



MARRIED

at
First Sight

MIA CARSON



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[About the Author](#)

“*I*’m telling you, if you want to win this thing—and I mean win it in a landslide—you need to up your public appeal,” Billy announced, spreading his hands wide as if giving a headline. “*News Bulletin: Vincent Cunningham running for Congress swept away in love, Marries local Texas Girl.* Huh? Come on, you know that sounds amazing.”

Vincent rested his chin on his hand, his elbow on the surface of his freshly polished wooden desk, and cringed. “A wife?”

“We’ve talked about this, man.” Billy sighed as his arms fell to his sides. “The whole bachelor thing might be fun, but it’s just bad news once you get into politics.”

“But a wife? Is that really necessary?”

“What else is going to stop you from going out every other night, partying, and bringing home strange women? Eventually, the tabloids will notice that shit. But,” Billy said, holding up his finger, “if you can change that lifestyle now and become a family man, the public will be more than ready to receive you come next year.”

Vincent rubbed his eyes hard. “Is that right?”

“I’ve been doing this for a long time. I know what I’m talking about.”

Vince laughed harshly. “You’ve been doing this for five years, and by the way, the last man’s campaign you worked on backfired horribly.”

Billy rolled his shoulders and his always too cheery smile faltered. “Then why did you hire me?”

“Because you’re a friend and I didn’t trust any other shark with my personal life.”

Billy’s smile widened and he clapped Vincent on the shoulder. “That’s the spirit.”

“I never said I was agreeing to this nonsense.”

“But you should.” A woman’s voice drifted over from the couch in Vincent’s office. His mother, Doris, lifted her cup of coffee, sipping it as elegantly as if it were a glass of high-class champagne. “He’s right. It’s high time you settled down and started a family. I am not getting any younger, son, and grandchildren would keep me busy.”

Vincent spun in his chair to face Doris, her white hair pulled back in a tight bun and hardly any wrinkles on her face from all the damn creams she used to look young and perfect in case anyone snapped her photo. She might not be in politics anymore, but she was the wife of the late congressman Liam Cunningham, Vincent’s father. Everyone in Texas expected him to follow in his father’s footsteps. He had died three years ago from lung cancer—he had smoked a pack a day, plus cigars—and Vincent was still partially in mourning. His mother told the world she was fine, but he knew she went home every night to an empty house and drank. Liam had been her world, and now all she had was Vincent. Her disappointment in his lack of enthusiasm for entering the political arena had been evident for the last three years before he finally broke down and said he would do it, if only to get that annoyed look out of her eyes.

“How exactly do either of you expect me to find a wife?” he asked, dragging himself back to the current predicament. “I can’t simply walk up to some woman on the street and propose.”

“Like how you get them into your bed?” Doris said lightly, and Billy choked on his laughter.

Vincent sucked in his lips and shook his head. “I’m not sure I want to talk about my personal life with you around.”

“It’s just sex, Vincent, there’s nothing wrong with it,” she told him curtly, but her cheeks reddened and she crossed her legs rather tightly.

Vincent watched her lips quirk in a grin before it hit him. “Seriously? Mother!”

“What? I have needs too, you know, and with your father gone, what am I supposed to do? Let my lady bits just wither away? Don’t worry, it’s only a few of your father’s old friends. They’re widowers, too.”

Vincent’s eyes bulged as Billy’s chortling echoed around his office. “We are not having this conversation. Jesus, Mom.”

She lifted one delicate shoulder in a shrug and continued sipping her coffee. “But he is right, you know. You need a wife. It will really help your campaign, especially if said wife is pregnant. Everyone loves a baby.”

Except me, Vincent thought, giving himself a shake. He’d dated plenty of women in his twenties, but none of them had been a good fit. They were either after the Cunningham wealth, too shallow, cheated on him, or bored him to death. None of them were what he looked for. Hell, he spent so much time with the wrong women, finding the right one didn’t seem possible. He simply settled for whichever women he picked up at the local clubs and took home for a night. Well, hotels, actually. He had learned his lesson after one woman tried to steal from his safe at home. He was a platinum tier rewards member at the local Ritz because of how often he stayed there with company.

Having a wife was pushing it, in his opinion. He was used to being a loner, but a baby? Out of the question. He had never wanted kids. Doris’ idea was for him to pop out a horde of grandkids for her to spoil. Vincent doubted he

would make a good dad, mostly because of the man he would have to live up to.

“I had a feeling this would come up at some point, so I’ve been doing some research.” Billy trotted over to his briefcase on the table near the window and pulled out a binder.

“What the hell is that?”

“Let the man talk. Billy, are those profiles of women?” Doris asked excitedly.

“Ah, Doris, always a woman on top of her game.” He smirked at his own pun, and Doris buried her smile behind her teacup. “Not profiles, but there is a way for him to find one within a decent amount of time.”

“A decent amount of time being?” Doris asked, leaning closer.

“A week, two tops. Married and all in only two weeks.” The binder fell with a resounding thud on Vincent’s desk, and he stared at it as if it might jump up and bite his face off. “Go on, check it out.”

“I’m not sure about this,” he muttered as his fingers hesitated.

“I spent months researching this program. It’s run by a major company with involvement in several different dating websites, studies, and basically the industry of romance,” Billy explained. “They’re legit, as are the women and men involved in their newest program. You could be one of the first to gain a wife from it.”

“Are we sure me picking a wife will look good?” he asked, desperate for a way out of this situation. “For the campaign, I mean? I’m not sure people will trust a politician who can’t even woo the love of his life.”

Billy waved his hand. “It can be arranged that no one outside of this room will know. The company has an iron-clad agreement with all involved not to say how they actually met if that is what the client—what you—wish.”

“Okay, what do I tell people about how we met?”

“You find your dream wife and you make up some romantic story or other with her. Come on, Vinnie, you’ve got a romantic bone somewhere in your body. Use it.”

Vincent did not have a romantic bone in his body and had been told so by several women before they ran out the door, clutching their clothes to their chests as he kicked them out of his hotel room. He made it quite clear every time he wasn’t looking for anything steady, just a simple romp in bed. What was he supposed to do if they decided it meant he wanted to date them? Kicking them out before things got awkward was the best policy. Realizing Billy and his mother weren’t going to leave him alone until he at least looked at the program, he slid the binder towards him and opened the front cover. The title popped out at him in dark red letters outlined in black with two hearts beneath it, bound by a set of wedding rings: *Married at First Sight*.

“Really? You’re joking, right? I can’t even see the woman I’m going to marry?” he asked, tapping the title, annoyed.

“Of course you can. It’s more of a ‘you don’t really have a lot of time to get to know them.’”

“That makes complete sense,” he told Billy, nodding his head calmly.

“It does?” Billy asked frowning.

“No, you idiot! What if I pick some psycho woman who wants to murder me in my sleep and take all my money?”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Doris scolded and walked over to lean against his shoulder. “Open it, come on then. If you don’t, I’ll simply sign up for you behind your back like any good mother would do.”

Grumbling under his breath because he knew she would do just that, he flipped the next few pages and read through the conditions of the program. Each woman or man on the website must pass a thorough background check and answer an intense questionnaire before being admitted to the program for consideration. The clients went through the same questions and background check before even being

allowed to browse the website. Then, the client created a list of possible candidates, and the compatibility team made of up psychologists, therapists, and counselors picked the one they believed suited the client best. The client and the person they chose would meet at the altar officially for the first time and have twelve weeks to decide if they wanted to stay married or divorce. Three months to see if he wanted to live with this woman for the rest of his life.

“What happens if this backfires?” Vincent asked. “Do you have a plan for that?”

“I have a plan for everything. You should know that by now.” Billy sat down in the chair in front of Vincent’s desk. “So, should we sign you up?”

Vincent closed the binder and shoved it towards his friend. “I guess traditional dating is out.”

“Unless you want everyone snapping pictures of you and following you around everywhere you go, then yes, conventional dating is out.”

He pushed out of his chair and paced to the windows, staring out over the parking lot. The main company building was in downtown Houston. The city used to be a huge pull to Vincent, being amongst so many people and living an exciting nightlife while running the family business based in oil and cattle ranches. Lately though, his heart tugged at him to hit the family ranch far outside the city limits and enjoy a simpler time. He hardly visited and missed the wide-open spaces, putting in a hard day’s ride or working to fix the fences and the old barn. Doris told him time and again they had people for those jobs and the horses were fine without him.

“Vinnie? I need an answer today, man, so we can get this set up.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” He gave in. “Just tell me what I have to do, I guess, and we’ll see if this plan works.”

Billy clapped his hands together. "Great! I'll get you set up. All you'll have to do later is answer the questionnaire. Once they approve you, which won't be a problem at all, you pay the fee and you're in!"

"Fee? What fee?"

"Didn't you read that part? Each client has to pay a fee for services rendered. It's only ten thousand."

"Only," Vincent muttered. "You're lucky I have that kind of money just lying around."

"Well, on the bright side, if this ends in a divorce, you get seventy-five percent of it back," he said cheerfully, scooped up the binder, and darted out the door. "Watch for my e-mail!"

Vincent bowed his head and scuffed his shoe against the carpet. "You really think this will work?"

Doris leaned against the back of his chair, watching her son with a worried gaze. "You're thirty-three, Vincent, and you're clearly not happy anymore."

"It's hard to be happy."

"Your father would be scolding you right now if he was here, you know that," she told him sternly. "You're stuck in this rut of not being able to move forward, of finding where your life could lead. This campaign is important, but your happiness is too."

He glanced up at her words. She would say that, but deep down, he knew the campaign was more important. She wanted the family name to live on in politics and to see him take up the mantle left by his father. Liam Cunningham had been a pioneer for Texas and many recent hot-button issues. Vincent followed the same ideas, but he wasn't sure he wanted to take on this much responsibility. His life was easy, maybe too easy. The company was well taken care of by his board of directors and their newest partners. As Doris put it a few days ago, there was no better time than now to make a push for political office.

He'd expected to start as mayor, but she and Billy went straight for Congress.

"You'll be fine, you're a Cunningham," Doris said as she walked over and patted his cheek. "Now, I have an appointment at the salon. Will you be at dinner this evening? Todd will be there."

"Todd Green?" he asked, his brow wrinkling as Doris picked up her purse and slung it over her shoulder. "One of Dad's old friends?" The words came out strangled as Doris' bright blue eyes shimmered with mischief. "I think I'll skip tonight. I just lost my appetite."

"Oh, don't be like that. Your mother's been having sex for a very long time, you know."

Vincent covered his ears with his hands. "I got it but don't need the details."

She giggled with mirth as she left his office, closing the door behind her. Vincent lowered his hands and smiled despite the nauseating image of his mother in bed with Todd Green. Shuddering and wishing he'd managed to avoid picturing such a scenario, he busied himself with paperwork and checking with the shareholders about how this quarter was going. May was their busiest month at the ranches, ensuring the fall-born calves were weaned and the ranches had everything necessary for the summer months. He placed a few orders, but his mind wandered and he decided to take the rest of the day off.

"Cheryl?" he said as he left his office.

"Yes, Mr. Cunningham?" his receptionist of nearly ten years said, not looking up from her keyboard as she typed an e-mail.

"I'll be working from home the rest of the day."

"Of course, sir. I'll move your three o'clock today to tomorrow?" she asked, her fingers pausing on the keyboard as she gave him a crooked grin.

"Shit, I forgot about that. Can it wait?"

“It should be fine. They’re usually pretty lenient—it’s just marketing.”

“Good. Thanks.”

She bobbed her head and went back to work as he walked towards the elevator bank. The drive home was quick. He lived in one of the many older stone mansions occupying the outskirts of downtown, but when he parked his Chevy truck in the garage, he made no move to get out of the vehicle. He had his phone if anyone needed him that urgently. He backed out and drove to the cemetery farther outside the city limits.

The stroll to his father’s grave was a long one. The weather was cool for May, but he left his suit jacket in the car. Sitting in the grass, not caring if he dirtied his pants, he rested his hand on his father’s obsidian tombstone for a second and smiled.

“Hey, Dad. Sorry I haven’t been out this week. I’ve been busy. I’m sure you heard, but Mom finally talked me into running for office. Can you believe it? Me, a damn congressman.” His eyes drifted across the empty cemetery as the breeze ruffled his shoulder-length, curly brown hair. “You did such a great job, you know. I don’t think I could ever live up to that.”

Usually, when he visited Liam, he brought along a bottle of whiskey. He passed the time telling his dad about this wife idea Billy had and groused about whether it was even a good plan.

“What if the whole thing falls apart? I mean, I want to be married, but I wanted to meet a woman the old fashion way. Like how you met Mom.”

He grinned remembering how Liam used to tell that story. Doris and he were at the same function for their parents back in the day. They were bored out of their minds, he would tell Vincent, so they snuck up to the roof with a bottle of whiskey Liam pilfered from the bar. They went up there to talk, but they wound up dancing and laughing the night away, tangled in each other’s arms until the sun came up. They were found,

of course, by a custodian going up to repair a skylight. Doris panicked. To be found with a man, naked on a roof? But Liam assured her he would stay quiet about it if she would.

“Too bad the custodian didn’t,” Liam would always say, bursting into laughter as Doris would roll her eyes and smack his arm playfully. “That rat bastard tattled and we weren’t allowed near each other for six months.”

“Except you two didn’t actually stay apart, did you?” Vincent would point out. His parents would lean into each other and smirk like two teenagers again.

“Hell no,” he’d say. “Our parents gave up after a while and let us get married. And a few years later, we had you, son. Nothing like a perfect fairy tale story, right?”

In the cemetery, Vincent leaned back against his dad’s tombstone. “Yeah, perfect fairy tale. If only you’d quit smoking, Dad, you might still be here to tell me what to do.”

Liam always told Vincent there had been a spark with Doris, a spark that ignited the strangest feelings inside him, a longing for a woman he spent a night with on a rooftop. Out of all the women Vincent dated and slept with, none of them elicited such a strong emotion. There was pleasure, that was for certain, but never a need to pull her close in the morning and ask her to stay with him.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out grudgingly, sensing it would be Billy. “Vincent,” he answered.

“Hey, just letting you know I sent you an e-mail with a link. Fill everything out for me tonight if you can, and we’ll get this show on the road.”

“Horror story more like it,” Vincent mumbled.

“It won’t be that bad, and if it is, I’ll owe you steak dinners for a month.”

“A year,” Vincent corrected. “I’ll get to it as soon as I get home.”

“I thought you were home. Where are you?”

“Having a chat with Dad.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” Billy assured him. “You’ll thank me in the long run.”

Vincent sighed as he climbed to his feet, kissed his fingers, and rested them on the tombstone. “I hope you’re right. I really do.” He hung up and tucked his phone away. “What do you think, Dad?”

No answer came to him, of course, but as he walked back to his truck, the breeze blew harder, pressing at his back and messing up his hair until it covered his face. He spun back around to stare at his Dad’s grave as the breeze suddenly died as if nothing had happened. Liam used to tease his son for his longer hair, messing it up whenever they were in the same room together. Vincent took it as a good sign and resigned himself to giving this marriage thing a shot.

Maybe he would wind up on a rooftop, too, making love all night long to the woman he was meant to be with.

He poured himself a whiskey when he returned home and sat down hard in his office chair. He opened the questionnaire and grimaced at the insane amount of questions to answer. Around midnight, Vincent finally finished filling out the questionnaire for the website and leaned back in his leather office chair, spinning casually from side to side as he sipped his whiskey from a highball glass. The website said it would take at least three days to process his answers, and thanks to a last-minute donation made by Vincent to fund more research for their program, they were willing to rush his background check.

Three days before he could start looking for the ideal wife. He shot back the rest of his whiskey and climbed upstairs to bed.

Those three days passed quickly. Saturday morning, Vincent was awake at six and rushed downstairs to his computer. His phone had alerted him five minutes ago that the website was open to him to start searching for his top picks for a wife. He was to choose five, and then the experts would suggest their top choice from there. He could always go with someone else, but this was new to him. He would go with whomever they suggested.

He logged into the website and clicked on the women's profiles. He wasn't sure what he expected to see, but pages and pages filled with smiling faces was not it. The day wasn't long enough for him to look through every single woman. A heart appeared next to several, and when his mouse hovered over it, he saw these were to mark those compatible with the answers he gave on his questionnaire. He sorted the women by the ones only with hearts and by their names, and the results still filled over twenty pages.

"Handy," he uttered and tapped his fingers on his desk. "All right, coffee and then the hunt for a wife begins."

Steam rose from the black liquid in his mug, and he sat down at his desk and started on page one. He clicked on each woman he found attractive with a heart by her name and

skimmed through their profiles. He chose those he thought he might have a chance with. When he reached the fifteenth page, he had chosen only three and worried this plan wasn't going to work after all. His excitement had built over the last three days thinking his house might not feel so empty soon, that he would actually have someone who cared for him to come home to at night. After a few hours, though, that excitement waned as he glowered at the screen. On the final page, a face framed by long, blonde hair caught his eye. The woman's eyes were dark blue and her smile was genuine.

"Lana Jenkins." He read her name aloud and clicked on her face.

Her profile showcased an excellent resume of graduating from Texas A&M. Since then, she had accepted a job working at a local law office and had several high recommendations from past internships. Aside from that, her likes focused on being outdoors, hiking, and fishing, though she admitted she was terrible at it. He was more intrigued by this woman with each sentence he read about her until he wanted to meet her. Talk to her. He spotted a message icon at the top by her name and decided he would send her a message and introduce himself briefly. If he did that, the experts would see his interest lay mostly with this woman.

Once the message was sent, merely saying who he was and what he was looking for and his belief they could be compatible, he sent the whole list of selections and sat back, drinking his coffee. A woman who enjoyed the outdoors as much as he did would be a perfect match, especially if he took the time to go back to the ranch every weekend as he planned. Something always seemed to come up to stop him, but if he had more motivation to get out there, he could find some semblance of happiness again. Doris never went anymore. She said it reminded her too much of the good times with Liam and she wasn't ready for that yet. Those memories were all Vincent wanted.

“She’s also the ideal woman for someone running for political office,” he mused as he stared at her picture again. She was gorgeous, educated, and had a great job. He didn’t have to worry about skeletons falling out of her closet.

All that was left to do was wait.



Natalie’s hand moved her mouse, readjusting her character’s position on the screen. “I said don’t stand in the red circles, you idiots!” she yelled into the mic at her mouth.

“Don’t yell at me, woman,” a man’s voice called back. “Damn it! Why did we think this was a good idea?”

“I never said it was a good idea,” Natalie reminded him and the rest of their group.

Her fingers tapped rapidly on the keys of her keyboard as she watched the health of her raid group fall drastically as the boss they fought in the dungeon wailed on them hard. She cursed when her character took a massive hit and the healers failed. She died and yelled in aggravation.

“All right, guys, let’s wipe it,” she sighed “I’m calling it, too. It’s one in the morning.”

“Whatever you say, bossy lady,” Gary, one of the other gamers in the group, said.

“We’ll try again Monday night. Everyone still good for the time” She heard a chorus of yesses before logging out of the game and removing her headset.

“You know,” a voice said behind her, and Natalie jumped with a yelp out of her chair, “you’re pretty amusing to watch while you raid. I think I might start recording you simply for shits and giggles.”

Natalie glared at her identical twin sister Lana as she walked into the room. “I already do. It’s called streaming. You should try it some time. People can watch those wrinkles

in your forehead get deeper and deeper as you sink into that horrible, boring job of yours.”

Lana’s hand shot to her forehead as she rushed to see her reflection in the mirror. Natalie hooted with delight behind her. “That is not funny.”

“Actually, it is—so funny that in a week, I’m going to do it again and you’ll still fall for it. You give us blondes a bad name.” She hung her headphones on their stand and logged the stats from her game on the website. “Did you want something or did you just feel the need to burst into my room at one in the morning?”

“You’re not the only night owl in the family.”

“Yes, and this night owl is about to get started grading papers.”

Lana rolled her eyes and flopped onto her sister’s bed. “Now who’s got the wrinkles?”

Natalie’s hand was halfway to her face before she grunted and forced it back down. “Whatever.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Of what?” she asked incredulously. “Sitting in a stuffy office all day, surrounded by men in suits who have their noses up their asses half the time? Or dealing with businessmen who are too big for their britches? Or even better, the rich bastard politicians you happen to have as clients? Please tell me which part of that makes me jealous of you.”

Lana tapped her finger against her lip like she had since they were little. “Uh, all of it, because I have a real job.”

Natalie spun completely around in her chair, her legs pulled up beneath her, and rested her head in the palm of her hand. “I have a real job. Where do you think my money comes from? It’s not like I go out and work the corner.”

Lana smirked. “I meant a job where I actively socialize with people.”

“I socialize,” Natalie said, stiffening in her chair.

“Online gaming does not count. Do you even know those people in real life?”

Natalie tugged at one of the many earrings running up her right ear and shrugged noncommittedly. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, it does. You never leave this damn apartment. I’m worried about you.”

At her sister’s sudden serious tone, Natalie glanced up and their blue eyes met. Lana’s were darker than Natalie’s, one of the only ways some people could tell them apart. At least physically. Lana had no piercings or tattoos and was usually dressed in leggings or skirts and dresses. Natalie, on the other hand, was quite at home in jeans and boots, or slacks if she had to dress up. Both of her ears boasted piercings along with a tattoo on the back of her right hand, another on the sole of her left foot, and a large one that covered her entire back. She rolled her shoulders, thinking of the phoenix and its flames stretching from the base of her neck down to her ass. That had cost her a pretty penny, but it was much better to look at than what was underneath it.

“You shouldn’t worry,” Natalie finally said lightly. “I’m fine, I promise. I enjoy my life.”

“That I do not believe. You’re not as happy as you used to be, and you hardly ever hang out with our friends. They’re worried too, by the way, and threatening an intervention.”

Natalie’s lips thinned. “Of course they are. I’m not a drug addict!”

“No, you’re a hermit, and we don’t tolerate hermits. There’s so much to this world and you’re sitting here wasting away. Don’t you want a boyfriend?” Lana pressed.

She glowered at her sister and spun back around in her chair. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Just because you had one bad apple—” Natalie shot her a glare over her shoulder. “Okay, two...maybe three? That doesn’t mean they’re all like that!”

“I know, but I’m happy focusing on my job right now.”

“Being an online professor for a junior college is not a job. It’s a point of no return. Have you even signed up for your PhD program yet?”

Natalie’s fingers hovered over the keys as her eyes narrowed. “I can’t take those courses online.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

“You know exactly why,” she muttered, whipping back around in her chair. “The world has not been as kind to me as it has to you, remember?” She twisted her fingers around each other until she gave in and cracked each and every one, ignoring her sister’s glare. “It was hard enough finishing my Masters.”

“Which you received with high honors. You were even offered internships and you turned them all down because you’re scared.”

Natalie’s mouth fell open indignantly. “I am not scared.”

“Oh, really?” Lana crossed her arms over her chest. “Prove it then. Go back to school. You’re too smart to be sitting in your room all day and you know it! You’re proving everyone right, just so you know. Is that really what you want? Because I’m pretty sure that’s not the Natalie I know.”

The Natalie Lana knew, the Natalie all her friends knew, had disappeared three years ago. She lied and told Lana repeatedly the nightmares had stopped, but nearly every night, she saw those flames and heard the roaring of the fire as it crept closer. She had barely survived the crash, bearing the scars to prove just what type of hell she had gone through. Of course, it had to happen right at the peak of grad school when she was showing the world what she could do and the ideas she had locked away in her head. After the accident, they really were locked away in her head. She lost so many memories and struggled, sometimes, to recall faces of people she knew.

“I’m trying,” she whispered, her shoulders sagging. “It’s hard though, all right? I still can’t get into a car without having a panic attack!”

“I know,” Lana said and hurried to hold her sister’s hands, kneeling before her chair, “but you have to keep trying. Please? If not for me, then do it for yourself. You deserve more.” Tears welled up in her eyes, and she wiped them away quickly.

“Don’t start that blubbery shit with me. It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but I was supposed to be in the car with you!”

Natalie sank to the floor beside her sister as she cried. “I don’t blame you, so stop it. I’m glad you weren’t in the car. They told me the passenger side was completely crushed. You would’ve died, Lana. I can’t lose my twin.”

Lana nodded against her shoulder. “I’m sorry about those assholes.”

Natalie gritted her teeth. “It’s not your fault those guys couldn’t handle scars.”

She briefly recalled the few guys she’d dated after the accident, and each one had freaked at the sight of her back and arms. They were burn scars. She knew they weren’t pretty, but how hard was it to really see past something like that to the person beneath? After her third failed date two years ago, she got the tattoo and decided dating was not in her best interest.

Lana sat up and wiped the rest of the tears from her eyes. “I guess I should tell you why I came here tonight.”

Natalie’s lips twitched with a smirk. “It wasn’t to nag your twin for the thousandth time?”

Lana cringed. “No, actually, it’s about something else and you’re going to hate me for it.”

“You didn’t set me up on a blind date, did you?” Lana’s lips clamped shut tightly and her cheeks reddened. Natalie’s heart sank and she groaned. “What the hell did you do?”

“You remember that website I signed up for like six months ago?” she asked, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger.

Natalie tilted her head, trying to remember, but it was hard. Everything was fuzzy. She started to shake her head then paused when the memory of that night came back and she laughed. “You mean the married at first sight shit? The one you tried to get me to sign up for?”

“I thought it was a good idea at the time,” she argued.

“You broke up with Alex in the heat of the moment, signed up for it, and then got back together with him two weeks later! Which is when, I might add, he proposed to you.” Lana nodded slowly, not meeting Natalie’s eyes. “So, what are you trying to tell me?”

“Some guy was a match for me on the website and sent me a message.”

Natalie waited for her to explain, but no other words left her mouth. “And what am I supposed to do with this information?”

“I was just thinking—and you can totally say no if you want—but since we’re identical twins, you could kind of take over the account for me and...you know, see what happens.”

Natalie swore she heard her wrong. She blinked furiously for a minute before her quiet laughter turned into howling as she gripped her middle and rolled on the floor. When she could finally talk again, wiping a tear of mirth from her eye, she saw Lana wasn’t smiling at all. Her gut twisted as she quickly sat back up. “You’re serious?”

“Of course I’m serious! This could be really good for you.”

“To be married to some rich bastard I don’t even know yet?” Natalie screamed. “What is wrong with you?”

“Oh, come on, Nat, give it a chance,” Lana pleaded as Natalie pushed to her feet and stormed out of her bedroom to the kitchen. “It’s only for twelve weeks!”

Natalie dug around in the fridge for a beer, popped the cap off, and chugged half of it while she glared at her sister. When she lowered it, smacking her lips at the heavy lager taste, she shook her head. “Why am I not surprised you’d ask me to do something like this? You’re asking me to be

you, for three months, with a strange man. How is this not a bad idea?"

"I haven't talked to him yet," she informed her quickly. "Which means you can act like yourself the whole time. You'll just have to use my name."

"You think he won't notice I'm not a damn lawyer?"

"You could tell him you're taking a sabbatical from work. My bosses like me enough, it's believable."

"And if we hit it off, then what? I wait until we have three kids and a house before I come clean and tell him I'm not my twin sister? Jesus, Lana, this has bad news written all over it. I can't!"

Lana's face reddened even more than before, and she laid her hands on the counter. "You're being a chicken and you know it. I'm offering you a chance to get out of this cramped apartment and figure yourself out! If you don't like the man you can divorce him at the end of the twelve weeks, no harm, no foul. He never has to know that you were acting as me."

Natalie chugged the rest of her beer, hating the voice in the back of her mind actually contemplating this idea. Marry a stranger, just like that? Before the accident, she did lots of crazy shit, was the adventurous one of the two. Since then, her adventures were online and in books.

It's time, the voice said sternly. She's right. You're being a chicken. It's three months. Get out of the apartment, get away from your job, and go back to the real world.

She opened her mouth to say no but instead, found herself asking, "Can I see what he looks like before I say yes?"

Lana squealed in delight and told her to wait there while she fetched her laptop.

Natalie dug around in the fridge for a second beer and had drunk half by the time her sister returned and set the laptop on the counter. "You do realize how much I loathe you at this moment in time, right? Like you can feel it surrounding you?"

Lana ignored her as she logged into her computer and brought up the browser. “There, see? Isn’t he handsome?”

Natalie prayed he wasn’t so she could have the easy decision to tell her sister she was a nut and be finished with it, but the man’s picture caught her eye. She set her beer down gently and sidled closer to see the image more clearly. His shoulder-length brown hair and the scruff on his face gave him a rugged look she’d always adored on men, but his eyes pulled her in. They reminded her of dark chocolate, and she licked her lips absently as she admired the sharp angle of his jaw and the smooth line of his cheekbones, balancing his face almost perfectly. Then her eyes drifted to his name and her hands gripped the edge of the counter.

“Cunningham?” she gasped.

“Uh huh,” Lana replied, grinning from ear to ear.

“As in Vincent Cunningham? As in the damn billionaire who’s supposedly running for Congress?”

“Yes, that’s the one. He also runs an oil company and owns several cattle ranches,” Lana added, pointing to the screen. “He is quite the man.”

She nodded but immediately shook her head and pushed away from the counter. “No, no! I can’t do this. It’s insane, completely and utterly insane.” She crossed her arms and padded around the living room, wishing her eyes would stop glancing back at the man’s face with that smoldering look and those lips—lips she bet had kissed at least a hundred women and left them wanting more.

Lana caught up with her and stopped her, placing her hands on her twin’s shoulders. “Honestly, Natalie, what have you got to lose?”

“Isn’t there something illegal about acting like someone else when you get hitched?”

“Eh, it’s not like you’re after his money or something. It’s a binding, confidential agreement. If you’re found out, the worst that will probably happen is you have to pay a fine and get a divorce right away, and sign some gag order,” Lana

added and her eyes narrowed. “I don’t think they would throw you in jail.”

“Lana!”

“I’m kidding. Just do it, please? Or at least talk to the man before you decide. You don’t have to say yes right away.”

Natalie groaned, her face dropping into her hands. “I hate you. I absolutely hate you.”

“I’m going to take that as a you’ll think about it,” Lana said cheerfully. “I’m going to bed, but I’ll leave that laptop sitting right there in case you decide to, you know, reply to his message.”

Natalie looked at the clock on the stove. “At one fifteen in the morning?”

“We’re not the only night owls in Houston. See you in the morning!” Lana kissed her on the cheek and skipped—literally skipped—into her bedroom. Her door closed, and Natalie was left alone with her laptop and his face watching her.

Tugging on the sleeves of her oversized sweatshirt, Natalie stalked past the counter, picked up her beer, and trudged to her bedroom. She focused on the papers she needed to grade, but every few minutes, her fingers would stop and she imagined a life not in this apartment. A life with someone else in it. With a man in it she could find some companionship with and chase the ache away from her heart. By two in the morning, she gave up on her work.

“Screw it,” she whispered and tiptoed to the kitchen.

Her sister’s bedroom door was still closed, thank God. She picked up the laptop and carried it to the couch, settling between the overstuffed cushions. The message box was at the bottom of the screen, blinking with one message yet to be answered. The inbox filled half the screen, leaving Vincent Cunningham’s face visible, and she read through his words: *Allow me to introduce myself, Lana. My name is Vincent Cunningham. I have been a successful businessman since the age of twenty-one when I inherited the two Cunningham family*

businesses. Based on your profile, I believe the two of us could be quite the compatible couple, and I do hope you take my proposal into serious consideration. I am also currently putting together a campaign to run for Congress next year, and having a wife by my side would help me in more ways than one. If you would like to ask any questions of me, please don't hesitate to message me. I look forward to meeting you.

Natalie leaned her head back against the couch. He was going into politics. She abhorred politics with a passion. She was a science nerd, an astrophysicist in the making, and a sci-fi geek. How was she supposed to pull off being the kind of woman he needed to stand by his side at rallies and during dinners? She would have to take it all seriously—very seriously—and Natalie was not good at being serious. Before the accident, she might have composed herself better, but now? She was nearly as scatterbrained as her sister normally was, not to mention her piercings and tattoos were certainly not what any good voter would expect to see on the wife of their next Congressman.

She reached up, ready to close the laptop, when that nagging voice started again in her mind. She moved the cursor to the dialogue box. Her fingers tapped against the keys for a few seconds before the words she wanted popped into her head: *It's very nice to meet you, Vincent. I am happy you reached out to me and am curious about what situation led you to decide finding a wife through this website was a good choice for you. Not to judge, just simply curious. And of course, if you have any questions for me, please feel free to ask.*

She hit send and reached up to close the laptop when a ding sounded. "He's awake right now?" she muttered as she stared at the dots on the screen, indicating he was responding.

She read the first message briefly: *I don't mind you asking at all.*

"Oh, God, what did I just start?" She picked nervously at the cuffs of her sweatshirt, waiting for his second message

to appear. As she waited for the words to come up, she walked to the fridge for a third beer, figuring it was safer to get it now than wait, and plopped back down just as the ding sounded again.

Her eyes passed over the words: *I tried dating over the years, but I never found the right woman for me. I don't want that to sound as pathetic as it probably does, but I find myself at a crossroads in my life and going forward alone no longer seems appealing.*

“Hmm, sounds familiar,” she said as she typed the words without giving it too much thought. “I too have found myself alone lately, unable to find that right fit.” Her finger hit enter, and the second the words appeared before her, she clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh shit.” She couldn't open up to anyone but her twin, yet she had nearly spilled her fears and admitted her loneliness to a complete stranger.

The dots appeared again followed by a new message: *I have to admit I'm surprised. Your profile comes across as a very sociable woman.*

“Well,” she said as she typed, “appearances aren't always all there is to a person. I guess I'm sociable when I have to be, but for the most part, I enjoy the peace and quiet of an evening with a good beer and good company. And I shouldn't tell you that if you're looking for someone to be by your side with the campaign.” When she went to hit enter, she paused. That was the truth, and if she was going to attempt to be with this man, she owed him at least that much truth since she her name and her true self would be hidden. “I'm sorry you wasted your time with me,” she added and hit send.



“Wasted my time?” Vincent murmured, sitting up closer to his computer at his desk. “What does she mean?” He watched to see if she would say anything else before his

fingers set to work, hurrying to explain to her he hated the dinners and other shit just as much. “That’s why,” he whispered, “I need someone there with me to help get me through them. To laugh and remember that it will all be over soon.”

As the message sat on his screen, he anxiously awaited a response, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair as he rested his chin in the palm of his other hand. For a few minutes, he worried she’d gone offline, but the dots appeared and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He hadn’t expected to be up this late, but waiting to hear back from this woman—his potential wife—left him restless and pacing around the kitchen with a beer in his hand. He worried Lana and he would have nothing in common, but he did know one thing: she was a night owl like him. He drank the remainder of his beer as the next message finally appeared. Sitting up, his eyes scanned the words and his heart warmed even more towards this stranger: *You need a sanity checker? Okay, that I think I can manage. If you don’t mind me asking, why are you running for Congress if you don’t like everything that goes along with it? Are you sure you even want to run? And I promise I’m asking as a concerned citizen.*

After her words was a smiley face, winking at him. He felt her humor in those words and replied that he wondered that some days, too. He also told her she could always be honest with him about anything because honesty made a great foundation for a strong relationship. He wasn’t doing this just because. He was doing it so he could find a life partner and have a sliver of the happiness his parents had enjoyed while Liam was alive.

They chatted for the next hour or so about their lives and her work. He asked if this would throw off her career, but she told him she planned to take a sabbatical this summer anyway, to get some fresh air and step away from all the suits she was constantly surrounded by. She would be his for the whole summer, which would match up perfectly with the

twelve-week marriage trial. He was curious about what her job entailed, but she avoided his questions until, with lips pursed, he gave up and asked about her family. He couldn't imagine her parents liking their daughter doing something like this, but she told him she wasn't really close to her parents because they lived in Maine since retiring. She had one sister, but that was it. He let her know he was an only child and it was only him and his mother.

"And all her new boyfriends," he spoke as he typed.

A few minutes passed before she responded again: *That's hysterical to watch, I'm sure. Sorry for the delay, had to grab another beer.*

He smiled, not about to admit he was worried when she didn't reply as quickly as before. He was ready to type back another question when he caught the time. "Four in the morning? Damn it, I think I'm going in late today."

He told her he had to go and hoped to talk to her again if she was up for it. She said she was and wished him good night. Vincent logged off his computer and stretched as he stood from his chair. When he saw Billy again, he would have to thank the man for pushing him towards this. Vincent thought internet dating was the worst way to meet women, but everything about that three-hour conversation seemed so natural. A voice of doubt gave him pause, though. She could have faked all those answers, telling him what he wanted to hear, but he shoved the voice away. The only way to know for sure was to marry the woman and find out who she was for himself.

He climbed the steps of his bedroom and flopped on the bed, his eyes closing when his phone vibrated with a new message. His hand searched the nightstand and held his phone over his face, showing him an e-mail from the marriage service.

As soon as he saw the words, he smiled and stretched again with relief. They'd matched him with Lana Jenkins. All

that was left now was for her to say, “I do” and become his wife. Mrs. Vincent Cunningham.

“*I* knew it!”

Natalie jerked awake, her head spinning left and right as her blurry vision cleared and she wiped the bit of drool hastily from her mouth. “What? What happened?” She was on the couch in the living room with imprints of a laptop on her legs. Her head shot to the right to see her sister holding it, scrolling through the messages. “Shit! Give that back!”

Lana chortled as she held it out of reach. “My, my, looks like you two got along famously.”

“Through an internet chat box,” Natalie pointed out, still trying to make a grab for the laptop without breaking it. “Come on, Lana.”

“Not until you say it.”

“Say what?”

“That I was right and you are dying for some interaction of the male persuasion.” Lana slid the laptop across the counter. “No one stays up until four in the morning unless they really like the person they’re talking to.”

Natalie thought of arguing, but it was pointless. Talking with Vincent last night had opened a part of herself she’d locked away since the accident and the fallout from it. What was even more astounding, she remembered every single

piece of that conversation in vivid detail. None of it was fuzzy or a blur. She could even recall exactly what Vincent's face looked like without having to think too hard.

"Fine, you were right," she admitted, and Lana shrieked in delight. "But that doesn't mean he's going to want me as his wife."

The laptop dinged as a new e-mail popped up and Lana opened it. "Are you sure about that?"

Natalie leaned down to read the message: *Congratulations. You have been selected by Vincent Cunningham to be his wife, nuptials to take place this coming Saturday, May 12th. Do you accept this offer? Signed contract and other important documents to follow.*

"Holy shit," she whispered and sank onto one of the barstools. "Holy shit, Lana."

"What? This is a good thing, right?"

Her mouth fell open but only strangled sounds escaped. He liked her enough to ask her to be his wife. No dating needed, not actually meeting and seeing if they liked each other, nothing. "I think I'm going to hyperventilate."

Lana rubbed her back and rolled her eyes. "Stop being so overdramatic. This is a good thing."

"Until he finds out the truth, remember?" she shot back hotly. "I don't think I can do this."

"Yes, you can, because I'm not letting you sink into that deep, dark hole of depression and cease being my fiery ass sister," Lana snapped. Natalie stared at her in wide-eyed amazement. Lana was the calm one—eccentric and bouncy yes, but she rarely lost her temper. Her nostrils flared and she planted her hands on her hips. "You are going to do this because it's the only way you're going to remember what it's like to be out there instead of tucked away in your little bubble."

Natalie's hand slid across the counter to the cursor pad on the laptop. Not giving herself another second to think, she

hit accept. “If this goes badly, you and your lawyer friends better get me out of it.”

Lana grinned and hugged her so hard Natalie couldn't breathe. “Enough with the negativity. Let's find you a wedding dress!”

“Oh, goodie,” Natalie groaned. Married. She would be married in a week. “Uh...hey, sis? Can we not tell Mom and Dad about this? At least not until we see what happens?”

“Deal. You always used to tell Mom you'd rather elope, anyway.”

“Yes. Yes, I did. Isn't that what's happening this weekend? It's not going to be some huge production, is it?” she asked, panicking.

“I don't know. Why don't you send a message to your future husband and ask? I'll get my purse—and please throw on something besides a ratty sweatshirt and holey denim shorts.”

Natalie mocked her sister as she walked away then frowned. “Hey, aren't you supposed to be at the office right now? Dealing with your big kid job?” She had to finish grading her students' final before she was officially free for the summer. She couldn't imagine her sister would suddenly take off the whole summer, too.

“You told Vincent you, meaning me, were on sabbatical, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, my wedding is this fall and you know how much my bosses love me,” she said, poking her head out of her bedroom door and batting her eyelashes.

“You actually are taking the summer off? How the hell are you going to keep your job?”

“Like I said, they love me. I started there when I was twenty, remember?”

Natalie grumbled as she typed the message about her fears of a big wedding to Vincent and hit send. “Cars. Shit, Lana! What about cars?”

“You’ll have to get over it, sunshine!”

“Get over it, right. Thanks for the advice that every single psychologist in the city gave me!” she hollered through the apartment before turning and walking into her bedroom. She tore through her closet, imagining her first time in a car with Vincent, watching him freak out as she screamed like a madwoman. *Get ahold of yourself! You’re not that bad,* she scolded as she pulled out a pair of jeans and a knit shirt. *You just get extremely pale and shake uncontrollably, and sometimes you vomit.* “Ugh, this is going to be terrible.”

“You ready yet?”

“Just give me one damn minute,” she yelled to Lana as she shoved her legs into her jeans. “Well, you’ve survived one wreck in your life. Why not go for a second?” Dressed and her hair pulled back in a messy bun, she found her purse and met Lana at the door. “Let’s do this, I guess.”

Lana bounced up and down like a kid instead of a twenty-six-year-old woman. “Good, because we’re shopping for my dress today too!”

“Of course we are.” Natalie followed her sister out and locked the door behind her.



Vincent looked up from his computer when Billy strolled in, grinning brightly as he clapped his hands. “Bravo. Look at you, big man.”

“Can you close the door if you’re going to act like an idiot?”

“Don’t tell me I embarrass you.”

“You’ve always embarrassed me,” Vincent murmured. “I’m merely too nice to tell you that.”

Billy closed the door and leaned against it. “I’m going to stand here waiting patiently until I hear those three little

words. Words that I have never heard come from the mouth of Vincent Cunningham.”

Vincent huffed as he stared at his friend, a single eyebrow arched. “You were right.”

“Those three words that—wait, what?” Billy asked surprised.

“You were right, and I’m not sure how I can thank you. Lana is amazing, and I met her because of you.” He strode to his friend and held out his hand. “Thank you, Billy, really.”

Billy shook his hand and winked. “You are very well welcome, Congressman Cunningham.”

Vincent’s chest swelled with a strange sense of pride at those words. “Not yet, but soon. With this woman by my side, I might manage to keep myself in check through all your political mumbo jumbo crap. I can’t imagine my Dad going through all that shit without Mom.”

“And now you’ll have a wife equally as grand. The wedding takes place this Saturday, correct? Where do you want to have it and how many people? I know it’ll be difficult to get into some places, but with the right amount, we could make it work.”

“Actually,” Vincent said as he held up his hand to stop Billy’s ramblings, “she asked if we could simply elope this Saturday. Her, me, and a witness.”

Billy tapped his chin. “She really doesn’t want a big wedding?”

“Nope, and honestly, I’m okay with that. I feel like it’s going to be hard enough convincing everyone that I’ve had a fiancée this whole time and she didn’t magically pop out of the ground.”

“I have that covered.” Vincent brows both shot up this time. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s my job to make sure every aspect of your life is covered. You’ve been with Lana Jenkins for a few years now and you finally popped the question. You’re both so in love you didn’t want to wait to get married so you decided to have a nice, simple ceremony

because being together was more important than wasting thousands of dollars on one day.” Billy nodded firmly when he finished. “Of course, it will be more extensive than that, but I’ll have to actually meet this woman and ask her some questions.”

“You’re insane. Is this what you do in your free time? Come up with contingencies and stories?”

“Eh, some people go golfing. I ensure my friend and favorite client has his ass covered.”

“Well, I don’t get to meet her until Saturday, so you won’t get to meet her until then either.”

Billy’s head bobbed, then he shook it, looking confused. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t trust anyone else to be my witness and not blabber about the whole situation, so I’m asking you to be my best man and witness. Will you accept? Because if I have to drag my mother there and listen to her prattle on and on the entire ceremony about finally finding a woman I can wed and bed to give her grandkids, I won’t forgive you so easily.”

Billy’s eyes teared up, and he hastened to wipe them away and cleared his throat. “Yeah, I’ll be your witness. Thanks, Vinnie.”

Vincent patted him on the shoulder. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“My best friend and future Congressman is finally getting married and he actually seems happy about it. It’s a big deal.”

“Oh? And what about you, Mr. Charmer? When are you finally going to settle down with the woman of your dreams?”

“Eh, if this works well for you, I might decide to do the same.”

Vincent sat down with him at the small conference table in his office as they went over the game plan for Saturday. Lana would arrive at the courthouse an hour before the ceremony, but Vincent wouldn’t get to see her until she

walked into the room to get married. His hands already shook with anticipation of seeing her in person, speaking with her, and what could possibly come later if they hit it off well enough. Sex was a very personal thing, and though they would be husband and wife, he would not push this woman to consummate their marriage the first night if she wasn't comfortable. There was a chance he wouldn't be either.

"What about a reception with everyone afterwards? Like the week after, once you two have a chance to get to know each other better?" Billy asked, setting up lists on his tablet and preparing to schedule such an event. "We could set it that Saturday. The convention center downtown looks wide open still."

"I assume you're going to tell me it would be good press to have a reception open to guests and certain reporters?" Vincent murmured.

"Yes, but if you don't think she's up for it..."

"No, no... if you think I should do it, then I will. I'm sure she'll be fine with it." He actually had no idea if she would be or not, but having their lives out in the open for the world to see was all part of being married to a politician. He'd left nothing out as far as those details went, of how much work would be involved with this campaign and her part in it. "Do it in the evening and make sure you get a good band. I don't want it to be boring if it's supposed to be our wedding reception."

Billy grinned. "You got it, boss. Now, how about a tux for this Saturday?"

"I have one, but it's old."

"And you need a ring."

"Shit, I didn't even think about that."

Billy laughed as he stood and tucked the tablet in his briefcase. "Then I think we need to go shopping. Shall we?" Billy offered his arm and Vincent gave him a friendly shove towards the door to his office.



A few hours later, Vincent changed back into his clothes after being fitted for a snazzy black tux, and Billy put a rush order on it so they would have it by Saturday morning.

“The ring is next,” Billy mumbled. “Do we need to get you a ring, or will she bring one?”

“I think I should get one. I don’t want her to have to pay for a ring,” he said as he stepped out of the changing room. “Lead the way.”

They left the tux shop and walked a few doors down to a jewelry store where they had to be buzzed inside. Vincent listened while Billy told the woman behind the counter what they were looking for as he peered into the glass cases of rings. He’d only talked to Lana once, and he was expected to pick a ring out for her? He only knew her likes from what he’d read on her profile, but that wasn’t nearly enough to figure out what ring was best suited to her. Did she even like diamonds?

“What were you looking for as far as style, sir?” the woman asked as she sidled over to him. “Princess cut, perhaps? Or something a little more unique?”

Vincent blew out an aggravated breath, his palms sweating. What if he picked the wrong ring? “Could we do something a little different as far as me picking a simple ring today and coming back for a new one in a week or so?”

The woman’s brow wrinkled. “You’re saying you want a place holder ring?”

“Yes, can we do that? I’ll pay for it in full, of course. I’m not asking to return it, but my situation is a bit unique. We’re eloping, you see,” he whispered as he leaned closer. “I’m sort of surprising her with a weekend getaway, something she’s always wanted.” It was as close to the truth as Vincent could get, but the woman’s bright smile told him she bought it.

“That is very sweet of you, and you want her to be able to pick out her ring afterwards?”

“Yes. She has very unique tastes. I told her she would have the chance to pick out her own ring. If I do it now, though, it’ll ruin the surprise. Can you help me?”

“Of course, sir,” the woman said. “Give me one moment to pull some selections for you. Will you need a ring for yourself as well?”

“Yes, if it’s no trouble.” The woman walked away, and Billy leaned on the glass case. “What are you smirking about?”

“You are definitely a politician in the making. Lying so smoothly already.”

“I don’t have a choice. I can’t exactly tell her about my current situation—unless you want to clean up the mess?” Vincent asked with a crooked grin, and Billy’s smile fell. “That’s what I thought.”

“No, you’re right, it’s the smart thing to do.”

Vincent walked around the small shop while the woman drew out several different rings. His eyes were drawn to a case of white gold bands with sapphires and fiery rubies staring back at him. If he were to pick a ring for his future wife, it would be one of those, a stone with character. A stone that would fit on the hand of a woman who had a great sense of humor and, he hoped, a continuing understanding of who he was as a person. The woman called him over, and he picked out a simple white gold band with a solitary diamond on it for Lana. For his own ring, he picked out a dark band made of tungsten with a darker band of white gold running around it.

“Very good, sir. I’ll ring this up and you’ll be ready to go.”

The woman measured his finger for his size and said a rush order was available, but he hadn’t a clue what size Lana’s finger was. She assured him they could resize it when he returned for the other ring.

As he walked out of the store with a receipt in his pocket for wedding rings, his stomach fluttered and his heart raced. "I think I need a drink."

"Please don't tell me you're getting cold feet?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm just nervous as hell. I'm getting married this weekend," he whispered.

"Yes, you are, and you know what that means?" Billy asked, but Vincent shook his head. "Bachelor party...brought to you by yours truly."

"I don't think I'm in the mood for a bachelor party," he cringed. "If I'm going to do this, I'm going to start it out right. No strippers, Billy. Drinks only, and only with you. We're keeping this quiet, remember?"

"All right then, a fine night of whiskey. How does that sound?"

Vincent agreed. A drink now would help soothe his nerves and prepare him for a night with his mother and her date, Todd, again. At least Lana had a good sense of humor. Any other woman might sit one night with his mother and her boyfriend and leave the room screaming. Doris certainly wasn't holding back any longer. Vincent wanted her to be happy, but hearing about her latest adventures in bed with men Vincent had known since childhood was not how he intended to spend his evenings at her house.

A few more days, and he would be a married man. Vincent wondered if Lana was as nervous as he was, but there was no turning back now. He'd agreed to this and would see it through, even if it ended in divorce at the end of twelve weeks. An image of his parents, much younger and dancing on a rooftop, came to mind. Could Lana be that woman, willing to dance as if no one was watching and make love until the sun came up with a man she hardly knew?

"Vinnie, you coming?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," he hollered and rushed to the curb where Billy waited beside his truck. "I hope this marriage pays off."

“It will, trust me. Past elections show those who get married and have happy little families are seen as family men, men who care about family issues and being there when times get tough for those voters. It’ll work out perfectly, you’ll see.”

Vincent pulled away from the curb. “Then let’s go have a toast to my impending victory.”

Vincent fiddled with the flower on his tux jacket again until Billy slapped his hand away.

“Stop fidgeting, you look fine,” he assured him.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think I’d be this damn nervous.”

“You’re getting married. You’re supposed to be nervous.”

Vincent glowered at Billy. “And you would know this from past experience, would you?”

Billy shrugged one shoulder. “I watch a lot of Hallmark movies, all right? I’m a closet romantic. Just keep it together.”

“And the judge is okay with keeping the secret?”

“All he knows is that you and this young woman are getting married today because of the love you have for each other and you want it to be private because that’s the type of people you both are,” Billy said, waving Vincent’s worries away casually. “It’s going to be perfect, trust me.”

“Gentlemen,” the judge announced as he entered the room beaming. His greying hair and tiny glasses relaxed Vincent. He hadn’t personally met this man before but knew his reputation. Judge Harvey was a fair, kindhearted man. “Now then, Mr. Cunningham, are you ready to be married?”

Vincent shook the older man’s hand with a shaky smile. “You have no idea.”

“Good, then let us get started. Music, please,” he said, motioning to Billy who hit play on the stereo behind him. Soft violin music played through the room, and Judge Harvey smiled even wider. “Enter the bride, if you please!”

The door opened, and Vincent held his breath. A woman stepped into the room with a small bouquet of red and white roses in her hands. Her white pumps were a modest two inches at most and her dress was extremely conservative, though it fit her body beautifully. Vincent let out the breath and smiled, his heart warming as she returned his smile. Her light blue eyes lit up. He remembered them being far darker in the picture, but he was told quite often his eyes darkened and lightened based on his moods. Lana stepped into the room, and after taking a deep breath, she strolled down the short, makeshift aisle towards Vincent and Judge Harvey. The cream-colored dress hit her right at the knees, fitting like a pencil skirt that went up to a snug-fitting top with a V neck and sleeves going to her elbows. There was a belt at her waist, beaded and lacy, while a simple bejeweled headband completed the look on her head. Her blonde hair was pulled back with ringlets framing her face.

“Hi,” he whispered when she stopped before him.

“Hi,” she replied, and her smile faltered for a moment before she squared her shoulders and it spread across her perfect red lips again.

“Shall we begin?” Judge Harvey asked.

“Sorry, yes,” Vincent replied, unable to pull his gaze from Lana’s.

Judge Harvey talked them through the ceremony, ten minutes in all, and at the end of it, Lana held out her hand for Vincent to slip the ring on her finger. Her eyes glimmered at the sight of it and tears shimmered in her eyes as she took his hand in turn and slipped the ring he’d picked out onto his hand.

“Nice choice,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth, nodding at his ring. “It suits you.”

“We’ll pick you out another for you soon,” he promised, and she grinned wider.

“Now then, by the power vested in me be the state of Texas,” Judge Harvey announced, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, Vincent.”

Vincent froze. Should he kiss her? He fumbled for a second, but Lana squeezed his hand and leaned in close. He closed his eyes and meant to do a simple brushing of his lips against hers, but the second they made contact, it was as if she was meant for him. Their lips moved against one another’s, and his arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her against his body. She kissed him without hesitation, and they didn’t stop until Judge Harvey cleared his throat politely.

“Save some for the honeymoon, kids,” he teased.

“Sorry,” Vincent mumbled as he drew back reluctantly.

Lana appeared as surprised as he felt by their instant connection. “Well, I guess we’re married. Now what?” she asked, laughing lightly.

“Now we start our lives together.” Vincent took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. “Mrs. Lana Cunningham.”

Her smile disappeared and she seemed to choke before she shook her head and the glimmer of guilt he swore he spotted in her eyes vanished. “Lead the way.”

They waved to Billy and Judge Harvey, the first saying he would drop off the papers later at the house. Vincent walked Lana through the courthouse and out to his truck. She smirked when he opened the passenger side door for her.

“What’s so amusing?” he asked. Her smile was contagious, and he found himself grinning with her.

“I knew this was your truck. Don’t tell me how, but I knew it.” She paused before climbing inside. Her face paled, and she swallowed hard several times. Vincent reached gently for her hand and kissed the back of it. “I’m sorry, I just...uh, I’m having issues at the moment.”

“You’re not the only one,” he promised. “We’ll take everything slow, I promise you, and I’m not taking you back to my house to lock you away forever.”

She barked a loud laugh, then covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry, that’s embarrassing.”

“Not to me. You should’ve seen me this morning.”

“You’re the one who wanted a married at first sight bride.”

“Yes, well, it’s still nerve-wracking to invite someone into your life—a stranger,” he said softly, running his thumb over her knuckles. “Today will be about getting to know one another over a nice dinner and a bottle of champagne, or several.”

The color returned to her cheeks. “I think I can handle that plan.” With his help, she climbed into the truck. He slid in behind the wheel a few seconds later and drove towards the house. He’d considered taking her out to dinner, but Billy warned that was inviting images and stories spreading that they weren’t ready for. The whole drive, he watched Lana as she gripped the door of his truck until her knuckles turned white and she whispered something under her breath.

“Do you have a problem with cars?” he asked.

“It’s nothing—an irrational fear. Don’t worry, I’m not going to ruin your upholstery,” she teased as she flinched when they drove over a bump.

Vincent pulled up the drive to the house and parked in the garage. “We’re here. You okay?”

She nodded and blew out a few breaths. “Yep, right as rain.”

“Good,” he said and stepped out of the truck. He opened her door again for her and led her inside the mansion he’d owned for the past ten years. “Welcome home, Lana.”

She stepped away from him, her jaw dropping as she walked further into the kitchen. “Holy shit,” she whispered. “This is incredible. Did you do all the work yourself?” She ran her hands along the dark wood cabinetry and admired

the state-of-the-art appliances. Her eyes caught every detail down to the stone floor beneath her feet. She kicked off her heels and wiggled her toes against the cold stone as he watched.

“If this is how you react to a kitchen, I can’t wait to see what you do with the rest of the house,” he said through his laughter.

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, she peered out of the kitchen. “May I?”

“This is your home now, too,” he told her. “Please, feel free.”

Lana rushed out of the kitchen, and he heard her cursing in amazement as she explored the first floor of the house. He drew out a bottle of champagne, popped the cork, and filled two glasses before he tracked her down at the bottom of the staircase staring up at the antler chandelier hanging overhead.

“What do you think so far?” he asked as he handed her a glass.

“I think I am not going to regret living here, for starters,” she teased and they clinked their glasses together. “Cheers.”

They sipped their champagne as Vincent studied the woman standing in front of him. She was everything he imagined after chatting with her that first night, but for some reason, she seemed to act in complete opposite of the profile he’d read on the website. The way she acted was not like any paralegal he knew, nor did he expect to spot the many holes along her right ear lacking earrings at the moment. When she turned, he also spotted black ink curling up along the back of her neck, almost hidden by her dress and hair. Her profile said nothing about tattoos and piercings.

“This feels so surreal,” she mumbled, tilting her head back as she spun around slowly. When she came to a stop facing him, some of the light disappeared from her eyes filled with sudden worry. “I keep thinking I’m going to wake

up and this will disappear. Or worse, that I've somehow created this alternate reality where everything is perfect and with one wrong move, it will implode."

"Alternate reality?" he repeated, smirking. "You sound like a Trekkie, my dear Lana."

Her face paled suddenly, and she shrugged. "Eh, my sister and I watched it a bit growing up. Some of it stuck with me, I guess."

Why does she seem so nervous all of a sudden? "Well, as far as I can tell, this is real. Why don't you explore the rest of the house and I'll get us more champagne?"

She drained the rest of her glass, and as he turned to the kitchen, he heard her bare feet walk up the hardwood steps. He refilled the glasses with more champagne but didn't hurry after her. His stomach clenched, but not out of nerves. He sensed something was wrong. All his hopes of this day running smoothly slipped away each second his mind ran through every possible scenario. What happened between the courthouse and his house? He assumed something as major as an irrational fear of cars would have been on her profile, not to mention the tattoo she hid on her back and who knew where else. He remembered his conversations with Billy over the week about ensuring no one caught wind of this ceremony, but what if she sold him out and that's why she looked guilty? Was she being paid off by another politician? The idea pissed him off that someone would stoop so low as to make a scandal out of his life, and even worse, the idea that the woman he spoke with—that he felt such a strong connection with—was there under false pretenses.

"Stop it," he muttered to himself. "You're freaking out over nothing. Now go track down your wife and stop being so damned paranoid."

His scolding didn't help much, and by the time he reached the second floor, his emotions were in turmoil. He wanted to go back to the moment when she walked in the room at the courthouse. He walked around the upstairs, looking for her,

until he spotted her standing in the doorway of the master bedroom. Vincent stopped abruptly, careful to be quiet as he stared at her face and the uncertainty there.

Maybe she's just nervous about your expectations with sex, you idiot, he told himself sternly.

"So what do you think?" he asked as he approached her.

She jumped and her eyes widened. "About what?"

"The house." He held out the glass of champagne and she took it, her hand shaking. "You can go in and look around if you want. There's nothing weird in there, promise."

Timidly, she stepped into the bedroom and circled the king-sized bed. "You have a very nice house. It's great." She licked her lips, and Vincent remembered what they felt like against his own. "I just...uh, I'm just a little out of sorts, I guess."

"Lana, we don't have to do anything if you don't want to, especially not on our first day together."

She drained her champagne glass and set it on the chest of drawers beside her. A hand went to her mouth, and she shook her head, drawing down the curls and letting them fall over her shoulders as she removed the headband too, setting it and the pins by the glass. "That's not it. I...I don't think I can do this."

He stepped back, confused by her words. He just told her they didn't have to. "So you're saying you didn't feel anything when we kissed?" he asked, trying to better understand what was going through her mind as the annoying voice in his mind warned him something was off about this woman.

"No...no, I definitely did," she whispered and smiled at him, but it didn't reach her eyes, eyes so different from the picture he knew by heart.

He set his glass down and walked to her, holding out his hand for hers. "Whatever you're worried about, we can work it out together. That's what couples do in a marriage, right?" He smoothed his hands through her hair, and his heart

fluttered when her eyes closed and she relaxed at his touch. He moved one hand to her chin, holding it lightly as he tilted her head up so their lips met.

As before, his whole body came to life and he deepened the kiss, testing the waters and letting his tongue glide along her lower lip. Her mouth parted on a sigh, and he took his time exploring as she pressed her body full length against his. His hands slipped to her shoulders, squeezing them as the kiss grew into so much more. This woman was filled with an energy he only truly felt when they touched, but he wanted to feel it for longer than a few moments. Her body shifted and her breasts crushed into his chest. His arousal rose, and she gave a startled sound before her hips ground against his hard erection. He opened his eyes briefly to glance at the bed so close at hand and wondered if leading her over there was a good idea.

“Wait,” she whispered and stopped kissing him abruptly. “I’m sorry, I can’t...this isn’t right.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, out of breath and wanting her more than he’d wanted any other woman in his bed before. “Lana?”

She stumbled away from him, wrapping her arms around herself like she was cold. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I thought I could do this, but it’s not fair to you. God, I’m such an idiot!”

“Can you please tell me what’s going on?” he asked, worried she was about to have a panic attack of some sort, but when her next words left her mouth, he wondered how he managed to stay standing on his two feet.

“My name is not Lana. My name is Natalie.”



Natalie held her breath and waited. Vincent had been so nice to her all day, the perfect gentleman, and damn, did he know how to kiss. Whatever sexual tension was between them was

certainly real, which was why she couldn't bring herself to go any further until she told him the truth. It wasn't fair to him and lying was not the person she was.

All right, Lana, I hope you have those backup plans in place, she thought. *I think I'm about to get sued into next year.*

Vincent's hands twitched at his sides, and he looked like he'd swallowed a lemon. His mouth opened and closed several times like a fish searching for water but finding only air. "You're...you're not Lana Jenkins," he muttered finally.

"No," she said shaking her head. "I'm Natalie Jenkins."

"So you're her sister? How is this possible? The picture online...you look identical!"

"We are," she whispered. "Identical twins."

"Jesus," he breathed and leaned against the wall with one hand, glaring openly at her. "You decided to simply take your sister's place and marry a stranger? Who does that?"

"I know, I know, which is why I told you," she argued. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking and she thought this would be a good idea and—"

"Who thought it would be? Are you working for someone?" he yelled.

"What?" she asked, confused. "No, my sister thought it was a good idea. She forgot she was on the site and is actually engaged to be married, and she thought I needed a way to get out. After the accident, she's been worried and...and...none of this matters right now anyway." She closed her mouth quickly, shutting off her rant, and hung her head. "Look, we can go get a divorce and this will all be over with and you don't have to see me again."

Her arms wrapped tightly around her as if to ward off whatever curses this man would fling at her. She marched to the door, but Vincent stopped her from leaving.

"What are you doing?" She glanced at his hand holding her arm and at the mix of anger and confusion in his eyes. Despite what she had done to this man, she wasn't worried

about him hurting her. She trusted him without fail. Why? She had no idea in hell, but she did.

“Hold on a second,” he mumbled and let her arm go. “Let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I lied and I married you under false pretenses.”

“I realize that, but the situation is a bit more complicated for me, remember? It will be public record that I was married, and it will also be public record if the same day I filed for divorce,” he told her firmly. “How do you think that will make me look to the voters?”

Natalie wasn’t sure why she did it, but she laughed—quietly at first, but it built until she almost howled, holding her aching sides. “Really? That’s what you’re worried about? You want to keep me around because of your damn image?”

His jaw tensed and he shook his head. “That’s not the only reason.”

“Oh no? Then what?”

“Despite this...current predicament, I felt something when we kissed, and I know you did too. Are you ready to walk out on that? Because I’m not.”

Natalie’s laughter died, and she blinked a few times. “But...I don’t understand.”

“The night on the computer, when we were talking, was that you or your sister?”

“Me. Lana never responded to you.”

“Then I think our next course of action should be to sit down and be truthful with each other. You mentioned an accident in your rant. What accident?”

Natalie huffed and stepped away from him. “You can’t really be this curious about me. You should be pissed and throw me out of the house!”

“I never said I wasn’t pissed,” he corrected with a smirk, “but I picked your sister because I thought she was you. Tell me the truth, Natalie. Why did you really agree to do this if it wasn’t to fuck up my political career?”

“You’re really concerned I’m here just to mess with you. Aren’t you a bit paranoid?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes, I am. It comes with the territory, I’m afraid. Why did you do this?”

She considered what her chances would be of trying to simply barrel past him and call a cab, but she remembered her bags had been dropped off here earlier that morning and she would have to either drag them with her or come back and get them.

Admit it, you don’t want to leave him either, not until you know what the hell that spark was. The kiss was incredible, but she refused to stay with him because of a damn kiss that made her toes curl and give herself hope that she wasn’t as horrible as those other guys said. *Okay, now you’re getting ahead of yourself.* She rolled her shoulders, remembering he hadn’t seen all of her yet.

“Natalie?”

“Right, explanation. My sister was worried about me turning into an anti-social hermit after the accident, and she forgot about her profile on the website.”

“You said that before. How did she forget about putting herself on a marriage website?”

Natalie’s eyebrows lifted. “Well, if you’d actually met Lana, you’d realize how scatterbrained and impulsive can be. She signed up for the website when she and her boyfriend were on a break. It’s a long story.”

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “And this accident you keep mentioning? Does it have anything to do with your irrational fear of cars?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I thought you were a politician, not a psychic.”

“I’m good at reading people. How bad was the accident?”

Natalie’s eyes closed. She heard the squealing tires again, the horrible cracking as her car slid off the road and rolled down and down and down. Felt the heat of the flames again.

Gritting her teeth, she refused to meet his gaze as she whispered, “Bad enough. Can we leave it at that?”

“Bad enough your sister was scared for you? Depression?” he asked, his voice softening as well as his face.

“It happens when you almost die,” she replied sharply. “Sorry, it’s been a long recovery.”

“It’s hard to recover if you lock yourself in your apartment. I’m going to take a guess that you haven’t been on a date in a long time, either.”

Natalie glared at him and stiffened her shoulders. “You have no idea what I went through, all right? I’ll answer the important questions, but I am not going to drag up what happened for your amusement.”

The anger faded almost completely from his face. “Sorry, you’re right.”

“No, you shouldn’t be apologizing. I don’t even know what we’re doing here. I really should go. It’ll make everything easier.”

“Easier, maybe,” he agreed, “but I’ve never been one for the easy road.”

She wanted to know what thoughts were going through his mind right now, what game he was playing. The set of his body said he was still mad and that he clearly didn’t trust her. Most people, at this point, would be clamoring to get rid of the problem, not try to find a way to make it work, and for what? She was about to tell him again she could leave when the doorbell rang.

“Hold that thought,” he murmured. “I’ll be right back.”

Natalie followed him to the doorway but stopped herself from going any further. Her head ached and she needed another drink—or several—until she figured out Vincent’s plan. She realized he needed a wife to help boost his public image, but why stick with the woman who lied to him?

Maybe there’s hope for a man in your life after all.

“One can dream,” she whispered to herself and leaned against the doorway, waiting for him to come back with his decision on their next step.



Vincent opened the door and Billy strolled in. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Yes, but not what you think. We need to talk.” Vincent dragged his friend into the kitchen.

“I know that look. That’s a there’s a major problem you need your friend Billy to solve look. What happened? You decided you don’t like her after what, two hours?”

Vincent gave up on the champagne and grabbed a beer, handing another one to Billy. “Drink it, you’re going to need it.” He chugged half of it and shoved his hair out of his face. “That’s not Lana.”

Billy choked on his beer. He wiped at it dribbling down his chin as he muttered, “I’m sorry?”

“The woman I married and brought home to live with me as my wife is not Lana Jenkins,” he repeated slowly. “That woman is Natalie Jenkins, Lana’s identical twin sister.”

Billy glanced upwards as if he could see her through the floor. “They switched on you?”

“Actually, no. Well...” Vincent rubbed his cheek and shrugged. “It’s complicated. Short version, her sister was worried about her and I’ve been talking with Natalie the whole time, not Lana. Lana, it turns out, is already engaged and forgot she was on the website to begin with.”

“Uh huh,” Billy murmured, clearly not believing a word he said. “You’re going to divorce her, right?” Vincent squared his shoulders as he drank the rest of his beer. “Vinnie, come on, man. You can’t seriously be thinking of keeping her around? She lied about who she was and then

you married her. You have no idea who this woman really is. What if she feeds information to the tabloids—or worse, your rivals?”

“And you think a same-day marriage and divorce will look better?” he argued.

“That I have a chance at explaining away, but this? You married the wrong twin.”

“Or the right one,” he whispered.

“I beg your pardon?”

Since Lana—Natalie—admitted who she really was, Vincent was at war with himself about what to do. He was pissed at being tricked, but when she told him he’d only talked to her and that her sister did it out of the goodness of her heart, not out of malice, Vincent believed her. Explaining why he trusted her was impossible, but he did and there was no changing that fact. The pain was clear in her eyes, as was the anger at her accident, but those weren’t the emotions that drove him to want to keep her by his side.

Over the years, his loneliness had built, though he hid it well, for the most part. The pain in Natalie’s light blue eyes was not something he was used to seeing, but he saw the loneliness in his eyes often. Lana probably saved her sister from turning into a hermit, in all honesty. No matter how it happened, Natalie landed in his life, and for the first time since his father’s death, he sensed he’d found a kindred spirit, someone he could rely on. They would get to know each other as time passed. After all, wasn’t that what real marriage was? And if he thought for a second she would bomb his political career, he would file for a divorce without hesitation.

“I need you to find a way to fix the name on our marriage license,” Vincent finally told Billy.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, man. You realize the judge called her Lana today? You don’t think it’s going to look odd if there’s suddenly a typographical error that has to be corrected?”

Vincent set his beer bottle on the counter by the sink and grabbed a second one. "Say he's an older man and Natalie didn't want to embarrass the judge by correcting him. He was confused. Maybe he thought she was her sister and she was too caught up in the moment to say anything."

"No one is going to buy that."

"Well, I need you to make sure they do. I'm not letting this woman go easily, Billy."

"I think I should talk to her," he muttered.

"You are not interrogating my wife."

"How did you even find out? Did she slip up or something?" Billy asked, still glaring out of the kitchen at the staircase.

Vincent shook his head. "She told me. We were...talking and she said she felt too guilty lying to a nice guy like me. She told me everything."

"Everything?"

"Well, the important details," Vincent amended. "Can you change the license or not?"

Billy groaned and rested his head on the counter. "Why do you do this shit to me? There I was, thinking all these messes of yours were behind us."

"My messes have not been that catastrophic." He peeled the label on his beer bottle. "And one more thing?"

"Now what? You want my liver? My kidney? Want me to spy on your mother and her sex life?"

"God, no," he snapped. "The website only ran a background check on Lana. Can you run one on Natalie—discreetly? Use your contacts at the police department?"

Billy picked up the folder he had carried in with him. "I'll make sure it gets done. You want me to stay the night and make sure she doesn't try to rob you or...I don't know, tie you up in the middle of the night?"

"I'm twice her size. I think I can handle myself."

"Fine, fine, just remember I offered." Billy slid the unopened beer back towards Vincent. "I'll call you when it's

taken care of, and do you still want to have the reception a week from today?"

"Shit, I forgot about that."

"I can cancel if you want. No invitations have been sent yet."

Vincent considered it, but though her name had changed, he knew Natalie as well as he would have known Lana. "Nah, keep it. We'll be fine."

"Good. See you Monday at the office. Call me if you change your mind."

Vincent walked him out and locked the door behind him. His eyes landed on the single suitcase dropped off that morning. Natalie's things. There was no reason he couldn't continue to be the nice guy she told him he was, so he picked up the suitcase and carried it upstairs with him. She stood outside the doorway to one of the three guest rooms upstairs.

"I figured I would sleep in one of these rooms," she said quietly. "I could have grabbed that."

"No need," he said and set the suitcase down beside her. "Listen, a week from today is our official reception for friends and family. A few reporters will probably be there, too. You still up for doing this with me?"

"It's what I signed up for," she said, trying to lighten the mood. "Vincent, I just want to say...uh, thank you for not throwing me out on my ass."

He smiled softly. "Like I said, I'm still pissed and this might not be the easiest beginning to a marriage, but I'm pretty sure my dad would roll over in his grave if I simply threw my new wife out onto the street without giving us both a chance to make this work."

She picked up her bag, and with one final nervous look, she walked into the bedroom. He considered following her in but decided she might need her space.

"There's food in the kitchen whenever you're hungry," he told her. "I'll be around, too, if you want to talk some

more.” He backed away and went to change out of his tux, closing his bedroom door. He stared at the knob for a few long seconds before he locked it too.

What happened to trusting her? he scolded himself as he shrugged out of his shirt and kicked out of his shoes.

“Time,” he told his reflection. “All we need is some time.”

When he closed his eyes, he felt her lips against his again, his hands wrapped around her body and her blatant want for him as he wanted her. He’d been with plenty of women before, but none of them made him ache for their touch. Hoping a cold shower would help, he turned the faucet on and stepped in, wondering what the next few weeks would bring.

Natalie fell asleep with hope that this situation would work out for the best. Vincent seemed more than ready to give it a try once he realized he'd spoken with Natalie the whole time and not her sister, but as the next few days wore on, she believed he regretted his decision to keep her around almost immediately.

Sunday passed with her wandering around the house and picking through the library she'd found the day before. There were several interesting titles she was curious to page through and occupied her time reading from the comfort of the couch. Vincent checked on her once or twice throughout the day, each time opening his mouth as if to ask her questions, but he would smile quickly and walk away. Dinner was dreadful, both eating only to get away from the table and hide from each other again. The house was large enough that it was easy to make herself disappear. She considered talking to him Monday when he came home from the office, but the scowl on his face let her know he was in a pissy mood. Gruffly, he told her he would be on the phone all evening in his study and apologized for not being able to spend time with her.

Tuesday, while he was at the office again, Natalie busied herself with tracking down some cookbooks in the library

and whipping together a good old-fashioned steak and potatoes dinner with a flair. She was pouring the red wine when he walked in.

“You don’t have to cook for me,” were the first words out of his mouth, and Natalie’s chest tightened, fighting back her hurt.

“I know, but I thought you might enjoy a meal when you came home. I don’t mind. Besides,” she added, handing him a glass of wine, “what would everyone think if they knew your wife didn’t cook for her husband every now and then?”

His eyes narrowed and he sat down hard at the kitchen table. “We’re still working on the husband and wife thing, remember?”

Natalie pushed her tongue against her upper lip, annoyed, and cut into her steak. “You’re right, sorry. I won’t mention it again.”

“Natalie.”

“Huh?”

“Your piercings. You put them all back in.”

She tugged at her right ear. “I have to wear them every now and then or the holes will close.”

“What if someone came to the door today?” he asked, not looking at her. “Did you wear that all day, too?” He motioned to her typical sweatshirt and denim shorts.

Natalie breathed in and out, counting to ten in her mind. “Yes, I did. I only brought so many clothes. The rest of my stuff won’t be delivered until next week. Do you have an issue with how I look?”

“I told you, public appearance is very important,” he reminded her stiffly. “You can’t have the piercings at the reception.”

“Whatever you say, dear,” she snapped and pushed back from the table.

“Where are you going? You didn’t even touch your food.”

“I’m not hungry, thanks.” She poured more wine into her glass, picked up the book she’d read all day from the

counter, and trudged upstairs to her bedroom. Her eyes skimmed over the words, but none of them registered in her mind. What happened to the Vincent she'd warmed up to on Saturday? The man willing to give her a chance—give them a chance? She stayed in her room for the remainder of the night, not daring to venture out until she heard his door slam around midnight.



Saturday finally arrived and Natalie dreaded it. She slipped into the one nice outfit she'd packed, her snug black slacks, short black heels, white blouse, belt, and red tank to wear underneath. She did her hair, curling it and pulling the curls up with pins. Her makeup was simple, and she only wore a single pair of silver studs with a matching necklace resting above her cleavage. She stared at her reflection for several long minutes, hating how Vincent's attitude and words the past few days had started to wear her down so she second-guessed whether she looked good enough for him. Years ago, she hadn't given a shit what anyone thought, and then the accident happened. After that, she locked herself away in her apartment, angry at the world for turning against her for something that wasn't even her fault.

"Ready?" Vincent asked, knocking on her door.

"Yeah, just a second." She smoothed her hands down her slacks and opened her door. "Is this appropriate?"

"You don't have a skirt or dress?"

Setting her jaw, she pushed past him for the stairs. "No, and if I have to change we'll be late."

He muttered something behind her, but she tuned him out, picked up her purse, and walked out the front door. A car was waiting for them this evening, and she didn't wait for him before she walked to the back door and the driver opened the door for her. She sucked in a deep breath before

she climbed inside and closed her eyes, hoping she wouldn't get sick on the way to the hotel. Her annoyance at Vincent helped her focus on something other than the vehicle she was in. The drive to the hall was horribly awkward, but no worse than the night before. That had been atrocious. He'd come to her in the library and said they had to go over a simple plan to explain to people how they met and why they kept their relationship and wedding a secret. She wanted to tell him why not tell the truth and simply print out her twin sister's profile since that was who he really wanted by his side, but she bit back the words and did her best to help him.

They agreed to say they met at a Rangers game two years ago and had dated ever since, always keeping it private so news of her dating life wouldn't affect her career.

"What is your job anyway, if you're not a paralegal?" he'd asked.

"Junior college professor," she'd told him. "It's why I currently have nothing to do. I don't teach classes over the summer."

"I thought you didn't like to be around people?"

"I don't. I teach the online courses."

If he was really curious about what she taught, he didn't bother asking and she wasn't offering anymore answers to make it easier for him. If this was the real Vincent Cunningham, she was glad her sister had not been the one to go through with the wedding. Lana was too nice for her own good, and this man would have walked all over her.

"You know everything you're supposed to say?" he asked as the car parked outside the hotel, and she released her grip on the edge of the seat. They'd made it in one piece.

"Do you?" she challenged.

The annoyance on his face was no match for what she felt. The driver opened the door before he could respond, and she slid out of the back seat, making him keep up with her so they could walk into the hall together.

You said you weren't going to fuck with his career, she reminded herself sternly. Stop being a bitch and suck it up, princess.

She waited for him outside the door and held out her hand. "Ready, dear?" she asked, trying to sound like a happily married wife and not pissed off.

Vincent took her hand firmly in his and planted a kiss on the back of it as the doors opened from the inside. "Always."

They walked in as one of the band members on the stage across the room announced them. "May I introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Cunningham! Can they get a round of applause, people?"

The hall erupted in loud cheers and whistles, clapping and shouts of well wishes as the band started playing what was supposedly their song. Vincent led her out to the dance floor and spun her out far before drawing her into his arms as the music played and everyone gathered around the edge of the dance floor.

"This is the song you picked?" he whispered.

"I thought it was very fitting," she said as Lana Del Rey's *Love* sounded around them.

Being this close to him again awoke the sense of belonging within her and the insane urge to kiss him in front of everyone, but she remembered how the week had gone and kissing him was the last thing on her mind. She struggled to keep a smile on her face and make it look like she had a good time with her husband. The song finally ended, and Vincent held up their clasped hands. Now the fun would really begin, and Natalie braced herself for an onslaught of questions. Most were thankfully directed at Vincent, and she let him take the lead. She shook hands and introduced herself to his colleagues and family friends, and even his mother, Doris, who sauntered over with a man on her arm.

"You are certainly a sight to behold, my dear," Doris exclaimed and hugged her close. "I'll be expecting

grandchildren now, don't you forget that."

Natalie burst out laughing as Vincent's face turned five shades of red and he ground his teeth. "Mom, really? You can't wait to do that later?"

"Do what later? I'm simply telling this adorable woman about my hopes and dreams."

"Tell her about them later, for the love of God," he muttered.

Doris waved her hand in her son's face, and Natalie covered her laughter with a loud cough. Vincent shot her a look as he tried to speak with a few more people. They all noticed the sudden spike in tension between them, and Natalie was tempted to reach over and pinch his arm. If he couldn't wipe that damn scowl off his face, no one would believe they were happily married. After an hour of him explaining to people about how they met and warding off any questions that dug too deep into the personal lives they clearly didn't know, Vincent looked ready to lose it. Natalie's hand tapped his, but he snatched it away quickly.

"I need to get some air. If you'll excuse me," he announced abruptly and walked away from the group of people he was talking to, mostly other business owners who were clearly interested in his upcoming campaign.

"My, is he all right, dear?" one of the women asked Natalie politely.

"I think it's work, and he had a cold earlier this week," she lied. "Nothing to worry about. I'm sure you know how men get when they're sick," she added with a wink, and the older women around her laughed knowingly. "If you'll excuse me? I'll go check on him."

Natalie stopped by the bar and snagged two glasses and a bottle of whiskey before she stalked out of the hall. A few people pointed her helpfully towards the doors leading to the gardens outside the hotel. Vincent was ruining his night. She was trying her best to be happy and make a good impression for him, and what did he do? Sulk and destroy this

relationship before it even had a chance to get started. He was a damn hypocrite, and she would not watch him sabotage himself on a night as important as their reception. He'd never told her why he wanted to run for Congress, but she had an inkling it had to do with his late father.

She walked through the gardens teeming with beautiful flowers in bloom and a burbling stream that ran under an iron bridge. The grounds were empty except for her and the man she found leaning on the railing of the bridge, glaring into the water.

"You keep staring that hard, your face will stick," she said as she joined him.

"I said I needed some air," he grumbled.

"No, what you need is whiskey. Here," she said and poured him a glass, along with one for herself, and set the bottle down. She clinked her glass against his. "Cheers." She shot the whiskey back in one swallow, smacking her lips and shuddering at the burn down her throat. "Damn, I picked a good bottle."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to keep this night going for you while you seem content to ruin it."

His eyes widened. "You're joking, right?"

"Who's standing there looking like the most dejected man in the world? That would be you. Who's been nothing but an asshole all week? Also, you. I said I would stand by your side and not fuck up your career and I meant it. Did you?"

"Did I what?" he snapped.

"Did you really mean it when you said you wanted to make this work? See if it could? Or were you practicing your lying skills before you hit the campaign trail next year?" All the anger she'd bottled up throughout the week seeped beyond her control, and she poured another full shot of whiskey, hoping to keep herself in some semblance of calm. Vincent's eyes slipped to the bottle and he took it from her.

“You don’t get to sit there and yell at me when you’ve spent the week in the bottle! You never told me you were a damn drunk!”

Natalie paused with the glass against her lips. “A drunk? I haven’t been drunk since I met you, though tonight, I might get damn close.”

“Sure, lie about that too. What else are you hiding from me?”

“Nothing, you asshole! I have not been drunk.”

His laugh was sharp and grated on her nerves. “So those nights when I talked to you, asked you questions and you agreed to change, and then the next day you acted as if we never spoke at all? You weren’t drunk those nights? Really?”

Natalie set the glass down. On second thought, she threw the whole thing into the water. Vincent blinked in surprise when she yanked the bottle from his hands and sent it over the railing too, along with his glass before he even had a chance to drink it.

“If I was a drunk, do you really think I would let that liquor go to waste?”

“Then explain to me why you act like you don’t remember our conversations.”

She sighed and gripped the railing. She’d hoped to avoid getting into the details of her accident so soon into their relationship, but if she was having conversations with him and not remembering, then there was no avoiding it. “During the accident, I suffered severe head trauma. It mostly affects my short-term memory, but some long-term,” she explained quietly. “There are days I have trouble remembering my childhood or recognizing friends—most of the time, actually.”

Vincent’s whole demeanor changed as he cursed under his breath and leaned on the railing beside her. “Why didn’t you tell me that a week ago?”

“It’s a sensitive subject.” She leaned on her arms and watched lightning bugs light up the garden. “I’m sorry for

not telling you and for forgetting things. Just another lovely tidbit I picked up from the accident.”

“Along with your fear of cars.”

She was thinking of something else but nodded. “Yeah, that makes life difficult.”

His hand moved down the railing until it rested on hers. “I think I owe you an apology.”

“You think?” she agreed. “Do you really not like my piercings? Or my clothes?”

His laugh was accompanied by a grimace. “I didn’t mean it to come across so harshly. I happen to find your piercings extremely hot, as well as your sweatshirt and those damn shorty shorts.” He picked up her hand so he could hold it, running his thumb over her knuckles in a soothing manner. “This political crap isn’t new to me. I know what Mom and Dad went through with me running around being the bachelor billionaire. I nearly cost Dad the election a few times.”

“And you want him and everyone else to be proud of you,” she murmured. “I get it, I do.”

“I don’t think you do. I wasn’t mad at you this week, Natalie. I was mad at myself and the pressures already building. Billy’s been on my ass about if this blows up in our face, and suffice it to say, I’ve never handled stress well.”

Gently, he turned her so they faced each other. His dark chocolate eyes glimmered with a sudden hunger, and Natalie’s toes curled in response.

“I want to get to know you—the real you, not a woman constrained by what’s expected.”

“But you also need to win this election,” she reminded him on a sigh. “I have a feeling you’re not letting me see the real Vincent Cunningham either.”

“Someday soon, we’ll have to change that.” He drew her to his body and slipped an arm around her waist. Natalie’s breath caught as he leaned in close for a kiss, but instead of following through, he waited. “Forgive me for being an ass?”

Her lips curled as she nodded. "If you forgive me for neglecting to tell you about my head injury."

He closed the distance between them, answering her with a gentle kiss. Her hands slid up his chest, his hard, muscled chest she longed to see without a shirt, and the kiss grew hotter as his tongue licked her lip. She responded by gliding hers along his, exploring the depths of his mouth as his hands fisted in her blouse. He pressed her against the railing, hugging her close while the water gurgled beneath them. She smirked, imagining falling over that railing and into the water. The distance wasn't that far, and there were no rocks she could see. At most, they might wind up with bruised asses. Reaching back to her impulsive days before the accident, the adventurous side of her poking its head up out of the sand after so long, she turned them both and they fell over the railing and into the water. They came up sputtering, but she shrieked with laughter as Vincent stared at her in surprise, sitting in the middle of the shallow brook, soaked from head to toe. She was just as wet but couldn't have cared less.

"Really?" he asked, and at first, she thought she'd misread him until a boyish grin stretched across his face and he splashed her, soaking her even more.

She clambered to her feet, shrieking with glee as she splashed him back, and they fell back into the water again as she tackled him. Yells reached them from the hotel and several faces stared down at them from the bridge and the edge of the brook.

"Ah, Billy," Vincent called out as he helped Natalie to her feet.

"What are you two doing?" he asked as he leaned down and took Vincent's arm. "Please tell me you're drunk."

"Sorry, not even close. The Mrs. fell in, and what type of husband would I be if I didn't go in and fetch my bride?" The older couples smiled and leaned into each other as they observed the hopeful Congressman and his wife step out of

the brook, unable to control their laughter. “Don’t worry, folks. Thankfully, we both know how to swim.”

More laughter met their words, and a hotel employee rushed towels to them from the nearby pool area. Vincent took one and draped it around Natalie’s shoulders.

“Thanks,” she whispered, and he leaned in, kissing her deeply before he drew back, letting her catch her breath.

He took a second towel and wrapped it over his shoulders before drawing her into a warm embrace. She rested her cheek against his chest, and the past week of awkwardness and annoyance seemed like a distant memory. They followed everyone into the hotel, and once they were no longer dripping wet, Vincent offered her his hand and motioned to the dance floor.

“So we can dry off faster,” he suggested.

Natalie ditched her towel and her heels and followed him willingly to the dance floor. The band played lively music for the rest of the evening, and lights burst around them as pictures were snapped of the happy newlyweds. This was how she pictured a wedding reception. Others joined them on the dance floor, but all too soon, the reception came to an end. Vincent and she wished everyone a good night before leaving the hall themselves and walking to the waiting car. She stopped dead, peering into the back seat.

“You’ll be fine,” Vincent promised in her ear. “I’m right here with you.”

She nodded and climbed into the car. The engine started and she flinched, but Vincent tucked her head gently against his shoulder.

“Just close your eyes and before you know it, we’ll be home.”

“Home,” she repeated.

“It probably doesn’t feel like it because of my shitty attitude.” He sighed and kissed the top of her head sweetly. The chill from the water and the air-conditioned hall

disappeared and Natalie snuggled closer instinctively. "I'll make it up to you."

She yawned and nodded at the same time. "I like the sound of that." The fingers on her left hand closed around the ring she was growing used to, but she sat up so fast, she nearly smacked her head into Vincent's chin. "Shit! My ring—it must've fallen off in the water. Damn it!" Frantically, she looked around the car, hoping it fell somewhere in there, but Vincent grabbed her hands and chuckled. "I don't find this funny. That thing probably cost a fortune and I screwed something else up."

"It's just a ring, Natalie. Besides, I was going to take you shopping for a new one."

"You were?" she asked, wrinkling her brow. "Why?"

"It's hard to pick out a ring for a woman I'm still getting to know," he whispered and brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips. "We'll go shopping for one soon."

Not sure why she did it, but she bit down gently on his thumb. His eyes darkened as he grunted. A mischievousness filled her, but before they could do anything else, they were at the house and the moment was gone. Once inside, Vincent walked her upstairs to her bedroom and stopped, leaning against the doorframe.

"Tonight went well, I think," she told him, tossing her heels behind her.

"Thanks to you."

"Eh, I just knocked some sense into your stubborn head."

"Exactly what I need," he murmured and let his body hang forward, held up by his hands on the doorframe. "A good night kiss for your husband?"

"How can I say no?" Her lips barely caressed his. She pulled back and reached for the doorknob. "Night, Vincent."

His shoulders sagged but he stepped back with a nod of his head. "Night, Natalie."

She closed the door and rested her back against it, her heart racing and palms sweaty. "Holy shit, girl, talk about a

rollercoaster of a ride.” She fell into bed grinning and dreamt of falling into Vincent’s arms and drifting away on a raft in the middle of the sea.

Since the night of the reception when Natalie put him in his place and he realized how much of an ass he'd been, the awkwardness between them faded. They grew steadily closer, talking more when he was home from the office and working towards building a more solid relationship. The kiss they shared that night on the bridge, before she made them fall into the water, was the last one they'd had so far, and he was anxious for another one.

"Are you listening to me at all?" Billy said, tapping Vincent's desk with his pen.

"Sorry. I'm distracted."

"I can tell. She's really gotten under your skin, hasn't she?"

Vincent smiled, folding his arms over his stomach as he leaned back in his chair. "Isn't that what most wives should do to their husbands?"

Billy frowned, but then a smirk broke out across his face. "It is nice to see you so happy," he whispered.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"You heard me, you asshole. Don't push it."

"Only because you wanted me to divorce her," he added.

"Yeah, well, we didn't know who she was."

“Speaking of which,” Vincent asked as he sat back up, “did you get the background check? I assumed there was nothing bad, which is why you neglected to tell me.”

Billy nodded as he reached into his briefcase on the floor and drew out a few papers. “Nothing, really. She has no record, never been in trouble. The only thing mentioned on Natalie Jenkins at all are her commendations for graduating Texas A&M with honors and the car accident before that.”

“This is the accident?” Vincent’s hand hesitated before he flipped open the file folder. A few times, he’d tried to get her to open up about it, but she must be used to that from other people. She was a master at avoiding his questions and changing the subject before he even realized what had happened. “Did you read it?”

“Regrettably,” he muttered. “You might want a glass of whiskey when you read it.” He checked his watch and tucked the rest of his papers away. “I have to get downtown and set up for your talk tonight. You’re still good to go?”

“Yeah. I told Natalie she could sit this one out.”

“You sure? She’s been a hit so far, by the way. I’m not sure if you saw the paper the day after your reception. That shot of you two in the water is all over social media. People love her,” Billy announced loudly, throwing his arms up in the air. “If she wasn’t your wife, I’d have to kiss her for saving your sorry butt that night.”

Vincent bobbed his head in agreement. “See you tonight, man.”

Billy left the office, and Vincent was left with all the information the man had gathered on Natalie Jenkins. In all the times they spoke, she never mentioned her time in school or what she taught as a professor, and he was too caught up with all this election campaign crap to think of asking. He opened the folder and skimmed the first page of her background report. There was nothing of concern on her, so he set that page aside and turned to the next. Billy had made a note of her two degrees, a Bachelors and Masters, but

didn't say what they were for. After that was the accident report, news articles, and pictures from the paper, and Vincent nearly lost it. His mouth fell open as he found the image of her car after it rolled six times down the hill and landed at the bottom in a creek. The next article reported what happened and the injuries suffered by the victim, by his Natalie.

The injury to her head was severe, but it was what he read after that nearly made him throw the folder aside and rush home to see her. The car caught fire while she was still inside, and the rescuers struggled to get her out. Her entire back, the upper part of her buttocks, the backs of her arms to her elbows, and part of her neck suffered severe burns. She was in the hospital for a very, very long time. It was a miracle she managed to graduate with honors for her masters, albeit a semester behind.

"Now that is not the look I like to see on my son's face." Doris walked into his office and rested her hand on his cheek. "What's wrong? You look like you're going to be sick."

"It's nothing," Vincent muttered and tried to close the folder, but Doris was too fast and turned it to face her. "Mother, don't. It's not pleasant."

She shushed him, and he watched her eyes widen as she skimmed through the words. "My, this happened to Natalie? That sweet girl? Good Lord, no wonder she has that look of defeat in her eyes sometimes."

"What do you mean?" He thought she'd been happy since the reception.

"Every now and then, there's a glimmer, but I think being around you is helping her as much as you being around her is returning my happy son to me. Now, when are you two coming over for dinner?"

"I was going to call you," Vincent said as he tucked the folder away. His gut twisted and his hands itched to hold Natalie close to assure himself she was safe and sound. The

burn scars...he thought about their time together and realized he'd never seen her back, and she never wore shirts that didn't cover her arms to her elbows.

"Call me about what?" Doris walked around his office and picked up a mint from the bowl on the corner of his desk. "Vinnie?"

"Huh? Sorry, right. I was going to call you to invite you over for dinner. Natalie is one hell of a cook. She said she wouldn't mind having more people to cook for," he explained.

"Do I get to bring a date?" she asked with a wink.

"If you must. I'm sure Natalie won't mind."

Doris crossed her legs and leaned on the front of her son's desk. "So you and the website wife are getting along then? Nothing I need to be worried about?"

"If you're trying to ask if we've had sex yet, the answer is no," Vincent grumbled. "And please, for all the love you have for me, do not mention grandkids at dinner. We're taking this slow, remember? We only met two weeks ago, after all."

"Eh, if it's meant to be it'll happen."

Vincent checked the clock on his desk. Four more hours before he would leave for the day and then another two before he would actually get home and see Natalie. She'd offered to come tonight, but she had gone to the last few functions and meet and greets with him. The actual events weren't the problem, it was the car trips that were getting to her. For two years, she said she was maybe in the car once a month. Her sister was able to get groceries for her, and most other things, she ordered online. He wanted her by his side, but pushing her to the point of tearing down what stability she had was not his intention. His mind rushed back to the accident report and he stood up from his desk.

"Where are you going?" Doris asked.

"I am taking a half day because I feel like it," Vincent told her. "Dinner tomorrow night?"

“I think that will be perfect. We’ll see you at seven.” Doris winked at her son as she left his office first, humming happily under her breath.

“Whatever you’re thinking, Mother, just stop it.”

“I’m thinking about that night with you two on the bridge and the whiskey bottle they found floating through the garden later,” she mused. “I’m curious is all. Very curious.”

Vincent’s cheeks heated, but it was the growing want in his lower belly for a woman who cared about him and his career as much as he was beginning to care for her. Today, things would change. He wanted to know more about her and would take the time to do it the right way. After he told his assistant he was leaving early, he drove to the local flower shop and sought the help of the young florist there.

“Good afternoon, sir, what can I help you with today?” the woman asked cheerfully.

“Yes, I’m hoping to put together a bouquet for my wife... something different.”

“I think I can help with that. What type of woman is she?”

Vincent froze, licking his lips nervously as he tried to think of how to describe Natalie. “Well, she’s beautiful, even though she doesn’t know it,” he started, and the woman nodded, moving slowly through the shop with him following. “She’s strong—stronger than me—and she makes me...I’m sorry, that’s probably inappropriate.”

The woman laughed as she drew a few long-stemmed orange snapdragons from a bucket of water. “Not at all. These will do for those inappropriate thoughts,” she added with a wink. “And I think hydrangeas for your heartfelt actions today on behalf of your wife, then some gladiolus for strength. Finally, tulips. Yes, you have to have tulips.”

“Tulips? What are tulips for?” Vincent asked, fascinated listening to the woman talk about each flower and what they symbolized.

The women picked out some orange tulips to go with the snapdragons and offset the white hydrangeas and vibrant gladiolus. “Tulips stand for only one thing. Love—the love I can see in your eyes right now as you talk about her.”

“Love? Well, of course,” Vincent said hurriedly when the woman eyed him funny.

Love. She saw love in his eyes for Natalie? The florist arranged the bouquet in a beautiful arrangement and wrapped it in paper, finishing it off with an orange ribbon. He handed over his card as she rang it up, while Vincent thought this woman—a stranger—was right. In the short amount of time he’d been with Natalie, he thought of her constantly and ached to feel her touch, even if it was only a brush of his hand against hers. His drive to get through the day was to get home to see her smiling face and hear her laughter as they talked and joked about Billy’s freak outs over the campaign, or her catching him up on what her identical twin was doing with her own wedding plans. Vincent hadn’t met her yet, but Natalie told her he could when she stopped thinking he hated her for what the sisters did to him.

“Here you are, sir,” the florist said. “I hope she likes them.”

“I’m sure she will. Thank you for your help.”

He took the bouquet gently in his hands and walked to the truck parked outside. When he reached the house and parked, he heard music blaring inside before he even opened the door. Grinning, he poked his head inside and paused to watch as Natalie swept her way around the kitchen, using the handle as a mic, though her lips only moved to the words. She shimmied in those damn short shorts she wore constantly and the sweatshirt he had declared her favorite. His smile faltered as he realized now why she wore such conservative tops and wished she was more comfortable with herself to show those scars.

Natalie spun around and staggered to a stop, laughing hysterically when she spotted him. She drew the remote from her back pocket and shut off the speakers. "You were not supposed to be home yet," she pointed out.

"I thought I would surprise you." He beamed as he revealed the bouquet to her.

Her eyes lit up instantly, and she bounced on the balls of her feet like she did every time something excited her. Last night, it was when she found a *Star Trek* marathon on TV and forced him to sit down and watch. After the first two episodes, he was laughing so hard his sides hurt. She recited nearly every line perfectly.

"They're beautiful," she whispered, taking the bouquet from him. She reached around his neck and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you. What are they for?"

"Just because," he said, his chest swelling with the love he knew he couldn't deny any longer.

She found a vase in one of the cabinets and rested the bouquet in it, setting it in the center of the kitchen table. The sight of flowers he bought for his wife on his kitchen table did something to Vincent he hadn't expected. The loneliness that had occupied his mind for so many years vanished in a flash, and he imagined the two of them sitting at that table every night for dinner. He pictured a child, maybe more, surrounding them, and friends and family. He saw their potential lives together pass right in front of his eyes and there wasn't a chance in hell he would let this opportunity slip from his grasp. He needed to know everything about this woman, and he was more than willing to take a lifetime learning from her.

For now, he hoped she would grace him with some answers.

"Mother and a date are going to join us for dinner tomorrow night," he said as he followed her to the kitchen island.

“Oh, good. I’ll have to order a few extra things from the store.”

“Order?” he asked, frowning.

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind. I had some groceries delivered this morning.”

“I have food in the house,” he grumbled as he pulled the fridge open. “Well, shit, I thought I had food in the house. Are you sure you bought enough?” he teased, looking over the shelves fully stocked with fresh produce and condiments he hadn’t even heard of. He checked the freezer next and his mouth watered immediately at the sight of the steaks stacked high. The pantry also brimmed with groceries. “Okay, I lied. I thought I had food in the house.”

“You had bachelor food, and as much as I like frozen pizza,” she said, hip-checking him as she passed to grab a cookbook by the stove, “a girl likes to change things up every now and then.”

He watched her flip through the cookbook, humming the theme to *Star Trek* under her breath the whole time. “You know you don’t have to do all this cooking, really.”

“And I told you I don’t mind. I’m off for the summer, remember? No classes.”

“What did you teach anyway? I never asked and I’m, uh, I’m sorry for that.”

She threw him a smirk before she picked up the cookbook and rummaged through the pantry, drawing out different ingredients and lining them up on the counter. “I teach astronomy and physics, and every now and then, I do a lecture course on current topics revolving around anything to do with space. All beginner courses, really. I can’t do much else with only a Masters.”

“But you graduated with honors, didn’t you?” he asked then glanced away when she shot him a look, one eyebrow arched.

“I did. You’ve done some research.”

“Billy might have looked up a few things. You can’t really blame him.”

“No. No, I can’t and I don’t. Yes, I graduated with honors, but that doesn’t count for shit when people assume you can’t work as well as everyone else can,” she snapped bitterly and shook her head. Her body stiffened and she chewed on her bottom lip, staring blankly at the cookbook in her hands. “Sorry, touchy subject.”

“Natalie?”

“Huh? Sorry, just...ah, I don’t always talk about what happened.”

“What did happen?” he asked softly. “You can tell me. I’m here for you, remember?”

She set the cookbook down and rested her hands on the counter, hunching over the book as she scrunched her eyes closed. He rested a hand over hers, and she laced her fingers around his. “After the accident, with the memory issues, I was told I wouldn’t be able to finish my Masters. I proved them all wrong, of course, but there were some issues. I saw them along with the other professors and my fellow students.”

“You never tried to get your PhD?”

Her laughter was harsh. “It’s hard to do that when no one will accept you and you can’t get an internship anywhere, either. No one thought I could do it, so I settled for the only job I was offered by the same college I attended before heading to a four-year school.”

“And the cooking you’re doing?” he asked, curious when she had time to take culinary lessons.

“Oh, I learned that last week.”

Vincent had to have heard her wrong. “I’m sorry, you did what?”

“I had nothing else to do, so I picked up a few cookbooks from the library and taught myself a thing or two.” She patted his hand. “I can be quite intelligent when my brain decides to cooperate with me.”

He should have brought her a second bouquet of flowers. This woman was incredible. When everyone told her she wouldn't be able to do something, she basically told them to shove it and did it anyway. "When did you decide to lock yourself away in your apartment?"

The seasoning in her hand clattered to the floor, and he bent to pick it up, catching her shaking hand on his way back up. Her face paled and her jaw tensed so hard, it was a wonder she didn't crack her teeth. "That came...uh, that came later."

Vincent tucked the errant strands of hair behind her ears and tilted her chin up so she faced him when she tried to turn away. "What happened?"

"It's stupid, really."

"I have a feeling it's not. Talk to me, please?"

She sighed, and to his surprise, she rested her forehead against his shoulder. "The accident nearly killed me, and while I recovered, my friends were there, my fellow classmates. They came to cheer me on, and I thought I could go back to living a normal life. But between the memory issues, my horrible fear of any moving vehicle, and the...the burns that disfigured my back, I wasn't good company."

"According to who?" he asked, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

"A few bitch girls I never liked before, and a guy...or several. They all knew about the accident and wanted me to get over it, to move on." She pulled back from him, wiping at her face, and sniffed hard. "It doesn't matter. They were right."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"Is it? You haven't seen the scars, Vincent. I look like something Frankenstein put together on his off day." Tears flowed over and slipped down her cheeks as she backed away from him. "I went from being the fun, carefree Natalie to the forgetful, untouchable freak."

She turned her back to him, hugging her arms close around her body as she cursed under her breath. Vincent reached out to draw her into his arms, but his hands fell inches away from her.

“They shouldn’t have done that to you.”

“No,” she argued as she turned around, her eyes red and puffy. “You know how hard it is to hang out with friends whose names you can’t always remember? Or you can’t go anywhere with? You know, my sister was never the one who wanted hiking or fishing.”

“No?”

“No, that was always me. I loved being outside, finding a new adventure every week.” She rubbed her hands over her face, staring out the window. He knew she saw something very different from his backyard. “Funny how one shitty night can change your entire life.”

Vincent was at a loss. He knew it must’ve been bad for a while if her sister was worried she would waste away in their apartment but never imagined her facing such negativity from people who should have cared for her. His gaze slipped to her back, and he wondered what the scars looked like to make men actually turn away from such a fiery woman. She ignited his life, and he’d noticed over the last week, she hadn’t forgotten anything. None of their conversations or events. She hadn’t forgotten one damn thing. Part of him hoped it was because she was with him.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered and shook her head, grinning. “I didn’t mean to dump all that on you.”

“I wanted to know,” he reminded her. “Just so you know, you don’t have to worry about any of that around me. I want you to be yourself all the time,” he told her sternly. “And you know what? The next event we go to, wear your earrings. All of them.”

Her fingers ran over her right ear with their multiple silver studs. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. It’s 2017. If they can’t handle a woman with piercings in her ear, then screw them.”

“Vincent, I said I wouldn’t do anything to mess up your career.”

“And you won’t,” he said, reaching for her hand and pulling her towards him. “I might’ve been too hard on you when all this started.”

“And you’ve apologized like fifty times at least,” she said, staring into his eyes. “I forgave you.”

He breathed heavily out his nose, running his hands up her back. She shivered at the touch, inching even closer, and he considered offering her an afternoon delight, but they had agreed to take things slow. When she was ready, they would push the boundaries of their fragile relationship. For now, he brushed his lips across hers in a soft kiss and hugged her, safe in his arms. They stood like that for a long time in the kitchen, him holding her as she wrapped her arms around his waist. This was what home was supposed to feel like. He’d wished for a wife, but what he’d found was a partner, a friend, a woman who had seen some shit and found a way to cope with it the best she could. She might have been close to giving up, but he wouldn’t let her reach that place.

“Don’t you have an event tonight?” she asked after a while.

“Not yet.”

“Vincent,” she giggled. “Billy will kill you if you’re late.”

“I have some time still. Don’t rush me, woman,” he growled and rested his cheek on the top of her head again. Her scent of oranges and spice surrounded him until he was lost in her presence. She moved, and he lifted his head to see her staring up at him. “What?”

Her hands cupped his face, scratching playfully against the scruff on his cheeks. She stood up on her toes and kissed him. Vincent’s eyes slipped closed as his hunger for her exploded. His hands reached lower, cupping her ass. She licked his lips before her tongue slipped into his mouth, and

they warred for control of the kiss as it heated. He backed them up until she hit the kitchen island then picked her up as if she weighed nothing, setting her on it. She spread her legs easily for him, drawing him in against her body. All ideas of needing to take it slow were no longer in his mind as her lips left his and kissed a path down his neck, nibbling and licking to his shoulder. She tugged at his tie and button-down shirt until he tore the first button free. Their hands fumbled with the rest together, her breathy laughter punctuating each kiss she planted on his body.

Natalie's hands shoved his shirt fervently over his broad shoulders, and her lips immediately went to the bare skin as he tossed the shirt to the floor. She drew up the muscle tank he wore beneath, and it joined the other on the floor. Her palms flattened against his pecs, and Vincent cursed roughly as she traced each one, pinching his nipples with a glint of mischief in her light blue eyes.

When her nails raked down his chest towards his abs, he grabbed her hips and ground himself against her, wanting her to feel exactly what she did to him. Her eyes widened briefly before narrowing with what he could only describe as glee.

"Natalie," he murmured and cupped her face in his hands. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

Her legs tightened their hold around his body. "I don't know. That's bad, isn't it? We shouldn't start this if I'm not able to go through with it. Damn, I'm sorry."

"No, don't you dare apologize to me," he growled. "I will wait however long you need to." She nodded, but the flicker of nervousness in her eyes gave him pause. "Have you done this before?"

"Ah, that would be a no," she whispered.

His hands fought not to grab her hips again and tear her clothes from her body. She had never fully experienced the pleasure of a man, and he would be the first. His primal

instinct to possess this woman rose with a fury, and he nearly lost his control.

“Is that bad?” she asked when he choked on his words.

“No...no, it’s not bad. But I want you to be really sure.”

Her hands continued their exploration of his chest and abs, tickling his ribs. He wanted her to say yes, needed to hear that word slip from her red lips so he could carry her straight upstairs to his bed, lay her out, and fill her with his throbbing cock, but the doorbell rang and he cursed, his head falling to her shoulder. She patted his naked shoulders with her hands and kissed the top of his head.

“I’ll go get it. I think you’re a little indecent to answer your front door,” she told him.

His hand held her thighs and he nuzzled her neck. “I’m not even supposed to be home right now. They can wait.”

The doorbell rang a second time and then a third as Natalie’s breathing turned to panting and he kissed the mounds of her breasts as he tugged the front of her sweatshirt down gently.

“Damn it,” he grumbled and pulled away.

She kissed him full on the mouth, leaving him with promises to continue this later, and hopped off the counter. “You should probably freshen up anyway and get ready for tonight.”

He watched her leave the kitchen, swaying her hips as she went, and he groaned, imagining where this moment might have led had the damn doorbell not rung. He picked up his clothes and rushed to the stairs as she reached the front door, chuckling behind her hand as he darted, half-naked, out of sight. He would definitely need a shower—a very cold, icy shower—to put him in the mood for spending the evening with white-haired old men instead of watching another *Star Trek* marathon with Natalie. As the water sluiced over his naked body and his erection continued to throb obnoxiously, he considered planning something else for them to do. A weekend away at the ranch would give him the

chance to have her alone and let Natalie find some of her adventurous spirit again. No prying eyes to judge her, no one to watch her, and no one except him to keep her company.

That, and for some reason, the image of her fishing was extremely amusing to him.

He washed his hair and his body, but every time he blinked, he heard Natalie's panting breath in his ear and felt her breasts against his chest, begging him to touch her. Her lips taunted his even now, and his hand slipped lower. He gripped his cock hard in his fist, and leaning against the shower wall with his other hand, he let his fantasies run wild of Natalie being in the shower with him. The past few times she left him wanting like this, he managed to think the erection away, but not this time. Probably because now he knew she was a damn virgin. His hand moved faster, and he groaned, seeing her spread out on his bed as he parted her thighs and slipped within her body. Hearing her moans turn into sharp cries of pleasure as he pushed her to the edge and sailed right over with her. Sated, for the moment at least, he washed his body a second time before shutting off the water and grabbing a towel to wrap around his waist. He'd just picked up his comb to tame his hair—steadily growing longer so Natalie wouldn't stop running her hands through it when they sat beside each other in the evenings—when a knock came at the bedroom door.

“Hey, Vincent? You decent?” she asked.

His cock twitched beneath the towel, and he glared fiercely at it. Once he knew he wouldn't greet her with an erection, he went to answer the door.

Her eyes widened and slipped to his chest. Her lips parted, and she had to try several times before she managed to get the words out. “Ah, door. There was a man at the door.”

“Oh?” he asked, his lips curling into a crooked grin. “What did he want?”

She licked her lips, and he cursed mentally. Her gaze was still focused on his chest when she murmured, “A reporter...

bit of an ass, really.”

“Reporter?” he asked, all teasing gone.

“Right, sorry,” she said and shook her head. This time, when she opened her eyes, they met his. “He said some weird shit and handed me his card in case you wanted to talk to him in private.”

“About what?” he asked as she handed over the card.

“He didn’t really say, but he kept looking at me and leering. He even tried to get into the house.”

“What?” Vincent was out the door and at the top of the stairs before she caught up to him, grabbing his arm to pull him back. “He’s gone?”

“Yeah, I shoved him out the door and locked it.” She cracked the knuckles on her fingers. “You don’t think he knows something’s hinky with our marriage, do you?” she whispered, sounding scared. “Vincent?”

He crumbled up the business card in his hand. “No, Billy made sure of it.”

“Damn it,” she cursed and hung her head. “This is my fault.”

“Nothing is your fault because nothing’s happened,” he said and drew her into his arms. “Don’t worry about it, all right? Promise me, Natalie.”

“All right, all right,” she muttered into his body.

He realized very suddenly that he was naked except for the towel, and her breathing increased, warming his chilled skin. His hands tightened around her, inching down her back. Her lips caressed his pecs and he considered scooping her up into her arms, if only to show her what he could do to her, but the doorbell rang again. This time, though, a key turned in the lock. Natalie disentangled herself from his arms as Billy stepped through the front door.

“Hello? Vincent? Natalie?” he called out.

“Yeah, I’m here,” he replied as Natalie, giggling, walked down the steps.

“Hey, Billy,” she said when she passed him. “You coming to dinner tomorrow night too?”

“Dinner? With who? Why wasn’t I told?” he asked and shot an accusing glare up at Vincent. His brow shot up to his hairline at his friend’s clear state of undress. “Was I interrupting something?”

“No.”

“Yes,” Vincent argued, and Natalie stifled her laughter with a cough. “And it’s dinner with Mother and her...date.”

“Ah, if you want me here, I guess I can come,” Billy said hesitantly.

“Oh, come on now, Billy, how much longer are you going to hate me?” Natalie pouted, and Billy floundered for words until she burst out laughing. “Come to dinner, eat the steak, and you’ll forget you ever doubted me!” she called over her shoulder.

Billy shifted his gaze back to Vincent. “She is a piece of work, you know that?”

“Yeah, I think I do. Why are you here? I said I’d meet you there.”

“Sorry, change of plans.” He motioned for himself to come upstairs, and Vincent waved him up. He had to finish getting ready anyway. “We might have a problem.”

“Oh? With what, exactly?”

Billy glanced over his shoulder, but Natalie was still downstairs. “A leak.”

Vincent’s hand froze with the comb in it. “About the marriage?”

Billy nodded, and Vincent realized how close to panicking his friend was. “I had a reporter stop by to see me right after I left your office. He wanted an in-depth interview with you and Natalie. I told him he’d have to wait in line, but the way he was smiling, it was like he wanted a chance to trip you two up.”

“Who would’ve told? There’s only, what, five people who know?”

“Me, you, Natalie, of course,” Billy said, counting them off on his fingers. “Judge Harvey only might say something about the name issue, but I doubt it. No reporter is dumb enough to bother that man. The website company, and then your mother.”

“And Natalie’s twin,” Vincent added.

“Her twin knows?”

Vincent stared at him with a flat look. “Really, Billy?”

“Right, sorry. The twin had the idea in the first place. You don’t think she would say anything, do you? Could she be jealous of her sister for landing the billionaire?”

“No,” he argued. “No, her sister is engaged already.”

“Well, someone said something.”

“Did you catch the bastard’s name?” he asked, glancing at the crumpled card on the bathroom counter.

Billy dug around in his suit jacket and revealed a matching card. “Hank Butcher.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised you didn’t pass him on your way in.”

“He was at the house?” Billy hissed.

“Natalie answered the door. She said he even tried to get himself inside.” Vincent tossed the card in the trashcan. “I think we might need to consider security guards if I’m going to have reporters showing up at the house like this.”

Billy nodded in agreement as his fingers flew across his phone’s screen. “I’ll get it set up.”

“Oh, and next weekend, I’m taking Natalie to the ranch.”

“Vinnie, man, I love you, but you have two events scheduled back to back.”

“I said I’m taking Natalie to the ranch,” he repeated. “I think it’s time we had a small honeymoon, don’t you?”

Billy frowned but gave in. “You see these wrinkles right here on my forehead? They’re all from you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay for your facelift,” Vincent promised, and Billy groaned in annoyance behind him.

He wouldn't worry about the reporter unless he showed up again or let something slip about the real story behind his and Natalie's meeting. It wouldn't do to start pointing fingers and accuse the few people who did know of ratting him out.

Natalie smelled the flowers on the kitchen table, running her fingertips along the delicate petals of the snapdragons and the tulips. Yesterday, she had been so close to giving herself completely to this man she put so much faith and trust in. She only held back because he scared the shit out of her. She wanted him, but it was more than that. She was comfortable around him, and since living with him, her memory issues were nearly non-existent.

Being with Vincent gave her a sense of freedom she thought she'd lost forever, but there she was, telling him all about her accident and why she had locked herself away in her apartment. Admitting to him how much she missed being outside and going on adventures every other weekend. She left the kitchen to hop in the shower. Vincent would be home soon, and she had to get dinner prepared for his mother's visit. The warm water relaxed the tension from her shoulders from a day spent watching the front door like a hawk, terrified that reporter would come back and tell her flat out he knew who she was and that her marriage to Vincent was a sham.

Steam filled the bathroom, and she took her time shampooing and conditioning her hair, massaging her scalp to rid herself of the rest of her stress. Dinner with Vincent's

mother could either go really well, or she could bomb it and risk distancing herself from her husband.

“Just keep your cool,” she told herself firmly. “She liked you at all the events. I’m sure she likes you already.”

The water grew hotter, and Natalie let her head fall back, simply enjoying the heat rushing over her body. Her dream from last night played in her mind and her eyes slipped closed. The scene from the kitchen turned into so much more last night when she had gone to sleep. What he had done to her—hell, what she’d done to him! She’d never had such fantasies about a guy before. That morning when she woke, her nipples were hard and she was so aroused, every little shift of her hips sent a shiver up her spine. Her body begged for his touch, pleaded for it.

What happens when he sees your back? You sure you can handle another look of disgust?

Her eyes shot open under the spray of water. Could she? What if, after he saw her back, he refused to look at her the same? What if he never wanted to hold her again or kiss her?

As she dried her body and blow-dried her hair, she glared at herself in the mirror. Why did she have to ruin everything with her worrying? Vincent had already proved he was a good guy and that he cared for her. The flowers he brought her yesterday were about more than just an apology. He was being affectionate, and she sensed more behind his touch, perhaps even a glimmer of love.

She was still in a towel, finishing her makeup and putting in her earrings, when Vincent called through the bedroom door. “You can come in,” she told him and steeled herself for what might happen in the next few minutes.

“I wanted to let you know I was home,” he said as he walked in.

When she stepped out of the bathroom in the towel, his feet froze and he looked like he’d swallowed his tongue. “That’s fine. I still have to finish cooking,” she said, letting

her right foot glide slowly up her left calf. His eyes watched the movement and her hopes rose. “Vincent?”

“Yeah. I...I’m sorry. You are stunning,” he whispered and stalked closer.

Natalie’s body flushed, and she smiled shyly. “I have my days.”

“No, every day,” he corrected. His eyes glanced over her shoulder, and his smile turned into a look of awe. “Do you mind if I see it?”

“See what?” she asked, knowing what he was asking.

“Your tattoo.”

He motioned over her shoulder, and she looked back to see part of her back reflected in the mirror. Natalie’s gut roiled at the thought of him seeing her whole back, but he would see it eventually. It might as well be now before they were in the middle of having sex and he suddenly stopped. Her knees shaking, she turned around slowly and let the towel droop to the top of her rear, exposing her back for the first time to someone new. She closed her eyes, scrunching them shut as tight as they could go, and held her breath. By the count of ten, she expected some sign of disgust but heard nothing. Vincent’s feet moved closer, and when his fingertips reached out to caress the base of her neck and moved lower, her heart nearly stopped.

Her body trembled as his fingers traced the lines tattooed on her skin to cover the horrible scars left by the accident. He started at her shoulder blades where the phoenix’s wings spread wide, stretching up her shoulders, the feathers spreading along the back of her biceps and down to her ribs. His other hand joined the first as he moved lower, covering the head of the massive bird and the flames surrounding its body before moving even farther down. With each brush of his fingers against her back, another bit of the fear Natalie had held onto for so long fell away, then another, and another. He was the first man—the first person—to touch her back with such care since the damn tattoo artist. Her toes

curled when his fingers ran across her lower back, dipping slightly below the towel where the rest of the phoenix's tail feathers twirled together in a spiral of flame.

The tattoo did a pretty good job of covering most of the burn scars, but the skin was still marred and bumpy underneath. A tear slipped from her eye, and Vincent's thumb was suddenly there, wiping it away. She opened her eyes and spied their reflection in the mirror. His eyes were narrowed in anger, and her forehead crinkled, wondering what pissed him off.

"Vincent?"

"Those bastards must not understand beauty," he grunted, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders. He lowered his head and kissed her left shoulder then her right, and then along the base of her neck. She sucked in a breath when his tongue flicked out, licking the ruined skin.

"Vincent," she whispered. "You can't possibly think that is beauty."

"I do," he argued, his kisses trailing even lower, touching each vertebra.

Her legs quivered at the overload of sensations, and his arm snaked around her waist to hold her up. "No one's touched me there...since...since before..." She trailed off, unable to finish as another tear slipped from her eye, filled with bitterness at what she thought she'd lost.

He straightened behind her, nuzzling her neck. "Then I'm happy to be the first. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Natalie. The phoenix was a nice touch."

She smiled and rested her head back. "I thought so." He was so comforting, she never wanted to leave his arms. All she had to do was drop the towel at her feet and see what happened next, but his mother would be there soon. When she gave herself to Vincent, she didn't want an hour. She wanted days.

As if reading her mind, his arm tightened around her middle and he kissed her earlobe, sucking on it hard as he

growled, "I guess I should let you finish getting ready."

"You probably should."

Neither made a move to separate, and Natalie chuckled. How the hell would they make it through dinner tonight? The lips between her legs were swollen, and one shimmy of her thighs told her they cried for his touch, throbbing with want. And she wasn't the only one having problems. His erection was a welcome presence against her lower back. For the past few years, she'd expected to remain alone, unable to find a man who could see past the scars to the woman beneath, but she was with a man who clearly wanted her even after he saw her back.

He planted one final kiss on her cheek and let her go. "I'll be downstairs in a few," he promised.

She watched him go, her hand holding up the towel nearly letting it drop, but she stopped herself. After she was dressed in a snug black dress with a scoop neck and two short slits up the sides, she considered her choice of outfit tonight. Her arms, usually covered by sleeves, were visible in the sleeveless dress. Vincent said he wanted her to be herself and that's who she would start being—scars, tattoos, piercings, and all.

An hour later, she heard Vincent's steps thunder downstairs. He poked his head into the kitchen and cursed. "Jesus, woman, are you trying to drive me insane?" His arms wrapped around her middle and kissed her neck as she squealed, his fingers tickling her ribs.

"Stop it! I have to finish this," she argued, smacking him playfully with the oven mitt.

"Fine, fine. I'll just have to come back for more later."

His words sent a white-hot thrill through her body, and she clamped her thighs together. "Go wait for your mother—out of grabbing reach of me, preferably. Too much more of you and I'll burn the damn steaks."

He sauntered away, whistling as he went, and Natalie sank against the counter, trying to collect herself before

their guests arrived. How long could a dinner last, anyway?



Stop talking and just leave already, Vincent thought, annoyed, as he poured himself another glass of wine and offered the bottle around. Todd, his mother's date for the evening, drawled on and on about the damn cattle prices and this and that. Vincent stopped listening an hour ago, too distracted by the blonde haired, blue-eyed beauty who stole the rest of his heart today.

Billy leaned forward eagerly on his elbows as Todd brought up the latest Rangers game. All he needed was them bringing up damn baseball when what he wanted to do was kick everyone out of his house. He shifted his chair slightly so he had a straight view of Natalie standing at the kitchen island while she cut up the pie she'd made for dessert. She laughed at something his mother said, actually cackling. She had to set the knife down, holding her sides as Doris howled loudly, her face bright red as tears of mirth slipped from her eyes.

"What are you two getting on about over there?" he asked loudly.

"You wouldn't understand, dear," Doris said, shooing him away with her hand. "This is women's talk."

"Yeah, that's what worries me."

His gaze raked over Natalie's body, starting at her calves and trailing up to her ass. His hand curled on his lap as the other threatened to break the wine glass. She turned, and the slit on the side of her dress parted, giving him more of that delicious flesh he wanted to spend all night tasting. The back of the dress covered her back, but her tattoo peeked through her hair hanging over her arms. He half expected his mother to point it out, or the earrings in her right ear, but Doris was

either pointedly ignoring them or had grown soft over the years.

“Oh, now, dear,” Natalie said through her laughter, “we’re just getting to know one another. Nothing wrong with that, is there?” She sauntered to the table carrying two plates with pie slices. As she set his down, she sidled even closer, rubbing her thigh against his leg and bending over. Her backside out of everyone else’s view, he snuck a quick squeeze, and she pressed herself into his hand. He swallowed the groan nearly falling out of his mouth. “Eat your damn pie.”

He wasn’t sure why he would expect anything less from her, but she sat down on his lap as if they had indeed been together forever. He wrapped an arm around her middle as he dug into his dessert, imagining digging into something much sweeter soon enough.

She’d stopped playing fair over an hour ago when her foot trailed up his leg during dinner and landed in his groin. His hand found its way to her lap, pushing her dress languidly higher and higher up her thigh, but if he went too much further, he worried she would jump and smack her knees on the table. Or he would simply throw her over his shoulder and excuse themselves from the table while he explored every inch of her body, including her back with its impressive artwork. When she dropped the towel and showed him her most vulnerable spot, any lingering doubts Vincent had of Natalie trusting him, of being right for him, fell away until all that remained was that future he saw with her by his side.

“I was simply asking your lovely wife about children,” Doris said as she took her seat at the table.

Vincent choked on his pie, and Billy leaned over, giving him a helpful whack on the back. “Mother, come on.”

“No, it’s fine,” Natalie told him with a wink. “Apparently, your mother had a dream.”

“A dream? How much were you drinking before this dream?”

“Oh, you hush,” she teased and flung a dollop of whipped cream at him. Vincent hadn’t seen his mom this happy since his dad died. As much as he hated to admit it, he probably had Todd to thank for that. “I had a dream of my three grandchildren running around me. It was a wondrous sight, absolutely wondrous.”

“Three, huh? Boys? Girls? Give me a little something to go on,” Vincent murmured.

“She said they were triplets,” Natalie supplied, and Vincent had to chug water to get the food to go down his gullet.

“Triplets?” he gasped.

“Yes, and they were all girls. Fancy that,” Doris mused as she forked a piece of pie into her mouth. “Oh, come now, Vinnie, you could handle it. I have faith in you.”

“That makes one of us.”

“Two,” Natalie chimed in. “You’d be fine. Maybe deranged by the end of it, but you’d make it out in one piece.”

He hugged her close, and she leaned down to kiss him. “I’m glad to hear you think so.”

He wanted to kiss her longer. She tasted of cherries and whipped cream and smelled like the coffee she just brewed, but he released her lips reluctantly and sighed.

“Natalie, I can’t help but notice the bit of tattoo on your arms,” Doris said lightly, and Vincent froze, ready to jump in and defend his wife if need be. “Can I ask what it is?”

“Of course. It’s a phoenix. I’m sure you all know about the car accident I was in.”

Everyone bobbed their heads around the table. Vincent didn’t want her to talk about it if she wasn’t up for it, but could only offer his comfort by wrapping his other arm around her and holding her close.

“I was burned pretty badly in the crash and thought it fitting to cover up the scars with a tattoo of a phoenix.”

“How fitting indeed,” Doris said admiringly and smiled. “Rising from the ashes.”

Natalie leaned back into Vincent’s arms. “That’s what I thought back then, but it wasn’t until I met Vincent that I really felt like I survived that accident.”

His heart swelling with love, he planted a kiss against her neck, whispering in her ear, “You have no idea how alive you make me feel, too.”

She settled even more into his arms, and Vincent swallowed the words to kick their guests out of the house. Billy finished his pie and drained his coffee before he stood, patting his stomach.

“All right, if I sit here any longer, I’ll fall asleep. Doris, Todd, can I walk you out?”

Todd appeared disappointed, but Doris patted his hand. “Come along, dear. Natalie, that is one of the best steak dinners I have had in a very long time. We would love to do this again.”

“Of course, Doris, anytime.” She pushed herself out of Vincent’s lap to walk everyone out.

When Billy passed Vincent, he reached out and squeezed his friend’s arm. “Thanks,” he whispered.

Billy winked, patting him on the shoulder. “I can tell when I’m not wanted. Besides, the tension between you two is so thick I could’ve forked it.” He bent over and added, “Go get her, tiger.” He grinned all the way to the front door.

Vincent cleared the dishes from the kitchen table and waited impatiently for Natalie to close the front door. He met her at the bottom of the steps as she locked the front door and sagged against it.

“Well, that went well,” she mused, kicking out of her heels.

Words failed Vincent as he gawked openly at her curves outlined in the tight black dress. He held out his hand for

her, and she sauntered towards him. The moment her fingers touched his, he grinned wickedly and picked her up, slinging her over his shoulder as she squealed with laughter.

“I can walk, you know,” she said.

He gave her ass a squeeze, and she gasped, wiggling on his shoulder. “You looked exhausted after making such a perfect dinner. How could I let my tired wife walk?”

Once he was at the top, he set her back on her feet outside her bedroom door. His fingers lingered along her cheekbone before gliding along her jaw, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her lips. Her normally light blue eyes darkened with desire. Her mouth opened, and she nipped his thumb. Was she ready for this, to have him in her bed? He didn’t want to push, and he wasn’t sure how to ask if he could join her in bed. Both options sounded terrible, so he remained silent and waited.

Natalie stepped away from him, and he prepared to suck up his disappointment when she reached out and yanked on his shirt, dragging him into the room with her. There were no words. Her arms snaked up around his neck, drawing him down for a kiss. Vincent returned it in kind, picked her up, and carried her farther into the room. He kicked out of his shoes as she fumbled with his shirt. Her fingers tore at the buttons as his mouth devoured hers, wanting to feel every inch she had to offer him. Their tongues warred for dominance of the kiss when his shirt finally came free and he threw it out of the way. Her nails raked down his back, and he wanted to feel her. He searched in vain for a zipper, and when he failed to find it fast enough, he knelt and gripped the slits of her dress. She stared down at him, confused until he tugged hard and the fabric ripped up to her hip.

Her eyes narrowed, and the hunger burning in those depths told him this night was only beginning.

The second Natalie heard the fabric rip, her blood caught fire and she needed desperately to have this man, to touch him and hear his grunts of pleasure as she explored his body and he took her. She stood before him, her dress torn and baring her right leg and the G-string beneath. Vincent spotted it, too, but he was a man of patience. His hands started at her ankles, massaging and caressing before they slithered higher. He kissed the back of her knee, and she gasped, knotting her fingers in his hair while those seeking hands of his reached up to cup her bare ass.

When the dress got in the way again, he tugged at the other slit, ripping the bottom part clean off. The act was so primal, Natalie's heart threatened to pound out of her chest as her cleft quivered with anticipation of what this man would do with her. He kneaded her ass as his mouth licked and nipped along her thighs.

"Vincent," she whispered, worried she would fall over.

"I've got you," he murmured. "I'll always hold you up."

She believed him. When his warm breath brushed her soft curls, her eyes closed on a sigh. She had no idea what to expect. No man she had dated ever got past feeling up her boobs, and there was Vincent, kneeling at her feet and—

“Oh, God,” she moaned.

His mouth pressed against her clit and sucked hard through the thin, lacy fabric of her thong. She pressed his head closer on impulse, feeling his tongue poke and rub, circling her bead as his hands dragged the G-string down her legs. With the fabric gone, he tongued her cleft, spreading her legs wider with his hands. She couldn't keep standing, there was no way, but his arm appeared around her waist again, and when he licked along her dripping cleft, she forgot why she cared whether she was standing.

He swirled around her wetness, sucking hard until her vision blurred and her hands slipped to his shoulders to keep herself upright. With each rub of his tongue, the pleasure built within her until her legs shook and she panted for air, moans slipping from her mouth. His tongue thrust within her, and she dug her nails hard into his shoulders. She thought this was as much as she could handle, but he managed to pick her up, carried her backwards to the bed, and laid her out. His mouth ravished her in seconds as he spread her legs even wider with his hands. Her hips rose and fell in time with his tonguing thrusts.

A small voice somewhere in the back of her mind said she should be embarrassed that his face was buried inside her vagina, but she was too far gone to feel anything but the ecstasy that damn mouth gave her. She rode hard against him as he grabbed her hips and held her to his lips. The orgasm grew before it shattered, dragging a scream from her mouth, the spasm shooting through her body before her limbs weakened. Gasping for air, she lifted her head to see him grinning up at her, licking his lips. Another shudder of ecstasy threatened to explode watching that single action, and she scooted to the edge of the bed. When she kissed him, leaning down over him, she tasted herself on his lips. She pulled him back with her onto the bed. Her hands worked at his belt, desperate to feel that hard cock in her hand, the one she'd felt so many times begging for her touch.

Their touches were urgent as she undid his pants, and his fingers finally found the zipper at the back of the dress. Their laughter filled the room as each worked to get the other undressed first. The second his pants were down, her hand surrounded his shaft, moving in a steady rhythm from the base to the tip. Her thumb lingered over the crown, admiring how soft the flesh was there.

He rolled them over, gently removing what remained of her dress from her body, and undid her bra with one pinch of his fingers. He tossed it over the bed and buried his face between the soft mounds of flesh. Natalie's hand stretched lower, following the curve of his shoulders to the slope at the small of his back. His ass was taut and well-toned. She gave his cheeks a good squeeze, and he grunted before sucking her nipple hard into his mouth. Her back arched off the bed, and he spread her legs with his knee. When his tip pressed against her lips, she slithered out of his grasp and rolled him onto his back.

"Not yet," she whispered. "I want to taste you first."

"If you play with him too much—shit, never mind," he groaned. "Play away. Dear mother of God, woman."

His hips bucked, and Natalie smirked as she ran her hand down his cock while sucking more of him into her mouth. Each time, she went down slow, lingering as her tongue massaged his flesh before letting him slip out again. While she explored what drove him crazy, his hand snuck up between his legs. His fingers spread her lips and twisted within her soaking sheath. She gasped as he spread her, stretching her. She moaned with his cock in her mouth, and he cursed, his fingers thrusting even faster within her body. Her breasts rubbed against his thigh, hardening her nipples and driving her closer to the edge again. His thumb pressed into her clit as his fingers continued their movement, each twist inside her rubbing against that small, sensual spot left untouched all this time. When she came, her mouth was around his cock, and she pumped her hand up and down,

sharing her pleasure as much as she could with him before he gripped her around the waist and dragged her up his body.

When their lips met, she thought an inferno started somewhere deep in her soul. His crown pressed against her folds as his mouth trailed down her neck, kissing and caressing her breasts. She rocked her hips back and forth, rubbing against him until he grunted with need.

“Take your time,” he muttered, even though he clearly struggled to control himself.

Natalie reached a hand down and guided him to her quivering snatch. As he massaged her breasts, she eased onto him, both of them groaning as he stretched her for the first time. She cringed at the first slight pinch of pain and eased back off. The second time, she sank lower, making a mental note later to tell him how much she admired his control. The next time, she held her breath, and when she lowered her body completely over his, she blew out the air and embraced the pain before settling on top of him. Vincent remained perfectly still, letting her adjust. Her head fell back and she bit her lip as she rolled her hips, embracing the intoxicating feel of him stretching her to her fullest, gliding in and out so smoothly. She fell forward onto his chest, riding him at a steady pace, searching for his lips with her own. His body moved beneath her, his hips bucking up to meet her downward thrusts, pushing him even deeper. She leaned back, bending herself backwards over his legs as he held her hips steady.

The ecstasy that poured over her body drove her completely over the edge as her cry echoed around the room, joined by his sudden bellow of release as his cock swelled within her and she felt his warmth fill her depths. Trembling and enjoying every single aftershock of pleasure rippling through her body, she sank back onto his chest and he slipped out, leaving her aching for him already.

He kissed the top of her head, his chest rising and falling hard as he tried to catch his breath when he cursed. “Shit, Natalie—I wasn’t even thinking.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“I meant to take you to my room. I didn’t wear a condom, I’m sorry.”

A flicker of worry filled her, but she shrugged. “I’m on the pill, and I’m going to assume if you had anything, you would have told me, right? Well, I mean, we are married,” she reminded him. “If anything happens, it’ll only be good for our story and for us both.”

He sat up, moving her with him so she straddled his lap. “Are you saying...you want to have kids with me?”

Did she? Having children was a huge step and something she long ago gave up on. “There are quite a few things I’m finding I want to do with you, Vincent Cunningham.” She trailed her finger down his chest rising and falling with hers so his dusting of chest hairs brushed her nipples, hardening them again. “I’m saying that I find myself quite happy with you in this life. Is that crazy? It is...it’s too much, I’m sorry.”

“No,” he whispered and lifted her face towards his. “It’s not crazy at all.”

“Oh no?” A smile played across her lips, and he hugged her as he sank back to the bed.

“No. The moment I saw you—and I mean the you who came out at the reception—I knew there was no way in hell I could let you get away from me.” He sighed, his lips pursing as he glanced around. “That night, when I told you I was lonely? I was dead serious. I never found the person who made me feel...made me feel...”

“Like you were home,” she offered, and he tilted his head to meet her gaze. “That you belonged no matter how much of a freak you were.”

“Yeah, something like that.” He chuckled. “Some crazy marriage, huh?”

“Some crazy marriage.” Her cheek met his chest and she closed her eyes, calmed by the steady thudding of his heart beneath his breast. “So,” she whispered, her hand snaking down his body. “How long until we can...uh, try this again?”

She wrapped her fingers around him, and he growled deep in his throat as he rolled her onto her back.

“Not long at all,” he promised.



The golden rays seeped through the window, warning Vincent it was close to time for him to get up and head to work, but there was no leaving the house for him today. The light touched Natalie’s bare back, the sheet pooled at her hips as she snuggled with a pillow. Her light snores brought a grin to his lips as he lightly traced the lines of the massive tattoo again. To see such an intricate piece of art on someone’s skin fascinated him, but this one had meaning.

His body protested when he shifted, sore from their all-night exploration of each other’s bodies. Every little moan she made taught him exactly what she liked, and he drove her mad several different times. Not that she didn’t pay him back in kind. Never did he think a mouth could wring that much pleasure from his body.

Natalie shifted beneath his hand, though she remained fast asleep. He longed to kiss the side of her breast and nibble her ribs, but watching her sleep was as comforting as seeing her smile or hearing her laughter. Her face was the most relaxed he’d seen it since they met. Sadly, though, nature called. He slipped silently from the bed and tiptoed down the hall to use his bathroom so as not to wake her. When he was finished, he slipped into a pair of low-slung jeans, and avoiding the creaky stairs, he considered brewing a pot of coffee. Breakfast didn’t sound like such a bad idea, and his stomach rumbled in agreement. He picked up the

cordless phone and dialed Billy's number when his gaze landed on the flowers and an idea popped into his head.

"What's up, boss?" Billy asked through a yawn. "It's barely six, you know that, right?"

"Damn, sorry. I wasn't looking at the time. I'm letting you know I'm off the radar for today. I'm about to call my assistant and let her know too."

"And may I ask the reason?"

"The reason is tucked upstairs in bed. I'll let you figure out the rest," he muttered as he found pancake batter in the pantry and set a mixing bowl on the counter.

"Understood. I don't think you have anything pertinent today."

"Good. And we're still good about next weekend?"

"Yes, you are. I've shifted everything to next month to ensure you have plenty of time, so you're welcome. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Yes, fine, go back to sleep. Bye, Billy."

His friend mumbled something along the lines of the same before he hung up. Vincent hummed as he mixed the pancake batter and cooked a very large stack to place on a plate with syrup and butter on the side. He made a pot of coffee, filling two mugs. Every few seconds, he checked the house for signs of Natalie stirring but heard nothing. When breakfast was ready, he plucked one of the tulips from the vase of flowers and carried it in his mouth while he held the tray of food and coffee in his hands. Chuckling quietly to himself as he climbed the stairs, he waited anxiously to see her eyes when he woke her up this morning.

Setting the tray on the dresser, he took the tulip, slipped out of his jeans, and climbed carefully back into bed. She mumbled under her breath and he froze, but she snuggled closer to the pillow. Her legs shifted and the sheet slipped over her ass—that perfectly curved ass he wanted cradled in his hips.

He set the tulip on the bed and pulled the sheet from her body, letting it drag across her skin. Goosebumps popped up along her arms, and she murmured in her sleep. With the sheet out of the way, Vincent picked up the tulip, and starting at her shoulders, he let the soft petals brush over her skin, down her bicep to her elbow, then back again. He circled the flower around the base of her neck. His lips followed, leaving wet kisses down her spine. The tulip traced along the tattoo, touching each vertebrae of her back. Each touch brought Natalie's body to life. She moved against the bed, her breathing quickening and her hands gripping the pillow tightly.

He eased down her body, each nerve on fire, and his cock throbbed with the need to spread her legs and thrust home. With the flower, he traced delicately around the curves of her ass, and when her legs spread for him, he dipped the flower between them, letting it barely touch the red lips there. He swallowed a groan when her lips parted and a mix between a moan and a whimper escaped her mouth. With the flower on the bed, he grabbed her hips and covered her body with his. He nuzzled her neck, licking her ear, and sucked on her earlobe. Her eyes blinked open as she gasped when his cock pressed between her ass cheeks, hard and aching for her body. He shoved her hair aside as she turned her head enough so he could capture her lips, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as he moved his hips, showing her what he wanted. Her hips arched slightly and he kissed her harder. When she spread her legs for him, Vincent nearly came all over her back. She was so open and hungry beneath his body, she threatened to drive him mad with lust.

Moving down her body, he lifted her hips and pressed his tip against her sheath. He eased into her, gasping as she took him in, stretching around his cock until her ass was cradled perfectly by his hips. His first thrust was soft and gentle, unsure of how much she could take after last night, but when she reached back and dug her nails into his thigh, he let go a

little more. With one hand holding her hip, he let his other wander, rolling and tugging her clit as he bucked forward. Each thrust was harder and deeper than the last. Her breasts rubbed against the sheets and her hands dug into the bed, needing to hold onto something as he held onto her body.

Vincent let go all control as soon as the first cry left her mouth, and she moved with him, timing his thrusts with her moving back against him. He groaned, fighting to maintain some sort of rhythm, but as he imagined waking up every morning like this, he pounded her depths and needed her to feel what was in his mind and his heart, what was in his soul because of her. She cried out, sharp and loud, her body squirming to get closer as he finished, spilling hotly inside her as he grunted with release and bent over, kissing her back while their bodies shook together.

“I like...waking up this way,” she murmured a few moments later as they lay facing each other.

“I think I can arrange that,” he agreed and kissed her knuckles, holding her hand to his lips. “I’m taking the day off, by the way. You are addicting, you know that?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She scooted closer until they were chest to chest. “I guess one of these days, I’ll have to tell my sister I owe her own.”

“For signing up on that website?”

“That, and for being a pain in my ass. It led me to you, after all.”

He kissed the tip of her nose, her forehead, and her cheeks before ending with her lips. The kiss quickly heated until her stomach rumbled loudly and they broke apart. He glanced at her stomach with a raised brow. “I think your stomach is trying to eat itself.”

“I’m not surprised. I’m pretty sure I worked off ten pounds last night.” She sat up and sniffed the air. “Did you make coffee?” He nodded towards the dresser and her eyes lit up with her giddy smile. “Pancakes!”

She hopped off the bed, and he admired the view of her ass bouncing as she bounded over to the tray. When she turned back, her cheeks flushed and she shot him a glare.

“What? You can’t get mad at a husband for admiring his wife.”

“Hmm, I guess not.” She glanced down at her left hand. “I still can’t believe I lost the ring.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” he said and climbed out of bed, stretching his arms over his head and shaking out his legs. “I think we’re going shopping today.”

“We are?” She had a pancake rolled up in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Vincent stalked towards her and took a bite off the end of the pancake. She glowered at him, and he grinned wolfishly with his mouth full.

“As soon as you’re dressed,” he said once he swallowed. “Darling.”

She scarfed down two pancakes and her cup of coffee and was dressed five minutes later. He watched the entire spectacle from her bed.

“All right, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

“One more thing,” he said and took her hand, pulling her from the room. He walked her down the hall to his room and spread his arms wide. “Before the end of the day, I want you to officially move into my room.”

She leapt into his arms, covering him with kisses. “I think I can manage that.”

Natalie cracked her knuckles as they climbed out of the truck.

“Well, on the bright side, I actually think you’re handling vehicles better,” Vincent mused beside her. “You don’t look like you’re about to vomit this time.”

“That’s good. It’d be a real shame to lose those pancakes. What did you use to make them, by the way?” she asked, trying to get her mind off the roiling in her stomach.

“The mix in the pantry. Why?”

“Just curious. Maybe sometime soon, I’ll show you how to make them from scratch.”

He pinched her rear and she jumped, smacking his arm teasingly. “Not all of us can learn how to cook in a day.” He linked his fingers through hers, and she melted into his side. “Time to find you a ring, Mrs. Cunningham.”

They were buzzed inside, and Natalie pinned her arms to the side. The rings were beautiful beyond any she’d seen in the department stores. She was terrified of simply touching the cases and having to pay thousands of dollars.

“Mr. Cunningham, welcome back,” a woman behind the counter said. “And this must be your wife. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Thanks,” Natalie said shyly and held out her hand. The woman shook it.

“I’m glad to see you found time to come back for the official ring. Tell me, Mrs. Cunningham, what type of stone are you after?”

She glanced at Vincent, but he shrugged. “Your choice.”

She shifted from foot to foot and leaned in close. “What about price?” she whispered.

“Natalie, you do remember who you married, right?” he replied just as quietly. “Indulge yourself, please.”

The woman behind the counter nodded in agreement. The diamond ring he presented her at the wedding had been pretty, but she was not a diamond girl. She paced from one case to the next, eyeing the sparkling stones beneath the bright lights of the cases while her hands fidgeted at her sides. What stone? Vincent remained a few steps behind her, his hands in his pockets and a subtle lift to his lips. The flowers he brought her the other day were all oranges and pink, like the phoenix on her back and the fire that used to fill her spirit before a real fire tried to snatch it away.

Her hand rested on a case holding stones of white gold rings with citrine and ruby stones adorning their bands. One of the rings towards the back drew her eye and she pointed to it.

“You’re sure?” the woman asked.

“Yes, definitely sure,” Natalie said.

The woman unlocked the case, and after laying out a small piece of felt, she set the ring down. The rubies and citrine twisted around the band in a swirl of fiery color, igniting the spirit of who she was. The stones were that of a faraway burning sun and the flames of a phoenix, two things Natalie held dear to her heart. She slipped the ring on her finger and held it up before her gaze.

“What do you think?” she asked Vincent, looking over her shoulder.

“I think you couldn’t have chosen a better ring.”

“If we can measure your finger, we’ll have the order placed.”

Natalie removed the ring carefully and handed it back to the woman before she went through several ring sizes to find her perfect fit. Vincent took care of the order, ensuring Natalie had no knowledge of how much the ring cost. He whispered something to the woman at the end, and she appeared to add something to the order.

“What are you up to?” she asked as they left the jewelers.

“Just a little something extra, is all. And I have one more surprise for you. If you think you can handle a two-hour car ride, I would like to take you away on a mini honeymoon at my ranch. Not this weekend, but the next. What do you say?”

Two hours, in a car? Natalie gulped as her hands shook. “Two hours?”

“Away from the city, away from everyone,” he whispered. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do,” she said without hesitation. Fear gripped her like a vice. He brushed the back of his knuckles against her cheek, and Natalie’s heart pounded quicker for a very different reason. “We’ll be all alone? As in completely and utterly alone?”

“Yes, and there are quite a few things I’d like to show you once we’re there.”

Nibbling her tongue as she regained control of her trembling body, she winked. “Maybe there are a few things I’d like to show you, too.”

His gaze darkened and his hands tightened around her hips. “Later then. Lunch first would be a good idea.”

“Oh, yes please. I need to gain back my ten pounds.”

He huffed, rolling his eyes as she giggled, linking her arm through his. A few people stopped and talked to him as they strolled through downtown Houston, but thankfully, a large crowd of reporters never swarmed them. He told her, once they reached the restaurant for lunch, that type of crowd was normal. Once the campaign picked up steam, it would only

get worse. Natalie had learned to hate being in public, but with Vincent by her side, it was easier to breathe through the situation and keep a smile on her face, even if she was quietly screaming inside at the curious gazes. Her name was out there. Any one of those damn reporters could look up her accident. Thankfully, Billy had managed to hold off on any in-depth interviews with the hopeful Congressman and his wife so far, but he warned her that eventually, they would want the scoop.

She'd brought up her fear to Vincent last night as they lay in her bed, half-asleep, about someone tracking down her family. She admitted she hadn't told her parents she was married yet, but he said Billy was handling everything at the moment.

"What about Lana?" she'd asked. "We live in the same city. Someone is going to realize I'm an identical twin at some point."

"Don't worry about it until we need to," he'd murmured, yawning widely. "Do you trust your sister to keep our arrangement to herself?"

"Of course I do, but she can a bit scatterbrained at times."

"It'll be fine, Natalie. Worst case scenario, we have to quickly come up with a reason why you didn't tell your parents about me over the last what, year or so we've been together?"

He made it sound so easy to take care of when the time came, but Natalie spent part of the night wide-awake and staring at the ceiling. The nagging still in her gut at lunch that afternoon was a bad omen she tried to ignore.

Too bad it only made her sick to her stomach and reminded her how easily her life could take a turn for the worse.



Another week passed and Vincent and Natalie acted more like a couple who had been together for years rather than weeks. They could barely keep their hands off each other, but it was more than that. Each day, he saw a new side of her as she continued to open up to him, and he in turn let her into his life more and more. The Friday they were leaving for the country arrived, and Vincent rushed to get back to the house. He'd packed last night, as had Natalie, both anxious to get out of the city and to the ranch. He worried about the two-hour drive, but if he could keep her mind focused on other things, she would survive. Once she saw the open land and the old house surrounded by gardens tended to by his mother for decades, the stress would be worth it.

Natalie's sister was swinging by the house before they left so she could tell Lana about how the marriage was going so far. At first, he feared he would see Lana and mix them up, maybe suddenly regret he'd married Natalie after all, but when he reached the house and stepped into the kitchen from the garage, one look was all he needed to know he'd married the right twin for him. Lana was beautiful, of course, but after spending so much time with Natalie, he could tell them apart with a simple glance.

"Hi, babe," Natalie greeted him and hugged him tightly, kissing him on the cheek. "I'd like you to meet my sister. This is Lana Jenkins."

He held his hand out to her and she shook his tentatively. "Pleasure to actually meet you this time." Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open.

"I'm sorry about the mix up. It was all my idea and I thought it would be good for her," she rambled until he held up his hand, shaking with laughter.

"I was mad at first, I'll admit, but stranger things have happened to bring two people together, I think. I've been meaning to thank you, actually."

"Thank me?"

“Yes. If you hadn’t been such a hard ass, I might not have found my wife.”

“So you two are happy. This isn’t an act for the cameras and stuff?”

Natalie rolled her eyes as Vincent tugged her close to his side. “Not even close. I love your sister.”

“Love? Holy shit, Nat, way to go.” Lana clapped her hands then bounded to her sister, squeezing her so hard, Natalie’s eyes bulged and she shoved at her sister’s arms, pleading for her to put her down before she cracked in half. “Oh, that reminds me! I brought you a present.” She pulled a gift bag from her tote purse on the kitchen table.

“What the hell is that? Wait, never mind. I don’t want to know so take it back.”

“Screw that. You need this, trust me. Did you pack already for your honeymoon?” She wiggled her eyebrows, bouncing on the balls of her feet in the exact same way Natalie did when she was excited.

“Yes,” Natalie replied slowly.

“Well, you need to repack. You stay here,” Lana ordered Vincent. “Lead the way.”

Natalie groaned, gave Vincent a martyred look, then took her sister’s hand and led her upstairs. He listened to their banter all the way up to the second story, planting his hands on his hips and nodding in confirmation to himself. Yes, he definitely married the right twin. Lana seemed nice, but the fire in her eyes was different, and she lacked the same sense of adventure that came with Natalie. He debated pulling Lana aside to have a quick chat with her in case any reporters came up to her, but when he heard the twins laughing upstairs, he decided not to ruin their fun. He pattered around the kitchen before taking a quick look around his study to ensure everything was tucked out of sight and the safe was locked under his desk.

Steps raced downstairs, and he exited his study to see Natalie hugging Lana at the door. “Bye, new brother-in-

law!” Lana yelled, waving behind Natalie’s back.

“Bye, Lana. Come back anytime.”

“Oh, I will, don’t you worry about that.” She squeezed her sister’s hand and left.

“Did you two have a nice visit?” Vincent asked as Natalie reached for his hand and fell into his body. “Is she always that excitable?”

“You have no idea. Usually, she’s worse.”

“So, what did she bring you?”

Natalie jumped back, her cheeks vibrant red along with her ears and every other bit of skin he could see. “Nothing, nothing at all. Um, I’m going to finish getting ready and then we can leave, right? Yeah, we’ll be good then.”

“Natalie, what did she buy you?”

“Nothing, nothing,” she called back down the stairs.

He had one foot on the bottom step, ready to go take a peek for himself, when the doorbell rang. Accepting the surprise present would have to wait until that weekend, he peered out the window of the front door to see a squat man standing there, a fedora hat perched on his head and a cell phone in his hand. Vincent cleared his throat and opened the door with a smile. “Can I help you?”

“Mr. Cunningham, I was hoping to catch a few moments of your time.”

“And you would be?”

“Hank Butcher, writer for the Houston Press,” he said, and Vincent stood to his full six-foot-three-inch height. “I have some questions I would like to ask you, if you have the time.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t. If you would like to leave them with Billy Ross, he handles all my interviews. Sorry you had to waste your time.” He tried to close the door, but the man had the gall to put his foot in the way. Vincent nearly went through with slamming the door shut and smashing the man’s foot, but being written off as a man who abused the press was not a good way to start his campaign.

“I’m afraid I will not continue to be turned away, Mr. Cunningham,” the man snapped.

“If you’re referring to my wife shutting you out the other day, let me tell you, off the record, I do not appreciate anyone trying to force their way into my home,” he growled. “I certainly don’t appreciate you doing it to my wife.”

Hank removed his hat with an apologetic smile that came across as a sneer. “I do apologize if I frightened the Mrs.”

“I would be more worried about pissing her off.”

“Is that how you would describe your wife? Easily angered?”

Vincent clenched his jaw as his grip tightened on the door. “That is not what I said and you are not to use anything I say right now, do you understand me?”

“Sure, of course not. As long as I get my interview.”

“I think you need to leave before I call the police for trespassing.” He tried to close the door again, but the man’s foot didn’t budge.

“You won’t even answer my question about the lookalike wife?”

Shit. “Are you watching my house?”

“Of course not, that would be stalking. I was merely passing by and saw a woman who appeared to be your wife leaving the house, but when I glanced back at the front door, I saw your wife clearly standing in the doorway.” Hank rubbed his crinkled forehead. “Is she a twin, by chance? An identical twin?”

“So what?”

“Just curious, is all, if things get complicated.”

Vincent’s chest tightened, and he forced the man out onto the front porch, pulling the front door shut behind him. “I don’t know what you’re implying, and frankly, I don’t care. If you have any questions, you may leave them with Billy Ross as I mentioned before. Otherwise, you are to leave my property and stop harassing my wife and myself,” he seethed.

Hank planted his hat back on his balding head and winked. “If that’s the way you want it.”

“It is,” Vincent huffed.

“All right then. But remember, you had your chance to talk to me first. Good day, Mr. Cunningham. Give my best to your wife—or is it her sister?” The man sniggered as he strode down the walkway.

Vincent glared at him until he reached his car parked along the curb and drove away. He even had the nerve to stick his arm out the window and wave. He tugged his cell out of his back pocket and texted Billy to keep an eye out for anything about him hitting the papers over the weekend. He trusted Natalie with his life and his career, but someone out there clearly had it in for him. It had to be one of his rivals, trying to dig up a scandal. If he wasn’t careful, they would find one big enough to bury his political career for good and tarnish the Cunningham name.

“You can open your eyes now.” Vincent’s soothing voice reached Natalie’s ears, and she stopped her incessant humming. “Natalie, did you hear me?”

“I did,” she replied and squinted one eye open, followed by the other. “We’re here?”

The truck shut off, and he jangled the keys for her to see. “We’re here.”

She slumped in the passenger seat with a grateful groan. “Thank God. I was close to passing out the last few miles.”

“Hence humming the *Star Trek* theme for the past fifteen minutes?”

Cringing, she undid her seatbelt and leaned over the console to kiss him. “You know you love me for all my weirdness.”

“I love you for more than that,” he added, reaching a hand around to squeeze her ass.

If they weren’t in a truck, she would crawl to his lap and show him just how excited she was to be in a non-moving vehicle, but he pulled away and turned her face to look around them. An old stone and brick house stood before them, surrounded as he’d promised by gardens of beautiful flowers and cacti, and the Cyprus trees with their low-hanging branches swayed in the evening breeze.

“Wow,” she beamed, stepping out of the truck in a rush. “Oh, wow!”

She spun around in a circle, taking in the open land surrounding the house. In the distance, she could see a herd of cattle. In another field closer by were several horses, moving through the tall grass waving in the wind. They whinnied at the sight of people, and her boots crunched across the gravel as she walked to the fence.

“Do you think you could be happy here for a weekend?”

“Just one?” she lamented as Vincent placed his boot on the bottom fence rail.

“I was thinking every weekend—that we can get away, of course.”

“Now that sounds like the perfect adventure to me. Even with the two-hour car ride.”

He draped his arm over her shoulders, and they stood side by side, watching the sun sink lower on the horizon as the horses continued to graze without a care in the world. The fresh air filled her lungs, and Natalie wiped a tear from her eye. She’d missed this so much more than she realized. Being outside, being on a new adventure, and there she was with her husband, on his land, with so many activities calling out to her.

“Unpack and we’ll rustle up some dinner. I was thinking burgers tonight?”

She snickered as she climbed up into the bed of the truck to undo the straps around their suitcases. “Your burgers or my burgers?”

His dark look had her chortling. “Yours. You know, at least I try to cook every now and then.”

“And I will always eat whatever burnt and weird food you serve me,” she informed him. Once the suitcases were unloaded, she stomped to the tailgate and fell into his waiting arms. “Just because I love you.”

“Damn straight, woman,” he grumbled, and before she could get away, he slung her over his shoulder, spanking her

ass as he carried her into the house. “Now, let’s get this honeymoon started right. Whiskey and burgers.”



Billy grumbled when his cell went off in the middle of the night. He covered his head with his pillow and tried to tune it out as another alert went off, and another, but finally gave up. With a curse, he reached out a hand, feeling for it. He brought it to his face, under his pillow, and squinted at the news alert.

Latest Scandal About to Rock Cunningham Campaign.

“What?” Wide awake now, Billy shot up in bed and clicked on the alert. His eyes skimmed the article, hinting at a larger one to come by Sunday morning. He was already on the phone with the man in charge of media alerts. When Jeff finally answered, Billy screamed at him to figure out what the hell was going on.

“What’s the scandal?” Jeff asked frantically.

“Just figure out where this asshole is getting his information, if he has any. I don’t want that article to hit on Sunday.”

“So there is a scandal? Billy, what’s going on, man?”

“Nothing, just do your job. I’ll try and get ahold of Vincent.” He hung up and dialed his boss and friend. There was no answer. After an hour, there was still no answer. Billy could drive out there himself, but that was overdoing it. Hopefully, they could stop the article before it hit the web or the papers and everything would be fine.

The pit in his stomach said everything was about to fall apart.



Lana locked her car and glanced around the street for her fiancé. They were meeting at the florist at the end of the block to pick out flowers for their wedding in September. She checked her cell again, worried she'd messed up the day or the time, when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, miss," a man in a fedora said.

"Oh, hello. Can I help you?"

"I believe you can. Where is your husband today, Mrs. Cunningham?"

"Huh? Oh no, you have me confused with my sister. I'm Lana," she said and held out her hand with a bright smile on her face. "And who are you?"

"Hank Butcher, ma'am. I'm sorry for the mix-up. I've been hoping to talk to your sister."

"Oh, well, she's been pretty busy lately," Lana informed him. "I'm sure you could always call her and leave a message or something."

"I suppose I will have to do something of the sort. Does it happen often, you two getting mixed up?"

Lana shrugged, uneasiness settling her stomach. She looked around for her fiancé again, but he wasn't in sight. "Sometimes. We got used to it after a while. And there are a few differences if you're paying attention. Most identical twins have at least one or two small details that are different. "My eyes are darker," Lana rambled, gripping her phone tighter in her hand. "And I have a tiny freckle on my chin that she doesn't. And then there's the piercings and tattoos, of course. Those help quite a bit. I'm sorry, who did you say you were again?"

"Hank Butcher, and thank you. That is very useful information."

"Useful? For what?" Panic set in and her hands shook as the man leered at her and swiped his finger across his phone before holding it up to her.

"So would this be you, then, on that marriage website?"

“What? What marriage website?” Lana fumbled for words as she stared at her photograph on the phone, her profile listed beneath it. “I don’t know what that is or how you got that picture, but you need to leave me alone, right now.”

“I’m just curious. if Vincent Cunningham went through all that trouble to pick you, how did he wind up with your sister? Although a change was made to the marriage license. Interesting story, don’t you think?”

Lana fumed and raised her hand, slapping the man across the face. “Get away from me, or I’m calling the cops. And you leave my sister alone, got it?”

“Lana!” Alex ran over and placed himself between her and Hank. “Who are you?”

“He’s an asshole, that’s who he is!” Lana yelled over Alex’s shoulder.

Hank tipped his hat and, whistling, walked away, not even seeming to care that he had been slapped across the face so hard it left a mark. Alex tried to talk to her, but she had to text Natalie and tell her what was going on. Her fingers shook so badly, she garbled the message a few times before finally sending it.

“I think I screwed everything up,” she mumbled and clung to Alex. “Oh, Natalie.”



“You’re cheating,” Vincent grumbled as Natalie held up the fishing line with another largemouth bass on it. “You’re singing to the damn fish or something, aren’t you? I’m calling bullshit, right now.”

She beamed at him as she unhooked the fish and dropped it into the bucket beside her. “I think that’s enough for a good fish fry, don’t you?”

“I think I hate you right now.” He cast his line out into the lake again.

Natalie giggled with glee beside him, a contagious sound that soon had him grinning again. “You’re jealous.”

“Yes. Yes, I would be that.”

So far, the day had been nothing but perfection. He’d started the morning with another tantalizing romp in bed followed by a good old-fashioned Texas country breakfast with enough calories to last until dinner. They went horseback riding through the fields and the trails around the ranch, and she spotted the archery range he and his dad used a long time ago. They rode back to the house and hiked through the trees and tall grass to the range. She was good—incredible, actually. Watching her shoot was such a turn on, they made love right there in the grass, sharing their passion with the rest of nature.

Afterwards, he led her to the private lake on his land and they fished. She was up by three, and the only thing he caught was a damn turtle that wouldn’t leave his line alone.

“I think your friend’s back,” Natalie teased and nodded out to the water.

“That bastard,” he growled as the turtle swam through the water, chasing his line all the way back to the dock. “That’s it, I’m calling it. I think we’re finished for the day.”

Natalie reeled her line in and handed it to him so she could carry the bucket of fish. “Not a bad haul for this afternoon.”

“No,” he agreed, nudging her playfully with his elbow. “Not at all.”

The adventurous side of Natalie had been in full swing since the second they stepped out of his truck on the gravel drive. He’d only brought one other woman here, and the last thing she wanted to do was spend time out in nature. Natalie, no makeup or jewelry, wearing her ratty denim shorts, sweatshirt, and cowboy boots, sloshed lake water on her legs as she walked and not giving a single damn about any of it. The light in her eyes had yet to dim, and he wanted to see it grow even more.

He put the poles up in the barn, and she sat out on the back patio at the cooking station, filleting the fish like a pro. "Please tell me you've done that before."

"Once or twice," she told him, concentrating on the fish in her hands.

"Once or twice. Okay, I'm going to go change real quick. If you need me, holler."

He'd barely stepped inside when she yelled for him. He darted back outside, thinking she'd sliced open her hand by accident, to see her grinning like a madwoman and shaking, trying to contain her laughter.

"Seriously?"

"What? You said holler if I need you. I always need you."

Grunting, he stomped onto the patio, wrapped an arm around her waist, and crushed her to his body as he kissed her hotly until she panted for more. Then he set her back on her feet with a wink and whistling, strode back into the house.

"That's not fair!" she called after him.

"I don't play fair!"

He walked into the bedroom and changed out of his dirty clothes from their hiking, using them as a blanket when they had sex, and the slime from the fish on his jeans. He dug through his suitcase, looking for a fresh pair of jeans, when he saw the bright pink gift bag left by her sister. He peeked out the bedroom door, but she was still outside on the patio. As quietly as he could, he dug through the tissue paper and pulled out several different items that instantly made his cock stand up, ready to go another round.

"Oh, good God," he whispered.

Inside the bag was a vibrating dildo, which he set aside as several ideas came to mind. The next item was a cock ring which he had never seen before in his life. Apparently, it vibrated, too. Several pieces of skimpy lingerie with beads making up the crotch instead of fabric were also part of the package. He pictured those on Natalie and groaned,

imagining her walking towards him in nothing but that pink slip of fabric and pearls. A pair of fuzzy handcuffs came next, but he wasn't into the bondage scene. The last item was a bottle of strawberry-flavored lube for both sexes.

“You done in there or what? I'm ready to fry these bad boys up!”

His lips curling with a mischievous grin, Vincent slipped the items he wanted into his suitcase and tucked the pink bag away again. After dinner, they would have some fun. They would have lots and lots of pleasure-squeezing fun.



The fish was delicious, probably made even more so by the fact that Natalie caught all of them, showing Vincent up for the second time that day. He might not admit it, but she was a better archer than him, too. All through dinner, his eyes raked down her body as if she was already naked, and by the end of it, Natalie's breath was shaky and her thighs were clamped together hard, trying to quell the throbbing want for him.

He pushed back from the table. “I'll clean up the dishes if you want to shower.”

“Are you telling me I stink?” she asked curiously. He was up to something, but she had no idea what.

“Only a little,” he added and winked.

“Hey, if you want to do dishes I would be more than happy to shower.”

She planted a kiss on his cheek and trotted off to the master bathroom to clean up. She showered quickly, not wanting to miss a moment of time with Vincent since this was their last night together. Though the honeymoon was short, Natalie had loved every second of it and knew they were returning home even closer than before. This marriage would work. She felt it deep in her bones.

When she turned the water off and pulled back the curtain, the clothes she'd picked out to wear were gone. In their place was the damn strip of pink lace with beads for a crotch. A wildflower rested beside it with a note.

Natalie glanced to the door to see it cracked open and soft flickering candlelight beyond. She grabbed a towel from the track and dried herself off as she picked up the note: *Join me when you're ready so we can watch the stars come out together.*

Her heart swelled, and she brushed out her hair, braiding it into a thick braid she tossed over her shoulder, rubbed lotion into her skin, and slipped into the panties. The beads felt strange at first against her lips instead of an actual piece of fabric. She took a few steps and bit back a surprised gasp of pleasure as they rubbed her in all the right places. The bedroom was empty, but there were more flowers on the floor, leading her out into the living room. The sliding glass doors were open, letting in the cool evening breeze. Candles covered the tables and mantle, the end tables, and a few places in between. Set on the coffee table by the oversized couch were several more of the items Lana had sent with her. Before, Natalie had been embarrassed by those things, but now, they called to her. She imagined Vincent holding the vibrator as he broke her apart in the most delicious ways. Another gasp slipped from her lips as a very naked Vincent stepped in front of the open back doors.

She opened her mouth to say something, but the love and awe in his eyes as he looked at her from toes to head tore the need for words away. He stalked closer, each step causing her heart to pound, and her hands trembled in anticipation. When he was only a foot away, his hand reached out and cupped her breast gently in his palm. Her eyes closed as a shiver of want slithered down her spine. His other hand slid across her ribs, but he didn't pull her into his arms. Didn't kiss her. Instead, his hands explored her body as if he touched it for the first time. Each finger pressed and massaged as they followed the curve of her hips and the

fullness of her breasts heavy with need. His thumbs rolled and teased across her nipples as she bit her lip on a moan. Each touch sent a ripple through her body until every nerve screamed for release.

Her hand reached out and held his hard cock, wanting to take part in this sensual dance. He grunted but didn't pull away. Her other hand reached for his hip as she smoothed it along his abs, up to his pecs, and tugged gently on his nipples. The fine dusting of hair on his skin tickled the palms of her hands. Then he was gone. She frowned, opening her eyes.

"No, keep them closed," he whispered hotly as his hands trailed around her body, telling her he was now behind her. "Keep them closed."

Grinning, she did as he asked, her hands searching for his body. "Vincent?"

"Right here," he murmured, and his lips kissed the hollow at her shoulder and neck.

She fell back into his chest as his kisses traveled to her shoulders and his hands gripped her hips hard while his erection teased her, pressed against her lower back. With his guidance, they walked backwards and Natalie nearly opened her eyes, but she heard the rub of his body on the couch cushions as he pulled her down to sit on his lap. Only one of his hands caressed her body now, holding her breasts, kneading and massaging the soft flesh. When something else dragged up her thigh, her nails dug into his thighs and her legs spread wide without even needing to be asked. He cursed, the sound muffled behind her, as he drew the vibrator up the inside of her thigh and back down the other. Each drag up made her hips lift, seeking out what she wanted, but his dark chuckle told her he was only getting started. His other hand disappeared from her breast and suddenly stroked her cleft, spreading her wetness and her swollen lips. She worried the beads would be in the way, but the man used them, dragging the strand up against her clit

and her crying sheath. She moaned, her hips rising and falling with each tug. When she was close, so close to finding her release, he stopped, shoved the beads aside, and the hard tip of the vibrator sought entrance within her.

With his cock pressing against her ass cheek and the vibrator stroking her cleft, Natalie was lost in a sea of wanton desire. She heard a click and a gentle vibration hummed through the vibrator and into her body. He slipped it inside her, languidly at first, just the tip. His other hand rolled and tugged her bead until he thrust the vibrator fully within her body. She moaned with each drag out and each thrust back in. His mouth found her neck, and as he sucked on her earlobe, Natalie lost all control. Her hips bucked in time with his hand until he thrust hard and fast with it, sending her soaring over the edge and into a bottomless abyss of pleasure. A cry tore from her throat, and he held the vibrator inside her, pinching her nipple at the same time, and she screamed even louder, her inner muscles clenching hard around the silicon toy.

As he dragged it from her body, she shivered and fell limp against him on the couch. His lips continued to soothe her neck and shoulders, kissing and nipping as she recovered. When she was able to see straight, she tilted her head to the side and met his amused gaze.

“You continue to surprise me,” she murmured.

“Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Wait until I show you what to use next.”

She glanced at the table and saw the strawberry lube and the cock ring. “Are you sure?”

“Why not? I think your adventurous spirit is rubbing off on me.”

Natalie sat forward, his hips bucking to press his cock against her back, and she wiggled her hips in reply. The lube...she would use that first. She picked up the bottle and stood on shaky legs, rolling it in her hands.

“This is going to be cold,” she warned him, sinking to her knees in front of the couch.

His eyes darkened as she popped open the bottle and dripped some of the thick liquid onto his cock. It twitched, and he sucked in a breath as his hands dug into the couch cushions. “That’s not cold, that’s freezing.”

“Not for long.” She spread it around, and moving closer, she covered him with her mouth.

He groaned and his hips bucked his cock into her mouth deeper. “Woman,” he uttered, trailing off in a stream of curses as she licked the vein in the side, squeezing his shaft with each glide of her hands. He hardened in her hands, and the throbbing urgency to have him fill her was too enticing.

With a pop, her mouth pulled free. She reached behind her for the cock ring. She stretched it a few times, added more lube just in case, and eased it around his shaft. His eyes bulged when it settled against his base.

“I’m not going to last much longer if you keep touching me with that thing on,” he warned and hoisted her onto his lap. She straddled him, and a shudder burst through them both as he slipped inside. She reached between their bodies, searching for the tiny button, and flipped it on. “Shit,” he cursed and grabbing her hips, held her steady as he thrust hard and fast.

Natalie had to agree and lowered her mouth to his as she held him tight. His darting tongue mimicked his cock, and she moaned before too long as he stretched her and rubbed her inside and out in all those tiny places that made her squirm for more.

The breeze blew through the house, sending the candle flames flickering around them as her cry echoed into the night. His hand reached up her back, tugging on her braid, and she relished in the desires he awoke in her body. She rode him hard, matching each of his thrusts until he rolled them over and pinned her to the couch. Her legs wrapped around his body as he plowed into her. With a yell of release,

his cock swelled within her, and she felt the heat of him spill into her as her cries of pleasure turned into a breathless moan. She gasped for air, in a state of disbelief at the never-ending waves of the orgasm that washed across her body. His arms shaking, he struggled to pull her back to his lap, slipping free at the same time. He reached down and picked up the used cock ring.

“Who knew,” he whispered and tossed it onto the coffee table.

“That’s...one way to put it,” she murmured as her head fell into his shoulder. “I don’t think I can move.”

“This couch is pretty comfortable,” he agreed, snuggling against her neck. “I vote we stay here for a while.”

“A long while,” she added. “Do we have to go back tomorrow?”

He sighed and lifted her face. “I wish we didn’t. We’ll come back as often as we can.” He kissed her forehead and whispered, “I love you.”

Natalie held him harder. “I love you more.”

His chuckle vibrated through her body. They remained together on the couch for a long time into the night, neither one wanting to move and break the magic of the moment.

Vincent lifted Natalie's hand to his mouth as he turned onto their street. "We're home."

"Good, that's good," she replied. Her eyes were scrunched shut, but she wasn't as pale as she normally was. Perhaps that a good bout of sex before she got into the car was the answer. He could roll with that if it would help ease her anxiety.

When the house came into view, he slammed on the brakes. "What the hell is going on?"

"What's wrong?" Natalie opened her eyes and peered through the windshield. "Are those reporters?"

"And Billy—he's on the front porch." Vincent pulled out his phone and called his friend. "Hey, man, I'm at the top of the street. What is all this?"

"Didn't you get my messages?" his friend yelled, waving his arm around wildly.

"No. I don't have reception out there, you know that."

"We have a problem. A very serious problem. I'll see if I can make a hole for you. Just pull straight into the garage. Don't stop and don't say a word, either of you. We'll talk about it once we get you inside." He hung up, and Vincent handed Natalie his phone.

"Vincent?"

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Billy said he’ll tell us once we get inside.” His hands rubbed on the steering wheel, debating turning around and driving to his mother’s house instead, but this was his home. No reporter was going to chase him away from it. “Whatever you do, don’t talk to them.”

Natalie nodded, her hands shaking as her face paled.

Vincent felt the exact same way. He pressed on the gas, and as carefully as he could, drove through the mass of people in front of his house and opened the garage. Billy rushed over to keep anyone from following them in, and Vincent immediately shut it as Billy ducked inside.

“What happened?” Vincent asked as Billy ushered him and Natalie inside. All the front blinds were shut as well as the ones at the back of the house. “Billy!”

“Ask your damn wife!”

Natalie flinched at the malice of his words. “Me? I’ve been gone all weekend, remember?”

“All I know is someone talked. They have everything. They know about the website, they know you paid a fee to use the website, and they know you married the wrong twin! They know it all, and they are demanding answers about why we lied to cover it up!” Billy threw his arms in the air as he yelled. “They want to know what’s wrong with you and if you really thought this plan would fool anyone into thinking you’re not the bachelor playboy!”

Vincent ran a hand through his hair as he paced around the kitchen. Everything was falling apart. All of it. He turned to Natalie, still shaking her head in disbelief.

“I didn’t do this,” she whispered, tears burning in her eyes. “I swear I didn’t.”

He hurried to her, hugging her. “I know you didn’t. I trust you.”

“Well, I don’t,” Billy snapped. “She could’ve been feeding information to your rivals the whole time!”

Vincent started to yell, but Natalie cut him off, pushing out of his arms. “Here,” she yelled and chucked her phone at

Billy's face, hitting him square on the nose. "Check it. Check the computers in the house, you asshole. I haven't done anything except marry this man and fall in love with him. Don't you dare stand there and accuse me of betraying him!"

Billy picked up her phone from where it hit the floor and slammed it onto the kitchen table. "It has to be you. No one else would know."

"That's not true and you know it," Vincent argued.

Billy snorted. "You're so blinded by love right now, it's sickening."

"What happened to you?" Vincent yelled. "You came up with this idea in the first place. We all knew the risks of being found out! You told me you had it covered, so what the hell are you doing, Billy? Maybe you're trying to sabotage me."

His friend flinched as if he'd struck him, and Natalie rested a calming hand on his arm. "Vincent, he wouldn't do that to you."

Vincent shot her a sideways look and sighed, his shoulders sagging. "You're right. Sorry, man."

"No, no...it's fine, really. Natalie, I'm sorry, too. I just...I have no idea how this happened."

"Why don't you go get cleaned up?" Vincent suggested to Natalie. "We'll figure out a plan of action."

"You sure?"

"Yeah...yeah, I'm sure." He kissed her sweetly.

"Don't you decide to talk to them by yourself. No matter what, we're in this together," she reminded him and headed upstairs.

Once she was out of earshot, Vincent cursed and slammed his fist on the kitchen island. "Where the hell is that Hank Butcher? Is he the one doing this to me?"

"His name is on the article. He has several quotes from an anonymous source. I have people working on it, but they're not getting very far. I know what you're going to say, but I

have to ask, just to be sure. You have absolute faith that it was not Natalie?”

Vincent's nod was firm. "I do, without a doubt."

Billy's twitching lip said he didn't believe him, but he dropped the subject. "Then for now, you stay inside this house and you do not talk to anyone. Don't answer the phone or the door, got it? I'll get them pushed back to the street until we can get a handle on this."

"What exactly are they saying?"

Billy cringed. "That you paid for a wife, and when you didn't like the first twin, you switched her out with the second."

Vincent groaned, his head falling to his hands. "Fuck."

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Billy agreed. "Keep your head down and we'll figure this out."

"Billy," he said when his friend walked away, "whatever plan you come up with, just know I am not divorcing Natalie. It's not going to happen. I love her and she is my wife, understand?"

"Sure, of course. I wouldn't dream of it."

Vincent wanted to believe him, but the glint of anger in his eyes said his friend was up to something, and whatever it was, Vincent wouldn't like it.



The clock on the nightstand read three, but Natalie couldn't sleep. Vincent snored soundly beside her, his hand on her thigh beneath the sheets. Coming home yesterday had not gone as planned, and she mentally kicked herself for having such high hopes that this would actually work. Not wanting to wake Vincent, she slipped from the bed, grabbed her sweatshirt and shorts from the floor, and tiptoed quietly downstairs. She flipped on the kitchen light and rummaged

through the freezer for a carton of chocolate ice cream—anything to ease her anxiety.

A knock at the back door made her scream. The spoon clattered to the floor, and she pressed a hand to her chest as her heart thundered away. The knock came again, and she grabbed a knife from the butcher's block. They hadn't tried to come through the back door, had they? Natalie crept towards the back door, the knife in one hand, and with the other, she threw back the curtain on the door.

"Lana? What the hell?"

Her sister stood on the other side of the door, leaves and twigs in her hair and her eyes red and swollen as if she'd been crying. Natalie unlocked the sliding glass door and dragged her twin inside.

"What's with the knife?" she squealed.

"Why are you knocking on the back door at three in the morning? Are you crazy?"

"Yes," she mumbled, and without giving Natalie a chance to set the knife down, her sister leapt into her arms, bawling her eyes out and mumbling incoherently. Natalie cursed and tossed the knife gently on the kitchen table and tried to set her sister back on her feet.

"Get ahold of yourself and tell me what's going on," Natalie ordered.

"It's my fault," she yelped, hiccupping because she was so upset. "I did it. I'm the reason the article came out. Natalie, I'm so sorry. He talked to me and I had no idea who he was and then I hit him and he walked away and I knew...I knew he was up to something—"

Natalie clapped a hand over her sister's mouth, her mind. "I'm going to take my hand down and you are going to tell me very slowly exactly what happened," she told her sister. "Understand? Very slowly, all of it."

Lana nodded frantically, and Natalie removed her hand. "I was meeting Alex at the florist, and this man in a freaking fedora hat comes up to me. He called me Mrs. Cunningham

and I laughed it off, telling him I was your twin sister and not you. He told me his name and that he'd been trying to talk to you," she said, pausing to suck in a loud breath, "and then he asked if we were mistaken for each other all the time."

Natalie's stomach plummeted as she realized where this was going. "And you said yes."

Lana's head bobbed, sending a few leaves falling to the floor. Natalie reached up and pulled the rest quickly from her sister's hair. "I told him we did, but there were subtle differences, like our eyes, and your piercings and tattoo help, of course, and a freckle."

"What did he say next?" Lana cracked her knuckles, a nervous habit they'd both inherited, and bit her lip, shaking her head. "Lana, just tell me, damn it, what did he say!"

"Natalie?" Vincent's groggy voice called from the doorway. "Lana? How did you get in? What's going on? It's three in the morning."

Lana broke down in hysterics again and hugged her sister. Natalie shushed her and guided her to a chair. Vincent's half-asleep look of concern turned into straight up confusion until Natalie narrowed her eyes and motioned towards the front of the house.

"Lana, I need you to finish telling me," Natalie said, crouching in front of her sister in the chair.

She hiccupped again, and hanging her head, she mumbled, "He showed me my profile from the website and asked...asked why, if I was on the website, Vincent married you? Then he mentioned something about an error on the marriage license. I smacked him and yelled at him to go away. Alex showed up and he took off. Natalie...oh, God, Natalie, I'm so sorry!"

"You didn't know," Natalie told her, trying to calm her down. "It's all right. He was pestering us before he talked to you, sis."

"He was?"

“Yes,” Vincent growled. “Lana, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Yes, I did! I ruined everything for you two when it was going so perfectly!”

Natalie didn’t know what to tell her sister, so she patted her on the shoulder and looked at Vincent, pissed at that bastard. Hank Butcher. If she’d been there she would have done more than slap the man. She would have punched his damn lights out for harassing her about her sister.

“Natalie?” Vincent nodded towards the doorway.

“We’ll be right back, okay?” she told her sister. “Wait here and blow your nose.”

Natalie followed Vincent into the living room. She waited for him to get angry and rant about her stupid twin sister, but instead, he hugged her, kissing the top of her head.

“I’m really not mad at her,” he whispered. “I can’t believe that man would stoop so low as to trick your sister into saying all that.”

“You don’t think it all came from her then?”

“No. No, I think one of my rivals hired him to start poking around. All he had to do was dig and ask the right questions of the wrong people.” Vincent sighed, and Natalie buried her face against his t-shirt. “On the bright side, I can tell Billy he can really stop worrying about you or your sister.”

“He still thinks it was all us?” she asked incredulously.

Vincent nodded. “Don’t worry. We’ll get it sorted out. I’m going to wake him up. Try and get your sister calmed down. It really wasn’t her fault.” He kissed her again and went upstairs to the guest room to wake Billy. The man had been unable to leave the house yesterday because of all the press.

Natalie steeled herself and went back to the kitchen. Lana lifted her head to stare at her, and she started crying again. “Oh, would you stop already. We’ll figure it out. It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. He can’t start his political career with a scandal. Who will vote for him?”

“It’s not a scandal, all right? It was a mistake on a marriage license. It happens. And so what if we met online? We love each other and I think that’s pretty clear to everyone around us.” Natalie held her sister’s hand firmly. “It’ll work out, you’ll see.”

Billy and Vincent joined them in the kitchen a few minutes later, and Lana retold her story. Billy’s face turned bright red, but to his credit, he didn’t start yelling as Natalie expected him to.

“Vincent, make a call to your mother. I’m sure she’s up by now,” Billy said, rubbing his forehead. “She might have a better way to go about this than I can think of at the moment. She dealt with your father’s career for so many years.”

Vincent walked off to call Doris. Billy shifted his gaze to Natalie, but when he smiled, it was not friendly. “Can we talk in private?”

“I guess so,” she replied. They walked into Vincent’s study. He closed the door and she crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s this about, Billy? You going to accuse me?”

“Look, I’ll admit I went off the deep end, but right now, I have no way of proving who gave that man information,” Billy snapped. “What I do know is that there is only one surefire way to make this go away and save Vincent’s career.”

“Oh? And what is that? Why don’t you tell him instead of me?”

“Because you, my dear, are the problem,” he told her hotly. “You are the reason the beginnings of a promising career have just gone down the drain. It’s all because of you.”

Natalie ground her teeth, glaring the man down. “Wasn’t it your idea for him to use that website?”

“To marry your sister, not you! You’re not even on it! No, he had to go and marry the wrong damn twin. You lied to his

face as you said your vows to him and placed a ring on his finger.”

“I told him that night what happened!” she ranted. “I came clean and he decided to try and make this work. We love each other, Billy, and yes, I made a mistake, but the marriage is real. We’re together and we’re happy. None of what I feel for him is fake. None of it!”

“Either way, I don’t care,” he admitted. “All I care about is saving my friend’s career. You are going to leave with your sister. You’re not going to talk to him first, you’re simply going to leave. In a few days, I’ll send over some paperwork, including a gag order to never speak of this again and papers saying you are filing for divorce.”

Natalie staggered backwards. “What? Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because I’m not giving you a choice. Vincent might think he loves you, but his career means more to him than some fling with you, and I’ll be sure he realizes that. He is going to divorce you and wipe his hands clean of this whole mess.”

“And you’re going to blame the entire situation on me and my sister. We’ll be run out of the damn city!”

“That is not my concern,” he said coldly.

“And if I don’t leave?” she challenged as her heart crumbled.

“Didn’t you swear to Vincent that no matter what, you would be sure not to fuck up his political chances? That you would do everything you could to ensure his victory?”

Natalie wanted to argue, to rant and rave that this was not what she meant, but she had sworn that, had given him her word. “I did.”

“Then this is what you need to do. Understand? It’s you or his chances at Congress. Take your pick.”

She opened her mouth to tell Billy to fuck off but closed her mouth quickly. Several different times, she asked Vincent why he was so set on running if he wasn’t thrilled about doing all the campaigning crap that went with the job.

The first few times, he shrugged her questions off, but over the weekend, as they lay beneath the sun, tangled in each other's arms, he told her exactly why. His father had held that seat for nearly thirty years. He was a good man who did great things for Texas and the rest of the country. He left a legacy behind, and what kind of son would he be if he didn't try to do as much as his father did? She'd heard the love he had for his father in those words and understood in those few sentences how much winning that seat meant to Vincent.

After everything he did for her—showing her she could be loved and find her adventurous side again—how could she stand in the way of his goals?

Tears burning in her eyes, Natalie stood straight as a board. "You better tell him the truth, Billy," she warned. "You better tell him this was all your idea. If you don't, you'll wish you never pissed me off."

"I wish I'd never showed him that damn website," he shot back. "I wish he hadn't married the wrong damn twin."

Natalie's hand itched to slap him, but she resisted. She was bigger than that. Wiping the tears from her eyes before they could fall and give him any sort of satisfaction at hurting her, she left the study. Vincent was upstairs on the phone with Doris. She slipped into her sandals near the garage door and pulled Lana from her chair.

"We're leaving. Where did you park?"

"Three streets over. What's going on? Don't you need to talk to Vincent?"

Her legs nearly carried her upstairs and into the arms of the man she loved, but Billy appeared in the doorway, shaking his head.

"No, not right now. Come on." She stepped outside, letting her sister lead the way, and listened as the door slammed behind them and Billy flipped the lock. They climbed over fences and ducked through people's backyards before reaching Lana's car. Natalie didn't even hesitate as

she opened the door and climbed in, hunkering down low in her seat.

“Natalie, this doesn’t feel right,” Lana whispered as she pulled away from the curb. “Natalie?”

She glared out the window as they passed the top of Vincent’s street with all the press vans parked along the curbs. “Just drive.”

“Are you leaving Vincent?”

Not by choice. “Yes. It’s what’s best for both of us.” She closed her eyes and held onto the edge of the seat with white knuckles. Without Vincent to help calm her down, her panic rose and she had to take short, even breaths to stop herself from losing it completely. “We might need to leave town for a bit until this blows over.”

“And go where?”

“Let’s go visit Mom and Dad. I’m sure by now they’ve seen the news.” She breathed in deeper and longer, but nothing helped. This would be her life again, all anxiety and panic with no Vincent there to pull her up when she needed it.

Another shitty night where she lost everything. How could her life get any worse?



The sun was up when Vincent hung up the phone with his mother. She told him repeatedly not to worry and to do what he felt was right. He wanted to be a Congressman like his father, but Doris said something he hadn’t expected from her. She was proud of him for finding a wife and taking that step in his life. She was happy to see him smile and be happy, something she hadn’t seen in him since Liam died.

“So you don’t care if I actually run?” he’d asked.

“It’s your life, son. Of course I want you to run, but why should you care about what I want? I also want a son who

lives his life to the fullest and gives me grandchildren one of these days,” she’d said and laughed.

“I don’t know how to fix this,” he admitted.

“Fix what? It’s the modern age. So you met your wife online, who cares? Big deal,” she chirped. “You did nothing wrong. You were lonely and you found the woman of your dreams. I say talk to your wife and figure out what to do. But no matter what, son, I love you and your father would be very proud of you.”

Vincent puffed out his cheeks as he paced around his bedroom. He should go downstairs and talk to Natalie, but he was scared of the unknown he faced as soon as he left the sanctuary of his room. Both choices would be hard, but he had to talk to one more person before he decided. He tugged on his shoes and found his wallet and keys.

“Billy, where’s Natalie?” he asked, seeing only his friend in the kitchen.

“She snuck out with her sister. She said they would go hide out at her place for a few hours until you called her,” he said but didn’t meet Vincent’s eyes when he said it.

“Why didn’t she tell me that?”

“She didn’t want to bug you, I guess. I don’t know. Where the hell are you going?” he questioned when he spotted the keys in Vincent’s hand.

“I need to talk to my father. Think you can hold down the fort for an hour?”

“And if they follow you?”

“I’d hope they wouldn’t be that disrespectful to follow me to my father’s grave. I’ll be back.”

Vincent ignored his sputtering as he walked to the garage and opened it. He was barely in the truck when he heard questions shouted at him, but he tuned them out, backed down the drive, and drove to the cemetery. No one followed him, at least, and he hoped Billy kept them occupied by selling them some story or other. All he needed was a few

minutes to talk to his dad and sort out the last of his concerns.

When he parked at the cemetery, he tried to call Natalie, but she didn't answer. He left her a voicemail then texted her for good measure, wanting to know what was going on. She hadn't texted him back by the time he reached his father's grave and knelt in front of it, kissing his fingers and resting them on the stone.

"Hey, Dad," he said, glancing up at the early morning sky. "I'm sure you know about what's happening down here. I've been all twisted up lately, and I think you know that too." He sat down, resting his back against the stone as he usually did. "I...uh, I found the woman I want to spend my life with. No whiskey on a rooftop, but we did have our night on a bridge that ended with us in the water. I really think you'd like her."

The wind ruffled his hair and he smirked.

"I know you told me you would be proud to have me follow you and take your seat one day, but with everything that's going on, I'm not sure if that's the right path for me anymore."

Leaves broke free from a nearby tree and landed on his lap. He brushed them aside absently, lost in his thoughts.

"I never meant for a scandal to happen, but I never expected to find a love so intense, so pure, I can't live without it. I want to be with Natalie, and to do that, I don't think I can run for Congress. In fact...I don't want to anymore. My heart's not in it. I want you to understand why I'm turning down the chance to be like you when I feel like I already am." He smiled softly and patted the grass by his side. "You loved Mom so much and everyone saw that, including me. I feel the same for Natalie. Thank you for teaching me how to see what was right in front of me. I'm not letting this chance go."

His conscience clear and his heart light, Vincent stood and brushed the grass from his jeans. He left another kiss on

his dad's grave and strode to the truck when the breeze lifted his hair. He spun around and swore he spotted the back of a man in a flannel shirt, jeans, and boots walking away through the cemetery. Vincent smiled, not caring if what he saw was real or not, and ran the rest of the way to his truck.

Alex handed Lana her suitcase and frowned at the twins. “How long are you going to be gone?”

Natalie shrugged and Lana sighed. “Just a week or two. It’s about time we visit our parents anyway, but we’ll be back, don’t worry.”

“She’ll be back for sure,” Natalie told him. “I’ll make certain of it.”

“You’re really going to run from this? Does Vincent even know what you’re doing?”

Natalie glanced at her phone and the five missed calls from Vincent along with a stream of texts. She turned her cell off and shoved it in her butt pocket. “It’s too late, we’re leaving. Lana, whenever you’re ready.”

The drive to the airport wouldn’t be long. Lana asked if she wanted to drive to Maine, but without Vincent to keep her from having a full-fledged panic attack, there was no way in hell Natalie could make that long a trip. Alex offered to drive them, but Natalie told him it’d be better if he came and picked up Lana’s car later. For all she knew, there were reporters staked out at the airport, waiting to catch her if they caught wind that she was running. She hadn’t a clue what Billy would leak to the press so they would chase her

down instead of Vincent, blaming her for the wedding and the mix up.

Lana climbed in behind the wheel. “All right, you ready to go?”

“For the tenth time, yes. Now let’s go.”

“Just checking. You don’t have to bite my head off.”

Natalie sighed and held her sister’s hand. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I just want to get out of here.”

“I know.” She put the car in drive and they pulled out into traffic. “What do you think Mom and Dad are going to say when we explain what happened?”

Natalie watched out the window as traffic grew heavy around them. “I have no idea.”

Just get to the airport and you’ll be away from this mess. I’m sorry, Vincent, it’s for your own good.

No, it’s not, you idiot, and you know it, she argued with herself and straightened in her seat. You are really going to leave the only man you’ve ever loved, just like that, because some d-bag told you to? What happened to the fiery Natalie?

“Lana,” she said urgently, gripping her sister’s arm. “Turn around.”

“What—why?”

“Because I need you to turn around.”

Lana’s look of confusion turned into a bright smile as she squealed with delight. “Thank God. There’s the sister I know. Let’s do this shit.” She exited the interstate and waited at the light for it to turn green so she could go under the overpass and head back in the direction they came from. The light turned green, and she let her foot off the brake. The car moved into the intersection. Suddenly, Lana screamed and threw her arm out against Natalie. Horns blared and Natalie heard her sister yell in pain before darkness flooded her vision and everything disappeared.



Vincent parked the truck in the driveway and stepped out. Billy ran to his side, whispering in his ear, "You need to get your ass inside and get changed. We're going to have a press conference right now and clear this mess up. I need you looking your best."

Vincent pulled his arm from his friend's grasp. "I'm afraid we're not, actually."

"What are you talking about? What the hell are you doing?"

"I am taking care of this situation once and for all." He waved his hand at everyone, motioning for them to be quiet as he walked to the front porch, Billy at his side. "I'm glad you all are here, actually. I understand there's been some confusion about my wedding and the woman I married."

"Is she even your wife?" a woman yelled out.

"Is it legal? What were you trying to do, marry both twins?"

"Are you secretly a Mormon? Do you have more than one wife already?"

"You see what you started," Billy uttered behind him. "Go inside and let me get them calmed down."

Vincent ignored him and held up his hands again. "Please, if you could all hear me out. For many years, I tried to find the right woman. It never happened, so yes, I resorted to a website that sets people up to be married, and yes, there was a slight issue with which twin I married, but it was a happy mistake brought on by one sister's love for another. None of that matters, however, because I love Natalie Jenkins and she loves me. We are husband and wife, and we are going to stay husband and wife."

Billy cursed and the reporters shouted questions out all at once. "What are you playing at?" Billy snapped.

"If you would give me a chance to speak, I'll explain everything to you. Where's Natalie? She hasn't texted or called me back. Are you sure she's with her sister?"

Billy's face darkened and he shrugged. "She's wherever she needs to be to be—away from you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You are being an idiot. You're throwing everything away, and for what? Love? You really think she loves you and she's not just some damn gold digger?"

"Jesus, Billy, what the hell is wrong with you?" Vincent growled. "What did you do?"

"I sent her packing like you should've done the day you found out the truth," he yelled. The crowd fell deathly silent. "You should have divorced her, and since you didn't, I've had to clean up your mess! The papers are being filed as we speak."

"What papers?" Vincent grabbed Billy's arms and shook him. "What God damn papers!"

"Divorce papers! It's the only way to save your ass."

"No, actually, it's not. I'm not running for Congress."

More shocked whispers exploded behind him, but it was Billy's hateful glare and the twist to his mouth that Vincent saw and only his words he heard as he spoke. "You're a fool. A damned fool. You have everything laid out at your feet and you're going to throw it all away?"

"For the woman I love. You know, I think it's time you had more time to yourself."

Billy's smirk turned into a scowl. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're fired as my campaign manager and as my assistant. Life's made you bitter, and I don't have time to put up with your shit. You were always jealous of my life. Go find one for yourself, man."

He glanced at the reporters crowded around, thinking how best to give them a good, final word, when Billy decked him out of nowhere. The hit sent him flying into the side of the porch, and the second nearly broke his nose. He shook his head and ducked under the third, nailing Billy right in the side. Vincent's cell rang, but Billy tackled him to the grass. They rolled, hitting each other as Billy yelled curses.

Two cameramen dropped their gear and rushed to break up the fight, hoisting both men to their feet. They dragged Billy, kicking and screaming, away down the drive.

“Mr. Cunningham? Your cell keeps ringing,” the cameraman who helped him up said.

“Right, thanks.” Wiping blood from his split lip, Vincent answered. “Yeah?”

“Is this Vincent Cunningham, Natalie’s husband?”

“Who the hell’s asking?” Were those sirens in the background? “Who is this?”

“Your wife was in a car accident, sir. We’re on our way to the hospital right now.”

“Car...accident.” He fell to his knees, holding his head. “No, no.”

“She’s stable, as is her sister. We’ll be there in five minutes. Ask for her when you arrive.”

He nodded, his body numb, and hung up.

“Mr. Cunningham?” the man asked.

“Natalie...car accident,” he mumbled and dragged himself to his feet. “I have to get there, to the hospital.” He pictured those scars on her back, saw the crumpled car from her first accident, and his blood boiled in fury. “I have to get there!”

The cameraman glanced around then picked up Vincent’s keys from where they had fallen during the fight. “You’re not driving. How about I give you a lift so you don’t crash on your way there?”

“Good idea.” Vincent heard the reporters talking and saw the cameras flashing, but he didn’t care about any of that anymore. Natalie. He had to get to Natalie.

They reached the hospital in record time and the cameraman—who’s name Vincent didn’t even know—handed his keys back. “Go see your wife. I’ll call a cab.”

“Thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wasn’t about to let our ex-hopeful Congressman crash on his way to see his wife.” The man patted Vincent on the shoulder and shoved him towards the hospital doors.

Pulling himself together the best he could, then deciding that didn't matter at all, he sprinted through the hospital doors of the ER and to the desk. "My wife...they just brought her in. I need to see her."

"Calm down, sir," the nurse behind the counter said gently, putting on his glasses. "What's her name?"

"Natalie, Natalie Cunningham."

The man typed the name in and picked up a chart sitting beside him. "She's stable, and it doesn't look like she requires surgery. Let me page the doctor and I'll see if you can go see her, okay? Please wait one second."

Vincent passed in front of the desk, rubbing his hands over his face and nearly tearing his hair out before the nurse called him back. He led Vincent into the ER and to a bed where Natalie sat, propped up and looking alert. The second she saw Vincent, she called out to him, and he sprinted to her side. He took the hand she offered and kissed her delicately, avoiding the small cuts and bruises.

"Don't ever scare me like this again," he whispered. "I can't handle it, do you understand me?"

"I'm sorry. We were turning around to come back."

"Come back? To me?"

"You really think I'd leave you just like that?" she argued, wincing as the doctor at the side of the bed stitched up a wound on her arm. "At least this accident wasn't so bad."

He sighed. "How bad is she?"

The ER doctor smiled, finishing up the last stitch. "Ten stitches. Some shallow lacerations and bruises, but all in all, she'll be fine in a few days. The stitches can come out in two weeks." She smiled at them both and said she would give them a moment alone.

"Was your sister with you?"

"Yeah. She's all right, but the accident knocked her out. Alex is with her," she said and nodded across the ER. Alex, Vincent assumed, was Lana's fiancé. He held her hand,

watching her closely. “We were headed to the airport, but I...I couldn’t leave you.”

Vincent sat on the edge of the bed and held her to him, needing to feel her solid body against his. “I was about to go track you down.”

“But the reporters and Billy?” Her eyes narrowed on his face. “Did you get in a fight?”

“With Billy, actually. Long story,” he said and shrugged. “The point is, I am no longer running for Congress. You and I can simply be you and me now.”

Natalie pushed herself up more, wincing in pain, and ignored his scowl. “What? No, you said that was what you wanted—for your dad. I can’t take that away from you.”

“You’re not. I’m giving it up because I would rather have you by my side than a damn seat.” He kissed her, wishing they were anywhere but the ER so he could really show her how much he loved her for being a part of his life. “And I think it’s time we had a real wedding.”

She sighed, relaxing into him. “A real wedding, huh? I think I’d like that.”

“Good, that’s good.”

“Your test results came back,” the ER doctor announced, grinning widely as she held the chart in her hands. “You know, I had to take a sample of your blood to be sure, and well, I think you’ll be glad we did.”

“Oh?” Natalie said slowly. “And why is that?”

“You two are going to be parents. Congratulations.”

Vincent stared at the doctor, sure he didn’t hear her right. His gaze shifted to Natalie’s belly and a smile crept across his face. “You’re pregnant?”

“I guess I’m pregnant,” she repeated in awe. “Holy shit.”

Vincent let out a holler of pure joy as he announced to everyone, “I am going to be a father!”

There was a scattering of laughter and some clapping as Natalie dragged him back down for a kiss. This was what his life was supposed to be like. No meetings and events, no

watching his every move and every word he said because of the cameras. His dad had lived that life and made it work, but that life was not for Vincent. This was, this moment right, with the woman he loved and their unborn child growing in her belly.

*F*ive Years Later

The warm summer breeze drifted through the open back doors, rustling Natalie's hair as she dozed on the couch. The sun's rays were so comforting on her body, she didn't want to move. Not that she needed to. The girls were well looked after. She heard their high-pitched squeals of laughter from the patio, followed by the boisterous sounds of their dad.

She peeked one eye open, unwilling to miss seeing Vincent at play with their three little girls. Triplets, just as Doris dreamt. Each one had light blue eyes like their mother but dark-brown hair like their daddy. As she watched from afar, Vincent lay on the patio, a blanket spread out beneath him, as his three daughters crawled over him, tickling him and squealing when he captured them in his arms for hugs. Natalie smiled at the sight, one she never grew tired of seeing.

Stretching her arms over her head, the sun glinted off the gems on her wedding ring and she was reminded of another wonderful day. Lana's wedding turned into a double, and not long after, she announced she was pregnant, too. They were supposed to come over today. Everyone was.

Natalie sat up suddenly, and Vincent turned towards her. "Momma's awake. Go get her!" he told the girls.

Lenny, Louise, and Nikki tumbled over each other in a rush to climb up onto the couch and tackle their mother. She kissed each one in turn, nibbling on their fingers and toes as they squirmed and laughed in her lap.

"Did we wake you?" Vincent asked as he sauntered in, bending over to kiss her.

"No, not at all. But I think I have to finish cooking for today," she said, frowning. "Not that I can remember what."

"Cupcakes," he called out helpfully.

"Right, cupcakes!" all three girls repeated excitedly and ran into the kitchen. She followed her girls, mixing up the batter as Vincent held Nikki and set the other two on the counter so they could all help. When Lana, Alex, and their little boy Henry showed up an hour later, the triplets were covered in icing, rushing to tackle their little cousin.

"Hey, how you doing, momma?" Lana asked as she hugged her sister. "That smells amazing. Vincent's been baking it all, right?" she mocked.

Vincent grumbled as Natalie smirked. "Always. You know how well he cooks."

"Oh, like that turkey at Thanksgiving. It was to die for. As in it literally made me want to die."

"Ha, you're so funny," Vincent muttered. He kissed Natalie so her toes curled. He reached around her for two beers out of the fridge and held one out to Alex. "We're taking the kids to the lake."

"Be back in time for dinner. And for the love of God, do not let Nikki try to catch fish with her bare hands again!"

Vincent shrugged one shoulder. "What can I say? She takes after you."

"Oh, that man," Natalie whispered but couldn't stop smiling. "You know, sis, I'm not sure I thanked you lately."

"For what?"

“For leading me to the man of my dreams and my three little girls to go with him.” Natalie and Lana stood arm in arm at the back door, watching their husbands and the kids run after their fathers. Life would never get any better than this. She had the man she loved, her beautiful children, and a home that embraced them all with open arms. “Yeah, I think we’re going to make it.”

“You’re welcome,” Lana whispered in her ear. The sisters laughed as they opened a bottle of wine and sat out on the patio, watching the day go by and finally happy with their place in the world.

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