

ALLYSON LINDT



Breaching
HIS DEFENSES

Love Hack 1

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Allyson Lindt

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Blurb

What happens in Vegas... Can break hearts and destroy careers.

Years ago, heartbreak corrupted Jared Tippins's outlook on love. He spun the betrayal into a rapid climb up the corporate ladder, and swore off any relationship with a morning after. Luckily, the playful siren who rescues him from singing a duet alone in a karaoke bar doesn't want anything long term. If only he could stop fantasizing about ways to make her moan. Sure, she could've mentioned he works for the competition. At least she's not behind the security concerns that have plagued his company for almost six months.

If she were, he'd be screwed on a whole new level.

Mikki Elford is determined to have the fun she missed out on when she fast-tracked her way through college. But school had its upside, too. She's qualified to legally hack corporate networks. Best job ever. She also gained an appreciation for the legends in computing — Gates, Jobs, and Tippins. When she meets Jared Tippins and realizes he's sexy and fluent in programming languages older than she is, no consequence will dissuade her from an impromptu fling. Fortunately, he doesn't mind that six months ago she compromised his network to land her job.

Oh, crap! He doesn't know.

For my eternal dragon

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Chapter One

Jared's fingers twitched toward the slew of jumbled shot glasses on the shelf in front of him. He shouldn't be browsing the gift shop of the hotel he was staying in; he should be on the same conference call as his best friend and business associate, helping to wrap up the biggest sale they'd had in their sights in months. He could have listened in. Just this once. Kept himself on mute and not said anything.

Compulsion won out, and he turned back to the shelf of shot glasses. His fingers flew across the rims and, within seconds, the entire section was a series of straight, neat lines.

He exhaled loudly. Okay, so maybe he couldn't have listened quietly on the phone and kept his mouth shut.

And none of this junk would make a good souvenir for his sister. She'd asked for something simple, but everyone brought back tiny trinkets from Las Vegas. He was halfway to the gift shop exit when a tucked-away display caught his attention. The digital photo frames were tacky as hell, trimmed with gaudy, gold Greek temples, and was that supposed to be a crown of leaves? Alyssia's entire desk was lined with photos. It was perfect.

Great. A line at the checkout. His toes tapped a tuneless beat inside his shoes as he waited for his turn to pay. At least waiting would give him something else to think about for a couple of seconds longer.

He couldn't help checking his watch as he stepped from the store. He'd killed six minutes and fifty-four seconds.

Tate, Vivian, and he would be heading to dinner as soon as the call was done. His associates were staying in the same hotel. But until then, Jared's schedule was open. Time to sequester myself in my room and get some work done. He'd get back to the proposal sitting in his briefcase for new call center hardware. Answer the emails with red exclamation points on them that had come in during his flight.

His gaze tripped around the lobby as he pulled out his phone and unlocked it. People came and went. The couple

checking in, she with silver hair cropped short, he in jeans and a T-shirt and probably thirty years younger, spent more time gazing at each other than looking at anyone else. Even across the room their adoration was almost tangible.

Too bad it won't last. People never took the time to figure out their own oddities before they hooked up with another person, but over the years, he'd managed to assemble a solid algorithm of what did and didn't work for him when considering a personal relationship.

He didn't expect perfection from a significant other, but there was no reason the relationship couldn't be flawless. The math was there to support it, as long as the variables were right. In a way it was harsh, but it hadn't let him down yet.

A twinge of envy echoed in his chest as he pulled his attention away from the loving couple, aka pending heartbreak. His eyes grew wide when his gaze landed on the woman whose black hair—complete with a Kool-Aid red streak down one side—just brushed her jaw.

Back to your hotel room. Work awaits. But the woman had his attention, and his feet refused to move. Even from this distance, she screamed chaos in a way that made his fingers twitch with the need to bring order. And at the same time, he couldn't stop staring.

Her hot pink T-shirt draped off one shoulder, exposing a strap of the black tank top underneath, and her messenger bag hugged her body enough to highlight perky breasts and round hips. Her lips moved as her gaze traveled the tablet in her hands. She glanced up occasionally when she swiped the screen, and then went back to whatever had her so engrossed.

Beautiful. The thought caught him off guard. It was true, her face was attractive and her bag enhanced every seductive curve, but something else had captivated him. He studied her a little longer as she shuffled at half-speed toward an unknown destination. It was the intensity she read her tablet with. Her gaze and focus were enthralling.

Being able to pay attention was an important quality in any individual. Not that he was keeping track. Even if his

thoughts were taunting him with images of stripping her shirt off and exploring her bare skin. He had way too much work to do this trip to deal with something like base lust.

He turned toward the elevator.

He exhaled as he stepped into a waiting car. Don't think about the call. You've got other work to do. Like making sure this sale and the next aren't repeats of those in the past.

His eyes grew wide when the woman with the tablet stepped through the closing doors, only looking up long enough to push a number on the control panel. The elevator sealed them off from the rest of the world, and she continued to stare at the device in her hands.

What's she reading that's so fascinating? He inched a step closer and peered over her shoulder. The faint scent of citrus teased him and kicked his pulse up a notch. His mouth twisted in ambivalence when he saw what had her attention. "You know none of that's accurate, right?"

He hid his wince. This was why he didn't talk to anyone on sales calls except the technical people.

She spun, eyes almost as dark as the eyeliner rimming them taking a moment to focus on his face. Her confusion vanished in a smirk.

"Which bit of it?" Between words, she clacked something against her teeth. A barbell—she had her tongue pierced. There was absolutely nothing logical about the accessory. But knowing as much didn't stop the blood from draining from his head and racing toward his lower extremities. She traced the metal ball along the back of her teeth, gaze never leaving his face.

His thoughts teased him with images of what it would be like to feel the piercing in other places, and his cock twitched in response. Down, boy. Don't go there. "The entire article." She hadn't balked at his comment. Might as well push the subject.

She glanced at the device in her hands, as if she'd forgotten it was there, and then back at him.

Completely captivating gaze.

“I think you’re being a bit extreme.” She tapped her nails on the edge of the frame, attention locked on him. “You can’t tell me things like gateways, the NSA, and the deep web don’t exist.”

A shimmer of appreciation pinged inside him. She was reading tech and had been absorbed by it. Sexy. He couldn’t think of a better word for it. Except it didn’t make the information any more correct.

“I’m not saying they don’t exist. Just not in that capacity. It’s a sensationalist article meant to strike an irrational fear into people.” He knew better than to unleash his unfiltered thoughts on the general public, but something about the challenge in her expression told him she didn’t mind. It wasn’t as though he was trying to extend the conversation. Or maybe he was just a little.

The car came to a stop, and the door slid open on what he assumed was her floor. Attention never leaving his face, she reached behind her and pressed the Door Open button. “That’s the point.”

He needed to cut this conversation short. Too bad his mouth didn’t agree. “To read something that’s wrong?”

She dropped her tablet into her messenger bag, eyes never leaving his for more than a few seconds. “Someone obviously thinks it’s true. Which means there’s value in being able to plainly state why it’s not possible, and knowing if it actually is.”

“But that’s why computers are fantastic. Only so many possibilities exist, and the things they mention in the article—” he nodded at her tablet, “—aren’t on the list.”

“Not yet, anyway. I love this place, you know?”

The circuits in his head tripped and stumbled, trying to keep up with the conversation. Time to regain control. “I’m not seeing the connection to the Wired article.”

“No connection. It’s my first time here, so I’m still awestruck. It’s amazing, right? All the lights, the people, the energy.”

Now he had enough information to switch tracks and fall

back into the discussion. "It's fixed odds, careless dreams, and when it's light outside, really dirty."

What was wrong with him? Besides the fact he couldn't get a handle on this woman and his fantasy was still running rampant, having now stripped her down to her panties. Did she taste like the faint lemon and plum drifting off her? None of those thoughts are logical. Get a grip.

"Once again, that's the point." Enthusiasm shone in her eyes as she talked. "It's a chance to experience things that aren't a part of everyday life. For instance, how many of those couples downstairs will only spend the one night together and then never see each other again?" She ducked her head as the question trailed off, but not before he saw the red flush her cheeks. "Sorry. I get carried away. Guys like you probably have more important things on their minds."

The alarm on the door protested at being held open so long. A part of his brain said the sound was another hint it was time to cut things short. Soon.

"Guys like me?" One thing he never did was one-night stands. But just then, studying each move and gesture and fighting a raging hard-on at the thought of trailing his fingers over her bare skin, he wondered if she was on to something.

She met his gaze again. "Jared Tippins, Director of Information Technology for Skriddie Bust Media, and world-renowned network security genius."

An uncomfortable chill crept through him, and he shook it off. She could have recited that off his business card, it was so eerily succinct and accurate. Except the bit about being a security genius. That was implied. Was he supposed to know her? Great, he was fantasizing about screwing a prospective client or something. But he would have remembered her. "We haven't met."

"Not really." She extended the hand not holding the elevator open. "I'm Mikki."

Which didn't clear anything up, but did give a name to his out-of-control thoughts. The strain against his jeans had already passed uncomfortable. When her warm, smooth palm

nestled in his, it only got worse.

Something hummed in his jeans' pocket. He dragged himself out of his own head, forcing away the arousal and trying to shake off the disorienting cobwebs left by the fantasy.

She nodded at his waist, playful smirk dancing on her lips, and leaned in close enough to whisper, "You're vibrating."

The heat brushing his skin, her teasing voice, and those full lips... He was seconds from suggesting they take this back to her room so he could add some reality to the fantasy. Except, even if she wasn't everything chaotic and unpredictable, that was his work phone, and no one was buzzing him this late unless it was critical.

"Duty calls." He gave her an apologetic smile.

"Enjoy work." She laughed lightly and spun on her toe. "See you around," she called over her shoulder.

It took the last of his willpower to drag his gaze from her ass before the elevator doors cut off his view. It wasn't the round shape, or the hint of wiggle—though both were incredible. It was the bounce in her step. Right. Work. Back to it.

His creeping good mood sank with the extra gravity of the rising elevator when he saw the text from Tate. He rubbed his forehead to chase away the tension, but a headache still threatened at the simple note. Dial in. Now.

That was a bad sign. Jared reached his floor, headed toward his room, and pulled up the info in his calendar. He was already calling before he slid the keycard in the lock. Tate wanted him there to finalize details; that was all. If only I believed it.

Jared swiped in the call pin and dropped into the chair in front of the desk in his room—alone. Regret murmured in his thoughts. How can I be so disappointed about letting someone I just met run off?

The line clicked into a conversation already in progress, and it took a few seconds for his ears to adjust to the speaker's heavy accent. It was why the call was happening after business hours. Skriddie specialized in electronic security for retail

stores, and this potential client was overseas, building sites for a wide variety of companies. That was what made the sale so big—they had dozens of customer sites that would need to be verified, tested, and put through the wringer. All of them worth millions, and most of them high-profile.

As an independent third party, Skriddie would be responsible for certifying that each site, and all the customer information contained there, was safe from hackers.

Tate cut through a pause in the dialogue. “I think someone just joined the call.”

“Good evening, or morning, everyone. This is Jared Tippins, director of technology for Skriddie Bust Media.” He kept his tone light and friendly, despite the anxious march dancing through every limb. “I’m sorry I’m late.” Which was ridiculous, since he wasn’t originally invited, but professionalism was what it was. Easy enough to remember, now that the blood wasn’t rushing away from his brain.

“Glad you could join us.” It was unlikely anyone on the call had heard the tension in Tate’s greeting, but after almost three decades of friendship, Jared knew how bad a sign it was. “We just have some questions for you before we finalize everything —”

“If we finalize anything,” someone corrected him.

Jared snarled silently at the receiver, glad no one on the phone could see him. He swallowed his retort and kept his mouth shut, waiting for more details.

“Right, of course.” Tate’s chuckle sounded like it had been strained through a cheese grater. “Jared, we have their head developer with us, so feel free to get as technical as you need to address their concerns.”

Which, Jared knew from experience, didn’t mean he could get technical at all. He’d have to walk a fine line between letting the developers know he was knowledgeable, and not boring anyone else listening in.

And then the questions began. Five minutes in, Jared’s grasp on not getting too in depth slipped. After ten minutes, he tossed all filters by the roadside as he was assaulted with some

of the most obscure, low-level questions he'd ever encountered. Ranging from things that hadn't been an issue since the internet was born, to little-known, cutting-edge techniques he knew almost no one had dared implement yet.

He handled it all, the entire time curious about where the third degree had come from and confident he answered every concern with zero error margin.

"Jared." He recognized the voice at this point as their developer. "Do you test for all these possible holes in your own network?"

Jared choked down a sarcastic laugh. Did he monitor his own systems for weaknesses no one had heard of in a decade, or wouldn't be familiar with for at least six more months? "Of course we do. We conduct internal audits on a regular basis, and my staff is encouraged to keep current on any and all new developments in the technology industry."

The muscles in his neck tightened, and the beginning of an ache throbbed behind his temples. This was too much like the other two lost sales they'd been sure they'd had in the bag. Both contracts lost to NetSafe Systems. He clenched and unclenched his free hand. And Jared was almost convinced NSS was behind whatever was leading to these lines of questions.

At first he and his colleagues at Skriddie tried to convince themselves it was just sour grapes, that they were pissed off NSS was owning their pitches so much better. But the pattern was too familiar. Every time Skriddie competed with the other company for a client, the question of internal network security came up.

But at least that meant Jared could anticipate the next question and could head off the concern before anyone asked. His network was perfect, and he was certain of that. Time to restore some confidence. "We have copies of those internal and independent system audits. We, of course, would never expect you to put your faith in someone who doesn't hold themselves to the same security standards as their clients. I'll send them to the group as soon as this call is finished."

"We'd appreciate that, thank you." That would be one of

their executives.

“Fantastic.” The dash of stress still flavored Tate’s reply. “So if no one has further questions, we can have the contract ready for you tonight and schedule a kickoff meeting for early next week.”

“I think we’d like to hold off on that,” another of their managers said. “We still have significant concerns and need time to discuss our options internally while we conduct due diligence.”

“Of course.” Tate’s tone was too cheerful. “Let us know if we can answer any more questions at all. We’re here for you.”

Jared muted his phone and kept silent as they exchanged pleasantries and wrapped up. Due diligence my ass. There’s nothing to see. The moment he disconnected, he let out the roar of frustration that had been building in his chest for several minutes. It echoed harmlessly off the surrounding walls.

The pattern was exactly the same as the last two times. That wouldn’t stop him from sending off the information he’d promised. But experience told him it wasn’t going to matter.

Email sent, he dialed Tate and started talking as soon as the line clicked on. “We’re fucked. You know that, right?”

“Intimately.” The phony professionalism had vanished from Tate’s voice. “You with V?”

Vivian, their counterpart from operations, was still in her room working. “No.”

“So she doesn’t know yet. Lucky her.” Tate’s sigh clattered over the receiver. “I say we grab a taxi and find a local place where we can get so drunk we forget this happened until tomorrow morning when NSS rubs our noses in it.”

“We can’t.” Jared didn’t know where Tate had gotten the notion taking the night off was a good idea. “We have to track this down.”

“You’ve vetted this rumor five billion times already.” Tate sounded exhausted. “Staying up all night for the five billion and first time looking for something that doesn’t exist won’t do you any good.”

“You want answers as much as I do.” Jared let the irritation leak into his retort. “If the rumors are still out there, we’ve missed something.”

“What are you going to check that you haven’t yet?”

“I’ll figure that out when I get there.” Finding answers was just as important to his friend. Then again, Tate had a point. They didn’t know where to look next. He could drag this conversation out for the next half hour, or concede, and search for solutions while he tried to unwind. If he was going to yield, he was doing it on his terms.

“All right.” Jared relented. “I’ll ping Viv and then get a recommendation from the concierge.”

“That was too easy. We’re not doing karaoke.”

Jared smiled at the phone. Music was his one outlet. People said it was an artistic medium, but he knew better. A good, solid song followed the same methodology as a well-written software program. There was a math to it. Only so many right answers and a series of patterns that made it pleasant and functional.

Tate was welcome to get wasted. But Jared needed a new angle to approach this problem from, and this was how he wanted to let his mind wander. “Yeah, we are.”

“Pfft. Then V and I are picking your songs.”

“Fine with me. Meet us in the lobby in five.” Jared dialed Vivian the moment the call disconnected.

Maybe he should have chased down miss hot-pink T-shirt Mikki, who had the gorgeous eyes. At least then he’d have some satisfaction to go along with the feeling he’d just been fucked.

Chapter Two

Mikki tossed the who's-who packet from her trade show registration back onto her hotel mattress, the page still flipped open to the page with his picture on it. Jared Tippins. As far as she was concerned, one of the greatest minds in computing, and absolutely hot at the same time.

She left her room—and her dusty clothes from setting up their booth in the exhibit hall—behind her and made her way toward the elevators. She'd gotten the peasant blouse, corset, and leather skirt she wore now at a consignment store. They made her feel seductive and bold, and she was going to find a place with loud music and lots of energy to enjoy the feeling.

Not that she'd needed the extra confidence earlier. Had she really asked him about one-night stands? The reminder flushed her skin. It was true she'd not only come out of her shell, but left it completely in the dust since Payton, but this was a new level of bold, even for outgoing her. For a moment she'd thought Jared was considering her offer, but she must have read him wrong, for as quickly as he'd brushed her off for a phone call. Guys like that had busy schedules to keep. They didn't do random hookups.

Not that she ever had before. After she'd broken up with her jerk wad ex-boyfriend, she'd become that kind of adventurous when it came to any man who wasn't him. She'd even considered the possibility a couple of times. But she'd never actually found a guy who inspired her to pursue the idea. Turned out, in her fantasy dreamland, Jared Tippins was the perfect guy to figure out how that kind of thing worked.

Outside the hotel, she grabbed the next cab in line. Speaking of firsts... "I'm looking for a club."

The cabbie met her eyes in the rearview mirror. "A specific one, or you want me to just drop you off somewhere?" His accent was heavy, his R's vanishing into the words surrounding them. He reminded her of her history teacher when they'd lived in New Jersey.

"Karaoke. The newer the equipment, the better." She

could have checked online before she walked out the door, but that wasn't any fun. She'd never done something like singing in front of a room of strangers before, but it sounded fun.

"I know the perfect place." He navigated the packed streets with ease while he chatted at her. "Just dropped another group off there. They've got the latest and greatest technology. They even let people text in to get their names on the karaoke jockey's list."

Her phone buzzed in her purse. "Speaking of texting." She grabbed the device, her good mood wrinkling when she read the message from her boss, Hayden. How'd booth setup go?

Time to report to her keeper. It was one of the few things she'd didn't like about her job. Hayden was an okay boss, but he wasn't much on delegation. His constant need to know what all his people were up to reminded her too much of Payton. Which meant she knew how to handle him, but it still didn't make it any more pleasant to deal with. On top of that, she didn't think it was a good sign she could compare her current boss to an ex-boyfriend who'd almost torn her down completely.

Hayden always wanted to know what his people were up to when it was work related. She'd flown into Las Vegas early because she was involved with setting up their booth, so it technically meant her entire trip was work related.

She sent back a quick, Like clockwork.

Seconds later, another message buzzed in. You set for your demo tomorrow morning?

She wasn't so irresponsible she forgot what she was supposed to be doing. It was probably a good thing irritation didn't carry in text messages. She replied, I've got it under control.

Her recently acquired appreciation for the spontaneous meant she tried not to let much faze her. Getting hung up on the details and people's opinions had almost destroyed her once. But there was no reason to snark herself out of a good job and decent paycheck if she didn't have to.

When her phone stayed silent for longer than a few seconds, she decided she must be off the hook and tucked it

away again.

Moments later, after paying the cabbie, she made her way inside a club that was all neon, chrome, and incredible sound. Music blared in the background, accompanied by decent karaoke vocals, with the clang of glasses on backup.

She loved it already. She had her choice of tables, so she picked one close to the stage, ordered a drink, and settled in to decide what to sing.

Her thoughts kept drifting back to the encounter in the hotel. It was a shame Jared had to cut things short. She was such a fan girl sometimes. Normal women swooned over actors and fictional characters. She'd had to go and be odd—again—and get all wobbly about some tech guy. Not that she thought it was a bad thing. Okay, so she was a complete dork, still lingering on one simple encounter in an elevator. They'd barely exchanged words. It wasn't like he'd propositioned her.

A flat rendition of a country song she couldn't name filled the bar. She definitely wasn't singing something like that. She wanted loud, with a lot of guitar and hopefully some good orchestration.

Too bad mister tall-dark-and-smoldering wasn't the kind of nickname that rolled off the tongue. Fantasy teased her thoughts—though she could think of a couple of things she'd like to try with Jared that involved tongues. Jared Tippins. What would it be like to spend a few hours with him? Not just the getting naked, but picking his brain after about where he got his ideas, if it was weird being one of the names in the industry, and if programmers really did do it with their fingers.

But even without him, she was going to enjoy her free night before she went back to playing professional. A wolf-whistle echoed through the room, adding to the hum of her excitement. Her gaze darted around, the sound of more whistles and clapping finally drawing her eye to a group just a few tables away.

Because she'd jumped ahead a grade when she was in high school—not that she'd ever attended any school longer than six months, thanks to her dad's work—and had spent most

of her time studying even through college, she'd never had any close friends or understood that kind of camaraderie. A ping of longing echoed in her chest. It looked like fun, though. Too bad friendship wasn't one of those things she could just try, and then file away if it didn't work out.

Two of them—a guy and a woman—were cheering a third man on as he walked toward the stage. Recognition tickled Mikki's thoughts. No way. It's him.

Jared. Yup, he was still hot in person. Nerds weren't supposed to be good looking. Most of the Fortune 500 names were faces who blended into a crowd. But this guy...tasty.

"Next up is J." The KJ's voice rang over the speakers. "Who, according to the schedule, needs to stop dragging his friends around when they just want to drink until they forget their woes."

Jared fired a smirk at his friends. "You know you love it."

Mikki dropped back into her seat. This would be worth watching just for the view. Jared's brown hair was cut short on the sides and spiked on top, his shoulders did his T-shirt justice, and no man's ass should look so good in a pair of jeans. And here she'd thought she'd have to relegate her swooning to the trade show.

She leaned back. Time to enjoy the sights while she decided what to sing. Maybe he'd inspire her.

The first strains of something familiar filled the bar, and the whistles and claps from the other table died down, replaced with a quiet snicker. She knew that song. "Private Parts," Halestorm and James Michael. Gorgeous, haunting duet.

"You want me to sing her parts, too?" Jared stepped away from the microphone and toward the edge of the stage.

"You said we could pick," the guy with him taunted.

Inspiration stuck, and she knew exactly what she was going to sing. And in the process, she could spend a little more time appreciating the view all up close and personal-like. Mikki was on her feet and walking toward the stage. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, and her fingertips twitched in anticipation—not at the idea of being on stage, but that she

was going to do so next to him. "I'll sing her parts."

His blue eyes grew wide, but appreciation lingered behind his shock. His voice was low, meant only for her ears. "Are you following me?"

"Not yet." She gave him what she hoped was a teasing smile, took the spot next to him by the mic, and slid into her part just as the female vocals kicked in.

His mouth twitched, and he picked up the next line without hesitation.

She sang her parts with only the occasional glance at the prompter. It was one of her favorite songs, and he carried the sad baritone with zero hesitation, sending chills through her.

As the music progressed, easing into the crossover and refrain, she lost herself in the lyrics and his voice. He was good. Maybe not professional quality, but neither was she, and at least he could keep up.

He stepped closer, never quite touching her as he traced a finger inches from her cheeks and sang about not blaming anyone, just trying to figure things out. Her nipples tightened at the intensity in his voice, and her skin hummed with anticipation each time he drew close but never quite made contact. It was easy to fall into the seductive pantomime. She let her hooded gaze rake over him while she slid into the chorus about getting naked but not undressing his heart.

The song ended, and as the last strains faded away, she found herself held captive by his gaze. Such clear blue eyes, she couldn't look away. He stood close enough the faint spice of his aftershave tickled her senses, and his heat brushed her skin. Every impulse in her screamed to lean in and kiss him. Just a taste. He tilted his head closer, and her breath hitched. Maybe tonight was her chance to live out any fan girl's fantasy—a random, no-strings tumble with her idol. She could imagine losing herself in him, at least for another hour or two.

A chorus of catcalls rocketed through the room, shattering her thoughts and the bubble around them. He stepped back, a smile drifting in to replace the intensity that had been on his face moments earlier, but not quite reaching his eyes. "Thanks

for rescuing me.”

Her body still tingled, pleading for more. Taking things further wasn't the plan, though. She forced her smile to stay in place, despite the voice in her head begging to find out what he could do besides sing, and put more space between them. “It was my pleasure.”

“I'm going to have to repay you somehow.”

She had a couple of ideas about what she'd like as remuneration. Even when he was pretending to be humble, he was sexy, in that sharp, too-serious-for-his-own-good kind of way. Images danced through her thoughts, teasing her with what it might have been like to end the song with a kiss. To feel those long fingers at the back of her neck, or gliding even lower. Heat and desire flooded her, and she tucked the notions aside before they could grow graphic and rampant.

And apparently he'd said something to her. She shook her distractions away. “I'm sorry, what?”

He rested a hand at the small of her back, and gestured toward the edge of the stage with his free arm. “I think they're waiting for us to leave so they can cue up the next song.”

“Right, of course.” Embarrassment joined the warmth flowing through her. She was tempted to lean into him and enjoy his touch a little longer. They reached the main floor too soon, but he didn't pull away. Instead he steered her away from her table, and toward the bar. He didn't break the contact until she was seated.

“Before you vanish into the crowds again, can I buy you a drink?”

So, so tempting. Despite the things she was willing to play fast and loose with, she knew she was a lightweight when it came to drinking. And if she was going to enjoy this opportunity, she was going to stay in full control of her senses. “I have to work in the morning.”

“So you're going to nibble on chips the rest of the night without anything at all? Coke, water, nothing?” His expression never shifted, the pleasant but infuriatingly neutral smile staying etched in place. He slid onto the stool next to her, and

his arm brushed hers when he rested it on the bar top. Had his face just twitched? Or was she imagining that he'd just bitten the inside of his cheek?

Maybe she wasn't the only one who thought there was an almost tangible cord between them. After all, he hadn't made his excuses and left yet. "Diet Coke, wedge of lime."

He grabbed the bartender's attention and ordered two. She fumbled for something flirty to say. Normally it wasn't a problem. She didn't tend to care what people thought of her, so whatever came out of her mouth came out. This was different, though. She idolized this man. She sipped her drink while a variety of witty openers—or maybe they weren't so witty and that was why she was hesitating—flitted through her thoughts.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen." The KJ's voice blended with the closing strains of a falsetto version of "Made in the USA" they'd just been subjected to. "Apparently our sexiest couple of the evening wants to do an encore performance for us."

Mikki was still processing the words when Jared's, "They wouldn't," cut into her thoughts. "Nope, they did." There was no irritation in his tone, and amusement danced on his face.

Her mouth drew into an O, and then a small laugh slipped out. "They mean us?"

He held up his phone with a text message on the screen from someone named "T." You're up again.

His friends must have set them up for another round. Boldness spurred by lust spiked through her. She hopped to her feet, intertwined her fingers with his, and tugged him back toward the stage. "We can't let our fans down."

He raised an eyebrow, and for a moment it looked like he might argue. Her pulse skipped when he fell into step beside her instead. "All right. But after this song is finished, I pick the next one, and you'd better keep up."

A new energy surged inside at the suggestion they'd be spending at least two more songs together. Her lips hummed in anticipation. "Me?" No way was she passing up that opportunity. She stepped in front of him on the stage. "Is that a challenge?"

He winked and took his spot next to her as the opening strands of “Close My Eyes Forever” by Lita Ford and Ozzy Osborne filled the room. “Take it however you’d like. Just keep making me look good.”

True to his word, when they finished, he stopped by the KJ’s booth and lined them up for another song. Because it was a weeknight, the bar was mostly empty. So twenty minutes later, they were on stage again. She lost track of time as they stepped in every few songs and picked new duets each time, alternating who got to choose. His taste ran softer than hers, and he seemed to prefer the classics from the eighties, but he didn’t have any trouble falling into the tracks she picked.

It had to have been hours later when “This Mess We’re In”—PJ Harvey and Thom Yorke—filled the room. He stood close, like he had every song, gaze locked on hers, never once glancing at the prompter, as he sang about looking each other in the eye directly, meeting on a Wednesday, and the mess they were in.

She pressed into him, sliding along his frame with lyrics of dreaming of making love and impossible dreams. Her nipples tightened each time he drew near.

His fingers glided up her spine as they moved into the last chorus, with her speaking the words and him singing about never changing or meeting again. The feather-light touch dragged her longing to the surface, and her skin tingled, begging to feel more of him. Each word sank deeper into her soul, drawing her into the moment as if she were living it.

The surreal, seductive feeling lingered as the last strains of the music faded from the speakers, not disrupted by the applause filling the room. She stood toe to toe with him, gaze locked on his, her breathing heavy and face hot. This time she didn’t fumble when he led her from the stage. He steered her out of the main flow of traffic, waving off the KJ to indicate they were done.

“I need to stop for the night.” He navigated them toward the bar again.

“If you’re getting tired.” She winced at the raw rasp in her

voice.

His hand rested at the base of her neck, and her breath caught at the spark that ran through her. His thumb traced up her throat so lightly she wondered if she was just imagining it. His voice was low, and a current of something she couldn't identify lined his teasing. "Thanks. My voice is a little worn out."

She nodded at the empty table behind him where his friends had been sitting at the beginning of the night. "I think you were abandoned."

He pulled his phone from his pocket and with a few swipes, showed her the screen. It was another message from T. Bailing. Tables are calling my name.

"Did you see that come in?" That meant no one was waiting on him now. And the message had a time stamp of almost two hours ago. So had he intentionally given them some alone time? The realization heated her further.

He shrugged and pocketed the device. "I was having fun."

"You've got a nice voice." Why had she said that? Of all the witty, flirty, intelligent things she could have come up with, a weak nicety passed her lips instead. The fact that his hand still rested on her neck must be short-circuiting her thoughts.

He tilted closer, stopping when his head was just inches from hers. "I was going to say something similar." He was near enough the faint spice of his aftershave filled her head again. "You've got incredible vocal cords." He dipped his head, hot breath brushing her ear.

The haze of the song still enveloped her. His nearness pushed a wave of want through her, and the suggestion in his very movement clenched in her belly and traveled lower. His breath on her skin enhanced her already rampant fantasies.

"I've got other skills besides singing." Instead of the seductive innuendo she'd intended, her voice came out as a shy whisper, and she hid a cringe.

"I bet."

She realized she was leaning into him and didn't pull away. Hesitation thrummed through her at what she was about to do,

but this was one of those moments she couldn't let get away from her. A random, foolish, completely tempting, once-in-a-lifetime chance. "Do you ever think about the lyrics when you sing along?"

His brows rose, question dancing in his expression. "Sometimes..."

She tried to be subtle about taking a deep breath. It had been ages since she'd worried this much about the words coming out of her mouth. She forced a wash of courage through her veins and let the question roll. "It makes me wonder what it would be like to make love while the sun sets over the city."

She'd managed to ask without her voice cracking. Slick need ached between her thighs. A tiny nagging in the back of her head pointed out this might not be her best idea ever. Something about being neighbors at the tradeshow, and working for competing companies.

Which was laugh-worthy. There was no way she wanted to walk away from a chance like this.

A frown crossed his face, and her gut sank. "I'm from out of town."

That doesn't sound like a no. And his hands still rested at her waist. "We met in a hotel. So am I."

"I don't do things like this." His words didn't match his actions. His eyes stayed locked on hers, and his palm slid toward her back, drawing her closer.

"Duets in karaoke bars?" She let her growing hope keep her question light. Even his low, smooth tone made her think he was more interested than his words indicated.

His breathing quickened. "One-night stands."

"Me neither." She risked stepping closer, and her pulse threatened to race away when his thumbs pressed into her hips, holding her captive. "But I figure sometimes you have to make an exception."

His fingers stroked small circles along her back. "I don't make exceptions, either."

Then she wasn't the only one this was a night of firsts for.

The idea sent tingles from her fingers, through her entire body, and down to her toes. She dipped her head in. He smelled incredible up close, like musk and fresh rain. She let herself fall into the scent as she whispered, "That's why it's called an exception. Because you don't normally do it."

His lips moved along her neck, never touching her, but making her blood roar in response. "You make a good case. And I'll admit, you're absolutely intoxicating."

No one had ever described her like that before. Something between a giggle and a sigh bubbled up inside, and she swallowed it back. Don't lose it now. "So what's stopping you from sating the curiosity?"

His mouth twisted into a hungry smile that stole the last of her reason. "Nothing, apparently."

Chapter Three

Jared brushed his lips over hers, and she leaned into the kiss without hesitation. The ordered part of his brain twitched that he couldn't get a solid read on this woman. In the few short hours they'd known each other, she'd been demure, confident, sarcastic, and removed. No one had that many variables so close to the surface. On top of that, she'd never stopped being sexy. Her black hair with a red streak, the off-the-shoulder shirt and corset combination highlighting the curves underneath, and the skirt ending a few inches above her knees drove his imagination wild.

And the way her tongue darted into his mouth completely disassembled his thoughts. His blood pressure increased another notch when a smooth metal ball rolled along the inside of his mouth. The fabric of her corset teased his fingertips, and the intoxicating scent of lemon and plum still drifted from her. His mouth watered at the thought of running his tongue up the long curve of her neck. Seeing if her skin felt more like silk or the suede tempting his palms.

He didn't have time for this. He had pressing problems to solve, and her what the hell attitude was as disconcerting as it was contagious. Except, for the first time in he couldn't remember how long, this moment was the only thing he wanted to focus on.

He dropped into a nearby stool and tugged her closer. She slid between his legs without hesitation, fingertips digging into his chest and soft gasps tearing from her throat. He glided his hands down her back and rested them on her ass. She pushed even closer, brushing his cock through his jeans. Jesus, he wanted more.

He trailed his nose up her neck, inhaling the sharp scent making every one of his senses sing. It took the last of his restraint, and the intense knowledge they were in a public place, not to push her skirt out of the way, bend her over the bar, and slide inside her. What was wrong with him? Tempted to misbehave just because he was a little turned on?

No way was he walking away now. Every gasp and moan whispering from her stole more of his reason. She was different—unrestrained didn't begin to describe her—and his senses begged for more than just a taste. He grazed his teeth along her ear, nipping at her lobe. "I should warn you now, if we keep going I won't want to stop. Hell, I already don't want to stop."

Her tiny laugh ended with a sigh when he traced up her collarbone with his tongue. The faint salt of perspiration mingled with the velvet of her skin. Another tick in her favor—his bluntness didn't seem to faze her. He needed to get some of these clothes out of the way. She rubbed against him, her response quiet. "I'm not letting you strip me down in the middle of a bar."

If he asked nicely, would she? He couldn't hold back his smirk as inspiration struck. "We could go back to my room."

"Or we could sneak off into one of the practice rooms they have."

Her breathy suggestion glitched his thoughts, but reason wriggled its way in. "You think they're not going to know exactly why we're going back there?"

She stepped back as far as was possible without breaking the contact between them, and her lower lip jutted out. "Does it matter?"

He wanted to kiss that pout away, then run his lips lower along her collarbone and dip between the curve of her breasts. Fuck propriety. At least for the next hour or so. He waved the bartender over and dropped a bill on the counter. "We want one of the sound rooms to warm up in."

He received an electronic key card and a raised eyebrow in return, but no comment. He tugged Mikki away from the main stage. As they passed the bathroom, something occurred to him. Convenient. He pressed her against the wall, using the dark corner to block them mostly from view. He ran his hand up the back of her leg, pushing up the hem of her skirt.

"And you were worried about what people would say," she teased as she squirmed under his touch.

He tangled his fingers in her hair and crushed his lips to

hers. When he broke the kiss, he pressed his forehead to hers. “Fifteen seconds. I’ll be right back.”

Pink flooded her cheeks. “I’ll give you twenty and then I’m leaving.”

He chuckled at the joking threat, ducked into the bathroom, and returned twelve seconds later—he’d counted—with protection.

“You’ve thought of everything.”

He nudged her toward the sound room. “Not everything, but I’ve got a head full of starting places to pick and choose from.”

The room was barely big enough for a bench and table mounted to the wall, a microphone, a screen in another wall, and a computer keyboard to let people make their play selections.

Is this place as clean as it looks? How many other people have had this same idea?

Her pelvis ground against his cock and shoved the nagging questions aside. He’d never been with a woman who was this kind of bold. His imagination was already careening out of control with the filthy things he wanted to do to her. He could overlook invisible germs. The space was small, but it was all they needed.

He twirled her so her back was to him and pulled her close again. Her warm figure pressed into him cranked his internal temperature several notches. He undid the hooks on the front of her corset and kissed along the back of her neck. The heady scent of citrus sang to his senses and filled him with a longing to feel every inch of her at once.

He tugged the bottom of her shirt out of her skirt. Every time her ass shifted, the friction made him harder. It was going to be difficult to be patient with her. He rested his palms on her bare stomach. Her skin was smoother than the silky texture he’d imagined. Warm and eager beneath his touch.

Her every sound tugged at his gut every time he touched her someplace new, making him want to hear more. He moved one hand higher, fingers brushing the bottom of her breast

through her bra. His head swam at the thought of what was hiding under her skirt. He kissed the edge of her ear. "Are your panties the same black lace as your bra?"

To her credit, she didn't ask how he knew. So, somewhere around the third or fourth song, she'd consciously undone the top two hooks on her corset, exposing a hint of lace as she'd traced her finger along the neckline of her blouse. Instead she pushed into him again. "I guess you'll just have to find out for yourself."

The attitude made his blood scream. He needed to be buried inside her. But first things first. He shoved her bra up, and she whimpered when the elastic brushed her nipple, followed closely by his fingers. He tweaked the hard nub between his fingers, tugging and pinching in response to her panting.

That sound was intoxicating. He moved his other hand to her other breast, squeezing both mounds. She ground into him in rhythm to his massaging, her gasps growing more punctuated with each movement. Was her frantic grinding enough to get him off? It was tempting to find out, but her pleasure came first. Always.

He couldn't help but smirk when his hands fell away and she let out a whimper of disappointment. It melted into a gasp seconds later as he trailed his fingers down her back. Friction built between his palms and her thighs when he pushed up the hem of her skirt. The slick leather was a sharp contrast to her warm skin beneath. He couldn't believe he was doing this. It was true, he wasn't new to the idea of a one-night stand, but they were all but in public, and there were no ground rules around the encounter.

He didn't want to walk away though. She was different from the women he dated. He didn't know anything about her besides her name, and that she had a fascination with incorrect tech articles. She had stepped onto the stage with such abandon. Hadn't caved under his attention, but made the most delicious noises as she yielded to his touch.

She pressed into him with more force when he dipped his

fingers under the thin elastic holding up her panties. He glided down her slit, moisture coating his fingers before he even slipped between her folds. A groan tore from his chest. "You're so wet already."

She arched her back, head resting on his shoulder. His teeth sank into her bare shoulder, each twist of her body sending an exquisitely painful dagger of want through him. A loud gasp echoed through the room when he brushed a swollen nub between her legs. She rocked against his hand as he traced circles around her clit, growing tighter each with pass until she was bucking under his attention, breath coming in short bursts.

Her back went rigid, and she pressed hard into his hand as a final, soft cry tore from her throat, and a shudder racked her body when she came.

She wobbled, still panting. He laid a line of soft kisses along her neck, and then down her spine through her shirt. Hooking his thumbs into the elastic of her panties, he dragged them down her legs. "They are black. Lucky me."

She let out a small laugh as she stepped out of the lingerie. "Glad I didn't disappoint." And there was her attitude. It made him as hard as the thought of burying himself inside her did. She spun to face him and plucked the panties from his hand, a teasing gleam in her eyes. She stepped close enough to rub her entire frame against him. Her hand slid along his waist, and she stuffed the lingerie in his pocket. "In case the memory of tonight isn't enough of a souvenir for you."

What made someone so tantalizingly bold? No, he didn't need to know, as long as she didn't stop. He tangled his fingers in her hair again, barely able to grasp the short strands. He pressed his forehead to hers, not able to keep the hunger from his voice. "Trust me, the memories are already enough to keep me company for a while. But when you walk out of here, at least I'll know it's without anything on under your skirt, the cool air brushing your skin, reminding you why you're so wet."

"Good thing I packed extra." She tilted her head and nipped at his bottom lip before kissing him.

A twinge pinged deep inside at the reminder this was only a one-time thing.

He shoved the thoughts aside, more interested in the moment. His tongue danced with hers, the smooth metal of her barbell stroking him as he guided her the short distance to the table behind her. Hands on her hips, he lifted her to sit on the edge.

She never broke the kiss when he shoved his knee between her thighs and forced her legs apart. Her skirt crept higher up her hips as he stepped closer. His chest was tight from the shallow breaths he drew. The hammering of his pulse in his ears blocked out every sound not associated with her, and his tongue wanted another taste of her. Of that silver ball that teased him as effectively as her words did.

Her fingers trailed down his stomach, and she only fumbled with his belt and button for a moment before opening his pants. He growled when her cool fingers wrapped around his warm shaft, freeing it. He nudged forward, and she scooted back, breaking away from him. Teasing eyes met his, and her hand slipped into his pocket. She plucked out a condom. He'd been getting to that, but at least she wasn't completely careless. Apparently, she could get sexier.

Seconds later she had it unwrapped. He groaned at the light sensation as she rolled the rubber onto his cock. The moment she was done, he dug his fingers into her hips and thrust forward. Her cry mingled with his when he pushed inside her.

"You're so tight." He spoke through clenched teeth. "So slick."

Her knees hooked on his hips, and she yanked him closer, nails gliding down his back.

The buildup had already drawn him close to the edge, and he wasn't going to last much longer buried inside her. She grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand up. He took the hint, finding her breast and stroking his thumb across the rigid peak. He kissed along her neck, the soft scent of her shampoo stealing his oxygen.

She matched his pace as he slammed into her depths. God, she was incredible. Her breathing grew shallow again, and this time he knew she was close to orgasm. The thought was enough to draw his own arousal to a peak. She didn't slow down as she climaxed, milking his cock and squeezing him until he burst. Endorphins raced through him, stealing the rest of his reason and plunging him completely into the moment. He grunted when he came, biting her shoulder and not stopping until he was spent.

She rested her forehead on his chest, breathing heavy, her laugh warm through his shirt. "I've never been the lucky lady to come to the rescue of a helpless businessman in a karaoke bar before."

"Honestly, I prefer to be the hero." He pulled out of her.

"I'm not saying I mind being swept away by a knight in shining armor." She nudged him back with her body as she jumped from the table. Pleasure rushed through him at the teasing contact. She straightened her skirt and clothing while he stripped off the condom, wrapped it in a tissue he kept in the small pack in his wallet, tossed it in the trashcan in the corner, and did up his jeans.

"I had a lot of fun tonight. All of it. Thank you." She stepped up to him again, rose on her toes, and brushed her lips over his. "But I have to get back before I turn into a pumpkin."

The kiss stole his thoughts. He could take her back to the hotel. See if she was interested in round two. He'd be up for it by the time they got there, if he could keep his hands to himself on the ride.

But that was a bad idea. Reason was returning. This was a one-night thing, and he had meetings in the morning. No need to prolong the inevitable, beyond making sure she got back safe. "Do you want to share a cab?"

She hesitated for a moment, brow furrowed, and then shook her head. For the first time that night, she looked like she was actually hesitating. Great, now he'd made things awkward. He should have established some ground rules.

"Thank you, but no. I've got things covered," she said.

He shoved his whispering disappointment aside and instead loosely grasped her wrist, tugged her close, and rested his other hand on the small of her back. He kissed her deeply, searing the sensation into his head.

A gasp slipped from her throat when they broke apart, and the corner of her mouth tugged up. "Good night."

He sank back onto the bench after she was gone, mixed emotions coursing through him. He focused on the pleasant ones. She'd even made him forget about work and that damn phone call for a few hours. Maybe he'd have to let Tate and Vivian pick his songs more often.

Chapter Four

Mikki's tiny smile—the one that had lingered even in a sleep that graced her with sensual dreams—couldn't be convinced to leave. This morning, when logic tried to horn its way in and remind her everything about the last night had been completely irrational, she'd smiled wider. And had she really given him her panties? Her own boldness made her grin in retrospect. So worth it!

Growing up, she'd always been the shy, quiet, nerdy girl. The way they moved around, combined with her younger age in school, had only helped keep her in her shell. Even through college she'd kept to herself. Yawn.

After graduation, she'd met Payton. The name made her thoughts snarl in irritation. The things he'd said to her. To other people about her. Her gut clenched at the half-formed memories, and she shoved them aside.

It didn't matter. He was in the past, and the poor decision to date him had led to her choice to experience life after they broke up. It had taken some time to get comfortable with stepping out of her shell, but she'd faked it until she made it. Her personal mission statement had become live first, think later, and never say "if only."

The night before had been the perfect addition to her memories. Sexy guy who just happened to be an idol of hers, tons of fun, and wow...some sizzling mental souvenirs. The only regret she had—and she didn't usually do regrets—was that she hadn't been more up front about who she was. She'd assumed he knew, but maybe she should have made sure.

She smoothed out the polo shirt with her company logo on it, grabbed her exhibitor's badge for the trade show and her purse, and left her hotel room behind her. Time to see more of Vegas, even if a lot of her view would be from the confines of a trade show booth.

It was her first time in the city of lights and though she was there for business, she was going to take every free chance she could to at least see the part of the strip their hotel and the

convention center were on. When she'd wandered the shops the day before at Caesar's Palace, she'd spotted the perfect place for breakfast. Now it could also provide a few more minutes for her to drift in the memories of last night. She and Jared had had undeniable chemistry on stage, and he was bandwidth-choking hot.

Her body flushed at the memories. She'd probably never do something like that again, which was all the more reason to relish the images seared in her mind.

The cafe looked like most she'd seen in her life—treats under glass, the smell of coffee in the air, and eclectic furniture. But it was nestled in the middle of a hotel and that made it awesome as far as she was concerned.

"Michaela." The staccato word cut through all the noise, like Styrofoam on Styrofoam. She hated her real name, and she only knew one person who refused to call her anything else. He insisted it was professional. Playtime's over. Bossman's in town.

She pasted on a smile and turned toward Hayden. He was attractive and as clean cut as she'd ever seen a person. Close-cropped, dark blond hair, broad shoulders, and doing a decent job of hiding he was almost forty. And his suit ensured he'd blend in with all the retail store owners they were about to mingle with—beige, pressed, and plain.

He was the senior vice president of the team she worked for. She couldn't imagine wanting to climb that high on the corporate ladder. Boring. His father owned NetSafe Systems, a company built on creating everything digital one could imagine for retail stores. Websites, shopping carts, point of sale software. Their group offered ethical hacks to companies with website security concerns.

Her job specifically—and the best job ever, in her opinion—was to try from every angle possible to break into a company's website or network, and then tell them how to keep people like her from doing it again.

Which was the only reason she was okay with being reminded regularly to put on a polite face for the public. This

was her dream job, and NSS was one of the two top firms in the country. Jared's was the other. Okay, so it wasn't his company, but still... Heat shimmered through her as more memories and fantasies teased her.

She would have liked a few more minutes alone with her thoughts, but she couldn't completely brush off her boss. Especially on a business trip. She grabbed her food and crossed the short distance to the table he'd secured.

"I hope you weren't too bored last night," he asked as he toed out a spare chair for her.

She dropped into the wooden seat. Sometimes it felt like he asked too many questions, but most of the time she was pretty sure he was just making small talk. Not that the details of her night before mattered in the grand scope of work. She hadn't missed anything, and she was awake and alert this morning. Besides, the question reminded her things had ended much better than she'd expected. "I kept myself occupied."

More memories flashed through her head. Jared's hands on her legs, roughly shoving her skirt up. Heat flooded her skin and she tucked the pleasant thoughts aside before she could fall into them.

"Glad to hear it."

He riffled through the laptop bag resting next to his leg and pulled out a magazine. A whisper of relief flitted through her. Small talk was fine most days, but this morning she had other things on her mind.

All her other thoughts evaporated when she saw his reading material. Staring back at her from the cover were Jared and his two friends from the bar, the headline proclaiming them the corporate dream team that was Skriddie Bust Media.

She couldn't pull her attention from the photo. The three had made their company a name. Vivian Graf was director of operations, Tate Foster was director of sales, and Jared Tippins rounded out the trio as director of technology. Her cheeks warmed, and a pleasant tingle crept through her. She'd really hooked up with him.

“Hey.” Hayden had set down the magazine and was staring at her. “Earth to Michaela. Did you just check out?”

“I’m good.” She swallowed, not able to push away the distracting fantasies tripping through her thoughts.

She’d heard stories in college—and after—of the legend that was Jared. A decade ago, he’d been her age—twenty three, when he’d built one of the biggest, baddest-ass security systems corporate America had ever seen. He’d been some kind of genius savant back in his day, before he’d traded it all for a suit and an impressive title.

Hayden looked between her and the picture, and his eyebrows rose. “I’ll do you a favor right now, not as your boss, but as a friend. He’s not your type, Michaela. Trust me. He likes his women with a digital voice and a square shell.”

A cloud drifted across the vivid images painted across her thoughts. There was that. According to Hayden, Jared was the industry’s version of a monk—more interested in machines than dating. In fact, those were frequently the exact words Hayden used to describe him. Except, that didn’t mesh with the man she’d met the night before. “You’re exaggerating.”

He set the magazine down and locked a steady gaze on her. “It doesn’t matter if I am or not. I’ll remind you once because I’d hate to see you destroy your career before it even starts—keep your distance from these guys.”

She had a list of things that irritated Hayden, but she hadn’t ever expected to have to add “Don’t sleep with Jared Tippins” to it. She tried to be subtle about inhaling deeply. It didn’t get rid of the memories, but it did mute her body’s reaction. She wouldn’t blurt out she’d already crossed that line, but couldn’t hide all of her irritation at his professional advice. “I’m pretty sure my contract doesn’t delve into who I can and can’t talk to.”

“Does conflict of interest mean anything to you?”

Oh. That. Hayden had made it clear what he thought of corporate espionage, or any violation, real or perceived, of the non-disclosure agreement all employees signed. In fact, he’d spelled it out for her during the later stages of her interview.

After he'd fired the guy who'd made hacking the Skriddie systems network a part of her technology test even though the interviewer told her she was still on NSS systems.

Hayden had reiterated his, and the company's, zero tolerance policy about the ethics of spying on the competition. He'd also driven home that Skriddie would probably demand her head when they found out she'd committed such a serious transgression as breaching their security just to get a job, unless he smoothed things over first.

She turned her attention to her breakfast, keeping her tone casual. "You want a dictionary definition of each word?"

"You kill me sometimes, you know? Slay me dead." He pointed at the magazine cover. "Look, I'm not trying to be a wet blanket. This is standard stuff." Concern edged his kind tone. "They were furious when I told them what you did, and steering clear of them is going to make your life less stressful. I just want you to avoid any unpleasant situations."

She frowned at the reminder she might have pissed off someone at Skriddie and gave her full attention to her food. Six months, and she'd almost managed to put the entire thing out of her mind. Hoped the situation might just evaporate. Talk about a buzzkill. "I get it. Thanks."

"Are you ready for the panel this morning?"

Good. A neutral topic. Dull as hell, but neutral. "I'm set." She redirected her thoughts to work-related subjects. "I pulled anything that could be considered interesting—sorry, proprietary—from the slides."

An unpleasant thought joined Hayden's warning. If Jared had known who she was last night, would he have had a different reaction to her? What if he was still angry about what she'd done?

Professional people didn't hold grudges like that, right? He was way too mature to do something like resent her just because she'd found a teeny, tiny...okay, fairly significant hole in their security when she wasn't even supposed to be on their network. Besides, at least she'd found it before someone else. And Hayden had made sure they knew about it. There should

be some forgiveness for that, right?

Still, conflict of interest. Not that it was Hayden's—or anyone else's—business who she did or didn't sleep with.

Images and sensations teased back in response to her mental question. Jared's breath on her skin, his teeth digging into her shoulder, his hands gripping her hips. No regrets. She just had to keep it quiet.

Chapter Five

Jared's sneakers thwapped against the rubber of the treadmill, the sound filling the hotel gym with a rhythmic pulse. The beat echoed in his skull and with images of the night before. He'd had enough impulsiveness to last him the next year, but it had been worth it.

The sensations from the bar still teased him. Her heady scent, the rainbow of sounds she'd made, and the carefree attitude always dancing behind her eyes.

"Ever stop to wonder why you're the only person in here at seven a.m.?" Tate's jab shattered Jared's rambling thoughts.

"Nope. Never even considered it." He couldn't help the tiny smile that slipped out. He owed Tate a thank you for ditching him the night before. Or maybe "giving him some room" was a more appropriate way to put it. He continued running—no reason to interrupt his daily routine—but did set the speed slower so he could talk and jog at the same time.

"Of course not." Tate used a nearby wall for support and took a long swallow from his oversized coffee. "Then you'd have to admit your routine is boring and predictable."

"Predictable and consistent," Jared corrected him. "Unlike, oh, say, abandoning your buddy in a bar after you suggested we drink all night."

Tate snorted. "Right. Because you're so torn up about that."

Jared couldn't suppress his grin. The expression had to be a dead giveaway about what happened. "If you'd rather have hit up the tables, you should have said so before we left."

"I have to do something to make sure they give me the room again next trip."

Jared doubted that. For as much money as Tate dropped on high-roller tables every time they were in town, he was pretty sure the guy had a lifetime's worth of comp in the luxury suites. Once upon a time, the way Tate went through his father's money had been a sore spot between them. Now that Jared had his own cash—even though he still couldn't justify

twenty-five hundred dollars a hand for poker—it didn't faze him the same way. "So really, you should be thanking me."

Tate laughed. "I don't think so. And for the record, if I'd known you'd get that kind of response, I'd have gone up there myself. Next time, you're forcing me onto stage and playing wingman."

"I've never stopped you in the past."

"Whatever. Speaking of your velvet-voiced siren, did she spill anything good? It would serve Hayden right after the bullshit he's already pulling today. I ran into him in the lobby, and he spent fifteen minutes trying to get me to slip up and tell him who we were in negotiations with."

Spill anything good? Serve Hayden right? Wait, what? The circuits in Jared's head collided with each other and he stumbled. He stepped on the edges of the treadmill before confusion could become a full-blown face plant, and shut the device off. She'd definitely said and done things that would stick in his head for a long time. But the tension rolling under his skin told him that wasn't what Tate meant, and shouldn't have anything to do with one of the senior vice presidents at NSS. "I'm missing a key point of reference, aren't I?"

Tate grimaced and set his coffee aside. "You don't know."

Obviously not. "Know what?"

"Vivian told me. I think she would have told you too, but figured you'd find out directly from the source. You and your karaoke partner seemed to be getting on just fine without us."

For the most part, he was used to Tate's tendency to not get directly to the point. He didn't appreciate it, but he accepted it. Just now, he needed to have details sooner rather than later. His brain was already erroring out from lack of information. "Tell me."

"She's Michaela Elford."

So that was what Mikki was short for. Why did her full name sound familiar? From Tate's expression, it was clear Jared should know it.

Tate continued, "She's the new prodigy Hayden hired. The one he stole from V six months ago."

Right. The weird interview that had pissed Viv off for weeks after. Apparently Michaela—Mikki?—had been just as impressive in her resume as in person when Vivian had interviewed her, and had seemed like she was ready to all but sign. Then, out of nowhere, she'd sent Vivian a very polite and apologetic thanks but no thanks letter. Something along the lines of, "I hope you're not too angry with me. I think we can all agree the best place for me is with NetSafe Systems."

Viv had tried to reach her a handful of times after, but Mikki hadn't returned her calls.

Yup, that was exactly where he'd heard her name. He never should have misfiled information that important. Fuck. Jared stepped off the treadmill. "Got it. And no, it didn't come up."

"Maybe she didn't recognize you."

Except she had. Alarms clanged in the back of Jared's thoughts. Suspecting anything was off about the situation was ridiculous. The encounter in the elevator had been random chance, and she couldn't have known they were heading out to get wasted and sing bad music. His paranoia might be a rampant bastard sometimes, but there was no way this was like Karen.

But Mikki working for the competition dragged up unpleasant memories he hadn't expected to deal with on this trip. Especially if she was associated with NSS.

Karen had taught him years ago getting involved with anyone in that company was a dangerous path to follow. Good thing he and Mikki knew last night was a one-time thing. The thought didn't take the edge off the realization she'd kept something as significant from him as working for the competition.

"Speaking of, if you want to see your karaoke partner on stage in a more professional fashion, she's running an NSS panel in the morning breakout sessions." Tate took another sip of coffee, grimaced, and tossed the cup in a nearby trashcan.

Jared cringed as coffee splashed in the waste bucket. So messy. Despite his irritation at being deceived, his pulse kicked

up at the thought of hearing that playful voice again. He beat the reaction back with the rest of the morning's conversation. "I was planning on it anyway."

He was going to see if there were any hints about the direction NSS was taking their security offerings. And hopefully uncover a detail or two as to what he was missing in these rumors that his company wasn't worth its own press releases. Not that he expected there to be any usable information—providing as little information as possible was status quo for these demos—but there was always a chance. And he could almost convince himself Mikki wasn't adding another layer of incentive.

Tate's brow furrowed, and he studied Jared for a minute. "I was joking. Vivian's already attending. You can skip it if you want."

Jared shrugged. "Hayden's been bragging they've got something that can put us in the dirt. I'd like to form my own opinion."

He didn't want to be excited, or intrigued, or anything besides nonplussed about the thought of seeing the playful siren again, but he couldn't swallow his growing arousal. Every inch of him hummed, his pulse racing in a way he knew wasn't related to his abbreviated jog.

"Almost forgot." Tate plucked Jared's phone from the top of his gym bag. "Check your mail."

Jared glanced between him and the device. "Just tell me what I'm looking for. You know I have about fifty unread messages." His own verbal reminder set his mental compulsion on edge. He always forced himself not to check before his morning workout. Otherwise he'd be stuck in email hell before he had a chance to wake up. But he'd have to catch up on those before the morning breakout sessions.

"That's it? How late were you up last night?" Tate shook his head. "Anyway. Peacock announced his retirement."

That was almost enough to pull Jared back to the now. Larry Peacock was chief operations officer for Skriddie, and rumors of his retirement had been circulating for a while.

Jared wanted the job, and he knew he was one of the people being considered. The kinds of changes he could make in a position like that... Excitement tingled in his limbs, and he drummed his fingers against his leg. One of the reasons he loved his work was because there was always something new to learn—another way to make things perfect. And a step up the ladder would give him even more access to exactly that. “Any other news?”

Tate tossed the phone back on the bag. “Nah. But I’m sure you’ll hear before either of us anyway.”

Jared slipped into the conference room with a just a few minutes to spare. Vivian already stood near the back, despite the empty chairs lining the last couple of rows. She gave him a tight-lipped smile and nodded him over.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.” Her voice was low amid the chatter of the trickling in crowd.

“I had to sate my curiosity.” He kept his tone as cool as possible and tried to convince his rampant imagination to chill as well.

“If everyone wants to have a seat, we’ll get started in a minute or two.” A familiar voice sliced into Jared’s thoughts, and his head snapped toward the stage.

Before his brain finished processing what the sound meant, his body reacted. Want tugged his cock to life and tempted him with memories of the night before. Even in her company’s basic trade show uniform, she still made his blood run hot. Not good. He needed to bring that under control.

Vivian looked between him and the podium, eyebrows rising. “Tell me you didn’t share more than a mic with her.”

Fuck. Why did she have to know him so well? When she’d been brought into the company a few years back and dropped into a high-ranking position, he’d resented her. This person didn’t know their business, especially not something as critical as day-to-day operations.

Since then, he and she had become solid friends. She understood things no one else did. And she had an odd—sometimes refreshing, occasionally irritating—way of looking into his head and helping him sort out his malfunctions when he wasn't thinking straight.

He couldn't pull his eyes away from Mikki as he talked to Viv. Maybe he could redirect the conversation. "Speaking of, did it occur to you to tell me who she was?"

"When would I have done that?" She dropped into a nearby seat. "While you were singing round after round of cheesy love songs? Besides, I figured she'd tell you."

He took the spot next to her, attention still fixed up front. "It didn't come up." Would the knowledge would have stopped him? Of course it would have. He needed to stop that line of thinking now. If he abandoned the logic and reason he used to keep his life in line, he'd surrender the grip that order had on his sanity.

"Weird. But it was just a couple of duets. Given this entire week is about networking, the two of you were going to meet anyway, and it's not like you screwed, right?"

"Hmm?" He'd heard the question clearly, but the sick clenching in his gut didn't know how to respond.

"You're pulling my leg. You did not do something that random. She's an incredible talent, and I have nothing but respect for her. But she's a decade younger than you."

"You make me sound ancient. We're both consenting adults."

Vivian brushed a nonexistent strand of hair from her forehead. "Not that it matters, as long as she knows it was only one night."

"Of course she does."

"Did I ever tell you she gushed about you in her interview? Some kind of minor hero worship."

Vivian had never told him that. And he wasn't pleased to hear it. Or maybe I am just a little. "Doesn't sound familiar, or relevant."

"Right." She crossed her legs at the knee. "Since you're

here, tell me if you think she's got the skills everyone says she does. I still want her."

That made two of them. Fuck, he needed to stop that. Of course Vivian was still trying to recruit this talent. She'd never been a good loser, especially when it came to Hayden. "Sure. I need you to give me something in return, though."

"What's up?"

Mikki's eyes met his, holding him captive. The corners of her mouth twitched, and then she looked away. The teasing half smile of her not-quite acknowledgement made his pulse quicken and refreshed the page file of his mind with pleasant memories.

"I need to talk to her, strictly business, and I need someone to run interference."

"Absolutely."

Chapter Six

Mikki paced next to the image projected on the wall behind her. It took every ounce of her concentration not to yawn at her own presentation. Fortunately the talking itself took minimal thought. Every time she touched on what the company could do technologically, she had to swallow back the details, and that made the entire thing duller and more bullshit-filled than an end user license agreement.

Even if she were allowed to talk outside the company about the specifics of her job, these people didn't want to hear what really made the technology work. They wanted glitter and bows and reassurances their information was safe from big, bad hackers. They didn't care if it happened because of a tear in the space-time continuum, as long as it happened.

She'd seen Jared and Vivian hovering in the back of the room, but resisted the urge to stare, turning her attention away from them instead. That was a distraction she didn't need. Or at least, she was telling herself she wasn't distracted. Her heart hammered in her throat, she'd stumbled over more memorized lines than she'd nailed, and she'd emptied more glasses of ice water than she cared to admit to dissuade herself from the rampant fantasies taunting her.

She needed to keep cool; they were. They would only be there to see what they could glean from the competition. And possibly see if she was using what she knew against them. Not that she ever would. Besides, they'd have corrected any security holes the moment Hayden told them there was an issue with their network security. And where had the sudden train of worry come from?

She rolled the question around in her head. It was because she cared what they thought. That was new. Or rather, an old feeling she thought she'd rid herself of. Before she'd set out to prove Payton wrong, it had been an intricate part of who she was to not make waves. After all, the nerdy girl two years younger than most of her class was safer going unnoticed.

But after his cruel words back then... She needed to

remember why others' opinions didn't matter, or risk being that kind of vulnerable again. Yet she couldn't help hoping Jared and Vivian would be impressed with what she had to say.

As she wound up her presentation, relief trickled through her, and her zombieified state ebbed. Next time, she was staying at home and Hayden was showing the slides. Traveling on the company dime wasn't worth it if this was what she had to put up with.

She almost laughed at the thought. Who am I kidding? It totally is. First time in Vegas, she already had memories to show for it, and she only had to surrender a few hours to boredom in exchange. She still had nearly three days left in town, the last day as authority-free as the first, and she was going to take advantage of her time here.

The room didn't empty immediately, as she'd thought it would. Some people lingered in corners, heads bowed together. Others waited to talk to her. She wouldn't have minded setting everything else aside and spending hours just chatting with people and answering their questions, but it didn't seem like anyone wanted real answers, just more pretty special effects. She used the excuse of needing to pack up her laptop and projector to give vague replies to vague questions. The room had come with its own computer technology, but since she was there representing a tech company, she'd brought their higher resolution equipment.

She'd expected to have to argue to get the budget for it, but Hayden had agreed appearances were important. Despite her reluctance to chat, she wasn't in a rush to get back, so making sure everything was securely packed away was a good excuse to drag her feet.

She shook hands with a couple of people in suits, accepted the compliments, and exchanged business cards. The entire time she was intently aware of Jared and Vivian hovering in the back of the room. Would it be worse or better if it was just him? What could they get up to if everyone else left? An unpleasant voice reminded her of Hayden's warning from that morning. Stupid propriety.

And then almost everyone else was gone. Vivian stood near the back door, but her attention was directed outside the room. Mikki's heart hammered a beat on her ribs when Jared approached.

"Let me guess." His familiar voice called to the pleasant half of her warring thoughts. "You're not the one who writes all the pretty words that take forever to say nothing."

She cursed her racing pulse. It was because he'd startled her was all. It has nothing to do with the chills his voice sends down my spine. "I wrote it myself, if that's what you're implying. I'm not just a pretty face."

"I wouldn't dare assume anything of the sort." He stood less than a foot away. Slacks and a suit coat had replaced the jeans and T-shirt from last night, and he looked incredible. He leaned against the podium, shoulders tilted toward her. He wore the same flat, difficult-to-read expression he'd had on when they'd first met last night. His gaze flickered over her before he met her eyes, and a hint of a smile threatened his face. "You know, when they talk about the NSS prodigy, they leave out the bit about you being really good at sounding like you're saying everything when you're not really saying anything."

She blinked and shook her head at the double talk. Insult or compliment? "Only when it's required of me."

"I mean it in the best way possible. I was impressed. And sympathetic, if it helps."

Warmth flooded her face, and she couldn't ignore the pleased note springing through her.

He opened his mouth and then snapped it shut again, brow furrowing for a moment. He took a deep breath. "I don't have any idea how to do this other than being direct, so please don't take it the wrong way."

"I'll do my best not to?" Wow, this was awkward. Maybe she should have considered the morning after before now. Still, she was tired of a morning of vagaries. Actually hearing someone speak his mind would be a nice change.

"Last night was incredible." A current of confidence and

heat ran through his words. "But I didn't know who you were."

Okay, she could do this. They'd set things right and life would move on. "I told you."

"You told me your first name."

Right. Embarrassment flooded her. So he really hadn't recognized her name. She couldn't believe she'd assumed something like that. Just because she knew who he was didn't mean she'd ever registered on his radar professionally. The realization kicked stones in her gut. At least that meant he didn't hold her hack against her, right? "I'm sorry."

He studied her for a moment, brows furrowed. "I should have poked for more information."

She couldn't help herself and let the teasing slip out. "I think you did an incredible job poking."

The corner of his mouth tugged up, but the smile vanished before it could form completely.

Don't be pleased he smiled. You're not trying to impress him. Nah, I totally am. She nodded toward the door, and Vivian. "Does she know...?"

This time his smile bled in and stayed. "She knows how to keep quiet, if you're worried."

He glanced around him before locking his gaze on her again, and stepped closer. She should put more space between them, except his heady scent, and the response her body had to the crisp smell, made reason evaporate. He wasn't touching her, but he was close enough she felt his heat.

He tilted his head toward hers, and the growing tingle in her belly stretched through her, hardening her nipples. Damn her body for betraying her need to put this behind her. His breath was hot on her ear when he spoke. "I still had an amazing time last night, don't doubt that. Even if it was just one time, and even though we can't do it again, I'm glad you gave me the souvenir."

Every inch of her screamed to lean in. To grab one last kiss, or something more. To add to the taunting fantasy dancing in her thoughts. She shoved it all aside and replaced the distance between them. The cool air rushing around her didn't

soothe her roaring blood. She kept her smile casual. Apparently, picking his brain wouldn't be an option right now.

She needed to bring her body under control and regain her rational ability to speak, before they could have a decent conversation. She would fan girl after he was gone and she was alone, and then tell her brain to start doing more than just swooning when he was around. Maybe next time they ran into each other, she could actually talk to him.

She shouldered her laptop and took another step back. "Me too."

They exchanged generic goodbyes, and she reined in the impulse to make the conversation any more than it already was. After he was gone, she packed up the rest of her stuff.

"Mikki." A pleasant female voice cut through her rambling thoughts as she left the room.

She whirled to face Vivian. Given the time they'd spent together when she'd interviewed with Skriddie Bust—they'd hung out after hours, seen the town, all as part of the recruitment speech—this conversation should be casual and normal. But Vivian knew. Maybe everything, since she'd seen them singing together last night, and it looked like she'd been running interference while Jared talked to Mikki. Does she think less of me? Is that even possible? Based on what Hayden had told her, Vivian's opinion of her was no longer measurable anyway. She hoped her tone sounded even and calm. "Good to see you again."

Vivian's smile grew, never appearing anything but genuine. Every hair was perfectly in place, and her suit looked like it cost more than everything Mikki had packed. "You never told me you're so impressive on stage."

Is she talking about last night, or today? "It's not really the kind of thing that comes up in casual conversation."

"I guess not. I'll let you get back to work soon. I just wanted to let you know it was a great presentation. I'm just sorry you weren't giving it for us."

A trickle of surprise nudged Mikki's senses, surging around every time Hayden had warned her that Skriddie was

disappointed in her actions. On several occasions, he'd told her Vivian made no secret of the fact she was glad she hadn't hired Mikki after all. What were the words he'd used? That Vivian couldn't have someone working for her who didn't know the difference between ethics and a challenge. "I'm sor—"

"Don't." Vivian waved her off. "You did what was right for you. But you should know, I still want you on our team, so if you ever change your mind..."

Mikki shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She's kidding, right? She started to say she was happy where she was, but the words died before they reached her lips. Odd. "I didn't think the job was still available."

Vivian furrowed her brows. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"You know... What I did."

"It's in the past now, right? We're all adults. We can handle it." Vivian adjusted her purse and glanced at her phone. "I'm sorry, I have an appointment. You still have my card?"

At least no one there was still mad about her hack. A guilt Mikki didn't know she was carrying slipped away. They exchanged handshakes and said their goodbyes. As soon as the other woman was gone, Mikki sank into a nearby chair. Her head was whirling even more than before. The two contrasting conversations had her thoughts in a jumble. She wasn't cut out for this casual sex thing, so why was she willing to do it again if it meant another night with him?

Bad road to go down. She needed to get back to work. She forced her feet one in front of the other toward the exhibit hall.

The next hour in the NSS booth dragged like dial-up. People came and went, but most of them only stopped for the free stress-relief balls with the company logo on them. She couldn't ignore her tingle of disappointment at the distinct lack of Jared's familiar face in the Skriddie booth.

"Michaela." Hayden stepped into an empty spot next to her, smile wide and warm. "Great job this morning. Everyone's talking about the impression you left, and we've pulled in a couple of significant leads."

"Thanks." The compliment warmed her, and she couldn't

help but grin. It was true, sometimes he fell into the repetitive, micro-manager role, but it was times like this she remembered he really did recognize and appreciate her skills.

“So.” He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled slowly. “Something’s come up this afternoon, and I need you to step in a second time.”

Her mind whirred, trying to process the words. “For...?”

“There’s that panel on shopping cart security. I can’t make it, so you’re up.”

Epic. That meant no script, shoot-from-the-hip answers, on a topic she loved to discuss when she was given free rein. “Awesome. Absolutely. I’m there.” She couldn’t keep the excitement from her voice.

He gave a small laugh and shook his head. “Glad to hear it. Just do me a tiny favor.”

“Of course.”

“There will be five of you on the panel, including a representative from Skriddie. My only request is you steer clear of them outside of the discussion. No reason to bring up bad blood here, right?”

Something ticked in the back of her head. That was the second time today he’d mentioned avoiding them. He seemed more fixated on the issue than anyone at Skriddie, and considering he wasn’t the one whose network had been hacked, that seemed odd.

Maybe he’s just looking out for me. Except, she couldn’t make herself believe it. For a brief moment, she considered telling him Vivian had assured her it was all done and in the past. Instead, she just turned a smile on him. “Of course not. I’ll behave.”

“Go grab some lunch.” He nodded toward the exhibit hall doors. “Panel’s at two-thirty. Take it easy until then.”

“Right, sure.” As she wandered away, she couldn’t help the doubt gnawing at her thoughts. Vivian had been genuine. Sure, there were some things Mikki didn’t know, but she thought she could at least tell when someone was being phony. But apparently either Vivian or Hayden had lied to her. A million

prickles crawled under her skin at the idea Hayden knew more about the situation than he was saying. She just wished she had a focus for her misgivings, rather than just a suspicion.

Chapter Seven

Sale is dead. They went with NSS.

Jared snarled at empty air and jammed his phone back in his slacks pocket. He didn't need any more info from Tate to know what had happened. After the call last night, he'd expected to lose the overseas contract, but the news still infuriated him.

The first time it had happened, almost six months ago, it had been a fluke. Sometimes they lost sales. It wasn't a big deal. He'd personally dug into the rumors. Scoured every inch of the network himself to make sure they were unfounded, and moved on. Reluctantly, but he'd done enough investigation to put his mind at ease.

The second time, two months ago, at least they'd been ready to answer the concerns about their own internal security. But their responses hadn't been enough, and since they weren't accustomed to clients giving such specific reasons for going with another company, he had been suspicious.

He'd dived back into the rumors. Even going so far as to spend an entire week personally checking every password and the security settings for every employee.

Money? Sure, sometimes someone balked at their pricing. But that usually happened early on in the process. Personality clash? Again, it came up. Just not often.

But to be minutes away from signing a contract and be told, "We heard a rumor you don't even have it together internally," and for it to have happened three times now...

It didn't feel right to Jared. Especially since it had never been an issue before.

The flaws weren't in his network, he was certain of that, which meant he needed answers. Since they'd lost to NSS each time, he could only think of one place to look. Even if he couldn't leverage a new contract to make him look better for promotion, if he could tie a tourniquet around the issue before it got worse, that would still work in his favor. He made his way through the convention center crowds, cutting a straight line

for the exhibit hall.

His determined footsteps slowed as he neared his destination. Mikki was at the edge of the NSS booth, back to him, tugging her messenger bag over her head. Each movement elongated her curves, and his chest tightened. He drew in a shallow breath, unable to drag his gaze away. She'd be the perfect way to get rid of some of this tension.

Too bad it wasn't an option. He'd been right to put an end to things before they started. She whirled toward him, and as her gaze met hers, joy dancing in her dark eyes, he realized he was still staring.

He let his smile grow and failed to completely suppress images of pinning her to the wall and trailing his lips along her collarbone. You have work to do, remember? "Is Hayden around?"

The corner of her mouth drooped, a half-frown flitting in. She nodded behind her. "Right there, can't miss him."

Jared might argue he could miss a lot when he was enthralled with someone else. Except missing details was counter-intuitive to everything he believed. His mind balked at the fact he'd missed one as obvious as the full-grown man just a few feet away. He still couldn't tear his gaze from Mikki. Professionalism warred with lust. Right. Promotion and reputation on the line. "Thanks. See you around?"

The only word he could think of for her expression was impish. "I'm hoping."

It took the last of his restraint to end the conversation there, but he still couldn't help watching her walk away.

After she was absorbed by the crowds, he forced his attention back to the task at hand. He caught Hayden's eye long enough to let the other man know he was waiting, and then meandered around the booth. NSS had a more diverse product line than Skriddie. They also built websites and point of sale software, so they had a bit more to show off.

"Stealing company secrets?" Hayden asked with a laugh.

Jared tried to make his chuckle sound genuine, but was pretty sure he failed when the stilted laugh choked from his

throat. He hated this game. If tossing passive aggressive insults were his thing, he'd considering firing back a, "Learning from the best." He'd rather not dive into that kind of pettiness. He didn't have to rein in his thoughts, either. This wasn't a prospective client. "We both know you don't keep the important stuff on display."

"So true. Speaking of, I don't suppose you're working with anyone new."

Jared gritted his teeth. He should have expected the question—Hayden was eternally looking for one of them to drop names about prospects—but today it carried a new cloud of irritation. "You know I won't tell you that."

"Had to try." Hayden winked. "What can I do for you?"

"Congratulations on your newest security client." Jared kept his posture casual and his attention on Hayden's face. He was surprised when the other man looked away and rested his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks." Hayden finally met his gaze again. "I need to get going."

Jared had expected...well, he wasn't sure what. Gloating, at least. Not whatever this was. Especially since he hadn't asked the hard question yet. "Sure. I was hoping you could tell me one thing first."

"As long as it's quick." Hayden took a step back.

So odd. If Tate were here, the conversation would probably go much differently. There would be deflection, and niceties, and a slow, subtle lead-in to the actual topic. Still, Jared had expected at least a little smugness about the lost client before he launched into the direct question. "They asked some things that seemed to come straight out of left field. Do you know anything about that?"

Hayden waved a hand. "Don't know how I could. But I'll tell you this, if the infamous Jared Tippins can't fix all his internal security leaks, I don't know how we could hope to if we had a problem."

Jared couldn't keep his shock from his face. He hadn't even mentioned what cost them the deal.

“I really need to jet.” Hayden was already turning away. “We’ll catch up soon.”

Jared didn’t need to stop him. The conversation had been enlightening enough as it was. Hayden’s behavior was too off-the-charts guilty, especially for a man who smooth talked his way through almost everything.

Something was going on, and Hayden wasn’t going to say anymore. Without solid answers, Jared would just have to cover as many bases as he could. He needed to get his own internal team on things, reaffirm internal operations were solid, and then put a plan in place to tie off the flow of bad press before it got worse.

He already had his phone out as he headed in the direction of the hotel, sending texts to Tate and Vivian to join him as soon as possible, and another back to the office to get the internal investigation started.

Five minute later, he’d secured a large booth in the back corner of a restaurant built to look like an old English pub. The setting hadn’t been as important to him as the fact that it was mostly empty.

He flipped his tablet open and started making lists. Writing notes. Getting every thought written down, regardless of how small it seemed.

By the time Tate and Vivian joined him, a plate of cheese fries sat untouched in the middle of the table, and he had a rough plan mocked up. He’d sifted through everything they’d already heard from lost clients—including the details of last night’s call—and had his top person investigating back at the home office.

“What’s up?” Vivian grabbed a fry, nibbled, and then grimaced and set it aside. “Cold.”

“Order more.” Jared wasn’t eating. He spun his tablet toward his colleagues, pointing to different sections of his notes as he talked. “We need to stop this before it gets worse. Distribute talking points to anyone who’s client facing, remind people about internal procedures. I’ll email you both. We need to start this sooner rather than later.”

Tate pulled his attention from the waitress after sending her away with a smile. "Is this overkill?"

Jared frowned. "You tell me. Do you want another sale like last night's?"

Tate exhaled loudly. "Then is this enough?"

That was the problem. The one question Jared couldn't stop asking, regardless of steps on a page. It should be plenty. And Tate was right. Under normal circumstances, it would be overkill. But obviously they were missing something, and they needed to make sure the situation didn't get worse.

Mikki crossed her legs at the ankles and kicked them beneath her chair. Fortunately, the drape covering the front of the table she sat at should hide the movement from the room full of people. She sat on a raised stage, along with five other people—one a moderator standing at the podium separating the two tables.

Jared was on the other side, and she was doing her best to pretend he was just another person. Her racing pulse and vivid imagination disagreed, but she beat them back with moderate success. She needed full control of her sensibilities for this conversation.

Someone in the crowd asked an opened-ended question, directed at anyone. Mikki's answer rose to tip of her tongue but stuck there. She wasn't sure she liked this new internal filter that cared what people thought, even if that person was Jared Tippins. Everyone else was exchanging looks, but no one seemed to want to delve into a response.

Before she could force out her thoughts, Jared leaned forward, and in some of the most measured words she'd ever heard, handed out a nicely wrapped answer about internet security and industry standardization.

He was sexy, but not very outside the box as far as she could tell. Was this the man she'd been taught had revolutionized network security? A tiny snort slipped from her

throat before she could stop it. Heat flooded her cheeks when several pairs of eyes swiveled in her direction.

Like most the people in the room, Jared locked his gaze on hers. His voice was smooth and confident. "I think Ms. Elford has a different opinion."

She shook her head. "I'm fine." It didn't matter if she disagreed with him or not. It wasn't even because she hadn't stopped thinking about him for more than a couple of minutes at a time all day. If she pretended hard enough, it didn't even have to do with what he thought about her. This all centered around how much respect she had for the legend. If he said something was the case, he either knew more than she did about the subject, or would figure it out on his own later.

"Please." There was no condescension in his tone. Only confidence and curiosity. "If you've got a different opinion, I'd like to hear it."

Great. Now he'd backed her into a corner. Either way, she'd lose. She forced herself to look him in the eye, took a deep breath, and let the words flow. "That's the problem with industry standards. They only matter to the people who are using them, and just because you've standardized something doesn't mean everyone is complying."

He shifted in his chair, turning more toward her, and rested his arms on the table. "It's true, but offering standardization up front gives people a certain level of expectation. They know they're getting specific services and that they can take that technology elsewhere if they need to expand or add on new components."

He didn't see it. The surprised realization sparked a new kind of confidence. She recognized the feeling inside—it was the same one she'd had six months ago when she'd breached the security on his network. The knowledge that for as much as this individual knew, he wasn't perfect. She felt surer of her response this time. "Which is great, I agree. Standardization makes business run smoother."

He smiled, nodded, and turned away.

"Except." She spit out the single word and once again felt

every head swivel in her direction. Having their attention is a good thing. Remember that. You don't care if they don't like what you have to say, as long as you state your point clearly. She had this right. "When it comes to security."

Jared raised an eyebrow.

She leaned one arm on the table, directing her statements at him. "Some bored chaos hacker stumbles on your website and decides they want to leave a little 'I was here' note. Or even worse, they want access to your customer database. They're not thinking, 'Oh, I need to use industry standards to break in.'"

"But why are they doing it in the first place?" Jared countered. "Why are they even there? That scenario doesn't make any sense."

"Chaos hacker. The explanation is in the name. They don't need a reason besides boredom. But if you'd prefer, let's make it more personal." She barely registered the hush in the room. Something in the back of her mind told her it was significant, but she was too focused on the debate. On making her point.

"Are we talking vengeful ex kind of personal?" Jared's attention was all on her now, never wavering. "Because it's true, that happens, but things like a girlfriend stealing your administrative password are a little harder to code for." He turned his attention back to the room. "Not that measures can't be put in place. Once again, industry standards dictate things like IP checking for logins. Trusted computer settings. There's an intensive list of things that prevent the up-close and personal violation from becoming an issue."

Vengeful ex. She hadn't even thought about that. Something to add to her ever-growing list of possible loopholes she tucked away for work. "I'm not talking about the trusted friend, loved one, or family member. Though there are things to be concerned about there, too." But that was a different conversation. "Everyone has beliefs, right? Something at their very core that they hold true?" She couldn't help her satisfaction when he shrugged in agreement. "With today's instant access to all things news—whether it's really news or

not—more and more people’s beliefs go on trial on social media every day.

“Suddenly, regardless of what you think or believe, someone decides they disagree with you, and they take it out on your business’s online presence. Graffiti on the website, maybe? Or again, stolen customer information. Names, phone numbers, addresses. Do you think they really stop and ask themselves, ‘does this website follow industry standards?’ and then steer clear if the answer is yes?”

Jared’s mouth drew into a thin line, and he half rose from his chair. “But you’re painting the rare scenario. Standardization and certification statistics show those things impact less than one percent of online businesses. These are companies who are paid to verify things work the way the rules say. Time and again, research has proven the chaos hacker is the boogey man in an executive’s closet. It doesn’t happen to the everyday user. Statistically it doesn’t even register on the radar.”

“But that’s what we sell.” The words slipped out without her considering them. “Peace of mind. You’re not buying security because it happens all the time. You’re buying because you don’t ever want to be the person who said, ‘That’ll never happen to me.’ And then it does.”

The corner of his mouth twitched up. It looked like he wanted to reply when the moderator cut in. “Thank you, Ms. Elford. Very enlightening. But I think we’ve gotten off topic. Next question?”

She turned her attention back to the audience, but not before she saw a hint of a smile whisper across Jared’s face. Had she impressed him? She liked the thought of that.

The rest of the panel passed without incident. After, she lingered, shaking hands and accepting business cards, along with a smattering of, “Great insight. We’ll be in touch.”

Part of her wanted to wait for Jared to extract himself from the small pocket of people around him. For professional reasons, of course. So far he’d had some very specific opinions on what did and didn’t work in this business, and she wanted to

know how a brain like that crossed the line into innovative.

And maybe she was lingering just a little because every time she looked at him, new images flashed through her mind. Of his lips gliding up her throat. Or his hands on her hips. Or his mouth swallowing her cries in a hungry kiss.

Her skin tingled, reacting to the simple caress of her shirt against her body. She pushed the onslaught of fantasy aside. Too bad she had to get back to work. She made her way toward the exit, still toying with fantasies around the familiar voice fading in the background.

“Michaela.” The sharp word cut into her thoughts, and she spun toward Hayden. He stood on the other side of the hallway, face stretched into a grin. “A minute?”

She crossed the short distance, taking a cue from the fact he’d picked an out-of-the-way spot and keeping her voice low. “What’s up?”

“I caught the end of your performance in there. Absolutely brilliant. Want to run the rest of the show?”

“I—” How was she supposed to answer a question like that? It was tempting, but only if it came with the great view again. “I think tech’s more my thing. I didn’t say anything you wouldn’t have.”

His expression shifted, corners of his mouth tugging down. “Except you did the one thing I really need you to not do.”

She replayed the panel in her head, focusing on the bits that weren’t blurred together. Nope, nothing stood out as “bad.” “Which was?”

“Making waves with Skriddie.”

“Oh.” This again? What had he expected? So much for him giving her more excuses to stare at Jared. When she rolled his words around in her thoughts, his request dragged back her nagging question from earlier. Why was he so fixated on this? “You know it was a panel discussion, right?”

He jammed his hands in his pockets. “Just... Please. You’re fantastic at what you do, so I let you do things your way. I only have this one request.”

She bit back a snort at how his idea of doing things her

own way contrasted with the tight leash he kept on everything, but she couldn't suppress her next question. "You're really kind to worry about my wellbeing. Especially since you already have me on staff, and technically I'm just a grunt. Are all bosses this concerned about how the competition views their employees?"

His jaw clenched. "No. Most of them are assholes. I know you're new to jobs like this, but I'll remind you again, making waves in an industry is never a good idea. You're talented. I'd hate to see you throw your future away because your ego is bigger than your sense."

She forced a smile onto her face, despite the welt his words left on her thoughts. "Of course. My mistake." She wasn't sure which bothered her more. The insult, or the thinly veiled threat about the future of her career.

Chapter Eight

Jared scanned the dining room, gaze flitting from face to face. Compared to the impromptu brainstorming session at lunch and the intriguing debate with Mikki, the rest of his day had dragged in a way he wasn't used to.

He didn't have time for a business dinner tonight. He should be going hands-on with the network again. Getting to the bottom of these rumors. Except he didn't have any leads beyond what he'd already checked. Any and all digging had come up clean.

So he was taking this chance to learn what people were talking about. Where the concerns were, and if there were any new rumors that might point him in a specific direction.

If only he could focus on the whispers around him. His attention kept drifting back to one face in particular. The way her black hair framed her face, and how her oversized, button-down shirt hinted at her curves without revealing anything. Then there was the fact he couldn't stop thinking about pushing up her knee-length skirt...

A sharp elbow dug into his ribs, dragging his attention back to his own dinner table. Vivian's voice faded in. "I'm sure it's all up to spec, but our tech brain can give you any details you want."

He smiled at whomever they were talking to—the owner of a small website making polite conversation. The man had indicated when he'd made himself at home at their table an hour ago he had no need of Skriddie's services. He'd spent the rest of the time trying to convince them to sign up for the same multi-level marketing company he sold candles for.

"Sure." Candle guy's smile was thin. "I'm just hearing rumors you've got some holes in your security. I wonder, if a big player like Skriddie can't keep their secrets hush-hush, what chance do I have?"

Something tickled the back of Jared's memory. You're most vulnerable where you'd least expect to look. Mikki's words from the presentation this morning. She didn't know about this,

did she? His nerves protested the idea she might be involved, but he couldn't shake the nagging thought.

He dragged his attention back to the conversation, nodding and smiling as was appropriate, and grateful when it was over.

"What's up with you, space case?" Vivian hissed in his ear as candle guy turned to someone else at the large table.

Besides non-stop thoughts of stripping Mikki out of whatever she was wearing? A fantasy he really needed to stow until they were back home. This was exactly why kept his attention on work, and order, and making sure everything in his universe lined up the way it was supposed to. Which Mikki didn't. She didn't fit into any of his plans or logic. "Do you think NSS really knows something?"

Vivian pushed her salad aside. "I knew you were thinking about her. I just didn't think you were still dwelling on what she said. It was a sales pitch."

"A very convincing one." When Mikki had said in her presentation NSS had something that could trump the competition, he knew she was hyping things up, and probably not of her own accord. At the same time, something in her body language said she believed it, at least to some extent. Mikki slipped out a side door, and he pushed back from the table before he realized what he was doing. "I'm done for the night. I'm going to get some work done."

Viv and Tate wouldn't argue. They'd both expected him to step out early anyway. He moved into the hallway and surveyed his surroundings. Now where had she gone?

Something caught his attention, a flash of electric blue like the shoes and shirt she was wearing, and he chased after her.

"Mikki," he called as he rounded the corner.

She paused, and the smattering of people still in the convention center milled around her. Her back stiffened, and she turned to face him. "Hey."

Don't stare. He forced himself to make eye contact. "Do you have a minute?"

She glanced around her, over his shoulder, pretty much

everywhere. "Sure."

She almost looked like she expected someone to jump out of the shadows at any minute. He stepped closer. His questions were strictly business, but he still didn't need anyone else eavesdropping. What was was off about her posture? "Are you all right?"

She didn't keep her attention on him for long. Every few seconds her gaze darted around again. "I'm fine. What's up?"

He caught sight of a small alcove behind her. He'd noticed spaces like it around the convention center. The spots were set aside to help people keep their phone calls or other conversations more private. As long as it was empty, they wouldn't have an audience. He nodded toward the hidden spot. "Away from prying eyes?"

She let out a tiny breath, and her expression relaxed. "Good idea."

Was she terrified of being seen with him? That didn't fit. Nothing in the last twenty-four hours aligned with that. But the moment they were out of sight, her posture eased further.

"What's up?" she asked again.

He leaned against a nearby wall. It was tempting to stand closer, just enough to dive into the heady scent of energy and citrus she radiated, but he hadn't tracked her down to get up close and personal. "Can I ask you something?"

She tilted her head to the side and leaned closer. Her voice dropped until he felt as much as heard the words brushing his cheek. "They don't match tonight."

Match...? She means her bra and panties. His eyes grew wide and he straightened, surprised when she met his gaze. "I wasn't..."

She blinked back, a tiny smile slipping out.

There was the woman he'd sung with. He resisted the urge to trace a finger along her bottom lip. "You should do more of that. You're beautiful when you smile." Not where I want this conversation to go. Focus on the facts. What does she know? How much can you get from her about her presentation? The verifiable info.

Pink flooded her cheeks and she ducked her head. “You didn’t pull me aside to flirt, I’m sorry.”

He did need to keep things on track, or risk the conversation sliding into territory he couldn’t have it in—like what color was her underwear if it didn’t match?

He was better off just asking his question. “Do you really know what we’re up to? And do you really have something better?”

She crossed her legs at the ankles and used the wall to support her, putting a few more inches between them. “It’s a demo. It was made to sell products.” Which was what he’d expected. There was no reason to put her on stage just to taunt Skriddie. Still, he wasn’t surprised when she continued. “But.”

Lust and fantasies of stripping her down aside, he wanted to know what came next. “I knew it.”

She laughed, and the carefree note tickled his senses. Damn it, he wished he could ignore his response to her. “It’s all the same old stuff. Things you already know,” she said.

Something about the casual assurance, as if this were shared knowledge between them, triggered another wave of warning bells in his head, but he couldn’t place the source. “Placate me.”

She shrugged and fiddled with the edge of her shirt. “It’s all about the remote machines, right? The ones no one realizes are connected directly to the servers. The machines they wouldn’t expect to have access to their deepest, most important information. They’re a risk for anyone, because no one thinks to check them thoroughly. All it takes is one person giving someone a password who doesn’t deserve it ‘just this once’ and you’re compromised. It happens three times, and if you don’t catch it, you’re screwed.”

Three times was an awfully specific number. What’s hiding under her explanation? He scooted closer, irrationally pleased when his hand brushed hers and she didn’t pull away. “They got lucky hiring you, didn’t they? There’s no one there who recognizes how much you know. Or have they just hidden their appreciation of your skill that well?”

"I'm not the best they have, and they gave me a chance."

She wouldn't look at him. Every few seconds, she wove the hem of her shirt through her fingers and then released it again. She glanced behind her, and then gave him most of her attention again.

"Am I holding you up?" he asked.

She finally met his gaze again. "Do you work all the time? Like, twenty-four seven all business and professional and company first?"

If he'd guessed a hundred times what she might ask next, that wouldn't have been anywhere on the list. "I do what's required of me."

Her lips twisted, and she ran her tongue along her teeth, metal ball clacking. "What was different about last night?"

Everything. The question loosed a floodgate of memories, rushing across his skin. He couldn't hold them back. Not good. "Last night was out of character for me. A one-time thing and such."

Her brow furrowed. "So you wouldn't do it again? It's not professional."

He was missing something; he had to be. When he set the rapid-fire questions aside and studied her face, he didn't see any irritation or malice there. In fact, the same challenge as the night before stared back. He didn't know what she was looking for, and trying to make sense of it simultaneously excited and infuriated his brain. "I wouldn't rule out the possibility, but I don't spend a lot of time doing things like that."

"Things like what?" She clucked her tongue along the roof of her mouth. "Having fun, or being impulsive?"

Great, now she was twisting his words. "I can be impulsive. When I've got time."

She rolled her eyes. "Checking your calendar isn't being impulsive. You need to look up the definition of the word. Before last night, when was the last time you did something out of the blue, without second-guessing yourself? Without planning, without having a step-by-step list of possible

outcomes, consequences, and stumbling blocks?”

The question flipped a switch in his head, taunting him. How did she make perfectly reasonable behavior sound so unreasonable? He searched her face, not sure what he was looking for. Then he let instinct take the wheel. He rested his hand at the back of her neck and kissed her.

She leaned in to the gesture, full lips crushing into his, almost imperceptible gasps drifting from her throat. Every sound goaded his pulse, and his lower extremities stirred in response. Jesus, she tasted good.

He let her go but didn't pull back. "Just now."

Her cheeks turned pink, and she smirked. "And was it as horrible as you thought it would be?"

Did she have any idea she was fucking with his head, or was she just talking as things occurred to her? "No. It was pretty incredible." Another flash of inspiration struck, sending electricity through his veins. The idea heightened the heat of her standing so close and brought every nerve ending to life. His gut tightened with the swelling potential. If he was going to do this, it would be under his terms. "Help me be impulsive again tonight."

Her breathing quickened, and her pupils dilated. "What did you have in mind?"

He pulled the spare room key from his wallet, slipped it into her hand, and gave her his room number. "Meet me upstairs. We can play things by ear from there."

"You're on."

He shouldn't be doing this. Going a second time with anyone he wasn't dating, but especially her, was a bad, horrible, terrible idea. Too bad his aching cock disagreed.

Please don't let him run into anyone between here and the elevator. Not just because he desperately wanted another round with this gorgeous, brilliant woman, but because he was so hard it hurt, and he didn't know if he could hide his erection if he had to stop and make small talk.

Chapter Nine

Mikki's heart threatened to tear from her ribcage. She hadn't started the night out meaning to goad Jared, but opportunity had struck, and the inspiration was too tempting to ignore. And if he was offering another chance, there was no way she was turning him down. A hint of hesitation—if this became a habit it would be harder to walk away from—mingled with her excitement, both spreading under her skin and making her squirm in anticipation.

She counted off the room numbers to keep from sprinting down the hallway. No reason to make herself breathless before things even started. And then she was there, in front of Jared's room. The door swung open before she could slide the key into the slot, and his confident grin sent another layer of tingles through her.

He grasped her fingers between his and tugged her inside. His arms wrapped around her waist from behind, and he pulled her back into him as the door clicked shut. Comfort and desire flooded her frame when his solid chest pressed into her spine.

Everywhere he touched, the textures of her clothing caressed her skin. The anticipation had made her hypersensitive. The shift of fabric against her arms, her back, and her stomach sent shudders of want through her. I can't believe I'm doing this. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, even. She needed to feel his skin on hers, not muted by too many layers of decency. She tilted her head back to rest on his shoulder, exposing her neck.

He took the hint, kisses so light along her skin she wondered if she actually felt them. The hard length digging into her tailbone, though, she definitely felt that. His hands glided forward and under the hem of her shirt, palms resting on her bare stomach. How could such a simple gesture short-circuit so many of her thoughts?

"There's something alluring—" his voice vibrated through her skin, "—about every curve and slope of your figure, and the thought of revealing it all inch by inch."

His touch called to the compliment wrapped inside his words. She closed her eyes so she could focus on each sensation.

He made quick work of the buttons on her shirt, breaking contact with her long enough to rake it down her arms and toss it aside. It landed near the bed, but he stayed behind her, hands returning to dance along her ribs.

Cool air brushed her mostly bare chest, and a new thrill rushed through her. Sex with Payton had been getting naked in the dark, crawling under the covers, and a couple of minutes of grinding before he rolled over and fell asleep. She'd been interested in more, but his passive belittling had kept her from asking. Even worse had been finding out after the fact that he blamed the boredom on her lack of impulse.

Last night had been a rush—sex in a public place. But something about now sent a new kind of euphoria racing through her veins. She was standing topless in an almost-stranger's room, about to let him do whatever he wanted to her. She forced herself to swallow.

His thumbs trailed up her sides, voice low, a commanding current running through it. He brushed the bottom of her breasts, and she gasped in surprise. "Watching you all day, and only having a hint from last night of what's hidden under your clothes, has been driving me insane." His hands continued up, fingers brushing her throat before gliding down her spine. "You know what my one consolation is?"

Each time he leaned in, she caught a hint of the rain-and-aftershave scent whispering from him. She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. The only thing she knew was how wet she was from his attentions. Memories of his fingers bringing her to orgasm teased her, mingling with the thoughts of what it felt like to be spread open when he'd pushed inside her. She had only been in his room a few moments, and already the way he was drawing out the moment was a more delicious torture than she'd ever imagined.

He unsnapped her bra, and the fabric fell away. He drew the straps down her arms, letting the cups drag across her

already rock-hard nipples before he tossed the lingerie on top of her other clothing. Everywhere his hands moved, his long, talented fingers danced along her skin. "My only consolation is finally getting to see."

Oxygen stole from her head when he grazed her shoulder with his teeth, leaving her light-headed and wanting more. "You can see it all if you want."

"Oh, I want." The seductive baritone of his voice hummed through every inch of her, adding flames to her desire. He unbuttoned her skirt and slid the zipper down, a tooth at a time.

She pressed back into him, grinding into the erection tempting her. The buttons of his shirt were cool against her bare back, and the cotton teased the hyper-sensitive skin. He inhaled sharply. His fingers dug into her hips. Her belly clenched in response as desire pulsed through her legs.

He pushed on her skirt. It dropped to the floor, pooling around her ankles. He traced a line along the elastic of her string bikini panties. "Black bra and red lacy bottoms? So not only do you not match, but you're trying to obliterate my thoughts before I even get you naked? Fucking sexy."

"You've figured out my master plan." she teased.

"I doubt such a thing exists, but I have more important things to focus on." He moved his hands back up her chest, cupped her breasts, and sucked on the soft flesh between her neck and shoulder.

She gasped, and her knees wobbled at the combination of light pain and exquisite pleasure. He pulled her closer, fingers rolling her nipples, gently at first before he pinched both.

The need between her legs screamed for attention. She ground her butt against him as he massaged and sucked relentlessly. She was vaguely aware of the soft cries tearing from her throat and mingling with his hungry groans.

One of his hands moved away from the pink nub it had been lavishing, but before she could wonder why or feel disappointed, he brushed the crotch of her panties.

"Jesus, you're soaked." He rubbed through the lace,

pushing the fabric against her slit.

She was too lost in the multiple sensations to reply. She covered his hands with hers, partly to help her stay upright and partly to make sure he kept going. The only thing she could manage was, "Harder."

He obliged, going straight for her clit, pressing back when she ground into his hand. Was she crying out? She didn't know, and she didn't care. Every single touch was pushing her closer to the edge. She tossed her head back further as she came, waves of ecstasy pouring through her. He eased off as she struggled to catch her breath, but he didn't stop kissing along the back of her neck.

"Better than just okay?" His warm breath teased her skin.

"Better than chocolate." She managed to find her footing enough to spin and face him. She made a point of studying him. "But I don't want to make a habit of this."

His brows rose in response.

He thinks I mean the sex. Which she should, but she didn't. She worked her fingers into the knot of his tie, loosening it. "I don't mind being naked in front of you." Understatement of the decade. That thought alone was enough to make her even wetter. "But you can't stay mostly dressed all the time."

She kicked her shoes and skirt into the rapidly growing pile and tossed his tie on top of it all. He hissed when her nails trailed down his chest, undoing each button in her way.

She dropped her hands to his waist, only fumbling with the belt for a moment before undoing the buckle, then sliding his zipper down. She grasped his shaft, and his growl filled her head. His hot skin seared her cool palm. She worked him free as she dropped to her knees in front of him.

Her tongue flicked over the bulbous head in front of her, licking a drop from the tip. The salty taste flooded her tongue. His fingers tangled in her hair. She took the hint and wrapped her lips around him, taking his length into her mouth and sliding down.

He rocked against her face, grip tightening as his

breathing grew shallow. "Jesus." His voice was strained. "That metal ball on my cock. You're killing me."

He caught her wrists, grip tight, and pulled her to her feet. His gaze locked on hers, eyes dark and holding her captive. He pulled her nearer, lips hovering close enough to her ear for his breath to tantalize her skin. "I'd draw this moment out all night if I could." A hard edge lined his voice. "But I can't stop thinking about how good it feels to be inside you, and I know how wet you are, and I don't want anything else right now."

Each new word sent another pang of want through her. He pushed her backward until her calves collided with the bed. One more nudge, and she was sitting on the mattress looking up at him.

He rested a hand on the back of her neck and his thumb brushed her windpipe. "Don't move."

Her anticipation spiked again when he stood and stepped back. He stood just out of reach as he tossed his shirt and undershirt aside. When he paused, she stopped breathing for a moment. What's he up to?

He bent to fumble with one of his bags and a moment later produced a condom.

Prepared. Again. Did that mean the evening with her was just another plan, and she'd only been the right person at the right time? She pushed the doubt aside and dove into the direct question instead. "So, Mister Impulse-is-horrible-and-scary. Do you have that because you were planning on getting lucky this trip?"

"I have it because it never hurts to be prepared." Every inch of his body molded to her. "And possibly because hope compelled me to pick up an extra last night."

The idea sent a new flush of heat through her and tapped a seductive rhythm in her veins.

Within seconds, he'd shed the rest of his clothes and wrapped himself in the rubber. She reached for him. He gave her a wicked smile, grabbed her wrists again, and pulled them above her head as he nudged her onto her back. He bent over her and crushed his lips to hers hard enough their teeth

collided. She struggled under his grip, not to break free, but to get closer to his touch.

While his tongue danced with hers, hungry and demanding, his free hand dropped back to her waist. He broke away long enough to tear her panties away and discard them. The friction heightened her want.

He nudged her knee with his. "Scoot back."

"Yes, sir." She gave him a teasing smile and relocated to the center of the bed.

He pushed her thighs apart with his knee and moved between them. Lowering his head, he drew his tongue across her nipple and sucked it into his mouth. She gasped and arched her back when he nibbled the hard flesh. He never let up his attentions on the nub as his cock nudged her opening. He pushed inside her, driving in his thick length all at once. His movements were slow at first, drawing out almost to the tip before plunging inside her again. She wanted more. She wanted things fast and hard like the night before. Her hips bucked against him to speed things up.

He sat straight up, driving deeper into her. "If you keep that up, I won't last."

"Isn't that the point?" Her question melted into another moan as he placed his hands on the back of her knees and pressed them toward her chest. The position put him deeper inside her than she'd ever been penetrated and slammed into a spot that made her groan louder with every thrust.

And then he picked up the pace. As he pounded, she felt climax claw its way through her again, and her hands dug into the blankets, looking for something to grab tight. A scream tore from her throat when she came, and she clenched tight around him, focused on every sensation at the same time.

His breathing grew more punctuated, and his thrusts reached a frantic pace. Never breaking the rhythm, he dropped her legs suddenly, rested his hands on either side of her head, and locked his gaze on hers. "You...feel...incredible," he managed between short breaths. His grunts became staccato and frantic as he peaked. Even after his groans reached their

apex, then faded, he continued to pound inside her. Her head floated back to reality, gaze locked on his, as his pace slowed to a stop.

He hovered a little longer, both of them searching for their breaths. She couldn't look away. Her heart squeezed at the raw lust staring back. What was it about him that had her so captivated? The impulse to curl up in his arms and stay there for hours flooded her, gnawing at a longing she knew wasn't appropriate. It wasn't just the sex. The thought hit her hard, and she couldn't shake it. There was a deeper connection she couldn't place. Damn it. How was any guy ever going to stack up to this once they went their separate ways?

Chapter Ten

Jared rolled onto his back, struggling to catch his breath. Mikki lay close enough the heat of her skin brushed his, teasing his thoughts with possibilities and memories. Condom disposed of, he pushed onto his side, propped himself up on one elbow, and rested his hand on her stomach. "You were right. Just this once, being impulsive was worth it."

A gentle smile played on her lips—he liked that look. It was natural and carefree. If he wasn't careful, he could start to miss it when it wasn't around. She scooted closer until her side pressed against his chest. "Just this once, huh? Last night was a disappointment after all?"

He traced light lines along her skin, memorizing each silken dip and curve. "Okay, maybe it paid off twice." He made sure teasing was evident in his tone.

She tilted her head up long enough to kiss him before dropping back again. "I hope all this nasty impulsiveness didn't take you away from anything important."

Christ, after feeling that steel ball roll along the head of his cock, he wondered what they could get up to that actually fit the word "nasty." Just the thought of it was enough to make his pulse race. "I'd say I got quite a bit more out of the evening than I hoped to. Besides, I'm not the only one who snuck out early."

She studied him for a moment, amusement still dancing on her lips. "But you had a plan, didn't you?"

He was still trying to figure out how she thought, but he was getting a better idea. It seemed to fall along the lines of the more random, the better. "And you didn't?"

She chewed on her bottom lip. "Believe it or not, I had a destination in mind. But I suspect this was better."

"You just suspect?" Pride bristled to the forefront of his thoughts, prodding him to remove any of her doubt. He glided his hand up her stomach and along her ribcage between her breasts. "What can I do to make it certain?"

She laughed and intertwined her fingers with his. "It's not

that. You were incredible. This is incredible. I can't believe..." She jolted upright, taking his hand with her. "Anyway. There's still time. You should go with me."

Uh... "Where?" He couldn't peel his gaze from her as she tugged on her bra, and then pulled her top on. She fastened buttons starting from the bottom. Watching her hide her curves was almost as seductive revealing them. She left the top few buttons open, just enough to tease.

She gave her panties a sad glance before shaking her head and shoving them into a side pocket on her purse. She finished dressing and dropped back onto the edge of the bed. "Outside."

He raised an eyebrow. "I can see how you might not want to get tied down by details."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "I've never seen the strip before. I'm going to see the casinos, be a tourist, everything fun and non-professional that Hayden would lecture me for hours on end if he knew I was doing on his time."

Jared was pretty sure they could check one thing off that list already. "The strip. Like The Thunder from Down Under?"

Her eyes grew wide. "Should I ask why you know that?"

He smiled at the lilt in her voice. "It's nothing scandalous. Viv has been talking about it."

"Mmm." She sank back into him and rested her cheek against his. "So I'm not keeping you from checking out the male strippers yourself?"

The quiet banter was pleasant, lulling him into a comfortable spot he didn't mentally get to rest in very often. "Nah. I don't want those poor men feeling inadequate."

"Too bad. I think you'd look good up there with them."

He nipped her earlobe with his teeth. "I don't need to advertise. I win people over with my personality."

"You're so arrogant." Her entire body went limp, her weight pressing into him. "But I still buy it. That's how you suckered me."

Her familiar scent filled his head as he nuzzled her neck. He couldn't help the serious tone creeping into his voice. "If I thought for a moment you were easily suckered, I wouldn't be

interested.”

“So brains really are sexy?”

He dipped under the bottom of her shirt, palm resting flat on her stomach. “Your brains are sexy, just like the rest of you. I just want to know how to keep seeing more.”

Great, now he was taking a light-hearted conversation and turning it intense in just a few swapped words. He wasn’t even sure what he meant. More after the show? No, that wasn’t possible. More of the fascinating mind behind this sexy creature? That was certainly alluring. And just more of her in general. He scrambled to slide things back to neutral territory. “So you’re really ducking out on me to hit up the card tables?”

“I was really hoping you’d go with me.”

He needed to tell her no. If he was going to have another sleepless night, it should be spent catching up on work, making sure all his ducks were in a row everywhere, not meandering through Las Vegas, gawking at the sights. He had plans to implement and a promotion to secure. Part of him roared in protest even as he forced the words out. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Her back stiffened, and she pulled away. He beat back his disappointment. It wasn’t like he could keep her wrapped up in his arms all night. He needed to get dressed. To move past this infatuation.

The smile she gave him didn’t reach her eyes. “You’re sure? I might get in trouble wandering the streets alone.”

He swallowed hard but couldn’t choke back his regret. He grabbed his own clothes. “I’m sure. Is it a mistake to ask if you have a starting destination in mind?” Why was he still making small talk?

Her brows furrowed, and her mouth twisted in a frown. “A mistake? No.” She stepped back when he reached for her hands. “Presumptuous? Yes. Probably Circus Circus.”

He shoved his hand in his pocket to hide the fingers that wouldn’t stop twitching, and to keep them from tugging her back to him. “Sounds like fun. Enjoy yourself.”

*

Mikki walked straight past the line of cabs. Her insides were twisted in sick knots, and she didn't even know why. Sure, the brush-off had stung a little. But it wasn't like she and Jared could just abandon the rest of the world because they'd had a little fun together. She had her life, he had his, and she needed to let him get back to important things.

A lump swelled in her chest at her own implication that she wasn't important to him. But why would she be? They didn't know anything about each other.

She stepped out of the flow of foot traffic, leaned her back against the concrete of the building, and tried to bring her racing thoughts under control. Maybe playing fast and loose was catching up to her. Was it possible living for the moment had its drawbacks? No, she refused to believe that. She'd learned to step out of her shell, she'd taught herself lust was lust and shouldn't bleed into the rest of life, and she could force herself to remember Jared Tippins was just a fling.

Several minutes and breaths later, she had managed to smooth the wrinkles in her thoughts. It wasn't a big deal. She inhaled a few more breaths of exhaust and heat-laden air and pushed away from the wall. At least she'd gotten out for the night. She could still see the sights.

Going out alone was something she'd learned so long ago; it was a part of her. Growing up around people who didn't share her interests had taught her early on that if she wanted to have fun, she had to be willing to leave everyone else to their own devices.

Circus Circus still sounded like a good starting spot. The thought tugged some positivity back to the surface. Her step lightened as she headed toward the bright lights and garish carousel top. She stepped through a side door indicating it led to the casino and stopped as joy rushed inside her. It wasn't the same as Cesar's. There was something brighter about it. Less... adult.

She smiled and picked her way across the floor. The slot machines were vibrant and eye-catching—cartoon characters,

gems, some digital and some mechanical, spinning in relentless circles. But if she wanted to play video games, she had her phone.

She came to a stop at the edge of the pit of card tables. Her hands twitched at her sides. That could be fun.

“You don’t strike me as a poker person.” Jared’s smooth voice flowed over her skin.

Her heart kicked against her ribs, both from being startled and the sudden sensation of him standing so close. His warmth caressed her back, and the intoxicating scent of his cologne made her light-headed. Her smile grew, and she faced him. “Are you following me?”

“If I say yes, does that make things better or worse?”

Good question. The heat and excitement rushing through her hoped the answer was yes. But since she’d just told herself they needed to tone things back less than ten minutes ago, not to mention the less-than-sweet brush-off in his hotel room, she needed to ignore her rampant hormones. Then again, they were surrounded by people. That would make it difficult to get into too much trouble. Probably. “If you say no, you have to convince me it’s a coincidence you’re here.”

“Not quite a coincidence.” His eyes never left hers, as if he was searching for something. “It turns out I can’t do my work until I have someone on site in the morning, so I thought I’d take a walk. I was hoping you wouldn’t be too hard to find. I’m sorry I blew you off.”

She wanted to push the apology, and the events leading up to it, aside. Act like it was no big deal he’d sought her out. But the rhythm of her pulse tearing through her veins wouldn’t let her ignore how happy she was to see him. “I’m glad you changed your mind.” There, that sounded casual, right? If so, it defied every giddy bubble flitting through her.

He gifted her with one of those rare, genuine smiles she hadn’t seen him use anywhere else. “Me too.”

Silence sank between them, filled with the clatter of bells and chimes in the background. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. If she stayed here, she was going to do things

she shouldn't. Flirt, be impulsive, hope for another sleepless night. She didn't know what bothered her more—that he might think less of her for being so flighty, or that she cared. Maybe she should see the town another night.

He locked his gaze on her, eyes searching hers. "I was wondering something, but I don't know how you'll take it, and I don't want to spoil the mood."

Not what she expected. Was it about the sex? Oh jeez, they weren't going to have an "it didn't mean anything" conversation, were they? The subtle lead-in didn't really seem to be his thing. "I pretty much expect the conversation to go south when you start things off like that."

"No reason to hold back then. Why did you sign with NSS?"

She felt like the air had been sucked from her lungs. Her eyes grew wide and she looked away. Her gaze flitted around the casino before finally landing on him again, but she didn't look him in the eye. She should be over this. However, the reminders from Hayden in the last twenty-four hours had her paranoid. Jared already knew she'd taken the NSS offer because of Vivian's reaction to her hack. Was he just trying to trip her up? "I was under the impression Vivian's offer wasn't on the table anymore."

He frowned, but seconds later the expression melted into neutrality. "Why would you—" He shook his head. "What would we have had to do differently to secure your talent?"

She twisted the edge of her shirt around her fingers. This was too much like the conversation with Vivian. Her racing pulse and thoughts had shifted away from how close he stood.

Hayden had told them what she did—everything she knew—six months ago. Hadn't he? She couldn't fathom why he'd keep something so important from them, competition or not. But Hayden seemed far more fixated on the entire thing than either Jared or Vivian. Maybe they'd gotten past their anger? None of it made any sense. What was she supposed to say? She struggled for an answer that wouldn't turn into a rambling, incoherent ball of thoughts that didn't quite make sense to her.

His brow furrowed. The seconds dragged on between them, his attention never leaving her. Finally he said, "As long as you're happy there."

Of course she was. Wasn't she? For the second time in the last twenty-four hours, she questioned her own certainty. And it honestly had nothing to do with Jared. Though, she was going to be daydreaming for a long time about the different ways he made her moan. "I guess."

He shook his head, the creases around his eyes and on his forehead taking a moment to fade. He nodded at the pit behind her. "Were you going to play?"

This was neutral. This she could do. "I've never played at tables. I've played Texas hold 'em online. I've played at parties."

"So I'll show you." He reached for her, then dropped his hand at the last moment.

Disappointment tickled her senses. She kept her voice low, embarrassed at what she was about to admit. "Not poker."

"You just said you knew how to play."

She stepped closer, watching the floor instead of him, chewing on the inside of her cheek. "But I always lose. I'm really bad at reading people." Like Hayden? She didn't obliterate the thought but tucked it aside to let her secondary processors deal with it. "I always bluff at the wrong time."

"So no cards? You're just observing?"

She still wanted to play. And maybe if Jared was here, he could teach her a couple of things. Besides, if she didn't ask, she'd never do it. "I didn't say that. I was thinking blackjack. But...I don't know what I'm supposed to do at the tables."

"You have to pick one first."

She already knew the one she wanted. The signs said it was a five-dollar table, and the dealer was only using a single deck, which meant she could count cards. She crossed the short distance, relieved when he followed her. She hesitated a few feet back, her voice a whisper. "What now?"

He nudged her forward, breaking contact again quickly after. "You take an empty seat, you buy into the game, and

you'll be dealt in." He nodded at the dealer. "She's a little new."

The woman behind the table gave her a warm smile and explained the basics.

Mikki dropped her hand by her side, a pleasant rush greeting her when she brushed Jared's fingers. It spread through her when he gave her a gentle squeeze before letting go.

She'd picked blackjack, and this table, because she'd be playing against the dealer, not the other players. There was no bluffing; it was all about the odds. And she knew how to read the odds.

Her confidence grew as the clock ticked away, and she won more hands than she lost. It wasn't supposed to be this easy. Warmth flowed through her from the spot along her spine where Jared's arm rested, occasionally making contact.

She pulled in more chips and was about to buy into the next game when his hand rested on the small of her back. "Cash out." His low voice sent tingles running through her, but the abrupt words filled her with a doubt she couldn't place. He almost sounded irritated, or upset. God, now what had she done?

Chapter Eleven

Mikki couldn't help her frown that he wanted her to end the game, but waved off the dealer and gathered her chips. She slipped from the chair. At least Jared's hand never fell away; that was pleasant.

"What was that about?" She wanted to know as they made their way to the cashier.

He nodded back toward the table she'd been playing at. "The two gentlemen as wide as you are tall, standing at the edge of the pit?"

Right, she'd seen them step up fifteen or twenty minutes ago. They looked like they were enjoying the game. "What about them?"

He waited for her to get her cash and tuck it away in her wallet. Hand still on her back, he steered her away from the casino floor. His voice was so low she had to strain to hear it. "You count cards."

He noticed. She smirked. "I didn't think I could, but turns out it's easy."

He sighed and nodded at the burly guys again. "They won't usually throw you out, but they'll ask you not to play at the blackjack tables anymore."

He sounded irritated, or annoyed. She bristled in response. "I just wanted to see if I could do it. I wasn't trying to break the house or anything."

He relaxed. "It's not technically against the rules, but they don't like it. I didn't want it to ruin your night."

She flushed at the consideration. "That might have spoiled my mood a little bit. Two big burly guys telling me I had to stop. You deliver the message a lot better."

"We're here; we can still do other things." A hint of levity returned to his voice.

Like walk around being adult and responsible, and not taking risks, and not pissing off management, and not being alone together. It all sounded like less fun than the boredom centers of her brain could handle. "I didn't really have anything

else in mind.”

He tugged her fingers. “Isn’t that status quo for you?”

The light teasing flitted through her veins. “As long as I’m not keeping you from anything...”

He nudged her further into the casino. “I’m here because I want to be, not because anyone made me. This is your show, you pick.”

Go back to her hotel. That was what she needed to pick. Screw responsible decisions. She wasn’t ready to walk away from Jared, even if he was just trying to keep her out of trouble. But at the same time, she didn’t have any idea what else to do.

It was true the city looked like it never slept...sort of. She could still go gamble her heart out if she wanted, but none of the attractions were open this late. While it was interesting to wander around looking at the closed shops and all the overpriced trinkets she was sure were ninety-nine percent for show, the hands-off experience wasn’t quite the same.

A familiar flash of lights surrounding a glass box caught her attention. Her cheeks warmed at the unintentional squeal that escaped her throat. She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the claw machine. “I love these things.”

She glanced up at him, surprised by the expression staring back. His brows were arched and his lips drawn in a thin line.

“What?” she asked.

He shrugged, and his face relaxed. “Nothing. It’s just...you know these things are a waste of money, right? The five or ten bucks you spend to win one toy would pay for everything in there?”

Wow, he was really no fun sometimes. She got his concern about the bouncers—or whatever they were—and the blackjack table, but this was different. She twisted her lips in mock irritation. “First of all, that’s not the point. Second, you’re just jealous because you don’t know how to do it right.”

“Really?” The corner of his mouth twitched with unformed amusement. “Tell me what I’m missing, then.”

She scanned the interior of the machine while she talked, looking for a viable target. “It’s not about winning, it’s about

the challenge.”

“Still not getting it.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels.

“Then you don’t have to play.” She plucked her wallet from her purse and rifled through the bills and coins. Disappointment that she didn’t have the right change settled inside. She tucked it all away again. She shouldn’t be wasting his time with childish games anyway. The thought jarred her. Why was she letting him dictate her schedule? “Never mind.”

He wrapped a loose hand around her arm before she could turn away. Even through her shirt, the contact sent a scorching jolt of want through her. “I’m not trying to talk you out of it.”

She shrugged. “No quarters or ones.”

He produced a leather tri-fold from his back pocket, extracted a one-dollar bill, and slid it the machine. “Two attempts.”

She should probably be more contained, but she couldn’t help her giddy rush. She kissed him on the cheek, lingering long enough to memorize the scruff of his five o’clock shadow on her lips, and then turned back to the claw machine. “Watch and learn.”

She’d located a white bear on top of the stack, as close to the middle as anything and not buried under any of the other toys. The mantra repeated in her head as she drove the claw, stick up, nudge nudge, stick right, nudge nudge, click the button... The mechanical arm dropped, clasped around the bear’s head, and lifted. Her elation was short lived when the stuffed toy slipped away and plummeted back to the mountain below.

“One more try.” Jared’s arm, shoulder to wrist, rested against her back, his warm breath caressing her neck. Her body swayed, tempted to lean into him. The lingering musk of his cologne drilled into her thoughts. “Make it good.”

Ten seconds later—according to the timer on the machine—the bear dropped into the slot.

“Sometimes though, winning makes the trying that much sweeter.” She bent at the waist to retrieve it and handed it to

Jared. "For you."

He held the furry toy up by the ear, examining it from every angle with a critical eye. "I don't think I need it."

She looped her hand into his arm. What am I doing? He hadn't pulled away, so he didn't mind, did he? But it just feels right. Instead of continuing to second-guess her actions, she went with it and led him back into the thinning crowds. "It's a gift. It doesn't have to be practical."

He untangled himself from her grip and seconds later rested his hand on her hip, holding her close as they walked. He continued to examine the toy in his other hand. "But what is it?"

"It's a teddy bear."

"What kind of teddy bear wears a beret, a black leather apron, and nothing else?"

"A BDSM bear." She flushed as soon as the words passed her lips. I wouldn't mind him tying me up for a while.

He paused in the middle of the walkway and spun her to face him. The sparse foot traffic cut a path around them. He stood toe to toe with her, blue eyes searching her face. "A bondage bear, really?"

"What? An apron, nothing on underneath, that's sexy." Her skin heated, and she couldn't pull her gaze from his. He was still studying her. "What?"

"You know what's sexy?" He smiled, dipped his head, and traced his lips along the edge of her ear.

That was an intoxicating sensation. Too many things were easy with him. A pleasant chill raced through her, and she slid along his frame with a, "Hmm?"

He dropped his empty hand to her hip. "Watching you lose yourself in whatever you're doing, seeing how genuine your joy is, and..." He trailed a finger down to her ass. "Knowing you're not wearing anything under your skirt."

Her breath hitched, and any witty response she might have had died in the back of her throat. Fun to intense in a millisecond. She couldn't code for response times that fast. Not that she was complaining. "I think you're trying to change the

subject.”

He stepped back, intertwined his fingers in hers again, and tugged her into step beside him, a serious note sliding into his voice. “You’re right, I’m sorry. We’re talking about the bear, aren’t we? Is she into spanking, or does she prefer being tied up?”

He was one of the only people she’d ever met who didn’t seem to recoil at how blunt she was, and was just as outspoken on top of that. Something about that was so damn appealing. “First of all, who said it was a she? And second, it’s hard to tell by just looking. I have a feeling he’s open to exploration. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

He half glanced in her direction, brows raised, before turning away again. “You’re still talking about the bear, right?”

“Of course I am.” Was she? She hadn’t meant to imply anything with her statement, but now the idea was there—the implication this might be about the two of them—it made her curious whether or not her unwitting observation was correct. She drifted closer as they wandered, resting some of her weight against his arm. Heat flowed between them and taunted her with promises of something she knew wasn’t hers.

As they wandered farther from the casino, the chatter and bells faded into the background. The half-lit, mall-like environment closed in around them. If she stretched her imagination just a few inches, it was easy to believe there was no world outside this place of fake pillars and painted-on skies.

“Have you rescued a lot of these poor, unexplored souls from claw machines?” His voice dropped in volume, adding to the surreal feeling of pleasant isolation.

The only issue she saw with their journey was eventually they’d run out of walkway. A soft glow broke the dim lighting ahead. Espresso. Perfect. She leaned into him enough to change their trajectory and memorized the sensation of her head on his shoulder. “Not as many as you might think. The odds on those things can be fixed. The claws made to not consistently grab as tightly. Typically only about in ten quarters wins, regardless of how good someone is.”

“Now we really are talking about the bear. If you know the odds, why do you still play? You were pretty diligent about securing your odds at the blackjack table.”

She scanned the menu on the small cart and reached for her wallet. For someone so bright, he sure had a hard time with some concepts. “Because with the blackjack I wanted to see if I could do it, not because of the need to win. Once again, it’s not about the outcome, it’s about how you get there.”

“Journey versus destination. Right.” He rested a hand on her arm. “Which is why you’re drinking, what, caramel mocha with extra whipped cream at almost midnight?”

“Americano, skim milk. It’s way too late for that much sugar.” She knew it sounded ridiculous. She’d been told so on several occasions and didn’t care. The caffeine didn’t keep her awake, and she enjoyed the flavor.

“Of course. Let me get this.” He stepped up to the cashier before she could protest.

A moment later, he returned with a paper cup, steam escaping from the top, and a bottle of water. He handed her the coffee, rested his hand on her back, and guided her to a table half in the shadows.

He held her chair out for her. She’d never had someone do that before. It heated her inside almost as much as the brush of his fingers along the back of her hand as he took the seat next to her.

She held up the drink. “Thank you for this.”

He gave her a look she couldn’t interpret, brows furrowed and a question in his eyes, before his expression shifted to something more neutral. “It’s not quite as grand a gesture as rescuing me from singing a duet alone, but it’s a start.”

The reminder tickled her amusement and brought back a flood of warmth from the shared time on stage. “Another thing I’m glad I did. I got at least as much out of the evening as you. You don’t actually owe me anything.”

“I do.” He leaned forward, water ignored, and focused on her. “It’s a nice philosophy, but as life goes on, you’ll find it gets harder to ignore the final outcome in favor of living in the

now.”

Some of her euphoria squished out around the implication she was too young to know better. Payton had drilled that point home over and over again—that she didn’t have enough life experience to have an opinion on anything if she disagreed with him. “I’m not naïve just because I’m not as old as you. Some of us learned early on not to let life break us.”

He leaned back, eyes wide. “I’m not broken.”

She tried to swallow back her indignation. Things had been fun and lighthearted just seconds ago, and now she’d let something get to her. Problem was, it stung too much to ignore. Did he really think she was a child? “And I’m not stupid.”

Chapter Twelve

Irritation raced through Jared. How had this all gone downhill in an instant? She hadn't had a problem with him speaking his mind up to this point. In fact, he appreciated that she was well-versed in the art of blunt when she wanted to get her point across, and now he was just trying to decompile her logic so he could figure out what language it was in.

A retort tried to force itself past his lips. Something about not knowing enough to know she knew nothing. However, not only was that cliché, it wasn't true. He had no doubt she knew quite a bit. He just needed more information to help him understand. Besides, the flush of her drawn lips, her narrowed eyes, all exposed his desire to make this right.

He held up a hand in surrender. "I didn't mean anything like that."

She rubbed her face. An irritated tone that hadn't been there before lined her voice. "Sorry. Some things hit me harder than others."

The revelation, not just that she had vulnerabilities, but that part of him had thought otherwise, barreled through his head. Suddenly, making her feel better and figuring out how to protect her, seemed as important as the answer to any other riddle. It was an odd sensation. Except, he didn't know how to approach the situation any other way but directly. "Why?"

She leaned back in her chair, deep frown lines crossing her forehead.

That hadn't been the right thing to ask. "I want to know." He poured all his sincerity into his reassurance. "Tell me what I said."

She looked him in the eye, her playfulness replaced with the soft edges of hurt. "Most of my life, I've been younger than the people around me. And then there was—" She clenched her jaw and dragged in a deep breath. "Do you know how tiresome it is constantly hearing how I must not be as smart as them just because I haven't lived as long?"

He didn't miss the unfinished thought, but filed it away for

future reference. There were things he didn't like talking about either. The chink in her shell made his heart clench. So she wasn't all fun and games after all. "I wasn't saying—"

"But you did." She took a long swallow of coffee. "That's exactly what you said."

He wanted to wrap her up and patch this wound that had painted a scowl on her features and ruined her smile. But that didn't make any sense. There was no mathematical calculation for fixing emotions. "It's not what I meant." The logical part of his mind said he didn't owe her an apology. However, he very much wanted to make this better. "I just wondered, why is the now so important?"

She dropped her gaze to her hands, fiddling with the corrugated edges of the cardboard sleeve on her cup and shredding off tiny bits of brown paper. "Then you should have said that."

"I'm sorry."

She looked back up, lines fading from her expression. "I spent my entire school career shooting for tomorrow. When I graduated high school, things would be better, I just had to make it through. And then it was the same in college. I kept my head down; I did my work, because when it was all finished it would be worth it." She licked her lips. "Except I woke up one day and realized tomorrow never gets here. If I don't enjoy what I've got now, there's no point in pushing for more of the same in the future."

Her logic was painfully simple. Too bad life was too intricate to just toss all cares aside for happiness. "Sometimes you have to miss out on the right now to experience what comes next. If you take everything as it happens, instead of considering the bigger picture, you're going to miss out on just as much."

She pushed her coffee aside. "Unless you spend so much time weighing your decisions and overanalyzing the world around you that you miss your window of opportunity."

"Then you wait for the next opportunity." He'd never come across any situation he felt like he was missing out by giving it

his full consideration. Except, if he'd stopped to be rational when it came to Mikki...he'd be back in his hotel room pretending there was anything work-related he could accomplish tonight. The idea he might have passed up time with her in favor of being reasonable pushed past the debate and ached in his chest.

She slid her hand across the table and under his. Her soft skin teased the pads of his fingers and made his pulse race. She clacked the barbell on her tongue along the back of her teeth before replying. "I'm not trying to convert you. I'm just answering your question."

He exhaled slowly to force the circuits in his brain to catch up with the broad shifts in mood. "Is that why you have the piercing?"

Her hand stopped moving under his, and her jaw clenched. She shook her head. "A different story for a different time."

Twice in so many minutes he'd summoned her frown without having any idea he was even pushing her buttons. "So impulsiveness doesn't always work out?"

Her laugh sounded forced. "I'm not as interesting as you think. What about you? I can't be the only one whose past still haunts me, despite my best efforts."

The question, combined with the aching desire to make her smile again, knocked something loose in Jared's head. Karen. The betrayal, the lies, the reason he personally never got involved with people who could be considered competitors.

The jumble clawed at his thoughts and powered through the pleasant shell the night had wrapped them in. They were all notions he didn't need in his head right now. He scratched at his mind until he could gather up all the doubt and file it away. Mikki wasn't Karen, and even if the two did have something in common, he and Mikki weren't a couple. This wouldn't be a copy of what happened before. "You're right. Sometimes the past is best left in the past."

Her somber expression vanished. She ducked her head and peered up at him through her eyelashes. "If we're not lingering on what happened then, and we don't have any way

of knowing what waits for us tomorrow, it looks like the only choice we've got is to live in the now."

A laugh slipped out before he could stop it. "I walked right into that."

"The timing definitely worked in my favor." She shrugged and scooted her chair closer until her knee brushed his. A shock of warmth raced through him. "But I promise it was far more coincidence than a setup."

As with the night before, it amazed him how this woman could make him forget the rest of the world, including the problems at work. It was too bad their time together didn't actually make the world stop, but this was far better than pacing in his hotel room because he couldn't troubleshoot.

"A more neutral question, then," he said. "Why did you get into this line of work?"

Her playful expression had returned full-force, and her eyes almost seemed to glow at the words. She tilted closer, the intoxicating scent of lemon and plum filling his nostrils, and excitement lined her voice. "I love figuring out how things work. Pulling the pieces apart, deciphering why someone did something, and reassembling it all into this nice, pretty package that just makes sense. You know?"

Hearing her unique twist on what he thought was an everyday necessity was one of the sexiest things he'd heard her say yet. He dipped in, grazed her throat with his teeth, nipped a line up to her lips, and stole a kiss. "I know exactly what you mean."

Mikki leaned into Jared as they walked through the hotel lobby. His arm wrapped behind her back, and his hand rested on her hip. A tiny voice in her head whispered a reminder that this wasn't going to last. She was getting too attached for a couple-day fling.

Which was silly. She wasn't attached. Or maybe just a little. But what was the point in doing something like this if she

didn't enjoy it?

It was late enough that the only people still awake were in the casino, and the desk clerk, who looked like he was falling asleep on his feet. Mikki and Jared had hopped from one topic to the next without much pause. Whether it was the latest in technology, or stupid things they'd done to cram for deadlines both in school and at work.

She didn't know if she'd enjoyed a conversation that much in...well...ever.

"The tongue piercing was because of a guy." She winced as soon as the words were out. Why had she just said that? That annoying, tiny voice squeaked it was because this was a good way to put distance between them. Or maybe it was just too easy to be honest with him. She didn't want to hold anything back.

He glanced at her as they stepped into an elevator. "Did he ask you to? Do you regret it?"

She might have tried to brush the comment off, but stubbornness forced out a response. "I don't do regrets. And no, he didn't ask. Not in so many words."

"How do you hint at something like that?" He pulled his arm away to push the buttons for their floors and shoved his hand back in his pocket after.

Disappointment ached in her limbs at the loss of contact. She should probably get used to it now. Which also meant plowing ahead with her story. "My first real boyfriend was a guy I dated after college." It felt odd saying these things out loud, especially to Jared, but at the same time it felt safe. "He broke up with me because I wasn't wild enough." And too immature, and boring in bed, and too focused on work, and, and, and...

Jared half turned and studied her face. "I can't even imagine."

"Yeah, well, I decided to prove him wrong. I did everything I'd ever heard him mention he thought was hot. Pierced my tongue, started wearing the clothes I wanted instead of what I thought other people wanted, stopped holding back." She

stared up in to his eyes. Jared hadn't looked away yet. In fact, was that a tiny smile playing on his face? "Except it turned out I liked it. A lot more than I liked him. I told him no when he asked for a second chance, and never looked back."

He brushed a strand of hair off her forehead. The gentle gesture raced through every inch of her, humming along her skin. His voice was low and firm. "Don't misunderstand. You're gorgeous. But the way you think—the way your mind works—is at least half of your sex appeal. I want you regardless."

Heat flooded her cheeks, warmth clenched in her chest, and for a rare moment, she found herself without a response. The elevator saved her, and at the same time flooded her with disappointment, when the doors slid open. She nodded behind him. "Your floor."

Never looking away from her, he stuck a foot back to block the door and hold it open. "Come back to my room."

Tell him no. Cut this off now. Don't make walking away hurt even more at the end of this trip. "Don't you need your sleep?" Not quite what she meant to say, but at least it wasn't a yes.

He kissed her, and the feather-light touch sent tingles of want from her lips to clench in her belly. He rested a hand at the base of her neck and said, "I'm not sleeping tonight anyway. I might as well enjoy as much of your company as I can before..." He gave a tiny shake of his head, as if trying to toss a thought aside. "Before the sun rises."

She needed to argue. But the desire to spend a few more minutes, maybe hours, with him won out. "I'd love to."

Moments later, his hotel door latched shut behind them, and Jared rested his hands on her hips. Her nipples strained against fabric when he trailed up the back of her neck, lips humming along her skin with each word. "It's true, thinking about the fact you've got nothing on under your skirt has made me hard all night." He nudged her toward the center of the room, the heat of his chest on her back never letting up. "But talking to you, seeing your mind at work, that's making it impossible to keep my hands to myself."

“I’d be disappointed to hear otherwise.” She leaned back into him. Everywhere they connected, she felt the pulse of need flow between them.

Hands on her hips, he guided her toward the desk in the corner instead of the bed, pausing long enough for him to toe the chair aside before he pushed her closer.

“It’s too bad I ran out of condoms earlier.” His fingers dug into her flesh as he raked them up her sides, and she moaned at the hungry contact. “I guess I’ll just have to improvise.” His hand traced up her throat and he tilted her head back. His teeth grazed her shoulder and then her neck. His words rumbled through her skin. “Bend over.”

His hand dipped under her shirt and up her spine, lightly pushing her forward. Slick warmth grew between her legs when he nudged them apart with his foot. One hand moved to her stomach and then higher, cupping her breast. The other found the edge of her skirt and pushed it up past her hips. The rough friction spiked through her, and she inhaled sharply. She rested her weight on her wrists, grinding her ass into the hard length pressing back. The air kissed her wet arousal, and she squirmed in anticipation.

“Jesus, you make it tough to behave.” He rolled the hard nub of her nipple between his fingers.

“Behaving is boring...” Her words melted into a moan when he dipped between her folds and sought out her clit.

“Good thing we don’t have to find out if that’s true.” He bumped her sex, a finger on either side, stroking fast and hard.

She dropped her weight onto her forearms and arched her back. The combination of sensations left her dizzy. She pressed into his hand, wanting more.

He pulled back from the swollen button between her legs and sought her opening. She cried out when he shoved two fingers inside her.

“You get so wet when you’re turned on.” His voice was lined with gravel. “There were so many times in the casino, knowing you didn’t have any panties on, I wanted to pin you against the wall and see how far we could get without getting

caught.”

The images his words summoned sent a new spike of desire through her. “It’s too bad you didn’t,” she managed between gasps.

He pulled out of her and focused his attention on her clit again, this time grinding the button hard and fast. “Then I’ll have to make sure this makes up for it.”

She couldn’t find the air to reply with more than a series of moans. He’d hit the right spot, and the pressure had her right at the brink, but wasn’t pushing her over.

“Come for me, Mikki.” His breathless prompt drilled into her head, coaxing and heightening her pleasure further. “I want to hear you scream again.”

She was so close. Without anything to grab on to, she clenched her hands, nails digging onto her palms.

He nudged his fingers just a fraction against her clit and hit the right spot. Orgasm spilled through her, tearing a cry from her chest.

She rested her forehead on the cool varnish of the desk, waiting for her legs to steady out before standing. An unfamiliar but amazing feeling flowed through her. Everywhere he touched drew her to life more. Every word seduced her thoughts and senses. She was spent, but filled with an aching need to curl up in his arms instead. The rush of emotion made something squeak inside her. A fear she had fallen too far.

His fingers slipped out of her, and seconds later his lips brushed her cheek. “You’re incredible.”

She hadn’t thought her face could be any warmer, but she was wrong. The compliment flooded her. She managed to find her footing and force herself upright. He wrapped his hand around hers and turned her to face him. She let longing blanket her fear. Dove into his touch instead of lingering on how much it was going to hurt when she couldn’t have him anymore. He cupped her cheek and kissed her gently. The gesture defied everything about the way he’d just made her come, but at the same time it felt right, and fluttered along her skin.

He brushed his lips over hers. “Don’t leave yet.”

The simple request latched on to every hope she'd tried to suppress all evening. At least she wasn't the only one wanting to make the most of this temporary connection. Temporary—the word made her ribs ache. She shoved the longing aside. She had him now, and this was more about living in the now than anything she'd ever done. Right? "I'm not dressed for sleeping over."

He unbuttoned the first button on her shirt, and then continued his way down. "Fortunately, there's no dress code."

"Lucky me."

His palms caressed her skin when he pushed the top off her shoulders and down her arms. He draped the garment on the back of the chair, and seconds later her bra joined it.

Embarrassment and pleasure flitted through her when his gaze lingered on her naked chest, eyes tracing every line. It was an attention she wanted to bask in, and though the sensation was new, it was welcome.

"Let me return the favor." She mimicked his previous movements as she stripped off his shirt. His bare chest was muscled, but not overly defined. That wasn't fair. How did some executive geek look so good shirtless? Not that she was complaining. She traced down his sternum and along his ribs, memorizing the sensation on her fingertips.

She dropped lower, to his waistband. The trail of hair running from his navel and disappearing under his boxers tickled her touch. She didn't have to do much to push his slacks and boxers to the ground, since they were already undone. She brushed his rigid cock, and he groaned. The skin of his shaft was warm and smooth against her palm as she stroked. He leaned his head back, eyes closed. Every sound that tore from his throat spurred guided her movements.

He wrapped a hand around her wrist and pulled her away. "I didn't do that so you'd have to reciprocate."

Her shoulders slumped, and a whisper of doubt flitted into her thoughts. Maybe he's not feeling the same emotional connection. Stupid brain. "I want to."

He rested his hand on the back of her neck and kissed her

gently, only lingering for a moment before pulling away. “We’ve got to sleep sometime.”

Which made sense. But she couldn’t ignore the tiny question repeating in her mind. Is he holding back?

He trailed his nose along the curve of her neck. “I just don’t want you to think you have to.” His hot breath on her skin chased away the sting of his no. “If that makes sense.”

She nodded.

His wicked smile returned, and he made quick work of her skirt button and zipper before pushing it to the ground. He led her toward the bed. She couldn’t help but enjoy the view, his gorgeous, chiseled ass, when he pulled back the comforter. He nodded at the mattress. She climbed between the sheets, and seconds later, he pressed into her back, arm draped over her waist. He kissed along the back of her neck. Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

They’d learned so much about each other in the last few hours, but she still wanted to know more. Her gaze drifted around the room, flitting past generic luggage, a black laptop, and a router that could be any model on the market. None of it had any personality.

Her eyes landed on something odd in the corner, on top of a suitcase. She squinted, trying to make out the letters in the dim light spilling in under the door. And then it hit her. A novelty picture frame. Nothing in their brief time together would have made her think he’d know what the point of something like that was. “Do you take a lot of pictures?” she asked.

His thumb traced lazy circles along her hip, and drowsiness lined his voice. “Not really. Are you offering to be a subject?”

The notion flooded her with a series of muddled emotion. Heat flared through her at the thought of being his private peep show and mixed with more aching at the reminder they didn’t have the kind of relationship that allowed them to make plans like that. Not that she needed to plan anything out. She nodded toward the box. “Are you going to put the pictures in

that?”

Behind her, the mattress shifted. He raised his head into view, kissed her shoulder, and flopped back down. “It’s for my sister.”

Right. Because he had a life and family outside this bubble of pleasant euphoria. The simple statement was a reminder how much they still didn’t know about each other. “Are the two of you close?”

“I love and adore Alyssia.”

Mikki couldn’t help her smile at the sincerity in the simple statement, even though he couldn’t see it. “Are you one of those overprotective brothers who thinks his younger sister is pure and innocent, and you’ll hurt anyone who dares suggest otherwise?”

His chuckle rumbled through her. “To hear her say it, I am. I’m just a normal kind of brother though. Not that I mind the questions, but conversations about my sister rank pretty far on the opposite end of the scale from sexy pillow talk.”

“I always wanted a brother like that. Or any kind of sibling, really.” She pushed back into him.

“Once upon a time, I would have told you it wasn’t that great, but really it is. Her, Tate, and Viv, they’re pretty much the sanity in my life.”

“You’re lucky.” She swallowed back the sting his words dragged up. Both that he had friends like that in his life, and that she wasn’t on the list.

“What about you? Family? Girlfriend you’re squealing about me with?”

She wanted to smile at his words, but her sadness had sunk too deep. “Dad’s a government contractor.” Mom walked out before I was old enough to remember her, and we never heard from her again. “We moved a lot growing up, so I didn’t really make any close friends.” She couldn’t completely keep the ache from her voice.

“I’ll share mine. You’d love Alyssia.”

The simple statement warmed her as much as his touch. Until her brain kicked on and reminded her he wasn’t part of

her future. Not like that. She bit back the creeping sadness and concentrated on his embrace instead. Silence settled in the room again. Behind her, his breathing slowed into a quiet rhythm. Her eyes began to droop.

“This is almost perfect.” His drowsy voice drifted to her ears.

It really was. She was opening her mouth to reply when he said, “Now we just need to figure out how you guys are stealing our clients, and I’ll be set.”

Her eyes jerked open. “What?”

He didn’t respond. The steady rise and fall of his chest against her back told her he had probably drifted off. Something about his question wouldn’t let her do the same. Why did that single thought make her stomach lurch and her skin crawl? Not even the warmth of being wrapped in his arms could chase away the chill his drowsy statement had covered her in.

Chapter Thirteen

The bed shifted under Jared, nudging him awake. He forced his eyes open when the warm body next to him pulled away. The night before teased his half-conscious mind, and a nagging reminder wormed its way into his thoughts; a voice whispering how completely she'd almost made him lose control.

She'd drawn out a side of him he thought he'd reined in long ago. The side that should know better than to say what was on his mind and wanted nothing more than to growl dirty words into her porcelain skin. He'd even considered sex without protection.

At least he'd pulled back before they'd gone too far. Stopped her from doing whatever her version of "returning the favor" might have been. He'd kept things from being about anything more than just immediate pleasure. Right?

Something tickled the back of his thoughts, reminding him he'd all but offered to introduce her to his sister. Maybe he'd lost a little more control than he'd intended to.

What was wrong with him? He watched Mikki climb out of bed and pluck her clothes from the floor.

"It's five a.m. You've only been asleep for a couple of hours," he said

She jumped and turned to face him, giving him a fantastic view of her naked figure. "We both have places to be today."

He pushed up on one elbow, smothering the disappointment swelling inside. She had a good point, and he didn't have an argument. It wasn't like they could lock themselves away for the rest of the week. Or that he'd ever see her again outside of trade shows. "Right."

Still, he couldn't just let her walk out. He sat up and scooted forward on the bed until he was sitting on the edge. He tugged her between his legs and pressed his lips to her stomach. The sound that tore from her throat was somewhere between a sigh and a moan. He continued the line of kisses as he stood, tracing up her sternum, her throat, and finally her

mouth. She molded into him, palms hot on his chest.

It was too soon when she stepped out of his grasp, dark gaze not meeting his. "I have to go. Last night was good." She shook her head. "No, that's not true. It was amazing."

He sank back to the mattress, silent and watching while she dressed. She gave him one last weak smile before she left. The moment the door swung shut behind her, he flopped back onto the bed, stare directed up but thoughts turned inward.

"Fuck." His soft curse echoed in the quiet room. The ache in his chest defied every denial he tried to feed himself that this was all over. He couldn't do this. He couldn't fall for her. It didn't matter how much she was everything intoxicating, she was also everything completely wrong for him.

He wasn't going to throw away his career or sense of order for a fling. This job was important, and she worked for the competition. On top of that, he'd already let himself be distracted too much this trip. He needed to remember where his priorities lay. His personal rules and boundaries existed for a reason, and she was so far from falling into the ordered pattern he required that he couldn't begin to rationalize making it work.

He didn't have to be downstairs for a couple more hours; he should get some more sleep. As seven a.m. rolled around, he hadn't done anything but stare at the clock.

He was due to meet with a potential client soon. He rubbed his face. Time to put the night behind him, except maybe the memories, and hope he could down enough coffee between now and then to make it through things without yawning.

He got ready for the morning and made his way to the lobby. For as little sleep as he'd gotten the night before, his eyelids should have been drooping. So why do I feel like I couldn't sit still if I needed to? He hadn't even touched the coffee yet. He stepped off the elevator and out of the flow of traffic. This tension needed to be under control, whatever the source. He closed his eyes and took a few calming breaths.

Nervous energy still coursed through him, itching under

his skin. This meeting isn't going to go well. The thought came out of nowhere. That was ridiculous. He was just jaded because of the string of bad luck they'd been having with new clients. They'd still signed people. It hadn't been a complete dry spell. Worrying about where the next contract came from was Tate's department. The sleep deprivation was attacking him from a different angle than he was used to.

Still, despite the lack of rest—remembering Mikki's gasps when she was turned on, the scent of citrus on her skin, her bare body under his, actually having someone who was interesting to talk to and didn't make him filter his thoughts—he'd do last night again in a heartbeat.

Half an hour later, he made his way to the back of the exhibitors' hall, near the row of rooms set up for private conferences. Tate was already waiting with an older gentleman, who glanced at his watch the moment Jared made eye contact.

And I'm five minutes early. Time to wrangle this in before it spirals out of control. He extended his hand as he drew closer. "Mr. Rosen. I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Rosen glanced at his watch again before returning the handshake. "No worries at all. Some of us aren't as busy as others. Call me Adam."

Jared's pleasant expression never cracked. If there was ever a time to not be blunt, it was now. He nodded at Tate. "Speaking of, I know Tate has other things to take care of."

Tate's attention stayed on the client the whole time. "And I'm off to it. Adam's in good hands."

A snort of laughter barked from Rosen's throat.

Jared held the door open, ignoring the implication he wasn't capable of handling this conversation, and gestured for the older man to join him in a more private setting. Adam Rosen worked for Lenoronto—one of the largest umbrellas corporations for retail websites in the country. Tate had been negotiating with him for months, pitted against NSS and whatever secrets they were hiding. The reminder of Mikki almost knocked Jared's thoughts offline, but this wasn't the time or place. Contracts and promotions were on the line.

He took his seat across from Adam, leaned forward in the leather plush, and rested his elbows on his knees, hands clasped. "Are you enjoying the trip?"

Adam checked his phone and then pocketed it again. "I wish they'd stop holding these things in places like this. An excuse for drunken foolishness. I'm petitioning the board to move it to Miami next year. We'll keep the warmth and lose the distractions."

Right, because Miami was such a dull place. Jared never flinched. "I look forward to the outcome."

Adam let out a long exhale. "Look, I'll be honest. When Tate told me he could hook me up with someone technical, I thought I'd be talking to one of your people who's actually close to the action. No offense, but how long has it been since you did any actual security work?"

The first few times someone had asked that question, Jared had gotten defensive. He'd learned since, the best way to prove he still knew his shit was to prove it rather than argue. "It's true; I'm not as involved in the day-to-day tech as I used to be. But we like to let the real talent do their jobs, and any questions you have I can't answer, I'll take back to them and get you an in-depth response within a few hours."

That had never happened. He didn't take questions back to his people, but it made the conversation flow more smoothly. As Adam launched into a series of concerns, Jared responded to each without hesitation. He'd heard them all before—it was a fairly standard list.

"So tell me about these holes in your own security," Adam said. "What are you doing to address them?"

For the first time since sitting down, a sick pit settled in Jared's gut. He nudged it aside. He had this as well as he had anything, and the answer was right there. Especially after the extra hours he'd put in yesterday making sure his network was still tight.

It didn't matter that he hadn't been able to do more work last night; he'd still covered all his bases. He just hadn't expected to use the reassurance again so soon. "We don't have

any internal holes. We undergo both internal and independent audits on a regular basis, and those results are available to anyone who'd like to see them. As a company who places so much importance on security, we're always aware of the risk—the badge of honor, if you will—for a hacker to poke holes in our walls. If a situation like that were to arise, and it hasn't in years, we'd have the weaknesses patched within hours."

Adam's lips drew into a thin line and he stared back, green eyes unblinking. A heavy silence hung between them before he finally spoke. "I guess what I heard can't be true then."

An alarm clanged in the back of Jared's head. This was the same conversation he'd already heard three times in the last six months. So why was it tugging up new memories he couldn't quite grasp? "You're in contract negotiations. I'm sure a lot of things were implied that aren't necessarily true."

Rosen laughed. "Fair enough. Then I guess there's nothing to the rumors some of your outlying departments have made your entire network vulnerable."

The simple phrasing kicked the right pebble in Jared's head, and the conversation from the night before avalanched back. The words were almost identical to what Mikki had told him. It was a coincidence, right? "Absolutely no truth to those at all." He kept his uncertainty from his voice.

Was this the basis of the rumors they'd been hearing in every missed sales opportunity for the past six months? Ever since... No, there was no way. "Our networks are secure; you have my word."

Adam stood, his expression flat. "Of course. I know your certifications support that, to the point I know something like a Trojan would be spotted in an instant. You understand, of course, this is just due diligence."

Fuck. That's new. "Of course. And I can assure you there's nothing to worry about when it comes to Skriddie and the standards we hold ourselves to." A Trojan virus was the digital equivalent of its namesake. Once it was on the network, it provided someone outside access to the inside. That was so many steps beyond—and a much larger threat—than just a

couple whispers they might have security holes.

Call the office. Isolate every server. Go into full lockdown until we know this is just a malicious rumor. Jared's thoughts raced with next steps, but he forced himself to stay in the conversation. "Can I answer any other questions for you?"

"No." Adam stepped away, ignoring the offer of Jared's extended hand. "I think I've got the information I need. Thank you for your time."

Jared sank back into his seat the moment Adam was gone and dropped his face into his hands. Shit. How would a Trojan even make it onto their systems? The server should have caught it. The virus software would have stopped it. There were so many check points along the way where it should have been obliterated. He was dialing the office before his thoughts finished forming. Dewson can hole up in the data center. Tate needs to know I'm skipping the courtesy suites. To-do items continued to stack on the list in his head while the phone rang.

At least he knew one thing—the rumors had begun six months ago, while Mikki was still interviewing with both companies. So even if there was anything to what Rosen had said, she couldn't have done it. Her odd questions and statements about why she'd signed with NSS instead, those weren't related at all. Were they? A new nagging doubt joined his mounting concern.

Not that it mattered if she was involved—it wasn't like he was attached. Fuck, who was he kidding? He was so hooked on her it ached to think about parting ways. How had she done that to him in just a few short days?

If she meant so much to him, why didn't everything he felt for her and knew about her reassure him? He was just being paranoid. Businesses went through slumps. Still, he couldn't take a chance on this. He snarled at the receiver when he went to voice mail after several rings. "Dewson. I don't care what you're working on. You have a new critical priority. Cancel your plans for the night. I promise I'll make it up to you. We need a deeper scan than you've ever done, yesterday. From the top down, servers, every department, any device that's ever even

touched our network. Call me for details.”

He dropped his phone into the coffee table in front of him. It would be okay. He'd work with his staff, they'd secure an all clear, and he could set everyone's minds at ease. His network wasn't flawed. There was no way something so severe had made it in. And once he proved it, all would be right with the world again.

Chapter Fourteen

Jared rolled his neck to try and loosen the tight cords running from his shoulder blades to the base of his skull. His eyes never left his laptop screen. The hotel desk wasn't an ideal workspace, but his room was private. At least he didn't have to rely on the free, unsecured Wi-Fi. A hotspot he'd rigged himself sat next to his computer, signal lights flickering and blinking as he worked.

"Peachtree servers next," he directed the comment at his phone, which sat next to the entire setup, with the speaker on.

A knock echoed through the room, and Jared's train of thought snapped.

He growled at the empty air. "Do not disturb means do not disturb. Hang on, Dewson." He crossed the few short steps to the door, shoved down some of his irritation when he saw Viv through the peephole, and let her in. He gave her a brief nod and gave his attention to the phone. "Dewson, rinse and repeat on that entire stack. I'll call you back in ten."

"Got it." The disembodied voice sounded tinny and distant coming from his phone. Jared glanced at the device long enough to see the call had been disconnected and turned back to Vivian. Her gown hugged every curve enough to show it off, without ever looking anything but professional, and the emerald made her eyes flash.

He offered her a weak smile. "You look great. Are you turning heads on purpose, or is that something you dug out of the back of your closet?"

The dress was new. He didn't have to hear her response to confirm it. She wouldn't do things any other way.

She tugged on the sleeve of his T-shirt. "It's not nearly high fashion as what you're wearing. I drew the short straw, so I get to come nag you to join us in the courtesy suites."

"Not happening." His fingers twitched toward his phone. "We're not done."

She pursed her lips and trailed a fingernail down his arm. Once upon a time, the gesture would have been seductive.

These days that moment was in the past, and he never questioned she knew it as well as he did. "You're ninety-nine point nine percent sure they're rumors." There was no question in her voice. "The odds Hayden's behind the gossip are so high, you couldn't even find someone in this town to bet against it."

He exhaled loudly. "But we're not at one-hundred percent." He pushed aside the part of his brain that agreed with her. Walking away for the night meant asking his people to do something he wasn't willing to do. Making them work while he went out and had fun. And there was no part of him at all worried that if he ran into Mikki downstairs, it would be even harder to say goodbye tomorrow.

Her lips drew into a thin line. "How much worse do you think we look when you miss rubbing shoulders with the industry tonight because you're chasing a rabbit down a hole that doesn't exist? Executives smile and shake hands. Their people do the grunt work."

A laugh slipped out, despite the tension permeating every inch of his body. "You're good. If you didn't wear that dress so well, I might have mistaken you for Tate." He knew his friends well enough to realize even though Vivian had been sent to bring him downstairs, it wasn't her idea.

She leaned her weight on the corner of the dresser the TV sat on. "I'll tell him I made a valiant effort."

He gave her a grateful smile. "Say I'm wrapping up negotiations with India, or have him make something up. You know no one will miss me."

"I suspect someone will. Speaking of, if you need an extra set of eyes, I can put a contract in front of some new talent. Sounds like decent revenge for rumors like this, right? Steal Hayden's prize out from under his nose at a trade show?"

Jared didn't have to ask who she was talking about. His pulse quickened at the idea of getting into a different kind of hands-on work with Mikki. Actually seeing what she was capable of in front of a computer. Don't linger on this. "She's already turned you down once."

She pushed upright again, and her gaze drifted to the

ground. "When was the last time you checked your email?"

His teeth clenched before he could process how on-edge her question put him. "I shut it off hours ago so I could work. Why?"

She pulled her phone from the small bag hanging from her wrist, made a couple of swipes to the screen, and handed it to him.

Hesitation told him not to reach for it. That was ridiculous. If she thought it was important, he'd rather know now than later. He exhaled slowly as he read the company-wide announcement from Sterling Foster, and all the strength drained from his legs.

They'd named a new chief operations officer. Gone outside the company for the guy. The email even said they felt the external insight would be more beneficial to them than pulling from internal talent.

He forced a smile onto his face and handed Viv's phone back. All his work... That job was supposed to be his. He couldn't keep the strain from his voice. "Good to know."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry."

He couldn't even grasp enough of his thoughts to figure out how he felt. "No big deal. It's not like anyone actually promised me the position."

"As long as you're all right."

"Absolutely." He wasn't. Not that he knew what he was, but he was pretty sure it wasn't all right. He nodded at his computer. "I need to get back to work. Make my excuses downstairs?"

"Of course." Sympathy lined her smile, and he was grateful she didn't push the issue.

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Mikki stepped out of one heel and dropped her foot to the floor so she could take the weight off her other leg. The shoes were killing her. She scanned the faces in the Skriddie courtesy suite. He's not here. She couldn't ignore her disappointment.

Vivian was. The other woman stood at the far end of the room, smiling and laughing with a small group of people. Vivian's heels were even more severe than Mikki's, making her taller than several of the men around her. How does anyone do professional that gracefully?

Mikki had struggled with whether or not to dress up tonight. Looking now at what everyone else in the room wore, she was glad she'd gone with the simple suit she'd brought. Maybe she should have toned back the camisole, though, and found something boring and off-white in one of the shops.

It was true, Jared had played along with her last night. Gone along with her silly games. But she needed to prove she could be responsible too, and her bright red lace top in a sea of whites and grays couldn't be supporting that image.

"What are you drinking, my dear?" A warm voice dragged her attention away from searching for Jared.

She slipped her shoe back on and turned toward the bartender. Shock and recognition raced through her. She'd never been introduced to Tate, but even if he hadn't been the third Musketeer at the karaoke bar, his picture made more industry papers than anyone else at Skriddie. The face of sales for Skriddie Bust Media. And the best friend of the guy she wasn't supposed to be falling for. "I, um..." She glanced around her. "Are you allowed to be back there?"

He winked and grabbed something from under the portable bar. "I am as long as no one complains." He extended his hand. "We haven't been formally introduced, but you're the name on everyone's tongue. I'm Tate." His grip was warm and firm without being too tight.

His smile was so genuine, she couldn't help but smile back. "I know."

He grabbed a bottle off the shelves behind him. "You look like a 7 and 7 girl. Yes? No?"

She shrugged. To be honest, she hadn't done a lot of drinking in her life, and since she knew she was a lightweight, it was taking her some time to figure out what she liked.

She hadn't planned on drinking tonight, but Hayden had

specifically sought her out and asked her to be on her best behavior. The request had gnawed at her. The implication she'd acted anything but professionally in public up to this point devoured her sense of decorum and wrapped it in spite.

It was true, she was travelling on the company dime, and this was a business function. She didn't have a problem with that. What was stuck in her brain was his comment. His assurance he was just telling her as a friend and his implication that she didn't know better without the warning. She was getting sick of it. One drink won't hurt anyone. "Possibly."

Tate handed her a glass with pale amber liquid in it and a swizzle stick. "Mostly sweet, just a little kick. I think you'll like it."

"Thanks." She wasn't sure what else to say to him. What kind of conversation did one strike up with the guy whose best friend she was sleeping with? The man who helped run the company she'd hacked as much to prove her skills to herself as anyone else? Her gaze drifted back to Vivian. Then again, none of them seemed to mind that she'd done either one.

"Did you lose someone?" Tate asked.

She stared at him again, heat flooding her cheeks that she'd been so obvious. She tried to joke it off. "Not that I'm aware of?"

He laughed. "You keep searching the room. You're not obligated to sit here and talk to me."

She tried to hide her embarrassment by taking a long drink. Sweet rushed across her tongue, followed seconds later by a smooth burn. "It's not that, I promise."

"I'm teasing. If I might be so bold as to guess, he's working. We probably won't see him tonight." He slid her a cocktail napkin.

"Like, actual work?" That sounded so much more appealing than pretending for appearance's sake. "I mean, who is?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tate lean forward and rest his forearms on the bar. "The person you're not looking for."

How much has Jared told them? Had she been a conquest to brag about? The thought clenched in her gut. She swallowed more of her drink. "Let's say I was looking for someone specific. How'd he get lucky enough to get out of the evening? Is that a perk of having a nice title?"

Tate's brow furrowed and he studied her for a moment. "Perk. Right. Are you enjoying the show?"

Small talk. Yay. She turned her full attention to Tate. He was kind of cute when she thought about it. Blond hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, and a smirk that said he was probably plotting something devious. Still, if he were Jared, the conversation would be about anything but the menial. The idea filled her with the temptation to walk away now and go find Jared. Down girl. "Are they all like this?"

"More or less."

A yawn swelled in Mikki's lungs, and she knocked back the rest of her drink to hide it. The liquor didn't burn as much going down this time. She slid him the glass. "Having to make nice with a bunch of people who may or may not like you doesn't really sound like the best way to spend work time."

Why had she said that? Her head swam when she tried to pull up an answer. It was that damn insecurity rearing its head again. That voice that cared what people thought of her. The one that always sounded like Payton. She squashed it as best she could.

He filled her glass again. "I'm sure it works that way for some people. You, on the other hand, probably don't have anything to worry about."

The compliment mingled with her drink and warmed her from the inside out. But the vague gnawing in her gut didn't believe it. "Honestly, before I got here, I didn't think any of you liked me." She winced at the honest words. Blunt was one thing, but spilling her guts and letting her vulnerabilities show was completely another. "I mean, not that you're not all nice people, but after what I did..." She snapped her mouth shut. Babbling wasn't making anything better.

He studied her, brows knit together, before smiling and

topping off her drink again. “We’re all grown-ups here. There’s no reason to let the personal bleed into the professional.”

The words whirred in her brain, taking longer to find purchase than she would have liked. Did he think she was talking about her relationship—correction, non-relationship with Jared? A portion of her mind begged her to ask him directly, but some of the words stuck in her throat.

It was that damn bit of her caring what he’d think again that was keeping her from specifically asking how they’d dealt with her hack. “I mean what I did during my job interview with NSS. I thought—that is, Hayden said—I just... I thought it might be an unforgiveable sin kind of thing.”

He poured her another drink and leaned forward, forearms resting on the bar. “Signing with the competition? Some of us aren’t fond of Hayden personally—” he looked around him before locking his attention on her again, “—Not me if anyone asks, but there’s some tension. And I know V was disappointed, she has nothing but praise for your talent. But your life, your choice. No one blames you for that.”

Reality seeped into her veins, and her insides felt like they were about to liquefy. “I don’t mean signing with NSS. I mean what led up to it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “The need for more employees?”

She tried to keep her posture casual, despite the growing turmoil in her gut. He didn’t know. It was true, Vivian might not have told him, but something like that would be conversation fodder, right? Especially with Jared’s best friends? “Sorry. I’m just babbling.”

Tate smiled. “No worries. I promise there are no hard feelings about any of it. Not that I’m aware of. Business is business, right? It’s not like you’re plotting to take us down.”

“Oh, God.” They don’t know what I did. The realization crashed around her, and she almost emptied the content of her stomach. Hayden was supposed to tell them, and they have no idea.

“Are you all right?”

“No.” Acid churned inside, bubbling up in her throat. “I’m

so sorry. I need to talk to Jared. Where is he?"

"His room, probably."

"Thank you. And I'm so, so sorry." Shit, what have I done?

She stepped into the cool of the hallway, needing the air to clear her thoughts. Except it didn't help. The room spun around her. She hadn't had that much to drink, had she? Maybe she shouldn't have skipped dinner.

She wobbled, and the carpet danced to life beneath her. This wasn't good. Stepping out of her heels, she bent at the waist to grab them. Her head threatened to float away when she straightened again.

There were too many people. She headed away from the crowds. The people faded into the background as she found a spot away from the suites. She leaned into a nearby wall, gulping deep breaths and trying to make the room stop spinning.

This was bad. This was so bad. She needed to tell Jared what she'd done. Her gut lurched. And then brace herself to never see him again.

Chapter Fifteen

Jared raked his fingers through his hair and leaned back in the chair. The frame creaked, but held. He blinked to restore the moisture to his eyes. Finally. He'd been through everything with Dewson. Made sure every last bit of hardware and software was checked. He could say with one hundred percent certainty his network was clean.

With the immediate problem cleared, his thoughts were free to ramble. To drift to the sexy brunette who was probably downstairs right now, mingling with his colleagues. His chest deflated, almost collapsing in on itself, as he exhaled. An unreachable ache throbbed beneath his ribs. It had been less than twenty-four hours since he'd seen her. How did he already miss her?

A quiet knock startled him out of his musings. He glanced at the clock. The suites would still be in full swing, with everyone taking advantage of the free booze. It wouldn't be Tate or Vivian.

He peered through the peephole, eyes growing wide and gut clenching. His senses flared to life, a million prickles of desire dancing over his skin. Mikki stood in the hallway, gaze directed at the floor and shoes dangling from her fingers. So gorgeous.

He yanked the door open, and her head flew up, eyes wide. He shouldn't stare but couldn't help himself. The way her suit hugged her hips, the not-quite-sheer of her lace top enhancing her breasts, and the flush on her face. Except something was off in her expression. He forced words past his lips. "Not that I'm complaining. I'm glad you're here. But are you okay?"

The pink on her cheeks grew, and the corners of her eyes tugged down. "I need to talk to you."

Not quite the answer he'd been looking for, but nothing in his mind was prepared to turn her away. He liked the talking. And what it could lead to, but he'd take the just talking if it was her. "Of course." He stepped aside and latched the door behind

her.

She hovered in the middle of the room, staring at her feet. Alarms sounded in his head. Something was obviously wrong, but what? A million possibilities ticked through his head, each discarded before it could become a full thought.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know." She whirled to face him and stumbled.

"Careful." He wrapped an arm around her waist to help steady her. Even through layers of clothing, her heat threatened to sear him, and his pulse spun up another processor in response. Images taunted him of pressing her against the wall, sliding his hands under her shirt, and tasting every inch of her.

He mentally shook the temptation away, but his body didn't stop reacting. Now was definitely not the time.

She fumbled a few times before finally extracting herself from his arms. "I have to tell you something."

The wash of alcohol on her breath hit him, and he cringed inwardly. She was drunk. At least now he knew what was wrong. It didn't erase his fantasy, but it did squelch any desire to act on it. "You look like you need to lie down."

The corner of her mouth tugged up, and a high-pitched giggle slipped out. "Are you propositioning me?"

Any other night but tonight. He shook his head and held out his arm. "Come on. I'll take you back to your room."

She stepped back and wobbled on her feet again. "Does rescuing the fair maiden ever get you in trouble?"

His brain's reaction to her slurred words battled with his body's response to wanting her closer. "Sometimes."

Even if she weren't so drunk she could barely stand, this had to end now. It was already tearing a hole in his chest to admit they'd never see each other again after this week. The further he got away from her now, the better.

She lunged forward suddenly, fingers digging into his shirt and face buried in his chest. "I didn't realize. I thought you knew."

Knew what? Did she regret what they'd done? A screaming

in the back of his head told him to look deeper, but he didn't dare. She wasn't making sense, and any drunken confession wouldn't do either of them any good.

"Come on. You need to sleep this off." He tried to point her toward the door.

She turned wide eyes on him. Smudged eyeliner rimmed her red gaze. "You haven't even heard what I have to say, and you're already throwing me out. I swear I didn't know."

Her head tilted up gave him an incredible view of her entire outfit. Jesus, the top really was almost sheer. Right, she was drunk. Fuck. He pressed his lips to her forehead, and then stepped back. "I'm not throwing you out."

"I don't want you to hate me." She grasped his wrists.

Her palms on his bare skin flooded him with desire, and the impulse to strip all their clothes out of the way rushed through him. He couldn't bring himself to break her grip. She pulled him closer and interlocked her fingers behind his head, hands resting at the base of his neck. A low groan tore from his chest when she pressed her lips to his. Soft, full, and hungry.

His hands slid to the small of her back, holding her captive. Her tongue darted into his mouth, the smooth ball at the tip teasing him and tempting his thoughts. She tasted like Seagram's and 7 Up. He'd never thought that flavor combination could be intoxicating again. Seemed like a good excuse to replace the old memories with new ones. Her body molded to his. Her yielding curves send daggers of want through every inch of his frame. It took more restraint than he knew he had to keep from inching her shirt up, then yanking it over her head.

She moved her hands to his waist and pushed up his T-shirt. He was as hard as a rock, and his cock ached to be free every time her hip rubbed it through his jeans. How was it possible to want someone this much, even though he had a list of reasons it could devastate his life? Or at least, his career and sanity.

He was about point-two-five seconds from lifting her onto the bed and removing her clothes in ways that would ensure

she could never wear any of them again.

He summoned the last of his self-control, dragging it past every sensual, aching inch of arousal, and wrapped his hand around her wrist. A painful chill rushed in around him when he broke all other contact between them. "I don't hate you, and I'm not throwing you out. Tell me what's wrong."

She turned her dark gaze on him, lower lip jutting out. "Promise not to get mad?"

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He needed answers now. "Talk to me."

Her pout melted into a quivering chin.

"Oh, shit." He clenched and unclenched his left hand. "Don't cry, please?"

She sank onto the edge of the bed, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Her shoulders shook, but she didn't make a sound.

He couldn't ignore the pain echoing inside. "Mikki. Talk to me?"

"I'm... I'm so... I'm sorry." She forced out between sobs. "I didn't mean to. Please don't be mad. I'm so sorry."

What was she apologizing for? Being drunk? That didn't tie into the carefree image she projected normally. He moved onto the mattress next to her and wrapped a tentative arm around her shoulder. "You didn't do anything wrong."

She turned into him and buried her face in his shoulder. And then the body-wracking sobs began. Her tears soaked into his shirt and skin as she cried, and he didn't care. All he could think about was how he couldn't take pain this from her, whatever it was. He trailed his fingers through her hair. "It's going to be okay."

She shook her head. "It's not. I can't undo this."

He pulled her to him, holding her tighter. Between him and his friends, they could talk or buy their way out of almost anything. But he had no idea what this was or how to make it better. He'd forgotten what it was like to feel so impotent, and he didn't like the reminder.

Each sob tore away another shred of his soul, but slowly

she calmed down, until all that was left was a few snuffles.

She finally pulled away and dragged the back of her hand across her cheeks. Why wouldn't she look at him?

He held her at arm's length so he could look her in the eye. Even red-eyed, with tear stained cheeks, she was gorgeous. And breaking his heart. "Don't move." He grabbed a glass off the tray near the TV, filled it with water, and handed it to her. "Drink."

She drained the water and set the glass on the floor next to him.

She looked miserable, and he wanted to fix it. To wrap her up and protect her and make her feel better. But she wasn't telling him anything.

He gripped her fingers lightly and traced the back of her knuckles. "Doing better?"

She gave him a weak smile. "Not really. But I'm not thirsty anymore."

He kissed her fingertips one at a time. "Whatever this is—Hayden, something else at work—there's always an answer."

"Hayden." She let out a bitter laugh. "I used to think he was a swell guy. Or at least an okay person."

Had she been fired? Something else? At least the conversation was moving forward. Jared just wished the progress had come with more answers. "What did Hayden do?"

She dragged in a deep, shuddering breath, and looked him in the eye. "You have some gaping, horrible holes in the security on your network."

The words stole the air from his lungs, and he sank back, ass resting on his heels. Of the billions of things he expected her to say, that was nowhere on the list. He knew people were talking about it, but he hadn't expected to hear it from her. Dread crept through him, and he tried to push it aside. "No. I don't."

Was that hope in her eyes? "So you do know? Did you fix it?"

No. Nononononono. This wasn't Karen. It couldn't be. "There's nothing to fix."

“Shit.” The word slipped past her lips and hung between them. “I thought you knew. When I told Hayden, he swore he’d shared the information.”

The cryptic circle of random words was compiling into something recognizable in Jared’s mind, and the output made every inch of him ache with betrayal and fury. It wasn’t true. He was going to make her spell it out, whatever this was. “Thought I knew what?”

“In my interview with NSS, they told me I had to prove my skills. Gave me an IP address and told me it was an internal site. Told me to find the holes in the security. Except it wasn’t internal, it was the Skriddie network. And your network has holes.”

Every thought in Jared’s head crumbled. She was leaving things out. Little details most people wouldn’t notice. Not only had she done this, and then kept it from him, she was still hoping he wouldn’t notice how deep the deception ran. Hurt mingled with anger. “So, you still poked around, even though you knew it wasn’t a NSS network.”

She bit the inside of her cheek not meeting his gaze. “I didn’t realize it at first.”

“Bullshit.” He spit the word out, not able to completely hide his agony in the venom. “You knew exactly what you were doing. You dug in first and didn’t stop until you’d had your fun.”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked.

“I don’t care.” He stood and backed away. “You need to leave.”

Her chin quivered. Please, don’t let her cry again. His splintered psyche didn’t know how it would handle that.

Instead, she brushed past him without another word. Seconds later, the door latched shut between them.

He collapsed onto the bed and dropped his face into his hands as two hundred and fifty-six shades of confusion pixelated his thoughts.

Morning. Maybe if she lay there just a little longer, Mikki could pretend this entire non-relationship hadn't completely outlived its license. Pain echoed in her temples, taunting her with reminders of too much alcohol and everything else from the night before.

She rolled onto her side and pulled her knees to her chest. Why had she trusted Hayden? Because he'd never given her a reason not to. Except the entirety of how her job interview went.

She was so stupid, and now she'd lost the trust of a wonderful man. Betrayed someone she adored, respected, and cared about.

The words hit her hard, carried on the furious look Jared had given her last night when he'd asked her to leave.

Pain throbbed behind her temples. She hadn't been thinking straight. Hadn't said everything she needed to.

She forced herself to sit up, and her skull screamed in protest. As soon as she found some aspirin, and maybe brushed the horrible taste out of her mouth, she'd find Jared and make sure he knew everything. Not because she deserved to be forgiven, but because he deserved the full story.

Chapter Sixteen

Mikki's gut hadn't stopped churning all morning. First hangover, on top of all this. At least I went all out. It was going to be hard enough getting Jared out of her system. In addition, she had to deal with the professional aspect of things. The fact that no one had ever told Skriddie what she'd done; they hadn't been warned about their own security leaks.

It took her remaining willpower to force one foot in front of the other to lead her into the exhibitor's hall. People meandered from spot to spot, stopping in aisles, chatting, going about their everyday business. Relief and disappointment warred in her veins when she didn't see any familiar faces at the Skriddie booth. She'd find Jared. But she was going to do something else in the meantime.

Hayden looked up from his phone as she approached. "Hey, Michaela."

Irritation surged inside. He was behind this. So was she. She'd have to take some of the blame herself, but the promises he'd made, and the guilt he'd poured on her for things that had never even happened. Telling her for months that Vivian hated her. And the fact he'd still never learned to call her by the name she preferred.

For the first time that morning, she smiled. But she didn't feel any joy. She tried to keep her voice even. "Do you have a minute?"

His brow furrowed. "Actually, I was going to ask you the same thing. Let's go somewhere quieter."

The tone in his voice dragged up her past insecurities and guilt. She wouldn't let him brush this aside again. As long as she could keep her fragmented thoughts in line, she could do this. She fell into step half a pace back as he wove his way toward the private conference rooms at the back of the exhibit hall, and gestured for her to step into their company's spot.

She hovered at the edge of the room. Where to start? She should just lay it all out there, or at least most of it. No reason to get into what she'd done with Jared. They were done. But

the rest of it, holding back wouldn't do her any good.

He dropped into one of the overstuffed chairs and nodded at the other. "Sit down. You're making me nervous."

Good. The admission gave her a touch of satisfaction. Even if he was just talking for the sake of being polite. She perched on the edge of the seat, knees together and legs tucked to the side. Begin with what had happened in the interview. That made the most sense.

He held out her cell phone. "I found this in the booth yesterday afternoon. You should keep a closer eye on it."

"Thanks." She grabbed the device and stuffed it in her purse. No, that wasn't right. She'd had it last night, before the party, hadn't she? Another lie to add to the stack. Why did he have her phone?

Something else nagged in her head. How much could she say to Hayden without losing her job? Was it worth trying to save? Skriddie wasn't going to hire her. Even if there had been a chance before, there wasn't now. Still, she couldn't let that fear keep her from speaking her mind. Not now.

"Why didn't you tell them?" The question slipped past her lips before she could formulate what came next.

His mask slipped, and his lips drew into a thin line. "I'm sorry, I'm confused."

She wasn't going to be vague like she'd been last night with Jared. Her thoughts were clear now, though she was still struggling to keep her hangover from making her head implode, and she was going to be direct with Hayden. "After my interview. You agreed with me Skriddie needed to know about their security holes. You said you'd make sure it was taken care of. Why, six months down the line, don't they know? Why didn't you tell them?"

He crossed the room and paused, hand on the doorknob, kind mask back in place. "Why didn't you?" He pulled the door open. "You're due on the floor in ten minutes, and we need this room for client meetings."

"I did tell them." She let the words fall out and take mountains of weight with them.

His eyes narrowed and he let the door swing shut again. "I thought you were smarter than that."

The words burrowed under her skin, and she sat straighter. "Excuse me?"

"This isn't a matter of us versus them. This is about your entire career, hon. Who do you think is going to hire you when word gets out you do shit like this for kicks?"

"But I didn't..." The protest died in her throat. In a way, that was exactly what she'd done. "They deserved to know. They needed to know. You'd want to know."

Hayden's irritation vanished behind a smile that made her blood run cold, and he stood. "If this comes back to bite us in the ass, it's all on you. And I can make that happen."

Acid churned in her gut as the door swung shut behind him. She was going to be ill. What had she done?

Her morning passed in a haze of self-doubt and ill-conceived resolutions, which were discarded before they could fully form. At least today was the last day of the show. She'd track down Jared as soon as she could, explain herself, and then stick around with the tech staff tomorrow to tear things down. Fortunately, most of the suits were flying out that night or early in the morning. So she wouldn't have to see the disdain on his face after she finished explaining herself. She wouldn't have to deal with Hayden, either. At least until the weekend was over.

And when the trip was finished, she would go back home, lock herself in her empty apartment, and be alone long enough to sort out her thoughts.

Instead of soothing her, the realization stung her eyelids with unshed tears. She angrily pushed the unexpected grief aside, along with the clouds of confusion, and tried to figure out where she was going to find Jared.

Jared tapped a finger on the edge of his coffee cup, mentally counting off each tick. Ten. I should have known

better. Eleven. Every single fucking step of the way. Twelve. I should have seen it coming.

Tate and Vivian were in sales meetings, and Jared was grateful. Normally he'd bend Viv's ear. She was the one person who could screw his head back on straight when he let his thoughts get too fragmented. They'd been nothing but since Mikki told him the truth last night.

But Viv wasn't an objective ear this time. She still wanted to hire Mikki, and even after their brief conversation this morning, her response had been, "You shouldn't have gotten attached. But this means she's got the skills, right?"

And he hated that a bit of him saw exactly where she was coming from.

"Excuse me." Mikki's familiar voice cut through Jared's swelling frustration. A part of his brain sprung to life, flooding him with the compulsion to wrap her up, accept whatever she had to say, and just leave it behind them. He wasn't going to make that mistake again. Even if she hadn't used him for the information the way Karen had, she'd still had her fun at his expense, and the company's.

"Can we talk?" Her gaze never left his face.

He didn't want to look in her eye. There were too many reminders, both good and bad, of the last few days. But he wasn't going to turn away. He nodded to the chair next to him. "I'm listening."

Her gaze flickered toward the empty seat before landing back on him. "I'll stand, thanks." Her expression was impassive, but by her side, she rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. "I don't remember what I told you last night, but I wanted to make sure you knew I meant it, and you heard all of it, once I was more coherent."

He wasn't going to be sucked into her apology, despite the frown lines in her forehead and the waver in her eyes. It was bad enough she'd lied to him. Tricked him. Threatened his livelihood and held the ability to destroy his friends' careers and his own. And she was still taunting him.

"We're not repeating this. You've told me plenty." He

couldn't keep the hurt from his anger. Since she'd confessed last night, he'd rolled every inch of her story around in his head. She was still leaving out details. "It's bullshit you didn't know you were on our network. You recognized it and did what you did anyway. Even if you never meant any harm. And then you told someone what you'd found. Someone who wasn't us."

Her firm stance faltered, and her voice was barely a whisper. "I did it for the challenge."

Challenge, he understood. Digital breaking and entering? That was a violation he didn't get. "I don't think I heard you right."

She looked Jared in the eye again, as if he was the only other person in the room. "I did it for the challenge. You're a name. You're the name. You were on our college curriculum. Jobs, Gates, Zuckerberg, and Jared Tippins. You revolutionized network security. You were a minor deity to my graduating class, and you aren't even some old, stuffy dude. I knew there was no way I could find holes in something you built. So yeah, I knew what I was doing, and I couldn't believe I actually pulled it off."

He didn't miss the underlying awe in her confession. He wasn't going to linger on it. It was too difficult to focus on with a new, furious voice asking if he'd ever been anything more to her than a legend. Not only had she violated his work, but she'd used him like a groupie would her favorite actor. "And then instead of telling us, maybe calling up Vivian, you gave that information to the one company who would love to see us go down like the Titanic."

"I wanted to tell you. I told Hayden. I said you needed to know. He promised me it would be a lot less damaging to me if it came from him. That he'd handle it, he'd smooth things over, and you'd be fine. He told me if I went to you, I risked destroying my career before it started, which he hated the thought of me doing. I didn't have any idea no one had ever told you until none of you were nearly as cold as Hayden said you'd be. And even then, I thought it was just in the past.

"Except the pieces didn't add up. I realized you didn't

know. That's why I told you as soon as I found out. And I can give you all the details. What holes I discovered. How I uncovered them. I swear I never did anything with information except try and make sure it got back to you, but I can help you fix it."

Jared's pride surged in on his hurt. He'd already fixed anything that was there. He'd been through that fucking system so many times in the past six months, he had no doubt it was solid. Especially after listening to her every time she'd talked about what kinds of unseen holes could be in networks. He'd taken every hint from anything she'd said and applied it. The last thing he needed was her help, or anything that meant spending more time with her.

He couldn't meet her hopeful eyes. He pushed back from the table, focusing on the irritation coursing through him. "I'm done here."

He put as much distance between himself and the coffee shop as quickly as he could. At least the show was wrapping up for the day, so he didn't have to meet with, or pretend to be civil to anyone else. He was starting to regret that the three of them were sticking around through the weekend just to enjoy Vegas.

He ignored Mikki's weak protest behind him as he wove through the crowds. The night before and this morning ran in a non-terminating loop in his head.

He walked without purpose, letting his feet pick the direction.

How had he missed so much? The signs about his nonexistent chances at promotion. Getting hooked on a woman who'd lied to him, used him, and betrayed him. Buying into the delusion that she had the right idea about work and life.

And still a part of his mind reminded him she didn't have to track him down last night or today. Whispered she'd seemed to be as into him as he was into her.

The words sank under his annoyance. Into her. The thought hit him harder than he expected, and a sharp pang ticked in his chest. Was he actually falling for her? The

revelation tumbled in on top of the question, and he ground to a stop in the middle of the foot traffic. How fucking stupid was he?

“Watch it asshole.” Someone jostled him from behind, and then someone else.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts, but it didn't work. She was flighty and impulsive and unpredictable. She was too young, worked for the competition, and wore sheer red lace to business dinners. Oh, and she thought breaking and entering was fun.

He stepped aside in the Skriddie booth and gave Tate a weak smile. Apparently the sales meetings had finished.

Tate joined him, dropping his voice so only Jared could hear. “V tells me you were Karened.”

Great. Now my past is a verb. A growl rolled through Jared. This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have anywhere, but especially not in public. Still, the answer rose to his tongue. “She didn't tell you that. She doesn't think the two are the same at all.”

He wasn't sure how he knew that, or why he said it. They were similar enough that it didn't matter. And why was he delving into this? He'd already made up his mind.

“She didn't use those exact words. She didn't use many at all.” Tate and Viv frequently didn't see eye to eye, so Jared wasn't surprised the conversation had been brief.

“She probably told the story better than I would have,” Jared said.

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry it came to this.” Tate kept his voice low. “You know what I say about business and pleasure, but I'm still sorry.”

Jared wouldn't mind going the rest of the day without one of his friends pointing out how they thought the physical part of this mess had been stupid. He knew that, and it hurt a lot less to focus on the ethical issues he had with the entire thing. Still, he couldn't take his frustrations out on them.

He could make his excuses and walk away long enough to get his head on straight, though. “Yeah, thanks. I need...”

What? The words died in his throat, assaulted by an avalanche of conflicted thoughts. He shook the jumble away. "I need to get some work done."

"Sure." Tate shrugged. Jared turned away. Tate's next question made him pause. "Would you have done it?"

Jared bit back a sigh. He didn't want to delve into this. "Done what?"

"Say you're up for the job of a lifetime, at least so far in your career. You can't get your foot in the door because you're young and inexperienced on paper, but you've found a place that looks promising. They say prove your skill, and you realize you're on a Microsoft network."

Jared clenched his jaw, not liking where the question was going.

"Do you really walk away and not touch it? Even if you don't work with the company after, because ethics. Do you really keep your fingers by your sides and not even test your skill?"

"I thought you were on my side." Jared didn't like the immature sound of his own response, but it was better than letting himself admit what his answer was to the question.

"I am," Tate replied. "The last thing I want is to see you devastated like last time. And not just because you're a superior ass when you're heartbroken."

"Thanks." Jared spat the word out. He wasn't heartbroken. Furious. Betrayed. Pissed off beyond belief. But not heartbroken. He strode away without another word, not sure what else to say.

The longer he wandered, the more his friends' words gnawed at him. Their logic mingled with Mikki's apology. It was true, both had warned him away from her in their own way. But neither seemed to think it was reasonable to hold her transgression against her.

He couldn't let it go, though. This wasn't the kind of thing he could just forgive. That realization warred with the bits of him that adored Mikki. It had been a fling, a stupid decision, and something he needed to put in the past now.

If it had really been just a fling, his chest wouldn't ache this much. He wouldn't keep coming back to how much it hurt that she'd betrayed him, even if she hadn't done it intentionally.

And he wouldn't be itching to talk to her again. To see if this could actually be made right. Stupid, fucking, irrational attachment. Goddammit, why did he have to want her in his life so badly?

Chapter Seventeen

Mikki couldn't believe she'd started to fall at all, let alone so hard it was going to leave bruises on her psyche. A stupid fucking hookup, apparently wrapped in a tremendous lie of her own making, and she'd sunk into it.

For the last four hours, she'd replayed her apologies in her head. Or at least the bits from last night she remembered. It had been the perfect background music to packing up the NSS booth and private conference room. Replaying Jared's disdain. Looping his dismissal.

She tossed a wound-up network cable against the wall, where it clattered harmlessly into the box below. Yup, it was the perfect series of thoughts to keep her company.

She didn't blame him for being furious. She would be too. It didn't matter how much she'd tried to tell herself their opinions were inconsequential. For the first time since she'd entered the industry, she'd met people she respected, and now she'd destroyed any ties with them.

She was stuck in a job with a shitty, lying, asshole boss, who'd made it clear he wasn't giving her references anywhere else. She'd destroyed her personal and professional lives just like that. Poof.

Maybe Payton had been right. She was awfully stupid for someone so smart.

"Do you have a minute?"

She jumped at Jared's question, pulse screaming into overdrive, only partly because she was startled. Calm down. He probably wanted details about her hack after all. He'd want to fix his network, not their relationship. She had a feeling there was no fixing them, even on a friendship level, let alone more. She faced him, unable to think enough to know how she should look or react.

He was lounged against the door frame, watching her, expression flat and guarded. "Is now a good time?"

She might as well get whatever this was over with. She nodded.

“In private?”

She nodded again. Where the hell was her voice?

He kicked the doorstep out of the way and stepped inside before the door swung shut. “Are you flying out tonight?”

“No.” She managed to force the single word past her lips but couldn’t hide her cringe at how weak it sounded. She swallowed. “Later tomorrow. I’m part of the cleanup crew.”

He bounced on his toes, still hovering near the door. “That’s nice.”

What did he want? Was he hoping for more of an apology? Was this his way of digging in the knife? She certainly deserved it. But nothing in their short time together convinced her he was like that. “You?”

“We’re here all weekend. Probably to see more of the sights and ignore work for a few days.”

“Awesome.” She couldn’t play this game. Whatever he was up to, she wouldn’t let it devour her. It needed to be out in the open. “What can I do for you?”

A tremor ran through his laugh. “That’s a loaded question.”

Was he nervous? That didn’t feel right. She shrugged, not sure how to respond.

He took a few steps but still kept his distance. “The other night you asked me about my past. You spilled your guts, I shrugged you off.”

She had no idea where he was going with a line like that, but it was better than his barely controlled disgust, so she let him talk.

“That shit people say when they talk about what I did all those years ago. The stuff I assume you learned in school. I’m not some great, genius mastermind. Don’t get me wrong—” he looked at her, the corner of his mouth tugging up for the briefest moment before the smile vanished, “—it was impressive, groundbreaking shit. I knew what I was doing.”

A tiny laugh slipped from her throat, driven by too much mounting tension, and she swallowed it back. “I don’t doubt it for a second.”

He gazed past her, at something she assumed wasn't there, and then shook his head. The focus returned to his eyes. "I didn't do it to get my name in textbooks, or even to impress anyone. I did it out of spite. There was a woman—Karen—who was like no one I've met before or since."

Mikki's gut clenched at the implication there was someone in the past she'd never measure up to, and she bit the inside of her cheek. Not that it should matter. She and Jared were so finished they'd never really started. The reassurance didn't stop her heart from aching.

"She used to tell me everything I wanted to hear." The clouded expression returned to his eyes, as if he'd stepped out of the room and into another place. "About work, and life, and all of it."

Did he want someone like that? Mikki recoiled at the thought. Half their relationship had been about her challenging everything he said. But the idea of coddling anyone's ego left a sour taste in her mouth. "I see."

"It was horrible," Jared said. "I didn't believe so at the time, but I hated it. I didn't have to think when she was around. Or grow, or change. I just had to be. But all I knew then was I had someone who adored and worshipped me. I was in love, and I was going to propose, and we were going to live happily ever after."

A stone sank in her gut at the word "love." He'd felt that for someone once. Obviously not someone he was with anymore, but the knowledge still dug deep. I adore and worship you. She swallowed the retort before it could spill out. Probably not the right thing to say.

He met her gaze, jaw clenched. "Except she didn't mean any of it. I mean, maybe she did once upon a time, but I have a hard time believing it. She..." He drew in a shuddering breath, and then exhaled slowly. "She worked for NetSafe Systems, of all companies, who at the time was in a completely different industry than we were. About three weeks before we were set to launch a new offering I'd been lead on, they released something almost identical. Not just similar. Not as in, okay,

there's an industry need for this, and we both thought of it. Their early demos had my wording on them. They approached our clients before we did. She was operating off everything she'd taken from my computer.

"I didn't come up with this 'amazing revolutionary code' because I was some genius kid looking to make his mark on the world. I did it to spite her. To prove she hadn't beaten me, and to save my career at the same time."

Mikki's insides twisted in on themselves. He'd been comparing her to an ex-girlfriend in pretty much every way imaginable, and now she was guilty of a similar betrayal. Except, she wasn't. Defiance surged inside. Even if he thought the worst of her—a concept she wasn't happy with—she wasn't going to be lumped into the same category as this other woman.

"I'm sorry." She struggled to find her voice, but once she grasped the words they spilled out. "I'm sorry someone screwed you over. I'm sorry no one told you what I did, including me." She breathed deep and let momentum carry her. "But I didn't steal anything from you. I never set out to hurt you. It's true, I was a little naïve and reckless about the entire situation—"

"A little?"

She glared at him. "But I never did any of it for money, or vindictively. And my attraction for you now isn't based on what you did back then, or work. Yeah, I idolized you. But turns out, you're not some god on a pedestal. You're a regular, normal, sexy, intelligent..." She ducked her head at his raised brows and her voice dropped. "You know what I mean."

"I've learned not to take that for granted." His voice carried no emotion. "Trying to assume what you mean, that is. It's one of the things I adore about you."

She risked a glance up, eyes growing wide when she saw the intensity in his gaze.

His impassive expression yielded to a soft smile. "I know we just met a couple of days ago, but I'm struggling with how dull my life is going to seem if I never see you again."

The words clicked in her brain, returning a syntax error. She examined them again, and a gentle warmth nudged aside the knot that had moved into her gut. "Really?"

"What makes that so hard to believe? You're intelligent, fun, unconventional." His gaze raked over her. "And sexy as fuck."

The words pushed aside more of her stress, but not her reservations. "But what about what you said this morning? What about what I did?"

"We're not okay." Those three words hurt more than any others he'd said. "This isn't the kind of thing that just gets shrugged off, even if you are all about living for the moment. But I know I'd be missing out if I walked away now."

Her breath hitched at the honesty, and her pulse quickened. "I can't argue with that."

He crossed the remaining space between them.

He raised his hand to the side of her head and tugged the short braid she'd pulled her red streak into. "I guess my point is, I don't want us to be over yet."

The confession was vague, but she wasn't about a detailed plan anyway, and the words pushed aside the tension that had haunted her all day. "Yeah, me too."

His lips moved against the top of her head, and his voice held a raw edge. "How much of your time can I steal before you fly out tomorrow?"

All of it. Hayden could rot in hell for all she cared. But she wasn't quite impulsive enough to stick someone else with her to-do list. Animosity toward her boss aside, no one else needed to be cleaning up her messes today. "I'm almost done here. Another couple of hours tops."

"Will you let me make a plan this time? Buy you dinner, learn about you, pretend we're normal people?"

"Lose the pretending-to-be-normal thing, and I guess. Just this once. Pick me up at my room at seven?"

He kissed her hard, holding her tight for a moment before releasing her. "I'll be there."

Chapter Eighteen

Jared's phone buzzed in his pocket. He should have given Mikki his number. He couldn't help his smile at the thought. Great, he was acting like a crushing teenager. Which, when he thought about it, wasn't as much of an issue as it should have been.

He pulled up the text from Dewson, and his gut turned in on itself. We're infected.

Maybe it wasn't a big deal. Sometimes someone clicked something in an email, and it was always isolated immediately. It had been almost twenty-four hours since he'd asked Dewson to look into the rumors Rosen had mentioned. This couldn't be related. He sent back a reply. How bad?

Trojan. Database array.

Shit. His mind was already whirring ahead several steps, even while he executed each thing that needed to be done now. Are we clean now?

Probably. Need a second set of eyes.

A directory of names ticked through his head. Who could check Dewson's work? His staff was small, but they were all good at what they did. No, he'd do this one himself. Another question slammed into the forefront of his thoughts, pushing all his lists and plotting to the side.

It died at the tip of his tongue. Something told him he didn't want to know the answer, but that was ridiculous. It wasn't like it mattered. Still, he had to force his fingers to type it out. Do we know where it came from?

Jared had stepped aside from the flow of traffic and had all his attention focused on his phone. The seconds ticked away, and his hands twitched. How long did it take to type out a name, or a "no"?

When his phone finally vibrated, he jumped. Tension ached in his temples. You.

A bitter laugh slipped from his throat. If his promotion hadn't already been shot, it would have been now.

More digging uncovered that the message had his name

on it, and someone in IT had opened it and clicked the link, but after having Dewson forward the appropriate information along—message headers and such—he knew it hadn't come from his computer or phone.

But it was an amazing imitation. Who knew how to do something like that? Jared pushed aside the nagging in the back of his head. It was an old scar. Resurfacing insecurities. Mikki may have been at the root of the original problem, but just finding out he didn't know about that simple indiscretion had torn her up. Hadn't it? There was no way she was doing something actually vindictive.

He told Dewson he'd take care of the rest—double-checking to make sure the virus was gone, figuring out what systems had been breached, and uncovering out how someone had tricked their network into believing the email was from him.

He took a deep breath and corralled the rambling bullshit to the back of his thoughts. If they were home, he'd take point on something this serious and his people would back him up. But he wasn't trusting it to anyone except himself and his friends. Tate and Vivian could keep up under his direction, despite their different career paths. Between the three of them, they would make this right.

Within minutes, they were waiting for him in a quiet corner of the hotel lobby. He gave them the lowdown as quickly as possible.

Vivian's brow creased with concern. "You're okay, right?"

Besides stressed, concerned, and a little wounded that this had happened under his watch, it was all status quo. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She wouldn't meet his gaze.

Tate cleared his throat, and Jared's head swung in that direction.

Tate shrugged. "This kind of violation isn't exactly easy to pull off, is it?"

"You know it's not."

Tate glanced at Vivian, but she was still fiddling with her

purse. He looked back at Jared. "So who would love to see us fall? Who has someone working for them who knows how to do something like this?"

He was asking if Mikki was behind this. Jared wanted to snap at him for the assumption. What he hated even more was that part of him was asking the same question, even though she'd just finished apologizing.

He stashed the doubt. "If someone on Hayden's side did this, we'll shut them down. First, we have to make sure we're clean, we have to make sure this won't happen again, and we have to do it now. Where can we set up?"

Tate's face twitched with a bitter smile. "I've got the high roller suite. A lot more room to spread out."

"Good call." Jared glanced at Vivian. "Grab your laptop. Track down the concierge and see where we can find a couple of clean ones as well. Out of the box. Nearest Fry's, Walmart, whatever. I'll grab the secure hotspot."

"Right. I'll meet you both upstairs as soon as I can." Vivian turned away even as she spoke.

A hollow ache throbbed under Jared's ribcage. It wasn't true. This was bad luck, and it had nothing to do with Mikki. Except it did. Even if it didn't come directly from her, her carelessness, combined with a scary knack for the obtuse, could have made this happen. He shoved the thoughts aside. Wallowing could wait.

"Can we get Legal on the phone?" he asked as he and Tate made their way to the elevators.

"Can you prove NetSys is behind this? Like undeniable, someone's-grandpa-could-understand-it proof?"

Jared clenched his teeth. They both knew proof was almost impossible. Some hackers signed their names, but not usually those involved in corporate espionage. Besides, right now it all pointed back to Jared anyway. Unless they could pinpoint where the infected message had actually come from, there was no point in doing anything besides plugging the hole as quickly as possible.

Mikki set her phone on the counter in the bathroom and cranked the volume. It wasn't as good as having it attached to the docking station she had back home, but the echo of the tiles gave her enough to sing along with. She wiped the steam from the mirror. Happy eyes and cheeks flushed with the heat of her shower stared back. She'd finished clearing up their display in the exhibit hall early and rushed back to her room, giddy with fantasies of the night ahead of her. She'd tried to take her time in the shower so she wouldn't have to wait long. Her clock told her she still had more than an hour until Jared would be there, though.

Blow-drying her hair only took up fifteen minutes. She stared at her luggage. Now, what to wear? After examining and discarding every piece of clothing she'd packed, she sank onto the bed. Maybe she should have thought of that earlier. Stopped by one of the casino shops and picked up something sexy. She absentmindedly twirled the belt of her robe around her finger, sliding the red satin back and forth.

She looked down at the kimono-style robe. Then stood and spun, examining herself from every angle in the mirror above the desk. The thought of opening the door for him dressed in nothing but the robe sent a rush of excitement through her. She needed to calm down a little. He'd mentioned dinner and conversation. And as much as she loved the memories of what he could do to her body, she was looking forward to some more in-depth getting to know each other as well.

Her imagination wanted something else. She perched on the edge of her bed, legs crossed.

The minutes passed, and the clock rolled past seven. Something twinged inside as the time hit five minutes late, and then ten. He was just tied up, right? She knew how busy he was. Something had snagged his attention. He couldn't let her know because he was on the phone or in a meeting.

And didn't have her number. The thought rolled through her head, taunting her. But trailing behind came another, much

better one. She did have his. She'd snagged business cards from pretty much every booth at the show, and his was in the stack.

Seconds later, she dug his card out and had his number in her phone. Her thumbs hesitated above the screen. Would she seem needy if she sent him a message? He was probably on his way up now. Right? She glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes late. No, this would be okay. She sent him a quick text. It's Mikki. Just making sure everything's okay.

Another half an hour ticked by, and nothing. Sick dread nudged her senses. He'd said they weren't completely okay but had still forgiven her. Had he changed his mind? Had the few hours apart given him a new perspective on how badly she'd fucked up?

She was overreacting. There was nothing wrong. Sometimes life happened. She set him another quick note. You all right? Where are you?

Which was okay, right? They hadn't exactly defined their relationship this afternoon, but she assumed when he said he wanted to see more of her, he'd meant it.

Except an hour after she sent the message, and still had no response, she wasn't so sure. She clicked on the TV and cycled through the channels two times before she realized she had no idea what she'd just seen on any of them. Another hour passed. He wasn't coming. Whatever was going on, he wasn't going to show up.

She set her phone on the nightstand and lay on her stomach on the bed. Crime drama. That should take her mind off things. Classic, straightforward whodunit with a smattering of interrogation and court room drama. The victim had been killed by his business partner, who had been sleeping with the victim's wife, and embezzling from their company.

Mikki clicked the channel to something with cartoons instead. The inanities and three nights of almost no sleep combined with her wounded disappointment and pulled her eyelids shut.

A loud hum tore through the room, jarring her awake. She

stared around her room, blinking away the sleep. What the hell? She turned toward the nightstand. A sad giggle escaped. It was just her phone vibrating against the solid surface.

She grabbed the device, not able to suppress her hope. It was Jared. It had to be. He had a good excuse. Her gut sank when she read the message. It was definitely him, all right.

His note just said, Cleaning up your mess. A Trojan, really?

She clicked the words around in her head, looking for a meaning. She knew what they meant, but how did it relate to her? Realization crashed in around her, and she sank to the floor. Someone had exploited what she'd found. It was the most plausible reason she could think of for why he'd be blaming her. Someone who'd known all the details of what she'd uncovered and had access to her phone less than twenty-four hours ago.

Her hands were shaking as she pulled up her phone's email history. There it was, sitting in a file that was deleted but still hiding on her phone, with Jared's email information spoofed as headers. Whoever had used her phone to do this hadn't even bothered to cover his tracks.

She pulled up Hayden's number, her raging fury making it difficult to even think. He'd still be on his flight, but he always checked his messages as soon as he landed. She didn't try to keep her voice steady. It took enough effort to keep a string of profanities and cruel names from flying to her lips. "It's Mikki. I know it'll be late when you get in, but I thought you'd like to know sooner rather than later. I quit."

All his warnings about her finding other work faded into the back of her mind. This was unacceptable. It bordered on illegal. She couldn't draw a paycheck from these people even if it did mean finding another job would be a struggle.

She pulled herself into the easy chair next to the bed and turned her attention back to the TV. Cleaning up your mess. Jared's text echoed in her thoughts. She hadn't meant to cause a mess. It was never supposed to be like this. This was more than the simplicity of her wanting to know if she was better than the legendary Jared Tippins; it impacted an entire

company. The livelihood of thousands of people.

She needed to find Jared and make things right. It didn't matter that sleep tugged at her senses. Rest could wait until this entire thing was straightened out.

She pulled on some clothes, grabbed her phone and her room key, and headed straight for the elevator. Hopefully Jared would be in his room. She had to help him make this right.

She pounded as loud as she dared without drawing attention from the neighbors and staff. Her gut sank further when there was no answer. Now what?

When her phone vibrated against her hip, it jarred her from the edge of panic. She didn't check the display, hitting answer on autopilot while her brain whirred for solutions on where to look for Jared next. "Hello?" Her voice cracked, and she winced.

"Everything all right?" Hayden's cheerful tone sharpened the edge of her exhaustion.

Any restraint she'd used earlier was lost in the haze of exhaustion and frustration. Time to be blunt. "No, it's not. Things have moved past bad and straight into fucked up."

His chuckle drifted over the phone line and sent ice dragging up her spine. "Then maybe you should have been more selective about how you landed your job." His tone was steel. "I've tried to put this politely, and I've tried to hint. You're smart. I figured you got what I was implying. The signing bonus was to help soothe your conscience. The fact you've kept quiet for six months implies you didn't want to be found out. That you fucked their director of technology and still didn't say anything indicates you're getting off on the entire thing. If you quit now, you'll never work tech again. Not just in this industry, but in any. Just like the guy who interviewed you. And your resignation is accepted, by the way."

The line clicked off, and Mikki stared at the device in her hands. Rage, fear, and nausea all rolled inside. She didn't know how she was going to make this better, but if it was the equivalent of spitting in Hayden's face and helped Jared out at the same time, she'd sacrifice a lot to make it happen.

Chapter Nineteen

Jared stared at the laptop in front of him, and tried to blink some moisture back into his eyes. Vivian's phone sat in the middle of the table, speaker on and cable running back to her machine to keep it charged. The clack of keys filled the room. Occasionally Dewson would report something, or one of them would snap out a question or command, but for the most part, they kept their heads down.

When he'd gotten Mikki's first text several hours ago, the rest of his doubt had been obliterated. The message headers matched. The email—the one pretending to be him—had come from her phone.

He didn't want to believe it. It devoured every thread of his consciousness not already dedicated to fixing the problem at hand. He'd really fallen for it again. Not in a million years would he have ever guessed...

Then again, that seemed to be his curse. It really was true—what his parents had between each other, the love he'd grown up around—that was the shit of fairy tales.

He hadn't been able to tell his friends the newest information. Vivian at least thought highly of her. They could deal with that after. The only thing he didn't understand was the shitty job she'd done covering her tracks. Six months ago, he hadn't seen a trace anyone had been on his network. This had her name stamped on it. Literally. Was she mocking him? He didn't want to believe it, but he also couldn't ignore the possibility.

He raked his fingers through his hair. He needed to focus on work. Where was the hole that had allowed the Trojan onto their network? What was he missing? Maybe Rosen had been right; he'd been out of the tech for too long. At least the network was clean, as far as they could tell. That was killing him, too. Not only could they not find the holes in their network, they didn't even know if they'd completely removed the immediate threat.

"Next steps?" The exhaustion in Tate's voice reflected the

weary atmosphere of the entire room. It was barely eleven, but they'd been at this for hours, only breaking long enough to down another can of Red Bull or cup of coffee. For about thirty seconds, he'd considered using the former to make the latter. Fortunately, he wasn't that exhausted. Yet.

Would Mikki do something like make coffee with Red Bull? He hated himself the moment the thought passed through his head. He'd managed to keep from thinking her name all night, and now there it was, flooding back in and taunting him. Maybe that was what he needed to do. Think like her.

Sexy, alluring, deceptive... He pushed the string of words aside. Later. Wallow later. Impulsive, fickle, and fleeting. There was the mindset he needed. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply—one...two...three times, trying to push away all the indoctrination he'd picked up over the years. If he was just some person, someone who had the skill and intelligence, but not the corporate experience, where would he poke around for holes?

Her words echoed in his head. Remote computers. Machines you wouldn't ever expect to have access to your deepest, most important information. He focused on the room again, gaze pausing on Tate. "Check the virtual machines quality assurance uses. You're looking at database users. Accounts with no passwords, admin access, shit like that." He turned to Vivian. "Same thing, focus group VM's. Dewson."

The drowsy "Yeah?" echoed off the glass coffee table.

"Every fucking administrative assistant we have. Ours, reception, all of them."

That was it. It had to be. Hope surged inside as he dove into his own work, searching and scanning the same things he'd ordered everyone else to do.

Except an hour later, no one had anything. It was all tight and secure. He flopped his head back against the couch, letting a frustrated grunt escape. "Fuck."

A knock echoed through the room. Jared shot a questioning glance at Tate.

His friend shrugged and nodded at the tray on the table.

“Room service was already here, and even if it wasn’t the middle of the night, I told the front desk to give us some quiet—including housekeeping.”

Vivian sighed and stood. “Staring at each other isn’t going to answer the ‘who’ question, and we’re obviously at a standstill, so an interruption won’t hurt.” She pressed her eye to the peephole and muttered, “Well then. Didn’t expect that.”

Jared’s gut sank, rage twisting with betrayal. He didn’t have to ask who it was.

“We’re kind of busy for a booty call.” Tate’s comment barely reached Jared’s ears through the scream of his thoughts.

What the hell was she doing there? Rubbing it in? The latch clicked, and the hinges squeaked. He didn’t want to look, but he couldn’t help it. There was Mikki, standing in the doorway. Even across the room he could see the circles under eyes. Her shoulders were hunched. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, gaze darting everywhere. Every time she reached him, she skipped past, never making eye contact. “I want to help.”

Vivian opened the door wider.

Jared’s protest stuck in his throat. He should be ordering her to leave. Ignoring everything she said. But that tiny little voice in the back of his head refused to accept all the facts at face value. Mikki stepped into the room, and the door swung shut behind her.

Vivian nodded at Jared before she turned away. “It’s his show, it’s not my call.”

Apparently it was her call, at least on some level. He fixed his most damning glare on Vivian, who shrugged it off and settled back onto the couch across from him. Maybe he should have told them there was evidence to back up their suspicions of where this had come from.

A heavy silence descended on the room, filling Jared’s lungs until he thought it might suffocate him. He forced himself to breathe but still couldn’t look at her. “How did you find the room?”

“It’s um...luck?”

“We have work to do.” Jared couldn’t keep his exhaustion from his voice. “You hacked another computer so you could come tell us you’re sorry for hacking ours?”

He finally forced himself to look at Mikki. Even being as furious with her as he was, she still spoke to parts of him which were desperately infatuated with her.

Her shoulders straightened, though she continued to shift from foot to foot. “People talk. You know that, right? Hayden. I mean, apparently not about the significant things like corporate espionage and ethical violations, but he does talk. I’ve never figured out if he hates you three or wants to blow you.”

Vivian snorted, and one corner of Mikki’s mouth twitched, but her expression didn’t shift. “Which is how I know one of you is a high roller. They only have so many of those rooms, at least the really nice ones, in this hotel. And logic dictates it’s more likely the one with the Red Bull on the tray outside the door than the empty champagne bottle.”

Jared’s brows rose. She was more observant than she gave herself credit for. Not that it mattered at this point.

“You still have to have a card to get up to this floor,” Tate countered.

Her gaze faltered, but only for a moment. “If you step onto an elevator someone else calls, and look like you know where you’re going, no one questions whether or not you belong up here.”

Jared rubbed his eyes. The contacts would have to come out soon. Fortunately, he had a spare set of glasses in his laptop case. “Why are you here?”

“I told you. I want to help.”

He was on his feet in an instant, crossing the room in a few short strides and stopping less than foot away from her. Her eyes grew wide, but she didn’t move. He couldn’t keep the anger and irritation out of his voice. “I’m pretty sure that’s how this started. You wanted to help someone.”

Her chin quivered, but she regained her composure quickly. “I can tell you everything they know. I can tell you

more than they know. I can show you all three weak spots, and where I assume another two exist.”

Her confidence, the quiet but firm voice, and the fact part of him still couldn't hate her, made something inside Jared snap. He didn't try and hide it when he spoke. “Is this fun for you? Is that why you did it? And now you're here to hold it over our heads? I didn't peg you as a sadist. Did you plant the Trojan yesterday for challenge too? To prove you could do it?”

Her face went blank, the color vanished from her cheeks, and even as she shook her head, her eyes never left his. “You don't think that little of my skill, do you? Thirty seconds after you mentioned a virus, I found what I assume is the same thing you did. That someone else used my phone to set us both up. I'm reckless, but I'm not stupid.” She licked her lips and bit the inside of her cheek. “And I quit by the way. About the moment I realized what had happened. Told Hayden he could shove his job.”

Fuck. If he hadn't believed her before, that really drove her point home. It didn't make the situation any less stressful, or alleviate his anger. He just needed a new focus for it. “So what are we missing? We've been through every inch of the blade array, and there's nothing.”

“The holes aren't in your data center.” She was standing straight now, defiance flashing in her eyes. It was the same sense of challenge he'd seen the night they met. Had it really been less than seventy-two hours?

Disappointment rushed through him. He turned away and headed back to his spot on the couch. “I kind of figured. We've checked everywhere.”

“You'll need someone on site. Is anyone on call?”

“Dewson, you still with us?” He'd been hollowed out. The pain was vanishing. The anger. The exhaustion. He didn't feel anything.

“Present. Barely.”

“Listen to the lady,” he told Dewson. He couldn't believe he was turning this over to her. “Do what she says.”

Mikki had followed him and stood a few feet back from the

circle of furniture. “You have a handful of machines—probably marketing or accounting, since they’re full of profit-loss projections. That’s your first weakness.”

This was useless. Now she was just mocking him. At least before she’d arrived, they’d been spinning their wheels in useful directions. “Marketing doesn’t have access to the data center.”

Her jaw clenched. “Number two, you have a server, probably call-center based, with no admin password.”

Jared bit back a snarl. “Call center operates on its own domain. It doesn’t touch us.”

“And then there’s the Exchange server.”

This was bullshit. There was no way their email was an issue. “If you’re not really here to hel—”

“Stuff your ego back in your pants.” Her nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed. “I’m sorry. For everything, the stuff I did on purpose, the stuff I chose to ignore, the stuff I never saw coming. But I’m not here because I like you glaring at me. All of you. I want to make it better. If you don’t want to know what I know, I can leave.”

He locked his gaze on hers, half scowling, half searching for answers he knew he wouldn’t find. An eerie silence settled into the room. He nodded to an empty chair, jaw clenched. He wanted to ignore her, except every one of the things she’d mentioned could be a real problem. It was what he’d been searching for, just in a different place. Fuck. “Do what she says.”

Chapter Twenty

Jared rolled his neck and stretched his arms above his head. Muscles protested and joints argued as he tried to force out the kinks of falling asleep on the hotel room couch. At least the silence was pleasant. A glance at his phone told him it was almost nine. Later than he'd slept in years. Then again, they hadn't pulled an all-nighter since...

The Karen incident, right. His creeping good mood vanished under a wash of too many emotions to identify. He let his attention trip around the room while he tried to work the knots from his arms. The suite was a wreck. Cups, cans, and picked-at snack platters littered the coffee table.

His heart sank when he looked further. On the opposite couch, Vivian had fallen asleep mostly sitting up, and Mikki was curled up next to her, head in her lap.

They'd fixed it. Plugged every hole and set measures in place to prevent a series of new ones. He was confident in that. Too bad he wasn't as confident about anything else. He pulled his gaze from the sleeping brunette. The last thing he needed was one more memory seared into his thoughts of another mistake.

But there was one thing he had to admit. It was the one thing he had Mikki to thank for, even if everything else was a wreck. She'd reminded him why he did this. That he'd gotten into this line of work for the challenge, for the way he worked with his friends, and because it pushed his limits mentally, and he loved it.

There would be other promotions. He'd already dedicated a portion of his brain to figuring out how to get Skriddie to add a CTO position to their list of executives, but until then and even after, he wasn't going to lose track of his roots again. What made him love his work.

He wandered to the sink in the kitchenette, grabbed a glass, and downed the lukewarm tap water in a single swallow. It wasn't the most exquisite drink ever, but it did help his throat loosen up. He splashed his face and reached blindly for a

towel. He raised an eyebrow when one landed in his hand, and dried his face off enough to open his eyes.

Tate sat on the counter next to him, staring at something in the living room. His voice was low when he spoke. "You know how many guys would give their right nut to wake up to that?"

"Because they haven't had to." Jared didn't have to turn to see he was talking about the two sleeping women, and honestly, the last thing he wanted to do was see Mikki any more than he had to. Second to last was having this conversation.

"Ouch." Tate blew a strand of blond off his forehead. "She saved us."

Jared shook his head. Warm fuzzies aside, he was still struggling with what Mikki had done. Even if she hadn't done it maliciously, she still wasn't innocent. "She almost ruined us."

"Yeah, but—"

"I'm going back to my room to shower." Jared tossed the hand towel at Tate and pushed away from the counter, spinning back toward the living room. He managed to hide his shock when he saw Vivian was awake and sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar. Mikki was upright now, too. Still on the couch. Legs drawn to her chest.

"He's got a point," Vivian said. "She didn't have to track us down. Yet here she is."

Jared looked back and forth between his friends. And to the sunlight streaming through the window. And the doors at the far end of the room. Anywhere but the dark eyes watching him from Mikki's expressionless face.

Vivian leaned forward, but her voice was distinct enough to carry through the entire room. "I can have an offer letter ready by ten on Monday."

Mikki's jaw dropped, and she stared at Vivian. Her voice was tiny in the large room. "For me? Why would you—"

"Whoa." Jared shook his head. "How did we go from 'oh fuck, we're screwed' to 'come work for us?'?"

Vivian's brows rose. "Have you heard anything I've said

for the last two days?”

“Really, she hasn’t shut up about it.” Tate tossed the towel back at him and moved to stand near the balcony. His gaze was directed outside, but it was clear from the angle of his body he was still part of the conversation.

Jared couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “A person can’t just make a mistake like that and hope it all goes away with an apology and a bit of hard work.”

“Not that you’d know from experience.” Sarcasm dripped from Vivian’s every word. “You’d never make a mistake like that. And then spin your entire career off it. What is it they say about you? That you’re a demi-god on college campuses?”

“Deity,” Tate offered.

Jared didn’t need this. “Why the fuck are we having this conversation while she’s still here?” Guilt followed the almost-yell. Better question, why did he feel so bad for snapping? It had nothing to do with the fact that as much as he was trying to ignore Mikki, his gaze kept drifting back to her. The sorrow and apology in her dark eyes. That his friends were making more sense than him. And it had nothing to do with how much of an ass he was being.

“Because it’s rude to talk about someone behind their back,” Vivian offered.

Jared ground his teeth, trying to maintain his composure while he spoke. He finally forced his gaze to stay on Mikki. To keep his stare hard and demand the rest of him feel the same coldness. “It’s nice you helped make it better. We all appreciate last night.” He let the ice from his tone flow through his veins. “But sometimes after the fact isn’t enough. This wasn’t an apologize-and-forget-it mistake. A lot of people might have found themselves out of work.”

It was only a slight exaggeration. If someone had exploited the virus before they’d obliterated it, or if someone more malicious than Hayden—he shuddered at the thought—had known about the security holes, it could have cost the company millions.

“You can’t live life one minute to the next, hoping it will all

work out.” Each word tasted bitter on his tongue, but it was true. “Sometimes being impulsive has terrible consequences you have to live with. And I don’t know how Vivian, or anyone, could trust a job—especially in security—to someone who doesn’t know the difference between ethics and a challenge.”

Vivian’s tone was sharp. “That’s not—”

“He’s completely right.” Mikki finally spoke. She uncurled herself from the couch pulled her stare from Jared. “You should be all set now. I have a plane to catch in a little while.”

The moment the door clicked shut behind her, Tate tossed the towel back at him, full force. It fluttered to the floor before it reached its destination.

“You’re an ass.” Vivian pushed away from the counter. “I’m going back to my room to clean up. Do we need to get early flights out of here?”

So he could head home and spend the rest of the weekend alone with his thoughts? Even hanging out with pissed-off friends was a better option. “We can stay the weekend. We’re in the clear.”

“Wow, I wonder how that happened. No, wait, I don’t. I was there. Are you sure you were?” Tate turned toward the bedroom. “I’m going back to bed for a few hours.” He paused halfway to the door. “I know you think that stupid fucking logic of yours is going to save you from yourself.”

Great, the lecture was taking on a new tier. That was what Jared needed—to hear Tate talk about how love wasn’t a business negotiation. “I’m going now.”

Tate faced him again. “She’s nothing like Karen. Mikki’s her own person. I can’t fathom she’s ever catered to your ego just to make you happy, and I’d never bet on her to back down if she knew she was right. Oh, and there’s her honesty. The list goes on. In fact, the only thing they have in common is they worked for the same company. You and Mikki, the two of you have sparks. Sorry to sound cliché, but every time you’re together, they’re bright, they’re electric, and you feed each other.” And with that, he vanished into his room and the door swung shut behind him.

“You think you’re the only person suffering here?” Vivian asked. She stood near the door, arms crossed, glare fixed on him.

“Really?” He couldn’t hide the disbelief in his voice. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? Everyone suffers for this. She almost destroyed lives.”

“Melodramatic much? And I meant her.”

“You’re taking the sympathy a bit too far, Viv. And it’s not melodramatic. She could have collapsed the entire fucking company because she wanted to see what she was capable of.”

She gave him a smile he knew from experience was laced with condescension. “Do you really still blame her for the Trojan?”

His thoughts ground to a halt, tripping over the sudden shift in conversation. He’d completely forgotten. One more thing to be furious about. “Even if she didn’t plant it, she’s not innocent.”

“You know those assholes look for every chance they can find to make us look bad.” She had a point. Hayden didn’t have to be technical if Mikki had laid out every detail for him, hoping it would help someone tell Skriddie how to fix the problem. He knew enough to manage a technical team. That was all the knowledge it would take.

“Do you really think she’d leave fingerprints, and then come groveling for forgiveness?” Vivian asked.

It didn’t matter that all the pieces pointed to Hayden. He couldn’t forgive this, and he wouldn’t be suckered again. He fixed a cold smile on her. “But she didn’t ask for forgiveness, did she? She showed up hours after the fact, flaunting the fact she’d found something we couldn’t. You do understand how that kind of ego works, right?”

She studied him, disgust and disappointment heavy in her frown. “Apparently not. But I can tell you’ve got a solid grasp on it.”

She thought he was describing himself? Jared obliterated the part of himself agreeing with her disdain. Squashed the voice into oblivion pointing out he was the one being irrational

by refusing to yield. He grabbed his laptop and walked out of the room without another word. It didn't matter how much he wanted to convince himself otherwise, what Mikki had done was unforgivable.

It had to be.

*

Mikki didn't blame Jared for his reaction. He had every right to be furious. At least she'd finally corrected her original mistake. His friends were wrong though, in comparing her actions to any he'd taken in the past. She wasn't trying to spin it into some sort of career-changing move. She'd just wanted to make things right.

She pushed into her room. Everything inside her ached with sorrow and regret. And a little bit from the position she'd slept in. She stripped off her clothes, cranked the shower on, and stepped under the stream. The water heated as it beat into her skin. It didn't dredge away her exhaustion, or anything else.

Her thoughts fumbled for focus as she toweled off and dressed. The bed beckoned her, but she had to be on a plane in just a few hours, and there was no reason for her to stick around. She'd grab the biggest cup of espresso hopped-up coffee she could find and snag a cab to the airport.

Her phone buzzed. She snagged it off the nightstand to press ignore and saw Hayden's name on the screen.

Her ambivalence and self-pity evaporated in a rush of angry heat, and she clicked answer. Her frustration had just found an outlet. "Hello."

"Michaela." Hayden was the kind, friendly person she remembered. "You were pretty stressed last night. I just called to make sure you were all right."

But she'd seen his true face, and she was tired of filtering her thoughts. "You mean last night when I quit and like the asshole you are, you threatened my entire career? Or are you thinking of a different conversation?"

His nervous chuckle was hollow over the line. "It was late, I was tired and jet lagged. That's behind us, right?"

"Oh yeah, completely." She let her irritation flow into her responses. "So behind us, it'll never be an issue again."

"Glad to hear it—"

"Because I just finished typing up my resignation and it will be on HR's fax machine in about twenty minutes."

"Excuse me?" And just like that, Hayden's smooth talking vanished.

"No, I won't." She held her free hand out in front of her, palm down, as she talked. She should be shaking from all the anger and adrenaline pumping through her, but all she felt was a growing calm.

"You'll go down for this." A low threat ran through his words.

"Too late." She let the words flow as they popped into her head. Impulsiveness had already ripped so much away from her, why not let it rain down chaos a little longer? "I'll destroy my corporate card before I walk out of the hotel, and drop my laptop with security on Monday. I expect they'll have the contents of my desk waiting for me by then."

"Where are you going to go? Skriddie's not going to have you. You're not getting a reference from me. So...you're planning to go back to call center life? That's not going to pay the bills."

"It's better than working for someone who thinks healthy competition is planting a virus on another company's network." It was true, Skriddie wouldn't have her. Jared had made that clear, and he was right. Not that she needed the reminder. She wasn't giving up a job opportunity because of a guy. It was because it was the right thing to do. Even though missing Jared was tearing her up more than the damage to her career. "If I burn, I have ways to take you down with me. You shouldn't have used my phone."

"Mik—"

She was done. As she hung up, the adrenaline took its toll. It plummeted into her gut, snatching away her breath and

leaving her ill. She sank onto the mattress, staring at the wall. In less than a week, she'd gone from being a growing name in her field and falling in love to being heartbroken and unemployed. Even worse was she didn't know which devoured her more—her career being dead or the realization she'd actually been falling for Jared.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jared tossed his laptop on the hotel bed. It sank into the smooth comforter, wrinkling the only order in the room. He dropped onto the mattress next to it, gaze drifting around what had been his temporary home. Memories seemed to leak from every corner, hiding in the shadows, taunting and urging him to remember. But he couldn't.

Living the last few days had already created too much of a mess. Clothes draped on chairs, nothing on hangers or in the "dry clean back home" side of his garment bag. He hadn't even stuck to his morning run. On the surface it wasn't a wreck. However, he knew how it normally looked, though, and it was all out of place. He wanted to be bothered by the disarray, but he was more bothered that most of him didn't feel it was significant. At least not on this scale.

Jesus, could he be more melodramatic? He'd dealt with this before. He knew how to move on. The idea was so overwhelmingly unappealing it almost made him retch. He only wanted one thing right now, and she wasn't here.

No, he couldn't do this. He wouldn't linger on her face, her laughter, her gorgeous body and the way it fit perfectly against him, the way her brain whirled so fast it was a rush to keep up. He wasn't going to think about any of those things.

He forced himself to stand. A semblance of order would help him compartmentalize his thoughts. He moved his misplaced clothes into their proper places. He plucked a shirt off the top of his garment bag, and his chest almost collapsed on itself. A teddy bear stared back, black eyes blank and accusing, taunting him in nothing but an apron and a beret. He grabbed the bear to fling it across the room, and a pair of black, lace panties tore loose from its arm and drifted to the ground.

Mikki was everything that could destroy him. She'd almost done it once. She was flighty, impulsive, and prone to do things like hack the competition's network just because she could. He tugged the apron down on the bear and set it back on top of his

luggage. He knew all those things at his core. So why did it feel like he was being ripped apart at the thought of never seeing her again?

Suddenly the air around him felt too heavy. He needed to get out of there. Being alone with his thoughts was going to crush him. He'd text Vivian and see if she wanted to do anything while they waited on Tate.

And listen to them lecture me some more. Fuck that. He'd surround himself with strangers instead. See if he could live their emotions through osmosis, or some stupid bullshit, instead of having to deal with the parts of him whispering she'd suffered through this as much as he had.

He showered as quickly as he could, hating the way the beat of the water drew his own thoughts back to the surface. He pulled on slacks, a shirt, and a suit jacket, and headed toward the elevators. When he reached the lobby, he couldn't find enough concentration to even figure out where he was going. Breakfast was a good start. Somewhere with lots of people. Loud people.

As he let his gaze drift around the lobby, déjà vu coursed through him. Had it really been less than four days since he first saw the distracted woman wandering across the lobby, oblivious to the world?

Great, now his imagination was taunting him. No. He narrowed his gaze. It was really her heading toward the business center. Time for breakfast. But he couldn't convince his feet to move in the other direction. She was only inside for a few moments before she emerged again. Her gaze stayed on the ground as she headed toward the front door, duffel bag and laptop slung over her shoulder, trailing a rolling suitcase behind her.

Let her leave. The two of us are done. Fuck it, he was an ass sometimes. His feet were carrying him toward the exits before the automated door finished swinging shut behind her. She was halfway to the cab line. This mental argument was stupid. He'd admitted yesterday he wanted to work through things with her. Nothing had changed except more of the truth

was in the open now. Things that hadn't been her fault any more than his. He forced himself to speak. "Mikki."

A doorman had a taxi at the curb, waiting for her. "Miss?"

She didn't turn to face Jared, but she didn't move toward the waiting car, either.

She couldn't leave. The single thought pushed aside all of Jared's hurt and confusion. He needed her. Everything Tate had said was true. Vivian was right. Logic be damned, he was going to be miserable without this woman, and she'd been as betrayed as he had. "Please?"

The seconds ticked away in slow motion. She finally shook her head at the doorman and stepped aside so the next person in line could have the waiting ride.

She turned to face Jared, jaw set and eyes hard.

He forced the words out. "Hear me out."

She shrugged her bags off her shoulder, let them drop in a controlled fall, and grasped the straps in her hand. She bumped her laptop with her leg each time her foot bounced. "There's not really anything left to cover. I told you everything I know."

It took him a moment to process the words. She meant about the security holes. He shook his head. "I know. And I'm grateful. So much more than I could ever say. But I meant about us. Can we go somewhere? I'll buy you coffee, or breakfast, or a day pass at Adventure Land. Just hear me out?"

"I have a flight to catch."

He deserved the brush-off. He closed the distance between them, but suppressed the urge to kiss her until neither of them could breathe. "Give me five minutes. You should still be able to catch your plane."

She crossed her arms, gaze locked on him, lips drawn into a thin line. And then her chin quivered. She swallowed, took a deep breath. "I have a little time."

Fuck, now what was he supposed to say? Every thought assaulted him at once, forcing his mouth open before he could process. "I need—"

Her "I can't—" overlapped him.

He choked back the words. "You go first."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, and her brow furrowed. The cold mask slipped away, and worry fell in to take its place. "I'm so sorry. I really am. If I had to do it all again, the whole hacking thing, the jobs, all of it, I'd do it differently. Except maybe you. Do you have any idea how much it hurts to realize that? How selfish it feels? To admit I'd still suffer through never seeing you again just so I'd have the memories?" She shook her head. "But that's the awesome thing about hindsight, right? It never happens before the fact."

He knew exactly how she felt, but he didn't dare interrupt. A sharp silence settled between them.

She stared at him. "That was it. I'm done."

He measured his words. "Thank you for everything you did last night. You saved us, and I don't have any idea how hard it must have been to track us down just to help."

She tugged her bags back onto her shoulder, eyes glistening. "Yeah, of course. Is that all?"

Maybe it was time to take a page from her book and stop overthinking everything. "No, it's not. It's not even close to everything." He didn't pause to consider the words as they spilled out. He let whatever came to mind have its day. "I know it's only been a few days. I know because I won't stop reminding myself. Years of cutting myself off from anyone and everyone except my closest friends, and you come along and bam, I'm hooked. I can't stop thinking about you. Not just how sexy you are, but the way you make me think, the fun we have together, that you challenge everything I believe."

He reached for her, and traced a finger along her jaw, relief flooding him when she didn't pull away. Apparently his brain wasn't done talking. "I'm falling for you, hard and fast and uncontrollably. I don't want you to walk away. I can't think of anything I want more right at this moment than to keep you in my life. Somehow."

She ducked her head, staring at the ground for a moment before meeting his gaze again. A tiny smile threatened her face. "That makes it easier."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"Telling you I'm falling for you is a lot easier than hoping the pint of ice cream calling my name can make me forget."

A laugh of relief rushed through his lungs. "It depends on what flavor it was."

She shrugged. "Whatever was on sale." She dropped her bags to the ground again, nudged them aside so they no longer rested between them, and stepped forward. Rising on her toes, she brushed her lips over his before pulling away again. "But I like losing myself in you better."

"You know that was really corny, right?" he teased.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Because a heartfelt confession of love right before I fly into the sunset is so original."

He tunneled his hands into her short locks and tugged her close. His lips crushed hers, and everything negative evaporated. She kissed him back, hard and hungry, and caught his bottom lip between her teeth as she broke away. She flashed him the mischievous smirk that made his blood run hot. "Maybe there's a reason it's all so cliché."

"Give me a day." He traced his hand down her arm, then tangled his fingers with hers. "I'll get you a flight out tomorrow. At least we'll have twenty-four hours to figure out what happens next."

"I already checked out." She nodded at her luggage.

He waved a busboy to them, slipped him a twenty, nodded at her bags and gave him his room number. "But wait a couple of hours," he told the busboy.

She pressed closer, body molding into Jared's, still gripping his hand tight. "I'm not going back to your room. You promised me breakfast."

He kissed her again, head swimming from the euphoria flooding his veins. "We'll order in." He moved his mouth to her ear and traced the lines with his tongue before whispering, "We have a problem we need to work through first."

Her brow creased, and concern leaked into her voice. "Oh?"

He nipped her earlobe, and then trailed his mouth down her neck. Her gasp filled his head with helium. He traced a line back up her throat and kissed her on the nose. "You're wearing too many clothes."

She shifted her weight, and her entire frame rubbed against him. "I can't argue with logic like that."

He slid his hand into her back pocket and steered her toward the hotel. It felt right when she leaned into him with a contented sigh. He didn't register anything except her warmth, and the faint citrus he associated with her, on the short path to the elevator.

A tiny wave of disappointment crashed over him when the car was packed. She slid in front of him as it rose. The shift of her body was almost imperceptible, but he was suddenly intensely aware of her ass pressing into him, grinding just enough to tease him but not enough for anyone to see her moving. His pulse kicked up another notch.

The moment the doors slid open on his floor, he nudged her out, and his hands slid to her waist, under the hem of her T-shirt. He dipped his head, voice low as he guided her toward his room. "You're horrible."

She broke away and turned, her grin spreading as she studied him, gaze lingering on his crotch. "I thought your slacks were looser. Oops."

Fuck, she had him wandering the halls like a teenager who couldn't control a hard-on, and all he could do was smirk like an idiot in response. It seemed like an eternity before they finally reached his room. He fumbled with the lock before finally getting the door open and pushing her inside.

She squealed when he backed her against the bed. She fell back with a laugh, sitting on the edge and staring up at him. Eyes never leaving his, she traced the bulge below his waist. His cock threatened to burst from the teasing contact and strained to get closer to her touch.

"I don't think I'm the only one wearing too many clothes."

She unbuckled his belt and slid down his zipper. He clenched his toes inside his shoes. She wrapped her warm

fingers around his shaft and freed it from its prison, and a low groan tore from his chest.

He almost came at the sensation of her lips wrapped around him. The smooth ball in her tongue glided along his length, teasing him further. She looked up at him, lips circling his shaft, tongue wet and warm on his skin. She caressed his sac. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Her other hand pumped him in rhythm with her sucking. His balls tightened, and he almost squirmed in agony when he forced himself to break away.

She looked at him, hurt dancing in her eyes.

"You're going to make me come," he managed.

Her playful expression returned. "That's the point."

Yeah, it really was. He hated himself for stopping her, but he knew it was going to be worth it. "Not yet."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The hunger in Jared's voice stole Mikki's breath.

Part of her still struggled to believe this was actually happening, but the rest of her had locked the doubt aside and was diving in headfirst. He studied her for a moment, before he lowered his mouth to the hollow at the base of her throat. He trailed his tongue along her collarbone and up her neck.

While his mouth worked the soft skin along her shoulder, one hand glided under her shirt and up her back. Seconds later, the clasp on her bra snapped free, and the restraint tumbled loose. He tugged the undergarment and her shirt over her head, and cupped her breasts in both hands. She gasped and squirmed, the dampness between her legs growing when he lowered his head and drew a nipple into his mouth.

She leaned her weight back on her wrists, arching her back to get closer to his touch. Her sex ached, wet with need, as he relentlessly nibbled, alternating between the twin nubs on her chest.

He nudged her shoulders, and she fell back onto the mattress without protest. When his lips trailed down her stomach, she lifted her hips off the bed out of instinct. The smooth fabric of the comforter caressed her bare back. Each new texture on a different bit of sensitive skin melted together, making her head swim. He traced a single finger under her waistband, half tickling, and half taunting before finally undoing her jeans. He slid the remainder of her clothes to the ground.

She struggled for breath as the air kissed her bare skin. "How is it," she managed to say, "regardless of my attempts at the contrary—" she moaned when his lips brushed the edge of her calf, "—I'm always the one naked first."

He kissed the edge of her knee. She felt more than heard his response, as his lips vibrated over her skin. "You're complaining?"

His mouth reached the inside of her thigh, and want spread between her legs. Her muscles clenched in anticipation.

She managed a breathy “No.”

His tongue trailed along her skin and along her lower lips. “Good.” The single word carried on a deep growl, drilling into her thoughts.

She gasped and tangled her fingers in his hair when he dove between her folds. She couldn’t find any intelligible words any more. When his mouth wrapped around her clit, a new spike of pleasure jolted through her. She squeezed her eyes shut, and stars danced behind the lids. “Oh, fuck.”

“Soon enough.” His words bounced against her swollen sex. “Jesus, you taste amazing.”

He licked and sucked, and she held him close as she drew toward the edge of climax. Just as she was about to peak, he shoved two fingers inside her. Her entire body reacted, her back arching, driving her into his touch. He pumped, fingers hooked up to hit just the right spot, never letting up anywhere, until a shudder raked her frame and she climaxed.

She pulled away from his touch, every inch of her hypersensitive. Slowly she opened her eyes. Her nerve endings felt raw and aware. The caress of the air conditioner, the gentle brush of his lips on her skin, the satin-like fabric on her back, it all danced in and out of her awareness.

She struggled to catch her breath, unable to turn her head or pull her gaze from the ceiling. Seconds later, the mattress next to her shifted, and his bare flesh pressed against her side, cock digging into her hip.

He appeared above her, propped up on one elbow, and brushed a loose strand of hair off her face. “Now, we can do it your way.” The gravel in his voice sparked her desire.

The scent she loved—rain and faint cologne—filled her head. She tilted her head up to kiss him. Her tongue dove into his mouth, the salty, bitter taste of her on his lips. She raised her hands to his shoulders and in a single gesture shoved him onto his back and straddled him. “You don’t give up control very often, do you?”

His gaze lingered on her naked form, searing her skin. He shook his head. “Not really.”

She hovered above him. His skin was hot between her knees, and if she lowered herself just an inch or two, the swollen head between her legs would nudge her opening. "I can live with that." She rested her hands on either side of his head, leaned forward, and kissed him lightly before saying, "Most of the time."

His hands found her hips, thumbs digging in and lighting her desire. As she straightened, he thrust up. She moaned and sank onto his shaft. He tried to set the pace, hard and fast, but she rocked slowly instead. His groans rolled through the room, echoing in her chest.

One of his hands trailed down her leg and along the inside of her thigh. She whimpered when his thumb pressed into her still-tender clit. She didn't know if she should pull away or let him keep going. His hips slammed into her, and she didn't resist the increased tempo this time. Each time he thrust, he bumped her aching sex as well, and she felt another orgasm build inside. She gasped as she came, and he didn't let up, still pounding furiously. Her head swam, and every inch of her body sang with pleasure.

A long series of punctuated grunts rose from his chest, and she knew he was close. He gripped her hips tight as he came, the frantic pace slowly fading off into nothing.

She leaned forward, head resting on his chest. His heart hammered against her cheek as she struggled to catch her breath. Comfort enveloped her when he rested his palms on her back, holding her in place. They lay there for a few moments, until she thought she might be able to speak again. She rolled to one side and curled up next to him instead, head on his shoulder and hand on his chest.

"You still want breakfast?" His question was quiet even in the still room.

She shook her head, her vocal cords feeling as wobbly as her legs. "I think something else filled me up."

He chuckled and tugged her closer. "So what are you doing instead of eating?"

*

“Falling asleep on my boyfriend. I don’t know if you know this, but I didn’t sleep much last night, and screwing you takes a lot of energy.” Mikki’s words were warm and soothing against Jared’s skin.

He was intimately and pleasantly familiar with it. Boyfriend, he liked the sound of that. “Sounds like a solid plan. And now you don’t have to sneak out in an hour or two before anyone knows you’re missing.”

She stiffened in his arms.

He shouldn’t have brought up her lack of job. Even if he respected her completely for the decision, she didn’t need to deal with the stress of being unemployed right now. “I can help, you know. I have contacts.”

“How would that look?” There was no bitterness in her voice. Only calm. “For me to use the guy I’m fucking for a reference.”

He knew she didn’t mean the words harshly, but they still stung. “Is that all I am?”

“Definitely not.” She kissed along his side before leaning into him again. “But you know what I’m saying.”

He hated it, but he did. “Your skills speak for themselves. You’ll be fine, regardless of whatever threats were hurled when you resigned.”

“I guess.”

He ached to erase the hesitation in her voice, but he didn’t know how. “I’m here in whatever capacity you need, I promise. Even if it’s just to ravage you so you forget your troubles for a few hours.”

That drew a laugh. She sat up and turned so she was facing him. The sheets fell away, and he couldn’t help but let his gaze trace her breasts and waist.

She looked down, and then back at him, mouth twisted in amusement. She tilted off the bed for a second and came back up with something in her hand. She tugged her T-shirt on. “Now are you listening?”

She was too much fun. He nodded. "I was listening before."

"Right." Her pursed lips faded into a smile. "Since we already ruined the pillow talk, I need to know something. About the future."

He pushed himself upright. "You're talking about making plans?"

She ducked her head, suddenly intently focused on the stark white of the comforter. "No. I mean, yes, but it doesn't have to be concrete or anything, just kind of a loose idea, and —"

"Stop." He placed a finger under her chin and raised her face so he could look her in the eye. "I'm teasing. Tell me."

She let out a tiny sigh, and the corners of her eyes tugged down, marring her smile. "We live several states apart. All this talk about lov—falling for each other, and still seeing each other, the details don't quite add up. I mean, okay, so I'm a bit transient, especially if I don't find a new job before my rent's due again, but you're a busy guy. You're not going to have time to drop by whenever, and I can't afford to travel like that."

He wrapped his fingers around hers. He hated to admit, he hadn't thought that far. All of his focus had been on not losing her now. "I'll make time. And you will find a new job. If you're interested in Atlanta...there are a lot of good companies out there." He didn't even know what he was trying to say. Something was stuck in the back of his head, but he couldn't reach it. "I'll visit on weekends until we can make it work. I promise. Okay?"

She nodded, but creases still lined her forehead. "Okay."

He pulled her back toward him and lay down again, tugging her back to his chest. He wrapped an arm around her stomach. "You've been running full throttle all week. Get some sleep. When you're rested, you'll be able to think better."

She nodded and pressed back into him. He held her tight until her breathing grew steady. The sound lulled away his tension and dragged his eyelids shut. They'd both think clearer once they'd slept.

A familiar chime echoed through Jared's thoughts, jarring him into consciousness. The first thing he registered was the warm weight in his arms and her mumbles of protest.

He kissed her cheek as he sat up. "Phone. Go back to sleep."

He could get used to this. Waking up next to her. Fuck, who was he kidding? He was already used to it. What was he going to do when she was gone tomorrow?

The clock on the nightstand said it was three, and the light peeking through the curtains confirmed yes, they'd slept into the afternoon.

He grabbed his phone and swiped Answer. "Yeah?"

"You still pissy and vengeful?" Tate asked.

"Uh..." Jared had to fumble through his memories to figure out what the question was linked to. That morning, arguing in Tate's room, seemed like an eternity ago. His entire world had shifted since then, and his friends had no idea. "No, I'm so much better you wouldn't believe it."

"Right." Hesitation dragged out Tate's reply. "Or you started drinking early and without us."

Jared laughed. The sensation felt natural and light drifting from his chest. "No. I'm actually good. What's up?"

"V says you're ignoring her. We doing something or not? Dinner? Cards? Celebrate not losing our shirts last night?"

Or celebrate losing them this morning. He glanced at Mikki. She had rolled onto her back and was watching him, eyes half open, full lips twisted in unspoken question.

He dragged his attention back to the phone conversation. "Yeah, dinner. We need to talk. Give me two hours. I'll meet you in the lobby."

"Two? Because you need to blow dry your stunning locks? Fine, but you text V, so she stops bugging me."

Jared said his goodbyes and sent Viv a quick message, assuring her he'd just been asleep and repeating the two hour

time frame. He set the phone aside and focused all his attention on the woman now sitting next across from him.

“You’re okay with dinner, right?” Maybe he should have asked her first.

“With your friends?” Her expression had gone flat.

“Yes?”

She grinned. “Duh? Tate’s kind of cute, have you ever noticed that?”

“No, I hadn’t. And those rumors about college and experimentation aren’t true.”

“Too bad.” She gave him an exaggerated pout. “I’d love to hear the stories. Why do we need the extra time?”

He shifted his weight and crawled toward her. He traced his lips up the side of her neck, inhaling her intoxicating scent. “I want to get to know you a little more first. Or a lot more. If I have to put you on a plane tomorrow, I want to learn as much as possible about you tonight.”

Chapter Twenty Three

Mikki drained half her orange juice in a single swallow. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks, when she realized all eyes were on her, and she ducked her head.

“Dehydrated?” Vivian teased.

Possibly. Dinner the night before had been a blast. Mikki knew for sure now why Jared, Tate, and Vivian were such close friends. At the same time, they hadn’t left her out. Though for the fourth night in a row, she hadn’t gotten much sleep. The sex had been amazing every other night. However, last night they’d only talked. Connecting with Jared, learning about where he’d grown up, hearing stories about his past, had been even more incredible. The sleepless night had been worth it.

“It’s a desert, Viv.” Jared grabbed Mikki’s hand from where it rested on the bench between them and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s important to drink plenty of fluids.”

“Good excuse.” Tate wasn’t paying attention to them. He’d been scoping out waitresses since they’d arrived. “Maybe it’s more important not to deplete those fluids so quickly in this dry climate.”

“No, I don’t think that’s the solution.” Jared poked at his toast. “I’m almost certain of it.”

Mikki’s face flared red-hot. She was going to die of embarrassment, she knew it. It was one thing to let loose and experience life—she was still pretty happy with her decisions there—but she hadn’t expected her impulses to be the focus of breakfast conversation. Especially since she hadn’t indulged last night.

“Did you tell her yet?” The shift in Vivian’s tone drew Mikki’s attention.

“Nope.” Jared suddenly seemed more interested in his food than the conversation. “I told you, I have nothing to do with this.”

Her embarrassment skittered away, and Mikki gave her full attention to the woman across from her. “Tell me what?”

Vivian reached down, grabbed a manila folder from her

briefcase, and handed it across the table. "Wait," she said before Mikki could open it.

A glimmer of hope flared inside Mikki, but she suppressed it. This wasn't the kind of thing she could afford to get her hopes up about.

"I should be allowed one more chance." Vivian's tone was serious and her expression neutral.

"Come on." Tate turned back to the table and looked at Mikki. "Please, for the love of all that's good, hear her out so she'll just shut up already. I swear, if I have to hear one more time— Ow." He rubbed his shin and glared at Vivian. "Kicking. Real mature."

Vivian gave him a casual shrug and nodded at the folder. "There are some ground rules. Things you have to keep in mind that don't really go in the contract, but are deal breakers."

Mikki's hope surged again. Contract? No. It couldn't be. She couldn't ignore the giddiness climbing inside, but she did manage to keep it from her voice. "Go on."

"First rule." Vivian ticked off on her finger. "I don't care what title the person you're screwing holds. You report to me, not him, so it earns you zero special treatment."

It really was what she thought. Mikki's fingers itched to open the folder. They were going to make her an offer. She glanced at Jared, then back at Vivian, not daring to interrupt.

"Which also means." Vivian ticked off another finger. "The two of you never work together, unless he needs you for collaboration."

"What else?" Mikki didn't care. She was ready to sign. This was her dream job. The one she would have taken in an instant if she'd been thinking six months ago.

"Nothing else." Vivian nodded at the folder again. "Take your time, think about it. Keep in mind the moving expense has to be repaid if you leave us within the next twelve months. Though honestly, that's just standard contract language. I'm not worried about it happening."

Mikki was surprised her hands stayed steady as she opened the folder. Skriddie letterhead sat inside, offering her a

touch more salary-wise than she'd made at NSS, and more than enough to move cross-country. She looked at Jared. "You knew about this?"

His smile made her insides melt. "I guessed. Tate's right, she hasn't shut up about hiring you since she figured out it might still be an option. I fought it every step of the way."

"He begged me to take you on," Vivian countered. "Groveled at my feet and told me he knew I'd never find someone so talented again."

"You're both so full of shit." Tate reached across the table and flicked the folder. "They're going to insist you take your time. You're going to say you don't need to. They're going to say you really should. Tell them now you're serious when you say yes." He handed her a pen. "And let me enjoy my pancakes in peace?"

She took the pen without another word and signed on the appropriate line. She handed the pen back to Tate and the letter to Vivian. "I'm serious when I say yes."

"Good." Vivian tucked everything back into her briefcase. "It's about time."

"But I will need something from you." Mikki felt like dancing. She might still; she hadn't decided yet. She'd be living closer to Jared, and she'd be working for an actual respectable company. A tiny Yay! echoed in her thoughts. "The names of hotels near the office that will give me a corporate discount, so I have a place to crash until I find an apartment."

Vivian waved the comment aside and took a long sip of coffee. "Details will be in your email by the end of the day. You just tell me what you prefer, and we'll make the reservations."

Jared pulled her closer and prompted her to shift her position enough she was half leaning into him. He rested his forehead on the back of her head. His warm breath glided over her neck when he spoke. "And I'm hoping you'll leave a couple of weekends open for me. Or more than that."

Her smile grew and she leaned more of her weight against his chest. "I don't have any plans right now, so your chances are pretty good."

Six months later

Mikki leaned back into Jared, the overstuffed sofa enveloping them both, and he draped an arm over her shoulder. They were all in his—their, he'd correct her in an instant if he knew what she was thinking—condo. She'd only moved in a month or so ago, after their relationship had reached the point where she wasn't going home most nights anyway.

Vivian was tucked into one of the recliners, legs underneath her, sipping a margarita. Tate occupied a second chair, and Jared's younger sister, Alyssia, rattled through something in the kitchen. After moving to the new town, Mikki had quickly learned this was a typical weekend for all of them if they weren't traveling. Gathering at someone's house, bullshitting, and just unwinding.

She never would have guessed she'd get used to that kind of routine. Never would have seen this kind of camaraderie with a group of people in her future. But now that she had it, she didn't know if she could ever give it up. The one thing making tonight different was they were celebrating her birthday. She'd never had friends throw her a birthday party before. Turned out it was a lot of fun, especially the reminder they cared.

Empty and half-empty Chinese take-out boxes littered the coffee table in the middle of the living room. A box that had once contained cupcakes, but was now just filled with wrappers, sat to the side. She was impressed Jared hadn't moved to clean it up yet, but she knew the clutter wouldn't evade his need for order much longer.

Alyssia stopped at the edge of the living room, arms crossed, scowl marring her face. "I was sitting there."

Tate reclined in the easy chair, arms open. "There's still room."

A low growl rolled through Jared's chest, rumbling through Mikki's back, and she bit back her smile. The first time

she'd seen Tate and Alyssia interact—flirt, really—she'd worried Jared might burst a blood vessel. Since then, she'd learned it was all part of who they were.

“No thanks.” Alyssia didn't move. “I know where you've been.”

“So do I.” The menacing tone in Jared's voice might have held more threat if it wasn't so familiar.

Tate shrugged and stood. “Had to try.” He gestured to the chair.

A smile twitched through Alyssia's irritation, and seconds later she dropped into the now empty spot. She snagged Tate's wrist before he could walk away, tugged, and let her hand drop.

He perched on the arm of the chair, a hint of smugness marring his expression.

Jared trailed his lips up Mikki's neck and ended with a soft nip on her earlobe and a whisper. “I'll be right back.” He extracted himself from behind her, and she couldn't help the whisper of disappointment at losing his warmth, even temporarily.

Apparently the clutter's lifespan was even shorter than she'd thought.

Alyssia made exaggerated retching noises. “Could you not paw at each other tonight? Just for once?”

“Are you ten?” There was only light-hearted teasing in Tate's question.

Alyssia glared at his back. “I don't know, you tell me.”

He glanced back at her, and his gaze traveled up and down her figure. “Nope. You're definitely not a little girl.”

Mikki laughed at the antics. It had taken her a little while, but she'd finally figured out Tate flirted with everyone. And she adored spending time with Alyssia—the other woman was only a year older, and they had a lot of similar interests.

“For you.” Jared handed Mikki a gift bag with a rainbow of tissue paper poking out of the top.

Her eyebrows rose. “I said no gifts.”

He shrugged and kneeled in front of her. “I say otherwise.”

She tugged out some of the tissue paper, and then some

more, curiosity growing as quickly as the pile of colorful wrapping next to her. "Is there even anything in here?"

He nodded. "Almost there."

And then her fingers closed around something small and velvety. She pulled the box out, and her heart leaped into her throat before her brain finished telling her it was a jewelry box.

Jared covered her hands with his. "Mikki Elford. You're everything I need in my life to balance me out. You complement me, you make me think, and you keep me humble." He pulled her hand back with his, raising the lid of the box.

A small gold band stared back, with a diamond solitaire glinting at her from the middle of a cushion of satin.

"I can't imagine life without you. And I'll always love you for showing me that what we have can actually exist. Will you marry me?"

A giddy bubble rose in her chest, and a squeak pushed past her lips. She didn't have to hesitate to know the answer. "Yes. Absolutely, yes."

He slid the ring on her finger and rose enough to rest a hand on the back of her neck. He kissed her hard, tongue sliding into her mouth, dancing around hers, teasing the barbell piercing.

When they finally broke apart, he rested his forehead against hers. "I don't know what I would have done if you'd said no."

She gave a small laugh. "I love you dearly and completely. Why would I say no?"

He brushed his lips across her knuckles. "To surprise me?"

"There are some things even I consider too sacred to be random about." She tugged him to his feet, shifted enough for him to take his seat again, and leaned back into him.

Congratulations and teasing passed around the room, each new comment warming Mikki further. She couldn't imagine anything less with this wonderful man. She raised his fingers, kissing the tips one at a time.

He slid his hand under hers, extending her fingers until the light glinted off the diamond. His words were warm on her

neck and meant only for her ears. "I really do love you."

She leaned farther into him, sinking into the familiar comfort. Yup, this was absolutely perfect. "I love you, too."

THE END

~*~Sheltering His Desire (Love Hack 2) is coming August,
2015~*~

Please help this author's career by posting an honest review wherever you purchased this book.

More by Allyson Lindt

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Roll Against Trust (3d20 1 by Allyson Lindt)

The line between fantasy and reality blurs when a late night gaming session goes from playful to smoldering.

Tasha's not looking for love, but she doesn't mind just looking... and maybe a little fantasizing. Her two best friends and weekend AD& D buddies, Seth and Ryan, are the perfect guest stars in her fantasies. When a late night gaming session with the three goes from silly to verbally scorching in an

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Then her ex's money mismanagement catches up to her in the form of draining her bank account, her job is threatened by a mistake that points to Ryan, and Seth takes his side. If Tasha can't move past her trust issues long enough to uncover the truth—both with herself and the men she's falling for—she'll wind up broken-hearted and just plain broke.

About the Author

Allyson Lindt is a full-time geek and a full-time contemporary romance author. She prefers that her geeky heroes come with the alpha expansion pack and adores a heroine who can hold her own in a boardroom. She loves a sexy happily-ever-after and helping deserving cubicle dwellers find their futures together.