

King OF MY Heart



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SEVEN RUE

KING OF MY HEART

A Forbidden Ex's Dad & Age Gap
Romance

Seven Rue

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Editing by Hope (littlewolfbooks), Ailyn (aiisreading), Blair (bookreaderblair), Bianca (bvaliente_)
and Seven Rue

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*To anyone who would immediately say yes if Keanu Reeves,
George Clooney, Tom Cruise, or Brad Pitt (or any other actor
over 60) asked them out on a date...this one is for you.*

PLAYLIST

Normal Thing – Gracie Abrams

Father Figure – George Michael

Wicked Game – Chris Isaak

Baby Did a Bad Thing – Chris Isaak

Brooklyn Baby – Lana Del Rey

Peace – Taylor Swift

Cowboy Like Me – Taylor Swift

Bad for Business – Sabrina Carpenter

Slow Burn – Kacey Musgraves

Home – Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros

Boulevard of Broken Dreams – Green Day

The Archer – Taylor Swift

Shadow of the Day – Linkin Park

Busy Woman – Sabrina Carpenter

Little Of Your Love – HAIM

Let it Happen – Gracie Abrams

King of my Heart – Taylor Swift

PROLOGUE

DARWYNN

My boyfriend was an insufferable drama queen, and I only now started wondering how I managed to deal with his crap for the past eight months. Well, it has been more than eight months, but before that, we weren't in an actual relationship.

Julian had been a one-night-stand.

Then he turned into an occasional fuck. *However that fucking happened.*

And later on, I allowed him to spend my free time with me.

Ultimately, I let him call me his girlfriend, and we've been together ever since.

And while Julian was—mostly—a good guy, I just knew that I wanted to end it.

Sooner rather than later.

I watched him sit back on the couch as he muttered curses, crossing his arms over his chest as he shook his head. "What an arrogant fucking asshole," he spat. "How rude was he toward that poor woman? She was just doing her job."

I frowned at him. "Her job was to ask questions, not insult him on live TV," I argued, pointing at the paused television in front of us. "She's crossed the line. I would've reacted the same way."

"Of course, you would've. You don't see the bigger picture, and you don't have your emotions under control."

Raising a brow, I wondered if Julian had gone mad or if I had just skillfully ignored how cruel his words had been in the past. I often blocked him out. Most times, whatever Julian said was not of major importance. He did whine a lot.

I let the comment about my emotions slip. “Are you serious? What bigger picture? Your father has just been insulted on live television in front of millions of people.”

Julian looked at me with emotionless eyes.

It looked like he had no emotions at all.

“Since when do you care about him?”

“I don’t.”

Admittedly, I didn’t care much about anyone other than me the past couple of months. But that didn’t mean I was a heartless bitch who wouldn’t stand up for the people who were being wronged. “But he’s your father, and all he has done is explain himself because he wanted to be honest about everything that happened. The whole world has been lying about him, and you’re now sitting here, stabbing him in the back because, what, you’re still mad at him for not coming to that one Christmas dinner five years ago?”

He snorted and shook his head, muttering something under his breath.

“What was that?” I asked, tilting my head to the side to say I didn’t hear her.

“I said, my father is a selfish prick.”

“Uh-huh, you’ve been the perfect son, right?”

I crossed my arms, challenging him.

At first, I had no idea who Julian’s father was. Famous Hollywood legend, Caspian King. But after one month of knowing each other, Julian started to tell me about him. About his broken relationship with father, and how insanely rude that man was.

Those were all Julian’s words, and, of course, as his son, he had to be right.

But he wasn’t.

Julian had personal issues with Caspian. Apparently, he wasn’t a very present father, and never really cared about Julian, but I always knew there was a bigger picture to it all.

Only thing was, I never really cared to ask what the real reasons for his hatred toward his father was.

Caspian King was an actor, living a life far away from where I grew up. Sure, I’ve heard of him, saw a couple of movies, but other than that, I didn’t care.

“What’s going on?”

I rolled my eyes at the voice of Julian’s best friend, Toby.

Toby was...weird.

And not in a fun way.

Toby smoked too much weed, ate Taco Bell almost every day, and listened to bird sounds all day long. He had no job, no family, no goal in life.

And he lived here, with Julian, where I happened to often spend my nights.

“My girlfriend is becoming my father’s biggest fan.” He got up and threw the remote Toby’s way. “Rewind. Watch the interview, and you’ll agree with me that my father is a total dickhead.”

Toby looked lost.

What a surprise.

I sighed. “Caspian King did a live interview about the things that happened during the filming of his latest movie, and the interviewer was blatantly rude and disrespectful, so he lashed out. And Julian thinks he was the disrespectful one.”

“Is he okay?” Toby asked sincerely. Surprisingly.

“Are you seriously taking their side?” Julian asked, his eyes wild. “My father is a monster!”

Damn.

“Julian, slow down.” Toby held up his hands, with one still holding the remote. “I’m not taking anyone’s side. I just think interviewers can be intentionally cruel when they want to get a reaction out of a famous person.”

Well...that had to be the smartest thing to ever come out of Toby’s mouth.

“I don’t care what the interviewer’s intentions were. I care about the way my father reacted. Do you have any idea how bad I look now?”

I raised a brow. “Sorry?”

Stepping closer to him, I pointed at the TV again. “Who *the fuck* cares about you? You haven’t spoken to your father in *years*. You never wanted anything to do with him or his career. Nobody even remembers he has a son. God, Julian, you’re such a—”

“All right, we need to step back here and take a deep breath.” Toby’s crooked smile told me how uncomfortable he was. And, to be fair, I had

raised my voice a bit too much just now.

There was really no reason for me to get so mad.

I threw my hands into the air and turned away. "Fine."

"He chose to push me away," Julian stated.

I stopped to look back at him again.

I didn't know how true that was, not knowing Caspian and his intentions. But I knew Julian's side of the story, and he had never once talked nicely about his father. Didn't matter if Caspian was the one pushing him away. Something about Julian's side of the story just didn't add up.

Caspian started acting at seven years old and was in hundreds of movies since then, and the older he got, the more famous he became.

Julian's mother was always there for him, raising him by herself, but even she once said something nasty about Caspian. She was angry at him for leaving, but leaving could've meant many things. They never clarified the reason why Caspian left, and I couldn't imagine that he left simply because he wanted to only be famous.

Caspian didn't strike me as a man who would leave behind his family.

Then again...I didn't know him personally, and anything could've been the case.

In my eyes, they just needed to catch up and talk. Face to face. Clear things up.

But I had no say in this.

It was their family's problem, not mine.

My family was great. Very functional and fun.

But ever since I moved out, I didn't see them very often. Only on special occasions. Still, I texted or called my parents almost every day.

And while my personal life was somewhat steady, there was one thing I still struggled with.

My job and my future.

I was twenty-one, and I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I had finished college a year early, and ever since, I had been working at a bank's front desk. It wasn't my dream job, though it paid well enough to keep me motivated to get up every morning, but I've had enough of that job now, too.

And, I've had enough of Burlington, Vermont.

And of Julian.

I tensed at the very truthful words I hadn't dared to say out loud.

I closed my eyes tightly and took a deep breath before looking back at Julian. "I think I need a break from you."

Julian furrowed his brows. "What are you saying, babe?"

"I'm saying, I'm leaving."

"That sounds awesome. Where do you plan on going?" Toby asked, still not fully understanding what was going on.

"I have no fucking clue," I sighed, shrugging. "Canada, maybe. I just have to leave."

"Canada is a beautiful country. I have a book about it if you want to read through it. It might help you decide where you want to go."

"I can just google it. But, thanks, Toby." I gave him a tight smile before shooting another glance at Julian.

"Did you hear what I said?" I asked, waiting for his eyes to meet mine.

But they never did. "Yeah, whatever."

My jaw clenched. "Julian."

"What? You've already said it all. Broke my heart in front of my best friend."

I rolled my eyes.

Drama queen.

"Oh, come on, Jule. We both know this wasn't really something... serious."

"To you maybe it wasn't. It was everything to me."

"Liar."

He finally looked at me, raising a brow at me. Then he rolled his eyes and muttered, "Yeah, fine, whatever. It's over."

"Woah, hey." Toby's eyes widened. "You're breaking up? Just like that? You two love each other!"

"No, we don't," Julian and I said in unity.

Toby looked between us, remote still in hand, with no intention of rewinding the interview. "Damn, shit...so uh..." He looked at me with a raised brow. "So, you're single now?"

I let out a heavy sigh and turned away to get to Julian's bedroom. "I'm going to do some research for my trip," I announced before closing the door behind me.

I needed to get away from here.

From Julian and Toby.

I needed to breathe fresh air.

Needed to see new things, new people.

And, most of all, I needed to figure out what I wanted to do with my
life.

CHAPTER 1

DARWYNN

six months later

Canada was beautiful.

There hadn't been one place I visited that I didn't want to move to immediately, but I moved along after a few days of stay and went to visit the next town on my list.

That list consisted of small towns across Canada, and while all the driving was exhausting, I was glad I kept going. I saw so many new things and met new people along the way, and I was starting to love that country so much that I was already thinking about moving here.

On this trip, I also got to know myself better, but the only thing I had yet to figure out was what I wanted to do with my life.

I was currently in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and this was again one of those cities and towns I could imagine moving to once my traveling was over.

It was my last evening here, and I decided to have dinner at the restaurant next to the hotel. The one I also had my lunch at earlier.

I got seated at a small table by the window, giving me a nice view of the busy street with little shops lit up with fairy lights and beautiful big windows. This area of the city was more touristy, and I enjoyed people-watching wherever I went. This place was perfect for it.

After ordering my food, I pulled out my phone to check the map and the road I would have to take tomorrow morning to return to Burlington. I had made it my mission to drive all eleven hours in one day, and while that

would exhaust me, I just didn't want to stop at a random motel or gas station somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

I had already bought snacks and enough caffeinated drinks to survive an eleven-hour drive, and the only pit stop I intended to make was to go to the toilet.

I got my food and ate the perfectly cooked steak and beans. The mashed potatoes almost burned my mouth, but I loved how warm they made me feel. They made me feel at home, and they made me want to redirect my plans and visit my parents in Nashua, New Hampshire.

I missed my hometown. Missed Mom and Dad, and all the friends I left behind when I moved to Burlington.

But I wanted to keep going for a while longer.

Julian kept on texting me. He wanted me back, and continued to ask if we could talk.

But I rarely texted back.

When I did text back, I came up with excuses, telling him that my phone's battery often died, or that my internet connection was bad.

He believed it all, but he kept texting. Kept spamming me with apologies—when there was really nothing to apologize for.

It was our decision to break up but, apparently, I was still on his mind.

I pushed all thoughts of Julian aside to enjoy the rest of my dinner. Letting my eyes wander off to the wall ahead of me, I noticed the signed Polaroid pictures all over it.

I took a closer look and recognized two indie musicians, one rock band, and three actors I'd once seen on TV.

"Crazy, huh? When I started working here, I didn't even know famous people knew of this place." The waitress smiled down at me, refilling my sweet tea. "My favorite was Keanu Reeves. Such a humble man."

I looked up at her and smiled back. "I heard he's a good man. He's a really good actor, too." I looked at the wall again. "But there's no picture."

"Oh, we had to give that one a special place." She pointed toward the bar area, where I saw a large, framed picture of Keanu Reeves with the whole staff. "He deserves the spotlight."

I laughed softly and nodded to agree with her. "Fair enough."

“Right? One more actor comes here often, but he asked us not to hang up his picture.”

I was immediately intrigued. “Who is it? Someone as famous as Keanu?”

“Probably even more famous.” She looked around, then leaned in and lowered her voice. “I’m really not supposed to tell you this, but you don’t seem like a stalker or anything.”

Oh, good.

“It’s Caspian King. He lives about fifty minutes away from here. He’s kind of a regular, actually. He comes here a couple of times a month.” She stood back up and grinned down at me.

No. Shit.

I pursed my lips. I had wondered what happened to him, especially after that famous interview. I was even worried because he had disappeared from the face of the earth after all of Hollywood had turned against him.

“Do you not know who Caspian King is?” she asked, looking shocked.

I had two choices here.

Tell her the truth or lie.

I liked telling the truth. Always and at all times.

But there was suddenly a subtle change of plans, and I figured going back to my hometown could wait another week or two.

“No, never heard that name.” I tilted my head to the side. “What movies was he in?”

The woman’s jaw dropped. “*Steel Pulse? Viper’s Wrath? The Art of Us?*” She blinked, listing some of the most famous movies ever produced in Hollywood—starring my ex’s dad. “You have never heard of *The Art of Us?*”

She was perplexed, and I wished I could’ve told her I knew about that movie and the world-famous actor who starred in it.

“No, sorry.” I gave her a crooked smile. “Why does he not want a picture of him in here?”

She sighed heavily and waved her hand. “Ah, because this whole interview thing happened a few months ago. On the set of his latest—and probably last—movie, there was an accident involving his co-star, Harris Grand. A car stunt ended badly. Harris died. They were good friends, and the producers made everyone stay quiet about how that accident happened.

Caspian, the man he is, didn't let anyone silence him, so he told the truth on live TV. But nobody believed him. He lost it, angry at everyone who saw and knew what happened, and so he swore off Hollywood and ended his career."

I watched her closely as she told me everything I already knew. I didn't know every detail, but I knew the truth, too. Unlike Julian and many people on the internet, I believed Caspian.

"That's horrible. How is he doing? You said he comes here often."

"He's very grumpy but still very respectful and nice. He always leaves nice tips," she said with a wink.

"And where did you say he lives now?"

"I'm really not supposed to say."

But she would tell me anyway because she thought I didn't care about *the* Hollywood actor, Caspian King.

"He lives in Hilton Beach. Very small village. Actually, I think half of that village is a campsite. Either way, he lives totally secluded. Someone once said he has a small house, nothing fancy at all. So he gave up on all the fame and became a normal guy."

Sounded like a plot for the next blockbuster starring Caspian.

I pursed my lips and reached for my drink. "Fun story," I said before drinking a few sips of my sweet tea.

"I know, right? Anyway, I'll let you finish your food." She left my table, and I continued to eat my now cold steak.

The more I thought about Caspian King, the stronger the urge inside of me became to try and get my ex to reunite with his father.

It's not like I didn't care about Julian anymore at all, and I wasn't a heartless person. It wasn't like Julian and I ever had some grand, earth-shattering love—what we had was more convenience than anything else. Two people who fit well enough to a while, until we didn't. I had no reason to care about his relationship with his father. No reason to get involved.

And yet, the idea of reuniting them stuck in my head like a bad song. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was boredom. Or maybe, deep down, I just wanted to prove—to myself, more than anyone else—that I was the kind of person who did the right thing. That I could still be decent, even when it didn't benefit me.

It wasn't about Julian.

Not really.

It was about me.

With a sigh, I pushed my plate away and pulled out my phone. It I was going to do this, I needed a plan.

I allowed myself to sleep in until nine the next morning since the drive to Hilton Beach wouldn't be too long, and I wasn't in a rush now, anyway.

I booked a tiny house at Hilton Beach's camping ground and planned to stay there for two weeks. It would give me enough time to meet Caspian and see if I could get closer to him. See if I could ask him about Julian.

But even if my plan failed, I would enjoy my two weeks in that tiny village.

Hilton Beach seemed nice to sit and look at the water.

The drive took me almost an hour, with a short break at a gas station to buy myself a snack. Once I reached my destination, I drove by all the small houses to investigate the village before checking into my stay for the next two weeks.

I saw a general store on my way to the camping ground and decided to return once I got the keys to the house. I would come back to grab some food.

Theresa, who showed me the tiny house, looked nice but annoyed. I watched her for a while as she explained the hot water situation to me, and when her eyes met mine, she raised a brow with a questioning look. "Why are you here?"

I pursed my lips and shrugged. "Vacation?"

"Is that a question?"

"No, I'm here on vacation." Which was partially true.

"You're a horrible liar."

Rude.

I couldn't tell her the truth though, could I?

She probably knew about Caspian. I mean, why wouldn't she know about him when he literally lived here?

Unless he didn't, and the woman at the restaurant lied to me.

"Why are you here?" Theresa asked again, her arms crossed over her chest.

I could go ahead with my plan and keep it a secret or tell her the truth and possibly get kicked out of the village.

Hard choices.

I looked around the kitchen and living area before my eyes met hers again. "Does Caspian King live here?" I asked in return.

"Who are you?"

Damn.

One dry question after the other.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know Caz?"

Caz.

Interesting.

Wait, so he is here, and she does know him.

I smiled tightly and crossed my arms loosely over my chest. "I'm his son's girlfriend."

That was another lie, but it was probably helpful to use my relationship to Caspian's son to earn Theresa's trust.

She watched me closely, her opinion of me not changing. She didn't like that I was here. Nor did she like *me*. But, hey, she couldn't kick me out now. Besides, I already paid for this place for the next fourteen days.

"Does he know you're here?"

"Uh, no. And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't run to him and tell him."

"Why not? I'm his friend. I should tell him."

Damn you, Theresa, you old witch.

"Because he doesn't know that I exist."

"Are you fucking with me, child?"

I would never, I gasped in my mind.

"No, Ma'am."

"Why would you come here then? He's a busy man."

Busy?

Here?

In the middle of nowhere?"

"How busy? I thought he retired."

"He did, but that doesn't mean he—" She stopped and held up a hand. "Why isn't his son here? Why did you come alone?"

Fair question.

“Julian is a busy man,” I said, repeating the words she outed about Caspian. “He asked me to come check on Caspian, on his behalf. You know, after everything that happened, we wanted to ensure he’s okay.”

“Hm.” She didn’t look too convinced. “How old are you?”

Does it matter? “Twenty-one.”

She studied me again, her eyes wandering all over my face. She was trying to put the pieces together, and to evaluate if what I was saying was enough to let me stay.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she leaned against the small kitchen counter, still inspecting me like I was some kind of alien.

“You said you have never met him, and Caspian never talked about his son. Or any of his family members, to be exact. Why now? Why bother looking for him after all this time?”

I suddenly felt uncomfortable. It was a good question, one I hadn’t fully reflected on myself. All I wanted was to get Julian and his father to talk. Whatever came out of it wasn’t for me to decide.

But at least I tried to do something kind. “Julian and Caspian have a difficult past. He’s been struggling without his father, and I’m pretty sure Caspian didn’t have it easy either. Their relationship is complicated, you know?”

Theresa’s expression softened ever so slightly, but her skepticism remained intact. “Complicated, huh?”

I nodded, unsure what else to say. She seemed to be weighing her next move, and I didn’t want to push her too hard in case she decided I wasn’t worth the trouble. Finally, she sighed and pushed herself off the counter.

“Look, kid, I don’t know what you’re expecting to find here, or why you think you can reunite a father and son, but Caz isn’t exactly a warm and fuzzy type. He’s...intense. And he’s got his reasons.”

“I’m not expecting much,” I said truthfully. “I just want to check on him. Talk to him. For Julian. And maybe I can help them get closer again.”

Theresa stared at me for another long moment, then shrugged. “Well, good luck with that.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying to sound sincere. “For not kicking me out.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she muttered. “This might not end the way you think it will. But I admire your determination.”

She turned and left, leaving me alone in the tiny house. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and glanced around the space. It was small but cozy, with just enough room for a bed, a kitchenette, and a little seating area by the window.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, my mind suddenly racing. Caspian was here, somewhere in this village. The man who'd been a constant topic on Julian's tongue. But what would I say to him?

What if he didn't believe me being Julian's girlfriend? Well, *ex*.

And what if he slammed the door in my face and told me to fuck off because he didn't want random people to appear out of the blue?

That would only be fair.

I rubbed my temples and sighed. Why did I think this was a good idea?

Well, I was being adventurous. And the worst case scenario would be not getting to reunite Julian with his father.

One thing was certain: I wasn't leaving Hilton Beach without at least trying. Whether he liked it or not, I was here and wasn't giving up that easily.

CHAPTER 2

DARWYNN

The general store was exactly what I'd expected from a tiny village like Hilton Beach. Wooden shelves were stocked with the essentials.

Canned goods, fresh produce, a small selection of meats, and a few household items. There was even a corner dedicated to handmade jewelry and locally made jelly and honey. It smelled faintly of cedar and coffee. It was a comforting mix that made me linger a little longer than I needed to.

I grabbed a few things to make a simple dinner.

Pasta, a jar of marinara sauce, a small pack of parmesan cheese, and a bundle of fresh basil that looked like it had been plucked from someone's garden just this morning. I also picked up a pack of chips, a bar of chocolate, and a loaf of bread from a basket near the counter.

The cashier was a thirty-something man with a friendly smile and a name tag that read "Henry." He rang me up while making small talk, which I happily participated in.

I liked doing small talk. Not sure why.

I liked the awkwardness of it.

"New in town?" he asked, bagging my items.

"Just visiting," I replied, keeping my answer short.

"Staying long?"

"Couple of weeks, maybe more."

He nodded, his blue eyes scanning me with the same curiosity Theresa had earlier. "Well, enjoy your stay. It's quiet around here, but the sunsets are worth it."

"I've heard," I said, smiling politely as I paid for my things.

"I'm Henry. I live right across the street," he told me, pointing his finger to the blue house on the other side. "And I own this store."

"That's cool." I gave him a tight smile. "I'm Darwynn."

“Nice to meet you, Darwynn.” He smiled back and handed me my bag. “Enjoy your night.”

“Thank you. You too.” I took my bag and headed back to the camping ground.

Back at the tiny house, I cooked my dinner in the little kitchenette. The scent of basil filled the space, making it feel a bit more like home. I did not miss home, though I missed every small town and city I visited in the past six months.

Once everything was ready, I plated the pasta and carried it outside to the small table on the porch.

The sun was just beginning to dip below the horizon, the sky showing off beautiful orange, pink, and purple colors. The water shimmered, reflecting the vibrant colors. I ate slowly, savoring each bite and the quiet serenity of the moment.

As the sun sank lower, I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye. My gaze shifted to a house down by the water, its porch bathed in the golden glow of twilight. The figure of a man emerged from the door, tall and broad-shouldered.

It had to be him.

Unless I was simply being delusional.

No...it *had* to be him.

Even from a distance, I just knew it was him.

His silhouette was strikingly familiar. I had seen it in movies, on TV, and on my phone screen.

It was Caspian.

He carried a mug in one hand and settled into the chair on the porch chair, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

I froze, watching him. My heart thudded in my chest as unfamiliar emotions surged within me.

Nervousness, curiosity, and something that felt an awful lot like hope.

He looked peaceful, sitting there as the day faded into night. The water stretched out before him, calm and unbroken, as if it held all the answers to the questions I wanted to ask him.

I considered walking down there for a moment, closing the distance between us. But something held me back. The timing didn't feel right.

I needed more time before I showed up unannounced.

As the sky became darker, I finished my dinner. The sight of Caspian still lingered in my mind as I cleaned up and prepared for bed.

Tomorrow, I told myself. I'd go see him tomorrow.

I climbed into bed, pulled the blanket up to my chin, and stared at the ceiling. It felt like the calm before the storm, like the air was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

Tomorrow, I will meet Caspian King.

For better or worse, I would at least introduced myself to him.

When I woke up the next morning, I was craving something sweet, and to my luck, there was a sweet little bakery right by the street at the camping ground entrance.

After taking a quick shower and putting on clothes, I got myself a cup of coffee and a baked good.

Before turning onto the road on which the general store was also on, I looked toward the house I now knew belonged to Caspian.

My plan was still to go over there and knock on his door to hopefully introduce myself as his son's girlfriend. However, deep down, I hoped I would see him walking to the bakery, casually passing him, and maybe sparking a random conversation.

Without telling him who I was or what I was there for.

But that wouldn't be the case because, apparently, the man rarely left his house.

Once arrived at the bakery, I walked inside and was immediately charmed by the interior. Wooden tables and chairs were scattered unevenly, a shelf full of secondhand books decorated one wall, and plants were all over the small place. Just a couple of what I assumed were locals sat there, chatting quietly or reading newspapers while sipping their drinks.

I approached the counter, where a cheerful barista with an apron smiled. "Good morning! What can I get for you?"

"Good morning." I took a moment to check out their selection of baked goods and then told her, "A croissant, a blueberry muffin, and a black coffee, please."

"To go?"

"I'll have it here, please."

“Take a seat.” She lifted her hand to gesture for me to sit down, and after giving her a quick smile, I went to occupy the chair by the window.

Seconds later, the girl stood by my side, setting down a dark green mug with steaming coffee and a plate with my croissant and muffin. “If you need anything else, let me know.”

I smiled up at her, giving her a quick nod. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

She touched my shoulder in a sweet gesture before leaving my table and serving another customer.

I was fully enjoying my breakfast when I felt eyes staring at me.

I didn’t dare to look up at first, but I forced my gaze upward to see who was gawking at me.

Theresa.

I smiled tightly, giving her a small wave.

She kept her eyes on me, shamelessly staring, making me nervous.

When I held her gaze for a moment too long, she got up and walked over to me, bringing her coffee and newspaper with her. “Well, look who’s up early.”

I hesitated and watched as she sat down opposite me. “Good morning to you, too.”

She chuckled dryly. “You look like you had a rough night.”

I pursed my lips before taking another bite of my muffin. “Actually, my night was pretty good. I slept like a baby in that bed. Very comfortable,” I admitted with a smile.

Theresa huffed, leaning back in her chair. “So, are you planning on going to see him today?”

“Yes.”

She watched me closely with those dark eyes and intense stare. I was starting to feel uncomfortable, but I brushed that feeling off. “Aren’t you going to ask me where he lives?”

“Actually, I saw him last night. I watched the sunset on the porch and saw him doing the same. So...I know where he lives.”

Theresa nodded slowly, with her eyes still fixed on my face.

God, she was scary.

The thing was, she didn’t really look scary.

It was those eyes that gave me shivers.

When her lips turned into a half-smile, she said, “Let me tell you something. He’s not the kind of man thrilled by unexpected visitors.”

“I’ve gathered that,” I said, sipping my coffee. “Still, I’m going to give it a shot. I didn’t change all my plans just to chicken out now.”

Her thin eyebrows raised. “What plans did you change?”

“I was actually about to head to my hometown—”

“Where’s that?”

“Nashua, New Hampshire.”

“Continue.”

“I was planning to go home after my months-long trip through Canada—”

She interrupted me again. “Trip? All alone? What about your boyfriend?”

Shit...I needed to come up with more excuses to make sure my story made sense.

I smiled, tilting my head to the side. “Like I said, my boyfriend is very busy at the moment, and I decided to go on a trip by myself because, well, I had the time and money. And my last stop was my hometown, but then I changed my plan when I remembered everything Julian ever told me about his relationship to his father, and since I was close, I decided to come here.” I stopped myself, thinking that giving her every detail wasn’t necessary, but when she kept on staring at me intently, I continued. “So...I did a quick Google search and found out that he lives here.”

That was another lie, and she didn’t seem to know much about the internet because she didn’t argue. She sighed heavily, muttering under her breath, “Damn paparazzi. I told the Sheriff not to let anyone close to his house.”

I was almost positive that there were no pictures of Caspian anywhere online, not from after he retired from Hollywood. And I was also certain that nobody other than a few people—and all of Hilton Beach—knew he now lived here.

Either way, I was glad she stopped questioning me because the more lies I told, the more I complicated my story. I was bad at remembering the things I said, and it would be pretty damn easy for me to twist my own story and get caught being dishonest about why I was here—and how I ended up in this situation in the first place.

Theresa got up and grabbed her empty mug. She studied me once more, then said, "Be brave."

Brave?

"He's rarely in a good mood."

That's good to know.

"I just hope he won't slam the door in my face. I still have to try."

She laughed. This time, it was a real laugh.

She was laughing at me.

Thanks, Theresa.

Her eyes met mine again. "He's a complicated man. Private, stubborn, and not exactly warm. But he's not heartless."

That didn't come as a surprise.

"I know. I can sense that he's not heartless," I told her with a tight smile.

She nodded once, clearly wanting to leave, but she couldn't just yet. She wanted to keep telling me about Caspian.

"He's done a lot for this village. Even if he doesn't advertise it, we owe a lot to him. He's not a bad man. He's just...not an easy one."

I absorbed her words in silence. They didn't erase my doubts but added another layer to the picture I was trying to piece together of who he was.

"Well, I guess I'll find out for myself," I said, my voice quiet but steady.

Theresa nodded, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "That you will. Just...don't take it personally if he's a bit rough."

"Noted."

After setting her mug on the counter, she left the bakery and said bye to the barista.

I stepped out about fifteen minutes later, and I stopped for a moment to feel the warm sun shining on my face.

Today, I would see Caspian King. And no matter how it went, I could proudly say that at least I tried.

CHAPTER 3

DARWYNN

I paced back and forth until the afternoon came, and after another trip to the general store and cooking myself an early dinner, I was finally ready to walk over to Caspian's house and knock on his door.

My heart was hammering against my chest as I walked along the gravel path that led to his house. The small home sat at the edge of the water, and the peeling paint and uneven porch gave it a kind of charm. It looked like the kind of place someone went to escape the world.

Clearly, Caspian King had succeeded in that.

I stood on the porch for a moment, staring at the door. My nerves threatened to talk me out of this, but I shook them off and knocked. Three sharp knocks, louder than I intended.

It was quiet at first, and I wondered if he'd even heard me. He must've. I basically hammered my knuckles against the door.

Heavy footsteps grew closer, followed by the creak of the door.

Caspian appeared in front of me, his frame filling the doorway. He was broad-shouldered and tall, his gray hair pushed back and tucked behind his ears. His brown eyes landed on me with suspicion, narrowing slightly as he crossed his strong arms over his chest.

How old was he again?

60?

For that age, he was still in incredibly good shape.

Muscular.

Handsome.

"Who are you?" he asked roughly, his tone making it clear that whatever I said next had better be good.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze.

Jesus Christ...Caspian King is fucking handsome.

“My name is Darwynn,” I said slowly, almost as if I wasn’t sure.

“Darwynn,” he repeated, his voice flat. “That’s supposed to mean something to me?”

I hesitated. “Not yet. But I hoped you’d give me a few minutes to explain.”

His eyes moved over me, taking in my jeans and jacket and the faint nervousness I was trying to hide. “Let me guess,” he said, his tone dripping with skepticism. “You’re one of Theresa’s nieces wanting an autograph. I told her not to tell anyone about me being here.”

I bit the inside of my cheek and linked my fingers behind my back. “Uh, no, I’m not related to Theresa.”

“Then why are you here?” His voice was demanding, his gaze intense.

“I...” My lips were pressed into a thin line as I weighed my options. Telling the truth or lying. I had played that game about ten times in the past two days. “I’m Darwynn Cove. Your son’s girlfriend.”

Ex.

But it didn’t matter right now.

His facial expression changed instantly. Almost as if the mention of his son made him remember that he was a father.

His eyes wandered all over my face, then he looked behind me, searching for someone else to stand there. “Is he here too?” he asked.

“No, it’s just me,” I told him with a tight smile. “Julian is back home in Burlington.”

“Hm.” His eyes were back on mine. “And you’re here because...”

Here we go.

“Because Julian asked me to check on you.”

Yet.

Another.

Lie.

“He keeps on talking about you, and we saw the interview.”

His brows raised. Nothing I was saying to him made sense.

And, truthfully, nothing was making any sense to me either. Not after all these lies and made up stories.

My mind was all over the place.

“My son—who never cared to call or text me back all these years—asked his girlfriend to drive all the way from Burlington to this shitty

place...to check on me?"

I nodded slowly. Very slowly.

My heart skipped a few beats. *God*, I wanted to run and never look back.

I never should've come here.

His eyes didn't leave my face as he continued to study me, letting my words linger between us.

Instead of questioning my being there, he narrowed his eyes and changed the subject.

"You're strange looking."

I raised a brow. "Excuse you?"

He scoffed as if I had been the one saying something rude about his appearance, and he waved a hand before turning back around to head inside. "Take off your shoes."

"You just called me ugly!"

My feelings were slightly hurt, and despite his invitation, my feet didn't move.

He was letting me in. I didn't expect him to.

Hell, I didn't think he'd even talk to me.

Yet, here I was, staring at his back as he walked toward the couches in his small living room.

"I did *not* call you ugly. Close the door on your way in."

I stepped inside hesitantly, shutting the door behind me as Caspian's deep voice ordered. The house was dimly lit, the curtains mostly drawn, but the faint smell of coffee and woodsmoke gave the place an oddly homey vibe. The furniture was mismatched and well-worn, and books and papers were scattered on nearly every surface.

It looked as if he kept busy.

Not in a way I thought he would.

Caspian didn't wait for me to catch up to him. He dropped into the sagging armchair, gesturing vaguely toward the couch. "Sit. Talk. Whatever this is, make it quick. And don't lie again."

"What do you mean?" I asked with a nervous laugh.

He caught me. He had no idea who the fuck I was, but he knew I lied.

"You lied. Just then. The reason why you're here. You lied about that," he said dryly.

“But I am your son’s girlfriend,” I stated—which was still a lie—but he didn’t seem to think it was.

I sat down on the edge of the couch, my nerves still buzzing.

“I believe that,” he assured me.

Caspian’s sharp eyes were fixed on me, waiting, but his posture was casual, almost lazy, like he didn’t want to give me the satisfaction of knowing he cared at all about why I was there.

“You sure are strange looking.”

Again?

Damn, Caspian.

“How so?” I asked, not allowing him to critique how I looked without a good reason.

He studied me again, his eyes narrowing for a split second. He lifted his hand, waving it at me. “The eyes...”

“Heterochromia,” I explained.

One blue eye.

One brown eye.

“I know what heterochromia is.”

“Then why are you acting like you’ve seen it for the first time?” I challenged.

He didn’t react to that. He kept on studying me. “And the freckles. Strange pattern,” he stated.

Because my freckles were only scattered on the right side of my face. The side on which my brown eye was.

“I’m aware.”

“Beautiful.”

My jaw dropped, and his eyes widened.

He didn’t mean to say that out loud.

But after the initial shock, it made me feel some type of way.

“Thank you.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his posture. “So,” he said, his tone flat. “What’s this about? Why are you really here?”

I took a deep breath. “Julian has talked about you a lot. Like, almost every week. And whenever he did, it was only negatively. At first, I didn’t really care about the things he said about because, well, you weren’t really in the picture. But the more he talked badly about you, and the more I

started to learn about who you were as a person, the more I tried to understand what really happened between the two of you.”

I stopped, needing to take a breather. I hadn’t come here with a plan or actual reason, but the words I said sounded convincing. So convincing, in fact, that I started to believe it all myself.

My heartbeat slowed down when I saw the tension in his face ease a little, and because I was such an empath—or thought I was—I immediately felt bad about lying to him about my actual relationship status with his son. “And, uh, by the way...Julian’s my ex. We broke up a couple of months ago.”

That didn’t faze him.

Not one bit.

“You lie a lot,” he said bluntly.

But that didn’t hurt me half as much as when he said that I looked strange.

“Not usually, I promise!” A nervous laugh bubble up. “I just... needed an excuse to come here.”

He kept studying me. “My son has never been very kind toward me,” he muttered, reaching for a mug on the side table. He took a long sip, his eyes never leaving mine. “So, Julian has no clue that you’re here?”

I shook my head, and I thought I caught a flicker of something in his eyes for a moment. Disappointment, maybe. But it disappeared as quickly as it came. “Huh, figures.” He leaned back in his chair, setting the mug down. “So, what? You just decided to track me down for kicks? How’d you do that? Nobody really knows I’m here. That’s why I like it.”

I shook my head. “It’s not like that at all. I was on a road trip, and two nights ago, I was ready to return home. To my hometown, that is. Nashua.”

He didn’t say another word, waiting for me to continue my story of how I ended up here.

“I was eating dinner at Lakeside Lodge—”

“In Sault Ste. Marie?”

“Yes. And I was talking to the waitress when you came up in the conversation. You came up because there were pictures of famous people on the wall. She said one actor didn’t want his picture on that wall. She told me it was you, and I lied about knowing you—” I stopped when I realized that I had admitted to lying to other people.

Shit, I'm really not making myself look too good here.

He raised a brow, and I continued before he could call me a liar again.

"...in the hopes that she would tell me where you lived. She believed me that I didn't know you—technically, I don't, so that wasn't a lie—and she told me you lived here. Hidden from the world. All alone."

"I'm not alone."

I liked to believe that, but he seemed pretty damn lonely to me.

"So, you've seen me now. I'm just fine being *all alone*. Happy? Will you leave now?"

I couldn't hide a grin.

He was charming, in a way.

"Happy that I got to meet you? Yes. Will I leave? No. I booked a tiny house by the campsite for two weeks."

He sucked in a deep breath. I watched as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and rubbing his hands together. "Right."

"Can I ask you something?"

"No."

I raised a brow. "Theresa was right. You're kind of an asshole."

"Did she say that?"

I shrugged. "Maybe not with those exact words, but hers intended the same."

A sigh left him, and he looked at me with furrowed brows. "What do you want to know, kid?"

"I would like to understand why..." I trailed off, unsure how to phrase it without setting him off. Anything could trigger him, it seemed. "Why things ended up the way they did."

His jaw tightened, and he let out a low laugh, though no humor existed. "You're gonna have to be more specific than that. What things?"

He wasn't making this easy, but I hadn't expected him to. "Why did you and Julian stop talking? What was the real reason?"

Caspian's expression darkened, and he looked away. His gaze shifted to the window. "That's between Julian and me. It's got nothing to do with you."

Not directly. But it was part of our nightly discussions.

I was the one studying him now. His gaze was locked on the window.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to discuss it now. But...maybe someday?” I asked, my voice filled with hope.

He didn’t respond, his fingers tapping on the chair’s armrest. The silence stretched, and I wasn’t sure if he was ignoring me or just thinking about how to tell me to leave.

“I started to wonder more about you the more Julian mentioned your name. I just know that his side of the story isn’t the full truth. And since I’m here now, I would really like to find out your side. And while I’m not with him anymore, I would still like to get you two to meet and talk.”

“And what in the world do *you* get out of that?” he asked.

His question was very valid.

I shrugged and took a moment to gather my thoughts. “I don’t know, probably nothing. I know this isn’t really about me, but I have a strong feeling that I can help you get some closure. After everything Julian told me, it just feels right to hear your side too. I thought, if I could help in any way, it might clear the air.”

Caspian’s sharp gaze met mine again, and I could see that he was analyzing me. “You’re still a kid,” he said, his voice steady.

“I’m twenty-one,” I countered, trying to inject a bit of confidence into my voice.

“Still a kid,” he muttered. “You think you can just waltz in here, play mediator between father and son, and somehow expect to change things? Nothing is that simple.”

“Maybe not,” I admitted, my nerves re-emerging. “But if you care—which I imagine you do, at least a little—what’s stopping you from trying?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “You have guts, I’ll give you that,” he said, a hint of approval in his voice.

I smiled gently, feeling the tension between us ease again. “I’m not forcing you, Caspian. I just think it would be nice. For you and Julian. I can give you some time to think about it. I’ll be here for two weeks, anyway.”

Caspian sighed. “And what if I told you to fuck off right now and leave me the fuck alone?”

I shrugged. A sharp feeling stung my heart. “I’d respectfully keep my distance, but I wouldn’t leave because I already paid for the tiny house for the next two weeks. And I really like it there.”

He laughed dryly, running his hands through his surprisingly full hair. “Stubborn little thing.”

I didn't know if that was a compliment or an insult, but I let it slide. And, in a way, him calling me *little thing* did something to me in a weirdly sexual way.

There was silence again. He stared at me like he was trying to decide if I was worth the trouble. Just like Theresa had.

For some reason, Theresa was scarier.

Finally, he spoke. "You really aren't leaving."

"Nope." I couldn't hide a grin. It seemed like he was letting his guard down.

"Don't get your hopes up, kid. I'm not just going to open up to a stranger who used to date my son who I haven't seen in years."

"I'll take my chances," I said with a small smile.

Caspian scoffed, shaking his head. "We'll see how long you last around me."

CHAPTER 4

DARWYNN

I was still in his house.

Even after he threatened that I wouldn't last long around him, I was still there.

And he even made me tea.

Well, sort of. He'd slapped a mug of hot water in front of me, along with a dusty box of tea bags. Then he'd retreated to his armchair, telling me to "help myself."

Caspian sat back, arms crossed and gaze sharp as usual.

He was intimidating in a quiet, grumpy way, his presence heavy in this small, cluttered room.

"So," he said, his deep voice breaking the silence, "what do you do?"

I blinked at him. "For work?"

He nodded.

"I used to work the front desk at a bank."

"Used to?"

"I quit before I went on my road trip," I explained with a tight smile.

"Why?"

"Because it wasn't what I wanted to do. It didn't really make me happy. It got hard waking up every morning."

"So you quit to do, what, find motivation on that trip?"

I shrugged. "Kinda. I mostly just wanted to figure out what I really wanted to do with my life."

"And now you're here."

I nodded.

"Did you figure it out? What do you want to do with your life once you return home?"

Pursing my lips, I lifted the mug to hold it, warming my palms. “Not really.”

“So that trip was a waste of money and time.”

“Definitely not. This trip was amazing. I met many cool people, saw so many new things, and captured everything with my camera, too.” I smiled, and my body eased. “It was the best trip I ever went on.”

He studied me, his thick brows furrowed. He didn’t reply right away. There was something unreadable in his gaze, something that made my skin tingle. He looked like he didn’t believe me. His gaze softened when he said, “You’ve got the rest of your life to figure out what you want.”

I nodded before taking a careful sip of my tea. The liquid burned on my tongue and down my throat, and all of a sudden, my body felt hot. I felt tense and had no idea how to deal with that feeling.

As I kept my eyes on him, I tried to figure out how to continue the conversation. Caspian didn’t look away from me, and it seemed he was trying to do the same.

He cleared his throat, then asked, “How did you meet Julian?”

I was surprised that he mentioned him. “We met at a house party.”

After that statement, he didn’t look very interested in learning more about my past with Julian.

Silence came over us again, and I tried to come up with a question that would tell me more about him. I pursed my lips, then asked, “How long have you been alone?”

He gave me a flat look. He didn’t like that I used the word *alone*.

But that’s what it looked like to me.

“You think being alone is a bad thing?”

I shrugged. “Depends.”

“Sometimes, you’re better off alone.”

“You would know that,” I shot back mockingly.

He scoffed. “I’ve had many people around me all my life. I think I deserve to be alone for once.”

“Fair enough.” I leaned back on the couch, getting more comfortable as more minutes passed. “And what do you do all day, all alone?”

“I mind my business,” he said bluntly.

“That sounds...exciting.”

“Works for me,” he said with a shrug. “Not everyone needs to be entertained every second of the day.”

I didn’t press him. He didn’t want to open up, and I wasn’t about to push my luck.

“So then...” I said, forcing a casual tone. “Can you tell me what people around here do for fun at night?”

“Fun?” He snorted as if the concept of it was foreign to this village.

“Yes, fun,” I said, giving him an expectant look.

He sighed, leaning forward again to rest his elbows on his knees. “The locals go to the bar. They play pool. Drink. That’s about it.”

“Are you going?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t enjoy sitting around listening to half-drunk idiots argue over who gets to break first.”

“Fair point. I might go. Check out what the locals are like. Unless you say they’re all like Theresa. Then I won’t go.”

That got a laugh out of him.

A real one.

Then his expression went back to serious. The grump was back.

“Theresa’s a witch. But she’s a good friend.”

“That’s not how I would want to be talked about by a friend,” I said honestly, pursing my lips. I set the mug back on the coffee table in front of me.

He didn’t respond; he just watched me as I got up and put on my brown leather jacket. His gaze felt heavy, and when I glanced back at him, his eyes were locked on mine, intense and merciless.

“What?” I asked.

“You think I’m an asshole.”

That came as a surprise.

I turned toward him and shook my head. That wasn’t what I thought of him. He was grumpy, in a bad mood, and kind of dry. But he wasn’t an asshole. “I think that *you* think you’re an asshole.”

His furrowed brows softened, and my words made him think.

I smiled, wanting to leave him with that. Think about what I said.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to the bar?” I asked, my voice softer now.

He didn't answer immediately, his gaze trailing from my face to my hand as I adjusted my jacket. The room felt smaller, and the air charged with something I couldn't quite name.

"No," he said finally, his voice lower than before.

I forced a smile. "All right. Can I come see you again tomorrow? Or do you want to grab lunch with me?"

It was a simple suggestion to spend more time together and for him not to be alone. Even if that's what he supposedly wanted.

"Maybe."

That was a step in the direction I wanted. "Great. I'll just come knock on your door again around noon. Thanks for the tea, Caspian."

The weight of his stare followed me as I walked to the door, my heart pounding for reasons I couldn't explain.

"Close the door on your way out," he said, his voice rough.

I nodded and stepped out onto the porch. As I closed the door behind me, I stood there for a little while, unable to get rid of that feeling that pulled me to him.

There was something about Caspian.

Even when he pushed me away, I felt...attracted to him.

The bar was exactly what I'd imagined.

The place was dimly lit, with dark wooden floors and the faint smell of stale beer lingering in the air. A jukebox in one corner hummed out old rock songs, and a group of locals stood around the pool table, talking loudly.

I glanced around and decided to sit at the bar. I ordered some fries and a large Pepsi.

As I sipped my drink, I let myself relax, leaning back to take in the scene. The bartender, a cheerful woman in her fifties, had been polite but not overly chatty, leaving me to observe the peace.

Though, that peace didn't last long.

"Well, well, look who decided to stop by," a male voice said.

I turned to see Henry, the general store owner. He leaned casually against the bar, giving me a charming smile. He wore a flannel shirt rolled up to his elbows, his brown hair slightly ruffled like he'd been working all day. There was a playful gleam in his blue eyes, sparkling with mischief.

“Hey, Henry,” I said, offering a polite smile.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” he said, sliding onto the stool beside mine without an invitation. “Thought you’d be hiding in that little house, writing poetry or whatever the city girls do when they come out here.”

I wanted to frown at him.

Men who assumed things about me annoyed me.

But I was just a guest in this tiny village filled with people who probably knew each other very well and talked to each other about any outsider, and I didn’t want to make a bad name for myself.

I smiled tightly. “Not much of a poet, I’m afraid. Besides, I wanted to see what the locals here do on a Friday night.”

He chuckled. “Good choice. This place may not look like much, but it grows on you.” He waved at the bartender, who nodded and started pouring him a beer.

“You come here often, then?” I asked, putting another fry in my mouth.

“Often enough,” he said with a shrug. “Most Fridays, for sure.”

“Cool.”

He got his beer and tipped his chin at me. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” I watched him take a few sips, then he grinned at me again.

“So, how are you liking our little slice of nowhere?”

I liked that description. “It’s nice. Quieter than I’m used to. But I like it a lot.”

“That’s good. Hopefully, the reason why you’re here won’t scare you away.”

I frowned and looked at him. Was he talking about Caspian?

He said the words so casually, but his voice had a hint of annoyance.

His laugh was dry. “Theresa told me why you’re here and how you know Caspian.”

Know was the wrong word, but I didn’t correct him.

“Right,” I breathed. “Word travels fast around here, huh?”

“It does in every tiny village with just about two hundred population.”

I took a deep breath. My chest was stinging when he mentioned Caspian, and I wondered what he was doing right now. All alone in his

house by the water.

Henry leaned closer, watching me closely as I kept frowning. “Listen, Darwynn, I know you’re here to try and rekindle Caspian’s relationship with his son, but I think you should be careful with him.”

“Careful? Why?”

Henry studied me, his brow raising. “Because Caspian King isn’t just some grumpy guy who wants to be left alone. And he’s definitely not the hero Theresa says he is.”

He hadn’t said much, but I wanted him to shut up.

“I’m just trying to help fix their relationship.”

“And I think it’s best for you to just leave him alone and not dig deeper. He’s not worth it.”

God, was he always this obnoxious?

I tried to keep the anger that was rising inside of me hidden.

I wanted to ask him to leave me alone, to go and talk to other people, but I wasn’t brave enough. My nails dug into my thigh, and my annoyance grew.

“Not sure why you would even give him a chance. As much as I understood from what Theresa told me, he’s never been around his son. He’s old and bitter.”

“And you’ll be sorry and hurt if you don’t get the fuck away from her.”

Chills ran down my whole body as Caspian’s raspy, deep voice sounded behind us. I turned my head to look at him and saw Henry’s posture stiffen out of the corner of my eye.

“Caz, old man, I didn’t—”

“Get away from her.”

Henry’s mouth opened, but no words came out. Caspian’s glare was sharp, and the weight of his presence seemed to fill the entire bar.

Nobody cared that he was here, though. Nobody but me.

When Henry finally left, letting out the heaviest, most dramatic sigh, I looked up at Caspian and smiled. “You didn’t have to do that,” I said, my voice quiet but steady.

He turned to me, his brown eyes locking onto mine. “Yes, I did.”

I bit my cheek, unable to hold back a grin. “You came. Why?”

Without giving me a response, he sat down on the stool Henry had been sitting on earlier, and without having to ask for one, a glass of whiskey

was set in front of him.

I chewed on my bottom lip as I tried to understand why he was there. Why he had changed his mind. He had seemed pretty confident to me that he wouldn't show up here tonight.

"If there's one person I want you to stay away from in this village, it's Henry. He's a dick."

Huh, wouldn't have guessed.

I reached for my drink and took a long sip before setting it back on the counter. "Only to you or to everyone?"

He raised a brow at me, silently telling me to give myself the answer to that question. "Got it. Only to you. Why? Did you two have an argument or something?"

"No." He fell silent again, and I watched him as I finished my fries.

He wasn't in the mood to talk about Henry and wasn't the type of person who opened up easily. So I wasn't going to push him. I decided to change the subject instead.

"So," I said after a while, "do you always swoop in like a knight in shining armor, or was that just for me?"

He gave a low chuckle, the sound surprising me. "I'm not a knight. Trust me."

"You're right. You're a king." I pursed my lips. "Powerful and honest." *And handsome.* "You lack communication skills, though, which is crucial to being a leader."

"I'm not a leader, either." This time, there was no humor in his tone. His lips were tight when his eyes met mine. "Don't read too much into it. I just didn't want you to get the wrong idea from someone who doesn't know what they're talking about. Henry's full of shit."

I nodded. "Well, thanks, anyway."

The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable.

If anything, it felt...natural. Like it had earlier in his living room.

CHAPTER 5

DARWYNN

Two couples started slowly dancing in the middle of the bar, with their arms tightly around each other and quietly chatting as they moved to the music.

I had turned around on my stool to watch them while Caspian was leaning forward, with his forearms against the counter and his fingers curled around his third glass of whiskey. He didn't exactly share my interest in watching those people dance.

When I turned back around, facing Caspian, his head hung low, and it seemed like he was in deep thought. He didn't look unhappy to be here, though, and deep down, I knew he wanted to be here with me.

"Do you have other family?" I asked, my voice careful but curious.

He didn't look at me immediately, swirling the dark liquid in his glass instead. Then, with a sigh, he set the drink down and glanced at me.

"No."

"No siblings? Cousins?"

He shook his head.

"What about your parents? Are they still around?"

"No." His reply was dry but direct.

"I'm sorry."

His expression didn't change, and he returned to staring at his drink. I studied him momentarily, trying to figure out his feelings, but he was so closed off.

Taking a deep breath, I looked at my hands and said, "I don't think I want a family either."

That got his attention. His eyes flicked to me, his brows pulling together slightly. "Why do you say that?"

I shrugged. "I mean, maybe someday I'd want a man. But kids? A big family? It's just not something I've ever really wanted." I pursed my

lips, then added, "I've always wanted a dog, so maybe that'll be enough for me."

He didn't respond immediately, his gaze lingering on me as if trying to figure me out. Finally, he muttered, "Dogs are less trouble."

I laughed softly. "You're probably right. Have you ever had a dog?"

Suddenly, the smallest smile tugged at his lips. "Yeah, I had a dog. A Great Dane named Minute. I got him from the shelter when he was eight, and just two years later, he died. But let me tell you, those two years were the best damn years I ever had."

I watched his eyes light up as he talked about Minute. I knew there was a heart in there somewhere. Deep down, Caspian was a good man.

"Tell you something, kid," he said, his eyes meeting mine. "I've met many people, and none have given me what that dog has. Some people are fucking horrible, but you can always count on a dog."

I made sure to remember those words. Smiling, I said, "Minute sounds like he was very special."

"He was." His eyes flicked back to his drink.

I studied him for a moment, my curiosity bubbling up again despite his obvious reluctance to share much. "So...you never wanted another dog?"

He shook his head, his hand tightening around the glass. "No. After him, it just didn't feel right. Some things you only get once. Everything else after that is just a cheap imitation."

I nodded, sensing the weight of his words. I wanted to push further, to ask if that was how he felt about more than just dogs. About people. But I held back, not wanting to poke too hard at the fragile connection we were building.

I kept my voice soft. "I think I get that. Sometimes, you don't want to try again because you're afraid it won't be the same."

Caspian's gaze flicked to mine, sharp and searching as if I'd stumbled too close to something he didn't want me to see. But he didn't say anything.

I let the tension ease a little, and silence fell over us again.

Neither of us said anything. The conversations around the bar filled the space between us, and I found myself content sitting with him.

Eventually, he downed the rest of his whiskey and set the glass on the counter. "We're leaving."

Oh.

“Already?”

“It’s almost midnight,” he stated with a frown, his expression telling me he wasn’t usually up this late.

“Right. I forgot that you’re old,” I teased. “Sixty, right?”

“Sixty-one.”

I raised a brow. “Since when?”

“Today.”

My jaw dropped. Seriously? “Today’s your birthday, and you didn’t even tell me?”

“Could’ve googled it,” he said dryly.

I scoffed and jumped off the stool. “And you didn’t even celebrate?”

“I had three whiskeys. I did celebrate.”

Funny.

I rolled my eyes and sighed as he put money on the counter. He started walking toward the exit, and I grabbed my jacket and hurried to catch up. “Happy birthday,” I said once we were outside.

“Don’t bother.”

“But I want to. Birthdays are important.” He walked along the road in the direction of the camping ground. I decided not to ask why he was walking me home, but I assumed he wanted to ensure I got home safely.

“Not when you’re my age.”

“September third. You’re a Virgo.”

“Does it matter?”

I shrugged, walking closely next to him. “I like to think that it does.”

“Hm.”

“My birthday is April twenty-second. Taurus.”

“Great,” he said sarcastically.

Got it.

No more birthday and astrology talk.

I stopped at the bottom of the porch steps when we reached my house, turning to face him.

“Thanks for walking me,” I said softly.

He nodded, his gaze meeting mine briefly before flicking away.

On impulse, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him. His body tensed like he wasn’t used to being hugged, but he didn’t pull

away.

He forced his hand to the small of my back, patting against it before he cleared his throat and stepped back.

His expression was unreadable in the dim light of the porch, but he gave a small nod. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Caspian.” I smiled and watched him turn away and walk back down the road, disappearing into the shadows.

Only when he was gone did I notice my heart pounding hard in my chest. I could still feel his presence, which confused me, feeling like this when he wasn’t even here anymore.

There was something about him, something I couldn’t quite put into words.

Something more between us, and as I stood there alone in the night, I knew I wouldn’t be able to shake the feeling anytime soon.

The next morning, I went to the general store to get ingredients and baked Caspian a cake in the small kitchenette. Finding everything in the drawers took me a while, but I collected everything I needed.

I doubted Caspian cared much for sweets, but after learning he hadn’t celebrated his birthday, I felt like someone had to do something about it.

When the cake was cooling, I added a finishing touch with a thin layer of frosting and a “61” written in blue icing. It wasn’t perfect, but it was heartfelt. I simply wanted to put a smile on his face. Though that was a lot to hope for.

Once it was placed on a plate, I took a quick shower and dressed. My hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, and I decided not to wear makeup today. I grabbed one last thing—the diary filled with Polaroid pictures from my road trip—before picking up the cake and heading to Caspian’s house.

I struggled to balance the cake in one hand and the book in the other, but after tugging the book under my arm, I managed to knock on the door.

It took a while before he opened the door, and his usual scowl deepened at the sight of me holding the cake.

“What’s this?” he asked flatly.

I held it up with a sheepish grin. “Belated birthday cake.”

He crossed his arms. "I don't eat cake."

"Figured," I muttered. "I'll eat it for you then. Can I come in?"

His brow twitched in annoyance, but he stepped aside and let me in. The house smelled of coffee again. I could use one, I thought.

Once inside, I placed the cake on the dining table and handed the book from under my arm to him. "Here."

"What's that?" he asked, eyeing it closely.

"Something I think you'll like."

He took the book from my hand and opened it, flipping through the pages and examining the Polaroid pictures. Each one was a snapshot from my road trip: a misty forest somewhere in British Columbia, a lonely stretch of highway in Alberta, and a quiet lake reflecting the sky in Ontario.

"These are yours?" he asked, his tone softening.

I nodded. "Took them when I drove through Canada the past six months."

He paused on a photo of an old barn surrounded by golden fields. For a long moment, he just stared at it.

"These are great," he said quietly, his voice honest.

I smiled. "Thanks. You can keep it for a while. Look at the pictures more closely."

He turned another page and then gave me a single nod. "Thanks." His voice was so sincere that it sent shivers down my spine.

"You're welcome. Are you sure you don't want to try the cake? It's chocolate. Everyone loves chocolate."

He sighed. He was about to say no when I gave him a knowing glance. "Fine."

He pulled back the chair at the end of the table and gestured for me to sit down. As I did, he went to the kitchen to grab a knife, plates, and two forks. Once he was back, he sat down next to me, his knee briefly touching mine under the table.

I looked at him as he cut two pieces and placed each on our plates, and after his eyes lingered on his for a moment, he finally picked up his fork and stabbed into it. His face didn't give much away as he took the first bite, and I held my breath, watching him.

"It's not bad," he muttered.

"Not bad?" I raised an eyebrow, grinning at him. "That's the best compliment I've gotten from you so far."

He smirked back. Barely. And the flicker of it did something dangerous to my pulse.

We ate in silence, and the silence was comfortable.

My attention kept slipping to the subtle way his fingers gripped the fork or his jaw moved when he chewed.

“You really drove across Canada by yourself?” he asked finally, his tone softer than I was used to.

“Yeah,” I replied, brushing a crumb off the table. “Six months. Just me, my car, and whatever random songs the radio decided to play.”

He nodded, his dark eyes unreadable, and the silence came over us again.

When we finished our cake, I stood, reaching for the plates, but Caspian stopped me with a hand on my wrist. His touch was brief, but it burned right into my skin.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said, his voice low.

I nodded. “Alright. Thanks.”

As he went to the kitchen, I weighed my next move. I had come to hang out with him, but I wasn’t sure he wanted me around any longer.

I stood up, pushed the chair under the table, and walked over to the kitchen. I watched his back, taking in his posture and muscular body. For sixty-one, he was very fit.

My eyes drifted down his back and to his ass, which I stared at for a while too long. It was suddenly his crotch I was staring at when he turned around to face me.

“Eyes up here,” he demanded.

I felt my cheeks burn, and in the strangest way, I felt caught. Dirty.

Biting my lower lip, I wrapped one arm around my waist. “Are you busy today?”

He watched me, his expression tight as usual. “No.”

“Okay.” I rubbed my arm and smiled gently. “Me neither. I wanted to read by the water.”

He didn’t react to that. He simply stood there, his eyes burning into mine.

I understood.

He wanted me to leave.

A tight smile spread on my lips as I stepped closer to him. “Thank you for letting me celebrate your birthday with you. Even if it was

yesterday.” I hesitated before pushing up on my tip toes and kissing his cheek quickly.

Without awaiting his response, I turned away and left his house.

Like it always had when we were distant, my heartbeat went crazy. I took a deep breath and looked over the water, unable to steady my pulse.

Walls were built around him, and getting to him wouldn’t be easy.

But today showed me that he was capable of letting me closer.

He was slowly letting me in, and with all the patience in the world, I would carefully get to know him better.

CHAPTER 6

DARWYNN

I hadn't seen him in two days.

After baking him that birthday cake and watching him eat it with furrowed brows against his will, I decided to give him some space. Caspian wasn't the kind of man you could push. If he wanted to talk, he'd find you. And sure enough, he did.

I was sitting by the water, the sun low in the sky. The non-fiction book I'd picked from the general store wasn't giving me the satisfaction I was used to from the usual romance novels I read, but I wouldn't let any book go to waste.

The quiet was nice and peaceful, but I heard footsteps behind me.

"Got a minute?" His low and raspy voice was unmistakable.

I turned, smiling up at him, surprised to see him. "Of course."

He took in the spot next to me, trying to decide if he wanted to sit on the cold stone or if he'd rather stand. I patted my hand on the ground, smiling up at him. "It'll warm up once you sit on it."

He grunted and finally sat down next to me. The book I had given him with the Polaroid pictures inside was in his right hand, and we both looked at it as the small waves crashed into the shore.

When he held the book to me, I set the one I was reading aside to grab it. "Did you like the pictures?" I asked, looking up at him,

He gave a quick nod. "These are pretty damn impressive."

My smile widened, pleased with his words. "Thanks. I wasn't sure if they'd be your thing."

"They're not," he said bluntly, then added, "but they're good. Really."

I flipped through the book, glancing at the photos. "Do you have a favorite?"

He reached over and flipped to a page in the middle of the book, tapping on the image of a misty forest. His hand brushed mine for a fleeting moment, and shivers ran down my spine. "That one. Feels like the kind of place you'd go to disappear."

"That's what I loved about it, too," I admitted, watching him closely. "The whole trip was like that, really. Finding places where it felt like the world just...stopped."

He nodded, his gaze distant. "I've had moments like that. Rare, but they stick with you."

"Like on a set?" I asked, testing the waters.

His eyes flicked to me. He didn't look amused, but he surprised me by what he said next. "Which movies of mine have you watched?"

I pursed my lips and shrugged. "A couple. Mostly the romantic comedies. Not much of an action movie fan, but I know you're amazing in them."

He huffed and moved his gaze to the water again. I knew that would be the only conversation we would have about his acting.

For now.

Again, I decided not to push.

There was another moment of silence, neither of us saying anything, while nature showed us just how beautiful it could sound.

He broke the quiet unexpectedly, as usual. "You like fish?"

I blinked. "Um, yeah?"

"For dinner," he clarified, his tone gruff as ever.

I stared at him, trying to figure out where this was going. "Dinner? At your place?"

He shot me a sideways glance, clearly regretting the invitation. "Forget it."

"No, no, I'd love to," I said quickly, trying not to sound too eager. "I mean, if you don't mind."

"Seven o'clock," he said, brushing the dirt off his jeans. "Don't be late."

Before I could say anything else, he was already walking away, leaving me with a racing heart and a million questions.

As usual.

One and a half hours later, I stood outside his door. I'd chosen something casual but nice to wear. A soft sweater, skirt, and my favorite boots. It was fairly warm for a September night, but I took every opportunity I got to not wear jeans.

When he opened the door, he looked as he always did. Scruffy, broad-shouldered, and slightly annoyed.

"You're on time," he said, stepping aside to let me in.

"I try to be punctual for special occasions," I teased.

His brow raised, but he didn't comment. Once inside, he led me into the kitchen. The smell of herbs and butter made my stomach growl. I looked toward the oven, where I could see two whole fish lying in a baking dish, with lemon slices and herbs decorating the fish.

It looked delicious.

"Did you catch them yourself?" I asked.

"Yeah." He looked proud, but he had to pay it cool. "It's easy."

I pursed my lips. "It needs patience, no?"

"Lots of it."

"And you got patience." It wasn't a statement or a question. I wanted him to decide.

"I got many things, kid, but patience is not one of them. I just know where to stand to catch the fish I want."

Ah, of course.

"Seems...kinda boring though. Isn't the whole point of fishing to sit and look out over the water and enjoy the silence and—"

"My way is effective," he said, shutting me up.

I nodded. "Got it. Well, it smells amazing. I can't wait to try it."

He glanced at me, his expression softening ever so slightly. "Sit."

Yes, sir.

I got comfortable as Caspian turned to the oven to take out the fish.

I watched him as he plated it with a side of potatoes.

"You drink wine?" he asked casually.

"Sure."

He grabbed a bottle from the counter, opened it with practiced ease, and poured two glasses before setting them on the table. I caught a faint whiff of the wine's sweetness as he slid a plate before me.

"Looks amazing, Caspian," I said, picking up my fork.

"It's just fish," he muttered, sitting across from me.

“Don’t sell yourself short. You caught it, cooked it...might as well open a restaurant,” I teased, trying to coax a reaction out of him.

He huffed out a laugh, focusing on his plate. “Yeah, sure.”

I smiled and took a bite, the flavors melting on my tongue. “This is incredible. You’re a really good cook.”

“Thanks.” His eyes lingered on me longer than usual before he returned to his plate.

We ate mostly in silence, broken by the occasional clink of cutlery against plates. The atmosphere felt easy, and I felt comfortable around him. But then, I usually did.

When we were done, Caspian stood and cleared the plates without a word. I offered to help, but he waved me off.

He grabbed a small box from the counter and set it on the table.

“Dessert,” he said shortly, opening the box to reveal two slices of cheesecake.

I blinked, surprised. “You bought cheesecake? I thought you didn’t eat sweets.”

“But you do.”

Oh.

I watched him closely as I realized what he just said kicked in. “And cheesecake isn’t sweet. At least not the one from the bakery,” he said, saving himself from the hidden sweet thing he had said seconds before.

“Well, I love cheesecake.”

“Figured.”

I smiled as he slid one of the slices toward me. “You’re full of surprises, you know that?”

He didn’t respond, but I didn’t take it personally. I knew my words had an effect on him.

As we ate, I noticed how his shoulders seemed to relax, the usual sharpness in his expression softening as the minutes passed. It was a rare sight, and I watched him for longer than I probably should have.

“You don’t do this often, do you?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“What?”

“Dinner. Sharing a meal with someone.”

He shook his head, setting his fork down. “Not in a long time.”

“Do you like it? Here with me, I mean.”

He glanced at me, his dark eyes unreadable. “It’s fine.”

I chuckled softly, taking another bite of cheesecake. “You know, for someone who spent years in the spotlight, you really don’t seem to like people much.”

His gaze dropped to the table again. “People are complicated.”

I leaned forward slightly, resting my elbows on the table. “Is that why you like being out here? Alone?”

He didn’t answer right away, his jaw tightening slightly. “Part of it,” he said finally. “After what happened, I needed space. Quiet. People took up too much of both in Hollywood.”

I nodded, letting his words sink in. “I get that. But don’t you ever feel...lonely?”

He met my gaze, his expression hardening. “Lonely is better than dealing with people who only want something from you. Or want to tell you how you should see the world when in reality, they have no fucking idea of what’s right or wrong. They only see what they want to see. In that world, you learn fast that most of it isn’t real. The smiles, the friendships...even the respect. It’s all for fucking show.”

That was the most words he had ever said to me.

I let them sink in. “And out here? What’s real out here?”

For a moment, I thought he would get up and end this conversation. But his gaze flicked to the window, then back to me. “The quiet. The space to breathe. The fact that everyone here seems to not care who I am.”

I studied him, his face's lines, and his eyes' weariness. “After what happened...” I needed to be careful with my next words. “On that set, you practically put yourself in exile. Left Hollywood.”

He raised a brow at me. “Exile?” He laughed, but there was no humor in his voice. He didn’t like that I called it that, but he wasn’t denying it either. A heavy sigh left him. “Yeah, maybe. But that’s what you did, too, in a way.”

“How so?”

“Because you went on a months-long road trip after needing space from your current life. I guess we had the same reasons. Needing space. Needing to be alone because the people around us were not giving us what we needed.”

“Or deserved,” I added, my eyes lingering on his. I reached across the table to place my hand on his, and to my surprise, he didn’t pull away.

“You don’t have to talk about it, but I just wanted you to know I believe your side of the story.”

He gave a simple nod. “Thanks. But it doesn’t matter who believes me. I know my truth. I know now that it should never bother me to care what others think. I was angry. I hated that my friend’s death was simply accepted and turned into a damn story for them to publish and earn money off. Everybody moved on, and I—”

The sudden emotions in his voice made my heart ache. I gripped his hand and slid my fingers over his large palm. His gaze dropped to our hands, and he kept his hand there, letting me touch him and comfort him.

“I can’t imagine how it must’ve felt not getting the support from the people you trusted most. I’m sorry, Caspian.” I squeezed his hand and felt his fingertips twitch, almost like he wanted to caress my hand back but couldn’t.

“It’s fine now. I won’t see those people again and don’t want to give them any of my time.”

I nodded, smiling softly. “I understand.”

I eyed him for another while, then retreated my hand when he cleared his throat and stood up. Silence came over us again.

We both needed it to reflect on what had been said earlier, and I specifically needed that silence to understand what that intense feeling I felt holding his hand was.

I couldn’t read too much into it, but it was hard because it felt good.
Too good.

CHAPTER 7

CASPIAN

She convinced me to go on a damn walk by the lake.

No woman had ever convinced me to do anything, but it seemed that the more she was around, the harder it was to say no to her.

I used it as an excuse to walk her home. I wanted her to be safe, especially knowing that a certain someone was lurking around here.

Should've taken my chance to expose him a long time ago.

Darwynn walked next to me, her arms wrapped around her body, her boots crunching on the gravel path.

"So," she said, breaking the silence, "what's the deal with you and Henry? You two looked like you could've had a full duel when you entered the bar."

Mind-readers didn't exist, but I was pretty damn sure Darwynn had that ability. It hadn't been the first time I had thought of something, and then she mentioned that exact thing seconds later.

I huffed a laugh, shoving my hands deeper into my pockets. "That obvious?"

"Painfully." She glanced at me, her lips quirked into a small, curious smile.

I took a moment, watching the faint waves of the water as I thought about how to answer. "Henry's the kind of guy who's always looking for a reason to hate somebody. When I moved here, it didn't take much. To him, I'm just some arrogant Hollywood actor who doesn't belong."

Darwynn's lips curled further in amusement. "You technically are —"

"Don't say arrogant. I'm not."

"I was going to say that you don't belong. But I guess you do now. This is your home, and it's good for you. You're happy here, even if you

don't show it on your face."

Yeah, it sure as fuck was my home.

And, *fuck*, this woman's words never ceased to make me feel an ache in my chest. An ache that felt good, one I had never felt.

I glanced at her, meeting her perfect eyes. Eyes I wanted to stare into the whole damn day because of how rare they were.

"But why does it matter to him who you are?" she asked, genuinely curious.

I shook my head. "I think he's just...bitter. About everything. But me? I've got plenty of reasons to dislike him, too."

She raised a brow, and I had to tear my eyes off her before I couldn't stop staring. I would make things weird. "Oh, do tell."

I debated how much to say, but then I decided to simply tell the truth. I wanted her to know the type of person Henry was before she let him get close again. "A while back, a group of women visited the village. Tourists. They first stopped by his store, and he urged them to go to the bar with him. They agreed, thinking he would simply show them the hottest hang-out spot around here. But once they were all at the bar, Henry filled them up. Bought them drinks." I could see in her eyes that she already knew where the story was going. I continued. "They were young. Around your age, I believe. They enjoyed themselves at first...until Henry started to be inappropriate. Touched them. Pulled them to the bathrooms one by one, doing whatever the hell he did to them before letting them return to their friends. It took us way too fucking long to realize what was happening, and we managed to get the girl to their stay safely."

"And Henry?"

"Henry deserved to leave the bar with a broken nose." My jaw clenched.

"But..."

My body tensed. "But he started crying and whining, saying sorry over and over again and explaining that he just got dumped by his long-distance girlfriend—who I'm pretty damn sure didn't exist—so what he did was his frustration's fault."

"Please tell me nobody believed him," she begged, her nose scrunched.

I let out a heavy laugh. "You think in a village like this, where everybody knows everybody, they wouldn't believe him?" I shook my head.

“They took him home, let him sleep off his “frustration,” and forgot all about it the next morning. I guess he’s still angry at me for holding that against him.”

“You have every right to!” she clarified, then muttered, “What an ass.”

“Exactly,” I said, my voice rougher than I intended. “I managed to talk to the girls and ensure they were okay. Luckily, they didn’t let Henry get to them physically. Still, they didn’t deserve that. No one does. Henry’s always been like that. Entitled, rude, small-minded. He only gets away with it because no one sees who he really is. But I do.”

“Is that why he’s so scared of you? Because if he messes with anyone ever again, you’ll call him out on it?”

“I won’t just call him out on it. I will personally break every single bone in his lanky body.”

She didn’t flinch at the harshness of my words. No, she looked like she would join me instantly if that ever happened.

“Honestly, I had a bad feeling about him from the beginning. He was too...flirty.” She paused and tilted her head. “I officially dislike him, too.”

I smirked, glancing at her. “Glad to have you on my side.”

“Always,” she said, her voice light, but the word hung between us like it meant more than just this conversation.

We walked in silence for a while after that, and we got closer to where she was staying. I never liked this campground. It was pretty safe around here, but I hated the idea of Darwynn staying in this tiny house alone. She didn’t seem to mind, though. She liked the calm. The quiet.

The automatic light turned on when we reached the small porch. She stopped and turned to me, tilting her head back to look up at me. She wasn’t small—about five-four. I was just a giant.

“So,” she said softly, pursing her lips as she eyed me closely. “Thank you for walking me home.”

“Anytime.”

I kept my eyes on her, taking in every single freckle on the right side of her face. I usually wasn’t curious or interested in knowing more about a woman, but with Darwynn, things were a little different.

It probably was the fact that she was my damn son’s ex-girlfriend.

It sure as fuck didn’t matter, though.

“What’s up with your freckles?” It sounded like an insult, but she didn’t take it like one.

She laughed, throwing her head back and exposing her delicate neck.

Fuck...

When her eyes met mine again, she said, “I wish I knew, but I guess it’s just genetics.”

“Do your parents have freckles?” I asked.

“No...but my grandmother did. So maybe I got them from her,” she said, her smile gentle. “You got some freckles too.”

“That’s sun damage.”

“Right.” She looked amused, and I huffed.

“Go inside now. It’s late.”

“Yes, sir,” she muttered under her breath.

I raised a brow. “Sir?”

There was a teasing gleam in her different-colored eyes. “Does it bother you when I call you that?”

No, it fucking made my dick twitch.

I didn’t answer her. Instead, I kept my eyes closely on her face as she calculated her next move, and my body tensed when she stepped toward me. Her arms wrapped around my neck as her body pushed into mine, and I steadied us both as I rested my hand on her lower back.

She was tiny.

At least, against me, she was.

Her body melted into mine, and I let it happen, even if it took everything inside of me not to push her away.

This felt too damn fucking good, and not in the way it should have.

“Thank you again for tonight. I had a great time,” she said, her voice soft.

I clenched my jaw, my hand flexing on her back. “Anytime.”

We stayed like that for a while longer, but when I risked my mind to go places it shouldn’t go, I stepped away from her, keeping my hand on her hip to keep her at a safe distance.

“Sleep.” It sounded like a demand, and in a way, it was one. “I’ll see you around, kid.”

She pursed her lips and rested her hand on my forearm before taking two steps back. “You keep calling me kid.”

“You don’t like that?” It wasn’t much of a question. Of course, she didn’t. She wasn’t a kid. She was a woman. A damn beautiful one at that.

She scrunched her nose. “I’m twenty-one, so...”

I cleared my throat and ignored the itch at the back of my head that was trying to come up with a different nickname for her.

Shit... I needed to stop those train of thoughts altogether. Immediately.

“Just call me Wynn timer,” she said softly, helping me out.

“Fine. Goodnight, Wynn timer.”

Her smile would stay with me all damn night. “Night, Caz.”

Yeah...I had never liked when people called me that—especially Theresa—but I sure as fuck liked it coming from her lips.

I watched as she entered the tiny house and waited until I heard the lock click, locking herself in safely.

As I turned to head back, the weight of the quiet night settled around me, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that something between us had shifted.

And I wondered if only I felt that way.

CHAPTER 8

DARWYNN

Without planning it, Caspian and I simultaneously showed up at the bar the next night. He was there first, sitting at the bar with his body turned toward the entrance like he had been waiting to see me walk in.

When I walked in, and our eyes met, I noticed a gleam in his gaze. One I hadn't seen before. He was excited to see me, happy that I was there, and I couldn't help but smile.

Once I sat next to him at the bar, we sat silently for a moment before I turned to face him with a smile. "I was hoping to see you again. Though, I didn't think it would be here."

He scoffed, his gaze fixed on the glass in front of him. He was drinking whiskey again, and I was slowly getting used to its scent. Hard liquor wasn't my thing, but it fit him, and I seemed to like anything about him.

"I'm only here because I knew you would be, and I don't want anyone to talk to you. Or touch you."

I would've laughed if any other man had said that to me. I was confident and strong enough to fight off any man who tried to bother me, but having Caspian protect me from any asshole sounded nice.

My smile widened, but I didn't give a reply. I picked up my Pepsi and took a few sips as I turned my head to look around the bar. There weren't many people here tonight. Just the three men playing pool like every night I had been here, and one couple sitting comfortably at a booth.

The soft music was louder than the chatter, and it all felt so cozy. "I don't think I'd get in trouble today. There's not much going on here." I turned to face him again, my body toward him and my knees pressing against the side of his leg.

Caspian shot me a glance and shook his head. "You never know when someone shows up and ruins the night for you. I'm here now, so you'll be safe, and that's all that matters to me."

Fine with me.

I pursed my lips and looked around again before my eyes landed on the side of his face. His white beard was freshly cut, looking as clean as ever, and his neck-long hair sat in perfect waves on top of his head, giving him that attractive silver fox look.

No wonder he's a Hollywood legend. He's handsome.

Without giving it a second thought, I pulled out my phone and opened my Google app to find pictures of him when he was younger. The search results did not disappoint, and I smirked when I saw a still from an older movie he was in, standing shirtless, showing off his muscular build.

"You haven't stopped working out, have you?" I asked, taking in his broad shoulders and hard chest. His arms were thick, covered in a flannel shirt, but I could still see his muscles flexing under the fabric.

His head turned, and his eyes fell to my phone. With a frown, he said, "Quit looking at that."

"I just wanted to know what you looked like when you were my age," I replied with a shrug. "No guy I ever met had looked like you."

"So?" He wasn't amused by my story. He wasn't uncomfortable, but he simply didn't want me to look at old pictures of him.

Grumpy old man.

I put my phone away and sighed, deciding to change the subject. "I saw a flyer at the general store this morning for a beer and cider festival in Bruce Mines. I figured we could go since there's not much happening around here. What do you think?"

"I don't usually go out in public," he muttered, sipping his liquor.

"Usually. Maybe that can change. The festival starts on Thursday. Maybe we can go then," I suggested, tapping my fingers on my thighs. My knees were still pressing against his thigh, but it didn't seem to bother him.

He was thinking about it, but it took him too long to reply, and I was getting impatient because hanging out with him sounded fun, and I didn't want him to overthink it and say no. "You could wear a baseball hat and glasses. I know it's not that good of a disguise, but I'd love to go with you. And if people recognize you and start to bother you, I will tell them off."

He snorted a laugh, which sounded like an insult. “*You* telling people *off*?”

Rude, but he was right. I probably couldn’t achieve anything by asking people not to bother a Hollywood actor.

“Fine, maybe that wouldn’t be so effective. But...maybe the people there won’t even care that you’re there. I mean, not that you’re not extremely famous or anything—”

“I *was* famous.”

“Right.” I pursed my lips. Everyone besides him—and maybe everyone in this village—thought differently. “Still. Will you please come to the beer and cider festival with me?”

“Do you even like beer or cider? I haven’t seen you drink alcohol since you came here.”

Well observed.

“No. But I bet you do, and I’d give anything to see you try it and maybe break a smile because you enjoy it so much.”

I was hopeful I would get him to break one day. I was positive that as grumpy as he was, that wasn’t the real him. I believed his past made him cranky, and maybe he just needed someone to help him become the man he used to be.

He observed me with narrowed eyes, tapping the side of his glass with his finger. He was thinking, weighing his options and trying to understand if this meant much to me.

“Fine.”

“Really?” My eyes widened in surprise as I rested my left hand on his shoulder. “Oh, it will be so much fun! Festival food is always so delicious.”

He tried to shrug off my hand but stopped when I almost fell off my stool out of excitement. He turned toward me, putting both hands on my hips to hold me in place. “Careful.”

I calmed down from my very short high, forcing myself to keep the excitement inside. “I just really like festivals,” I admitted with a tight grin.

“I can tell.” His hands left my body as quickly as they were placed on me, and he turned back around to rest his forearms on the counter. “Your enthusiasm is sweeter than that fucking chocolate cake you made for me.”

I had to let those words play in my head a couple more times before I realized what he said. Although it sounded like a compliment, seeing as he

hated sweet things, I wasn't sure I could take it as one.

I pursed my lips and decided not to play into his comment. Instead, I got up and slapped his back lightly. "I'm going to the toilet," I announced, leaving him at the bar.

CASPIAN

I've never been a fan of sugary things.

Couldn't explain why, and I never bothered to figure it out.

But out of all the sweet things I ever had, Darwynn was on another level of sweetness. The way her eyes widened and sparkled with so much joy when I agreed to go to the festival with her was a sight I hoped to see more often. For that, I'd be way kinder toward her. More open. Less... broody. Grumpy.

When the bar's door opened, I initially didn't bother looking at who was coming in, but when the obnoxious voice of a man I'd rather not face echoed around me, I had to turn my head.

Henry stood there, grinning, unfazed by the bar's lack of people. I stared him down, waiting for his eyes to meet mine. When they finally did, his expression changed from arrogance to unsureness.

I saw him mouth "shit," and I raised a brow at him, happy with the effect my presence had on him. I truly wasn't a violent man, but if he ever tried to flirt with Darwynn again, I would punch him straight in the face.

Without saying a word to him, I emptied my glass and got up from the stool with my eyes still on him, watching him as he simply stood there, frozen, like a prey scared to move and get the hunter's attention.

"Motherfucker," I muttered, turning away to head to the restrooms. I needed to keep Darwynn safe, and I didn't care if she thought I was overreacting. Men like Henry were unpredictable, and I sure as hell wouldn't let him get close to her again. Not even to talk.

I got to the narrow hallway with the two bathroom doors and waited for her to come out of the right one. It didn't take her long before she stood before me, and we were quickly cramped between the tight walls, facing each other.

"Oh, do you also have to—"

"No."

Her head was tilted back, her remarkable eyes looking curiously at me in the dim light. Her lips parted, and I couldn't help but let my eyes

wander over her face. My hands didn't seem to understand what was happening because they were suddenly on her hips. My dick twitched, and my jaw ticked as I tried to figure out what the fuck was going on.

"Is everything okay?" Darwynn asked, her voice soft. So damn soft.

I managed one quick nod.

My left hand rested on her hip while I moved my right up her side, caressing her waist and then her arm until I cupped the side of her neck.

Her breath hitched as I moved my fingers into her thick, brown hair at the back of her head. As her strands curled around them, she tilted her head further back, exposing her neck.

Every inch of her body—at least the parts I've seen of it for now—were perfect. Her skin was soft and warm to the touch, and the way she melted into me, just like she had when we hugged the other night, did something to me.

Something I didn't allow my mind to explore further.

Darwynn didn't question what I was doing. She simply stood there, with her hands hanging by her sides and her eyes staring up at me. She wasn't pulling back or pushing me away, but I feared that was because I was holding her captive between my body and the wall behind her. *Shit...* I wasn't any better than Henry.

With one last glance to her lips, I dropped my hand from her hair and pushed them into my pockets so they wouldn't wander off without my damn permission. I cleared my throat. "We're leaving."

I could tell she wanted to argue, but she simply accepted my demand for some reason. "Okay."

Shit, I didn't give her the wrong impression, did I?

"I'm taking you home. Where you're staying," I clarified.

"Okay," she said again, her smile tight.

Before I changed my mind, I walked ahead and made sure she followed me back to the bar, where I put money on the counter and gave the bartender a nod.

Once we were outside, Darwynn wrapped her hand around my arm, and I led her down the road to the campgrounds.

"Is Henry the reason why we left?"

Of course, she figured it out.

"Yes."

“You know, we could’ve just ignored him. I was having a really good time with you at the bar,” she told me.

I looked at her and sighed. “But I wasn’t. Not with him in the same room.”

I hated the idea of ruining her night. I had to make this better.

Stopping, I looked around before meeting her eyes. We weren’t far from the bar, and she looked at me with expectation.

“I don’t want him near you. Or any woman, for that matter. But other women are not my business right now. You are.” I paused to think about my next words, hoping to see her smile again. “So if we go back inside, you promise me not to look at him. Don’t give him attention. None. Focus on me.”

She studied me, her eyes searching my face as the tip of her tongue slowly brushed across her bottom lip. The corner of her mouth lifted ever so slightly, and a hint of mischief flashed through her eyes.

She put one hand on my stomach and stepped toward me, tilting her head back to keep eye contact.

What she said next made me want to wrap my hand around her throat and push her up against the damn tree. “If you want to be alone with me, just say it.”

Fuck...

CHAPTER 9

DARWYNN

I may have pushed the limits.

No, not maybe. I definitely have.

He didn't look happy after what I said, and I definitely interpreted everything the wrong way.

Shit, that's embarrassing.

And not to mention, wrong.

My cheeks flushed, and the nervous tingles all over my body didn't feel as good as usual.

I wanted to run and hide, but Caspian was pulling me toward the tiny house I was staying in, ready to lock me up and never let me out again.

I guess he was just being nice. Making sure I was safe and not doing anything stupid. I was *only* twenty-one, after all.

His grip around my hand was tight, and once we reached the few steps leading up to the door, he stepped behind me to guide me up. His hands were on my hips, making sure I wouldn't bolt. But I had nowhere to run, no other option than to let him handle me the way he was.

I was ready to pull out my key and unlock the door, but he didn't give me time to do that, either. He turned me around, and I stood with my back against the wooden door and his body right in front of mine.

His brown eyes were darker than usual, even with the motion sensor light above our heads shining down on us. His right hand gripped my hip, and his left pressed against the door next to my head.

"Say it again," he demanded, his voice low. Raspy. Fuck, it was so damn hot.

I knew what he wanted to hear.

And, instantly, I knew where this was going.

Holy. Shit.

My heart was racing, and I was pretty sure it was about to explode in my chest.

“Say. It. Again.” His words were sharp this time, and his jaw clenched.

I slowed my breathing before my lungs started to hurt, and then I whispered, “I said, if you want to be alone with me, you just have to say it.”

The tip of his tongue came out to brush his bottom lip, and I stared at his mouth, amazed at how insanely hot a man his age could be.

His left hand moved, and I felt his fingers wrapped around my throat seconds later. His mouth was on mine without a warning, without giving me time to process what was happening.

But it didn’t push him away.

I kissed him back, melting into him as I lifted my hands to rest them on his hard chest. His muscles flexed under my touch and the fabric of his shirt, and he took one more step toward me, pressing me harder against the door.

His hand around my neck tightened, and he deepened the kiss skillfully by tilting his head to the side and dipping his tongue into my mouth to swirl around mine.

I moaned, unable to hold back my emotions. Surprised but mostly shocked by how good it felt, I kissed him as passionately as I could.

He kept me there, with one knee pushed between my legs and my pussy pressing against his thigh. His right hand came up to cup the side of my head, his fingers pushing into my hair. He was now holding my head in place, and I was unable to move. It was all him, and I let him do whatever he wanted.

The taste of whiskey on his tongue made me want more, but I wasn’t sure how that would be possible. The way he kissed me was intense, and no guy had ever taken control over me like Caspian had.

Another moan escaped me, and I gripped his shirt with both fists, tightly holding him there. I didn’t want him to stop. I wanted this to continue all night.

He briefly broke the kiss as his head tilted to the other side before his mouth was on mine again. His tongue plunged inside, swirling around mine and showing me exactly what an experienced man like him could offer.

Fuck, this kiss is everything.

His grip around my throat eased, and he slowly broke the kiss, finally letting me breathe again. He stayed close, with his forehead resting against mine and his hands still on me.

I kept my eyes closed, scared I would lose control if I looked into his. There was an intense pull between us. One I wanted to explore, but not before he told me that this kiss wasn't just a temporary impulse. Or a mistake.

He let out a grunt. His heart was pounding just as hard as mine. But he didn't say a word. Not for a little while.

The longer we stayed silent, the more this moment felt right. Still, I needed to know that he thought the same.

He took a deep breath, his right hand moving from the side of my head to my cheek. He cupped it gently, with his thumb brushing along my bottom lip. Without thinking too much about it, I wrapped my lips around his thumb and sucked on it gently before letting it pop out of my mouth again, and I finally dared to open my eyes, finding his locked on my lips.

"I shouldn't have done that, but I'd do it again if you asked."

Just the words I wanted to hear.

My heart pounded so hard it felt like it had risen to my throat.

Our eyes met, and I moved my hand further up around his neck, needing to get even closer. "I want you to do it again," I admitted.

Both his hands dropped to my hips, and he put some distance between us as he took a small step back. "Not tonight."

Boo.

"Why not?"

"Because if I do it again, I won't stop. And we both need time to think this through." His words were direct but not harsh. He was honest and mature, which, deep down, I wasn't. I would've jumped him in seconds if he agreed to kiss me again.

God, I needed a cold shower.

Good thing this tiny house didn't have warm water after nine o'clock.

"Okay." I pressed my lips together and played with my fingers, avoiding his eyes to not get tempted.

"Go inside. Sleep." His demands were as clear as ever, and I had no reason to fight it. Or to ask him to come inside.

“All right. Tonight was fun,” I told him with a smile. I placed my hand back on his shoulder and leaned in to kiss his cheek before I turned around and unlocked the door. I headed inside and locked myself in, and while I got ready for bed, I knew he was still out there, waiting until my lights went out.

I learned two things about Caspian: he was extremely protective and an insanely good kisser.

Bruce Mines was only a half-hour drive from Hilton Beach. We spent the first ten minutes of the drive in comfortable silence until I noticed the maroon baseball cap and dark sunglasses on the bench between us. I smiled and lifted the cap, looking at Caspian as he focused on the road ahead.

“You took my advice,” I said, looking back at the cap in my hands. “I’m sure people won’t even realize it’s you.”

He didn’t reply. A scoff was all I got from him.

Puckering my lips, I put the cap back down and took in the interior of the old pickup truck he was driving. “Have you had this car for a long time?”

“I got it when I moved to Hilton.”

“So you didn’t have some fancy car when you were still in Hollywood?”

He furrowed his brows. “I always had drivers.”

“Even when you went grocery shopping?”

“I had people doing that for me.”

Of course.

“Right, should’ve thought of that. So then...why do you have a driver’s license?” I asked, grabbing his wallet from the middle console and unfolding it to find his license.

“Who doesn’t?”

Fair point.

I shrugged and pulled out the card. “Some people never learn to drive because they—” I stopped as I read the name on his license and frowned as I was hit with a wave of...surprise? Shock? It was something because my heart skipped a beat. “Your middle name is Darwin?”

I turned my head toward him, watching him side-eye me and the card I held. “Why are you looking at that? Put it away.”

I ignored his request and let out a breathy laugh. “You have the same middle name as me, and you didn’t even tell me. Why? This is so...” I tried to find the right word as I dropped my gaze back to the driver’s license. “Cool. Though, mine’s spelling is more fun.”

“My middle name was never relevant to me.”

Of course, it wasn’t.

I rolled my eyes. “But you knew, and you didn’t tell me. We have a connection after all. Although...it is a strange one,” I said with a small laugh.

“We also have a different connection. An even weirder one.”

I knew what he meant.

Julian.

My ex.

His son.

I frowned, then scrunched my nose. “Wait. Does Julian know what your middle name is?”

“He does. He *should* know.”

Which made everything even stranger.

There were so many things I wanted to ask him. Things about him and Julian, and what their relationship had been before everything went to shit.

I studied him for a while, trying to determine whether the twenty minutes we had before arriving in Bruce Mines were enough to hear the full story of what truly went down.

“Will you ever tell me what really happened? I know Julian’s side, not yours. I want to understand this weird-as-hell full-circle moment.”

Caspian’s knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel tightly. His forearms flexed, and his jaw tensed. “If I tell, you’ll think differently of Julian. You’ll dislike him. Maybe even more than you do right now.”

He was somewhat wrong about me disliking him. But I only disliked him in certain moments. He was still my ex, though we never truly loved each other.

“I still want to know,” I told him, taking one last look at the license before putting it back. “You don’t have to tell me now if you think it will

upset me. But...please promise me you will tell me soon.”

He glanced at me and sighed. “Fine.”

Good enough for me.

I reached over and patted my hand on his thigh lightly. “Thank you, Caz.”

His hand covered mine and lifted it to his lips, kissing the back of my fingers. I watched closely, and it looked like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t.

We sat in silence again. I didn’t allow myself to think about what it could’ve possibly been like if Julian’s relationship to Caspian wasn’t this broken.

He probably would’ve whined way less, and I wouldn’t have spent so many nights listening to him talk badly about Caspian.

Caspian, the man I was now spending my time with.

And had made out.

Caspian, my ex’s dad.

God...this is messy.

CHAPTER 10

DARWYNN

The beer and cider festival was perfect—just as I imagined it. Even Caspian enjoyed going from stand to stand to try different kinds of beer. He kept his baseball hat on but wasn't wearing sunglasses. It didn't help him see very well in the dim fairy lights hanging all over the stands, and luckily, no one did a double-take or asked if he was really the Caspian King.

He was enjoying himself, but he would never admit it. So I let him take it all in without constantly reminding him that he was currently being a normal guy doing everyday things.

We got the greasiest burgers from one of the stands and ate them as we walked back to the parking lot. After washing it all down with some water, we stood against the side of his car, looking over the water. It was a full moon that shone down over the water in the prettiest way, making the surface shimmer.

I took it all in. The calm. The contentment. Him.

The festival sounds were distant, replaced by the quiet lapping of waves against the dock and the occasional burst of laughter from festivalgoers heading back to their cars.

I didn't let that bother us.

I glanced at him, taking in his softer-than-usual expression. I liked seeing him like this. Relaxed. Present.

"You had fun," I said, nudging him with my shoulder.

He scoffed—something he was really good at. "It was tolerable."

I laughed. "Good enough. I had fun. I like spending time with you."

Caspian turned his head toward me, and I let his eyes wander over my face and body, letting him take in every inch of me as I kept mine on his face. His gaze lingered on my lips briefly before meeting my eyes again.

We both knew what was going to happen next. The tension had been there all evening, and I sure as hell wouldn't interrupt it by asking him to take me home.

"Darwynn," he murmured, turning more toward me. "Have you thought this through?"

I did think it through right after our kiss last night.

And right now, I wasn't thinking.

I just acted.

I turned to him and placed my hands on his chest, pressing up on my toes to kiss him. A low grunt made his chest rumble as his lips brushed along mine. Soft, testing, waiting. Then he responded.

He took control instantly, his hands gripping my hips as he pushed me against the car. He deepened the kiss, his tongue plunging into my mouth.

Yes.

This is what I needed.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he lifted me off the ground with so much ease, with his hands under my thigh, making me wrap them around his hips. His body pressed against mine, my back flush against the truck door.

I moaned and placed one hand on the back of his head to keep him right there. I wasn't going to stop this. No chance.

His hands moved from under my thighs to my ass, squeezing hard as his upper body pressed against me. The world blurred, the festival, the lake, the moon—it all faded, leaving only us.

I was breathing hard, and his groans became louder, making my clit pulse every time that sound rang in my ears. And his hand on my ass, squeezing tight, made me want to rip off my clothes and give myself to him.

With another grunt, he took a step back from the car and broke the kiss to let me back down, and just as I was about to argue, he opened the car and got inside, pulling me with him. "On my lap," he demanded, and I quickly crawled into the car to straddle him.

He shut the door and threw the keys to the driver's seat, and then his hands were on my face, cupping my cheeks and pulling me into a kiss. His tongue curled around mine, sucking it into his mouth while his hands held my head in place.

It's only been our second time making out so heavily, but I never wanted it to end this time. I never wanted any other man to ever kiss me again, and I hated that before him, others had.

"Fuck," he muttered into the kiss as he lifted his hips to meet mine. I was rubbing against him, needing to feel more than just his hard body against mine. He broke the kiss and trailed his tongue down my neck as he tilted my head back to get better access. "So fucking wet. Needy girl."

I could've melted right there in his arms, but then I would've missed out on what he did next. With his eyes on mine, he reached between us and unbuttoned his jeans. My eyes widened. My heart pounded hard.

"I'm not going to fuck you in this damn truck, Darwynn," he assured me. It was disappointing to hear, but I didn't want to have sex in this truck either. Not yet. Fuck...I wanted him badly, but I felt we were rushing whatever this was becoming.

No. Fuck that.

We were already crossing the line, so why not fuck already?

"Look at me," he ordered, and I lifted my eyes from his crotch. "I want you to take out my cock and rub your pussy on it."

Direct. Uncensored. No fucking shame.

My pulse rose, and my fingers twitched. "You want me to—"

"Yes, Darwynn, that's what I want you to do. Now."

I bit my lower lip and grazed the fly of his jeans with my fingertips. "A-and do you want me to pull down my—" He stopped me again.

"No. You keep those jeans on. I can't promise you I won't turn into a damn animal if I get the full scent of you."

Oh.

I took a deep breath and pushed the fabric down until his bulge came into view, and without giving me a second chance to think too much about it, I reached down and pulled back his shorts to reveal his hardening cock.

It was semi-hard and fucking huge.

God. Damn.

I gasped, which got a smirk out of him. "Go on."

I glanced up before dropping my gaze again. Wrapping my hand around his shaft, I pulled it out and rested it almost too carefully against his abdomen. His tip was glistening, and it seemed that his cock didn't need to be fully erect to have those hot veins standing out along his length.

God, everything about this man was perfect, and he simply let me have him.

We'd definitely have a conversation after this, but right now, I wanted to enjoy every second without thinking about any possible consequences.

"Now, Darwynn. I'm getting impatient." His voice was low and raspy, and his hands were gripping my hips tightly. "Don't have to be nervous."

"I'm not," I told him, meeting his eyes again. "I'm adjusting to your dominance."

He arched a brow in amusement but didn't say a word. He simply got more comfortable and looked at me with expectation.

Resting both hands on his shoulders, I slid forward until my crotch was pressed against his. His cock nestled between my thighs against my pussy, and I started to move slowly, letting him take over shortly after.

"Just like that. Good girl," he praised. He kept his eyes on mine as he moved me back and forth.

My clit was getting just enough traction to tease me, making me want to take off my jeans to feel more. But this was okay.

This was enough for now.

My breath finally slowed, and so did my heartbeat. He kept moving me on top of him, and I held on to his shoulders to keep myself upright and not fall against him.

I looked down to watch his cock harden. I loved the sight of my crotch squeezing his tip to his abdomen, and every time I moved back, I got a better look at his hardness. God, it was beautiful, and I couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like inside me.

"Caz," I breathed, unable to hide the pleasure on my face. I wanted to come, but it would be difficult this way.

He noticed my need, but apparently, he had other plans, which he quickly told me about. "It's my turn to come."

I didn't argue but needed to ensure he would return the favor. "What about mine?" I asked, my eyes meeting his.

"At home," he said through gritted teeth.

That was enough for me. At home. His home. Later. Once we got back to Hilton Beach.

Fuck, I want to go now.

His fingers dug into my hips as he slammed them into his, my pussy dry humping his exposed cock with every thrust.

The veins on his neck throbbed as his body tensed beneath me, and I watched him closely as he looked down, jaw clenched.

“Are you close?” I asked. Excitement rose inside of me. I wanted to see him come, see his face overcome with emotions. Then again, I didn’t want this to end. It was a whole new experience.

He grunted and lifted his left hand to cup my jaw and pull me to him, slamming his mouth on mine. I kissed him deep, passionately, and he used his tongue the way he had before.

I needed to feel his mouth between my thighs. I just knew he could make me come in seconds.

His body tensed as my riding him slowed, and when he broke the kiss, we both looked down to watch strings of cum shoot out of his cock and onto his stomach. He had pulled up his shirt, but his cum still stained it. It didn’t bother him, though.

“Fuuuck,” he breathed, his voice low and shaky.

I smiled, and when our eyes met, he said, “Clean it up.”

He wasn’t asking.

He demanded it.

And, hell, who was I to say no to this man?

He could tell me to do anything, and I would without a fight.

CHAPTER 11

CASPIAN

It took all the strength I had in me not to strip her and take her to the backseat and fuck her senseless.

If I did that, I'd be a sick son of a bitch.

Fuck, I already was one for making her dry hump me.

But I'd also be a fucking liar if I said I didn't enjoy this. She was into it too, and as long as this was consensual, I gave no fucks about morals.

Didn't give a fuck about getting close to her who has most likely let my son fuck her before.

Other people did worse.

Abused.

Killed.

And I did none of those things. Never had, never would.

So, fuck it.

I wanted her; she wanted me.

She was on her knees between my legs in the tiny space before me, with her back to the passenger side dash after I told her to clean up my cum. She didn't hesitate and moved down to do exactly what I asked of her.

No pushing back.

No arguing.

She was being a damn good girl.

I adjusted in my seat, widening my legs and pushing the fabric of my shorts further down. My dick was still hard, and it kept throbbing just from having her eyes on it. She rested her hands on my thighs as she looked up through her dark lashes. The tip of her tongue brushed along her bottom lip, and the tiniest grin tugged at the corners of her mouth when she dropped her gaze again.

I reached out my hands to run my fingers through her hair, pulling it back to hold it together at the back of her head with my right hand. "I don't want that mouth around my cock. We'll do that when we get home," I promised her. "Clean up my cum."

She gave a small nod, then she lowered her head, with her tongue sticking out, as she licked across my abdomen. I sucked in a breath and covered my cock with my left hand, pulling it aside so she had better access to my stomach.

I watched as she licked every drop off my skin, with her hands holding on tight to my thighs and her body moving sensually between my legs, just like her tongue.

"That's it, baby. Clean it all up. You like that, don't you?" I tightened my grip on her hair and pulled her back to make her look at me. "So fucking naughty. How long have you been wanting me to fuck you, hm? Was that your plan all along?"

I knew it wasn't, but I wanted to taunt her. She needed to know who I was. What I was like. Especially with women. I've experienced many different sexual encounters throughout my life, and I have always been a man who wielded power while fucking. I was preparing her for everything we would do after this.

I wasn't easy, and no woman could ever handle me for more than one night. But in the most twisted and fucked up way, I knew Darwynn could.

"No, it wasn't." She shook her head and searched my face. "I swear, this was never my plan."

"Yet, you're doing as you're told, using that tongue to taste my cum." Teasing. Taunting. I liked the reaction I got out of her.

"Because you asked me to, and I do like you. Even if..."

"Even if I'm way older?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Does that turn you on, Darwynn?"

Her lips parted. "Yes," she choked, biting her lower lip. "Very."

I tightened my grip even more and pulled her face closer until it was right in front of my cock. I moved my left hand to its base, lifting the tip to touch her lips. "You know word travels fast back home. I don't want everyone to find out and ruin this for us."

She closed her eyes as I continued to rub my tip against her mouth, watching as her lips slowly swelled.

“This will be our secret.”

She looked up at me again and nodded. “Yes.”

“Promise me, Darwynn. You won’t say a word to anyone. For now.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Her response was genuine.

I let go of my cock and pulled her up to straddle my lap again. With my length nestled between us, I pressed her body against mine with one hand on her lower back and the other cupping her jaw. “You know I don’t mean to scare you. But this is serious. Whatever’s gotten into us—whatever’s happening between us—we need to keep it to ourselves.”

She nodded again, her eyes filled with emotions. Good ones, at least. “I know,” she whispered before adding, “But I’m not worried. I know we can keep this a secret.”

But something told me that she wouldn’t care about anyone’s—Julian’s—opinion if this got out. I decided not to care too much about it for now.

My jaw clenched right before I put my lips on hers. I kissed her hard. My tongue swirled around hers, sucking it into my mouth. I couldn’t get enough of her, and the need to taste her was matched only by my need to breathe.

Fuck, I needed her.

I broke the kiss and rested my forehead against her, with my eyes closed and my hands holding her closer. “We’re going home, and once we’re there, I want you in my bedroom.”

“Okay.” There was no hesitation in her eyes.

DARWYNN

The drive back to Hilton Beach seemed shorter.

My heart hadn’t stopped beating like crazy since we first got to the festival, and I feared that if it didn’t slow down, it would explode right there in my chest.

The way Caspian made me feel was hard to describe. It was a good feeling, that’s for sure, but I definitely would have to get used to it if it became permanent. This whole thing made me nervous, too, because it wouldn’t be easy to explain. Not only because of Julian, but also because of

our age gap. Nobody would accept this—no matter what it was Caspian and I were feeling for each other.

After he parked the truck in his small driveway, we both got out and headed to the front door. He placed one hand on my lower back, his fingertips grazing my ass, and with the other, he unlocked the door.

He gently led me inside, and I kept walking as he shut the door behind us. I didn't know where his bedroom was, but according to what he said earlier, that's where he wanted to take me.

"This way." His hand touched my hip as he guided me to the door furthest down the hall, and once we were in his bedroom, he turned me around to face him.

His eyes studied my face closely as he brushed strands of my hair behind my ears. My lips parted, and my breathing became unsteady again, but I managed to stay calm.

He lowered his head, tilting it to the side as he took my mouth, kissing me deeply but slowly this time. He wasn't in a rush, and I savored every second of it.

I placed my hands on his hard chest and leaned more into him, tilting my head back further so he could deepen the kiss even more, and I swirled my tongue around his, tasting every inch of his mouth.

A moan escaped me as he wrapped his fingers around my throat, squeezing gently while his other hand cupped the back of my head. I loved how much control he had over me and how he showed me exactly what he wanted without speaking. Although, I loved his dirty words and how they made my body tingle most blissfully.

He pressed two smaller kisses to my lips before moving away slightly, and I looked into his eyes with a smile, admiring him and how he made me feel.

God, he treated me so well, and while I had no clue what this thing between us would become, I started to become hopeful that it could be something that would last.

"Are you still sure about this?" he asked, his eyes searching mine. "If you have doubts, we better stop this now."

"Do *you* have doubts?" I countered.

He let out a heavy laugh. "As twisted as this is...no, I don't."

"Me neither." I smiled at him and lifted my right hand to touch the side of his neck. My fingertips brushed over his beard. "I want this."

“Do I have to go easy on you?” His question came as a surprise.

“I...”

Yes? No?

Shit... “I don’t know.”

One of his eyes twitched, and the grip on my throat eased. “You’re not a virgin.”

It wasn’t a question. More of a hopeful statement.

“No, I’m not.”

“Good. Then I only need to know if I have to go easy on you. Because, baby, I’m not about to hurt you by being too rough.”

Oh...

I swallowed hard and smiled again. “You can be rough with me.”

“Hm.” He grunted, then took a step back to glance down my body before he muttered, “Thank fuck.”

I held my breath as he reached for my pants and unbuttoned it, pulling down the zipper and then hooking his fingers into the waistband. I let him take off my jeans, and once they hit the floor, I stepped out of them. He was down on one knee, and he looked up at me as he hooked his fingers into the waistband of my panties this time.

I sucked in a deep breath once they were off. His fingers trailed up the sides of my legs, and his eyes took in my pussy. I was exposed to him like he was to me earlier in the car. But unlike him, I didn’t feel as confident as he did.

I hadn’t shaved, and I couldn’t tell by the look on his face if he liked that or not. Not that I would shave just to please a man...ah, who was I kidding? For Caspian, I would.

“Beautiful,” he said quietly, moving me closer by grabbing the back of my thighs. I stepped toward him until I felt his breath on my skin, and I steadied myself on his shoulders, knowing exactly what was happening next.

He glanced up one last time before he leaned forward and put his mouth on my pussy. His lips moved like it would when he kissed me, and his tongue flicked against my clit skillfully.

I moaned and dug my nails into his shoulders, crying out when he moved two fingers through my slit, teasing my entrance. He made me feel incredible, and as much as I wanted him to make me come, I feared that it would be too much for me to handle.

My knees were weak all of a sudden, and they threatened to give in.

“Caz,” I breathed, my legs shaking. “I can’t...”

“Yes, you can. Focus. Hold on to me. Let me play with this pussy and make you come.”

Okay.

Yes.

Please.

I shut my mouth by pressing my lips together tightly, and I threw my head back as he continued to flick his tongue against my clit. My moans filled the room, followed by his pleased grunts.

His fingers circled my entrance, and to give him better access, I parted my legs slightly. I needed his fingers inside of me.

“Please,” I begged, moving one hand to his hair and gripping it tightly. “Caz...”

He didn’t make me wait. Two fingers slipped inside of me, and my pussy clenched around them, showing him exactly how good he made me feel.

“Oh, yes,” I moaned, looking back down to watch him. I liked the sight of him on one knee before me, with his face pressed between my thighs and his mouth on my pussy.

I wanted him to stay there forever.

CHAPTER 12

CASPIAN

I had tasted many women in my life before, but none had tasted as sweet as Darwynn. No idea what it was that made me immediately addicted to her after just one lick through her wet folds, but I knew I only wanted to taste her for the rest of my life.

However long it would be.

Her legs were shaking, and her grip on my left shoulder was so damn tight it made it sore. With the other, she continued to pull at my hair, and, fuck, I loved that.

She was enjoying this, and if she'd let me, I would've stayed kneeled in front of her and with my mouth on her pussy forever.

But I needed my dick in her mouth. And then in her pussy.

Her walls clenched around my fingers as I pushed them into her, getting them as deep as I possibly could to hear more of her sweet moans.

"Please," she begged, breathing heavily. "Make me come."

"Let go then. It's all up to you, baby," I told her, thrusting my fingers into her harder before flicking my tongue against her clit again.

She cried out, and seconds later, her body collapsed. Both her hands were on my shoulders now, and I continued to pleasure her for a couple more seconds, loving the feel of her clit pulsating on my tongue.

I pulled out my fingers and got back up, steadying her with one arm around her waist as I looked down at her, watching her face overcome with emotions. "Look at me," I ordered, searching her eyes before they met mine. "Open that mouth."

When she did, I leaned in to kiss her, pushing my tongue deep into her mouth to let her taste herself. Every muffle noise made my dick twitch, and I held her closer, pressing her body against mine to make her feel just how hard I was for her.

After licking my tongue over hers one more time, I moved back and pushed my two fingers into her mouth.

“You like how you taste?” I asked, keeping my face close to hers as I watched her suck on my fingers. I pushed the deeper into her mouth, pressing down on her tongue and almost hitting the back of her throat.

She nodded, held her breath, and reached up with both hands to grip my forearm. At first, I thought she would push me away. Instead, she surprised me yet again by holding my arm in place and leaning in even more to suck my fingers in as much as possible.

“Naughty girl. Look at you...so damn needy. Can’t get enough, can you?”

Her eyes were on mine the whole time, and the hint of excitement in them told me that she wanted more. Much more.

Once she licked my fingers clean of her juices, I pulled my fingers out of her mouth and reached down to grab the hem of her sweater, pulling it up and over her head. Her bra was gone just as fast, and after a moment of admiring her tits, I cupped them in my hands and squeezed gently.

“You’re perfect,” I told her, unable to take my eyes off her pretty pink nipples. “Everything about you. Every fucking inch. Just pure... beauty.”

I felt her body ease, and her expression was soft when I looked at her face. “You mean that?”

“Fuck, yes, I mean that.”

“Only because...you called me strange-looking the first time I showed up at your door.”

I hated that I said that.

Obviously, I was a fucking asshole with no filter.

And I was angry.

That anger seemed to have eased ever since I’d gotten to know her better.

“I lied.” My jaw ticked. “But it would’ve been weird admitting to my son’s ex-girlfriend that I found her attractive.”

She puckered her lips and tilted her head to the side in the sweetest way. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “And it’s not weird now?”

“No,” I admitted, meeting her gaze again. “Because the feeling is mutual.”

I squeezed her tits again, pinching her nipples between my fingers and thumbs and rolling them, getting them harder than they already were.

“It was mutual before...” she said, her voice a sensual whisper. “I also thought you were attractive the first time I saw you.”

I let out a dry laugh. “That’s good.”

Leaning in, I kissed her again, keeping my hands on her tits for a while longer before making her drop to her knees. She looked up at me with parted, swollen lips, and I saw her on her knees, admiring her beauty because I just couldn’t stop.

I caressed her cheek. “Unbutton my pants.”

She didn’t hesitate. Her hands came up and made quick work of the button and zipper, and with her fingers hooked into the waistband, she pulled them down, followed by my shorts.

Her eyes went directly to my cock, and the excitement lighting up her face proved that she wanted to be there. Wanted to be with me. And that’s all I needed to know to not feel like a total asshole for being intimate with her.

I reached out to grab her jaw, making her look up at me again. “I’m asking you one last time, Darwynn. Do I have to go easy on you?”

“No. I can handle you.”

She said that without knowing what I would do to her to get what I needed, but she seemed confident. “Good.”

I squeezed her cheeks to get her mouth to open, and with my left hand on the base of my cock, I guided my tip to her lips, pushing inside without giving her any more time to prepare for this.

My length disappeared in her mouth, sliding along her tongue until my tip hit the very back of her throat. She gagged, her body curling.

“Focus,” I told her, never taking my eyes off her. “I’m not holding back. Keep that mouth open and focus on your breathing.”

She looked at me with a frown between her brows, almost like she was telling me that breathing with a dick in her mouth wasn’t possible.

“Breathe through your nose,” I advised. “You’re a good girl. You can do it.”

She gave me a quick nod and proved to me that she was able to do just that with my dick in her mouth by taking a deep breath.

I gripped her jaw tighter and placed my left hand on her head, holding her in place as I pulled back and then thrust back in with more

force. After giving her another moment to adjust, I started to move my hips back and forth, mouth-fucking her.

“That mouth is mine,” I grunted, thrusting harder as her eyes looked up at me. God, I loved that sight. She was fucking perfect. “Keep your pretty eyes on me, baby.”

And her eyes.

Fuck, never had I seen eyes like hers, and I only wanted them to see me.

And never had I thought about a woman like I did about Darwynn.

My length hardened as I continued to thrust into her mouth, but it wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed to bury my dick deeper down her throat. Taking a step forward, I made her lean against the front of my bed, with her head pressed to the mattress.

She was sitting now, with her legs folded against her chest and her hands pressing to my thighs.

“Keep breathing. Or hold it when you can't.”

She nodded.

“Open wide,” I ordered.

With her tongue sticking out, I pulled out of her mouth again, watching my cock slide along her tongue. Then, by holding her head in place and pressing her back against the bed, I slid into her with a hard thrust.

“Don't move,” I told her as I held myself there, my dick buried deep inside her mouth. I grunted, watching as her face turned red before pulling out enough to let her breathe. She didn't gag or argue, and so I started thrusting again until my cock throbbed.

I didn't want to come in her mouth. As much as I loved watching her taste and swallow my cum earlier in the car, I wanted it to fill her pussy this time.

I finally pulled out of her, watching strings of saliva mixed with my precum hand from her lips to my tip, and I brushed over her mouth with my thumb to clean it up. I pushed my thumb into her mouth, then pulled her up to stand in front of me.

Before putting my hands on her body again, I took off my shirt and put it to the side where the rest of our clothes were.

“Come here,” I said, placing my hand on her lower back and pulling her flush against my body. Her expression was a mix of desire and

uncertainty. Something was bothering her. “What’s on your mind, baby?” I asked as I leaned down to place a kiss on her lips.

Her eyes searched my face before they dropped to my chest. “Is this enough for you? I mean...am I enough for you?”

Her doubtful words stung my damn heart. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...am I giving you enough? Was that good enough?” Her eyes met mine again, worry filling her different-colored irises. “I’m just saying that I really liked it. It was different from what I’m used to, but—”

I covered her mouth with my hand to shut her up. She was talking nonsense. “It was perfect. It felt amazing,” I assured her. “Better than any mouth I’ve ever had around my cock.”

Her gaze studied mine as I kept my hand over her mouth. I lowered my head again to rest my forehead against hers. “You’re more than enough for me, Darwynn.”

“Okay,” she whispered into my palm. She smiled, and I lowered my hand to press another kiss to her lips.

“Now...I need to fuck that tight pussy. Will you let me?”

My hands were on her hips, her naked body still pressed against mine.

“Yes.” She bit her bottom lip, a hint of excitement flashing through her eyes. “Please.”

CHAPTER 13

DARWYNN

He lifted me by my waist and put me on the bed. I leaned back on my elbows and looked up at him as he rubbed his hardness, looking like a damn God standing there naked.

I admired every inch of his upper body. From his hard pecs down to his muscular abdomen. How often did he work out? For his age, his body looked very healthy and fit. Clearly, Caspian's life as a Hollywood actor who always did his own stunts—I fact-checked that—paid off, and even at sixty-one, he carried himself with the confidence and physique of a man half his age. His biceps flexed slightly as he reached for my thighs, pulling me to the edge of the bed in one swift move.

“You’re staring,” he said, his eyes fixed on my face.

My cheeks flushed, and I pursed my lips before asking, “Can you blame me?”

The low chuckle escaping him made me want to press my thighs together, but I couldn't because he was holding my legs apart with both hands on my knees.

“Glad you’re enjoying the view. I like mine too,” he said, letting his gaze wander down my body as the tip of his tongue brushed across his bottom lip.

We took each other in, and seeing one another naked started to feel like the most normal thing ever. It didn't feel forced or weird. It felt natural. As if we were meant to be like this. Together. Naked. And so fucking horny for each other.

“What about a condom?” I asked, breaking the silence.

A grin tugged at his lips. He rubbed his cock as he replied. “I’m clean. And I got a vasectomy done a long damn time ago,” he told me, watching me intently. “But I can still wear one if you want me to.”

He was so caring. Selfless.

God, he was perfect.

“No, it’s fine. I like it without.”

He huffed out a laugh, squeezing my knees before he moved over me to grab me by the hips. Without telling me his next move, he turned me over so I was lying on my stomach, and with his hands hooked around my hips, he pulled it up to stick my ass into the air.

I arched my back and looked over my shoulder, needing to see him.

“Nervous?” he asked, raising a thick brow. His hands moved over my ass, squeezing gently.

“No. I’m excited.”

Caspian chuckled. “Excited. I’ve never heard a woman say that before I fucked her. But I’m excited, too. I think I’ll enjoy this more than ever.”

I smiled at him and wiggled my ass. “Go ahead then. I’m getting impatient.”

Another laugh escaped him, and he stepped closer as his eyes wandered over my body. He squeezed my ass, then pressed his length against my slit, rubbing it along my folds.

I took a deep breath and rested my head on the mattress, with my eyes closed and my body relaxing. “Whenever you’re ready,” I teased.

“Don’t rush me. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I can take you.”

I felt him tense behind me. “I’m sure you can. But this pussy is tight,” he said, sliding one finger inside, making me gasp. “So damn wet, but so fucking tight.”

I moaned as he added a second finger, sliding it in and out of my pussy. I arched my back a little more, pushing back each time he pushed inside. “Please,” I begged, needing more than just his fingers.

He continued for another while until I had gotten used to the thickness of his two fingers, and I felt empty the second he pulled them out. “Caspian.”

“Patience.”

“I don’t have any. Please, fuck me already.”

A low chuckle left him, and after giving me a hard slap on my ass, I finally felt the tip of his cock against my entrance. I pushed back, but every time I did, he pulled away.

Rude.

I rolled my eyes and decided not to push. To simply give him all the damn time he needed to finally fuck me. Even if it took a lot of strength, I let him be in control.

“Good girl,” he murmured when he noticed that I gave up urging him, and my body shook all over with how hot those two words sounded coming out of his mouth.

He brushed his tip through my folds, getting my wetness all over it before he pressed it against my entrance. He slid inside in one swift move, and I cried out, feeling him deep inside of me.

“Oh God,” I breathed, clawing the covers with my hands.

He stayed buried inside of me for a moment to let us both adjust to the feeling. “I’m no God, baby, but you can call me King.”

In any other situation, and with any other man, hearing that sentence would’ve made my skin crawl with embarrassment. But it was Caspian saying it, and it just made sense. Shit, he hadn’t even truly fucked me yet, and he was already the death of me.

“King,” I croaked, looking over my shoulder to watch his face. “I want you to fuck me hard.”

His grip on my hips tightened. He pulled out of me, then thrust back in with a hard push that made me cry out his name. I heard him curse under his breath as he found his rhythm, fucking me slow but hard.

“Oh yes,” I moaned. I held my position, loving the sound of our skin slapping against each other.

“So goddamn tight,” he said through clenched teeth.

He moved faster, hitting a spot deep inside of me that no man ever hit and making me feel things I never felt before. But it wasn’t just his cock that made things different from other times I had sex. It was Caspian who was mature and experienced, knowing exactly how to move and fuck a woman to make her feel good.

Everything about this was perfect, and I didn’t want it to end.

Just when I had that thought, he pulled out of me. I whined, begging him to come back. Instead, he gripped me by the hips again and turned me around to make me face him.

“Come here,” he demanded, pulling me up to stand in front of him. Before I could even think of what his intentions were, he moved around me

to sit on the edge of the bed, and I faced him again, waiting for him to pull me onto his lap.

“Ride me,” he demanded. “I need to see your pretty face when I fuck you.”

Anything.

At this point, he could do anything to me.

I straddled his lap, and with a few quick movements, he was inside of me again. I slid down his length while holding on to his shoulders, moaning as his cock buried deep into my pussy. It felt even better this way.

His hands were on my ass, lifting and lowering me while I moved my hips simultaneously.

Our eyes were locked on each other, and the fire in his mirrored mine. “So damn perfect. A pretty face and a tight little pussy. And you’re all mine.”

His possessiveness didn’t bother me.

In fact, it made me feel wanted. Needed.

Like I was the center of his world, the one thing he couldn’t bear to lose. And even if it’s only been a short period of time since we have known each other, I liked to believe that it truly meant something.

That what this was becoming was real.

“Caz,” I breathed, resting my forehead against his and wrapping my arms around his neck. “You feel so good.”

“You feel every inch of my dick inside you?” he asked, his words teasing. “Feel how I fill this tight pussy?”

“Mm, yeah,” I moaned.

“It’s my pussy. Mine. Every inch of you is mine, and I’ll take good care of you, baby.” He pressed kisses to my jaw, neck, and cheeks.

His words went straight to my heart. He wasn’t just claiming me; he was making promises. His mouth covered mine, and a burst of emotions came over me. I kissed him deeply, swirling my tongue around his and moaning into the kiss whenever he plunged his tongue deeper.

His fingers flexed on my ass, and when his grip tightened, he slammed me down his length harder. We were both getting closer to a climax, and I let myself go, needing to feel more than one orgasm. When the first wave hit me, he slowed us down just slightly, breaking the kiss to look into my eyes.

My body trembled.

“I need to see that again,” he whispered, brushing a strand of my hair away from my face. “Got another one in you?”

“If you keep fucking me like this, yes.”

He grabbed my ass with both hands again, pulling my cheeks apart as he moved me up and down just like before. It didn’t take long until another wave came crashing over me; this time, he was right there with me.

His body tensed, but he didn’t slow us down. He kept on thrusting into me, and I felt his warm cum fill my pussy.

“Fuuuck.” His hands moved to my waist, where they rested. We both stopped moving, and he turned us back around, making me lie down on the bed with him on top of me. He was still inside, and he didn’t move for a while.

I felt his cum run out of me, with drops rolling down my folds and thighs. His eyes were on mine, and I smiled at him. “Thank you.”

He furrowed his brows. “For fucking you?”

I laughed softly. “Yes. And for making me come. For taking care of me, too.”

“That’s a given.”

“No, it’s not.” I moved my hands into his hair, curling his strands around my fingers. “Not every man cares.”

He huffed, seemingly disgusted with my statement. “Then those are not men. A woman is to be taken care of. To be cherished.” He said those words with such pride and determination that it made my heart clench.

While he appreciated women, it seemed that not many had ever appreciated him or given him the same amount of respect that he deserved.

Women must’ve used him. As famous as he was, it couldn’t have been easy for him.

I smiled gently. “Still...thank you. You made me feel amazing, and I hope I could make you feel the same.”

He pushed himself up and slid out of me to stand. His gaze lingered on my body before it met mine again. “No, baby,” he started, running a hand through his hair. “You made me feel a thousand times better.”

CHAPTER 14

CASPIAN

I had never seen someone sleep as deeply as Darwynn.

It had gotten late last night after two more rounds of fucking, and since falling asleep in my arms, she hadn't moved even an inch. Her breathing was shallow, and I had to check if she was still alive by holding a finger under her nose. She was breathing, but she did it so damn quietly. Almost as if she didn't want to bother me by making even the smallest sound.

Something about that made my heart squeeze.

She either learned to be quiet because of others telling her she was being too loud—which should never be the damn case—or that was simply how she breathed, and I was looking too much into it.

It was probably the latter, but I liked to believe that Darwynn was very aware of other people and what could bother or annoy them.

She was selfless. I learned that about her quickly.

That was one of many things I adored about her.

Adored.

Shit.

That woman crawled under my skin, planted herself there, and made herself comfortable. And I let her.

Even when I got up from bed one hour ago, she hadn't moved a muscle. I slid out from under the covers and walked out of the bedroom as quietly as possible. Though, I was sure that not even a damn marching band would've woken her.

I made myself a coffee and grabbed the latest newspaper from the table before heading outside. I sat on the porch, sipped on my coffee, and read half of the damn newspaper, and when I started to miss her body pressed against mine, I headed inside to slide back into bed with her.

“Incredible,” I murmured with amusement, looking down at Darwynn as she kept sleeping, as if that’s all she’s ever done. She looked so damn content. So damn happy.

I put my arms around her and pulled her body flush against mine, needing to feel her warm skin on my own. Wrapping her arm around my waist, I held her hand on my chest while resting the other on her back. I caressed her, moving my fingers up and down her spine and along the curves of her waist and hips.

More time passed, and while my mornings usually consisted of sitting on the couch or casually strolling around the village, I liked this type of morning more. I wanted tomorrow to be the same, the next day, and the next.

Fuck, I wanted to watch her sleep every morning.

I closed my eyes and let the minutes pass, not caring about any other thing I could’ve been doing instead. This was good. We were good.

She finally stirred, making the sweetest noises as she looked up at me with sleepy eyes. “Hi,” she croaked out, giving me a tired smile. “Have you been up for long?”

I snorted, unable to hold back my amusement. “You could say that. You sleep a lot,” I said.

She scrunched up her nose and hid her face with both hands. “I’m sorry. You should’ve woken me.”

“You looked way too peaceful to be woken up.” I reached for her wrist and pulled her hand away from her face, needing to see it. “Have you not been sleeping well lately?”

Her eyes met mine. “No, I’ve slept well. I just like to sleep.”

I smirked, finding it damn adorable. “Fair enough. How are you feeling?”

She stretched her arms and legs, making her back crack. “Good. I’m not sore, which is surprising.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I haven’t had sex in a while, and I thought my body would have to get used to it again. But it felt nice. And I feel relaxed.”

Did that mean she didn’t have a lot of sex with Julian?

Shit, it didn’t matter.

And I didn’t want to know.

I gently brushed back a strand of her dark hair, caressing her face. “Get used to it,” I repeated. “So this wasn’t a one-time thing?”

Her brows furrowed as she gave me a confused look, then a hint of panic flashed through her eyes. “Was it for you?”

I didn’t have to think about that. I knew exactly what I wanted, even if I’d go straight to hell. “No, it wasn’t a one-time thing for me.”

Relief washed over her beautiful face, and a small smile tugged at her lips. “Good. It wasn’t for me, either. I’m not the one-night-stand type of girl.”

“Good.” I smiled back and leaned down to kiss her lips.

All my life, women had only ever been a pastime. Not only because I didn’t want anything serious but also because women saw me as a price. I had the money, the fame, the reputation. I had it all, and the women wanted me to share it. But being used like that didn’t give me the satisfaction I needed. Even quick fucks started to become boring.

But now—now that I was getting damn old—I had changed my mind.

And all because of Darwynn.

“I had a weird dream,” she told me when I broke the kiss.

“Tell me about it.” I leaned back against the headboard and pulled her to me. She rested her head on my chest and placed one hand on my stomach.

“It was about Julian. He came here to Hilton Beach to visit us.” She stopped, and I saw a deep frown between her brows when I looked down at her. “Which is something he definitely would never do.”

Because he didn’t want to see me.

I stayed quiet, caressing her back and waiting for her to continue telling me about her dream.

“He was...mad. Upset that I broke up with him. And then he screamed at me. And...then he called you an asshole.”

“Of course.” I took a deep breath and tightened my arms around her. “Sounds like him.”

Darwynn turned her head to look up at me. I hated the hint of pain in her eyes. Sure, it was just a dream, but my son had been like that for years. Towards me, at least.

“I really want to know what happened between you two. I only know his side of the story,” she said, her eyes searching mine. “He said...he

said that you never cared about him. That you only ever cared about your career.”

Darwynn’s voice was hesitant as if she wasn’t sure she wanted to say it out loud.

I let out a slow breath, pressing my lips together. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard those words but hearing them from Darwynn—hearing that they were still being spoken, even after all these years—stung me more than I wanted to admit.

Darwynn studied my face, looking for something. Maybe the truth. Maybe a reaction.

“I don’t know why he kept saying that,” she murmured. “I mean, I’m sure you were busy...but I can’t imagine you never even tried to call him.”

I took another breath. I wanted to tell her the truth. Tell her how things really were, but I wasn’t sure she could handle it.

“And I know you’re not a bad man. I mean, you didn’t push me away. You were grumpy, yes, but you still let me stay. You could’ve ignored me when I showed up, but you didn’t.”

I reached for her hand, running my thumb over her knuckles. “My son has always had his version of things. But the truth isn’t as simple as that.”

She sat up slightly, her expression sharpening. “Then tell me.”

I hesitated. The truth wasn’t something I’d ever planned on forcing on anyone. Especially not on her, not now that she meant something to me. But she was here, asking for it, and maybe it was time to tell someone.

Tell *her*.

I kept holding her hand while running the other through my hair. I took a deep breath, meeting her gaze again. “I was always there for Julian,” I finally said, my voice quieter than I intended. “I never abandoned him. Never chose my career over him. I was there, Darwynn. I tried. Over and over again.”

She frowned, her fingers tightening around mine. “Then why does he think you weren’t?”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “Because he never wanted to see it. He convinced himself that I didn’t care, and nothing I did could change his mind.”

Darwynn stayed quiet, watching me intently. I could see the conflict in her eyes, the way she wanted to believe me but also didn't want to dismiss Julian's side. That was fair. But she needed to know the full truth.

"I called him," I continued, my voice growing rough. "I called him on his birthday. I called him on holidays. I called him just because I missed him. And when he didn't answer, I left messages."

Darwynn's eyes softened, but I wasn't done.

"And every time he did respond, it was with anger. He'd write back with words so sharp, so filled with hate, that I wondered if he even remembered who I was to him. He told me I was a selfish bastard. That I only reached out when it was convenient for me. That I didn't deserve to be his father."

A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it down. I'd never said this out loud before. Not to anyone.

Darwynn looked down at our joined hands, rubbing her thumb absently over my skin. "I don't understand," she murmured. "If you tried, why was he so convinced that you didn't?"

I sighed. "Because when his mother and I divorced, he was young. And I was working hard, for my career but also for them. To give them everything they needed, and most importantly, shield them from the public eye. My schedule was demanding, but I never let that stop me from being there for him. I flew back to them whenever I could, made time in between projects, did everything in my power to be present. His mother, though... she made sure he saw it differently. And soon she started to not let me visit Julian anymore."

I hated to bring my ex into this, but she played a big part in the story. To Darwynn, she was irrelevant though.

She looked up sharply. "His mother did that?"

I nodded slowly, feeling the old bitterness rise in my chest. "Our marriage ended because we fell out of love. It was mutual, and when Julian was still little, she always let me go see him. Then, with time, she made excuses why I couldn't come by. When Julian was around eleven, his mother stopped answering my calls. When I finally pushed through, when I showed up at their door one day unannounced because I couldn't bear the silence any longer, Julian had already been fed a different version of the story."

Darwynn's brows furrowed. "She told him you abandoned him."

“Not in those exact words. She was smarter than that. But she let the silence do the talking. The missed visits. The unanswered calls. Years went by again, and when I finally did get him on the phone, Julian was angry. He thought I had just...disappeared.”

Darwynn’s grip on my hand tightened, her thumb still absently stroking over my skin. “That must’ve been awful.”

I exhaled slowly, rubbing my free hand over my face. “It was. And the worst part? I couldn’t prove him wrong. He wouldn’t let me. Every attempt I made to fix things only pushed him further away. It was like trying to hold onto smoke.”

Silence stretched between us, filled only by the distant sound of waves crashing outside. Darwynn leaned into me, resting her head against my shoulder again. “Do you hate her for what she did?” she asked, her voice low.

I let out a soft chuckle. “I did, for a long time. But hate doesn’t fix anything. And it sure as hell won’t bring my son back.”

She turned her face up to me, searching my expression. “I suddenly don’t feel so hopeful that I can get you two to talk again. Not because of you...but because of Julian.”

I wished I could tell her that there was still a chance for reconciliation but knowing Julian and how deeply brainwashed he had been by his mother, I had no hope myself. “I’ve always hoped that he’ll eventually realize the truth. I don’t think it will ever happen, though.”

Darwynn reached up, cupping my jaw gently. Her touch was warm, grounding, and her eyes lingered on mine. “I still want to try. Will you let me?”

I took a deep breath, soaking in the quiet comfort of her presence and touch. For the first time in a long time, I allowed myself to believe—just a little—that maybe, one day, Julian would listen.

“Okay,” I told her, smiling tightly before I pulled her into my arms.

CHAPTER 15

DARWYNN

We spent most of the afternoon in bed, kissing and touching each other. And I thought about everything he told me. About Mom. About how unfairly she treated him. And he didn't push me any further.

I didn't urge him to talk about Julian again. Not that I would've wanted to, anyway. He was hurt—and I was disappointed in Julian—and I figured we both needed to let it settle for a moment now.

When our stomachs started growling, we finally got out of bed to shower and head out.

I held his hand as we stepped out of his house, but he dropped it immediately, reminding me that we couldn't let anyone know about us.

Not just yet.

"Sorry," I said quietly, gazing up at him as we walked along the small gravel path.

"Don't be. It'll take all the strength in me not to touch you in public."

I smiled softly, loving that he struggled just the same.

What we had was bittersweet.

We walked in silence as we headed to the bar. Once we arrived, Caspian opened the door and held it for me. I squeezed past him, touching his arm gently to thank him.

The jukebox was playing softer than usual, and more people were there than the other nights. To be fair, it was a Friday night.

The scent of grilled food and stale beer wrapped around us, and I looked up at Caspian, waiting for him to decide where we'd sit.

"Over there," he said. His hand was on my lower back, guiding me through the crowd and toward an empty booth in the corner.

I slid in, with him following close behind. The bench we sat on wrapped around half of the table, and I liked having him so close next to me.

A few heads turned, but I didn't give them much attention. I was here with Caspian, and I was determined to give him all of my attention. All night long.

Our knees brushed underneath the table, and the urge to put my hand on his leg was irresistible. Before I could dare to, a waitress I hadn't seen before appeared, a notepad in hand. "What can I get you two?"

Caspian glanced up at her, giving her the slightest bit of care. "Chicken burger, fries, and a beer."

I hesitated for a second before saying. "Same. But just a Pepsi, please."

The waitress nodded and walked away, leaving us in the hum of conversations going on around us and the faint country song playing in the background. Caspian draped his left arm along the back of the booth, his fingers grazing my shoulder for one short second.

It was a subtle thing, but it sent a shiver through me.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice softer now, just for me.

I nodded, picking at the edge of a napkin. "Yeah. Just...still thinking about everything."

His jaw tensed. "I know. Me too."

I looked at him then. The dim lighting softened his sharp features, making him look almost vulnerable. I wanted to reach for his hand under the table, but I didn't. Not here. Instead, I leaned in just enough that our arms pressed together, and I felt him exhale.

"You can talk to me. About anything. I hope you know that," he said, barely whispering.

I smiled tightly and gave him a nod. "I know. Thank you. And the same goes for you."

Caspian nodded slightly, his fingers tapping absentmindedly against the wooden table. The tension between us was palpable, with an invisible string pulling us together despite the unspoken rules we had to follow. I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the warmth of his body so close to mine.

Our food arrived, and I thanked the waitress as she set down our plates without much more than a fleeting glance in our direction. Caspian immediately reached for his burger, taking a bite as I started with my fries.

As much there was going on around us, I was more focused on how his jaw tensed and relaxed as he chewed.

“Stop staring,” he murmured, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. “People will start talking.”

“What, just from me looking at you, they’ll figure out that we fucked last night?” I shot back, feeling brave and wanting to tease him. This couldn’t be easy for him either.

“Darwynn.” His voice was low, harsh. He was being serious, and he was warning me. “Don’t provoke me.”

Damn.

That was hot.

I bit back a grin and decided not to push.

After finishing half of my fries, I picked up my burger and took a bite, savoring the salty, charred flavor. We ate in silence for a few minutes, only the small thud of our glasses being placed on the table breaking the quiet between us.

“This is good,” I finally said, just to fill the space. “Almost as good as the food you make.”

Caspian huffed out a laugh, his eyes flicking up to meet mine. “Flattery will get you nowhere. But keep trying. I enjoy the effort.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “I mean it. I like your cooking. And you liked the cake I baked for you. We’re compatible.”

He responded with a simple nod, not taking the conversation further. He was trying his best not to give in to the tension. The urge to touch each other was irresistible for both of us, but we had to stay away until we were alone.

But as hard as I tried, as much as I wanted to keep what was growing between us a secret, I had this strong urge to not give a shit.

The idea of trying not to get caught was thrilling.

I reached for my drink, taking a slow sip before setting it down and daring to shift just a little closer. Caspian immediately tensed again but didn’t move away or glare at me. He let the right side of my body press against his left.

“There’s a thin line, and we won’t cross it,” he said, his voice a low warning.

“I’m pretty sure we crossed one very thin line last night already,” I replied, amused.

He grunted. Though he was frowning, the moment felt light.

The bar had grown busier while we finished eating. The crowd thickened, conversations growing louder, but it was like we were in our own little world. At least, that's what it felt like to me. Caspian's fingers flexed on the table, and then, under the cover of the dim lighting, his knee pressed against mine more cautiously.

I didn't pull away.

Why the hell would I, anyway? I was enjoying every moment. Every little touch. Every small sign of his that told me he wanted me close.

I let my fingers slide down to my lap, brushing against his hand beneath the table. He didn't flinch. He didn't pull back. Instead, his fingers curled around mine. Carefully yet determined. We were touching in a place filled with people who would frown and grimace at us if they knew what we did and who we were to each other.

My breath hitched slightly, and I glanced at him, my pulse hammering in my throat. His eyes were dark, steady, filled with something unreadable but undeniably intense.

His jaw clenched. "I can't fucking stand not touching you. Thought I could handle it, but apparently, I can't."

My heart skipped a beat, and my breathing quickened. "Then touch me."

He squeezed my hand and shook his head before gazing at the empty plate in front of him. "Touching is not enough."

My body tensed, and I skimmed the crowd with my eyes before they landed on the narrow hallway. The idea of fucking in the restroom was exciting, but I knew he would say no to that.

Way too risky, and I didn't want to get kicked out of this bar.

I had another idea.

One I was sure he would say yes to.

I looked at him again, licking my lips and studying his face for a moment before asking, "What if we just pay and leave? Head back to your place?"

He eyed me closely as his hand squeezed mine. I couldn't quite read him. He was thinking hard as if what I had asked was the toughest question ever. Even after a moment, his answer still hadn't come. He kept watching me, and his hand moved to my thigh.

"Can you be quiet?" he asked, surprising me.

“Depends—”

“Yes or no.”

“Yes,” I said, my voice a faint breath.

Only when he wrapped his hand around my left leg and lifted it over his lap did I understand his plan.

“Are you sure?”

He shot me an amused glance. “I’m not the one needing to keep quiet while getting fingered in a bar full of people. You need to be sure.”

If he kept talking like that, I would get naked right there, putting myself on the table for him to take me in front of everyone. But I had to hold back. I needed a cold shower.

“I am sure,” I told him, sighing as he ran his fingers along my inner thigh.

“Good. Unbutton your pants.”

I didn’t argue, nor did I hesitate. My jeans were unbuttoned and unzipped in seconds, and I parted my legs more to give him better access. He glanced down, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I can smell your arousal. Fuck, baby, you’re not making this easy for me.”

“It doesn’t have to be hard,” I told him with a raised brow. “We can still just go home.”

“No.” His hand cupped my pussy, with his fingers pressing against it over my jeans’ fabric. “This is way more fucking exciting.”

I was glad he changed his mind. I liked his daring side and wanted to see more of it in the future.

I bit my bottom lip and looked down before leaning back in the booth, breathing deeply. I was ready for him to do whatever he wanted to.

Fuck everyone else.

Only Caz and I mattered.

CASPIAN

My cock was throbbing against the hard fabric of my jeans. I cupped it but simply held it, not wanting to make myself even harder. It was Darwynn’s turn, and all my focus was on her.

I fucking adored this woman. She made me feel alive again. Young. Reckless. Just like I had been throughout my twenties and thirties. Giving into her had been the hardest fucking thing I had ever done, simply because I thought I had the rest of my life planned out.

I had come to terms with the fact that living here alone with a few random people around would be the end of my life. I still had a long time to live, and I was healthy, but I was ready to spend the rest of my life as planned.

Then, Darwynn showed up. And all of a sudden, my whole fucking life revolved around her.

I had no idea what her plan was.

Would she leave once her stay was over?

Would she stay a while longer now that something was growing between us?

The connection we had was special. I had many women in my life, but never did I want to be with a woman, have her live with me, and spend every single day with me.

But I wanted all that with Darwynn.

She turned my life upside down, and it didn't bother me one fucking bit.

Hell, she could burn down my house, and I wouldn't mind.

As long as she would be in my arms after.

I pushed my fingers into her panties, feeling her wetness immediately. "Goddamn," I muttered, my jaw clenching. Having this effect on her made me feel powerful. I was a dominant man, but I liked her confidence, and I would let her shine when the time was right.

Right now, I needed her to give in to me and let me make her come in this bar full of people I couldn't give less of a fuck about.

I teased her entrance with my fingertips, circling it slowly and feeling her pussy clench at my touch. Her body was tense, but she was good at not showing her emotions on her face. This couldn't be easy for her, but she wanted it, and she wouldn't risk getting caught.

"Relax," I murmured seconds before I dipped two fingers into her.

She gripped my wrist, her nails digging into my skin. "God," she choked.

"Quiet. I don't want to attract an audience."

"Me neither," she said through clenched teeth.

I chuckled in amusement.

She cleared her throat and took a deep breath, her hips pressing forward as I pulled out of her slightly.

"Don't move," I ordered.

She stilled, and I slid my fingers back in, deeper this time.

“God, you’re so fucking wet. I wish I could taste you.”

“You can,” she told me, her voice hopeful. “Later.”

“Definitely.” I wouldn’t pass on that opportunity. I would spend the rest of my life with my mouth on her pussy if I had the chance to.

I thrust my fingers in and out of her in a slow and steady rhythm. My eyes wandered around the bar occasionally, making sure nobody was paying attention to us.

I continued, feeling her inner walls pulse around my fingers. Her breath caught as I curled them inside her, finding that spot that made her squirm. I pressed my thumb against her clit, circling it slowly, building the pressure gradually.

Darwynn’s eyes fluttered closed, her lips parting slightly. I could tell she was fighting to keep quiet, her chest rising and falling rapidly with each shallow breath. I leaned in closer, my lips brushing her ear.

“That’s it, baby. You look so damn beautiful,” I whispered, my voice low and husky.

I increased the pace of my fingers, thrusting them deeper, harder. Her hips bucked slightly, and I pressed my free hand against her lower back, holding her still.

I felt her start to tremble, her thighs quivering against my hand. Her fingers dug into my forearm, her nails leaving marks on my skin. I could sense her climax building, her pussy clenching in a steady rhythm around my fingers.

It turned me the fuck on, watching her try her hardest not to be too loud. Her face was filled with emotions.

“That’s it,” I murmured, my lips still at her ear. “Come for me, Darwynn. Nice and quiet. Don’t want anyone to know I’m fingering this wet pussy.”

She let out a grunt, her brows furrowing. “You’re not playing fair,” she argued.

I smirked. “You don’t have a say in this right now.”

I curled my fingers inside her, pressing firmly against the right spot while my thumb kept on working her clit in circles. Her breathing grew ragged, coming in short, sharp gasps. I felt her whole body tense.

She shuddered violently, her pussy clenching down on my fingers tightly. A strangled whimper escaped her lips, barely audible over the

music. I held her right there, watching as she rode out her orgasm. Her body was shaking with wave after wave of pleasure and the pulsating of her walls around me. She pressed her lips together tightly, muffling her soft moans as she came undone.

I continued to stroke her gently, drawing out her climax for as long as possible. Her hips rocked subtly against my hand, chasing every last tremor of ecstasy.

“Beautiful,” I muttered, taking in her face. “So goddamn beautiful.”

I could watch her forever.

Hell, I could make her come forever. Until she couldn’t take it anymore.

As her quivering lessened, I slowly withdrew my fingers from inside her. Darwynn’s eyes fluttered open, pupils dilated with lingering desire. I held her gaze as I brought my fingers to my lips, inhaling her sweet scent before sliding them into my mouth.

I was addicted to her taste.

To her sweetness.

To *her*.

She was intoxicating, and I savored every moment.

Darwynn was watching me intently, her chest rising and falling. Her cheeks were flushed, a rosy glow spreading down her neck.

“Delicious,” I murmured as I pulled out my fingers. “But this was just a tease. I can’t wait to take my sweet time with my head between your legs later.”

This time, she stopped breathing, her eyes widening.

I made her speechless.

Leaning in, I cupped her face with the hand I just used to fingerfuck her. Her skin was warm beneath my palm. I brushed my thumb across her cheekbone, savoring the softness. Our eyes locked again, and I saw a mix of desire, vulnerability, and something deeper swirling in her gaze.

I like being in control, and I liked that she was giving herself to me willingly. And I liked seeing her slowly fall in love with me.

She didn’t have to tell me. I could see it. Feel it.

But I knew she could see it in my eyes, too. No way I could ever hide a feeling that strong. I had no reason to try and hide it. No chance I would be able to lie about how she made me feel.

I dropped my hand and put more distance between us before giving anyone in this bar even the slightest idea of what went on between us. My need to kiss her grew with every second we sat in that booth, but I had to be patient.

Only for a couple of minutes, though.

“Button your pants. We’re leaving.”

CHAPTER 16

DARWYNN

We didn't even make it to the bedroom.

In fact, the second he unlocked his front door and closed it again, he undressed the both of us and lifted me up into his arms. He pressed me against the wall, pressing his hard cock against my throbbing pussy. I had my arms and legs wrapped tightly around him, and his hands were cupping my ass, squeezing tightly as his fingers dug into my flesh.

Every touch of his sent shivers through my body, and I gasped as he ground hard against me. The friction of his length against my folds and clit only heightened my arousal, and I was certain that I had never been this wet before.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll forget your own damn name." His raspy, deep words had the ability to make me come, but I could hold it together.

"Yes, please," I begged, running my hands into his hair.

His mouth was on my neck, kissing, licking, sucking. I moaned and threw my head back, letting him taste every inch of me.

I rocked my hips, sliding up and down his length. He groaned, gripping my ass tighter. "Needy little thing. Tell me, baby," he murmured, trailing kisses along my jaw and down my neck. "How much do you want me?"

I moaned loudly and arched my back when the rubbing of his cock on my clit got too intense. "I want you so bad...I'm so wet for you," I croaked out.

"Hmm, I can feel that. You have been since we sat down in that booth earlier. It's a constant state for you when you're with me, isn't it, darling?"

“Ahh!” My body shuddered as he covered my breast with his mouth, sucking in my nipple. “Yes. Oh, Caz...”

“So damn sweet. You’re mine, Darwynn. Mine.” He carried me over the couch and set me down, standing in front of me while stroking his cock. “Look what you do to me. Making me harder than I’ve ever been.”

I let my eyes wander down his body, taking in every single muscle that was flexing under his skin. He truly looked like a god. A king. And I still couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that he was sixty-one.

My eyes were on his cock now, watching as he stroked himself. He reached down with his other hand to cup his balls, and he squeezed them the same way he squeezed his tip whenever his forefinger and thumb reached it.

I licked my lips, needing to taste him.

“You want it?” he asked, taunting me with a smirk on his lips. “You liked having my dick in your mouth, hm? Even if you almost choked on it.”

My cheeks flushed. It had been difficult taking all of his length into my mouth, but I was a quick learner, and after a while, it hadn’t been so difficult after all. “I can handle you.”

“Yeah?” He stepped closer, placing both hands on my knees to part my legs and get a good view of my pussy. “You want it again?”

I nodded, biting my lower lip. “Yes, please.”

“Lean back,” he demanded, and I did as I was told.

He moved closer, putting one knee on the couch next to me. I wanted to move forward, but he raised a brow at me. “Lean. Back.”

I swallowed and nodded, obeying this time.

I dropped my gaze back to his cock, and watched as he rubbed it for a little while before moving forward again. “Open that pretty mouth.”

Once my lips were parted, he placed one hand on the top of my head and rested his knee on the couch next to me before guiding his tip to my mouth. He pushed inside without giving me another warning, and I placed my hands on his thighs, stopping him from pushing deeper.

“Hands down,” he demanded, stopping his movement.

I glanced up at him through my lashes, unable to speak with his cock in my mouth.

“You said you could handle me. Let me fuck this pretty mouth.”

I swallowed the saliva that had puddled at the back of my tongue, then nodded, preparing for him to be in control again. I relaxed, moving

further down so he had better access.

“Good girl. Keep those pretty eyes on me.”

He caressed my hair and placed his right hand on his base before pushing into my mouth again. I held my breath as I felt his tip at the back of my throat, loving how his cock filled all of my mouth.

“So damn perfect. That’s it...take it all in.”

He held himself there, buried deep inside, and his eyes watching me closely. He muttered a curse when he slowly pulled out, then pushed back inside. And when I got used to it, he started thrusting in and out in a slow and steady rhythm. “Feels so good,” he grunted, gripping a fistful of my hair with his fist.

He moved his right hand to my tits, teasing and pinching my nipples.

As Caz’s thrusts grew more forceful, I struggled to keep my eyes locked on his. His cock plunged deeper with each stroke, filling my mouth completely. I focused on relaxing my throat, determined to take all of him.

“That’s it, baby. Take it like the good girl you are,” he growled, his grip tightening in my hair again.

His hips snapped forward sharply, and I felt his thick length hit the back of my throat. My eyes watered as I fought against my gag reflex.

Caz held himself there for a long moment, watching intently as I struggled around him. His expression was tense, and his nostrils flared. “Fuuuck.”

Finally, he pulled back, allowing me to gasp for air. But before I could take a deep breath, he captured my lips in a deep kiss. His tongue plunged into my mouth this time, tasting himself on me. I moaned, gripping both his arms to keep him there.

The kiss didn’t last long enough, but I knew that the second his lips left mine, he would move on to my next body part.

He lowered his head between my legs, his hot breath teasing my inner thighs. I shivered in anticipation as he placed gentle kisses along my skin, working his way inward. When his tongue finally licked over my swollen clit, I cried out and arched my back off the couch.

Caz groaned against me, the vibrations sending shockwaves of pleasure through my core. He sucked at my entrance, gathering my juices on his tongue before focusing his attention on my throbbing clit. His skilled

mouth moved perfectly, alternating between long strokes and quick flicks that had me bucking beneath him.

“Aah! Caz!” I cried out loud enough to be heard outside. But nobody would hear us. We were alone in his cabin, far enough away from the people back at the bar and hidden away in our own little world.

“You taste fucking incredible,” he murmured, his voice muffled against my flesh.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, holding him close as I ground myself against his face. His beard rubbed against the insides of my thighs, only intensifying everything I was already feeling.

He kept his left hand on my thigh, keeping my legs apart as he moved two fingers of his right hand through my folds. He slid them up and down before pushing them inside my pussy, thrusting hard until I felt his knuckles press against my skin.

“CAZ!”

“Rock those hips for me, baby. Ride my fingers while I lick this needy clit.”

If I had no control over my own body, I would’ve come right then. In an instant. Because of his words only.

But I didn’t want to let go just yet. I wanted to keep him down there, with his face between my legs and his perfect mouth on my pussy.

I moved my hips up, meeting his thrusts, and when I started to whimper, he looked up while licking through my folds one more time, slowly.

“Can’t hold back forever, baby. Come. Let me feel that clit throb against my tongue.”

And, suddenly, I lost all control.

My body tensed, and I cried out his name as he sent me right over the edge. The climax washed over me in big, harsh waves, and I shook all over as I let them all come over me. His grunts were faint in the distance, and I couldn’t make out what he was telling me. But I knew his words were as dirty as ever.

Everything around me went dark, and for a moment, it felt like nothing was real. The way I was feeling because of him couldn’t be real. How was it possible for a man to make me experience something so deep when we had only just met?

In the shortest time, Caspian had become part of me.

My pulse raced, my breath caught in my throat, and the world around us turned silent. I opened my eyes and met his own, smiling gently when I realized that this was very much real.

“Tell me this is forever,” I whispered.

His jaw ticked, his eyes flickering with emotions that mimicked mine. His hands flexed on my thighs as he moved up to brush his lips on mine. “If you want it to be.”

CHAPTER 17

DARWYNN

Checking out of the tiny house wasn't as bittersweet as I thought it would be. The moment I handed the keys back to Theresa, her eyes sharp as ever, I felt a strange sense of relief. Maybe it was because I knew I wasn't really leaving Hilton Beach.

Not yet, anyway.

Yesterday, when I brought up having to check out this morning before ten, he glared at me with the most unhappy expression I had ever seen. He had always been grumpy, but the way he looked at me was an all-new look. He didn't want me to leave, and with a stern voice, he said, "You're staying."

Of course, I couldn't say no to that. He invited me to stay at his place until we figured out what was next.

"So," Theresa said, locking the front door of the tiny house, "are you going back home now?"

I shook my head, smiling tightly. "I'm actually staying for a while. At Caspian's."

Her brows shot up. "He actually invited you to stay. Well, I'll be damned."

"Is it that surprising?" I asked with a small laugh.

Theresa shrugged. "I didn't think he'd want you to stay for longer, seeing as he liked being alone. But...it seems that he likes having you around. For whatever reason. You're just his son's girlfriend."

Despite her confusion about why I was staying, her words warmed me more than I cared to admit. I smiled. "We get along quite nicely."

She huffed, slowly shaking her head. "Go figure. You showed up out of nowhere without a warning, without knowing each other beforehand, and with the stupid idea of reuniting him with his son."

I knew what she was getting at. Before I came, Caspian was done with his past. He wanted to live his life quietly and without company. But I believed that I came to find him at the right time.

Or...I was the person he was missing in his life.

Either way, I was here, and I wasn't leaving.

Not unless Caspian kicked me out of this village himself.

"All right," I said, giving her another tight smile. "Thanks, Theresa, this place was nice." I picked up my bags and headed down the two steps of the porch. "I'll see you around."

A small nod was all she gave me before she left, and without giving our conversation any more care, I walked to Caspian's house, where he was already waiting for me on the porch.

His arms were crossed over his chest, and he watched me carefully as I stepped up to stand in front of him. I dropped my bags on either side of me and smiled up at him. "Here I am. But you don't really look so happy that I am."

He scoffed. "What did Theresa say to you?"

Ah. He must've seen us talking outside the tiny house.

"Nothing. She asked if I was going back home, but I told her that I was staying with you."

"And she made a snarky remark, I guess?"

I shrugged. "Pretty much. But I handled it, and I don't think she caught on that we got closer." I smiled again, tipping my chin toward the front door. "Will you let me in?"

He lifted one finger. "There are house rules."

I raised my brow, amused. "I've been in there before, Caz."

"But you haven't *lived* in my house before." His gaze was locked on mine, serious, and I decided not to fight him on this.

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Don't leave dishes in the sink overnight."

"Fair."

"Don't touch the thermostat. I like it cold."

I pursed my lips. "Guess I'll never sleep naked then."

"I'll keep you warm."

"Fine with me," I said with a grin.

"No baking."

"But—"

“No. Baking.”

“But why? It’ll make your house smell amazing.”

He raised a brow. “Are you saying my house stinks?”

“No, of course not. But you’d be surprised at how relaxing it is sitting around the house with the smell of freshly baked cupcakes around you.”

He studied me carefully, making up his mind about his rule. “Fine. You can bake. But you clean up afterward.”

“Of course I will,” I promise with a gentle smile. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” He took a step closer, looking around to make sure nobody was casually walking by. His eyes met mine, and he lowered his head before whispering, “We fuck every day. No exceptions.”

My breath hitched. That’s a rule I would definitely obey. “Gladly.”

“Good girl.”

Shivers ran down my spine as he left me standing there on the porch while he grabbed my bags and carried them inside. I followed him inside when I managed to get my legs to work. He carried the bags to his bedroom, and when he returned, he stood in front of me again.

He cupped my face with both hands, leaned in, and kissed me softly. I eased into him immediately and rested my hands on his chest. He pulled back a little while later and rested his forehead against mine. “I’m glad you’re staying with me,” he whispered.

“Me too.” I smiled, kissing him again, and wrapping my arms around his neck. He held me close, putting his arms tightly around my waist.

Yeah, I definitely stayed a while longer. I wanted more of this moment. More of him. Of us.

Hilton Beach wasn’t just a detour anymore.

It was starting to feel like a place where I might just belong.

Two weeks later, I managed to follow the four little rules he had asked me to follow. I especially enjoyed rule number four: *fucking every day*.

He rarely made me catch my breath or give me time to let my body relax, but all the soreness from all the fucking felt good in a way. He was

restless, and when I asked him if he had always slept this little, he just laughed.

Of course, he had slept way more hours before I turned up at his door a couple of weeks ago, but he didn't seem to miss it.

Today wasn't about him or our rules. Today, I needed to get out of the house for a bit. I convinced Caspian to let me walk to the general store to get a few ingredients for dinner tonight. I promised him I'd text him the second I arrived, even if the store was just down the road. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea, but he relented.

He told me not to talk to Henry, but I hadn't intended to, anyway. My plan was to go in, grab the ingredients, and leave.

The bell above the door chimed as I stepped into the store, making my entrance seem way more excited than I was. I looked around and grabbed a basket before making my way toward the shelves.

Henry was nowhere in sight, but I'd for sure see him at checkout.

I started placing things in my basket, occasionally grabbing things we didn't really need. Caspian wouldn't be too happy about that, but I was sure he'd enjoy some good old salt and vinegar chips too.

"Well, look who it is." Henry's voice came out of nowhere, and when I turned around, I saw him standing right there, a few feet behind me. "Heard you're extending your stay. Say, are you staying on your own will, or is he forcing you to stay?"

I frowned at him. "Forcing me?"

I didn't have the strength to start an argument with him, but I wasn't going to let him say things that simply weren't true.

"Yeah. I'm surprised he let you come here alone. Thought he kept a tight leash on you."

I gripped the basket tighter. "He's not keeping me on a leash."

Henry's eyes gleamed with mock amusement. "Sure, he's not. Everyone in town's talking about it. You know, how Caspian's got you holed up in that house of his now. Never lets you go anywhere alone. Doesn't let you talk to anyone."

"That's not true," I said, heat rising in my cheeks. "I can talk to whoever I like, but he's pretty much the only one I like talking to."

He lifted his hand to his chest. "Ouch. That hurt, darling."

God, I hated him.

He was in his thirties, and you would think that he was mature enough not to act this way.

I turned away to grab the last couple of things I needed for dinner, needing to get some distance between us, but he followed me shamelessly.

“Men like Caspian...they don’t change. You think you’re special because, what, you’re dating his son? He doesn’t really care about you. God knows why he’s keeping you here. Probably wants us to think that he’s a good man, but we all know he’s not.”

I was angry.

Hurt by the words he so loosely threw at me.

Henry didn’t know shit about Caspian.

I opened my mouth to respond, my words ready to attack, but I was stopped when the door behind me creaked open. I didn’t need to turn around to know who it was. I felt the shift in the air, the sudden tension.

There was also the look of horror in Henry’s eyes, which he tried hard to hide.

Of course, Caspian came to my rescue. Again.

“Henry,” Caspian’s voice was low, deadly. “Step away from her.”

Henry’s smirk faded as he took a step back. “Just talking, Caspian. Didn’t realize she needed a bodyguard.”

Caspian moved past me in a blur, placing himself between me and Henry. His fists were clenched at his sides, his body tense. “You’re done talking. You don’t get to make her uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable?” Henry laughed nervously. “Come on, man. I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking. She doesn’t look like she wants to be here. You’re forcing her.”

Brave motherfucker.

Didn’t think he’d actually have the balls to tell Caspian what was on his mind.

The veins on the side of Caspian’s neck flexed, and I reached out to touch his arm, wanting to calm him down. “Caz, come on. It’s not worth it.”

But he didn’t react to me. He continued to stare him down. “I don’t give one single shit about what any of you think. She’s staying. And she’s here because she wants to be here. Now stay the fuck away from her.”

Henry held Caspian’s glare for a moment before muttering, “Whatever,” and heading back to the counter.

Caspian turned to me, his jaw still tight. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “I’m okay.”

He gave me once-over, trying to figure out if I was truly okay, then he grabbed the basket from me, asking, “Did you get everything?”

“The milk and eggs are missing.”

“Wait by the exit,” he ordered and walked over to grab those two things before heading to the counter. He didn’t give Henry any attention but waited patiently as he scanned every item.

He grumbled the total, and Caspian threw the money on the counter before grabbing the paper bag and turning back to me. “Let’s go.”

I let him lead me out of the store, his hand on my lower back. Outside, I exhaled shakily.

“I’m sorry,” he said, voice low. “I should’ve come with you.”

I didn’t argue with that.

I could’ve done it alone if Henry wouldn’t have been such a dick.

“I’m glad you showed up when you did.”

His eyes softened slightly. “Next time, we go together.”

I smiled faintly. “Fine.”

We walked in silence, and once we got to his house, I turned to him and said, “You know, I don’t believe anything anyone says about you here. I know who you are and why you want me to stay. I don’t care about anyone else.”

He gave me a sharp nod. “Good. Because everyone here is full of shit. Especially Henry.”

I agreed, so I decided to leave it at that.

But Caspian didn’t.

Later that night, after our homecooked dinner and changing into my pajamas, I found him standing by the living room window, a glass of whiskey in hand. The muscles in his back were tight beneath his shirt, his posture rigid as he stared out into the darkness.

I approached quietly, slipping my arms around his waist from behind. He was still thinking about the interaction we had with Henry. “He’s not worth your time,” I whispered against his shoulder blade.

His hand covered mine, squeezing gently. “I know,” he said, though his jaw remained clenched. “But when I saw him standing there, talking to you like that...I wanted to rip his throat out.”

I shivered, not from fear but from the raw protectiveness in his voice. “I can handle guys like Henry.” At least, I liked to think I could.

“Yeah?” He turned around, cupping my face with one hand. “Well, you shouldn’t have to.” His thumb traced my lower lip, his eyes burning into mine. “You’re mine to protect. Always.”

The intensity of his gaze made my knees weak.

I leaned into him, tilting my head up for a kiss, but instead, he gave me another once-over—this one slower, more possessive. His mouth curved into a dark smile.

“Go to the bedroom,” he said softly, the command clear in his tone. “Undress. Get on the bed.”

I swallowed, my pulse quickening as I nodded. I turned and headed down the hall, my legs trembling with each step, anticipation drumming through me.

Whatever anger Henry had stirred in Caspian earlier had shifted into something else now. Something sharp and unrelenting.

And tonight, I knew I would feel every ounce of it.

CHAPTER 18

CASPIAN

“Turn around,” I demanded, watching her intently as she gazed up at me with lustful eyes. She was already naked and sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting on me like the good girl she was.

I took in every inch of her body. Every curve, freckle, mark. Everything.

She obeyed, turning slowly to reveal her smooth back and round ass.

I stepped up behind her and ran my hands down her spine, savoring the softness of her skin. Gently, I pushed forward until her upper body was flat on the bed, and her hips flush with the edge of the bed. She turned her head to the side to look back at me, licking her lips slowly.

“You probably don’t even know this, but you’re a damn tease when you look at me with those eyes. And that mouth,” I said, my voice low. “Fuck...I love those lips.”

I leaned forward, keeping my right hand on her hip while pressing my crotch against her ass. Gently, I brushed the hair away from her face to get a better look at her beautiful features, and when I pressed harder against her, I watched as she closed her eyes in ecstasy.

“Not even inside you yet, and you’re ready to come undone for me.” I caressed the side of her face and continued to rub my hardness against her ass, grinding on her to tease her. “Tell me, baby...how much do you want me inside this tight pussy?”

“Desperately,” she breathed, moaning louder when I squeezed her ass.

“Hmm.” I smirked and pulled away from her to slide my fingers between her slit. Heat rose from between her legs, and the scent of her arousal made me feel light-headed.

I teased her asshole with my fingertips, circling slowly. "Think I can finger this tight little asshole? Do you think you can handle that?" I asked, watching her closely as her body reacted in a whole new way.

"Just your fingers?" she asked, her voice unsure.

"For now. And maybe once you've gotten used to it, we can try my cock."

My suggestion sparked something in her. Her eyes widened, and body tense.

"Easy, baby," I said, rubbing both my hands over her ass cheeks. "We don't have to. But I would like to try. One finger. Fuck, I wanna taste it, too."

Her breath was shaky. "Okay."

"I need you to be sure, Darwynn. I won't do it otherwise."

"No, I want you to. I want to try," she told me. "But just one finger."

I nodded, giving her a silent promise before sliding my fingers down her slit again. I looked down as I pulled her left ass cheek to the side to get a better look. Although her pussy was wet enough, I needed more lubricant. I collected a pool of saliva on my tongue, then aimed for the top of her slit before letting it drop down and roll right to her asshole. I put my thumb there, gently pressing my saliva against the entrance.

I teased it for a moment, then slowly slid my forefinger into her ass.

She winced, but instead of pulling away, she arched her back and clenched around my finger, automatically pulling me further in.

"Oh..."

"How does that feel, baby?" I asked, looking at her face to see her expression.

"Good," she whispered, a faint smile appearing on her lips.

"Yeah?" I looked back to my finger, dipping it further in until it fully disappeared. "You're such a good girl. All relaxed and open to try new things. I adore that about you."

Her smile widened, and her walls clenched around my finger again, reacting to my words. I slowly moved my finger in and out of her, and after teasing her with a second finger, I pushed it inside as well, letting another drop of spit fall to her entrance.

Darwynn moaned louder this time, and I curled my fingers slightly to stroke her inside. "That's it, baby. Let me hear how good it feels," I

encouraged, increasing the pace of my fingers. With my free hand, I gave a sharp smack on her ass cheek, watching the flesh jiggle and redden.

She cried out in pleasure, pushing back against my hand. "More, please," she croaked.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

I knew she could take it, but I didn't want to overwhelm her.

"Yes."

"And the spanking?" I asked.

"Yes, that too. Please."

"So damn polite," I murmured.

I alternated between fingering her deeply and giving her playful spanks on her ass. Her skin flushed and felt hot under my touch.

"You're taking it so well," I praised, loving how responsive she was. "Such a good girl for me. So eager."

I continued working her ass with my fingers, admiring how well she took them. Her moans of pleasure filled the room as I alternated between gentle strokes and firmer thrusts. With my free hand, I unbuckled my belt and opened my pants, freeing my throbbing cock.

"I'm going to slide into your pussy now," I told her, my voice husky with desire. "You're going to feel so full, baby."

I positioned myself behind her, the head of my cock brushing against her slick folds. Slowly, I pushed forward, entering her tight heat inch by inch. The sensation was intense. Her pussy gripped me tightly as my fingers remained buried in her ass.

Darwynn gasped, her back arching as she took all of me. "Oh god," she whimpered. "It's so much."

"But you can take it, can't you?" I held still to let her adjust for a moment. "You're doing so well, taking my cock and my fingers."

I began to move, setting a steady rhythm as I thrust into her pussy while gently working her ass with my fingers. The dual sensations seemed to overwhelm her in the best way. Her walls clenched around me, her body trembling with each thrust.

"How does it feel?" I asked, my free hand gripping her hip tightly.

"Amazing," she moaned. "I feel so full."

I increased my pace, driving into her more forcefully. The room filled with the sounds of my grunts, skin slapping on skin, and her breathless cries of pleasure.

I could feel the pressure building, my own release approaching as I worked her body relentlessly.

"That's it, baby," I growled, feeling her walls tighten around me again. "Let go for me. Come on my cock."

I increased my pace, pounding into her hard as my fingers worked her ass. Darwynn's cries grew louder, her body trembling beneath me. I could feel her getting close, dancing on the edge of release.

"Oh god, don't stop." Her fingers gripped the sheets tightly. "I'm gonna come!"

"Do it," I commanded, my voice rough. "Come for me, Darwynn."

With a final, deep thrust, she shattered. Her back arched beautifully as waves of pleasure coursed through her body. Her pussy clenched rhythmically around my cock, milking me as she rode out her intense orgasm.

The sight and feel of her coming undone pushed me over the edge. With a loud groan, I buried myself to the hilt inside her and let go. My release hit me hard, pleasure exploding through my body as I filled her with my seed.

For a moment, we stayed frozen in place, both of us panting heavily as the aftershocks of our orgasms ripped through us. Slowly, I withdrew my fingers from her ass and my softening cock from her pussy.

Darwynn whimpered at the loss, her body still sensitive.

I gently helped her fully onto the bed, then climbed in beside her. Pulling her into my arms, I pressed soft kisses along her shoulder and neck. She snuggled back against me, fitting perfectly against my body.

"That was incredible," Darwynn murmured, her voice thick with satisfaction.

I hummed in agreement, nuzzling into her hair. "You were amazing, baby. So beautiful, so responsive."

We lay there in comfortable silence for a while, our breathing syncing. My hand lazily traced patterns on her skin, savoring its softness. Her fingers intertwined with mine, bringing our joined hands to rest over her heart.

"Thank you," she said softly, turning her head to look at me.

"For what?" I asked, meeting her gaze.

"For being patient. For making me feel safe to try new things."

I smirked, leaning in to place a kiss on her lips. “Always, baby. I’ll always take care of you. And I’ll always protect you. Especially from people like Henry.”

She pursed her lips, looking amused. “You’re still thinking about him?”

I shook my head. “Just trying to make a point.”

Her eyes shone with affection. She shifted, turning in my arms to face me fully. Her hand came up to cress my cheek, and I leaned into her touch.

“Thank you,” she said again, her voice soft.

I took her in, admiring her beauty. “No, thank *you*.”

CHAPTER 19

DARWYNN

My heart was pounding as I held my phone to my ear, waiting for the person I had called to pick up. I had thought about calling Julian for a while now, and this morning, I had gathered enough courage to do it.

Caspian was outside, working on his car, and I figured that if I didn't do it now, I never would. Caspian and my relationship was getting more serious, and I just couldn't keep on dealing with this tension inside of me.

And I hated how hurt Caspian was about this whole situation with Julian. I wanted them to talk. To clear things up. For them to just accept each other again.

"Babe?"

Babe?

I frowned. That was a weird way to greet me after all these months. And after very obviously breaking up the last time we saw each other.

"Uh, hey, Julian," I greeted him back. My voice was shaky. "How are you?"

"Relieved, now that you called. I thought you had forgotten about me."

Damn, he wasn't making this easy for me.

There was a hint of hope in his voice, and I needed to stop him right there.

"Julian..." I sighed, covering my forehead with my free hand. "I'm calling for a reason, and I need you to listen to me, okay?"

There was a pause on the other end, a long enough silence that made my stomach twist. Then, his voice came back, filled with worry. "Are you hurt? Where are you?"

I let out a slow breath. "I'm okay, Jule. I'm in Hilton Beach."

“Where’s that?”

So he never cared to find out where his father lived now.

“Canada. About twelve hours from Burlington,” I told him.

“So you’re still on your trip? You’ve been gone for so long.”

Did he think I was someday going back to him?

Shit... was he waiting on me?

No, why would he? And why wouldn’t he text if he missed me?

It didn’t matter, anyway. I didn’t want him back.

I broke up with him, but he clearly didn’t fully accept it.

“I uh...” I stopped to find the right words. I needed to move this conversation into a different direction. “Hilton Beach is where your father lives.”

Silence.

Again.

And though I couldn’t see his face, I just knew there was shock and disappointment written all over his face.

“What the fuck, Darwynn!”

Aaaand he’s back.

“Let me explain,” I said, biting my lower lip.

“What. The. Fuck!”

Apparently, he was still trying to swallow the news of me being at his father’s place.

“Look, I didn’t call to fight. I just...I wanted to talk.”

“About what?” He sounded wary now, like he already knew where this conversation was headed.

I hesitated, gripping the edge of the couch cushion beside me. “About your past.”

He scoffed immediately. “Of course.”

“Julian—”

“You’re fucking insane. Do you even realize what you’ve done? First, you break up with me. Then, you go on a months-long trip without ever calling or texting. And now you’re with my *father*? What the actual fuck is going on, Darwynn?”

Oh, he was *angry*.

I clenched my jaw and gripped my phone tighter.

I swallowed. I needed to keep calm. “I will explain it to you. Just give me a moment. And, please, hear me out.”

“Hear you out?” He let out a bitter laugh. “You’re being crazy. God, Darwynn, how dare you insert yourself into this? This isn’t about you. It’s about me and him.”

This time, I laughed.

Dryly.

“I never inserted myself into this. *You* did. When you kept talking about what a “horrible man” Caspian is. For six long months, you talked badly about him in front of me. So, yes, Julian, it’s about me, too.”

“What, are you trying to make up for something? Trying to be a heroine? For what?” He muttered a curse. “What the fuck!”

If he said that one more time, I would riot.

He was quiet again, but I could hear his breathing. He was annoyed.

“Please, hear me out,” I said, keeping my voice soft. I truly didn’t want to fight with him.

“You can’t convince me to talk to him.”

“I’m not trying to convince you of anything. I just thought I would try. Because I know how much you’re hurting, and after getting to know Caspian—”

“How long have you been there?” he asked, interrupting me.

“A few weeks.”

“Shit.” He sighed heavily. “I bet he’s been lying to you all this time. Whatever he said is not true. He’s an asshole.”

“That’s not true,” I whispered, my heart clenching with pain. I hated how he talked about Caspian.

“Whatever,” he muttered, falling silent once more.

I pressed my lips into a thin line and looked up when a creak from the door caught my attention. Caz walked in, wiping grease off his hands with an old towel.

“Julian,” I said, letting Caspian know who I was on the phone with. His brows raised, but he didn’t say anything. He just watched me, waiting for me to continue. “I talked to Caspian about this already. He told me his side of the story, and I already knew yours. Some things just don’t add up. And...your father would like to talk to you. Clear things up.”

“You’re fucking insane if you think I will talk to him. He’s never been in my life and I don’t need him to be now.”

My heart ached, and I was glad Caspian couldn’t hear what his son was saying about him.

I stayed calm. “Julian, he’s not who you think he is. And what you think is the truth is far from what actually happened.”

“Oh, right,” he snapped. “Because you know him so much better than I do, huh?”

“I know a different side of him. A side you refuse to see.”

I was scared that I would give away too much. I didn’t want him to know that Caspian and I were...dating.

I could hear him breathing louder now, like he was trying to hold himself back from saying something cruel.

I kept my tone soft. “I wouldn’t be asking you this if I didn’t think it was important. And I know, deep down, it’s important to you too.”

He exhaled sharply. “So, what? You want me to just forget everything? Sit there and forget that he abandoned me?”

“He didn’t abandon you,” I said firmly. “He tried. He really did, Julian. And you know it. He told me about all the calls you missed, and all the messages you responded to in a rather rude manner.”

He didn’t say anything, and I sensed he felt caught.

I hesitated for a second, then took a deep breath. “Caspian would like to come visit you.”

His reaction was immediate. “What?”

“He wants to visit you,” I repeated. “He wants to sit down with you and talk. In person.”

“Darwynn...” He groaned in frustration. “Come on, that’s stupid.”

“Please, Julian.” I was pleading now. “You have nothing to lose by just talking to him. But if you don’t, you might regret it one day. I just know it will be good. For both of you.”

I could feel him wrestling with himself through the silence. He wasn’t hanging up, which I took as a major win.

After a long moment, he let out a defeated sigh. “I’ll think about it.”

Hope sparked in my chest.

My eyes flicked back to Caspian. “That’s all I’m asking.” *For now.*

“Yeah, yeah.” He sounded exhausted, like I had just asked him to move mountains. “I’ll let you know.”

I smiled a little. “Okay.”

We were still a long way from fixing things. But maybe—just maybe—this was a start.

“All right,” he said, letting another wave of quiet wash over us. “I’ll text, or something.”

“Okay, yes. Thank you, Jule.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he murmured. “Bye.”

“Bye.” I waited for him to hang up, and as I lowered the phone from my ear, I looked up at Caspian and smiled gently. “He said he’ll think about it. About meeting you.”

He exhaled slowly, his expression unreadable. His hands, which were now clean, clenched into fists for a brief moment before relaxing.

“That’s...something,” he said at last, his voice careful, measured. “It’s better than nothing.”

I nodded, searching his face. “It is. It’s a step.”

He gave me a faint smile. “You’re persistent, you know that?”

I let out a soft laugh. “I’ve been told.”

He took a step closer and placed his right hand on my hip, pulling me to him. “I just don’t know what I’d even say to him. Where to start. It’s been so long.”

I pushed my phone into my back pocket and rested my hands on his chest, gently picking at his shirt’s fabric. “You don’t have to figure that out right now. Just be open when the time comes.”

He glanced down at me, his lips pressing together. “I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

“I know.” And I did. Hope was dangerous. But it was also the only way forward. “You’re not alone. I’m here.”

Caspian sighed again, heavier this time, but not in frustration. “I know. And I’m thankful for you.”

He leaned down to kiss me, and I savored the moment.

When he pulled away, his forehead rested against mine, his breath warm and steady. For a few precious seconds, we stayed like that—silent, connected, caught in the fragile space between uncertainty and hope.

Then, with a final exhale, Caspian straightened. “I’ll make us dinner.”

I nodded, threading my fingers through his. “I’ll help.”

It took Julian exactly eight hours to agree to that meet-up.

Eight hours, and it was the middle of the night when he had texted.

I saw his message the next morning, and without giving him a chance to change his mind, I told him that Caspian and I would be on our way the same afternoon.

It was a twelve-hour drive to Burlington, and Caspian decided to stop halfway into the drive to sleep in a small town motel, then we'd get back on the road the next morning.

Caspian had been quiet throughout most of the drive. It wasn't unlike him to keep to himself, but most times, he didn't have a reason to. This trip made him nervous, though. Hell, I was nervous too. This wasn't just a visit. It was a reckoning.

My mind raced with possibilities. Would Julian admit what he had done or keep pretending? Would he even give Caspian a chance to speak? Anything could happen, but Caspian wasn't alone. He had me right by his side.

By the time we pulled into the apartment complex's parking lot, my hands felt clammy. But in a way, it felt good to be back. Even if a part of my life I didn't want to pursue was here.

I looked over at Caspian and smiled tightly, reaching for his hand to squeeze it. "I'm right here. If he's not able to have a mature conversation, we'll just leave."

Which would be counterproductive. But at least we tried.

He studied our hands, turning his around so his palm was facing mine. I slid my fingers through his, interlocking them. He gave a quick nod before meeting my gaze. "Okay. Sounds like a plan."

I squeezed his hand once more before we both stepped out of the car. With one more glance at Caspian, we stepped forward to get to the entrance.

It was open, so we headed up to the second floor where Julian's apartment was located.

I rang the doorbell, and the door swung open shortly after. Julian stood in the entryway, his eyes never meeting Caspian's as he took me in. There was a hint of relief on his face, but uncertainty was the emotion that took over most of his expression.

"Hey, Jule," I said with a small smile.

"Hey."

I glanced up at Caspian, then at Julian again, wanting for him to acknowledge his father. I raised a brow with expectancy, but it was Caspian

who took the first step.

“Hey, Julian. It’s good to finally see you.” His words were filled with so much love and pain. I couldn’t imagine how he was feeling. He hadn’t seen his son in years.

Julian looked up at him, swallowing hard with a clenched jaw. “Hello, *Dad*.”

Well, at least he didn’t fully disown him.

Julian stepped aside then, gesturing for us to go inside. “Come in.”

I went ahead, walking straight toward the living room. Julian motioned toward the couches, and we sat down after taking off our jackets while he went to grab us something to drink.

How considerate.

I didn’t think he would be.

I glanced at Caspian, smiling gently to reassure him that everything will be okay. He gave a nod, then moved his eyes to Julian when he reappeared and sat down on the other couch opposite of us.

“How have you been, Jule?” I asked, trying to ease the tension.

“Fine. Work has been stressful. I’ve been alone for a couple of months now. Toby moved out.”

“Oh. How so?”

That came as a surprise. Toby and Julian were such good friends, and I always thought that they’d keep living together forever.

“Believe it or not...” he started, letting out a harsh laugh. “He got a girlfriend and moved in with her.”

I did, in fact, not believe it. “Really?”

He nodded. “Couldn’t believe it either. But he’s totally whipped.”

I smiled tightly. “That’s...sweet. Toby’s a good guy.” Even if he was a walking cannabis plant.

“Yeah. But since he left, I’ve been gaming way less, and reading a lot more. I finally finished the book you got me for my birthday.”

I smiled at him. “That’s nice. Did you like it?”

He hesitated, then glanced at Caspian briefly before answering. “Yeah, it was good.”

Caspian gave a small, polite nod but said nothing. He was letting him set the tone, letting him ease into the conversation. I appreciated that, but I also knew we couldn’t dance around the real reason we were here forever.

Silence stretched between us, thick with unspoken words. I didn't want to push him or urge him to come clean, but I couldn't wait any longer, either. I wanted them to clear the things that kept them apart for years. The reason for Caspian's pain that he just couldn't shake.

I cleared my throat as the silence became unbearable. "Julian, you know why we came."

His face tensed, his fingers tightening around the glass in his hands. "I know. Although...this is still fucking strange. You went looking for him."

I couldn't deny that.

I did go looking for him, and, personally, it paid off.

"Yes, to do you a favor," I told him. "Can we talk about it?"

He inhaled sharply but didn't respond immediately. Instead, he placed his glass down on the coffee table and folded his hands in his lap. "I still don't understand how this is important to you, but, truthfully, I'm too exhausted to find out. And I don't know what he has told you, but—"

"He told me the truth, Jule," I interrupted softly. "That he tried. That he wanted to be there for you, but you wouldn't let him."

His lips parted, but no words came out. Caspian, still quiet, sat with his hands clasped between his knees, his gaze never leaving him. He wasn't here to fight or argue. He was here to closure.

Finally, Julian exhaled and looked down. "I hated him," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "He..." He stopped and looked at Caspian, wanting to address him directly. "You weren't around much. Hell, I was little, but I knew you tried. But I was just so angry. You were busy with your acting, and I thought that...if I cut you off like Mom wanted me to, you wouldn't get the chance to leave me, and it wouldn't have hurt as much."

Caspian let out a breath through his nose, rubbing his palms together. "Julian," he said, his voice low and filled with so many emotions. This was hard for him, too.

"I get it. I really do. I wasn't always there, but I always made time for you until your mother wouldn't allow it anymore. And when you got older, you never gave me the chance to prove that I could be there for you."

And he would've been an amazing father to Julian. I was sure of that.

Julian swallowed hard, and for the first time, he looked truly regretful. “At the time, I thought I was doing what was best for Mom and me. She did a damn good job at raising me. So why would I have needed a father who wasn’t around all the time?”

Caspian leaned forward slightly, his eyes softening. “You did need me, Julian. You needed a father, even if it wasn’t in the way you thought. And I wasn’t perfect. I should’ve fought harder, I should’ve tried harder. But you also needed to know that I never stopped loving you.”

Julian shifted uncomfortably, his eyes moving to the coffee table as if he were trying to process everything that was being said. The silence stretched again, but this time, it wasn’t as suffocating. There was something fragile, like a thread about to snap, but it was still holding them together.

“I know,” Julian murmured, his voice small. “I know that now. but when you were gone, I didn’t know what to think. I was angry, and I didn’t know how to make sense of any of it. I saw you on TV all the time. On billboards. On the damn news. It hurt so much seeing you everywhere and not having you close. It was easier blaming you. Easier to think you didn’t care.”

Caspian’s throat tightened, and he reached out, resting his hand on the arm of the couch. “I never stopped caring. And I’m sorry I didn’t fought even harder to be in your life. Your mother truly made it hard for me. But I’m here now. we’re both here, and I want to make this right, if you’ll let me.”

The words hung in the air, and Julian seemed to be contemplating them, torn between the years of hurt and the possibility of healing. He wiped his hand across his face, taking a shaky breath before meeting Caspian’s gaze for the first time fully.

“I’ve been so fucking scared,” he admitted quietly, his voice breaking slightly. “Scared to forgive you, scared to let myself trust again. But I can’t keep holding on to the past. It’s not helping either of us.”

Julian kept on surprising me with his words. But the more he said, the cleared it was to me that Julian had truly struggled with this. He had felt the same pain as Caspian—only Julian had inflicted it himself.

Caspian’s eyes softened even more, and I could see the weight he’d been carrying for so many years begin to lift. It wasn’t a quick fix. This wasn’t a moment where everything would be magically repaired, but it was a start.

“I never wanted you to carry that burden alone,” Caspian said, his voice rough but sincere. “If you would’ve let me be there for you, I would’ve been. I’m here now, and I won’t stop trying to show you that.”

Julian swallowed hard, his eyes glossy now. “I’m not perfect either. I’ve...I’ve said a lot of things I regret not. To you, to Mom...and to myself. But maybe we can start over. I don’t know how, but I want to try.”

There it was—the first step toward something new. Something that had been impossible for years, but now, it was there...and there was still a big secret between us that couldn’t come out just yet.

*Shit...*I was ruining this.

I managed to get them to talk, and now I was the one thing standing between them.

I turned my head and looked at Caspian, wondering if he thought the same.

When his eyes met mine, he immediately understood why I looked so worried.

His jaw tightened, and it took him a moment to figure out what he would say next.

I didn’t expect him to keep this thing between us a secret, but I wasn’t sure he would open up about it just yet.

He cleared his throat and looked at Julian again, smiling tightly. “We don’t have to have it all figured out right now. We’ll just take it one step at a time.”

There was so much hope in his eyes and voice.

“Yeah,” Julian said, his smile as tight as Caspian’s. “One step at a time.”

The conversation was far from over, and there would be more hard talks, more moments of tension for them. But it felt like the beginning of something real. Something worth fighting for.

As Julian stood, walking to the kitchen to refill our glasses, I looked at Caspian once more. His gaze met mine, and he reached for my hand, squeezing it. “I know what you’re thinking. But I need this now. With Julian. I need this to work.”

I quickly nodded. “I understand.”

Although, I didn’t understand what that meant for us.

Did he want to break up?

Keep it a secret?

Whatever he chose—and however much it would hurt—I would support his decision.

Julian came back, and Caspian pulled his hand away from mine.

“So...how long are you staying in Burlington?” he asked, looking between us as he sat back down on the other couch.

“We got two rooms at a nearby hotel. I booked it for one night, but if you would like for me to stay a while longer, I can extend our stay,” Caspian suggested.

Julian shook his head, although his eyes flashed with hope. “I don’t want to sound rude but I think I need some time to let everything sink in first. I know it was a long drive for you...but I need some time and space. We got phones, though. We can text and call until I’m ready to, you know, have you around for more than a day.”

Julian’s decision was one I could comprehend, and Caspian too.

“I fully understand,” he told his son. “That’s okay, Julian.”

“Great. Thanks.” His eyes flicked to me, and the corner of his mouth curled up slightly. “And you? Are you staying here this time? Your trip has to end someday.”

I smiled gently, agreeing with his last statement. “I...am going back to Hilton Beach, too.”

“Why?” Julian’s brows furrowed, and he tilted his head like a puppy.

“Because...” I looked at Caspian, biting my cheek. I wasn’t going to mess this up. I couldn’t, and I didn’t want to. “I’ve been enjoying my time in Hilton Beach, and I’ve totally fallen in love with that place.” I didn’t say more. I wanted him to interpret the rest.

“Just like that?” he asked, his frown deepening.

“Yes, kind of. I don’t really have a plan yet, and I haven’t told my parents yet—because that’s where I was hoping to head next—but if nothing gets in the way, I want to move there.”

Caspian’s body eased next to mine, and when I glanced at him, I saw a pleased gleam in his eyes. I hadn’t told him all of that yet. But by saying it out loud now, I was letting him know that I wanted to keep being with him.

“You’ve always followed your heart,” Julian said, his smile gentle and sad in a way. “You’ll definitely have good company.”

I laughed softly, knowing he meant his dad. But my laugh faded when I realized how oblivious he was. It would break him finding out that Caspian and I were dating.

He would probably change his mind about his father, too.

Or...we would let enough time pass and act like this happened over time.

"So..." Julian said, his smile tightening. "How about dinner? I don't want to kick you out just yet. And, by the way, you can stay here for the night. It's not like you've not lived here for over six months," he told me before moving his gaze to Caspian. "And it's not like you're not my dad. We'll figure out a sleeping arrangement later. Toby's bedroom still has a bed in it, and the couch is an option too."

"Dinner sounds nice," Caspian said, ignoring the *sleeping over* part.

I felt bad about not being able to tell Julian the truth about us but I knew that if I told him today, things would end up differently.

I didn't want to risk it.

So I let it be.

For now.

CHAPTER 20

DARWYNN

Dinner was civil. Julian decided to go to the small, Chinese restaurant that he loved. The conversation remained on safe topics, even if there was no tension between them. We talked about how the food tasted, a funny memory from Julian's teenage years, and small talk that filled the silence in just the right moments.

Caspian and Julian were still careful around each other as if stepping on thin ice, but it was progressing. It was something. And I didn't expect them to fully open up after all these years. Although, Caspian would've definitely wanted to.

Now and then, he looked at Julian with unspoken emotions in his eyes. But he didn't push him. Didn't want to make him talk when he was perfectly fine sitting there, keeping his past without him in it to herself.

Caspian respected his boundaries. He, in turn, didn't shut him out completely because he did answer all of his questions. I counted that as a small victory.

By the time we left, the air between us felt much lighter. The drive back home was mostly quiet, with me sitting in the backseat, feeling rather awkward.

When we arrived back at the house, Julian went to prepare Toby's old bedroom for me. Caspian had decided to sleep on the couch and give me the bedroom. I didn't like the idea of him sleeping right outside the bedroom I would be in without me being able to get onto the couch next to him. It would be the first night in a while being apart from each other, but what was one night when we had the rest of our lives together?

I smiled at Caspian, daring to step closer while Julian was still in Toby's room. "I thought today went well," I said, taking his hand carefully.

He turned to me and nodded, interlocking our fingers as he squeezed my hand. "Yeah, I thought so too. I'm certain he'll open up to me eventually."

"I'm sure of it. He needs time."

He studied me closely and gave a small nod, silently accepting everything that happened today. "I figured so. But I'm pleased, though. Grateful that you made this happen."

I lifted our hands to my lips and pressed a kiss to the back of his hand, smiling up at him. Our moment was interrupted when Julian back into the living room. I stepped away, putting space between us.

"The guest room is ready," he said, his voice natural.

Caspian offered a small smile. "Thank you, Julian."

He nodded, then said, "Well, I'm off to bed. I'll get us something to eat at the bakery for breakfast tomorrow morning. Good night."

"Night, Julian." We watched as he followed the narrow hall to his bedroom. The one I had slept in for months.

Caspian led me to the guest room, and I entered it, looking around before dropping my overnight bag on the bed.

"It's not much, but it's enough for one night," I said, my eyes wandering from the double bed to the nightstand and over to the desk.

"It'll do."

Caspian lingered in the doorway, watching as me as I started to unpack. I didn't want him to leave. Sleeping alone just didn't sound right.

"Well," I murmured, turning around to face him, "we should get some rest. You must be tired from the long drive."

Caspian met my gaze, his lips twitching like he had something to say, but he just nodded. "Yeah."

I pursed my lips. "You know, just because we're here doesn't mean we can't—"

"Darwynn, Julian is right down the hall."

I felt a sense of regret in his voice, and I hated that I hadn't noticed it before. My face fell, and I dropped my gaze to my hands. "You're not rethinking all of this, are you? This between us?"

He stepped closer the second I uttered those words, and I stared at his feet, unable to look up at him. My heart was racing in my chest, and the most upsetting thoughts flashed in through my mind.

"Darwynn." His voice was low, raspy. "Look at me."

I clenched my jaw but didn't look up. I couldn't. Not when he was ready to end this.

"Darwynn." His voice was hard, determined. "I'm not going to ask you again."

I sighed, furrowing my brows as I tilted my head back.

When his eyes met mine, he reached up with one hand to grip my jaw. His fingertips dug into my skin, and he held me there, not giving me a chance to look away. "I love you. I'm—"

We both held our breaths, and he looked surprised that he even outed those words so casually.

His jaw ticked, and his grip tightened as he swallowed hard. "I love you, and if this trip has done anything, it's deepening what I feel for you. But I'm really trying hard here not to get us in trouble, all right? So you have to forgive me for not giving you the devotion you deserve. I don't want Julian to question things."

I swallowed, my heart pounding as I searched his face. He meant it. Every word. His words settled deep inside my chest, where I would keep them forever.

I managed a nod, then whispered, "Okay, that's...uh, fair, I guess."

He chuckled and loosened his grip on my jaw, sliding his fingers down my throat. "Glad we're on the same page about that." He leaned in and kissed me. Softly, faintly, then he stepped away. "And you don't have to say it back. It's written all over your pretty face that you're in love with me, too."

Pursing my lips, I felt my cheeks turn bright red.

God, he was just so...proud.

Proud to love me and proud to be loved by me.

He left the bedroom without giving me another chance to keep him here.

I watched him go back to the couch, and when he gave me a sharp glare, silently telling me to close the door, I did and dragged myself to bed.

Three hours later, I was still awake, unable to sleep. My thoughts kept circling back to Caspian—how close he was, just outside the bedroom.

I needed to see him.

Especially after his confession, I wanted to be close to him.

Besides, what fun was it to not sneak around?

Without making a sound, I slid out of bed and tiptoed to the door, easing it open just enough to peek out into the hallway. Everything was still. There was no sound coming from down the hall, and no light was glowing. I knew Julian slept like a rock. My urge to be with Caspian was too strong to stay in bed and close my eyes.

Barefoot, I stepped out of the room, my heart pounding in my chest as I moved toward the living room. The floor creaked beneath me, but I continued until I reached the couch.

I hesitate only for a second before stepping in front of it, looking down at Caspian.

He was lying on his back, but at the sound of me shifting on my feet, he stirred.

“Darwynn?” His voice was rough with sleep.

“Yes, it’s me,” I whispered, stepping closer.

I could barely make out his face in the darkened room, but for some reason, I knew he was frowning. “What are you doing?” he asked, sounding grumpy as he sat up.

I reached down to hook my hand around his arm. “I missed you,” I admitted. “Come to bed with me.”

There was a pause, and I thought he was getting ready to push me away. But then he exhaled and sat up, rubbing his face with one hand. “You’re going to get us in trouble.”

I smirked, even though he couldn’t see it. “Only if we get caught.”

He grunted as he got up, taking a quick glance down the hallway. “How deep does he sleep?”

“Very. Even deeper than me,” I told him silently. “Come on.”

It took him another moment before finally giving in and letting me take him to the bedroom.

Once we were inside, I closed the door behind us and headed to the bed. We got in, and he immediately pulled me against him.

His hand flexed flat on my stomach. His body was pressed against my back, and I breathed in deeply to let him understand just how comfortable I was in his arms.

He buried his face into the crook of my neck, breathing deeply and muttering a curse as he let it back out. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to

share a bed with you tonight,” he grunted, pressing his hard cock against my ass.

I bit my lower lip and placed my left hand on his, sliding my fingers through his. “But we’re here now,” I said, keeping my voice quiet.

“Yeah...we are.” He moved his right arm under me, wrapping it around my hips and sliding his hand into my panties without a warning. “And you’re so damn wet. Say, baby, have you been thinking about this all day?”

I let out a shaky breath and nodded, arching my back. “Y-yes,” I admitted.

He ran his fingers through my folds, teasing my entrance and flicking his fingertips against my clit. “Naughty girl,” he murmured into my ear.

His fingers moved over my sensitive flesh, sending shivers through my body. He circled my clit again, slowly, taunting and building the tension as I squirmed against him.

“So responsive,” he growled, nipping at my earlobe. “I bet I could make you come in seconds if you’d only let yourself go.”

I was holding back, that was true, but I didn’t want to come just yet. I was always scared that my body would be too exhausted after two orgasms, and I wanted this to last.

I whimpered softly as he slid two fingers inside me, curling them to that perfect spot. It was the ball of his thumb working my clit now as he pumped his fingers in a steady rhythm.

“That’s it, baby,” he encouraged. “Don’t hold back. I want to feel you come on my hand.”

His words pushed me closer to the edge. I bit my lip to keep from crying out as waves of pleasure washed over me. Caspian held me tight as I shuddered against him, and he lifted his left hand to my mouth to keep my moans muffled.

“Shh, we’re not alone in this apartment,” he whispered.

God, he was not playing nice. As much as he wanted this, he wanted me to understand just how delicate this situation was. We couldn’t get caught, or else our relationship was over in an instant.

When the aftershock decreased, he withdrew his hand, and I heard the rustle of fabric as he pushed down his pajama pants. I got rid of my

panties, and he lifted my leg shortly after, hooking his arm around the back of my knee to open me up to him.

“I need to be inside you, and you need to be quiet. You got that, baby?”

“Yes,” I breathed, arching my back again. “I’ll be quiet for you.”

“Good girl.”

He positioned himself at my entrance, sliding his already wet tip through my folds before he pushed inside with one smooth thrust. He filled me completely, and I gasped at the stretch, savoring the feeling fully.

Caspian set a steady pace, his hips thrusting against mine. His left hand gripped my leg to keep it in the air while his other palmed my breast under my shirt, pinching and rolling my nipple.

“God, you feel amazing,” he groaned. “So tight and wet for me. This pussy is mine.”

His words made it impossible for me to keep my feelings on the inside. I wanted to scream and moan. To order him to fuck me even harder, but that would most likely wake Julian. And even I didn’t want to risk that.

“That’s right, take my cock,” Caspian whispered harshly. “Such a good girl for me.”

He angled his hips, hitting deeper with each thrust. I buried my face on the pillow to muffle my moans as the pleasure built once again.

“Are you doing to come for me again?” Caspian asked, his breath hot against my neck. “I want to feel you squeeze my cock as you fall apart.”

His fingers found my clit, rubbing quick circles as he pounded into me. The dual stimulation was overwhelming.

“Caspian,” I whimpered. “I’m so close.”

“Come, baby,” he commanded. “Come all over my hard cock. Make that pussy squeeze around it.”

With a few more hard thrusts, I fell over the edge. My inner walls clenched around him as ecstasy flooded my senses. Caspian groaned, his hips stuttering as he followed me into bliss. I felt the warmth of his release as he buried deep, holding himself there.

We both breathed heavily.

“Don’t move yet,” I whispered, needing him to stay inside of me for a while longer.

He wrapped his arms around me tightly as we both came down from our highs, but I knew once our breathing was steady, we would do it all

over again.

I spent the next morning trying not to wince from the soreness between my legs. Caspian and I stayed awake for two more hours, fucking as silently as possible while Julian was sleeping in the other room.

This morning, he didn't look like he had heard us, which was a relief.

Caspian and I acted normal, not letting anything show.

He sat in front of me, focused on his coffee and the morning newspaper in front of him, while Julian moved around the kitchen to get everything onto the table.

He went to the bakery while Caspian and I took turns taking showers in the bathroom.

No one spoke much once we started to eat, just quiet murmurs here and there, the occasional request to pass the butter. If Julian had heard anything last night, he gave no indication.

Then again, if I were in his shoes, I wouldn't know how to act.

After breakfast, Caspian and I went to pack our bags.

Julian lingered in the doorway, watching without saying much. After I zipped the bag, I turned to face him.

"I guess we won't see each other much anymore," he said with a tight smile.

I nodded, my lips pressing together. "We can still call and text. We're friends, right?"

He swallowed, unsure of what to say to that. "Yeah, I guess so."

A beat of silence passed between us before he stepped forward and pulled me into a hug. It wasn't tight, but it wasn't hesitant either. Just firm, steady, and full of things left unspoken.

"I know this was all you. And I'm not as ungrateful as you think I am. I truly admire how kind your heart is. I haven't really appreciated that when we were together."

I didn't like the words he outed, but I couldn't lie and say he was wrong.

"You don't have to say anything," he said, pulling away from me, and holding me at arm-length with his hands on my shoulders. "I have a lot

of growing and thinking to do. It'll take time, but I'm here if you ever need me."

I smiled gently.

This has turned out better than I ever could've imagined. "Thank you, Jule. I'm here for you, too."

"I know. You always have been."

I nodded and gave him another hug before he carried my bag to the living room where Caspian was waiting for us.

"Ready?" he asked, glancing between us.

"Yes, ready."

Once we got downstairs and put our two bags into the car, we turned back to Julian, and I gave him a small wave. "Thank you for letting us stay. And for breakfast."

"Of course," he said before his eyes met Caspian's. "I'll call."

Caspian nodded. "Take your time, son."

Something sparked in Julian's gaze.

At first I thought we were leaving without them hugging. That was the least they could've done. And to my surprise, it was Julian taking a step forward to give Caspian a hug.

They stood there for a moment, then he pulled away, his smile tight.

With that, we got into the car. As Caspian pulled out of the driveway, I glanced back one last time. Julian still stood there, his arms crossed over his chest, watching us go.

He looked relieved, but a hint of sadness had lingered in his eyes all morning long.

He would miss Caspian. Not too much.

And I knew his promised call would come way sooner than either of them expected.

Two days later, the call came.

I was sitting on the couch, reading a book, when Caspian walked into the living room with his phone pressed to his ear, looking as hopeful as ever.

He mouthed "Julian," and pointed to the phone, and I gave him two thumbs up, sitting up in excitement.

The conversation was quick, and I only heard bits of it.

But when they hung up, Caspian told me every single detail.

“He’s coming over on Christmas,” he said, a bright smile on his lips.

“Oh, that’s amazing!” I got up and hugged him. “I’m so happy it worked out. You deserve this, Caz.”

He rubbed my back and held me tightly, letting everything sink in for a moment. “I hope I do. I missed him. God, I can’t explain how I feel right now.”

I leaned back slightly to look at him, smiling gently. “You have time to absorb it all. I’m so happy for you, truly.”

He smiled and leaned down to kiss me. “I’ve always hated Christmas,” he admitted, pulling away from me. “But with Julian and you —”

He fell silent, and I knew what the problem was now.

I reached up to cup his face, gently caressing his cheeks with my thumbs. “We still have time to figure out how to tell him about us. Let’s not stress it.”

He studied me carefully, then let out a heavy breath. “You’re right.” He gave me a grateful smile before pulling me back into his arms, holding me close. “I must’ve done something incredible to deserve you.”

I chuckled softly, tilting my head. “Who knows? Maybe you were a hero in another life, a king who saved his people.” I traced my fingers along the side of his neck. “But in this life, you’re the king of my heart.”

Caspian let out a breathy laugh. “Always so damn good with your words.”

I grinned. “It’s a gift.”

He tightened his arms around me, his voice barely above a whisper. “Best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

CHAPTER 21

CASPIAN

one month later

A year ago, I would've laughed in someone's face if they had told me that I would be sharing my home with a woman, especially in this tiny village in the middle of nowhere.

But now, with Darwynn curled up beside me, stealing all the warmth from the blanket, her sock-covered feet tucked under my leg, I couldn't imagine it any other way.

She had settled into my home like she'd always belonged here. Her books cluttered my shelves, her clothes hung next to mine in the wardrobe, and the faint scent of her shampoo lingered in my pillows. She had even claimed an entire drawer in the kitchen for her baking utensils and endless mugs.

I never understood why one person needed more than one mug.

I had lived alone for a long time, but Darwynn made it easy to share a space. She had filled the quiet, softened the edges of my solitude, and made the house feel like a real home.

Nobody in town cared about her moving here.

Well, they did stare the first night we went to eat at the bar, and there were some whispers, but no one dared to come and ask us if Darwynn was now officially a resident of Hilton Beach. All the paperwork we filled out would immediately answer that question, but they didn't ask.

Not even Theresa.

Tonight, we decided to stay in to watch a movie. It seemed appropriate for a rainy Friday night. Though, once we sat down on the couch, she convinced me to watch one of my films.

I had tried to fight it. “We could watch anything else, Darwynn. Literally anything.”

But she had just given me that look, the one with the slightly raised eyebrow and the amused smirk that always made me feel like I had already lost the argument before it had even started. “Caspian,” she had said, tone sweet but firm. “You spent years writing, directing, and acting in these films. How is it possible that I have seen more of them than you have?”

I sighed, already knowing she was going to win. “Because I don’t like watching myself on screen.”

“Actors are so strange,” she had muttered. “Well, I do like watching you on screen.”

And that had been the end of the discussion.

So now we were here, wrapped up in blankets, a bowl of popcorn between us, watching a film I had made nearly two decades ago.

I had forgotten so much about it. The way I had agonized over the script, the long hours on set, the stress of pulling the production together. It had been one of my biggest projects, and it had a big impact on cinema back then. Darwynn watched it like it was something new and magical like it was more than just a movie.

I noticed the way her posture had changed halfway through, her body tensed slightly, her fingers gripping the edge of the blanket. She was fully immersed in the story, and her breath hitched during a particularly intense scene. When I turned to look to her, I saw the unmistakable sheen of tears in her eyes.

I frowned. “Are you crying?”

She blinked rapidly, as if trying to pretend she wasn’t, and quickly wiped at her cheeks. “No.”

I smirked. “Liar.”

She groaned and buried her face against my shoulder. “Shut up.”

I chuckled, wrapping an arm around her, and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “It’s not even a sad scene.”

“That’s not the point,” she murmured, her voice muffled against my shirt.

I pulled back slightly so I could see her face. “Then what is?”

She hesitated, then sighed. “It’s just...you wrote this. You made this. And it’s beautiful, Caspian.” Her voice was soft, full of something I couldn’t quite name. Admiration, maybe, or something even deeper than that.

I felt something tighten in my chest. I had heard compliments about my work before—even got a couple of awards, including Oscars, for it—but never like this. Never from someone who knew me.

I swallowed, turning my gaze back to the screen. “It feels like a lifetime ago.”

She was quiet for a moment before asking, “Would you ever do it again? One last time?”

I shook my head. “You know I’m done with all that. It’s in my past.”

“Maybe you should revisit it,” she said immediately, with no hesitation.

I finally looked at her, raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because I think you still have stories to tell,” she said simply.

I sighed, shaking my head. “I don’t know, Darwynn. That part of my life is over.”

She didn’t look surprised. She just watched me, waiting. “You’ve been saying that for a while now.”

“Because it’s true.” I gestured at the screen, at the younger version of myself delivering a monologue I barely remember writing. “That was me then.”

Darwynn curled her legs under her, still looking at me like she was seeing something I wasn’t. “I know why you left,” she said softly. “And I know how much you hate the industry. But that’s not the same thing as hating filmmaking.”

I exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over my face. “It doesn’t matter. The second I step back into that world, it’s all going to come rushing back. The press. The whispers. The people who pretended I didn’t exist after what happened.” My jaw clenched. “Nobody wants to see me again, Darwynn. And honestly? I don’t want to see them either.”

She didn’t flinch, didn’t try to tell me I was wrong. She already knew how deep the scars ran. She knew about the accident, about the friend I lost, about how the industry had turned its back on me.

She had never once told me to get over it. And that was part of why I loved her.

“I get it,” she murmured. “I really do.” Her fingers brushed against mine. “But what if you didn’t have to go back to all that?”

I frowned, glancing at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...what if you didn’t go back to Hollywood? No studios. No investors breathing down your neck. No executive turning your story into something you don’t even recognize.” She tilted her head. “What if you did it your way?”

I let out a short, dry laugh. “You make it sound so easy.”

She smiled. “I didn’t say it would be easy. But it would be yours.”

I looked away, my mind turning over her words.

I hadn’t let myself think about making another film since Harris died. Hadn’t even entertained the idea. Because the moment I did, I would have to face everything I had been running from.

But Darwynn wasn’t asking me to go back to that world. She was asking me to create something new. To reclaim something I had lost.

I swallowed. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

She squeezed my hand, her smile soft. “You start with the story.”

I turned back to the screen, watching as my past self spoke words I had once written with so much enthusiasm.

For the first time since Harris’ death, I wondered if I still had something left to say.

And for the first, the idea of stepping behind a camera again didn’t feel impossible.

Maybe...just maybe...one last film wasn’t such a crazy idea after all. And if I did it, I’d dedicate it to Darwynn for all the love, belief, and quiet strength she had given me since the day she showed up at my door.

EPILOGUE

DARWYNN

four months later

The set was small—almost too small for a production, but that’s how Caspian wanted it.

No big studios.

No overwhelming crowds.

Just a handful of crew members, a few passionate actors, and an indie film that felt as raw and real as the story he was telling.

Exile, his script, had transformed into a humble production, far from the gloss of Hollywood.

But it was his, completely and utterly his, without anyone breathing down his neck.

The set was far from the polished, glamorous worlds I had imagined when I first thought about what it might be like to be involved in filmmaking. I knew it wouldn’t be too fancy, but this was different from what I imagined. Better. Much better.

There were no extravagant lights or sets, no high-budget crew. Just a handful of people scattered around a quiet rural town in Canada, each of them with multiple tasks. The sound engineer also did the lighting. The makeup artist doubled as the costume designer. And Caspian? He was doing it all. Acting, directing, producing. He even had his hands on the camera sometimes. It was chaotic and stripped down, but it felt real. More real than anything I had ever experienced.

And I was here, by his side, watching him in his element. Caspian had created this film. A story based on his life, his heartache, his loss. And somehow, watching it unfold around me, I felt like I was watching him reclaim something he had thought he had lost forever.

I sat off to the side, notebook in hand, occasionally writing down observations or ideas for him. I wasn't exactly "on the team," but Caspian made me feel like I was. He was always glancing my way, seeking my approval, offering me quick smiles between scenes. And those smiles—God, they did something to me every time. They were full of warmth and quiet confidence I'd never seen in him before.

The crew worked tirelessly, moving quickly between takes and adjusting lights and cameras. It was all happening so fast, but it was so full of life. There was an energy here that I could feel in my bones, and it wasn't just from the cast and crew—it was mostly from Caspian.

I'd never seen him like this, so fully present, so full of purpose. His movements were deliberate, his voice steady and authoritative as he gave direction. And I knew, deep down, that he was finally doing something that mattered. Something he had longed to do again, even if he hadn't realized it until recently.

The scene they were filming was intense, full of raw emotion. I felt my chest tighten as I watched Caspian coach the actor, pulling something out of him that wasn't scripted. It was as if the actor had become a vessel for Caspian's own pain. It wasn't just a performance, it was real.

The break between scenes came, and I sighed in relief as I got up from the chair, setting my notebook on it. I stretched, glancing out at the sun setting in the distance. The light was beginning to face the golden hour spilling over the hills. It was one of those rare moments when everything seemed to slow down—even on a busy set like this.

I smiled at him as he approached me, and he nodded to the notebook on the chair. "Got some new observations?"

I nodded, pursing my lips. I couldn't touch him out here. Not with everybody watching. To all of them, I was Caspian's assistant.

Which...I was. But they didn't know about our relationship. Only Julian knew, and he had taken it fairly well when we told him last Christmas. And even though we trusted these people working with us on the movie, we wanted to keep our relationship to ourselves. It wasn't what the world should focus on once Exile was out.

I wanted Caspian to have his moment. To show everyone that he wasn't the bad guy everyone thought he was.

"I got a few things. You're great out there. As always," I told him. "I'm so proud of you."

He smiled, pushing his hands into his pockets. I knew he wanted to touch me. To kiss me. But he couldn't. It was hard for both of us.

"Thank you, Darwynn. You know that means a lot to me. And you know how glad I am to have you here with me."

I nodded, assuring him that I knew what my presence meant to him.

He took me in carefully, and an emotion—no, a *need*—I knew all too well flashed in his eyes.

"Fuck," he murmured.

"What is it?"

"We have one more scene before we're done for the day, but I can't stop thinking about burying my face between your thighs and tasting your sweet pussy."

My eyes widened, and I looked around to make sure nobody could hear us. Luckily, nobody was close enough to hear him say those naughty words.

"I, uh..." I laughed nervously.

It was incredible how exciting our relationship was, even after so many months.

"Do me a favor?" he asked, taking a step closer and leaning in. "Go back to our hotel room. Undress and get on the bed. Wait for me there. Legs wide open."

I bit the inside of my cheek, my pussy reacting instantly. "Okay," I breathed.

"Yeah?" He smiled and moved away again. "I won't be long."

It was a promise he would keep, and so I rushed back to the nearby hotel we all stayed in for the weeks of filming.

CASPIAN

She was there on the bed, naked and with her legs spread wide open. Her pussy was glistening, and I could smell her arousal from here.

Her tits rose and fell with each breath, nipples already hardened to rosy peaks. She was a damn dream. So fucking perfect.

"God, you're beautiful," I murmured, quickly shedding my clothes.

I took her in for another while before crawling onto the bed, running my hands down the insides of her thighs. She took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on me at all times. I trailed kisses up her thighs, getting closer to her center.

I inhaled deeply, savoring her intoxicating scent before running my tongue along her slit. She gasped, arching into me as I explored her folds.

I circled her clit with the tip of my tongue, teasing her before sucking the sensitive bud between my lips. Darwynn moaned, her fingers tangling in my hair. I caressed her thighs with my hands, then ran two fingers between them, sliding them through her folds. She moaned when I slid two fingers inside her, circling them as I pumped in and out.

“Caspian,” she panted. “Oh god, don’t stop.”

I would stay right here, with my mouth on her pussy, if I could.

I increased my pace, my tongue flicking rapidly over her clit as my fingers stroked the right spot. Darwynn’s thighs began to tremble. I could feel her walls clenching around my fingers as her climax built.

With a cry of ecstasy, she came undone. I drank up her release, drawing out every tremor of pleasure. She tasted like heaven.

When her shudders lessened, I kissed my way up her body, lingering at her breasts. “I love these tits,” I murmured, squeezing them both hard as I sucked the other nipple into my mouth.

She bit her lower lip as she watched me, enjoying every moment of me pleasing her.

“You like when I do this, don’t you? Suck on these pretty nipples. Makes you wet all over again, hm?”

“Yes,” she breathed, arching her back to press her tit more against my mouth.

I pulled it in again, sucking hard enough to make her cry out in pain, then I moved further up to take her mouth. She kissed me passionately, tasting herself on my lips.

“I need you inside me,” she breathed.

I had my tip already at her entrance, and with one swift move, I thrust into her. We both groaned at the sensation of her wrapped around me, and I began to move immediately, setting a steady rhythm. Darwynn wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper.

Our bodies moved as one, the room filled with the sounds of our lovemaking. I could feel my own release approaching as Darwynn tightened

around me.

I had been thinking about this the whole damn day, and while I loved filming, I loved fucking her more.

With a few final thrusts, we tumbled over the edge together, crying out in shared bliss.

“Sorry,” I said, burying my face in the crook of her neck and kissing her warm skin. “I promise we’ll do it all over again, but I needed to get that out of me. Fuck, I’ve been wanting to fuck that tight pussy all damn day.”

She laughed softly, running her hands through my hair. “It’s okay. We can do it again. And again. All night long.”

Yeah, that sounded amazing.

I lifted my head to look at her, watching her intently and admiring her beauty. Her gaze was soft, and she caressed the side of my face, her touch gentle.

“I really meant it earlier, you know?” she said quietly, brushing my hair away from my sweaty forehead. “About being proud of you.”

I smiled at her, enjoying her touch. “You know I wouldn’t have gotten here without you.”

She smiled back, a soft, knowing expression on her face. “But you did,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “You got here because you had the strength to push through, to try again. To find your way back to what you loved. I just helped you see it.”

I leaned into her touch, the sensation of her fingers brushing against my skin, grounding me in this moment.

“I don’t know if I believe that,” I murmured, my voice thick with emotion. “I couldn’t have done it without you, Darwynn. You were the one who made me see that the world didn’t end when I walked away from my career. You reminded me that there’s more to life than what I left behind.”

She pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my lips.

“You make it sound like I saved you,” she said softly, her voice a mixture of amusement and affection. “But I don’t think you needed saving. You just needed someone who believed in you when you couldn’t see it yourself.”

I chuckled. “I don’t know Darwynn. I think I needed more than belief. I needed you.”

She let out a quiet laugh, her fingers tracing my beard. “Well, I’m glad you had me then.”

I kissed her again, the taste of her lips as familiar as my own breath. There was something in that kiss. A promise. A reassurance. That we were in this together, no matter where the story went.

I started to move again, pulling out of her slowly before thrusting back into her.

She didn't stop me. Instead, she met every single one of my thrusts.

Her moans got louder, and her nails dug into my back as I thrust harder. I savored every sensation, every little sound coming out of her.

"God, you feel amazing. I could stay like this with you forever," I groaned, burying my face in her neck.

"Caz, harder. Please...I need more."

She didn't have to tell me twice. The bed creaked beneath us as our bodies moved together. Darwynn's breasts bounced with each thrust, hypnotizing me. I cupped one in my hand, rolling the nipple between my fingers.

Her walls clenched around me as I hit a particularly sensitive spot. I angled my hips to hit it again and again, drinking in her cries of pleasure.

"You're so fucking tight," I growled. "So wet for me."

"Only for you," she moaned. "Always for you."

I captured her lips in a deep, passionate kiss, our tongues tangling as the air around us heated. The room was thick with the scent of sex and sweat.

"I'm close," Darwynn whimpered. "Don't stop."

"Not until you've come all over my cock, baby," I promised, fucking her harder.

I slipped a hand between us to rub her clit. Her back arched off the bed as she came undone, crying out my name. The pulsing of her walls around me pushed me over the edge unexpectedly. I buried myself deep inside her as I came, groaning loudly.

"I love you," I told her, my lips closer to hers.

She was breathing heavily, her eyes looking into mine. "I love you too, Caspian. More than anything."

I had once been exiled, cast out from everything I thought defined me. But now, I realized, I had found something far more valuable than fame.

Home. And it was with her.

She had healed the parts of me I thought were broken forever. With this new script I wrote, I wasn't just making a film; I was building a life—our life.

I kissed her lips before pulling out of her and wrapping my arms around her body tightly. She cuddled up to me, both ignoring the stickiness of my cum all over our skin.

I closed my eyes, feeling the weight of my exile finally lift. I wasn't lost anymore. Hadn't been since she came into my life.

With Darwynn by my side, everything was better.

We had rewritten my story together, and it was only the beginning.

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