

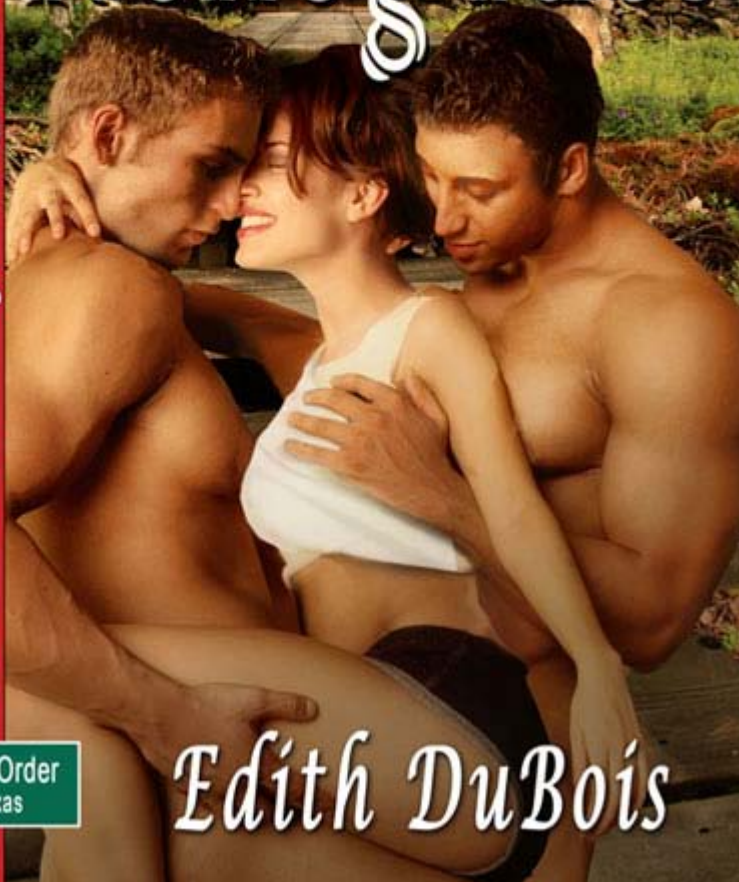
SIREN  
Publishing

*Ménage Everlasting*



Male Order  
Texas

# *A Bride* *for* TWO *Renegades*



*Edith DuBois*

**Male Order, Texas**

## **A Bride for Two Renegades**

Forced to give up one quirky trait after another, Male Order native Sherri Winston feels lost in a sea of ordinary. It's not until one spectacular night spent with the enigmatic Ethan Blacker that she begins to feel herself again. But he's an agent working abroad for the UN, and the next morning Sherri must watch him go.

After weeks of pining for what cannot be, Sherri is ready to snap out of it. Little does she expect, however, that hunky film star Benji will roll into town and snatch her heart away. As the two fall in love, Sherri can't fight the feeling that something is missing.

It's not until Benji and Ethan meet in an explosive, revelatory encounter that Sherri realizes only she has the power to bring her men together. As the stakes grow deadly, will love prevail? Or will past wrongs prove too bitter to overcome?

**Genre:** Contemporary, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

**Length:** 43,110 words

# **A BRIDE FOR TWO RENEGADES**

*Male Order, Texas*

**Edith DuBois**

**MENAGE EVERLASTING**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.  
[www.SirenPublishing.com](http://www.SirenPublishing.com)**

**ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:**

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **[legal@sirenbookstrand.com](mailto:legal@sirenbookstrand.com)**

**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

**A BRIDE FOR TWO RENEGADES**

Copyright © 2011 by Edith DuBois

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-618-1

First E-book Publication: June 2011

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

All art and logo copyright © 2011 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED:** This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

**PUBLISHER**

Siren Publishing, Inc.

[www.SirenPublishing.com](http://www.SirenPublishing.com)

## **Letter to Readers**

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *A Bride for Two Renegades* by Edith DuBois from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

### **Regarding E-book Piracy**

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Edith DuBois' livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. DuBois' right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher  
[www.SirenPublishing.com](http://www.SirenPublishing.com)  
[www.BookStrand.com](http://www.BookStrand.com)

# **DEDICATION**

For Erika. You got my butt motivated. Plus, you're the bestest friend  
a gal could hope for. LYLAS!

# A BRIDE FOR TWO RENEGADES

*Male Order, Texas*

**EDITH DUBOIS**  
Copyright © 2011

## Chapter One

Lights flashed. So many damn lights flashed that Benji thought he would lose his way and fall off the path, but then Carlene—his date and one of the stars of the film premiere they attended—gave him a yank in the right direction back onto the red carpet. Stumbling through the corral of bodies and lights, he eventually tripped inside the Million Dollar Theater, his retinas throbbing from the onslaught of cameras just outside the door.

Luckily, the lights were low, and the color scheme of the grandiose lobby was subdued. The whiskey coursing through Benji's body didn't help. It made everything look fuzzy. He reached out to pet the shiny diamonds dangling across Carlene's chest, fascinated with their shimmer in the soft lighting, but she swatted at his hand.

"Stop it, Benji. Not in front of everyone." Her voice, her sharp movements, her canary yellow dress really fucking hurt his head.

"Get me a drink," he ordered. He liked to give his dates tasks. It kept them out of his way, and they always did what he said. Carlene was no different. She stomped away, and Benji was momentarily free to find some place away from the crowd. After five minutes of searching, he found a secluded nook close to the staircase and away



from the coterie. Less than a minute later, however, his privacy was invaded.

“Another premiere, eh, Blacker?” Johnny Dale held out his hand for Benji to shake, his bowtie, his British accent, and his glasses immediately grating against Benji’s nerves. “How many does this make for you?”

Benji stared at the man’s hand for a long moment. “Three.” Benji’s own hands were all jittery. He wanted a cigarette, a drink, anything to keep his mind off the throng of people, the mindless, useless chatter happening all around him, and the pissant in front of him.

“Shit. Just this week? Thanks for coming out.”

“Fuck off, Johnny.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Oh, excuse me. Did I not speak clearly? I must have forgotten my plosives. Please. Allow me to reiterate. I said, ‘Fuck. Off. Johnny.’”

Johnny shook his head. “Man, you need to chill out. I came to say hello. Nothing to get excited about.”

“Chill out?” Benji laughed. “I think you need to get the fuck out of my face. You’re a joke. This movie is a joke. This whole fucking town is a joke.” Just then, Carlene returned with a whiskey and thrust it into Benji’s hand.

“Hi, Johnny,” she said, huffing from the struggle of navigating her way through the milling bodies.

“Carlene,” Johnny said.

Carlene glanced up at Johnny’s stiff tone and then shot Benji a questioning look. “Everything all right, fellas?”

“Shut up.” Benji rolled his eyes. “You know? You need to quit butting your nose into people’s shit. It’s starting to really get on my last fucking nerve.” A small part of Benji’s brain realized he was being an ass, but at the moment, he really didn’t give a fuck.

Carlene frowned but then turned to Johnny with her most brilliant toothpaste-ad smile, annoying Benji more. “Johnny, always nice to see you,” she said.

Johnny nodded at her.

Then she turned to Benji, and he could easily distinguish the ire in her features. “And, Benji,” she said, her voice low and strained, “I am not dealing with this tonight.”

“Dealing with what, sugar pie?” Benji didn’t bother keeping the sneer out of his voice.

Carlene glared and flicked her blond curls over her shoulder. “I’ll find my own ride home.” She turned to walk away, but Benji grabbed her arm.

“Where do you think you’re going? You came with me. You’re leaving with me.”

She looked down at Benji’s grip on her elbow. “Let go of me, you drunk bastard.”

Benji only tightened his grip.

“Now, Benji. Or, so help me God, I’ll talk to Jimmy.”

Benji didn’t doubt her words, but the threat taunted him, reminded him of his powerlessness. He released her arm, but as he did, he said, “Your talk is cheap, Carlene, just like everything else you put out.”

At his words, Johnny shoved past Benji and offered his elbow to Carlene.

“You’re a cunt,” Johnny said and then took Carlene away.

“Good fucking riddance,” Benji said to himself, ignoring the rotten taste in his mouth. He tossed the whiskey down his throat, enjoying the burn and then the heat that licked through his veins. It curled in the pit of his stomach and helped him to forget. Not everything. He would never forget everything. But some. He could forget some. Just for the night.

A few minutes later, the lights dimmed and then rose up again, indicating that only ten minutes remained before the premiere began. Letting the school of people sweep him up as they swam toward the

doors, he soon found his seat near the front of the theater. Benji grimaced when he read the place card on the seat next to his. Carlene had traded her seat with Jimmy.

Dammit, Benji did not want to deal with that man tonight. He'd already drank too much whiskey, and he had at least three more hours to go before the night was over. On top of that, the last man he wanted to sit next to was Jimmy Duren.

Benji didn't acknowledge Jimmy as he settled into the red velvet upholstered chair.

"You're a wild one tonight, aren't you, Benji?"

Benji glared at the man sitting next to him, hating everything about him. He hated his rotund belly and how it spilled over the sides of his chair, protruding oppressively close to Benji. He hated Jimmy's fat jowls and his trimmed blond mustache and the deep creases in the pink skin that encased overly large features—a too large nose, a too large forehead, a too large mouth. He hated his slicked-back hair, and he hated his deep, oily voice.

But what Benji hated most about Jimmy Duren was the one thing that Benji could never get away from—Jimmy Duren's money.

Just over nine years ago, when Benji turned eighteen, he'd been approached by Jimmy. The big man had introduced himself as one of the co-founders of Duren Brothers. Benji may have been a spoiled and naive prick, but he still knew that Duren was one of the most powerful and respected names in the film and television industry. After introductions and a few drinks, Jimmy had invited Benji to an audition for a reality TV series called *The Turnpike*.

What he remembered most about that first meeting with Jimmy wasn't the way the man casually threw hundred dollar bills at the woman gyrating in front of them. Benji's father was a rich man, and Benji was used to that sort of casual spending. Hell, Benji had already thrown a couple hundreds onstage himself. No, what really caught Benji's attention was the way Jimmy spoke, the way he dealt with people. He didn't say much, but he never failed to say enough.

Before that meeting, Benji had never imagined a life in the spotlight or that he would ever come across either of the Duren Brothers. After it, however, he had agreed to an audition that would end up linking his life indefinitely with Jimmy's. Now, sitting next to the fat man, Benji felt all the usual resentments rising up inside him. Almost a decade of his life had been spent under the control of this man, and it chafed. Not a day went by that Benji didn't regret signing that contract with Duren Brothers giving them exclusive rights to Benji's acting career.

The lights dimmed, and Jimmy leaned his bulk closer to Benji, who resisted the urge to lean away. "I've got a proposition for you, Benji."

Benji snorted but listened.

"I have a couple nephews, name of Ellis. They live about thirty minutes outside of Dallas. I think you ought to spend some time with them. See a little bit of the countryside."

"And why the fuck would I want to see a little bit of the countryside? I work here."

"No. Not right now you don't."

Benji gripped his armrests with both hands, wanting to rip the red velvet into a pulp until it dripped through his fingers like blood. "So you're sending me away."

"Don't worry, Benji. You'll get your money. We'll call it 'research'. For your next role, we'll say. Just head on down to Male Order within a day or so, and when you think you're ready for work again, give me a call."

Benji spoke low, his voice coming out in a rough whisper. "You won't always be the one on top. One day you will come crawling to me on your belly, asking for scraps."

"That may be so, my dear Benji, but unfortunately for you, that day is not today. Today, I am telling you to get the fuck out of my town."

“Your town? *Your town?*” Benji stifled a wild laugh because the film’s score had begun, and the chatter of the guests around them had begun to dwindle. “What about Tony Reed? Marshall Pierce? David O’Brisner? Any of those men would commit murder to have me under contract with them.”

“Maybe that’s true. Maybe it isn’t. But you didn’t sign their contract. You signed mine. And now I own you. When I tell you to jump, you jump. When I tell you to sing, you sing. When I tell you to smile, you fucking smile. It’s a really simple thing actually, this arrangement we have.”

“You think you’re a big man, telling us all what to do, sending people off to God knows fucking where, all the while rubbing your fat, greedy hands together, thinking you have us all wrapped up. You think you own me. No man owns me.”

Jimmy Duren chuckled, making his big belly jiggle. “Silly boy. I don’t think that I own you. I know I do. Life would be much simpler for you if you could just remember this. Now shut your fucking trap. I’m watching a movie.”

## Chapter Two

With a flourish, Betty Louise whipped the cape off Sherri's shoulders, sending a fluttering of hair clippings up into the air and then down to the floor at their feet. Sherri squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to acknowledge the plain brown specks of hair that moved around her. She hadn't wanted to dye her lilac-colored locks, hadn't wanted to lose that one last bit of eccentricity, but her summer internship started the next day. It was time for her to be a mature adult, or so she had been told, and after waiting until the last possible second, Sherri finally had to let her beloved hair color go.

Brandishing a hair-dryer like an extra arm, Betty Louise moved around Sherri, blowing wayward strands of hair from Sherri's clothes, the older woman's White Diamonds perfume wafting lazily around Sherri as she worked. Eventually, her motions ceased, and Betty Louise stood in front of Sherri with her hands on her wide hips, her turquoise-shaded lids blinking once or twice before she finally said, "Are you ready to see my fabulous work of art?"

"I'm so nervous, Betty Louise." Sherri didn't want to admit it, but she already felt like crying. And she hadn't even peeked into the mirror yet. The few other ladies in Luscious, Male Order's beauty salon, all offered Sherri reassurances that she looked great.

Aurora, the owner of Luscious, stopped mid-cut on her client to come inspect Betty Louise's work. She ran her fingers through Sherri's hair, muttering low sounds of approval. Aurora stepped back and said, "Sherri, honey, you look adorable." Then she frowned, "No, that's not right." She studied Sherri even more intently, and Sherri felt

her insides clenching in apprehension. “You look downright gorgeous.”

“Aww, thank you so much, Miss Aurora.”

“All right, moment of truth,” Betty Louise said, turning Sherri’s chair to face the mirror behind her. Sherri looked at herself for a long moment, and despite earnest attempts to stop it, her chin began to wobble. Then a large teardrop plopped onto her cheek and rolled down until it dripped off her chin.

She felt like she was looking at a stranger—a plain, uninteresting, unremarkable stranger.

“Oh, no, no, no, no!” Aurora said, noticing Sherri’s tear. “You know the rules, Sherri Elaine Winston.” She pointed to a sign just above the entrance to Luscious: *This is a NO TEARS zone*.

Instead of staunching her tears, the words on the sign just made them fall faster, reminding her how ridiculous the situation was.

“I’m sorry, Aurora. Betty Louise. I’m so sorry. I love it. I really do.” Someone shoved a Kleenex into Sherri’s hand. “It’s just...I’ve been lilac for so long.” All the ladies suddenly crowded around Sherri, patting her hair, hugging her, telling her not to worry, she looked beautiful. A loud sob broke free, and Sherri felt her cheeks blazing in embarrassment.

“Oh, honey,” Aurora said, her voice starting to waver. “You know I can’t stand for anyone to cry alone in my presence. Gimme one of those, Betty Louise,” she said, grabbing a Kleenex after a few loud sniffles. “Are you sure you like it? We can do something else if you want. Free of charge.”

Sherri blew her nose and wiped her cheeks, struggling to regain control. “No, Miss Aurora. I like it.” Looking at herself in the mirror, she forced herself to believe those words. “It’s just a bit of a shock at first. I think I might need a day or two to adjust. That’s all.”

“Oh, honey, you look beautiful.” Aurora and Betty Louise wrapped her up in a big hug between them. She sighed, enjoying their

hugs more than she should, feeling warm and safe between their plumpness.

Birdie, her aunt, had been gone for almost two years now with only a few short visits over Christmas and in the summer. Sherri lived in her aunt's house in Male Order while Birdie worked at an outpost in the Australian outback as part of an archaeological research team stationed about forty miles west of Alice Springs.

Aunt Birdie had practically raised Sherri, taking her in when she was eleven years old after her parents died in a car crash. Her aunt had given up a research-oriented career, along with traveling, her freedom, and her independence in order to settle down in Male Order to take care of and homeschool Sherri while teaching at SMU a couple days a week.

Sherri remembered traipsing through the woods and the riverbeds around Male Order, looking for specimens with Aunt Birdie. She remembered afternoon tea on the lawn or naps in the hammock while Aunt Birdie read in a rocking chair. But mostly she remembered Aunt Birdie's hugs, so warm and encompassing. For a long time after her parents' deaths, Aunt Birdie would find Sherri intermittently throughout the day and wrap her up in her arms. Sometimes she'd sing a song. Sometimes she would just hold Sherri.

And with Aurora and Betty Louise hugging her now, Sherri realized just how much she missed Aunt Birdie. It hit her right in the gut.

Sucking in a deep breath, she pulled away from the two women. "Thank you," she said. "I feel much better." She flashed them each a watery smile. "I've got to get home, though. Lots of stuff to do before tomorrow."

"Oh, honey, good luck," one of the shop's long-time customers, Lucille, called from across the room, peeping from beneath a domed hair-dryer.

"Thanks," Sherri said as she paid Betty Louise, hugging and kissing her old friends as she left the shop.



Choruses of “Tell Birdie hello next time you talk to her,” and “See you later, Sherri,” followed her out the door until it closed behind her. She crawled into her car but couldn’t find the motivation to start the vehicle. She didn’t want to go back to her little cabin. All that waited for her there were a bunch of books and an empty bed.

For a long moment, she fiddled with her Rorschach key chain, listening as it jingled against her keys. With a mental cringe, Sherri realized it had been over a year since she’d slept with anyone. She’d been so focused on grad school at SMU that she hadn’t let herself get caught up in anything romantic, and her last year had been consumed with clinical studies at the Brandsen Center in Dallas. She spent so much time studying, reviewing her case notes, and then preparing for her next session that she barely had time to think, much less time for sex.

Just the thought of sleeping with someone, even a one-night stand, had her pussy clenching with longing. “Oh, God,” Sherri said, her forehead falling onto her steering wheel. Then an idea came clanging into her always-whirring mind, bright and loud and not to be ignored.

She glanced around, but she had parked a few blocks down the street from Luscious in a small, secluded parking lot. Plus, it was the middle of the afternoon on a Monday. Almost everyone in Male Order would be at work, at school, or out of town on business.

Grateful that she had chosen a white cotton skirt that fell to just above her knee, Sherri slipped a hand up beneath the fabric of her skirt and between her legs. Her fingers were met by the already moist fabric of her cotton panties. Through the barrier of fabric she pushed fingers against her soft, inflamed flesh, massaging the hard nub of her clit.

Her head fell back against the headrest, and she closed her eyes. It had been a long time since she’d masturbated, and her pussy felt ultra-sensitive to the prodding of her fingers. Slipping two fingers under her panties, she gasped aloud as she pushed them into her hot, silky cunt. Grinding her hips against her hand, she began wriggling her

fingers around and across her inner walls. As pleasure built, she also felt a sadness rise up within her as she realized she not only wanted but needed much more than a self-administered finger-fuck.

Suddenly her cell phone blasted out Liza Minnelli's voice from the seat next to her. Jumping, she yanked her fingers out of her pussy, momentarily disoriented, thinking she had been caught. Then, as her heart rate lowered, she realized that she needed to answer her phone.

Clearing her throat, she hit the *Accept Call* button on her smart phone. "Hey, Em," Sherri said.

"Sherri, are you okay?" Despite having lived in the United States for over ten years and despite the fact that she was married to two very American husbands, Emilie Benson-Stephens still retained a slight French accent. "Miss Aurora and Betty Louise called. They said you were upset."

"I'm fine," Sherri said with a sigh. "You know me. Just enjoying some fear and self-pity before my big day tomorrow."

"Hmm." Emilie didn't sound amused. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm going home to drink a bottle of wine and eat lots of pickles."

"No, no," Emilie said. "That is not acceptable. Go home. Get dressed. You're coming with us to Hester's."

"Ugh," Sherri groaned. "I sort of just want to wallow tonight."

"*Non! Ce n'est pas bon.* I am meeting with one of *Papa's* clients tonight. He is very important. A foreign dignitary."

"Sounds kind of stuffy."

"Believe me, he is anything but stuffy. Sherri, *mon amie*," Emilie whined, but of course it still sounded very chic and dignified. "I could really use your help tonight."

"*Puh-lease*, Emilie. As if I would be any help to you. You just don't want to leave me alone with my pickles. I see right through you, you sneaky little Frenchie."

“Come on, Sher,” one of the twins said, probably Gavin. “Don’t be a dweeb.” Definitely Gavin. “The wifey is preggers. She needs some backup tonight.”

“Fine,” Sherri said with pseudo-annoyance. “What time are y’all picking me up?”

“Seven o’clock,” Emilie answered brightly. “See you then. Can’t wait to see your new *coiffure*.”

“Don’t remind me,” Sherri said, but Emilie had already hung up. Sherri rolled her eyes but started her ignition with a slight smile on the corner of her lips, realizing just how petulant her little crying jag in the beauty salon had been. She had friends. She was a smart, free-thinking young woman. And she was about to start a coveted internship at The Brandsen Center in Dallas, a world-renowned psychology research and treatment clinic. She had so many reasons to be happy. She just needed to get her shit together.

A couple hours later, Emilie, Gavin, and Grayson pulled up to her front door, and she pranced out to their car. The evening air was unusually crisp for May in Texas, and it brushed across her bare shoulders with cool, tantalizing fingers. Ordinarily by May, Texas and the high nineties were good friends, but tonight it was barely above seventy.

Trying to go with her new “mature” look, she’d chosen a black, empire-waisted dress. It had a sapphire blue sash just below her bosom and a sapphire blue tulle petticoat to give it a little more shape. She wore a pair of sheer black hose, black ankle boots, and black earrings that hung delicately from her ears, which, when combined with her new pixie haircut, she thought lent her neck an extremely long and graceful appearance.

Normally, she preferred more vibrant colors, but for the past school year, working at the clinic, she’d grown used to black as her main color. Sometimes she felt utterly stifled, but mostly she managed to ignore her boring garb.

What was worse, however—even worse than giving up bright, brilliant colors in wardrobe—was that she'd been forced to give up her Wicked Whimsy parties. With most of her time spent at The Brandsen Center over the last school year, she didn't have enough to spend cooking up the monthly Male Order girl's night out. She didn't want to put half an effort into it, so she'd handed the reins of power over to Cyndi Smith, one of the veterans and regulars.

Sherri had even missed last month's, and the thought made her cringe. Shaking her head to force the regret away, she climbed into the car. Before she had even settled onto the leather, Emilie wrapped Sherri up in her long arms and then pulled back to run her fingers through her freshly cut hair. "Oh, *ma petite cherie*, you are so gorgeous, so beautiful, so *précieuse* with this hair."

"Okay, okay, that's enough." Sherri said, swatting Emilie's hands away, and then she leaned over Emilie's protruding belly. "But how is my darling Gaston doing, hmm?" She patted Emilie's tummy.

"We don't know if it's a boy yet," Emilie said with a content little half-smile.

"Geez, how many times do we have to tell you?"

"Shut up, Gavin. If I want to believe it's a boy, I will believe it's a boy."

"Don't make me come back there for a knuckle-head sandwich. I will pull this car over so fast."

"Yak, yak, yak. That's all you ever do," Sherri said, laughing.

"Besides, Gav," Grayson said, "You need a little more toughness in your voice. If this child is anything like his or her fathers, it's going to be a hellion." He winked at the two women in the back seat. "That tone would never work." Sherri giggled at his matter-of-fact tone, and the four of them spent the rest of the trip arguing over the sex of the baby and the date and the time and the weight and the height of the baby and just about anything else they could think of concerning the baby. When they arrived at Hester's, the mysterious foreign diplomat had already arrived and waited for them at the table.

His back was to them as they approached, but she could tell he was a big man. His broad shoulders tugged at the material of his jacket, hinting at a lot of muscle and a strong body beneath.

“Monsieur Blacker,” Emilie greeted him, offering her hand out to the man.

He turned around at the sound of his name, taking Emilie’s hand and shaking it as he rose from his seat.

Sherri stopped in her tracks, making Grayson bump into her from behind.

“Whoa,” Grayson said, catching Sherri’s shoulders to keep her from face-planting in front of the stunningly handsome stranger. As she stood in front of him attempting to maintain a small semblance of dignity, she was struck with the thought that she had never seen a more perfect man. He had chestnut brown hair and dark skin, like he’d spent many toiling hours out in the sun. His eyes were set deep within his rugged features, but they noticed everything. And they held a sort of wildness that Sherri had not witnessed in anyone else.

“Mrs. Benson-Stephens, I presume,” he said in a deep, cavernous voice. Sherri thought that a voice like that could hold a thousand secrets.

Then he turned fully towards Sherri. Their eyes met. Something flickered deep in his, and Sherri could see deep into his hazel depths. His eyes were mostly green with just a little brown around their edges. He smiled down at her, his wide mouth warm and inviting and the skin around his eyes crinkling at the corners. As Emilie introduced him as a Mr. Ethan Blacker, he offered Sherri his hand.

She lost her words and could think of nothing logical or important enough to say.

His hand was huge, swallowing her tiny one, but he exuded just the right amount of pressure. His palm pressed against hers, reassuring her with its solidarity but not overbearing in its pressure. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Winston.”

Sherri could only nod, suddenly feeling shier than she ever had in her life. His beauty, his perfection intimidated her. Too soon, he released her hand, though, and Sherri suddenly felt her loneliness from the afternoon come flooding back through her.

She went to sit on the other side of the table because they were at a booth, and she didn't want Emilie to have to scoot all the way to the back with her belly. Emilie, however, cut her off, sliding gracefully into the booth and gliding all the way around. Naturally, the twins flanked each side of her, so the only place left for Sherri was directly across from Ethan Blacker.

He waited until she had seated herself before sitting back down, and he shot her a warm smile as he did so. Sherri quickly crossed her legs, astounded at how fast and how strong her pussy had responded to that one little glance. Already the moisture had gathered, and her muscles were clenching with need.

*Dear Lord*, she thought to herself with an inward groan. *Give me strength. Just one meal. Let me make it through one meal.*

\* \* \* \*

Ethan tried to focus on Emilie Benson-Stephens' words, but the tiny woman next to him kept inadvertently yanking his attention away from the conversation. Her big blue eyes were luminous against her pale, delicate features, and she'd been staring wide-eyed at him all night. She looked like a fairy or a witch or an enchantress, and she watched him like she would weave a spell and make a slave out of him.

She hadn't said much since her initial greeting, but Ethan felt something strange emanating from her. He was so drawn to her. He kept telling himself it was only because he'd spent the last year and a half on the coast of Africa, working for the UN to negotiate peace in Abidjan, a major port city in Côte d'Ivoire. He kept trying to convince himself that it was because he hadn't been with a woman in over two

months, and even the women he had been with were only fleeting encounters. He'd been living in such a high state of anxiety and unease for the past months that her stillness was disconcerting, seemed unnatural, but also sublimely comforting.

Except it wasn't exactly stillness. She hummed beside him, her body alight with an odd sort of energy, as if the smallest touch of his finger would send her reeling. Ethan liked that idea, he realized, and had to concentrate on not reaching out to touch her just to watch her reaction.

When their food arrived, she looked down at her plate, and Ethan took the opportunity to study her features more closely. She had short brown hair that framed the most angelic, most delicate face he'd ever seen. Her slightly protuberant eyes were surrounded by dark lashes and capped by two dark brows. She smiled at something one of the Stephens brothers said, her full, wide smile so brilliant and transfixing that Ethan's cock tugged in response. When she smiled, her elfish features softened, became so sweet and demure, that Ethan thought even the softest of touches would fracture her into a million bits and pieces.

As the dinner progressed, it became increasingly difficult to keep his fingers wrapped around the fork instead of reaching across the table to hold her cheek in the palm of his hand.

"So, Mr. Blacker," Emilie said from the other side of the table. He forced his gaze away from Sherri's bewitching features and willed his mind to focus on Mrs. Benson-Stephens' questions. "You just arrived last week from Côte d'Ivoire, correct?"

"Correct."

"And you work for the UN? As a peacemaker? A diplomat?"

"Of sorts," he said with a wry chuckle. "I've been there for over a year and half, but peace still seems centuries away."

"I think I remember something on BBC about an election a few months ago? Is that right?"

“Yes.” Ethan tried not to let too much tightness seep into his voice, but this was a subject he didn’t particularly wish to discuss. “I’m flying back to France tomorrow morning to meet with some UN dignitaries along with Martin Ongwerra, the newly elected president of Côte d’Ivoire.”

“Oh really?” Mrs. Benson-Stephens said, shooting a brief glance at Sherri as if to gauge her reaction to that announcement. “How long will you be over there?”

“A month at least, possibly more. And then I’ll head back to Africa most likely.”

“Sherri, isn’t your aunt in Africa?”

“No, Emilie. Australia. I’m surprised you would forget that.” Ethan thought he heard something in her words, not annoyance but exasperation. Her voice was smooth and clear and delicate, just like the rest of her, but it also sounded weary, like it guarded something it had grown tired of protecting.

“Australia?” Ethan asked. “What’s in Australia?”

“Aboriginal rock art after the arrival of Europeans and Asians.”

Ethan laughed at her dry tone, and she raised an eyebrow at him, apparently not amused. “At least it’s not explosions and bullets,” he said, hoping to make her smile again.

She didn’t reply, only frowned at him, a small crease appearing between her dark brows. “Then why do you do it?” Her voice was soft, and the restaurant was full. Noise surrounded them—silverware clinked against china, laughter broke out a table away, and several waiters tended to the guests. Despite all the noise, however, he heard the tension in her voice like she was worried for him, cared about him.

His gut tightened, and his dick stood fully up. He wanted to wrap the tiny woman up in his arms and hold out all the bad. He wanted to sink his cock deep into her and show her how strong, how solid he could be.

He looked at her and shrugged. “Who else will?”



“That sounds a little simple.”

“To me, it always has been.”

“But what about your family? Your home?”

“I don’t have either here. My family is the people I work with every day, the ones working to bring peace and democracy to Ivorian citizens. My home is there.”

“But you don’t want a wife? Children? A family of your very own?”

Ethan felt his jaw clench, and he held back a curse as his teeth bit the inside of his cheek. How the hell had they gotten to this topic? In the blink of an eye, the little sorceress had managed to reach right down inside of him and pull out his most vulnerable nerve, mercilessly exposing it. It wasn’t that she’d asked if he had a wife. It was the way she asked it. Like it wasn’t a question. It was like she was saying, *I see you, and I know you. I know you want this.* It brought up too much rawness, too much longing for things that would never be.

“I think *Papa* will be eager to speak with you, Mr. Blacker, about your dealings abroad,” Mrs. Benson-Stephens said from the other end of the table. The French-American woman’s voice pulled him back to the conversation, giving him a momentary respite from suddenly chaotic thoughts. He watched as Sherri’s eyes widened in surprise at the abrupt change in topic. “As I’m sure you are aware,” Mrs. Benson-Stephens continued, “he has long wanted to become involved with the UN. It is obvious you have a unique perspective in these matters. I will speak with him.”

“I appreciate your help, Mrs. Benson-Stephens.”

She smiled warmly at him. “Please, Emilie is better.”

“Of course. And Ethan, as well.” Ethan smiled at Emilie although he still felt a little queasy from Sherri’s unexpected onslaught.

“Interestingly enough,” one of Emilie’s husbands said, “Sherri has a big day tomorrow as well.” The man smiled at Sherri.

“Gavin,” she said under her breath, so low that Ethan had to strain his ears.

Ethan smiled at Sherri, hoping to encourage her.

“Go on, Sher,” Gavin prodded. But when Sherri refused to answer, only looked down at her plate, shifting the contents around, Gavin spoke up for her. “Sherri is starting an internship at The Brandsen Center tomorrow.” If Ethan hadn’t noticed all the tiny little gestures of affection and love that Gavin and his brother had been lavishing upon their wife just in the thirty minutes they’d all been at the table, Ethan would have been extremely jealous at the note of pride and love he heard in Gavin’s voice. As it was, he’d spent years learning to judge interactions and relationships between people. He realized Gavin spoke out of brotherly love for Sherri.

“What kind of internship?”

Sherri rolled her eyes at Gavin, and both of her cheeks had high spots of color beneath her pale, translucent skin, but she said, “I’m studying to be a psychiatrist.”

Ethan felt his eyebrows pushing up his forehead. So she was not only stunning to look at, she was smart, as well. “What type?”

“Developmental with a focus on teenagers and young adults with eating disorders.”

“Very impressive. And interesting.”

She smiled at him but said nothing more. The rest of the meal was spent on relatively innocent topics. Emilie had made up her mind to recommend him to her father, and anytime the conversation seemed to be heading back into too personal waters, she managed to steer it away. Sherri rarely spoke, and Ethan noticed all three of her friends shooting her inquisitive, concerned looks throughout the evening’s progression.

As they were all leaving the restaurant and Grayson Stephens shook his hand, Ethan noticed Sherri pull Emilie aside and tell her something. Emilie looked concerned but then nodded.

Then Sherri turned to Ethan. “It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Blacker. I truly hope our paths cross again in the future.”

“I feel the same,” he said, taking her proffered hand and then finding it difficult to release. She seemed to sense his reluctance because, for a moment, Ethan thought she swayed toward him. Then she gently removed her hand from his and turned on her heel, waved good-bye to her friends, and walked away.

He shook hands with the rest of them after their car had been pulled around from valet parking. Once they pulled away, Ethan couldn’t resist looking back in the direction that Sherri had walked, just hoping.

With a little jolt to his heart, he spotted her walking around the corner of a street about five blocks away. He took a step in her direction.

“Mr. Blacker?” The valet parking boy called his name. Ethan looked over his shoulder, at his waiting car and at the young man watching him with a perplexed frown.

Making a quick decision, Ethan pulled out his wallet, handed the boy a fifty and said, “Park her again for me, please.” With that, he began sprinting toward the corner that he’d last seen Sherri. He had to reach her before she disappeared down another street. He picked up his pace, feeling a little crazy, but also feeling the happiest he had in months because, for the first time in months, he wasn’t dodging bullets or rocket fire. He wasn’t eluding murderous political assassins or car bombs. He wasn’t running for his life.

He was running toward it.

## Chapter Three

Not wanting to face the drive back home with Grayson, Gavin, and Emilie and the questions she knew they would fire at her, Sherri had quickly made the decision to walk home. Three sides of Male Order were surrounded by water, a river at the south of town and two smaller branches that stretched along each side. Most of Sherri's walk home was along one of the smaller branches. She'd walked to and from town ever since she was a young girl. Even in heels, the distance and the night didn't bother her.

Stopping at a bench beneath a pecan tree and a wrought-iron street lamp, Sherri leaned against the railing, watching lightning bugs floating and flickering just above the dark night waters. For a moment, she let herself feel all the loneliness and the emptiness of the river and the lightning bugs. The waters moved, silent and dark, all through the night, the whole world unaware of its movement and progress as tiny little glimmers of light moved just beyond its reach.

Sherri sighed, annoyed at the melancholy direction of her thoughts.

"That sounds more serious than a boring dinner guest."

Sherri shrieked at the suddenly close voice, but before any real fear could set in, she realized whose voice it was. "Oh shit," she said, breathless. "You scared me. Don't you know it's ill-mannered to sneak up on a girl in the dark?"

Ethan Blacker chuckled. "My apologies, ma'am, but I couldn't let you walk home unattended."

"Did Emilie tell you?" Sherri would throttle her the next time she saw her, pregnant or not.

“No. I followed you.”

“Oh.” Sherri pondered that for a moment. “Surprisingly, I’m not creeped out.”

He chuckled again, and Sherri’s pussy quivered at the sound. “Then will you allow me to escort you the rest of the way home?”

“Are you sure? I mean, I definitely appreciate the gentlemanly gesture and all, but it’s almost two miles away, and I’ve walked home alone hundreds of times, and—”

When Ethan pressed a finger against her lips, Sherri felt her eyes widen. “I would take it as a personal affront if you refused,” he whispered, his voice as soft and as gentle as the night.

Sherri nodded once, and he offered her his elbow. She took it and began walking in the direction of her house, but his elbow tightened around her arm, impeding her progress. “Wait,” he said, “before we go...” Sherri turned toward him. “There’s just one little thing I need to do.” He looked down at her, his deep-set eyes dark and searching. He leaned down toward her and pressed a warm kiss on her lips.

Sherri felt her toes curl, and she closed her eyes. Everything inside her that had been feeling cold and alone and empty was suddenly filled with warmth. Without thinking, without letting her thoughts stop her, she pressed her body against his, her smile moving across his lips when he wrapped strong arms around her. She couldn’t ignore the feel of his hard cock against her abdomen, and her pussy blasted waves of heat and fire through her body. As she rolled her hips up, warm cream began to gather between her legs.

Ethan held her face between his hands and then gently broke away from her lips. Kissing the tip of her nose, he said, “Let’s walk now.”

She slid her arm back through his elbow, and they began strolling along the water’s edge toward Sherri’s house. As they walked, Ethan asked her about grad school, about The Brandsen Center, about her aunt in Australia, and even though she was still completely intimidated by the man, she slowly felt her shyness wearing off.

When she tried asking him about his work in Côte d'Ivoire, however, he got silent for a long moment.

"I have a lot of...history," he finally said. "Most of it is painful. I don't want to hide anything from you, Sherri, but I would ask that, for tonight, we don't go there. Would that be okay?"

Sherri smiled sadly into the darkness. "Okay. Just for tonight then," she agreed, knowing that tonight was most likely all she would get.

When they arrived at her cabin, he walked all the way to the front door with her.

"Thank you, Mr. Blacker."

"Sherri," he said roughly, his gruff, strained voice scratching against her heart. She wanted him. She wanted him bad, but she wanted him too much. He'd shifted something inside her with that kiss, and she knew that anything that happened with him would have to be more than a fling or nothing at all, and it would probably break her heart either way.

But he looked at her with so much wanting. His eyes begged her to let him in.

She had never been a girl to have casual affairs. When she made love to someone, it was because she felt something powerful and undeniable. She felt that pull with Ethan, but in her mind, she knew that there was no reason to hope for something permanent with him. He had responsibilities. It would hurt too much to be with him.

An incoherent plea rose in the back of Sherri's throat, and she shook her head. Opening her front door, she slipped inside, closing it firmly behind her. Falling against the door, she tried to shove down the thoughts, the doubts flying around inside her skull. She wanted to turn it off. She wanted just to be and to live and to not *think*.

She wanted Ethan. Her body buzzed with her need. Electricity snapped through her muscles. They all screamed for her to turn around, rip open the door, and pull Ethan into her.

But her mind said no. Her mind told her not to be foolish. Her mind wanted to protect her.

It was up to her heart.

With a groan of frustration, Sherri said, “Goddamn-mother-fucking-shit-fuck-ass-cake,” and turned and ripped open her front door. At the sound, Ethan whirled around. Their eyes met, only for a moment, but it was all either of them needed. They collided. They crashed. His lips crushed hers, and she felt her body’s desperation take over every thought in her mind.

Ethan wrapped his arms around her ribcage, squeezing her tight and lifting her slightly off the ground, and then moved inside, not even bothering to close the front door as his lips devoured hers. Breaking the kiss only for a moment, he looked down at her. “Bedroom?”

“At the end of the hallway behind me to the right.” Sherri could barely get the words out she was so breathless, but Ethan scooped her up in his arms and strode purposefully down the hall. Sherri curled against him, splaying her palm against his broad chest and pressing her lips to his neck. He placed her on the bed. Sherri lifted up first one leg and then the other while Ethan removed her shoes. Then he ran his big hands up her thighs until he found the top of her stockings. Pausing, he looked deep into Sherri’s eyes, and when she nodded, he slid the black nylon down her legs, alighting every nerve along the way.

Reaching up, she rolled his coat off his shoulders and then began unbuttoning his shirt. Greedily, she ran her fingers over his muscled chest, the dark, sun-tanned skin a contrast against her pale fingers even in the dim moonlight shimmering through her bedroom windows. Before long they were both completely undressed. Ethan crawled onto the bed with her, trailing warm kisses from her ankles up her calves then over her knees and thighs, pausing to give a little extra attention to her pulsing cunt. When he moved his lips over her stomach, making the sensitive muscles quiver just beneath the surface

of her skin, she wrapped her fingers in his brown curls, holding him tight as the tremors of desire passed through her body.

He kissed each of her nipples, his soft, warm lips sending flames of need coursing through her, and then he made it to her lips again. By then, his hips were aligned with hers, and Sherri slowly arched up. She wanted his cock to fill, to consume her. When she felt his tip between her thighs, a shudder rippled the length of her body and a rush of liquid blossomed in her pussy.

“I’m ready for your cock, Ethan,”

One of his hands grabbed a hip, and he guided his long, hard shaft to her entrance, not pausing as he began to slowly push inside her. Sherri sighed, closing her eyes. Feeling stretched and taut and primed, she moved her hips, ready for Ethan to begin moving inside her, ready for the exquisite pleasure she could already feel building up.

As he answered her unspoken request, he covered her mouth with his lips, moving his tongue into her mouth, swirling and pulsing and thrusting. He pulled his cock out and drove back in, not brusque or rough but forceful and steady, each thrust pushing deep into her body. Her heels dug into the muscles of his legs as she strained against and then with and then against him again. Her moans came unbidden from somewhere deep and untamed within her, spilling into his mouth.

“Sherri,” he said against her lips, his voice deep and scratchy. He drove and he drove, and Sherri reveled in the feel of his hot length moving against the inner walls of her pussy, setting them on fire and causing them to clench tighter and tighter around him. Soon her legs began to tremble. She wanted to hold onto the tension, the sublime torture, but her pussy wanted release. Hot flames licked through her, and she shuddered, wrapping herself even tighter around Ethan’s solid body until every nerve ending exploded with pleasure. He continued to thrust inside her, but her pussy held his cock so tightly that it only took a few more strokes until he groaned deep in his throat, and she felt his hot cum pulsing up into her body.



He rested his weight on her for a long moment, and Sherri liked the way it made her breathing difficult, like nothing could reach her when he was with her, not even air. When he rolled off her, he left one leg over her, pulling her close, holding her, and resting his cheek on her chest. Their breathing slowed, and Sherri felt him smile.

“You have a beautiful heartbeat,” he said.

Sherri ran her fingers through his dark hair, playing with its curled ends. “Oh really? And what makes a heartbeat beautiful?”

He tapped his fingers against her stomach, and Sherri realized he was mimicking the beat of her heart. Then he began humming a lullaby to the tempo of her heartbeat. After he finished his song, he said, “I learned that in Côte d’Ivoire.”

His soft, humming voice had begun to relax her into a somnolent state, but his words pulled her out of her drowsiness.

“There was a little boy in a village where I was staying,” he said. “He had a heart defect. It made his heartbeat irregular, and he could never quite keep up with the other village children. One day he was more upset than usual, and his mama wrapped him up in a hug. She said her heartbeat would be perfect enough for the both of them, and he should not ever forget that. As she held him to her body, she told him to be still and listen. Soon he was tapping her heartbeat, and she hummed out that lullaby for him.”

Ethan’s voice got very low then, and Sherri stopped breathing, fearing even the slightest noise would pull him out of his memory. “Two weeks later, the village was bombed. Their bodies were not found, and I never saw them again, but I cannot forget how peaceful they both looked in that one moment. It stays with me always.”

Sherri tightened her fingers in Ethan’s hair, knowing there was nothing that she could or that she needed to say. Pulling her tighter, Ethan held her, and they fell asleep wrapped up in each other’s arms.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan woke up the next morning to the quiet buzz of his cell phone. It was still in his pants, and he rose out of bed without disturbing the delicate creature who lay beside him. Taking a moment to study her, he admired the small pout of her lips and the delicate pink color of a nipple that the bed covers didn't quite conceal. Her short hair was mussed and the ends curled snugly against her round cheeks, framing her ethereal face.

The insistent buzz of his phone drew his thoughts away from the sleeping Titania before him, and he rummaged through the clothes on the floor, found the device, and snuck out of the bedroom.

"Ethan Blacker speaking."

"Well, well, well. You're alive."

"What the hell do you want?" Ethan said, fury licking through his veins as he moved into the kitchen to make sure Sherri wouldn't overhear his conversation if she woke up.

"Now, now, Ethan. Is that any way to greet your little brother?" Benji's words came across slurred, and Ethan immediately knew the man was drunk. Every instinct he possessed told him to hang up the phone, to end the call, and to go on forgetting about the existence of Benjamin Blacker.

But much to Ethan's chagrin, a small part of him wouldn't allow this. A small part of him still held on.

"You better have something really fucking important to tell me."

"Oh my. Guess someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. Should I send for coffee? A bagel? Oh. Wait. I can't do that seeing as I haven't heard from you in...what is it? Nine years? I was beginning to think that maybe those Frenchies finally managed to get your head blown off or something."

"How did you get this number?" Ethan ground out.

"Hey, I just wanted to check up on my big bro. You *know* how much I look up to you."

Ethan opened his mouth to tell Benji to fuck off and hang up when Sherri spoke from behind him, her tone drowsy and gruff from sleep. “Who’re you talking to?”

Whipping around, he attempted a smile. “Just checking on my flight information.”

“Oh shit,” Benji said into his ear. “Is there a girl in the castle?”

Ethan ground his teeth together but forced his voice to sound friendly as he spoke into the phone, “Okay, and that’s all I need to bring this morning?” Sherri watched him with a smile from the doorway, and Ethan waited a moment for Benji to respond, but all Ethan heard was silence on the other end of the line. Ethan ended the call.

Just as he pushed the end button, though, he thought he heard Benji say something, but he hadn’t spoken with or seen his brother in over ten years.

He didn’t owe Benji a goddamn thing.

And fuck him for calling and ruining his morning with Sherri.

“Is that an iPhone?” Sherri asked him, moving around the kitchen, putting on some coffee.

“Yes.”

“I was thinking about getting one of those.”

“They’re nice.”

Sherri barely glanced at him as she bustled about the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher, scrubbing a few dirty dishes that had been left on the counter, folding a hand towel.

“What time is your flight?” she asked.

“Eleven twenty-five.”

“Feel free to use the shower if you’d like.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m all right.”

“You fly a lot then?”

“Yep.”

“Ever to DFW before now?”

“A few times.” He thought her face looked a little drawn, like it held a million thoughts behind it, like it was a struggle to keep them from exploding across her features.

“Everything all right?”

Even though Ethan spoke in low, hushed tones, Sherri jumped at his question. “Yes,” she answered too quickly, too brightly.

Ethan took a step toward her. “Are you sure? You seem a little...”

“I’m fine! Everything’s fine. Everything’s just fine.” She grabbed a clean coffee mug from the dishwasher and moved to a cabinet in the corner, reaching up to put the mug in its place. Ethan moved closer, and when she turned around, she squeaked. “You’re so close,” she said, laughing nervously, trying to move past him back to the dishwasher, but Ethan caught her wrist.

“What’s the matter, Sherri?”

Suddenly she was still, and she looked up at him with her big blue eyes. “Who was that on the phone? I know it wasn’t the airline.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You fly a lot, but you don’t know what you’re allowed to bring on the plane?”

Ethan didn’t say anything even though she waited for him to respond.

“And you have a smart phone. Why even call the airline? Why not just look it up?”

She looked deep into his eyes, searching.

He knew he couldn’t tell her the truth, yet he wouldn’t lie to her either. She stepped closer to him, not breaking eye contact, and her blue depths held him.

“In case you’ve forgotten, I’m accustomed to studying body language. I recognize stress patterns.” She ran her finger over his jawline. “I know where people hold tension in their bodies. What aren’t you telling me, Ethan?”

He didn’t speak.

Sherri put both hands around his face and held him, her eyes moving through his for a long, tense moment. Then she frowned, her dark and delicate brows dipping down across her pale forehead. “Ethan,” she pleaded, “I have to know. Are you married?”

“No,” he whispered.

“And you have no family? No one?”

Ethan felt his features tighten, and he drilled his gaze into hers, hardening his emotions. “No,” he said again. “I have nothing and no one.”

Technically, it wasn’t a lie. His parents were dead, and he’d had his relation to Benji removed from his birth certificate. He’d told his superiors it was a precaution and that he didn’t want to risk putting his brother in danger because of his role in Côte d’Ivoire. He’d still felt a sense of justice, though, once Benji was no longer officially his brother.

After another long moment, she nodded, her shoulders relaxing. “Sorry,” she said, shrugging and smiling sheepishly. “I’m new to this whole ‘morning after’ thing.”

Ethan smiled down at her and pulled her into his arms, pressing a firm kiss on her lips. She took a deep breath in through her nose, and then Ethan felt her settle into his embrace. After a long moment, he broke the kiss, saying, “Believe me. That is the last thing you have to apologize for.”

Smiling, she said, “Well, do you mind if I just hop into the shower?”

“Of course I don’t mind.”

“I have to leave in about forty-five minutes, and you still need a ride to Hester’s right? To pick up your car? Will that give you enough time to check out of your hotel room?”

“Yes. I should be fine.” He smiled down at her, and she placed an affectionate peck on his lips. Then she darted out of his arms, calling over her shoulder that he could help himself to any breakfast item he managed scrounge up. About fifteen minutes after she’d left, Ethan

had dressed and prepared a bagel with cream cheese and blueberries when his phone buzzed again. His jaw clenching involuntarily, he jerked his phone out of his pocket, half-expecting it to be Benji again. Instead, he saw *Unknown Caller* flash across the screen.

“Agent Blacker?” a familiar voice asked on the other end.

“Yes, sir.”

“What was the last thing Lt. Stokes said to both of us before the commencement of the Lionheart Ops?”

Ethan was immediately on alert. The only time General Hawkes employed the use of their code question was when he had a vital piece of information that he needed to pass along to Ethan.

Lowering his voice in case Sherri walked in, he said, “The last thing General Stokes said to both of us before the commencement of the Lionheart Ops was ‘Mess with the best. Die like the rest’.”

“Good. I don’t have much time, Agent Blacker. I’m sending a file to your phone. Hide this file locally, and then destroy your phone.”

“Yes, sir,” Ethan answered. “Any further instructions?”

“When you arrive in France, at this point in time, only Agent Williams has clearance to know the whereabouts of these files. Until you hear from me again, speak to no one of the phone call. Understood, Agent Blacker?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

The line went dead, but Ethan was already moving. He slipped into Sherri’s bedroom. She’d left the bathroom door cracked, and he could hear the shower water running. Spotting her desktop computer across the room from the bathroom, he moved to it and wiggled the mouse to wake it up.

In the bathroom, Sherri’s soft voice floated in the steam, a tuneless hum.

With a deftness that came from many years of practice, Ethan created a hidden folder deep within the programming of Sherri’s computer. Plugging in his phone, he began the file transfer. As each file flickered across the screen, however, Ethan sucked in his breath.

“Shit,” he said quietly. Names, geographic coordinates, and security information for each political leader linked to the newly elected President Ongwerra loaded onto Sherri’s hard-drive. Ongwerra’s claim to the presidency, though voted on by citizens of Côte d’Ivoire, was precarious at best. After the elections, the dictator in power, Izladdi, refused to relinquish his power and step down. If any of his followers, known as Loyalists, gained access to these files, Ongwerra’s tentative grip on the presidency would shatter.

*Why the hell did General Hawkes send such vital and confidential data over the phone?*

Something felt wrong about this, but Ethan had his orders. All he could do was follow them.

As it loaded, Ethan heard the water turn off in the bathroom. He still had more than fifty percent to go before the download completed.

Sherri continued to hum softly as Ethan watched his phone track the progress of the download. It got down to forty percent and then thirty, and then Sherri called from the bathroom. “Ethan?”

Twenty percent remained, and no sound came from the bathroom. Ethan glanced behind him, and through the crack in the door, he could see Sherri moving, wrapping a towel around her body.

Looking at his phone, ten percent remained.

“Ethan?” Sherri called again, louder.

The phone had five percent left. Ethan began to strip. He ripped his clothes off. He made no sound. He looked down at the phone. *Download Complete* showed across the screen. The bathroom door opened. Ethan ripped the cord out of the computer. He shoved his phone beneath his clothes.

“Ethan, what are you—”

He sat on her computer chair, completely naked, and smiling. “Surely we have time for one quickie before we both have to go?”

Sherri’s eyes grew wide, her desire clearly evident in them. The towel fell from around her body, and her skin, rosy and flushed from the hot shower, looked as soft as petals. Ethan rose from the chair,

crossed the room in three strides, grabbed her under her arms, and tossed her tiny body onto the bed. She giggled, but primal need flittered tauntingly beneath the mirth.

Ethan moved over her, pressing the tip of his hard cock to her pussy's entrance. Without waiting, he slid into her warm depths. Sherri purred, but as he began moving inside her, it became more of a growl.

"I want to be on top," she said, pushing at him, urging him to roll over. "I want to ride your cock. Let me do it."

He bent down, kissed her mouth hard, his teeth pushing against her lips, and then he pushed his arms under her and rolled them over as one. Sherri placed her palms on his chest and arched her back, her knees on either side of him, her thighs clutching him as she began working her silken cunt up and down his length.

Her full, round breasts bounced each time she let herself fall down his cock. He felt her pussy squeezing him tighter and tighter, and her motions faltered as her orgasm took over. Ethan grabbed her hips and rolled them over again until she lay beneath him. Slamming himself into her clenched inner walls, he watched Sherri's eyelids flutter. He felt her fingers dig into his back. Just as he reached his own climax and felt his seed spurting deep within her body, she moaned, another, more powerful orgasm causing her to tremble uncontrollably beneath him.

He lowered some of his weight over her, trying to help absorb some of the tremors that violently shook her body. She gasped for breath and clung to him. When his cock began to relax, he eased himself out of her and rolled to her side. He never let her go, though, and he pulled her quivering body close to his.

"Sherri," he whispered into her sweet-smelling locks. Her fists were curled against his chest, and she snuggled even closer, tucking her face against him. "I know that you barely know me, and therefore, have no way of knowing if I'm speaking the truth, but I want to tell you..."



She became still, not even breathing, and he continued. “I won’t forget you. If things were different...if I wasn’t...”

“Shh,” she said, pressing a kiss to his chest where his heart beat rapidly. “It’s better to leave those things in the quiet. You are special. I know that. I won’t forget that, either.”

“Maybe, in a year or two—”

Sherri jerked in his arms and wriggled, making him loosen his grip. Then she looked up at him. “Please, let’s not do that. It’s too hard.”

Ethan frowned, wanting to say so much but knowing that Sherri was right. It was cruel, to both of them, for him to say anything else. Without closing her eyes or glancing away, she pressed her lips to his. In that moment, he saw everything swimming in her deep blue depths. Every laugh. Every frown. Every tear. Every moment that they would never have, he saw it there.

Finally, she broke away. “It’s time for us to go.”

Ethan nodded, and three hours later, he was on a plane, flying away from the only good thing he’d felt in over nine years.

## Chapter Four

*Two months later*

Ethan stood next to the window, its white linen curtain shielding him from view but allowing him to watch the movement of the civilians below him on the streets of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's major port city and the location of Ongwerra's headquarters. He heard clinking from the patrons of the cafe below them. He heard shouts and blaring horns and bicycle bells from the tiny street. He noticed the pelican perched on a wooden post that jutted out from the rooftop across from his window. The bird watched its surroundings with a passive eye while seagulls squawked incessantly above.

The president-elect of Côte d'Ivoire sat in the corner of the room, out of sight from any possible gunfire. He listened to the other men in the room argue, and Ethan's partner, Nicholas Williams, stood by the door, watching the room but also listening for approaching footsteps in the hall and stairway just outside the door.

The sun beat down on the city, and the clay walls of the room absorbed the heat, making it feel like they were all baking despite the small sea breeze that trickled through the window. The fifteen bodies squeezed into the tiny space didn't help, either. Ongwerra had a mansion and his presidential headquarters in Abidjan about two miles away from the safe house they were in now, but there were too many prying eyes and too many curious ears for a meeting of this magnitude to take place there.

"Sir," General Saint-Neuf, Ongwerra's chief military advisor, said. His voice was deep and rich as if he could carve truth with his

words alone. “We must not be hasty with Izladdi. Hundreds of Ivorian citizens have already died at the hands of this madman. If we try this, and we fail, he will retaliate. And it won’t be you and me who suffer. You know, President Ongwerra, that the blood of our countrymen, the heart of this nation, will be spilled in our streets, on our doorsteps. We must think long of this.”

A man wearing a red jacket walked down the street and cast a glance up at the window where Ethan surveilled. All of his senses went into overdrive. The sounds around him amplified. He heard the woman next door humming softly under her breath as she hung out laundry. His vision became acute. His eyes scanned the crowd, quickly taking in the smallest of details—eleven women wearing religious jewelry of some kind, seven bicycles on the road, the man who dropped an onion.

But then the man in the street shifted his eyes back to the people around him, and he continued walking down the street. Ethan watched until the man rounded the corner, and he let his breath out quietly.

“*Oui*, this is certainly not a decision to be taken lightly, Monsieur Ongwerra,” General le Carré, the head of France’s envoy to Côte d’Ivoire, said. The short man clicked his heels together at the end of each sentence, and his voice rose on the last syllable. “But what about this? If we do not act, if we allow Izladdi to continue his killing, his slaughter, then there will absolutely be blood in our streets. But we could try this tactic, and *maybe* we will fail, and *maybe* more people will die. But, also, maybe we succeed, and maybe we finally begin to get this country productive again.” He gave one final resounding click of his boot heels and glared at the other men, waiting for his next challenger.

Several voices immediately rang out, and the same arguments they’d been circling for an hour and a half were spat back into the room. Ethan continued scanning the street and the surrounding buildings, not paying much attention to what the men were saying, only that they were saying it.

Then he saw her.

Her short brown hair bobbed through the crowd. He saw the graceful shape of her neck as she bent over to smell some oranges at a vendor's booth. He could just make out the curve of her cheek as she turned to look over some mangoes.

Ethan's stomach clenched, and he stepped in front of the window to get a better look. He wanted to run down to her, to scoop her up in his arms. He wanted his cock deep inside her.

A million questions flooded his mind. Why was she here? Was she looking for him? Did she remember him? Did she still want him? Should he go to her?

At his movement into a more visible position, the mood in the room behind him changed abruptly. A hush fell upon the men, and Ongwerra's two personal bodyguards who'd been standing next to him, who always stood next to him, had him lie on the floor while they crouched next to him.

"What's the status, Agent Blacker?"

Ethan stared hard at the woman in the street, and Nicholas's words didn't break through his thoughts.

God, he wanted her. He knew she'd been pervading his thoughts, his dreams, for the past few weeks, but he had no idea that the mere sight of her would have such a profound impact on him. His heart began to beat faster. Every muscle in his body thrummed with adrenaline.

He could crawl out the window and grab onto the small balcony that stuck out from the window next to him. He could dangle from the edge of that and make his way, hand by hand, over to the wooden trellis to its other side. He could scramble down that and be to her in less than a minute.

His muscles coiled, ready to act, ready to have her in his arms.

"Agent Blacker," his partner whispered again.

Just then, the woman turned until she fully faced him, and Ethan let out a tight breath.

It wasn't her.

He suddenly came back to the present and noticed how quiet the room was.

Sliding back into his hidden position behind the curtain, he nodded at Nicholas and said, "All clear."

His partner met his eyes, questioning, but knew better than to say anything in front of the room of foreign dignitaries.

Ignoring the disappointment pressing against the back of his skull, he began his methodical scan of the crowd. The men in the room began speaking again but in more subdued tones.

After only a few moments, he noticed a man sitting at the cafe facing his window with a newspaper in front of him. The whole time Ethan had been standing there, the man hadn't turned the page although he'd been staring at it like he was reading it.

Then he picked the newspaper up, and a man standing near the entrance of the cafe slipped inside. Another man about a block away slipped into an alley, and a man at the street corner headed toward the cafe. Ethan met Nicholas's eyes. His partner listened intently at the door as if he'd heard a commotion.

An argument had broken out at the bottom of the stairs.

Ethan moved to President Ongwerra and crouched in front of him. "President, there are men coming up here. We must get you back to the mansion."

The President nodded once.

"Stay low and keep up with me. We may have to do some running."

He nodded again. The president was middle-aged but, having spent most of his life as a soldier, had kept himself in shape. Ethan knew Ongwerra could keep up with him if he needed to.

They moved along the wall, keeping low, and Nicholas cracked open the door. The voices at the bottom of the stairway became clearer. A man was trying to come up, but the cafe owner argued with

him and wouldn't let him enter the stairwell. Ethan and the president had just stepped into the hallway when a shot was fired.

The argument was over.

Several pairs of heavily booted feet began pounding up the stairs.

With Ethan in front and Agent Williams behind, plus Ongwerra's two bodyguards, they began running toward the door at the opposite end of the hallway. Shouting came from behind them, and someone fired more shots. Clay from the walls rained down on them. The bullets had just missed them.

Ethan heard either Nicholas or one of the guards fire back, but he could not spare a backward glance. He burst through the door, ushering President Ongwerra into the room.

They'd poured over a detailed map of the city, reviewing the escape route hundreds of times, but when Ethan strode across the room and looked out the window, the ladder was broken off.

"Shit!" Ethan growled. Nicholas had planned the route. A small part of Ethan's brain found it odd that he would overlook something this vital. Why hadn't Nicholas scoped out the route? He should have found such a discrepancy. These thoughts flew through Ethan's head, but he had already begun looking for alternate means of escape.

Agent Williams came through the door. "What the hell's the problem? Get out the window."

"The ladder is broken. It's too high to jump without risk of injury to the president."

Nicholas went to peer out the window. "God dammit. Someone must have known we were going to be here and cut it."

Ethan could hear President Ongwerra's guards at the doorway, shooting at their pursuers.

"What about that dumpster?" Nicholas said, indicating one about ten feet to the left of the window.

"President," Ethan said, motioning Ongwerra over, "do you think you can crawl along this ledge and fall into the dumpster below? We don't have much time. They'll find this alley soon."

President Ongwerra eyed the four-inch ledge protruding from the building. "I will do this."

Ethan motioned for Nicholas to go first, and before he had dropped into the dumpster, President Ongwerra crawled out the window, clinging to the wall. He moved inch by inch while Ethan scanned the street, looking for any sign of a threat.

He heard a shot come from the hallway and then a loud groan. Running to the front room, he saw one of President Ongwerra's guards on the ground, blood spilling from his leg. His partner crouched next to him, already trying to staunch the blood flow with a makeshift tourniquet.

A man burst through the door, and Ethan's instincts took over. His breathing became steady, and without hesitating he attacked. His forearm shot out, aiming for the man's jugular. The man blocked, but Ethan had already begun his next move, an elbow to the cheek. He caught the man off-guard, causing him to stumble backward as Ethan felt the hard bone of the man's cheek against his elbow. He didn't stop. He continued to attack, slamming his fist into the man's gut and then grabbing the top of the doorframe with both hands to swing toward the man, the bottom of his booted feet slamming into the man's chest and sending him sprawling backward.

Another man ran at Ethan, and at the last second Ethan crouched down and slammed his fist into the man's balls. The man fell to the floor, incapacitated.

He closed the door and shoved a chair beneath the lock.

"This won't hold for long," he said to the crouching bodyguard. "Can you hold them off until backup arrives?"

"Yes. I will call for the medics, as well."

Ethan nodded and ran to the window and saw Ongwerra fall into the dumpster. Glancing down the street, he saw five men round the corner with guns. The only entrance to the back alley was about seven blocks away. He didn't have much time to get President Ongwerra safely away, and he quickly climbed out the window. He scooted

across the ledge with deft, precise movements, falling adroitly into the dumpster.

“We’ve got to move.” They began running down the street and then turned into another narrow alley. Halfway down, Nicholas burst through a bright blue doorway nestled in the stone wall of the building.

Once inside, they found themselves in an office. When they went through another door, they spilled out into the lobby of a hostel. The people milling about the lobby stared at Ongwerra and the two Americans with perplexity, some openly pointing. The three of them ran through the lobby and out the front door into a busy street.

In his suit and flanked by two men dressed in foreign military dress, President Ongwerra stood out. Almost as soon as they were outside, the sun glaring down upon them, the people around them approached, some trying to shake Ongwerra’s hand, others spitting at him.

Ethan heard shooting from inside the lobby. When he looked inside, he saw the five men from the street running through, shouting orders for the people to get out of their way. The people in the lobby screamed and scrambled to move.

“Go,” Nicholas said. “I can hold them off for about thirty seconds.”

Ethan hesitated, his instincts warring within him, half telling him to stay and help his partner, the other half demanding that he protect the president.

“Go,” Nicholas urged again.

Ethan grabbed President Ongwerra, and they ran across the street, breaking free from the people who had begun to crowd around them. And then they fled.

Darting in and out of buildings, hiding for a minute in an alcove, then zigzagging and going far out of their way to avoid their pursuers, they slowly made their way back to the mansion. Ongwerra knew his city. He knew where to slip out of sight and where to turn. When they



were about half a mile from the mansion, they found a vehicle with some of Ongwerra's men. They climbed into the car and panted heavily as they rode the rest of the way to the mansion.

President Ongwerra met Ethan's eyes across the seat, and although neither man said anything, they both knew the truth.

Someone had betrayed them.

## Chapter Five

Resisting the urge to glance down at her watch for the fifth time that afternoon, Sherri stifled a yawn, the effort of holding it in almost not worth the embarrassment an actual yawn would cause. This was one of her “off” nights, which only meant that she wouldn’t have face time with any of the patients, not that she didn’t have to work.

“Ooh, honey, I can hear your jaw cracking all the way across the room. Are you getting enough sleep?” a nurse named Clotilda asked from behind her drug-doling counter. “It’s only four in the afternoon. That was a four-in-the-morning yawn if I ever saw one.”

“Don’t I know it.” Sherri mustered up a wan smile for Clotilda. “I keep telling myself I only have a few more months of this before I’m done with grad school, but you know what? I have a feeling it’s not going to get any easier once I’m done at SMU.”

“Amen, honey. But you’ll be all right. Trust me. I’ve seen more than one grad student break at the last minute. They just couldn’t cut it, but I’ve been watching you. You’ve got pluck. You’re going to be just fine.”

“Thanks, Clotilda. When I’m so tired that I don’t know whether to curl my dinner or cook my hair, I’ll remember that.”

Sherri spent the rest of the afternoon looking through case files for Dr. Madden, her mentor, based on some notes she’d given Sherri. She also got to sit in on one of Dr. Madden’s session with Melanie Sender, a long-time client who struggled with bulimia, and then Sherri squeezed in about half an hour working on a grant proposal. At around five, she sat in on a lecture from a visiting doctor from Rhode

Island, who spoke about the lack of government funding available for mental health care facilities across the country.

Walking into the elevator, exhausted but pleased with all she'd accomplished, it didn't bother her that the elevator was crammed full of people. The Brandsen Center had sixteen stories, and the lecture had been on the very top floor. At around the tenth floor, a familiar-looking man strode into the elevator car. Sherri tried not to stare openly, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she somehow knew him.

Glancing out of the corner of her eyes, she studied his profile. He had dark blond hair that looked like it fell naturally into place, more perfectly arranged than hers did after an hour in front of the mirror. He had high cheekbones, a straight nose, and pouty lips.

Sherri crinkled her nose. A little too pretty for her, but she still couldn't figure out why he looked so familiar.

He must have noticed her studying him because he suddenly turned to her. Sherri jumped at his abrupt movement. His eyes drifted over her face and then raked down her body. The corner of his mouth tipped up, and when he looked back up at her, he had a devilish air about him.

"You're a student," he said, flicking her name tag in a flirtatious manner.

Sherri instinctively jumped away and studied him again. "Have I seen you before? Here, I mean."

"Nope. It's just that I only get to see a bunch of old codgers every day and all with sticks stuck right up their asses."

Sherri glanced around when someone in the back of the elevator blatantly cleared her throat. "That certainly is an opinion."

He shrugged. "I got lots."

"Yes, well...wait, how did you know I was a student?"

She glanced down at her name tag to make sure that she remembered correctly and that it didn't have anything mentioning her status as an intern. It didn't.

"It was an educated guess. No Ph.D. after your name."

"I could be a drug sales rep. Or an office worker. Or even a patient at a speaking event."

"True. But then I also know that there's a bunch of interning grad students on the loose, or that's the rumor on the tenth floor."

Sherri raised her brows in surprise, knowing that only the most expensive therapists practiced on the tenth floor.

"Plus, you have that sort of drawn, on-the-brink-of-madness look that I've often noticed in students."

"Excuse me?" Irritation flared up inside her. Who did this guy think he was? A quick glance at his apparel, and her Male Order-trained eyes easily recognized the look of a man with expensive tastes. Ralph Lauren loafers, Yves Saint Laurent casual wear, a whiff of Tom Ford cologne, and a pair of Versace sunglasses dangling from his shirtfront told her everything she needed to know.

"Let me guess. Dr. Huffstead?" Sherri snickered to herself, knowing that the smug coxcomb most likely wouldn't catch the insult. Every client she'd ever seen going in or coming out of the woman's office was of the male variety and always between the age of twenty-two and thirty-nine. And Mr. Fop in the Elevator certainly fit the bill.

"Well, you wouldn't find any Allan Woodcourts on that floor, would you?" he asked, his tone dry. Uh-oh. Maybe he *had* caught the insult.

"You read Dickens?"

"Yes. I read Dickens."

"Oh! No...I mean...you probably read Dickens all the time. I wasn't saying..." She grunted, annoyed at how flustered she sounded. She was too tired to deal with this kind of crap at the end of her day. "Listen. I didn't even make it all the way through *Bleak House*."

He turned to her then with a smile, his eyes crinkling in the corners, and she knew that she *had* seen him somewhere. There was no doubt. His eyes looked so familiar. They were hazel. Just like Ethan's had been.

At the thought of Ethan, Sherri immediately clamped her mouth shut. She was *definitely* too tired to be dragging that whole mess into the forefront of her mind. It had been over two and a half months since that night, and she kept telling herself, day after day, to forget the whole damn thing. She felt perilously close to tears, although she dared her emotions to try such a stunt in an elevator full of strangers. Turning sharply away from the handsome, though somewhat dandyish, man in the elevator, she glared at her distorted reflection in the elevator's shiny walls, determined to push thoughts of Ethan and the accompanying hot ball of emotion caught in her throat back down into the pit of her stomach where they belonged.

It had been almost a full day without one thought of Ethan passing through her mind, and she wasn't about to let those memories take away the little pleasure she'd derived from her productive day.

The elevator reached the third floor, the floor where she kept her belongings, with a loud ding, and Sherri began to leave the elevator.

"Dammit," she heard the man say under his breath. "Look, at the risk of looking like a complete prick..."

"Really!" The woman at the back of the elevator huffed although Sherri couldn't hold back a small giggle.

Holding open the sliding metal door, Sherri waited for him to spit out whatever he wanted to spit out.

"...but what would you say to dinner? To make up for our little literary misunderstanding?"

"Oh, that." She waved her hand in dismissal "That wasn't you. I promise. I've had a long day, a long week, and a long month. One of those off-to-a-bad-start-that-never-really-gets-right kind of things. You know?"

"Sounds like you need a young, handsome, filthy rich man to take you out on the town and keep your mind off things for a while. Say...Friday night?" He smiled down at her, his eyes crinkling around the corners, something that Ethan's did, too.

Sherri grimaced. “Friday night I’ll be here, in session with a patient. Sorry.” She shot him a smile, hoping he would get the hint, and turned to leave, letting the door begin to slide closed. But she heard someone stop it again.

“Okay, then Saturday.” He’d taken her place, holding the door open while the rest of the passengers waited impatiently behind him.

“Obligatory dinner party.”

“Sunday?”

“Studying for the upcoming week. And that is the only day I have for studying, so there’s no negotiating for that one.”

“Why do I get the feeling that no matter what day I throw at you your answer will still be no?”

“Look.” Sherri met him square in the eyes even though that meant his hazel ones stared right back at her, a painful reminder. “I don’t know your name, and I know absolutely nothing about you. But even considering all that, the truth is by the time I’m done with school and with work each day, I’m too tired to feed myself, much less be charming and effervescent on a date with someone I barely know.”

“I get it. The whole ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ shtick. You know, for someone studying psychology, I thought you’d at least have a better excuse.”

“Well, for a young, handsome, filthy rich man, I thought you’d at least have a better pick-up line.”

The elevator let out a high-pitched wail, angry at having been open and stagnant for so long, and turning on her heel, Sherri strode away. A part of her wondered if she’d been just a little too harsh on him, but what the hell? She’d never see him again. Oddly enough, the thought didn’t comfort her. In fact, it only intensified the emptiness she’d been feeling ever since that night with Ethan.

“Well, fuck all,” she muttered to herself later that night on her way home. Whipping her car into a convenience store halfway between Dallas and Male Order, she knew that her only solace would

come in the form of cheap wine. Cheap wine and a whole jar of pickles.

\* \* \* \*

Benji felt like he needed to wash his hands. He'd shaken so many in the last quarter hour. Although a few of the people attending the Ellis Spring Luncheon had approached him to schmooze and chat, the cool spring breeze on his back and the soft, sweet scent of magnolia blossoms, barbecue, and fresh-cut grass made dealing with adoring fans so much easier. Plus, there were quite a few less of them at this private event than he would encounter on an average day walking down the streets of LA.

So far Dalton Ellis, his brother, Garrett, and their wife, Madeline, had been very accommodating. They'd invited him down to dinner each night, given him a tour of Male Order and their offices downtown, and had even lent him a sleek black Jaguar XKR. Actually, he couldn't believe Jimmy Duren had such pleasant relatives.

Jimmy had warned him before he came that the citizens of Male Order led very interesting lives, and at first Benji hadn't known what to make of that statement. Once he arrived, however, it quickly became apparent that the women of Male Order were well-loved and cherished. *Extremely* well-loved and cherished. He hadn't met a woman yet who didn't have more than one husband dangling off her arm.

Granted he'd only hung around the billionaire estates and driven to Dallas a couple times, but the lifestyle intrigued him. He never would have imagined it could work so well and for so many. There had only been one person he would ever consider sharing a wife with, but as Benji had completely and utterly destroyed that relationship, he dismissed the idea of the ménage lifestyle for himself.

Everyone had already gorged themselves on barbecue, grilled corn on the cob, potato salad, and homemade peach cobbler and ice cream. A quick glance to his watch and Benji realized he had been mingling for well over an hour. He thought it was just about time to leave when he noticed an oddly familiar figure, petite and topped with choppy brown hair, playing badminton. With a newfound purpose, he strode away from the main crowd towards the badminton net that had been set up in a manicured, sprawling lawn too large to be considered a backyard.

Keeping a little bit away, he made sure to stay behind her so she wouldn't spot him. He watched her whoop when she hit the birdie high in the air. The opposing team, a set of twins, thought it was heading out and didn't bother to hit it back, but just at the last second a soft breeze blew it back into the white chalk lines in the grass marking the out-of-bounds. She laughed and stuck her tongue out at the twins, placing her thumb on the end of her nose and then wiggling her fingers at them. Her partner, a woman Benji vaguely remembered meeting earlier in the afternoon named Emilie, gave the petite woman from The Brandsen Center a high five.

Damn, why couldn't he remember her name? He distinctly remembered flicking her name tag, and he remembered reading it. But his mind, only recently devoid of the constant influence of alcohol, was having difficulty remembering the actual name he'd read on the tag.

Benji watched as the women scored point after point. He was beginning to wonder if the twins were letting them win. If they were, they didn't make it obvious, keeping the score extremely close throughout the entire game but always letting the women stay just ahead of them. Finally, when the two women only needed one more point to win the game, Emilie served, the four of them volleyed back and forth for a couple shots, but then the little woman dinked one into the back corner.



Laughing softly to himself under an oak tree about twenty feet away, he watched as the tiny woman fell to her knees, overcome with ostentatious joy at their momentous victory. She let out a long roar as Emilie tried to haul her to her feet.

“Boo!” one of the twins shouted. “We want a rematch.”

“Yeah!” said the other.

“Rematch. Rematch. Rematch,” they chanted together.

Emilie shook her head, rubbing her stomach. Even though she had a bulge, it was well hidden beneath loose-fitting clothes, and Benji had forgotten she was pregnant.

“We need some rest and some refreshment,” he heard her tell the two men. Benji thought they had to be her husbands because they immediately threw their rackets down and rushed to her side, grabbing her by the elbows and seating her in a white-painted wooden lawn chair.

The woman he’d met in Dallas held Emilie’s racket out toward the bystanders, looking for a new partner and two new opponents. Benji saw his opportunity.

“I take it this is the obligatory dinner party?” he said when he reached her, taking the racket from her hand before she had enough time to react to his presence and could think to snatch it away from him.

Her already wide eyes grew even more round in her tiny face. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I was invited. Though, don’t you think it’s more of a luncheon than a dinner party? It *is* called the Ellis Spring Luncheon.”

Putting one of her hands on her hip, she glared up at him. “Har. Har. I should have known someone as well-dressed as you would end up in Male Order. Now, who the heck are you, and why are you here?”

“Like I said, I was invited and am trying to enjoy a pleasant afternoon amongst the kind and welcoming citizens of Male Order. But you know, I might ask the same of you.” He took a step toward

her, and she instinctively took one step back. “Who are *you*?” he asked. Then he took another step. “Why are *you* here?”

Her voice came out soft and breathless. “Me? But I live...” She trailed off, suddenly realizing his trick. Her brows shot together in frustration. “Okay, mister. I don’t know who you are...” She pointed the netted end of her badminton racket at his chest, forcing him to halt his progress. “But you had best tell me who you are this instant, or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what, refuse to go out on a date with me?” Benji shot her a big smile. “Too late.”

“Everything all right, Sherri?” Emilie called from her lawn chair, lifting her sunglasses to peer over at them.

Benji grinned. “So. Your name is Sherri? That sounds about right.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Thanks, Em,” he heard her mutter under her breath, but she waved at the woman.

He snatched up her hand and placed a warm kiss on the top. “It is a very beautiful name.”

“Puh-lease,” she said, yanking her hand out of his. “Look, I don’t really care who you are. Just promise you’ll quit with all this gentlemanly flattery crap.”

“Only if you promise you’ll let me take you out,” he countered.

“I’ll let you be my badminton partner. We’ll go from there. Got it?”

“I can live with that. I’ll serve first.”

“Whatever.”

Two other luncheon attendees had picked up the twins’ rackets and were waiting on the other side of the net for Sherri and Benji to start the game.

Sherri walked up to the net, and Benji was afforded a lovely view of her figure as she bent her knees in preparation of the volley. He didn’t dare linger too long, not wanting to arouse her suspicions, but he popped the birdie up into the air a couple times on the end of his

racket, drinking in the sight of her slender legs in the sunshine and the high curve of her round little ass.

He felt his cock rise, and he forced his attention to the game, not wanting to embarrass himself in front of strangers, but when he glanced at Emilie and her husbands, who had returned with refreshments, they all three wore identical, knowing smiles.

Well, damned if he cared. Let them know he found Sherri attractive. Hell, maybe he was even lucky enough to have found some allies.

\* \* \* \*

Sherri stomped away from the house with Emilie and the twins toward the place where the car was parked, replaying the afternoon in her head. It had been going so well before that annoying man had shown up. For the first time in weeks, she had begun to feel some of the tension in her shoulders dissipate and her mind unwind itself. It wasn't much, but it had certainly felt like the start of something healthy.

Then that little rat turd had shown up. Every opportunity he got, he flirted with her, grabbing her hand or touching her arm, whispering little comments into her ear like they'd known each other for years and were on the most intimate of terms.

After she'd taken just about as much as she could, she slammed her palms against his chest, sending him backwards a few steps. "If you don't stop breathing down my neck," she'd yelled at him, "I am going to pour a pitcher of ice-cold lemonade down your pants."

He'd grinned but had slightly lessened his attention. Only slightly, though.

"Can you believe the gall of that little bug?" Sherri panted as they walked across the lawn.

"No," Emilie answered, her voice even.

“Every time I turned around, there he was, just like, *right there*. And the way he said my name, always with his, every time, like we were...like we were...Anyway, you heard it. ‘Oh, Sherri and I this. Oh, Sherri and I that.’ And don’t think I’ve forgiven you for divulging my name to him. Everything was under control until you had to go and give that away. Once he knew that, it was like someone opened up the floodgates or something. I couldn’t get the fart-monger to go away.”

“Well, I hope you’re not too terribly set against him.”

“Why?” Sherri asked, an ominous feeling rising up in her gut. She’d been around Emilie long enough to know that, when she spoke in such a carefully even tone, it usually meant she was about to tell Sherri something she knew Sherri didn’t want to hear.

“Because I’ve invited him to dinner this week.”

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“You’re going to be there.”

Sherri stopped moving and rounded on Emilie, who had fallen slightly behind. “What?”

Gavin chuckled from behind Emilie as their whole party halted at her low, tense voice. She glared at Gavin, pointed a finger at him in warning, but then returned her attention to Emilie.

“I don’t remember agreeing to this.”

Emilie shrugged, completely undaunted. “Sherri, darling, I can’t help it if he’s smitten. And he looked so sad and longing when you walked away. And who am I to refuse a fellow actor when he asks me to help him get you out on a date?”

“As if,” Sherri said, rolling her eyes. “He is not smitten. He’s just bored.” She almost turned around to resume their walk when she noticed that all three of them—Emilie, Gavin, and Grayson—looked at her with identical smiles of amusement. Then it clicked.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘fellow actor’?”

“You mean you don’t recognize him?” Grayson asked, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “I thought every female between the age of fourteen and ninety would recognize that man.”

“He said his name was Benji. That’s all I know.”

Nobody said anything for a long moment, possibly thinking that Sherri would catch on.

“Okay,” she finally said, placing her hands on her hips. “Is anyone going to tell me who this turd is?”

“Benji?” Gavin said. “Benji Blacker? That doesn’t ring a bell?”

Sherri could feel the blood draining from her face. It rang a bell all right, but she didn’t think it was for the same reason that Gavin thought. Emilie caught her eye, and Sherri saw that she shook her head, letting Sherri know there was no relation to the only other man Sherri had ever met with the last name of Blacker.

Sherri had never told anyone about her night with Ethan, but somehow Emilie seemed to know that *something* had happened. Emilie always had an intuition about these things. Maybe it was her French blood, but even so, Emilie never mentioned him and always managed to change the subject if one of the twins happened to bring him up in front of Sherri.

When Sherri didn’t answer Gavin, he said, “You don’t know Benji? Benji from *The Turnpike*?”

Sherri shook her head. “What’s *The Turnpike*?”

“That TV show about all those rich kids from New York who had to get working-class jobs in New Jersey for six weeks? You don’t remember that show?”

Sherri shook her head. “Aunt Birdie never had a TV, and I haven’t gotten one since she left. Don’t see the point now.”

“Yeah, but he’s been in movies, too. What about *Spy Am I*?” Grayson asked.

Sherri shook her head again.

“*Consuelo and Her Palace*?”

“Oh, I like that one,” Emilie said. “He plays the groomsman in that one. His scene in the pond with nothing on but a white cotton breechcloth.” She winked at Sherri. “*C’était très délicieux.*”

“Okay, what about *Robotica*?” Gavin asked.

Sherri shook her head again.

“Come on! You had to at least have heard of it. It was so huge when it came out.”

“Yeah, everyone talked about that robot sex scene for months.”

“Apparently not everyone,” Sherri said. “I don’t watch TV, and I don’t watch movies. But we’re getting off-topic.” She glared at Emilie. “Now, explain to me why you thought it was okay to promise Mr. Gropey that you would help get me on a date with him?”

Emilie lifted a dismissive shoulder then swept past Sherri, continuing their walk to the car. “When I see my friend stare at a man’s ass for over thirty seconds when she thinks no one is looking, I do what I can to make sure that friend gets herself a date with that man.”

Sherri was left sputtering, cheeks ablaze. When she caught back up to the trio, she said, “The only reason I’m letting you get your way, Emilie Benson-Stephens, is because you’re pregnant. When you finally pop this kid out, don’t expect me to be so nice.”

“So you’ll come?” Emilie asked, a brilliant smile lighting up her graceful features.

“Do I really have a choice?”

They had reached the car, and when Gavin held the door open for them to climb in, he said, “At least I’m not the only turd anymore.”

Spotting a perfect opportunity to let out some frustration, Sherri whacked him right on the back of his head as she climbed into the backseat. “You got that right, turd bucket.”

\* \* \* \*

Holding her blue and white polka dot jacket open for her as Sherri slipped her arms into the coat, Benji forced his hands to remain still. There was a little bit of hair that he wanted to tuck behind her ear, but he also didn't want to make her skittish. The dinner had gone well, better than he'd expected.

Sherri had already made it to the house when he arrived, and as he walked through the kitchen door, she'd glanced up at him. She'd offered him a tight smile, but as the night wore on, her smiles grew bigger and bigger until, by the end of the dinner, they felt almost natural around him. At first, she'd seemed almost sad, but she'd treated him with more civility than at the luncheon a week before.

Emilie had insisted they sit next to each other, and all throughout dinner Benji had wanted to sneak his hand over to her thigh, reach up under her flimsy cotton dress, and slip one of his digits right up her pussy. Despite her attempts to treat him with indifference, he saw the way her eyes caught his, full of heat and unspoken desires. He'd be willing to bet she wouldn't be quite so cold and distant with his fingers buried deep in her cunt.

He kept waiting for her to give him some sort of sign—a glance, a touch, a whisper—but every time she came close to that, she drew away, rejoining the main conversation, turning away from him, and not speaking directly to him for another five minutes or so. His cock had been on a roller coaster ride all night, and not a very fun one at that.

Now, as the night was drawing to a close, he realized he wasn't ready to give up.

They'd already thanked Emilie and the twins for dinner and wished them a good night. As the front door closed behind them, Benji caught Sherri's hand but kept his grip loose, letting her know she could pull free if she wanted. She didn't, and encouraged, Benji said, "Let me give you a ride home. You shouldn't have to walk through the woods alone, much less at night."

"I've been walking these woods alone at night since I was eleven years old. They're harmless."

Benji frowned, searching for some way to hold on to the beautiful creature just a little while longer.

"You could always walk with me. See for yourself." She smiled up at him, her wide, full lips begging him for a kiss. He resisted, knowing he needed to take this very slow. If he wanted her, and he did, then he'd have to move at her pace. He'd wait for her signals.

"I'd love to," he said.

They headed toward the woods, and Benji couldn't help but smile into the darkness when she moved closer to him, snuggling her body up against his.

"Benji," she said after a minute or two of walking hand in hand.

"Yep?"

"I want to ask you a personal question, and I'd understand if you didn't want to answer."

"Go ahead."

"Do you still have appointments at The Brandsen Center?"

Benji chuckled softly. "Whew, thank goodness."

"What?"

"I thought for sure that you were going to ask me about *Robotica*."

Sherri giggled, and Benji's cock shot straight up. God, he wanted to plow into the woman, but he forced his mind away from those thoughts.

"Robot sex. I heard."

Benji shuddered in mock revulsion. "I was young. I was naive. Let's leave it at that."

Sherri giggled again, but louder. It was almost a full-throated laugh, and Benji tightened his hand around hers.

"But to answer your question," he said, lowering his voice. "Yes. I see someone every week."



“Oh.” She didn’t say anything else for a while, and Benji let the silence grow. Surprisingly, he didn’t feel the need to fill the night air with chatter. If he’d been walking through some semi-creepy woods with Carlene or with any of the other bimbos he’d dated through the years, he would have been talking just to keep the silence out. With Sherri, he liked the quiet just as much as the talking.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Shoot.”

“Why are you in Male Order? It’s not exactly a vacation hot spot. The founding families have managed to keep it pretty much off the radar. And you’re not related to anyone here, are you?”

He shook his head even though he knew she couldn’t see it in the darkness. “I don’t have any family.”

“None?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“No mother? No father?”

“No, Sherri.” He laughed, but something about her questions unnerved him.

“You don’t have a brother?” Her voice was low, and a chill ran through Benji.

It felt like her question was loaded even though Benji knew there was no way in hell she knew about Ethan. As far as Benji knew, Ethan hadn’t been to the United States in over eight or nine years. And even if he had, the odds of him coming across Sherri were so small that they seemed almost inconceivable.

“No,” he said. “I don’t have a brother.” He wished he could have answered her question differently, but Ethan had made it abundantly clear that Benji no longer had a brother. Benji grimaced as he vaguely remembered a drunken phone call to Ethan a couple months before.

It was just after Jimmy had banished him to Male Order. Benji had been more than a little surprised when Ethan actually answered. Now Benji regretted that he’d been so drunk. He wished he could remember what they’d said to each other.

Squeezing his hand, Sherri brought him back to the present and said, "I'm sorry. I would be lost without my Aunt Birdie."

"Don't be. It's not your fault. In fact, it's probably my fault more than anyone else's." Despite his efforts to stay focused on Sherri, her questions had stirred up his memories, and he couldn't seem to get them out of the forefront of his mind. He thought back to the events that had transpired so many years before, the way his brother had phoned him not two minutes after that horrible episode of *The Turnpike* aired, and then how his brother had whispered across five thousand miles that Benji had shamed the whole family and that he should consider himself brotherless.

Benji blinked to block the memories, so long buried, and thankfully Sherri didn't press him for details.

A few minutes later, he saw a porch light begin to show through the thinning trees.

"Is this it?" he asked, surprised when he saw something that resembled a European chalet more than the tiny, rustic cabin he'd been imagining.

"Yep. This is Aunt Birdie's cabin."

Looking at the petite structure nestled so perfectly in the woods, he laughed.

Sherri stiffened beside him. "What? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," he said, and emboldened by their intimate walk and the starlight and the bright moon, he tucked that little bit of hair that he'd been watching all night behind her ear. "Nothing's wrong with it. It's just that, standing here, I was suddenly struck with how perfect it is for you."

"How do you mean?" Her voice was soft in the night, and he could feel her warm breath on his face, on his lips. He let his hand linger on her cheek, holding it against his big palm. "It's tiny," he said, leaning closer. "It's tucked away from the world." His lips were almost to hers. "And it's..."

"It's what?" Her lips brushed against his when she spoke.

“I forget.” He closed the distance, and finally, he tasted her.

Gently sucking her bottom lip between his teeth, he let his tongue enjoy the plump firmness of it. And sending jolts of pleasure straight to his already rigid cock, Benji pressed his lips tighter to hers when she not only let him kiss her, but she kissed him back, moving her lips over his and pushing and pulling. She pressed the length of her body against him, moaning when his cock pressed into her abdomen.

Wrapping his hands around her body and gripping her ass cheeks, he lifted her against him and walked up the porch, pinning her against the rough timber of her cabin. He rolled his hips against her, trailed his lips over her skin, and he tasted salt on her skin. The hard, pebbled tips of her breasts pressed against his chest as she undulated against him.

Her dress had buttons all the way down the front. He undid the top one. He kissed the skin beneath. He undid the second one. He kissed the skin beneath. He undid the third. He kissed the skin beneath. And he continued to unbutton and to kiss, moving between her breasts and then to her stomach and then to the thin fabric of her panties which covered the tender flesh of her pussy and then to her legs.

She whispered his name as her fingers ran through his hair, and he couldn't stop himself from smiling against her skin. After he had her dress all the way unbuttoned, he pulled it apart but didn't let it fall to the porch. Kneeling down, he slipped her yellow cotton panties off her waist and down her legs. The porch light cast a golden glow onto her skin, and Benji thought he'd never seen a more beautiful woman nor a more beautiful pussy.

He gripped her thighs, urging her legs into a wider stance. Dipping his head to her, he began licking at the warm liquid that had gathered between her folds. After a moment, he thrust his tongue more fully into her hot, silky depths, swirling it around the inside and flicking against her lips.

“Benji,” she gasped, and he heard her head hit the hard cabin wall behind her as she threw it back.

Moving a thumb over her clit, he began to rub it fast and hard but continued to roll his tongue in a gentle up-and-down pattern inside her. She whimpered.

She tried to buck against his face, but he used the hand responsible for her clit to keep her pinned firmly against the wall. Taking his thumb away from her clit, he moved his mouth to the little nub and began sucking furiously while also jabbing two fingers deep inside her.

“Yes,” she said, her voice deep and urgent, the pleasure making it sound so different from her usual bell-like tones. “That’s what I want. Oh God, it feels good.” He sucked and stroked, hearing her whimpers grow to pants and then to moans and finally stretch into a long cry as her muscles clenched and squeezed around his fingers.

Sherri began to slump against the wall, and when Benji looked up, her head was still tilted back against the wall, and her eyes were closed. With her lips slightly opened, though, he thought she looked like some Italian sculptural masterpiece of a saint in rapture. He liked that thought.

A smile crept over her lips, and she opened her eyes. “Best dessert ever.”

Chuckling softly and rising up from his knees, he kissed her, holding her rosy cheeks in his hands while he did.

“Are you going to invite me in?”

Her delicate brows bent toward each other, and she nibbled on her full bottom lip. “I want to...but...there’s something I should—”

Benji kissed her again, deeper, pulling her hips to his, pushing his iron cock against her pussy. Like he knew she would, she responded, her eyes fluttering closed as she fought to bite back a moan of wanton need. “Say you’ll let me in.”

“I want to.”

“Then let me, Sherri.” He held her chin between his fingers, kissed her, breathed her in. “Let me in.” He could tell she fought it, but her hand slipped down between them. She grabbed his balls,

rolling her palm against them while also pushing his cock harder against her body.

As he ground against her, he dipped to her breast, sucking a nipple through the thin cotton of her bra. Then he laid his head against her chest, pillowing his cheek against her fleshy softness. He listened for a minute and said, "I can hear your heartbeat. It's like a song."

Sherri stopped moving and became quiet. "What did you just say?" Deep emotion coursed through her voice, though Benji didn't understand it.

"Sherri? What's wrong?" He pulled slightly away to look at her face. He touched her cheek, but when her eyes clenched tightly closed, he pulled away. He noticed that both her hands were made into tiny fists, and he took a step away, giving her some space.

"Please go, Benji."

"Sherri, what did I...?"

She didn't open her eyes, only remained rigid standing against her cabin, her breathing ragged and shallow.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Sherri," he said when he reached the bottom of the porch. She barely nodded, but he figured that was the most he would get.

And for the moment, he thought to himself, he could live with that.

\* \* \* \*

Waiting until Benji had disappeared into the woods, Sherri finally let herself sink down to the rough wooden surface of her porch. She sat that way for a long time, staring blankly out into the darkness, still reeling from the shock of Benji's words.

He hadn't known, of course he hadn't known.

But Sherri had been so unprepared for the way his words slammed into her, bringing up all the memories from her night with Ethan. She'd been trying to push him away, trying harder than usual. And

she'd been reaching for the doorknob when Benji spoke. He'd said her heartbeat was like a song, and all Sherri could think, could see, could hear and feel was Ethan tapping out the rhythm of her heartbeat as he lay on her chest, singing his lullaby, telling his story.

Maybe it was because she'd been trying so hard all night to keep Ethan out of her feelings for Benji. Maybe it was because Benji was the first man at her house since Ethan. Maybe she was just tired.

But no matter the reason, Sherri knew that no matter what she felt for Benji, Ethan was always going to be there, pushing his way into her mind, her memories, her desire. At that chilling thought, Sherri pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

She couldn't fool herself. Even if Benji hadn't said anything, every time she looked in his eyes she saw Ethan. He looked and acted nothing like Ethan, but Benji's eyes, the exact same balance of green and brown as Ethan's, conjured up his memory. Sherri couldn't run away from that anymore.

"Ethan," she whispered into the night. "Please let me go."

A chilly wind swept across her porch, sending bits of old leaves and debris skating across the wood, and Sherri wrapped her arms tighter around herself as her shoulders shook.

*Please come back to me.*

## Chapter Six

Thumbing through the pictures in his hand, Ethan cursed under his breath. He didn't like to in front of President Ongwerra, but the situation called for some choice expletives. It felt like someone had crammed a screwdriver into his gut and then given it a few vicious shakes.

The pictures shamed him, made bile rise up in the back of his throat. He wanted to yell and rage, and he wanted to deny the truth that he held in his hands. But he couldn't. He couldn't turn away from the fact that his partner of twelve years had done this.

In his hands, he held several pictures of his partner, Agent Nicholas Williams, his commander, General Hawkes, and the strongman Fernande Izladdi—the man who refused to concede power to Ongwerra. It was obvious from the pictures that the three men were coming to an agreement. Towards the end of the stack, there were some pictures where Ethan could see that an object was exchanged between them. Ethan couldn't quite make it out in the photo, but it was small. Ethan guessed it was a flash drive of some kind.

"This is how Izladdi's men knew about our meeting." Ethan ground out the words, the taste of betrayal putrid in his mouth.

"Yes. I believe, as my men believe, that these two men are responsible for several information leaks that have occurred over the last few months."

Ethan nodded but then pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, trying to physically push the headache out of his brain. He almost couldn't comprehend it. He'd been working with Nicholas for

twelve fucking years. How the hell could his partner throw all of that away?

“We have been sitting on these pictures for about a month,” President Ongwerra said. “We were not sure if you were working with your partner or ignorant of his involvement. Last week, however, after our meeting in the city—”

“You should have requested new agents. Everything, all of your work and the work of many honest men, could have been compromised.”

General Point-Neuf shrugged and said in his deep voice, “Some things are out of our control.”

“A fact that is becoming clearer by the second.” Ethan stared down at the pictures in his hand, the need to burn the proof of his partner’s betrayal threatening to take over his capacity to think rationally. “Did you notify the UN? Who else knows about Agent Williams and General Hawkes?”

“That’s why we’ve brought you here this afternoon,” President Ongwerra said. “Last week, we needed to know without question, without a doubt that you are worthy of our trust. I do not tolerate lies, Agent Blacker. If a man does not have truth, he has nothing.”

Ethan met President Ongwerra’s deep brown eyes, realizing that he had been completely aware of the risks undertaken the week before. President Ongwerra had gone through with the meeting despite knowing that a traitor lay in their midst, and Ethan’s respect for the man grew. When the Ivorian leader spoke, his voice rang through the room, clear and steady. “Not only did you save my life—a deed I cannot easily forget nor easily repay—but you protected my men. At the risk of losing yours, you ensured that the life of a good and honest man was saved, and because of your actions, he lives another day to love his wife and his children and to serve his country. These are not the actions of a man who holds lies in his heart.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ethan nodded at President Ongwerra.



“Now we have a concern, Agent Blacker, because a few months back, a large amount of vital information leaked from within the mansion. Hundreds of innocent lives would be lost if this information fell into the wrong hands, and Izladdi would remain in power. Indefinitely.”

Ethan’s blood chilled. He knew precisely what information President Ongwerra was referring to. “The names,” Ethan said.

“We know that General Hawkes passed this information to you before removing the files from his possession. He suspected that someone knew about his activities, and he got rid of the files before any of our undercover agents could extract the files,” General Point-Neuf said, his voice hard.

Ethan nodded but clenched his jaw, ashamed at how easily he’d been fooled. “General Hawkes passed this information to me with orders to hide it until he needed it again. Agent Williams was the only agent with clearance to view the information.”

“We need you to retrieve the files and restore them directly to me.” General Point-Neuf met Ethan’s eyes, and Ethan understood the implicit threat behind the words.

So many lives weighed in the balance, and that included his.

He could not fail.

Ethan’s body jerked. *Oh shit*, he thought to himself as the image of the sweet, beautiful woman he’d shared such an incredible night with sprang into his mind. It had been a struggle every day to force his brain away from Sherri. A woman had never clung so tightly to his mind. He couldn’t forget the softness of her inner thighs as she’d wrapped her legs around him. Or her delicate, trickling laugh, her gentle voice as they’d talked through half the night. Oh God, the way she took his cock so fully inside her. She wouldn’t let him go, and now, he’d put her in grave danger. Even if Nicholas and General Hawkes didn’t know the location of the files yet, Ethan didn’t doubt that eventually they would figure it out. Somehow they would.

He had to go to her. He had to reassure himself that she was safe.

He forced his attention back to the two men in front of him. “At the moment, I’m afraid the files are vulnerable. I will need to physically retrieve them. Is this acceptable to you, President Ongwerra? General Point-Neuf?” The men exchanged a glance and then nodded their approval in unison.

Ethan took a deep, yet unsteady, breath.

Although the situation was far from ideal, he couldn’t stop his heart from beating just a little bit quicker. He was going back to Male Order, back to Sherri Winston.

## **Chapter Seven**

“So where the heck are you taking me?” Benji had arrived at Sherri’s house about five minutes before. He had told her the day before to wear durable clothing, but he still hadn’t divulged the details of their destination. Taking a peek over at him, despite her initial assessment of his appearance, she thought he looked rather rugged in his outdoorsy attire. A tarp covered up what she suspected was her four-wheeler in the bed of the truck.

She went to sneak a quick look underneath the tarp, but when Benji caught her, he swatted her hand away. However, not before she caught a glimpse of her cherry-red darling.

Benji grabbed her wrists and yanked her hands away. “You naughty little girl,” he said, pushing her up against the truck, pinning her body with his.

Sherri’s giggles quickly dissolved into a low moan as Benji pressed his mouth to hers. He deepened the kiss and then bit her bottom lip, pulling at it with his teeth. He then moved his greedy mouth to her neck, nibbling her soft skin and biting the top of her shoulder. Despite the small voice in the back of her head telling her not to, she rolled her hips toward his, rewarded by the feel of his hard cock rubbing through their clothes against the soft, eager flesh of her pussy.

It had been almost three weeks since that night on the porch, and Benji had been taking her out pretty regularly. He’d called her the next day to make sure she was all right and then, upon discovering that she was, asked her to a drive-in movie. They’d spent the whole night making out, but Sherri had warded off all attempts to take it

further. She hadn't been ready. Ethan was still too fresh. Every time she looked into Benji's eyes, she saw Ethan. She knew it wasn't right, but it felt like the more she wanted Benji, the more she missed Ethan. It felt like she couldn't have one without wanting the other. So most of the time she spent with Benji she also spent feeling extremely confused.

Standing against the truck, though, with Benji's insistent cock nudging her between the thighs, a hot flame of desire rose up within her. Something shifted, and somehow she wanted him. She could just want him. She could force Ethan away. She had to.

"Let's get in the truck before I take you right here in the driveway," he said, echoing her thoughts.

"I wouldn't mind," Sherri heard herself say.

Benji held her face, "Don't tempt me, you little wood nymph. I've got something better planned for us. Now"—he pulled open her door, and it emitted a loud, rusty squeak—"climb in before I have to spank you."

Sherri's eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?"

She'd scooted along the length of the truck, trying to keep her ass from his sight, but she had to turn around to climb into the high cab. Feeling flirtatious and deciding to let her body take over for the day, she lifted her foot up to the truck but paused with her ass held high. Benji didn't immediately take the bait, though, and she shot him a teasing pout over her shoulder, letting him know that she was in a mood.

Benji planted one firm slap across her cheeks. "That'll teach you." He laughed as she squealed and quickly scrambled away. Her pussy quivered, though, ready for another slap.

As he walked around the front of the cab, she stuck her tongue out at him, and they'd been teasing and name-calling the whole ride. Sherri felt antsy, though, wanting to know where they were going. Finally, after about half an hour he turned onto a county road that,

surprisingly, she'd never been down. She peered eagerly out the window, taking in the unknown yet familiar landscape.

They crossed over a bridge and then turned onto a small dirt road.

"Are you sure it's okay that we're here?" Sherri asked.

"Yes, but why are you whispering?" Benji whispered back although she figured it was more to make fun of her than anything else.

"Oh, shut up."

She crossed her arms over her chest, pretending to be annoyed. Benji parked the truck under a huge pecan tree, one of the biggest Sherri had ever seen. Twisting under its branches was a creek, tall reeds and grasses growing along its edges. When she climbed out of the truck, she couldn't resist running to the water. Tiny little darts of silver flashed under the sunlight as minnows scattered away from her sudden appearance at water's edge. A startled frog leapt out of the water, and then realizing its mistake, hopped right back in, kicking furiously away from her.

"All right, nosy, come help me lift this tarp."

Sherri skipped over to help Benji, and when her baby was gleaming bright and red in the sunlight, she said. "How the hell's bells did you get this in here without me noticing?"

"Gavin."

"That little turd bucket." Sherri shook her head in disbelief.

"Okay, okay, stop gawking and help me get her down." Benji opened the bed door and pulled out one iron ramp and then another, his muscles on his back rippling beneath the thin cotton shirt he wore. Sherri licked her lips at the sight and then climbed up into the bed. She straddled her baby and started her up, making her purr within minutes. Looking over her shoulder, she put the four-wheeler in reverse and slowly backed down the iron ramps.

Tossing a helmet to Benji, she scooted back, only allowing him to drive since she didn't know where they were headed. As the four-

wheeler lurched forward, Sherri wrapped her hands around Benji's muscled abdomen, holding her body as close to his as possible.

Her nipples hardened with each bump and jolt, and she knew he liked the way she had them pressed into his back because she snaked her hand down between his legs. Just as she knew it would be, his cock was hard and eager for her touch. She ground her palm against his bulge a few times, liking the way she could feel his low groans rumble through his body and into her chest, but she had to stop when they began to veer off the path and almost ran right into a stump just off the dirt path.

After almost fifteen minutes, he began to slow the four-wheeler. They'd started the trip in a field with a few trees dotting the landscape here and there, but by the end of it, they were well into the woods.

After Benji cut the engine off, there was no sound but the afternoon cicadas and a few half-hearted bird calls. The afternoon's heat had pushed oppressively down on them as they rode, and Sherri's back was drenched in sweat. She didn't feel bad about it, though, because she knew Benji's back was soaked through as well. She kind of liked the idea of their sweaty bodies rubbing together. Kind of really liked the idea.

Benji grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the main path and onto a smaller footpath.

Sherri opened her mouth to protest, to demand to know where they were going, but Benji put a finger to her lips, anticipating her protests. His eyes seemed to beg her for her trust, so she nodded and fell into step with him. After about five minutes of walking, they came to the end of the path. A large clump of boulders rose up from the ground, and Sherri thought it odd that they were the only notable large rocks that they had come across so far.

When Benji took her around to the other side of the boulders, however, Sherri gasped in surprise. Gurgling from between the rocks was a spring that bubbled into a small pool. The pool looked big

enough for only three, maybe four, people and was almost perfectly circular, although Sherri doubted that it was man-made.

“Care for a dip?” Benji asked in a gentle, reverent voice, not wanting to disturb the natural peace of the area.

Sherri nodded, and Benji tugged at the bottom of her T-shirt until she lifted her hands above her head and he could pull it all the way off. She did the same for him. Then they both unbuttoned the other’s pants, and as Sherri pushed down his shorts and he pushed down hers, they stepped out together, their clothes pooling at their feet, their bodies touching, and their hearts racing.

Benji kissed her and then took her hands, walking backward and leading her down into the water. When her feet first touched the water, she gasped aloud. It was so much cooler than she’d thought it would be, but it felt like heaven on her hot skin. As she lowered into the water, she was surprised that it came all the way up to the middle of her ribcage. They moved to the middle of the pool, the water immediately soaking through the thin turquoise cotton of her bra and panties. The water was so clear that Sherri could look down and see Benji’s hard, eager cock poking through the slit in his white boxer briefs. The rippling water distorted its appearance, making it look like it waved up at her.

Snaking a hand under the water, she grasped him and stroked him, pulling him closer all the while. He grabbed her hips and lifted her up in the water until her pussy rubbed against the tip of his cock. It nudged against her folds through the fabric of her panties, and she wrapped her legs around his body, wanting to be so close.

Bending his face to hers, he covered her mouth with his, and then he slowly sank down into the water until it covered their whole bodies all the way over their heads. Sitting on the stone bottom of the pool, they didn’t break the kiss. They clutched at each other, lingering at the bottom of the pool, both needing air but neither willing to break contact with the other. Benji held her close, and when they could stand it no more, he shot them back out of the water, both of them

gulping in the sweet oxygen. Benji pushed her hair away from her face, and she did the same for him.

With her legs still wrapped around his body, he walked them to the edge of the pool, placing her bottom on a small rock outcropping that jutted out a foot or two below the surface of the water. It served perfectly as a bench. When she was seated, Benji gripped the sides of her panties.

“You want this, Sherri? I know you have reservations, but you want this?”

She bit her bottom lip, pushing Ethan out of her mind. She would never see him again. She told herself this, but a part of her still didn’t want to accept it. Mentally telling that part of herself to be quiet and go away, she nodded.

“Yes,” she said, her voice coming out in a strangled whisper. “I want this.” She kissed him, licking the water off his lip. “I want you.”

Sherri lifted her hips so that Benji could slide her panties off, and then he undid the clasp of her bra, never taking his eyes away from her face. When her breasts were free and floating in the water, Benji looked down and smiled, his face so reverent that Sherri wondered how she had kept him away for so long.

Quickly, he shed his own underwear and, placing a finger under Sherri’s chin, he brought her lips to his. Pulling her off the ledge slowly, he slipped his cock into her slick and waiting pussy. Her whole body shivered as she absorbed his full length. When she felt his balls sandwiched firmly between their bodies, he took a few sideways steps until he had Sherri’s body pinned between him and the rough rock wall of the pool. Each step made Benji’s dick shift inside her, and it tickled her depths and made her wriggle against him, itching for him to begin moving more purposefully within her.

Holding her against the wall, Benji pulled out and then slowly pushed back inside. He continued to move in and out of her, adjusting his angle slightly each time he did in order to reach a different spot.



Sherri clutched his body between her thighs, wanting him to move faster but also wanting him to continue his maddening pace.

Soon she felt the first tingling buds of white-hot pleasure begin to spread through her body even as the cold water surrounded them, only serving to intensify the heat rather than douse it. Each new and deliberate stroke from Benji had her pussy squeezing just a bit tighter around him until all she could focus on was the fiery, pulsing rhythm of their bodies. Then Benji pushed hard into her, smashing her against the wall, roving against the farthest reaches of her inner walls. Demanding and undeniable, his cock drew forth a wildfire in her body, causing her muscles to tremble and shake, unable to take the pleasure he caused.

Her head fell back, and she moaned, the sound ripping across the tender flesh of her throat. Benji continued to move inside her, insisting she give more than she thought she had and pulling another guttural moan from the bottom of her lungs until she saw white dots sprinkling her vision. He gave one final plunge, and his hot cum shot up inside her as he pressed tightly against her.

After a long moment, he pulled out of her, and the rush of cold water against her hot pussy made her gasp aloud, and she sank under the water, wanting to disappear into its all-encompassing oblivion, wanting it to soothe her agitated, trembling body. She slowly let the oxygen out of her lungs, floating gently to the bottom.

Looking up through the blur above her, she could make out Benji's form as he waited for her to emerge, and the sunlight above the trees spilled golden, green light down upon him, making him shimmer until he looked like some kind of mythical creature. Her very own mythical creature. He belonged only to her. She clenched her eyes closed, driving the image away as her memories of Ethan flooded back into her mind.

She rose out of the water, and Benji immediately pulled her close. "Everything okay?"

He kissed her forehead and then the smooth space between her eyebrows and then the tip of her nose. Pulling back to look at her, he smiled when she nodded. "I feel good," she said. "I feel really good."

His smile grew, and his eyes crinkled in the corners. "Me, too. Now go sit on the ledge. I have another surprise for you."

Sherri watched as he pulled on a rope that she hadn't noticed before. His body shielded his goings-on from her view, but he seemed to be untying something. Keeping his treasures under the water, he moved back over to her.

"Now, we just missed the Male Order strawberries so I had these special ordered all the way from Japan." He pulled his bounty out of the water, revealing a large, sealed plastic container full of the biggest, reddest strawberries Sherri had ever seen. Benji opened the plastic container as Sherri squeaked her delight.

Reaching in, she pulled out a berry almost as big as the palm of her hand and sank her teeth into its tip. It was cold from being under the water for so long. She closed her eyes in pleasure as bursts of juice and tangy-sweet flavor filled her mouth, so she wasn't expecting Benji's kiss.

"Mmm," she said against him as she swallowed her bite and then opened her mouth more fully to the kiss.

After a moment, Benji pulled away with a grin. "Mmm is right."

"What kind of berry is that? I've never tasted one so vibrant and flavorful."

"They're called *Amaou* berries."

Sherri finished her strawberry and was reaching for another one when Benji pulled his other hand out of the water. In it, he held a bottle of Pernod-Ricard Perrier-Jouet Champagne and two delicate flutes.

"Before you spoil your appetite with the berries, would you like a little drinky-drink?"

Sherri took the strawberries out of his hand, placed them on the edge of the pool, and grabbed the flutes. "I'll hold, you pour."

Benji followed her orders with a laugh, and they both enjoyed the dry bubbles as they fell down the back of their throats. After a couple minutes of more strawberries and a champagne refill, Sherri felt her head begin to float, and words rose up inside her just as easily as the bubbles had gone down. “Benji?”

“Yep?”

“Why’d you come to Male Order? I mean, what’s here for you?”

She heard him sigh and looked over to find him frowning down into his champagne.

“I guess it was bound to come up at one time or another, but the truth is...I was sent here.”

“By whom?”

“My boss. I was behaving in a very ungentlemanly manner, so he sent me here as a sort of punishment until I could get my act together.”

“Oh.” Sherri swirled her champagne around. “Did it work?”

“Did what work?”

“Your punishment. Have you stopped behaving like an ungentleman?” Benji chuckled softly at her choice of words, and she waved her hand at him. “You know what I mean. Are you back to good behavior?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Well, for the most part, I think I could safely say that, yes, I am well on my way to recovery. Why?”

“Oh.” Sherri couldn’t stop the drop in her stomach at Benji’s words nor keep the note of disappointment from her voice. He would be going back to LA soon. She tried to shove the thought to the back of her mind. She wanted to enjoy every minute she had with him, but all the insecurities that had grown after her night with Ethan were beginning to make a violent reappearance.

“Sherri?” Benji set his champagne down and moved closer to her, niggling his way between her legs, letting his hands rest lightly on the tops of her thighs, stroking lazy patterns there as he looked into her

eyes, searching. She studied his hazel eyes for a long moment, unable to keep Ethan out of her mind.

“What does ungentlemanly behavior entail, exactly?” she asked, hoping that conversing with Benji would drive away thoughts of Ethan.

Benji shook his head, and for a second, Sherri thought he wouldn’t answer her, but then he clenched his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “There were a thousand small things. Small, but most often irreparable. They added up. I was mean to people. Nasty and selfish and mean. I never hesitated to point out flaws. I liked watching myself hurt people. It actually brought me joy.”

Sherri put a hand to his cheek. She could see the tight pain in his eyes. Despite the deeds of his past, they brought him no pleasure now. Sherri could see that.

“And on top of that,” he continued. “I was an alcoholic. I partied. I ruined every relationship with every human being I came into contact with. And it wasn’t just that I was doing these things. It was that I honestly didn’t care. When you met me in the elevator at The Brandsen Center, I had already been in Male Order for two months. And that was my good side.”

“Aw, come on. You weren’t that bad when I met you.”

“No, but even you didn’t want to go on a date with me. Remember?”

Sherri grinned sheepishly and then leaned forward and placed a quick little kiss on his lips. “I’m glad you changed my mind.”

“Me, too.” He smiled warmly at her. “Dr. Huffstead has been helpful. I’ve come a long way with her.”

“That’s great.” Sherri smiled, but when she looked deep in his eyes, it seemed like there was still something buried in their depths, something he tried to push away and ignore. “You’ll be fine, Benji. You’ve come this far. And now”—she didn’t know if she was brave enough to say what she wanted to say, but she made herself do it anyway—“now you have me.”

The faraway look in his eyes vanished when he smiled, his beautiful lips curling upwards. A hot flame of desire curled in her stomach. He was such a stunning man. She didn't know how she'd ever thought of him as foppish. He took her breath away.

His hazel eyes burned for her. "You mesmerize me, Sherri. I honestly don't know who I was before I met you." He bent down and pressed a lingering kiss on her lips. "Being banished to Male Order was the best thing that's happened to me in a long time." He laughed when he said it, and for an instant, he sounded like Ethan, his voice low and gravelly. Suddenly Sherri was nervous.

The moment was perfect, but she felt her doubts bubbling to the surface again. Even after spending so much time with Benji, even after one of most perfect afternoons, Ethan haunted her.

She looked at Benji, who picked a berry out of the plastic container and took a big, juicy bite. He was just one more man to lose, one more man she could never hold on to.

He glanced over at her and quickly swallowed, concern showing in his eyes. "Hey. Sherri," he said, gripping her thighs, "don't do that. Tell me what you're thinking. Your eyes look so sad right now."

She shook her head, trying to pull away from him, but there was nowhere for her to go. She struggled against him, but he held her tight.

Finally, she stilled and looked at him. His hazel eyes were wide and searching. "You're going to leave me. Just like everyone else. And, dammit, that hurts."

Benji frowned but put his hands on Sherri's shoulders. "Sherri, I want you to listen to me and listen good. I am not leaving you. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not the day after that. As long as you want me, I'll be with you. Okay?"

Sherri couldn't look at him. She wanted to believe those words, but Aunt Birdie was gone. Ethan was gone. How could he promise her that he wouldn't go, too?

Benji grabbed her chin between his fingers. “Do you understand me, Sherri? No more talk of me leaving you. Understand?”

“Benji, I...”

“Ah-ah,” he said, putting a finger over her lips. “I’m here, Sherri. You have me. No more talks about me leaving, deal?”

She smiled wanly back at him and nodded. “Deal.”

Despite her promise, though, doubts and unease continued to float through her mind like jellyfish, beautiful and ethereal and so tempting to reach out and touch even when she understood the danger in their seduction.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan had been sitting on Sherri’s porch for over two hours. The orange and blue flowers he’d brought were already beginning to wilt. Deprived of water and oversaturated with sunshine, they lay limp and browning on the porch beside him.

Part of him wanted to break into the house, retrieve the files, and make a hasty escape without Sherri ever knowing he was there, but a larger part of him couldn’t resist seeing her again. He hadn’t been able to get her out of his mind. After leaving Male Order, he’d thought the memories of their night together would fade. He thought his life would go back to normal, but she’d come to him at night. When his mind was the most vulnerable, she visited him in his dreams.

Sometimes she would ride him all night. She would scream his name as her wet, hot cunt grabbed at his cock when he drove it up into her. Sometimes she would love him sweet and tender, her pussy cradling him, pulling him farther and farther into her. Sometimes, though, and these dreams were the hardest to let go, he would see them sitting together on her front porch, holding each other’s hands as they moved back and forth in the wooden rocking chairs she kept there. When he looked over at her, she was gray-haired and wrinkled,

but he felt her. He knew her soul, and she knew his, and they had such a beautiful life.

He couldn't leave Male Order without seeing her just one more time. He had to know if she felt the same way, if she burned for him like he still did for her. As the sun sank lower and lower toward the trees, he noticed some sort of creature shuffling around the edge of the woods on Sherri's property. As it moved closer, a pair of bandit-masked eyes looked him over, and then the raccoon continued toward him.

A few minutes later, it heard something and swiveled its head toward the driveway. Ethan heard the rumble of Sherri's truck crawling up the gravelly path, and the raccoon waddle-ran toward the woods, chattering in protest to the disturbance its whole way back. Ethan stood up, suddenly nervous. He forced his legs to remain still, resisting the urge to dart toward the woods like the raccoon had.

There was a glare from the sun as it reached over the treetops and splashed across the windshield of the truck, so Ethan couldn't see her until she had shut the engine off and stepped out of the truck.

"Sherri," he said, standing and taking a couple steps down from beneath the shadows of the porch. She stopped in her tracks. She did not step toward him, but he could still make out the look of pure shock that flitted across her features. He took a few more steps toward her, coming off the porch.

"Ethan," she said at his movement, and then she sprinted toward him. Crashing into his arms, she buried her face in his neck. He held her close as her tears soaked through his shirt and she mumbled something into his chest.

"Sherri," he said again, trying to pull away just enough to hear what she was saying, but this only made her clutch him even tighter. So he just held her.

When she finally did pull away, she looked up at him, her face tear-stained and red. "You waited too long, Ethan Blacker." She hit her fist on his chest. "I missed you too much. It hurt too much.

I...I..." She backed away from him, looking shocked. "Oh, God. Why didn't you call me? Or write me? You left me." She buried her face in her hands.

"It's okay, Sherri. I'm here now. It's all okay." He pulled her to him again, stroking her soft hair.

She shook her head against his chest, muttering "no" over and over again.

He heard the passenger door of her truck open and then close, and his head snapped up.

And there, leaning against Sherri's car, was Benji, arms crossed and glaring at Ethan.

Then Benji's mouth tilted up in a sardonic grin. "Long time, no see. Brother."



## Chapter Eight

Ethan erupted into action. Grabbing Sherri by the shoulders, he moved her away and strode toward Benji, who remained leaning nonchalantly against the truck. “You motherfucking son of a bitch. How the hell did you find her? Who are you working for?” Ethan had reached Benji and shoved his forearm against Benji’s throat, pinning him against Sherri’s truck.

Sherri found it difficult to process the situation. That word kept ringing through her ears, making her dizzy, clanging around the inside of her skull like dozens of tin cans in a dryer, blocking out all other thoughts and words.

*Brothers? They’re brothers?*

“I would seriously reconsider the placement of your hands.”

Ethan slammed Benji against the truck but released him. “I don’t want to ask you again. What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I could always ask the same of you. Just curious, do you think I will have any better luck getting an answer from you than you will from me?”

Ethan breathed heavily through his nostrils, his hands two tight fists at his side. “If you don’t wipe that smirk off your goddamn face, I will do it for you.”

That statement reached through some of the dull gray haze seeping through Sherri’s brain. The men standing in front of her, both men whom she had trusted with so much of herself, now felt like strangers a hundred miles away from her. She felt as if she had suddenly woken up in a dream, a dream where a sea stretched out on

all sides, as far as the eye could see, and she had not a scrap of driftwood to keep her afloat.

Ethan's threat, however, brought to the surface some long-buried womanly instinct. She did care about these men. Somewhere in her mind, she knew this. She didn't want them to fight. She had to stop them.

"Come on now, bro. You know your threats never worked on me." Ethan opened his fists and then clenched them again. "I dare you to throw a punch," Benji said, a mean smirk across his face.

"Tell me why you're here."

"After you."

"Enough of this shit." With those words and in one fluid motion, Ethan reared his hand back and punched Benji in the jaw. Benji flew backwards, slamming against the truck. He glared at Ethan, and his features tightened, but other than that, he showed no sign of fear, staring Ethan directly in the eyes.

Sherri, however, snapped right out of her daze.

Walking cautiously toward the two men, she said in a low voice, "Ethan, listen to me. I don't know what's going on, but please, just calm down."

Ethan ignored her. "Did Nicholas send you?"

Benji continued to glare, and Sherri took a cautious step toward the two men.

"What did you do with the files?"

Benji's mouth remained closed.

"Ethan? Please listen to me. I don't know what's going on—"

"Answer me." Ethan pressed was panting, and the brothers stared hard into each other's eyes.

"Please, Ethan." Sherri took a deep breath, forcing the tremble out of her voice. "I don't want you to fight." She was close enough to put a hand on Ethan's forearm. When she did and he didn't flinch away, she slowly slid her hand down to his wrist, exerting a small pressure, urging him to relax.

“I love him, Ethan,” she said in his ear so only he could hear. “And he’s your...your brother. Please.”

Sherri felt the muscles of Ethan’s arm relax ever so slowly, and he moved away from Benji. Exhaling sharply from her nose, Sherri stepped back from Ethan, suddenly feeling sick. Placing her palms on the truck, she let her head fall down between her shoulders, her breath coming in shuddering waves.

Ethan walked a few steps toward Sherri’s cabin, breathing deeply but keeping his eye on Benji. Moving to Sherri, Benji rubbed his hand over her back in a smoothing motion. “Are you okay?”

Sherri could only manage to nod, but Benji gave her shoulders a squeeze and placed a warm kiss on the back of her neck. Straightening, she gave him a wan smile.

Once he saw she was okay, his eyes hardened and he rounded on Ethan, who had been watching their little interchange. Taking only two strides, Benji closed the distance between himself and his brother and swung his fist at Ethan. Sherri flinched, her mind not ready for the sound of flesh hitting flesh and bone pounding bone.

“Benji!” she screeched, but Ethan had already recovered from the blow and had tackled his brother around the middle, slamming him onto the ground. They were so intent on hurting each other that Sherri knew her screams would not filter through to their brains.

Sickness welled inside her and threatened to send her reeling into unconsciousness as Ethan landed a solid punch across Benji’s mouth. Blood spurted from Benji’s bottom lip, and Sherri could not take another second. The sound of their fists striking each other had her stomach roiling. She ran to the porch, grabbed the end of a hose, turned the spigot, and ran back to the grappling men. She squirted water on their writhing forms while screaming for them to stop.

Ethan had pinned his brother and was about to land a solid punch on Benji’s face when the fast stream of water hit him square in the nose. Sherri felt relief surge through her body as he halted his punch,

sputtering. Benji received the next faceful of water and sputtered for a moment.

“Ethan Blacker,” Sherri yelled, not giving them a second to resume, “get off him this instant.” When he had obeyed that order, she folded the hose to reduce the flow of water and said, “Now, you”—she looked at Ethan—“and, you”—she looked at Benji—“stand up and march yourselves into that cabin. Do not speak to each other. Do not look at each other. Do not even think about each other unless I tell you to. Am I understood?”

Ethan nodded once and abruptly turned toward the cabin. Benji lingered a moment, looking at Sherri with big puppy-dog eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, and Sherri waved her finger in his face. “No! I don’t want to hear a damn word you have to say.” He opened his mouth again, but Sherri cut him off. “I said not a damn word, Benjamin Blacker. Now get inside!”

He clamped his mouth shut but did as she said.

Stomping behind him, she headed straight for the freezer when she got inside. After a few moments’ rummaging, she tossed a package of frozen peas at Ethan and a package of frozen lima beans at Ethan. They pressed their impromptu cold packs against their faces, albeit in different places, and both closed their eyes in relief at the soothing sensation.

Sherri opened a cabinet, pulled out a large glass bowl, filled it with warm water, and got a rag out of a drawer, all the while muttering curses under her breath. The constant flow of words helped to keep her emotions in check.

Moving to the bathroom, she found some hydrogen peroxide and some materials for bandaging and then marched back to the kitchen. A quick assessment of their injuries showed that they were both equally bruised and bleeding, so it didn’t matter who she started on first.

She sat in front of Benji, not quite ready for Ethan to be so close. She hadn’t seen him in months, and suddenly he was waiting for her

on her doorstep, looking more perfect than she could have possibly remembered.

How could she have remembered the way his hair curled so softly across his forehead? Or how his muscles rippled so magnificently every time he moved? How could she have remembered that his smile tilted up ever so slightly to one side? Or how he had smiled at her in that one perfect moment after she stepped out of the car. She'd meant to speak, to ask him what the hell he was doing on her front porch after months of no news, but when he smiled at her and took those few steps toward her, she'd forgotten everything.

And then Benji got out of the truck, and all hell broke loose.

Muttering a few more vehement curses, she began wiping at Benji's face. She decided to clean off the blood that had already begun to dry, and since his lip was pretty swollen, she started there.

"First things first," she said. "Why the hell did *neither* of you mention that you had a brother? Of course, I thought it odd that I had fallen for two guys with the same last name and hazel eyes that looked eerily similar, but never in a goddamn-fucking-million years did I imagine that you two assholes would lie to me about having a brother. Both of you! You both flat out lied to me."

Sherri clenched her teeth together, breathing heavily through her nose, trying to get a hold of her emotions. "Benji, I distinctly remember you saying that you had no siblings. And now that I think about it, you did too, Ethan." So perplexed by this realization, she paused in her ministrations, looking over her shoulder at Ethan. "What the hell?"

"Because I don't have a brother," Ethan said, glaring at Benji. Benji returned the favor.

Looking back and forth between the brothers, Sherri finally rolled her eyes and said, "Obviously, you two have some beef that seriously, *seriously* needs to be resolved. And, to be honest, I don't particularly want to be in the middle of it. However, it seems that's exactly where

I've found myself, so whether you want to admit it or not, you two are brothers."

They kept glaring at each other, reminding Sherri of two angry, belligerent badgers.

"All right, since neither of you are willing to let me know what's going on, we'll start with you, Ethan. Why did you tell me you didn't have any family? Why did you deliberately lie to me?"

It was easier to maintain her angry tone when she wasn't looking directly at him. One look into the soft brown and green of his eyes, and she knew she would melt right into the palm of his hand. By concentrating on cleaning Benji's wounds, she could hold onto her ire.

"It's not my story to tell, Sherri. That's something you need to ask him."

Benji tentatively rested a broad hand on her thigh, and when she didn't twitch or brush it off, he gave her a firm little squeeze. The immediate reaction of her pussy heating and clenching annoyed but also reassured her. She knew that underneath her anger, she still wanted these two men. She wanted their cocks to fill her, to make her scream. She wanted both of them. At the same time.

She instinctually clenched her thighs together at the risqué thought. Knowing that Benji watched her and must have noticed her movement, she quickly averted her eyes to the bowl of water, dipping her rag into the liquid and then ringing it out.

Finally, she met his eyes. "Will you tell me what happened?"

Frowning, he nodded and took a deep breath. "Please keep in mind that I was very young. It was on *The Turnpike*, so it was nationally televised, but I sort of..." He frowned, concentrating on forcing the words out of his mouth. "I took a crap on the American flag."

Sherri gasped aloud. Whatever she'd been expecting, it wasn't that. "Benji," she whispered, horrified at the idea of anyone doing

that, much less a man she thought she might possibly have been falling in love with.

The muscles in Benji's face tightened, but he didn't respond to Sherri's disapproving tone. He offered no apology, no explanation. But something about the tension in his features reminded her of that moment in the pool earlier in the afternoon. She'd seen something hiding in his eyes, a sort of shame that he kept buried deep inside, and she wondered if this incident was at the root of that pain.

So placing a hand on Benji's cheek, she looked right at him. "Benji, he needs to know."

"Stop it, Sherri."

"How can he forgive you if he doesn't even know that you want that?"

"You don't know a damn thing about it, Sherri." Benji shoved away from her, jostling the table and the water in the large glass bowl, causing some of it to splash across the wood and into Sherri's lap.

"Look. Just take some deep breaths. You'll be fine. We need to talk about this. Communication is the only way to work through this kind of stuff."

Benji's features contorted in fury as he exploded out of his chair. "Don't try to use your psycho babble on me."

"That's not what I...I mean, I wasn't trying..." Benji breathed heavily and took a few steps away from her, watching her with angry, caged-animal eyes. She stepped toward him and spoke in a low, soothing voice. "I know this is hard, but I also know..." She hesitated, wanting to get her words just right. "I can see that you miss your brother. Please just try and talk to him."

"I said that's enough, Sherri." He stepped toward her until his tall frame towered over her, causing her to flinch in reflex to his sudden motion. "You know what? It's been a lot of fun, Sherri. Really, it has. Great sex..." She winced at his callous tone. "...but let me give you a tip. Learn when to fucking butt out."

“Hey,” Ethan said, rising, the warning clear in his voice. “Don’t talk to her that way.” Benji turned, glaring and nose-to-nose with Ethan.

“It’s okay.” She put a hand on Ethan’s arm and met his eyes for a moment, assuring, then turned back to his brother.

“Benji, please. You came here to get better, to deal with all of this. If you don’t try and talk to Ethan, it’s always going to be with you. You’ll never get away from it. You have to—”

“Jesus Christ, Sherri. Shut the fuck up.”

She clamped her mouth shut and fought back sudden tears.

After a moment, Ethan’s low voice cut through the tense air. “Get out.”

Benji glared at Ethan.

“Now.”

Benji turned to stalk toward the front door. “Oh, Benji,” Sherri whispered sadly to herself when it slammed closed behind him.

Ethan put a tentative hand on her shoulder, and without hesitating she turned into his embrace. He held her for a long moment, not saying anything, only giving her the solace that she so craved.

He began to stroke the back of her hair and hum his lullaby, the sound of it moving through her chest. It made her feel so safe. “I know, if he would just talk to you, just tell you how much he regrets what he did...I know that he does.” She pulled back to look into his face. “He misses you, Ethan. When he first came to Male Order, he told me he was such a mess. He told me—”

“I get it,” he said flatly, cutting her off.

“Do you think that maybe, if you just talked to him, that you might be willing to try forgiving him?”

“He put my career and my integrity as an agent for the UN at stake. I work for the United States of America, Sherri. His deed was heinous, almost inconceivably so. I couldn’t—”

“Ethan,” she pleaded.



“He has never once acted ashamed of what he did.” He put a hand to her cheek. “I know you want to believe that he’s changed or that he regrets what he did, but just because you want it, doesn’t mean you can will his remorse into existence.”

Sherri frowned, frustrated. She knew—she knew with all of her heart—that Benji regretted his actions. He was a good man. Sherri knew that. She just didn’t know how to make both him and Ethan see that.

“Sherri,” Ethan said, his voice suddenly full of emotion. “Can we not talk about this? I didn’t come here for Benji.” Sherri’s breath caught because suddenly Ethan’s eyes burned bright with desire. “I came here for you. I wanted to see you again.”

“Ethan,” she whispered, standing up on her toes.

“Not a day goes by without you on my mind. Never has a woman bewitched me so.” He put his lips to hers.

Deep inside, Sherri felt the fire that only he could ignite rise up within her as he caged her in his arms. It was a cage that she longed to be held in, never dreaming of escape. His tongue thrust through her lips and pushed against hers. She could feel his hard cock against the softness of her belly. She hungered for that cock, hungered for it in her mouth, in her pussy, and in her ass. She wanted him everywhere.

His fingers moved to her shirt, beginning to pull it up over her head.

But suddenly, Sherri was afraid, and she grabbed his wrists. “Wait.”

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

She met his gorgeous, penetrating eyes. “Nothing has changed, has it, Ethan?”

His eyes searched hers, trying to decipher her meaning.

“You will leave me again, won’t you? You’re not here to stay.”

Understanding dawned across his features, but he didn’t refute her statement. She took a few steps back.

"It's not that simple, Sherri. My life is..." He shrugged, encompassing the chaos.

Sherri clutched her stomach as a wave of loss swept through her. It was happening again, dammit, but it was worse. It was a million times worse because now she knew.

She knew exactly how much she cared.

She couldn't ignore it any longer. She cared deeply for Ethan, and he cared for her. She knew that he did...

"But it's not enough." She finished her thought out loud.

"Sherri, please. I want you." He watched her, gauging her reaction, so Sherri squeezed her eyes shut tight. Ethan's words called to her. They ignited that space inside her that he'd carved out for himself, cold for so long but now blazing and drawing her toward him. "I had to see you again, Sherri."

"Ethan, don't. You can't."

"You want me, too."

"Please don't do this to me," she said on a sob, every instinct in her body urging her to fly into his arms. She needed to say something. Something powerful enough to drive him away. She couldn't resist for much longer.

"I love him," she whispered, ashamed of her behavior, but knowing she had to do it. "I love Benji, Ethan."

Ethan inhaled sharply, recoiling from her. "Sherri, you know what he did."

She nodded. "Please just go, Ethan. You and I...it's not...we're not..." She wanted to say that it wasn't meant to be, that they didn't belong together, but she just couldn't force the lie through her lips.

For a long moment, he stared at her. Maybe he was waiting for some sign from her, some indication that she would take back what she had said, but Sherri forced herself to stay in place. Then his face hardened, and he nodded. "I understand."

He walked around her, and the sound of his footsteps as he walked toward the door moved through Sherri like poison. It weakened her

and made her brittle, as breakable as porcelain. When Ethan reached the door, he called to her. “Sherri!” She turned to face him, and he looked hard at her from the doorway. “You love me, too.”

Hot liquid blurred her vision, but she remained a perfect statue.

For the second time that night, her front door slammed.

Two words pulsed through her mind with every beat of her heart.

*I know.*

## Chapter Nine

Benji made it about halfway back to the Ellis's before he realized how much of a shit hole he'd dug for himself. He turned his car around, tires squealing, and headed back toward Sherri's cabin.

He knew she loved him, dammit. He'd heard her whisper it into Ethan's ear.

And, dammit, why the hell hadn't he said anything in her cabin? He'd just sat there, acting a damn fool and powerless to stop the idiotic words that flew out of his mouth.

He hoped to God he didn't make it back to the cabin only to find Sherri and his brother in her bed. He didn't think he could handle that right now.

But then, much to his surprise, his cock seemed to disagree with that thought. His cock grew hard between his legs, obviously excited by the idea of Sherri and Ethan together.

"Fuck," Benji shouted, not caring if he sounded crazy.

It was the damn town. It was all the testosterone still coursing through his body from the fight with Ethan. It was the way Sherri's breasts had looked, her nipples poking through the thin cotton shirt when water from the hose had splashed on her when she broke up their fight. She was one tiny hellion, and she had him wrapped around her little finger. Hell, he could admit that to himself.

And whatever the reason, he knew that part of him was aroused by the idea of Sherri and Ethan because a part of him—a part buried deep within—wanted something to happen between his brother and Sherri. Because a part of him wanted to join in, wanted to know what it would be like if he and his brother fucked Sherri at the same time, her

delicate body shimmering and moving like a hot summer breeze between the two of them.

The image of his cock buried deep in Sherri's sweet ass while his brother pounded her from the front sent his dick straight up, completely hard and ready.

When he parked the car in front of her house for the second time that day, he didn't hesitate. He jumped out of the car and sprinted inside. He found her sitting at her table in the kitchen, looking forlorn and distant. She perked up at his commotion, though, surprised at his sudden appearance.

"Sherri, I'm sorry. I am a fool. A ginormous, giant, gargantuan prick-turd." She smiled at his use of her favorite insult. Encouraged, he continued. "I don't know what came over me. I thought I was getting better, but you were right. I still have so much to deal with. You saw right through me. You knew everything, without me having to tell you, you knew."

She rose from her place at the table and crossed the short distance between them. Putting a hand to his cheek, her eyes met his, burning, and he could see plainly that she wanted him.

"Oh God," he said, yanking her to him, covering her lips with his, needing to claim her, mark her, own her. She gasped, and it only made him push harder. He slammed his hips into her, and she gasped again against his lips. But she didn't stop him. She grasped him, clawed his back, and her teeth bit into his lips.

Ripping her shirt off, he bent his head toward her nipple and bit it through the thin fabric of her bra. A small startled yelp escaped her lips, but he could tell she liked it because she rubbed her pussy over his stiff cock through their clothing.

His movements were rough as he unbuttoned her pants, but then so were hers as she unbuttoned his.

"I am going to take you right here and now, Sherri. I am going to fuck you hard, so goddamn hard." Sherri breathed heavily as she backed up, sat on the edge of the table, and then laid back. Her eyes

never left his. Benji went down with her, covering her body with his and plunging his dick into her before she had settled onto the solid pecan wood table. “Whatever you do...” his voice snarled in her ear, “don’t give in. Make this last.”

He slammed his cock into her pussy.

Her eyes burned into his. “Harder.”

He slammed his cock into her pussy again.

“Harder,” she said again but with more insistence.

So he slammed and he slammed.

And she took and she took and she took.

They drove each other, neither willing to come before the other. Their bodies became so slick with sweat that Benji had a hard time holding onto her, and his hips began to bruise from slamming into her so hard and for so long, but every time he moved his hips away from her, she had already begun pulling him back toward her hot pussy.

Benji’s muscles began to tremble from exhaustion, but he wouldn’t give up. He slammed harder. He would make her come, goddammit.

Suddenly, her muscles clenching tight around his cock, Sherri screamed, her voice ripping open the air, and something in Benji snapped. His cock, withholding for so long, burst inside her. His cum shot out of his dick for what seemed like minutes, filling Sherri until he didn’t know how she held so much. Her pussy clenched roughly around his cock for a long while, even after his cum stopped its flow.

Unable to hold himself up any longer, he pulled his cock out of her and moved down to lay fully, resting his cheek on the table next to hers. Her hands held his arms, and they lay still until the sweat on their skin had dried and they could hear the night creatures through the open kitchen windows, swelling and receding in an orchestrated cacophony around them.

“Benji,” she whispered.

“Hmm?”

“I think there’s a napkin holder poking my ass.”

Chuckling, he rolled off her, and she pulled the offending object out from under her then rolled into him, cuddling against his side and resting a palm on top of his chest, her fingers twirling in his chest hair.

After a long moment, she said, "I don't know what I should say, Benji."

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

"Well...what do you think about me and...?"

"Ethan?" he finished for her.

Her hand on his chest stilled. "Yes. About me and Ethan."

She sighed, and he could hear the relief in her voice as she began to speak. Obviously she'd been holding this story in for a while. He was surprised to find out that she had told no one about her night with his brother, and as she continued her story, he realized that she was in love with Ethan, although she didn't admit it to him in so many words. Hell, no wonder he'd had such a tough time cracking through her shell.

"I don't see how it can work out, though, between me and Ethan. And I..." She moved closer to Benji, wrapping a leg around and between his.

"What is it?"

"I want to be with you, Benji."

He kissed the top of her head, her words sending warmth and happiness through his body. He wanted more than to just be with Sherri, though. He was really starting to fall for her, and he wanted to spend time with her. He wanted to be healthy with her and for her.

"I want to be with you, too." She squeezed him tightly to her and held him that way for a long while.

He didn't want to ruin the moment, but there was a question burning in his mind, and it grew brighter and brighter every second he thought about it until he could no longer ignore it. "Sherri?"

"Yeah?"

"Is Ethan gone?"

Sherri stiffened in his arms. “Yes,” she whispered. “And...” She let out a long, pain-filled sigh. “And he won’t be coming back.”

“I’m sorry, Sherri.” The words felt stupid and idiotic rolling off his tongue. They’d been said millions of times and for a million different things, but he *did* mean them. He hoped that some of that sincerity made it to her heart.

For a while she didn’t say anything, and she barely even moved, but then he felt the first tremor. He thought it was a hiccup at first, but then he felt the second uneven jerk of her body. With a start, he realized she was crying.

He pulled her tightly to his chest and held her close because Ethan was gone.

Ethan was really gone.

\* \* \* \*

About an hour later after Sherri had showered, she sat on the edge of her bed. She heard Benji rummaging around in the kitchen. Staring down, a pair of green and blue-striped yarn socks covered her feet. Aunt Birdie had knitted them for her just before leaving for Australia. Sherri had a matching scarf and glove set stuffed in a drawer somewhere.

She had felt so happy when Benji came striding through her door. It was exactly what she wanted, she kept telling herself. And it was. She knew that it was. She wanted Benji. No matter what, no matter who else she missed, she wanted Benji. She could see such a beautiful future with him.

She saw what it would be like for their children to run through the cabin, their bare feet thumping happily against the wood floors, their shrieks of laughter moving from room to room. She saw herself on the front porch in her rocking chair, listening to the early morning birdsong while she and Benji sipped on mugs of steaming coffee.



The only trouble was that she also saw Ethan sitting on her front porch, drinking coffee and laughing with her and loving her.

She wanted him. She loved him. But she loved Benji. She loved and wanted both of them. And, dammit, if that made her selfish, she didn't care. She was from Male Order. It was something she could not change.

Sherri shook her head, banishing thoughts of what could never be when Benji walked into the bedroom holding two big, steaming earthenware mugs. He handed one to Sherri, and she took a deep whiff.

"Mmm, smells like Earl Grey."

"It is."

"With honey and lemon?"

"Yep. My favorite."

Sherri blew on hers and took a tentative sip. The mug was still too hot, so she set it on her bed stand, letting it cool for a while. "It's funny that you made this. Aunt Birdie loves Earl Grey."

"You miss her a lot?"

Sherri nodded, staring at and wiggling her toes, and Benji sat down next to her on the bed, their combined weight making the bed sink down low. Sherri's body bounced and then rolled into his. Benji leaned in front of her to put his mug next to hers, and Sherri breathed in his smell. She caught a faint trace of his Tom Ford cologne mixed in with the scents of earth and of sweat, and the smells comforted Sherri.

Benji had his hand on Sherri's thigh and made lazy, circular patterns. She loved when he did that. "She must be an incredible woman to have raised someone like you."

Sherri ducked her head, embarrassed at his compliment.

"I can't wait to meet her."

She looked up at Benji, who smiled, his eyes crinkling the way she adored so much. "I think she'd like you..."

"Really?" He lowered his head, coming in for a kiss.

“...to stop turning her goddaughter into a wanton harlot devoid of all morality.”

“You little imp,” Benji said, grabbing Sherri under the shoulders and tossing her backward onto the bed. “You’ll pay for your insolence, wanton harlot.”

Sherri squealed and rolled over, trying to scramble off the other side of the bed, but Benji caught her ankle and yanked her back toward him. “I don’t think so.”

While Sherri shrieked and giggled, Benji whipped her onto her back and straddled her, only putting enough weight on her to hold her in place while leaving enough room for her to breathe. Then his hands and fingers got to work tickling her.

“No, Benji,” she said as laughter began to take over her voice. She was so powerless against his tickling.

“Say mercy,” he demanded.

“You wish!” She glared up at him even though it took all her willpower to keep her eyes open while laughing so hysterically.

Her defiance only caused Benji to tickle harder, and Sherri wriggled, trying everything to escape his marauding fingers.

“Give up?”

“Never!”

Benji kept tickling her, his fingers moving all over her body, light and then hard, fast and then teasingly slow. She laughed so hard tears fell out of the corners of her eyes, and she couldn’t think past the maddening sensations. Finally, she could take no more.

“Please, Benji,” she gasped through her laughter. “I can’t...I can’t...no more...oh, God...”

“Say the magic word.”

“Please...”

“Say it.”

“Mercy!” she screamed.

Benji rolled off her, dissolving into laughter, and Sherri panted. After a long moment, she said, “I feel better.”

Propping up on his elbow next to her, he gazed down at her, smiling, and she drank in the sight of him. She adored the lock of dark blond hair that fell over his forehead, his warm hazel eyes, his generous lips and high cheekbones. She adored his broad shoulders, not as wide as Ethan's but still muscular and toned and capable of handling Sherri.

That thought caused a wave of desire to wash through her body. It had only been a little over an hour since she'd fucked Benji, and already, she wanted his cock in her again. She really *was* a wanton harlot devoid of all morality.

Giggling, she sat up, propping up a couple pillows beneath her back. "Would you hand me my tea, please?"

When Benji had sat up and handed over her tea, she said, "Now if you look in that top drawer—"

"Toys?" Cutting her off, Benji ripped open the drawer in her nightstand, and Sherri bit back a giggle.

"You'll find some crackers," she finished.

"Oh." He didn't try to hide the disappointment.

"Did you actually think I would keep my toys in the top drawer where they could so easily fall prey to sticky fingers?"

"Who has sticky fingers?" Benji asked a little too innocently.

Rolling her eyes, Sherri said, "Give me a cracker."

Reaching in the box, Benji pulled out a cracker and held it out for Sherri, but right as she went to grab it, he yanked it away and popped it in his mouth.

"You turd!"

He munched happily, his eyes laughing at her. When he swallowed, Sherri said, "Okay, now give me a damn cracker."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't resist."

"Yeah, yeah." He pulled another one out of the box and held it out for her, but again, he snatched it away at the last second and popped it in his mouth, laughing.

“Benjamin Blacker,” she shouted, putting her tea down on the other night stand. She tried leaning over him to get the box, but he rolled over, keeping the box just out of her reach. The more she struggled against him, the more he laughed.

She was wriggling against him and could almost reach the box when he said, “Oh, here’s something better.” He suddenly turned his face to one of her breasts and grabbed her nipple with his mouth. Squealing in surprise, at first she tried to pull away from him, but he already had his arms locked around her. She could feel his teeth through the thin fabric of her nightshirt, and as Benji’s cock rose against her inner thigh, her own desire flared.

His eyes blazing up at her, Sherri grabbed the box of crackers and threw it across the room. The few articles of clothing they wore soon came off, and positioning herself on top of Benji so that she straddled him, she sighed as he pushed his cock up into her pussy. Leaning forward and resting her palms on his tan chest, she rode him. All the emotions, all the ups and downs of the night began to dissolve with each upthrust of his cock. Her orgasm came slowly, beginning with gentle tingles. It soon blossomed into a steady blaze and then finally swept completely through her. Benji’s release came after hers, and they clung to each other for a long moment. Eventually, she moved off him.

Curling her body against his, however, she suppressed a shudder. Even as happy as she was, in the furthest reaches of her heart, she knew that until she had both Ethan and Benji, she would never be completely fulfilled.

\* \* \* \*

Sherri had been asleep, but as her hand slid under her pillow, the sharp sting of a paper cut startled her and slapped her into wakefulness. She hissed out a curse into the moonlit room. Benji

snored lightly next to her, and she was relieved that her activity hadn't stirred him.

The day's events and the day's orgasms had left her quite fatigued, and she crawled laboriously out of the bed, trudging with eyes half-open to the bathroom. After she had rinsed her finger off under the faucet and put a Band-Aid on the tip, she crawled back into her bed. Lifting her pillow to see what had caused the cut, she discovered an envelope. Her name had been scratched hastily across the front, and her heart tripped in her chest.

Snatching the envelope up, she snuck out of the bedroom and then ran to the kitchen. She slipped into the pantry and yanked a string that turned on the single light bulb dangling from the ceiling. She ripped open the top flap and pulled out the few papers from the inside. Before she read anything, she looked to see who had signed it.

It was Ethan. Ethan had written her. He must have snuck in her window while she sat at the kitchen table. He'd been in the cabin with her, and she hadn't even known. If only she'd looked down the hallway, gone to the restroom, anything to have seen him again!

With trembling fingers, she returned her eyes to the beginning of the letter and drank in his words.

*Sherri,*

*I know I don't have a claim on your time. You owe me nothing. And I would understand if you refused to read these words. But I write them in the hopes that you will allow me this one indulgence, for you are a woman of generosity and of grace, both qualities of which I call on now.*

*Believe me, Sherri, I wish that we had been dealt a fairer hand. One that would have allowed us more than one night and one morning. One that would have afforded me the chance to show up on your porch the next day rather than three months later. Because I would have been there every day after. Every day and every night.*

*My only hope now—for I see that you love another, and it is not my wish to intrude upon your happiness—is that you live a long life and that your days are safe and full of comfort. I consider myself a lucky man. I have held the love of a good woman, even if only for a moment, and I carry that with me.*

*Yours,  
Ethan*

Sherri sat in her pantry, her mind blank for a long moment.

He loved her. He had loved her for as long as she had loved him, and he loved her still. That knowledge filled her with such warmth. She didn't know how she kept it all inside.

Her head snapped up.

Benji.

He couldn't know. She had to keep this a secret.

Taking a deep breath, she read the letter again. Then she read it again and again. She read it until she had it memorized word for word.

Then she stood up and left the pantry. Grabbing a lighter out of a kitchen drawer, she walked into the night. She walked across her lawn and into the woods until she reached the creek.

She set the letter on fire, holding it and watching it burn until the fire licked at her fingertips.

Then she let go.

## Chapter Ten

*Two months later*

After tossing three pairs of khaki shorts, five pairs of thick socks, and about a gallon of sunblock into her suitcase, Sherri ran a hand through her hair. It had grown to an awkward length. Too long to not annoy her if she left it down but too short to put up into a decent ponytail. She had a little baby ponytail that stuck out from the back of her head, and she employed the help of a lot of bobby pins to keep her curly bangs out of her face.

For good measure, she tossed in a brimmed hat but then sighed. She still had so much to pack before she was ready for her non-stop flight to Brisbane, Australia the next morning. Emily, Gavin, and Grayson were supposed to pick her up at seven, and it was already past midnight. A flush of excitement swept through her body when she remembered that she would be with Benji and Aunt Birdie in less than two days time.

Benji had left two weeks before her to begin filming his new project, *Drover*. He had been cast as the rugged ranch hand on a wealthy cattle station in the Outback who, upon the death of the ranch owner, inherits the ranch and has to save it from debt and from bad guys. Benji had let Sherri read the script, and she couldn't wait to see him in action out on the range, riding a horse and roping cattle like some sexy cowboy from another era, ready to sweep her off her feet and be all chivalrous and gentlemanly and shit.

Closing her eyes, Sherri imagined his rough, callused hands running up the smooth skin of her thighs and pressing firmly against

her clit while he spoke to her in a rough Australian accent. She imagined his cock filling her pussy, dust and tumbleweeds swirling and skipping past them under the wide, starry night.

She moaned low in the back of her throat. She needed to get packed, and she needed to get to Australia as quickly as possible.

Of course, as soon as she'd found out that Benji would be filming in Australia, she'd called her aunt up on the phone and told her not to make any plans for Christmas. They'd laughed and giggled on the phone for hours, planning this trip. It was weird to have ice cream planned as dessert for their Christmas dinner, and even weirder to be packing shorts when it was in the high thirties in Texas.

There was only one thing that kept this trip from being absolutely perfect.

But she had promised herself not to think of that, not to think of *him*.

But perhaps because she was so amped on travel adrenaline, her mind flitted where it wanted.

If she could just think of a way for him to be with her, for them to all three be together. If she could just figure out how to be with Ethan, how to make the brothers speak to each other, how to love both of them without hurting both of them.

Throwing her boots into the suitcase, she stomped into the bathroom, suddenly annoyed that she let herself worry about this kind of crap. She'd been brought up in Male Order, lived her whole life around ménage couples. They'd all worked their shit out. She sure as hell could, too, dammit.

Couldn't she?

She slammed a cupboard door closed, tossing some deodorant and her toothpaste into a toiletries bag. Muttering under her breath, she stomped back into her bedroom, and then, looking up, she screamed.

A stranger stood in her bedroom doorway watching her.

He was dressed all in black and was big and bulky. He had a crew cut and piercing blue eyes. That was all Sherri noticed before she ran



back into the bathroom. She saw him coming at her as she slammed the door closed and locked it.

“What the fuck? What the fuck?” she muttered over and over again. She cursed herself. Her phone was on the bed, and there was only one tiny window in this bathroom made for ventilation, not an escape route.

The man beat on the door. “Sherri,” he said, and she froze. How the fuck did he know her name?

“Sherri, I’ve already been around the house five times. I know that there’s not a window large enough for you to crawl through. I also know that I could easily break down this door. However, you could save us both a lot of trouble if you open the door for me. I don’t want to hurt you. I just need to find something, and I’ll be out of your hair. Okay?”

Sherri didn’t answer. She crawled into her tub and opened the window. Stepping up onto edge of the tub, she began crawling through. It wasn’t large, no bigger than an average-sized computer screen, maybe a little smaller, but Sherri thought she could squeeze through. She had to try. If she could just get to the woods—she knew them a hell of a lot better than the asshole in her bedroom—then she could get to the twins and to Emilie.

Her shoulders would be the hardest part to get through. She turned her head to the side and stood on her toes, sliding her arms through the narrow passage. She could hear the man speaking to her through the door. It sounded like he was counting.

Using her arms to pull herself through, her shoulders pushed out. The window scraped her stomach and her back, but she kept fighting.

She heard a loud thump as the man slammed into the door.

“Shit,” she whispered because her hips were at the window, and once they were through, she would fall to the ground into Aunt Birdie’s rose bushes. Even though the roses weren’t in bloom, Sherri knew a nest of thorns waited for her at the bottom of her fall.

The man kicked the door again, and Sherri could tell his next attempt would get him through it. In desperation, she wriggled through the window, her hips breaking free, and she fell forward. It was only about five feet down, but as she landed, thorns drove up into the palms of her hands and scratched her face and her shoulders and her stomach.

She cried out as her full weight landed on her wrists. Rolling forward with the momentum of her fall, her breath came to her in shuddering gasps as her whole body exploded with the painful aftershocks of her fall. Every inch of the skin on her hands and arms burned with the sting of the rose thorns.

“Damn,” the man said from above her, his head sticking out of the window. “You got through.”

Sherri forced herself to roll over. He would already be heading out the door of her house. Clambering to her feet, she began running for the woods. If she could just make it to the trees, she could weave in and out. She could hide. She could escape.

Every inch of her skin was on fire as the poison from the tips of the thorns spread farther and deeper, its itchy, fiery sensation flaming across her body. Her bare feet encountered stones and sticks and stickers, but she didn’t let it slow her down.

She heard the sounds of his footsteps behind her. She looked at the trees. Tears blurred her vision. She wasn’t going to make it. He was too close.

She tried anyway, begging her leg muscles to deliver her to safety.

He had almost reached her. The trees were fifty feet away from her.

A weight slammed into her, knocking her onto her stomach.

She sobbed into the ground, dirt filling her mouth. He lay on top of her for a moment. Immediately, she began struggling.

“Dammit, woman. I didn’t want to have to do this.” He shoved his knee into the small of her back and yanked her hands together behind her back, securing them with a hard plastic tie. She heard each click

as he tightened it around her already injured wrists. She screamed at the top of her lungs, praying that someone would hear her.

“You and I both know that the closest house is over a mile away. Save your breath.”

“What do you want?” He grabbed her arms and hoisted her onto her feet and then slung her unceremoniously over her shoulder.

She wriggled, trying to knock him off balance. His hand slapped hard across her ass, the sting bringing tears to her eyes. “Stop it,” he commanded.

All she had on while packing was a large T-shirt and some panties. This realization struck her dumb. *Oh god, please don't let him rape me. Please. Please. Please.*

“You are a spirited little thing. Ethan found himself quite a woman.”

Sherri sniffled, choking on the dirt. Then, in a small voice, she said, “You know Ethan?”

“Didn't have much time to introduce myself, did I? Agent Nicholas Williams at your service, ma'am. Ethan's partner. Well, probably ex-partner now.” His body shook like he was laughing, but no sound came out.

“His partner? What...why would you...?” She remembered that day that Ethan had shown up on her front porch. When he'd punched Benji, he'd accused Benji of something, but Sherri couldn't remember exactly what he'd said. At the time it hadn't seemed very important. If only she could recall.

“It's a very complicated story, Sherri, but all that you need to know is that I'm here with you now because I believe you have some rather important files hidden in your computer that I need to extract.”

“I don't have any files. Ethan would have told me.”

“All I know are the facts, and here they are. You met Ethan in May, yes?”

When Sherri refused to answer, he slapped her thigh hard. “In May, yes?” he repeated.

“Yes.” She hated the wobble in her voice.

“Ethan was only in the United States over one weekend in May, which he spent mostly in Male Order. And during his time here, he was sent some very important files with instructions to hide those files until they were needed again. He spent the night with you, did he not?”

Sherri sniffed. She didn’t want to answer, didn’t want to share something so intimate with him, but she also didn’t want him to slap her leg again. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You seem like a smart girl. You can probably do the math.”

Sherri found it difficult to breathe. She wouldn’t believe that Ethan had hidden files in her computer. This was a nightmare. She would wake up any moment. She clenched her eyes tightly shut.

“And now I’m here to get those files back.”

When they got back to Sherri’s room, he tossed her onto the bed. When she tried to scramble away, she saw her blood smear across the pale pink comforter. Agent Williams grabbed her legs, making her flail with the fear of what came next, but he just yanked her back to the edge of the bed, pulled up a chair, sat her in it, and secured her wrists to it.

Without another word, he began working on her computer. His fingers flew over the keys, and he pulled up window after window, searching, but as the minutes progressed without him finding anything, his movements got more and more violent.

“Fuck!” He slammed his hand down and then pressed a palm to his temple, wiping at some sweat that had begun to pop up. He turned to look at Sherri, and she recoiled in fear.

“Has he been here since that night?”

Sherri glared up at him, her jaw clenched.

“Fuck. Where are your keys?”

“Why?”

He slammed the back of his hand against her cheek, and she tasted blood. “Don’t ask me questions. Where are your keys?”

Gasping in shock, Sherri said, "In a drawer next to the fridge."

He sprang into action so suddenly that she flinched. He began unhooking her computer and then lugged the whole thing out of the room. He straightened up her room and turned the bloody comforter over on her bed so that its clean side was visible.

"Taking a trip?" he asked, looking at her open luggage. He stuffed the old sheets into her suitcase, zipped the suitcase, and then carried it out of the room. A few minutes later, she heard him rifling through a drawer in the kitchen, and then he stomped out the front door. Her car beeped when he unlocked it.

"Please let him leave me here. Please let him leave me here." She pleaded up to the ceiling though knowing deep down that he wouldn't.

He stomped back inside. "Where are your pants?"

"Umm..." Her voice still sounded shaky when she answered. "I have some jeans on the floor in the bathroom. He nodded once, retrieved the pants, and helped to slide them over her bloodied and bruised legs. He cut the ties that held her to the chair and shoved her into the windowless closet.

"Finish getting dressed," he ordered. When she had done as he asked and opened the closet door again, he grabbed her, keeping a firm hold on her arm, and led her out the door.

Silent tears began to leak out of the corner of her eyes. She hated them. They made her feel weak. But they fell down her face, nonetheless. He didn't seem crazy. He didn't seem like he really wanted to hurt her. She knew the signs of a lunatic. She'd read enough case studies, and he didn't strike her as crazy.

But nobody would discover that she was missing until a little after seven in the morning. By then, they could be hundreds of miles away.

The tears fell a little harder. The only thing, the only wisp of hope that she held onto was that this man was Ethan's partner. Maybe somehow, some way, he would find out. Maybe he would know how to find her.

Later that night, however, as she rode silently next to him and the miles grew and grew between Male Order and wherever they were headed, the wisp of hope got thinner and thinner. As they moved through the desert, their only companion the wide Texas sky, the wisp of hope finally vanished, and Sherri realized she had absolutely nothing left.

## **Chapter Eleven**

The wind whipped into Benji's face. He could feel individual specs of dust sting his skin with each new gust. He sat atop his black horse, the animal's muscles rippling beneath him, gleaming with sweat, ready. He heard hundreds of hooves thundering across the land, and the sound filled him with awe.

"Ya!" He dug his heels into the horse's flanks, and they both exploded into action. Leaning over the horse, he urged it faster and faster, raising a whip high into the air and snapping it down at the cattle around him, driving them west.

Several other men spread out over the land, doing the same action as Benji. His voice was gruff from the dust and the strain of his muscles, but he kept driving the bellowing cattle. The hoarse voices of men melded with those of the animals as the wild orange dust of the Outback swirled manically around the mass of bodies.

After almost fifteen minutes, over the din of the herd and the shouting men, Benji barely made out the faint call, "Cut!"

He turned his horse, heading back toward the rigging where the director sat high above the ground, watching and organizing the scene from above like a god.

After dismounting, he strode toward the awning that gave the actors and the crew a bit of protection from the blistering afternoon sun. Halfway there, he made a pit stop at a bush and relieved himself. Being so far from civilization lent him a more rugged attitude.

As soon as he neared the others, one of the young production assistants ran up to him, his hand held against his face like a visor. "Mr. Grossman says that's a wrap on the wide shot. You have an

hour, and then it's the tents and beans scene. And Mrs. Birdie is here to see you."

"Birdie's here?" Benji lengthened his stride, his face breaking into a grin. "I thought she wasn't supposed to be here until Friday."

"She seemed a little..."

"What?"

"Well, I don't know her, and I don't want to give you the wrong idea, but—" Benji didn't wait for the man to finish. He ran the rest of the way to his trailer. He didn't make it all the way there, though, because Birdie flung the door open.

"Sherri's missing. Benji, Sherri is missing."

Despite the hundred-degree temperature, despite the heat waves rising like a shimmering fog all around him, Benji's blood froze and a chill ran through him.

"What happened?"

"The police aren't sure, but...they think..." She couldn't finish, and the older woman's face crinkled as a deep emotion ran through her.

"Dear God, Birdie, tell me."

The sun shone into her bright blue eyes, and her long silver braid hung over her shoulder. Standing up straight, she said, "Emilie and the twins came to pick her up to take her to the airport. When they got to the cabin, she was already gone. Her luggage was gone. Her car was gone."

"She could have driven herself to the airport. Did they check? Did they talk to the airline?"

"Yes, Grayson called the airline as soon as they realized she wasn't at the cabin." Birdie's face contorted in pain for a moment, and then she realigned her features. "They found trace amounts of blood on a rug in her bathroom and in her closet. And then, later, they found blood on her comforter. It had been turned over, but it was a substantial amount." Birdie swallowed, closing her eyes but staying erect. "It was hers."



“That doesn’t mean anything. It could have been something else. That doesn’t mean anything, Birdie. I mean, what could have happened? This is probably just a miscommunication. She’s probably on the plane right now. We’ll see her in a few hours.”

Birdie shook her head. “She’s not on the plane, Benji. The airline checked. Benji...” Birdie placed a hand on Benji’s arm, her eyes soft. “She’s officially been reported as a missing person. We’re going back to Male Order.”

\* \* \* \*

A private plane had taken them from Alice Springs to Brisbane, and from Brisbane they had flown straight to Dallas. Even so, since they’d been informed of Sherri’s disappearance, nearly two days had passed. With every minute that passed, he imagined scene after gristly scene, and every minute that passed made it more likely that the scenes he imagined were true.

He’d heard that after three days, if the victim hadn’t been found, their chances of being discovered alive narrowed down almost to the realm of impossibility. He held Birdie’s hand the whole way back to Texas, not sure if she was the one shaking or if it was him.

Emilie and her husbands met them with a limo at the airport and drove them to Male Order. When the driver began to turn into their driveway, Benji said, “No. Keep going. I want to go to the cabin. I need to see.”

The driver slowed, unsure. Across the seat from him, Emilie said, “Are you sure, Benji? The police still have a lot of stuff going on out there. And it might be...” She watched his face. Her clear blue eyes held only compassion, but Benji stared at her, an incomprehensible anger rising up within him. Birdie put her hand over his. “Shh, it’s okay. We’ll go. I’d go, too, if that’s all right with you three.”

“Of course,” Gavin said. “Whatever you want, Aunt Birdie.” Grayson nodded his agreement.

As soon as they pulled up, Benji sprang out of the limo and ran up the porch steps then through the front door. The air inside was chilly. Everything felt more still than usual. A languor pervaded the atmosphere. Marching straight to Sherri's bedroom, he pushed the door open. The first thing he noticed was the smell.

Usually, Sherri's house was filled with the smell of old rugs, herbs, Earl Grey tea, and pine trees. None of those smells bustled or tripped through the air as usual. All he smelled was the cold. His nostrils pinching in disgust, he moved into the room. Everything appeared so stark and in place. Her bedcovers, usually crumpled and unmade, had been pulled tight across the mattress and tucked snugly under her pillows. No pairs of shoes lay on the floor. No books, no makeup, no old teacups were cluttered across the top of her cedar wood dresser.

He heard Birdie walk up behind him, and he heard her sharp intake of breath.

"This is how they found the room?" Benji asked Emilie and her husbands who waited in the hallway.

Grayson nodded. "Yes, why?"

"Everything's all wrong." Benji looked at the desk next to her bed. "And her computer is missing."

"Oh, yes," Emilie said, her head snapping to the desk. "Why didn't I see that? My brain is mush." She sounded truly distraught, and Grayson began rubbing her shoulders.

"It's okay, Emilie. None of us noticed." He ran a hand over her protruding belly.

"We should alert Sheriff Dawes. See if he can pull any new leads with that information." Gavin pulled his phone out of his pocket and moved toward the front door.

Benji turned back to the room. Birdie had walked a few feet inside and stopped next to him, looking over the room.

"I don't like it, Birdie," he whispered to her. It's like she's...she's..."

Birdie clutched his hand in hers. “Don’t say it. Don’t even think it.”

“What if she is?”

Birdie squeezed his hand, but she didn’t have an answer.

\* \* \* \*

“Ethan won’t let you get away with this,” Sherri said with a grimace. She tried not to let her mind focus too intently on her wrists or her scraped and aching skin. “Even if you kill me, he’ll know it was you.”

“That’s what I’m planning on, sweetheart.” Agent Williams had set up Sherri’s computer as soon as they’d arrived and had been running more extensive tests, searching for the files, ever since.

At his words, Sherri sat up straighter in her chair. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to get these files, one way or another. And if they’re not on your computer—”

“They’re not.”

“—then I need Ethan.”

Sherri tilted her chin up, glaring at Agent Williams’ back. Inside, though, her hopeless heart perked up. He’d said he needed Ethan. Maybe that meant that Ethan would be coming for her soon. Then her heart drooped again. How the hell would Ethan know where to find them? They were in the middle of the New Mexican desert. Still, she couldn’t let Agent Williams know just how much her situation frightened her. “He’d never give you those files.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would agree with you. However, seeing as you are tied up and at my mercy, I’d say this qualifies as an abnormal circumstance, wouldn’t you?”

“So you’re going to offer me up as exchange for some computer files?” Agent Williams ignored her question and continued typing in combinations of codes and commands on Sherri’s computer. “What

makes you think that Ethan would even know to come here? How do you know he won't bring the whole damn army?" Her questions were met with the tapping sound of Agent Williams' fingers across her keyboard.

"I thought you were supposed to be a good guy. You work for the UN. Why are you doing this, for God's sake?"

Agent Williams continued to disregard Sherri's questions, and, fed up, she rolled the chair he had fastened her to toward him. Just as she approached him, she swung her foot up between his legs. "Answer me, dammit!"

Her efforts were met by a loud groan as her foot connected with his groin. She only got to enjoy her small victory for a brief moment before he whipped around and backhanded her across the face. The chair tipped over, and Sherri fell to the floor, landing on her shoulder.

"Shit," Agent Williams said above her. "If you would just sit quietly and stop pestering me..." He righted her and then rolled her across the room, fastening her chair to a wooden post that rose from floor to ceiling with another plastic tie, restraining her even more than she already was.

About two and a half days earlier, sometime in the late morning, they'd arrived at a tiny shack out in the New Mexican desert. It had one room and a bathroom. There was a trapdoor in the wooden floor into a storage area that held canned goods and a substantial supply of potable water.

At first he'd let her feed herself, but when she tried to stab him in the eye with her fork, he tied her hands back up and fed her himself. When she refused to eat, he forced her mouth open and shoved mouthfuls in and wouldn't let her mouth open again until she'd swallowed.

She couldn't figure it out. Apart from the slap he'd just given her, he refrained from beating, attacking, or abusing her in any way.

How long could this go on?

That question didn't bother Sherri too much. What bothered Sherri the most was that he seemed so unconcerned. He didn't care that she knew who he was, what he looked like, what he wanted. A man who planned on letting his victim live wouldn't reveal so many personal things about himself. A man who planned on disposing of his victim, however, would have no qualms in sharing the most intimate details of his life. Because, hell, she'd take them to the grave, wouldn't she?

\* \* \* \*

Benji paced in front of a blazing fire. The plush rug had a few char marks where embers had popped out and singed the fibers. He stopped for a moment to stare into the bright orange flames, hoping to find wisdom in their erratic dance. With the Stephens' library at his back, he stood this way for several minutes.

He stood there, and he kept sneaking glances at the slip of paper in his right hand and then at the cell phone in his left hand.

The longer he stood there, the more ashamed he felt of himself, but shit. What the hell was he supposed to say to Ethan if he actually picked up?

Benji had already swallowed a big bite of chagrin and called Jimmy Duren the night before to see if he could pull a few strings and locate his brother's personal phone number since it seemed to change every few months or so. Even though Jimmy had agreed to let Benji come back to work, the men had been on cool and wary terms with each other, barely saying more than was strictly necessary to work through contracts and legal work. Surprisingly, though, Jimmy had sounded happy to hear Benji's voice on the end of the line. He'd been almost eager to help Benji.

Benji didn't have the time to contemplate his boss's odd behavior now, though. Right now he had to grow some balls and call his brother.

Shaking his arms, he cracked some joints in his neck and rolled his shoulders first forward and then backward. He dialed the number from the paper into the phone and then held the phone's speaker up to his ear. "Pick up, you bastard. Pick up," he whispered under his breath as the rings went on and on. He had almost given up when he heard a clicking noise, the sound of someone picking up, and then his brother's gruff, sleep-ridden voice crackling across the distance between them.

"Hello?"

"Ethan?" Benji whispered.

Ethan didn't answer for a long time, and Benji held his breath, hoping, praying that he would stay on the line. He only had one chance. He knew it, and he couldn't fuck it up, not when Sherri's life hung in the balance.

After a long moment, Ethan sighed heavily. "It's two in the morning. What do you want, Benji?" His voice sounded weary, old. Benji realized that Ethan was only an hour ahead of him, so he must be on the east coast. New York, maybe?

"Sherri's in trouble, Ethan. She's missing." He knew it was a low trick. He needed—no, he *wanted*—to apologize to his brother for so many things, but if Ethan knew Sherri was in trouble, he would come. Benji was sure of it. Despite all that had grown between them, Ethan was an honorable man. If he truly loved Sherri, and Benji thought he did, then if it was in his power, he would come to her.

Suddenly, Ethan's voice was sharp. "What's happened? How long has she been presumed missing? What are our leads? I need every detail."

Benji told Ethan everything that he knew, and he heard sounds of Ethan moving around wherever he was, packing things, typing on a computer, brushing his teeth. He was already preparing to leave. He knew it was still a long shot, but having his brother on his side suddenly made him feel a bit more hopeful.

As Benji neared the end of relaying all the information he had, he told Ethan about Sherri's missing computer. All the noise on Ethan's side of the line stopped except for the sound of Ethan breathing heavily.

"What?" Benji asked. "What is it?"

"Oh, fuck," Ethan said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." Benji heard a door slam and a car engine start.

"Dammit, Ethan. What is it?"

"I know who took Sherri."

"A thrill shot through Benji. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but if Ethan knew where Sherri was, then maybe there was a chance she was still alive. Maybe they would finally get a lead on where she was. Maybe—

"And not only that." Ethan's voice cut through Benji's thoughts, hard and determined. "I know where she is, too."

## Chapter Twelve

With her head against the window and tipped back, Sherri watched some buzzards circling lazily above the shack in the late morning winter's sun. She'd been in the shack for four days. At least that's how long she thought it was. She couldn't be sure anymore.

Her wrists were swollen and dark blue. Her limbs felt heavy and lethargic. She had no strength, no energy, and she began to wonder if the buzzards above were circling for her.

The front door of the shack exploded open, sending a burst of bright sunlight inside. Agent Williams had received a phone call about two hours before and then had abruptly left. Sherri struggled to lift her head up and was surprised to see not only Agent Williams but another man behind him. The second man was older, his military crew cut streaked with silver, his face wrinkled with age, and a thin scar beneath his right eye.

The older man flicked his gaze over Sherri and then moved to the computer.

"We don't have much time. The bidding window closes in less than twelve hours. We need those files. How long do you think before we have them?"

Agent Williams looked at Sherri. "I'm not sure, but it should only be a couple hours. Even though Ethan deleted them, I'm running the WingCorp ghost finder program. It should have the files rebuilt with plenty of time to spare before the window closes. If that fails, I'll call Ethan. When he gives us the files, and he *will* give them to us"—he eyed Sherri—"we make the call to our highest bidder."

The older man walked over to Sherri. "This is Ethan's girl?"



“The one and only,” Agent Williams muttered as he plugged his phone into the computer and began uploading some files.

The older man leaned down close to Sherri. He had ice blue eyes that bore into her. Grabbing her chin, he tilted her head up toward him, making her wince. Her jaw was still sore from Agent Williams’ backhand. “You’re a pretty little thing, aren’t you?” he asked so quiet that Agent Williams couldn’t have heard. His breath, reeking of tobacco and fish, washed across her face as he spoke, and he slid his hand down her throat to cup her breast.

Sherri glared at him and then spit in his face, her saliva splashing across his cheek. He didn’t strike at her, didn’t curse. He only smiled, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe the spit off. “It’s good to know you still have a little fight in you.” He carefully folded the handkerchief up and slipped it back into his pocket. Then he leaned down, placing his hand on her thigh, his finger kneading into her soft flesh. Sherri jerked, trying to squirm away from him, but she had nowhere to go. Her restraints were too tight, and his oily voice slid into her ear, sending chills across her body. “Don’t worry, pretty girl. You and I will have plenty of alone time. Just wait.”

He licked the inside of her ear, and Sherri’s senses came to life again. She yelled, her anger shooting through every synapse in her body. She smashed her forehead against the man’s nose. Her head exploded in pain, but her need to hurt the disgusting man was so great that she barely registered it.

The man’s head flew back, and he let out a string of curse words. His hand flew up to his nose, and Sherri was satisfied to see that, when he pulled it away again, it had a fair amount of blood on it. A couple drops fell from his nostrils.

“What the hell?” Agent Williams said, approaching. But when the older man lunged at Sherri, Ethan’s partner lunged as well, preventing the older man from reaching Sherri.

“You fucking cunt,” he roared at her, his eyes livid. “You will pay for this. You goddamn fucking whore.”

“General Hawkes!” Agent Williams shouted over the general’s ranting, wrapping his arms around the general’s midsection. The harder Agent Williams tried to hold on, the more the general struggled. “We don’t need to hurt her to get the files. Forget about her, and leave her alone.”

Sherri watched in horror as General Hawkes’s elbow connected with Agent Williams’s face, causing his grip to slacken. Taking advantage, General Hawkes swung around and punched Agent Williams square in the face.

“Dammit,” Agent Williams said, rubbing his jaw and panting. “Fine, do what you want, but you’ll have hell to pay if Ethan ever finds out.”

With that, Agent Williams turned his back on her. Sherri’s breath came in short, painful bursts. General Hawkes undid his belt, grinning at her when he reached inside his pants.

“You’re going to suck my cock, bitch. Suck it long and fucking hard.”

Sherri began whimpering. She didn’t know how to stop it, and she clenched her eyes tightly closed, just praying that it would be over with quickly. A rough hand grabbed her jaw, and she cried out in pain as her mouth was forced open.

“I’d better keep this mouth open, huh. Don’t want you biting down on me. Fucking cunt.”

She waited, mouth forcibly held open, tears falling freely down her cheeks, but when after a long moment nothing happen, she cracked her eyes open. General Hawkes held a limp penis in his hands, and standing behind him was Ethan, a gun in his hand pressing against the back of the general’s head.

Sherri had been focusing so intently on blocking every sensation from her mind that she hadn’t heard Ethan enter the shack.

“General Hawkes, kindly take your dirty fucking hands off my girl,” Ethan said, his voice low.

The pressure on her jaw relaxed, and a breathless sob wracked her body. She was safe. After more than half a week, she was safe. Ethan had come for her. The relief was so great that she nearly passed out from it.

More men rushed inside, men wearing a lot of gear and holding big guns. Sherri's vision blurred and she bit her lip, willing herself to stay awake and conscious.

In the confusion of so many bodies moving in the small space, General Hawkes took his momentary advantage to swing an arm around and knock the gun out of Ethan's hand.

"Ethan," Sherri croaked, but she was too late. General Hawkes had pulled a knife out of his boot and slashed it at Ethan's face. Ethan could only block it with his bare arm. Red blossomed across his forearm as the knife scraped across his skin, and Sherri fought again to maintain her consciousness.

Before Ethan had time to gain the upper hand and make a maneuver of his own, General Hawkes slammed the knife into the side of Ethan's knee.

Sherri's heart lurched when Ethan released a roar of pain.

A body slammed into General Hawkes, sending him flying feet away from Ethan. Even through the din of all the men in the cabin, she heard the thud of the knife as it flew out of General Hawkes's hands and onto the floor.

It was Benji. The man who had tackled General Hawkes was Benji. He was here, too, and he rose up, straddling the older man's chest, and slammed a fist against his cheek. General Hawkes's body lost its tension and fight. Benji had knocked him out.

"Sherri," Ethan called to her. "Are you okay?" She looked at Ethan, her thoughts murky and slow. She wanted to stay with him.

But her mind and her body had taken enough abuse. Her vision grew dark. Ethan's mouth moved in front of her, but her eyes were too heavy.

The last thing she remembered before passing out was the red flower growing from the side of Ethan's knee and the knife in the middle of it.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

“I said god damn!”

The nurse looked at Ethan, unimpressed. “Son, there are only two kinds of people that come in here.”

Ethan glared at her as she stretched his leg out and then bent it back up a few centimeters.

“There are the ones that eat their peas, and there are the ones that gotta talk about it, gotta make sure everyone in the damn hospital know that those peas taste like shit.”

Her dark hands stretched his leg out again, and he winced but kept his mouth firmly closed. After a few more stretches she put his leg back onto the bed and wrote some notes on her clipboard.

“Dr. Robinson will be here in just a few minutes. Now, you don’t need to be givin’ him any trouble. You hear me, son?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“After he gets done with you and Ms. Winston, you can probably have some visitors. How’s that sound?”

Ethan grumbled his approval, knowing he was acting like a petulant child, but hospitals always made him queasy. And long stays at hospitals made him absolutely stir crazy. The only thing keeping him sane was Sherri. Benji had pulled some strings and probably had made a very generous donation to the hospital, and they had allowed the two of them to stay in the same room and be treated by the same doctor. Sherri had been sleeping for almost sixteen hours because the doctors had given her a sedative to help her relax after surviving four days of such intense levels of stress.

He turned to look at her in the bed next to his. Her long, dark eyelashes lay over her pale cheeks. Her soft lips, though a cut sliced across one side of them, still looked like the most perfect pair of lips he had ever seen. A dark bruise blossomed across her jaw, and Ethan clenched his fist just thinking about all that she had endured because of him. If only he had never put those files on her computer, then none of this would have happened to her.

A few minutes later, Dr. Robinson came in and did a perfunctory checkup on Ethan and Sherri. “We’ve reduced her intake of Vicodin, so she’ll probably be awake in just a little while.”

“How is she?”

“Her vital signs are good. Her bumps and scratches will heal. It’s the stuff on the inside that I’m worried about. That’s going to take a little more time.” Dr. Robinson eyed Ethan over his glasses. “Are you willing to give her that time?”

Ethan frowned, disconcerted by the doctor’s direct question, but he answered truthfully. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Because she’s going to need a rock.”

Ethan nodded.

“All right, visiting hours are over at eight for everyone besides immediate family.” With that, Dr. Robinson left. A few minutes later, Benji walked in and headed straight for Sherri’s side. He sat down on the bed next to her, holding her tiny hand between his.

A pang of jealousy rose up inside Ethan, but he had no words. He wanted Sherri. He loved her. But so did his brother. Sherri cared about Ethan. He knew that. But she loved Benji.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Benji finally said.

“What is it?” Ethan tried not to sound bitter, but his mind kept circling around the fact that Sherri would never be his, that his brother would get to keep her his whole life, and Ethan would always be alone.

“Why did you leave that night you came to Male Order? She wanted you there.”

Ethan looked at his brother, trying to decide how truthful his answer could be, to discern what his brother was getting at, but Benji kept his features blank. Finally, Ethan shrugged. “She may have wanted me, but she needed you.”

Benji shook his head. “That’s a shitty answer. You’ve been to Male Order. You know the lifestyle. Did you ever consider that, growing up in such a town, Sherri may have envisioned such a future for herself? She definitely would understand wanting more than one man. That idea wouldn’t make her skittish, and you know it.”

“Yeah, the thought crossed my mind, but hell, Benji, I’d just punched you in the jaw. I didn’t think it was the best time to bring it up, you know?”

Benji frowned and rubbed his thumb over the back of Sherri’s limp hand. He didn’t say anything, though, so after a long moment Ethan laid his head back on his pillow to stare aimlessly up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know...” Benji started but then stopped himself, and Ethan looked over at him. “There are so many...” Benji shook his head. “Fuck.”

“Just say it, man.”

Benji looked up at him, his gaze steady, but Ethan noticed that he still gripped Sherri’s hand like a lifeline. “I’m sorry, Ethan.”

Ethan felt his eyebrows shoot up his forehead, but he didn’t say anything, giving Benji time to continue.

“I never should have done what I did. It was horrible and disgusting, and I feel the shame of it every day.”

The muscles in Ethan’s face relaxed. Something tight that he’d been holding in his chest released. “You were young.”

“I was.” Benji nodded. “And I thought I hated you because you were a hero. When you left home and became a Foreign Service Officer, Mom and Dad were so proud of you. You were the perfect

son growing up, and you were the perfect son after you left. It got to me. And I wasn't thinking straight, and I was mad. And I got this fucking harebrained idea of how to get back at you." Benji ran his free hand through his hair and then kissed the top of Sherri's hand.

"But that's not even my biggest regret." Benji looked at Sherri, his gaze full of adoration. "It took her to make me realize that all this shame and guilt and hate that I've been carrying around wasn't for you, wasn't for Jimmy Duren, wasn't for anybody. It wasn't for anyone except me." Benji finally looked up from Sherri, looked right at Ethan.

"And I fucking missed my brother."

That caught Ethan up short, and something hot balled in his chest. After his impromptu trip to the cabin, he never expected to see his brother again. He thought his life would contain mission after mission. He thought that he had come to terms with this fate and that he could do nothing to change it. But now everything had changed.

Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be with Sherri. He wanted Benji to be with Sherri. He wanted them to be a family. He stared in open wonder at the tiny woman resting in the bed beside his. How could such a tiny woman wield so much power over their lives? He was reminded of the first time he'd met her, how he'd thought of her like some magical woodland creature casting a spell over him. Hell, maybe she had.

"I've missed you, too, Benji," he finally said after his thoughts managed to flow through his mind with more order. It just felt so damn good to say them that he was tempted to say them again, but he held back, still unaccustomed to the sense of wholeness he felt growing so rapidly inside him.

He nodded at Sherri. "Do you think that she would still consider...you know...us?"

Benji's face brightened, and he grinned wide at Ethan. It was almost like in the old days when Benji would come up with some crazy idea. He'd come running to tell Ethan, waiting for his judgment.



If Ethan said no, then he'd go off and come back later with some new scheme. But when Ethan said yes, he'd get that goofy grin on his face, and all hell would break loose when the Blacker brothers were up to no good.

"You know, even after I was a complete asshole prick and you kind of left her alone for a few months, she still wanted us. Still does, if I'm not mistaken." Benji said it with a wry twist to his mouth but gazed down at Sherri with such love that Ethan had no doubt that his brother would do anything for her.

"And what about you, Benji? Would you be willing to give that whole...?" Ethan waved his hand in a wide circle, encompassing Male Order and everything that meant.

"I told Sherri I would. But lately, I'm beginning to think that if my brother doesn't pull his head out of his ass, and quick, I may not have to worry about it. A woman can only take so much shit from a man, bro."

"Watch it," Ethan warned, but even he could hear the teasing undertone. Then he looked at Sherri and nodded, understanding that some important decision-making lay in his near future. At least one part of his life was over. He knew that much. "Dr. Robinson said this knee will never be fully functioning again. Said I'll probably have a small limp and some soreness for the rest of my life."

Benji nodded, a grimace of sympathy crossing his features.

"I think I may look into what sort of positions are available at the Male Order Sheriff's Department."

"I'd really like that." Both men flinched at the sound of Sherri's voice, thick and heavy from her drugged sleep, but still like music to Ethan's ears.

"How long have you been awake?" Ethan asked.

She softly smacked her lips together a couple times. "Long enough to know that I'm going to be the happiest woman in Male Order." Benji smoothed some short curls back from her forehead, and Ethan wished he could crawl out of his bed and into hers to snuggle

up close to her. Just the feel of her body stretched out next to his would be enough.

Ethan met Benji's eyes. A wordless communication passed between them, and then Benji returned his attention to Sherri. "You little eavesdropper."

Sherri smiled her wide, beautiful smile and gazed up at Benji in complete adoration. "I do love you, Benjamin Blacker." Benji kissed Sherri, carefully avoiding the cut on her mouth.

Then she turned to Ethan and smiled, her blue eyes shining and radiant. "I can't lose you again, Ethan, so please...if you meant what you said, tell me you'll stay with us this time."

Ethan's breath caught in his throat. "Yes, Sherri. I'm here. I'm with you."

"I love you," she said.

The words were simple and used by millions of people, but there was simply no replacement that would do. "I love you, too."

## **Epilogue**

*Five months later*

“My darling, you look beautiful.” Emilie and Aunt Birdie stood behind Sherri and met her eyes in the mirror.

Then Sherri looked back at her reflection in the mirror, at her petite form enveloped in a lacy, pale rose Eli Saab confection. The lace afforded tiny glimpses of her fair skin while an under layer of silk wrapped and swirled down her body, caressing and holding her curves and just barely covering her nipples. It was the sexiest she had felt in a long while.

Her hairstylist had tamed her riotous, shoulder-length brown curls into silky smooth S-curls that framed her face and made her blue eyes luminous. Her lips were the color of wine, seeming a little dramatic to Sherri against her pale skin, but Emilie and Aunt Birdie had both assured her that it was the only color that did her dress justice.

They’d just finished the meal portion of the cotillion, and the three ladies had snuck away to the restrooms to freshen up their makeup.

Sherri’s cheeks blossomed with color when she remembered how much she’d had to freshen up after Ethan and Benji showed up an hour early to pick her up for the cotillion. She had insisted on privacy while she got dressed for the cotillion. She wanted her dress and her look to be a surprise. Unfortunately, or perhaps *fortunately*, they’d not been able to completely stay away.

She’d had her hair done that morning and was soaking her muscles in the tub, rubbing her belly and softly singing a French lullaby that Emilie had taught her.

Ethan had arrived first, and when he spoke from her bathroom door, she'd nearly jumped clear out of the tub.

"You sitting in that tub is one of the most beautiful sights ever to befall the eyes of man."

Sherri splashed water at Ethan, cursing him for scaring her in her own bathtub in her own home. She got a particularly good splash in, hitting him right in the chin, and he stomped across the tiled floor, pretending to be furious at her antics, and scooped her out of the antique claw-foot tub. He took her flailing, screeching, dripping form to the bedroom.

"Ethan Blacker, put me down. I demand that you put me down this very instant. If you mess up my hair, so help me God..." After laying her gingerly on to the bed, he leaned over her and placed his finger over her lips.

"Shh." His eyes burned, and Sherri grew still. Lowering his mouth to hers, he took her full lips between his and kissed her long and deep. Sherri shuddered beneath him, her whole body alive with wanting him.

Not speaking but never taking his eyes away from her, he got off the bed, removed his pants, and crawled back on top of her, pushing the tip of his cock to the edge of her pussy. "I will never have enough of you, Sherri. Even when I've just come and my cock is buried deep in your womb, I want you still. It never stops."

Then he pushed deep inside, causing Sherri to let out a soul-shuddering sigh. She held him in her arms. "You have me, Ethan. You'll always have me."

He moved out of her and then in, and then out and in, steady like the pull of the tides, the rhythm unchanging, the rhythm as timeless as time itself. He drove at her womb, his cock reaching for that essence which made her a woman, and her pussy welcomed his every stroke. As he reached and reached inside of her body, her moans of pleasure broke free from her throat, filling the room with their melody, and the two of them expanded into orgasmic oblivion together.

Afterwards, they fell asleep for a few minutes, the love they shared wrapped tightly around them. Soon, though, Benji arrived.

“What did I mi—” His voice trailed off as he took in the sight of Sherri’s naked form on the bed, her pussy still pink and swollen from Ethan’s cock.

He lifted a wry brow. “Obviously, I missed quite a bit.”

Sherri grinned sheepishly up at him. Motioning her head toward the bathroom, she said, “Why don’t you get the lube?”

Benji’s eyes lit up. “Is it time for that? All of that?”

“I’m ready if you are,” she said with a wicked lilt to her voice.

Ethan spoke from beside her. “Are you sure, Sherri? There’s no rush.”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“Okay. Just know that you can tell us to stop at any time.” He gave her a quick, reassuring kiss, which Sherri greatly appreciated. Despite her brave words, she was still a tad nervous about having one of the brother’s very large cocks all the way up her ass.

When Benji returned, he had joined Sherri and Ethan in their naked state. She licked her lips as Benji walked confidently toward her, the sight of his ridged shaft and two large balls dangling beneath it sending jets of desire shooting through her body.

He crawled onto the bed. “Let’s start loosening her up.”

Moving beside her, Ethan shifted their positions so that Sherri straddled his hips. Leaning over so that her breasts cupped Ethan’s chin, she gasped as the brothers’ fingers attacked her at the same time, Ethan’s on her clit and Benji’s on her back entrance. They’d been using butt plugs for the past couple of weeks, preparing Sherri for this occasion, but each time Ethan moved his fingers in her pussy and Benji moved his in her ass, she still flinched, the sensation so foreign and exotic to her senses.

Benji kept his fingers methodical and swirling in her hole while Ethan jiggled and pressed hard against her clit. He also took a nipple

in his mouth, pushing it around with his tongue and then nibbling. Involuntarily, Sherri pushed her ass up against Benji's fingers.

"Oh God," she whispered. "I'm ready for both of you. Come into me now. Please, just now."

Ethan grabbed her hips and lowered the lips of her pussy to his dick. "Lower onto me, Sherri," he said in a commanding yet gentle voice. After she had done so, and her body had adjusted to the feel of his cock inside her, he pulled her torso toward him just a little so that her ass would be more fully exposed to Benji. She rested her palms and forearms on the flat of his muscled chest.

"Remember, if you're not sure..." he said, a slightly worried expression moving across his features.

"I want this. I want both of your cocks filling me up. I need this."

At her words, she felt Benji nudge his slicked-up cock against her back hole. She sucked in her breath when the head of his cock grew insistent and then pushed past the tight ring of resistant muscle. It felt as if she was ripping at the seams. She wanted the burning to end, but her ass massaged his cock, pulling him deeper and deeper within her body.

Her arms trembled as she forced herself to ignore the pain, but Ethan held her steady until she finally felt Benji's balls tickling the skin of her ass. Her body was on fire, and at first she couldn't tell if the flames were too much or too intense, but then Ethan gave her clit a couple strokes.

She moaned. It was all they needed.

Benji began moving in her ass, and Ethan echoed his movements in her pussy. Ethan pushed up into her, causing her hips to roll back, and Benji would pull his length out. Then he would drive himself back in, forcing Sherri's hips back down until yet again, her pussy was full of Ethan's cock.

They drove at her, their cocks filling her so completely. Soon Sherri exploded, much before either Ethan or Benji was ready, and they continued to move, igniting every organ, causing everything

inside her to burst into flames. Only, the flames didn't dim. They grew higher and higher until all Sherri could see was the brightness, the harsh brightness, of her pleasure. Each of her moans fell into the next, and she lost total control of her body. She bucked wildly between them, but there was no escape. Any way she moved brought her unending pleasure, and she screamed and she screamed and she screamed, her muscles contracting and releasing, wild and powerful.

After what seemed like an eternity, she felt first Benji and then Ethan release their hot seed inside her, both holding her tight as they did. When they were all three spent, they collapsed in a heap on the bed, Sherri between her two lovers.

Now, a few hours later, standing in the bathroom next to Emilie and Aunt Birdie, Sherri shifted uncomfortably, her ass and pussy tingling at the memory.

Emilie tucked up a loose strand of hair into her chignon. "Not that I didn't absolutely enjoy every second of my pregnancy..." Sherri and Aunt Birdie snickered, but Sherri also blushed again, thinking about what sort of activities led to pregnancy. "But it feels so good not worrying about bumping my belly into things."

Sherri forced herself to focus on the present. "And how was *le petit monsieur* when you left tonight?" Emilie had given birth to her beautiful baby boy about four months before. He had the most adorable dimples Sherri had ever seen, and he laughed at anything and everything. They'd named him Gaston Henri, and Sherri already knew that he was going to be a little heartbreaker.

"I'm not sure. He seemed okay, but I am anxious. I've already called Grandmama Stephens two times this evening."

Aunt Birdie squeezed Emilie's arm. "He'll be just fine."

Emilie laughed. "I think that scares me more than if he isn't."

The women laughed and then headed back into the ballroom. Sherri's heart still fluttered just a little every time she saw her men, but when they were dressed in tuxedos with eyes only for her, she almost couldn't breathe.

“You are ravishing,” Ethan said.

“And lovely,” Benji added.

“And tempting.” Ethan gave one quick squeeze to her ass through the lace of her dress. Sherri squeaked, jumping into Benji.

“Definitely tempting,” Benji said, squeezing the opposite cheek.

Sherri poked her finger first at Ethan then Benji. “Kindly desist in your ungentlemanly behavior. We are at a dignified and stately event. Very stately. I’ll not have you embarrassing me with your libidinous tendencies.”

“Oh, so now *we’re* the ones with libidinous tendencies?”

“Because that’s not what it seemed like this afternoon.” Benji tried to reach his hand around for another squeeze, but Sherri darted away.

Sherri snaked out her hand and pinched Benji’s lips between her forefinger and her thumb. “Stop acting like a turd bucket and behave like a proper escort should.” Even though Sherri had a firm grasp on his lips, Benji smiled, his hazel eyes twinkling at her mischievously.

“Is Benji acting out of turn, ma’am?”

Jumping in surprise, Sherri emitted a small yelp at the stranger’s voice behind her. Whipping around and falling back a few steps, Benji caught her from behind, helping her gain control over her rapidly beating heart and her heaving chest.

Damn, but the smallest things still frightened her. She’d been seeing a therapist ever since the incident five months before, and despite her brain knowing she wasn’t in danger, her body often reacted before her mind could let her body know that. It was starting to annoy the hell out of her.

Ethan rubbed his hand up and down her arm a few times while Benji grasped her hand in his.

“Jimmy Duren,” Benji said to the man who had unknowingly startled Sherri. “I’d like you to meet Sherri Winston. Sherri, this is Jimmy Duren, my boss.”



“Oh,” Sherri said, appraising the large man in front of her. “So it’s you I have to thank for hoisting this mongrel off on me.”

Mr. Duren took her proffered hand. “And I supposed it’s you I have to thank for whipping him back into shape.”

Sherri smiled. “Well, I do thank you, Mr. Duren, wholeheartedly.”

“I hate to admit it, Miss Winston, but you’ve got yourself a good man.”

“Don’t I know it.” Sherri shot a conspiratorial wink at Jimmy.

“So will we be seeing your lovely figure at Benji’s premiere next month for *Drover*? You would be a smash hit. I’m sure of it.”

Sherri giggled at his flattery and batted her eyelashes at him. “I just might at that.”

“All right, all right,” Benji broke in. “Take your schmoozing elsewhere, Jimmy.”

Tipping an invisible hat at Sherri, Mr. Duren turned and made his way to Emilie and her husbands. Sherri giggled again. If he was going to schmooze, at least the man knew to whom he should schmooze.

“Ah,” Ethan said, taking her hand like Benji had. “Now here’s someone *I* want you to meet.” Tugging her around, Sherri spotted a middle-aged black man in a dress uniform approaching, accompanied by a lovely woman with an exquisitely patterned yellow, red, and fiery orange *pagnes* draped over her body.

Before Ethan could say anything, Sherri stretched out her hand to the man. “President Ongwerra,” Sherri said, annoyed at the hitch in her voice. “It is such an honor to meet you.”

President Ongwerra smiled, as did the woman next to him, both of their smiles warm and sincere. “Mademoiselle Winston.” He bowed over her hand. “May I present to you my wife, Madame Ongwerra.”

Sherri shook the tall, slender woman’s hand, and Madame Ongwerra spoke to Sherri in a low, melodic voice. “But the honor is ours, Mademoiselle Winston.”

“Agent Blacker saved my life,” President Ongwerra said. “But that is nothing when I remember that he has helped me to save my country.”

Sherri’s eyes felt hot, but she forced herself to keep her proud tears of happiness at bay, not wanting to embarrass Ethan.

Madame Ongwerra put her hand to Sherri’s cheek. “You have a good man.”

Sherri nodded, unable to speak. Thankfully, the string quartet started a waltz.

“And now,” the president said, “I would like to dance with my beautiful wife.”

The three of them watched as the stunning couple floated onto the dance floor, and Sherri had such a warm glow in her heart. After they’d returned from the hospital in New Mexico, Ethan and Benji had immediately moved in with her. After a few weeks, Ethan was hired at the Sheriff’s office and was second in command only to Sheriff Dawes. So now, even if Benji had to go far away to shoot for a film, Ethan would always be nearby. She didn’t know if a heart could be fuller. She squeezed Ethan and Benji’s hands, never wanting to let them go.

Ethan tugged at her hand. “Come on. It’s stuffy in here.” He began to drag her off the dance floor and away from the crowd.

“We haven’t even gotten to dance yet,” she protested.

“Yeah, I’m burning up.” Benji tugged her other arm and dragged her toward a set of large French doors, one of many that lined a side of the ballroom. Outside there was a large marble balcony overlooking the river.

The string quartet onstage sent a slow waltz drifting through the doors, and as soon as they were out of the golden glow of the ballroom and only the milky light of the moon fell gently upon them, Ethan pulled her to him and kissed her lips. It wasn’t rough, but it was more intense than she was expecting. When he broke away, Benji grabbed her hand and put his lips to her palm.

“What’s going on?” As Sherri asked the question, Ethan grabbed her hips and lifted her up, setting her feet on one of the many benches that ran along the length of the balcony.

Benji smiled up at her. “Traditionally, we would both dip down to our knees, but since that’s not an option for Ethan, we had to figure out a way to put you above us.” He grabbed one hand, and Ethan grabbed the other, which rather inconveniently left her no free hands to wipe away the pesky moisture she felt gathering in her eyes.

“That’s not hard, though” Ethan said, “considering that every day you bring us such joy and purpose. You made us a family again, Sherri. We owe you everything.” He kissed the top of her hand.

“And so,” Benji continued, reaching into his pocket, “Sherri Winston, would you be my wife?” He opened a box that held a perfect little diamond ring.

“And would you be my wife?” Ethan held open a box, too.

Sherri gasped, the tears she’d been trying to keep back all night falling silently down her cheeks. “Yes,” she said, not hesitating. “Now get me down from here, you turds, so I can kiss you good and proper.”

They slipped each of their rings on each of her hands, and then Benji got her off the bench, sealing the bargain with a loud kiss. After Benji, Sherri turned to Ethan to seal his part of the bargain, and while their lips were pressed together, Sherri dimly heard a small round of applause break out from the ballroom.

Sherri’s closest friends and family stood in the doorway, all smiling and offering their congratulations to the happy trio.

Sherri turned to her men. “I have something for you as well, a gift of sorts.”

Ethan frowned, perplexed. “What is it?” She took each one’s hand and placed them on her still-flat stomach.

Benji’s eyes widened. “We’re going to be...you mean you’re...you’re p-p-”

Unable to hold back her giggles at the way Benji pattered in surprise, she said, “Yes. You’re going to be fathers. I’m pregnant.”

Ethan yanked her to him, holding her tightly, and then immediately loosened his grip. “Oh damn. I’m sorry. Are you okay? Is the baby okay?”

“Yes,” she said, holding his cheek and looking between him and his brother. “We’re fine. We’re all perfectly fine.”

## THE END

**[HTTP://WWW.BOOKSTRAND.COM/EDITH-DUBOIS](http://www.bookstrand.com/edith-dubois)**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Although she grew up in small-town, Texas, Edith has lived and traveled in both France and the UK. She currently resides in Austin, Texas but wouldn't mind a gallivant or two across the Australian Outback, the highlands of Scotland, or any other foreign land that happens to interest her.

She's been writing since she was eight or nine, but she never thought about writing as a career until she handed in her first short story to her high school English teacher. She had so much fun writing it and spending time with her characters and actually finishing it that she started another, and she hasn't stopped since. Edith enjoys writing in all sorts of genres, including song-writing and script-writing, but no matter what, love is always at the center of her stories.

### *Also by Edith DuBois*

Male Order, Texas: *A Bride for Two Babes*

Available at  
**BOOKSTRAND.COM**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
**[www.SirenPublishing.com](http://www.SirenPublishing.com)**