrigo traded back quickly. "I doubt I'd think she's a liar or a cheat, even if she was. Which she isn't."

"Good point." Henry's weathered face lit up just as much as his eyes, and Rodrigo breathed easier. "How did you meet her?"

"We each briefly had the same foster mother, although not at the same time. When she—her name was Marisol—died, we both knew the guy who took responsibility for taking care of Mari's final wishes. We were helping him out during a tough time, and we hit it off right away in an unusual kind of way. Her name is Abby, and we've recently taken a step toward something new."

Really new.

Talking about Abby conjured images of Braden and the equally raw emotions he brought out in Rodrigo. Only, Rodrigo had never had this loose a conversation with his father before, and he had a feeling telling the guy he was stirred up about another dude would bring their talk to a screeching halt. Still, leaving all his mixed-up emotions about Braden unspoken twisted a sick feeling in Rodrigo's stomach, almost like a betrayal.

Rodrigo took a fast swig of his soda and cleared his throat. "How about Mary?" The brief ease Rodrigo had experienced sharing details about himself withered away and pushed him back to that guarded place he'd lived in with this man for the last six months. "When did you guys meet?"

"Ah, my Mary. Now there's a good woman." Henry settled back into the booth, and from the dreamy expression on his sun-roughened face, Rodrigo would have thought the man was envisioning Marilyn Monroe. "I'd just about figured I was too old and set in my ways and that my hands were too rough and nicked and my fingernails too dirty for an attractive, nice, smart woman to want me. Then about ten years ago, this pretty woman who seemed like she was about my age was visiting with one of my neighbors. When she went to leave, her car wouldn't start. I was working on my lawn close by. She asked me if I knew anything about cars. I know a bit." Henry shrugged off that understatement, even though Rodrigo knew he'd done a stint in the army as a mechanic. "That was the first time I met Mary. She didn't seem to mind that I had more rough edges than smooth, and the first time she laughed when I made some dumb-ass joke about the car's dead engine, I fell in love with her."

Henry pushed forward, leaned in, and lowered his voice. "I was sweating like a whore in confession, but I asked her out to dinner and a movie. She said yes. She was—is, as you know—a biology and chemistry teacher and way too fucking smart for me, but she liked me, and I wasn't dumb enough to let her slip away. We were married a year later." He fingered his wedding band. "We've been getting along together ever since."

"That's nice. Thank you for sharing that with me." For the first time with Henry, Rodrigo found himself with a dozen more questions milling inside him and a mouthful of things to say that didn't feel artificial or forced. Rodrigo looked at this man, who was so clearly in love with his wife, and thought maybe there was something in Rodrigo that was from his father after all. They certainly didn't look a damn thing alike.

"I appreciate Mary's kindness toward me," Rodrigo said. "I suppose it was just as much a shock to her as it was to you that you had a grown son."

"She sees you as a blessing, Rodrigo." Henry made the words sound like a pat on his shoulder even though they came out a little gruffly. "That's just the way Mary is."

"Still, she could have chosen to distance herself from it and say you were on your own with me."

Shadows passed through Henry's eyes. "Mary wanted kids. We tried for a couple of years after we got married, but it didn't happen. We couldn't afford all that fertility stuff, and even if we could have, I think I would have been too worried about her health to try it." Henry's lips pressed tighter together, exaggerating the grooves cut into his skin around his mouth. "She hasn't come out and said anything, but I think she hopes that if you and I grow closer that you'll eventually view her as someone you can talk to when you want advice from a woman who could be like a mother." He held up a hand even though Rodrigo had not opened his mouth. "I'm not saying she wants you to call her Mom or anything, but just, you know, when you think you might want to talk to someone who has mom qualities, she'd like to be there for you."

A mother to go with the new father. Rodrigo had never even really had one parent—unless he counted the time he spent under Marisol's temporary care—let alone two. Plus, Rodrigo had to think about the needs of *two* people now in his new relationship, and he wasn't at all sure he had the skills necessary to keep all three of them happy as a unit. *When the hell did my life get so fucking full of people I feel a responsibility to?*

"Mary would like you to come over for dinner one night," Henry added. "Maybe you'd like to bring Abby too."

"I'll think about it." Politeness kept Rodrigo from completely rejecting Mary's offer, but no way could Rodrigo take Abby to meet Henry and Mary and leave Braden out in the cold. "Let me get back to you later, at a better time."

A server in jeans and a Thomasine's T-shirt brought their food to the table right then with apologies for the delay. She added a serving of *platanos* at no extra charge and told them to have a good meal.

"So..." Rodrigo inhaled the tangy scent of the *pico de gallo* with black beans steaming up from his plate. "Tell me what you're doing now. I take it you're working in the area?"

Henry nodded around a mouthful of Jonah's sandwich. "We're repainting the police station a couple of blocks away."

"Oh? I have a friend who is a detective in that building." Maybe Rodrigo could share something about Braden without coming right out and revealing that he'd let the man fuck him last night.

Henry had his brows raised, clearly waiting for Rodrigo to go on, so Rodrigo said, "He's a hard-ass, but a pretty cool guy to have on your side..."

Chapter Thirteen

Abandoned.

From the passenger seat of Rodrigo's truck, Abby stared at the house she'd lived in the first eight years of her life, heartsick at the empty shell it had become. Her farmhouse had been soft yellow with white shutters and doors. Now the siding was a faded tan with muddy brown treatments. The porch looked dark and gloomy rather than cheerful, and weeds had taken over the yard and oak trees.

Abby blinked away the threat of tears. *It's not my home at all.* The clog in her throat made her feel like an absolute ninny. She hadn't thought of this house as a home since the night her parents had been murdered, yet looking at it right now, the pull to run up and down the wide hallways while playing chase with her dad nearly had her looking over her shoulder and expecting to see his tall frame and red hair.

Next to her, Braden touched her arm, and the sensation jerked her back into the truck. "Do you want to get out?" He kept his voice gentle, and Abby could see equal concern on Rodrigo's face next to Braden.

"Of course." She opened the door and jumped out of the truck with a forced lightness in her step. "I need to go inside. I don't think the outside is going to jog any memories of that day and night."

Braden climbed out behind Abby, reading from a note in a file. "The house has exchanged hands a couple of times since you lived here. The last owners went underwater with their mortgage and walked away from it three months ago. Right now"—he turned in a circle, taking in not only the home, but the buffer of land surrounding it—"the bank is just sitting on it. It's empty and shouldn't be too hard to get inside."

From the back of the truck, Rodrigo hauled a ladder out and settled it on his shoulder. "Looks like the previous owners gave up on it long before they moved out. At least on the yard."

Braden led the way up the porch to the door. As he extracted a small case from his jacket pocket, he looked over his shoulder with a twinkle in his eye. "You didn't see me do this." He handed Abby the case file. "It won't be going into my official notes."

"I won't say a word." Abby held the file up to her mouth. "It's locked in the vault."

Rodrigo trudged up the steps with his ladder in tow. "Your boss know you pick locks, Crenshaw?"

"No." Braden glanced over his shoulder and looked right into Rodrigo's eyes. "He doesn't know I fucked you last night either." He took in Rodrigo's tall, fit frame in jeans and a long-sleeved gray T-shirt and winked lewdly. "Some things are just for me, you know?"

"Smug prick." Red cut through Rodrigo's dark coloring.

Braden blew him a kiss. "And you know you love it."

Abby kept the file over her mouth to cover her laugh. She didn't know why, but listening to these two men exchange suggestive insults wrapped itself around her like two strong pairs of arms holding her tightly so that she didn't fall. Suddenly, stepping foot inside this house didn't fill her with nearly so much dread as had been eating at her all morning.

They'll be here with me. They won't let me break apart and lose my mind.

"Ahh..." The door snicked as Braden successfully picked it open. "And there she is." He reached in to flip a switch as the door swung open. "No electricity." Using his shoulder and back, Braden pushed the door open and held it wide. "I didn't figure there would be, but it was worth a shot."

Abby held her purse aloft with three fingers. "I have two flashlights in my bag."

"I have a couple in my truck too," Rodrigo added. "If we need more."

Taking a cleansing breath, Abby walked into her old house, into an empty cave she barely recognized. Her memories of this house were attached to someone half her height who saw everything from a completely different angle. The hardwood floor squeaked under her sneakers as she moved, and that was definitely familiar. But where her mom had once stamped her own country-girl personality over every color painted on the walls or wallpaper border used, and her father had souvenirs from his hunting and fishing trips, this place had an impersonal modern taupe color on every wall Abby could see.

I can't feel even a hint of them here.

"There used to be a huge marlin mounted here." Abby pointed at an entry wall. "And then my mom had this little bench with hearts cut out of the wood. There was a big floor vase next to the bench with stalks of dried flowers in it."

"It's tough to see things changed from the way we remember them." Braden curled his hand around Abby's arm and brought her attention back to him. He rubbed up to her shoulder, massaged her neck, and offered an encouraging smile. "You take this in whatever direction you need to go." He took the file out of her hand. "You take the lead, and we'll follow and listen."

Rodrigo leaned the ladder against the wall and pecked a kiss to the top of her head. "Just tell me when you need me."

Feeling lifted, Abby nodded and squeezed their hands. One of the first things that struck Abby as she moved through the living room to the dining area to finally

the kitchen was how much smaller this house was in reality than she'd ever thought as a little girl. Abby never remembered her father dwarfing each room when he entered, yet every time Braden and Rodrigo followed her into a room, the space immediately felt like it shrank by a quarter. The personal touches in the kitchen—like the nicks in the wood indicating her growth, and her mother's mural of a cottage in a wildflower meadow—were long gone, and the walk-in pantry was now a tiny bathroom.

Nothing left to show we ever lived here.

Picking up her pace, Abby backtracked to the foyer and went down the hallway, racing for her old bedroom. More of that taupe color coated the walls, but by this point, Abby had no illusions that the multicolored pastel dream room she'd spent her nights in as a little girl would have remained. Logically, she'd known the house would look entirely different. Eighteen years had gone by. Even if her parents had survived and still lived here, they would have made changes to reflect their life and the times. As a teenager, Abby certainly would have nagged for an upgrade from the soft, childlike room to something bolder and more in line with her emerging personality.

Still, Abby had not expected to feel as disconnected to this place as she did right now.

There is still one room to check.

Backing out into the hallway, Abby took a half dozen more steps and came upon the only room in the house with the door firmly closed.

Seems fitting somehow.

The frantic heartbeat she'd not had to deal with before kicked in and pumped blood so fast it deafened her hearing.

Facing the demon, Abby exhaled and said, "This was my parents' bedroom." And just as when ripping off a Band-Aid, Abby pushed the door wide open in one fell swoop.

The space had no furniture, and the walls were not her mother's favorite peach color any longer, but in here Abby could somehow envision the soft, warm shade through the tan...and she could also see blood spatter coating it grotesquely and her father as he lay slumped against it.

You can do this. Almost outside herself, Abby watched her breasts lift as her breathing quickened. *Pull it together. This is why you're here.*

"I came down from the attic through that closet and my mother was here"—with two steps, Abby pointed at the floor—"and my father was there." She lifted her arm in the direction of the wall straight ahead.

Braden circled Abby and crouched down so he could look up at her downturned face. "What do you remember first? Can you tell me?"

For a good long minute, Abby stood there mute, her mind a blank. Or rather, too much data from that day and night rushed at her, and she couldn't sort it out. Then her nose tingled, and she nodded, almost to herself. "I remember I couldn't

smell the oranges.” She rushed to the built-in seating and leaned over it to unlock and raise the glass. “The window was cracked open but I couldn’t smell the oranges.” She saw the question on both men’s faces from across the room. “One of the orchards we drove past on our way out here butts up against our backyard. Back then, when the windows were open, I could always smell oranges.”

“But you couldn’t that day,” Braden prompted.

“No.” This time, flashing back made Abby crinkle her nose and swallow down the acrid taste of bile. “I smelled blood—this sharp, coppery smell—and...excrement.”

Braden turned to Rodrigo. “Bodies empty out when people die.”

His arms crossed, looking like a guard, Rodrigo nodded. “I know.”

Moving across the room, Braden came to sit at Abby’s side. “Do you remember anything else?”

“I remember wishing my mother would wake up. Somewhere inside me I knew they were dead, but they were my parents, you know, so there was this big chunk of me hoping that somehow they weren’t and would be fine if someone would come help them.” Abby swiped her cheeks with the heels of her hands and was surprised to find them dry today. “I’m told I was screaming endlessly, but I don’t recall doing that.”

“Can you remember if you looked around the room?” Braden flipped through the pages of his file. “Was there anything out of place or missing? Something beyond the obvious that wasn’t right? It might help if you walked around.”

“No. Well...” Abby’s fingers shook, but she let them run along the perimeter of the room as she walked. Abruptly, she came to a stop. “This was my mom’s side of the bed.” Using her hands, Abby framed out a small table. “She had a picture of me and my dad on her nightstand. I was a baby, and he was holding me at the hospital. I always used to touch it when I came into their room. I think I looked up for it when I knelt down next to my mom.” Rushing to the exact spot where her mom had lain, Abby crouched and stared at the emptiness where the picture would have been. “But it was gone. It was definitely gone.”

Braden thumbed through his file again, made an affirmative noise, and then stooped by Abby’s side. “Moved but not taken. It’s here on the floor in one of the evidence photos.” He showed her a picture that had no blood or body in it, just a depiction of the photo frame, the glass shattered, against a wall. “It must have become part of the casualties in the struggle with the killer.”

“That’s it.” Abby fingered the small depiction of her vibrant, smiling dad. “I loved that picture. I don’t have one for myself.”

“I’m sorry.” Braden rubbed her shoulder. “Evidence wouldn’t have kept a picture all these years. Otherwise, I’d see if I could get it for you.”

Brushing aside the whisper of old longing, Abby said, “It’s all right.” Abby’s hiding place loomed behind an accordion wall of slatted white wood. “I want to go up in the attic now.”

“Wait.” Rodrigo put a hand on Abby’s shoulder before she even got to her feet. “Let me go up there first and check it out. Braden,” he said as he moved and jimmied open the closet, “can you get the ladder for me?”

Braden leaned the file against the wall by the door. “Be right back.”

Abby matched Rodrigo’s stance of hands clasped at his back where he blocked access to the closet. “I’ll be all right,” she told him, nudging right up against his immovable force. “I know it’s going to be a lot tighter up there than I remember, and probably a mess too.”

“It’s also possibly less structurally sound,” Rodrigo said, no negotiation or wiggle room in his voice. “Let me crawl around up there first, and if I think it’s all right, you can go up. I’m not trying to stop you, Bit.” He planted his hand on the wall, dipped down, and invaded some of her space. “I just don’t want you falling through the ceiling and getting hurt.”

“All right. That’s fine.” She beamed at him. “See? You know what you’re doing, and I don’t, so I don’t have a problem with your plan.” Leaning in, she pecked a kiss on his warm, stubbly cheek. “When you’re reasonable and explain yourself, I can work with you.”

He snagged her lips with a fast kiss. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Braden returned with the ladder. “Here you go.”

Murmuring a “thanks,” Rodrigo opened the short double-sided ladder under the covered hole in the closet ceiling, climbed up, and pushed the rectangle of wood aside. “Hold on to the ladder for me, will you?” he called down. “I’m going to climb through.”

Braden steadied the metal with his arms and legs, and Rodrigo hoisted himself through the dark hole.

“Hand me up a flashlight, Bit.” Rodrigo’s dark arm appeared through the opening. “It’s fucking dark as hell up here. Musty too.” She could hear him cough and clear his throat.

Once Abby handed a flashlight up to him, Rodrigo disappeared from sight. The occasional groan of wood or a banging noise—sounded to Abby like Rodrigo using his hand to hit against the flooring—and an eternity later, Rodrigo poked his head through the opening again, his face smudged and cobwebs putting silver in his hair. “I feel confident the attic is still in good shape, but I don’t want more than one person up here at a time.” He lowered himself down feet first to the top rung on the ladder and joined Abby and Braden in the closet. “You go up.” With his hand on Abby’s back, Rodrigo put her in front of the ladder’s rungs. “There are bugs and droppings and all kinds of nasty stuff up there, so be careful. You shouldn’t be up there for more than a short time either. Braden and I will stand on the ladder and watch you from here.”

After depositing her purse on the floor, Abby climbed up the ladder and pulled herself through to the attic. Shadows overtook the entire area, leaving Abby empty of nostalgia or a tug on her heart. Rodrigo appeared with flashlight in hand and

passed it to her. Braden joined him a second later and used her second flashlight to direct a beam of light across the floorboards, creating a dust-filled streak of illumination in the darkness.

Turning the light back on himself so Abby could clearly see his face, Braden said, "I'll train this flashlight in whatever direction you crawl, and hopefully that will help to guide you too."

Her smile and her entire body feeling tight, Abby nodded. "Thanks."

Now. Here it is. Abby turned herself around, away from Rodrigo and Braden, and pointed her light into one corner of the musty space. As promised, Braden directed his flashlight alongside hers and doubled her ability to see. *But to see what? What the heck am I hoping to find?*

Abby stalled in place, staring at nothing. Back in her rooms or in any of the dozen foster homes she'd ever lived in, she could envision her attic playroom clear as day. She could always close her eyes, cover her ears to block out the world, and hear her parents' voices and picture them crawling around so as not to bang their heads on the angled roof. Now, here she was, crouched in the very place, and she could not see either one of them, hear them, and didn't have any idea what to do to help solve their murders.

Behind her, Braden startled her, making her grab her chest, as he said, "You mentioned this morning that you needed to look in the den. Can you remember what that means now?"

The vents. Right.

The nudge from Braden got Abby out of her stupor. She started to crawl as remnants of her latest dream came back to her. "When I was hiding up here," she talked back toward Braden and Rodrigo, needing to remind herself they were close by, "I was looking through these vents in the floor. I think I was hoping I'd see my mom or dad. I started at the kitchen but nobody was there." Abby squeezed her eyes shut as her knee landed on something that *crunched*. Reaching the kitchen vent, just like that day, Abby looked through, down to an empty space. "Then, as I was going to the vent where I could see my dad's den, the phone rang, so I crawled real fast to that vent so I could look down into the hallway."

As Abby repeated that pattern on her hands and knees, Braden's voice reached her from across the attic. "They collected the machine as evidence. It was your neighbor calling because you'd run from her house when she was babysitting you. Do you remember that?"

Looking down into the empty hallway, pieces of that day mixed in Abby's mind with the dream she'd had last night and flooded every bit of that day over her in a torrent. "Yes." The flash of dark blue blurred a line before her eyes right now, as it had done that day. "That was why he left," she whispered, her voice suddenly thick. "When Mrs. Bruno called, the killer cursed and then ran out the front door. I saw an arm and part of a shoulder in a blue shirt. The arm and shoulder were thick, like a muscular man's."

"The detectives on the case at the time figured the phone call scared the murderer off," Braden answered. "Mrs. Bruno's statement says she was coming to get you—which her recorded phone message backs up—but then one of her sons fell out of one of their orange trees. She rushed him to the emergency room instead, so she didn't come for you right away."

"No, she didn't come." Although Abby didn't move a muscle, she could feel her eight-year-old body push out of her adult skin and make that trek across the attic and down the rope ladder, straight into a nightmare. "She said she was going to come." Abby's voice sounded high and tight, and her throat hurt. "When I felt sure the man wasn't trying to trick me, and wasn't hiding outside waiting for me to show myself, I climbed out of the attic to wait for Mrs. Bruno." Abby squinted as if it would help see through the blur of her memories attached to that day. "I don't think she came for a really long time."

"Approximately six hours," Braden supplied.

"Leaving you with just your parents in that room?" Rodrigo sounded like someone had gutted him. "Son of a bitch."

"Mrs. Bruno admits she forgot about you." Braden filled in some of the blanks. "When she finally got her kid home from the ER, she remembered. Then she started worrying because your mom hadn't called to find out why you'd come home. Then she called your house again, and still nobody answered. That's when she sent her husband over to see if everything was all right. He's the one who found you."

"I don't remember that," Abby murmured, trying to recall short, beefy Mr. Bruno in her parents' room with her.

"You'd been screaming so much, honey," Braden said, his voice so terribly gentle, as if he were handling the child she had been back then. "It's noted in the file that the physician who looked at you said your throat was like hamburger. I'm sure you were in a severe state of shock. It makes sense that you don't remember everything and had trouble talking about what you had seen."

Abby look down through the vent to the hallway, but in her head she saw herself watching an entirely different scene. "I could see my mom through the slats in the closet doors before she died. She didn't speak, but her eyes told me to be quiet." Abby swung her flashlight around to Braden and Rodrigo, studying their shaded, angular profiles. "So I was."

Braden nodded, almost imperceptibly. "For over two years."

"Yeah."

"Do you think that's why the killer never went after you again?" Rodrigo asked.

Abby started. "What do you mean?"

She could see Rodrigo's face turn grim. "That bastard was looking for you to kill you. Why didn't he come after you again later? It makes me cold inside to even think about it, but you were still a witness."

Before Abby could say she'd never even thought about that, Braden said, "That would have been way too risky. Abby was no longer in a rural area. She was living in town, in addition to having detectives and child psychiatrists checking in on her. There's no way the killer could have made a move for her without being caught. I'm sure he laid low in terror at first, but then days, weeks, and months go by without anything happening to him. The police are pursuing Cormack, the news is reporting the child found in the house is mute and traumatized, and I bet he just started breathing easier. When Abby doesn't dispute Cormack as the guy, the real killer probably realized that Abby either didn't see anything or wasn't even there, and he's home free."

Rodrigo nodded. "That makes sense," he said, even though he still looked dark and fierce.

"And he was right." Abby felt sick to her stomach admitting that. "He was home free."

The light flashed across Rodrigo's eyes, and they suddenly gleamed. "Until now, Bit."

"But not if we don't find some new concrete evidence that I can use as leverage to keep this case open." Braden moved the beam of light around the entire attic, momentarily lighting up every nook and cranny in the room. "Abby, why don't you try to focus on why you wanted to get into the attic again. You said you looked for your mom in the kitchen that day"—he flashed the light on the first vent—"and you wanted to look for your dad in his den." He swooped the band of light across and spotlighted the second. "Only, the phone rang, so you went to the hallway vent instead." He focused the flashlight back to where Abby knelt.

"This is where I stayed," Abby shared. "Watching, to make sure the killer didn't come back. After that, I thought Mrs. Bruno was coming to help, so I never went and looked for my dad."

"But he wasn't there, honey," Braden responded. "He was in the bedroom, already dead, which you know. So why would you wake up this morning with such a need to come see the den?"

Tension began pressing behind Abby's eyes, pushing for the beginnings of a powerful headache. "I don't know." She rubbed her nape, trying to work the knots out so she could think clearly and remember. "It's where I was in the dream when I woke up, I guess. It was on my mind, and you guys were asking me what was going on, so it's what I said." Folded on her knees, Abby pressed her cheek against her thighs and looked at Rodrigo and Braden over the lines of light connecting them. "Back then, where I was in my dream, I don't think I'd wrapped my brain around the fact that my mom and dad really were dead. Especially my father, because I couldn't see him from where I was in the closet. I heard him gurgle and try to scream, but I had no visual of him, so I guess I hoped he was still alive and would go to his favorite room to call for help."

With cramped legs, Abby turned herself around and started crawling back to the second vent, pushing through the places inside her mind that told her to stop.

"My dad had a desk and a phone in there, and I guess I'd just twisted it in my head that he would be there if I looked."

Once Abby got to the metal grate in the floor, she pressed her face down into the dusty slats of metal. Like a mirage, before her very eyes, the taupe room below swirled to shades of blue and gray with accents of oak everywhere. She could see the back of her dad's auburn head as he stood at his desk, his back to the room. Then, rough shouts in her father's voice that didn't make any sense to Abby sounded like they consumed the entire house. They burst up into the attic right now, making Abby jerk backward and tuck her knees against her chest, as if her father were in that room right this second and could see her watching him.

When did I hear Daddy shouting?

Rodrigo's voice cut through the noise in her head. "Abby?" Concern filled his tone, and on top of him, Braden asked, "Are you okay?"

Bits of sound and blurry, brief flashes of imagery worked in Abby's brain in such a way that her head felt like it had a strobe light and disco ball in it. "I think my father might have had a fight with someone before he died. I don't know when, though." She squinted, searching for clarity. "I don't know if the guy was on the phone or here in person. I must have gotten scared and hid from what I'd overheard."

"Like you did just now," Rodrigo said.

"I guess." Abby created circles against her temples with her fingers, working out the beginnings of nausea. "Yes."

"You said guy," Braden pointed out. "If your dad was on the phone, how would you know it was a man?"

"I wouldn't." Abby sat up straight and banged her head on the low ceiling. "Ow." She pushed her fingers through her ponytail and rubbed the pinpricks of pain radiating from the bump. "Do you think my dad knew about my mom's affair, invited the man here, and confronted him in person?"

"It's possible," Braden said. "I'll have to lay it out and see if it makes sense."

Abby suddenly felt dirty in a way that went beyond the dust on her face, hands, and clothes. Each clue they unearthed pushed her more and more toward the certainty that her mother had cheated on her father. And if her dad had found out about it, and obviously wasn't happy, Abby might have been about to become a statistic of divorce. She put her hand over her mouth, stifling the sob that wanted to erupt.

I always thought they loved each other so much.

Suck it up, girl. You're here to find a killer, not wallow in self-pity.

Ignoring the pounding in her head, Abby tucked the flashlight handle in her belt and began crawling back toward Braden and Rodrigo. "I want to go talk to Mrs. Bruno. Maybe she knew something about my mom's affair. Maybe Mr. Bruno knows if my dad suspected anything."

Braden craned his neck, looking up at Abby, as he backed down the ladder. "You want to go right now?"

"It's not that far." As soon as Rodrigo cleared the rungs too, Abby swung her legs through the entrance and dropped down to the ladder. "I remember how to get there."

"So you're done here?" Braden asked from the door, where he grabbed the case file from the floor.

"Yeah." Taking another look around her parents' bedroom, Abby rubbed goose bumps away from her arms. "I don't want to be in this place anymore."

"I can understand why," Rodrigo said. "Come on." He tucked his arm around Abby's waist and steered her to the door. "I have baby wipes in the truck you can use to clean up."

Braden stopped them with a hand to Abby's arm. "You don't remember anything else?"

Rodrigo nudged Abby into the hallway. "I don't want her to be here anymore, Crenshaw." He sounded the way he did when he gave orders to his employees. "I think that's enough for today. Get the ladder for me, and let's go."

"I wasn't trying to push, man," Braden said as he jogged across the room. "Let me close the window, grab the ladder, and I'll be right behind you."

Abby had entered this house without feeling any sense of bond to it or her parents. Now, as she walked out, she eerily sensed that every corner called her to look closer and see all the scars still there that spoke of her past.

Shivering, Abby felt like ghosts floated out of this house, right at her side, talking, if she could just hear what they had to say.

* * *

Abby trudged up familiar blue-painted porch steps and walked right up to a matching door that took her back twenty years. The wonderful aroma of citrus permeated the air, the smell so clean and tart that Abby breathed in deeply and let it take away some of the tension still locking her tight.

Now this hasn't changed much at all. She smiled, feeling buoyant again.

A gleaming new gold knocker adorned the door. Abby rapped it sharply, smiling over her shoulder at Braden and Rodrigo as she waited.

Someone inside shouted, "Be there in a second," and a moment later a young, dark-haired woman answered the door.

"Hi." Abby stuck out her hand, too anxious to wait. "My name is Abby Gaines. May I speak with Martha Bruno?"

The woman pulled a funny face. "Sorry, but there's no Martha Bruno living here."

As fast as air lifted Abby, she now felt like someone had popped a hole in her balloon. “Did she pass? Are you a relative? A granddaughter? She owned this land with her husband, Anthony Bruno.”

“Nope.” The woman shook her head. “Never heard of either one of them. We bought the orchard a year ago from someone named Hector Gonzalez. He never mentioned any Martha or Anthony.”

“Oh.” Abby thudded back to earth.

“Sorry.”

“I apologize for bothering you.”

“No problem. You have a good night,” the woman said as she swung her front door closed.

Braden took hold of Abby’s elbows and turned her to face him. “I’ll track Mrs. Bruno down tomorrow at work, Abby. It shouldn’t be that hard.” He slid his hand down her arm and closed it around her fingers. “We’ll just have to keep busy with something else until I do.”

She narrowed her stare at him. “Doing what?”

Braden smiled, oh so very wickedly. “It’s quitting time for me.”

Rodrigo traded a glance with Braden and adopted his own naughty gleam. “For me too.”

Mierda!

Chapter Fourteen

Stretched across her headboard, arms and ankles tied to the top posts and forced wide apart, Abby tried to scream around Braden's cock stuffed in her mouth as Rodrigo shoved his long prick into her cunt.

"Oh yeah, that's it," Braden said. Standing on the bed, he held Abby's head to face him and worked his length past her lips in short, snapping bursts. "Take it all." His pale eyes were a luminescent jade in the warm shadows of Abby's bedroom. "You have the fucking most beautiful mouth."

"Fucking most amazing everything, Bit." Rodrigo moaned and shoved his hands under Abby's ass, clutching her cheeks to tilt her hips for a deeper thrust. Every slam of Rodrigo's hips abraded Abby's inner thighs and chafed at her pussy lips, but she had long ago given up caring about anything but coming and coming and coming again.

Upon arrival at Abby's place, though unspoken, Abby knew Braden and Rodrigo had made it their mission to eradicate any thoughts or hurts from the day. They'd stripped her naked and covered every inch of her body with licks, kisses, and love bites. Each man had made her come twice already by trading off going down on her or sucking on her breasts or kissing her to the point of exquisite, painful sensitivity.

When Abby swore she was about to turn into a puddle of goo, Braden had dipped into her toy drawer—which he must have discovered on his own in the last few days—and produced silk ropes. Braden had Rodrigo arrange pillows behind Abby while he lifted her legs up and wide open, putting her ankles almost on level with her wrists. He'd then created two slipknots into each rope and pinned Abby to the bed. By that point, Rodrigo already had his wonderful fingers halfway up her pussy and his incredible tongue working her clit like a professional, and Abby had been too far gone to share that she'd never actually used the ropes before.

Now Abby alternated between hanging limp when her muscles couldn't take the strain and yanking against the ropes every time Rodrigo grazed her sweet spot with his driving thrusts.

Scorching-hot, wet cock pushed past Abby's lips again, taking her almost to the throat, and the raw nature of the act helped pump her cunt with more liquid heat. Abby loved having a man in her mouth, and she couldn't help creaming and moaning each time Braden filled her full. When Braden withdrew, leaving Abby nearly in a state of tears for more, Rodrigo sank his iron-hard dick into her sheath and stretched her open with shivery depth again.

As soon as Abby's mouth was free of Braden's cock, Rodrigo surged forward and covered her, taking her with a voracious kiss. He slowed everything down and moved his hips in rolling waves, stroking Abby's throbbing, wet walls with massaging full pumps. Abby kissed Rodrigo back with messy licks and bites; she struggled against the rope binding in her efforts to work her body into Rodrigo's mating, desperately wishing to rub herself more completely against every inch of Rodrigo's solid, muscular body. She arched her back, straining for Rodrigo with a whimper, and Rodrigo pressed his weight into her, giving her that rougher grind against her breasts, belly, and sex Abby so desperately needed.

Her pussy flooded with proof of her arousal, making her buck her hips in a shuddering display. Above her, Braden moaned, watching as Rodrigo claimed Abby so completely. He shuttled his tightly closed fist up and down his rearing erection, thumbing the head each time he reached the leaking tip, and then coated his red length with the sheen of precum.

Rodrigo rubbed his chest and stomach all up and down Abby's front. Abby jerked and keened as Rodrigo abraded her pebble-tight nipples with every move, and Braden picked up the pace of his handjob as his leaking slit became a stream of early seed.

"You both like this, huh?" Rodrigo's dark hot gaze passed between Abby and Braden.

Abby answered by pulling against the ropes. She failed to move much but managed to grab Rodrigo's mouth with a quick, licking kiss. Braden nodded while groaning and reaching between his legs to pull on his balls.

Rodrigo's eyes darkened to pitch. "Bring that cock back in here, Crenshaw." His voice sounded like secretive, dirty sex in the back of a truck on a steamy summer afternoon. "I want a taste too."

At Rodrigo's words, Abby's cunt throbbed all around his embedded prick. *Oh good God, yes. Do it.* Braden jerked in response and grabbed on to the headboard, his legs clearly going a little bit wobbly.

Rodrigo already had his mouth almost touching Abby's, and they both struggled with their breath as Braden stepped in closer. Braden closed his hand around the base of his cock and pushed his dick into the space between their mouths. The thick, stiff shaft grazed both sets of lips, snagging skin against skin, and all three of them gasped at the light contact. Then, like starving animals pouncing on one morsel of food, Abby and Rodrigo opened their mouths around each side of Braden's dick and licked up, down, and over each centimeter of flesh. They used their tongues to follow the lines of ridged veins and often met around the top or underside to tangle with each other before separating to lick all over Braden's slick, rigid cock again.

"More." Braden buried his fingers in both Abby's and Rodrigo's hair, pulling hard enough to sting as he bowed his spine and thrust his hips in a furious rhythm, his face a stark, ruddy mask of unforgiving lines and angles. "Oh fuck, more."

Abby absorbed Braden's desperation and knew exactly what he needed.

She knew she wasn't going to give it to him either.

Rodrigo was.

Dropping her gaze from Braden's to Rodrigo's, Abby looked into eyes burning black with desire. "Let him in your mouth." She pulled back just as Rodrigo's lips grazed Braden's cockhead. "You already know exactly what he needs to come."

Rodrigo's fingers clenched convulsively and dug into Abby's ass, but he also turned his head and parted his lips. He didn't open very wide, though, which made it fucking orgasmworthy as Abby watched Braden nudge his penis against Rodrigo's mouth and oh so very slowly force his way inside. The second Braden got there, Rodrigo made one of his excited noises and sucked more of Braden's length in on his own, clearly taking to the task quickly. He bobbed up and down the top third of Braden's dick and played with the head, getting it nice and wet, and hummed something incoherent each time he went down on Braden's penis. Soon Braden started rocking his hips, helping feed more of his erection deeper and deeper into Rodrigo's mouth.

"Rigo, oh fuck, Rigo." Braden stared down at Rodrigo with lust-filled eyes as pale as moonlight. "So good."

The sight of Rodrigo giving Braden a blowjob rushed blood into all of Abby's erogenous zones and shoved her dangerously close to the edge. With her arms and legs restrained, she couldn't give herself relief, so she knocked her cunt back and forth in an abbreviated motion and fucked herself on Rodrigo's unmoving cock. Rodrigo didn't let up on Braden's prick for one second. Instead, he held tightly to Abby's hips and ass and moved her body for her. He impaled her on his stationary erection with driving force and took her pussy with as much aggression as Braden used to fuck Rodrigo's mouth.

Everything about what these two men did to each other and to her rushed through Abby hotter than a Texas oil fire and pooled a controlled burn deep in her core. Each time Braden shoved his cock into Rodrigo's mouth and Rodrigo took it with a rough grunt, the coil inside Abby twisted tighter and tighter and wrenched her closer to the abyss.

"Oh yeah, yeah... Please." Abby rolled her head back and forth against the headboard, unable to remain still as the invisible chain inside her pulled so fucking taut she thought it might tear her in two. "Touch me."

Without breaking from Braden, Rodrigo speared two fingers into Abby's slit to finger her clit. He used just the perfect amount of pressure and ripped a convulsing tremble out of her entire body.

Letting out a deep, guttural moan, Braden wrapped his hand around the back of Abby's head, pulled her to his cock, and put her mouth around his root. "Together." He made it a plea and an order, withdrew solely from Rodrigo's mouth, and went back to sawing his length between both of their lips.

Voracious and near to shattering, Abby licked up and down Braden's dick in time with Rodrigo, pairing up with his pace. With each pass along Braden's shaft,

the man held on to Abby's head with a rougher hand, and his hips lost any sense of control. Meanwhile, Rodrigo continued to manipulate Abby's pussy with his fingers and cock and pulled her insides tauter than a drum.

Unable to take it anymore, this time when Rodrigo flicked his tongue just under the rim of Braden's cock, Abby licked across his wide slit and wiggled into the opening. In an instant, Braden grabbed his root and roared with his release. Abby stuck out her tongue, and just as Braden's ejaculate hit her taste buds—and she saw it splash on Rodrigo too—Abby let go of the fight and exploded right along with Braden. Orgasm hit her with a powerful, clenching wave; each squeeze inside Abby's cunt wrapped around Rodrigo's penis and yanked him deeper inside, which in turn rocked a jolt through Rodrigo. Rodrigo grabbed Braden and jerked him down to his knees beside Abby. He held Abby and Braden to him with his intense, unblinking stare as he swelled and then spilled inside Abby, warming her with his seed.

Rodrigo hadn't even pulled out of Abby, and nobody had regained his or her breath when Braden leaned down and put his mouth on Abby's shoulder, kissed his way down to her tits, and started sucking her breast. He still had one hand wrapped around his cock, stroking himself, and his scorching-hot skin hadn't cooled one degree. "Christ, I want you." With teeth and lips scraping down her stomach, Braden stopped to tease his tongue into Abby's belly button. "Rodrigo, untie her so I can roll her onto her stomach." Braden then kissed his way to Abby's mound and probed his tongue into the top of her cunt.

Simultaneously, Abby's pussy lubricated and yet protested another penetration this quickly. *Onto her stomach.* Anal sex immediately filled Abby's mind, but as much as she was excited and nervous to try it with these men, another image took its place and perked Abby up with a burst of new energy. *One dip into the secret drawer deserves another.*

Smiling at Rodrigo as he released her arm from the ropes, Abby shook out her tingling hand and then ran her fingers through Braden's dark hair. "You sure do like to give orders about what we're going to do and how we're going to play, Detective." She took hold of Braden's short locks, pulled his face out of her pussy, and forced it back to meet her gaze. "Why don't *you* get on your hands and knees and perch that sweet ass of *yours* in the air?"

"You want to watch..." Braden's gaze drifted to where Rodrigo now worked Abby's other arm and leg free of the rope bindings.

"Oh..." Abby stalled, moaning with joy as her freed arms and legs filled with blood and became her own again. "I want to watch *that* one day very soon. But right now"—her eyes on Braden, Abby leaned sideways and reached into her nightstand drawer—"that pretty hole is all mine." She hooked her fingers through the leather strap she wanted and lifted the toy in the air. "What do you think about this?"

A strap-on cock.

Christ. Braden's first thought was that he might very well already be in love with this woman. His second thought focused squarely on his ass and how just by looking at Abby merely *holding* that sex toy, his channel already pulsed for a fucking. It wasn't how Braden imagined he would break in his chute again, but looking at Abby, who was so goddamn full of excitement, he suddenly didn't want anything else.

Rising up on his knees, Braden watched Abby with an animal-on-the-mating-hunt gleam. "Put it on for me." He continued to stroke himself and massage his sac, although he didn't figure in a second he'd need anything more than Abby's performance to keep him half-hard. "Show me what you've got."

The hot pink dildo—not too big—lay heavy in the leather harness. The strap that would run between Abby's legs had a nub that Braden figured would tuck right up against her clit and keep everything stimulated with a nice buzz.

Braden noticed Rodrigo had paused at the head of the bed, another rapt spectator of Abby's sexy little show. Her gaze on Braden, glittering with chips of Caribbean blue, Abby worked herself into the leather straps, settled the dildo in a nice position—not too high, not too low—and adjusted the waist strap and buckle that would hold the toy securely in place.

Fully loaded with her fake prick cocked and ready to fire, Abby squeezed a dollop of lube onto the fuchsia silicone. She wrapped her hand around the dildo and rubbed the stuff up and down its length, and even teased her fingernail into the molded slit at the head. On her knees too, she looked down at her new appendage and then up into Braden's eyes. "Is this enough to get your attention, Detective?" That twinkle in her gaze turned into a full-on light show. "Or do I need to dip back into my drawer and find something more substantial?"

"Holy hell, honey." Blood rushed with painful speed to Braden's prick and lifted him back to fully erect. There was something about a woman willing to don a strap-on and do her man that spoke to some of the most basic private fantasies Braden had never thought he could have in real life. Then to have Rodrigo, someone Braden sensed on a fundamental level had never stepped out of the traditional mores of sex until so recently, leaning against the headboard, still half-hard as he took in the play before him, rocked Braden all the way to his core.

This is who I was always supposed to be.

Braden crawled up the bed to between Rodrigo's legs, lowered himself down to his elbows, and used his shoulders to push apart Rodrigo's thighs. "You don't get a break from this either, Rigo." He dipped down even farther and tongued the man's taint, to Rodrigo's trembling response. A warm mixture of scents lingered from Rodrigo's and Abby's lovemaking, and Braden hummed as he inhaled more of that one-of-a-kind fragrance and licked his way up Rodrigo's dark sac to his cock.

The mattress dipped as Abby moved, and a moment later, as she moved in behind him, her smooth skin caressed Braden's thighs like the lightest of kisses. Her hands danced up his back on either side of his spine, tantalizing and rubbing his flesh in such a way that Braden arched his spine inward and tilted his ass

higher in the air, asking without words for a taking. Abby murmured little nothings such as “so nice” and “so sweet” and “so sexy” as she ran her hands over his shoulders, down his upper arms, and then under his pits to down his sides and hips. She whipped up excited bundles of nerve endings inside Braden, making them clamor to the surface for more of Abby’s touch.

Completely distracted from his intent to suck Rodrigo, Braden instead rocked his hips and swished his ass, biting his lip as he so shamelessly pleaded for more of Abby’s soft, feminine fingers. She ran her palms up the backs of his thighs to his buttocks, and Braden moaned as she got ever so much closer to his pucker. Her thumbs met at the cleft of his ass and then dipped into his crack, running the length of his crease to his bud. She thumbed the tight ring of muscle, transferred some lube onto the pulsating entrance, and then separated his buttocks to rub the cool length of the dildo between the hills of his ass, over his hole, and down to tease his perineum and balls. All the while, in the fucking sweetest voice, Abby kept telling Braden how responsive his pretty little hole was and how she couldn’t wait to make his ass hers. Such dirty talk coming at him in such an innocent tone spurred a mountain range worth of goose bumps all over Braden’s flesh and had him creating a new wet spot on the sheets with an open faucet worth of precum.

She’s gonna fucking make me come without ever getting inside.

Braden looked over his shoulder at Abby, at the dreamy expression in her eyes and the slight, secretive smile on her face. As Braden stared, his rectum clenched with each glide of her hands over his excited flesh and playful flick of the dildo across his sensitive asshole.

“Fuck me.” Braden had gotten hard enough watching her slather a ton of lube on that pink shaft of hers, and he knew his body already wanted to take the toy. “I don’t even want any prep.” He shoved his ass into her strap-on and ground his hole against the leather and metal studs, needful of any and all contact. “Take me.”

The feel of the dildo head suddenly lining up and pressing against his pucker had Braden shoving his cheek and jaw against Rodrigo’s washboard stomach, bracing himself for what was to come. Each successive bump to Braden’s bud loosened the muscle more and created deeper spasms in his chute, driving him mad. He gritted his teeth and ordered, “Now.”

Right fucking then, Abby broke through and speared the dildo into Braden’s ass, breaching his rectum with something other than his own finger for the first time in over two years.

Oh Jesus, yes. Braden turned his head and buried his face against Rodrigo’s abdomen, biting the man’s flesh in order to stifle his hoarse cry. Braden’s entrance burned, and his passage fluttered and contracted around the toy, out of his control, but still, Braden pushed through the renewed sensations of a fucking and bumped his ass back into the penetration, stealing more of its length. *Fuck me.*

Abby ran her hands up and down Braden’s back and made a clicking noise with her tongue and cheek. “Oh, my clever detective.” She withdrew her fake cock

almost all the way out of his chute and then made him moan as she slid it back in with shiverworthy slowness. "I think you like having something in your ass."

With his passage taking another easy thrust from Abby's strap-on toy, Braden clenched his teeth, trying to fight the pull of desire already tugging his balls. "Yes. I fucking love it." He found strength in his arms again, managed to push up to his hands, and circled his butt backward into the dildo, working to stretch himself in the way he so loved. Tilting his head to the side, Braden found the reflection of his and Abby's joined bodies in an oval-shaped, full-length mirror. Seeing Abby kneeling between his spread thighs, her head down, watching her bright pink cock push through his hole and claim his channel as far as it would go sent shooting lines of pleasure up Braden's passage and into his spine and dick.

Abby glanced up just then, and their gazes connected in the mirror. A slow smile spread across her face, causing color to bloom in her cheeks and flooding her lips with a deep red. She ran her hands up Braden's sides and around to his chest, wrapping him up tightly as she leaned over his back. Her cheek came to rest at his nape, and she began to rock her hips against him once she was tucked inside his ass, pushing into his ring with each motion, with just a bit more force each time, making him choke down a rough noise as his excited cock reared all the way up to his belly.

Beyond seeing her in the mirror, Braden felt Abby smile against his flesh.

"You like that?" she asked and nudged the root of her dildo against his stretched entrance once more.

"I like everything you're doing," Braden confessed, his voice stripped. Part of the way beneath Braden, Rodrigo released one of his fucking sexy moans, and then the sticky head of his prick pushed against Braden's jaw. Loving that she'd managed to get Rodrigo hard again too, Braden laid everything out with one lingering look into her eyes and then nuzzled his cheek against Rodrigo's burning shaft. "Don't stop, honey," he told Abby. "You don't have to be gentle." He then dipped down and swallowed half of Rodrigo's prick.

Rodrigo shouted and bucked, which pushed more of his length toward Braden's throat. Braden didn't care. He wanted it, and he knew how to relax and swallow down every goddamn inch. As he pulled back and drizzled saliva all over Rodrigo's glorious, hard cock, Abby straightened upright and started snapping her hips in a faster motion, fucking Braden with full thrusts.

She grabbed on to Braden's hips and drove into his passage with the confidence of a man who'd done nothing but top his whole life, and Braden automatically shoved back into the taking and pleaded for more, submitting to a craving for domination he rarely showed a partner. Abby accommodated him with sawing drags of her fake cock in and out of his chute, nailing his kill spot with each passing thrust, and sent lines of pure joy through to every corner of Braden's body. All the while Abby screwed him, she moaned in a way that Braden knew was due to the nubby attachment rubbing over her clit, but she did it with such precise timing

that Braden would have sworn she could feel his rectum milking every inch of that silicone dick.

In front of Braden, Rodrigo groaned too, writhing his bare ass on the sheets. He pushed his prick at Braden's face, his dark eyes pleading for a salvation Braden very much wanted to give. In a way he'd never felt before, Braden ached to have his ass filled to capacity and his mouth stuffed to overflowing. He went down on Rodrigo with a vengeance, twisting his head and swirling his tongue around to touch upon every millimeter of Rodrigo's steaming hot cock, and even pulled off the stiff length to nuzzle lower and suck on his lightly furred balls, to Rodrigo's moaning delight. With a tonguing up the underside of Rodrigo's dick, Braden swallowed him again, just as Abby took Braden's newly-back-in-use ass to the hilt. She shoved him bodily forward, which in turn shoved Rodrigo's cock deep into Braden's mouth. Rodrigo muffled a string of moaning Spanish curses; Braden pulled off as Abby pulled her cock out of his chute, and then Braden took Rodrigo past his throat again as Abby drove into his ass once more.

Each time Abby filled Braden's rectum and Rodrigo filled his mouth, Braden's prick grew somehow harder and harder. His tender passage and scratched throat took a beating he craved, but on the sixth or seventh pummeling, Braden's penis screamed for release. He reached down to his belly and wrapped up his own aching cock to stroke the solid length. In a shot, Abby knocked Braden's hand away and yanked him up to his knees, taking over the handjob herself. In the next instant, Rodrigo shot upright too, joined his hand to Abby's, and together they pulled on Braden's prick with an aggression he welcomed with choking cries.

Abby and Rodrigo sandwiched Braden and circled their arms around him, surrounding Braden in the most wonderful heat. They kissed all over his face, neck, and shoulders while jerking him off with a myriad of hands, and they fucking made Braden feel like the most beloved man on earth.

Braden reached back to grab Abby's thigh and forward to lock his other arm around Rodrigo's waist, tying them in an even more intricate knot. Braden pulled them all so closely together that he trapped Abby's and Rodrigo's hands in between his and Rodrigo's stomachs, bringing the handjob to a complete halt. Abby and Rodrigo still had Braden's dick wrapped up in the tightest two-handed squeeze he'd ever felt, though, and with Abby's strap-on cock shoved all the way up his ass, Braden didn't need much more to come.

His every nerve ending poised to snap, unable to even shift his hips a scant inch more, Braden clutched Abby's thigh, scratched Rodrigo's back, and uttered, "Kiss me."

Abby yanked Braden's head to the side just as Rodrigo swooped in close. Together, they took Braden's mouth with an almost violent, shared kiss. Lips and teeth scraped together, nicking swollen skin as they forced Braden to open wide, and licked into his mouth as one. The second all three of their tongues tangled, and three distinctive moans created one raw elemental sound, Braden's nuts sucked

halfway up into his body, his entire body jolted, and he shot seed all over his and Rodrigo's stomachs, coming with crushing intensity.

As Braden lost himself in the joined kiss, his cock continued to pulse and pulse and pulse in the confines of Abby's and Rodrigo's hands, wringing out more tiny spits of cum. A heartbeat later, Rodrigo inhaled sharply, went completely still against Braden's front, and then wet warmth covered Braden's thigh as Rodrigo lost himself to another orgasm.

Trembling against Braden's back, Abby breathlessly whispered, "Let me feel." She ran her fingers through the ejaculate coating Rodrigo's stomach and then down to the semen Rodrigo had dumped on Braden's leg. Her fingers traveling in reverse, Abby wrapped her smaller hand around both Braden's and Rodrigo's cocks and stroked both shafts with her cum-slick hand. She extracted a final jerking response out of both men, and as she did, the shiver against Braden's back accelerated into a full-on shudder, and Braden knew Abby released herself to the pleasure of orgasm just as deeply as Braden and Rodrigo had.

They all hung wrapped up together for an extended moment, suspended in time. Rodrigo eventually pulled away first. His fathomless dark gaze darted between Braden and Abby; he fell against the pillows lining the headboard and shoved his hands through his silky black hair. Braden could almost see Rodrigo mentally shaking his head when Abby stirred behind him and pulled his attention to her. She very gently withdrew the dildo from his worked-over ass and even rubbed three fingers over his pucker to help settle the muscle back into place.

Still on her knees, she moved around Braden toward the headboard, and Braden couldn't help his attention falling to the residual sheen of cum on her hand. Abby dropped her focus to where Braden looked, swung her head, and saw Rodrigo staring too.

"What?" Her voice rose with the lift of her shoulders. "I like cock. I don't have penis envy, but I like what the male body is and does. Everything about it excites me. That includes when you come." She wiggled her shiny fingers in front of her. "Apparently it can get me there too."

Braden chuckled, feeling as light as he almost ever had in his life. "Apparently in a *big* way from all the shaking I felt go through you against my back."

A deeper flush crept over every inch of Abby's already rosy flesh. "A lot of that was my reaction to watching myself fuck you." She blushed like a virgin but at the same time stroked her dildo like a well-satisfied man. "I like your ass, Braden. It was fun making it mine for a little while."

"Thank you." Braden pecked a kiss to her cheek and swatted her tush, pleased when she yelped. "When I eventually get you to roll onto your stomach, I'm sure I'll like yours as much as I like the parts of you I've already tested."

Rodrigo muttered, "Shit," and tugged at his hair again.

"Aww." Abby kissed her way up Rodrigo's leg, ending with a peck to the tip of his sated cock. "Don't feel left out." She shifted to sit next to him and linked her arm

through his. "You moaned so much last night when Braden fucked you that I definitely want a piece of your sweet ass one day too."

If the color red could make a head explode, Rodrigo's would be splattered all over Abby's walls. "Shit."

"Rodrigo doesn't feel slighted, Abby," Braden shared, studying this sexy traditional man sitting next to a woman with a strap-on cock, after having just finished moaning for more himself while another man sucked his dick. "He just can't quite believe he's in the middle of something like this. Not only participating, but also loving it, and he *really* can't wrap his brain around the fact that you like it so much too."

Abby's eyes darkened and turned somber in a flash. "I know." The way she rubbed her cheek into Rodrigo's shoulder made Braden wonder if they'd talked about this subject before. "It's a unique situation, and not one many can offer practical advice for, that's for sure."

Rolling his head against the padded board, Rodrigo lifted his focus to the ceiling. "It's a mind fuck is what it is. I'm not gonna lie." Just as fast as he said that, he brought his gaze back to Braden and Abby. "Doesn't mean I don't want more or that I regret a second of what we've done since the first night we all shared a bed, but that doesn't mean I have any fucking clue what we're doing or how it's supposed to proceed. Makes me feel like I'm twisting out there in the wind sometimes, and I don't fucking like that feeling. I never have."

Abby perched her chin on Rodrigo's shoulder. "I was just teasing, Rodrigo." She grazed her fingers down from his elbow and took his hand in hers. "I'm sorry if it was in bad taste or too much too fast."

With a kiss to Abby's forehead, Rodrigo said, "Don't worry. It wasn't. I was just saying *shit* mostly for him." He jerked his head toward Braden, a wicked, masculine grin showing briefly. "I know how much it turns him on."

"It definitely does." Braden leaned in fast and stole a quick kiss from Rodrigo's lips. "If I had one bit of energy left after the last few days, I'd happily go down on you again and spend the next half hour trying to get you hard and coming."

Hardly moving, Rodrigo shifted his head just enough to find Braden's gaze. "If I had one drop of spunk left to spend, I'd let you do it." His legs fell open as he sank deeper into the pillows tucked behind him. "But I don't."

Letting out a sigh, Braden dropped back against the pillows next to Abby, squishing her in between him and Rodrigo. "I don't think I do either."

Still wearing the strap-on, Abby had a similar butterfly stance to Braden and Rodrigo. "So is this what happens after sex between men?" She glanced down at her cock, then to Rodrigo's, and finally Braden's. "You just sit around with your dicks hanging out and shoot the breeze?"

Braden had to laugh at the sight the three of them made. "Kind of. We normally turn on the TV and find something to watch." He wished she had a TV in her bedroom he could click on. "Then I'd hold yours while you hold mine"—he

wrapped her fingers around his cock and then took hold of her dildo—"and we'd just keep each other pleasantly aroused until we're ready to go at it again." Rodrigo immediately did the same on Abby's other side, arranging her with one hand on each man's limp dick and two big hands wrapped around her modest pink cock. "See?" He and Rodrigo thumbed the silicone toy. "All kinds of secret fun."

Abby rolled her eyes at Braden. "Jeez, Detective. I had no idea you had a second job as a comedian. Seriously, though." She looked at him, no teasing twinkle in her gaze. "What do you really do? I'm curious."

Braden shrugged. "Either go home or go to sleep," he shared. "Depends on the person you're with."

"You don't have to stay awake for me," Abby replied. "I promise. Either one of you." She turned to included Rodrigo. "If you want to crash, that's cool. I don't need entertaining. And I'm not just talking about tonight. I mean any time we're together."

Rodrigo drew Abby's hand from his cock to his lips and kissed the back. "Bit, right now I'm good with just sitting here listening to the two of you breathe."

Braden's heart constricted with an incredible, pleasant pain. Sometimes, overbearing Rodrigo said just the right thing.

Linking Abby's hand to his in a mirror of Rodrigo's hold on her, Braden added, "Me too."

As all of them fell to silence, Braden watched Abby study and finger the big, masculine hands tangled with both of hers. One darker than the other but both with long fingers and chewed-to-the-nub nails. Rodrigo definitely had more nicks in his skin than Braden did, but Braden knew he had some rough spots too. His hands definitely weren't dainty or pristine in any way.

Braden suddenly bit back a smile as he realized he was comparing his hands to Rodrigo's and hoping Abby found his as masculine as the other man's. *Fucking ridiculous*. He guessed a little bit of competition always existed when there were two or more men side by side.

Right then, Abby brought Braden's hand close to her face and then a second later did the same to Rodrigo's. She glanced between them both and said, "Neither one of you have tattoos."

A buzzing started in Braden's brain. "What do you mean?"

"Your hands." Abby untwined their fingers and held each man's hand up in the air by the wrist. "Neither one of you have tattoos on your hands."

The tingling sensation crept down Braden's neck, into his arms and fingers, and he had to force himself to maintain a calm tone and not shake Abby. He did keep his hand right in Abby's line of sight, though, and exchanged a look with Rodrigo that told the man to do the same. "We don't have tattoos," he said carefully. "Tell me why that matters, Abby."

Her eyes scanned the air in front of her as if she looked at something nobody else could see. Then she crushed Braden's wrist under her fingers. "The killer didn't

either.” Abby rushed out of bed to her computer in the living area, her strap-on dildo flapping in the breeze. “Why do I think that matters?” The hibernating machine came to life, casting a glow in the shadowed room, and Abby’s fingers instantly flew over the keys as she punched words into a search engine. “Why do I care? I need to see Cormack’s picture.”

While Braden flipped on the light and went for the photocopied version of the Gaines case file tucked in a side table, Rodrigo moved in behind Abby and braced his hand on the back of her chair. “Damn, Bit,” he said. “Your fingers are fast.”

“I get most of my weather and news from the Internet,” Abby explained. “You start to get good at speedy searches.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Braden could see Abby moving through screens at a rapid pace.

“It lets me read when I have time,” she added. “Plus, I’ve searched for information about Cormack before. Ah...” She tapped the monitor with her finger. “Here it is.”

Braden grabbed the file and raced to Abby’s side.

“Look at that.” Abby pointed to the mug shot on the computer screen while glancing to Braden. “Look at Cormack’s fingers where he’s holding up his arrest information. He has a snake tattoo that goes all around his fingers on his left hand, and some kind of letters or symbols on the other. Neither one of those is the hand I saw open the closet door as I closed the lid on the attic entrance, Braden. The hand I see in my dreams does not have a tattoo. Cormack does.”

Wait just a second. Braden held his breath as he flipped through his file and pulled out a copy of Cormack’s original mug shot. “Fuck.” He slapped it on the computer table and pointed at the fingers. “He has them in the original mug shot too. They’re old tats.”

“He’s definitely not the guy.” Abby’s hand shook as she lifted the paper and handed it back to Braden. “He really didn’t kill my parents.”

Rodrigo ran a protective hand down Abby’s shoulder to between her breasts, but his dark stare remained trained on Braden. “So what do we do now?”

“Same as before,” Braden answered. “We keep asking questions.” He slid his hand across Abby’s breastbone and linked it to Rodrigo’s over her heart. “And we don’t stop until we track down a murderer.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Gotcha.”

Sitting at his desk at work, Braden stole a pen out of Kaufman’s supply and jotted down the address of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Bruno. He had assured Abby it wouldn’t be hard to find them and that they would visit with her old neighbors today. Thank God the Brunos still lived close by. When offering her that promise, Braden had thought no further than his desire to comfort Abby and give her hope that they hadn’t reached a dead end. He had played the odds based on his knowledge and access to a search database, and the gamble had paid off.

A hand and arm suddenly appeared over his shoulder and snatched the pen out of his fingers. “I’ll take that back, thank you very much.” April plopped down in her chair and dropped her pen back into the overfull cup. “Keep track of your own pens. Between you and Watson, I swear I feel like I’m back in third grade getting my Trapper Keeper raided every day.”

Braden glanced to the empty desk at his right. “Where is Watson?”

“Doctor’s appointment. Finally. He’ll be in later. His allergies are acting up, but you’d think he has the swine flu.” April narrowed her stare at the empty desk across from her while knotting her long hair at her nape. “Yet he’ll suffer and bitch and moan rather than just go get checked out so he can get a prescription that will work for his symptoms.”

Kicking back in his chair, Braden grinned at his pretty colleague’s snarl. “Must be hell sharing a bed with the bastard every night.”

April knocked his boots off the edge of the desk. “I wouldn’t know anything about that.” She took up one of her pens and aimed it in his direction. “And you ought to be thinking more about how the boss is going to ride your ass and possibly shut down your Gaines investigation than trying to weasel information out of me about Watson sharing my bed.”

All joking fled, and Braden sat up straight. “What the hell are you talking about?”

April kept hold of her pen and twirled it between her fingers. “All I know is Zanger came out here yesterday afternoon wanting to know if you’d said anything to me or Derek about what leads you’re pursuing in this case. I also know I had passed on a message from a Father Jim just before Zanger came out here asking questions, and I know he’s out talking to this priest right now.” Glancing around the half-full squad room, April rolled her swivel chair closer and lowered her voice. “The boss

was not happy and was bitching something about this case stirring too many people up for too little chance of finding a new suspect.” She scrunched up her face and looked at him through one squinted eye. “Eighteen years is a long time, man. You have to wonder if he’s right.”

Son of a bitch.

“He’s not. You’re not.” Braden locked his desk, tucked his scrap of paper into his pocket, and got to his feet. “I have a lead to track down right now,” he said as he shrugged into his blazer. “I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Braden booked it the hell out of the station. He had to get Abby and Rodrigo and go talk to Mrs. Bruno right now. The interviews Braden had managed so far with some of Richard’s old coworkers had not produced anything useful, making the church seem more and more the place where he would find an answer. Braden figured he needed to slip in one more interview with Father Jim and some of the church’s employees while he could still claim ignorance about his right to pursue this case. Once he talked to Zanger, even with Abby’s new memory that eliminated Cormack as the killer, all bets could be off.

* * *

An hour later, Martha Bruno plunked her coffee cup down on her kitchen table with resounding force. “I don’t buy it, little missy,” she said, looking right at Abby. “Not one bit.”

Martha Bruno sat next to her husband at their kitchen table. Abby had taken the seat across from her. Braden was situated next to Abby, and upon entering the kitchen to a table with only four chairs, Rodrigo had assured the Brunos that he was fine leaning against the counter.

The sharp tone of Martha’s voice caught Abby off guard. “Why not?”

“I don’t know why. I just don’t. Call it my gut.” Martha’s dyed black hair moved in one big hair-sprayed wave. “Your mama was too devout a Christian to cheat on her husband. Even if she’d fallen out of love with your daddy, she was too close to Jesus to forget that adultery is a sin.”

Abby bit down the bitchy retort that wanted to spew out of her mouth. “What about the word *baby* I heard her say to the killer?”

“I do not know.” Martha waved her work-roughened hand in a dismissive flip. “You were eight years old, and you were probably already scared because you knew you were gonna get in trouble for running away from my house without telling anybody. On top of that, you hear someone attacking your mama and daddy. You probably did not hear what you think you did. I do not think Elaine would have used an endearment with someone about to kill her.”

“But I clearly remember your message on the answering machine, which you confirm was right.”

“A message is a lot more words strung together than one word slipping out during a terrifying moment,” Martha responded. “It’s a lot easier for your ears to

mistake hearing one word than a whole message. I simply will not believe Elaine was unfaithful to her husband. It would be like being unfaithful to her child, and she would never do that to you."

Abby clamped her teeth together so hard her jaw hurt. "People find ways to justify acting on something they desperately want all the time. My mom was human." Spreading her hands on the table, Abby mentally told herself to focus rather than argue. "Let's narrow it down to the last year of her life, and please think hard before you answer." She held Martha's stubborn gaze with an unblinking one of her own. "My mother never said *an-y-thing* or acted in a way that *ever* gave you pause and made you think something was going on? Even if you didn't suspect an affair, was there anything in just her behavior in general that now might make you think something was off? Did you ever come over to the house and find a man there she had trouble explaining or that you simply didn't recognize? Did she ever mention a man's name more than once when you guys talked? A male friend or someone from the congregation spoken of one too many times? Anything like that?"

With her chin propped in her hand, Martha drummed her fingers against her plump cheek. "I don't recall Elaine mentioning one person's name more than another, although she did speak of male members of the church as friends. But she talked about just as many women, and often these people were spouses to each other. I suppose I can't say anything one hundred percent, but the truth is"—her dark eyebrows went up—"I'd be more likely to think your daddy was having an affair than your mama."

That jerked Abby upright, but Braden put his hand on her leg under the table before she could utter a word.

"Do you have some evidence of that, Mrs. Bruno?" Braden asked.

Martha looked at Braden in the same way she used to look at her sons when they would try to spin a tall tale for her. "No, Detective. I said *to think* not that I knew."

Braden's lips turned up just the slightest bit at the edge. "Fair enough." He scribbled some kind of shorthand note in his pad without breaking eye contact from Martha. "Then what would make you *think* it enough to say what you just did?"

The woman shrugged her linebacker shoulders. "Nothing concrete. Except that Rich was less involved in the church than Elaine. Not that he didn't want to go or that Elaine dragged him there every week. I just know Elaine volunteered for a lot more of the church-sponsored outreach programs than Rich did. Plus, Rich took a fair number of fishing and hunting weekends that men are like to do." Martha's voice rose in speculative tones with each sentence she spoke. "He could have just as easily been shacking up with some gal in a motel off the interstate for two days as to be at a camp in the woods or sitting in a boat on the river." She reached across the table and petted Abby's hand. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm not saying that it is so, just that I'd be more likely to believe it from him than your mother."

A lump Abby had sworn she wouldn't let herself build up to anymore once again sat in her throat, and she hated the weakness. "No, it's all right. I came to hear your thoughts; that's what you're giving me. I can't throw stones at you just because I might not like what you say." She took a fortifying sip of her water to cover the strain in her voice. "About either one of them."

Martha's ample bosom lifted and fell as she sighed. "Heck, Abby, sweetheart. I don't know if what I'm saying is right or not." A mothering softness filled her hazel eyes, and she offered a gentle smile as she ran two fingers down Abby's cheek. "Everything happened such a long time ago. Maybe it's just that you look so much like your mama but I can't look at your face without thinking of Elaine and then feeling like I'd be a sinner if I ever thought she could cheat on her marriage vows. I don't believe she did. But I suppose more importantly to you, I definitely do not have any evidence that she did. If there were troubles, she never confided in me about them." Martha squeezed Abby's hand one more time and then withdrew to her side of the table. "Nor did your daddy, for that matter. I was just speculating, as I often tend to do."

"It's okay," Abby answered, smiling tightly. "Sometimes speculations turn out to be correct."

Braden soothed Abby's thigh under the table with the steady weight of his hand. "And you, sir?" He shifted to Anthony. "I've read your official statement of that night, but I have to ask again if you remember anything else from when you entered the house to find Abby. The smallest detail might prove very useful."

His lips pursed, Anthony shook his head. "Not more than what I told those detectives all those years ago. The den and the bedroom were ransacked. I passed the den and peeked in; I was looking for somebody when nobody answered my knock. Everything that had been on the desk was on the floor, like it had been swiped, which made me think there might have been a fight that started in there and ended in the bedroom." Anthony's focus slid to Abby, and obvious pity filled his gaze. "Once I saw that bedroom and Abby folded up next to her mother, I couldn't think or remember much more than that. A scene like that fills up your mind and takes over everything else."

"Yes, it does," Braden said. "You're right." He reached across the table and engulfed Anthony's hand in a fast shake. "Thank you for your help. Both of you."

"Yes, thank you." Abby stood as Braden did. "We won't take up any more of your time."

Martha quickly rounded the table and gave Abby a fast, suffocating hug. "It was good to see you again, sweetheart." She took Abby's shoulders in hand and held her at arms length. "I know it probably won't do you any good to hear it now, but I'd have taken you in if we didn't already have the six boys of our own. We were barely holding our heads above water. That's why we ended up having to sell the orchard about two years after your parents passed away."

"It's all right, Mrs. Bruno. I did okay." The stupid choking sensation made Abby's chest burn again. "I promise."

"You're all grown up." The woman touched her fingertips to Abby's face, tilting it up into the light. "I guess you can call me Martha now."

This formidable woman looked exactly as she had eighteen years ago. "That might feel weird. I'll always think of you as Mrs. Bruno."

"Whatever gets you picking up the phone, I'll answer," Martha said. "Don't be a stranger."

"I won't." Abby felt Rodrigo move in to protect her back, and with Braden at her side, it allowed the strangling in her throat to ease some. "Thank you again. I appreciate your thoughts."

Martha linked her arm in Abby's and led her to the door. "I hope you find out who did it but don't let it hold up your life anymore if you don't."

Inviting heat from the two men closing ranks around her made Abby's answer an easy one. "No, I won't, Mrs. Bruno." As she followed Braden and Rodrigo into the hallway, she offered her old neighbor a little wave. "You have a good day."

Martha lifted her hand in return. "Bye."

In silence, Abby walked between Braden and Rodrigo to the elevator, her mind a jumble of more confusing half pieces of speculative information than ever. She didn't know what the heck to believe or where to turn anymore to find the truth.

Once inside the elevator, as soon as the door dinged closed, Rodrigo faced Abby and Braden, his shoulder braced against the wall. "I'm just the observer here. What did you guys think?"

What do I think? As the elevator started its descent, Abby sifted through the handful of people she'd spoken to in person thus far and tried to sort the wheat from the chaff. "I think the edge in insight still has to go to Lorene," she finally answered. "Lorene knew my mother a lot better than Martha did, even though Martha might have been at my house more, due to being closer by."

The elevator opened to the apartment lobby; Braden held his hand against the doors, letting Abby and Rodrigo out first. "And you can't discount that Martha openly admits she's just chucking curveballs based on her gut," Braden said. He walked backward out of the building and through the parking lot, facing Abby and Rodrigo. "It was pure speculation in a different way from the careful suspicions Lorene presented when I talked to her."

"I agree." Abby's mind wandered ahead to their next destination, and an excited tickle made her belly do a flip-flop. "But I wonder if I could throw Martha's suspicions about my father in Father Jim's face. Maybe I can get him to react and accidentally admit to something about my *mother* in his efforts to defend my *father* the way he tried to do with my mother the other day."

Rodrigo barked a sharp laugh that filled the open air. "You have one hell of a twisted mind, Bit." He curled his hand around her nape and pulled her to his side. "Not only did I somehow understand what you just said, but the element of surprise is probably a good idea. Not that I'm the expert or anything." Rodrigo's focus shifted

to Braden. "Because I gotta say, I didn't think Mr. Bruno's idea about the fight starting in the den and ending in the bedroom made that much sense."

They reached Braden's car, but rather than get in, Rodrigo leaned against the rear door, his arms crossed. "I mean, I've been in some fights in my life, and while I'm not saying this with pride, one or two actually involved a knife. In all the fights I've been in, I've never moved around one room enough to make a mess, down a hallway, and then into another room where we tussled enough for me to make *another* mess, all *before* someone not only slashed at my neck, but then another person too." His mouth twisted, and his dark brows pulled so tightly together they looked like one line. "A real fight doesn't happen in the way they choreograph fights in the movies. You just don't cover that much territory when you're taking swings at each other. It's a very focused act. At least it always was for me."

"The precise nature of the fatal wounds, as well as the lack of significant bruising on any other parts of the victims, doesn't suggest a drawn-out battle," Braden responded. "The kind of fight you're talking about is not what I think happened here. A surprise attack on the killer's part could have feasibly started out in the den. He isn't successful. Richard ends up running for the bedroom with the assailant in pursuit. Maybe it draws Elaine's attention in a way it hadn't before, and she comes into the room. I don't know. That doesn't seem entirely plausible to me either, based on Abby's assessment that her mother was attacked first, but we have to keep putting scenarios together until we find one that makes sense with the evidence we have."

Rodrigo nodded. "Got it."

Now that Abby had started having these confusing dreams and flashbacks, she spent the better part of every day trying to find the right pieces to fit together and make a complete puzzle. "We do know my father was having that fight in the den, though," she said, her focus on Braden as she tried to work a scenario out on her own. "So let's assume for a moment it was with the man my mom was having an affair with. Maybe that shout I heard was from a short while earlier in the day or even the day before or week before, and the guy left but then came back? Maybe he figured if my father found out and my mother confessed, then he would be exposed? So maybe he decided to come back and eliminate the threat?"

"It's definitely possible." Braden unlocked the car doors from his keychain and moved around the front of the vehicle to the driver's side. "It makes total sense that the person she was cheating with could have as much to lose as she did if everything came out in the open. He easily could have been married too. Would your mother have left the den in disarray for more than an evening?"

Abby shot Braden a little glare from over the hood of the car. "My mother was a traditional homemaker, so I'm not going to assume that was a broadly sexist question about women cleaning up after men but rather one specified to her life."

Braden swung back around the vehicle and loomed over Abby, his hand planted on the hood of the car by her head. "Honey, I've had an apartment and have been cleaning up after myself for a dozen years." A fingertip from his free hand slid

down her sternum and belly to land at her belt buckle. "I'm not making any assumptions that you're going to become my maid just because I've seen you naked."

Rodrigo joined Braden and caged Abby in, his eyes as dark on her as Braden's were light. "Me either, Bit. I've been taking care of myself for even longer than he has. Shit." He licked his fuller lower lip. "I have a whole house that I keep clean on my own."

Something in the way Rodrigo mentioned his home stirred Abby's blood and made her mouth go dry. "I have never seen your mystery house, Rodrigo. You keep it very private."

"You can see it tonight, if you want," Rodrigo responded. "I can make you both dinner." His hand joined Braden's on Abby's waist. "We can spend the night there too." He glanced at Braden and held on him for a moment before coming back to Abby. "If you both want to."

Abby couldn't believe how ridiculously fast her heart raced. "Really?"

The intensity in Rodrigo's black stare only increased. "Yep."

"Damn, Santiago." Braden pushed off from the car and turned away to adjust a visible bulge forming in his jeans. "Apparently there are things other than seeing you naked and hearing you say *shit* that make me hot."

Abby's skin warmed under the exchange. "Amen to that."

"Wait till you see it." Rodrigo's gaze went from Abby to Braden, and the smile that accompanied it was downright full of sinful pride. "It'll have you wet and you hard without my ever having to say a word."

"Stop talking about it, then," Braden said as he moved back to the driver's side and climbed in behind the wheel. "I don't want to walk into a church with an erection."

Abby kept mum. Nobody had to know Rodrigo's invitation to spend time in his home had already made her very, very damp.

* * *

Sitting a dozen rows back in the church, Abby found herself sinking into the peace and safety this building used to envelop her in as a little girl. The sunlight streaming in through the myriad of stained-glass windows cast colorful shadows on the hardwood flooring and pews. Abby could remember sitting in this place with her father, trying to catch the different colors on the back of her hand, and her mother whispering at them to pay attention to Father Jim. Her mother always smiled over Abby's head at her father when she said it, though, so Abby knew her mom wasn't truly upset.

After service, Abby sometimes ran around with the other kids in the grassy area behind the church. Most times, though, when her shyness overwhelmed her, Abby would stick to either her mom or dad and navigate the after-church socializing that happened between the adults. Even that left her warm and comforted inside. She rarely understood what the big people were actually saying; Abby had just liked

listening to all the laughter and seeing the hugs and slaps on the back and occasional group cheer. Most of the time, Sundays were the best days because her father didn't have to go to work and her mother didn't have some charity duty that Abby couldn't attend with her. They all stayed together. From the moment Abby crawled out of bed and they all ate breakfast, until her eyes were so droopy her dad would scoop her off her mom's lap and carry her to bed, they spent it as a family.

Then they died, and it all went away.

As Abby sat here now, frustrated that she couldn't find a single person in this place who would say anything more than that her mother was a fine Christian woman and her dad a hardworking provider and family man, Abby wondered when she'd stopped believing in church and God. Then she wondered if her parents were up in heaven sad and disappointed that she'd let go of her faith.

Maybe I was tired of hanging on after it let go of me.

Hearing the cynicism in her thoughts now, Abby knew what her parents would say: *Faith didn't let go of you, baby, nor did God. People did. We're all imperfect, and you have to learn to forgive.*

Rustling sounds and the *squeak* of wood tickled Abby's ears, making her open her eyes. Father Jim now sat in the pew in front of her. He had his body shifted sideways so that he could look back at her.

"Your detective friend is persistent," he said. "If you'd like to question me in the same relentless manner, let me know so that I can rehydrate myself first."

Abby looked over her shoulder and found Braden sitting next to Rodrigo at the back of the church. He wore his best poker face, but Abby had started to learn how to read the subtle lines that formed around his mouth and the unblinking, alpha, straight-ahead stare that said he wanted to tear something apart. She knew without a doubt he had not succeeded with his questioning of the church's employees or Father Jim.

That leaves one final shot with me.

Bringing her attention back to the priest, Abby asked, "Would it matter if I changed my approach with you?"

The father settled his elbow on the back of the pew and rested the side of his face against his palm. "My answers would be the same, no matter how you frame your questions. I am not your enemy." Father Jim's voice gentled in a way that grated all Abby's exposed nerves. "I want to help."

"But not at the expense of my mother's memory," she fired back at him quickly.

"That is a trick question, Abigail." Father Jim might as well have said *ah-ah-ah* and wagged his finger. "You really have been spending time with Detective Crenshaw. He's rubbing off on you."

"You have no idea," she muttered under her breath.

"Pardon?"

“Nothing.” *Here goes nothing.* “I’ve thought about it some more anyway, and I think my dad might have been cheating on my mom just as hard as my mom was on him.” Abby spread her arms against the back of the pew and tapped her fingers in a lackadaisical beat against the wood. “Just a couple of Christian cheaters living a big old marriage lie.”

That got Father Jim pushing out of his casual position. “Don’t say that.” Professional distance slipped from his tone. “Don’t sully your parents’ image. It would sadden them, and it’s beneath you.”

“Beneath me?” Abby shoved forward to the edge of the seat and dropped her voice to a hiss. “Suddenly you know me again? You suddenly think we have such a connection between us? You presume to know my mind and heart and believe you can use guilt on me?”

“Your parents loved you. That. Is. All. That. Matters.” The priest thumped his fingertips into the pew with each word. “They would have wanted you to have a good, fulfilling life. Nothing else—”

“You mean like they did?” Abby cut down the father’s pandering lecture. “Where my mom was cheating, but hey, my dad was probably neglecting her with his fishing and hunting trips, so he probably deserved it. But then again, my mother probably came to you and confessed her sins every week, and you told her to say some Hail Marys, so that absolved her, so everything is good in the eyes of God for another week. Right?” She felt her mouth twist with judgment but couldn’t halt the oncoming crash. “Is a life like that what you think would make them proud of me, *Father?*”

“Look at what this investigation is doing to you, Abigail. You’re destroying every good memory you had of your parents. You don’t want to do that. You’ll be lesser for it.” Ruddy coloring pulled to the surface of Father Jim’s face, and he scratched his fingers through his blond hair, mussing the clean style. “Come to Mass this Sunday. Come let the people who knew them tell you what good members of this church community they were. Let them tell you stories that will remind you how much they loved you.” He took a deep, visible breath, and when he spoke again, he once more sounded and looked like a kindly, sympathetic priest. “Come spend time in this house and let God help you begin to heal.”

I want to smack that perfection off his face.

“You want me to come to your church again?” Abby licked her lips as dryness took over her mouth. She could barely keep herself tied to her seat.

“Yes.”

“Can my friends come with me?” she asked, as a full realization that this man would never tell her anything substantive about her parents sank in and pushed her core past its tipping point.

He looked past her shoulder to where Rodrigo and Braden sat. “Of course.”

Abby looked over her shoulder too. She found Braden and Rodrigo still waiting for her, patiently, as she knew they would be, and everything calmed and settled in place for her.

I couldn't hide them for the world.

Abby came back to Father Jim, and the new warmth inside her absorbed much of the rancid tone from her voice. "Are Detective Crenshaw and Mr. Santiago welcome if you know I share a bed with them, and you know I care about them more than I ever thought possible to care about any one person, let alone two? Are they welcome if you know they care about me, as well as about each other, and we're somehow making it work as a couple or a threesome or whatever you want to label it? Am I welcome now"—Abby jabbed her breast as she looked around at all the familiar nooks and crannies in this church and wished for the comfort it once offered her—"after what I've just told you?"

Only the slightest flare in Father Jim's eyes betrayed any sense of surprise. "I would not turn you away, Abigail, but I would counsel you that such a relationship is not healthy for your well-being, nor is it part of God's best plan for you."

"Because I'm with both of them at the same time?" Abby asked. "Or because they're both fucking each other too?"

The priest's sigh sounded like that of a parent tired of scolding a child who would not learn. "If you're trying to shock me into a response that you think will make you feel better or if you're lying because you're angry that I won't tell you what you want to hear about your mother, I won't succumb to such tactics."

Rejection, frustration, anger, and hurt added to a growing knot in Abby's stomach that she feared might overtake her if she sat with this man for one more minute.

She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders and got to her feet. Stalling at the end of the pew, she looked at Father Jim, and for the first time, pity went through her. "I guess I accept now that you're never going to tell me anything about my parents. For whatever twistedly noble reason, I get that you'd rather let their killer remain free than tarnish their memory. What you don't understand is that I haven't stopped loving them." She determinedly blinked moisture from her eyes. "Nothing you could have told me would have changed that. I love them, simple as that. The thing is, though"—one look to the back of the church, to her men, filled Abby's voice with strength again—"I love those guys back there too, and I don't want to sit in a building with a man at the helm who won't embrace how much they cherish and want to take care of me. I've never felt more loved by anyone than I do by them."

Father Jim stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his chin unwavering. His black clothing and white collar, which used to fill Abby with such gladness, felt like nothing so much as a steel-enforced wall keeping her out today.

"You have nothing more to say?" Abby asked, her arms crossed around her middle. "Like with my parents, I suppose you wouldn't dare lower yourself to speak badly of my relationship, but your silence speaks volumes." She looked down,

caught her fractured reflection in the hammered silver dome of one of her favorite ring designs, and the memory of her mother reminded Abby why she was here. "We're going to find my parents' killer with or without your help. It would have been nice if you could have found it in your heart to make the task a little easier." Abby matched his unblinking stare with one of her own. "I know you know who it was, Father." Her voice dropped to a scratch as memories and loss overtook her. "One day I will too."

Abby managed to perform a quarter turn and start walking with her head high and eyes dry, but the pressure burned, and she started leaking tears not two steps down the center aisle. She picked up the pace and dropped her head as she ran, cursing herself for letting Father Jim get to her and for his putting a damper on the warm glow she'd been feeling before he sat down and opened his mouth.

Running out of the church with Braden and Rodrigo hot on her heels asking what was wrong, Abby slammed straight into another person with a *thunk*.

Abby looked up into Lorene Jones's eyes.

"Oh, hello, dear." Lorene's wrinkled skin glowed with the warmth of the sunny February day. "I was just coming to talk to Father Jim about you."

Every hair on Abby's body shot on end. "Were you?"

"Yes." As she circled Abby, Lorene squeezed Abby's hand, her eyes beaming with excitement. "I talked with Bill and the kids, and we would all like to invite you for dinner. I was hoping the father would like to join us. He is so pleased to have you back in our lives as well."

The priest's cool disdain of a moment ago doused any momentary pleasure at hearing Lorene's invitation. "Father Jim's pleasure at having me back is conditional," Abby shared. "He won't want to sit at your table with me if I bring Braden and Rodrigo." She reached back, found hands waiting for her, and linked herself up to warm, sure holds. "And I won't come without them."

Lorene looked down at Abby's fingers entwined with two different men's, then to the church, and glanced to Abby, her face now pale. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"I just explained to the father that these two men are more than friends," Abby stated, pushed to stand up with the men who had, without recognition, been standing up for her since before this investigation or a sexual relationship had ever begun. "We're intimate together. They are more important to me than any other souls on this earth, and if they are not welcome in this church, or anywhere, for that matter, with me, then I will not leave them behind like some dirty secret and attend alone."

"What?" A frown pulled bracket lines around Lorene's mouth and across her brow. "Do you mean... Oh." Her voice dropped. "Oh. I don't think... How..." Finally, Lorene's face drained of the rest of its color. "Oh dear."

She understands now.

As had happened inside the church with the priest, Lorene went silent.

The punch struck harder in the gut than Abby had anticipated, and it caused her to flinch. "You go have your talk with Father Jim and get back to me. If you decide not to..." She couldn't quite make herself say she would understand. Abby pulled away from Rodrigo and Braden. She needed to shield herself from Lorene's intruder eyes as the tears started leaking again. "Anyway, that's your choice." She didn't wait for Rodrigo and Braden as she took off for the car.

The smooth black asphalt cushioned the pounding of Abby's feet as she went from walking with speed to outright running, as if putting distance between her and Lorene could protect her from the cutting rejection. These dreams and nightmares had done more than open fissures in her memories of the day her parents died; they'd created enormous cracks in the shell she'd unknowingly put around her life.

Abby reached the car and folded herself against one of the front tires as an onslaught of emotions attacked her. The foster-care system had taught her how to be a survivor. She'd had to let it. The only other option was to constantly get eaten up and spit out by it until there was nothing left worth picking up and trying again. But in surviving, Abby had nailed shut any doors that allowed her a glimpse of the peace and joy in her past. She'd had to do it. If she'd kept herself open and only been given glimpses of what her life used to be, the solitude she'd had to learn to live with would have crushed her.

These dreams are opening all that up again, and I don't know how to close the door without shutting out Mom and Dad again. Without pushing out Rodrigo and Braden too.

Both men skidded to a halt on either side of Abby and dropped to their knees next to her. Braden took her hand and kissed the side of her head, and Rodrigo tucked one arm around her back and the other across her bent knees.

Rodrigo rubbed his thumb in a soothing circle over Abby's knee. "You look like you've gone through the wringer, Bit." His dark eyes pinned her to the side of the car. "Are you all right?"

Abby swiped the tear tracks off her cheeks. "I'm fine." She fanned her face with her hands. "God, I feel like such an emotional idiot." She blinked any residual wetness away and shifted her line of sight to Braden. "Plus, I shot my mouth off and definitely ruined any chance of Father Jim speaking to us again."

Braden glanced in the direction of the church, and his eyes grew as hard as the jade stone they sometimes looked like. "He isn't going to give us the answers anyway. We'll just have to find them by going around him."

"That was my thought too," Abby responded. "Still, I didn't have to let him get under my skin like I did. He didn't even have to push my buttons." She jammed her fist into her thigh hard enough to make it hurt. "I uncovered them and set every one of them off all by myself."

"Hey." Braden wrapped his hand around her braid and tugged her face out of hiding. "This is very personal for you, honey. Accepting that it is so, and that you will experience difficult moments that you might not handle in an ice-cold manner, isn't a sign of weakness."

As soon as the man paused, Rodrigo picked up where Braden left off. "For the first time since you were a little girl, you're seeing people who knew your parents and you, and in some way or another, they all let you go. That has to hurt. It doesn't matter that Mrs. Jones had a good reason; rejection still cuts and bleeds you out the same. You're dealing with it almost twenty years later, so you feel dumb that you want to cry, but that doesn't mean you are. You're definitely not. But you have to let yourself feel it so that you can move through it, rather than trying to build a thick skin so you can better deflect it. You have the softest, most incredible skin, Bit." Rodrigo moved his fingers under the hem of Abby's shirt, rubbed the bare skin at the base of her spine, and pushed away some of the weight pressing her into the asphalt. "I don't want it to get hard because you don't dare let yourself cry in front of Mrs. Jones." He moved his hand from Abby's knee and put it on Braden's thigh. "Or in front of Braden and me."

Abby cupped Rodrigo's cheek, loving the smooth, warm skin that housed a solid jaw. "Were you always this amazing?"

"I hid it under a nice armor of 'asshole' most of the time." Rodrigo flashed one of his know-it-all smiles, but his eyes quickly deepened to onyx. "I don't want anyone to think I'm weak either. But maybe I'm starting to see that it's okay to be a little bit exposed with the two of you."

His elbow braced on his knee, Braden spoke through the hand partially covering his mouth. "I've been aching for this relationship since the night I met you two, but I have no experience navigating a successful partnership with one person, let alone two. I just want to be with you guys and take care of you." Now it appeared as if his eyes glittered in a way he tried to blink away. "If I can't, if I let either of you down, if I hurt you, then I won't be able to look at myself in the mirror or think of myself as any kind of a man worth knowing." That gaze held on Abby's and tore through her heart. "You need this case solved," he said, his voice gruff, "for your own sense of peace, and I'm scared as hell I'm not going to be able to do it for you."

Abby scrubbed at her face and knew her cheeks were dry now because of Rodrigo and Braden. "The two of you are all I need to get through this, even if we never figure out who did it." She rose to her knees, lowered Braden's hand from his lips, and pressed a kiss to his palm. "I meant what I said to Lorene." Shifting, she leaned into Rodrigo and kissed his cheek. "I don't go anywhere where you're not welcome too."

Another fast smile lifted Rodrigo's lips at the edges. "Are we having a profound moment here?"

Braden cleared his throat. "We're all sufficiently serious and teary. I think so."

Dark eyes burned hot between Abby and Braden. "Is it sinful that I'm also feeling an incredible desire to strip you both naked and fuck you right here?" Rodrigo asked.

"Not for me, it isn't," Braden muttered as he adjusted the front of his jeans.

Abby refused to let her attention stray to the church. It didn't deserve a second more of her time. "Honestly, I wouldn't mind flipping Father Jim the finger in

exactly that way, even if it is petty of me.” She looked into Rodrigo’s eyes and let some of that vulnerability they’d just talked about show. “But even more than wanting to thumb my nose at him, I really want to see your house.”

Eyebrows arched with definite intent, Rodrigo said, “Some great places to fuck there too.”

Braden growled. “Let’s go.”

He took one of Abby’s hands, Rodrigo took the other, and together they hoisted her into their embrace.

Chapter Sixteen

Braden pulled into Rodrigo's drive, and nerves suddenly attacked Rodrigo as he viewed his house with new eyes. The front stucco facade, painted in a warm Tuscan amber hue, was virtually flat, with no steps or porch leading up to the thick oak front door. On either side of the door, beams reached out from the roof of the one-story home all the way to the perimeters, and on parallel below, Rodrigo had rustic planking running underfoot, serving as an abbreviated version of a front porch.

Rodrigo scrambled out of the backseat as soon as Braden killed the engine. Moving backward up the sun-bleached paver walkway, Rodrigo watched Abby and Braden as they took their first look at his home.

"I know it's not much to look at from the front," he said quickly, "but it's the inside that is unique."

"Are you kidding me?" Abby rushed up the walkway to Rodrigo's side, her gaze still running the length of the house, and then also glancing left and right at the simple drought-resistant landscaping. "It's completely inviting. I feel like I'm at a vacation villa in Spain or Italy or Puerto Rico or, I don't know, somewhere I can feel a cool breeze on my skin as I bask in the morning sun."

Braden crowded in behind Abby and met Rodrigo's gaze over her head. "I was just going to say *it's nice* and *I like it*, but all the subtext would have been what she just said."

In a wave, the tension stiffening Rodrigo's back and shoulders fell away, and the jackhammer nailing his gut lost its power. "Right." He palmed his key out of his pocket and unlocked the front door. "Let me show you the inside."

With one inward swing of the large door, Rodrigo stepped over the threshold of his home and bade Abby and Braden welcome. As soon as they entered, he shut the door behind them, leaned back against it, and beamed inside with silent pride.

The front room ran the length of the house and served as a living-room-and-office combo. The wall at Rodrigo's back was a cool white, the flooring beneath his feet was dark wood, and the furniture was clean and functional in warm, natural color palettes. It was simple yet inviting. He had deliberately kept everything minimal for one reason and one reason only.

Abby dropped her purse and rushed to that very reason right now. "Rodrigo." She put her nose to the glass. "It's breathtaking."

A picture window made up the entire inner wall of the room, and a courtyard lay beyond. Enclosed on all four sides by the house itself, the centerpiece of the courtyard was a pool tiled in varying shades of blue laid out in such a way as to create an ombré effect, making the pool look so bottomless one might think it was a lagoon. The secluded yard also had ample comfortable outdoor seating as well as solid teak table and chairs, a bar, and a fully functioning kitchen area.

Abby slowly turned around to face Rodrigo, her mouth agape. “I don’t see how this place didn’t sell in a snap.”

Rodrigo stuck out his hand in offering. “Let me show you why.”

As Abby closed her fingers around Rodrigo’s, Rodrigo reached out and snagged a silent Braden with his other hand and tugged the man along with them. He walked them around the west corner of the front room, came upon his open bedroom door, and pulled them both inside. Just like the living area, the inner wall of Rodrigo’s bedroom looked out onto the courtyard, which in his opinion, made one hell of a view at night. His king-size bed faced the glass, and again, simple furniture designs took a backseat to allow the full window wall to be the star. The bed butted the back wall, and open wood-framed arches cut into that wall at the ends.

“Those entrances lead into a narrow walk-in closet that runs the length of the room behind the wall. If you look across the way,” Rodrigo explained, leaning his shoulder against the window, “that’s the kitchen on the other side of the courtyard. It has a full pantry that mirrors the way I laid out the closet in here. It’s the same size as this space and doubles as sort of a half casual dining area as well as having the kitchen basics.

“And that door over there”—Rodrigo pointed to the front end of the far wall—“is the bathroom.” Abby stood the closest. With his hands shoved in his pockets, Rodrigo nudged his shoulder in her direction. “Go ahead.”

Abby pushed open the door, and from across the room, Rodrigo heard her gasp. “Oh wow.” She moved farther in and disappeared from Rodrigo’s sight, but her voice echoed back, “It’s beautiful.”

Braden followed Abby into the bathroom, and although Rodrigo had built it and had every detail memorized, he brought up the rear. Created to work with the corner of the house, the steam shower and soaking tub were separate pieces that butted up against each other at the corner. The tub had a step-up ledge, and the clear glass-encased shower had a stone tile bench, floor, and walls with twin showerheads that hit at different levels. A toilet and two individually set sinks rounded out the bathroom.

“Jesus Christ, man.” Braden let out a low whistle as he opened the shower door and stepped inside. “You could fit a whole basketball team in here.”

Rodrigo worked hard to keep the smile full of pride and ridiculous giddiness off his face. “All of a sudden Abby and I aren’t enough for you, Crenshaw?” He openly checked Braden out through the glass. “You need a whole team sharing your bed and bathroom now?”

Braden flipped Rodrigo the bird from inside the shower. “Jackass.”

On the outside, Rodrigo chuckled. On the inside, as he watched Braden and Abby ooh and ahh at all the little touches, he wanted to share everything about his decision to move walls and the risk he’d taken in completely reimagining this house from top to bottom. In response, he wanted Abby and Braden to tell him that everything he’d done was spot-on and great and that he’d chosen the right career and was great at what he did for a living. Instead, Rodrigo kept his explanations to a minimum and tried not to sound like a needy braggart.

“Rodrigo”—Abby rushed up to him and linked her arm through his—“the more I see, the better it gets.” She practically bounced at his side. “Show us the rest.”

Now comes the flaw that kept it from selling.

Rodrigo wanted to bask in Abby’s compliments, but radical design choices had cost him six figures and shaken his confidence. He guided her around the bend in the bathroom, past a small vanity area, and then pointed ahead. “Go through that door.”

Abby did, and it led them straight into a room that mirrored the first. A matching picture window ran the length of the inner wall. On the back wall, French doors opened up into Rodrigo’s backyard. The doors led to an open grassy area with seasonal flowers and foliage, as well as another group of outdoor seating that looked onto an open field as far as the eye could see. This was Rodrigo’s media room; it had plush leather seating on the far end around a big-screen TV mounted to the wall, and it also had a vintage pool table.

“My goodness, Rodrigo.” Abby spun from the French doors and crossed to the picture window. “Everywhere you look is breathtaking.”

Before Rodrigo could respond, Braden joined him at the pool table. “But your master bathroom links two rooms,” he said as he leaned his hip against the carved wood.

“You got it in one.” Rodrigo grimaced. “It’s a somewhat common thing in houses in other countries, but American buyers don’t tend to like double entrances for bathrooms, particularly for a master bathroom. I could have shrunk the width of the bedroom to provide a hallway along the west wall of the house. I could have done that and created a bridge from the front room to here, but the space it would have taken would have encroached on the bedroom’s width by a third, which basically would have put the foot of almost any bed to bumping up against the picture window.”

Abby crinkled her nose. “It would have killed the wonderful airy vibe in that room.”

“Absolutely.” Rodrigo wanted to hug her for so immediately picking up on that truth. “And unless I wanted the hallway to be dark, I would have had to put windows on that side wall, and even then, it still would have felt like an old dungeon hallway at night. I made a choice.” He shrugged. “When I took this house on, I knew it would be a risk. It didn’t have any of the practical elements of the

homes I usually choose to refurbish. This is basically four big rooms, only one of which is a bedroom, although I suppose someone could choose to make this a bedroom if they wanted to. There is another bathroom on the front end of the house, before you get to the kitchen, but it's just a half bath."

Rodrigo pushed away from the pool table and strolled to the wall of windows, his fingers tucked in his back pockets. He stared, could see into every other room in the house, and had an odd feeling in his belly that it was his child to protect. "When I saw this place, I immediately knew how I'd want to restructure it, and it was too good a bargain to let pass. As we were fixing it up, I could hear the guys mumbling that it wouldn't appeal to enough people to sell, and they were right. It's not practical for a family, and the outskirts of Coleman aren't exactly where couples decide to retire, so that severely limited the buying pool."

As if they knew his throat had gone a little bit tight, Abby and Braden moved in on either side of him. He could see a faint reflection of each of them in the window, and that, along with the contact against his sides, allowed Rodrigo to find his voice again. "After about six months on the market, I decided it would make more sense for me to break my apartment lease and move in myself. At first I thought I'd continue to try and sell it, but it has been about four months since I even saw a potential buyer, and I don't think I want to anymore."

"It has your personality stamped all over it." Abby leaned her head against Rodrigo's shoulder and looked out at the courtyard Rodrigo hoped guests would think had an inviting ambience. "You don't want to part with it because you've already made it your own."

"I have to give you credit, man." Braden rubbed his big hand across Rodrigo's shoulders. "I had you pegged all wrong on this place. I thought it would be a cavern with a bed, a couch, and a TV. Instead, you've staked a claim on it and made it warm and inviting." He worked his fingers into Rodrigo's nape with an inviting massage. "Nice work."

Rodrigo suddenly felt ten fucking feet tall. "Do you want to take a closer look at the courtyard?" He reached up and fingered open a lock tucked out of the way at the top of the track. "These walls of windows consist of three panels each and open up for direct access. They do for all four rooms." The latch gave, and with one push, the center panel silently moved on its track, out of the way. "The fridge behind the bar is stocked, and the pool is heated too."

Abby squeezed Rodrigo's arm, half dragging him outside. "The pool is heated?"

"Yep."

"You thought of everything." With one move, Abby kicked off her ballet flats and let her shawl fall to the ground. Her gaze going downright sultry, she undid her shirt one button at a time, revealing pale, smooth flesh. "I thought I was hungry but I think all I need right now is something physical to exhaust me away from this day." One snap of her bra's front clasp and Abby drew the lacy material aside to reveal her small, perfect breasts. "Come on, boys." Her jeans and panties

disappeared in one smooth motion, leaving her enticingly bare. “I’m not going to be able to work up a big enough sweat all by myself.”

As Abby dived into the pool, her pale, naked body sliced through the water and moved under the surface in a graceful line. She didn’t come up for air until she reached the other end. When she did, she found the little shelf under the water and perched herself on it. Her sleek arms went wide across the lip of the pool at her back, her fiery hair sat slick against her scalp and down her back, and her blue, blue eyes stole the vibrancy of the pool’s indigo tiles.

The water bobbed right under Abby’s breasts, and her smile rivaled the late-afternoon sunlight glinting across the pool’s surface. “Coming?”

His hand on his belt buckle, Rodrigo turned to Braden, his cock stirring as it caught up with his dirty mind. “Do you swim?”

Braden kicked off a boot. “Hell yeah, I do.”

Rodrigo let every wicked, immoral thought in his head show in his eyes. “First one in gets to turn her over the side of the pool and fuck her until she can’t walk to the bed on her own.”

“I heard that,” Abby shouted. In the next second, she rolled over, pushed her pretty ass above the waterline, and looked back at them from over her shoulder. With a wiggle, she practically purred, “I’m waiting.”

Forget rules or *ready, set, go*. Rodrigo and Braden dived into the pool at the same time, still fully clothed.

* * *

Rodrigo stirred and blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the moonlight streaming into the bedroom. He hadn’t yet gotten used to falling asleep with one person in his bed, let alone two, and had woken up multiple times in the handful of nights since sharing one with Abby and Braden.

Sleeping in the middle tonight, Rodrigo rolled to his left to check on Abby first. She lay curled on her side, naked and lovely as anything Rodrigo had ever seen. And best of all, sleeping peacefully. She hadn’t slept a full night in God knew how long, but maybe he and Braden had exhausted her enough with their activities outside that she had no room in her brain for nightmares or confusing memories tonight.

Thank God. Rodrigo rubbed his hand down her arm and accepted the constriction happening in his heart and throat with a minimum of fear for what it meant, even if he couldn’t bring himself to say it yet. Abby didn’t need heartfelt declarations or more emotional baggage thrown at her door right now. *She just needs me—us—to have her back. And she needs this uninterrupted rest.*

He dipped down, brushed a kiss against her bare shoulder, and whispered, “You’re gonna be okay, Bit. I promise.”

A warm, firm weight suddenly blanketed Rodrigo’s back, and a moment later, Braden rested his chin on Rodrigo’s upper arm. “You watch over her like a warrior,

you know.” He reached over and covered Rodrigo’s hand where it rested on Abby’s hip. “You have since the day I met the two of you.”

Rodrigo felt a small smile appear on his lips as he flashed back to that day in Christian and Jonah’s kitchen, to the sudden appearance of a new alpha male into their lives. “I knew you wanted her. You have a good cop face, but I could fucking smell your desire in that room.” He craned his neck and glared at Braden. “I really didn’t like it.”

“No shit. You wanted her too badly yourself.” Braden rolled away from Rodrigo’s back, and Rodrigo twisted his neck even further to see the man’s smirk. “Your cock was like a hunting dog pointing at the skittish fox hiding in the bushes.” Braden framed his hands around his own prick and moved in small intervals, as if his dick were searching for a radar signal. “You were already scenting her and didn’t want anyone else marking territory too.”

“You’re right.” Rodrigo clenched his fingers around Abby’s hip and then yanked his hand away with a silent curse to himself not to wake her up. “I didn’t.”

His eyes on Rodrigo, Braden shifted onto his side and braced his head on his palm. “Took you a long time to realize I was circling just as hard around you.”

Braden stared without censure, and Rodrigo swallowed against the dryness taking over his mouth. “Yeah.”

The man raised a perfectly arched brow. “But you’re getting there now?”

“Working on it.” Rodrigo let out a long, even breath and tried to control the thumping in his chest. “Still trying to wrap my brain around wanting you just as much as I want her.” He shuttled his gaze back and forth between the soft beauty of Abby to Braden’s efficient hard lines, marveling that they were both happily naked in his bed. *Goddamn*. He looked back to Braden with a shake of his head. “And that it’s okay with both of you that I do.”

Braden’s gaze softened and went even paler with the reflection of the moon. “It is, Rigo.” Leaning up, he grazed his lips against Rodrigo’s with a barely there kiss.

The gentle contact immediately ignited Rodrigo. Everything he’d done these last days—that he’d always considered forbidden—and all the things he’d fantasized about trying flashed before his eyes and shot a reaction straight to his cock.

Rodrigo grabbed Braden around the neck and kept their mouths close together. “I want you.” He scraped their lips harder and teased with his tongue. “I want you the way you’ve had me.”

Braden strained against Rodrigo and clung to the kiss. His fingers dug into Rodrigo’s waist and around to his back, pulling Rodrigo on top of him. With eyes shining bright, Braden rubbed his thumb across Rodrigo’s sensitized lips. “You can have me whenever you want me.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, Rodrigo tried to fight the feel of Braden’s thumb moving against his mouth. He did his best not to revel in their chests, stomachs, and penises crushed against one another or to hear the man’s almost

silent catch of breath as Rodrigo rocked into him. Sensation after sensation after sensation kept piling on, though, and overwhelmed Rodrigo.

Too fucking much.

Caving into the need for full contact, Rodrigo looked right into Braden's eyes. "I want you right now," he said and swooped down, stealing a rough, consuming kiss.

Braden opened up and accepted Rodrigo's tongue with an eager, sexy little noise, creating a new flood of testosterone that rushed to every pore and crevice in Rodrigo's body. The idea that Rodrigo could pull such a response out of a bigger man who liked controlling everything in his daytime world consumed Rodrigo and pushed him deeper into the kiss. Rodrigo took with ruthless abandon, sweeping Braden's cheeks and teeth and roof of his mouth, forcing his tongue so deep he clinked their teeth. Braden held on through the whole thing, kissing Rodrigo back with nearly equal aggression, and clamped his thighs against Rodrigo's hips, urging Rodrigo closer into the intimate hold.

Rodrigo might have been happy kissing Braden for the rest of the night, but the man's erection knifed into Rodrigo's stomach with persistence, and it shocked Rodrigo to find his mouth filling with saliva in response. His balls ached and pulled in his sac too.

Tearing his mouth off Braden's, Rodrigo shoved the man's head back into the pillow. He exposed the column of Braden's throat and started licking his way downward, savoring the hint of salty sweat as he swirled his tongue around Braden's Adam's apple.

"Ohh fuck..." Braden jerked as Rodrigo sucked. "That's good." He tunneled his fingers into Rodrigo's hair. "You're gonna kill me if you don't stop."

One glance upward and Rodrigo found Braden's mossy gaze. "I want another taste of your cock."

"Then I take it back." Chuckling roughly, Braden untangled his fingers from Rodrigo's hair and shoved against his shoulders. "Keep going."

Rodrigo nipped Braden's chin and scraped his teeth down the man's throat. Braden pushed at Rodrigo's shoulders, but Rodrigo moved at his own pace, taking the time to explore the firm, warm skin beneath his mouth. Solid muscle sculpted Braden's shoulders, arms, and chest, and Rodrigo ran his tongue or grazed his lips over every inch of it, taking extra time to nibble the tiny pebbled peaks of Braden's copper-colored nipples. Braden moaned softly and arched his back with the simple torment, which sent more blood speeding to Rodrigo's cock.

Braden's little noises spurred matching ones out of Rodrigo. Rock-solid six-pack abs awaited Rodrigo, and as he moved down Braden's stomach, he outlined every visible line of muscle with his tongue, loving it every time Braden quivered under his touch. When Rodrigo reached the soft patch of skin at the base of Braden's lower belly, he could feel the wave of pure heat emanating from Braden's erection where it pushed upward, the tip only centimeters from Rodrigo's mouth.

God, I want that piece of meat so fucking bad.

His lips right there, a breath away from contact, Rodrigo looked up the length of Braden's torso into white fire burning in the man's eyes.

"Don't toy with me," Braden pleaded. Balanced on his elbows, his chest rose and fell visibly with each breath he took. "You're gonna give me more damn gray hairs every second you wait."

Without breaking eye contact, Rodrigo dipped out his tongue and swiped it across Braden's slit. The man's lower body jolted, and Rodrigo swelled inside with masculine prowess. "I like your gray hairs, Crenshaw. They're fucking sexy." He took the thick root of Braden's cock in hand and gave it a preview squeeze. "I like them almost as much as I like you." Unable to find his voice anymore, Rodrigo opened wide and sucked Braden's knob into his mouth.

Burst after burst of new male flavors Rodrigo hadn't yet grown accustomed to attacked his taste buds and sank into his bloodstream. A rough cry from Braden accompanied by a bucking of his hips pushed Rodrigo deeper down on Braden's length, hungry for more. Rodrigo didn't exactly know what to do in practical application yet, and he understood he wasn't capable of accepting Braden's entire cock into his mouth, but that didn't stop him from moaning around Braden's thick prick and learning on the job. After two or three fumbling attempts, Rodrigo managed to pump his fist up and down the lower half of Braden's cock while he tongued and sucked like hell on the top portion, leaving plenty enough saliva behind to jerk the man off with a good, rough pull. Soon, Rodrigo found himself pushing for more, working more and more toward a mouth filled with every bit of Braden he could get. He tried to take more of Braden's cock and even managed to cover another glorious inch, but that was as much as he could accept without gagging, and it wasn't nearly enough at all.

Braden moaned and swished his hips against the bedding with every drag Rodrigo sucked off the top of his length, but Rodrigo wanted the man screaming and shooting his load all over the crisp white sheets. Growling when he tried again and couldn't take Braden all the way down his throat, Rodrigo spit him out and traced a line down a thickly ridged vein to Braden's smooth red balls. Each high, tight orb moved and pulled, and Rodrigo smiled with wicked intent as he pushed Braden's legs up and apart, wanting a bit more room to play.

One swirling lick around the entire area had Braden hissing for more. When Rodrigo sucked one testicle past his lips, the man shouted that it was too good and begged Rodrigo to stop. Having already seen how much Braden could withstand, Rodrigo ignored the hoarse plea and went to town in earnest, suckling and tugging on one nut and then moving to the other to give it similar treatment. As he did that, he locked his fingers around Braden's cock and began stroking him from root to tip. Every time Rodrigo sucked on Braden's nuts, his own balls pulled against his body in response and shoved him into needing more. Rodrigo drew one of Braden's balls into his mouth again, but this time, rather than alternating, Rodrigo forced the

second past his lips too. His mouth as full as he could get it, Rodrigo gently tongued and pulled Braden's sac away from his body.

Braden shuddered and bit off a string of expletives with the second sucking pull. "Let me breathe for a minute." He used one hand to shove Rodrigo off his nuts and the other to yank Rodrigo's hand up to his mouth. Braden shoved Rodrigo's middle and ring fingers past his lips, drenched them in spit, and licked into the webbing too, wetting down everything he could get his tongue on. "Get me ready, Rigo." Braden shoved Rodrigo's saliva-lubricated fingers between his thighs. Reaching in from under his hips, Braden then spread his buttocks and put his asshole on display. "Stretch me for your cock."

Never in Rodrigo's life had he thought such a sentence would arouse him to such a painful degree. That rosy little bud sat waiting and pulsing for him, and just looking made Rodrigo's fingers twitch and his cock rear toward his stomach. He added a little more spit to the tip of his middle finger, put it against Braden's pucker, and rubbed the striated muscle.

First contact made Braden gasp. "Push in." He looked up at Rodrigo, the edge of his lip between his teeth. "Please."

Rodrigo applied force, and Braden nudged against it. Within a half dozen seconds of opposing pressure, Braden's entrance collapsed, and Rodrigo's finger slid inside the man's tight ass. Damp snug heat surrounded Rodrigo's digit, conjuring immediate images of his cock slipping in even deeper to take its place. His dick leaked a fast affirmation of the visual, and Rodrigo didn't even think as he shoved a second finger into Braden's chute, pushing both inside Braden's hot tunnel as far as they would go.

A long, low groan escaped Braden. He let go of his butt cheeks, shoved his hands into his hair, and pushed his head back against the pile of pillows behind him. "Mnn...fuck yeah, Rigo." Braden rocked his hips and instigated a slide of Rodrigo's fingers along his passage. "Twist them both inside me good."

Braden's obvious pleasure eradicated the final sliver of fear in Rodrigo about hurting Braden with this act. Rodrigo pressed the heel of his free hand to Braden's left buttock, held him open, and watched himself pull his fingers out of that barely open hole and force them back inside, taking Braden with sure, measured strokes. He gave Braden a corkscrew motion from his fingers, producing a tremble, and then eased a third finger inside for just a couple of pumps, knowing Braden would need that in order to accept Rodrigo's cock. Rodrigo stole the thicker penetration away almost as fast as he'd introduced it and went back to two digits and then one, leaving Braden hanging on that lone finger, almost like a hook.

Inside Braden's ass, the pad of Rodrigo's finger rested right over that bump he knew was so fucking sweet in him, and he had little doubt teasing it would rock Braden to his core. Lifting his gaze to Braden's face to watch, Rodrigo employed his middle finger inside Braden's ass, used his thumb on the soft patch of the man's taint, and brushed ever so lightly on both sides. Braden shot halfway off the bed with one rub, and with a harsh moan, started knifing his lower body into the

contact. Rodrigo increased the pressure the slightest bit, moving in time with Braden's rocking hips. As soon as Rodrigo saw the twisting mask of need turn Braden's face dark, Rodrigo stretched Braden's ring again and eased a second finger back into his scorching ass.

Braden jerked with the extra finger, and his rectum contracted around Rodrigo's digits in a fisting hold. "Oh, fuck no." He grabbed Rodrigo's wrist and put a stop to the inside and outside touch over his kill spot. "I don't want to lose it like this." Swirls of mossy green created an unusual storm in Braden's eyes. "I want you to feel me come around your cock."

The air sucked right out of Rodrigo's lungs. "Shit." His arm went dead, and his fingers slipped out of Braden's channel. Rodrigo's cock wept for the new home, and nothing in him could stop his ascent up Braden and settling on top of him. "Shit." With his elbows braced above Braden's shoulders, Rodrigo trembled at the closeness of their bodies. "There's some stuff in the nightstand drawer," he said, keenly aware of his dick tucked *almost* where it ached to be. "Get it and put it on me."

Glancing to the side for just a second, Braden found the drawer and yanked it open. With not much in the nightstand to clutter the space, it didn't take but a moment for Braden to find the lubricant and pop the cap. It wasn't designed specifically for anal sex; it had a nice slick, silky feel to it, though, and Rodrigo liked to use it when he jerked off.

But it's not my ass that has to accept another man's cock with it.

Conscience had Rodrigo's jaw clenching and him asking, "Will you be all right with that?"

A smile Rodrigo could only classify as indulgent lifted one corner of Braden's mouth. "It'll work." Reaching between their bodies, he took Rodrigo in hand and coated his length in the clear, cool lube, reinvigorating all the excited nerve endings on Rodrigo's prick. "We're not stopping now."

Holding himself steady, Rodrigo looked straight down into the blur of Braden's beautiful eyes. "Then put me in." His voice caught with a surging new sense of closeness. "Give me your ass."

Braden guided Rodrigo's dick right up to his hole, letting slit kiss ring. With the slightest nod, Braden lifted his hips; at the same time, Rodrigo bore down on the connection and pushed his cock into Braden's ass.

Holy Jesus fucking shit. Rodrigo's jaw dropped as his length sank deeper into unimaginably tight burning heat, and the sensation immediately shoved him about a dozen steps closer to the edge. *Damn it. Shit. God.* Rodrigo's cock slid the rest of the way home, tucked right in to the root, and he started trying to cite building codes in his head so that he didn't lose his mind right on the spot.

Fingers played in the hair at Rodrigo's nape, distracting him with an agonizing, gentle touch. Rodrigo blinked to clear the spots from his vision and found himself with his forehead drilling into Braden's.

His eyes burning stunningly bright, Braden slid his hands down Rodrigo's back, took hold of Rodrigo's buttocks, and nudged them somehow tighter together. He brushed his mouth against Rodrigo's and whispered against his lips, "Now fuck me."

Gritting his teeth, Rodrigo just won the battle not to start slamming his hips. "Won't last long this time." He let out the familiar warning.

That grin of Braden's held against Rodrigo's mouth. "Then make it good, Rigo." With that, he licked Rodrigo's lips and bumped his asshole into Rodrigo's buried cock.

The wet kiss and nudge against Rodrigo's erection married themselves to that abbreviated version of his name and knocked Rodrigo off his delicate balance with control. He crushed his mouth down on Braden's, shoving the man's head deep into the pillows, and kissed him with rough possession as he started to move. Rodrigo ate at Braden's mouth in a way he knew would leave swollen, nicked lips behind, but Braden's surprisingly sweet taste mainlined sugar straight into Rodrigo's blood and had him moaning and foraging for more. Braden kissed Rodrigo back just as hard while lifting his hips to meet every knifing drive of Rodrigo's cock. To Rodrigo, it fucking felt like Braden's chute strangled his dick in the tightest, most amazing hold each time he drove into the man's scorching ass.

"Rigo..." Sounding breathless, Braden crushed his fingers into Rodrigo's ass cheeks and helped push him down into Braden's every upward thrust. "Oh Jesus, Rigo, yeah..." Braden closed his eyes and strained his entire body against Rodrigo's, rubbing burning-hot, sweat-slick skin against skin everywhere he could make contact. "Fuck me."

Fighting off an agonizing pull in his balls, Rodrigo shoved Braden's head to the pillow with a fistful of hair, forcing the man's eyes to open. "That your pet name for me or something?" Not letting up anywhere, Rodrigo surged into Braden's squeezing-snug passage with stabbing shots from his cock. "You only use it when we're naked."

Moonlight turned Braden's face into pale angles and deep shadows. Gritting his teeth as his ass accepted another rough claiming, Braden choked out, "When you're open and you let me. In public..." For a flash, his gaze deepened to nearly pure green. "Doesn't look like you want endearments from me."

His heart seizing, crushing his chest, Rodrigo staggered to a stop. "I'm sorry." Unclenching his tight fist, Rodrigo soothed his fingers through Braden's dark hair instead. "I'm so sorry, baby." He sipped from the man's lips, aching to take away the trace of hurt he heard in Braden's voice and saw in his eyes. "So sorry."

Braden slid his hands up Rodrigo's back and tunneled them into his short tresses. "Shh, shh. It's okay, Rigo." He pressed kisses to Rodrigo's cheeks, forehead, and nose before coming back to his mouth. "Whenever you're ready." Braden wrapped his legs around Rodrigo's waist, embracing him—fucking holding him so tenderly—in every way possible. "In your own time."

Rodrigo couldn't stop his gaze from darting all over and memorizing Braden's arresting face. *He's so perfect. Everyone should know he's mine.*

With only a heartbeat to feel his testicles tingle and draw toward his body, Rodrigo seared his lips to Braden's. He pushed a rough noise into the man's mouth as orgasm raced upon him. His cock swelled and pushed deliciously against Braden's rectum, pulling a groan out of Braden that mingled with the embarrassing moans Rodrigo could never control. Release tugged strong in Rodrigo's belly on its race toward his cock. He set his forehead to Braden's, staring right into his shimmering gaze, and opened his mouth with a sharp cry as he bucked and jetted an endless line of cum deep into Braden's ass.

When the first shot of wet heat unloaded inside Braden, the shiver running through him turned to a full-on shudder. He brokenly whispered, "Rigo," touched their lips together, and with nary a noise, spilled himself on Rodrigo's stomach. A half dozen spurts of warm ejaculate coated Rodrigo's belly, and Braden's last spit hit just as Rodrigo's release wound down and he didn't have a drop more to give himself.

Rodrigo settled on Braden with a satisfied smile, and Braden waggled his brows. "Not bad for a first timer," Braden said as he spanked Rodrigo's ass. "We'll have to work on your staying power."

Cursed heat burned Rodrigo's cheeks. "Cocky bastard." He bit Braden's jaw, tugging it with a growl. Then he looked down and slowly withdrew his cock from Braden's ass, conjuring one final gasp between them before shifting on his knees to the left of Braden's prone body.

A breathy, feminine moan broke through Rodrigo's and Braden's labored breathing. Rodrigo turned to find Abby awake, half on her side. Looking at them, she had two fingers plucking one stiff nipple and the other hand pushed between her closed thighs.

Her sleepy gaze reflecting the colors of the deepest oceans and her lips stained as red as the ripest strawberry, Abby whispered with a high catch in her voice, "I think that's the single most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life."

Rodrigo stared, his hunger seemingly never fully sated with these two people. It appeared as though a couple of fingers moved within the fold at the apex of Abby's thighs.

That delicate hand playing between her legs isn't nearly enough.

One glance back at Braden showed the other man watching Abby just as intently. His gaze slid briefly Rodrigo's way and conveyed one thought: *she needs some help.*

God, Rodrigo sometimes really loved having a man at his side who could read his mind.

Together, they attacked.

"Oh my God!"

A mixture of shocked laughter and a scream flew out of Abby as Rodrigo and Braden pulled nearly her entire body off the bed and sandwiched it between them. Her shoulders and head remained on the mattress, but the men knelt on the bed with the rest of her tucked up between their stomachs and chests. Their arms were hooked around her legs, spreading her wide open, and Rodrigo's back and ass were in her direct line of sight.

Before Abby could fully wake up and process her upside-down position, the lightest flick of rough fingers teased her pussy lips and jolted a line of response all the way through her.

"Christ, Abby girl." That was Braden's voice. "You have the sweetest-smelling honey I've ever known." Then he dipped his head down and lapped his tongue in a line from her asshole to her clit.

Abby shrieked and almost drowned out Rodrigo saying, "Let me get a taste of her, baby." He then tongued her crease in reverse. Without preparation or relent, Rodrigo and Braden went back and forth, sharing the task of licking Abby all over and around her sex, making her moan and pant with each pass along her cunt. The wonderful feel of their muscular arms wrapped around her legs, holding her open for their feast, tickled tentacles of additional joy into Abby's brain and mingled with the purely physiological response they dragged out of her with their masterful mouths.

Each pass of Rodrigo's or Braden's tongues created more moisture in Abby's pussy and had her begging like an animal in heat for more. Twin male moans vibrated against her vulnerable slick slit, firing snapping pleasure up Abby's channel and through her clit to twist a tighter knot in her belly. This time, rather than pass each other in the middle, Rodrigo and Braden tangled their tongues right at her entrance—she could fucking feel the battle against her sensitized pussy lips—and as one sank them straight into her cunt and started fucking her with their tongues.

Sharp stabbing lines of pure joy consumed Abby's entire body with each thrust, dragging a deep throb through her channel that quickly became a tremor in her thighs. Rodrigo and Braden kept tight hold of her legs, anchoring her, and with one last push into her cunt, each man pulled out his tongue and took a brief detour in either direction. Braden licked down and flicked her asshole repeatedly with wonderful, shocking new sensations, and Rodrigo traveled up to surround her clit with whisper-light, crazy swirls from the tip of his tongue. A guttural moan ripped its way out of Abby, and she crushed the bedding in her fists.

Just when Abby feared she might lose her mind entirely, Rodrigo and Braden pushed her there and hurled her straight into the insanity. As if licking her clit and pucker wasn't enough, Rodrigo and Braden switched to rubbing those zones with their fingers and dived right back into her pulsing, wet pussy with their double tongue penetration. They took her sheath with a shared endless moan that reached all the way into Abby's bones and rattled her from the tips of her spread legs to the ends of her tangled mess of hair.

“Ohhh God... God yes.” Thrashing her head side to side, Abby squeezed her breasts and tugged hard on her stiffened nipples, crying inside and out for some relief from the delicious, torturous pain. “Ohh, fuck, guys, guys.” Aching need had Abby’s twisting her body against Rodrigo’s and Braden’s unrelenting hold. “Mnnm...yes, yes...” Torqued so tightly inside due to every bit of contact on her head, cunt, and bud, Abby thought she might rip apart right down the middle. “I’m gonna come.”

“Wait!” Braden’s raw plea ricocheted around the room. His and Rodrigo’s tongues no longer inside Abby, Braden kissed Rodrigo with a crushing quickness while moving Rodrigo to Abby’s side, out of the way, revealing all the harsh lines and cutting angles taking over Braden’s face. “Christ, honey.” Still on his knees, Braden yanked Abby’s lower body up his thighs and fit her sex to his. “I need to feel it.” Not even fully hard, Braden stared down and watched himself feed his cock into her pussy. He hissed, and Abby moaned and arched her back as Braden split her open and pushed himself into her to the root. “Just to feel it.”

Looking on his last legs, Braden lifted his gaze to Rodrigo. “Finish it for her.” Holding her wide open, Braden hooked Abby’s knees over his elbows and held himself fully buried inside her throbbing channel. Next to him, Rodrigo bent down and put his mouth on Abby’s exposed clit. With one hand reached out and twined in hers, Rodrigo suckled the little red pearl of flesh, put it between his teeth, and using crazy speed, he swatted it with his tongue and shot Abby straight out of her skin.

She screamed as her hips bucked out of control and her cunt contracted in a choke hold on Braden’s invasion. Concentrated bursts of pleasure exploded deep in Abby’s belly and radiated in a wide circle, pebbling her nipples into tight buds and creating shattering, strong pulse after pulse after pulse into her pussy. Rodrigo kept his head down and his tongue working overtime, and Braden clenched his jaw and dug his fingers deeper into her thighs with every wave of Abby’s orgasm, groaning low in his throat right along with her cries.

It tired the hell out of her, and Abby went limp as a rag doll as the final ebb of release worked its way through her, but eventually her orgasm came to an end. Rodrigo pressed a kiss to her mound before lifting upright, and Braden eased his cock out of her sex and laid her back on the bed as gently as he’d put himself inside her.

Exhaustion and satiation blurred Abby’s vision, putting Rodrigo and Braden in murky shadows. “Come closer.” She reached out, found wonderful, big hands waiting, and tugged both men to her, one on each side. Abby could see their beautiful black-brown and jade green eyes now, and their sweet upturned lips. “That’s better.” She lifted her hands and let her fingers drift through silky soft and then coarser tresses, and finally drew Rodrigo’s and Braden’s mouths to hers. The gentle brush of their lips against hers settled deep inside Abby and wrapped itself around her heart.

With all their mouths still touching, Abby whispered, “I love you both,” without censure. “You’re everything to me.”

Then Abby slipped toward unconsciousness in the shared comfort and security of Rodrigo's and Braden's arms, a soft smile on her face, so at ease she never even realized what she'd admitted.

As she drifted off, more peace and contentment settling inside her than she'd ever experienced, Abby thought she heard a raw "shit" and an equally gruff "agreed."

Chapter Seventeen

In the bathroom the next morning, Abby stepped into the panties and jeans Rodrigo had run through the washer and dryer the previous night. As she wiggled the finicky zipper up, she crinkled her brow when Braden brushed right up against her backside to move past her, even though the bathroom had so much space none of them would ever have had to touch if they didn't want to. Rodrigo had done the same multiple times since they'd woken up. Abby had expected it and even enjoyed it during their shared shower, but this was something different.

What the heck is wrong with them?

From one of the sinks, Rodrigo held his toothbrush poised over the basin but studied her in the mirror's reflection. When she pointedly grabbed his stare, he raised a brow. "What?" he asked.

"You tell me," Abby replied. Her gaze slid Braden's way, and she found him watching her rather than paying attention to buckling his belt. "Either one of you are welcome to."

Braden tucked in his shirt, finished doing up his buckle, and strolled to Abby's side. "You look particularly lovely this morning." He pecked a kiss to her cheek. "Isn't that reason enough to look at you?"

"Fine." Abby rolled her eyes at the man's innocent act. Her pale skin was blotchy without her moisturizer, and her hair could be mistaken for Medusa's without the product she used daily to keep the frizz to a minimum. "Don't tell me."

After putting on her shirt, Abby turned to the sink and grabbed the one-use toothbrush she kept in her purse for emergencies. Rodrigo had been able to locate one extra in his medicine cabinet, so it had gone to Braden.

Out of the corner of her eye, Abby watched Braden move in behind Rodrigo and reach around his waist to get that extra toothbrush. They both put their toothbrushes under the water at the same time, and Braden chuckled as he said, "The one thing you didn't count on when designing this house was the need for three sinks."

Rodrigo bounced back and forth between paying attention to applying paste to his brush and looking at Braden in the mirror. "There's plenty enough room for me to add a third if you want it."

"Nah." Braden dipped down and kissed Rodrigo's bare shoulder. "I don't mind sharing."

His smile growing, Rodrigo reached back and ran his hand down Braden's outer thigh. "I did notice that."

Abby was enjoying the banter and play between the men when Braden braced his hands on the edge of the sink on either side of Rodrigo and pretended to grind his crotch into Rodrigo's ass. Teasing in return, Rodrigo dropped his head back on Braden's shoulder and made loud, exaggerated moaning noises. In between the fake moans, they laughed together as they simulated sex.

Suddenly, the bathroom swam in front of Abby's eyes, and she saw Braden's jeans around his hips, his ass exposed, and heard him shout hoarsely in a way that terrified her all the way to her core. Only, it wasn't Braden's voice or even his dark head bent over Rodrigo that she heard and saw anymore. And it wasn't Rodrigo's dark head turned toward Braden's neck. Instead, red hair flamed hot, and the back of a blond head concealed faces caught up in a passionate kiss as bodies merged into one, the image partially obscured by intermittent dark slashes.

Like looking through a vent.

"Oh my God." Abby covered her mouth and stumbled backward, not stopping until her legs hit the bathtub ledge. Her limbs the consistency of heated rubber, Abby dropped to sit, mindless of anything except the images flashing like oncoming traffic in her mind. "He wasn't fighting." The shout Abby had originally thought she'd heard while eavesdropping on her father in the den changed from something full of anger to something released in the throes of exuberant lust. "He was having sex." In her mind, below the short blond hair, Abby saw a thickly corded, masculine neck and part of a wide, bare shoulder and arm.

Oh dear Lord.

She looked up, blinking, and found herself back in the bathroom with Braden and Rodrigo crouched at her feet. "He was with another man."

Braden pushed Abby's hair out of her face. "Who, honey? What are you talking about?"

Half pointing in the direction of the sink, Abby didn't know what to do. Moving her arm—her whole body—felt like a foreign thing. She squinted and tried to bring back the imagery. "You and Rodrigo were playing there, and the way you were positioned triggered the rest of the memory. I heard that low shout, and back then, in my mind, I filled in the blanks with anger and a fight, but it wasn't."

The pictures in Abby's head flashed back and forth between Rodrigo and Braden, teasing, to something much more aggressive—set in a den with entirely different men. "My father... That day we talked about..." *Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus.* Abby didn't know how to process such visual information about her own parent. "He wasn't yelling at someone on the phone or in person." Rodrigo and Braden shimmered before Abby's eyes, and her voice cracked. "In his den, against the desk, my father was making a noise that I thought was shouting, but it was really a sound he made while having sex with another man."

“*Dios mío.*” The rest of Rodrigo’s Spanish muttering occurred under his breath. He finally shook his head, and when he looked up at Abby, his eyes burned like he wanted to hit something. “And you saw it?”

Abby nodded, the feeling jerky and unnatural. “Just for a second.” Abby’s psyche recoiled against the idea of going back into that moment of new memory to catalog everything again, but she forced herself to delve in quickly and grab some details. “My dad is covering the man, like Braden was just doing to you. The only things I can remember seeing in that moment from the other person are the back of a blond head and a thick shoulder and upper part of an arm.” Every word Abby spoke felt like it was coming out through sandpaper. “I think my eight-year-old mind must not have been able to accept or process what I was seeing, so I jerked away and covered my face.”

“Like you did the other day in the attic,” Rodrigo said.

“Yes. And then I must have blocked it out entirely, along with the murders.” Elbows on her knees, Abby held her head in her hands, exhaling a shaky breath. “Jesus.” She scrubbed her face. *Careful what you toss out into the universe.* “My dad really was cheating. Just like my mom.” She shrugged, her shoulders almost too heavy to move them. “Maybe that guy killed them.”

“No.” Braden bracketed her head with his big hands and shifted her to face him directly. “It’s shocking as hell, and I’m sorry you saw one of your parents being unfaithful, as sorry as I am that you heard them being murdered. No eight-year-old should have that kind of information in their head about a mother or a father with a man or a woman. But it’s not relevant to the case. Remember”—he brushed the pads of his thumbs under her eyes, drying skin—“it’s your mother who said *baby* and knew the murderer. It’s still whoever *she* had the affair with we have to focus on and find.”

It felt tight, but Abby forced herself to smile for Braden. Or at least to stop frowning. “Right.”

“But maybe they both knew, Bray,” Rodrigo said, thumping his fist on Braden’s thigh. “Maybe they each knew about the other’s affair, and if we find this guy, he could tell us if Richard ever told him the name of Elaine’s lover.”

Braden’s lips thinned, and his stare narrowed. “I can think of one blond man I’ve come across who possibly had his own secrets to hide and thus much more personal reasons for blocking this investigation than we originally thought.”

Oh no. Abby’s inside churned between sickness and rage. *No, no.*

“The priest?” Rodrigo voiced Abby’s horror.

“I’m not saying definitively.” Braden put his hand on top of Abby’s, automatically easing her distress, as if he’d been able to read her mind. “But it would give reason for his desire to shut down an investigation that would require looking deeply into the Gaineses’ personal lives. I might have a new set of questions to ask Father Jim now. I need to talk to the captain, but maybe I can even bring our priest friend into the station and help make him a little bit more nervous about his

circumstances.” Lifting out of his crouch, Braden took a seat next to Abby on the tub and tucked her close to his side. “If nothing else, the implications could intimidate him enough to loosen his lips about the information he’s protecting about Elaine.”

“Damn, Crenshaw.” Kneeling close, Rodrigo rested his arms alongside Braden and Abby, closing them in. “That’s why you’re the cop, and I refurbish houses. I would not want to sit across a table and drill a priest about his secrets and lies. If you’re wrong—and pardon the way I say this—you’ll get crucified.”

His hand tightening at Abby’s waist, clutching her, Braden grimaced. “I’m not saying I’ll like doing it, but sometimes you have to unearth places people don’t want to see in order to get to the truth.”

“Ohhh my goodness.” Abby looked upward, mentally seeing beyond the ceiling to the blue sky outside...and even higher above to what she had always been taught existed far beyond the clouds. “This is weird. It’s so strange and unnerving and bizarre.” She blinked a handful of times and brought her gaze back down to find Braden’s and Rodrigo’s waiting for her. “I had no idea when I started having these nightmares that I’d learn all this.”

“Do you want to stop?” Braden asked.

Two faces that always had a smile for Abby as a child, two sets of ears that never seemed to tire of listening to her fanciful tales, and two sets of arms that took turns holding her when she was sad or scared or hurt still whispered over Abby’s skin and into her heart today, buffeting her with new resolve. “No. They’re still my parents. Someone still broke into our house and butchered them. They still deserve justice so they can rest in peace.” Abby looked upon these two new beautiful, masculine faces that gave her extra strength today, and her throat went tight. “We all do.”

“Then let’s get something to eat so we can get going,” Braden said. “I’ll drop you both off”—Rodrigo’s truck was still at Abby’s place—“and then I’ll go have a chat with my boss.”

“Come with me.” Rodrigo shot to his feet and pulled Abby and Braden upright too. He drew them to his sides, then led them to the kitchen through the media room, saying, “I make an even better breakfast than I do dinner.”

Abby welcomed the distraction of watching Rodrigo move around his kitchen like a pro.

* * *

“Come on, Bray!” Rodrigo stood at his open front door and shouted into the house. “You’re the one who wanted us to shovel down our breakfast so we could get this show on the road!”

A second later, Braden appeared from the direction of the kitchen, his middle finger saluting high. “Hey, give me a fucking break, Rigo. When you have to piss, you have to piss.” The man pecked a kiss to Rodrigo’s cheek and smacked his ass as he squeezed past him to the outside. “I’m good to go now.”

From behind, already outside, Abby said, “You guys are so cute when you bicker.” Rodrigo could hear the smile in her tone. It lightened his heart and pulled a secret grin out of him.

Anything to keep her spirits lifted.

“You notice that he’s the common denominator with instigating the bickering”—Braden pointed at Rodrigo as Rodrigo locked his house up tight—“because he does the same cute pushy crap with you.”

Rodrigo pocketed his keys and moved in close to where Abby and Braden stood. “As long as you both think it’s cute” He put his hand on Braden’s hard stomach but leaned down to brush his lips across Abby’s upturned mouth, savoring the closeness with both of them.

With a poke to Rodrigo’s ribs, Braden started moving backward down the curved walkway. “I’ll tell you what’s cute,” he said, smiling at Rodrigo, “is this little *Bray* you started calling me this morning. It’s not exactly original, *Rigo*”—the twinkle in Braden’s eyes laughed for him—“but I’ll take it.”

Two big strides had Rodrigo within catching distance. He grabbed the front of Braden’s shirt, dragged the man right back to him, and yanked him down until their mouths were only an inch apart. “You’ll fucking take whatever I give you and like it.”

“Yeah?” Braden’s breath feathered over Rodrigo’s mouth, the warmth one hell of a foreplay move.

Rodrigo closed the distance between them. “Yeah.” He whispered the word past Braden’s parted lips and then took him with a slow, easy kiss. Rodrigo grazed and feathered his lips against Braden’s, feeling none of the frantic need to dominate he had from the moment this relationship between all three of them had taken its first intimate turn. Instead of pushing and claiming with force, Rodrigo relaxed his mouth and let Braden work his tongue inside; he just let himself enjoy Braden tasting him with inquisitive little licks that started pleasant sparks but didn’t erupt into a catastrophic inferno. Abby moved in at Rodrigo’s back and started pressing kisses against his nape, warming and protecting Rodrigo from behind while Braden kept his front covered and his mouth busy.

As much as Rodrigo would have thought the opposite, something in his taking Braden last night had actually settled much of the chaos within him about this odd three-person coupling. Rather than bring his sexuality into question, it eradicated any insecurities about Rodrigo’s place between this pair, where he stood, and whether a ménage relationship could work.

If it’s me with these two people, it can.

Just as Braden nipped Rodrigo’s lower lip and Rodrigo was about to drag Abby around to his front for a deeper taste—along with a suggestion that they go back inside and try the pool table out before heading to work—Abby squeezed him around the waist. Hard.

“Guys, guys.” Abby’s hissing tone and short fingernails digging into Rodrigo’s stomach cut through the haze of lust like a sword. “Rodrigo, you have company.”

Easing back from the kiss, Braden stepped to Rodrigo’s left, clearing the way to see the new car pulling up the drive. Or rather, the two people emerging from the car already parked in the drive.

Henry and Mary. What in the hell was Rodrigo’s father doing here with his wife? Rodrigo stiffened to hard as granite. *Shit.*

Henry rounded the front of the vehicle, his rough face a mask, with his chin tipped high. His green gaze barely swept over Rodrigo’s and definitely didn’t hold on him. The man also reached the foot of the walkway and stayed put, as if the break between the driveway and the walk couldn’t be breached.

A casing started to solidify around Rodrigo’s heart at Henry’s rebuff. Rodrigo felt Braden start to step away, so Rodrigo snatched his hand out to the left, grabbing Braden before he could move.

Mary approached on her own, a flowerpot in her hands and a wobbly smile on her glossy lips. “I noticed when we came for lunch last weekend that you didn’t have a hanging plant for the front of your house.” Her voice rose in accompaniment with her growing, clearly forced, grin. “Everyone should have one. It’s welcoming. We didn’t think you would be here. I was just going to hang it from one of the beams and slip the note in your mailbox.” She thrust the cascade of yellow and green out in front of her. “Here.”

Rodrigo couldn’t stop himself from staring over Mary’s shoulder to the imposing blond-haired man standing so stiffly at the foot of the walk. Everything in Rodrigo wanted to race down the walkway and bodily force Henry to look at him with more than a cursory glance. The ease of their conversation at the diner rang in Rodrigo’s head like the hollowest of laughs, mocking him for the chump he’d been to think he might actually have a real father one day.

After a couple of thick, tense heartbeats, Abby took the plant from Mary. “Thank you. It’s so pretty.”

“You’re welcome.” Mary glanced between Rodrigo and her husband, and her mouth pulled down at the edge. “Okay, well, I have to get to work. It was good to see you.” She lifted her hand only a few inches from her side in an abbreviated wave. “Bye.”

As Henry stepped back to open his wife’s door, his gaze slid Rodrigo’s way and finally did hold for that moment Rodrigo had thought he so desperately wanted. Piercing anger showed through during the split second of eye contact between them, and it screamed in Rodrigo’s ears louder than the ugliest epithets Henry could have shouted. Then it was gone. Henry slammed the passenger-side door and moved back around to the driver’s side of his car without ever speaking a word.

Oh, no fucking way. Rodrigo flashed back to Braden’s uncertainty last night about Rodrigo welcoming a nickname between them in public, and it merged in his head with Abby’s uncensored confession of love as she drifted off to sleep, content

and safe in her lovers' arms. *You do not get to pretend you don't see the people I love, you son of a bitch.*

Rodrigo raced down the walkway and practically leaped over the car in his effort to get to Henry. He grabbed at Henry's army jacket, jammed him up against the side of the car, and bit out each word through clenched teeth. "You don't have to sully your precious, pure gaze by looking at me ever again, but you will damn well at least acknowledge that there are two other people standing here. Good people. Decent people. People worthy of respect. But you wouldn't know that because you saw a woman hanging on my back while I was kissing another man and decided I wasn't worth even saying hello to anymore."

Chips of icy green stared back at Rodrigo at eye level, unblinking, and Rodrigo felt his face twist into an ugly distortion of himself.

"Nice to know where I stand with you before I wasted anymore of my time," Rodrigo said with ruthless chill in his voice. "Have a fucking nice day." With the taste of bile burning a hole in his throat, he shoved off and walked away.

Rodrigo didn't get halfway around the front of the car when Henry grabbed him from behind, spun him around, and bowed Rodrigo back over the hood with a hand to Rodrigo's chest and a finger pointed in his face. "Listen, you judgmental little bastard, because you do not get to walk away from this, making assumptions like you know *shit* about me."

As Henry held Rodrigo down, his voice went low and deep, and possessed as abrasive a timbre as Rodrigo had ever heard in himself. "I step out of my car and see something that doesn't make a shit-licking bit of sense to me, but whatever, you're thirty-four years old, and it's your life. Only there you are in the middle, looking fucking ready to cock your imaginary weapon and blow me to kingdom come before I even speak a word. You don't say one goddamned word. What did you expect me to say or do when you didn't even introduce me to your friends? You not only refuse my wife's gift, but you're outright rude enough to her to make me want to smack you in the mouth. And all that time, you're staring at me waiting for me to spew some racist or sexist or I-don't-the-fuck-know what kind of bullshit, waiting for me to fulfill every one of the nasty little expectations you apparently have of me.

"Oh yeah," Henry added, craggy eyebrows shooting upward. "You think I couldn't see you? I could. I was watching you out of the corner of my eye the whole fucking time, wondering what the hell I ever said or implied to you that would make you think I would call you names or turn you out for *anything* you do or want or are. But it wasn't me. I didn't say anything. I just did my best every time we were together to get to know my son." He jammed both hands against Rodrigo's chest. "It was *you* who decided I was gonna dismiss you, so you judged me first. Nice going. You successfully pissed me off. And generally speaking"—Henry pulled back and pointed as he moved away, snarling just as hard as Rodrigo had—"it's not good for me to talk to people when I'm this fucking mad."

Shit. Grabbing his stomach, Rodrigo thought he might throw up as Henry's tirade unfolded and was processed in his brain. *Shit. Shit. Shit. What did I do?*

Rodrigo hauled himself off the car's hood, panic making his feet clumsy. "Henry, wait!"

Without even looking up, Henry opened the driver's-side door, and Rodrigo could only see the man driving out of his life forever.

No. His chest heaved. *Don't go.*

"Dad!" Rodrigo's voice went high with a croak as he used that word out loud for the first time in his entire life.

That one syllable jerked Henry to a halt and had him grabbing on to the open door of his car.

Reaching Henry's side in three strides, with only the open car door between them, Rodrigo locked his legs so that he didn't fall to his knees and beg. "I'm sorry." He imagined this was how he might have felt if he'd had a father at ten years old and earned his disappointment for poor behavior. "You're right. I did do all that. I started to care, and I didn't want you to hurt me, so I set myself in a position where you couldn't. I was wrong." He notched his chin even higher, as if the angle might reverse the ridiculous threat of tears. "I apologize."

Henry shut the car door, eliminating the barrier between them. "Rodrigo, I didn't even know you existed for the first thirty-three years of your life." He took Rodrigo's face in his rough hands, creating the most wonderful prison. "That's more than half *my* life that I lived every day without knowing you were around. Do you get how sorry I am about that? I think I know what I saw when I drove up, but I'm not sure. But even if I'm right and I don't understand it, it's not gonna be anything I'm gonna make a stand over and risk losing you. That's just not going to happen. Even if I get angry and need to step away to breathe, I'll still come back." Henry's gaze shimmered with too much brightness, not like a sheet of cold ice as Rodrigo had so recently assessed it. "I'm not walking away from this. Get used to it."

Hating the flood he could feel coming on, Rodrigo buried his face in Henry's shoulder but could not hide the ridiculous tremors in his shoulders. Henry simply cuffed his hand around Rodrigo's neck and held him close, allowing Rodrigo a moment to get out some of the stuff he had bottled up so tightly inside himself.

Taking a breath, Rodrigo pulled his shit together and faced Henry again. "I want you to meet some people." He hadn't for one moment forgotten Abby and Braden, arm in arm across the drive, waiting for him. "I care about them more than I've ever cared about anybody, and for some reason that I'm not going to question, they feel the same. We're doing an unusual kind of thing together, but it's good, and it's working, and I'm trying every day not to fuck it up."

Henry chuckled and cuffed Rodrigo's neck even harder. "That's a good plan."

"Abby, Braden"—Rodrigo beckoned them closer—"can you come here? I want you to meet someone."

As they approached, Abby turned her head for a moment, but Rodrigo still caught her wiping her eyes. Braden was more subtle, but Rodrigo still heard the man clear his throat.

My man and my woman. Rodrigo stood up straight, and his chest expanded with a burst of pride and love. *Hell, my very life.*

"Henry, meet Abby Gaines and Braden Crenshaw. Guys, this is Henry Portman." Rodrigo slid his arm loosely around Henry's shoulders. "He's my father."

"Good to meet you, sir." Braden stuck his hand out in greeting.

Henry clasped Braden's hand and shook it. "Likewise." He then shifted to Abby and exchanged a handshake too. "Abby, it's nice to put a face to the name. Rodrigo has shared many wonderful things about you. Braden?" The man's gaze suddenly narrowed. "You're the detective, right?"

"Yes, sir." Braden nodded.

"Then I've heard lots of good things about you too."

Rodrigo left the three of them to their exchanges. He made his way around to the passenger side of Henry's car and squatted so he could look in at the petite blonde who had shown him nothing but kindness from the moment they'd met.

"Mary"—Rodrigo's voice went husky again—"I apologize for my rude behavior. It was sweet of you to bring me something for my house, and I do appreciate it very much." He stood back up and wrapped his fingers around the door's handle. "Will you let me introduce you to my friends?"

"I'd love that, Rodrigo." Mary smiled up at him through the open window. "Thank you."

I don't deserve this much kindness.

Rodrigo opened the door anyway, took the woman's hand, and helped her out of the car.

* * *

"You have got to be fucking kidding me, Captain!" Braden slammed his fist into the arm of his chair. "One week? You can't do this. I'm turning up all kinds of new information that not one person even made note of in the case file before."

"None of which seems relevant to the actual solving of these murders." From behind his desk, Zanger shot back his reply with the grit of a rusty knife blade. "You don't have a single solid lead about this phantom lover the Gaines wife supposedly had. And pretty much everything you do have is gleaned from the fuzzy memories of a traumatized eight-year-old girl."

Righteous fire blazed through Braden and shot him to his feet. "That doesn't mean they're not real!"

Zanger didn't move, but his stare narrowed so ferociously Braden had to fight the instinct to step back. He figured if the man'd had any hairs left on his shaved head, they would have stood on end and carried all the way down his back.

"First"—Zanger's deadly whisper rang around the office louder than the biggest shout—"if you fucking yell at me one more time, I won't even give you one more day on this case, let alone a week."

Braden forced himself to sit back down. "I'm sorry, sir."

A sharp nod from the captain acknowledged the deference. "Second, I've had a couple of conversations with the priest since this whole thing started, so don't think I don't know how fucking deeply involved you are with this Abby woman." His gaze settled on Braden, heavy on the pitying censure. "You don't have any perspective, Detective, and that is never good in a cop."

Braden snorted. He couldn't help it. "This insight happens to be coming from a priest with his own agenda and possibly his own secrets to hide."

Light ignited in Zanger's ice-blue eyes. "You are not bringing Father Jim into this station and accusing him of having a sexual relationship with one of his male parishioners." He pointed at Braden with his pen, striking the fountain tip through the air with his order. "I have met this man enough to know he is not diddling with anybody in his congregation."

Christ, Braden wanted to shake the politician out of his boss. "How do you know for sure?"

"I don't know for sure, but I've been doing this job long enough that I trust my gut." Passion captured Zanger for a moment, but then he quickly contained himself, clasped his hands on his desk, and settled on Braden with an unblinking stare. "You have a decent amount of experience too, Crenshaw. So you sit there in that chair, right now, look me in the eyes, and you tell me you think this priest was having an affair with Richard Gaines. Did he?"

Wishing with everything in him that he could lie about a suspect without losing his soul, Braden gritted his teeth, the truth lodging in his gullet. "No, I don't truly believe he did." As soon as he admitted that, he shoved to the edge of his seat and drilled his finger into the case file sitting at the edge of the captain's desk. "But he knows something. I can use this to get him talking."

Zanger sliced his hand across the air. "No."

"Come on, Captain." Braden dragged his hands through his hair. "With any other person in this situation, you'd let me go at him until a diamond shone through all the crap."

"Another person is not an innocent priest who is beloved by a large portion of this community." With each sentence Zanger spoke, the logic in his voice made Braden want to tear every fishing photo, award, certificate, and accommodation off his walls. "I will not let you drag him into my station and start a riot on our doorstep that I have to quell. It's not going to happen."

Fuck. I can't go back to Abby with nothing.

"Can I at least talk to him at his church again?" Braden asked.

"Yes. But understand me. Talking does not mean browbeating or blackmailing with threats you can't prove. You have one week, and then, more than likely, I'll be shutting you down." Zanger held up a hand before Braden could open his mouth and protest. "This is not personal, Detective, which is something you need to start remembering. You're spinning your wheels, using department time, and it hasn't

given you one viable new lead. If you were not involved with this woman, you would be questioning the legitimacy of her uncovered memories too, and you know it. We have current cases that need your attention more than this one does.”

Braden didn’t want to hear Zanger’s logic right now. The man didn’t share a bed with a woman whose memories haunted her during sleep *and* consciousness. Sometimes having a personal stake mattered.

Getting to his feet, Braden vowed, “I’ll produce something solid in the next seven days. Guaranteed.”

“I’m giving you the leeway, but I’m not holding my breath.” The captain’s cigarette-savaged voice dismissed Braden with a cut that pricked well deeper than his professional pride. “Get out of my office and go do some real work.”

Braden grabbed the case file and left silently, but inside he fucking seethed. Captain Zanger had thrown down a challenge and a deadline. Braden only had to think of Abby and her horrific memories of sitting with her dead parents for hours on end to renew his resolve to solve this case. Zanger would come to eat his words and political pandering, Braden silently promised Abby.

I will find the killer.

I swear.

Chapter Eighteen

The bell attached to Abby's Attic's entrance jingled softly against the glass, indicating the arrival of a customer. Abby looked up from her workstation, a smile and greeting on her lips. She got the *good* portion of *good morning* out and then lost her voice. Lorene stood just inside Abby's store, her purse clutched against her front like a shield.

Nobody else was in the store. It was still a bit early for most of her customers, and Iris, one of Abby's two part-time employees, had an appointment that would keep her away from the store until noon. Rodrigo had hemmed and hawed about leaving Abby alone, but Christian needed some backup with one finicky wholesaler, and Rodrigo had stepped out to assist.

Lorene approached, and Abby's heart raced. She wanted to stand and offer a welcome. At the same time, her limbs went numb, keeping her glued to her seat. Nothing in her life felt normal or predictable anymore, and she'd lost any sense of a safe place inside herself to turn to and trust.

"Your store is lovely," Lorene said with a shaky voice as she reached the workstation counter. "I'm ashamed to say I've known about it for some time but was too nervous about your response to come inside and say hello."

The white-gold wire in Abby's hand slipped from between her fingers, and her pulse skittered under her skin. She looked at Lorene's fingers nervously rubbing her purse strap, and realized her hands were trembling too.

"I know it might not seem like it after the last conversation we had," Abby said, "but I promise I don't bite."

Lorene's gaze dropped to the paraphernalia clustered on the table in front of Abby. "May I see what you're working on right now?"

"Yes, of course." Abby found her legs again and rose. "Come around to my worktable." She waited for Lorene to round the counter, handed her a color-pencil sketch, and then leaned in at the woman's shoulder. "I have a friend who is able to get me raw gemstones every once in a while. Recently he had some extra little ruby nuggets, not much for anyone looking to make more than one of something. Anyway, he sold them to me. I already had some lab-created pink sapphire that I wasn't really sure how I wanted to use. When I got the ruby nuggets, I saw this waterfall-style earring in my mind. I sat down to sketch them, and by the time I was finished, I'd put briolette-cut pink sapphire stations at three points in each." Abby ran her finger down the line of shaded red and pink stones in her earring

sketch. "I have a friend who is a cutter, and he created the briolette orbs for me." Placing the sheet of paper on her table next to the wire and little piles of tiny stones, Abby ended, "I'm laying out the nuggets right now, trying to figure which ones should be clustered where based on the strength of their color and size, so that I can decide the best length to make them."

Lorene brushed her fingertips over the sketch paper, studying the earring design. "They're sure to be beautiful." Her voice drifted to almost a whisper. "You're very talented, Abby."

"Thank you." Jitters took Abby over again, and she busied her hands by touching over the various stones. "The style and color combination isn't for everyone. They will be expensive, and it'll probably take a while to sell them. I don't get to work with natural gems that often, so when it's affordable, I snatch them up and hope for the best."

Without looking up, Lorene reached out and covered Abby's hand. "I have a confession to make," she said softly. "After you ran away from the church yesterday, I followed you." She finally did pull her focus off the table, and she looked straight into Abby's eyes. "I saw you with your friends by the car."

Unable to tear her gaze away, Abby's hand froze under Lorene's. "Oh."

Her attempt at a smile not completely successful, Lorene picked up Abby's hand and clasped it between her own. "I don't understand the desire to be with two people. I don't know that I ever will. I followed you because I saw how upset you were, and I wanted to comfort you. It didn't take me but a moment to see that you already had all the comfort and support you needed."

She petted the back of Abby's hand repeatedly, as one might do someone's hair, and Abby understood Lorene's nerves had just as great a hold on her as Abby's did on herself. "I might struggle with whether I think it's right or wrong to have three people in an intimate relationship," Lorene went on, "but there could be no confusion or mistaking how much those two men care about you. I saw your tears, and I saw their faces. It was clear the only thing they cared about was making sure you were all right and felt better." Her hold on Abby's hand grew tighter, and she pumped it as if to make her point. "That's all I wanted when I went after you, so I don't see how I can think that wrong in another person. Or even in two."

Abby could hardly speak through the clog in her throat. "Thank you."

"I talked to Bill and to my kids and to Father Jim too. The father can't offer his approval, but Bill and the boys want to see you again. Most of them have families of their own now, but they still think about you and want to know you again." Lorene cupped Abby's cheek, and for the sweetest moment, it felt to Abby like the loving touch of her own mother. "You and your two friends are welcome in my home, if you'd like. Any Sunday. Any day at all." She brushed a loose strand of hair behind Abby's ear and then let her hand drift down to squeeze Abby's shoulder. "Father Jim and I will continue to talk, but in this, right now, I won't take his counsel."

Letting out a long, uneven breath, Abby blinked rapidly in an attempt to dry her eyes. "I'll talk to Braden and Rodrigo. I'm sure they would both love to come."

“Good.” Lorene discreetly brushed at the corners of her eyes. “I have to get going, but I will be in touch with you soon.”

Abby rushed to the register and grabbed a business card from the acrylic holder. “Wait. Here. Take my card.” She flipped it over and jotted down some additional numbers. “These are my cell and home numbers too.”

“Very good.” As Lorene moved back to the other side of the counter, she slipped the card into a zipper pocket on the outside of her purse. “I have to get to a meeting at the church, or I would stay and chat longer.”

“I understand.”

Lorene took a step toward the door, came to a stop, took another, and paused again. She finally looked back at Abby, and words just started tumbling out. “Perhaps this isn’t my place, but I’d just like to say that you don’t need Father Jim or our church to have God in your life. I believe he welcomes you and continues to hold you in his arms, no matter who you are or if you never come to church ever again. That’s not what’s important.” Maybe without realizing, Lorene reached up and took hold of the delicate cross around her neck. “It’s the faith and belief that matter, and you can have that wherever you are.”

The twist in Abby’s heart almost took her to her knees. “Thank you.” Her voice sounded scratchy, and it hurt to talk. “I’ll think about it.”

Lorene dipped her head and turned back to the door. “Good-bye, sweetheart. Oh!” Just as Lorene went to push open the door, Rodrigo pulled it from the other side and stepped inside. “Hello again.” She smiled up at Rodrigo, who towered over her petite frame. “Lovely to see you.”

“You too, ma’am.” Rodrigo pressed his back against the glass and held open the door for Lorene. “Bye now.”

His attention half on the door Lorene had just vacated, Rodrigo made his way to Abby’s side and slid his hand across her back. “What was that about?”

The comfort in his casual touch pushed Abby right over the edge. Burrowing against Rodrigo’s front, Abby wound her arms around his waist and tucked her head under his chin.

Rodrigo immediately wrapped her up tight. “Hey.” Kisses peppered the top of Abby’s head. “What’s this about, Bit?”

Looking up at his handsome, loving face, Abby rested her chin on Rodrigo’s chest and said, “Something very good.”

* * *

Two hours later, in the passenger seat of Rodrigo’s truck, Abby’s cheeks were starting to hurt from all the smiling she couldn’t control. She slapped her hand against her leg and shook her head at Rodrigo. “I still can’t believe she not only came to see me but wants us all to know her and the family.” Her giddiness all morning proved how much she’d been secretly aching for a connection to her past. “I never let myself believe that would happen in a million years.”

Rodrigo took his hand off the wheel to rub her leg. "It's nice. People are surprising us left and right today."

"That's an understatement." From her position, Abby studied Rodrigo's starkly handsome profile and tried to control the uptick in her heart. "Plus, as an additional bonus, you finally figured out what you inherited from your father."

That got Rodrigo's attention off the road for a moment and swinging her way. "What are you talking about?" His voice rose comically high.

"Your know-it-all stubbornness." Abby laughed at the way Rodrigo immediately glared at her. "I swear, Rodrigo, as you were standing there this morning silently facing off, your face could have been his. The jutting chins and stances were identical."

"If you say so." Rodrigo put his attention back on his driving. His hand stayed on her thigh, though, and his voice dropped as he curled his fingers inward. "I've stared at myself in the mirror a hundred times since I met Henry, and I don't see anything that matches."

Abby lifted his fingers and brushed the rough knuckles with her lips, loving the strength in this man that went well beyond his muscles and strong hands. "It goes beyond the physical." Resting her head against the seat, she let herself slip back to the showdown between Rodrigo and Henry. "I wish I'd had a video camera with me this morning. You would have recognized yourself in him in a heartbeat."

Rodrigo's jaw moved visibly. "I don't mind hearing that so much today." He took his hand back and curled it around the wheel. "Six months ago, it might have been different."

The catch in Rodrigo's voice reached inside Abby and stole what little was left of her protected heart. "I'm happy for you. I think you're going to end up with a really strong relationship with your father."

"We'll get your answers for you, Bit." Rodrigo took his attention off the road once again and let her see a burn of determination in his eyes, one that matched his tone. "I promise you we will."

"I know."

Abby rolled her head away to look out the window at the houses and businesses they passed. Talking about Rodrigo's father drew thoughts of Lorene's visit to the surface again, and the tumult of emotions she'd dragged out of Abby just by reminding her she could renew her commitment to her faith if she would just let herself believe and do it. The problem was, thinking about God always conjured the emotional connection Abby's parents had to the church and the sense of community they'd gained by rejoicing together every Sunday. A bone-deep part of Abby still pined for such a place, yet that desire constantly butted heads with the fact that she had her own independent mind, thoughts, and beliefs. A very big piece of her remained fearful that she could no longer fit into an environment that fostered groups of people who came together because they all thought the same way.

Maybe I'm being greedy. After all, Abby already had the two most incredible guys in the world in Rodrigo and Braden, and now she even had Lorene making an effort to accept her too. *Maybe I'm not supposed to have everything I want.*

Suddenly, Abby shot up straight and grabbed the door's handle. "Pull over the car." The signage in front of the white building with the wraparound porch had felt like it reached out from the side of the road and dragged Abby's eyes right to it. Abby pointed and could already feel herself perspiring. "Do you mind if we go in there for a few minutes?"

Rodrigo backed up the truck. "Bit, we can go wherever the hell you'd like."

With that, Rodrigo pulled into the parking lot of Coleman's Episcopal church.

* * *

"Thanks for coming, man." Braden thumped Ben on the back as he gave him a bear hug. "I appreciate your sparing me a few hours of your time." He led Ben to a picnic table behind the police station where they could have some privacy.

Ben eased onto the bench seating, his attention on Braden. "Hey, you call me saying you need another perspective, and I'm going to come." He lifted a raven black brow with just the perfect arch. "Particularly since this involves your Abby and Rodrigo."

"Ah." Braden carefully flattened his palms against his case files. "So you came for some gossip as much as to lend me your mind."

"I am curious to know how it's going." Not even a smidgen of shame or guilt leaked into Ben's voice or showed in his gaze. "I was the one who told you to pursue a relationship like this, if you will recall, so maybe I feel like I have something invested in its success." When Braden didn't answer right away, Ben cocked that thick brow of his even higher. "Go ahead, man. Spill."

A band tightened with incredible precision around Braden's heart. He plunked his elbows on the table and buried his hands in his hair. "Christ, Ben. I don't even know where to begin." He chuckled at the many changes in himself. "It's so much more than I ever thought it could be. I'm in it up to my neck already, and it's the fucking scariest, best thing I've ever done in my life. It's more than the sex, and that they both like sharing it as much as I do. I think about them all the time. I worry about them and wonder if I can keep them safe. I'm like the biggest goddamn cheerleader when one of them has good news. Every single day when I wake up, I psych myself up and promise myself that I can do this. I can keep us all together and happy and we can make this thing work, no matter the obstacles. And most of that"—he jerked his thumb as if the list were typing itself out in the air behind him—"I was doing and feeling well before we ever got into bed together.

"When I'm here at work and something horrific comes into the system, I think about them, and my blood goes cold at the thought that I could ever lose one of them. My happiness depends on their well-being. It's terrifying and insane...and really, really good."

A slow grin spread itself over Ben's wide mouth. "So you love them."

"Yeah." Braden had felt it for a long time, but saying it aloud still evoked a sense of wonder and put a lump in his throat. "I do."

"Good, man." Ben clasped Braden's forearm and gave it a hard squeeze. "That's what you're supposed to feel. I'm happy for you."

"You really are, aren't you." It wasn't a question. Braden could see the support shining in Ben's eyes.

Hints of mossy green deepened Ben's hazel gaze. "I loved you once myself. I could only want what's best for you."

"You're something fucking special, Evans. You know that?"

"Stop cheerleading for me," Ben growled. "I'm fine. Let's get started on this case."

"Right." Braden handed over one of the folders. "Take a look."

* * *

After gaining permission from a church employee, Abby now sat in one of the front pews, absorbing the peaceful silence and soft shadows created by the dimmed lighting. About only half the size of the church Abby had grown up in, this place only boasted one stained-glass window, and the altar was simple and without a lot of ornamentation.

As was his way, Rodrigo had told Abby he would be close by if she needed him, and then he took a seat on the opposite side of the aisle, giving her space and time by herself. Rodrigo probably thought she was crazy—and maybe she was—but she appreciated his willingness to accept her journey rather than ridicule or judge her. Without her needing to say so, he understood which things to tease and torment her about and which sat too close to her heart to touch.

It's just one of the reasons I love him.

With a quick glance to her right at the man in question, Abby smiled to herself, content and warmed by his presence.

Right then, a masculine voice with a chuckle mixed in reached Abby's ears. "I do like to see a person full of joy in my church," it said.

Abby looked up, and to her right found a compact, silver-haired man dressed in black with a white collar. He had a stack of books braced against one forearm and a pair of readers perched on the end of his nose.

"Oh." *A priest. Well, of course there would be one, girl. This is a church.* She cycled back and couldn't remember what he'd said. "What was that?"

"Your smile. It was joyous." For a moment, the priest's attention slid to Rodrigo across the way. "It doesn't matter what put it there. A joyful heart inside these walls lifts everyone within." He plunked his stack of books—hymnals—on the padded pew. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Yes. I mean no, I don't mind. Thank you. Father... Reverend..." This man's presence threw her, jumbling her brain and tongue. "I don't know what it's proper to call you."

The man's knees cracked loudly, resonating against the walls of the church as he sat down, keeping a respectable distance between them. "Father Kurt. Or you could just call me Kurt. I'll answer to that too."

"I'm Abby." She forced herself to breathe in through her nose and out through her mouth until the butterflies in her stomach settled down to rest. "Good to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too." With his head turned so he could see her, Kurt dangled his clasped hands between his knees. "Is there something I can help you with, Abby? Or did you just come inside for a few minutes of quiet?"

Abby opened her mouth, the words *I'm fine* on her tongue. Instead, they came out as, "I don't really know why I'm here."

Kurt dipped his gray head. "That's okay too. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Although it will get louder in a few hours when we begin choir practice. Fair warning, we're loud and passionate, but contestants on *American Idol*, we are not."

"I've been fairly warned." Abby found herself pushing back her shoulders and shifting in the pew to face this man. "I suppose passion is the most important component anyway."

"Without a doubt," he said, no hesitation in his tone.

"Do you feel that way about all the members of your congregation?" The question popped out of Abby without moving through a filter first. "Is a desire to feel God's presence in your heart more important than what you do or who you love?"

"Hmm." In silence, the man tipped his head back and steepled his fingers under his chin. He stayed that way for a good solid minute before making eye contact with Abby again. "That's a broad question, Abby. I'd have trouble answering it without going on for hours or possibly even days."

"And that's an evasive answer." Her mouth twisted and her gaze narrowed. "You priests are very good at that."

"Now you're casting a net and judging me by the actions of everyone you've already trapped under it."

Abby pulled up short, her mouth agape. When she finally snapped it shut, she realized it wasn't easy to swallow the bitter taste of crow sitting at the tip of her tongue. "You're right," she told the priest. "I apologize."

"It's all right." Kurt's tone held no defensiveness. "My feelings are not easily bruised."

Father Kurt fell silent again. Casual as could be, he stretched his legs out in front of him and stuck his hands in his pockets, as if he planned to stay for a while. For Abby, his ease felt like nothing so much as an open-ended invitation to say as much or little as she wanted, and it would be all right.

"I used to go to church when I was a little girl," Abby confessed, her voice going soft. "I loved it. Life took me away from it for a long time, but recently this thirst for

a connection to something bigger than myself has grown to a point where I want to find a home for it.” Frustration slipped back in, killing the peace inside. “Only I have these two men in my life. There’s Rodrigo; that’s who you caught me smiling at over there. I have him, and I have Braden too; he’s at work right now, but he makes me smile when I look at him the same way Rodrigo does. Rodrigo and Braden have my back at all times, no matter what. I would never disrespect them for the world, but because we’re all in a relationship together, I’m not welcome where I used to go unless I’m open to guidance”—she threw her fingers up in quotes—“about how being with two men is not part of God’s best plan for me.” Abby’s blood pressure kicked right back into as high a gear as it had been when she spoke to Father Jim, and every bit of passion inside rang in her voice. “Now you tell me how in the hell is loving two people who care about me and only want the best for me not part of God’s plan? Why wouldn’t God be jumping up and down with joy for me? I’ll tell you.” She wagged her finger. “He’s caught up in the gay part where Rodrigo and Braden love each other too.”

“*He* as in God?” Father Kurt asked. “Or *he* as in this priest you spoke to?”

“I believe it’s the priest,” Abby replied, “although his thought would be that he’s speaking on God’s behalf. But I think, as long as we’re all consenting adults and not hurting each other, I don’t think God cares. Is that wrong? I don’t think it is. How can it be?”

“Abby.” Father Kurt took her hand in both of his. “If you are firmly committed to these people, and if you believe God tells you your friendship is right, then you already have all the answers you require. You don’t need me or anyone else to tell you if your relationship with these men is acceptable. God has told you the truth.”

“I know, I know.” Abby had no fears or worries that her relationship with Rodrigo and Braden was wrong. Nobody would ever convince her of that. But why couldn’t anyone understand what she was seeking? “I’m stubborn, I guess,” she admitted. “And I just want someone in a collar to acknowledge, to admit, it’s okay to be what we are. I can’t open myself to guidance from someone who doesn’t. If I did, that would be the same as a piece of me telling Rodrigo and Braden that I’m not sure about us. That I’m willing to be swayed by a good enough talker. And I’m not.”

“Then why does it matter?”

“I don’t know. It just does.” Abby hated not having the answer for herself, let alone confiding it to someone else. “Maybe because I need to feel it’s worth the struggle to find my faith again. If I can’t find a place to fit where I don’t feel compromised and can be myself, if my friends aren’t all welcome as equally as I am, then maybe I need to know that now so I can move on to somewhere else.”

“That sounds like a reasonable and honorable journey to have.”

“But...” *Enough with him turning this conversation all on me.* “What do you believe, Father Kurt?”

The man took his time before answering. His mouth pulled, making deep brackets on his face, and his eyes held curiosity and thirst as he worked his answer out in his head, all of which made Abby respect him. Even if she didn’t end up liking

his answer, she appreciated that he clearly put some personal thought into it. He didn't just spew an answer by rote.

"You know," Kurt finally said, "I don't have a *ménage* relationship in my congregation, and I've never been asked to counsel one. However, I would openly accept you if you were with either this Rodrigo or Braden separately, and I would accept and welcome Rodrigo and Braden in a relationship together, so logically speaking it would be hypocritical of me to judge the three of you as fundamentally wrong."

He put his elbow on the stack of hymnals and rested his chin in his hand, which put Abby in mind of a scholar from long ago. "I suppose ultimately it's not the number that matters. What matters to God is your love for each other, your commitment, your respect toward one another, your bond, and your desire to be faithful to each other in a monogamous relationship. Of course, the word monogamy makes us draw the definition of a single mate for a lifetime, but in practical application, three people could be just as committed to each other as two."

"Would you get in trouble with your higher-ups for having this belief?" Curiosity pushed Abby to ask more questions. It was trippy as all get-out to sit with a person of such profound commitment to his faith and simply feel like she was having a *conversation* with him. Not a lecture, not a sermon, not a constant fear of judgment on her end, but just two people *talking*.

"I don't know how others of my faith would feel," Kurt said. "It wouldn't change my belief, though. My mind is my own." He smiled, and it was lopsided and wonderful. "I believe God likes it that way."

Abby found herself grinning back. "You're an unusual man of God, Kurt."

"I don't know about that." He brushed her compliment off with a shrug but then sat up straight, his gaze deepening as he looked at her. "And I would caution you against believing this other priest you spoke to came to his belief lightly or blindly. Men and women of God have just as many internal struggles with what they are taught to believe and with what their heart quietly tells them is right as any other person does. Putting on a collar is not a magic wand. It's not a cure-all for doubts, and it doesn't automatically give you all the answers, no matter the few who are very outspoken on behalf of their particular religion might tell you. We're all human, Abby." His tone dropped, as if imparting a valuable secret. "We're all interpreting what we believe God's true word to be, and sometimes we make mistakes."

"Forget unusual man of God, Father." Abby laughed outright, amazed that she could with this person she'd just met. "You're just an unusual man. Period."

"I was raised by my mother and grandmother, and I have a twin sister," Kurt shared. "I've also been married for twenty years and have two daughters. If I'm at all enlightened, you can thank them. They teach me lessons every day."

"Thank you." Abby reached her hand out in offering. "Thank you for talking to me. You have no idea how much I needed to hear some of the things you said."

Honesty overcame her pride and forced her to say, "You've given me a lot to think about too."

"Thinking is always good." Still grasping her hand, Father Kurt stood. "I'll leave you to it. You're welcome to stay however long you'd like."

As Father Kurt wished her a good day and her fingers slipped from his grasp, from somewhere behind her, Abby heard a woman softly say, "It'll just be five minutes. I promise." Then, a gravelly, stripped-raw male voice that Abby had never thought to hear again said, "Let's make it quick. I have to get back to work."

Every molecule of blood in Abby's body froze. The man then whispered again, and she shuddered violently.

The devil's voice.

Instinct pushed Abby back in time, to when she was eight years old. Such terror swamped her that she wanted to curl up into a ball on the pew and hide from the evil.

From where she sat, statue still, Abby saw Father Kurt's lips move. She saw her name in the way his mouth formed the word, but such blood roared in her ears that she could not hear him.

Get up!

Abby had to scream at herself in her head to get her limbs to unlock and move. Once they did, she stood, turned, and found the eyes of a killer.

His face meant nothing to her, but his voice had changed her life. She looked at the man, barely held herself straight, and uttered, "It was you."

Chapter Nineteen

After sifting through paperwork in silence for a good stretch of time, without looking up, Ben asked, “Why do you have multiple files for this case?”

Pausing in his reread of the old case notes, Braden glanced at Ben. “Because when I started looking into the Gaineses’ murders, it was unofficial. I worked off a copy. I made a copy of that copy for you. My copy is what you’re going over right now. I used it as a reference when I wanted to study the case outside the office. When the captain gave me the okay to investigate, I switched to the original. And”—Braden tapped the thin file on the table between them—“I also created a new one.”

“Just doesn’t seem efficient to me.” The sound of another sheet of paper being flipped followed Ben’s comment.

Braden looked down at the table to hide his smile. Ben’s world would collapse without his attention to detail and desire for order. “That’s why I called you in, Evans. Let’s get it streamlined so we know what we have.”

“Like, what is this?” Ben sounded exasperated. He pulled a folded piece of paper from beneath a paper clip keeping the square attached to the copy file. He opened the paper and flattened it against the tabletop. “A book-club list?” he said, lifting his gaze to Braden.

Braden’s brow pulled together as he searched backward over the last week. “Oh, right. Okay. Abby’s mother belonged to a book club, and the mother’s best friend was going to track down a list of its members. Damn,” he said, awe in his voice. “The woman didn’t waste any time. Attach that to the front of the file. I need to interview those people ASAP.”

A moment of companionable silence fell between them. Then Ben softly said, “Huh.”

The hairs on Braden’s neck tickled a sensation straight down his spine. Ben’s *huhs* were never simple. “What, huh?”

Ben settled his big hand on top of the paper. “Have you looked at this list?”

“Not yet.” Braden’s mouth pulled down at the edges as the pulse point in his neck started to pick up speed. “I didn’t even realize Mrs. Jones had gathered it for Abby. She must have passed it on to Abby, and Abby put it there without mentioning it to me.”

"Were you aware that your captain was in this book club with Elaine Gaines?" Ben spun the sheet of paper around. Right there in block letters halfway down the list was *Tom Zanger*, big as life.

"Son of a bitch." Braden growled. His lips automatically pulled back to bare his teeth. "Zanger never mentioned being in a book club with the wife. He never said anything about even knowing either of the victims let alone disclosing a connection to one of them."

"Your boss knew Elaine Gaines personally, and he never told any of the detectives working the case?" One of Ben's eyebrows shot up so high it certainly could not have moved up any farther on his forehead. "And he had his hands legitimately in this case—possibly handling evidence—as a uniformed officer eighteen years ago?"

"Yes," Braden replied. Then Abby's throwaway words from the other night roared in Braden's ears. "Oh my God." His heart stopped. "The devil's voice. She said the killer had the devil's voice." Another picture from a few days ago flashed in Braden's head and coalesced with Abby's memory of her father. "Son of a bitch." Braden shot to his feet and started running.

Ben caught up, snagged Braden's arm, and whirled him around. "What are you talking about?"

"Grab those for me." Braden pointed back at the files on the picnic table while yanking free of Ben's hold. "I need to check something before I say."

Braden raced inside the station as fast as his legs would carry him. Skidding past his desk and a stunned Derek and April, he kicked in the captain's office door, knowing the man was out and that he always kept it locked. Running past the wall of official accolades, Braden raced to Zanger's many fishing trophy photos, searching until his gaze homed in on the one featuring a sandy-haired Zanger in his younger years.

I knew it.

Braden ripped the framed photo off the shelf just as Ben rushed into the office, files in hand.

"Motherfucking murderer," Braden murmured.

"What the hell, man?" Ben reached Braden's side.

Braden clutched the wood frame in his hands to the point that it dug into skin. *I'm gonna tear this fucking bastard apart.*

"Look at this." He thrust the photo at Ben. "Remember how I told you Abby remembered her father having sex with a muscle-bound guy with trim blond hair?"

Ben glanced down at the photo of a young Thomas Zanger proudly holding up his marlin catch. Shirtless and tan, Zanger had the same muscular body he had today, but back then his short blond hair blew in the breeze.

"There are a lot of blond guys in the world," Ben said, his voice reasonable as he handed the picture back to Braden. "That's a reach."

“Abby’s father was an avid fisherman too. The neighbor said he took lots of trips, and Abby even mentioned that he had some of his big catches mounted on the walls in their house.” The wheels were spinning inside Braden. On a roll now, he would not be deterred. “The devil voice too.” He spoke aloud, working it out with Ben. “Abby remembers the person who killed her parents having an awful devil voice. To an eight-year-old, Zanger’s voice probably sounds like what you would think the devil’s does. I always thought it was from a lifetime of smoking, but maybe he’s always had something wrong with his vocal cords. And”—the final block slid into place and completed the puzzle—“Elaine Gaines called her murderer baby before he killed her.”

“But you started out showing me a picture of Zanger and connecting it to the husband,” Ben reasoned. “So, what? You think Zanger was having affairs with both of them?”

Braden nodded. “Either that or they were all in it consensually. The husband’s fucking a blond guy, and Zanger is blond. They both loved to fish, so in a town as small as Coleman was back then, they easily could have met through that interest. The wife calls her murderer baby, and we know from Abby’s recollection that the man sounded like the devil. You could easily classify Zanger’s tone as a devil voice.” Braden ticked the evidence off on his fingers. “It’s an awfully big coincidence if the two men aren’t one and the same. Motherfucker.” Braden snarled and punched at the wall. “That’s why Zanger wanted to shut down the case so fast.”

Ben snapped his fingers and pumped his hand at Zanger’s desk, looking for the world like he was on board now. “You told him about the husband with the blond man as a way to go after the priest, but he knew it was him. You were getting details that could eventually point to him. Maybe he feared the priest knew something and would turn on him when you put the priest in the hot seat and implied *he* was the one getting it on with the husband. Zanger probably panicked and used the politics as a way to shut you down.”

“Maybe he was about to be exposed back then too,” Braden said.

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone killed to hide a secret.”

“I have to find him.” Braden spun to leave the office to find Derek and April standing at the door, looking sick, clearly having heard every word. Braden couldn’t worry about who had overheard his theory or explain it further right now. As he pushed past the pair, he asked, “Watson, where’s the boss?”

“Not sure,” Derek answered, following Braden to his desk. “The wife came in.”

April added, “When she said hello, she mentioned something about dropping her car at the place down the street for an oil change. They have the boss’s vehicle.”

“Find it.” Braden leaned in and kept his voice low. “Find him and let me know where he is immediately.”

Derek and April grabbed their phones. “On it,” Derek said.

Braden started speed walking to the front of the station. “Call me on my cell when you have an address.” He lifted his hand, the device clasped in his fingers.

“Ben—” Braden turned in a circle, having lost his backup.

“Right behind you.” Right there all the time, Ben nudged Braden out the door. “Let’s go.”

I’m coming for you, you son of a bitch. Years of betrayal and lies on top of these gruesome murders choked in Braden’s throat. *Your freedom is over.*

* * *

On the echoes of Abby uttering, “It was you,” the man whipped a gun out from under his jacket and pointed it at Abby.

“Elaine?” The man choked out Abby’s mother’s name, his voice like rocks going through a wood chipper. He took one hand off his weapon long enough to cross himself. “How?”

Abby’s mind acknowledged there was a weapon pointed at her, but she couldn’t process its power. She couldn’t stop looking at this individual who looked like a man while everything in her screamed that he couldn’t be human. She didn’t know how to reconcile the demonic image her childhood had conjured and this person who was just...a person.

Who murdered two people.

She found her voice, and new fire ate away any tremor in her tone. “I’m not Elaine. I’m her daughter, Abby.”

The murderer’s eyes took over his face, and it seemed the breath rushed out of his body. “The girl.”

“Yes.” The one word snapped out of Abby and cracked around the church walls.

The woman next to the man backed away and stumbled into one of the pews. She put one hand over her mouth and the other over her heart. “Thomas, what are you doing?”

Thomas. Its very normalcy nearly buckled Abby to her knees. *You have a name.*

With his hands raised in surrender, Father Kurt inched to the middle of the aisle between Abby and the killer. “Sir, look at your wife.” He continued to shuffle toward the woman as he spoke. “Listen to her fear. You don’t want to scare her anymore. You don’t want to hurt anybody here today.”

Rodrigo moved in carefully from Abby’s left. “Abby.” He stretched out his arm and eased in front of her, his big frame casting her in shadow. “Stay behind me. Father”—Rodrigo reached out but missed grabbing on to the priest’s shirt—“get out of the way of that weapon.”

“No, Rodrigo,” Abby whispered, her tone lethal. Rodrigo’s desire to protect Abby gunned her own instincts to protect her dead parents. “I want him to look at me. He needs to see me and remember what he did.” She ducked around Rodrigo and pointed her finger as if she were throwing a dagger. “You killed two people eighteen years ago. On that day”—she jabbed again—“you wanted to kill me too.”

"No." His face deepening in color, Thomas swept his head back and forth with near violence. "That's not true."

"It is true." Abby battled against Rodrigo's arm and shoulder, pushing against his attempt to keep her safe. "I've started having nightmares about that day again, and I remember your voice. You killed my parents in cold blood." She felt wetness hit her cheeks, but her voice did not waver. "And then you started looking for me."

The woman Father Kurt had now reached slumped against his side. "Thomas," she said in a hushed tone. "What is this girl saying?"

Thomas shook his head almost as if he were trying to get an irritating mosquito away from him. "Nothing, Karen. Don't listen."

"You will listen to me!" Abby thundered as she struggled against Rodrigo, who had his hands wrapped around her upper arms, holding her back from charging this man-made monster. "You will listen to me tell you how terrified I was while I hid in the attic, shaking to the point of exhaustion and trying not to scream as you shouted *little girl*. You searched every room and closet in my house trying to find me, and you know it." Every sentence punctuated Thomas's silence, creating bullet holes in the fragile facade. "You will listen to me tell you that if it weren't for my neighbor's phone call interrupting your search, you would have kept looking and eventually found me. You will listen to me tell you that you were wearing a long-sleeved blue shirt, jeans, and boots, and that you cursed as you ran out the front door."

The red that had infused Thomas's face only moments ago drained away in a flood. "Dear God."

"Dear God is right." Venom laced Abby's every word. "I remember now. It's not just fuzzy stuff left over from a traumatic childhood. I remember everything. You know because you were there, and so was I. If you hadn't had to leave so quickly, you would've kept looking for me. You would've found me eventually"—a rush of fear from that day choked her—"and you would've killed me."

"No, damn it, no," Thomas swore. "You were just a child."

"But I was a witness!" Abby swiped at the wetness blurring her vision. "You called me by my name, you devil bastard. You tried to lure me out with ice cream." The tears flew freely, and her voice was stripped raw, but the pain only helped push her more. "If my mom hadn't looked at me as she lay there dying, urging me to be silent, I might have come out of hiding. You might have slashed my throat too and gotten away with three murders."

Thomas shook his head. No words, no defense, no explanation, no confession, and no apologies. Just a shake of his head, and his lack of a response stabbed Abby in the heart all over again.

"Do you know how long I sat with those bodies because nobody came?" She screeched at him, but she didn't care. She couldn't stop. "You ran to save yourself, but nobody ever came. It was just me in a bloody room with my mom and dad. I couldn't get them to talk, and they wouldn't blink their eyes, but I couldn't accept

why.” Her voice cracked on the flood of released emotions. “It went on for hours and hours without end.”

“I know.” His voice broke too.

“You know”—Abby hit her head with her fingers—“but you don’t understand.” She dug her fist into her breast, but the pain didn’t amount to a pinprick of the rage and fear and loneliness she’d lived with every single day after her parents died. “You can never *understand*. You changed my life in a way that can never be undone. I’ll never be someone who didn’t have her parents murdered and stolen from her life when she was eight years old. I’ll never be a person who didn’t bounce through the foster-care system until it kicked her out on the day she turned eighteen. I’ll always be the person who stopped believing in God on the day you stole my parents from me.” Her chest heaved, heavy with old hurts, weighing her down. “Do you still want to point your gun at me and pretend you didn’t do it?”

“It’s not what you think,” Thomas said, his gun not lowering an inch.

“It’s over, Zanger.” Braden’s voice suddenly filled the room.

Zanger? Braden’s boss? Abby jerked her gaze to the left and saw Braden coming up the outer aisle, his gun drawn and aimed at Thomas. Another man took up point on the right side, his weapon drawn on Thomas too. Abby had been so intent on her parents’ murderer that she hadn’t heard or noticed either one of them enter the church.

“She recognizes your voice,” Braden said, his focus trained on the killer. “We know from the tattoos that Cormack didn’t do it. We can put you in a book club with Elaine Gaines. Once I talk to those people, I’d bet a few of them will remember the two of you were friendly.” Braden kept Zanger’s attention on him and his own steps to a minimum, but he and the man he’d entered with did slowly get closer to Thomas. “We have Abby’s memory of the blond man in the den with her father. I’ve seen pictures of you in your office from that time period. You fish. So did Richard. I bet if I search hard enough, I can find at least one person who remembers you two together. I know it was you.” For a split second, Braden’s attention shifted to the woman with Father Kurt. “If you want to maintain that position with your weapon, we can keep discussing it here. I’d think you might want to do it down at the station and spare your wife any more details.”

“They didn’t know about each other,” Thomas said, his severely textured voice somehow rising in pitch. “They were married, but they were really just companions. It wasn’t like they were really cheating. They were never supposed to know what was going on.”

Braden’s mouth slashed to a thin line. “It’s easy to say you don’t care until you find out there’s another real flesh-and-blood person in your spouse’s bed.”

“Richard called me and said he wanted to end it. He wanted to come clean to Elaine, to get counseling, and try to make a go of the marriage. I knew it wouldn’t work; that wasn’t who he was.” All of a sudden, Thomas became the Niagara Falls of information. “I loved him. I loved Elaine too. I didn’t want it to be over with either of them. I knew Elaine had a charity thing, so I drove out to the house and

tried to talk Richard out of it. We... Something happened between us, and I thought we came to an understanding. But afterward, he still said he couldn't see me anymore. It was the last time we could...do what we did. I left, but I knew Richard, and I knew Elaine too. If they confessed to each other what they'd done, they would need to purge their souls of everything, and they would tell." Anger entered Thomas's voice, and the blotches of red returned to his face. "The secret would come out. Someone would overhear something. You tell one person a secret like this, even a priest, and before you know it, two people know, then three people, until the whole town is in on it."

"And you couldn't have that," Braden said, his voice conversational. "You were respected at the station and had the start of a promising career."

Thomas nodded as if his reasoning made perfect sense. "And I had Karen. We'd just started dating, but I knew she would make the perfect wife. If she'd found out I'd been involved with another woman, and a man too, she would have left me. I would have had nothing."

Rodrigo growled behind Abby. "So instead you killed two people and left a little girl with nobody to call her own."

Thomas went very still, and his gaze locked on Abby. "If you'd gone with them, you never would have suffered."

Everyone in the church gasped.

"You sick son of a bitch," Braden hissed. "You just confessed that you'd intended to kill a child too."

Karen grabbed her mouth and doubled over. "I think I'm going to be sick." As she swayed to the side, she retched violently.

"Karen!" Thomas moved to grab his wife.

The second Zanger took his focus off his weapon, Braden and his partner rushed the man. Braden shouted, "Get down! Get down on the ground now!" The other man shoved Zanger onto his stomach with a boot to his shoulder blades. He kept it there, holding Zanger in place, and pointed his gun to the back of Zanger's head as Braden yanked his boss's arms behind his back and cuffed him. His cheek planted into the floor, Thomas pleaded with his wife to understand him, but she just wiped her mouth and turned away.

Father Kurt dropped to Karen Zanger's side and propped her semilimp form up with an arm around her waist. Braden glanced in the wife's direction, and the priest assured Braden he would make sure Karen had all the help she needed.

As Braden hauled Thomas Zanger to his feet and read him his rights, Rodrigo wrapped his arm around Abby and tugged her to his side. "It's over now, Bit." He pressed a kiss to the side of her head, holding his mouth there. "You don't have to be afraid to go to sleep anymore."

"Right," Abby murmured. Her legs and arms suddenly trembled again terribly, and she wasn't sure if they would ever stop. She leaned into Rodrigo's big frame, feeling as weak as a baby bird. Together, in silence, they watched Braden do his job

from the sidelines. At the exit, with Zanger cuffed in his custody in front of him, Braden looked back at them and gave them a brief nod.

Abby knew Braden would make sure Zanger put his confession down on paper and that there would be no loopholes through which the man could slip free.

No more nightmares. No more search for a motive and murderer.

Now I just have to figure out how to live with the truth.

* * *

Hours later, Rodrigo answered Braden's knock on Abby's door. Rodrigo was a sight for sore eyes, and Braden stepped into the man's embrace, taking a good long moment to enjoy the security of a pair of big strong arms holding him tight. Braden had been able to do his job today because of Rodrigo. Not only by being able to take time away from Abby to take care of business at the station after everything had gone down, but also because it was Rodrigo who'd texted Braden a brief message *911 episcopal church* that led Braden and Ben to Zanger's location.

As he pulled away, Braden cupped his hand against Rodrigo's chiseled cheek, needing to maintain the connection. "How's she doing?" he asked, even though he'd already called twice tonight.

Rodrigo pressed a kiss to the inside of Braden's wrist. "Same. Quiet." He wound his hand in Braden's and tugged him up the stairs. "She's looking at a picture of her parents a lot."

"That's understandable."

"Yeah. Chris and Jonah just left," Rodrigo shared. "They wanted to help but didn't really know what to do." He looked back and met Braden's gaze. "Not sure I do either."

They reached the landing, and Abby appeared from her bedroom. Sadness absolutely drenched her eyes to the deepest, bluest midnight, and it broke Braden's heart.

"How'd it go?" she asked, not moving any closer.

"Good, I think." Braden held his position when everything in him wanted to scoop her up in his arms. "Zanger doesn't want this being dragged out in public any more than it has to be, and that's really motivating him to avoid a trial. He made his confession on the record, and now it's just a matter of the lawyers and a judge hashing out the rest."

"That's good." Abby rubbed her palms on her shirtsleeves and then her jeans, as if she didn't quite know what to do. "I was hoping you would say that."

"What can we do for you, Bit?" Rodrigo took one of those hands and kissed it. "Do you want me to make you some dinner? Or I can take us out to eat. Or we can just veg out in front of the TV and not think for the rest of the night. It's up to you."

Haggard as hell, Abby looked down at the floor. "I think I'm going to go for a walk." She squeezed past them. "I need some time alone to process everything that went down today."

Rodrigo kept hold of her hand, preventing her from taking more than one step. "We can come with you."

"No." She tugged against Rodrigo's hold. "I promise I'll be fine." A tremulous smile briefly appeared. "I just need some air and a few minutes by myself. I'll see you in a little while."

Braden curled his hand around Rodrigo's shoulder and squeezed. A moment later, Rodrigo released Abby.

She dipped her head then called out, "Bye," as she rushed down the stairs.

One glance and Braden could read everything in Rodrigo's dark eyes. "You're thinking about following her."

Rodrigo's stare remained on the empty staircase. "I know I can't, but it's fucking hard not to chase her down."

"I know," Braden murmured. "She has to be able to do this in her own time and in her own way. If we push, we'll screw everything up."

"I know that too. Doesn't stop me from wanting to grab her and hold her anyway." Running his hands through his dark tresses, Rodrigo killed any sense of order or style to his hair. "This has to be what it feels like to be impotent." His grimace looked feral. "I fucking hate it."

Braden's chest weighed heavily as he looked around at the colorful, empty hallway and rooms. Without Abby, the painted walls seemed dimmer and not quite right. "It's not any easier for me, Rigo." His stomach growled right then, as it had been doing for hours, and this prowling man next to him needed a distraction. "Are you open to cooking something for me? I haven't eaten anything since you fed me breakfast."

Rodrigo staggered to a stop only inches from Braden. "What do you want? I need something to do."

"Surprise me." Braden reached out and brushed his fingers through the tufts of Rodrigo's disheveled hair. "You haven't disappointed me yet."

Rodrigo rolled his eyes. "You don't have to flatter me." Taking Braden's hand, Rodrigo led him to the kitchen, adding, "You already know I love you."

Braden staggered, and it didn't much surprise him when he uttered Rodrigo's favorite curse word.

Chapter Twenty

From bed, Abby stared out into Rodrigo's courtyard, her thoughts and heart and beliefs a jumble she didn't know how to fully reconcile. Twinkles of early-morning light filtered in through the wall of windows and danced across her purse where it sat in one of the two chairs in the room.

Abby scooted to the end of the mattress to get up, careful not to disturb either of her bedmates. A note sat inside her purse, one she'd read at least twenty times since receiving it at her store yesterday morning. She took out the envelope again and withdrew the cardstock to read what was written on it, although she'd already memorized every word.

They remained together with much love between them because they loved you, Abby. You were their treasure. In the end, nothing else matters.

The card was not signed, but the letterhead told her it was from Father Jim. Abby figured she would never learn exactly what information about her parents—or even about Thomas Zanger—the priest had possessed. She would have to figure out a way to live with that. As much as she didn't condone Father Jim's methods or some of his beliefs, something in his desire to preserve the memory of her parents for her had honor in it. Abby no longer believed he'd obstructed the investigation solely as a means to protect the image of his church.

So where does that leave me now?

Not back at the beginning. Abby felt that on a bone-deep level. She couldn't return to who she'd been before she'd started having those dreams.

In her sight, two perfect men lay fast asleep in bed. Rodrigo on his stomach with the white sheet tangled around him, the brightness a sharp contrast against his beautiful tan skin. Braden was on his back with his arms and legs thrown wide, as naked and incredible as the way God sent him into this world. Abby's heart ached with such love, admiration, and respect for both of these people that she sometimes thought it would burst inside her and visibly leak out of her pores.

As much as they had become the biggest part of her world, right now, Abby had somewhere to go. Something inside her needed exploring, and she couldn't ignore it. As much as she wanted these two men at her side in absolutely everything, she knew she had no right to ask them to come with her. She treaded quietly to the walk-in closet, pulled out some clothes, and went out the other side to the bathroom to clean up.

A half hour later, she kissed each man on the cheek, propped a note against the alarm clock, and left Rodrigo's house.

* * *

The scratchy, masculine utterance "son of a bitch" sank into Rodrigo's brain and jerked him to consciousness. On top of that came "cutting the yard early on a fucking Sunday" much too close to Rodrigo's ear.

"Go back to sleep, Bray," Rodrigo muttered. Barely opening one eye, he reached out and pushed Braden's head back to his pillow. "There are no lawn mowers around here except for mine."

"It stopped now," Braden said. "You heard it, Abby, didn't you? Abby?" His voice rose in a way that perked up Rodrigo's ears again. Then, "damn it."

"Aaannnd"—Rodrigo bobbed into an upright position—"I'm awake." He scrubbed the grit from his eyes so he could see. "What's the matter?"

Braden shoved a note card into Rodrigo's hands. "She's gone again. Damn it." Obvious frustration had him throwing a pillow against the wall. "I didn't even hear her get up this time."

"She's getting stealthy." Rodrigo reached out and rubbed at the tension knotting Braden's shoulders.

Over the week and a half since capturing her parents' murderer, Abby had slept less, not more, and she had slipped out to take walks by herself on multiple occasions. She wasn't her usual mouthy self either. Rodrigo had tried poking at her in an attempt to get a rise out of her to no avail. It had looked like she'd wanted to go at him once or twice, but something stopped her. Rodrigo didn't like it. Braden continued to hold himself back in order to give Abby the space they knew she needed, but Rodrigo could see the man's need to help her fighting against his famous patience and cool.

Rodrigo took a second to read the note in Abby's flowing script. Short and to the point, it told them not to worry and she should be back by lunchtime.

With a glance past Braden to the clock, Rodrigo brought his attention back to the other man, tapping the note against his chin. "I think I know where she is."

"Me too," Braden murmured.

One look between them conveyed their shared intent.

Okay, then. We have a plan.

Rodrigo shot out of bed. "We don't have much time. Let's go."

Braden followed Rodrigo into the closet. "Do you have a tie you can lend me?"

"No lending." Rodrigo handed Braden a length of silk that would match the work blazer he had with him. "If it's mine, it's yours."

Braden grabbed Rodrigo to him and crushed their mouths together in a fast, hard kiss. With his forehead pressed to Rodrigo's, Braden made eye contact, and such a burn lived there Rodrigo couldn't look away.

"You know I love you too, right?" Braden said.

On the outside, Rodrigo kept a straight face, but on the inside, laughter lifted him. This was the first time Braden had directly referenced Rodrigo's admission, and the man was so very intense and serious about it now.

So like his everyday self.

"Yep." Rodrigo brushed their noses, nipped the man's lips, and got back to gathering clothes. "I know."

Braden's chuckle carried softly between them. "I love how you're so matter-of-fact now, Rigo. Like getting into this thing with me and Abby never messed with your head or was much of a big deal."

"This has been one hell of a few weeks." His heart somehow light and heavy at the same time, Rodrigo lifted his gaze to Braden's, clothes draped over his arm. "At a certain point, you gotta stop worrying about everything and just start believing in what you feel. You have to trust that the people you're with are for real and are going to keep you safe. I guess because of everything that happened, I ended up getting there a lot faster than I might have otherwise."

"Yeah." Clouds turned Braden's eyes murky for a moment. Just as fast, that glint of focused determination Rodrigo had witnessed in him when he'd faced off against Zanger cleared the storm. "Let's go get our girl."

* * *

Abby sat at the back of the church, tucked away in the last pew, feeling like a virgin who hadn't been given any instruction on what to expect from sex. Which was ridiculous. She'd gone to church every Sunday, and often on Wednesdays, for the first eight years of her life, so it wasn't as if she'd never done this before.

But you never did it here.

She'd never sat through a service at an Episcopal church. She'd never had such an uplifting conversation with someone like Father Kurt—someone who certainly hadn't signed up to meet the needs of her internal drama. A glimmer of her need for hope rested on his shoulders. He shouldn't have that responsibility, yet Abby's heart raced as she waited for the service to start, her expectations high. Nerves and second thoughts kept her hands clenching and her stare directed down on her feet.

Someone shuffled in front of her, murmuring a barely audible "excuse me."

Before Abby even whispered an apology and shifted her legs out of the way, someone else said, "Scoot over, will you?"

Braden.

Abby snapped her gaze out of hiding and found not only Braden waiting for her to clear a space for him, but Rodrigo too. He'd been the one who'd pushed past her seconds ago.

She moved to give Braden room at the end of the pew, her mouth agape as she looked between them. Her heart now skittered into her throat for an entirely different reason than Father Kurt.

"How did you know where to find me?" she finally managed to ask.

Rodrigo quirked one of those thick brows at her. "We know *you*, Bit." His hand found hers and stilled the nervous twisting. "That's how."

"You didn't have to come." *Oh Jesus*. She was going to fall into a puddle of tears in this building again. "You don't have to feel obli—"

"Shh." Braden took her other hand, squeezing it as he looked ahead. "I think it's about to start."

* * *

The service now complete, rather than exiting the church, Braden pushed through the throng of people leaving, making his way to the front row of pews. "There, I see her up ahead." He had hold of Abby's hand, and he knew she tugged Rodrigo along behind her. "I knew she was here somewhere."

Just as Braden reached the front of the church, a stout woman in vibrant purple, wearing a matching hat, stood up and spotted him.

"Braden!" His aunt Ida rushed to him as fast as her short legs would carry her, and she engulfed him in a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Aunt Ida." Braden maneuvered under the brim of his aunt's hat to peck a kiss on her cheek. "I'm here with my friends." He took hold of Abby's hand again and this time grabbed Rodrigo's and pulled the man to his other side. "You know Abby and Rodrigo." Braden's aunt lived next door to Christian and Jonah and thus had met their friends on numerous occasions.

Ida touched her hands to Abby's and Rodrigo's cheeks. "Hello, my darlings." Her gaze grew somber as it held on Abby. "How are you, my dear girl?"

"I'm getting there." Abby offered Ida a small smile. "I have lots of good people looking out for me." She squeezed Braden's hand as she said that, and Braden wondered if she even realized she did it. "That's all I can ask."

"Indeed," Ida replied.

"Auntie." Braden knew his aunt's ears would perk up at the affectionate form of address. "I need to share that Abby and Rodrigo are more than just friends." Love for these people clutching his hands made Braden's voice husky. "They're my partners. Both of them. We're all together now in one relationship."

"Oh, my stubborn boy." Ida's eyes lit up, and she pinched his cheek with her bejeweled fingers. "It's about time."

Next to him, Rodrigo's jaw dropped. "Seriously?"

Ida shrugged. "My Braden tells me about women friends, and he tells me about men, and I even met one of each. I liked them both, but I knew it would not last. This..." She waved her finger in front of all three of them, and her eyes sparkled as brightly as the ring adorning that finger. "The lightbulb finally went on for you. You love both, you need both, and I must just tell you that I sensed this interest in you for these two right from the start." She pressed her hands together and lifted them in the direction of the altar. "I prayed they would come to feel the same."

The acceptance from his aunt filled Braden up, not for himself, but for Abby and Rodrigo. "I wasn't worried about you at all, Auntie." Time and again, Ida proved to Braden her love did not come with conditions. "We'll come over for dinner sometime soon."

"Yes, you will," Ida responded with a nod. "But now I must go. I have lunch plans with friends, and they will worry if I'm late." She kissed Braden first, then gave hugs to Abby and Rodrigo and finally singsonged her good-byes as she toddled on down the aisle to outside.

Abby turned, her attention on Ida's back until the woman was out of sight. "Well, that was easy."

"Christian and Jonah are her honorary nephews," Braden reminded her. "Are you really surprised?"

"I guess not."

Rodrigo broke away from Braden's hold and stepped in front of Abby. "How about you, Bit?" His hands were casual in his pockets, but the unblinking way he studied Abby was anything but. "Are you feeling better?"

Braden watched Abby's gaze move around the emptied church. When she completed the assessment, she held on Braden for just as long, showing the burn of blue, and did the same to Rodrigo.

"Yeah," she finally said. "I think I am."

Holding out both hands, Rodrigo offered, and Abby and Braden accepted. "Then let's go home."

Chapter Twenty-one

They were pulling into Rodrigo's place, Abby sitting in the middle of him and Braden, when Abby remembered she'd driven her own car to church and had left it in the parking lot. The moment Rodrigo let them inside the house, Abby found the church's number in the phone book, called them, and promised she would return to pick it up later.

She hung up the phone at the desk, turned, and found Rodrigo and Braden watching her with eagle eyes. Braden held coolly in place, leaning against the back of the sofa, his pale gaze assessing her in that detective's way of his. Rodrigo paced in front of the wall of windows, his hands clasped behind his back, his line of sight always shifting so he could see her.

Caught.

Guilt nagged Abby's conscience. She had put these guys through so much since this whole thing started, and she hated the distance she'd created between them the last week.

"You think I'm going to leave again," she said. She could feel the truth filling the room with everything Rodrigo and Braden *didn't* say.

What you're not saying either, girl. Conscience pricked at Abby again.

His gaze not letting hers get away, Braden crossed his arms against his chest, still openly studying her from his position. "I just want to know why you didn't simply tell us you were going to church."

Abby had hoped not to have this conversation this quickly. In dealing with her own uncertainty about church and God and religion, she found them compounded when thinking about Braden and Rodrigo's reactions mixed in.

Rodrigo stopped his pacing at Braden's side, and it seemed he'd suddenly mastered Braden's interrogation stare. "We're waiting, Bit."

Just say it already, girl.

"Because this wasn't who you signed up for when we started dancing around our attraction to each other." Abby's voice sounded dangerously screechy to her own ears. "Hell"—she snorted and threw up her arms—"it wasn't even what you thought you were getting when we all started sharing a bed."

"What the fuck?" Braden's stare narrowed, and his brow pulled with puzzlement. "You're pulling back from us because you've discovered you want to go to church every Sunday? That doesn't make any sense."

Feeling too warm, Abby yanked off her floral duster and started to pace the length of the room. "I don't know what I mean exactly. All I know is that while it was sweet as hell of both of you to show up today, I certainly don't want you thinking you *have* to come or be a part of whatever the heck I'm trying to figure out right now."

Braden's forehead only furrowed more, Rodrigo looked at her as if she were speaking a foreign language, and Abby scrambled in her inability to articulate her fears.

"I don't want either of you to feel pressured to participate in something you might not believe in," she said. "And you shouldn't think your feelings aren't allowed to change about me because I am doing this. If they have or do, or you're not comfortable, or if you think my attending church makes me someone different than the woman you thought I was..." She dragged her hand through her hair and in the process knocked the barrette loose. "I don't know... I guess I'm saying you shouldn't feel guilty if you want to rethink being with me."

"Wait a damn minute," Braden said, his voice hard. He snagged her arm and reeled her in front of him and Rodrigo. Nothing in his pale eyes looked remote or cool anymore. "You think your experimenting with faith and church is something that would make me want to break up with you? Do you think I'll just move on to someone else who is—I don't know—an atheist or something?"

"No." Honesty compelled Abby to add, "I don't know. Maybe." Her scalp tingled as her hair fell out of its binding, but she ignored the itch of the fall as it surrounded her face. "Look, 'churchgoing Abby'"—she put her fingers up in quotes—"wasn't a part of the person you started getting to know ten months ago, and it's feasible that you might not be comfortable with it."

Braden kept his hands fisted at his sides, but Abby could tell he wanted to strangle her. "You didn't have nightmares ten months ago either," he spat out, "and you didn't have all the baggage you now have about your parents. You'll continue to change as that information settles inside you over the next few months too. Should I be allowed to keep that as a free pass to leave you?"

He clamped his hand around Rodrigo's nape and drew him right in close between them. "Rodrigo didn't have a father he knew ten months ago," Braden reminded her. "That changes him; it will continue to do so; it has to. So should I be able to use that to break up with him as well? Just because it wasn't part of the list of things that made him the person I was originally attracted to?"

Now Abby wanted to strangle Braden right back. "No, I'm not saying that, but religion isn't the same thing. People break up—heck, people never even make an attempt to get together sometimes—due to religion. I didn't have this desire to know God again when you first met me, and now I'm trying to figure out how it's going to fit in my life. Maybe it will change me." That confession hit at the heart of Abby's deepest, secret fears, and it raised chill bumps all up and down her arms. "Maybe in a way you won't like." She blinked rapidly to hold back her pathetic, needy tears. "Maybe in a way you won't be able to live with or love anymore."

"No, it won't." Braden did not so much as hesitate in his response. "Abby girl." He tunneled his hand under her hair and pulled her close. "You wouldn't be struggling so much to find a place where you fit in a church community—one where you can be yourself—if you were so weak of will that someone else could change who you fundamentally are. I'm not worried about that, honey. As far as things go that will be speed bumps for us down the road, that's not even on my radar." Braden dragged her the rest of the way home, pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, and Abby almost sobbed. "I promise."

"What he said," Rodrigo added. Tilting Abby's face out of hiding, Rodrigo offered her a crooked smile. "I'll just add that I did not feel any unspoken pressure to go sit through that service with you this morning. Just as you have the strength of your convictions, I also have mine. And as much as it might shock you to hear this coming from me, I can be open to new things. I like this guy, Father Kurt, and I'm willing to give him a try. If I decide it's not for me, I'll go back to sleeping in on Sundays, and you can keep going with Braden. If Braden doesn't want to go either, I have no problems or insecurities about you going on your own."

Rodrigo's gaze darkened, and his hand clenched into a fist at the small of Abby's back. "You are not shoving me out of your bed because of church, Bit. It took me long enough to figure a way in, and I ain't leaving. That's all I have to say."

"What he said," Braden mimicked, making something between a laugh and a choking tightness do battle in Abby's throat.

Braden took Abby's face in his hands, and it was as if the green in his eyes was translucent. "I didn't fall in love with you originally because you were a person who abstained from church. I don't need your hair to always be fiery and long because that's how I first saw you. You run a well-oiled machine of a business and make beautiful jewelry, but if you decided tomorrow that you wanted to try something new, I wouldn't stop loving you." As Braden brushed the hair out of Abby's eyes, his thumbs mapped the angles and contours of her face and mouth, as if desiring to memorize every detail. "You're allowed to explore and grow as a person while being in a relationship, Abby. At least I think so. I'd think you would be open to me or Rodrigo doing the same."

"I would. I do. I am." Abby kept a bruising hold on one of Braden's arms but also grabbed at Rodrigo and pulled him in too. "I just love you both so much. I haven't let myself feel that for such a long time, and I was afraid of losing you over this. I've loved you both for so much longer than the time we've been together these last few weeks."

With her confession, Abby's heart wanted to pump right out of her chest. But her gaze narrowed at the evenness of both men's pupils and lack of visible response.

"Not that I need either of you to drop to your knees or anything," she muttered, "but you're not exactly blown away by my declaration."

"We already know you love us, baby," Rodrigo said, his eyes now *finally* twinkling. "You told us the other night as you were drifting off to sleep all exhausted and happy from a mind-blowing orgasm."

“Oh,” she said, somewhat deflated. “Well I guess that explains the little looks in the bathroom that one morning.” Tears no longer an issue, Abby suddenly felt a bit surly. “Nice of you not to tell me that I’d declared my undying love for you both.”

“We were properly stunned and moved,” Braden informed her, clearly enjoying the hell out of himself. “We also figured you’d get around to admitting it again.”

“Fine, fine. Have your fun.” Abby wasn’t really upset. In fact, Braden’s teasing lifted the rest of the weight she’d been dragging for days off her shoulders. “This is all so freaking weird.”

Confessing secrets and fears, as well as being vulnerable with these men, didn’t feel quite so life-and-death for Abby anymore. A new zest for life that couldn’t be contained suddenly flowed through her, and she no longer feared one of these men might look inside her too closely and see something they couldn’t love. She should have had more faith in *them*. They were too strong and secure in themselves to be thrown by her new journey.

Abby looked at the sexy, masculine sincerity emanating from Braden and Rodrigo, and every pore in her being filled to overflowing with love. “I apologize for frustrating you both so much this past week. The rigid nature in how my parents viewed faith caused them to lie to each other and maybe even deny who they were. Ever since I discovered that part of their history, I let it seep into our relationship and started to fear we could somehow let an outside force tear us apart too. I mixed that in my head with trying to figure out my own faith again, and it all seemed overwhelming.” She took one hand from Rodrigo and one from Braden and put them against her heart. “What we have between us is different. I know that. I swear I do. We’ll all be open with each other as we try to figure this out. None of us are lying, we all love each other, and none of us are living a public life that denies who we are when we’re alone together. That’s what makes the difference.”

“Now you’re getting it.” Rodrigo tugged Abby to him and slipped an arm around her waist. Dark eyes sparking with light, Rodrigo said roughly, “I love you, Bit.” He captured her mouth to his in a clinging, fast kiss. “Nothing you discover about yourself is going to change that.” His gaze slid to Braden, and he jerked his thumb in the man’s direction. “A week ago, I told this son of a bitch I loved him too.”

“I graciously accepted,” Braden shared, grinning wickedly.

Rodrigo made a face. “What he means to say is that his tongue was tied up over it until this morning.”

Braden shot an even smirkier expression back at Rodrigo. “Bite me.”

“I promise to later.” Rodrigo exchanged a dark look with Braden that curled Abby’s toes. Braden then stepped right up to Rodrigo’s side, letting their shoulders touch.

“Right now,” Rodrigo said as they each cuffed a hand around Abby’s neck and tilted her mouth up, “I think Bit needs us both to bite *her*.” As one, they descended and captured her lips, kissing not only her but brushing against each other too. Adrenaline immediately spiked in Abby, and she sank into the three-person kiss.

They already know so well what I like.

Rodrigo and Braden took turns commanding Abby's mouth, each one bruising and sensitizing her lips with their own style of scraping and nipping and tugging, keeping her so overwhelmed by wonderful sensation she could barely think or breathe. Already achy and desperate, Abby's lips parted, releasing a wordless moan that each man understood to perfection. Tongues invaded Abby's mouth, side by side, and took her over with deep licks and tangles, killing Abby and then bringing her back to life with the force of their attention and love.

Her pussy began pulsing and lubricating in record time, preparing itself for some kind of penetration—any kind—so long as it involved one or both of these men. Abby rubbed herself against the solid walls of Rodrigo's and Braden's bodies and at the same time tore at their jackets and shirts, needing that hot, hard skin against hers, or she thought she might scream.

Struggling to catch his breath, Braden broke the kiss and reached down to still Abby's frantic fingers. "Slow down, honey. Slow down." He lifted one of her hands to his mouth and pressed a kiss into the palm. "Right now, this is all about you."

Abby's heart raced so fast it burned and dried her throat. "Then get naked. Please." Hints of skin at Rodrigo's throat and Braden's rolled-up sleeves spurred Abby's desires. "I want to see and feel you both more than anything."

Rather than undressing themselves, Rodrigo and Braden shared another glance and then turned, giving Abby a show of each man undressing the other. Rough fingers trailed over solid ropes of muscle as Braden drew Rodrigo's shirt down his arms, letting it fall to the floor in a blue puddle. After Rodrigo removed Braden's shirt in return, he went for the man's belt buckle. His knuckles grazed Braden's stomach as he did it, and Braden sucked in a breath. Once Rodrigo finished undressing Braden, and the man stood gloriously tall and nude against the backdrop of light filtering in through the windows, Braden finished Rodrigo. Pants glided down Rodrigo's legs to bunch at his ankles; as Braden lowered to his knees to remove Rodrigo's pants, shoes, and socks, he stayed where he was, his face on level with Rodrigo's crotch. White briefs still covered Rodrigo's growing erection, but it only took a moment for Braden to push them down Rodrigo's thick thighs and take the man's jutting erection into his mouth.

As Abby watched Braden pleasure Rodrigo, her cunt filled with more moisture, and she slipped her hand inside her shirt to pluck at her nipple. Rodrigo grabbed a fistful of Braden's hair, dipped his own head back, and gently fucked Braden's mouth. Rodrigo made little noises under his breath with each shallow push of his cock past Braden's lips, but within a dozen pumps, he pulled Braden back to his feet. Before Braden could wipe at his swollen lips, Rodrigo lowered himself to a kneeling position and returned the gesture. His actions still possessed a nervous quality, but the way Rodrigo held on to Braden's hips as he bobbed down on the man's penis as far as he could go, and the way he licked all around Braden's shaft, clearly more than made up for his lack of experience. Braden's eyes glazed, and a

faraway little grin appeared, but soon he murmured, "Enough," and helped Rodrigo to stand back upright.

Braden reached out and rubbed his thumb over Abby's lower lip. "You are so wet right now, honey." Awareness of her shone in his eyes. "I don't even have to finger you to know it."

"Yeah." Abby's pussy fluttered as she imagined Braden's long fingers sinking inside her. "I love you two together as much as I love being with both of you myself."

"How about both of us at the same time again?" Rodrigo asked, looking into her eyes as he unbuttoned her shirt and let Braden take it off her body. "Because I've been fantasizing about your ass since the first time I saw you in that little pair of cutoff shorts you so loved to wear last summer."

Abby let herself picture Rodrigo drilling his cock into her ass while Braden drove his dick into her pussy. A shudder—full of possibilities—beat out the underlying trickle of fear of the unknown.

"You want it." Rodrigo pressed his palm against her belly. "You're shaking for it."

Abby nodded. Her breasts felt weighty in her bra, and her skin pulled tight and hot under Rodrigo's and Braden's open stares. "Touch me." She popped the first hook on the front clasp of her bra. Her sex clenched too, already reaching for a connection. "Do whatever you want to me. I know I'll cry for it and beg for more."

With two fingers, Braden worked open the rest of Abby's bra. "You never have to beg." Her breasts spilled free of the cups, the nipples already heading toward tiny pebbles. Braden uttered, "Not even close." His gaze falling to half-mast, he dipped down and wrapped his lips around her breast.

Ohhh yes.

Braden suckled her, and Abby hissed. Then Rodrigo pulled her other tit into his mouth, and Abby released something that mingled a whimper, moan, and cry. Two men gave full attention to her breasts, and she wondered how she'd ever lived this long without the sensation of both nipples being stimulated so completely with lips, teeth, and suction. Braden continued to pull her toward the back of his mouth, and each time he did, the exquisite line of joy tugged all the way down her middle to her core, awakening her clit out of hiding. Rodrigo laved all around her tit, wetting her skin, and then alternated lightly blowing it dry with pinching the very tip of her nipple between his teeth, tugging it away from her body with delicious torment. Unspoken, they then changed styles, to Rodrigo sucking her till it hurt and Braden teasing her nipple to the point of the most wonderful pain.

Together, Rodrigo and Braden worshipped Abby's breasts as if nobody had ever offered them such bounty. It felt so damn good. Abby loved seeing the two dark heads of the men she loved against her breasts. It touched her so deeply she couldn't hold back a high cry as her cunt squeezed in a sharp, fast release. A couple of intense contractions turned her sex into a fist, grabbing, grabbing, grabbing at what had not yet come.

Rodrigo lifted his heated gaze to meet hers, and she could feel the press of a smile against her skin. Braden had the look of a proud man, and Abby wanted him too much to care that he already so arrogantly knew how to play her body to wring out its optimal response.

Again, as a unit, Rodrigo and Braden kissed their way under her breasts and down her stomach. Light pecks and little licks danced softly over her belly and sides, barely enough to feel, but more than enough to keep Abby's legs shaky and her pussy shivering with aftershocks.

At the waistband of her skirt, Rodrigo paused with his lips on the side zipper's tiny pull tab. "Let's wind you back up for round two, baby." Still looking up at her, Rodrigo used his teeth to bring down the silent zipper. Braden knelt at her other side; he dipped his hand into her skirt as Rodrigo did and then pushed it, along with her panties, down her legs. Thigh-high black stockings and high-heeled boots were the only cover that remained on Abby's body. Rodrigo whistled, and his eyes slid closed as he leaned in and bit into her bare hip.

"Christ." Braden watched himself run his hand all over Abby's silk-covered thighs. "I know I sound like a broken record, but you are fucking incredible."

Abby threaded her fingers into Braden's hair and tipped his head back. "I'll never get tired of hearing it." She brushed the back of her other hand down Rodrigo's chiseled cheek. "I'll never stop believing the same of both of you."

After nuzzling his cheek into her hand, Rodrigo laved his tongue up her hip to her waist and then started licking his way around to her back. Abby wanted to close her eyes and picture Rodrigo's mouth as it brushed against her flesh, but Braden chose that moment to begin kissing his way up the front of her thigh, into the crease of her leg, to her mound. He inhaled deeply and darted his tongue into the top of her slit, teasing but not quite touching her clit.

If that wasn't enough to test Abby's ability to stay upright, Rodrigo parted her buttocks right then and licked his way down her crack, straight to her asshole.

Oh dear God.

He flicked his tongue over her pucker, darted the tip against it, and Abby moaned as a rush of sensations radiated from her back entrance out into her ass cheeks, into her cunt, and down her legs. Braden clearly smelled her response and quickly lifted her foot onto his shoulder. He murmured his appreciation for her sweet pussy and lapped her up from back to front. Abby cried out and dug the spiked heel of her boot into his shoulder muscles in response. Braden didn't flinch. He just held her pussy open and kept right on eating her out in front while Rodrigo worked her over in the back with such relentless attention that soon her asshole pulsed with just as much anticipation as her cunt did.

Abby's nerve endings were strung so tightly, pushing her so close to another orgasm already, she didn't care that Rodrigo played in an area with the intention to take the teasing to a much different place. She didn't care that if he shoved his finger inside her right now, it might hurt terribly. With these men, she knew any pain would only last for a second, and both would make sure she felt so good and

cherished everywhere else that she would soon beg for a thick, long cock to own her ass to the hilt.

Just like what Rodrigo begged Braden for the first time Braden mastered his ass.

The image of these two men fucking each other as they both pleased *her* so completely shocked Abby over the edge a second time. With Braden sucking on her clit and Rodrigo putting the same kind of suction on her bud, Abby gasped and moaned from somewhere deep inside as another tremor worked its way through her, the concentrated pulse of orgasm starting and ending in her pussy and rectum.

Rodrigo nipped at her ass cheek, growling as he stung the flesh. “Another nice little one there, Bit.” His silky hair brushed against her nakedness as he nuzzled his way around her side to look at Braden. “I don’t know about you, Bray,” he said, his voice thick, “but I’m ready to be buried inside our woman when she comes again.”

“So fucking ready, Rigo.” Braden’s irises were rimmed with pure green as he studied Abby from top to bottom. As he looked, he reached between his legs to stroke his leaking prick.

Heaven help me live through this in one piece. Abby’s heart pounded fast and pumped shot after shot of adrenaline into her bloodstream.

Moving out of sight, Rodrigo grazed his lips across Abby’s buttocks, drawing forth a shiver. A finger, or maybe his thumb, touched the snug ring of her asshole. “I’m gonna need lube.”

“In my purse,” Abby answered quickly, her voice scratchy with the torrent of desire coursing through her. She couldn’t believe how much she wanted Rodrigo to take her ass. “I bought convenience packets the other day.”

“Nice.” Rather than shooting to his feet, Rodrigo kissed his way up Abby’s spine one vertebra at a time, darting little licks in between, while also drawing his hands slowly up her sides. Each whisper of contact had Abby biting her lip to keep her moaning to a minimum, and she feared if they didn’t hurry up she would come again. Rodrigo’s rigid cock grazed the back of Abby’s thigh and then against her buttocks as he gained his full height, and each light touch had Abby picturing that hardness pushing its way inside her.

Abby’s cunt and back passage throbbed in answer, and as Rodrigo reached her nape, he curled his hand around her throat. He angled her head back and took her mouth with a deep, thorough kiss. Rodrigo held her jaw in place, slanted his lips across hers, and put his mark on every corner of her mouth. Needful little noises escaped her—wordless pleas for more. Braden ran his hand up the inside of her thigh and answered Abby’s call.

As Rodrigo broke the kiss and left her, Braden rubbed his thumb through the slickness coating Abby’s pussy lips and dragged the personal lubricant to her clit. He looked up at her from his kneeling position, demanding her complete focus, and moved his thumb in a circle over her bead. He started almost lazily, brushing back

and forth with hints of increased pressure, but then pulled back as the blood started to rush in earnest toward the little bundle of nerves. The way he locked his gaze on hers, along with the laconic nature of his fondling, almost mesmerized Abby. She reached down and held herself open for him, so focused on a harder, more concentrated contact that it took her a handful of seconds to process that Rodrigo's heat had returned to her back and one of her ass cheeks had been pulled aside again. Cool lube suddenly coated her ring, making Abby gasp and her rectum automatically clench.

Yes. Abby hissed as Rodrigo fingered her hole. He somehow matched the pressure and pattern Braden set with his thumb working her clit, and their combined touch slowly drove her mad. *So close to happening.*

Rodrigo remained standing behind her, his cheek pressed against the side of her head. "Just relax and enjoy what Braden does to you," he said.

A deeply seated place inside Abby recognized his rough voice as one of home, and it calmed away any twinges of fear.

Braden's gaze flicked from Abby's to Rodrigo's. "Use care, love." Braden's words, clearly meant for Rodrigo, sank into Abby and completed the triangle, sealing them all into its protective walls.

Then it didn't matter what Braden had said or if Rodrigo had even heard him. Braden dived forward and latched his lips around her clit. He sucked her with such precise pressure she felt it all the way up in her breasts, where each tug on her bead made her nipples twist and harden into tight kernels of needy nerve endings. Feeling desperate already, Abby took hold of her breasts and tugged hard on the tips in time with Braden's suckling on her clit, distending her nipples in a way that only supplied a modicum of relief. Her muscles tensed, and she bore her heel into Braden's shoulder, possibly breaking skin with her heel's spike, but Braden only burrowed deeper down into her pussy to torment the swollen lips.

Braden wreaked nearly cataclysmic havoc inside Abby, but tension and awareness of Rodrigo covering her back kept her from hurtling over the cliff. No matter what Braden did—and it was magnificent—Abby remained peripherally aware of Rodrigo's finger constantly teasing and bumping against her hole. Every time Braden flicked his tongue against her clit, she also experienced exquisite pressure against her ring, pushing a little more each time. Then, when Braden went down and dipped his tongue into her cunt, Rodrigo broke through the resistance in back with one long finger and invaded her ass.

Oh dear motherfucking God.

Pain sliced through Abby's rectum and up into her spine, stealing her breath. Yet at the same time, Braden yanked pleasurable sensation after sensation out of her sex, and she still pulled and twisted on her sensitized tits too. The mixture of pleasure and pain merged in Abby's mind and made her crave more of Rodrigo in her back passage. Much more, fast, so she could quickly feel his cock shoving deep inside her ass.

Abby held on to Braden's hair but twisted her head to search for Rodrigo's gaze. She found it, and the dark burn she saw in him matched what she felt inside herself. "I need you to fuck me soon." Need stripped her voice bare. "Don't go slow."

"Goddamn, baby." Rodrigo bit at her cheek and licked her mouth. "You are so fucking sexy." He crushed his lips to hers, silencing her cry as he withdrew his digit from her channel and then quickly eased it back in as far as it would go. As Rodrigo worked her ass with one digit, he consumed her with a kiss. Between Rodrigo's mouth taking hers and Braden still tending to her pussy as if he needed no other sustenance to survive, Abby didn't have time to process much discomfort or strangeness from Rodrigo pushing and pulling his finger in and out of her backside. She only knew she couldn't stay still, and she'd never felt more aware of her body or alive and loved in her life.

Abby bumped her ass back as best she could onto Rodrigo's finger, trying to circle her hips into the invasion. Stopping the kiss, Rodrigo breathed heavily against her mouth, his eyes so close they were a black blur. He watched her as this time when he eased back inside, he forced a second digit past her pucker and into the narrow passage of her ass. She immediately pressed her forehead to Rodrigo's and gritted her teeth through the initial burning stretch around her entrance and then exhaled through a series of spasms rippling around Rodrigo's thicker two-finger fucking. Rodrigo watched her closely as he slowly deepened the penetration past the second knuckle, used a corkscrewing motion to touch over every confused nerve ending in Abby's channel, and then pulled almost all the way out, leaving just the blunt tips inside her.

It felt like Rodrigo looked past her eyes and searched for her soul as he asked, "How is it?"

Abby no longer had any fear or reason to hide. "Do it again." She exhaled and tried to relax her muscles as she gave that order. "Give me three." Rodrigo jerked behind her, but Abby brushed a kiss to his cheek with a promise that she could take it. After that, she looked down to Braden and dug both hands into his hair, certain she would need another anchor. "Now."

Braden took hold of her gaze, and she couldn't blink or break away from him as Rodrigo gave Abby her wish and wedged three fingers through her hole. With him barely past her back entrance, Abby fisted her hands in Braden's hair, and her jaw dropped as her passage squeezed and fought the invasion. She bore down on it, though, and Rodrigo continued to sink his digits deeper, a bit at a time, until there was no more for her to accept. Stuffed to overfull, Abby groaned as Rodrigo went still inside her, letting her adjust, and Braden remained poised with his thumbs holding open her pussy.

Abby's vaginal and rectal muscles contracted again, making her suck in air as a shiver of pleasure rolled through her. "Touch me, Braden." Her pussy fluttered in agreement. "Make me flood for you."

Instead of going down on her again, Braden went back to teasing her clit with soft flicks from his thumb and swirls with his pointer and index fingers. He kept his

eyes glued to hers as he toyed with her, mixing hints of deeper future pleasure, frustrating her that he wouldn't give it to her full-force right now. Braden played with her and slowly drove her mad; he slipped his fingers down to her pussy lips but only rubbed, denying her penetration. As he did, all the strings stretched within Abby neared their snapping points. Then Rodrigo began pulling his three fingers out of her ass, only to sink them back in before getting there, keeping her back channel stretched with a shallow fucking in a way that slowly became a delicious thing of beauty...as well as the most torturous denial of full gratification Abby had ever experienced in her life.

Abby whimpered and tried to move her hips, but nothing satisfied that shredding, vicious need inside her for complete and utter oblivion. "Please..." Her legs could barely hold her upright anymore anyway. "No more of this. I need you both to fuck me right now." She didn't wait for either man to agree. She no longer could. Taking her boot off Braden's shoulder, she crumpled to the floor between both men and in the process cried out, "No," as she severed contact with Braden's digits working her pussy and Rodrigo's fingers in her ass.

Full of need, without a single care or thought for how she looked, Abby shifted to her hip and lifted one leg up the side of her body. She hooked her arm under her knee and displayed her cunt and asshole not only to Rodrigo and Braden but to herself too.

Jaws dropped. Rodrigo uttered, "Shit, baby."

Braden went with "Jesus Christ."

"Take me." Abby scraped out the request, her voice almost gone with the tumult of emotion raging inside her. "I want to watch you both do it."

His rearing cock already shiny with lube, it didn't take long for Rodrigo to drop to his knees. Together, the men crawled to Abby, and Braden situated himself at her front while Rodrigo angled himself so he could get at her rear. Taking hold of his thick, jutting cock, Braden bent one knee to get in closer to Abby. Rodrigo wrapped his hand around the base of his erection and scooted in until the tip covered Abby's hole. Braden lined himself up against her entrance, and the sight of them both *so fucking close to making it happen* caused a catch in Abby's breath and a skip in her heartbeat.

Rodrigo lifted his gaze to Braden, got a nod, and both men turned their focuses right back down, dragging Abby's along too. Rodrigo nudged against her asshole first; he took gentle stabs once, twice, and on the third breached her pucker, slipping the head of his penis into her ass. Braden gasped in unison with Abby as they watched it happen, but just as fast, he refocused and pushed his cockhead into her pussy. Each sat right there, splitting her open on both ends, and Abby bit her lip, trying not to scream.

Then, slowly, oh so torturously slowly, Rodrigo and Braden flexed their hips and sank their dicks into her cunt and ass. Abby lost herself to the pleasure, crying out as she watched and felt each man's length disappear into her body, their twin grunts the sweetest music she'd ever heard. Deep-seated throbbing took over Abby's

rectum, surrounding Rodrigo's prick, and milked him to sliding farther into her passage. Her sheath closed in around Braden's dick and invited him to push all the way into her pussy too.

Flames raged through Abby, licking over every inch of her in a way she'd never experienced with anyone else in her life. She looked at each man as pure love choked her voice. "Make love to me." Right now, it felt like her body belonged to them. "Make me come for both of you."

Braden bit off a swear word and took hold of her ankle, pushing her leg up straight, while Rodrigo's stare became jet-black. Just then, out of her control, Abby's channels clamped down on Rodrigo's and Braden's embedded cocks and wrung deep groans out of both men. In unison, their faces went stark, and then they started to thrust. Rigid, thick cocks pushed in and out of Abby's pussy and ass in long, deep strokes, filling and emptying her with delicious hot friction on both ends. Abby's thigh muscles protested the position, but she reveled in the base openness of all three of them watching Rodrigo and Braden withdraw their long, shiny penises and then push them into her body again, temporarily making them all one entity.

The sensation of being so completely full with these two men who loved her attacked at Abby's most secret core of need and drew from her a plea for more, faster. She tried to shove herself into the spearing of Rodrigo's and Braden's cocks as best she could and cried out at the incredible slice of deeper penetration Rodrigo drove into her ass. The flash of discomfort only made Abby want it more and turned her hips into a churning frenzy, searching for complete ownership from Braden too.

Braden knifed his prick into Abby's sheath and growled when he couldn't take her to the hilt. In rapid succession, he released his grip on Abby's boot, wrapped his arm around her waist, and rolled her on top of him while barking an order at Rodrigo to turn with them. Rodrigo didn't miss a beat, and Braden didn't either. Braden hummed with satisfaction as Abby's cunt opened over his penis; he drove his hips up, taking Abby to the root. Rodrigo braced himself on the rug on either side of Braden's shoulders and thrust his prick into Abby, taking her ass with such force and depth they both shouted as it happened.

Abby gloried in the rougher mating and lifted herself up too, planting her hands into the floor above Braden's shoulders. She used the leverage to slam her pussy down on Braden's thick length over and over again, giving him the fucking of his life every time Rodrigo slammed his cock into her ass. Braden's lips parted, his eyes glazed with lust, and he begged Abby to push harder and make him feel even more. Rodrigo picked up on Braden's need and started snapping his hips into Abby with faster, sharper thrusts, tenderizing the hell out of Abby's virgin hole. Rather than fight it, Abby adopted Rodrigo's pace and made it her own. She worked herself off on Braden's cock as if her life depended on stealing every glorious inch into her cunt and smothering it with the liquid proof of her excitement. Braden moaned a yes each time her pussy swallowed his dick, and Rodrigo groaned his needful, deep noises every time his erection drove deep and took complete possession of Abby's ass.

The volume of Rodrigo and Braden's combined pleasure only enhanced the physical havoc they wreaked on Abby's body, and soon the coil twisting tighter and tighter inside her reached the point where it could not turn on itself anymore. She locked on Braden's gaze and reached back to touch Rodrigo's hip.

"So close," she whispered. Staring into Braden's eyes and squeezing Rodrigo's hip, Abby gritted her teeth, trying to fight the oncoming tide of release. "Come for me." With his cock tucked fully in her flaming back passage, Rodrigo jerked to a stop. "I need to feel it happen."

Braden reached up, tunneled one hand in Abby's hair, and also dragged Rodrigo down to him too. He put Abby's forehead to his temple, where she could see him pull Rodrigo's lips to his. Braden and Rodrigo sandwiched her; they possessed her body completely; they weren't afraid to look at each other with open love shining in their eyes, and it all made tears sprint to Abby's.

Clutching the back of her head, Braden whispered, "Watch, honey." His voice was gruff as he gave her what she so desperately loved. Rodrigo's and Braden's mouths came together in the gentlest, most loving kiss, sipping from each other first so she could watch them. They then turned to her, clinging in an achingly tender three-person kiss filled with equal love for her.

The bone-deep response pulsed out of not only Abby but Rodrigo and Braden too, all at the same time. Rather than loud and wildly thunderous, Abby's cunt and rectum clenched with crushing power, pulling and holding on to the spasm from somewhere deep inside her soul. With a vengeance, her pussy and back passage held tightly to each man's cock, for what felt like forever. When her body finally released them, Rodrigo and Braden exhaled their shared held breath and spilled inside her as one. Nobody blinked as Rodrigo pumped his seed into her ass, warming and coating the sore walls. Braden shot hot, long spurts of cum, filling her pussy with his essence. Abby's body throbbed the whole way through, and with pure, raw happiness, she absorbed every small grunt of pleasure from each man, shaking as orgasm continued to consume her.

Oh my dear good God.

Eventually, although Abby didn't know how long they stayed tangled in a knot during the afterglow, Rodrigo slowly withdrew his cock from her rectum and rolled off her back. She hated losing his furnace of heat but reluctantly did the same and crawled off Braden, giving him full capacity to breathe again. She fell to the rug between each man, her body trembling as she came down from that one-of-a-kind orgasm.

Rodrigo shifted to his side and planted his head in his hand. His chest moved in big waves as he regained his breath, but his gaze was unblinking as he looked between Abby and Braden. "I want to say *shit*"—a dry chuckle coated his comment—"but we keep outdoing ourselves so much I think it's getting redundant."

With one arm slung over his head and the other on his stomach, Braden wore a satisfied grin. "Go ahead and say it, because I don't know how many times we're going to be able to top that."

Narrowing her stare, Abby pursed her lips, feigning deep thought. "I don't know. I love the hell out of you guys, and I can be damned creative when I'm motivated." She let her fingers drift up the outer thigh of each man, admiring the way she left raised hairs in her wake. "I can't think of any better reason than the two of you to stay on my toes. Shoot, I have a feeling you'll keep me there constantly just by being in the same room together."

Braden grabbed her hand and dropped a kiss on the back. "I look forward to the challenge, honey."

The rustle of movement to her right signaled Rodrigo shifting again. A moment later, he knelt between Abby's and Braden's ankles, and his dark gaze held none of the humor of a second ago. "I want you to take up that challenge here, in this house," he told Braden. "I want you both to move in with me." He drilled Abby with one look that pierced right into her soul. "I want us to live together."

Abby and Braden sprung up to sitting positions. Her chin dropped to her chest, and Braden looked like someone told him day was now night and the color he'd always thought was blue was actually red.

Rodrigo put up a stop sign with his hand. "Hear me out. When I bought this house, I knew I was taking a huge risk. On a fundamental level, I sensed I wouldn't be able to sell it and recoup the renovation costs." His jaw clenched visibly, and his hands did too, but never once did he turn his head down or glance away. "Even though I didn't have any idea what would go down between the three of us, I think I was building this house for us." He dropped that confession matter-of-factly, and Abby's breath caught with the sharpest, sweetest pain. "Right now, it's just a roof over my head. With you both here"—his bright eyes didn't blink—"it'll be a home."

Abby covered her mouth to hold back the emotion, but an "oh my" slipped out.

"Shit, man." Braden wiped his hand down his face, the lines and grooves suddenly prominent against a loss of color.

Rodrigo's mouth went incredibly tight and thin. "Those aren't exactly yesses."

It still appeared as though one swift punch had knocked Braden on his ass. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he asked.

"Is this what you really want?" Abby whispered, translating for Braden's less-than-eloquent phrasing.

Exhaling heavily, Rodrigo pushed his hands through his thick mess of hair. "I'm thirty-four years old, and I've never asked one person to live with me, let alone two. It's not something I do lightly." His gaze remained strong, and his tone held steady. "I've never told anyone I loved them in my life either, but I've told both of you. Shit, I love both of you so goddamn much I don't know what to do about it half the time." He licked his lip, but it barely paused him for a second. "I do know I want us all in the same bed every night. I want us sharing dinner every evening, taking turns talking about our days. I want to take care of you both when you get a cold, and rub your back when you're hanging over the toilet puking up your guts with the flu."

Quick tears leaked out of the corners of Abby's eyes, out of her control.

Rodrigo went on, tearing through Abby's heart, and from the way Braden tried to jut his chin, Abby knew Rodrigo struck every emotional chord in him too. "I want to wake up every morning knowing that no matter what I'm getting ready to face, it's going to be okay because I have the two of you to come home to." Rodrigo shrugged, but there was nothing casual or throwaway in the rough texture of his voice or the unwavering way he looked between Abby and Braden. "I don't know how else to say it except I want you both, for better or worse, for the rest of my life." He breathed in deeply and flattened his hands against his thighs. "I'll ask you again: Abby and Braden, will you make this house a home with me?"

Her heart full to bursting, Abby didn't even have to do more than glance at Braden to know his throat was full to choking with love too. Without words, they both pounced on Rodrigo, pushing him onto his back as they attacked his lips, cheeks, nose, and even up into his hair with dozens of kisses, vowing, "yes yes yes yes," with each one.

Rodrigo howled with laughter and pretended to dodge their rainstorm of kisses, but Abby could tell that he deliberately leaned into the lines of their tender assault. They teased Rodrigo with kisses in between promises of love, but it didn't take long for the laughs to turn to moans and the teasing kisses to become deep and invasive with passionate enthusiasm. Braden started licking his way down Abby's neck to her breasts as Rodrigo began kissing Braden's ear and rubbing his cock against the man's hip.

Abby wanted to melt into the floor all over again, but a former offer scratched at her brain. "Wait." She sat up between them, twisting to her knees so she could see their faces. "We need to get cleaned up, or we'll be late for the gathering at Lorene's." *Huh*. She cocked her head to the side as warmth flooded her system. "It's our first commitment as a family."

"Yeah." A wonderful half grin lifted Braden's mouth. "I like the sound of that."

Rodrigo's gaze twinkled as he looked between them both. "Me too."

"Me three." Abby hopped to her feet, a ball of exuberant energy again. "I think we have time to test out the soaking tub." She reached out her hands to Rodrigo and Braden, where they still reclined on the rug. "Want to join me?"

Instead of Abby helping haul Braden and Rodrigo to their feet, her men pulled her back down to the floor. They rolled her under them with wicked, wonderful promises of what the three of them could accomplish quickly if they put their minds to it.

Abby, Rodrigo, and Braden ended up taking a record-fast shower an hour later. They still managed to ring Lorene's doorbell right on schedule.

Epilogue

Sunlight sparkled against the surface of the pool, yet the temperature and humidity in the air remained surprisingly mellow for a May afternoon in Florida. Dozens of guests milled around Abby, Rodrigo, and Braden's courtyard, enjoying the threesome's first official party.

Jonah and Christian talked with Ida, Braden's cop friends mingled with Rodrigo's employees, and the Joneses and Brunos mixed into the group with ease. Abby had even closed her store today so her two part-timers could attend.

The walls of windows were all thrown open wide, allowing people to move from inside to out with ease. The hosts had made sure everyone had an introduction upon arrival, and now former strangers congregated in small bunches and chatted easily.

After checking on the food, Abby stood at the kitchen entrance, watching, and just let the laughter and happiness surrounding her fill her with love and pride. These people were her friends and makeshift family. They all wanted her, Rodrigo, and Braden not only to be happy but also to succeed in their relationship, making Abby feel like the luckiest person in the world.

And I know Rodrigo and Braden feel the same.

It never took Abby any time to pick her men out in a crowd, and today was no exception. Rodrigo, looking all dark and sexy in jeans and a black T-shirt, had his head down in conversation with his father. On the opposite side of the pool, Braden, equally droolworthy in a white button-down shirt and khaki trousers, chatted with his friend Ben. Their friend now, Abby corrected herself.

A presence moved in behind Abby, and a moment later, Lorene stood next to her, her arm draped loosely around Abby's waist. "It's a lovely party, dear." Lorene gave her a little squeeze. "You should be very proud of yourself."

Abby basked in Lorene's comforting embrace. The woman had quickly become one of the most important people in her life. "Thank you." She rubbed the small hand at her waist. "My guys helped out a lot too."

"I don't doubt it." Lorene kept her arm around Abby and leaned her smaller frame companionably against Abby's arm. "Your mom and dad would have loved Rodrigo and Braden, sweetheart. Nobody can deny how much those men love you, and I know—no matter what they grew up believing as right or wrong—nothing else would have mattered to them." Lorene's voice dropped, but Abby clung to every syllable. "They would have only demanded that the people you love cherish you equally as much."

A tight band constricted Abby's breast as she let her gaze find Braden and then Rodrigo. "I definitely have that."

"Yes, you certainly do." Looking straight forward, Lorene rubbed Abby's arm. A tremble went through Abby, and for a split second, she thought her mother and father were standing at her side this afternoon too.

Rodrigo winked at Abby from across the pool, and he fucking swore to God if she got any more beautiful, he would never be able to wear snug jeans around other people again. Moving around in her bare feet, she wore a swishy skirt that barely grazed her knees and a little green top that showed hints of her waist when she lifted her arms. Then there was Braden, who somehow seemed to grow bigger and stronger every day in Rodrigo's eyes, and that man daily tested Rodrigo's ability to function around other people without a perpetual hard-on too.

In the three months they'd been living together, Rodrigo often couldn't fathom how much fuller, richer, and more valuable his own existence had become. He'd always led a pretty structured life, one where he was fully in charge and answered to no one. But since the three of them had merged their lives and become one household, Rodrigo had taken to being accountable to Abby and Braden and had quickly come to depend on their presence every morning and night. Knowing he would see their faces when he woke up eased his rigid desire for control in a way he'd never thought would happen. Looking forward to getting home from work every night so he could unwind over a meal with them—allowing himself to accept their comfort and support without feeling like it weakened him to do it—had opened up a whole new capacity to love that Rodrigo had never imagined he was capable of giving to another person, let alone two.

And they make me want to figure out how I can give even more.

Henry nudged Rodrigo's shoulder with his. "Doesn't look like you're in any danger of fucking up this different kind of relationship you've started for yourself." He made subtle gestures toward the kitchen and the bar with his glass of beer. "I've caught Abby and Braden both peeking glances at you a dozen times since you three broke apart and started working the crowd."

Moving his attention between his two partners, Rodrigo let his mouth twist in a sardonic smile. "I've done the same to each of them as many times, if not more."

"I noticed that too," Henry said with a chuckle. He cleared his throat and then touched Rodrigo's arm, drawing Rodrigo's focus fully to his father. "I know you didn't always have people to love you or who had your back when you were growing up," he said, his mouth pulling down in a frown. "That kills me. I wish I'd known about you and could have been there." Henry turned his gaze to the ground for a heartbeat. When he returned it to Rodrigo, a glint of brightness shone across his eyes. "But it does a father's heart good to see you have it double in Abby and Braden now."

Rodrigo clasped Henry's shoulder with a grip hard enough to bruise a less muscled man. "I don't hold anger or resentment in regard to my childhood, Henry.

Hell, if that's what I had to go through for some higher power to decide I deserved *two* people to love this much"—a maelstrom of love, honor, pride, unconditional acceptance, and joy rushed through Rodrigo's system just in thinking about the life he had with Abby and Braden now—"then I would choose the same course all over again."

"I know you would, Son. I'm happy as hell for you, and I don't worry about your future at all." Henry swallowed convulsively, making his Adam's apple bob in a big wave. "I just want to be a part of it so I can keep getting to know you better."

Now the man was about to fucking bring Rodrigo to tears. "You're not going anywhere, old man." He gave his father a thump on the back and a shoulder bump. "And neither am I."

Standing beside the outdoor bar, Ben leaned down and used a low voice near Braden's ear. "Are you ever going to tell him you're the one who found his father for him?"

Braden glared at his friend. It obviously hadn't been difficult for the guy to follow Braden's discreet stares Rodrigo's way as the man talked to his father.

When Braden had decided Abby and Rodrigo would be his, he'd started researching Rodrigo's history in the system at the same time he'd pulled Abby's file about her parents' murders. Braden had never told Ben this, but Ben had known Braden inside and out at one time, so it didn't surprise Braden that the man had put two and two together and come up with four.

"What makes you think I haven't told him?" Braden asked.

"I know you," Ben replied. "There's no need for you to take credit, so you won't."

"Doesn't mean they can't call me on it," Braden revealed, making Ben draw back with dark eyebrows raised high. "Oh yeah." The whole episode still made heat rush to Braden's cheeks. "Once we got together and Rodrigo truly understood I'd been interested in him for as long as I was in Abby, it didn't take him long to figure out I was probably the only one in his life who had the skills and research database at my disposal to look more deeply into his paternity. Abby got there on her own too." Braden nodded at Ben's obvious shock. "They confronted me about it one night a couple of months ago, and I came clean about everything."

Ben barked with laughter. He shook his head as his attention circled the crowd gathered in the courtyard. "I love how well they know you." His focus landed on Rodrigo. "So Rodrigo got a father out of your interest. And Abby..." Braden watched Ben's gaze shift to her. "Not only did your decision to look into her past bring closure to her parents' murders, but she also got this Lorene person and the woman's family back in her life."

Seeing Abby with Lorene lifted Braden's heart and made him smile in his woman's direction. "I wish I could take credit for that, but that was all Abby. She sought out that first conversation, and she is the one who opened herself to Lorene's

friendship. I admire her ability to forgive Lorene and move forward. It has brought her peace, and her parents back, in a way. At least her mother, through Lorene.”

“You have a good life going here, man.” Ben clinked his glass to Braden’s. “I’m glad everything finally worked out for you.”

A big piece of Braden’s former feelings for Ben remained part of his current makeup. They always would be. “I don’t know if I could have let this happen without the time I spent with you.” Braden watched Abby and Rodrigo break away from their respective conversations, and his heart tugged him in their direction. Right after he got this one thing said. “Take care of yourself, Ben.” Braden embraced his dear friend. “Be open to the possibilities life puts in front of you. You never know which one is going to change you forever.” He pressed a kiss to the man’s chiseled cheek, holding there for a moment before pulling away.

“I know you see them together. Go on, guy.” Ben jerked his head in Abby and Rodrigo’s direction. “There’s a whole party of people here to talk to. I’ll be fine.”

Braden cuffed his friend’s massive shoulder. “I’ll find you again later. Bye.”

Abby watched her two men approach from opposite sides of the pool, and her heart skittered wildly for them. She imagined it always would.

God gave me the best. Can’t hold a grudge when I get to have the two of them for the rest of my days.

As Rodrigo and Braden reached her, she said, “I think we’re a success. Everyone is having a good time.”

“Bit,” Rodrigo said as he slipped his arm around her waist, “we were always a success.” His brown eyes held such warmth it raised Abby’s temperature just to be near him. “We just give great parties too.”

Braden wrapped his arm around her waist and put the other around Rodrigo’s shoulders, creating something of a triangle between them. “I second Rigo’s sentiment. We’re fucking amazing together. Who wouldn’t want to be around us? If they’re lucky, some of our good fortune will rub off on them too.”

“Holy Mother.” Abby rolled her eyes and tried to cover her smile. “Your egos, the pair of you. I don’t know how I fell in love with two such—hey, mhmnh—”

Rodrigo and Braden shut her up by covering her mouth with theirs and delivering a playful, loving three-person kiss. Just as Abby started losing her mind and melting right into them both, hoots, whistles, catcalls, and clapping erupted around them. Abby bit her lip, and she felt herself turning redder than her hair as she remembered she wasn’t alone in bed with her two men.

Abby turned to face the crowd, happy for the weight of both Rodrigo and Braden at her back. “What can I say?” Even as she blushed, she couldn’t wipe the smile off her face. “They’re good kissers.”

Christian, standing with Jonah at the other side of the pool, lifted his glass. “To Abby, Rodrigo, and Braden,” he said, his voice carrying around the courtyard.

“Falling in love couldn’t have happened to three more caring, deserving people. We’re honored you invited us all into your life and home.”

Everyone else in the courtyard lifted their glasses, cups, and mugs in toast. “Hear! Hear!” Then they all applauded—whether to Christian’s sweet comment or the relationship Abby, Rodrigo, and Braden had built, Abby didn’t know. Only the love, acceptance, and forging of new friendships this afternoon mattered.

From behind, Rodrigo tucked his arm around Abby’s waist, and Braden settled his arm across her breastbone. She didn’t have to look back to know they held each other tightly too. They were all three intertwined.

Exactly as it should be.

THE END

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Knowing Caleb
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Finding Home
The Ultimate Kink
Saying I Do

Cameron Dane

I am an air force brat and spent most of my growing up years living overseas in Italy and England, as well as Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Virginia while we were stateside. I now live in Florida once again with my big, wonderfully pushy family and my three-legged cat, Harry. I have been reading romance novels since I was twelve years old, and twenty years later I still adore them. Currently, I have an unexplainable obsession with hockey goaltenders, and an unabashed affection for *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

I'd love to hear from you! Visit me on the Web at <http://www.camerondane.com>.