

The book cover features a composite image. In the background, the Golden Gate Bridge is visible against a cloudy sky at dusk or dawn. In the foreground, a man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace. The man is shirtless and looking down at the woman, who is wearing a white top and looking up at him with a slight smile. The overall color palette is muted, with purples, blues, and greys, creating a romantic and mysterious atmosphere.

Loose Id

LISA SANCHEZ
OBSESSED

Obsessed

Lisa Sanchez



www.loose-id.com

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Dedication

To my critique partners, Kristin and Kaiti: I wouldn't be where I am today without you. You've made me a better writer, and I cherish your friendship.

For Lisa Langdale: Girlfriend, without you this book simply would not be. Thank you for being the best damn beta reader on the planet. You rock, chica! Mwah!

Chapter One

Damon sat back in his seat and ran a hand through his dark hair. “Dude, you need to get laid.”

Nick palmed his beer and took a lazy sip. He scanned the bar, eyeballing the cesspool of desperation and hedonistic gluttony with a sour stomach. Nothing but a sea of “fuck me to fill my empty void” as far as the eye could see. He shook his head and scowled.

“Not interested.”

The bar was full. Hell, it was always full. Located at the corner of Grant and Columbus in the heart of San Francisco’s North Beach, the Black Diamond was the place to be on a Friday night.

After a long day of pounding nails and running electrical conduit, all Nick wanted was to get plowed, go home, and sleep it off. Alcohol-induced, comalike sleep. He didn’t get enough of that lately.

“I don’t know, man. I think your dick fell off. Did you grow a vagina and not tell me?”

Nick glared at his best friend and slammed his empty beer bottle onto the smooth surface of the black table. Damon didn’t know when to keep his damn trap shut. “Why don’t you back up off my shit? Why are you so interested in my dick?”

Damon pushed back from the table and stood. At six-three, two hundred plus pounds, his aura radiated “don’t fuck with me.” Not that Nick was afraid. Damon might have fifteen pounds of muscle on him, but he didn’t have half of Nick’s rage.

Damon jabbed a large finger in his direction and growled. “I’m not interested in your johnson, peckerhead. I just want my friend back. You’ve been one nasty SOB for the last couple of weeks, and I need a goddamn break.” With one final glare, he stalked away, launching a string of curses, half of which Nick had never heard before.

Frowning, Nick crossed his arms over his chest with a sigh and watched Damon hotfoot it to the bar, pimping himself the entire way. The guy worked out daily to stay fit, and the ladies...well, they fell all over him. With his messy black hair, dark eyes, and carefree attitude, Damon Gianakos was a veritable magnet.

Nick picked at the label on his beer and scowled. Damon was right. He had been acting like a complete tool the past few weeks, but he didn’t know how to stop. An enormous black cloud followed him wherever he went. He couldn’t break free from the darkness, couldn’t find his happy place, but that wasn’t surprising. His

happy place was dead and gone—buried six feet under damp soil, green grass, and warm Texas sun. He closed his eyes, shutting out the neon blue haze covering everyone and everything in the bar. What he wouldn't give for just a sliver of peace, a moment of pure, soul-easing quiet.

A high-pitched, nasally voice rattled his brain. "Can I get you anything else, sugar?"

Nick turned his head and got up close and personal with the pair of medically enhanced boobs, each the size of Mount Rushmore. Two heaping mounds of flesh ready to bust out of the tight, white button-down that held them at bay. He let his eyes wander down a pair of bare legs, a black mini that barely covered a plump, round ass, and back up to a pair of full, collagen-injected lips and flowing blonde hair.

His dick didn't even twitch. *What was up with that?* He was breast man, a leg man; hell, the list went on and on. Yeah, he seriously needed to get his head examined.

A black name tag that read "Shauna" rode just above the server's left breast, pinned into the thin fabric of her shirt.

Nick ran his hand over his skull-trimmed head and exhaled heavily. The beer wasn't doing it for him, and it was time to hit the heavier stuff. "Yeah, okay, Shauna. How 'bout you bring me some tequila." He pulled out his wallet, fished out some bills, and slapped them onto the table. "And keep that shit coming."

A hungry smile crept across Shauna's face as she laid her drink tray on the table and leaned forward. "Can do, sugar. Nice tat, by the way," she said, eyeballing his right forearm like a starving woman at an all-you-can-eat buffet. "How far up does it go?" Her tongue slid across her Corvette red lips like she was sizing up a meal.

Nick tugged at the sleeve of his charcoal gray shirt and pulled it down to his wrist. The tat, a series of tribal markings, swirled up the length of his arm and covered the right side of his torso and back. The over-eager Shauna would never see his ink. It was personal, and he wasn't in a sharing mood.

Either overly persistent or really stupid, the latter being more probable in Nick's book, Shauna continued babbling. "Is there anything else I can do for you? My shift is over in twenty minutes, and I—"

Nick shook his head and pushed her tray toward her. "Sorry, babe. Not interested. The tequila is the only thing that's gonna wet my whistle tonight."

The sound of plastic scratching across resin barely registered above the din of the bar as Shauna retrieved her tray. If she was upset, he couldn't tell, and that said a whole lot about her. A no from him was sure to be a yes from someone else. "Okay, sugar. I'll be back with your drink. Here," she said and pulled a small rectangular piece of paper out of her cleavage. She placed it on the table and pushed it toward him. "In case you change your mind."

Nick slid the business card from the table as Shauna sauntered off to fill her drink orders. The small piece of cardstock was still warm from its fleshy resting place and smelled like cheap, flowery perfume.

“Personal masseuse, my ass.” Nick crumpled the paper and tossed it before looking over toward the blue neon lights of the bar. He let out a snort and sat back in his seat.

Damon had a blonde on either side of him, his arms resting on their shoulders and a beer in each hand. He glanced over to Shauna, who stood behind the bar, and then back at Nick before frowning and mouthing the word *pussy*. He then ushered his all too willing Bettys toward the darkened hallway near the back of the crowded taproom, where he was sure to get his itch scratched, in more ways than one.

A deep ache came out of nowhere and rolled around in Nick’s stomach before taking up residence in his chest. He tore his eyes from the dark hallway and looked out into the massive sea of bodies that filled the Black Diamond, disgusted with himself and mankind in general.

It was always the same. Every weekend the bar filled with a mixture of lonely fools and morally bankrupt garden tools. The fools just wanted to connect, to lose themselves in a warm body and a false embrace, to believe for a few minutes they weren’t alone.

He knew the song and dance like the back of his hand, because he’d played it on a continuous loop for the past year hoping to drown his feelings, snuff out the god-awful ache in his chest. It never worked and always left him feeling like the biggest fool ever born. The morning after was always the same. The dark void, the same vast, unending pool of emptiness that shared his skin always chased him down, hog-tied him, and hung him by the balls. *Ain’t life grand?*

A platinum blonde with dragon-lady nails and enough cleavage to make a grown man cry shot him a come-hither look as she walked past his table. He cast her a blank stare. *Yeah that’s right, babe. Keep on walking. You got nothing I want.*

The Bettys... Well, they were an entirely different monster altogether. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the chicks frequenting his haunts wanted nothing more than to get you off to make a buck or latch on to your wallet and bleed you dry, all the while claiming love. America might be the land of the free, but he’d learned early on after moving to the city that its female inhabitants were far from it. Along with sex, they wanted cold, hard cash, and they’d use any means to get it and didn’t give a damn about his feelings when all was said and done. In truth, that suited him just fine. He wasn’t looking to get attached. No. All he needed was a soft place to land every now and then, a nameless face to tell him everything would be all right. What he needed was an illusion.

The other 0.1 percent of the female population he’d come across? He avoided them like the plague. Relationships were a thing of his past. Nick took a deep breath and sighed. He’d had his fill of bullshit and was taking himself out of the game. An endless string of booty calls wouldn’t change the past, wouldn’t give him his life back. Nothing could.

Nick craned his head toward the bar, impatient for his drink. Where the hell was Shauna with his liquor? His mouth felt like it was full of sawdust, and his head swam with memories of meaningless trysts acted out in the same dark hallway Damon just disappeared into.

He shoved the empty beer bottle across the table. "Screw it." He was done. Tired of living a lie, tired of being someone he wasn't. He'd come to San Francisco to start over, to escape the pain, to forget. But drowning his sorrows between a nameless pair of legs night after night didn't dull the pain, didn't make him forget. It left him feeling like a complete asshole, and he still missed her on top of it. Aside from the constant longing, the ever-present yearning for something he couldn't have, he felt numb. And that was a feeling he was more than okay with.

Nick was so lost in thought he didn't spot Shauna walking toward him with his drink until she all but crawled into his lap.

"Okay, sugar. Here's your drink. Any chance you changed your mind?" She flashed a set of well-manicured nails and a slick smile. "I've got magical hands."

Nick kept his cool, but inside he felt like hurling.

At first glance, Shauna looked okay—tall, thin, and enhanced in all the right places. But when you looked deeper, the stress lines near her eyes were clearly visible, and her front teeth stuck out just a bit, suggesting her real line of work wasn't slinging beer and cocktails.

Nick picked up his glass, swirling the amber liquid around before tossing it back in one fast gulp. "Sorry, babe. Still not interested." The mere thought of another round of meaningless sex was about as appealing as a shit sandwich. He shook his head and grumbled beneath his breath. *Yeah, no thanks.*

"Your loss, sugar." She shrugged and sauntered over to the next table, assaulting a couple of twenty-something geeks with her double Ds and scarlet grin.

Restless and again without a drink, Nick stood up from the table and made his way toward the bar, intent on getting shit-faced and forgetting everything. As he neared his destination, an electrical shock strong as lightning shot down the length of his spine straight to his johnson. His muscles stiffened, his hands started to sweat, and yeah, his dick felt like a rigid iron girder in his pants. It was the strongest feeling he'd experienced in months.

"What the..." A freight train loaded with emotion barreled over him when he turned and saw *her*.

* * *

The Black Diamond was loaded, which was typical for a Friday night, but still, Halley had never seen it so full. Loud music pounded out a steady beat, ringing in her ears and dancing across her skin. Conversation, laughter, and the heavy stench of alcohol bounced off the walls and filled every spare inch of the large room with the promise of good times and no regrets.

A bomb could have gone off and Halley wouldn't have noticed. She'd ceased to register her surroundings the moment her gaze locked with a pair of haunted blue eyes at the end of the bar. Electricity, hot, powerful, and potent, shot through her veins, sending every nerve ending in her body on high alert. Those eyes, that lost, hollow stare full of pain and loneliness, tore at her heart and threatened to wrench a piece of her soul away. *So beautiful. So sad.*

The determined voice of a sassy sprite tore her from her romantic stupor. "What are you doing, Hal? I found us two seats by the bar, hurry." Kaiti, Halley's best friend and business partner, stomped over from where she stood at the bar, grabbed her by the wrist, and gave a yank. Though petite at five-three, Kaiti was a spitfire and packed one hell of a punch.

"Ouch, Kat. What the hell?" Halley tugged, fighting to free herself from Kat's iron grasp.

"I don't want to lose those seats. C'mon."

Unable to escape her friend's death grip, Halley shuffled over to the bar behind the tiny brunette and took a seat. She rubbed at the burning flesh on her wrist and craned her head toward the far end of the bar. Those eyes, so full of sadness, tugged at her heartstrings. The tall stranger was devastatingly handsome, rugged and masculine in the extreme. What happened to him? Why was he so sad?

"What are you looking at?" Kaiti narrowed her eyes and focused her attention toward the end of the bar. "Let me rephrase. Who are you looking at? I know it's not Mr. Stuffed Suit with the crappy tie and comb-over. You've got better taste than that."

"Jeez, Kat, give me a little credit, please." She glanced down toward the suit in question. Midlife crisis wasn't attractive, and the poor man looked wound so tight he could probably shit a diamond. No, she definitely wasn't looking at the suit.

"Well, who is it that you're staring at, then? The tall guy with the skull-trimmed hair and gauges? Really, Hal? You can't be serious."

A hot flush danced across her skin, and she bit her lip while avoiding Kat's harsh gaze. She wasn't ready to admit she felt drawn to Mr. Blue Eyes. Roughly six-three with a muscular build, shaved hair, a tribal tat peeking out from his shirt, and an aura that screamed badass, he wasn't her usual type, and Kat would think she'd lost her mind.

She normally went for Mr. Safe-and-Dependable. The result was always the same. The guy in the power-suit was always more interested in himself than her when all was said and done. Halley was tired of dating her parents' idea of a good man and sick of settling for guys who were more interested in status and climbing the corporate ladder. Screw that! She deserved to be somebody's numero uno. Nope. Mr. Blue Eyes was definitely her flavor, but she'd keep that little secret to herself.

Kaiti leaned forward onto the bar and took a good, long stare before turning to face Halley once more. "Well, color me shocked, Hal. I didn't know you were into

large, tatted, and angsty. But hey, he's definitely a looker if you can get past the whole 'woe is me' vibe."

Halley shook her head. "Damn, Kat. You are so mean. Maybe he's going through something right now. Or—"

"Or maybe he's constipated." Kat flashed her a toothy grin and flagged down the bartender. "Two lemon drops, please."

Halley rolled her eyes as a very metro-looking blond with a name tag that read "Sven" filled their order.

Unable to stop herself, Halley let her gaze wander to the end of the bar and felt her stomach drop when she saw Mr. Blue Eyes was no longer there. The amount of disappointment coursing through her body shocked the hell out of her. He was a stranger, for crying out loud. Why was she so worked up?

With a deep sigh, she shook her head and turned back to face her friend. She didn't have time for emotional entanglements. Not when everything she'd worked toward the last four years had finally fallen into place.

After placing a few bills on the bar, Halley picked up her sugary martini and faced Kat with glass raised. "Are you ready to toast our new business venture?"

A flash of excitement burned in her friend's eyes. "Hell yes," Kat answered and raised her glass. "The loan closed today, we pick up the keys on Monday, I've got a contractor ready to gut the place, and I gave notice at the bank. Zeppoli's Italian Bakery is no longer a dream, but a reality."

Halley couldn't hold back her excited smile and extended her arm, relishing the token clank when the glasses made contact. "Here, here. To Zeppoli's."

Just as she lifted the glass to take a sip, she was knocked forward, her lemony drink splashing across Kaiti's neck and torso, covering her in a sticky mess.

Halley peeled herself off her best friend and turned to see a twenty-something male with greasy, black hair and a set of large, blinding white veneers that looked too big for his mouth. He wore a long-sleeve white shirt with a black vest and a pair of black jeans so tight they had to have been painted on. Rico Suave looked like a slick dick, and he made her skin crawl. The contents of her stomach threatened an unwanted appearance, and she stepped back, putting as much space between them as she could.

Kaiti shrieked. "What the hell, numb-nuts? You just learn to walk yesterday?"

Slippery Dick swiped a thumb across his mouth and cocked his head to the side. "My bad, little lady. Guess I lost my footing."

Kaiti leveled a harsh glare at Slippery Dick and hopped off her stool. "Well, I suggest you find it. Pronto." Her face softened a bit as she turned to Halley, her hands swiping across her alcohol-drenched clothing. "I can't sit here like this. I'm gonna go to the ladies' room and clean up." She craned her head toward the restrooms and groaned. "Dammit. There's a line." She looked at Halley, then toward Slippery Dick, who'd made a hasty retreat toward the far end of the bar. Satisfied he was a safe distance away, she flashed Halley a quick look of apology. "This might

take a while. Go ahead and order another drink, and we'll toast the bakery when I get back."

Halley gave her a nod and turned back toward the bar.

The blaring rock music that floated through the air was unfortunately not loud enough to drown out the sound of Slippery Dick's voice. *Crap. I thought he'd left.*

"Let me get your drink for you, sweetness, since I'm the reason you spilled it."

His sour breath wafted across Halley's face as he leaned in close, triggering her gag reflex. Every hair on her body stood at attention, rigid with frightened anticipation. *Chill out, Hal. Just blow him off and be done with him.* Readjusting her mental armor, she doctored a fake smile and waved him off. "Not necessary," she said, choking on the nasty combination of Dick's rancid breath, cheap cologne, and smoky clothes. "I'm good, but thank you." She gripped her empty glass, praying he'd leave sooner rather than later.

It was obvious Dick was a founding member of the forty-watt club and didn't understand the meaning of no.

"Aww, c'mon now, sweetheart, don't be like that. Just let me buy you a drink." Dick's large, sweaty hand brushed the hair off her shoulder and gripped her behind her neck.

Not again. Fear rushed through her veins like ice water, shaking her to her core. For a moment, the bar, the people surrounding her, Slippery Dick, fell away, and she found herself in another place, another time.

Brown eyes, large and full of hatred, bore down on her as a pair of leathery hands latched on to her throat, crushing and squeezing the life out of her.

"You're mine, Halley. The sooner you figure that out, the better. Looks like I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson..."

A mixture of fear and self-preservation exploded from deep within Halley. She didn't think—she just reacted.

"Please. No!" Wiggled out, Halley stiffened, ramrod straight, and flailed her arms up with a stifled scream. The cocktail glass she gripped shot out of her hand and bounced off the greasy jerk's nose.

Dick clutched his snout and leveled a harsh glare at Halley through watery eyes. "Goddamn. You smashed my nose." His eyes watered like a faucet, and his face flushed an angry red.

"Oh God." Halley backed away with her hand over her mouth and did her best to ignore the horde of curious onlookers.

Dick's nasty glare sent a wave of panic rushing through her veins. "Sorry, missy. My mistake. Won't happen again." Still clutching his nose, he ambled over to an older redhead a few seats down to his right, leaving Halley to herself.

Metro Sven, who apparently saw the entire debacle from the other side of the bar, appeared moments later with a new lemon drop. "Damn, girl. You're definitely

no Jackie Chan, but way to show him who's boss." He inclined his head and smiled. "This one's on the house."

Relieved the creep was gone, Halley thanked Sven and took a sip, savoring the tart flavor of the liquor. Still a bit spooked by Slippery Dick and his roving hands, she sucked in a deep breath and blew it out through puffed cheeks before setting her glass onto the bar. Her palms felt sweaty despite the shiver rocking her frame.

Damn anxiety! I will not let it get to me. She rubbed her hands across her thighs and focused on her breathing, taking long, slow breaths through her nose until the shaking subsided. *C'mon, girl. Calm thoughts, deep breaths. This night is too important to let some creep spoil it for you.*

No longer quaking in her seat, she peered out into the massive crowd. The place had filled up even more over the last few minutes. There wasn't an empty seat in the house.

A quick peek at the long line snaking out from the bathroom reminded her Kat wouldn't return for a while. Maybe she could get another peek at Mr. Angry and those gorgeous sapphire eyes of his. She'd never experienced such an intense pull, such raw, animal attraction for someone before. The fluttery feeling in her stomach felt exciting...and a bit overwhelming.

Mr. Blue Eyes appealed to her on a base, primal level as well as an emotional one. Not only did she want to wrap her arms around him and take away the hurt behind those gorgeous eyes of his, she wanted to lick him from the top of his closely shaven head to the bottom of his muscular toes.

She craned her head, searching the crowd for the handsome stranger only to come up painfully short. The sheer number of people milling around the establishment made it nearly impossible to see anyone who wasn't sitting right at the bar. With a frown, Halley turned and sipped her drink, fiddling with the paper napkin it sat on.

Several minutes passed as Halley waited for Kat to return. The air in the room dissipated and felt thin and sparse. A wave of dizziness rushed out of left field, rolling over her, and she fought to fill her lungs with precious air. Woozy, she gripped the edge of the bar to keep from falling out of her seat. What the hell was going on? Why were her hands so sweaty?

The loud music blaring through the bar sounded muffled and far away, like she was trapped underwater.

"Kat?" She felt her mouth move, but didn't hear any sound. Why wasn't her voice working? Flushed, she reached a clumsy hand toward the napkin under her drink, which for some odd reason kept moving on her. *Holy.* Her head whirled, and she saw double. Why couldn't she grab her drink? Had she ordered two? Her arm felt like a lead weight as her fingers finally made purchase with the napkin, spilling her martini in the process. She swept the small paper square across her forehead. She was hot—so hot and dizzy.

A distorted voice blared into her ear. "You okay there, little missy?"

Halley barely registered Slippery Dick's voice as another swell of dizziness and nausea crashed over her. She gripped the bar with shaky hands and managed a nod since her mouth still wasn't working.

Air. She needed fresh air. Halley gripped the smooth edge of the bar and moved to stand. *Whoa!* Maybe standing wasn't a good idea after all. What was wrong with her legs? They felt boneless, out of her control. The last thing she remembered was a large sweaty hand grasping her by the elbow.

Chapter Two

Fucking beautiful. It was the only way to describe the emerald-eyed beauty standing at the opposite end of the bar. Petite, with rich brown hair that flowed well past her shoulders, a tiny frame, and just enough curves in all the right places, she was a potent shot of adrenaline, shocking life back into him against his will.

Who was this woman, and why did she have such an effect on him? He didn't want to feel. He wanted to drown, to waste away into oblivion, alone and numb.

She wore a black halter, dark jeans that hugged a perfect, round ass, and a black pair of boots he'd fucking love to see wrapped around his waist as he pounded into her. *Hot*. Wait... What the hell? He was done with that scene—done burying his pain in meaningless sex. But there was something about her that drew him in, held him captive. He couldn't look away. He was dying to run his fingers along the creamy white skin peeking out from underneath her dark fan of hair. It looked angelic against the neon lighting of the bar.

Princess didn't look like your average barfly. She looked clean—pure. Different from the sausage jockeys who made up 90 percent of the bar scene. He knew right away she wasn't looking for a quick hookup. This girl had a classy vibe about her. She was the real deal, a refined lady, one of the good ones. Which meant he needed to stay the hell away from her. The diamond-hard rod in his pants would just have to understand. He wasn't going anywhere near her. He'd been there, done that, and wasn't doing the relationship thing again. His shredded heart didn't have anything left to give.

After sweet-talking the bartender, Sven, who'd made no effort to hide the fact he was into him, Nick gripped a full bottle of tequila and walked back to his table, hell-bent on putting the emerald-eyed princess out of his mind. Except no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop himself from watching her every move.

She sat at the bar with a pixielike brunette who looked like hell on wheels. Where Princess gave off an aura of sweetness, Pixie looked downright sassy. They raised their glasses, ready to make a toast, when some mangy-looking douche bag barreled into them. Anger spiked as he watched Princess sprawl forward into her friend, spilling her drink.

Nick let out a small chuckle as the sassy pixie laid into the greasy-haired idiot. But the hilarity of the situation turned on a dime when moments later she stormed off toward the restrooms, leaving Princess alone at the bar with the offending piece of crap. He didn't like how close Dickhead was standing to her, and he really didn't

like the hungry look in his eyes. The overwhelming urge to sprint across the room and slam the asshole's face into the bar was strong. Damn strong.

Nick's pulse skyrocketed as Dickhead leaned in close, whispering something in her ear. He watched as she waved him off and gave him the cold shoulder, angling her body away from him. *That's right, baby. Stay the hell away from him. Shifty bastard's no good.*

Fire tore through Nick's veins when he saw Dickhead put his hand on her neck. His jaw clenched, and his hands balled into fists. *Muuutherfucker*. He pushed back from the table, ready to mop the floor with the idiot's ass, when Princess freaked out, inadvertently chucking her empty martini glass at his face. He stifled back a laugh as the slimy bastard sidled away with his snout in his hands. *Fuck me*. Baby girl didn't need his help. At least not this time.

Nick sat with a groan and reached for his glass. He needed to get the hell out of there. No good would come of him getting worked up over something he couldn't have, shouldn't have. He poured himself some more tequila and downed it.

Damon appeared seconds later, hair mussed, face flushed, and a satisfied grin sprawled across his mouth. "Still sitting here alone, I see, you antisocial bastard. You ready to leave?"

Relieved, Nick gave a nod and tossed several large bills onto the table. He was more than ready to get the hell outta Dodge. He grabbed his tequila, then stood and followed Damon toward the exit. He didn't know why—because he really shouldn't have given a shit—but he looked over toward the bar in search of Princess. His chest ached when he saw she wasn't there. What was up with that? He didn't know her. He didn't want to know her.

Damon clapped Nick on the shoulder, pulling him into the here and now. "Dude. What is up with you? You look like someone ran over your dog."

Nick shook his head and made for the exit. "Nothing, man. Let's get out of here." Damon didn't need to know about Princess, and Nick needed to put her out of his mind.

The cool night air and the salty scent of San Francisco Bay assaulted Nick's senses as he stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Black Diamond.

"Later, Niko." Damon straddled his Harley, which sat parked in front of the bar, and Nick threw him a half-hearted wave as the bike's engine roared to life.

Nick took a long pull from the bottle he still held and headed north up Columbus toward Lombard street, where his apartment was. He hadn't bothered to drive, knowing he'd planned on getting plowed. And parking in the city? It was a total bitch.

He'd walked all of one block when the sound of metal hitting asphalt rang through the night. He looked down the alley to his left and stopped dead in his tracks.

Light from the full moon shone down into the darkened pathway, illuminating the area just enough for Nick to spot the dickhead from the club dragging someone

behind a Dumpster. Rage triggered deep in Nick's gut as the attacker dropped to his knees and leaned forward, a flash of silver slicing through the air.

"What the—" Nick's heart stopped as he spotted a familiar pair of black boots sprawled out across the pavement. Princess's boots. *No!*

Fury, hot and uncontrollable, burned through Nick as he flew down the narrow alley and barreled into the sick bastard leering over Princess, sending them both careening across the filthy pavement. Gruesome memories tore through his consciousness. Pictures he'd tried so hard to bury, to forget, came floating up to the surface, fueling his rage. Blood—God, there'd been so much blood. On the walls, on the carpet, seeped into the mattress under—

The sound of bone snapping and cartilage crunching filled the air as Nick beat the living piss out of the pervert. "Goddamn freak. You...don't...hurt...women." A sticky layer of blood coated Nick's fists and splattered his arms, but he didn't care. Blind fury took over, and he was no longer himself. He was an animal, exacting justice, doling out retribution. He'd failed once before, but he sure as hell could keep this asshole from hurting anyone else.

Dickhead fell unconscious, but Nick wasn't taking any chances. He stood up and let his boot rest just over the bastard's throat. One false move and he'd force all of his weight down onto the asshole's windpipe and snuff out his life.

The sound of laughter carried across the breeze. A large group of people passed by the alley, and he shouted over his shoulder. "Call 9-1-1. There's been an attack. We need an ambulance."

* * *

Halley gripped the blue plastic pen between shaky fingers and signed her name alongside the marked "X" fifty times. Well, maybe not fifty, but it sure as hell felt like she was signing her life away.

"That's the last one, sweetie." Linda, the stout nurse who woke her out of a dead sleep at five a.m. to check her vitals, flashed a thin smile and shuffled out of the room with her release papers in hand. Wasn't sleep a required element in healing? Why on God's green earth did they have to know what her temperature was at the ass-crack of dawn? And why did they have to know how much she peed?

She inhaled deeply. *Crap. Not good.* A sharp, stabbing pain tore through her throat and chest, and she grimaced. Her fingers met a whole lot of gauze and tape as her hands shot up to her neck. The knife wounds. She'd been cut up pretty good. Two hideous slash marks traveled from the outer corners of her jaw in a jagged pattern down the column of her neck where they met up with a mishmash pattern of superficial cuts. Ugly—but lucky. Lucky the slash marks hadn't gone any deeper. Her hospital stay could have been a hell of a lot longer.

"You sore?"

Halley nodded while Kaiti stood up from the faded green chair she sat in and glided to the edge of the hospital bed.

“Well, you’ve been through hell.” Kaiti paused, running her fingers along the edge of the faded hospital bedding, her lower lip trembling as she seemingly fought to find her words. “Jesus, Halley. I’ve never been so scared in my life. I came out of the restroom, and you were gone. If it weren’t for the bartender, I never would have known you went outside. And that...that sick...freak. God, Hal, I’m so sorry.” Her face twisted, large tears welling in her eyes. “I never should have left you alone at the bar. I should have made you come—”

“Stop it, Kat,” Halley said, cutting her off midsentence. “It wasn’t your fault. I should have paid more attention.” She ran shaky fingers over the bandages covering her throat and chest. “I’m here. I’m still alive...and he didn’t...” She trailed off, every muscle in her body tensing, her subconscious blasting her with memories she’d tried so hard to lose.

She’d prayed for death with each brutal strike to the stomach, with each repeated kick to the face. Pain, white-hot and searing, permeated every cell in her body, every nerve ending as she cried out for the mercy she didn’t receive. Hot, rancid breath wafted across her cheeks as she struggled to suck in precious oxygen. “That’s right, bitch. You think you’re too good for me? Well, think again. When I’m through with you...”

A cold sweat covered her skin, and she bolted from the bed, barely making it to the bathroom in time. *Dammit. Not again.* The cool porcelain of the hospital-grade toilet became her best friend as her empty stomach heaved and protested. Each retch tore at her aching chest and throat, threatening to rip apart her newly sewn stitches. Yeah, she was lucky, all right. The pervert hadn’t raped her, or so she’d been told. But he’d stolen something else, something she’d fought to regain once and now feared might never return: her sense of safety.

Halley’s thoughts traveled back to the latter half of the conversation she’d had with Doctor Abrams, the hospital’s psychiatrist, earlier that morning...

“I’ve read your file, Ms. Davis. I was both shocked and saddened to see this was not your first brush with violence.” The doctor’s smooth voice complemented the gentle lines of her face. Her auburn hair was swept up into a neat bun, and the pale green dress she wore beneath her white hospital coat flattered her ivory skin.

Halley blew out a ragged breath. Yeah, she was shocked and saddened too. She was also pissed off, frustrated, and sported a bevy of other unsavory emotions, all of which brought her down. Unsure of how to respond, she simply nodded.

The doctor glanced down at the file she held. “I see you were prescribed clonazepam to help with anxiety after your attack two years ago. May I ask what symptoms you suffered from?”

Halley pressed her lips together, hesitant to bring up such bitter memories. But if rehashing her anxiety-ridden past would help keep her sane this go-round, well, she was all for it. She ran a shaky hand through her hair. “Um...I had a lot of symptoms. My heart raced, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Some days I felt so dizzy I could barely stand, and others the nausea was so bad I couldn’t make it out of bed.

The worst symptom was the constant fear. Things got so bad, I couldn't leave my apartment." She dropped her head and stared down at her upturned palms, shame covering her like a thick blanket, smothering her last breath from her. "I don't want to go back to that place again."

Doctor Abram's smooth voice broke through her bout of self-pity. "Ms. Davis. Halley..."

Swallowing thickly, Halley met the doctor's stare head-on.

"Everyone deals with traumatic situations differently. Panic disorder is nothing to be ashamed of and more widespread than you think."

Halley's eyes widened, and the doctor treated her to a reassuring nod.

"Unfortunately, because of the violence you suffered in the past, coupled with the distress you're feeling as a result of last night's attack, bouts of panic and anxiety are to be expected. It's your body's way of coping, dealing with the trauma. In fact, don't be surprised if anxiety decides to rear its ugly head in the next day or two."

Halley groaned. Day or two? Try hours. Halley felt like someone had knocked her ass out and tossed her on a freight train headed straight for panic, misery, and uncertainty. No, thank you. She'd been there, done that, once before, and wasn't up for a repeat trip down Scared Shitless Lane. Her shoulders fell forward, her body sagged, and warm tears welled in her eyes. "I can't go through that again. I just can't."

"You won't have to, dear." Doctor Abrams pulled a pen from her breast pocket and scribbled away at a small white notepad. "I'm writing you a prescription for alazopram"—she paused and looked up from her paper—"Xanax."

Halley blew out a shaky breath and nodded.

"While clonazepam works well for anxiety, it's longer-acting and has a few side effects I don't care for." She ripped the small paper square from the pad and handed it to Halley. "I think the Xanax will work better for you. Please take it responsibly, Ms. Davis. Benzodiazepines are highly addictive, and I'll know if you're abusing the medication by how quickly you refill the prescription."

"Thank you," Halley said while reaching for the slip of paper. She had no intention of abusing the medication. She hated popping pills. Still, if the Xanax was capable of warding off the panic spiral she'd suffered two years prior, then yeah...she was totally gonna throw back the happy tablets...

A small pair of warm hands rubbed soothing circles on her back, pulling her from her memories. A violent surge of dizziness blasted her from out of left field. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she pull herself together?

"C'mon, sweetie." Kaiti slipped her hand under Halley's elbow, pulling her up from the tile. "Let's get you off the nasty hospital floor."

Halley nodded and stood on shaky legs. She moved over to the sink, washed her hands, and splashed cool water on her face, trying to calm the shattered nerves

hell-bent on pulling her under. Her heart raced, each rapid beat pounding out a fierce tune in her ears. *Deep breaths, Hal. C'mon girl. You can do it. In through the nose, out through the mouth. That's it.*

"Um, Hal?" Kaiti's voice sounded mildly annoyed. "You've got a...uh...visitor."

Halley exited the bathroom to find a stranger standing just inside the door to her room, towering over her and a clearly awestruck Kaiti. *Hmmm.* Someone thought the new guest was cute.

"Ms. Davis." The man gave a slight nod and pulled a pen from the front pocket of his starched blue shirt. "I'm Inspector Blackwood, and I'd like to ask you some questions before you leave."

Great. The police. Halley swallowed hard, crossed the room, and took a seat on the edge of the hospital bed. "Um...I don't remember much, but okay."

"That's all right." The inspector held a black leather portfolio and scribbled away on a notepad he'd pulled out. "We'll just take it one step at a time, and you tell me everything you can recall."

Halley took a deep breath and tried to swallow the mammoth lump in her throat before nodding.

Wide-eyed, Kaiti fanned herself and mouthed the word *smokin'* as she walked behind Inspector Blackwood and sat on the faded green chair.

The policeman's good looks hadn't even registered with Halley. The minute he'd asked her to recall the events of the previous evening, she'd shut down, tuned everything out. She didn't want to answer his questions. She didn't want to think. Thinking meant remembering, and remembering meant opening up a Pandora's box of shit she had no desire to deal with.

Glancing at the formidable male standing just in front of her, she had to admit Inspector Blackwood was a looker for sure. Tall as an oak, he sported a wide chest and muscular arms that looked capable of crushing a human head as easily as a soda can. Cropped blond hair framed a handsome face, and a pair of steel gray eyes bore down on her with serious intensity.

"Are you ready, Ms. Davis?" His deep, raspy voice tore her from her daze.

"What? Oh...I'm sorry...yes."

"When did you first arrive at the Black Diamond last night?"

"Um...just after ten, I think. Is that right, Kat?" She looked toward her best friend, who nodded in agreement. She turned back toward the officer. "So yeah... Just after ten."

He gave a nod. "And when was the first time you saw Mr. Norvall?"

Halley shook her head and narrowed her eyes. "Who?"

The inspector looked up from his paper and met her gaze. "Mr. Norvall. The man who assaulted you."

All the air rushed out of the room, and an uncomfortable heaviness leveled Halley's chest. Her mouth felt dry, and she clutched the thin blanket that lay atop

the bed, desperate to hold on to something, needing to ground herself. *Norvall*. She shook her head and fought to maintain her cool.

"Um... I don't know... Maybe about twenty or thirty minutes after we arrived? The bartender had just filled our drink order when he crashed into me."

The officer nodded. "And what happened when he crashed into you?"

"Are you flipping serious?" Kaiti stood up from her seat and stomped over to Halley's side. She glared up at the officer and crossed her arms over her chest. "What do you think happens when someone crashes into you? You get knocked down, you fall forward—you get hurt."

Inspector Blackwood frowned and shifted his feet in place. "There's no need to get testy, Ms....?"

"Raine. Kaitlyn Raine. And this," she said, sweeping her arm out in front of her, "this is not testy. Trust me, I haven't begun to get testy." She treated the officer to a scathing glare before shaking her head and running her hand through her disheveled curls. "Look... I'm sorry for snapping. I'm tired, and I'm worried about Halley." She crossed her arms over her chest and blew out a ragged breath. "That douche bag, *Norvall*, barreled into Halley. She spilled her drink all over me and fell sideways off her seat."

Ignoring Kat's animated tirade, he turned and focused on Halley. "Is that right?"

"Yes." She pulled the blanket onto her lap, picking away at the pilled fabric as the officer jotted down Kat's recollection.

"Then what happened?"

Halley ran a shaky hand through her hair and bit her lip before taking a deep breath. *C'mon girl. Just answer his questions so you can leave.*

The memory of Slick Dick's rancid breath sent nausea rolling around her stomach like a pinball in an arcade machine. "Well... Kat went to the ladies' room to clean herself off, and that's when he, Mr. *Norvall*, that's when he offered to buy me another drink. He wouldn't take no for an answer, and he grabbed me by the neck. I didn't think; I just...freaked out and chucked my empty glass at him."

Kaiti squeezed Halley's shoulder and rubbed her arm. "That's okay, Hal. Freak out or no, you took care of business."

Halley jerked her arm away from her friend. "Obviously not. I allowed myself to get roofied." Shame and disappointment were not welcome emotions. She fought back bitter tears and struggled to maintain composure. She'd been an idiot, dropped her guard, hadn't kept her eyes open, and as a result, she was sitting on a set of faded hospital sheets in a room that smelled of bleach, depression, and death. No, she most certainly did *not* take care of business.

Inspector Blackwood stepped forward and bent to meet Halley's gaze. His hard, serious gray eyes softened, and he gave her elbow a gentle squeeze.

Halley flinched, shying away from his touch.

The inspector pressed his lips together and gave a nod. He stood his ground but made no move to touch her again. "I assure you, Ms. Davis, even the most cautious of women fall prey to sick predators. It's an unfortunate fact but true nonetheless." He stood tall and put his game face back on. "Now, is there anything else you can tell me?"

Even the most cautious of women fall prey to sick predators. A shudder ripped through her body, and she looked away, avoiding the inspector's heated stare. She felt like screaming at the top of her lungs, "Yeah, and sometimes they get attacked twice, so better be extra careful!"

Wiping away a renegade tear, she shook her head and gripped the yellow plastic cup Kaiti thrust under her nose. The cool water sliding down her throat washed away the cotton lump that formed in her mouth, wetting her parched throat. Exhaustion pulled at her from every angle, and she ached for the comfort of home. Rotating the empty cup in her hand, she breathed in deep through her nose, then exhaled long and slow. No more playing twenty questions with the good detective. "I don't remember much else. I took a few sips of my drink, and then everything is just...hazy."

The officer gave a nod and clicked his pen, stuffing it into the front pocket of his shirt. "Okay, then, I think we're—"

"Wait!" Halley leaned forward, her mind no longer focusing on the here and now, her eyes no longer seeing Kaiti or the officer. Reality slipped away. Her vision tunneled, a vivid memory ripping through her subconscious demanding to be seen. "Blue..." Halley turned and met the detective's stare head-on. "I remember blue eyes. Like sapphires. And...gauges?" Realization smacked her hard across the face. She gasped. With her hands covering her mouth, she faced Kaiti, who in turn smiled and gave a single nod. *Mr. Blue Eyes.*

The officer cleared his throat. "I'm assuming you are referring to the gentleman who came to your rescue?"

Halley gave a silent nod and white-knuckled a handful of hospital bedding. She was about to find out about Mr. Blue Eyes, and the anticipation ate away at her insides, making her squirm.

"That would be Nicholas Ackart you're remembering," the officer said. "He detained Mr. Norvall until the police arrived on scene."

"Nicholas..." His name echoed off the whitewashed walls of the hospital room and danced through her head.

"He did a bit more than detain." Kat sat on the bed beside Halley, eyes wide with appreciation. "He opened up a serious can of whoop-ass and beat the piss out of him. It took two officers and a crapload of muscle to move him off the bastard."

Mouth open in shock, Halley looked from Kaiti to the officer for confirmation.

He cleared his throat and gave a sober nod. "Mr. Norvall suffered several broken bones and multiple lacerations and contusions to the face from the beating he took at Mr. Ackart's hand. He's out of commission and behind bars."

“Good,” Kaiti said while smoothing a hair out of Halley’s face. “Bastard deserves that and a hell of a lot more. Sick freak...”

Kaiti’s heated words drifted off into the ether as a striking pair of haunted eyes filled Halley’s mind. *Nicholas Ackart*. Her Mr. Blue Eyes from the bar had come to her rescue.

Chapter Three

Nick woke up to the mother of all headaches. His skull pounded like someone had shoved his head in a vise and cranked it tight. His eyeballs stung, burned. Hell, had someone hollowed out his peepers with a hot poker while he slept and scrambled his gray matter? He reached up to rub the damn things and got an eyeful of gauze. *Shit*. He forgot. Both hands were covered in bandages. He'd busted most of his knuckles on the sick bastard's face last night, and they were covered in cuts and bruises. He didn't care. His teeth ached from grinding them together as he remembered the damage he inflicted to Princess's attacker.

A loud groan rumbled from deep in his throat. *Goddamn*. The things that pervert had done to her. Slicing up her neck and chest. Those jagged gashes tearing across her beautiful skin, marring that perfect flesh. A flash fire of rage tore through Nick's veins. He wanted to find the rat bastard and finish the job he'd started. Wanted to kill the fucker, gouge his eyes out—beat him with his own severed limb. Losers who hurt women were the worst kind of scum, and he felt no remorse for pounding that deviant's ass into the ground. He'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Nick rolled onto his side when an image of blood spattered across a heaping mountain of fluffy white rained down on him, slamming him back against his mattress, choking the life out of him. He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes, trying to block out the memory of the word *mine* scrawled out in hideous bloodred letters across his bedroom wall. He took a deep breath and scrubbed his gauze-covered hands over his face. "Get a grip, dude. Not the same. It's not the same."

Memories of the past slowly fell away, but when he looked up at the ceiling, expecting to see nothing but white, the image of Princess lying drugged and unconscious on the filthy pavement stole a front-row seat in his brain. His stomach seized up, twisted, turned. Why? Why couldn't he escape the dark-haired beauty? What was it about her that called to him, pulled him in when all he wanted to do was run away? Nick yanked his pillow over his head and swore. He didn't sign up for this shit. Didn't buy a ticket to the movie and just wanted his damn money back.

Princess was lovely, beautiful, and... Christ, she had this girl-next-door vibe about her that drew him in, made him want to talk to her, to get to know her. Nick thanked the good Lord above for putting him in the right place at the right time and cringed at the thought of what might have happened to her if he'd shown up any later.

He was damn happy he'd stopped the attack, but that was where his involvement in her life ended. At least, that was what he told himself when he'd shown up at her hospital room last night. He didn't know her name, didn't feel like lying or sweet-talking the portly nurses, so he'd sneaked around the emergency wing, dodging in and out of rooms like a wraith until he found her.

Nick tossed the pillow aside and ran his bandaged hands over his face. The memory of Princess's tiny body, dwarfed by the hospital bed, soured his stomach, tore at his chest. She'd been asleep. So had her friend, which made things easier. How would he explain his presence in her room? *Hey there. I put the hurt on your would-be rapist and just wanted to make sure you're okay.* Yeah, he didn't think that would fly. He'd stayed in the doorway and watched the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest as he listened to the monitors beep in time with her heart. What was it about her that had him acting like such a pussy? He'd killed his sensitive side, buried it six feet under with his heart.

The pounding of a fist on his front door rushed through the air and rattled his aching head. He rolled over and eyeballed the alarm clock on his nightstand: 5:43 p.m. *Fuck.* He hadn't planned on sleeping the day away, but after the shitstorm the night before, his energy was zapped.

The pounding grew louder, and an angry shout ping-ponged off the walls. "Niko, I know you're home, asshole. Let me in."

With nothing on but a pair of black pajama bottoms, Nick rolled out of bed with a groan and lumbered out of his room toward the annoying racket. "Dammit, stop banging on my goddamn door. I'm coming."

Nick barely turned the knob when Damon burst into the apartment wearing a scowl and a crapload of attitude.

"Where the hell were you, jack-off? You were supposed to meet me for lunch"—he glared down at the silver Rolex on his wrist—"four fucking hours ago. I blew up your phone. Are you not checking messages?"

Crap... Lunch. He'd totally spaced on that one. He ambled over to the black leather sofa in the center of the room and sat. "You sound like a chick, Damon." Nick threw up his hands and knocked his voice up a few octaves. "Oh my God. Where were you? I called and called."

Damon sat his ass in the black leather seat across from him and scowled. "Fuck you, asshole. We need to talk business, and you know it. David's got a new job for us, and we start tomorrow."

Nick swore under his breath, then let out a heavy sigh. "Look, man, I'm sorry. After we left the bar last night, things took an epic nosedive." He held up his bandaged hands before letting them fall into his lap.

Damon's eyes narrowed. "What's up with the bandages? You get tanked and play with your blender?"

Nick frowned. *Asshole thinks he's funny.*

He cracked a grin, leaned back, and propped his feet up on the POS coffee table the previous apartment owner had left behind like he owned the place. "More important, can you work? We need those hands, man."

"Hell yes, I can work." Nick tore off the gauze covering both sets of knuckles and surveyed the damage. The ER doc had cleaned him up good. A slick coating of antibiotic ointment covered both hands. It would take a hell of a lot more than a set of bruised and bloodied hands to keep him from his work, the only thing keeping him sane.

Damon leaned forward, elbows on his knees, still smiling. "I hope the other guy's face looks worse than your hands. What'd he do, jack your booze?"

"No." Nick pegged Damon with a hard stare before looking away. "The asshole tried to rape a woman. Knifed her up good." The temperature in the room rose several degrees as heat crawled across his skin, fanning his anger. He hadn't realized he'd balled his hands into fists until his knuckles cried out, the healing skin stretching painfully.

"Damn, Niko." Damon's cocky smile was replaced by a look of seriousness. "I hate fuckers that mess with women. Tell me you beat his ass. Tell me you put the bastard out of commission."

Nick met his friend's eyes with a pointed stare. "You know me. It's all or nothing. Asshole looks like a walking meat Popsicle."

Damon gave a nod and eased back into the leather seat with a sigh. "You're still thinking about it, though, aren't you? Getting caught up in shit that's not your business. You need to stop. Like now. That kinda crap won't change the past, won't bring..." He looked down at his lap and shook his head. "Damn, man. I'm sorry. I..." He pegged Nick with a hard stare. "Look, you did your thing; you helped her out. Now leave it be. Let it go."

Nick propped his bare feet onto the chipped, wooden surface of his coffee table. He threw his head back against the couch and covered his eyes with his hands. Damon was right. He'd come to Princess's aid before she'd been injured any worse and put a major hurt on her attacker. It was more than he'd been able to do a year ago, and though he should feel satisfied he'd helped her, he still felt nothing but empty. He was beginning to think the ache in his chest would never go away.

"So tell me about this job we're starting tomorrow." He needed a diversion, something to keep his mind off the shitty dreams haunting him night and day. Something to help him forget Princess and her perfect skin and emerald green eyes.

Damon leaned forward in his seat and gave a chuckle. "Better save some room in that cast-iron stomach of yours, bro. We're building ourselves a bakery."

* * *

Stiff muscles, the smell of pine cleaner, and the soft nudge of a cool nose against her cheek ripped Halley from the few minutes of sleep she'd managed to get between bouts of dry heaving and dizzy spells. With a groan, she peeled her eyes

open. “Mmm, not now, Mocha. I’m beat.” The small black Chihuahua whined and licked her face once more before darting out of the bathroom. Someone was hungry.

Halley rolled onto her back, the soft fibers of the bathroom mat doing little to cushion the hardness of the tile floor. Wretched. Yeah, that was a great word to describe how crappy she felt. Sleep, the one thing she was desperate for, had eluded her, taunted her, and remained just out of reach. Her body was exhausted, but every time she closed her eyes, blurry images from Friday night’s attack and memories she’d tried so hard to bury played on a slow-motion loop over and over again. Hot, rancid breath wafting across her face. Voices, one high and reedy, the other with a faint Southern accent, promising her pain and degradation. Slippery Dick holding a knife to her throat while dragging her out the back of the bar. The hot, searing pain of a boot to the face. The coppery stench of blood. Her own blood.

With a grumble, Halley pulled herself onto her feet. She hadn’t taken the Ambien prescribed by the psychiatrist from the hospital but planned to that night. She couldn’t take another night sleeping in front of the toilet.

After washing up, she shuffled down the dark hallway into the kitchen. The sharp sound of metal scraping against tile drew her attention to the floor as she hit the light switch. Tail wagging and eager to be fed, Mocha had nudged her small silver bowl across the floor as if to say, *Hurry it up, I’m hungry*. The fluorescents blared, and she searched for the clock on the oven through squinty eyes: 6:15 a.m. Halley groaned. “All right, then, let’s get you fed.”

After dishing out kibble to her furry friend, she preheated the oven and shuffled over to the pantry, pulling out the dry ingredients for her favorite breakfast pastry—strawberry-filled cornettis. She might not be able to sleep, but she sure as hell could bake. The sticky feeling of the dough between her fingers and the sense of pride she got whenever she created a confectionary masterpiece was exactly what she needed to feel better.

That and the ibuprofen she was supposed to take for pain. Her stitches burned, and her muscles ached. It felt like someone had beaten her with a steel girder. After wrestling with the cap for a lot longer than she cared to admit, she popped the plastic pain in the ass off the bottle, dry swallowed a pill, and went to work on the pastries. Exhaustion finally caught up to her, and by the time she placed the cornettis into the oven, she was so tired her head spun like she’d just taken an extra-long ride on a Tilt-A-Whirl, and her eyes were so heavy she could barely keep them open.

She shuffled across the cool hardwood flooring into the dining room, and then collapsed into a seat at the table. The familiar pitter-patter of paws sliding across the floor wafted through the air as Mocha took a running leap, and landed in her favorite resting place, Halley’s lap.

Despite her cloudy head, Halley zeroed in on the vase full of daisies that had showed up on her doorstep the day before. She fingered the small card that came with it, dragging it across the table so she could read it again. The words *Feel better soon* were written in clean, masculine lettering.

Halley flipped the small piece of cardstock over in her hand and sighed. There was no signature. Who were the flowers from? She hadn't called her parents to tell them about the attack—didn't see the point. There wasn't anything they could do. And even if Kaiti had gone against her wishes and told them about it, they wouldn't have sent an anonymous card—or daisies. Her father, Hal Davis, came from old money, and her mother, Katherine, knew how to spend it. If her parents learned about the assault, her apartment would look like a botanical garden. So who left the flowers?

The case of the unidentified posies was giving her a headache. She rested her head on her arms and closed her eyes, thinking a few minutes' rest was better than nothing at all.

* * *

"Halley. Wake up, Halley." Yippy barking and the panicked sound of someone shouting echoed in Halley's ears as the table shook beneath her arms. "What?" She jerked her head up, one eye closed. Kaiti stood over her with wide eyes, her hands clamped onto her shoulder, jostling her around. Okay, so the table wasn't shaking, she was. And Mocha? Yeah, she was freaking out and yipping up a storm at her feet.

"Jesus, Hal. You scared me to death. You were screaming in your sleep. Are you okay?"

Halley sat up straight in her chair, the snap, crackle, pop of her stiff back filling the room. She rubbed her eyes. "I was screaming?"

Kaiti slid into the chair kitty-corner to her, and brushed a piece of hair out of her eyes. "Yes, loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood. You did it last night too, just after you fell asleep. Scared me to death. It's the attack. You're dreaming about it, yeah?"

Halley closed her eyes and breathed in deep before nodding. She opened her mouth to speak when the loud beeping of the oven signaled her pastries were done.

"Oh, my God, the cornettis." She raced into the kitchen, thankful she hadn't slept through the timer, and pulled her golden delicacies from the oven. The sweet smell of perfection filled the air. Halley breathed in the sugary scent, saturating her lungs with the telltale aftereffects of the one thing she was good at, her one constant: her baking.

Kaiti shuffled into the kitchen, her fuzzy pink slippers thwacking across the Pergo, and went straight for the coffee pot. "Damn, those smell good. I don't know how you do it."

"Do what?" Halley asked. She sipped down the rest of her meds with a tall glass of water. Hopefully her little orange pills would kick in and do their thing. The image of Slippery Dick and his rancid breath and smoke-covered clothes was bad enough. Coupled with the horrifying memories of her beating two years ago, the stress was more than she could stand.

"I don't know how you eat all the pastries and desserts you do and still manage to stay a size two. If I'd been the one to go to pastry school, you'd be hefting my ass out of bed with a crane."

Halley rolled her eyes and placed the adult-proof cap back on her meds.

Kaiti crossed through the small kitchen with a frown and reached for the medication. "Jesus, Hal. How many different meds did they give you?" She pulled the bottles off the counter and read them aloud. "Xanax, Ambien, ibuprofen? Damn, girl. You've got yourself a regular cocktail here. You sure it's safe to take all these together?"

Halley nodded, remembering the pharmacist's instructions on how to safely take the combination of drugs.

Kaiti plucked a warm pastry from the baking sheet and thrust in under Halley's nose. "Here. You better scarf down a few of these. You can't take all this crap on an empty stomach."

Halley frowned. "Jeez, you sound like my mother. Here," she said, taking a monster bite of the strawberry-filled pastry. A large, steaming glob of strawberry oozed onto her chin. "Ahh! Goddammit that's hot!" She swiped at the molten filling and grimaced. Exhaustion, it seemed, had snuffed out her common sense. She glared at Kat. "Lovely. I crispy fried my taste buds and chin, but my tummy is full. Feel better?"

"You'll thank me for your flaming breakfast later," Kaiti said with a raised brow and handed her a napkin before ducking out of the kitchen.

Halley pursed her lips and eyed the row of brown bottles on the counter. She'd never been a fan of popping pills, but she was even less of a fan of pain. Once her soreness went away, she'd forego taking the ibuprofen. She could only hope to be able to do the same with her anxiety medication. She'd suffered panic attacks before and had managed to get them under control. Hopefully she'd be able to conquer her fears this time as well.

Kaiti's voice echoed down the narrow hall into the kitchen. "I'm headed for the water locker. Don't forget we have a meeting with the guys from Nichols' Construction at eight."

With her mouth full of cornetti, Halley picked up a pan and headed for the sink when the phone rang. Frowning, she eyed the clock on the oven: 7:20 a.m. *Shit. Better get moving.* She shuffled over to the opposite end of the counter and snatched up the receiver, wondering who would call at such an early hour.

"Hello." Her greeting was met with silence.

She swallowed the last bit of pastry, walked back over to the sink, and tried again. "Hello?"

The line went dead.

"Frigging wrong number." Irritated, Halley made quick work of cleaning the kitchen, fully aware she didn't have a lot of time to get ready for the meeting. Tired, cranky, and wary of anything with two legs and a pulse, the last thing she wanted

was to be stuck in a room with a handful of men she didn't know. Still, she hadn't worked as hard or as long as she had to let her nerves get the best of her now.

Just as she was about to round the corner and head for the shower, she stopped and eyed the anxiety meds and bit her lip. A meeting with a few of the men from Nichols' Construction didn't sound like something that would send her over the edge. However, she'd always had the mindset that it was better to be safe than sorry. With the roller coaster of emotions she'd been on the past two days, she didn't know what to expect. She snatched them without another thought and tossed them in her purse.

Chapter Four

Kaiti let out a frustrated sigh and yanked her cell out of her bag. “This crap isn’t gonna fly. I need to call the city and find out why our water isn’t turned on. I’ll be right back.” She stormed out the back entrance of the future bakery, her black heels clacking against the floor, her cell phone plastered to her ear.

Alone, Halley inhaled a slow, steady breath. She stood in the center of the large empty space, just breathing in the possibilities. Closing her eyes, she let her imagination run wild. She may have been standing amidst the dusty remnants of what was once a clothing boutique, but her mind pictured a bustling café. A top-notch pâtisserie, pushing out the finest cassata, pasticciotti, and cannoli money could buy. Located on Columbus, in the heart of San Francisco’s North Beach, Zeppoli’s Bakery would be the place to go to get your sugar on. In just a handful of weeks, the dream she’d been holding on to for so long would finally become a reality. And oh yeah, baby, she was giddy with excitement.

The corners of her lips pulled up into a smile as she pictured a large refrigerated display case full of pastries, cakes, and desserts. The image of a shiny new commercial-grade convection oven filled with biscotti sent her mouth watering and her mind racing with possibilities. Most women got excited about new shoes, expensive designer purses. Not her. Throw a commercial-grade mixer in front of her, and she’d salivate all over the thing. The name KitchenAid was an aphrodisiac.

“Daydreaming, are we?”

Halley jumped, her high-pitched yelp bouncing off the dust-covered walls. She wheeled around, her hands automatically reaching for her injured neck and chest as she backed away from—Mr. Blue Eyes?

“You...but...what...” Flustered, she shut her mouth before she made a bigger idiot of herself. What was he doing here? How on earth had he found her? Her heart hammered against her rib cage, and her hands got all hot and sweaty the moment she laid eyes on him. “What are you... Why are you here?” *Shut up, Halley! Don’t bug him about why he’s here. Just be happy he is.*

Fidgeting in place as though he were uncomfortable, he shoved his large hands into the front pockets of his faded jeans and winced before crossing his arms in front of his chest. His knuckles were an angry red, bruised, and swollen. Avoiding her eyes, he waved a hand through the air and spun in a slow circle, making a show of checking out the empty space. “Thought I’d...uh...check things out before I start working.”

Damn. He looks more uncomfortable than I am.

This, of course, was a surprising revelation. Nervous around anything with arms, legs, and a heartbeat, she'd armed herself with her bottle of happy pills, expecting anxiety to rear its ugly head at some point during the day. Yet, here she was, alone with Mr. Blue Eyes who stood just a few feet away, with no visible signs of panic. Aside from the normal nervous, giddy feeling she got whenever she came across a good-looking guy, she felt surprisingly okay. Looked like her happy pills were doing their job. Or maybe her Good Samaritan had a calming effect on her. She wasn't going to question it either way. The lack of anxiety felt damn nice.

A little dizzy, Halley sucked in a quick breath and enjoyed a good, long look at her silent and brooding hero who had busied himself with inspecting a nearby wall.

A plain black T-shirt hugged the muscled expanse of his broad chest. A faded, battered pair of jeans rode low on a narrow waist, showing off a Grade A, top-choice ass. As impressive as his physique was, it was the dark swirling ink crawling up his right arm that drew her attention. Magnificent was the only way to describe it. Well, magnificent and sexy. A flush crawled up the back of her neck, down her front, and settled in nice and good. Had someone turned up the heat? Even more powerful than her body's attraction to him was the sense of safety she felt now that he was in the same room with her. The tension in her shoulders eased, and she finally felt like she could breathe. *Holy hell.* She didn't have the urge to bolt. She wasn't afraid of him.

Apparently satisfied the integrity of the wall was sound, Mr. Blue Eyes turned and faced her once more.

She licked her lips, stared down at her hands for a moment, and then met his eyes once more. The electricity sparking through the air was almost tangible. Thick, full of anticipation and words unspoken. The sensation was new and foreign yet exciting at the same time. Hell, if she could bottle the magnetic, exhilarating, almost love-drunk feeling, she'd be rich. Halley opened her mouth to speak, but Mr. Blue Eyes beat her to the punch.

He shifted in place. "I work for David Nichols. My partner and I are here to meet with the owners of Zeppoli's Bakery."

His eyes are so blue. I wonder if they're contacts. And that jaw...

Her breath caught, and she glanced away for a moment. Nervous, Halley chewed on the inside of her lip while she searched for her missing voice. She stepped forward. "It's nice to finally meet you. It's Mr. Ackart, right?" Her voice shook and sounded like someone else. *Damn. Great, Hal. You sound like a dying cow.* "My name is Halley Davis. I'm part owner of Zeppoli's."

He stared at his feet and inhaled a deep breath. When he looked up, it was like the sun broke out through the clouds on a rainy day, filling the room with warmth and light. His smile was radiant, and it warmed the bone-cold chill, which had refused to go away ever since the attack. His presence calmed her, eased her. *Who is this guy?*

"It's nice to meet you, Halley. And yeah, the last name's Ackart, but you can call me Nick."

* * *

Nick glanced down at his shoe, trying his damndest to fight back the raging hard-on that filled his pants the moment he walked into the empty building. Dammit, why? Why couldn't he escape her? *Fate*. The word kept nagging at his head, wouldn't go away. Screw fate. Fate was yanking his chain, and if it didn't stop, he was gonna yank back—hard.

He'd wanted to turn around and run in the opposite direction the moment he walked into the bakery and found her daydreaming. Self-preservation took over, his brain screaming at him to get out, save himself from heartache. But something inside him, his gut maybe, glued his scuffed work boots to the dusty floor, anchoring him in place. The pull he felt toward her was magnetic, irresistible—and frustrating as hell.

She hadn't heard him enter the shop, and he was thankful. Damn, she was lovely. His little jaunt around the interior of the bakery had given him ample opportunity to sneak a few glances at her magnificent form. The maroon sweaterdress she wore was striking against her pale skin. And her legs—Christ, he'd never wanted to be a pair of gray leggings more. Those bad boys hugged a pair of slender legs and a round, firm ass his hands begged to squeeze. And dammit if those legs weren't topped off by another pair of wicked, sexy boots. He wanted to crawl up under that pretty sweater, wrap those boots around his waist, and sink himself deep into her warmth. Pound out his need until there was nothing left.

Rein that shit in, numbnuts. She was just assaulted. He tried to think of something, anything to deflate the painfully swollen rocket ready to fire in his pants. *Shit. Why didn't I take lit classes in school? Oh yeah, because I fucking hate poetry. Crap. Do some math, asshole. Recite the square root of pi. Pie... I wonder if she's bare? Fuck, not working!* Yeah, he was a total douche bag. Fantasizing over a fragile assault victim. He'd hit an all-time low.

Feeling like a jackass for ogling her while she daydreamed, he'd opened his mouth and ended up scaring the crap out of her. Her eyeballs practically shot out of her head when she jumped. *Idiot*. Of course she'd be skittish.

And when she finally spoke, well, he felt like he'd died and gone to heaven. Either that or the sky opened up and some winged creature started singing. *Halley*. Her name fit, and the way it rolled off her tongue with that soft, musical voice of hers made his pulse race and his balls ache with need. Yeah...he totally needed to get away from her. Princess was a choice helping of prime rib, and he was on a relationship fast. Scratch that. If women were meat, his ass was vegan. Regardless of how attracted he was to Halley, she was off-limits. He wouldn't use her for meaningless sex, and a relationship was out of the question. Falling for someone so soon after losing... God, it almost seemed like a betrayal. Besides, he had nothing left to give.

“Thank you.” Her smooth voice floated across the air like a melody, breaking the silence between them. “You know, for what you did, for saving me.” She stepped forward, slow and tentative, her hand shaking like she was afraid, but her face full of gratitude and determination. Her brows furrowed. “Your hands.”

A jolt of electricity shot up his arm the moment her fingertip inadvertently grazed the top of his right hand. *Holy shit*. He waved her off, tearing his hand away from her touch, and crossed his arms again, hiding the angry red reminder of the attack. “I’m fine, and you’re welcome. Anyone would have helped.” Of course, that was a lie. This day and age, most people were more likely to turn their heads and walk away than get involved. *Self-involved losers*. He couldn’t fathom the idea of *not* getting involved, *not* helping.

He stood motionless, tethered in place by an undeniable need to soak up her intoxicating presence while she inched forward, slow and unsure.

Her eyes zeroed in on the whirling black ink etched into his skin, indecision splashed across her face. Brows furrowed and lips mashed into a thin line, she held her tiny, shaking hand over his arm as if she were afraid to touch him on purpose this time.

Hell, he couldn’t blame her for shying away, not wanting to get close. After what happened to her, he was surprised she could tolerate being alone in the same room with a stranger.

She let out a tiny gasp, then... *Oh shit*. She laid her hand just above his right elbow and gave a gentle squeeze.

The same spark that shocked him before lit up his arm, sending a powerful surge of lust straight to his johnson.

A soft smile graced her lips. “No. Most people wouldn’t have jumped into the thick of it like that, so thank you.”

Indecision ping-ponged through his brain. His first instinct was to take her in his arms, inhale her sweet, sugary scent, and never let her go. Not really appropriate, since they’d only just met. Maybe he could touch her. She’d laid a hand on him, and damn, he’d love to reciprocate.

A muffled chirping filled the empty space, and just like that, the moment was gone.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry.” She dug around in her bag, brows furrowed, searching for her cell phone.

She held up a finger and flashed him an apologetic smile as she held the phone to her ear. “Hello.” Her eyes narrowed in frustration, and her jaw clenched before she pulled the phone away and shook her head. With an irritated sigh, she chucked it back into her bag.

What the hell was that all about? “Not in a talking mood?” Nick teased.

She shook her head, the left corner of her mouth curling up. “No. It’s not that. Someone keeps calling me and hanging up. It happened twice at my place, and this is the second time they’ve called my cell. To be honest, it’s creeping me out.”

Nick opened his mouth to speak when a cool breeze rushed in, and Damon burst through the front door of the empty shop. The sassy pixie he'd seen Princess with Friday night followed close on his heels, along with his boss, David Nichols.

"So, an Italian bakery in the heart of Little Italy, eh? Real original."

Damon's deep voice bounced off the empty walls of the shop, making Halley jump.

A twinge of something that felt an awful lot like worry tore through his gut the moment she reacted. Those slender arms and tiny hands of hers trembled as she clutched her bandaged neck, and her frightened eyes spoke volumes. She was more than skittish from the attack. She was downright scared, and it tore at his insides.

The pixie brushed past Damon with a haughty glare and stood in front of Halley. "You okay?" When Halley gave her a nod, she turned and spoke through clenched teeth. "Let's all try and use our indoor voices from now on, shall we?" She glared up at Damon with a serious look of "keep it down or ima beat you."

Damon crossed his arms and puffed out his chest as he met the pixie's glare with a scowl of his own. His excessive display of posturing was pure crap. Nick would put money on the pixie any day and twice on Sunday. Girlfriend could take all two hundred fifty pounds of him easy.

"Enough, Damon." David stepped forward, placing himself between the guerilla warriors who continued throwing angry eye darts at one another. "Why don't we introduce ourselves and get down to business? I'm sure the ladies have better things to do today than be mean-mugged by an idiot Greek and his bald companion."

Nick did a double take and feigned innocence. "Hold up. How'd I get included in his crap? And what's wrong with my hair?"

The soft sound of an angel laughing filled Nick's ears, tearing his attention from the idiot Greek and his boss.

A nervous smile crossed Princess's mouth but didn't reach those emerald orbs of hers. As amusing as it must have been to watch the three men bicker back and forth like Larry, Curly, and Moe, he knew deep down she was still rattled by Damon's abrupt entrance. Baby girl did a bang-up job at hiding her discomfort. Not only did she sound like an angel, she looked like one too—ethereal, beautiful, and almost like a dream.

David cleared his throat. "Let me just go ahead and apologize for my men before we get started. The tall, dark one, Damon"—he pointed in his direction—"tends to stick his foot in his mouth on a regular basis. And the bald pincushion over here"—he gave a nod in Nick's direction—"is Nick. He's got a mouth that would put a sailor to shame. They're crass, loud, and full of themselves, but they're the best at what they do, they work fast, and will build you a damn fine bakery."

David stepped forward and quickly extended his hand toward Halley. "David Nichols. It's a pleasure to work with you, Ms. Davis."

Princess flipped a complete emotional one-eighty. One minute she stood smiling, giggling, the next her body stiffened, froze ramrod straight. She stared at David's hand like it was the spawn of Satan. Hesitantly, she reached her hand out, her gaze darting back and forth between David's hand, the floor, and the pixie who stood staring at Damon like he was the Second Coming. Abruptly, she dropped her hand to her side with a nervous gasp. The moment was long, drawn-out, and awkward as hell.

"Sorry," she said, forcing a polite smile.

David was a cool guy. Smart and successful, he didn't lack in the sensitivity department. Obviously realizing Halley was spooked, he stepped back and cracked a wide smile. "Not a problem."

"So, you the businesswoman or the chef?" Damon asked, apparently done playing "who's got the meaner mug" with the pixie.

The fear that riddled Halley's body dissipated and was quickly replaced with a swell of pride. Her shoulders, which had fallen forward and inward, straightened and rose as she took a relaxed breath. "The chef," she said with a glorious smile.

* * *

"So, I think the meeting went well." Kaiti unlocked the street-level door that led to their second-story apartment. "Too bad that Damon's a pompous assmunch. He's a hottie, don't you think?" Her shiny black heels clapped against the wooden stairs as they trudged up the steps. "But David sure had his stuff together."

Halley gave a faint "Mm-hmm." She hadn't really paid attention to Mr. Nichols until he'd thrust his hand forward, expecting her to shake it. Then she became very aware of him and of Damon. Both males seemed harmless enough, friendly and professional. It was such a simple act too—a handshake. But the thought of touching him made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, her skin crawl, and sent her heart hammering like she'd run a fifty-meter sprint through the sand. She couldn't do it. She'd left him hanging, and the resulting embarrassment was a bitter pill to swallow.

"Damn," she mumbled under her breath. "I don't have time for this crap." And she didn't. With the bakery's construction underway and an impossibly long to-do list before the shop opened, fear and anxiety were the last things she wanted to battle.

"Oh hey, Shane." Kaiti's musical voice went up an octave and took on a distinctively flirtatious tone.

Halley groaned inwardly and peered up the stairwell. Her eyes were immediately assaulted with a flash of blond hair and rippling tan muscles clad in a white T-shirt, shorts, and running shoes. *Oh, for the love of...* An invisible cloud of cologne surrounded the über-fit ladies' man, wafting down the narrow stairs, choking the air from her.

Shane Gray, self-proclaimed lady-killer extraordinaire, had moved into the apartment above theirs two months prior and had been flirting with them nonstop

ever since. She'd wondered more than once if it was just stubborn persistence motivating him to continually ask her out or sheer stupidity. She turned him down every time, and the guy kept coming back for more. Either way, she prayed he'd wise up and get a clue.

Shane booked down the stairs toward them at a breakneck pace. "Hey there, sweetness." He flashed Kaiti a beautiful set of pearly whites as he passed her.

He took the steps two at a time, stopping short just in front of Halley, staring at the angry stitches on her neck with obvious disapproval. "Damn, girl. Someone messed you up good. You okay?"

No, she most certainly wasn't okay, but she wasn't going to let him know that. She forced a smile and nodded.

Shane ran a large hand through his blond hair. A look of determination crossed his face. "So, you give any more thought to my question?" He leaned forward and placed a hand on the wall behind her head, the overpowering scent of Cool Water stinging her nose. *Does the guy bathe in cologne? Ugh!*

His pale blue eyes were intense, and the way he devoured her with them made her slightly uncomfortable. She also didn't like how close he was, his hulking frame towering over her, his face mere inches away.

Uncomfortable, Halley moved to step back and found she couldn't. With her back plastered to the wall, she'd have to sidestep up the stairs to get away.

A thick layer of cotton coated her drying tongue, and cool, sticky sweat formed on her palms. Why? Why did he have to stand so goddamn close? If she'd known him better, trusted him at all, she might have been able tolerate his close proximity. But as it stood, his hovering gave her the willies and made her heart palpitate. *Dammit.* Did the man have no respect for personal space?

Despite his oh-so-easy-on-the-eyes appearance, Halley wasn't interested in going out with Shane and wished he'd stop pushing the issue. If she wasn't interested before the attack, she was even less interested now.

She offered up a polite smile and shook her head, silently wishing he'd disappear. "Sorry, Shane. The answer is still no."

The crooked smile he wore quickly faded, and he shook his head. "So stubborn. Jesus. I've never had to work so hard to get a girl to go out with me. My ego's taking a huge hit here."

Unsure of what to say, she shrugged and inchwormed up a few steps with her back still flush against the wall.

"That's okay," he continued. "I'm not giving up on you. You *will* go out with me, and you'll be sorry you waited so long to say yes."

Halley stood frozen in place with her brow raised and mouth open in shock. She'd always appreciated a confident man. But Shane's blatant disregard and stubborn persistence proved he was more arrogant than anything else. *No, thank you.*

With a wink and a nod, he pulled an iPhone out of his pocket, shoved a pair of earbuds in his ears and, with a quick wave of his hand, jogged down the stairs and out the door. Shane was a looker for sure, but his brazen overconfidence was a major turnoff, and she was damn sure she'd never change her mind. There was no way she'd ever date him, and she sure as hell wasn't sorry about it.

With a scowl, she turned and climbed the last few steps.

"Oh...my..."

Halley's phone buzzed just as she heard a low whistle escape Kaiti's lips. "What are you gushing over?" She dug out her phone and frowned as the words "unknown caller" flashed across the LCD screen. She powered off her cell, not wanting to deal with whomever it was that kept calling and hanging up. Cursing, she shoved the device back into her bag.

Curious about Kaiti's fussing, she stepped out from behind her curly haired friend, utter surprise and a tinge of excitement anchoring her in place. An enormous bouquet of red tulips decorated the space in front of her door, their soft petals permeating the air with a pleasant smell. A large white envelope sat propped against the crystal vase.

Kaiti bent, picked up the card, which she promptly handed to Halley, and hefted the large vase off the floor before unlocking the door.

Mocha barreled into the hallway, excited and ready to play. "Easy, pup. Your mama's got an admirer. Give her a chance to check out the goods, and then she'll play with you."

The Chi scurried down the hall a few feet, sniffed the air, and let out a low growl before scampering back into the apartment with an excited whine.

Once inside, Halley dropped her purse on the dining room table and opened up the envelope.

Still holding the tulips, Kaiti sneaked up beside her with an excited grin. "Hurry up, girl. See who they're from. What's it say?"

"All right, sheesh," Halley said as she pulled out a folded sheet of paper and CD. "I have no idea who'd be sending me flowers. I—"

The CD hit the floor first, then the paper. Mocha's barking, Kaiti's voice, both sounded distant and muffled. The room shook and swayed, and an odd whooshing filled her ears.

Kaiti let out a frantic wail. "Oh my God, Hal. Breathe."

With a shaky hand, Halley pulled a chair out from the table and fell into it. The room wasn't shaking—she was. And that whooshing sound? Yeah, those were her lungs frantically sucking in precious air.

"What the...?" Kaiti snatched the note from the floor. "Oh...oh Halley. Where's that card Detective Blackwood gave you? We need to call him. This...this is creepy."

Chapter Five

“And you said you found the flowers and the note...”

“By the front door.” Halley crossed her arms over her chest and held on for dear life. She’d popped a Xanax a few minutes before Inspector Blackwood arrived and hoped the damn thing would take effect sooner rather than later. Her chest felt tight, she couldn’t breathe, and her teeth ached from all the nervous rattling.

The inspector took a gander at the front door and frowned. He rubbed his forehead and walked back toward the living room where Halley and Kaiti sat on the cream-colored sofa. “Any idea of who might have sent you the note? Any jilted ex that might want to scare you? Maybe someone you turned down recently that might be following you and know about your attack?”

Halley’s stomach churned, and her skin felt too tight over her muscles. She scooped Mocha off the cushion beside her and ran her fingers through her soft fur, trying to calm herself down.

“Two years ago...” Her throat tightened, making it impossible to speak. She closed her eyes, reminded herself she was safe, at home, and in the presence of a police officer, no less, and tried again. “I was assaulted two years ago by a fellow student at my culinary school. He attacked his arresting officer and was shot and killed.”

“I’ll need a name, please.” He clicked his pen, shifted in place, and waited for Halley to answer.

“Timothy Lutzen.” A shudder ripped through Halley as she remembered the wiry, sandy blond pastry chef. His high, flinty voice and soulless black eyes sent her mind reeling into panic even now.

The inspector gave a sober nod. “What about your neighbors? Anyone have a beef with you? Anyone new to your building?” His steel gray eyes bore down on Halley with fierce intensity. She watched the muscles in his jaw cord and flex as he waited for her answer, and it struck her fast that Inspector Blackwood didn’t mess around. This man took his job seriously, and she couldn’t be more thankful.

With a deep breath, she heaved a sigh. “Well, we did have a new guy move into the apartment above ours a few months ago.”

“Shane,” Kaiti interrupted. “Shane Gray. He’s an impossible flirt, and he keeps asking Halley out, even after she says no.”

Halley’s stomach churned as she thought back to her brief conversation with Shane on the stairwell. He’d been so persistent, all but telling her they’d eventually

go out and insisting she'd be sorry for making him wait. Sure, Shane was pushy and cocky as hell, but a stalker? She didn't get that vibe from him. Then again, her bad-guy radar was obviously out of whack. What the hell did she know?

"I see," the inspector said. "That would make him a person of interest. I'll need to know if he's shown up at your apartment uninvited, your place of work, or if he's been calling you."

Halley shook her head. "No. No, we just see each other in passing, that's all. I have had a couple of weird phone calls. I've never given him my number, though, so I doubt they could be from him."

The inspector frowned and shook his head. "Don't count him out, Ms. Davis. You'd be surprised at the amount of information criminals can dig up on you."

She shifted in her seat, restless and full of anxiety. Why couldn't life go back to normal? Why did she have to deal with a bizarro stalker on top of everything else?

"Look, I really don't think Shane sent the flowers. It's possible, but I don't think so. As for anyone else who might have sent them, if I knew, I would have told you already. And I haven't dated anyone recently, so I can't think of anyone who would do this." She cringed, picturing the creepy note and its ominous words.

Did you not learn your lesson Friday night, Halley? Why are you out and about so soon after your unfortunate incident? Rest up, lover mine. I'm watching.

Halley's mouth went dry, and she rubbed her sweaty palms across her gray leggings. "What about Norvall? Could it have been him?" She hadn't been able to get the image of his greasy hair, lecherous smile, and painted-on jeans out of her head. Every time she closed her eyes, it was like she was reliving her attack all over again. What she could remember of it, anyway.

The inspector's eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. "No. He spent the weekend locked up at County and was arraigned earlier today."

"Oh God." A cold sweat rippled across her skin. "Can he make bail? Can he walk? Is he... Is he..."

The inspector raised his hands toward her. "Relax, Ms. Davis. He's being charged with assault with intent to commit rape, assault with a deadly weapon, and kidnapping. There's no way a judge will set bail."

Halley sank back into the couch and clutched Mocha to her chest, relief swimming through her body. Norvall would go to jail, become someone's butt boy, and she'd be able to live out her life free of fear. She hoped, anyway.

"It's not my intention to scare you, Ms. Davis, but we need to consider that there's a strong possibility Norvall has someone on the outside doing his dirty work for him."

"Someone else?" Halley's stomach lurched. Was there no end to the endless string of crap plaguing her? "So, where do I go from here, Inspector Blackwood?" The thought of Norvall sending one of his goons to watch her had her stomach threatening to empty and her blood running cold.

"Please, call me Hunter." With a reassuring smile, he stepped forward and sat on the matching loveseat across from her, the soft cushions crying out under his massive build.

Mocha, normally wary of strangers, bolted off Halley's lap and leaped into the policeman's arms.

"Mocha! No!" Embarrassed, Halley pushed off the couch to grab her wayward pup, but Hunter waved her off.

"No worries, Ms. Davis. I've got a dog of my own at home." He scratched the overexcited Chi behind the ears and leaned back in his seat.

Halley thrust a finger toward her little diva and frowned as she reclaimed her seat. "You and I are gonna have a talk later, dog."

"Okay, Hunter." Kaiti leaned forward, businesslike. "What's the normal protocol for this type of thing? What should we do?"

He shook his head and pursed his lips, apparently unhappy with his answer. "At this point there isn't anything you can do. Technically, no law has been broken. There's been no forced entry, nothing stolen, no attack on your person."

"What? Are you serious?" Kaiti stood up from her seat and glared down at Hunter through heated eyes. "Were you not listening when Halley told you what was on the CD? The sick bastard burned 'Every Breath You Take' over and over again. It's a stalker song. Whoever left the damn thing is an obsessed freak!"

Halley watched the veins in Hunter's neck pulsate and strain as he reined in his frustration. "Losing your temper won't help the situation, Ms. Raine. I suggest you sit down and calm yourself." His tone was harsh, his stare lethal. Though he was a police officer and one of the good guys, from the serious look on his face, Halley knew in an instant Hunter didn't take lip from anyone, least of all small, pixielike girls.

Halley tugged on Kaiti's wrist. "Please, Kat. You're not helping. Just...please." The last thing she needed was for her best friend to get hauled off to jail for disorderly conduct.

"Fine." She pegged him with another eye dagger and sank back down onto the sofa.

Hunter leaned forward, placed his forearms on his knees, and unleashed the full force of his granite eyes on Halley. "Please don't think I'm going to let this go, Ms. Davis—"

"Halley," she said, forcing a weak smile. "Please, call me Halley." He'd given her his first name; the least she could do was reciprocate.

He gave her a nod, the corner of his mouth curling up into a crooked smile. "All right, then, Halley. As I was saying, please don't think I'm taking this incident lightly. I'll be taking the CD as well as the note downtown for fingerprinting. In the meantime, the best thing you can do is to take precautionary measures to ensure your safety."

"What kind of precautionary measures?"

He leaned forward and set Mocha on the floor, smiling as she scurried into the kitchen. "It's simple, really. Be aware of your surroundings and the people around you. Don't go out on your own, especially at night. Vary your schedule. Be unpredictable."

Halley rested her forehead in her hands and swept them through her hair before blowing out a heavy, frustrated breath. "That's all common-sense stuff. Things I already do. Ugh...I feel so..." *Helpless*. She'd wised up after the beating two years ago and enrolled in self-defense. Taking a guy down with a hard knee to the jewels, eye gouging, those things were second nature to her now, at least in theory, anyway. She'd never actually put her skills into practice. Still, how would she fight a shadow, a ghost waiting in the wings, stalking her, hunting her like prey?

"Unfortunately, unless your admirer makes another move, there isn't much more you can do. You've got my card, right?" His eyes lit up as he looked at her expectantly.

"Yes." Halley nodded, plucking the business card from the coffee table where she'd left it earlier.

"Here," he said and reached for the card. He pulled his pen from his pocket, clicked it open, and began scribbling something on the back. "I'm giving you my personal number. If you can't reach me on my work cell, call this number." He handed her the rectangular slip of cardstock, ten digits scrawled in semilegible handwriting filling the back.

"Don't worry, Halley." He stood from the loveseat, two hundred plus pounds of steel muscle swathed in pure confidence. "I'm watching you now. No one's gonna touch you."

* * *

"Did you catch the fight during the Sharks game last night?" Damon dropped his pneumatic nail gun and threw back a swig from his water bottle. They'd gotten a jump-start on the job after their initial meeting with the girls the day before, taking all the necessary measurements so they could start framing ASAP.

Nick shook his head and kept working. He'd had the game on, all right. But did he watch it? No. He'd spent most of the evening nursing a large bottle of whisky, trying to put Princess and those bewitching emerald eyes of hers out of his mind. It hadn't worked, and the nightmares...they still kept him up most of the night. He was seriously starting to believe in the existence of zombies. He felt like a reanimated corpse.

Damon pulled out his level and started flapping his gums again. "I swear to God, if the Sharks don't pull one out, I'm gonna high-stick every last one of those fuckers."

Nick rolled his eyes and let his nail gun rip, preferring the ease of technology over the use of good, old-fashioned manual labor. He heard his friend yammering

but wasn't really listening. In fact, he hadn't paid attention to a goddamn thing since he'd left Princess the previous morning.

Fate was messing with him big-time. It knew he was attracted to her and was forcing the issue in an epic way. Everywhere he went, there she was, all soft and sweet and shit, sexy as hell. And damn, she smelled good, like sugar cookies and vanilla. Her scent still lingered in his nose, on the tip of his tongue, teasing, tantalizing his senses.

The sound of his nail gun blasting filled the small space, drowned out his thoughts, pulled his focus to the only thing he could do well anymore. He was done thinking about her for the day, done feeling. If it didn't involve a two-by-four and nails, he didn't want to know about it.

Nick's nail gun ran dry, and Damon wasted no time taking advantage of the quiet. "Damn, Niko. I still can't believe chef girl is the woman you saved the other night. How weird is that?"

Fuck. He'd made it, what, two whole seconds before fate brought Halley into his thoughts again? He was screwed. He was so totally screwed.

Ignoring Damon, he finished loading a new strip of nails into his gun, enjoying the solitude of the noise the moment he pulled the trigger. He sucked in a breath and threw himself into his work.

By the time lunch rolled around, they had a skeleton of a wall up. Electrical was next, then Sheetrock.

The front entrance to the bakery flew open, the faint smell of cookies and vanilla floating across the air toward the back of the shop. *Princess.* Nick didn't bother to get up from where he sat, hoping whatever brought her down to the shop in the first place would take her away just as fast. He bit into a smashed turkey sandwich and grimaced. The thing tasted like cardboard.

"How's it going, boys?" The pixie's voice rang through the small space. Girlfriend packed a serious set of lungs despite her tiny size.

Damon set down his water and mouthed off again. "It'd go a lot better and faster if you weren't here, sweetheart."

Kaiti scowled. "Yeah, because you're really working hard right now, shoving that PB and J down your throat. We're here to see how the construction is going and—"

"Speaking of food," Halley interrupted, effectively putting the kibosh on another verbal joust between the two hotheads. "I thought you boys might enjoy something other than a... Is that supposed to be a sandwich?" she asked, eyeballing Nick's cold turkey like it was the most disgusting thing on the planet.

"Last time I checked." Nick stared at his feet, avoiding her intense viridian stare.

Her soft, smooth voice floated across the air like a feather. "Pshh, that's not a sandwich. This...this is a sandwich."

Nick didn't want to look up. He really didn't. But hunger grabbed him by the balls, and his body won out. His meager lunch was about as appetizing as an old shoe, and if she'd brought something better, well, he was all over it.

The smell hit him first, making his mouth water before his eyes even registered what was in front of him.

"Dude," Damon shouted from his corner and shot up onto his feet. "Are those—"

"Panini, yes. Grilled chicken and mozzarella, with tomatoes, rosemary, and Italian dressing, to be exact. I baked the bread fresh this morning."

Nick watched Halley's internal battle with fear as it played out across her features. Wary of Damon but unwilling to back away, she donned a tight smile and held the tray far from her body as Damon attacked the food like a madman.

Nick shook his head and stared at the floor. Unbelievable. Most people would crumple, draw inward, and implode after such a violent attack. Not baby girl. She pushed forward, soldiered on like a damn hero. *Fuck*. Princess was a warrior, a caretaker, and a damn good cook to boot. His cock doubled in size, straining against the seam of his faded, hole-covered jeans. Uncomfortable, he shifted around as he set his joke of a sammie down and leaned forward to get up. Suddenly the tray full of tasty goodness was right under his nose.

"Here," she said, handing him a napkin with her free hand. "You're working so hard on the bakery for me and Kat, the least I can do is provide you with a"—she eyed his flattened sandwich with contempt—"a decent meal. I've got dessert for you when you finish. Eat up."

Her delicious scent of fresh-baked cookies and vanilla combined with the smell of the panini had him in desperate need of a drool bib. There was no avoiding her angelic gaze, and he looked toward heaven, losing himself in the beauty of her soft white skin, full, pouty lips, and mesmerizing stare.

God, she was beautiful. Dressed casually in a baby pink velour tracksuit with the word "Pink" written in silver letters down her left arm and leg, and a white tank with some kind of bedazzled peace sign on it, she looked comfy and natural. Her long, shiny brown hair fell in glorious waves over her left shoulder, covering a large portion of the angry red stitches riddling her neck and chest. She'd taken the bandages off, and the evidence of her attack sent his stomach reeling. That and the dark circles lining the undersides of her eyes. Princess wasn't sleeping.

He peered deeper into her eyes and didn't like what he saw. Her pupils were dilated, and her eyes told him what the rest of her so desperately tried to hide. She was struggling, fighting the demons that Norvall bastard had left behind after the attack.

His fingers brushed hers while he grabbed the napkin, and a jolt of lightning shot up his arm. He palmed one of the warm sandwiches, his stomach growling, desperate for actual food and not the smashed, processed crap he'd been used to.

Princess eased onto the floor a few feet away. A mix of what looked a hell of a lot like confusion laced with a fat heap of anticipation crawled across her face as he sank his teeth into the fruits of her labor.

A loud moan escaped his lips before he knew what he was doing. “Fuck me.” The flavors from the grilled sammie exploded in his mouth. He vaguely remembered food tasting good, but it had been so long since he’d had anything this fabulous in his piehole, he couldn’t remember.

An image of Halley naked beneath him with his mouth devouring her silky flesh snared a front seat in his brain. She probably tasted a hell of a lot better than the sandwich. *Get a hold of yourself, Romeo*. He shook his head, put a choke hold on his libido, and squashed back those elicit thoughts. Imagining the glorious possibilities of sex with this magnificent creature would do nothing but leave him with a serious case of blue balls. “This is...” He enjoyed another large bite, savoring the delicious flavor of the marinated chicken and warm gooey cheese, groaning loud as he swallowed. “Oh my...fuck, Princess... Thank you, this is—”

“The best damn sandwich I’ve ever eaten.” Damon held up the last bite of his panini from where he sat before shoving it into his mouth and washing it down with a swig of water. “Chef girl, you are gold. Gold, baby!” He looked over to the pixie with a fat grin. “Aww, don’t feel bad, sassy. I’m sure you’re golden with the number crunching and shit. Maybe you can do my taxes for me.”

Nick could have sworn he heard the pixie mutter the word “asshole.” She hauled herself up from where she sat. After burning a hole into Damon’s head with her invisible rays of hatred, she turned to face Halley.

“I think I need some fresh air, and I’ve got a few calls I need to make. Gotta talk to a man about an oven. I’ll be out front when you’re ready.” She breezed out of the construction zone like hell on wheels.

“The constant verbal foreplay isn’t necessary, you know.” Halley dug into the brown bag she’d brought with her and pulled out a large plastic container. She wrenched herself off the floor and eased over to Damon. Hand shaking, she supplied him with another napkin and opened up the container. “She likes you too.”

Damon stared up at her like she’d grown two heads. “What?”

“You heard me.” She jostled the container under his nose until he swiped a handful of whatever was in it.

From the near orgasmic look on Damon’s face, whatever she’d given him was good, and Nick wanted some for himself.

Nick leaned forward craning his head to get a look-see. “What you got in the plastic tub, Princess?” Damn, he was acting like a starving dog with no manners.

“Down, boy. I’m coming.” Her cheeks flushed a delicious shade of pink as she bit back a flustered smile. She walked over and bent down, holding a tub full of—

“Orange and chocolate zeppole. They’re my specialty. What I named the bakery for.” She handed him another napkin, and he plucked two of the chocolate-dipped pastries from the plastic tub.

He felt a bit like a lab rat as she stood over him, waiting for his reaction to the sweets, but the moment the sugary confection hit his tongue, he forgot about everyone and everything around him.

“Holy...” He shoved the rest of the small Italian doughnut into his mouth, savoring the delicious mixture of orange pastry and chocolate drizzle. His mouth was full, but he couldn’t contain himself. “Fuck me sideways, six ways from Sunday. Damn, baby. Tell me you have more.” He lunged at the tub of sweets like a starving kid in a candy store who’d just been told he could eat his fill. He shoved another pastry in his mouth and groaned. “These are just...”

The dark cloud that dogged his every move dissipated the moment Halley cracked a smile. Its beauty, her beauty, radiated an atmosphere of warmth and comfort. Those tired, scared eyes of hers for the briefest of moments looked satisfied, proud.

“I’m so glad you like them.”

And then everything went to hell.

Damon came up behind Halley with a shit-eating grin and wrapped his hands around her waist, pulling her into a bone-crushing hug. “I like ’em too, chef girl.”

Chocolate-covered zeppole flew everywhere, and Halley let out a bloodcurdling scream. She jerked sideways, hands over her heart, and stood shaking like a lost dog stranded outside during an ice storm. The trembling was so bad, Nick worried for a moment she was suffering some sort of seizure.

He jumped to his feet, prepared to come at Halley nice and slow so as not to scare her. But when her knees started to give way, he hauled ass to her side, catching her before she crumbled to the floor.

“So...sss...sorry,” she stammered, still visibly shaking.

Nick gathered Halley into his arms gently, prepared for the possibility she might bolt from the close contact. When she melted into his body, he tightened his grip and let instinct kick in and do its thing. Soft, whispered words rushed out as he tried to bring her down from the edge she teetered on. “Ssshh. I’ve got you. Breathe, baby, yeah that’s right, you can do it, nice, easy breaths.”

He wanted to be angry with Damon, wanted to knock him upside the head and scream, “Stupid! She was just attacked. You can’t come at her like that.” But he kept his trap shut. Damon hadn’t meant any harm. He’d just wanted to thank Halley for the sweets and received an ear-shattering vocal display in the process.

Overpowered by her nearness, all he could do was hold her close. The feel of her in his arms, her soft, warm body, sent his hormone levels into overdrive. His already painfully hard cock felt like a granite boulder in his pants. He shifted, careful not to let his body’s automatic reaction scare her any further. The last thing she needed was to be assaulted by his dick.

What he wanted was to scoop her up, take her somewhere safe, somewhere quiet, away from anything or anyone that would scare her. The instinct to protect her was strong—damn strong—and that sent him reeling. He couldn’t let himself

get attached to her. He'd given his heart, his soul, once before and watched them wither away and die. He had nothing left.

Nick buried his nose in the silky strands of her hair, breathing in her scent as he rubbed soft, soothing circles on her back.

And how was he able to hold her when she shied away from other men's touch? She'd nearly burst a vein when David had tried to shake her hand the day before. And poor Damon. He'd scared the bejesus out of her twice now with his loud voice and burly personality. Princess was scared of everything and everyone. Yet, here he stood with his arms wrapped around her, and she made no move to stop him. How was that possible?

Trembling from head to toe, she clung to him for dear life, burrowing her face into the crook of his neck, struggling to catch her breath.

What was it about her that had him so invested already? And against his will at that. He couldn't go down that road again, refused to go down that road again. It was obvious he'd lost some IQ points over the past year, because despite all the caution tape and warning signs his brain kept throwing at him, he stupidly continued down the winding path leading right to her.

Damon pressed his lips together and scrubbed at his chocolate-covered shirt as the pixie stormed in, frantic.

"What the hell happened? I was in the middle of a call and heard screaming." She glanced over to Nick, who held Halley in his arms, and then toward Damon, who'd pulled up his shirt and was licking the sugary remnants left by the hailstorm of zeppoli.

It happened so fast Nick almost didn't catch it, but he could have sworn he saw the pixie's eyes grow wide with appreciation before she shot across the floor, got all up in his face, and went postal.

"You stupid oaf. What the hell did you do to her? If you hurt her, I swear I'll break every damn bone in your—"

The sense of loss Nick felt the moment Halley stepped out of his arms was staggering. "Kat, it's okay." Hesitant and a bit shaky, Halley crossed the small space between them and latched on to the pixie's shoulder. "Really, look. I'm okay. I just freaked out, that's all."

Kaiti stared at her best friend, a mixture of anger and confusion dancing across her face as she said on a breath, "Are you sure? You don't sound okay, and you're shaking."

Princess closed her eyes and gave a sober nod. "Yes, I just..." She glanced over to Damon, who'd finally ceased licking his T-shirt like a toddler, and grimaced. "I freaked out. Damon came up to thank me for the zeppole, and when he touched me...I..."

Nick's stomach clenched as he watched her fall apart in the pixie's arms. Her body shook, silent tears falling down her porcelain cheeks.

With one hand clutching her stomach, the other covering her mouth, Halley turned to face Damon. "I'm so sorry. Please. Please forgive me. Please...I...I..."

Damon held up a hand and shook his head. "Don't worry, chef girl. We're cool. I'll just holler thank you from a safe distance from now on." He cracked a smile, and just like that, the awkward tension weighting the air dissipated. She managed a weak, unconvincing grin and nodded as she swiped at her tear-stained face.

"Here," Nick said, handing Kaiti a napkin he'd plucked from the brown bag Princess brought in with her.

She gave him a hard stare filled with an emotion he couldn't make out and said, "Thanks." She turned her attention back to Halley, wiping a stray piece of hair out of her face. "I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

Halley shook her head and walked over to her purse. She dug around in the thing and turned her head, speaking over her shoulder, "Whatever it is just tell me and get it over with."

Nick's eyes narrowed as he watched Princess pull out a prescription bottle. Her hands shook as she popped the cap, and little orange pills went scattering all over the floor.

"Crap, crap, crap." The distinct sound of defeat tainted her voice as she frantically reached for the scattered pills.

Nick bent over and plucked up a pill that landed near his boot. *Xanax*. He recognized the damn happy tablet right away. Sarah had taken them when...

A tight, squeezing pain crushed his chest. There was no doubt Princess battled anxiety from Friday night's attack, and this little episode had sent her floundering into the deep end of the pool without a float. He handed her the stray pill and walked over to where he'd left his tools, not wanting to eavesdrop on their conversation. Her medication, her life, none of it was his business. Just the same, he moved a hell of a lot slower than he normally did and kept nice and quiet so he could hear pixie's urgent news. Nick watched them out of the corner of his eye as he wound up a power cord.

Kaiti held up her phone and waved it around in the air. "Well, the good news is, I found us an affordable convection oven."

Halley let out a deep breath, her shoulders visibly relaxing. "That's wonderful news. Finally, something good."

"Yeah, good news for sure, but..." Kaiti paused and bit her lip.

"Spit it out, Kat."

"I have to drive out to Napa to see it in person first. The guy's offering us a sweet deal, so I want to make sure nothing's wrong with it. He's got more than one person interested in the thing, so I need to drive up this afternoon to see it."

Halley gave her a nod and forced a smile. "Okay, good. That's good." She swiped a hand through her hair and sighed. "God, I hope the thing is in good shape. The things I could do with a convection oven."

Kaiti snatched up her purse, which lay next to Halley's. "I know you wanted to go to the market, but I'll have to take you tomorrow. This can't wait." Impatient, she stepped toward the door. "You ready?"

Indecision went to work on Halley's face. "Oh, um..." Her eyes darted back and forth between the pixie and Nick. He wasn't sure, but it almost looked like she was embarrassed or maybe even ashamed. "I can go to the store by myself. And I'm not really sure if I'm up for a road trip right now. I just—"

The pixie placed her hands on her hips and frowned. "How you gonna get to the store, Hal? You probably shouldn't drive with all those meds you're taking, and it's too far to walk. I—"

"I can take her." The words flew out of Nick's mouth before he knew what he was saying.

Mama bear reared her ferocious claws as the pixie stared him down with narrowed eyes. Her visual appraisal of him went on for quite some time until she finally decided to speak.

"You got a car, MacGyver? The closest market is all the way over on Marina." She shook her head. "I don't know. I just—"

Nick held his hands up and stepped forward. "Relax, Wonder Woman. I know where the damn market is, and look," he said, pointing to the large white SUV parked in front of the bakery, "that's my ride. You need to see my license and registration?" Next thing he knew she'd be asking for a blood and semen sample.

"Ha ha." She sneered. "Smartass." She crossed her arms and faced Halley. "Are you comfortable staying with him, Hal? You heard what Inspector Blackwood said. You can't be alone right now."

The words "inspector" and "can't be alone" hung in the air like a bad stench. Something was going on that he didn't know about. He turned his head and opened his mouth just as Princess focused those beautiful green eyes of hers on him. They spoke at the same time. "Why the hell can't you be alone, Princess?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm comfortable with him."

Chapter Six

Nick white-knuckled the steering wheel and released his foot off the brake, feeling like a cross between a man on fire and a complete tool. Someone was scaring the piss out of Halley, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Helpless, pissed off, and angry were becoming his favorite emotions. Whatever happened to numb? He liked numb. This new cocktail of passion, rage, and sympathy left him wound up and jonesy. Not a good feeling.

Pixie said the police were looking into the flower incident, but he didn't have any faith they'd protect Halley from the plethora of sick freaks roaming the city streets. Damn Keystone Kops. The system was flawed, had failed him once before. He didn't trust it would be any different for Halley.

Small talk wasn't his thing, and a hideous wall of silence grew tall and wide the moment they climbed into the cab of his truck. What the hell was he supposed to say to her? "Your cooking's so good it makes me want to cry, and hey, by the way, you smell real good, and my dick gets hard every time I'm around you?" Something told him that might send her jumping from the truck and running in the opposite direction. Wasn't that what he wanted, though? Talking led to attachments. Attachments led to relationships, and he was done doing the couple thing.

Except, if someone was watching her, scaring her, he couldn't sit back and do nothing. *Shit*. He'd just have to be careful. He could keep an eye on her and not get attached. Yeah, he was gonna keep telling himself that over and over. Maybe he'd even believe it eventually.

Unable to endure another moment of awkward silence, Nick manned up. "So, what do you need at the store?"

Princess bit her lip, a shy smile showing just a hint of her pearly whites. "I need quite a bit, actually. I'm out of most of the basics. Flour, sugar, vanilla, cream..."

Nick listened to her rattle off a long list of foods, none of which required a microwave to heat, and marveled at her quick change in demeanor. Yeah, her eyes looked off from the anxiety meds and her hands still trembled and shook. She radiated an aura of overall exhaustion, but despite all that, she was beautiful, a magnificent creature gracing his pathetic presence, and when she spoke about food, her entire body came alive. It was intoxicating. She was intoxicating, and shit, he couldn't get enough. For whatever reason, being alone with him didn't upset her, and he was damn happy about it.

Christ. The way she bit down on that bottom lip of hers... It made him want to tear her tracksuit off with his teeth and devour every inch of her skin right then and there.

Focus, asshole. “Hey, you want me to take you to Rainbow?”

A flash of excitement registered on her face before she narrowed her eyes in what looked like confusion. She shook her head. “That’s all the way over on Mission Street. I don’t expect you to drive me that far.”

“It’s a better market, though, right? They push all that organic crap, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking at him like he’d grown another head. “Yeah, they do.”

Nick felt Halley’s eyes boring into the side of his face as he flipped a U-ie and hit the gas, headed toward the opposite end of the city. He glanced over his shoulder to see her staring at him with a whole lot of “what the hell do you know about organic food” smeared across her face. He rolled his eyes.

“Aww, c’mon, Princess. Don’t look at me like that. Once upon a time, I cared about what I put in my body.” It was true too. Before he moved to the city, he’d been a health nut. Worked out every day, occasionally drank on the weekends, not every day, and actually prepared real food from scratch, unlike the bland, tasteless crap he filled his body with now.

He and Sarah... *Dammit.* He pressed his lips together and shrugged away old memories. Wallowing in the past wouldn’t help Princess and would only serve to bring him down. With Halley in his care, he needed to be at 100 percent capacity. Refocusing, he cast a sideways glance toward the angel next to him and smiled. “And besides, sometimes every now and then, a man gets a hankering for some bulk dry goods and shit.”

Halley’s soft laughter permeated every square inch of the truck’s cab. She was like a breath of fresh air, clearing away the storm clouds that followed him everywhere. In spite of himself, he smiled right along with her.

* * *

Nick pulled the last of the brown bags out of the back of his cab and armed his truck before trailing Halley up the stairs toward her second-story apartment. He made it all of two feet inside the building before they were stopped by one of Frisco’s finest. *Fuck.*

Her soft voice sounded frightened. “Oh, Inspector Blackwo—I mean, Hunter.” Flustered, she dropped a bag, apples scattering across the entryway tile.

Nick set his load down on the landing and retrieved the wayward fruit as Princess went into panic mode.

“Oh my God. What’s wrong? Did something happen?” Her entire body shook as she eyed the cop with a mixture of horror and anxiety.

Nick watched with narrowed eyes as the inspector stepped forward and laid a hand on Halley’s arm in an effort to calm her. The cop’s actions did more harm than

good. She jumped, dropping the rest of her bags, and stood glued to the floor, shaking. Frowning, the cop stepped forward again and opened his mouth. "Calm down, Halley. Everything's going to be okay, I just—"

Acting purely on instinct, Nick chucked the apples into one of the bags, eased up behind Halley, and wrapped his arms around her. Once he was certain she felt comfortable in his arms, he tightened his grip and leaned in close. "Breathe, Halley. Breathe with me. You can do it. I know you can. Close your eyes, baby. That's it. Good girl. In through your nose. That's my girl."

The weight of the cop's stare bored into the top of Nick's head, but he didn't bother to look up until Princess's trembling subsided. Once he was sure she was okay, he met the idiot's eyes head-on with a serious look of "don't fuck with me." Cop or not, the guy was a complete tool. "Not a good idea to be grabbing her like that. I suggest you never do it again."

Hunter's jaw clenched. He inhaled sharply before focusing his attention on Halley.

"I'm so sorry, Halley. I didn't mean to frighten you. My deepest apologies."

* * *

With her heart hammering a rapid staccato in her ears, Halley managed a weak nod and bent out of Nick's comforting grasp to pick up her fallen groceries. "Why are you here?"

A cold sweat covered her skin, and her knees threatened to buckle. There was something wrong, there had to be. Why else would he be in her building? Had someone left something else at her door? *Oh God*. Had someone broken into her home?

Hunter put on his game face, a hard mask of seriousness. "I was responding to a call about a break-in at the residence adjacent to yours. Turns out it was nothing. The owner forgot to lock the door. Nothing was taken."

Hunter's reassuring tone did nothing to calm her frazzled nerves. Her skin felt hot, and her throat... It felt like it was closing up on her.

"Oh, I didn't know anyone had rented the space. I'm, uh, glad everything is okay. So..."

Halley paused for a moment, trying to pull herself together before asking the question that had sat in the front of her mind for the past twenty-four hours. Ignoring the tremors wreaking havoc on her frame, she dug deep and summoned some courage. "Did you find any prints on the note or the CD?"

Hunter shook his head and frowned. "I'm afraid not. Both items were clean. Whoever left the items is smart and didn't leave any incriminating evidence behind. Unfortunately, at this point, with the way our justice system works, there is nothing we can do until your admirer makes another move."

Halley's chest ached, and the walls surrounding her felt like they were closing in. Air. She couldn't get enough air in her lungs. No prints. There were no prints on

the note or the CD. Whoever left them knew how to evade the police and roamed the streets free to frighten her again. A strangled gasp escaped her lips, and she fought to hold on to her groceries.

Nick let out a loud groan and came up behind her. "Admirer, my ass. Try stalker. And the legal system? It sucks ass. C'mon, Princess. Let's get you upstairs."

Nick scooped the bags from her arms and ushered her over toward the landing, where he hefted up the rest of the bags.

The fact that Nick was able to touch her without causing her to panic hadn't escaped her notice. She was skittish around just about everyone since the attack, including Hunter, and he was a cop.

She'd pondered, on more than one occasion, about Nick's ability to hold her, touch her when no other man could. At first, she'd attributed her comfort around him to her new medication. The Xanax worked a hell of a lot better than her old meds and didn't leave her feeling loopy or out of it. But after her blowout at the bakery with Damon, and now this episode with Hunter, she was sure the comfort she felt in Nick's presence was due solely to him and not her happy pills.

His proximity was like a blanket of comfort, and Halley wanted nothing more than to bury herself in him and hide until her nightmare was over. Whatever the reason, all Halley knew was that, aside from the meds she took, Nick was the only thing that made her feel better, feel normal, and she couldn't explain it. She didn't want to.

* * *

As far as Nick was concerned, the time for talking was over. Halley didn't need to listen to any more of Officer Douche Bag's legal jargon. What she needed was the comfort and familiarity of her home.

"Thanks for your help, Officer..." He stared down at the tall, blond cop with hard eyes. Nick wasn't born yesterday. He noticed the extra long glances the cop gave Halley and the way the guy leaned in close whenever she was near. Officer Uptight was into her, and Nick didn't like it one bit. Pissed off for giving a damn, Nick shook his head. He had no business harboring feelings of jealousy over Princess. She wasn't his. Never would be. "You plan on answering me, Officer?"

"Blackwood," he said, sneering at Nick. "It's Inspector Blackwood, and it's my pleasure." He turned, fixating on Princess. "Feel better, Halley." With a nod and a wave, he exited the building.

Fear and anxiety radiated around Halley like the fog rolling in before a storm. Nick needed to get her mind off the bad stuff and quick. He ushered her up the stairs and over to her apartment. Maybe if he got her talking about food, she'd relax a little. It was certainly worth a try.

"Damn, baby, when you said you needed the basics, I didn't know you planned on cleaning out the entire store. You've got enough food here to supply a goddamn army. Who you planning on feeding?"

Her soft, nervous giggle was like music to his ears.

She looked over her shoulder before unlocking her front door and flashed a weak grin. "You."

The same tight, squeezing sensation he'd felt earlier came back with a vengeance, tugging at his chest, pulling him toward her like some invisible magnet. "Me?"

A high-pitched yipping bounced off the walls, ringing through his ears. He looked down and saw a flash of black fur race into the kitchen after Halley and then scurry back again, its small frame sliding across the hardwood floors, unable to stop itself. The pup crashed into his feet, snapping and snarling. *Great. Damn ankle-biter.* Ignoring the yippy furball, he closed the door and followed Princess into the kitchen. "Do I look underfed to you?"

He set his load down on the counter and familiarized himself with her home as she went to work putting away the food. The damn yippy dog continued to snap at his heels.

"Mocha! Enough!" Halley flashed him a look of apology, rushed to the small Chi, scooped it up, and disappeared. "Sorry about that," she said a minute later as she waltzed back into the kitchen and dove into one of the brown bags.

She bent to toss a handful of apples into the crisper, and her tiny jacket and tank rode up, exposing the milky white flesh of her back. It also gave him a bird's-eye view of her tight, round ass, and his already hard cock swelled against the seam of his pants. He forced himself to look away. Not a damn bit of good would come from him staring at her ass, imagining all the different ways he wanted to take her in the kitchen—against the counter, on the floor, up against the big silver refrigerator. Was that whipped cream he saw? *Fuck.* The things he'd like to do to her with his tongue and a can of whipped topping. The rifle in his pants twitched, begged, barked, whined to come out and play. Nick fled the kitchen.

He felt a little bit like an ass for not helping. Scratch that. He felt like a complete ass for dropping the ball. But he didn't know where she kept her stuff and was afraid he wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself, so he opted for more crappy-ass small talk. "Nice place you got here." *Yeah, total douche bag.*

He heard her shout thank-you from the kitchen as he tooled around her living space. His observation was an understatement of epic proportions. His 760-square-foot apartment looked like a hovel compared to Princess's spacious two-bedroom walk-up. The entire building had an Edwardian feel to it, and the place was immaculate. A large bay window in the living room showed off a magnificent view of the downtown area, as well as Russian Hill, where he lived. The place felt open, airy, and was loaded with cream-colored furniture and all kinds of artsy decorations.

The place looked like a model home or something from a magazine, and he wondered if she'd done the remodeling herself or if the poor bastard who'd lived here before her had paid for it. In a word, Princess's home was posh.

He stared out the window toward the street where his truck was parked. The sun dropped down over the horizon, casting an orange glow over everything in sight. Something caught his eye, a flash. He looked across the street in the direction it came from to see a black Escalade pull out from the curb and speed away, tires squealing. *What the...?*

The magnetic tugging he always sensed around Princess spiked, and he turned toward the kitchen. A warm tingling filled his gut as Halley rounded the corner with a plate of antipasti in her hands.

Rattled, he ran his hand over the back of his head. "So, uh, what's the rent like on a place like this?"

Princess frowned before setting the plate onto the nearby table. "Oh, um, I'm not really sure. Kat and I own the place."

Shock must have registered on his face, because she quickly amended, "It was a gift from my parents when I started culinary school."

He continued to stare at her like a fool. *An apartment? Her parents bought her an apartment?* He shook his head in awe. He'd received a hearty congrats along with a clap on the back when he'd shared his acceptance into school with his old man. Yep. Princess was way out of his league. Just another reason to keep to himself, not get tangled up in her life.

She cast a sideways glance toward the bay window, visibly uncomfortable with the topic. "Can I get you something to drink? We've got vodka, rum, and some tequila."

Ah, the comforting familiarity of booze. Maybe he wouldn't feel like such an uptight loser when he had a few drinks in him. He shifted in place. "I won't say no to some tequila."

Nick followed Halley back into the kitchen, his eyes getting a good long look at the sensual sway of her hips as she walked and her perfect, round ass. The thing was so tight you could bounce a quarter off it. His hand twitched, itching to palm one of those cheeks and give it a nice hearty squeeze. He slowed his steps, sucked in a deep breath, and tried to pull himself together. With the cockstand he was pulling in his pants he was a prime contender for the douche bag of the year award. She didn't need his out-of-control hormones scaring her any more than she already was.

He rounded the corner to see her standing on her tiptoes, fingers straining as she reached for a glass.

Without thinking, he came up behind her. *Shit. Too fast, numbnuts. You're gonna freak her out.* He eased back a bit "Here. Let me..."

He paused as she turned around, every inch of her sinfully warm body brushing up against him. His dick took on a life of its own, straining against his jeans, begging to be set free so it could have its way with her.

"Thanks," she said breathily, staring up at him with those giant green eyes. Time slowed to a halt as he set the glass down, lost in her mesmerizing stare. His

mind screamed at him to stop, turn around, get the hell out. But his body? It wasn't hearing a goddamn thing.

* * *

Halley's brain ceased working, and she lost herself in the brilliance of Nick's sapphire eyes. Wasn't she supposed to be doing something? Air. There was none. Or maybe she'd just forgotten to breathe. She tried to concentrate, tried to pull precious oxygen into her lungs, but it was no use. She was capable of nothing but meeting his haunting gaze with her own. *Those eyes... So beautiful.*

The corner of his mouth turned up into a wicked grin.

Crap. Had she voiced her thoughts out loud?

He lifted his hand, letting it hover centimeters from her skin. A spark of electricity filled the space between his fingers and her face. *It's okay. Touch me. Please, please, God, let him touch me.* When she thought she might burst if he didn't lay hands on her, he finally brushed a strand of hair off her cheek, allowing the rough pads of his fingertips to blaze a trail of heat across the side of her face. "So soft." His voice was low, gravelly, and full of desire.

Halley's hands possessed a life of their own as they traveled up the length of Nick's thick, muscular arms. Her gaze wandered to his right arm, her fingertips tracing over the swirling ink decorating his flesh. The markings were beautiful, masculine, powerful, and sexy as hell. A rush of heat pooled between her legs, and a hot flush danced across her skin. The call of his body to hers was primal, and she felt powerless against it.

Breathless and barely able to speak, she trailed her hands up onto his shoulders and then down the front of his tight-fitting black T-shirt. Her fingers danced across the edge of the cotton, and she could have sworn she felt him tremble when a finger accidentally made contact with the hard, sinewy muscle beneath. "Your tattoo. It's so beautiful. Can I... Can I see the rest of it?"

She tore her gaze from his large, impressive frame and looked up.

Nick stared down at her with dark, hunger-filled eyes, and gave a single nod.

He lifted his hands over his head as Halley latched on to the thin cotton, pulling it up and over the wide expanse of his chest.

There were no words. It was rude, and she knew it, but Halley couldn't help but stare at the magnificent creature before her. Every last inch of him was covered in raw, well-defined muscle. He wasn't bodybuilder huge but had the build of someone who worked hard and worked out even harder. Smooth skin covered a broad chest and—*oh yeah, baby*—a set of washboard abs.

The tribal markings covering his right arm traveled up over his shoulder and down the entire right side of his torso, and—*holy Lord*—his nipples were pierced.

Her skin blazed, and she reached forward with a shaky hand, certain the only way to gain relief from the erotic pull he had on her was to give in to the call of his body to hers. The sense of safety and comfort she felt whenever she was around him

roared right along with her desire for him, and she knew somehow, deep in her gut, this man was essential for her survival.

A shudder ran through Nick the moment her flesh met his. She ghosted her fingertips down his collarbone, over the arcs and swirls of black ink. Her thumb grazed his nipple, gently tugging on the small silver ring, resulting in a loud hiss from Nick.

She pulled her hand back. "I'm sorry." She dropped her chin to her chest. "I..."

"Don't be, Princess." He placed a finger under her chin, lifting her face to meet his gaze, and a shockwave of delicious tingles traveled up and down her spine. He stared down at her with heavy-lidded eyes and groaned. "It felt good."

"Oh..." All the air in the room disappeared again, and her pulse jumped from zero to sixty in nothing flat. "I thought I hurt you."

With a raised brow, his vibrant blue eyes searched hers, asking silent permission to move closer. Once granted, a pair of strong hands gripped her waist, and he closed the small gap between them. His enormous and very hard arousal pressed against her stomach as he crushed her against the edge of the counter. *Oh my God.*

He leaned forward, his nose trailing up the column of her neck. "No, Princess, you didn't hurt me. Although I wouldn't mind if you did. Some pain is very good."

White heat burst from beneath Halley's skin, engulfing her entire body. Shmexy boy was too damn much.

His warm breath tickled her ear, riddling her skin with goose bumps.

Overwhelmed by his nearness, Halley closed her eyes and gave herself over to the sensation of his heated skin against her palms, running them across the ridges of his rock-hard abs.

"Did the tattoo hurt?" She was barely able to think, let alone form a coherent sentence.

He peppered her jawline with feather-soft kisses. "Yes," he said as his lips found the sweet spot behind her ear, making her knees buckle.

"And these?" She sucked in a rapid breath as her palms grazed over the tips of his pierced nipples. "Did these hurt?"

A deep groan rumbled through his chest. "*Fuck me, Princess.*" His voice was raw, breathy. "Yes." He pulled his head back while his large hands latched harder onto her waist, and lifted her onto the countertop. And God, it was all she could do to keep from whimpering when he ground his bulging erection against the sensitive flesh of her core. They hadn't even kissed yet, and she was ready to explode.

God, yes. This was what she needed, what she craved: to feel something other than fear. She wanted to lose herself in Nick's warm embrace, drown herself in his masculine scent, and never come up for air.

Every inch of her skin was ablaze, burning for him to touch her, put his mouth on her. She'd never been this hot for a guy. Ever. There was something about Nick

that drove her wild, made her forget herself. All masculine and sexy, rough around the edges, but oh-so-beautiful, he was her secret fantasy come to life. And holy hell, it looked like her fantasy man was about to act out her deepest desires with her right in her kitchen.

“And...” Halley’s breaths came in shallow pants, she was so worked up. She ran her thumbs over each of his nipples before gently tugging on the rings. “Did you like it?”

She watched any control he had over himself fly out the window as he whispered a low “fuck me,” and came at her hard, claiming her mouth with his. His hands... They were everywhere, kneading, pulling, pushing, running over every inch of her, driving her wild.

Halley ran her hands up the bare expanse of his chest, up the thick column of his neck, and cradled his face in her palms.

His soft, warm tongue darted across her bottom lip, tasting, teasing, looking for a way in, and she gave it to him. Her hands moved to the back of his neck, pulling him closer as she opened her mouth, granting him access to deepen the kiss.

Closer, she had to be closer. His scent was intoxicating. A heady mix of spice and fresh, clean soap sent her already raging libido into overdrive. She wanted to lick every inch of his skin, starting with his ink.

His mouth left hers, his lips trailing down her jawline and stopping at her neck. He pulled back.

“We shouldn’t be doing this. I’m sorry.”

Halley’s stomach seized like someone kicked her hard. Her ugly neck, her chest; both were covered in grotesque, hideous stitches. *He’s disgusted by me.* She sucked in a quick breath, and her eyes teared up. She felt like someone had slapped her. Unable to bear what was sure to be a look of pity on his face, she looked away. Insecurity reared its ugly head, and she reached up to cover the grisly reminder of her recent attack. Her hands never made purchase, a large hand stopping hers midair.

“Don’t, Princess. It’s not your stitches, baby.” He stepped forward and placed a warm hand on either side of her face, forcing her to meet his gaze. “You’re beautiful.” He ran his thumb back and forth across her cheekbone. “Fucking exquisite. I just... I, ah, hell, I’m just... Fuck.” He dropped his hands to his sides and took a step back before running a hand over his face and swearing under his breath.

Halley’s pounding heart dropped. He’d shut her down, put a stop to their glorious kiss, pushed her away. Rejection was never fun, and coupled with the crapload of doo-doo she’d dealt with over the past few days, her emotional state was something akin to a piece of meat someone chewed up and spit out. She wished someone would scrape her off the floor and throw her out, put her out of her misery.

Even worse was the ache gnawing at her chest. The crushing weight of his physical absence was staggering. Her life, as of late, was rushing in all different

directions, flowing freely like wine from a spilled bottle, completely out of control. Nick was her cork, the only buffer keeping what little she had left from streaming out her near-empty bottle. But he'd pulled away, leaving her heart and mind feeling as though they were trickling away.

Nick snatched his shirt off the counter and pulled it over his head as he moved to leave. He stopped just as he was about to round the corner, eyeballing the notepad and pen sitting on the counter. Indecision racked his handsome face until finally he grabbed the pen and scrawled something onto the paper. He set the pen down but didn't look up. "Good night, Halley." With that, he left the kitchen, the front door opening and closing moments later.

Halley stared at the space Nick had just occupied, unable to speak. What the hell had just happened? Dizzy, disappointed, flushed, and horny, she slid off the counter and shuffled over toward the piece of paper he'd left behind.

The handwriting was very masculine but incredibly neat.

Nick Ackart 555-0984 I'm here if you need me.

"I'm here if you—" Frustration and anger spiked, and she crumpled the paper before tossing it aside. What kind of crap was that? What kind of game was he playing, kissing her one minute, pushing her away the next? The note, along with his mixed messages, made no sense to her at all. He was into her. The swollen appendage he'd ground into her core told her that much. So what was his problem? Why'd he pull away?

She sank onto the floor, her back propped against the cupboards. With her head resting on her knees, she buried her fingers in her hair and had a good, long sulk. Life sucked ass, as far as she was concerned.

Halley yawned and ran her fingers through her hair. She was tired, so tired, and just wanted to sleep, to put the day behind her, start fresh in the morning. Desperate to block out any and all thoughts of Nick, she got to her feet and pulled out some vodka. The empty glass from earlier still sat on the counter, so she reached for it and poured herself a nice, long swig. The glass made it halfway to her mouth when she stopped, remembering she needed to take her anxiety meds.

The glass came with her as she got what she needed and downed the booze and pills lickety-split, visions of a warm bed and dreamless sleep guiding her every move. It probably wasn't a good idea to take her pills with alcohol, but at that point, she didn't care. Sleep was the goal, and to hell with everything else.

She'd lumbered halfway down the small hallway toward her room when a knocking on the front door echoed throughout the apartment. With a groan, she stopped and weighed her options. She wanted to ignore the rhythmic pounding, wanted to turn back toward her room, fall into bed. Kat had a key, could let herself in, and after the episode in the kitchen, she wasn't in the mood for company.

The knocking turned into pounding, making her decision for her. Sleep would just have to wait. "All right, already! What the hell?" she muttered under her breath

and crossed through the front room. She stood on her toes and looked through the peephole. *Nick?*

His eyes were on fire, his jaw clenched, and the muscles in his neck strained as he paced back and forth in front of her door.

She stepped back, grasped the handle, and opened the door. “Nick? What are you—”

He brushed past her, radiating anger and frustration. “Someone slashed my tires. Can I hang here while I wait for a tow?”

Chapter Seven

"I'm tired. I'm just gonna change into my jammies," Halley said, stifling a yawn. She pointed toward the small hallway that no doubt led to her bedroom. "I'll be right back."

Nick gave a silent nod, watching her with narrowed eyes as she shuffled down the short hallway, and disappeared from sight. Princess looked more than tired; she looked drugged. Shit, he was only outside for what twenty, twenty-five minutes? Long enough to scare a poor homeless man with his fit of rage over what happened with his truck. He shook his head. *Dammit*. Long enough for her to toss back a handful of pills.

What the hell had she taken? Xanax made you tired, sure, but it didn't knock you out, and baby girl looked like she might fall over any moment. Her pupils were gargantuan and her speech slightly slurred.

He eyed the empty glass and pill bottle on her dining room table. *No. She wouldn't take her meds with...* The glass was in his hand and under his nose before he knew he'd moved. *Vodka. Fuck.* She'd taken her meds with alcohol. Not smart. Alcohol would amplify the effects of the meds, and with her small size, and the fact he hadn't seen her eat anything, it was a wonder she'd stayed on her feet as long as she had.

With his mouth squeezed shut, Nick battled the urge to break something. Not a good thing, since he wasn't in his own place. He paced back and forth in front of the large bay window, staring out into the skyline. The city lights shone down onto the streets, casting a magical hue against the dark of the night.

Nick shook his head and groaned. The city wasn't magical; it was messed up. Someone had jacked his ride, slashed all four tires, broken into his cab, and stolen some of his tools. To say he was pissed off would be an understatement. Work was the only thing keeping him sane these days, and carved-up tires made getting to work difficult. If he couldn't work, he couldn't forget, couldn't dull the pain. The thought of sitting at home wallowing in a crapload of painful, bloody memories was more than he could bear.

He also couldn't live with the idea of not seeing Halley. He needed to keep an eye on her, make sure she was safe. Especially now that he knew she was chasing pills with booze. The thought of some sick bastard watching her, scaring her, hurting her made his blood boil and sent his pulse skyrocketing. Despite his efforts to hold back, to remain an outsider in her life, Nick couldn't deny he held feelings for Halley any longer. Didn't mean he wanted those feelings. Hell, feelings,

emotions, those things led straight to heartache—something his ravaged ticker was all too familiar with. And really, would he even be able to give her the kind of care and attention she'd want, need? He wasn't sure. He could hardly care for himself.

Nick cast a sideways glance down the hall where Halley had disappeared. Where the hell was she? Did it normally take her so long to change clothes? Tired of pacing in front of the window, he spun around, took a few steps toward the kitchen, and stopped. Yeah, he wasn't going in there. The memory of her soft mouth moving with his own still lingered, so strong he still tasted her sweetness on his lips.

The attraction between them was undeniable, electric, and powerful. It scared the living crap out of him. He'd been so sure that part of him, the part that was capable of caring for someone wholly, unconditionally, had died a year ago right along with everything else that meant anything to him. But after meeting Halley, after holding her, kissing her, he wasn't so sure.

A high-pitched, bloodcurdling scream echoed through the apartment, making the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, sending him fist-first into ass-kicking mode.

"What the fuck?" Nick bolted across the living room and down the hall toward the source of the noise. He threw open the bedroom door, ready to beat the piss out of whoever was hurting Princess, and stopped short at the foot of her bed, a wrecking ball of emotion nearly dropping him to his knees.

Mounds of fluffy white bedding sent him back in time. He no longer stood in Halley's bedroom but his own. Pain spiked, and his chest ached and burned as if someone had dug out his still-beating heart with a spoon. The image of bare feet, ankles tied together, sent his stomach churning. And the blood. So much blood. It covered the walls, the carpet, saturated the center of the pristine, white, goose-down bedding, like a brilliant shade of crimson set against white winter snow. *No! God, not again!*

An earsplitting scream pierced his mind, bringing him back to the here and now. Halley. She lay writhing atop her bed, her eyes clamped shut, terror etched across her delicate, sleeping face. The white T-shirt she'd changed into rode high on her stomach as she thrashed, exposing a generous slice of milky white skin and a beautifully flat stomach.

High-pitched yelping sounded from the corner, and he turned his head momentarily to see her small dog barking away in its tiny crate, clearly unhappy with the frightened sounds of its owner.

Nick rounded the bed and sat beside Halley, feeling like a complete ass for losing his shit when she needed him.

He reached out and grabbed her shoulders. "Halley, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

Her thrashing continued, her terrified screams ripping away at his already shredded emotional state. *Damn.* He needed to wake her up, needed to put an end to her torment. Desperate to help her, he leaned forward, slid his arms underneath

her, and sat her up. The scent of vanilla and cookies overpowered his senses as he pulled her against his body.

Unsure of what to do and not wanting to shake her into consciousness, he opted to rub long, soothing strokes up and down her back while he all but shouted in her ear.

“C’mon, Princess, wake up for me, baby.”

It took a few minutes, but her screaming died down to a faint whimpering, her body melting into his with each word he spoke, each pass of his hand up and down her back. At one point, he swore he heard her whisper his name, but he could have been imagining things. With his earlier messed-up trip down memory lane, he didn’t trust his head much at the moment.

Nick eased Princess back onto the bed and brushed a finger along her cheekbone. Her long hair splayed across her pillow, a glorious fan of shiny brown against the white fabric. *So beautiful*. He felt relieved she’d finally settled but a bit uneasy about the fact she never woke. Whatever meds she’d downed were strong, held her under, trapped her in a horrifying nightmare, and wouldn’t let her go.

Seeing her so terrified, so overwhelmed with fear, even in her sleep, made him sick. He could watch over her, protect her, ease her while she was awake. But how could he battle a dream? Shit, he couldn’t fight his own damn subconscious. How the hell was he supposed to protect Princess from hers?

Nick groaned as his cell buzzed in his pocket, alerting him to the tow that was no doubt outside waiting for him. He hated the thought of leaving her alone, especially after the screaming episode, but he didn’t have much choice. If he planned on going to work in the morning, he needed to take care of his ride. And besides, the pixie would be home soon. Fierce and protective, she’d watch over Halley like a mother lion looking after her cubs.

Nick leaned forward, gently grazing his lips across the smooth skin of her forehead. “Good night, Princess.” With an ache in his chest and a hollow feeling in his gut, he hauled himself off the bed and out toward the front door. Turning the handle lock, he let himself out, praying to God no one would try to bust in before the pixie got home, because the deadbolt was still unlocked.

* * *

Kaiti plucked two towels from the stack on the receptionist’s desk and thrust one at Halley before heading toward the cardio room. “I don’t like this, Hal. Not one bit.” She looked over her shoulder. “I mean, yeah we live in a big city filled with crime, but I don’t know. I can’t shake the feeling that all the crap that’s happened lately is related, you know?”

Nausea rolled over Halley like a freight train and leadened her shaky feet. She’d been thinking the same thing ever since she woke. What if? What if it was all connected? Norvall. The creepy note and CD—and now Nick’s slashed tires.

Hunter said Norvall was behind bars. But what if he had someone else doing his dirty work for him?

“How long did angst boy stay once he came back? Oh hey, Hunter.”

Halley whipped her head around in surprise. Kaiti stood smiling at a very sweaty and very muscular Hunter. He flashed a perfect set of teeth and ran his hand through his damp hair.

Kaiti stepped back and waved her arm in Hunter’s direction. “Look, Hal,” she said with an all too familiar grin. “It’s Hunter. I didn’t know you worked out here. Did you know, Hal?”

Halley forced a smile, let out a nervous giggle that sounded more like a gasp, and shook her head. Kaiti was up to no good, and she wasn’t having any part of it. It was obvious she thought Hunter was a fine piece of eye candy and was gearing up to work her matchmaking mojo on the two of them. Hunter was good-looking, all right, but she wasn’t interested. No. She couldn’t get Nick’s beautiful, hollow, tormented eyes out of her mind. She also couldn’t seem to forget the feel of his mouth moving against her own. *God, that bottom lip... So soft...*

Hunter cracked a smile, his steel gray eyes boring down on her with an unwanted intensity.

Halley chewed on her bottom lip and squirmed in place. *Damn, Kat. I don’t need this right now.*

“Well”—Hunter cleared his throat, breaking the awkward moment—“looks like you two want to get a workout in, and I need to hit the showers before I do the nine-to-five thing.” He adjusted the strap of his duffle bag and lifted his chin toward the locker rooms. He focused on Halley for a moment, his smile fading into a mask of seriousness. “Make sure you call me if anything happens. I don’t care what time of day it is, I’ll come running. You got me?”

Halley gave him a single nod and looked at her feet before meeting his eyes once again.

The corner of his mouth turned up, and he flashed her an impish grin. “See you two around.” He took off down the crowded hallway as Kaiti hightailed it into the cardio room, leaving her speechless and alone. *Awkward!*

She was going to have to have a talk with Kat about her matchmaking attempts. Hunter was definitely a catch, just not hers.

Halley peered into the cardio room, dizziness slamming into her like a freight train loaded with TNT. Why were there so many people in the gym? It was six thirty a.m., for crap’s sake. Didn’t people sleep?

With sweaty hands, she whispered to herself, “You can do this. Get a grip, Hal.”

“Halley?” Kaiti waved at her from behind two unoccupied treadmills. “Quick! I snagged the primo machines in front of the TVs. Burn rubber, *chica*.”

Halley grasped her water bottle and walked over to the large cardio machine, all the while trying to breathe. The large room was packed to capacity, filled with sweaty bodies all working to burn calories, build muscle, stay in shape. For some reason, she couldn’t catch her breath, couldn’t fill her lungs. What the hell was

wrong with her? Why was she so freaked-out? She'd worked out at this gym regularly for the past year and a half.

Swallowing back her fear, she dropped her backpack alongside the machine and stepped onto the treadmill. Running on autopilot, she pulled her black hoodie over her head and wrapped it around her waist. "Has it always been this"—she scanned the large cardio room, her mouth suddenly feeling dry—"crowded?"

A series of loud beeps drew her attention to Kaiti, who had programmed her machine and started jogging. "Yeah. Mornings are always busy. You know that. Are you sure you're ready to do this? I can take you home, if you like."

She shook her head, feeling like a complete loser. "No. No, I'm fine. It's fine." She was an adult, goddammit, and she could get through a simple workout. There was no way she'd let that Norvall bastard, or whoever it was who was watching her, have the satisfaction of caging her in.

She twisted the cap off her water, took a quick swig, and dropped it into the cup holder before hitting the green Quick Start button on her machine. The last thing she wanted was to become some kind of crazy shut-in. Life didn't care that she'd been attacked. It didn't care if she had some psycho following her. It kept on keeping on, and she wasn't about to let it pass her by. Not again. Not ever.

Her body and her mind had other ideas. Both decided it'd be fun to gang up on her while she wasn't paying attention. Ten minutes into her jog, the little old lady who'd been running alongside her vacated. The tension in her neck and back was just starting to ease when a large, blond bodybuilder type stepped onto the empty machine. *Shane*.

His pale blue eyes bored a hole into the side of her face while he fiddled with his machine.

With her heart in her throat, Halley glanced over toward him, offering a polite smile and a small wave. The black tank and shorts she wore covered a decent amount of skin, but for some reason she felt naked, exposed, and had the strong urge to put her hoodie back on. To cover up.

What if Shane was the creep watching her and calling her? Nausea twisted through her stomach, and a cold sweat covered her skin.

She looked over her other shoulder toward Kaiti, unsure of what to do. Her first instinct was to bolt, get the hell outta Dodge. But running seemed the cowardly thing to do, especially when she wasn't even sure if Shane had anything to do with the flowers or the phone calls. He'd lived above them for two months without incident, never giving her or Kaiti a problem.

Kat eyed him with a raised eyebrow and mouthed Halley a quick *it's okay* while motioning to the room full of people.

Halley swallowed hard, gave a nod, and focused on the TV in front of her, trying to drown everyone and everything in the room out of her mind. She wasn't successful. The crowd of strangers gave her the willies, and Shane's persistent stare made her want to dig a hole beneath her treadmill and climb in.

Her new neighbor's persistence was disconcerting. Shane continued to eagle-eye her while she ran, his slick smile never leaving his perfectly tanned face. *Crap.* Why wouldn't he just leave? He kept gawking at her every ten seconds, the weight of his unwanted stare a heavy burden she had no desire to bear.

He took a swig from his water bottle before shaking his head. "Not even gonna give your neighbor a good morning, then? What's wrong, love?"

Halley's heart stopped. *What did he just call me? Shit!* Whoever left the note referred to her as "lover mine." While the pet names weren't the same, they were definitely similar. Close enough to send a wave of panic pulsing through her and a sick feeling of dread crawling across her skin.

Maybe if she kept ignoring him, he'd just go away. She locked her eyes on the TV once more, not really paying attention to what was on the screen. *Air. Dammit.* Why couldn't she pull air into her lungs? Light-headed, she reached a shaky hand for her water, praying to God she wouldn't black out and fall over. She should never have left the apartment this morning.

Mr. Can't Take a Hint tapped her on the shoulder, and everything went to shit. Halley screamed, her entire body flinching away from his unwanted touch. Unable to catch her footing, she flew backward off the treadmill, and landed on her backside, hard. Her water bottle flew sideways out of her hand, landing under Kat's feet. Tripping on the bottle, Kaiti lurched face-first into the control panel before sliding off her machine in a heap.

The sight of Kaiti hitting the cement flooring next to her was the last thing she remembered before horrific memories from two years prior placed her in a chokehold.

Hot breath prickled across her ear as she lay broken and unmoving on the pavement. Pain. There was so much pain, in her gut, her ribs, her face. She felt like a crash test dummy on a bad day, mutilated and broken.

"You think you can ignore me and get away with it? Stupid bitch! I guarantee you aren't ignoring me now."

Searing heat combined with the sound of bones crunching, radiated throughout her head before everything went black.

Thunderous applause sucked Halley back into the here and now. She glanced up in time to see Kaiti shoot up off the floor with a scowl. "Yeah, yeah. I'll be here all week. My next performance is at ten." She waved off the horde of hecklers before kneeling in front of Halley. "Oh my God, Hal. What the hell just happened?"

Mortified, she opened her mouth to speak when Shane hopped off his machine and crouched down, his large frame hovering over her. His blue eyes narrowed, making the skin between his brows crinkle. From the look on his face, it was clear he thought she'd lost her mind. "Are you okay? I've never heard anyone scream so loud before. Here," he said, reaching out his hand, "let me help you."

Just as Halley shrank away from Shane's unwanted touch, a low, familiar voice covered her like a warm blanket, calming her racing heart, holding her fear and panic at bay.

* * *

He felt her the moment she entered the room. How he was able to sense her presence, he didn't know. But just the same, his skin came alive, as if an electric current skimmed every inch of his flesh. A deep, tugging sensation wrenched at his gut, pulling, persisting, until he finally stopped fighting it and looked over his shoulder.

Princess. She stood just inside the cardio room with her friend, Kaiti, talking to—*crap*—Officer Douche Bag. What the hell was he doing here? Seemed like the past few days, everywhere he turned, there he was. It was obvious the cop had a thing for Halley too. She might not notice the extra-long glances he gave her, or the way he leaned in close, but Nick did. Cop or not, the guy was a tool, and he didn't like him. The fact he was working Halley's case, looking for her stalker, was the only thing keeping Nick from ripping him a new one.

He watched the cop trod off toward the showers and the girls head over toward a couple of treadmills. How was it that he'd never seen Princess at the gym before now? He'd been coming to the place almost every day for the past year. *Fate.* The word echoed through his head, bounced off the gray matter, and settled in real good. "Shit." He reached for his water. "Here we go with the fate garbage again." He shook his head, punched up the level on his own treadmill, and ran like the wind, wanting nothing more than to lose himself to a runner's high.

He'd just settled into a kick-ass pace when a familiar scream erupted a few rows back, rebounding off the cardio room walls.

Nick whipped his head around to see some blond ass-wipe reaching for Halley, who had lost her footing and literally flew off her machine. *Crap. Not good.* He didn't think; he just moved. He slammed the Stop button on his machine and barreled his way through the heavy maze of stair-steppers, treadmills, and elliptical machines with one goal in mind—helping Princess.

The roomful of curious strangers all too interested in whatever drama played out before them was the only thing keeping Nick from mopping the floor with the blond idiot's face. He came up behind Halley just as ass-face was about to touch her again. Meathead didn't have a clue.

"Dude. Are you fucking stupid? You saw how she reacted when you touched her the first time. It's probably not a good idea to go for it again." He stared down at Halley's would-be helper through a red haze. Ass-face was altogether too close to her for his comfort. "Get gone."

The idiot stood up slowly and scowled. "Fuck you, asshole. I was just trying to help." He looked down at Halley and shook his head, muttering a quick, "Sorry, Hal," before hopping back onto his treadmill. He hollered a quick, "She's all yours, bro. Good luck," before popping in a set of earbuds and resuming his run.

Douche bag.

Nick didn't waste another minute and crouched down, meeting Halley's eyes with his own. "You okay, Princess?" He held out his hand and stood, wanting nothing more than to get her up off the nasty floor and away from the onslaught of rubberneckers.

He didn't like how pale she looked, didn't like the clammy feel of her hand as she placed it in his. He didn't buy into the façade she'd put up, the false sense of normalcy she projected. Especially after last night's scream-fest. Halley was hanging on by a thread. The nightmares, the thin sheen of sweat covering her hands and forehead were just a few of the telltale signs.

"C'mon, Princess. Let's go sit for a minute. Yeah?"

Red-faced and chagrined, she allowed him to help her off the floor, grabbing her bag as she stood.

With her fingers laced through his, Nick led her to the lounge area in the front of the gym, sat her down on one of the tacky orange sofas that lined the wall, and took a few steps back. "So you know that douche bag back there?"

Halley gave a nod and grimaced. "Yeah, he's my neighbor. God!" She buried her face in her hands for a minute before running them over her face and through her hair. "I'm so embarrassed. I freaking landed on my ass back there." She shook her head, a mix of shame and embarrassment marring the delicate lines of her face. "I don't act this way. I just... Dammit! I feel like I have no control over my body, my emotions, anymore." She rested her elbows on her knees, placed her head in her hands, and sighed.

Visibly worried, the pixie took a seat beside her on the couch and proceeded to rub soothing circles on her back. "You okay, Hal?"

A disgusting wave of helplessness washed over Nick as he watched Princess warring with her body's knee-jerk reaction to the onslaught of crap she'd been dealt over the past few days. She sat trembling on the ugly couch, her body shaking like she'd been out in the cold without a jacket for too long. Her already pale skin had taken on an almost gray tone. He had the overpowering urge to pick her up, wrap his arms around her, and just...just hold her, ease her body with his.

She lifted a shaky hand and winced. "No. I'm not okay. I'm disgusted with myself. I hate this. I just... I need a minute to myself. I'm gonna hit the bathroom. Be right back." She stood quickly, threw her tiny backpack over her shoulder, and all but sprinted down the hallway toward the women's locker room.

Chapter Eight

Halley leaned forward and splashed her face and neck with water, the cool liquid washing away the thin sheen of sweat covering her skin. Too bad it couldn't wash away her shame, her embarrassment. She'd lost it back there, let her anxiety, her fears, get to her, and the result had been nothing short of humiliating and disastrous.

Thankful the restroom was empty, she straightened and took a good long look in the mirror.

"Jesus, Hal. You look..." A hot mess, she thought. Dark circles lined her eyes and her already pale skin appeared sallow and unhealthy under the crappy fluorescent lighting. She pulled a brush out of her backpack and ran it through her unruly hair. Normally when she worked out, she pulled her hair into a pony to keep it off her face. Not today. She eyed the tight rows of stitches on her neck and chest with disgust and pulled her long locks over her shoulders, using them to cover the hideous reminder of her attack. She didn't want anyone else to see her marred skin; she could barely stand to look at it herself.

With a sigh, she chucked her brush back into her bag and pulled out the bottle of Xanax she now carried with her wherever she went. For some reason, just knowing the bottle was in her bag gave her a measure of comfort. She'd felt so off-kilter the past few days, weak, half of what she once was, and it killed her. The meds made her feel normal, took the edge off, for a little while, anyway.

Normal. "Humph." Halley shook her head, damn sure she'd never feel normal again. She popped the cap, desperate for the little orange pill to work its magic and make everything go poof.

Shame wormed its way through her gut. She'd never had to rely on anyone or anything before. True, she might not be an extrovert like Kaiti, but she prided herself on being strong, self-reliant, independent. The past few days she'd been anything but. She clenched her hand around the bottle and slammed it onto the counter with a heavy sigh. Fragile glass. That's what she'd morphed into over the past four days. A delicate pane of glass covered in bright yellow hazard tape marked CAUTION, HANDLE WITH CARE. The pills, the Xanax—they filled the open spaces, seeped into the tiny fissures and cracks, held her together when she was sure she'd fall apart. She was like a shattered windshield someone had taken a rock to—fractured, broken, and in desperate need of being replaced.

Halley tensed as a handful of blonde über-Bettys paraded into the restroom like a pack of hyenas, giggling and flushed from their workout, their high-pitched laughter a painful reminder of how crappy her life was at the moment.

Desperate to be alone, Halley shoved her meds into her backpack, zipped the thing up, pulled her hoodie over her head, and got the hell out. Humiliated by her ass-first tumble off the treadmill, she wasn't up for awkward stares full of pity and misplaced sympathy. Yeah, she'd been victimized, but dammit, she wasn't a victim. Or at least, she planned on being a victim no longer. There was no way in hell she'd let herself slide into the anxiety-ridden mess she'd been two years ago after the beating—skittish, afraid to leave her home, wary of anything with two legs and a pulse. Hell no. She'd come a long way since then and refused to retreat into the abyss that had once held her at bay.

With her face hidden beneath the large hood of her sweatshirt, she stepped into the hallway, and everything went to hell.

The air surrounding her seemed to warp and expand. People. There were so many people. Hot and covered in sweat, they crowded the narrow hallway, shoulders bumping into her as they rushed to their destinations.

A two-ton weight appeared out of nowhere, pressing down onto her chest, squeezing the air from her lungs. Limbs tingling, Halley plastered herself against the peeling paint of the hallway's wall and closed her eyes. *Anxiety. That's all this is, Hal. You're having a panic attack.* She grimaced. "Shit." The damn Xanax wasn't working. Or maybe she wasn't taking enough?

She peeled her lids open for a split second and promptly slammed them shut again. The world was spinning around her, and if she didn't do something quick, she was going to black out.

Tears laced with shame trickled down her cheek as she struggled to pull air into her lungs. The damn things felt like they'd shrunk. Sideswiped by the overwhelming urge to flee, she glanced right and left, eyes searching for the nearest exit. *Out.* If she didn't get out of the building and away from the crowd of sweaty strangers, her heart would explode. Or worse, she'd pass out and have to be taken away by ambulance. She had no desire to experience that particular kind of horrifying embarrassment.

She opened her eyes and steeled herself against the massive onslaught of people traipsing back and forth in front of her. As far as she could tell, she had two choices. A left-hand turn would lead her back to a whole lot of worried glances, a steady stream of "it's okay" from her best friend, and a handful of awkward silence where Nick was concerned. That was if she made it as far as the lobby. With the tightness in her throat and full-body shakes rumbling through her, she didn't think she'd make it that far.

Heart skipping beats, she glanced in the opposite direction from her friends. Turning right would lead her out the back exit, which stood a scant twenty feet from where she stood, and leave her blissfully alone. No more crowds. No pity-filled

eyes witnessing her quietly fall to pieces. It was a no-brainer as far as she was concerned. Halley turned right.

Yeah, it was crappy to leave Kat hanging. Nick would no doubt think she was an inconsiderate loon, if he already didn't. Thing was, she just couldn't stand to be around anyone right now. She needed to get her head on straight, lose the anxiety, and to do that, she needed to be alone. With a sigh, she fished her cell out of her bag and tucked it into the kangaroo pocket of her hoodie, deciding she'd call Kat in a few to let her know where she was and that she was okay.

Compared to the warm, musty atmosphere inside the gym, the salty San Francisco air felt cool and refreshing against Halley's skin. She breathed in the fresh air, filling her lungs to capacity, and exhaled. The act of breathing itself had become somewhat of a challenge over the past few days, and finally being able to take a full breath felt invigorating, hopeful. Now, if she could just pull her shit together, rid herself of those god-awful memories and her panic disorder, she'd be in business.

First things first. She needed to get her ass home. Thank God her apartment wasn't far from the gym. She'd jog the short distance to make up for the workout she'd missed inside the gym and call the whole exercise thing quits for the day.

The door behind her burst open, and she jumped, startled by the handful of roided-out meatheads flooding the small walkway. Panic bubbled up in her gut, a desperate fluttery sensation that made her want to heave. Things hadn't gone so well for her the last time she shared close quarters with a strange man, and now there were...one, two...four of them, all headed her way. The pavement swayed beneath her feet. She needed to get out. Now.

The tallest of the group, a beefy blond with the grim reaper tattooed on his right bicep, glided forward wearing a hungry smile. "Hey there, little lady. What you doin' out here?"

Heart pounding, Halley didn't stick around to answer the beefy stranger's question. The instinct to flee once again took root, this time for good reason, and she bolted down the street paying no heed to where she was going. *Shit. So much for heading home.*

The psychiatrist she spoke to during her stay at the hospital had said exercise was a great way to get rid of unwanted anxiety. After this morning's hellish escapades, Halley had it in spades. Maybe a long run was what she needed to melt away the lingering fear, the always present panic taking up space in the back of her mind. At the very least, it would keep her away from the damn creeps crowding the exit back at the gym.

Halley swung a right on Bay Street and jogged over to Columbus, the same path she'd taken earlier when she and Kat walked to the gym. Instead of heading down Columbus toward her apartment, she veered left onto Lombard toward Telegraph Hill with a specific destination in mind. If she was going to clear her head, really think, she needed a spectacular view, and the best place for that was

Coit Tower. Nothing like a 360 view of the entire city from high above the hustle and bustle of life to put things into perspective.

Eager to get to her destination and desperate for some relief from the bevy of crap swarming around her, she stepped up her pace. The steady beat of her heart and the whooshing of her breathing kept time with her feet. She made it all the way to the corner of Lombard and Grant before the persistent buzz of her cell caught her attention.

Out of breath, she pulled it from her pocket to see Kat's face on the LCD screen. *Here we go. Time to grovel.* "Hey, Kat. I—"

Kaiti's angry voice blasted from the phone. "Don't 'hey, Kat' me! Where the hell are you?"

Halley felt her shoulders drop, and she pressed her lips together. "I'm sorry. I just needed to get out of there, I—"

"Dammit, Hal. You're not supposed to be alone right now. Does the word 'stalker' ring any bells with you? And why are you out of breath? Are you running? Are you okay?"

Jogging in place at the corner, Halley looked both ways and darted across the intersection. "I'm fine, Kat. Really. I need some time alone, and a run seemed like a good idea. And besides, this is San Francisco we're talking about. I may be on my own, but there are tons of people milling around. Plenty of eyes to witness anything hinky going down. I've got my cell. If something happens, I'll use it, okay?"

She wasn't sure who she was trying to convince more, Kat or herself. She shook her head and frowned. Lying to Kat made her feel like a snake, but the shame she felt over her growing anxiety smothered any inclination she might have had about sharing her feelings.

Kaiti's voice blared through the tiny speakers. "No, Hal. Not okay. I don't understand—"

"Sorry, Kat. Gotta go. I'll call you at work when I get home." Halley's stomach dropped the moment she hit the End button on her cell. She hated cutting her off midsentence like that. Kat was pissed off, yeah, but her voice also carried a worried tone—one that tore at her insides. Although she didn't regret her decision to take some time to herself, she did regret being the cause of Kaiti's grief. She stuffed the cell back into her pocket.

Seemed like the past few days, she'd not only turned into a whining, sniveling shell of her former self, she'd become a burden to her friend as well, and she wasn't having it. And as far as her stalker went—well, she wasn't about to let some crazy, obsessed loon run her life.

Ready to put the pieces of her life back together, she stepped off the curb to cross the next street when a black Escalade came screeching around the corner. "Holy!" With a breathy yelp, she jumped back onto the curb, both shocked and appalled by the rude driver's apparent disregard for human life. "Douche bag." She

shook her head, watching the slick SUV burn rubber down the busy street. “Asshole’s gonna kill somebody.”

Still scowling, she did a quick glance to her right and left, then jogged across the street, eager to keep her heart rate up. Lombard ran into Telegraph Hill Boulevard, a steep, winding road, which was typical for San Francisco. The jog would be tough, but with all the pent-up negative energy she sported, she was more than up to the challenge. Maybe her shrink was right. Maybe all she needed was a good burn in her thighs and a healthy sweat to help clear the fog she’d been trapped under and get her head on straight.

The climb up the hill took longer than she’d anticipated, but eventually, she made it to the top. She stood just outside Coit Tower, overlooking the magnificent city below. A sparse but somewhat steady stream of cars—tourists, most likely—snaked up and down the hill as she ran and circled the parking lot near the tower, searching for a space to park. Didn’t matter what day of the week it was, San Francisco was always packed with day-trippers armed to the teeth with cameras and gadgetry.

Halley wished she had a camera of her own as she peered down at the city below. The early morning light shone down on the crowded urban landscape, casting a warm glow across the plethora of buildings and megastructures. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let the familiar, salty air of the city she loved seep into her bones. This—this was what she needed. Perspective. If she gave in to her fear, let some sicko control her every move, shut her down, then she’d miss the little things in life, like the sun rising over her hometown. She’d also miss out on bigger opportunities as well, like getting to know Nick better. And God, she wanted to know him better. Those haunted blue eyes of his called to her, tugged at her emotions, her heart.

“Hey there, neighbor. Didn’t mean to scare you earlier.” A large hand clapped down on her shoulder, squeezing hard.

Halley’s eyes flew open, and she jumped out of the steely grip clamped down on her deltoid. “What the...? Oh! Shane... I...” Stunned, heart ricocheting off her rib cage, Halley stood, paralyzed with fear. What the hell was he doing here? Had he followed her? Was he... Oh God! Was he stalking her? Acting on pure instinct, she took several steps back, eyeing her overly friendly neighbor warily. She palmed the cell in her pocket.

Panicked, she reminded herself that all she had to do was hit three numbers and Send, and the police would do their thing, show up, and drag his stalkerish ass away. That was, if he was actually the person tailing her. What if he was just an overconfident neighbor who couldn’t take no for an answer? She hated not knowing who to trust.

Shaking, she shifted in place, unable to move. *Crap*. Why wouldn’t her feet work? Damn things felt like they’d fused to the ground or grown roots. “What...what are you doing here, Shane?”

Sweaty and panting, he took a long swig from a sports bottle and a few deep breaths. "I jog up the hill a few times a week. Like to work out in the gym every day, but nothing beats fresh air filling your lungs while you work up a sweat." After another long pull from his water bottle, he pegged her with a cautious stare. "So, uh, what exactly happened back there? You know, back at the gym? You normally freak out like that when someone touches you?" He took a step forward.

Halley took three steps back. *Thank God!* Her feet finally seemed to be working.

Shane stopped, confusion drawing his brows together. He shook his head. "What's wrong, love? Do I scare you?"

Panic surged, the rush of adrenaline sending every nerve in her body on high alert. "Don't call me love." Halley tried to swallow the mammoth lump in her throat but couldn't. Her mouth had gone completely dry. In fact, her body was shaking, pumping with energy, ready to bolt at any moment. Fight or flight, she thought. Her body, her subconscious, both feared Shane. Who the hell was she to argue with her body's natural response to her handsome yet creepy neighbor?

Taking a stand, refusing to become a shut-in was one thing. Stupidly remaining in the presence of someone who may or may not be stalking her, who may or may not want to cut her head off and preserve it in their freezer, was another. Halley didn't waste another second and bolted.

Shane's deep voice carried across the early morning breeze as she burned rubber down the hill. "Why, you running from me, baby? I'm not gonna hurt you!"

His voice sounded too close for comfort. Freaked-out, she shot a quick glance over her shoulder to see him following behind her, his expression harsh and determined as he gained on her.

Shit! Why was he following her? Why wouldn't he leave her alone? Desperate to get away from him and knowing he'd be on her in two seconds flat if she didn't do something drastic, she resorted to the one thing she knew would work. Halley screamed her ass off. With arms flailing in the air and her voice cracking from overuse, she hauled ass down the hill, tripping over her feet twice and nearly crashing into a silver minivan that sat parked at the base of the hillside.

As she flew down Lombard, nearing Grant, she glanced over her shoulder. She didn't see Shane, but that didn't mean he wasn't following her. She hadn't seen him on her way up the hill either. Until she knew whether or not he was up to no good, she was staying as far away from him as possible. That meant she needed to take evasive action, and quick.

Her legs were on fire from all the running, but she pressed forward anyway. She banked left on Grant, wove in and out of people on the sidewalk as she scrambled toward her destination. If Shane was still following her, she'd lose him in Washington Square. The park was always loaded with people no matter the time of day. She'd hide among the gaggle of ladies doing yoga if she had to until she knew she was safe.

“Halley! Stop running! Wait!”

“Shit.” Warning bells clattered in her mind, and she looked over her shoulder to see Shane booking it down the street toward her. She had to get away from him. Her limbs felt as though they might give out any second, but she pressed forward, willing her tired legs to continue.

Taking a hard right, she ran down Greenwich and made another hard left onto Stockton. Desperate to evade him, she ducked into the recessed entrance in front of Mama Leone’s Pizzeria, hoping if Shane still followed, he’d run right past her.

Gasping for air, Halley crouched behind the metal newspaper rack and fought to catch her breath as she waited, ignoring several annoyed stares from the short, stout woman cleaning the windows on the inside. No doubt she thought Halley was a crazed homeless woman looking to take up residence.

Several minutes passed, maybe longer, when she finally crawled out from her makeshift hiding place and peered around the corner.

A large hand grasped onto her hoodie, yanking her from the safety of her hiding place.

Survival instincts kicked in. Being hacked to pieces by a psycho stalker was not on her bucket list. Escape was the only thing on her mind. With a frightened wail, she threw her arms out and wrenched her body away from the steely grip of her captor. Her hand came into contact with something hard. There was a loud grunt and a grisly cracking sound. The hand that gripped her top released her, and she pitched forward, almost losing her footing.

“Shit! What the fuck, Princess?”

Halley stiffened, the familiar voice blowing away the hailstorm of panic caging her in. She spun around. “Nick!”

Chapter Nine

Halley dropped down in front of Nick who, in turn, swore like a sailor on a drunken bender. Groaning, he pinched his nose between his thumb and pointer finger in an effort to stanch the steady flow of blood streaming down his face. She reached out to touch him but dropped her hand before making contact. She didn't think he'd respond well to her touch after the blow she'd accidentally delivered to his face.

He let out several groans and glared at her through watery eyes. "Christ, Princess. I think you fucking broke my goddamn nose." Several more curses flew past his lips, and he tugged at the hem of his black T-shirt, pulling a large wad of the fabric to his face to sop up the blood. His voice sounded muffled by the thin fabric. "What the hell are you doing out here by yourself anyway? I've been looking all over for you."

Halley barely registered his question, distracted by the rippling set of washboard abs on display in front of her. *Good Lord, he's cut. Snap out of it, Halley!*

The portly woman from the window scuttled out of the pizzeria with a handful of napkins and thrust them under Halley's face. After treating her to a scathing glare, she rattled off something unintelligible and hobbled back into the restaurant, shaking her head the entire way.

Halley grimaced at her unwitting handiwork. "Oh God... Here," she said and handed Nick the napkins. "Let's get you up off the ground." Motivated by the growing number of gawkers lining up to have a good stare and the unpleasant stench wafting up from a nearby sewer, she rose to her feet and reached for him.

Her breath caught and a jolt of electricity shot up her arm the moment her fingers latched on to his elbow. She dropped her hand reflexively, rubbing at her singed fingertips. *Whoa. What was that?*

Once up, Nick evaded her grip and glowered at her long and hard. "You didn't answer my question, Halley. What the hell were you doing running around the city by yourself? Your roommate's half out of her mind with worry, and I—" He stopped, looked away, and sucked in several deep breaths trying to compose himself.

Flustered and full of guilt, Halley looked down at her feet and chewed at her bottom lip. Tears were just around the corner. "I'm sorry. I just needed some time to myself. And besides, I wasn't really alone. I mean... The city is huge. There are people everywhere, all the time. I didn't think I..." The words spewed forth like a dam bursting, so fast she wasn't sure if he'd be able to follow. "I just don't want to

be a shut-in, you know? Afraid to go out into the world, afraid to live a normal life. I can't live that way again. I needed...ugh. I needed to feel normal. I—"

"Shhh, Princess." A warm finger touched her chin, raising her head so she had no choice but to meet his vibrant blue eyes head-on. Normally hollow and sad, they were now heated, electric, with flecks of silver ringing the bright blue. "It's okay, baby." His gravelly voice was soft, his tone reassuring. "You just scared me. That's all. When you didn't come back from the restroom, all kinds of nasty shit went racing through my head. I don't want to see you hurt. You feel me?"

Halley gave a shaky nod and swiped at her tearstained cheeks. Even scared as she was over the episode with Shane, there was no denying the feelings building inside her. She felt him, all right. She felt the weight of his stare, the way those cerulean eyes of his raked her over with a mixture of reluctance, pain, and need. She also felt her body's response to his gaze. Nick cared about her. Enough to run around one of the most crowded cities in America, in search of her.

Her heart swelled with excitement, then dropped like the Dow on a bad day when he spoke again.

"You wanna tell me why you were hiding behind a newspaper rack in the entryway of a pizza shop?" The muscles in his jaw flexed as he ground his teeth together. He crossed his arms and gave her a long stare. There'd be no getting out of this one. He expected an answer.

Halley swallowed. She eyed her handiwork with a heaping mound of guilt and a small handful of humiliation thrown in for good measure. God, she'd jacked up his face but good. Sure, she had a plausible excuse for hiding and going postal on him. She thought he was her crazed stalker. Reasonable or not, she still felt like crap when she got an eyeful of his messed-up nose. Swathed in a wretched blanket of shame from head to toe for worrying Kat and bloodying Nick on top of it, she took a deep breath and readied herself to eat crow.

She kept her head down and looked at Nick through her lashes. "Shane was chasing me."

Nick's azure eyes went dark and filled with rage. The tissues he'd been grasping fell to the ground, and rustled away in the morning breeze. "Shane?" He looked to the side for a minute, and Halley could have sworn she heard him growl. He balled his hands into fists and pierced her with another hard stare. "The douche bag from the gym? He was chasing you?"

Nauseated and tired, Halley exhaled a ragged breath and nodded. "He came out of nowhere on top of the hill. I didn't see him. I... Crap! I hate this." She covered her face with her hands. "I don't even know if he's the one stalking me, but I ran from him anyway. He followed and..." Sick to death of crying, she struggled to fight back tears. "He must think I'm a freak."

Before she knew what was happening, Nick pulled her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her. His breath felt warm against the top of her head, and her body sagged against him.

Wait? Did he just...? Yep, he kissed her hair. Halley's knees turned to rubber.

"Screw him, Princess. You don't need to worry about what he thinks. Steer clear of him. You hear me? If he comes anywhere near you again, I want to know. I'll beat his pretty-boy ass into the ground." He reached down and lifted her chin up, again forcing her to meet his eyes. "Promise me, baby. Promise me you will tell me if he comes around again." His jaw was rigid, his eyes fierce, and she knew he meant business.

Halley took a deep breath and blew it out before nodding. Her early morning quest to find inner peace had gone way off track. "God, Nick, I don't know what to say. Sorry doesn't really seem to cover it, you know?" She must have looked like a complete idiot, flailing around like a mad woman while trying to escape. The manhole up the street looked pretty damn inviting. Maybe she could hide beneath the city while she rode out her shame.

She reached up and winced as she traced her finger along the soft skin just under his eye, not wanting to touch his swollen nose. "Does it hurt bad?" It had to. The skin under both eyes was starting to blacken, and the blood that had flowed freely before now trickled out in a slow ooze.

Electricity sparked when he took her hand in his, and he raised an eyebrow as if to say, *You've got to be fucking kidding me.*

"I've had worse. And from people far less attractive." He shuffled in place and looked away for a moment. "No worries, Princess. I'll be fine."

The rough pad of his thumb rubbed soothing circles on her palm, and the small group of butterflies that took up residence in her tummy anytime he was near grew into a large, frenzied swarm of bees ping-ponging around in her stomach. Nick's presence was warm and comforting, for sure, but his touch—it nearly bowled her over, it was so electrifying. Even the air surrounding him seemed charged, energized.

The effect he had on her, his power over her emotions, was staggering. Not minutes before, she was a panicked, crying mess, and now? Well, her heart was pounding a mile a minute, and it wasn't from fear.

A red, swollen nose didn't mar his beauty in any way. Ruggedly handsome, his high cheekbones, strong jaw, and piercing blue eyes sent her blood boiling beneath the surface of her skin. So did the monster tribal tattoo crawling up the length of his right arm, and the gauges in his ears. Halley had never been a huge fan of body modification. But on Nick... Yeah, it looked damn good and had her mouth begging for a taste. Even sweaty and covered in blood, he looked positively edible.

He gave her hand a quick squeeze and inclined his head toward the street. "Let's get outta here, yeah?"

Unable to fight back the shy smile emerging, she laced her fingers through his and followed him down the street toward home.

* * *

Halley's stomach dropped the minute she reached the top of the stairs and caught a glimpse of the mock botanical garden setting up camp in front of her apartment door. She sucked in a ragged breath and stood frozen in place, one hand holding her stomach, the other her mouth, in an effort to keep from being sick.

"The fuck?" Nick pushed past her, stepping into a massive sea of flowers, anger creasing his brow. Lilies, hydrangeas, roses of every color, filled the narrow corridor, their bright colors and aromatic scents threatening a sensory overload. It looked like a flower shop had thrown up in her building.

Eyes wild, Nick paced back and forth for a moment in between a daisy plant and a gaggle of sunflowers, his fists clenched and ready to do damage. "Goddamn obsessed bastard. I'll kill him," he muttered under his breath. His head whipped around, and he pegged Halley with a hard stare. "Don't touch anything." He pointed toward her door. "Go inside, and I'll take care of it. Go on," he said when he saw her hesitate.

With a nod, she hurriedly jammed her keys into the lock, desperate to get away from the sick reminder of her creepy stalker. A loud gurgling noise bounced off the walls of the narrow hallway as she fiddled with keys. *Damn stomach!* The darn thing cried out in agony as if she hadn't eaten in years and not just a couple hours before. It gurgled like a dying cow on its last legs, magnifying her embarrassment and adding to her already frazzled mental state.

Mortified, she swung the door open and paused, standing just under the threshold. An excited Mocha barreled into her legs, whining and yipping to be picked up. She scooped her pup off the ground and opened her mouth to say something, but Nick shook his head and cut her off.

"Go inside, Halley. You don't need to see this. I'll be in, in a few."

"But..." Her stomach gurgled in protest.

"Hungry?" He cracked a smile and gave a nod toward the door. "Go on, baby. Get yourself something to eat. This won't take long." He hoisted the flowers off the floor and headed for the stairs.

She managed a nod, thankful he'd taken it upon himself to rid the hallway of the unwanted flora. A wave of dizziness rolled over her as she stepped into her apartment and closed the door. She let out a low curse. Why was she always so damn hungry?

Actually, hungry didn't cover it. Halley was starving. Blessed with a fast metabolism and a love of exercise, she was able to eat just about anything she wanted without repercussion. While she enjoyed being able to scarf down baked goods and sugary treats anytime she liked, she didn't enjoy the jitters, dizzy spells, and general crankiness that came when she needed to eat. In a nutshell, if she didn't eat every two hours, she became a shaky, psychotic bitch.

After treating Mocha to a good scratch and a heavy dose of snuggling, she set the pup down and kicked off her sneakers, leaving them by the front door. Convinced if she was dying for a bite to eat, he must be too, she shuffled into the

kitchen to whip something up. Diving into her favorite pastime would help ease some of the pent-up anxiety still floating around in her system.

Fresh bread and some soup sounded great but not quick enough. She'd have to pull something out to snack on while she waited for the bread to bake. Luckily, she'd prepared some dough before she'd left that morning. It would pair nicely with the pasta fagioli Kaiti brought home from her favorite restaurant the day before.

She took a few minutes to straighten up the dining room, gathering up the scattered newspaper and stacks of magazines and placing them in the pantry. Embarrassed by the line of empty water glasses lining her counter, she darted into the kitchen and made quick work of her and Kat's early morning mess.

There was a quick knock on her front door, and Halley turned to see Nick pop his head in. "Just me, Princess. Flower shop in the hallway is a thing of the past."

He made it all of two feet into the apartment when Mocha tore through the kitchen with a low growl and proceeded to snap and snarl at him as though he were the devil himself.

"Mocha! Bad girl!" Embarrassed by her Chi's overzealous behavior, she scooped the agitated pup off the floor and apologized. "I'm so sorry. She's wary of strangers, so she barks. Once she gets to know you, she's a real sweetheart. Here," she said and stepped forward. "Maybe if you pet her and let her catch your scent, she'll calm down."

Nick raised his eyebrows like he didn't believe her but stepped forward with his hand raised anyway. "Yeah, okay."

The Chi bared her fangs and snapped.

Halley jumped back, putting some space between Nick and her angry pet. "Okay. Maybe not." She frowned at Mocha. "I'm not happy with you, missy." She cast Nick a quick look of apology. "I'll just put her in her crate. Be right back."

A heaping dose of contentment washed over her when she exited her bedroom and saw Nick standing in the center of her apartment. His presence alone drowned out the ill effects anxiety left gnawing at her bones. The sweaty palms, racing heart, and jitters that plagued her earlier had vanished, leaving room for more pleasant emotions, like desire.

He was beautiful. Hard-bodied, rough, and masculine. But beyond that, beneath his rugged, masculine exterior lay something more appealing to Halley: the promise of safety. Something told her that even though they barely knew each other, Nick would protect her from harm. And that right there was a powerful aphrodisiac for her.

After the snapping incident with her Chi, distraction seemed like a good idea. She sashayed into the kitchen and got busy readying the snacks. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Did you smell the pizza on the way over here? I've been drooling ever since."

"Sorry, babe. Didn't smell a thing."

Halley glanced over her shoulder to see Nick leaning against the entryway to the small kitchen. He looked far more appetizing than any food she had in her kitchen. And for Halley, that was saying a lot. Another hunger rose to the surface. Lust...hot, carnal, wet. The memory of their brief kiss hijacked her psyche, flashed across her brain. Those lips, that soft skin covering hard, sinewy muscle... The silver rings piercing his nipples. A rush of warmth pooled between her thighs.

He raised a finger and pointed to his face. "Someone busted my sniffer." His dry wit along with the impish grin crossing his mouth yanked her from her lusty daydream.

Halley stuck her tongue out. "Ha ha, smartass. I thought you liked pain?"

His eyes flashed wide for a moment, and he chuckled. "Touché, Princess."

Proud of her snappy comeback, she waved her arm in the direction of the hallway. "Bathroom's down the hall if you want to get cleaned up. Washcloths and towels are under the sink." Poor guy's face, hands, and shirt were covered in blood. She pointed to the tall, wooden chairs seated along the bar opposite the kitchen sink. "When you get back, have a seat, and I'll get you something to eat."

He gave her a quick nod and groaned, his eyes full of appreciation. "Sweet. Be right back."

After preheating the oven and a quick hand wash, she pulled out two bottles of water, one of which she set on the counter, the other she set aside for herself. After chugging half its contents, she brought out a bowl of fruit she'd cut earlier in the morning and a variety of cheeses to complement the fruit. A little shaky after placing the bread in the oven, she plucked a few grapes from the bowl and snacked away as she pulled down her favorite ceramic plates, the ones with the fat little chefs on them, for her and Nick to eat from. Satisfied she'd thrown together enough food to hold her handsome guest over until the bread and soup were ready, she set the heaping tray onto the bar and waited. And waited.

Wait. Was that her shower she heard running? Curious, she left the kitchen and tiptoed through the dining room and down the hall. To her surprise, the guest bathroom was dark and empty. Where the hell was he? She padded down the hallway, following the sound of running water, and ended up in her bedroom, staring openmouthed at her bathroom door.

Chapter Ten

Nick was in her shower. Naked and in her shower. Yeah, she'd told him to clean up, but she never thought he'd take her shower for a spin. What was she going to do? Bust into the steamy room and ream his ass for using up her hot water? *Wait a minute...* He was naked in her shower. Masculine and sexy, Nick was the epitome of her hidden fantasies, and if he affected her so strongly with his clothing on, she could only imagine the effect he'd have on her if she saw him in the buff.

She stood still for a moment, picturing his broad muscular chest and those chiseled abs of his that reminded her of moguls on a ski slope. She wanted nothing more than to jump in, bounce and swoosh around for a while, and then maybe lick every square inch of him from head to toe. *Nice...*

The air in the room thickened, excitement making ordinary things like breathing seem difficult as she stared at the open door leading into the small room. With all the steam, she couldn't see anything, so she lifted herself onto her tippy toes and craned her neck to get a better look. Just one little peek. That's all she wanted. No luck. *Damn.* She inched forward toward her bed, desperate for one glance at the hard, naked body in her shower, wasn't paying attention to where she was going, and rammed her toe into the baseboard. "Ow! Shit! Mother..."

With one hand holding her damaged toe, the other over her mouth, she felt like a lunatic out of *Funniest Home Videos*, hopping around her bedroom in pain and cursing like a sailor. She felt like an idiot and a perv to boot. What was she thinking? Since when had she become a Peeping Tom? *Since a hot, naked man decided to shower in my bathroom, that's when.*

"Princess? That you?" Nick's voice, low and gravelly, wafted through the air, sending an electric charge straight to her girlie bits. *Crap.* He'd heard her. Might as well fess up.

"Uh, yeah." Her voice cracked and shook. "It's me. I was just—"

"Sorry, Princess. Can't hear you over the water," he shouted. "Come a little closer, baby. Don't be shy."

Closer?

If breathing was difficult minutes before, it was near impossible now. Nick had just invited her into the bathroom while he was showering, naked as the day his mama brought him into this world.

Barely able to think straight, Halley shuffled across the cool, hardwood flooring until she stood just outside her bathroom. A warm mist clouded the

washroom but not enough to shield from her eyes the one person she wanted to see more than anything else.

Through the clear enclosure, she saw him standing just under the showerhead, hot rivulets of water bouncing off a sea of rippling muscle and smooth skin. Strong, powerful shoulders, thick, corded, and covered in ink, topped off a set of sturdy arms. A broad, bare chest narrowed at the waist, and a taut, sculpted ass, sweet enough to make a grown woman cry, finished off a pair of equally spectacular legs. But the kicker, the thing that did her in, was the sight of his colossal member jutting out from his body. She'd never particularly considered the male genitalia anything pretty to look at, but holy hell! Nick's package was a thing of beauty.

He braced himself with one hand on the tile wall in front of him, his head hung low, turned toward her. A pair of dark, heavy-lidded eyes drank her in, and that was all it took. Her nipples puckered, tightening to stiff buds beneath her tank, and a hot wisp of excitement sent a rush of warmth between her thighs. The right side of his mouth turned up into a wicked grin and every ounce of air in her lungs came rushing out in one quick whoosh.

"You're looking a little tense, Princess. Want to join me?"

* * *

The steady stream of hot water sluicing over Nick's body was just what the doctor ordered. Hosing down in Halley's bathroom felt a little funny at first, but when it came down to it, he really didn't think she'd mind. Not to mention, he didn't like walking around covered in his own bloody DNA.

Nick's stomach rolled as he pictured the daisy patch he'd cleared out of her hallway earlier. He'd tossed over two dozen floral arrangements in the Dumpster outside her building. What he hadn't bothered to share with Halley was the note he'd found attached to one of the sunflower plants. The sick bastard had been at the gym watching her that morning, and warned her to stay away from other men. She didn't need any extra stress, so he kept that little gem to himself and pocketed the note. He planned on contacting that douche bag officer who was always hanging around to let him know her stalker was stepping up his game and tailing her twenty-four seven.

He also planned on grilling her about the little comment she let slip earlier when he confronted her on the street. Halley had mentioned something about not wanting to live in fear again, and he wanted to know what she'd meant. Why had she lived in fear before? What the hell happened to her? He wasn't leaving her apartment until he found out.

Damn. Princess pulling an accidental *Crouching Tiger* routine on him on the streets of San Francisco was not what he'd expected when he'd gone searching for her. His busted nose? Yeah, he didn't care. She had been running scared, and he should have known better than to just grab her like that. With all the shit going down right now, the fact she tolerated his presence at all made his heart swell with a surge of emotion he'd never had with Sarah.

Nick closed his eyes and groaned. He wasn't going to dwell on the past. Not today. Not when he was standing in Princess's shower, naked, with her just a few feet away in another room. Tired of the self-flagellation, he wanted one day—hell, one hour—where the sins of his past didn't rain down a monsoon of pain. As much as he hated to admit it, just being around Halley lifted his spirits. She eased him in a way no one else ever had, including Sarah, and that was what burned the most. Any feelings other than misery and pain seemed like a betrayal to the woman he'd lost. *Fuck*. He was a damn head case. A whacked-out loser. A stain.

Nick palmed a large white bottle of shampoo sitting on the ledge of the shower, a ledge that would be perfect for—*Douche bag! Get your head out of the clouds. Girls like Princess don't go for mental cases like you. Stop with the fantasizing*. Except, when he popped the top to the shampoo bottle and took a whiff, all bets were off. “Fuck me.” Frosting. Her shampoo smelled like cake frosting, all sweet and sugary, just like her, and it was more than he could take. An image of her seated on the ledge of the shower with her legs splayed wide and his face between her thighs hijacked his thoughts. His dick went hard in an instant.

Painfully aroused, he set the bottle down where he found it and decided to take matters into his own hand. He couldn't very well face Princess with a tent in his pants. He braced his arm against the tile, closed his eyes, and hissed as he palmed his aching cock. Between the smell of the shampoo still permeating the air and the image of Halley naked with her long, brown hair fanning over him, it wasn't going to take long. A couple strokes max and he'd find his bliss.

A loud thud came from the bedroom, followed by a high-pitched squeak and a rush of nasty curses. He dropped his hand, cursing to himself about the set of blue balls he'd be dealing with. “Princess? That you?”

What was she doing? Spying on him? Trying to see him naked? His dick twitched in excitement. “Idiot,” he muttered under his breath. This was her apartment. If Halley wanted in her bedroom, she had every right. Still, hope swelled at the thought that maybe, just maybe, she was as curious about him as he was about her. Hell, if the tables were turned and she was the one showering, he couldn't say for sure if he'd have been able to keep himself away.

He heard a shuffling and the sound of Halley's muffled voice, but he couldn't make out what she'd said. She was going to have to come closer. An ache swam from deep in his gut, swirling up into his chest. He'd felt it before, knew what it was. Need. Deep, all-encompassing, physical need. Nick wanted her like he'd never wanted anyone before. But after everything she'd been through, he wouldn't press her. The ball was in her court. If she didn't want him, he wouldn't push. And damn, did he want to push, pull, suck, lick, and kiss every inch of her beautiful body. With a groan, he reined himself in and gave her a choice. “Sorry, Princess. Can't hear you over the water. Come a little closer, baby. Don't be shy.”

He knew the moment she entered the bathroom. Electricity charged the air, and a lick of heat burned across his skin. He glanced down. Yup, still had a stiffy. Not much he could do to hide it.

But when he turned his head and got a good look at Princess, he wasn't sure he needed to hide anything. She stood just inside the entrance to the room, the fear and panic that had shone behind her viridian eyes earlier gone, replaced with a heavy dose of desire as they devoured every inch of him. Vaguely aware of inviting her into the shower, Nick's thoughts spiraled down the drain the moment she pulled her tank over her head. *Jackpot!*

Nick sucked in a quick breath. *Fuck me.* Perfect. She was absolute perfection. Smooth, ivory skin covered an ample pair of breasts, complete with a set of soft pink nipples no plastic surgeon could ever improve.

She slid her shorts down next, nice and easy, revealing a pair of pink cotton boy shorts with the word *Fun* written all over them.

Oh yeah... He could imagine a hundred different ways to have fun with her, starting with pulling those bad boys off with his teeth. His dick jumped at the sight of her in nothing but panties, and his left hand twitched, itching to relieve the pressure. But he held it together, kept his cool. He was going to take things nice and slow with Halley. Let her take the lead. So he stood motionless as a statue as he watched her inch the thin cotton down her thighs and... "Fuck, Princess." He closed his eyes for a minute and took a deep breath, afraid he might blow his load right there. "Baby, your kitty's bare."

Her porcelain skin flushed pink. The corner of her mouth turned up a little, and her green eyes sparkled with anticipation as she nodded and stepped forward.

A tight, squeezing sensation gripped his chest. Seeing her like this, passionate, unafraid, nearly brought him to his knees.

Nick fought to keep his voice from cracking as he spoke. "Do you know how hot that is?"

The next thing he knew, she was in the shower with him. She took hold of his hand—"No. But I know how hot I feel right now."—and placed it on her breast. "You're the only thing, the only person who makes me feel safe, makes me feel protected. I trust you. I want you. Touch me, Nick."

A bomb loaded with a year's worth of pent-up, repressed emotion and need went off the moment she told him to touch her. He didn't waste time and dug his fingers through her hair at the base of her neck with his free hand, claiming her mouth with his own. And damn, did she taste every bit as sweet as she smelled—sugary, warm, and just plain *good*.

He swiped his tongue over her bottom lip, seeking entrance, and he moaned deep and low when she let out a soft sigh and opened for him. She wrapped her small arms around his neck, pulling him closer. Gently, he rolled her nipple between his finger and thumb while exploring her mouth with his, plunging, seeking, mimicking the act of love. If it felt this good to get inside her mouth, he could only imagine what it would feel like to take her fully, drive himself into her deep and hard.

Eager to explore, he dragged his lips across her jaw and peppered featherlight kisses along her neck, taking care not to irritate her stitches but paying enough reverence to the surrounding area to make damn sure she knew he wasn't turned off by them. He groaned. As if anything about her could ever turn him off. Ever. Petite, with the softest skin he'd ever felt covering lean muscle, Princess had a body most women would kill for. From her perfectly rounded breasts to her tiny waist to an ass that just begged to be squeezed, there wasn't an inch of skin covering her body that he didn't want to devour, to claim. *Mine*.

A sudden possessiveness slammed into him, rattling his senses. There was no way he could harbor that type of feeling for Halley. Impossible. He barely knew her, and he was running on empty, a husk of his former self. Still, as he kissed a lazy trail across her collarbone, down to her breast, and flicked his tongue across her pink, puckered nipple, the soft cry of pleasure she made had him singing a different tune. The idea of anyone else seeing her like this, touching her, making love to her, sent him into a spiral of rage.

"Oh... Nick," she said with a pant as he feasted on her other breast, rolling his tongue over the tight peak. "You just don't know. I've..."

Nick smiled to himself as he began a slow journey down her abdomen, circling his tongue around her navel, darting in and out before moving lower still. "What, baby? What don't I know?"

Her hands cupped the back of his head as he neared her smooth mound. "I've...I've wanted this since..."

He paused for a minute, looked up, and what he saw nearly shattered him. Princess devoured him with wanton, heavy-lidded eyes. Those oh-so-kissable lips of hers were parted slightly as she breathed in shallow pants. Her tongue swept across her lower lip as she watched him prepare to take her into his mouth. *Shit*. He knew what she wanted. He'd wanted it too, from the moment he saw her. He wanted in. Into that sweet spot right between her legs, into her heart...

Nick shook his head to clear the crazy thoughts swimming around. He couldn't wait any longer and focused on the dessert mere centimeters from his face. God, he had to know. Had to know if her honey tasted as good as the rest of her. His tongue darted out, and took a long, slow trip up her center. She let out a strangled cry of pleasure as she arched forward all but shoving her core in his face.

A rocket launcher filled with instant orgasms impaled him straight through the gut the moment her sweet honey touched his lips. "Fuck, Princess. Your kitty..." He went in for another taste. "So good," he said with a growl. That soft, pleased cry wasn't enough. He wanted her writhing beneath him, begging for release, screaming his name while she dug her nails into his flesh. And when she climaxed, he wanted to start all over again.

Overwhelmed by the absolute need to penetrate her in some way, he grasped her ankle and lifted her leg, placing her foot onto his shoulder. *There we go. Wide open, baby*. Halley's breathy moans filled the glass enclosure as he went to town on her clit, sucking on the bundle of nerves and then driving deep with his tongue. Her

hips moved in time with his mouth, and it didn't take long for her to shatter, her body going rigid as she cried out, his name echoing off the glass, floating across the hot mist.

After gently lowering her foot to the floor, Nick got to his feet and claimed Halley's mouth with his once more. "Damn, baby," he groaned as he sucked her lip in between his. "Your honey... Can you taste yourself on my lips? Yeah, you can." She threw her head back and cried out as he palmed her ass with both hands and moaned.

He ravaged her neck, desperate to fill his mouth with the sweet taste of her skin. "Birth control. You on it?" He grunted while ghosting his palm across her breast.

Princess gasped for air. "Yes. Yes, we're good. I'm tested too. I'm clean."

Nick dropped both hands to her ass, lifted her up, and wrapped her legs around his waist. His swollen cock rubbed against the sensitive flesh of her core as he pushed her back against the tile, and they both hissed in pleasure. "Thank fuck. So am I." With a small lift of her hips, he positioned himself at her entrance and drove himself home, the sounds of their ecstasy reverberating off the glass walls of the shower.

Chapter Eleven

A massive invasion. Pure, sensual overload. There was no other way to describe the sensation of Nick's massive cock rocking in and out of her. Well, there were probably tons of ways for her to describe the feeling but none that she could think of at the moment.

She was hot. So hot. And not from the water either. The spray from the shower had long since run cold. No. It was the man inside her. He drove her wild with lust, crazy with an all-encompassing need to touch him, hold him, and never let him go. He was her rock, her fortress.

She crossed her feet at the ankles, pulling him deeper into her depths with each powerful thrust. Closer. She needed him closer, and yet she knew he'd never be close enough.

Entranced by the swirling arcs of ink covering the right side of his body, she leaned forward, tracing the dark circles and swooshes with her tongue, drinking in the fresh, clean taste of his skin. Wiping her hands over his shoulders and down to his chest, she took hold of the silver rings in his nipples and gave a gentle tug, causing him to throw his head back with a hiss.

"Fuck, Princess. Harder, please." His voice was low, gravelly, and full of need.

Eager to please, she did what he asked, delighting in the power she had over him as he bit his lip and moaned. His tempo increased, the sound of skin slapping skin filling the air as he pummeled into her. "So good," he breathed. "God, Princess. You're... I've never..."

Dizzy and barely able to breathe from the force of his thrusts and her impending release, she knew exactly what he was saying even though he couldn't find the words. Never had she experienced anything remotely close to the type of pleasure Nick was giving her now. She'd reached a pinnacle. Every cell, every molecule in her body was cresting on the edge of release and pining for a climax.

"Oh Nick," she said with a moan. "I'm close. I'm so close." She threw her head back and closed her eyes, ready to fall over the edge when she felt his hand move between their bodies.

"Look at me, baby." His voice was firm, hard, and dead sexy.

Halley obeyed, lowering her gaze to his as his thrusts became even more frenzied.

He held her up with one arm, the other searching for the bundle of nerves at her center. His normally vibrant blue eyes were wild, dark, and filled with lust. "Keep your eyes on mine. I want to see you when you shatter."

That was all it took. Between the magic he was working with his finger and his erotic admission, Halley exploded with a strangled cry, the force of her climax sending her over the edge into white-hot oblivion.

"Aww, fuck yeah. That's it, baby," she heard him growl before thrusting once more and shouting with his own release.

Spent and still riding the last waves of her orgasm, Halley went limp and fell forward onto Nick's chest.

She uncrossed her legs, and he set her feet onto the tile floor. She wondered how, in the midst of all the crap that was going down in her life, she'd managed to find something special with Nick.

He held her in his arms for what seemed like forever, running his hands up and down her sides in long, soothing strokes. He nuzzled his head in her neck, breathing in her scent. Lost in the sensation of his hands caressing her skin, she didn't notice he'd reached for her shower poof until she heard the pop of the plastic cap and got a whiff of the gingerbread body soap she loved so much. With a tenderness that surprised her, Nick washed every inch of her body, gliding the sudsy poof over her skin with a care bordering on reverence. Once she rinsed off, he went to work on her hair. Gooseflesh covered her skin as he took his time pulling the shampoo through her locks, his fingers working some kind of unholy sensual magic on her. She wanted him inside her again. Badly.

The cool water from the shower became somewhat of a shock after the heat and passion of their lovemaking subsided. A chill ripped through Halley as the last remnants of shampoo swirled down the drain, and she sucked in a quick breath.

"Shit. You're cold. I'm such a dick. Here," he said and reached for the handle. The cool spray stopped abruptly. "Don't move," he said, pegging her with a hard stare, and stepped out of the shower.

Movement wasn't really a problem for Halley, as her legs felt like Jell-O. Walking, moving, after the sex they just had seemed damn near impossible.

Nick came back seconds later, a large white towel wrapped around his waist, another in his hands. "Here." He motioned for her. "Let me dry you."

Nick smoothed the soft terry over her skin with a tenderness that nearly overpowered her. It amazed her how someone so strong, so masculine and tough, could also be so gentle and caring. Her heart swelled as he wrapped the towel around her and took her into his arms. This man, this perfect creature sent from heaven, was fast becoming her entire world. She'd never felt safer, more cared for, or more satisfied in her life. The idea of being away from him for any length of time made her sick.

She no longer questioned his ability to touch her when no other man could after the attack. Her body, her mind, they both knew he was the one for her. Nick

was her comfort, her heart, her home, and the very air she breathed. It didn't matter that they'd just met days before. The sense of ease and completion she felt when he was near told her all she needed to know. Halley had fallen for Nick. Hard.

A loud gurgle rumbled through her gut as Nick set her down on the edge of her bed. *Seriously?* Halley wanted to tear her obnoxious stomach from her abdomen and toss it out the window. She'd just had the best sex of her life, and from the prominent bulge jutting out from beneath the white terry towel, it looked like Nick was up for another round of hide the weasel. Her eyes roamed the thick, muscled contours of his towel-clad body. She was hungry, all right. Just not for food.

* * *

The delicious aroma of fresh-baked bread followed Halley as she sauntered into the room and sank down onto her bed. Nick dropped to his knees in front of her, unable to contain the wide grin plastered across his face. The tortured noises coming from her stomach sounded like something straight out of *Wild Kingdom*. "Sounds like we need to get you fed, Princess."

The crimson blush creeping across her creamy skin and the way she bit down on that full lower lip of hers had his dick rock hard and twitching. As eager as he was to sink himself deep into that sweet honey of hers, he knew he needed to wait. Her needs came before his and...

A strange, long-dormant feeling swept over him, tugging at his gut. *Her needs come before mine*. Nick felt protective of Halley. "Dammit," he muttered under his breath.

Halley stared down at him, confusion narrowing her eyes. "Is everything all right?"

He gave her a quick squeeze just above the knee and shook his head. "Everything's fine. Just feeling like a selfish ass. That's all." He pegged her with a hard stare. "So, you wanna tell me what you meant earlier when you said you didn't want to live in fear again? Did something like last Friday night's attack happen to you before?"

She stiffened and looked away.

"Uh-uh, Princess." He placed a hand on her cheek and forced her to look at him. "You don't get to look away. I want some answers. I can't help you if I don't know everything. Start talking."

Unease ricocheted off his gut and bounced around his insides for a bit. *Shit*. Did he really just say that? Was he really going to dive in headfirst and get involved after he swore to himself he wouldn't? One look at her frightened eyes provided all the convincing he needed. Hell yes, he was getting involved. Halley was under his skin, in his bones, and there was no going back. He'd just have to keep his guard up whenever she was near, make sure he didn't fall for her. Sex was one thing. Emotional attachments were another. He could watch over her, protect her, without giving her his heart.

Her emerald eyes filled with unshed tears, and her lips trembled as she nodded. "Two years ago. A student at my culinary school, he wanted to date me, wouldn't leave me alone. When I said no, he beat me." Her body lurched forward with a sob, and she buried her face in her hands.

A flash fire of rage tore through Nick. He wanted to torture the fucker who hurt her, administer obscene amounts of pain before killing the asshole outright. How anyone could hurt such an innocent, gentle creature astounded him.

It was nearly impossible, but he managed to swallow back his anger and gathered Halley into his arms. He buried a hand in her damp locks and rubbed her back with the other. Needing to comfort her somehow, he placed a kiss on the top of her head before staring at the wall, resolute. "I'm gonna kill him. He's a dead man," he muttered under his breath. He'd hunt down the creep and annihilate his ass.

Halley pulled back and swiped at her tearstained cheeks. She blew out a deep breath. "He's already dead. He rushed his arresting officer with a knife and was shot and killed." She shook her head and closed her eyes momentarily. "That part of my life is over. I hate looking backward. I hate talking about it."

A fresh set of tears welled in her eyes, and Nick drew her against his chest once more. "Shhh, baby. It's gonna be okay. I'm sorry I brought it up. Sorry I made you talk about it."

She exhaled a heavy breath against his chest and pulled back to meet his gaze. "I don't want to think about any of it. The beating, the attack last week. I just want to forget."

The overwhelming sadness behind her eyes splintered his heart, tore at his gut.

Princess placed shaky hands on his chest, leaned forward, and brushed her velvety lips against his. An avalanche of desire and hunger shot straight through him, hardening his cock, making his balls ache with need. *Oh yeah, baby.* He might not be capable of much, but he could sure as hell make her forget.

Nick didn't waste time. His mouth found hers in an instant, and he pressed her back against the bed so that he was lying on top of her. He took a lazy swipe across her lips with his tongue and drew her bottom lip between his own. *So soft, so full.* He'd suck on her lip all day long if she'd let him. She opened her mouth with a sigh, and he felt like crying for joy when his tongue found hers. Nick deepened his kiss, exploring, tasting, memorizing her delicious mouth. *Damn, she tastes good.* He knew right then he'd never get enough of her. One taste was all it took to remind him of just how addicted to her he'd become.

He rolled onto his side, propped his head on his elbow, and trailed his finger back and forth over her collarbone. A sea of goose bumps rippled across her flesh. His cock stiffened, and the corner of his mouth turned up. His touch did that to her. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. His gaze traveled lower, to the soft terry towel barely covering her naked breasts. Eager to taste more of her, he leaned forward and traced his tongue along the same path his finger had traveled just moments before. He groaned. "Fuck, you taste good."

He tore his eyes from her delicate flesh and met her gaze. Her emerald eyes blazed with heat, the gold flecks ringing her irises on fire with lust. "Time to get rid of the towel, baby. I want to see all of you. I want to taste every inch of you."

Her breath caught, and she held his gaze while opening the towel to reveal herself.

It was like a bomb went off inside him the moment his eyes took in the magnificence of her body. A low growl escaped his lips as he eyed the silken perfection of Halley's naked flesh. Two pink nipples stared up at him just begging to be suckled. He couldn't wait another moment. He had to have his mouth on her, had to taste her.

Nick leaned forward, sucking one of the soft pink buds between his lips. Halley's back arched off the mattress, and she cried out as he swirled his tongue around the taut peak. He sucked and lapped, reveling at the soft skin just beneath her nipple before attacking the stiff bud once more. He continued to tease her until she lay writhing beneath him, crying out his name in breathy pants.

"Like that, do you?" he said with a wicked smile.

* * *

Barely coherent and unable to speak, Halley simply nodded when Nick asked her if she liked his mouth on her. Like was an understatement. Halley loved his mouth on her, and the throbbing ache between her legs proved it. The wicked things he did with his tongue drove her insane with need. No man had ever paid homage to her body in such a manner. The few lovers she'd had before had only been interested in their own needs. Nick was a fucking revelation, and she wanted more, needed more.

His husky voice breezed across her flesh like a warm caress. "Where else do you want my mouth, Princess?"

Halley moaned. A shockwave of electricity ripped through her, fueling her already heightened senses. "Everywhere. Please." She'd never been vocal about what she wanted in bed before. But then again, she'd never been with Nick. Something about him tore down her inhibitions, made her comfortable, eased her like no other. Holding back, hiding her true self and her needs, was not something she'd ever have to do with him. Was it possible? Had she found Mr. Right?

Any lingering thoughts faded away as he dove down and suckled her other breast. He worked her until she was nearly breathless, then lifted his head with a low growl. "Baby, I'm gonna do you so good. When I'm done with you, you won't remember your name. Now close your eyes and just feel."

Desperate for his touch, Halley closed her eyes and gave herself over to the sensation of Nick's mouth on her naked flesh.

Teasing and taunting, Nick's tongue blazed a hot trail toward her navel. Nibbling at her flesh, he doled out featherlight kisses before circling her belly button with his tongue. "Fuck, you taste good," he said with a moan, traveling lower still. "Like fucking sugar cookies. So sweet."

Halley gripped a handful of comforter in each hand as his lips grazed the skin just above her smooth mound. *Please. Just a little lower. Almost...* “Oh!” Her back arched off the bed the moment his warm tongue licked a leisurely trail up her center. All thoughts of the outside world vanished. There was only Nick, his incredible tongue, and pure, unbridled pleasure. A rainbow of color flashed behind her eyes as he lapped at her clit and then plunged in deep. “Oh yeah! Just like that. That’s good!”

“Yes.” He groaned and slipped a finger inside of her. “Yes, it is. So fucking good.”

The sensation of his finger sinking into her depths as he tongued her sensitive nub was almost too much, and when he slipped a second finger in, she almost exploded.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he said, pulling away. “I’m not ready for you to come yet.” He shed the towel he still wore and climbed farther up the bed so that his head lay on the pillows. With a sexy grin, he beckoned to her with his hands. “Come here, sweetheart. I’m not done tasting you.”

Prickly heat covered every inch of Halley. She crawled up the length of his magnificent body and straddled his hips, helpless but to obey him. She was so close to her climax already. All he had to do was touch her, and she was sure she’d explode.

The wicked grin he wore grew larger, and he shook his head. “You’ve got the right idea. I want you to straddle me. Just higher.” He crooked his finger toward her, motioning her to move up.

Halley’s eyes widened momentarily. Did he want her to...? She almost came just thinking about it.

Nick grabbed her by the hips and pulled her forward. “You like my tongue in you. I like my tongue in you. Move up, baby. Grip the headboard. Yeah, just like that.”

Halley had just grasped the wooden headboard when a blast of pleasure rolled through her. Nick gripped her ass with both hands and laid siege to her aching clit. Lapping, licking, and teasing, Nick paid homage to her core, dipping in and out of her depths over and over again before finally sucking on the tight bundle of nerves at her center. Her entire body stiffened, her orgasm just a hairbreadth away. “I’m so close, Nick.”

“Not yet, baby. Not yet.” Lifting her off his mouth, he lowered Halley to his hips and sheathed himself fully inside her.

“Aww fuck, that’s good, Princess.” He latched on to her hips with both hands and rammed into her in quick, steady strokes.

Each thrust brought Halley closer to the edge of total bliss.

“Lean back, baby. Grab on to my legs and hold on.”

Skin slapping against skin reverberated off the bedroom walls as Halley obeyed. She arched backward and held on to his shins as he continued to ram into

her with his giant cock. This new position was Halley's undoing. "Oh my... Nick!" The combination of his hard thrusts and magic fingers working her clit sent her over the edge into an orgasm. The room went white, and the world disappeared as a tidal wave of pleasure crashed over her.

"That's it, baby," Nick growled as he pistoned in and out of her. "Let it out. Aww yeah, Princess. Let me...aww fuck...let me hear you."

Halley screamed Nick's name as he rode out his own orgasm. A low, guttural noise escaped her lips along with her last breath, and she fell forward onto his chest, gasping for air. "That was... I can't..."

Nick chuckled and wrapped his arms around her. "Told you you wouldn't remember your name afterward."

* * *

Heaven. Nick glanced down at Halley draped across him like a blanket and couldn't help but think he'd died and gone to heaven. The way her body responded to his was incredible. It was like she was made for him and him alone. Just thinking about their time together in the shower, on the bed, made his dick hard again. He glanced toward the clock on her nightstand: 10:15. "Goddammit," he muttered under his breath. "I'm fucking late for work."

He kissed the top of Halley's head and smoothed her hair. "Time for me to go, Princess." With a groan, he tore himself from Halley's arms, knowing if he didn't get up now, he'd stay in bed with her all day. He dressed hastily, opting to carry his bloody shirt rather than wear the soiled thing. "I'm sorry, babe. I don't want to leave you. Especially after..." He looked toward the bathroom and then over to Halley with a hungry smile. "Thing is, if you want to have a successful bakery, I kinda need to get off my ass and go build it."

Halley's face fell for a brief moment before she squared her shoulders and sighed. "I suppose you're right." A wicked grin crossed her mouth, and she raised a playful brow as she stood from the bed. "Though, I can guarantee, as your boss, you won't be in trouble for being late." She crossed the room and stood just in front of him, nothing but a thin sheet of cotton wrapped around her torso, barely covering her breasts.

Nick wanted to tear the damn scrap of fabric off her and lose himself in her body and soul, and it scared the crap out of him. He was treading a fine line with Princess. Teetering on the edge of a precipice he had no business jumping off. Halley deserved someone whole. A person who could meet all of her needs, not just the physical. His heart? Yeah, well, the damn thing felt like it'd taken a shotgun blast at close range. The few pieces that remained ached for Halley, wanted her to be the one to put him back together.

His psyche was another story. His mind shied away from any and all attachments with the fairer sex. And the stalking thing with Halley? Too damn close for comfort. He felt like he was reliving the nightmare with Sarah all over again. Only this time, he promised himself he wouldn't fail. He'd watch over

Princess himself. He refused to rely on the police to do their job. Yeah, he'd keep Halley above the ground, and he'd do it without giving her his heart.

Nick eyed the clock on her nightstand with contempt, knowing he needed to swing by his apartment before heading over to the bakery where he was sure to get his ass reamed by an angry Damon. He hadn't checked his cell and wasn't about to listen to a string of angry messages. A sick feeling wormed its way through his gut. *Don't leave her alone.*

He hesitated for a moment and scrubbed at the back of his head before meeting her gaze head-on. "When's the pixie coming home?"

"Kat?" Halley's eyes widened with surprise. "Oh, not till later this evening. She visits her parents on Wednesday nights."

That was all he needed to hear. "Get dressed, baby. You're coming with me."

Halley stepped back with a frown and shook her head in protest. "I don't need a babysitter, Nick. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself." She turned away, but Nick gently took hold of her wrist, keeping her near.

He leaned in good and close, reveling in the sugary scent of her freshly washed hair and body. "I know you can, baby. But I'd never forgive myself if I left you and something happened. You saw those flowers in the hallway earlier. Whoever's watching you is sick, and I don't plan on giving him any opportunity to get at you." The words from the note the bastard left her with the flowers raced across his brain. *Take heed of my words, lover mine. You are mine. Stay away from other men, or the attack you suffered at the club the other night will look like a walk through the park. I'm watching you, lover. Always.*

On fire and ready to tear apart anyone who came within a one-foot radius of Princess, Nick knew he'd never be able to leave her alone for the day.

When she refused to move, he cursed under his breath and stalked over to her closet, rifling through the thing until he came across a comfortable-looking brown tracksuit with the word *Juicy* stitched into the back of the jacket. He tossed it onto the bed and then laid siege to her dresser, pulling out a tank and a pair of pink boy-cut panties with the word *Jealous* stamped across the front. His dick twitched at the mental picture he had of her wearing the barely there undergarments. Jealous? Hell yes, he was. He'd love nothing more than to be the scrap of thin cotton hugging her ass all day.

Determined to have his way, he marched across the room, took hold of her wrist, and pressed the undergarments into her unwilling hand. "Please, Halley. I—" He paused, 100 percent certain he looked like a whiny douche. Feeling like a pansy, he swallowed his pride and pushed forward. "Fuck! I need you to do this for me, okay? Just put on the damn clothes and come down to the bakery with me."

With fire in her eyes, Halley tossed the tank and panties on the bed. "Fine," she said with a huff, readjusting her towel. "Wait out front while I get dressed. I'll just be a few minutes."

Nick smiled, relief coursing through his veins. He pulled Halley in close, planting a quick kiss on her forehead before heading for the bedroom door. He stopped just inside the door frame and turned. “You sure I have to wait out front? I mean, it’s not like I haven’t been up close and personal with your goods. I’ve seen it—hey!” he shouted and dodged the giant throw pillow she chucked at his face.

Halley pointed toward the door and pegged him with a “try it again and I’ll hang you by your balls” look.

Knowing he had to pick his battles, he turned tail and fled the room. Princess may have won this fight, but when all was said and done, he’d win the war. And in doing so, he’d assure her safety.

Chapter Twelve

“No!” Halley raced through the front door to Zeppoli’s, her designer flip-flops crunching on broken glass and debris. “No no no!” She barely registered Nick muttering a low “What the fuck?” as she took in the chaotic scene before her.

The front window of the bakery had been shattered. Giant shards of glass littered the floor along with a layer of dust from broken Sheetrock. Damon and Kat stood in the center of the room, gathering up large chunks of drywall and broken wood and placing them in a large trash receptacle.

Frantic, she spun around, taking in the massive destruction. “What happened?”

Giant, gaping holes riddled the wall Nick and Damon had spent the last few days building. Exposed wires jutted out from the tattered frame. A few pieces of broken two-by-fours were all that held up the destroyed remnants.

Damon pegged Nick with a nasty glare. “Dude, where the fuck have you been? I called your cell at least a dozen times. Look at this shit.” He jabbed a finger at the destruction and slammed a fat chunk of drywall onto the ground. “We’re going to have to fucking start all over!”

Kat, whom Halley always relied on for strength, stood crying in the center of the room, a mixture of anger and desperation radiating behind her caramel eyes. She covered her mouth with her hands and shook her head. “No! This is going to set us back. Shit, shit, shit!”

Damon stepped forward, placed his hands on Kaiti’s shoulders, and leaned down to meet her eyes. “Don’t worry, sassy. I told you. I’ll have this place cleared out and a new wall up in no time.” He cupped her cheek and gave her a wink. “I promise.”

“Fuck!”

Halley whipped around to see Nick pacing back and forth through the rubble, angrily scrubbing at the back of his head. His sapphire eyes pierced Halley’s. “This shit is way out of hand. It’s connected. Your attack, the flowers, the note, I’m sure of it.” He looked over toward Damon. “You call the cops?”

Damon nodded. “Yeah.” He inclined his head toward Kaiti. “Sassy called them right before you showed up. I found this”—he bent and picked up a sledgehammer—“on the floor next to the window. Looks like the bastard used it to break in and tear down the wall, then chucked it before leaving.”

Unable to cope with the devastation before her, Halley sagged, falling to her knees amidst the rubble. "Forgive me," she cried. "I'm to blame for this." If she'd been more observant, more aware of her surroundings, she never would have tossed back a drug-laced cocktail. The repercussions of that screwup grew larger with each day that passed. Not only had she almost lost her life, but now she was haunted by a crazed lunatic hell-bent on driving her insane with terror while destroying everything she held dear.

"Honey." Kaiti stepped forward to comfort her. "No. You're not."

Nick swept in and cut her off, crouching in front of her. He cupped her cheeks in his hands and forced her to meet his eyes. "Look at me, Halley."

A ripple of warmth skimmed over Halley as he swiped away a renegade tear with his thumb. Even now, while she drowned in a rainstorm of heartache and fear, Nick managed to comfort her with his touch, ease some of her despair.

"This is not your fault. We're gonna catch the sick bastard responsible, and when we do—"

"Ahem."

Nick broke off midsentence, and they all turned toward the entrance of the shop. Hunter stood just inside the door, flanked by two officers. They both brushed past him, grim-faced and silent, and started their investigation. "I suggest you leave police work to the professionals. My partners and I are more than capable of tracking down the perp responsible." He focused his attention on Halley, his steel gray eyes blazing with determination. "I will find out who did this, Halley. I promise you."

Halley swallowed back the urge to sob and nodded as Hunter went about questioning Damon and Kaiti.

Helpless to do anything, she watched as one of Hunter's silent companions snapped pictures while the other wrapped the sledgehammer Damon found in plastic to be used as evidence.

Nick yanked out his cell and made a few calls. Before she knew it, he'd ordered a new pane of glass for the front window and arranged for the wreckage to be hauled away. Thank God he'd kept a clear head.

The moment Halley had seen the destruction wreaked on her future bakery, her brain had shut down. She'd heard people say time and time again that when faced with adversity, true character shone through. If that was the case, Halley's true character was a spineless, frightened do-nothing. *Pathetic.*

Eventually, Hunter and his mute lackeys left the bakery, Hunter promising he'd notify Halley if they were able to lift any prints from the sledgehammer. Halley wasn't holding out any hope. The police hadn't been able to find any prints on the note or CD left at her home. Whoever was tormenting her was smooth, knew how to evade the authorities, stay under the radar. *Loser freak!*

Kaiti reluctantly returned to work, only after Damon repeatedly assured her he had everything under control. The two shared a long, meaningful stare before

Kaiti finally gave a nod and strode from the building. Halley wasn't sure what was going on between the two of them, but it eased her mind to know Kat had someone like Damon to rely on. Maybe all the verbal sparring they treated one another to really *was* flirtation.

"Yes. I'm aware of that." Nick's raspy voice floated across the small space, its familiar, comforting sound warming Halley from the inside out.

"Yeah, okay. I'm on it." Nick slid his cell into his pocket and closed the gap between them. "I just spoke to David, and we're going to do everything we can to get this place cleaned up and keep construction on schedule." He placed a warm hand at the base of her neck and drew her forward into an embrace.

Halley closed her eyes, wishing she could hide forever in Nick's arms. It seemed like the only time she felt safe and secure was when he held her close.

"I promise you," he whispered and kissed the top of her head. "I'm damn good at what I do. Zeppoli's Bakery will look amazing. You have nothing to worry about."

Snuggling against the warm expanse of Nick's muscled chest, she knew he'd make good on his word. He and Damon would ensure the bakery would open on time, looking fabulous.

As for everything else going on in her life at the moment, well, she was scared shitless. And as comforting and safe as she felt in Nick's arms, she knew she couldn't hide away in them forever.

* * *

Halley's heart flipped a couple 360s the minute she stepped through the threshold into Nick's apartment. True, she'd accompanied him to his home earlier in the day. The trip had been a quick in-and-out so he could change into a set of clean clothes before heading over to the bakery. Flustered and a bit pissy over being coddled, she hadn't paid much attention to her surroundings.

Her afternoon at the construction site had sucked ass on a multitude of levels. Stubborn to a fault, Nick had refused any help cleaning up the place, insisting he and Damon had it covered. He also refused to let her out of his sight, which made for a long and painfully boring afternoon spent sitting on her ass doing nothing.

Nick's insistence that she hang with him until Kat came home was a welcome idea. Halley didn't relish the idea of going home to an empty apartment, and Nick squelched that notion anyway. Grateful for his concern, she planned on whipping up a nice home-cooked meal for him, something she was sure he didn't see often.

Located on the lower end of Lombard Street, in the heart of Russian Hill, Nick's apartment was meager in size and sparsely furnished. Halley had expected to see a large-screen TV mounted to the wall with an Xbox sitting on the floor nearby. She'd expected to come across dirty dishes, socks shoved into the couch cushions, and fast-food wrappers on the coffee table. Typical bachelor pad-type stuff. The home in front of her was anything but.

A black sofa and chair sat in the middle of the front room, a coffee table separating them. The kitchen, small and cozy, sat off to the right, complete with a round glass table and two chairs. A half wall divided the kitchen from the front room, and a small television set sat in the corner of the bar area. A small doorway past the kitchen led to what was obviously a bedroom. There were no pictures, no artwork, no magazines scattered about, no personal touches at all. The place, though immaculately clean and filled with a modest amount of furniture, felt wholly empty, and Halley's heart twinged at the hollow sight. What happened to him to make him live in such a spartan manner?

Nick swept his arm out in front of him, ushering her toward the couch. "Sorry it's so small. I know you're used to fancier digs, but I don't need much, and well...it's a roof over my head."

Mortified she'd made him feel insecure somehow about his home, Halley shook her head in protest. "No, Nick. There's no need to apologize. I—" Desperate to change the subject, she decided to fall back on the one thing that never let her down: her cooking. She inclined her head toward his barren kitchen. "So, any special requests for dinner?" She stood, offering him a smile, and crossed the small room, venturing into the small space.

A loud snort echoed off the thin, taupe-colored walls, and she looked over her shoulder to see Nick staring after her with one hand on his side, the other scrubbing the back of his head. It was something he did a lot when he was nervous, she'd noticed. "Good luck, sweetheart. I haven't got shit for groceries. If you're able to find something edible in here, I'd be surprised."

Up for a challenge, she flashed him another smile and began rifling through his cupboards.

Halley frowned. *Damn. Boyfriend wasn't kidding. He doesn't have a pot to piss in.* Halley cringed as she pulled a large can of sweet potatoes from his cupboard. She eyed the canned veggies with disdain and placed it on the counter. Hadn't the man ever heard of fresh produce? Potatoes in a can were about as appetizing as an old shoe. Slim pickings or no, she'd make do with what he had.

After scouring a bare-bones fridge, Halley found some thick-cut deli turkey, some butter, and a bag of frozen vegetables in the freezer. A quick search under the stove led her to a single large frying pan and a rusted old pot. *Good Lord.* The man obviously never cooked. What the hell did he eat? She glanced over toward the counter, glimpsing the canned sweet potatoes, and shook her head with a frown. "You don't cook much, do you?" she hollered over her shoulder as she set the pan on his stove and went to work preparing the meal.

A jolt of electricity alerted her to his close proximity before he even spoke. "Does opening up a can of corn count as cooking?" Nick's voice sent shockwaves of excitement bouncing off her skin, and a dull ache radiating between her thighs. What bizarre power did he have over her that his voice could affect her in such a manner? She wanted to rip his clothes off and get down to business right there in the kitchen, dinner be damned.

She glanced over her shoulder as she stirred the ingredients together over high heat. Nick leaned against the wall with his feet crossed at the ankles, watching her with intense curiosity.

"No," she said, stifling back a surprised laugh. "No, it doesn't."

He swiped his hand over his face and sighed. "Don't look at me like that, Princess. I used to cook all the time before I moved out here. Hell, I'd even say I enjoyed it." He rolled his shoulders and sniffed. "It was kind of relaxing. You know?"

Hell yes, she knew. Cooking, baking was what she knew best. It was ingrained in her; it was who she was. The idea of never creating an edible masterpiece with her hands was completely foreign to her.

Halley bit her lip, stifling a frown. Why would he give up something he enjoyed? She narrowed her eyes. "So if you liked cooking so much and found it relaxing, why don't you do it anymore?" She plucked the empty potato can from the counter and held it up. "This right here isn't very healthy, you know."

Nick's face hardened to stone, and he pushed himself away from the wall. "I lost something."

Confused, Halley pressed further. "You lost—"

Nick sliced a hand through the air. "Can we just not go there right now? Please?" He looked down at his feet for a moment before meeting her eyes. The sadness that was always present beneath his vibrant blue eyes grew exponentially, permeating every fiber of his being. He shook his head. "I just...can't."

Bewildered by his sudden shutdown and heartbroken by the overwhelming sadness radiating off him, Halley decided a change of subject was in order. "Here." She beckoned him over to the where she stood. Lifting up the wooden spoon, she blew on the scorching food so he could have a taste. "Well? How is it?" she asked after he'd swallowed a mouthful.

He didn't need to speak; his eyes and the look of pure satisfaction swathed across his masculine features said it all. "Fuck, Princess," he groaned. "That's...damn, that's good stuff. How'd you do that? I've got nothing but cardboard and rocks in my fridge."

Pleased she'd been able to sway his emotions toward the positive, Halley tasted a spoonful for herself and shrugged. *Not bad, all things considered.* "I don't know. I..." She paused, wondering what was so damn funny and why Nick had a goofy grin sprawled across his face. "What? Why are you laughing?" She set the spoon down and wiped at her mouth. "Do I have food on my face?" *God, please don't let me have food on my face.*

"Yeah." He chuckled. "Actually you do." He stepped forward, so close his chest grazed her own.

That small touch was all it took. Her nipples hardened to tight buds, and a zing of hot excitement barreled through her already wanton body.

With a tender hand, he swiped her hair off her shoulders and leaned forward. "Here," he whispered before brushing her lips with his own. The sensation was so

delicious her knees started to give way. And the moment his tongue darted out to lick away the small remnant of food... Fire coursed through her veins. Passion and need consumed every cell in her body. Good Lord, he tasted divine, minty and fresh. Did the man walk around chewing mints all day? A deep aching hunger sprang forth, and she wanted nothing more than to lick him from head to toe, taste every inch of his body. He'd had his fill of her earlier that day in the shower, on her bed. Turnabout was fair play, as far as she was concerned. *Oh yeah, baby.* She was going to eat him up.

Eager to feel his skin under her fingertips, she ran her hands beneath his shirt, grazing hardened nipples and cold steel. The T-shirt covered too much of his skin and clearly had to go. In fact, if she had it her way, the man would never wear a shirt in her presence. Pants either. "Shirt. Off," she said breathily while tugging the irritating scrap of cotton up and over his head. *There we go. Oh yeah...*

Gliding her hand up his arm and behind his neck, she pulled him in for another kiss, deeper than the first. A low moan rumbled from deep in her throat. She felt his glorious lips from the tip of her head all the way down to her painted toes. God, but the man could kiss!

Ghosting her hands down warm, smooth skin covering taut, hardened muscle, she focused her attention on the steel running through his nipples. Nick moaned, an erotic and deeply sensual sound, as she rolled the rings between her fingers and thumbs. It wasn't enough just to caress the piercings with her fingers. Oh, no. She knew how sensitive they were, knew how much he liked it when she tugged on the rings. She wanted to suck on him, taunt him, pleasure him with her mouth.

Laving and nipping at the skin on his neck, she licked and tasted her way down to his chiseled pecs. A loud hiss filled her ears as her tongue darted out, barely grazing his tight bud.

"Aww fuck, Princess. That feels..." He threw his head back and slammed his hands onto the edge of the counter behind him with a groan.

She circled her tongue around the ring before grazing his nipple with her teeth, then tugging on the ring.

"You're driving me crazy," he said with a hiss.

Halley felt her lips curl into a satisfied smile. Clearly women weren't the only ones with sensitive nipples.

Satisfied with her ability to drive him crazy with lust, she trailed her lips down the smooth contour of his washboard abdomen. With a wicked smile she dropped to her knees and darted her tongue across the deep ridges of his six-pack, circling his navel. Her hands followed suit, trailing down his sides until they came to rest over the waistband of his jeans. Never. Never had she tasted anything as good as his skin. All masculine with a fresh soapy scent, he tasted just the same, and she couldn't get enough.

As if they had a mind of their own, her fingertips ducked beneath the waistband of his pants, trailing back and forth across the skin of his lower

abdomen. She felt a bit like a kid who'd just been given a wad of cash inside her favorite toy store. So excited, she wasn't quite sure where to begin.

Wait a minute... She reached down farther with her fingertips, feeling nothing but a lot of warm skin and nothing else. *Yum.* Nick went commando under his low-rise jeans.

Heat prickled across her neck, and a warm rush of wetness pooled between her legs, soaking her panties. Licking her lips, Halley glanced up, questioning him with her eyes as she unbuttoned his pants. "Is this... Can I?" *Please say yes. Please, please, say yes.* Fellatio had never been her thing, but with Nick, for some reason, she couldn't wait to have him in her mouth. Honestly, she'd never heard of any man turning down a blowjob before. But hey, with the way her luck was running lately, anything was possible.

Nick peered down at her through dark eyes, the rapid rise and fall of his chest cluing her in to how much he was enjoying the idea of her mouth all over his dick.

"Christ, baby. You don't have to. You know, if you, uh, don't want to." His expression was comical. With his lips pressed together tightly and his eyes half closed, he looked like he might explode if she didn't relieve him. And did she ever want to relieve him.

Tracing the contour of his bulging erection on the outside of his jeans, she carefully unzipped his pants, tugged the waistband down, and watched in fascination as his swollen cock sprang free.

Smooth, with an impressive amount of girth and a length that had her questioning his ability to fit inside her earlier that morning, Nick's cock was a thing of beauty. Halley licked her lips and ran her finger just over the tip, smiling when he trembled and hissed in pleasure. "It's so..." She looked up and met his eyes. "You're huge."

A wide grin spread across his face, and he ran a finger down her cheek, setting her flesh on fire with his heated touch. "Flattery will get you everywhere, baby."

Unable to wait another second, she focused on the straining appendage in front of her. Leaning in, she licked the heated skin from base to tip, smiling on the inside as she listened to his pleased gasp. Swirling her tongue around the tip, she took him all the way into her mouth.

Nick let out a low "aww fuck" as she sheathed him fully with her mouth, so deep the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat. She pulled back, grazing the tip again with her teeth as she grasped the base with her hand. Halley found her rhythm quickly, sliding, sucking, and pumping with her fist until he was nothing but a quivering mass of flesh beneath her hand. She worked him hard, over and over, driving him to the brink only to ease off moments later. He'd tortured her with pleasure that morning, and she could do no less for him.

Nick's hands that gripped the counter made their way to her head, guiding her up and down as she brought him closer to release. "Shit, Halley. I'm... Fuck! I'm close."

His low, breathy voice sent a wisp of heat coursing through her. She squeezed her thighs together, needing to do something, anything to relieve the pressure.

He pulled on her chin, urging her to break away before he blew, but she shook her head and continued her ministrations, redoubling her efforts. With her free hand, she cupped the heavy sack beneath, gently squeezing her fingers as she hummed deep and long in her throat. The vibration from the humming sent him over the edge.

“Fuck! Halley!” It was glorious. He was beautiful. His hips jutted forward, pumping back and forth as he rode out his orgasm, his fingers gripping her hair, hanging on for dear life. The sweet sound of her name bursting from his mouth in panting, labored breaths was music to her ears. She’d be doing this again. And again and again.

Once the last pulses of his release ebbed, Halley pulled back and tucked him back into his jeans, zipping him up. She met his eyes with a smile. “Wow. That was...”

He grasped her by the shoulders, pulling her up off her knees. “‘Wow’ doesn’t begin cover it, Princess.” Dipping his head down, he nuzzled her neck, kissing his way up to her face and finally settling on her lips. “Mmm.” He moaned. He pulled back, capturing her gaze with his own before darting in for one last peck on the lips. “You’re amazing. You know that?”

Halley bit her lip and blushed. Nick thought she was amazing. Despite all her faults, her crippling fears and anxiety-ridden episodes, he thought she was amazing. Her heart leaped at his words. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, tell him he was the amazing one. She wanted to thank him for watching out for her, for saving her from Norvall, and comforting her when no one else could. What she really wanted was to tell him she’d fallen for him. But given the way he’d bolted after their first kiss, the way he always seemed so torn, so tortured, she didn’t want to push him. He’d shut down earlier, admitting he’d lost something, and she worried if she pressed him about it or sprang her feelings on him he’d shut her out completely. One way or the other, she’d find out what it was that tormented him, and she’d stop at nothing to make him whole again.

The stench of burnt sweet potato followed by a billow of smoke wafting up behind Nick caught Halley’s attention. “Oh crap! The food!”

Too late. The smoke detector went off. Loud, obnoxious beeping tore through her ears. Feeling like a complete idiot for forgetting to turn off the burner, Halley grabbed a nearby towel, grasped the searing hot handle of the pan and threw it into the sink while Nick took care of the alarm.

Hot steam rose up from the sink with a hiss as she doused the pan. Coughing and sputtering, she turned to face Nick and found him doing the same. “So much for preparing you a home-cooked meal,” she coughed out. “God, Nick. I’m sorry. I—”

“Seriously? You’re apologizing?” His eyes widened, and his upper lip pulled up in one corner, revealing a smirk. “You just blew me in my kitchen, Princess. I’d say you’ve got nothing to apologize for.”

Frustrated, Halley threw her hands into the air. “I burned dinner!”

Nick shrugged, seeming not fazed by the situation. “Look”—he stepped forward, grasping her by the shoulders—“I’ll pick something up. Okay? It’s really no big deal.” He pulled open a nearby drawer and sifted through a bunch of takeout menus.

So that’s how he eats.

“You like Chinese?”

Halley frowned. “Yes, but—”

Nick placed a warm finger on her lips, effectively shushing her. “Stop worrying, Halley.” With a wink and a smile, he swiped his keys off the counter and headed for the door. He stopped and turned before closing the door and pointed a finger in her direction. “Stay put. Don’t leave this apartment for any reason. You feeling me?”

A ripple of desire surged through her veins. *Oh, I feel you all right. Every freaking, delicious inch of you.*

“Halley? Did you hear what I said?”

His serious tone shook her back into the here and now.

“I need you to stay put. Promise me.” His jaw was taut, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

For crying out loud. How old does he think I am? Two? Overcome with attitude, she stood at attention and saluted him—“Sir. Yes, sir!”—before sticking out her tongue. She ignored his frown of disapproval and went to work on his messy kitchen as he exited the apartment with a curse.

After scouring his kitchen, Halley took a seat on his sofa and waited for Nick to return. And waited. And waited some more. She pulled out her cell and checked the time. Half an hour. The restaurant wasn’t far, and it was known for their fast service. Where the hell was he? She nearly jumped out of her skin when her cell went off in her hands. *Sheesh!* The familiar ringtone told her it was Kat, so she answered right away.

Afraid Kat would worry if she went home and saw she wasn’t there, she’d left her a voice mail earlier to let her know she’d be spending the evening with Nick.

She sank back into the couch with a sigh. “Hey, Kat. I take it you got my message?”

Halley heard the jingling of keys over the line. “Yep, got your message. I’m actually just walking into the apartment now. Dad ate some bad sushi for lunch, and well, you can imagine. I didn’t feel like bearing witness to a grown man crapping his pants, so I cut the visit short.” A loud gasp echoed through the phone, and Kaiti’s breathing kicked up a notch. “What the...? Oh my God! Halley!”

Kaiti’s terrified screaming sent Halley into a panic. Clueless as to what had her friend so terrified, she held her head in her free hand, gripping a fistful of hair. “Kat! What’s happening? Kat?”

A loud crash rang out over the line, followed by the sound of muffled movement.

Violent images of a sex-crazed lunatic wielding a machete toward Kat raced through her mind. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks, and she shook her head in denial, praying the sounds carrying over the phone were not what she'd imagined. Her body shook, silent sobs racking her as she stared at the kitchen wall, not really seeing anything.

Dread, cold and terrifying, rippled across her skin, shaking her to the core as the sound of heavy breathing wafted across the other end of the line.

"Stupid whore. I warned you to stay away from the tatted-up asshole."

The voice carrying across the phone sent shockwaves of terror through her, chilling her to the bone. Her stalker was in her home, with Kaiti, doing God knew what to her. Digitally altered somehow to disguise his true identity, his voice was easily the most horrific sound she'd ever heard.

"You fucked him, Halley. Took him inside of you this morning. Was it good, lover mine?"

The world around her began to spin, and her vision tunneled. Halley sank to the kitchen floor and sobbed into the phone, terrified of the evil monster on the other end of the line and what he might have done to Kaiti.

"Bitch! You're no longer pure for me, and for that you will pay."

Halley shook her head violently, wincing with each horrifying word. "No! No, please!"

The sick sound of maniacal laughter carried over the phone before the line went dead.

"Kaiti! No!"

Chapter Thirteen

Halley snatched her bag off the couch and tore through Nick's apartment and out the front door. Her mind focused on getting to Kaiti as quickly as she could, she didn't see Nick until it was too late. She crashed into him at full speed. Bodies tangled together, they careened through the air and smashed into the wall on the opposite side of the hallway with a loud grunt.

Nick rolled, untangling limbs as he moved to sit up. "Dammit, Princess. Fuck! What did I tell you about leaving the apartment? I—"

"No! No!" Halley shook her head and jumped up. "It's Kat! He got to her. In our apartment. He hurt her. Please. We have to help her!"

Nick's blue eyes darkened, and he shot off the floor. "Let's go." He grasped her by the wrist and without hesitation raced her out the building and into his truck that sat parked nearby.

Halley fished her cell from her bag and phoned the police as he sped them through the crowded San Francisco streets toward her apartment.

Panic overrode everything, and she struggled to think, let alone breathe. Sick to her stomach, she dug around in her bag for her Xanax, popped the cap, and swallowed two pills. Fear had her in a choke hold, its razor-sharp claws waging war against the last shreds of hope she had left. "What if we're too late? What if he...?"

A large, warm hand gripped her knee and squeezed. With that simple touch, the world and everything in it slowed down. The fear and desperation eating at her was still present, but along with it was the promise of comfort, of safety. Nick. He didn't say anything. Didn't have to. That one action alone spoke volumes. He was there for her. He'd be her rock, her support. No matter what they found at her apartment or what happened in the future, she knew Nick would be there to shield her from pain and harm. She placed her hand on top of his and squeezed back. *God. For Kaiti's sake. Please don't let us be too late.*

* * *

He had barely rolled his truck to a stop before Halley jumped out and raced toward her flat.

Juiced up on adrenaline, Nick slammed the gear into park. "Goddammit, Halley. Wait!" Gripping his keys, he bolted out of the truck and hotfooted it into the building, fast on her heels. There was no way in hell he was letting her into that

apartment alone. If he had his way, she wouldn't step foot into her apartment at all until he knew it was safe.

Fortunately for him, the police had beaten them to the scene. A handful of officers littered the street in front of the building and the narrow hallway near Princess's front door. Paramedics wheeled the pixie out of their apartment on a gurney just as they hit the top of the staircase.

Halley rushed forward and gripped the sides of the gurney with a heart-wrenching wail. "Kaiti! No!"

The despair tainting Halley's voice ate away at Nick's gut like a festering wound. He'd give away everything he owned and sell his soul to the highest bidder to ensure she'd never have to suffer or endure that level of pain again.

The pixie slashed a tiny hand through the air while tugging at the oxygen mask covering her bloodied and swollen lip. "I'm okay. Really! People need to stop fussing over me and focus their energy on catching the shithead that broke in." She jabbed her thumb toward the medic to her left and scowled. "I'm perfectly capable of walking out of here on my own two feet, but jerk-off over here won't allow it." She eyed the gangly medic with a shocking amount of disdain and groaned.

The medic rolled his eyes. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "You took a serious blow to the head, and I'm pretty sure your wrist is broken. So, yes, Ms. Raine, you need to be transported on a gurney."

A fresh round of tears began flowing down Halley's cheeks the moment the medic uttered the words "serious blow to the head."

"Oh God, Kaiti," Halley cried. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Hal, it is not your fault a psychopath broke into our home. Asshole knocked me down trying to get out of the apartment, and I took out the coffee table with my face and arm." She hesitated for a moment and looked off to the side, eyes glassy with unshed tears. The tough act she was putting on for her roommate was obviously just that—an act. Lower lip quivering, she finally broke down, her voice cracking as she tried to speak. "I'm so sorry, Halley. I was so scared, and Mocha, she got loose. I don't know where she is. I—"

One of the paramedics, a pear-shaped woman with an unnatural amount of facial hair, peeled Halley's fingers from the metal gurney and shoved her out of the way. "Conversation over, Miss. You need to stay back so we can do our job." The burly woman then pegged Nick with a look of extreme irritation before following her coworkers toward the stairs. "Keep her out of our way." She shot a quick glance at Halley and then met his eyes again. "And if you can, keep her out of that apartment." With that, she rushed forward to assist the other paramedics as they hefted Kaiti down the narrow stairwell.

The fleshy paramedic's words still lingered in the air when out of the corner of his eye, Nick saw Halley lunge forward toward the stairs, eyes frantic and filled with tears.

"Oh no, you don't!" He dove forward, caught Halley around the waist, and whipped her around so her face was buried against his chest.

Clearly grieving, she sagged in his arms, her body trembling with breathy sobs. "Why, Nick? Why? Why is this happening, and when is it going to stop?"

Fury blazed inside him. He tightened his hold on Halley and pressed his lips to the top of her head. He didn't have a damn clue why shitty things happened to good people. But what he did know, what he was damn sure of, was that if the police didn't catch the douche bag responsible, things would get a hell of a lot worse before they got better.

* * *

Nausea ripped through Halley's gut as she raced through the glass entryway of the emergency room. Nick trailed behind her, cell phone pressed to his ear as he filled Damon in on what had happened. They'd both been detained at her residence by Hunter, who'd been the first officer on scene. Hysterical with grief over Kaiti's attack and her missing pet, she'd been unable to answer any of the inspector's questions. Neither Hunter nor Nick would allow her into her home and even went so far as to usher her outside for questioning. Tired, heartsick, and emotionally spent, Halley shut down. She'd fled the scene, much to Hunter's chagrin, aching to get to Kaiti.

After accosting a chubby nurse dressed in bright pink scrubs with the personality of a bulldog, she hurried to the far side of the emergency room, ripped back the curtain shrouding Kat's bed, and gasped in horror. "No! Kat!"

Bruised and surly, Kaiti sat propped up against a mountain of pillows, wearing an irritated scowl. She tugged at her IV line and shook her head. "One little concussion and they treat you like you're dying. Whatever!"

A pronounced bruise traveled down the left side of her face, leaving the corner of her eye swollen and her upper lip puffed and bloodied. She glanced down at the cast encasing her left arm and groaned. "Goddamn medic was right. Fractured my wrist breaking my fall."

Unable to choke back her sobs, Halley raced to Kat's bedside. Smoothing a stray curl out of her face, she grasped her right hand, taking care not to jostle the IV tubing crawling down the length of her tiny arm. "Kat. I'm so..." The tears came so fast and hard she could barely make out the outline of her best friend lying in front of her. Her voice, muffled by the giant lump in her throat, came out strangled and pathetic. "This is because of me. I'm so sorry."

Kat shook her head, wincing in pain from the slight movement before focusing on Halley. "None of this is your fault, Hal. Frankly, I'm just happy it was me who caught the creep off guard." Her lips mashed together as she nervously smoothed the faded sheet covering her. "I just... I can't imagine what would have happened if it had been you who walked in on him."

A strangled sob blew past Halley's lips. "How can you say that? He hurt you, Kat. He..." Overcome with emotion, she broke off, unable to speak.

She didn't care what Kat said. It was her fault. She was saddled with a sick predator hell-bent on making her his own. If she'd paid better attention to her surroundings at the Black Diamond, she wouldn't have some sick bastard slithering around, following her every move. The psycho creep wouldn't have broken into her apartment, Kaiti never would have been attacked, and her precious Mocha wouldn't be wandering around the city lost and alone. No. This was entirely her fault, and she'd never live it down.

Nick moved in behind her, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. Even now, as grief-stricken as she was over Kat's attack, his touch, his presence somehow soothed her. "Did you see who did this to you?" he asked, anger tainting his voice.

Kaiti closed her eyes and eased back into the pillows with a sigh. Frustration and fear marred the soft lines of her face, creasing the skin between her eyes. "No," she said and sucked in a deep breath. "I walked into the apartment, and he was..." Her entire body shook as the weight of what happened crashed down onto her. She bit her lip and swiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks. "He was dressed all in black and wearing a black ski mask. The place was torn apart. The walls, those pictures, those words. My God," she broke off, gasping for air.

A petite, auburn-haired nurse rushed in, no doubt reacting to the elevated beeping coming from the monitors. She glared at Halley and Nick. "I'm sorry, but you two will have to leave. I can't have you upsetting my patient." After checking the monitors, she injected something into Kat's IV.

Halley shook her head in protest. "No! Please. I won't say anything else. Please let me stay." Her entire body shook as she gripped the metal bar on the side of the bed as if it were her lifeline.

Ignoring her desperate pleas, the nurse stuck to her guns and pointed toward the flimsy curtain. "Out! Now!"

Heartsick, she leaned down and kissed Kaiti on the forehead and smoothed away another stray curl. "I'll be close by," she whispered. "I promise."

Apparently groggy from whatever it was the nurse had shot into her IV, Kaiti gave a slight nod before drifting off into the ether.

Nearly hysterical and barely aware of her surroundings, Halley felt as though she were floating when Nick ushered her from Kaiti's bedside. He guided her over toward a set of chairs in the waiting area. The loud snap of the hospital curtain being drawn to a close behind her ripped her from the fog holding her under. It was then she saw Damon hunched over in the chair beside her, his eyes dark, his jaw rigid, and his hands clasped together tightly.

"Is she..." He faltered for a moment and cleared his throat before trying again. "How's Sassy? She gonna be okay?"

Halley had never seen Damon so upset. Truthfully, the few times she'd encountered him, he'd proven himself to be somewhat of a smartass with an obnoxious sense of humor. Despite his bold personality, she liked him. He worked

hard, and Nick trusted him, which said a lot. Touched by his concern for her best friend, Halley's body shook as a fresh batch of tears sprang forth.

Nick stepped up to the plate and filled Damon in when she couldn't.

He rubbed soothing circles on her back as he spoke. "She's busted up pretty bad. Loser knocked her off her feet while trying to get away. She hit her head on her coffee table and broke her wrist. As far as anything else, I don't know, man."

A loud groan filled the air, and Damon shot out of his seat. "Fuck!"

Surprised at his reaction, Halley sat up and watched as he paced back and forth under the fluorescent lighting, his hands balled into fists, fury filling his dark eyes. After their meaningful stare back at the bakery, she'd suspected his feelings for Kat ran deeper than friendly flirtation, but she wasn't sure. She was sure now. His emotional display tugged at her heart, and she felt better knowing Kat had a big, strong guy like Damon at her back.

"Think they'll let me see her?" Damon glanced at the faded blue curtain, then back to Halley and Nick. Worry lines creased his forehead, and he swiped a hand through his messy hair.

"Nah, man," Nick said and scrubbed a hand over his face. "They just drugged her up pretty good and kicked us out."

Damon groaned in frustration and threw his hands up in the air. "Gah! I can't fucking take this shit." He paced back and forth, his strides short, erratic. Finally, he stopped. "I need coffee." He waved his thumb toward the hallway. "You guys want some?"

Halley shook her head. All she wanted was for her nightmare to be over, for Kat to be okay, for her puppy to be home safe, and for life to go back to the way it was before the attack.

Nick took a seat in the plastic chair next to her and grasped her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. He glanced up at Damon before focusing on Halley. "I think we're cool, man. Thanks."

Damon gave a sober nod and stormed off in the direction of the cafeteria, anger and frustration billowing off him in waves.

With her head pounding like someone had cleaved it in two, Halley shifted her body in her chair so she faced Nick and swiped away the last remnants of her tears. "You didn't let me into my apartment earlier. Tell me the truth, Nick. What was Kat talking about? What was written on my walls?"

* * *

Nick's stomach seized as if someone shanked him with a blunt weapon, then ripped the damn thing from his body while he watched. The room spun around him, and he closed his eyes, took a deep breath to steady himself. He couldn't help Princess if he was out cold on the floor.

The words. Christ. It was just like before. Just like it was with Sarah. The one glance he'd stolen into Halley's place tore down the walls he'd so carefully spent the

past two years building. Memories, painful and unwanted, flooded his brain, ripped at his psyche. Bloodred words scrawled onto the walls of her apartment sucked him back into his painful past. *Slut. Whore. Bitch.* Hateful, evil words meant to harm, to cut deep, burned themselves into his brain.

Although the hand that wrote them was different, the words were the same, and that scared the hell out of him. Sarah's loss had nearly killed him. He couldn't bear to lose Halley the same way. He refused to lose Halley the same way. *Shit.* It was a good thing he'd caught her before she bolted into her apartment. And thank fuck for Officer Douche Bag. He didn't particularly care for the uptight asshole, but he was glad he'd kept Halley from seeing the rest of the chaos her stalker had left behind.

Actually, chaos would have been welcome compared to the shitstorm the sick freak left in his wake. Her couch lay sliced up and overturned. Her pictures were torn from the walls, their frames shattered. In their place hung hundreds of black-and-white photos of him and Halley naked in her shower in the throes of their early morning lovemaking. The sick fuck had been in her apartment and somehow managed to get a camera hooked up so he could spy on her.

A maelstrom of rage tore through Nick, swirling up from his gut at high velocity until he was sure he'd explode, taking out everyone and everything in a ten-foot radius of him. The idea that someone had been in her apartment unbeknownst to her, rifling through her things, desecrating her private space, sickened him. Until he could clean her place up, locate the hidden cameras, dispose of them, and change her locks, he wasn't letting Halley set foot into her apartment.

"Answer me, Nick." Her eyes filled with determination and anger as she stared him down. His heart swelled, bursting with admiration. She was shy and unassuming for sure, but when faced with an insurmountable amount of shit, her inner strength shone through. Simply put, Halley was amazing, and he cursed himself for keeping her at arm's length. He wondered how it was he'd managed to blind himself to the fact he'd fallen for her. It didn't matter that his heart was shredded and barely functional. Princess had somehow managed to worm her way into his soul and patch up the tattered holes left over from Sarah's death.

Nick breathed in deep and swiped at the back of his head. Lying was out of the question, but he didn't exactly have to tell her everything either, so he chose his words carefully. "Just a bunch of shit meant to scare you." He squared his shoulders and raised an eyebrow. "That's all I'm gonna tell you, so drop it." After pegging her with another harsh glare, all but daring her to cross him, he sat back in his seat and relaxed a bit. "You're not going back there either."

Halley opened her mouth to protest, but he shut her down hard and fast, waving her off with his hand. "Don't even bother trying, baby. Until the bastard that did this shit is dead or behind bars, you're staying with me." Preferably dead, if Nick had any say in the matter.

Someone cleared his or her throat, tearing his attention from Halley. Nick glanced over his shoulder and saw Officer Douche Bag towering over them, his lips

pulled down into a frown. His charcoal gray suit and the leather portfolio he clutched in one hand only served to add to his already uptight and altogether irritating persona.

Nick cringed on the inside when Halley pulled her hand from his. She swiped it through her hair and chomped away at her lip, fidgeting in place. Her tiny fingers gripped the edge of the plastic seat, making it painfully obvious she was stressed to the max.

Nick hated to see her so uncomfortable and wished there was something he could do to make it all just go away.

Finally, with a grimace, she looked up and sighed. "Hunter. Listen, I'm sorry I took off so quickly during questioning. I just—"

"It's all right, Halley," Hunter said, slicing a hand through the air, cutting her off. "I understand your desire to check on your friend. There's no need to worry or feel bad about caring for someone."

He cast her a soft smile, sending the contents of Nick's stomach hurtling upward with the force of a rocket. *Way to lay it on thick, assface.* He saw through Officer Uptight's façade easily. The guy was into Halley, and really, Nick couldn't fault him for it. Any man with a pulse and a set of eyeballs could see she was an angel sent from heaven. Nick didn't care if Hunter was a inspector. Hell, he wouldn't let her alone with the damn Pope at this point. He didn't trust anyone.

Halley exhaled long and slow, her shoulders visibly relaxing once she realized Hunter wasn't going to read her the riot act. "Thank you. Thank you for understanding."

"It's not a problem, Halley. I do need to speak with you, though." He cast Nick a harsh glare, then turned back toward Princess. "In private, if you don't mind?" He held out his arm, signaling her to follow him. "If you'll come with me, please?"

The hell with that. Nick sat forward in his seat, eyebrows drawn together. He shook his head. "She's not going anywhere with you." Until the bastard terrorizing Princess was behind bars, he wasn't letting her out of his sight.

A tic formed in Hunter's jaw, and Nick swore he saw a flash of anger in his eyes before he focused his attention on Halley. He stretched his arm out, reaching for her once again. "Halley? If you don't mind?"

She flinched, and Nick shot out of his seat, throwing his body between her and Hunter. "Don't touch her, asshole. I said she's not going anywhere with you."

A cacophony of voices filled the air.

Halley gasped, tugging on his arm frantically. "Nick! It's okay. Stop! Please!"

Hunter, eyes filled with rage, puffed out his chest and jabbed a thick, sausage-like finger toward him. "It's in your best interest, Mr. Ackart, not to interfere with my investigation."

The sound of Halley's frantic pleas tore at Nick's insides, and he turned his head, his heart sick at the sight of her beautiful face twisted with worry. *Fuck.* He'd made the situation worse when all he wanted to do was look out for her, make

things better. With a deep breath, he scrubbed his hand over his face and took a step back. Maybe he needed to ease up a bit. "Fine. Question her all you want. But you'll do it where I can see you. Understood?"

Hunter glared back at him, all business and ready to throw down if need be.

"Enough already." Exasperation tainting her face, Halley jumped out of her seat and placed a tiny hand on Nick's chest. "I'll be fine, Nick. Really." She turned to face Hunter, and pointed toward an open curtain across the room with an empty bed. "Can we talk there? Will that work?"

The acrid taste of shame filled Nick's mouth. He was an ass. Because of his anger-filled tirade, Halley was now playing the go-between, trying to make him happy. Princess had every right to go with Hunter, talk to him about whatever. But she knew he was worried over her and fought to give him what he wanted. He felt sick. Halley was too good for him, plain and simple.

Hunter pegged Nick with another scowl before nodding. "You've been through a lot, Halley, so I won't force the issue." He strode over the empty space and turned, raising a finger toward Nick. "Do not try my patience further, boy. Stay seated."

Boy? Nick shifted in his seat, ready to tell Officer Douche Bag where he could stick that damn finger of his, when he caught a glimpse of Princess shaking her head. With narrowed eyes, he concentrated on her sweet lips as she mouthed the word *please*. That was all it took. Pissed off as he was, he'd never do anything to hurt Halley. If she needed him to stay put, he would. Still, leashed or not, he wasn't taking his eyes off her.

* * *

Physically tired and mentally worn, Halley just wanted to climb onto the empty hospital bed and sleep. But with Kaiti's attack, the destruction of her home, Nick's overprotective ranting, and Hunter standing over her, she knew rest was the last thing she'd be getting. Instead of sprawling out like she wanted to, she took a seat on the edge of the bed and met Hunter's gaze head-on. "So," she said and sighed. "You have more questions for me? I don't know that I have answers for you, as I wasn't at the apartment when Kat was attacked, but I'll try."

Forehead creased, Hunter shook his head. "No more questions, Halley. I'd like to speak to you about Mr. Norvall."

The pungent hospital smell of ammonia, combined with the stench of sickness and death already had Halley on edge, but the moment Hunter uttered the words "Mister" and "Norvall," the room took on a violent spin, and she had to grip the edge of the bed to keep from falling over.

She choked out a loud gasp and lurched forward. "What? Is... Did he..."

"Make bail?" He gave Halley a sober nod. "Just this afternoon, unfortunately."

A wave of nausea barreled through her, and she shook, her body pumping with adrenaline. She hated her body's automatic reactions since the attack. It didn't matter whether news was good or bad, both sent her spiraling into anxiety. Just

like two years before. Her perception, the way her mind dealt with everyday ordinary things, skewed way off track, and simple things like the telephone ringing sent her careening into panic. She clutched her stomach, willing its contents to stay put. "Do you think Norvall's behind Kaiti's attack?"

Hunter nodded. "It's a distinct possibility, Halley. We've got officers looking for him as we speak. I will say that he's not the only person of interest at this time." He shifted in place, pressed his lips together, and cast a glance toward the waiting area where Nick sat.

A sick feeling sprang into Halley's chest. She didn't like where Hunter seemed to be going.

Hunter cleared his throat and continued. "As I was saying, I'm afraid you need to prepare yourself for the possibility your assailant may be someone you know."

Halley jerked back, confusion and disbelief permeating every corner of her mind. "Someone I know? That can't be." Her circle of friends was small, and lately, with the start of the business, nonexistent, with the exception of Kaiti. She hadn't dated in months, and was sure her last fling wasn't the creep terrorizing her because he'd called things off. Not to mention she'd heard through certain circles the guy recently came out of the closet and was dating a male underwear model out of New York. Halley always thought he was a bit too metro. Regardless, there wasn't anyone in her life she could picture coming after her in such a manner.

Her gaze traveled to Nick. A mask of seriousness was scrawled across his face as he watched her. Aside from David Nichols, whom she hadn't seen since their meeting at the bakery, he and Damon were the only new men in her life. Both were more than capable of putting a serious hurt on her and Kaiti with their massive builds. But something deep inside her heart told her they weren't involved.

Damon's earlier meltdown over Kat's condition and the fact that he raced to the hospital so quickly told her he harbored strong feelings for her best friend. Tender feelings. She'd bet good money that, given the chance, Damon would beat down anyone who so much as looked at Kat with menace in their eyes. Nope, Damon might be a big flirt, but underneath all that false bravado was a teddy bear.

Nick cocked his head to the side, eyebrows raised, and mouthed a quiet *you okay?*

Comfort, warm and familiar, pumped through her veins, pushing away her jitters. Nick was her safe place, the one person who made her feel protected, cared for, and whole. She refused to entertain the notion he had anything to do with the crap raining down on her.

"Halley?"

Hunter's frustrated voice tore her from her thoughts, and she snapped her head around to see him eyeing her warily. "I'm sorry. I just refuse to believe my stalker is someone I know."

He inhaled through his nose and shook his head. "Denial will get you hurt, Halley. You need to pull your head out of the clouds and face facts. In cases like

these, nine times out of ten the perpetrator is someone the victim knows.” His gaze darted briefly over to where Nick sat before settling back on her.

Halley glanced over to Nick, then back to Hunter and narrowed her eyes. “Just what are you insinuating, Hunter?” She knew what he was trying to say but wanted to hear him utter the words.

Hunter squared his shoulders and sighed. “I’m saying your attacker may well be sitting in this hospital. Just how long have you known Mr. Ackart, Halley?”

Vivid images of her morning tryst in the shower with Nick barreled through her mind. The tenderness, the care he’d given her after their lovemaking, shook her to her core. No man had ever shown her that level of kindness and affection. He might look like a ruffian capable of reducing someone to a bloody stain on the floor on the outside, but deep down, his soul was gentle, sweet, and capable of the kind of unconditional love she longed for. Halley had found her diamond in the rough, and it didn’t matter to her she’d only known him a handful of days. She had no intention of ever letting him go.

Halley stood from the bed, her back rigid and her pulse racing as she glared up at Hunter. “Long enough to know he’d never hurt me.”

Hunter stepped forward with his arm outstretched. “Halley, please, you must list—”

“No,” she said through clenched teeth. She heard Nick jump out of his seat, a warm, tingling sensation covering her from head to toe when he stepped beside her.

“Is he upsetting you, baby?”

Halley glanced up at Nick to see him staring Hunter down, pure hatred and rage beaming from his eyes. With a wide stance, his powerful arms crossed over his chest, and a deadly sneer, Nick looked like he was ready to tear Hunter apart.

Sliding her arm beneath Nick’s elbow, she faced Hunter and cast him a haughty glare. “No. As a matter of fact, we’d just finished talking. Isn’t that right, Inspector Blackwood?”

Hunter’s eyes flared at Halley’s use of his full name, and he shook his head and sighed. “You’re making a mistake, Halley. I really think—”

Nick cut him off. “The lady said she was done talking with you, asshole. Conversation over.” He placed a warm hand on her shoulder, ready to usher her away.

“I’d like a word with you, Mr. Ackart.” Hunter’s deep voice boomed off the surrounding walls.

Nick looked over his shoulder and scowled. “See? The funny thing is we don’t always get what we want. I don’t have shit to say to you.”

Hunter stepped forward, his steely gray eyes narrowed to thin slits and his jaw rigid. “You can answer some questions for me here, boy, or I can drag your ass downtown. What’s it going to be?”

Uncomfortable with the escalating scene and terrified Nick had pushed Hunter too far, Halley tugged on Nick's arm, pleading with him to comply. "Please, Nick. Don't fight him."

The hardness on his face softened as he took in her exasperated expression. "Fine," he said, frustration tainting his gravelly voice. "What do you want to know?"

Hunter whipped open his portfolio, pulled out a pad of paper and a pen, and started scribbling away. "First off, I want to know your whereabouts for the entire day."

Eyes full of hatred, Nick heaved a sigh and glared at Hunter. "I went to the gym this morning, after which I went looking for Halley."

"Looking for Halley?" Hunter raised an eyebrow.

"I went for a run this morning and didn't tell anyone where I was," Halley interrupted, caving beneath Hunter's deprecating glare. Her poor choices kept coming back to bite her in the ass.

Hunter shook his head. "Given your situation, Halley, that wasn't the smartest course of action."

Nick folded his arms across his chest and cleared his throat. "Are you gonna ask me some questions, or are you just here to make her feel like crap?"

The air surrounding the two men turned to ice, and Halley was certain a fight would ensue at any moment. Who would throw the first punch? It was anyone's guess.

Hunter took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring as he stared Nick down. "Please continue with your whereabouts."

Nick scoffed. "After I found Princess, we went back to her place, and..."

Prickly heat covered every inch of Halley's flesh as she thought back to the morning she spent with Nick. A warm tingle shot up the length of her spine when she met his gaze and found him smiling down at her.

Nick laced his fingers through Halley's and gave her hand a squeeze before turning his attention back to Hunter. "So, yeah, we stayed at her place for a while. I didn't think it was safe for her to be alone, so I brought her to work with me and then back to my place afterward."

"I see," Hunter said while scribbling away on his pad. "And you were with Halley when she received the call from Ms. Raine?"

"Uh, no." Nick scrubbed at the back of his head and breathed deep. "I was out picking up dinner."

Hunter looked up from his notes, his gaze laced with suspicion and a whole lot of "tell me another one, asshole."

"And where was it that you went, Mr. Ackart?"

His accusatory tone didn't go unnoticed, and Halley cringed. Why was Hunter so suspicious of Nick?

Nick shifted in place and squared his shoulders. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he clenched his teeth. "Uncle Yu's."

Halley squirmed. The bizarre, nonverbal warfare playing out between the two men sent her pulse racing. And not in a good way. Beyond the short, clipped answers and questions laced with incredulity raged a silent battle. Wordless accusations hurled back and forth under the mask of professionalism and pure irritation packed a weighty, oppressive punch.

Hunter narrowed his eyes and faced Halley. "So, how was dinner?"

Halley's stomach clenched, and she bit down hard on the inside of her lip. Truth was, Nick had been gone for quite a while. When she'd crashed into him in his hallway, he'd been empty-handed. Unwilling to believe he had anything to do with Kat's attack, she searched his eyes for the truth.

Nick shook his head at Halley. He shifted his stance and glared at Hunter. "She can't tell you how dinner was because I didn't get it."

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "So, can you explain to me please, Mr. Ackart, why it is you left your apartment in search of food yet came back empty-handed?"

Behind his simple question lay an accusation. Halley was certain of it. *So if you're telling me you went to pick up dinner, then where the hell is it? You're lying to me.*

Nick, every bit the master at silent conversation, didn't miss a beat.

"The place was packed; they jacked up my order and then expected me to pay for cold fucking food. I got pissed and left." *I'm not the one responsible, asshole. I'm trying to protect her.*

"Is there anyone that can account for your presence at the restaurant?" *If you're lying to me, I'll haul your ass to jail, and I'll enjoy it.*

"The place was fucking crowded. The whole damn restaurant witnessed me arguing with the damn checkout lady." His crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "I don't think she'll forget me anytime soon."

He glanced down at Halley, and his eyes softened. Flecks of silver rimmed his vibrant blue irises, drawing her into their haunted depths. "I figured I'd come home, pick you up, and we'd go out somewhere to eat. You know, like a date."

Like a date. Halley's heart swelled with joy. For Nick to admit, in front of Hunter, no less, that he'd planned on taking her out on a date, meant he was opening up, letting her in.

Hunter grumbled under his breath and glared at Nick like he wanted to wipe the floor with his ass. "For your sake, boy, you better be telling the truth."

Nick shook his head in frustration. "What the hell are you focusing on me for? Why don't you go after that douche that lives above Halley? The one that keeps asking her out. He chased her down this morning you know." He pulled a folded sheet of paper from his back pocket and thrust it under Hunter's nose. "Here. Found this with the crapload of flowers sitting in front of her apartment earlier today."

“Um, excuse me,” Halley said, pointing to the scrap of paper. “What the hell is that?” Halley looked from Nick to Hunter, then back to Nick again, pissed he’d kept something from her. “Nick!”

Nick whirled around and got right in her face. “It’s a damn threat, Halley!”

Halley flinched at the force of Nick’s heated words.

His normally vibrant blue eyes were wild and full of anger and frustration. “I found it attached to one of the vases I tossed. I didn’t want you to get scared, so I kept it from you.” He stepped back, his face reddening by the second until he exploded. His heavy arms sliced through the air, and he grasped the back of his head. “Fuck! This is just...” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then turned to face Hunter and jabbed a finger toward him with a scowl.

“Listen, asshole. Whoever left her that note is the bastard that hurt Kaiti, the freak who’s after Halley. Why don’t you fucking do your job and dust that shit for prints or something and quit wasting time questioning me?”

Hunter scowled. “I don’t need direction from you, Mr. Ackart. I’m damn good at what I do. We’re investigating several leads, including Halley’s neighbor, Mr. Gray. I’ll need you to come down to the station for fingerprinting,” he said while sliding the note into a plastic sleeve and tucking it into his portfolio. “If your alibi sticks and we find prints on the note other than yours, you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Something reminiscent of a growl emanated from deep within Nick’s chest. “I’m not worried now, asshole.”

Ignoring Nick’s heated words, Hunter focused on Halley once more. “Do you have relatives or someone you can stay with tonight? Until we can locate Norvall, I’d refrain from going it alone.”

Halley felt Nick stiffen beside her. He stepped forward. “Norvall? He’s out?”

Hunter gave a single nod. “He made bail this afternoon.”

The reminder her attacker was loose, roaming the streets, coupled with Hunter’s suspicion of Nick finally caught up with Halley. Her vision blurred, and she fought to suck in air. Her entire body trembled, and she felt as though she were being buried alive. Weak and shaky, Halley collapsed into Nick’s capable arms just before she hit the floor.

He cupped her cheek with his warm hand. “Don’t worry, baby. I won’t let that bastard anywhere near you. I’ll cut off his goddamn hands and feed them to him before I let him touch you.” He shot Hunter a look of death. “We done here?”

“For now.” He stepped forward, his lips pulled down into a frown. “I’m so sorry to frighten you, Halley. Please be assured, I’m doing everything I can to keep you safe.”

Nick shifted his hands beneath Halley, tightening his grip. “So am I,” he barked over his shoulder. He ushered her from the empty space out into the hallway, where Damon had just returned from the cafeteria, coffee in hand.

Nick sat Halley on a nearby chair and grimaced as she dove into her bag for her Xanax. Doing her best to ignore his disapproving frown, she popped the cap and threw back two more pills. That ought to drown out the god-awful ache in her chest, help her catch her breath.

With a slight shake of his head, Nick clapped Damon on the shoulder, his eyes dark and serious. "You mind staying here and watching over Kaiti for a while? I need to get Halley out of here, and—"

"Uh, hello? I'm sitting right here." Halley cocked her head to the side and waved a hand in Nick's direction, glaring at him when he met her eyes. She crossed her arms over her chest. "If you think I'm leaving this hospital, you are sorely mistaken." Deep in the throes of a panic attack or not, there was no way in hell she'd abandon her best friend. They'd have to peel her cold, anxiety-ridden body off the hospital floor and remove her by force to get rid of her.

Nick heaved a sigh that sounded more like a groan and closed the gap between them. He grasped her by the wrist gently. "Be reasonable, Princess. It's been a long-ass day. Kaiti's drugged up and out of it, and there isn't anything you can do for her at the moment anyway."

"Yes, there is," she protested. "I can be here for her. I can be at her bedside when she wakes up. I can—"

"I'll sit with her, chef girl," Damon interrupted. "I promise you, she won't wake up alone and scared."

Halley's frustration ebbed a bit as she witnessed the sincerity in Damon's eyes. She didn't doubt for a second he was a man of his word and knew Kat would be well looked after between the hospital staff and the hulking man towering in front of her.

Truth be told, hospitals skeeved her out. The metal bite of the steel gurneys and the scent of bleach permeating the air reminded her of her tenure there just a short week ago. And Nick was right; it had been a long day, and she was beyond tired and drained. A good night's rest was definitely on the menu, and then she could return, fresh and ready to be there for Kat in any capacity.

Halley swiped her hands over her face and nodded. "Yeah, okay. I think maybe getting some rest is a good idea." The dizziness from her panic attack had yet to fade away, despite the double dose of anxiety meds she just took, and her body still shook, pumping with excess adrenaline. She jabbed a finger toward Damon and raised an eyebrow. "Promise me you'll stay by her side. I don't want her waking up alone in this sterile nightmare."

Damon crossed a finger over his heart and nodded. "No worries, chef girl. I'm on it." He inclined his head toward Nick. "Later, man." He then strode over toward Kat's cubicle, ducking behind the curtain with stealth so as to avoid Nurse Barracuda.

"C'mon," Nick said, threading his fingers between hers. "Let's get you out of here."

Chapter Fourteen

The drive home from the hospital was a goddamn nightmare. Full of guilt for leaving her best friend and terrified Norvall was lurking around every corner, lying in wait, Halley cried uncontrollably the entire time. Between bouts of self-condemnation and despair over her missing puppy, she fussed about her medication, insisting they needed to stop by her place to retrieve her sleeping pills as well as a change of clothing. The only thing she had on her was her Xanax, which she'd gobbled like candy just before they left the hospital.

It killed him to do it, but Nick shot down her desperate pleas and drove straight to his place. He'd stop by her apartment in the morning and pick up whatever she needed. She didn't need to see the destruction her stalker left behind. Not tonight. Not ever. After the drug-induced nightmare he'd been unable to wake her from the other night, the idea of her throwing back sleeping pills on top of the Xanax already in her system sent his stomach churning. If there were any chance of him helping her face her demons, he needed her lucid.

He cast a sideways glance at Halley as he pulled into his parking space in front of his home. A dull ache tugged at his chest, the sensation growing stronger with each passing second. She was piecing his broken heart back together. By opening himself up to her, helping her, he was healing himself, and for that he was eternally grateful. Overpowered by his feelings of protectiveness, and of... *Shit*, it couldn't be love, could it? He glanced over to Halley, his heart quickening at the sight of her. They'd only just met. Was it possible to fall for someone that quickly? Staring at the dark-haired beauty seated beside him, he was sure anything was possible where she was concerned.

He shook his head, disgusted with himself. Halley was an open book; she held nothing back and gave of herself freely, without reservation. He couldn't say the same for himself. After losing Sarah, he'd closed himself off, shut down the part of him that longed for a connection. Determined never to feel the pain of loss again, he'd built a wall around himself, held people at bay, never let them see his true self. Somehow, and he wasn't sure how she'd done it, Princess penetrated the iron walls he'd put up. He knew, without a doubt, the absence of her in his life would be devastating.

Halley deserved so much more than he gave her. She deserved the truth about who he was, as well as the truth of his feelings for her. His mouth went dry as he ushered her across the sidewalk and into his building. He hoped the truth about his past wouldn't scare her away.

* * *

A strangled moan and the sound of rapid, shallow breathing tore Halley from the first night of non-drug-induced sleep she'd had in days. Groggy and out of it, she didn't remember where she was until Nick's agonized shouts ripped through her foggy haze, thrusting her back into consciousness. Kaiti's attack. Mocha. The hospital. Nick's apartment. The dark reality of the past few days crushed down on her like a heavy, oppressive weight.

"No! Please... No!"

Halley jumped from the force of Nick's voice.

Raspy and filled with pain, his frightened cries bounced off the walls of his bedroom as he thrashed between the black cotton sheets.

"Nick?" Halley rolled over and raised an arm to comfort him, when suddenly he shot forward onto his knees and began pounding on the foot of the bed with heavy fists.

"Breathe! Breathe, goddammit!" His normally deep, gruff voice cracked as he cried out, "No! I won't let you leave me! Breathe!"

Desperate to wake him from his horrific dream, she lurched to her knees, crawled up behind him, and wrapped her arms around his chest, molding herself to his body. "Shhh," she whispered into his ear.

He gasped for air and continued pummeling the bed.

Freaked-out, Halley redoubled her efforts and squeezed him tighter. "It's okay, baby. It's okay. Ssshh."

After a few minutes, his crazed pounding stopped, and he slumped his shoulders forward with a suffocated cry. "Please." His voice broke as he sobbed into his hands. "Don't leave me. Stay."

The sound of Nick's gut-wrenching plea was more than Halley could bear. She snaked herself around his body, knelt in front of him, and cupped his face in her hands. "I'm here, baby. I'm here."

His eyes were dark and cloudy with tears, and he stared right through her as though she weren't there, still lost in his dream.

Needing to comfort him, Halley drew him close, rubbing his back in long, soothing strokes. "Wake up, Nick. Please, baby. Wake up." Heartsick over his pain, she wondered who he'd lost. Obviously someone of great importance to him. But who? Was that what he'd meant earlier when he'd said he lost something? Had he been referring to a person?

Halley felt Nick stiffen beneath her embrace and knew he'd woken from his dream.

"Princess?" He pulled back, a blank look etched across his face. He opened and closed his mouth several times as if to say something but never did. Finally, after swiping away a renegade tear, he shook his head and took a deep breath. "I, fuck, I don't know what to say." He swung his powerful legs over the side of the bed, leaned

forward, and placed his face in his hands. Moonlight beamed in from a small window just over the bed cast a soft glow over his naked torso, highlighting his magnificent form.

The rustling of sheets tore through the silent void as Halley climbed off the king-size bed and knelt on the carpet in front of him. She placed her hands on his knees. "Don't hide from me, Nick. Talk to me."

He scrubbed at his face and lifted his head. His eyes were dark, stormy, and filled with pain. With a wince, he shook his head. "I never wanted you to see me this way. I... Fuck." He groaned and tried to look away, but Halley caught his face in her hands and forced him to meet her eyes.

She shook her head. "What way? Vulnerable?"

His gaze darted to the floor, then the wall, avoiding the heat of her stare.

Frustrated, Halley snapped, "Look at me, Nick."

Silence, heavy and oppressive, weighted the space between them as he did as she asked.

Satisfied he wouldn't look away again, she continued. "It's okay to be vulnerable, Nick. It's okay to show weakness. That's what... That's what makes us human." She swept her fingers along the side of his face, tracing the outline of his scruffy jaw before grasping his shoulders and giving him a shake. "If you were hard as nails 100 percent of the time, I'd wonder what was wrong with you."

He let out a huff and frowned before shaking his head once more.

Halley pressed her lips together and shook her head. *So stubborn.* She dropped her hands to his shoulders and trailed them up and down the length of his arms. "Wanna talk about it?" More than anything, she wanted to help him, take away his pain and carry it herself. Whatever he'd gone through, the loss he'd suffered had fractured him. Nick was cracked, split down the middle, and the wound was raw, fresh. If he'd just open up to her, share with her, she'd do everything in her power to ease his pain and soothe away his suffering.

Nick swallowed hard, the muscles in his neck rippling and straining with the movement as he stared down at her, unwilling to speak.

She sat back on her heels and sighed. *Typical male.* He'd rather agonize in silence than share his burden. Rather than give in to her frustration with his refusal to open up, she focused on his needs instead of hers. He obviously wasn't ready to talk, and forcing the issue was a selfish move on her part. Maybe what he needed was some time to himself.

Using his knees as leverage, Halley pushed herself up from the thick carpet and took a step toward the door, when Nick gently took hold of her wrist.

"Wait." Anguish defiled his raspy voice and tugged at her heartstrings. "Don't go."

Halley whipped back around, and what she saw nearly brought her to her knees.

Nick gripped her wrist as though it were his lifeline. He stared up at her, agony creasing the skin between his eyes, making his lids heavy and his jaw rigid. "Stay with me? Please?"

Unable to bear the sorrow and need radiating off him, Halley climbed onto the mattress and slid between the bedding. She held up the soft cotton sheet and signaled for him to lie beside her. When he did, she wrapped her arms around him and snuggled in close, pressing her chest firmly to his. Sagging against the warmth of his skin, she rested her head in the crook of his neck.

His body trembled beneath her cheek, so she ran her hands over every inch of skin she could find in an effort to soothe him. At that moment, she knew she would do anything to comfort him, anything to make his pain go away. If only she could go back in time, erase the horrible event that broke him. As painful as it might be to risk losing him, she'd do it in a heartbeat if it meant he'd never experience the pain she'd witnessed tonight.

"Promise me," he whispered, his trembling finally easing.

Halley placed a kiss on the smooth skin of his collarbone and nuzzled the warm flesh on his neck. "Anything, Nick."

His strong arms pulled her even closer to his body, crushing her against him. "Don't ever leave me."

A spike of adrenaline, or maybe it was fear, shot through her veins. The mere thought of being parted from him was inconceivable to her. Nick was her lifeline, her heart, and her soul. She needed him like she needed air. Wincing, she closed her eyes, willing the awful thought from her mind. Resolute, she snaked her arms around his large torso and held him tight, reveling in his warmth. "Never."

* * *

Nick held Halley close, one arm wrapped around her middle, the other hand buried in her lush mahogany locks. Relief washed through him as he watched the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest and listened to her soft, shallow breathing. Peaceful. She looked serene and at ease as she slept in his arms, and for that, he was thankful. She'd fallen asleep ages ago, but he couldn't bring himself to join her in slumber.

Shit. Princess had asked him point-blank to talk to her, open up about his past. And like the pussy he was, he'd choked, clammed up, and shut down. *Loser.*

Nick didn't even know where he'd begin. He wanted to share his past with Halley, come clean, lay it all on the line. But what if she couldn't deal? If she had any idea of just how similar her situation was to that of his former love, she'd most likely run screaming for the hills.

Nick rolled onto his back, ran a hand over his face, and let memories he'd worked so hard to bury bubble up to the surface...

“Do you really have to leave? There’s still so much to do before Saturday.” Sarah’s husky voice held a twinge of apprehension, a clear undertone of fear. His baby was strong, too proud to admit, out loud, anyway, the real reason she wanted him to stay home. She was afraid.

Nick’s stomach soured, unease and worry gnawing at his gut. He didn’t want to go to work today. In fact, he hadn’t felt comfortable leaving Sarah alone since her father fired that pervert Travis Nickleson.

The creep was a relative newbie to Anderson’s Construction, the family business where Sarah and Nick worked, and had been harassing her on and off for weeks. At first, no one knew who was sending her the lewd and suggestive e-mails, the flowers and unwanted gifts. Bold, sick, and stupid, Nickelson finally revealed himself when he cornered Sarah in her office and tried to put the moves on her. The slimy bastard was fired on the spot and hauled away by the police. Thing was, with no prior offenses and a rich daddy who provided him with a well-known attorney, the sleazebag got off, scot-free.

The first letter arrived one week after Nickelson was fired. The phone calls started two days after that. Of course, with no prints on the letters and calls that were seemingly untraceable, the Dallas police claimed there was nothing more they could do. Until they had a positive lead or proof Nickelson was behind the disturbances, he and Sarah were on their own. Fucking Barneys.

Nick slipped his other shoe on and stood up from the bed. He crossed the room in a few short strides and drew Sarah into his arms, breathing in her fresh, lemony scent. “Christ, woman. You smell good.” He captured her face in his hands and pulled back, gazing into her impossibly large, sky-blue eyes. “Trust me, sweetness. If I didn’t absolutely have to leave, I wouldn’t.” He swept a soft, blonde curl out of her eyes and kissed her forehead. “Damn idiots down at the MacNair site can’t tell their asses from their elbows.” He pulled away and crossed the room. Cursing under his breath, he grabbed the plans for the MacNair building off his work desk and held them up. “I’ll try to be as quick as I can. I promise, baby.”

Sarah exhaled long and slow and wrapped an arm across her chest, hugging herself. She gave him a quick nod and forced a smile that was meant to be reassuring but wasn’t. “Don’t worry, sugar. I’ll be fine. It’s not like I don’t have a million last-minute details to keep me busy.” She set her coffee mug down and twisted her long, curly blonde locks up into a knot on the top of her head.

She’d slept in one of his white button-downs, and when she lifted her arms to tie up her hair, he was treated to a flash of white lace covering nothing but golden, tan skin.

He crossed the small space between them and kissed her long and deep. One more week. Just one more week and she’d be all his. “Goddammit, woman.” He groaned between kisses. “You keep parading around like that, and I’ll never make it to work.” Hungry, and not for breakfast, he pulled his lips down her neck, savoring her citrusy fresh scent.

She giggled and wrapped her arms around him. “That’s the idea, sugar.”

Nick treated her to one last kiss and pulled back, still holding her in his arms. “Remember what we talked about last night, baby. Stay in the house and don’t answer the door for any reason.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Okay, Dad.” She wriggled out of his arms and sauntered over to her computer desk which sat in the far corner of the room, hips swaying side to side like a metronome.

Smiling to himself because, dammit, she was cheeky and he loved that about her, Nick followed close behind. Reaching out, he snaked an arm around her waist, drew her against his chest, and gave her one final squeeze. And because he knew she wouldn’t mind, he slapped her on the ass for good measure before he made for the door. God, he didn’t want to leave. He jabbed a finger toward her. “Better do what I say, damn, sassy woman.”

“You like my sass!” she shouted from the bedroom as he made his way through the house and out the door.

Those were the last words Sarah ever spoke to him.

His promise to return home as quickly as possible didn’t pan out. In fact, what he’d hoped would be an hour or two of sorting things out turned out to be a long-ass day of picking up slack and doing other people’s jobs for them.

Intent on making it up to her, Nick swung by the local market on his way home and picked up fixings for a home-cooked meal. Seafood pasta was Sarah’s favorite, and dammit, he loved hand-feeding her those little shrimps. Just thinking about the way she sucked the buttery seafood between her lips had his dick rigid as an iron girder. He floored it and kept an eye out for the police as he raced home toward Bluffview, the upscale neighborhood in northern Dallas where he shared a home with Sarah.

Sarah’s father, Donald “Big Bud” Anderson, was one of the five wealthiest men in Texas. The construction tycoon owned land all over Texas and parts of New Mexico. As generous as he was hardworking, he’d set Sarah and Nick up in the smallest of the three homes he owned in the swanky, hilltop neighborhood. Even nicer, he charged them half the normal rent.

Nick wasn’t used to such fancy digs, and he sure as hell wasn’t comfortable eating off Big Bud’s spoon. But after his first week living in the Lone Star State, he soon learned there was nothing the old man wouldn’t do for his baby. Not only had he welcomed Nick into the family no questions asked, Big Bud had also happily provided a home for both Nick and Sarah to live in.

That was why, though it pained him to do it, he’d left the house in such a hurry earlier. Nick didn’t take handouts from anyone, and he’d work damn hard to prove his worth and earn his keep. As soon as he was able to save up enough money, he planned on buying a house of his own.

Hues of purple, pink, and blue smeared across the twilight sky as Nick pulled into the driveway.

Nick hefted the groceries from the back of the vehicle and ambled up the grassy walkway. For seven p.m., the house was oddly dark and unusually quiet. Sarah had yet to grasp the idea of conserving energy. Much to his dismay, she usually kept every light on, making their home a blazing beacon for all to see.

"Sarah?" He padded across the hardwood floor into the kitchen and flipped the light on. After dumping the perishables into the fridge, he rounded the corner and made for the family room. Sarah liked to read those trashy vampire novels, and his best guess was she'd fallen asleep on the couch again while reading.

The cool breeze wafting into the darkened room told him something was wrong before his eyes made purchase. Nick flipped the light switch and looked down at a whole lot of broken glass and toppled furniture. "Fuck! Sarah!"

Running on autopilot, he yanked his cell from his pocket and dialed 911 as he ran full tilt out of the room.

Time seemed to slow as he raced through the house in search of his love. No matter how fast he propelled his feet, it still felt like he was moving in slow motion. Nick flew up the stairs three at a time and ran straight for the master bedroom. He tore open the white, six-paneled door and bolted into the center of what could only be described as his worst nightmare.

"Sarah! Fuck! No!" He vaguely recalled hearing a female voice calling out from the other end of the line as the cell phone he gripped crashed to the floor.

He clutched at his heart as searing pain eviscerated his chest, flaying his skin away layer by bloody layer. The agonizing reality of what lay before him was too much to bear.

Their once pristine white bedroom was now covered in a sea of crimson. Large, reddish brown pools of blood stained the carpet and splattered the walls. Vile, hideous lettering covered the open space just above the headboard of the bed, spelling out the words "Bitch. Slut. Mine." But the thing that stopped his heart, that sent his world spinning off its axis, was the sight of Sarah, hands and feet bound, lying motionless atop their bed in a large pool of sticky blood.

Nick launched himself onto the bed, oblivious to the gray pallor of Sarah's skin, the glossy sheen coating her eyes that stared, unseeing, toward the ceiling.

By the sheer volume of blood that soaked the bedding, covered the floor and walls, it was clear she'd bled out. But that didn't stop Nick from pounding away at her chest for all he was worth. "Breathe, goddammit! Breathe!" He leaned down, pressed his lips against her bloody mouth, and blew before starting on chest compressions again. "C'mon, baby! You're going to live! Breathe! Please. Please, baby. Breathe!"

He didn't hear the paramedics when they entered the house. He didn't hear them when they entered the room, didn't register what was happening when they pulled him off the bed.

Voices, warped and muffled, echoed off the walls as he sat in the center of the room and stared down at his bloodstained hands.

One voice rang out above the rest. "Put your equipment away. We're too late."

Halley shifted in his arms and sighed, yanking him out of the horrors of his past.

He glanced down at the beauty in his arms and swore under his breath. The last thing he wanted to do was cause Halley more heartache, more grief. His gruesome past with Sarah was horrifying, sick, and the kind of scary shit seen in movies. He'd spent the past year trying to cope with the backlash but to no avail. Weekends spent drowning his heartache in booze and meaningless sex did little to dull the pain.

For Nick, life had become an empty black abyss, a waking nightmare. And then, when he least expected it, Halley waltzed into his life, bringing with her light and laughter and the promise of better days to come. The prospect of spending another 365 days in a state of perpetual numbness sent his mind reeling and his ravaged ticker barreling into despair. He needed Halley, to live, to breathe. No. If he told her the truth about his past with Sarah now, it would send her into a spiral that would end their relationship before it even had a chance to begin.

He rolled back onto his side and pressed a kiss to the sugary-sweet skin on her forehead before wrapping his arm around her once again. He'd come clean with Princess. But not yet.

Chapter Fifteen

“And roll the left thumb here.”

Nick pressed his thumb onto the inepad, then smashed it against the sheet of paper. He rolled his chubby digit from one side to the other, following the officer's instructions. The bald, aging cop taking his prints wore a blank look on his face and had the personality of a rock: dense and silent.

The smell of the ink combined with the stench of desperation and filth radiating around the police station sent his stomach reeling. “We done here?” he asked, wanting nothing more than to race home and crawl back into bed with Halley. He hated leaving her alone knowing Norvall was on the loose. But he needed to get this shit over with, and first thing in the morning was as good a time as any. A string of curses blew past his lips as he swiped the ink off his fingers with a towelette the size of a penny. He scowled. How the hell was he supposed to clean up with something so damn small?

The officer gave him a nod and a grunt before sauntering off.

Nick rolled his eyes and made for the exit when a skirmish from the far side of the room caught his attention.

A bald, beefy officer with a mustache and a scowl shoved a handcuffed Shane Gray into a dented metal seat in front of an aging wooden desk.

Shane, obviously pissed, let his opinion be known. He thrashed in his seat, straining against the cuffs binding his hands behind his back. “I fucking told you, asshole. I saw the damn flowers in the hallway and wanted to know who sent them. I read the note and then put it back. I’m not stalking anyone!”

The cop, visibly irritated, slapped a hand onto the desk and leaned forward, eyes on fire. “I told you to shut up, boy. You flap your yap again, and things will get ugly.”

Completely disregarding the officer's warning, Shane stood up from his seat and got in the policeman's face. “You’ve got the wrong fucking guy. I’m innocent!”

Now three shades of purple, the officer rounded the wood-paneled desk and gripped Shane by the shirt with both hands. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, idiot.” He whipped Shane around, gripped him by his cuffed hands, and shoved him toward a nearby interrogation room. The door slammed shut behind him.

Nick pursed his lips. Things were about to get mighty ugly for the blond pretty boy.

“Thank fuck,” he muttered under his breath. He rapped his knuckles on the time-worn, particleboard-covered counter, before turning on his heel and heading for the door. “Looks like Officer Douche Bag’s finally doing his damn job.” One down, one to go. With Shane in police custody, Nick’s only concern other than watching over Halley was making sure Norvall was out of the picture. Once that was taken care of, everything would be as it should.

* * *

The scent of heaven nearly bowled Nick over when he stepped out of his shower. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he left the steamy confines of his small bathroom and headed straight for the kitchen. He’d made it two feet into the front room when the delicious smell of homemade breakfast sent his mouth watering and his stomach growling. “Goddamn, that smells good.”

Princess cast him a satisfied smile and blew him a kiss.

A bit snippy at having no clothing and nothing to cook, Halley had sent a laundry list of items with Nick when he’d left the apartment earlier that morning. He’d swung by her place after leaving the police department. After a fruitless search for her missing puppy, he picked up a bunch of clothing, some toiletries, including that friggin’ awesome smelling shampoo of hers, then stopped by the grocery store before coming home. An idea struck him hard and fast while he shuffled through the market, and he picked up a few extra items to surprise her with.

Despite the fact Norvall was still on the loose, the news of Shane Gray’s arrest visibly eased Halley. The fear, the constant worry dragging her down, lessened, though only a fraction. And her smile that only rarely reached her eyes shone bright with hope when he’d relayed the news. Seeing her relax even a little made him want to search the streets for the bastard stalking her and put him down for good right then and there. At this point, he’d do anything to make her feel better, illegal or not.

Worry chewed through his gut every time he watched her pop those anxiety pills of hers, and she seemed to be doing it more and more frequently. Damon had called that morning to let him know he’d spoken with their boss, David Nichols. David, being the cool guy he was, agreed to give them a few days off to watch over the girls, which Nick thought was damn smart, given their situation. Halley had nearly jumped out of her skin the moment his cell rang and dove for her meds the next second. And she wasn’t tossing back one pill at a time either. She was downing two at a time at regular intervals. Not good. But he wasn’t about to call her on it at the moment. The meds helped her deal with the mountain of shit caving in on her, so for the time being, he’d keep quiet. Once Norvall was caught? Yeah, he’d be helping her to wean herself off that addictive crap.

Halley had insisted on whipping up a hearty meal for them both while he showered, vowing to make this day better than the last. Nick wanted to protest, wanted to tell her he was happy tossing down a piece of bread with some peanut butter slapped on it, but he kept his trap shut. Cooking seemed to ease her. It relaxed her, made her whole, and if that was what she needed, then hell, who was

he to argue? Besides, it would feel damn good to finally put something healthy in his gut. The processed garbage he'd been throwing back left him sick to his stomach half the time.

Nick rounded the corner into his kitchen and came up behind her. "Hey, baby." Overpowered with the need to touch her everywhere all at once, he ground his hips against hers and wrapped his arms around her. Reflexes took over, and he buried his nose in her thick mane of hair, inhaling its sweet, sugary scent. "Do I get a taste?" he asked, trailing kisses down the length of her neck. Her stitches, no longer an angry red, seemed to be healing well. He planned on taking her to her appointment the following week when she'd have them removed. Thank fuck he hadn't damaged his own hands any more than he had. Watching over Halley was his number one priority at the moment, and he didn't have time for extraneous trips to the doctor.

Halley spun around in his arms, a shy smile spread across her lips. "Food will be ready in a few minutes. You can have a taste then." She lifted up onto her toes and placed a soft kiss on his lips. A zing of hot pleasure blasted from his mouth straight to his already excited dick. "As for tasting anything else... Well, you'll just have to wait," she teased and turned back toward the stove. She raised a pointed finger into the air and shook it from side to side. "I refuse to get carried away and burn another meal."

Nick craned his head around her tiny frame to see what she was cooking and instead got an eyeful of the outline of her breasts beneath the thin cotton of her shirt. He groaned. "You're killing me, woman." Damn, she looked beautiful. Wearing nothing but one of his T-shirts and a bright pink pair of lacy panties that her ass cheeks peeked out from, she looked positively edible. Nick was hungry, all right, and the missile jutting out from beneath his towel proved it. Unable to deal with the battle raging between his stomach and his libido, he fled the scene.

"Hey!" Halley's sultry voice carried across his small apartment. "Where are you going? Food will be ready in two minutes!"

Nick stopped just in front of the entrance to his room and turned, giving Halley a full view of his...problem.

Princess took one look at the bulge protruding from his towel, and her eyes grew wide. "Oh!" The look of surprise she wore changed instantly to one of desire. A flash of pink caught his eyes as she licked her lips in anticipation, and his already rigid dick hardened to stone.

He groaned. He wanted her. Badly.

She raised an eyebrow and held up two fingers. "Give me two minutes," she said and began flitting around the small kitchen like a fairy on speed. "I'll meet you in the bedroom."

Oh hell yes. Nick didn't need to be told twice and hauled ass into his bedroom, intent on rocking her world. He planned on bringing her to orgasm so many times basic motor function and speech would be impossible.

Nick made it as far as the side of his bed when a warm tugging pulled at his gut and a tingling sensation rippled across his naked flesh. *Halley*. No other woman had affected him so. Not even Sarah, which sent his mind reeling. They'd been as close as any couple could be. But this was different. Princess was the center of his universe, his sun. He was trapped in her gravitational pull, helpless but to orbit around her and lucky as shit to bask in her warmth and light. In short, she was heaven on earth.

A full-body shudder ripped through him when her warm hands came to rest on his hips. They hovered just over the towel, and she lifted up onto her toes and whispered softly into his ear, "Food's warming in the oven."

Cool air wafted across his skin as she ducked her fingers beneath the soft terry, sending it falling to the floor. His painfully swollen cock ached; he was desperate to get inside her. After the hellish day they'd had before, his need, his desire for her, overrode everything else.

He spun around and pulled her roughly to him. The silkiness of her skin beneath his fingers combined with her intoxicating scent prompted a sensory overload, and he groaned. "God, Princess. I need you." He cupped the side of her face before running his hands through the soft strands of her hair. "Now." He dove forward, attacking her lips with his, moaning when she opened for him. Her tongue danced in time with his as he explored her mouth with a mounting passion.

He took pleasure in that pouty bottom lip of hers, sucking it between his own. "I don't think..." He fisted a handful of her hair and deepened their kiss, sucking her tongue into his mouth.

One minute they stood beside the bed, the next he had her pressed against the nearby wall.

With a wicked grin, she tugged her shirt over her head and tossed it to the floor. She glanced down at her breasts, then back at Nick, her lids heavy with passion. "I thought you were hungry." She placed a hand behind his neck and pulled his head toward a rosy nipple. "Go ahead. Have a taste."

Holy fuck. Princess was a damn vixen, hot as hell, and he liked it. He bent and latched onto her taut bud, rolling his tongue over its smooth, rigid surface.

She threw her head back and moaned, soft and low.

Desire swept through him. He needed to be inside of her. Now. With a groan, he cupped her ass and lifted her off the floor.

Following his lead, Halley wrapped her legs around his waist and crossed her feet at the ankles.

The second the moist heat radiating between her legs brushed against his swollen shaft, any shred of control he'd clung to flew out the window.

Tiny squeaks of pleasure escaped her lips as he ground his diamond-hard cock against her kitty, a thin strip of lace the only thing between him and the promised land.

He buried his head in her neck, nipping at her skin with his teeth. "I'm sorry, Princess. I just can't wait this time." He slipped a finger beneath her panties and came across her warm honey. "Oh fuck, baby. You're so wet for me."

"Please, Nick." She whimpered. "Now. I need you now!"

Her fevered cries sent him over the edge.

"Shit." He didn't need to be told twice. Ripping the thin strip of lace from her body, he plunged himself into her heat in one swift motion, groaning with pleasure.

Halley dug her nails into the flesh on his shoulders and screamed. "Yes! Nick!"

The way Princess's heat wrapped around him, the way her touch scorched his flesh from head to toe, was unlike anything he'd ever known. He slammed into her hard, the sound of flesh slapping and grunts of pleasure filling the air. Close. He was so close already. This wasn't lovemaking. No, this was something else altogether. Some type of primal need they both needed to sate, a joining necessary for survival.

"Mine," he said with a grunt between frenzied thrusts. "Tell me you're mine, Princess. Say it."

Shit. She looked beautiful, all sexed-up and wanton with her head thrown back and her dark hair fanned out over her shoulders. "I'm yours." She whimpered, panting and breathless.

Nick gripped her ass and thrust harder, perilously close to orgasm. "Look at me, baby. Look at me when you say it. I want to see your eyes."

She gasped and dropped her head. "I'm yours, Nick," she said and bit down on her bottom lip.

That did it. The breathy sound of her voice, the sight of her biting that full bottom lip, sent him spiraling out of control. He slammed into her one final time, hurtling them both into a mind-blowing orgasm.

Nick stood, sheathed in her warmth for an immeasurable amount of time. Sated and with his heart pounding a steady beat, Nick wrapped his arms around Halley and held her for all he was worth. He'd never expected to find love again. Hell, he'd never expected to *feel* again. Somehow, somehow, Halley had melted the icy wall that caged him in. She'd freed him from the state of perpetual numbness that had held him captive for the past year, and he was forever thankful.

Was it possible? Did he dare allow himself to hope? The idea of a real life, a happy life with Halley, as opposed to the pained existence he endured now, seemed incomprehensible. He'd given up on dreaming a year ago when Sarah died. Yet here was Halley, so full of life, so full of love, nestled in his arms, ready and willing to give herself to him.

Unsure of what he'd done to deserve someone as fine as Halley, he fisted a handful of her hair, pressed his forehead to hers, and thanked God for pitying his miserable existence and sending him Princess.

Once this wretched stalking nightmare was behind them, he'd come clean, tell her about his past. He owed her the truth, and as scared shitless as he was to tell

her, he knew they couldn't move forward until he did. In the meantime, he'd have to keep quiet. His grisly story would send her over the edge. With her fragile mental state, she didn't need anything else to worry about at the moment. After pressing a quick kiss to her lips, he set her to her feet and ran a hand through her soft, brown hair. "So, are you ready to start the day?"

As if on cue, her stomach gurgled in response, and they both laughed.

"I guess that answered my question." He laced his fingers through hers and took a step toward the door. "C'mon, baby girl. Let's get a move on."

Chapter Sixteen

Breakfast, well, brunch, really, since it was fast approaching noon, was put on hold. Promising her they'd get something while they were out, Nick helped Halley wrap up the meal she'd made and placed it in the fridge for later. Half starved from their passionate lovemaking, it took everything he had not to tear into the delicious-smelling food right then and there. But knowing what he had planned, he suffered in silence and made quick work of tidying the kitchen.

The moment Princess hopped in the shower, Nick frantically set about gathering the few last-minute things he needed for their day together. Halley needed an afternoon, a few hours, even, of pure mindless distraction. The monsoon of garbage flooding her life was more than most people were able to cope with, and a day spent relaxing, laughing, and reveling in normality was definitely on the menu.

Nick could only hope his idea would work. He wasn't exactly an expert at the dating thing, and his interpersonal skills often left something to be desired. Still, he'd watched enough television, seen enough movies, and listened to enough of Damon's bullshit to have a good idea of what women liked to do outside of the bedroom.

He'd just finished loading his truck when Princess completed her morning ritual. And damn, she looked beautiful. It was unusually clear and warm for the city, so she'd donned a pair of jean capris with holes in the knees, a flowy black-and-white tank, and sandals. Her skin looked radiant, and her long, brunette locks seemed extra shiny for some reason and flowed past her shoulders in gentle waves.

She stood just in front of his black leather sofa with a curious smile.

A vision of her naked beneath him with her legs splayed wide while he pummeled into her slammed into his thoughts. He shook his head and cleared his throat. If he didn't get her out of the apartment now, they'd never leave. Princess was that tempting.

"So, where are we going?" she asked as he ushered her out onto the street and into his truck.

Nick cast her a playful grin and winked. "Can't tell you. It's a secret."

Her eyes narrowed, and her bottom lip jutted out into the most delicious pout he'd ever seen. "Really? You're not going to tell me?"

It took every ounce of willpower he had not to lean across the small cab and suck that bottom lip of hers into his mouth. Instead, he bit back a smirk and shook his head. "Nah. I'm not into spoiling surprises."

Halley crossed her arms with a *humph* and feigned irritation. “I like being spoiled,” she muttered. She eyeballed him out of the corner of her eye and tried frowning, but ended up giggling with a loud snort. “Oh, who am I kidding? I love surprises.”

Her smile was infectious, and Nick couldn’t help but return one of his own. Looked like their afternoon was off to a good start.

Nick placed the key into the ignition and Journey’s “Faithfully” blared throughout the vehicle as the truck roared to life. “Sorry about that,” he said sheepishly after cranking the volume down to a respectable level.

Princess shook her head, leaned across the seat, and cranked the volume back up. “Don’t be sorry. I love Journey, and I love this song. As far as I’m concerned, the louder the better.” She treated him to a flirtatious grin, and his heart swelled. She liked old-school rock, was a mean-ass cook, and a vixen between the sheets. *Shit*. He’d found the perfect woman.

The drive was quick, and it didn’t take long for her to figure out where they were going.

She gasped and let out an excited squeal as Nick pulled into a parking space. “Golden Gate Park? Is this where we’re spending the day?”

* * *

Excitement and peace covered Halley from head to toe. With her busy schedule, it had been ages since she’d visited the scenic park. She was dying to get outside, enjoy the warm weather, and wander around the beautiful grounds with Nick by her side.

Along with an overwhelming wave of giddiness at spending the afternoon with Nick was a sense of relief that she’d be engaging in a normal activity. As of late, it felt like all her time was spent either at the hospital, with the police, or running from psycho stalkers who wanted to hurt her. An afternoon spent wandering around one of her favorite places was just what the doctor ordered.

Unable to contain her appreciation, Halley launched herself across the small cab and showered Nick with hundreds of kisses. Grasping his face in her hands, she peered into his vibrant blue eyes and smiled. “Thank you.” A bone-crushing hug seemed natural, so she squeezed him as hard as she could before pulling away. “This”—she pointed toward the entrance to the park—“is just what I need. You’re amazing.” With that, she grasped the handle of the passenger door and jumped out into the fresh air.

Halley looked to the sky and smiled. Nothing but blue as far as the eye could see. Normally obstructed by a thick layer of cloud cover even in the summer months, the San Francisco skyline was unusually clear. She glanced down at her outfit, suddenly thankful she’d worn a tank and capris. Maybe she’d get some color on her arms. Pasty white was a great color for bread dough but not so attractive on her.

Nick rounded the vehicle with an old quilt and a cooler in his arms. "So, uh..." Clearly uncomfortable, he glanced down at his feet for a moment before clearing his throat and looking back up to meet her gaze. "I thought you might like to eat in the park, so I, uh..." He shrugged and held the cooler out toward her.

Halley couldn't hold back the grin wanting to escape and smiled brightly. "A picnic? You brought food for a picnic?"

His face fell, and he shook his head with a sigh. "Hell, I'm sorry, babe. I'm not real good with the dating stuff."

"No no no," she blurted out and rushed forward. He must have misunderstood her smile and thought she was making fun of his efforts. She gripped his muscular shoulders and squeezed. "It's wonderful, Nick. I'd love to picnic with you."

Positive he needed a little reassurance, she lifted onto her tippy toes and brushed her lips against his in a sweet and altogether too short kiss. She whispered softly into his ear, "Very romantic, by the way," before pulling back, grasping his wrist, and guiding him into the park.

Though it had been quite some time since Halley had last visited the area, her memory kicked in as though she'd been there only yesterday. She led Nick through the crowded grounds toward one of her favorite spots to lounge: a lush, grassy area beneath an enormous Monterey Cypress tree. The enormous tree was flanked by a spattering of smaller trees and various shrubberies and sat near another one of her favorite places in the park: the botanical gardens.

Nick set down the cooler, opened up the faded quilt, and spread it out onto the grass. Seemingly happy with its placement, he dropped to his knees, stretched out onto his side, and patted the fabric next to him. "Come here, Princess. Lie with me."

Oh hell yes. Halley bit down onto her lower lip in an effort to keep herself from squealing like a lovesick schoolgirl. She stepped onto the soft blanket and positioned herself alongside him.

His large hand snaked around her back and pulled her closer, so she was flush against his side. "Oh yeah, baby. That's better," he mumbled and proceeded to rub long, soothing strokes up and down her arm.

Halley melted into the blanket, the combined heat from the sun and Nick's impossibly warm body relaxing her until she was sure she'd nod off in his arms. "Mmmm," she mumbled under her breath, then closed her eyes and snuggled in closer. She breathed in deeply, feeling slightly intoxicated by his wonderful, masculine scent. *Mouthwatering.* "This feels so nice. I could totally fall asleep here in your arms."

He trailed his hand up the length of her arm until it rested just at the base of her neck. The rough pads of his fingertips grazing the sensitive skin sent a delectable tingling sensation rippling down her spine. Her breath caught, and she felt like she was sixteen again, excited over the simplest of touches. Truth be told, Nick's touch was electric and utterly sensual. The man possessed some kind of magic that charged her libido and sent her passion into overdrive anytime he was

near. Hell, the man could flick her across the nose and it would probably send her into orgasm.

It wasn't long before his lips pressed against hers in a kiss that nearly stole her breath away. Minty fresh and magical all on its own, his tongue dipped inside her mouth, and she groaned in pleasure. She felt his body shift and his hand move away, but she couldn't be bothered to check on what he was doing. Not when his tongue was exploring her mouth the way it was, caressing, seeking, plunging.

He groaned in pleasure and pulled back ever so slightly, gazing into her heavy-lidded eyes with a mischievous grin. "Well now, we can't have you falling asleep before lunch, can we?"

The next thing Halley knew, something ice cold and shocking was slipped into the back of her tank top. "Ahh!" She screamed and sat bolt upright, grabbing at the back of her shirt as the handful of ice cubes Nick dumped down her shirt slithered their way down her back.

Uncomfortable, Halley snatched up the half-melted cubes, and launched them at Nick, who lay on the blanket laughing hysterically. Her irritation lasted all of two seconds as the reality of the situation hit her like a line drive straight to the heart.

In the short time she'd known Nick, she'd never once seen him let go and laugh. Sure, he flirted, smiled, and cracked a variety of smartass jokes, but never once had she seen him let loose, give himself over completely to his emotions, and just laugh. There was always that ever-present sorrow lingering behind his sapphire eyes. Now, though, as he lay rolling on the blanket in silent mirth, the hollowness, the melancholy, was gone. She smiled down at him as he thrashed on the blanket, gasping for air. Nick's laughter was a thing of beauty and music to her ears.

She jabbed a finger into his side. "Okay, smartass. Now that I'm wide awake and up, let's eat."

Still snickering, Nick sat up, swiped a hand across his mouth. He planted a quick kiss on her cheek before reaching for the cooler, pulling it toward him. He looked up for a moment and met her eyes before digging into the ice chest. "Goddammit, Princess. That was some funny shit right there. You must have jumped ten feet the minute that ice hit your back."

Halley rolled her eyes. "Jackass." She shifted onto her knees and watched in awe as Nick pulled out a shockingly enormous amount of food.

Nick had packed enough food to feed a small army. Along with about every brand of cracker ever made, there were a variety of cheeses and salamis, grapes, apple slices, and cherries. Tucked away in a small gold dessert container were four chocolate-covered strawberries for dessert. Halley's mouth watered. She loved strawberries, both in and on everything. And, well, strawberries covered in chocolate were even better.

He handed her a paper plate and napkin and nodded toward the small buffet. "Dig in."

Halley loaded her plate while Nick pulled out a bottle of sparkling cider and two plastic cups. Hungry, she popped a fat grape into her mouth, enjoying the tart, juicy fruit as he poured her a glass of cider.

"Mmm... These are good," she said, biting down on another juicy grape. "Here." She plucked one from the spread and reached across the blanket to feed him. She pressed the green fruit to his lips and gasped when he sucked both it and her finger into his mouth.

A hot wisp of desire licked at her insides.

Nick swirled his tongue around the tip of her finger before releasing her with a small pop. "Delicious," he said with a groan. He then went on to stuff his face full of cracker and cheese as if he hadn't just driven her mad with desire.

Pretty Boy was playing with her. Halley raised an eyebrow and washed down a piece of cheese with her apple cider. *Two can play that game, buddy.*

With a wicked grin, she plucked two cherries, both connected by the stem. She glanced at Nick, eyes at half-mast, and licked her lips. "I love cherries. Don't you?" Holding the cherries by the stem, she ran her tongue around the succulent fruit before sucking them between her teeth. With a gentle tug, the stem gave way, and she groaned low in her throat. "So good."

Nick's eyes bulged wide, threatening to pop out of their sockets. He sat staring at her openmouthed for a moment before launching himself across the blanket onto her.

He ground his swollen cock against her and groaned. "I fucking love cherries, Princess." His voice was low, raspy, and oh-so-sexy. He kissed her long and hard, sweeping one of the tart cherries into his mouth with his tongue. He moved up near her ear and whispered, "And if you do that again, I promise you, baby girl, I won't be responsible for what happens."

He dipped his head down and nipped at her neck, sucking her delicate skin between his lips while kissing her. "The police might drag us away for indecent exposure before I'm done with you."

Oh. My. God.

With one last kiss, he sat them up and slowly resumed eating as if nothing happened. She wouldn't be teasing him that way again. Not unless she wanted to risk cardiac arrest on top of indecent exposure.

It didn't take long for them to finish eating. Stuffed to the gills, they'd decided to save the chocolate-covered strawberries for later, and packed everything up.

Halley stood up from the blanket, assuming they'd be heading back to the truck to pack away the cooler, when she was hit in the side of the face with something soft and squishy.

She turned and was struck in the center of her forehead with a spongy yellow object. Before she knew what was happening, Nick tossed her a small plastic Nerf

gun loaded with small purple balls and shot her again. The squishy ammo jettisoned through the air, bouncing off her left breast. His lips curled up into a panty-dropping smile as he aimed for her other boob. "Better run, sweetheart. I'm armed and dangerous."

Halley white-knuckled her Nerf gun, squealed, and ran full tilt into the nearby Japanese tea garden.

Giggling and out of breath, she stopped just before she reached a beautiful wooden footbridge which spanned a small stream. The quaint bridge was flanked on either side by towering trees and lush green foliage. A family of ducks swam under the stone structure and out of view.

Full of excitement, she ducked behind the base of a fat tree and peered around the stump with the Nerf gun raised and ready to fire. She hadn't sensed Nick behind her when she ran, though with his height and massive stride she knew he couldn't be far behind. She glanced down at the plastic toy in her hand and smiled. *Nerf guns*. She loved this new, playful side of him. It was quite unexpected and altogether wonderful. Not only was he sexy as hell and capable of putting a major hurt on anyone who came near her, he was young at heart and playful. *He's the perfect guy*.

Dizzy from her newfound revelation, she scanned the area, straining to calm her erratic breathing down so as not to draw attention to herself. "Where is he?" she mumbled. She took another tentative step from behind the safety of the large tree, eyes peeled for her handsome Casanova.

A barrage of thin yellow darts blasted her in the chest, and the sound of deep laughter rang throughout the quiet space, echoing off the water.

Halley screamed, pointed her gun in his direction, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. The little purple ball that was supposed to fly out was jammed inside the barrel. Meanwhile, Nick wasted no time in showering her in a steady stream of spongy yellow darts.

Laughing uncontrollably, Halley chucked her broken gun and dove, scooping up the wayward ammo, shoving it down the front of her shirt before Nick could retrieve it.

Nick let out a breathy laugh and lunged forward. "Oh no, you don't!"

It was make-or-break time. Without thinking, Halley ducked to the left and scrambled out of his grip just in time.

Nick lost his footing and went down like a falling tree, howling with laughter.

With a shriek, Halley ran like the wind over the footbridge and away from Nick.

She heard his gravelly voice carry across the water. "That's right, baby! You better run! Who do you think you are? A goddamn arms dealer?"

Halley glanced down at her tank top loaded with Nerf darts and giggled. She was an arms dealer of sorts.

Nick's heavy footsteps pounded across the bridge.

Halley clutched her ammo-laden chest and beat feet down the path. She felt him bearing down on her, so she ducked off the path and darted in and out of the greenery, taking shelter behind a large pagoda. It took a few moments, but she was finally able to catch her breath. Good Lord, she couldn't wipe the giant smile off her face if she tried. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun. Nick was truly heaven-sent.

Still giddy with excitement, she padded across the grounds and rounded the opposite side of the structure, positive she'd find Nick lurking about, searching for her.

She peered around the corner and sighed good and deep when she didn't see him. In fact, the pathway was eerily silent.

"Nick?" She stepped out from her hiding place and jogged a few feet up the pathway. With her eyes narrowed, she spun in a slow circle, taking in a whole lot of dense, green foliage, empty walkway, and nothing else. Where was he? "Nick!"

Frowning, she walked farther up the path, and that was when she heard something snap in the underbrush to her right. A strange feeling swept over her, almost like she was being watched. She shrugged off the bizarre sensation, telling herself someone *was* watching her: Nick. Smug bastard was probably gearing up to shower her with another stream of Nerf darts.

Swallowing, she continued up the path, the odd sensation growing stronger by the minute. A lightning bolt of fear struck her hard and fast. The fine hair at the back of her neck stood at attention, and it felt like someone poured ice water through her veins. Nervous, she expelled a quick breath. *Okay, game over. This is getting creepy.* She spun around again and shouted into the brush, "Stop it, Nick. You're scaring me."

Halley expected Nick to jump out of the bushes and ream her with Nerf pellets, but nothing happened. In fact, aside from the chirping of birds and the sound of a baby crying off in the distance, the trail was quiet. Dread, terrifying and oppressive, crashed down on her, and she broke into a cold sweat. Something wasn't right. Someone was hiding in the dense foliage. She was positive. Whoever it was, it wasn't Nick. He would never scare her like this. Not after everything she'd been through.

She whirled around with her lips smashed together, frightened tears streaming down her face. She didn't know where Nick was, but she sure as hell wasn't sticking around to find out who was lurking in the bushes. Especially not when Norvall was still on the loose. *Crap!* What if it was him tailing her? What if he was biding his time, waiting for the right moment to jump out and finish what he'd started at the club?

Halley didn't wait around to find out and hauled ass down the pathway, running as fast as her legs would carry her.

Too busy looking over her shoulder while she ran, she didn't see Nick until it was too late and plowed into him at full speed.

Unlike last night at his apartment, this time he stayed on his feet, catching her in his powerful arms with ease. His raspy voice drew her from the hysteria threatening to pull her under. He held her tight with one arm and cupped her cheek with the other hand. Bright, cerulean eyes narrowed and searched her own for the truth. “Whoa! Princess, what’s wrong?”

Halley gave a frightened gasp and shook her head. Jumbo tears welled in her eyes, clouding her vision. She punched him in the arm. “Where were you?”

Visibly torn, he shook his head. “I saw you duck behind that huge pagoda back there, so I ran farther up the path and hid behind a large rock. I was going to take you by surprise.”

His guilty admission confirmed her worst fears. Nick hadn’t been the ominous presence she’d felt lingering in the bushes. Angry, frustrated, and freaked-out, she broke down and buried her face in his chest. “I couldn’t find you,” she whimpered. “I was calling for you, and that’s...when I felt it.”

Nick shifted his stance and frowned, the skin between his eyes creasing with tension. “Felt what, Princess?”

Halley’s entire body shook, and her breath came out in a quick whoosh. “Someone watching me.” She glanced over her shoulder at the empty pathway behind her and shook her head. After swiping at a fallen tear, she focused on Nick. “At first I thought it was you hiding out in the greenery with your Nerf gun. But the vibe I was getting was way too creepy, and I knew it couldn’t be you. God, Nick! What if it’s Norvall? What if he’s here in the park, watching me?”

He clenched his jaw and pulled her roughly against his chest. His arms felt like iron bars holding her tight, protecting her from anyone and anything that might cause her harm. “Don’t you worry, Princess. I’ll fucking kill that sick bastard before I let him lay hands on you.” With dark eyes scanning the area, he bent and retrieved the plastic toy gun he’d dropped when she barreled into him and then laced his fingers through hers. “C’mon. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Chapter Seventeen

Nick smashed his lips together so the nasty string of curse words swimming around in his head wouldn't make an appearance. He glanced over at Halley. She was fumbling with the cap to her Xanax and shaking so badly he was sure once she did get the lid off, the contents would fly out every which way. "Here," he said and popped open the cap as they sat at a stoplight.

His stomach twisted as she downed two pills like it was nothing and issued him a quiet "thank you." He needed to take those damn pills away from her before things took a nasty turn. Xanax was powerful and addictive. The last thing Halley needed was an addiction to battle on top of everything else.

Fuck! How did things turn bad so quickly?

They'd been having fun. Hell, he'd been having fun. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed so much, felt so...free. And then he went and blew it by leaving her alone, letting her get scared. *Idiot!* He fought the urge to ram his head into the steering wheel as he drove. What the hell had he been thinking? True, he'd jogged only a few yards up the pathway, so in reality, he hadn't really left her alone. But Halley didn't perceive it that way, and dammit, he'd never forgive himself for being the cause of her fear.

So caught up in the moment, the carefree play they'd been enjoying, he hadn't remembered the reason he'd brought her to the park in the first place: to take her mind off Norvall and all the crap that had happened over the past week. He'd taken his eyes off her for two seconds, and in that short time, everything had gone to shit.

Nick shook his head. Never again. He'd do everything in his power to make sure she never felt frightened again. Starting now.

He'd planned on taking her to the de Young Art Museum after they'd finished enjoying the park. But with Halley's concern that Norvall might be lurking around the park, watching her, he scrubbed his earlier plans and was now making shit up on the fly. He'd take her somewhere else, another public place in case the bastard following her decided to tail them, and do his best to distract her. For a little while, anyway.

"You like the beach, Princess?" The Sutro Baths ruins weren't far from here, and the Cliff House restaurant was a short distance up North Beach.

Halley sat quietly in her seat and shrugged, treating him to a weak smile and a tepid nod. The episode at the park had really done a number on her, and dammit, he felt like shit over it. He'd take her back to his place if that was what she wanted.

Her needs came before anything else. Still, he suspected she'd just sit and stew over Kaiti, mourn her missing puppy, and worry about that sleaze, Norvall. Distraction was not only key, it was necessary.

Aching to take away her pain and helpless to do anything about it, he reached across the space between them and brushed a silky strand of hair off her shoulder. "Do you need me to take you back to my place, or can I take you somewhere else?"

She exhaled quietly and looked down at her hands with a shake of her head.

The complete absence of sound saturated the space between them.

Shit. She was shutting down, closing herself off. Not good. Nick looked over his shoulder to double-check traffic, then pulled into a nearby lot and parked his white SUV. An uncomfortable silence permeated every molecule in the cab, but he wasn't about to let that stop him from reaching out to Princess. "Talk to me, Halley. Tell me what you need, baby."

Halley's hands sliced through the air. Her deep emerald eyes blazed with hatred and frustration. "I need my life back! That's what I need!" She slammed her fist against the dashboard and groaned. "Dammit, Nick! I don't know how much more of this I can take. The attack, the destruction down at the bakery..." She broke off with a sob, leaned forward, and rested her head against her knees. "Oh my God, Nick. Kaiti. Mocha."

Nick reached out to touch her but instead balled his hand into a fist before dropping it into his lap. Christ, he was a bumbling idiot, a weak fool cut off at the knees, blind and incapable of helping the woman he cared for.

She wrenched herself upright, and the pain behind her eyes was so intense it took every ounce of willpower he had to maintain control. Rage bubbled up from deep within his gut, consuming every cell in his body. He wanted to hunt down the scum terrorizing her and tear him apart limb from bloody limb. Torture him nice and slow, make sure he suffered a shit-ton of agonizing pain and degradation before putting him down for good. The fact Norvall was on the loose, with him helpless to do anything about it, was too fucking similar to what happened with Sarah. Too damn close for comfort. The only difference was, this time he promised himself he wouldn't fail. He'd protect Halley at all costs.

Nick sat back against the seat with a slow exhale, shocked senseless by his newfound revelation. He knew he'd fucked up and let himself get too attached to her over the past week. But he didn't see how it could be helped. Sweet, gentle, and sexy as hell, with a generous heart and giving soul, she'd smashed through the wall he'd built and endeared herself to him like no other. He'd never stood a chance. Hell, he'd challenge a mute eunuch to ward off her charms and see how well he fared. So, hell yes, he'd protect her with his body, with his life, if it came down to it. Halley was irresistible, perfect, and he'd fallen for her—hard.

Nick gripped the steering wheel with his left hand and shifted his body so he faced her. He leaned forward, taking care to be gentle with her, and cupped her cheeks in his hands. "Listen to me, Princess."

Frightened eyes stared back at him, hacking away at his soul like a dull knife. Visions of the past, of Sarah lying bloodied and broken on their bed, burst rapid-fire behind his eyes. He shook his head, resolute and determined to prevent Halley from suffering the same fate as Sarah. The past would not repeat itself.

He closed his eyes momentarily and took a deep breath before focusing on her once more. "I will do everything I can to protect you, to keep you safe. I'll kill that lowlife piece of shit before I let him get near you again. You feel me, baby girl? You're safe with me. I promise."

Before he registered what happened, Halley launched herself into his lap and smothered him with a bone-crushing hug. She pulled back and brushed the tips of her fingers along his jawline, making his heart jump and skip beats.

Ensnaring him with the full force of her emerald peepers, she stared up at him through her lashes, fear, exhaustion, and need tugging at his heart.

"Nick. I do feel safe with you." Without hesitation, she pressed her lips against his in a savage kiss. All the hurt, all the pent-up fear and emotion, rushed out full throttle as she attacked his mouth with her own. The sweet smell of sugar cookies filled his nose, sending his blood boiling beneath his already heated skin. His body's reaction to her was immediate, powerful, and beyond anything he'd ever known.

Her tiny hands, which had been digging into his shoulders, pulled upward until they rested at the base of his neck. She dragged her soft lips from his mouth to his jawbone, then down along the side of his neck. With a soft moan, she ground her hot center against his cock while simultaneously nipping at the skin beneath her soft, kiss-swollen lips. "I *only* feel safe with you, Nick."

Fuck me. That was it. The breathy sound of her passion-filled voice sent his hormones exploding outward with the force of a volcano. His dick jumped to life, straining against the seam of his jeans, begging to be set free, pleading to have its way with Halley. Hungry for her, he palmed her ass and pulled her hips down harder against his swollen appendage, reveling in the friction. Magical powers would have been a welcome thing right about then. He'd poof them from the cramped confines of his truck's cab to his bed and ensure they were both naked as the day they were born.

Emitting soft moans that drove him wild, she licked a lazy trail up his neck and whispered in his ear, "Still want to go to the beach?"

Nick groaned nice and deep. "Fuck no." He gripped her by the waist, lifted her off his lap, and dumped her into her seat in one swift move. The truck roared to life as he glanced over at his woman. With his breaths coming in slow, shallow pants, he gripped the steering wheel to keep his hands to himself. "Seat belt. My place. Now." Screw the beach. The only place he wanted to visit was the sweet spot between those gorgeous legs of hers. He'd take her right then and there if he thought he could get away with it. But given the cramped quarters and the fact they were parked out in the open in broad daylight, his bed seemed the better option. And as far as distraction went, well, he was pretty damn sure she'd forget

everything that troubled her once they got back to his place. At least for a little while, anyway.

* * *

Halley woke to the early morning sun shining down on her from the window above the bed. She closed her eyes and stretched her arms above her head, enjoying the soreness in her muscles. A satisfied smile emerged as she remembered the previous day and what, or rather who, caused it. *Nick*. Her nipples hardened beneath her T-shirt, and warm heat pooled between her thighs while vivid images of her and Nick making love throughout his apartment flooded her thoughts.

Her mind wandered to their tryst in his kitchen, and she moaned softly at the heated memory...

Hungry and still naked from a marathon lovemaking session that had begun the moment they'd entered the apartment, Halley had ventured into Nick's kitchen. Craving something sweet, she'd pulled out the chocolate-covered strawberries that had gone uneaten earlier in the day.

Nick's strong arms wrapped around her waist as she closed the refrigerator door. "You plan on sharing those, I hope."

The sensation of Nick's warm skin against hers was nearly indescribable. She turned in his arms and kissed his chest, right at the center of his collarbone. At roughly six-three, Nick towered over her, and she loved the feeling of being wrapped in his well-defined arms. "Of course I do," she said softly.

Gingerly lifting a strawberry from the small gold box, she pressed the succulent fruit to his lips and cast him a wicked smile. "Open wide."

Nick bit into the fruit and groaned. "Damn that's good." He plucked the chocolaty berry from her fingers and raised a brow. "But I think I know something that would taste even better." Starting just below her neck, he traced the half-eaten strawberry down her chest and around the hardened tip of her left breast. A visible trail of strawberry juice and chocolate paved the way for his tongue, which followed soon after.

Halley threw her head back and moaned as his tongue swirled around her nipple, and when he grazed the tip with his teeth, her knees almost gave way.

He pulled back, his dark, passion-filled eyes ready to devour her along with the luscious fruit. "Oh yeah," he groaned with a raspy voice. "Strawberry and chocolate is good. But strawberry and chocolate on that scrumptious tit of yours is a thousand times better."

He repeated his actions with her right breast, licking and sucking until she was out of breath and dizzy. When her knees gave out a second time, he scooped her into his arms and lowered them to the floor.

Once she was resting safely in his lap, Nick lifted the strawberry, or object of torture, as she now thought of it as, and pressed it to her lips. "My bad, Princess. I've been hogging the dessert all to myself."

"Mmm." Halley bit down on the red berry and whimpered in delight as the combination of sweet juice and rich chocolate swirled around her taste buds.

Nick leaned down and sucked her bottom lip between his own. "God, woman. You taste good. I fucking love that bottom lip of yours."

Halley's breath caught, and she purposely licked her bottom lip before biting down on it for good measure.

That little action had the desired effect. He groaned low in his throat, lifted her off his lap, and placed her gently onto the floor in front of him. With a grin, he plucked another strawberry from the box. "Shouldn't have bit your lip like that." He held the strawberry in front of her face and raised an eyebrow. "Now you're in trouble."

This time, instead of starting at her collarbone and working his way down, Nick traced the chocolate-covered fruit from her navel, straight down to—

"Oh! God yes!" His warm tongue lapped the trail of juices left over by the fruit and continued its descent, licking her clit like a lollipop. *Holy... The things he can do with his...* "Ah! Nick!" She threw her head back again, this time smacking it hard against the refrigerator door. Didn't matter. She didn't feel anything but the massive orgasm ripping through her body. Bursts of neon color exploded behind her eyes, her toes curled, and the world and everything in it stood still. She was in trouble, all right. She'd never look at a strawberry the same way again.

Halley scissored her legs and shifted between the sheets, still floating on a high from the vivid memory of yesterday's sexcapades. They'd christened every room, every surface, and it still wasn't enough. After an entire day spent in Nick's arms, touching, exploring, memorizing every square inch of his flesh, she knew it would never be enough. Her desire for him would never wane. Never in her life had she felt more loved, more satisfied, or more complete. Nick was an angel sent from heaven. She knew without a doubt he'd keep her safe from the disgusting sickos of the world like Norvall and Shane.

With a satisfied moan, she rolled over, tempted to start the day out with a little strawberry lovin'. Her hand padded across the mattress in search of Nick and came up empty. Cold. Nick wasn't in bed with her, and the sheets where he once lay were icy cold. Disappointed, she sat up. "Nick?"

Silence rang out loud and clear. With a frown, she glanced at the clock on his nightstand: 9:15. "Nick?" Where the hell was he?

Kicking off the covers, Halley slid out of bed and padded across the carpet into the front room. "Nick?" She scanned the small room and kitchen, frustrated to find he wasn't there either.

“Huh,” she mumbled and chewed the inside of her lip. A wave of panic tore through her, and she retrieved her phone from the coffee table and dialed his number. She listened to it ring. And ring. And ring. Frustrated, she hit End and tossed the phone onto the couch. “Where the hell is he?”

A chill the size of Texas shot down her spine, followed by a terrible sense of dread. Something was wrong. What, she didn’t know. She took a deep breath, fighting back the swelling panic. Why? Why did her body always have to dive headfirst into hysteria? Wired and shaky, she hustled into the kitchen and popped a couple Xanax. The damn pills weren’t working anymore. They’d seemed to calm her down sufficiently when she first started taking them, but now? Now she had to take two at a time to get the same calming effect, and she had to take them more frequently.

Suddenly cold, Halley wrapped her arms around herself and chewed away at the inside of her lip. She’d always been a “glass half full” kinda girl, but recently, after the attack at the club, the creepy stalker stuff, and the flashbacks from her attack two years before, her mind leaned more toward worst-case scenarios than anything else.

Kat was safe in the hospital with Damon looking after her. Shane was in police custody. That left Norvall. What if Nick had some kind of run-in with him? He’d beaten the piss out of him before, but what if Norvall came better prepared for a fight this time around?

Upset and shaky, Halley knew she couldn’t sit alone in Nick’s apartment all morning. Fear and worry would eat away at the few shreds of sanity she had left. No. The only way she’d feel better was if she knew he was okay. She raced into the bedroom and dove into the small suitcase Nick had packed for her. Thankful he’d filled it with comfortable clothes, she pulled out a pair of soft yellow sweats and a matching tee and hoodie and gave a nervous chuckle when she found a matching pair of flip-flops. For as tough as he looked, the man knew how to put together an outfit, and she planned on teasing him about it as soon as she found him.

After a quick cleanup, she brushed her teeth and hair and threw her long locks into a ponytail. She grabbed her cell off the couch and tossed it into her bag. After making sure her Xanax rested safely in the inside pocket, she pulled out a wad of cash and hit the street in search of a cab.

Halley swallowed back a ripple of fear as she looked toward the sky. Thick, black clouds loomed over the city skyline like an ominous sign of things to come. Why they felt so dark and foreboding, she didn’t know. San Francisco was known for its cool, cloudy weather. But today, for someone reason, she couldn’t shake the feeling that the cosmos was trying to tell her to go back inside and lock the door. She swiped her sweaty palms against her legs and squared her trembling shoulders. Venturing out on her own with all the crap that was going down probably wasn’t the smartest idea. Still, she wouldn’t be able to breathe until she knew Nick was okay. She had her cell on her. If anything weird went down, she’d dial the police.

Shaking from both the cool weather and frazzled nerves, she focused all her energy on hailing down one of the bright yellow death traps speeding through the city at light speed. It wasn't long before one pulled up to the curb.

Halley flung open the door, slid in, and winced, her senses immediately assaulted by the smell of dirt, severe body odor, and the pungent smell of rotten crotch. Now she remembered why she avoided taking cabs whenever possible. They were breeding grounds for all kinds of nasty stuff. Gagging, she slammed the door shut and focused on the wrinkled old man behind the wheel.

"Where to, little lady?" His gray hair was sparse and styled into a severe comb-over. He cast her a tired smile, showcasing a full set of dentures.

Where to? That was the million-dollar question. "Um..." She bit her lip as she flipped through a mental catalogue of possible places Nick could be. Hospital. Bakery site. Gym. Apartment.

The cabbie blasted a heavy sigh. "Listen, girly. Time is money. Either give me a destination, or get out of my cab."

Rattled by the cabbie's surly disposition and sickened by the filth she knew was creeping off the dilapidated seat onto her body, she barked out the first location that came to her mind, and before she knew it, she was speeding across town toward her flat. She wasn't sure why, but she couldn't shake the feeling Nick was at her place.

Thankful the drive was short, she thrust a wad of bills at the beleaguered driver and hopped out of the rank vehicle, positive she'd need to burn her clothes and bathe in bleach to get the yuck off.

Electricity charged the air, and a loud thunderclap rumbled high above as Halley stepped onto the curb in front of her building. No sense putting off the inevitable. With keys in hand, she hightailed it up to her flat.

The horrible sense of dread eating away at her intensified the moment she hit the top step and entered the narrow second-story hallway. Her door, which should have been locked, was ajar. Terror, strong and oppressive, weighed down on her, choking the breath from her lungs. The hallway began to tilt and sway beneath her feet as images from the past laid siege to her mind.

Searing pain stabbed at her skull, the crack of a heavy boot striking her over and over again.

"That's right, bitch. You think you're too good for me? Well, think again. When I'm through with you..."

Norvall's voice blasted through her head as she remembered her encounter with him at the bar just a week before. "*Let me get your drink for you, sweetness, since I'm the reason you spilled it.*"

Gasping for air and clutching her chest, she crept forward, chastising herself internally for reacting like such an idiot. Why was she so scared? Timothy Lutzen couldn't hurt her; he was long dead. Shane was in custody, and Nick, well, he was most likely the person in her apartment, picking up more of her belongings.

Determined to keep her fear of Norvall under control, she swallowed hard and pressed the door open. “Nick?” Halley froze, completely unprepared for the chaos sitting in front of her.

Furniture lay strewn throughout the apartment. Chairs, tables and, God, even her television had been chucked haphazardly onto the opposite side of the room.

Frantically sucking in air, she crept into the shambles of her once immaculate home and surveyed the damage. No wonder Nick had refused to let her in the day before. Her couch lay shredded to bits and sat juttied up against the wall, upside down and destroyed. Shattered slivers of glass from broken frames peppered the hardwood flooring. But it was the walls that sent Halley spiraling into despair. Her white, pristine walls were covered in horrific bloodred lettering. WHORE. BITCH. SLUT. Each vile word sliced through her mental armor like a machete.

Bile shot up into her throat, and she covered her mouth to keep from losing her stomach. Why? Why her? Who had she pissed off? What had she done to deserve such a heinous punishment? She spun around to see the macabre writing covered every wall but one. Two buckets and a scrub brush sat on the floor just to the side of the bar in front of her kitchen. The lettering above the bar had been scrubbed clean; only a faint shadow of the horrific words remained.

Beside the bucket was a large trash bag filled with...pictures?

“What in the...” Halley lurched forward and plucked one of the crumpled black-and-white photos from the top of the bag. She dropped to her knees with a loud gasp. In her shaky hand was a wadded up photo of her and Nick—hot, wet, very naked, and in the throes of passion. Frantic, she dove into the sack. There were hundreds of photos, all intimate, all taken without her knowledge. It was obvious the person who was cleaning her walls had taken down the offensive photos to keep her from becoming even more upset.

Nick. It had to be him. Kat was still strapped to a bed, and no one else had a key to her apartment. Fighting back tears of gratitude, she spun around. “Nick?” Where was he?

Sidestepping the large shards of glass covering nearly every inch of flooring, she sprinted across her apartment and down the narrow hallway into her bedroom. “Nick?”

Before she knew what happened, she slid forward, lost her footing, and crashed into her dresser. Dizzy from slamming her head against the hard wood, she moaned as she clutched her head and rolled onto her side. “Oh sick. What is that?” Sticky. She was lying in something cold and sticky. With a groan, she pushed herself up. Once her eyes would cooperate, she looked down at her hands and screamed.

Blood. She was lying in the center of a large pool of blood. With a strangled cry, she scrambled backward toward the doorway, away from the gore spread out in front of her. A high-pitched wailing filled the room, and it took her a minute to realize the sound was coming from her. Shaking and on the verge of passing out, she gripped the frame of the door to hold herself upright. She needed to get out of

her apartment, but she couldn't move. She couldn't tear her eyes from the grisly blood trail. It smeared across her wood flooring and into her bathroom.

Shaking and blinded by the tears clouding her eyes, Halley inched forward, terrified of what she would find in her bathroom. Horrific worst-case scenarios played out in her mind as her feet inchwormed toward the small room. So much blood. There was so much blood. What if Norvall had shown up and taken Nick by surprise? What if he was bleeding out in her bathroom right now? Vicious pain tore through her chest at the idea of Nick being hurt, or worse, dead. She shook her head, swallowing back a frightened cry.

"Nick?" Halley's voice cracked, terror eating away at her psyche. *Shit*. What if Norvall was still in the apartment? What if he was in the bathroom? Her room spun around her and went black for a minute before she regained her wits. If her attacker was hiding out in her bathroom, she couldn't barge in empty-handed. No. She whipped her head around, her eyes frantically searching for a weapon, something to defend herself with.

Pants-pissing scared whoever was in the room heard her crash landing into the dresser, she darted toward her bed. With her heart in her throat, she reached beneath the mattress and gripped the wooden bat she kept for protection.

Gripping the bat, she padded across the floor on her tiptoes, her labored breathing and roaring heartbeat the only sound in the apartment. Sick to her stomach and shaky as hell, she raised the bat high above her head, stepped into the doorway...and screamed.

The bat clattered to the tile floor as she took in the grisly scene before her. "No!" She shook her head, the movements jerky and frantic. "No. No. No!"

The coppery stench of blood filling the air combined with the sight of Nick's blood-soaked shirt and pants sent an upsurge of nausea choking her breath away. Kneeling in the center of the small room, his beautiful blue eyes blackened and wild, he stared off into the ether, oblivious to her presence.

Halley's blood ran cold.

Her gaze trailed down from his face to the bloodstained hacksaw he clutched in his right hand. A low, guttural cry escaped her lips, and she stumbled sideways into the counter. That was when she saw what lay in her shower and lost all control.

Too frightened to move, Halley clutched the countertop and vomited into the sink.

Norvall lay dead at the bottom of her shower. His lifeless eyes were wide open and glossy, revealing the terror he'd experienced in his last minutes. Blood from a deep gash in his neck oozed down his body in a steady drip, swirling a vivid crimson down the shower drain.

The heated words Nick uttered at the hospital the other night raced through her mind. *"I'll cut off his goddamn hands and feed them to him before I let him touch you."*

Whimpering, Halley shook her head, her movements violent and frantic. Her worst nightmare was playing out in real time, and she was helpless to do anything about it. Had Norvall shown up and attacked Nick? Had Nick tracked him down and exacted out his own personal justice? If so, why would he bring him back to her apartment? The latter made zero sense. Either way, the evidence before her was damning and grotesque. How could he have carried out such a brutal slaying? True, she'd known him only a short time, but for all his tough-guy bravado, Nick was sensitive, and she just didn't see him as the slice-and-dice type. Even if the bad guy was a serial stalker and a would-be rapist.

Hunter's accusatory words from the other night rang in her ears. *"Just how well do you know Mr. Ackart, Halley?"*

Hunter seemed adamant that her stalker was someone she knew. But Nick? He never once gave off the creepy, stalker vibe. *"Denial will get you hurt, Halley. You need to pull your head out of the clouds and face facts. In cases like these, nine times out of ten, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows."*

A sudden chill ripped through her body, and her stomach dropped as pieces of the bloody puzzle started shifting into place inside her head. The attack at the club. Hunter said he'd been the first on scene after her attack. The flowers; the CD. Nick worked for the contractor building her bakery. He could have got her address that way. Nausea ripped through her again, and she covered her mouth, willing the contents of her stomach to stay down. Nick hadn't been with her when Kaiti was attacked, and he'd disappeared this morning without telling her where he was going. Could it be? Was Nick her stalker? Her heart told her no, but her head, her eyes as they took in the bloody destruction that lay before her, said otherwise.

Gasping for air and blinded by her tears, she stumbled backward toward the door, tripping over something. She looked down. The bat. Without hesitation, she snatched it up and stared at Nick, who still sat catatonic in the center of her bathroom. How could she have been so wrong about him? Even now, gaping at him covered in blood with a bloody weapon in his hand and a dead body inches from him, her mind couldn't assimilate, couldn't accept what she saw as fact. She'd given herself to him, body and soul, and... God, it had felt so right. Seeing him like this now didn't make any kind of sense. Still, her sense of self-preservation won out over her tender feelings toward the man in question.

Suddenly, a loud gasp escaped his lips, and he shook his head, as if he were coming out of some sort of trance. Cold, empty eyes burned into hers. "Halley?" Confusion marred his beautiful eyes, crinkling the smooth skin of his forehead as he moved to stand. "What are you...?"

"Don't!" Terrified, Halley gripped the bat and raised it high above her head. "Stay back!" One step. That was all she needed to make to get the hell away. Swallowing thickly, her mouth dry as sin, she stared at the man she loved, the man she thought she knew. She shook her head, desperate for an explanation, refusing to accept the harsh reality that Nick could be the madman terrorizing her.

Wide-eyed, Nick looked from Halley to the hacksaw in his hand, then back to Halley again, horror-struck. "Princess, you don't think I..." The saw slipped from his fingers as he shook his head slowly from side to side. He rushed forward. "Halley, no. It's not what it looks like. I—"

Fight-or-flight took over, and she didn't let him finish. Halley closed her eyes and swung the bat as hard as she could. There was a loud crack. She opened her eyes to see Nick drop like a stone to the floor. Taking advantage of the moment, she turned and bolted from the room.

The wooden bat went flying as she gripped the sides of her head and raced through the chaos of her small apartment and out the front door. She didn't make it far, crashing into Hunter's steely, two-hundred-plus-pound body with a terrified shriek.

"Help me! Help me! Please! Help me!" Out of control, she screamed and thrashed, desperate for someone, anyone, to make it all just go away.

"Halley!" Hunter's deep, baritone voice drew her from her hysteria. Strong hands gripped her shoulders like a vise and pulled her against his chest. "It's okay, Halley. I've got you. I've got you. You're safe."

Shaking her head from side to side, she wailed, frightened, angry tears raining down her cheeks. It was no use. No matter how hard she struggled to free herself from Hunter's iron grasp, the only thing she succeeded in doing was tiring herself out. "No. No. No. It's not okay. It'll never be okay." Clutching her chest, she fought to breathe as a giant weight came crashing down over her. "I can't breathe!"

Vertigo slammed into Halley. Her fingers and toes felt numb and cold and her chest tight. She was dying. Heart attack. The low, husky sound of her labored breathing filled the small space around her, and her vision flickered in and out.

Hunter swept her up into his arms just as her knees went out. A large hand cupped her cheek and shook her gently. "Breathe, Halley. You're having an anxiety attack. I need you to breathe for me."

Vacillating between reality and some bizarre realm of hysteria, Halley was vaguely aware of Hunter moving her from the hallway. Barely lucid, she cried out when he set her down on a soft mattress, then turned to walk away. Frightened, she reached out. "No! Don't leave me! He's in there! He—"

A set of warm fingers pressed against her lips silencing her. "Shhh, Halley. Everything's going to be okay. I'll be right back."

Terrified and clueless as to her whereabouts, Halley rolled onto her side and curled into a tight ball. Where had Hunter taken her? Her stomach heaved. Was Nick okay? God... She'd pummeled him with the bat. Hadn't even given him a chance to explain. A fresh wave of tears burst forth like a dam breaking as she pictured the grisly scene in her bathroom. What was there for Nick to explain? She'd found him sitting in a pool of blood with a dead Norvall in the shower and the weapon in his hand. "No!" Too much. It was all too much. She gripped the sides of

her head, clamped her eyes shut, and wailed for all she was worth. "Make it stop. Please! Someone just make it all stop!"

There was a sudden shift in the mattress, and Halley cried out, her body stiffening and jerking away as a warm hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"Here." Hunter's deep voice was calm and controlled. He leaned forward, snaking his arm beneath her, and lifted her shoulders. Grasping her hands, he placed them around a navy blue mug and held up his palm. Her Xanax. Two orange pills lay in the center of his large hand. Where had he found them? She'd dropped her bag in her apartment. She opened her mouth to ask him, but he cut her off.

"Take your meds, Halley. Drink."

She shook her head, turning away from the cup. She wasn't thirsty. She was in danger, and so was he. There was a dead body oozing away on the shower floor in her bathroom, and the killer, who may or may not be Nick, was on the loose! "Nick," she whimpered, her voice all but gone. "He's in my apartment. He..." Uncontrollable sobs wracked her body as a vivid image of him hacking away at Norvall barreled through her mind. "Norvall...he...murdered him. Oh God, Hunter!" Dizziness overtook her, and she sagged beneath his hands, her head lolling to the side.

"Shhhh." Hunter leaned in close, cradling her to his chest. "You're safe now, Halley. I won't let him touch you. I won't let any of them touch you ever again." He lifted the dark blue mug toward her once more and pressed the pills to her lips. "I can't do what I need to do if I have to worry about you, Halley. Be a good girl and take your medicine."

Too tired to argue, with a shaky hand she gripped the cool mug and slowly sipped its contents. The tiny pills hit her tongue, swirled around her mouth, and slid down her throat. She shook her head, pushing the mug away. "No more."

Ignoring her protests, Hunter pressed the mug to her lips again. "You need to stay hydrated. Drink."

The room began to spin as she swallowed the last bit of liquid, and Hunter took the mug from her hand before she dropped it.

He gently swiped her hair from her forehead. "That's my good girl."

A thick haze clouded her thoughts, making it hard to think, hard to concentrate. The dark room had strained her vision from the start, but now Hunter's outline in the inky blackness began warping and shifting like a strange specter, though she knew he hadn't moved. She lifted her hand to touch him, but her arm felt heavy, weighted, and it wouldn't budge. Neither would her mouth when she opened it to speak. She closed her eyes and grimaced. So familiar. She knew this feeling, had felt it before, but couldn't concentrate, couldn't navigate her way through the thick cloud to remember when.

Hunter's voice echoed hollowly through her ears as he pressed her back onto the mattress. Hands were on her, brushing across her face, down her arms, buried

in her hair. One hand? More than one? She didn't know, only felt but couldn't comprehend.

A deep voice echoed through her mind as the room faded into blackness.

"Sleep well, lover mine. I'm going to take care of everything."

Chapter Eighteen

Nick peeled himself off the floor with a groan. His upper back ached like he'd gone twenty rounds with Mike Tyson, and it hurt to breath. *Shit! Broken ribs.* Frightened beyond all reason, he couldn't fault Princess for her Sammy Sosa imitation with the bat. Thank fuck she swung like a girl or he'd be as dead as the creep lying at the base of her shower.

Nick glanced back at the carnage and winced. No need to see that again. The image of Norvall's dead body would forever be burned into his psyche. With his head pounding like someone had cleaved it in two, he dragged himself out of the bathroom and headed for the front of the flat in search of Halley, wondering how everything had gone to shit so quickly.

Dammit. He shook his head and swore. He knew how bad it must have looked with him sitting catatonic in her bathroom with Norvall dead a mere two feet from him. Her attacker's gory remains were just as much a shock to him as they'd been to her, and he needed to let her know.

Fully aware he wouldn't be able to keep her out of her apartment long, he'd awoken early, intent on making a quick trip to her place to tear down the naked pictures and clean the nasty writing off her walls. Once the walls were clean, he'd planned on changing the locks and searching the rooms from top to bottom for the hidden cameras the sick fuck had planted.

He'd made quick work of the pictures, but the writing scrawled across the walls was another story. Knowing they needed several coats of fresh paint but unwilling to leave the writing in the meantime, he'd filled a bucket full of straight bleach and scrubbed the shit out of the white surface in front of her kitchen. The sponge he'd found in the kitchen fell apart in the acidic liquid, so he'd ventured into Halley's bathroom in search of a scrub brush and found Norvall...dead. And the kicker, his hacksaw, the one that had been missing ever since his tires had been slashed, was lying in the center of the floor, stained with Norvall's blood.

Nick threw his hands up in the air before gripping the back of his head. "Fuck!" He'd been set up, and he knew the asshole responsible. Officer Douche Bag was the only other person with Halley when he'd learned of Norvall's release. The only person other than Halley who had heard his angry promise to cut off the bastard's hands and feed them to him.

With his blood roaring in his ears and his jaw clenched, he seethed a low growl. "Fucking Hunter." Eyeballing the bat that lay just in front of her bedroom door, Nick swept it off the floor, gripped it tight, and sprinted into the hallway. First

he'd find Halley, and then the rat bastard was as good as dead. "I'll fucking kill him."

"Not if I kill you first."

Nick skidded to a halt in the middle of the hallway, his body tense, coiled, and ready to attack. He narrowed his eyes into thin slits. "I'd like to see you try. Where's Halley?"

Hunter stood in the center of Halley's front room, a sadistic smile plastered across his face as he pointed his Glock straight at Nick's chest. "I'm not going to try, boy. I'm going to succeed. And when I'm finished here, Halley will think you were responsible for everything. Her attacks, the notes, the flowers, Norvall's murder. She'll be so distraught, she'll run willingly into my arms."

"The hell she will." Blind rage tore through Nick like a Mack truck, and he rushed Hunter with a single purpose: to kill the sick freak before he hurt Halley further.

Vaguely aware of the sound of gunfire, Nick grimaced, a searing heat tearing through his shoulder as he flew at Hunter. Nothing short of his own death would keep him from taking out the dirty cop, so he ignored the pain, hell-bent on destroying the monster in front of him. A loud crack filled the air as the bat made contact with Hunter's side, sending the dirty officer flying sideways across the room. The gun went soaring through the air in the opposite direction, ending up in a pile of shattered glass.

Wasting no time, Nick shot across the room and tackled Hunter as he came to his feet.

Shards of glass sliced into Nick, gliding through skin and muscle like butter as he rolled across the floor, struggling with Halley's stalker.

A large fist smashed into his nose, smarting like a bitch and bringing tears to his eyes. He relished the pain. It fed his anger. Made him stronger.

Nick gripped Hunter by the upper arms, flipped him over, and pressed a knee into his chest. Anger, rage, absolute hatred tore through him like a freight train. Unable to contain the fury within, he freed the raging animal inside him that longed for retribution and hammered his fists into Hunter's face, blow after bloody blow.

Ignoring the shards of glass slicing into his knees, he gripped Hunter's neck like a vise, squeezed as hard as he could, and slammed his head into the hardwood flooring, over and over again. "Where is she? Where's Halley?"

So intent was he on squeezing the life from the sleazy bastard beneath him, he didn't see Hunter grip the fallen vase until it was too late. The porcelain vessel shattered as it crashed into the side of his head, sending him toppling sideways onto the floor.

Face swollen and bleeding from the nose, mouth, and forehead, Hunter towered over him with a maniacal, satisfied smile. "Halley is no longer your concern."

Through a dizzy haze, Nick saw a black boot coming at him out of the corner of his eye. Everything went black.

* * *

A loud popping noise ripped Halley from the black fog holding her under. Her tired eyes refused to cooperate as she struggled to open them. Why did her head feel so cloudy, her body so sluggish? Her thoughts felt disconnected from her body as though someone had rewired her circuitry. Moving seemed the smart thing to do, but for some reason, she couldn't get her mind to connect with her limbs. What was wrong with her?

Willing her stubborn eyes to obey, Halley blinked rapidly, a glimmer of orange and yellow flooding her vision and stinging her eyes. It took her a few moments to realize the soft light came from hundreds of candles, large and small, circling the room. Where was she, and why couldn't she concentrate? She felt trapped, lost in the darkest recesses of her mind, and she couldn't get free, couldn't find her way home.

Shadows danced and swayed across the room, and she squinted, trying to focus on the blurry images in front of her. Pictures lined the walls from floor to ceiling. There were hundreds of them. Black-and-white photos of...her.

She tried to swallow back the fear choking her, but her mouth was too dry, too pasty, and she ended up crying out instead. Where the hell was she, and why was there a makeshift shrine to her covering the walls? Squinting as her vision faded in and out, she focused on the photos across from her. Who was that in the pictures with her? So familiar. She knew that face. Those eyes, the tattoo. Why couldn't she remember?

A twinge of fear rippled through her. Out. She needed to get out, but she couldn't move. Her body felt heavy, weighted down like someone had tied anchors to her limbs and left her for dead at the bottom of the ocean. Her sight, sense of touch, even her hearing, was shrouded, muffled. The sensation was sickening and terribly familiar. She'd felt this way once before and not long ago.

Frustrated with her mind's inability to control her body, with a groan she summoned all her energy and heaved herself sideways.

A loud crash bounced off the walls, clattering through the fog in her mind as her head smacked into something hard. She cried out, tears welling in her eyes as she pressed up onto her hands. Weak and barely able to sustain her weight, she craned her head and blinked rapidly, straining to see what she'd hit on her way to the floor. Something warm trickled into her right eye, blackening her already cloudy vision, and she was barely able to make out an old wooden nightstand in front of her. That explained the throbbing pain in her temple.

Unable to hold herself up a moment longer, she collapsed onto the cool hardwood floor, the hot wax from one of the fallen candles burning the skin on her outstretched arm. *The candles!* The room spun as she strained to lift her head.

Sweeping tendrils of soft orange and bright yellow danced across the baseboard of the nearby wall. *Fire!*

Fear tore through her, paralyzing her already uncooperative body. Gasping for air, she lurched sideways, away from the flames. Up. She needed to get up. She needed to get out, but her body felt useless, her muscles sapped and wobbly like Jell-O.

What was wrong with her? Awareness sliced through the mist shrouding her mind. Cognizance was fleeting, but its stamp remained. Someone had drugged her. She gave up trying to clear the dark veil blocking her memory and focused on the flames crawling up the wall in front of her.

If her useless body wouldn't stand, she'd crawl. She had to move. Had to get away. With a strangled cry, she inched forward on her stomach, her leaden arms near useless as they pulled her through the dimly lit room. The shallow, strangled breaths pulling into her lungs weren't enough, and she gasped, frantically sucking in precious oxygen.

Her hand hit something hard, something smooth. "Up," she said. "Have to..." She pushed up onto her elbow and ran her fingers across the hard surface again as her eyes focused on the blurry vision in front of her. *A door? Yes!* A door. Out. She needed to get out. The room spun and tilted as she pushed up onto her knees, and she pitched forward, her aching head slamming against the smooth, cool surface. Oh God. What was that awful noise? Someone was groaning, crying out in pain. Wait, was she making the noise?

She didn't have much time. The small orange and yellow flames licking the baseboards had grown into a large, monstrous inferno behind her, snapping and taunting her as it engulfed the entire wall. Dry heat scorched the side of her face, burning the inside of her nose and mouth.

Move, Halley! You have to get out of here! Reaching up, she felt something cold and hard as she slid her heavy hand up the surface of the door. Round. A knob. A doorknob! Gripping it with all her strength, she pulled herself from the floor, bracing herself against the door. Hot. She was so hot and dizzy, and she couldn't breathe. Something was choking her, filling her lungs, keeping the air away. *Oh God! The smoke!*

A sharp pain sliced through her temple, and she doubled over, gasping, choking. With a frightened cry, her body went stiff at the sound of a loud crash. The large mirror hanging on the wall to her left smashed to the floor, no longer able to withstand the heat. She needed to get out and fast. Still gripping the knob, she leaned away, using her weight to help open the door.

Pulling smoky air into her lungs, she dug deep, rousing the little strength she had left, and lurched forward into a...closet? Were those TV monitors? Inside the closet? "No! I need to get out!" She cried out in frustration, slamming her hand down onto something hard. Light flickered, and then suddenly the closet was no longer bathed in darkness. Bright neon light flared out from a wall of television screens.

Halley's breath caught in her throat. Her knees gave out, and she crumpled backward onto the hard floor, the hot glass from the broken mirror burning and slicing into her skin, the heat from the fire scorching her flesh. The images in front of her contorted, warped in and out on themselves as her eyesight flickered. She reached for the screen, but her arms no longer worked. *I know that place. My apartment.* She went limp, darkness enveloping her once more.

* * *

Searing pain ripped Nick from the darkness holding him under and tossed him like a rag doll back into consciousness. Someone was stabbing him all over, and a dull, agonizing ache radiated from his shoulder.

The floor moved beneath him. No. Wait. He was moving. More accurately, he was being dragged.

Hunter.

The movement stopped, and with a groan, he opened his swollen eyes to see he was lying in what was left of Halley's destroyed kitchen. His body lay propped against the oven, his wrists shackled to its handle. Drawers and kitchen appliances lay scattered everywhere on the floor, left over from Hunter's maniacal tirade. What was that loud whirring sound?

The officer's heavy footsteps raced back and forth in the other room. What the hell was he doing? *Setting you up, idiot. You're gonna take the fall for Norvall's murder, for Halley's stalking, Kaiti's attack. Douche bag planned the whole thing. Played you like a fiddle.*

Pain sliced up and down his right arm as he moved into a sitting position. He had to get free, had to kill Hunter before Hunter killed him. Then he needed to find Halley. Fuck! Where was she? First thing he needed to do was to detach himself from the damn oven. After a quick glance at his shackled wrists, he yanked forward and groaned. No wonder he was in so much pain. His right shoulder was not only bleeding from the bullet wound, but out of joint as well. He strained his fingers in an effort to undo the lock on the oven door, but it wouldn't budge. "What the fuck!" Nick slammed his head back against the glass door and groaned. The asshole had locked the oven door and hit Clean. The damn lock wouldn't budge for another four hours.

With a deep breath, Nick scanned the chaos riddling the kitchen floor for a knife, a skewer, something sharp he could use as a weapon, something he could pick the lock on the cuffs with. Except how the hell was he gonna get the weapon in his damn hands? He was fucking chained to the oven like a Nancy.

Goddammit, Nick. Concentrate. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself. He couldn't help Halley if he panicked and freaked-out. Did he smell smoke? He took another deep breath. Yeah, definitely smoke. *Shit.* The asshole was gonna burn him alive.

He stretched his body as far as the shackles binding him would allow, his feet tunneling through the mess on the floor again. Something. There had to be something.

There was nothing. He craned his neck as far as he could and caught a glimpse of the butcher block of knives sitting way back on her counter, far out of reach. He swore and kicked his legs out, sending spatulas and wooden spoons flying every which way. "Goddammit! Halley!"

"I told you, boy. Halley is none of your concern. She's mine." Hunter stood bruised and bloody in the entrance to the small kitchen. The psycho bastard had a towel in his hands, the bloody hacksaw from the bathroom clutched in its folds. Swollen from the beating he took at Nick's hand, the left side of his face was nearly unrecognizable. The skin surrounding his eye was puffed and bulging, and his lip was purple and ten times its normal size.

He stalked forward with a low chuckle and bent down just in front of Nick. "Losers like you never learn. You were nothing but a worthless plaything, a pitiful waste of Halley's time. But no more. She's seen with her own eyes"—he inclined the bloody hacksaw toward him and smiled—"what kind of man, what kind of monster, you are, and she's learned from her mistakes. There will be nothing keeping her from me—"

An earsplitting alarm blared throughout the room. The building's fire alarm.

Nick yanked at the handcuffs, the cold metal slicing into his wrists as he struggled to free himself. "You sick fuck! It's not enough you're terrorizing Halley, but you have to torch her place too? Where is she?"

Hunter shot up from where he knelt in front of Nick, his head craned to one side, his gray eyes wild as he inhaled the burning scent of smoke. "Halley! No!"

Nick didn't think; he just reacted. Desperate to save Halley and determined to keep her away from the crazed lunatic in front of him, he shot his feet out in front of Hunter, tripping him as he tried to flee the kitchen.

The inspector went down, the hacksaw flying out of his hands and into the other room.

A loud crunching noise carried over the blare of the fire alarm as Nick kicked Hunter in the face as hard as he could.

Stunned but not out of it, Hunter lurched forward to escape, but Nick was faster. Utilizing every bit of strength he had left, he stretched his legs forward, wrapped his knees around Hunter's neck. "Die, motherfucker!" With a hard clamp and a fast twist of his lower body, Nick snapped Hunter's neck.

Chest heaving and out of breath, Nick knew he only had minutes, seconds, maybe, to get to Halley before the fire got to her. He needed to break free from the cuffs. With a loud yell, he pulled forward with his wrists, the pain in his shoulder sapping his strength. "Fuck!" He'd have to pop his shoulder back in.

Gritting his teeth, he held his breath and slammed his shoulder into the side of the oven as hard as he could. There was a loud *pop* and instant relief.

Thick puffs of smoke began wafting down on him through the vents in the ceiling.

Halley's time was running out.

Twisting his body so his feet braced against the oven, he let out an animal-like cry as he pushed as hard as he could with his legs while simultaneously pulling down on the oven handle with his wrists.

The sound of metal twisting and warping filled the air.

Finally, the handle broke away from the oven with a loud snap, sending Nick sailing back into the counter behind him.

Sirens rang out in the distance, but he paid no attention to them. Nick shot up off the floor, hurtling over Hunter's lukewarm remains. No chance of the fucker getting up and coming at him. His dead eyes were glassy, and his head sat twisted atop his shoulders at an unnatural angle.

With his heart flying, Nick didn't remember racing out of the apartment. In fact, his mind couldn't focus on anything but finding Princess. He had to get to Halley, had to get her to safety. Before he realized what was happening, he'd followed the smoke billowing into the narrow hallway outside Halley's place and into the apartment next to hers.

Smoke, hot and thick, choked the air from his lungs and sent him hurtling toward the floor. He had to stay low, had to find Princess. "Halley!" He shot forward on his hands and knees toward the back bedroom, his heart in his throat, his stomach ready to drop. "Please. Please," he muttered to himself as he quickly crept across the sooty floor. "Please, God. Please let her be alive."

Oppressive heat licked at his skin, promising a slow, agonizing death if he did not heed its warning to get away. He ignored his body's gut reaction to get the hell out. Halley was somewhere in this bedroom, and he was going to find her or die trying. He pressed forward into the room. A wall of fire blanketed each wall and ceiling, melting the makeshift shrine to Halley and incinerating the photos covering their surfaces. "Halley!"

Hungry for air, the fire had sucked up every bit of oxygen in the room, leaving Nick coughing and gasping for breath. With no time left, he dragged himself to his feet, his eyes scanning every inch of the burning room. "Halley!"

She was there! On the floor, just in front of him. Nick dove forward onto his knees. "Halley! Baby! I've got you, baby." She lay motionless, limp, still. He couldn't see her chest rise or fall. He checked for a pulse and didn't feel one. "No!" Not again. Not again. He had to get her out of here. Had to save her. Halley *would* live.

With his wrists still cuffed together, he swept her lifeless body into his arms, shot to his feet, and turned, ready to get the hell out, when a giant flame swept down from the ceiling, blocking the door. It jumped and recoiled, taunting, teasing, laughing at him, daring him to pass.

Nick spun in place, searching for an alternate exit. Window was out, the fire having completely consumed the far wall. The only hope of escape was through the bedroom door.

Out of options and unwilling to give up, Nick set Halley down, ripped the comforter from the bed, and pulled it over the two of them before lifting her up once more. Cradling her in his arms beneath the shroud of the blanket, he gave a monstrous roar and gunned forward, leaping through the specterlike flame into freedom just as the fire department came barreling in through the front door.

He rushed the masked and heavily suited men. "Help her! She's not breathing! Help her!"

A pair of hands ripped Halley's lifeless body from his arms as another grabbed him by the chest, and raced him out the door. "Please," he sobbed. "Help her." Falling heart-first into a black pit of despair, he slumped to his knees and prayed. *Because if she dies, I die with her.*

Chapter Nineteen

A low, persistent beeping drew Halley out of the black fog holding her under. That and the parched, cottony sensation drying out her mouth. The right side of her forehead throbbed. Had someone taken a meat cleaver to her skull? She moaned and reached her hand to touch the source of pain.

A warm hand clasped hers, pulling it away before she made purchase. “Easy, Princess.”

The frustration ebbing through her, the pain in her throat, in her chest, in her head, eased the moment she heard his voice. *Nick*.

Her eyes flitted open, bright fluorescent light making it impossible to see anything at first. Grimacing, she continued blinking, until finally, Nick came into view.

Black circles ringed a pair of tired, grief-stricken eyes. “You’re awake.” He didn’t say anything else. Just took a deep breath, pressed his lips together, and then buried his face in his hands. Several seconds passed, his chest heaving up and down as if he were sobbing.

“Nick?” It hurt to talk. Her chest ached, and her throat burned. She reached across her body and brushed a finger along the back of his head before dropping her arm. Tired. Her entire body was weak, zapped of energy. “What happened?”

He drew a quick breath and looked up, his eyes filled with unshed tears. “You don’t remember anything?” He reached out and gently brushed a piece of hair from her eyes before taking her hand in his.

Halley went to shake her head and winced in pain. She wouldn’t be doing that again. “No,” she said, her voice shaky and hoarse. “I remember my apartment. The writing. The pictures. The blood...”

Loud beeping from the monitors kicked up a notch, her pulse accelerating as she remembered the bloody scene in her bathroom. “I remember seeing you in my bathroom with a...a bloody saw in your hand and...Norvall.” Fleeting images, dark and out of focus raced through her mind. A dark bedroom. Candles. Hundreds of pictures. A hand forcing her to drink. Hunter! She gasped. “Nick! It was...”

“Hunter. Yes.” Nick laced his fingers through hers while stroking her arm with the other hand.

“Halley?”

The sound of Kaiti’s worried voice shattered her momentary flare of panic, and she turned her tear-filled eyes toward the entrance to the room.

Kaiti stood white as a sheet beneath the door frame, clad in nothing but a faded hospital gown and a pair of pink fuzzy slippers. The swelling on her face had gone down significantly, her lip no longer fat and puffy, the swelling near the corner of her eye gone. A soft cast ran the length of her left arm from her wrist to her shoulder and was supported by a sling.

Her right hand covered her mouth, muffling her cries. She crossed the sterile room in a flash and hovered over Halley, large tears streaming down her cheeks. "Thank goodness you're okay, Halley. I..." A fresh wave of tears burst forth, and she buried her face in Halley's neck as she held on for dear life. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you!"

Nick gave Halley's hand a quick squeeze and pointed toward the door. "I'm gonna give you two some time together. I'll be right outside."

The moment he released his grip on her hand, she felt an overwhelming sense of loss and a deep ache in her chest that wasn't caused by the tubes that had been shoved down her throat. Yes, she was happy to see her best friend, but she didn't want Nick to leave. Ever. Thankfully she wasn't able to dwell on the rotten sensation for long, as Kaiti pulled back, swiped away her tears, and started jabbering at high velocity.

"All I can say is thank goodness for Nick. If he hadn't pulled you out of that fire when he did..." She gasped for air, closed her eyes, and shook her head. "Halley... your heart stopped. You were dead! You died!" She gripped Halley by the shoulder and gave her a gentle shake before jabbing a finger through the air. "Don't ever do that again! You're not allowed to die. Ever!"

Yeah, if this was how you felt after dying, then she never wanted to do it again. Not that she remembered any of it, anyway. "Ow." She moaned, wincing under Kat's tender grip. "Easy, okay? I feel like someone tossed me into a wood chipper and then tried to glue the pieces back together."

Stricken, Kaiti pulled back and claimed her hand, holding it in her own. "I'm so sorry, Hal. It's all just too much, you know? The apartment. Norvall. The fire. Shane."

Halley's stomach lurched at the mention of her overconfident neighbor. Guess her initial instinct where he was concerned was right. He wasn't the stalker type. She groaned, guilt-ridden. "Poor Shane. The cops released him I hope. I bet he hates me."

Kaiti frowned and pegged her with an "are you kidding me?" look. "Please, Hal. You've got nothing to be sorry about, and who cares what he thinks of you. Your safety came before his pride. I won't say the situation didn't suck for him, but that's just the way it goes. With his prints on the note Hunter left, we all thought he was your guy." She shook her head and closed her eyes. "I still can't believe a cop did this to you. God! At least the dirty bastard's dead—"

"Wait," Halley interrupted. "Hunter's dead? How? When?"

Kaiti drew back and narrowed her eyes. “Do you remember anything that happened yesterday? Anything at all?”

Halley closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and shook her head. “Not really, no. Everything’s cloudy, fuzzy.” Each time she tried to navigate her way through the dark haze shrouding the previous day’s events, she was met with a skull-fracturing headache and a butt-load of frustration. “I remember finding Nick in my apartment and Norvall...dead in my shower.” Swallowing the giant lump in her throat, she forced herself to take a few deep breaths to try to stay calm. “I thought Nick...” A deluge of tears inundated Halley as she recounted her last memories from the day before. “I hit him, Kat. With the wooden bat I keep under my bed. I was so scared. There was so much blood. I couldn’t think straight. He stood up and came at me, and I...”

“Sssh, Hal. It’s okay. Nick’s okay. He knows you were scared; he understands.”

A stabbing pain radiated from the inside of her elbow as she raised her hand to wipe away her tears. She scowled. *Damn stupid IV*. “I just feel so awful. I didn’t trust my feelings, didn’t listen to my heart. I just hit him and ran. Straight into Hunter.”

Kaiti reached over and snagged a box of tissues from the utilitarian nightstand sitting alongside the hospital bed. “Here.”

Halley plucked a tissue and wiped her nose, the rough one-ply paper chafing the few centimeters of flesh that didn’t already hurt. She balled up the soggy generic tissue and tossed it toward the foot of her bed in disgust. Thank goodness for medical insurance, because that snot rag had probably cost her twenty bucks.

Kaiti shoved the box between the bed railing and the hoard of pillows behind Halley before searching her face once again. “So, do you remember anything else?”

Halley breathed deep and exhaled through her mouth. “No. After running into Hunter, everything is fuzzy.”

Kaiti’s face went rigid, her jaw tensing, her eyes filling with pure, unadulterated anger and hatred. “That’s because the asshole drugged you. Fucking dirty cop.” She looked away for a moment and then turned back to face Halley. “I feel so stupid. I trusted him. God! I pushed him toward you, wanted you to date him. I thought he was...” She paused for a moment and pressed her lips together tightly. “Gah! I thought he was good-looking and built. I feel like I’m gonna be sick.”

Halley remained quiet while Kat pulled herself together. So, Hunter had drugged her. That explained the veil of blackness, the thick curtain blocking her memories, keeping them just out of reach.

Blurry images inundated her mind, distorted, warped, and altogether troubling. A sea of candles. A blue mug forced against her lips. A wall of... She gasped, a strangled whimper escaping her lips. “Oh God, Kat. I think I remember something.” She focused on Kat’s pixielike face and struggled for air. “Pictures. There were hundreds of pictures of me...and Nick. All over the wall. It was like some sort of—”

"Shrine," Kaiti interrupted. "Yeah. Turns out Hunter had a history of inappropriate behavior with women."

"What?" Halley asked, feeling suddenly tired. She eased into the pillows behind her back and turned her head toward Kat. "What kind of behavior? And how do you know all this?"

"The cops have been here all night, Hal. You've been unconscious, so they spent most of their time with Nick." She squeezed Halley's hand and cast her a reassuring smile. "Nick's in the clear. Most of the evidence burned in the fire, but they were able to salvage some of the video footage from Hunter's freak-ass spy set up. Damon's been giving me the rundown, filling me in when he finds out something new. Hunter was a class one dirtbag. A real piece of shit."

Halley raised her eyebrows in question, urging Kaiti silently to go on.

"Did you know he'd only been with SFPD for the last eighteen months?"

Halley shook her head and winced, a sharp, stabbing pain chiseling away at her temple. "Ow, crap," she mumbled and closed her eyes. "Note to self. Never shake head again." She opened her eyes to see Kaiti staring at her with sadness in her eyes. "Don't look at me like that. I'm fine. Please. Continue."

It took her a minute, but she started up again. "According to Damon, Hunter had been under scrutiny with the department for hinky behavior for quite some time. He was put on administrative leave this past Monday pending an internal affairs investigation."

Halley's stomach lurched. "An investigation?"

Kaiti's lips curled into a snarl, revulsion evident behind her fiery eyes. "You're not the first woman he's become abnormally attached to, apparently. He had the hots for a female dispatcher about a month ago and made all kinds of inappropriate phone calls to her. When he found out he was going to be disciplined, the behavior stopped." She shifted her hips, swung her legs over the side of the small bed, and slid off before turning to face Halley once more. "Then you came along, all pretty and wounded and in need of help, and the sick bastard lost his grip on reality. He crossed the line from small-time perv to obsessed psychopath."

Kaiti's heated words slowly faded away. Along with her pounding headache, Halley felt sick to her stomach, violated, and dirty. Why her? Why couldn't he have found someone else to terrorize? She grimaced and closed her eyes as guilt washed over her. Her situation sucked ass, and she'd never wish the type of torment Hunter put her through on anyone else.

"Halley?" Kaiti waved her good hand in front of Halley's face. "Hello! Did you hear what I just said? This wasn't Hunter's first IA investigation. He left his department in Florida after—"

Halley held up a shaky hand. "Stop. Please, Kat. Just stop. I don't want to hear anymore. I don't want to hear, think, or speak Hunter's name ever again. I just need to put all this behind me." The ache in her chest grew stronger by the minute,

and she groaned in pain, desperate for Nick's comforting presence. "Why does my chest feel like a twenty-ton man performed jumping jacks on it?"

Kaiti dug around in the bedding and lifted up a cream-colored cord with a red button on the end. "Ah-ha! There you are." She held the cord up, pushed the button, and set it down on the bedding. "Nurse should be in in just a sec. Your chest hurts, Halley, because you've got a few broken ribs. The paramedics had to perform CPR on you after Nick pulled you from the fire. Hunt—" Kaiti stopped herself before she finished uttering the name that would never again be spoken and cast Halley an apologetic glance. "The asshole pumped you full of liquid Ecstasy, Hal. That, coupled with the high volume of Xanax in your system, was too much. Your organs shut down. If Nick hadn't found you when he did, the fire wouldn't have been the only thing to kill you. You'd have died from an overdose."

A young nurse wearing jungle-print scrubs and a smile shuffled into the room, and made a beeline for the IV pole alongside Halley's bed, syringe in hand. "You in pain, sweetie?"

Halley gave a slight nod, whimpering as the constant throbbing in her temple became a brain-splitting ache.

The nurse gave a sober nod, popped the cap off the syringe, and stabbed at the IV line, pumping its contents with God knew what. "This ought to help. Say goodnight to your friend, sweetie."

Halley eased farther into the pillows, every cell in her body relaxing simultaneously. Kat gave her hand a quick squeeze before everything went black.

* * *

"Ouch!" Halley scowled at the nurse taking her blood pressure. The cuff squeezed her arm to the point of bruising and made an obnoxious buzzing noise. "Do you have to take my blood pressure in the middle of the night? I thought you wanted me to rest. How can I sleep if you keep waking me up?"

A familiar, masculine chuckle sliced through the wall of tension building between Halley and the now frowning nurse. *Nick*.

"Remind me never to wake you up," he said with a laugh and pushed off the faded chair he sat on. He glided over to the opposite side of her bed, ignoring the angry darts the nurse fired at him, focusing only on Halley.

"Listen here, Romeo. I don't care that you're my patient's fiancé—"

Halley's eyes widened. *Fiancé*? She looked over at Nick, who stood smiling at the nurse as if nothing was wrong, his beautiful blue eyes piercing the dim light, bringing her home.

The nurse kept barking. "Ms. Davis needs her rest. Do you hear me?"

Halley turned her attention to Nick, who made a show of bowing and then saluting the disgruntled nurse. "Ma'am. Yes, ma'am!"

With a frown, the nurse sidled out of the room, grumbling under her breath.

"Nick."

He leaned down, brushing his lips across her forehead ever so gently before claiming her lips with his own.

Halley melted into the bed as her body surged with comfort and need. She may have felt like she'd been mauled by a grizzly bear, but her heart didn't take notice. Nick's touch was like a healing balm, knitting Halley's broken body back together one piece at a time.

"You gave me quite a scare, Princess." He brushed a fingertip across her cheekbone before lowering the railing to the bed and climbing in with her. Taking care not to tug on her IV, he lifted Halley forward, placed his arm behind her, and winced as she rested her head against his shoulder.

With her eyes narrowed in concern, she reached a hand toward the source of his pain. "What's wrong?" She gasped as she pulled the neckline of his T-shirt down and saw gauze and tape. "What happened? Did Hunter—"

"Shoot me?"

Halley stiffened at his words.

"Yeah, he tried. Asshole was a terrible shot. Bullet went straight through. Doc patched me up good, so no need to worry."

Halley stared up at Nick in awe. The man had been shot and acted like it was no big deal.

Desperate to put the nightmare behind her, she closed her eyes, buried her face in his warm chest, and breathed in his wonderful, masculine scent. Safe. Now she felt safe, relaxed, complete.

"You good?" he asked, running his fingers through her hair.

Halley snuggled in even closer. "Mm-hmm." Yeah, her hair was probably greasy and full of grime, but she was too tired and it felt too damn good for her to care. "So, you're my fiancé, huh?"

He pressed a soft kiss on the top of her head. "It was the only way they'd let me stay with you. I didn't think you'd mind."

She smiled, imagining for a moment what life would be like as Mrs. Ackart. "I don't."

He tightened his grip on her. "God, baby. I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm so sorry, Nick. For everything."

He shifted beneath her. Tilting his head down, he lifted her chin so their eyes met. "Baby, you've got nothing to be sorry for. None of what happened was your fault. I'm only sorry I didn't see Hunter for the nasty piece of shit he was sooner."

Halley winced at the mention of the dead officer's name.

A low growl erupted deep within his chest, vibrating against her ear. "Goddammit. I should have known. I should have done something."

The desperation and shame in his voice tore at Halley's heart. "Nick. Stop." She angled her head so she once again could meet his eyes. "There's nothing you

could have done either. He was a dirty cop, knew all the tricks, knew how to keep from being caught.”

Nick closed his eyes and looked away, his jaw rigid. He took a deep breath, turned his head, and stared down at her, sadness darkening his eyes. “That’s the thing, baby. I know what to look for. I’ve been through this before.”

Halley narrowed her eyes in confusion. “What?”

He looked away again, scrubbed at the back of his head, and swore under his breath. “I was engaged once before.” He paused, looked down to gauge her reaction, and then continued. “I’ve only lived in San Francisco for a year. Before that I lived in Texas. Dallas, to be exact.

A Texan? “You don’t sound like—”

“I was born here in California,” he said, cutting her off. “I followed *her* when she went home.

Not knowing what to say, Halley kept quiet and let him continue.

“Her name was Sarah. We met in college during our junior year. God, she was beautiful and smart too. I fell hard and fast and asked her to marry me the day after graduation.”

Though it hurt to hear him speak of another woman, Halley listened intently, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from interrupting him while he opened up. It all made sense now. His reluctance to kiss her at first, the way he always seemed so torn in her presence.

Halley settled back against his chest and gripped Nick’s hands that held her. “So why did she leave the city after graduation? Why didn’t she stay here with you?” Nick’s quick intake of breath and heavy sigh preceded a whole lot of quiet. “Nick?”

She felt him shake his head. “Sorry, Princess. This is just... It’s hard to talk about, you know?”

Guilt tore through Halley like a freight train. She was pushing him too hard, causing him pain. “I’m so sorry, Nick. We don’t have to talk about this right now. If you’re not ready, I totally understand.”

His strong arms squeezed her tight, and he kissed the back of her neck, sending a delicious chill rocketing up and down her spine. “It’s okay. I want to tell you. Everything.” He shifted in place and swept her long mane of hair over her left shoulder.

“Sarah graduated with a business degree. Her family, well, let’s just say they’re loaded. Her father owns a successful construction company. It was always her plan to return home after college and help run the family business. When her dad found out I graduated with a degree in architecture, he brought me into the fold, and things kinda just went from there.”

Halley craned her head to face Nick. “You’re an architect?” Honestly, she didn’t give a damn what he did for a living. He could have been a garbage man and she’d love him just the same. But learning he designed buildings and structures for a

living totally turned her on. Not only was Nick devastatingly handsome, he was smart to boot.

He cocked his head to the side and shrugged. "I like to build things, to create." An embarrassed smile crossed his lips. "You should have seen my room when I was a kid. The damn thing was filled with erector sets, Lego towers, you name it. I was always building shit."

Halley clasped her hands to her chest, unable to contain the broad grin that emerged as he shared his story. She'd known in her heart for a while now that Nick was the one for her. What she hadn't known was just how alike they really were. They were both artists, both liked to create. They worked with different mediums, her food, him iron and steel, but the end result was the same: an intense feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment at having created something meaningful.

"I'm glad to see you're still building, but why aren't you working for a big company, designing skyscrapers? I mean, hello, we live in San Francisco. You'd make a killing."

He dropped his chin and shook his head. "I don't know. After I lost Sarah, I just didn't care anymore, you know?"

Dreading her next question, Halley laced her fingers through his, dug deep within, leaned forward, and found his eyes. "What happened to Sarah, Nick?"

He looked away for a moment with his lips pressed tight together, then faced Halley again, his troubled eyes full of determination. "She was murdered. A week before the wedding."

Sharp pain seared Halley through the gut, and she held herself, one hand on her aching chest, the other over her mouth. She shook her head in disbelief, no longer aware of her pain as she watched Nick struggle to hold himself together while recalling his horrific past. "Oh Nick."

"There's more, Halley." His expression was grim as he scrubbed his hand over the back of his head. "I...I don't really know how to tell you..."

Confused, Halley dropped her hand from her mouth. "Tell me what?" she asked, shaking her head.

He paused for a moment, scrubbed his hands over his face, then swore. "Fuck!"

Halley's mouth went dry. "Nick? You're scaring me. What is it?"

He looked up from his hands. "Sarah was a stalking victim."

All the air rushed out of Halley's lungs, and she gasped, feeling as though someone had impaled her. She opened her mouth to say something, but words failed her.

Stone-faced and grim, Nick continued. "The stalker was some newbie her father hired just after we started working for him. He made a bunch of inappropriate advances toward her and was fired on the spot, but it didn't stop him from going after her."

The tiny hospital room took on a vicious spin, and Halley's ears began to ring as she listened to him recall Sarah's awful plight. Tears, hot and sticky, covered her cheeks, and she fought to maintain composure as she quickly spiraled toward an anxiety attack. She didn't want the nurse booting him from the room, so she took deep breaths and willed herself to keep it together.

Focused on her breathing, she barely heard the rest of what he said. She vaguely registered the words "restraining order" and "violated" before a wave of sorrow swept over her. Nick's last words rang loud and clear through her panicked haze, squashing her already heavy heart.

"—and that's when I came home and found her. He'd... Fuck, Princess. He'd stripped her and tied her wrists and ankles. There was so much blood."

Halley lost control, silent tears racking her body. She cried for Sarah and the horrific nightmare she'd endured while alive. She wept for Kaiti, who'd suffered cruelly because of her own depraved stalker. And she wept for Nick, who'd not only lost his fiancée a week before their wedding to a sick, obsessed bastard, but willingly dealt with the same heinous garbage again with her. How could he stand to be around her? Having gone through a similar situation before only to lose the woman he loved—why hadn't he cut her loose? She wouldn't have blamed him if he had. It would've hurt like hell, but she'd have understood. A person could take only so much loss.

Nick wrapped his arms around her protectively and kissed the top of her head again. "I'm so sorry, Princess. I knew my past would upset you. I just didn't want to keep anything from you, you know?"

Halley swallowed back a huge lump and whimpered. "I'm so, so sorry, Nick. I can't imagine how you must feel. To have lost someone you loved so deeply, and in such a violent way." Remorse, bitter and cold, swept across her like an icy wind. "How can you stand it?"

"Stand what?" he asked, gently running his hand up and down her arm.

Her words came out in a breathless rush. "Being around me? How were you able to go through this again?"

Nick slid his arm out from beneath her and cupped her cheek as he hovered over her. He brushed a stray piece of hair from her face, his fingertip blazing a trail of fire along her skin. "Haven't you figured it out yet, Princess? I fucking love you."

Pure, undiluted happiness flowed through her veins the moment he spoke those three little words. Better than any medicine in the world, Nick's heartfelt admission was a soothing balm to the horrific ache plaguing her every waking moment. Despite his monumental loss, he'd given his heart to her without reserve and for that she'd be forever grateful. Nick was her heart, her soul, her every breath, and she knew she'd love him forever. "I love you too, Nick. I love you too."

Chapter Twenty

Two months later

Nick stood in the center of his bathroom, wiped off the steamy mirror with his hand, and frowned at the ugly mug staring back at him. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath. “Fucking gauges.” He’d never regretted any of his body modifications until now. The tats and the nipple piercings he could cover, but the gauges in his ears? Those suckers were huge, and not something you could just take out and forget about.

He stalked out of the bathroom and into his bedroom, glaring at the long-sleeve gray button-down, dark jeans, and tie Halley had plucked from his closet and laid out on the bed. *Halley*. The ridiculous grin he’d been wearing for the past two months emerged once more as he thought of the beautiful woman he now called his own.

Fire damage forced the girls from their swanky apartment. The pixie moved in with her parents, and Halley—she didn’t hesitate to say yes when he’d asked her to stay with him, a fact that made him immensely happy.

A bright and shining ball of sun amidst a world filled with darkness, Halley was his light, his happy place, and the past two months had been the best of his life. Nick wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve such an angel, but one thing was for sure, he knew he’d never let her go. Halley had brought him back from the dead, healed his shattered heart, and made him whole again. She wasn’t just his girlfriend, his lover—she was his life. The thought of her moving out made him positively sick, and he planned on bringing up the subject of living together permanently after the bakery’s grand opening.

Since she’d moved in, his life had flipped a one-eighty. The nightmares haunting him for the past year ceased, and he found himself looking to the future, planning, and—*fuck*—hoping. No more drinking to forget, no more hiding away in his apartment. Determined to be a better man, a man more worthy of her, he’d stopped the self-destructive bullshit and thrown himself into his work.

Halley was doing better herself. She still battled anxiety, but now she did it with the help of a therapist and alternative therapies that didn’t include drugs. Baby girl was obsessed with yoga. That shit was fine with Nick. He liked her limber and bendable.

Nick's lips turned down into a frown as he plucked the titanium-striped tie Halley had bought him off the bed and fingered the satiny material. Tonight was a big deal, and his casual duds just didn't fit the bill. Her parents were throwing a huge party in honor of Zeppoli's grand opening the following day. He'd be brushing shoulders with San Francisco's elite, and given his rough exterior and less than expensive clothing, he was sure no one would take him seriously—architectural degree or not. The party would also serve as a launching pad for both Nichols Construction and his new position within the company.

Once Halley's father had learned of Nick's degree in architecture and saw his handiwork firsthand at the bakery, he'd set up a meeting with his boss, David. It didn't take much to convince David to take him on as a partner. Especially after Halley's father invested a crapload of cash into the company. Damon, who'd recently started dating Halley's former roommate, Kat, had been promoted to foreman as well.

Nick tossed the tie back onto the bed and scrubbed at the back of his neck. He shook his head. "Should have bought a goddamn suit."

"Hey! Why aren't you dressed? Damon and Kat are going be here in like twenty." Mocha, who he'd found at the local animal shelter a few days after the attack, scampered into the room before Princess, yipping up a storm. He ignored the snappy ankle-biter and focused on the sound of Halley's sweet voice.

His cock stiffened and jerked beneath his towel, and a warm, tingling sensation pebbled across his damp skin. He spun around and was temporarily blinded. Halley looked positively radiant. Dressed in an elegant yet sexy black cocktail dress, with her long brunette locks flowing past her shoulders, she wore a genuine smile and an air of confidence that blew him away. God, she was beautiful. Everything about her appealed to him. Including the chocolate-dipped zeppoli in her right hand. His eyebrows shot up, and he caught himself smiling. *Wicked little vixen. She knows I can't resist those damn pastries.* The stiffy under his towel doubled in size.

Nick shrugged. "Thought I'd give those high-and-mighties a thing or two to talk about and just go as is."

She stepped forward, slid her fingers beneath the towel wrapped around his waist, and gave a tug. The damp cotton fell to the floor. "Mmm, very nice," she said while staring hungrily at his swollen member. She licked her lips and smiled before meeting his gaze. "While I definitely prefer you naked, I doubt my parents, their friends, or the investors will. And besides," she said and pushed him back onto the bed, "I'm not really into sharing." Sliding the hem of her dress up her thighs, she climbed onto the bed and straddled his hips. Leaning forward, she pressed her taut body against his, igniting a flash fire of need, and brushed the chocolaty zeppoli across his lips.

Nick didn't waste any time and opened wide, groaning the minute the pastry hit his taste buds. "Damn, Princess. That's...shit...that's good."

Her lips curled into a naughty smile. “Yeah, but not as good as this,” she said and slithered down the length of his naked body. She glanced over toward the clock on the nightstand and then looked up at him with a wry smile and hungry eyes. “We’ve got a little time. Let’s see if we can’t take care of the—ahem—big problem of yours, shall we?”

Nick’s heart soared as a dark emerald gaze feasted on his own through a thick fan of lashes. He groaned as she nipped at the inside of his thigh, and thanked the good Lord above for the beautiful angel who was a little slice of heaven here on earth. Halley, his princess, completed him, and he knew without a doubt they’d be together for the rest of their days.

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Lisa Sanchez

Obsessed

Lisa Sanchez

Lisa Sanchez is a California cheer mom taxiing her way through life, one car ride at a time. Along with chauffeur, she sports several job titles, including, but not limited to: author, chef, seamstress, videographer, nurse, enforcer, and general slave to her three daughters.

Reading and writing? Yeah, most days those two things are all that's keeping her sane. Romance is by far her favorite genre. Give her a shmexy, muscled up hero with attitude, tattoos, and a generous heaping of angst, and she's a happy girl. Give that hero a happily-ever-after and she's over the moon!

Along with an amazing hubby, she has three beautiful daughters, all who participate in All Star cheerleading. Lisa is a member of RWA, loves chocolate, avoids dairy at all costs (it's the devil) and has a serious problem when it comes to buying handbags.

Find out more about Lisa at <http://www.lisasanchezromanceauthor.com> and keep up with what's new in her life at <http://www.calicheermom.com>.