



Slow Burn: A Driven Novel (The Driven Series)

By K. Bromberg

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From the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Driven series.

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Reeling from the sudden loss of her sister, Haddie Montgomery has sworn off relationships. All she wanted from Beckett Daniels was a sexy distraction to help her escape her pain for just a little while....There weren't supposed to be any strings attached—so why can't she shake the memory of that unforgettable night from her thoughts? Or the taste of his kiss from her lips?

No matter how hard Haddie tries to forget about him, Becks relentlessly tries to prove that she should start living for today. But she is determined to avoid romantic commitment, and she can always use her ex-boyfriend's reappearance to help snuff out the *slow burn* within her that Becks has sparked....

Or will fate force her to realize that this kind of connection doesn't come along very often and a chance at love is worth the risk?

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Novels of K. Bromberg

"Captivating, emotional and sizzling hot!" – #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author S.C. Stephens

"K. Bromberg is nothing short of an absolute genius."—Romance Addiction

"[A] highly emotional, yet satisfying series, oh, and let me not leave out SEXY."—Guilty Pleasures Book Reviews

"Well-written and with a great balance of dialogue and description."—Love Between the Sheets

"An emotionally charged, adrenaline-filled, steamy, and passionate read....K. Bromberg deliver[s]."—TotallyBookedBlog

About the Author

K. Bromberg was born and raised in Southern California. She graduated from University of California at San Diego with two bachelors-economics and political science-but always loved to write. K. Bromberg remains in Southern California with her husband and their three young children. When not writing or working her day job, she can be found playing ninjas or power rangers with her son, fixing the hair of her oldest daughter's American girl doll, or doing 'arts and crafts' with her youngest daughter, or listening to any or all of them fight/whine/laugh at once. When she needs a break from the daily chaos, you can almost always find her with Kindle in hand, devouring the pages of a good book or mentally outlining her next set of characters.

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF K. BROMBERG

Chapter 1

My sensations are dulled by the alcohol. And I am *so* okay with that. Okay that I've had enough to drink so that for the first time in six months, the ache that hits me with the memories isn't as sharp.

I look around and try to focus on everything—the abundant flowers, the welcome chill from the ocean breeze, the pair of high heels abandoned in the corner—but all I can think about is how beautiful and happy Rylee was tonight. And my mind keeps recalling what my sister, Lexi, looked like on her wedding day. The words she said to me, her laugh ringing out above the guests as Danny made his toast to her, the smile on her face as the future stretched ahead of them.

Stop it, Had. Don't ruin a perfect night. You deserve to celebrate your best friend's wedding without feeling

guilty.

But I can't stop thinking about that other wedding, although the details are starting to fade in my mind. And I so badly want to remember every little detail about her. I need to be able to tell my niece, Madelyn, about how her mom loved to stand in the rain because she wanted to catch it on her tongue, how she ate pizza backward because the crust was her favorite part, how she loved to face the opposite way on the swings so we could give each other high fives. There are so many things I fear I'll forget.

And so many other memories from the past year that I wish I could.

"We'll be back in the morning, miss, to pick up the tables and chairs and the lot."

The caterer's voice pulls me from my melancholy thoughts—thoughts that don't belong after the sheer beauty of today's wedding. I turn to look at him, words choking in my throat.

"Not a problem." Becks's voice startles me. I didn't realize he was out here on the deck, but I'm so glad he answers because, between the alcohol and the memories, I'm in no shape to respond coherently. "The housekeeper, Grace, will be here at ten to let you in."

I finish the rest of my drink as the caterer thanks Becks. Then I turn around on unsteady legs to face him as he steps out of the night's shadows into the light of the full moon. And it must be a mixture of the heady emotions of the day and my lack of sobriety, but my breath catches when I meet his eyes.

It's just Becks, boy-next-door handsome as usual . . . dirty blond hair spiked up at the ends, aqua blue eyes so light the night makes them seem transparent . . . so why in the hell are parts of my body suddenly on alert?

I dart my tongue out to my tingling lips as he leans a broad shoulder against the post of the trellis and stares at me, head angled to the side, shirt unbuttoned at the collar, and bow tie hanging loosely around his neck. I hear the ice in his glass clink as he shifts to set it on the table beside him, but his eyes hold steadfast to mine.

"You okay?" That slow, even drawl of his breaks the silence. I nod my head, still not trusting my voice, still trying to figure out why all of a sudden there is this tension between us—this electric energy—that has never been there before. Sure we've flirted harmlessly since we met through our best friends, Rylee and Colton, but this is different. And I can't quite put my finger on what's changed, not sure if I even want to.

Maybe it's the fact that right now, face shaded with darkness, he looks a little dangerous, a little mysterious, a lot more the bad-boy type I usually fall for. He's always struck me as more of a good guy, a down-home country type. But somehow the mixture of moonlight and night shadows brings out another side of him I've never envisioned; he looks edgier, more the wilder type I waste my time on, get my heart broken by, have a hard time resisting. That has to be why I'm feeling a sudden attraction.

So if I know the reason, why is my drunk mind still wondering what he'd taste like? What his hands would feel like as they run up my inner thighs? How the slow, even tone of his voice would sound as he loses control?

The silence sparks between us, only interrupted by the distant roll of ocean waves. I draw in a breath and shake my head again. "I'm okay," I say, and laugh, trying to avoid the questions I don't want to answer. "Just drunk and enjoying the feeling."

"*Feeling* is most definitely a good thing," he says, straightening up his tall, athletic frame and taking a step toward me, "but, City, I think it's best if I get you to bed before it starts to not be a good feeling."

I smile softly at his use of the term of endearment. He gave me the nickname *City* the first night we met in Las Vegas, back before my life had been torn apart by Lexi's death. It feels like a lifetime ago when in reality it has only been a year since the unexpected overnight trip with Rylee and Colton to the city of sin where the two of us flirted, first acknowledged the attraction we felt but have never acted on. . . . I close my eyes and remember the carefree feeling I had that night. I'd called him *Country* to tease him about that laid back demeanor of his, so opposite from everything I usually find appealing. And yet as he sat there in the Las Vegas nightclub, the club's lights flashing over his face while he called me *City* in return, I caught myself wondering just what Beckett Daniels would kiss like.

The question floats through my mind again. *Forget about it, Montgomery*, I tell myself as I go to place my hand on the railing at my back and miss by a mile, causing him to chuckle, low and soft.

Chills light a path over my skin, and I can't help the giggle that falls from my lips as my mind wanders to other things I'd rather be feeling right now. Other distractions I could use to shake the bittersweet emotions weighing me down.

Christ on a crutch! Why didn't I think of it earlier? Going to bed—especially someone else's—is most definitely a good idea.

That'll fix it. Always has, these past six months. I'll just go grab my keys and my cell, call Dylan or Pete and let them know I'm on my way over. I'll let whoever is the first to answer know that I'm feeling a little *sexually festive* tonight. I'll use one of them to try to forget; feel a little less, by feeling a whole lot more.

"Something funny?"

I cover my mouth with my hand but can't stop myself from snickering. "Just feeling a little festive, is all." And the giggle returns as I think of Lex and how she used to say that women are not sluts, just sexually festive. And tonight? God, tonight I just want to be that. I don't want to think. I don't want to care. I just want to escape a bit from my thoughts.

"Festive, huh?" he asks, eyes appraising me and full mouth tugging up at one corner.

"Yep!" I nod my head. "Time for this girl to carry this party to another location, Country." I start to walk—well, stumble. *Shit!* How the hell am I going to drive? I keep walking, hand running across the wall to help steady myself.

"Nice try, Haddie. Did you forget that the limo brought you here? I have to drive you home."

Crap! I try not to falter. "Well, I guess I'm taking your car, then," I say as I keep walking away from him.

"That's funny, but, uh, you're in no shape to drive." His voice calls out to me, and the amusement in it pisses me off. "You're not going anywhere, festivities or not."

"Like hell I am." I toss over my shoulder and keep walking toward the house. Just leave me alone, I yell in my head. Don't go all alpha on me now when all I want from you is slow and steady because I'm way too drunk and way too needy to see in him what I'm attracted to.

"Try me." The arrogance in his voice sets me off. Pushes me to be bitchy and defiant so that I don't make a huge mistake I don't want to make. Do want to make. Fuck if I can think clearly enough to know what I want, but I do know that Beckett's one of those guys you settle down with . . . and no way in hell do I want to settle down.

Ever.

The hurt comes flooding back, the memories riding shotgun right alongside them. I stop to steady my legs and remind myself not to repeat the mistakes my sister made.

I can hear him behind me, know he's waiting for me to respond. "Neither of us is in any state to drive tonight. *Festivities* are over." I hear his shoes step on something that crunches just behind me, and I squeeze my eyes shut to fight off the whirlwind of shit in my head. "C'mon, Montgomery. It was a perfect day, but I'm taking you to bed."

I snort a laugh because even though his comment is innocent in nature since we both told Rylee we'd stay the night to oversee all of the postreception cleanup, Becks just hit the nail on the head. To bed is exactly where I want him to take me right now, *his in particular*. Wait! No, I don't want that. Goddamn alcohol is making me wishy-washy. I hate wishy-washy.

He says my name again, and something in the way he says it causes my feet to falter. We stand there, my back to him, in a silent standoff. I don't move, don't turn around to face him, because I just want to run. Rewind time and get *me* back again. The carefree, careless me who has been drowning in grief these past few months.

His hand closes over my biceps, and I don't know why I'm so angry at him, but I am. I don't want to be touched gently. I don't want to be coddled. I just want to leave so I can escape the memories today dredged up from deep within me, reopening the wounds I don't think will ever heal.

I turn around, trying to shrug out of his grasp, but the movement makes me wobble on my heels. "Whoa!" I hear him say as one of my ankles gives out and I fall into him. His back is pressed against the wall, and I land solidly against him.

It's not as if I haven't been in this position with him tonight already. We danced so many times earlier during the reception, so why is it that this time, when my breasts rub against the firmness of his chest, the fight leaves me? The need fills me? I don't even want to think about it, but it's all I can focus on when our bodies touch from chest to thigh. It's all my mind can grasp, because when I look up at him from beneath my lashes, my eyes catch sight of that magnificent mouth of his.

Maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe it's the sentimental aftermath of watching two people who really belong together get married. Maybe it's because I felt closer to Lexi today than I have in a long while. I don't know. What I do know is that I don't give a fuck about mistakes or consequences. *I just need to feel*. Need to lose myself. And shit, it's just Becks after all.

I don't meet his eyes. Don't want to know whether he wants this, because I do. I lean forward and press my lips to his, not giving him any time to react because damn if his lips aren't the perfect combination of firm and soft. His body tenses as mine softens into him, and I slide my hands up his chest at the same time my tongue slips between his lips. I moan softly at the warmth of his mouth, the taste of the rum on his tongue, the feel of his breath catching. His strong palms slide slowly up my bare arms as we sink further into the kiss, when all of a sudden his fingers dig into my shoulders and he's pushing me away. A shocked gasp falls from both of our mouths when our connection is broken.

"Haddie." His voice is pained as he says my name, a contradictory plea and curse at the same time.

And my mind may be a little fuzzy and my body coiled so tight from his kiss, but that break in his voice tells me he more than enjoyed it. That he wants me just as badly as I want him.

I force myself to look up, meet the clouded shock in his eyes. “What? Don’t you want me, Becks?”

I feel his fingers tense on my shoulders, hear a strained chuckle deep in his throat. “Oh, there’s a whole lot of want here,” he says before closing his eyes momentarily. He works a swallow in his throat and then pushes me away. “I’m just trying to play it safe, Had.”

His rejection stings—the alcohol softening the blow—but I feel the hesitancy in his fingers before he removes them from my shoulders. And with desire coursing through me, lust fueling its fire, I use my need to forget as the match to light the flame.

I step into him, slide my hands up his crisp white shirt, and meet his eyes. “C’mon, how much safer can we be? I’m with you, aren’t I? You’re not going to hurt me . . . are you, Becks?” I may have drunk a lot tonight, but I know desire when I see it, and damn if it doesn’t look sexy on Becks.

His jaw clenches, head tilts ever so slightly to the side, and his body tenses as he stares at me through the moonlit night.

“Isn’t it normal for the best man and the maid of honor to hook up, anyway?”

“Haddie.” My name is a drawn-out sigh, and I can hear his frustration laced with desire. I can feel the heat of his breath hit my lips.

The way he says my name causes the fire within me to rage because now I know the answer to my question: how he sounds when he loses control. And if he thought he was going to push me away after hearing that, he’s got another think coming.

“No one wants to play it safe tonight. . . . Live a little,” I tell him, reaching out and running a fingernail up the hollow of his neck where his shirt is unbuttoned. I lean in closer and whisper, “Please, help me live a little.”

“Oh, I believe you live a whole lot.” He chuckles with a subtle shake of his head, but those blue eyes of his remain locked on mine, a war of unexpressed emotions between us. “That’s what I love about you.”

My need to have him escalates with his nonchalance. And fuck, *this is frustrating*. Can’t a girl just get laid here? I’m not used to having to convince guys to get what I want, so why in the hell is this so difficult?

“I didn’t say shit about love, Country.” I say the words playfully but taste his rejection on my lips. “I don’t need strings. I just need you to make me feel . . . help me lose myself for a bit.”

He leans his head forward so that we are eye to eye, his hands coming up to frame my face so that I can see the concern and unwanted desire dancing in them. “I didn’t know you wanted to be lost.”

“We all need to lose ourselves sometimes, don’t we?” My question hangs in the still of the night as his eyes search mine for answers I won’t give.

He shakes his head, and I can tell he’s trying to convince himself to step away. “I don’t want to complicate things,” he says with a clenched jaw as he lowers his hands slowly from my face and stands back. Physically distancing himself to emphasize his words, but they contradict the look in his eyes.

“No complications. I told you, Becks,” I say, trying to keep the desperation I suddenly feel from my voice, “no strings, just sex. A little release after this incredible day. C’mon, what guy would pass up that chance?”

He groans. “A guy who’s trying *really hard* to do the right thing here and play it safe.” He steps forward, and I think I’ve gotten to him. He places an arm around my shoulder and starts steering me into the house. “C’mon, *festive Haddie*, I’m gonna help you to your room.”

“You’re a buzz kill, Becks,” I whine like a petulant child, nearly stomping my four-inch heels.

“And you’re a lot drunk like me,” he says into the crown of my head, followed by a chaste kiss. “Hell, if I don’t want you, Had . . . hell, if I don’t doubt that sex with you would be incredible, but fuck, I don’t want to do anything we’d regret in the morning because we’re drunk. Don’t want there to be awkwardness every time we hang out together. And goddamn it if you’re not making it hard to do the respectable thing and walk away.” The heat of his breath on my scalp sends chills down my spine.

“Aha!” I shout out, feeling like my feet are a bit more steady, now that I know he’s not really rejecting me, but being the *good guy* I pegged him to be. “You do want me!”

He stops immediately and looks down at me as if I’m crazy, brow furrowed, eyes wide. He starts to say something and then stops and shakes his head, before sighing and starting to move again. I turn into his body so that I can look up at him as he steers us through the house to our respective rooms. I take in his strong jaw and tanned skin and wonder what he would taste like as I run my tongue up the line of his neck. The ache of sensations that at this point I can only imagine spiral through me, make me even more determined than ever to prove to Becks that I need this, need him, tonight, and that we can do this without complications.

Shit, every man needs a push now and again. . . . Guess I’d better start pushing.

He stops walking and raises his eyebrows with a lift of his chin toward the open door to my room. *It’s now or never, Had*. I press against him, the hum of my desire igniting instantly. “Please, Becks?” I lower the pitch of my voice even though it’s just the two of us. “All of the romance and nostalgia of tonight didn’t get to you? Didn’t make you need the comfort of a woman? Want to hear her moan, bury yourself in her, feel her heat?”

My God, my own damn words are turning me on. My attempt at seducing Becks is making my own need undeniable. I lean up and bring my lips to his ear. “Comfort me, Becks.”

“You’re making it so damn hard to be good.” He says it like a curse, and when I step back, his body instinctively moves forward. His reaction causes a part of the old me to spark to life, and I grab onto it. I hold it tight as I push the sappy, needy, emotional Haddie away. And I welcome the forward, balls-to-the-wall attitude that’s been drowned by my grief.

And God, it feels good, slipping back into her shoes, even if for just a bit.

“Hard. Hm,” I hum deep in my throat, “now, there’s a good word.”

I step backward into the room, my eyes still trained on him as he stands in the doorframe, hands gripping the sides. I know I’ve won him over, know it’ll just take my next move to get what I’ve been working toward. What I desperately need.

And as I stare at him so handsomely framed in the doorway, I wonder fleetingly what it is about this moment that has made me feel normal again. Allowed me to shed the guilt that’s burdened me and taken my carefree attitude with it. I push the civil war of thoughts that’s been a constant refrain as of late from my head. I don’t allow myself to think any more about it, because all I want to do is feel.

With our eyes locked, I pull down the zipper of my dress. “Hey, Becks?” His eyes widen at the coy tone to my voice. The dress falls and pools around my feet. “Fuck playing it safe.”

Chapter 2

Beckett stares at me for a beat—jaw clenched, eyes locked on mine, body tense—before his restraint crumbles. As buzzed as I am, I notice that as he walks toward me his eyes never leave my face. They don’t wander to take in what I’m handing over to him—my body, the lace hugging my curves, and all of its temptation. They stay steadfast on mine, desire brimming and disbelief warring inside them.

But when he reaches me—when his hands flash out to pull my body into his, one hand on the nape of my neck, the other pressed against my back—my thoughts are lost as my need surges. His lips find mine in a frenzy of lust. Lips mesh, tongues lick, teeth nip.

Desire unfurls and breaks its way through the haze of alcohol. His hands map the lines of my body, fingers dipping beneath the lace of my bra to tempt and touch but not to take, not just yet. Soft moans turn into urgent murmurs of *hurry, quickly, I want, and I need.*

I’m desperate to feel the heat of his chest against mine, skin to skin—the initial connection that will sate the frenzy until I can expose the rest of his flesh. His lips and tongue continue their pleasurable assault on my lips, distracting me thoroughly from the task at hand, getting him naked.

I can’t help but giggle as I drag my mouth from his to draw in the air he’s knocked out of me, and to get my fingers to unfasten instead of grip his shirt. I laugh again as I try to concentrate on the little buttons that don’t want to slip through the tiny holes.

His chuckle is deep and strained, and I can feel its vibrations against my fingers. “Let me,” he says, my eyes flicking up to his, but not before I catch the amused smirk curling up the corner of his mouth. His hands close over mine and tug apart the shirt. The sound of buttons hitting and scattering over the hardwood floor is the only other noise filling the room besides our labored breaths.

His eyes darken and cloud, and then his lips are on mine. I run my hands up the toned plane of his chest while he pulls his arms from his shirt. My nails scrape and his breath hisses as he brings a hand up to fist in my hair and pull my chin up so that he can work his mouth along the line of my jaw and across the curve of my neck.

“Sweet Haddie,” he murmurs as his hand finds my breast and yanks down the cup of my bra, his callused palms replacing the softness of the lace. I gasp out loud as his mouth slides in its tempestuous descent. “Sweet, sweet Haddie . . . I wonder if your pussy tastes just as sweet as your kiss . . . as your skin . . . as right here.”

The heat of his mouth replaces the caress of his fingers on my breast, and I’m swamped by the sensation of it. Of him. My head falls back, and my words tumble out. “What are you waiting for?”

That chuckle of his hums against my breast before he tilts his head back and looks up at me under lust-laden eyelids. “Demanding, are we?” His eyes dance with humor before the dare flickers through them. *Try me,* they say.

And a part of me wants to. A part of me wants to push him to see just how much control he’s willing to give me. Is he going to do what I say, or will he do what he wants?

Challenge accepted.

“Then taste me, Becks. I want to feel your mouth on me, your tongue in me. I want you to taste me on your lips as I’m still coming and while you’re fucking me.”

He sucks harder on my nipple; a tortured groan escapes his lips as he rises to his full height and stares at me. “Fucking hell, Had,” he says before his lips brand mine, his mouth possessing, taking, claiming as if I were his. “Are you trying to tell me how to fuck you?”

I feel the heat of his breath on my lips, see the taunt in his smirk and the raise of a brow, but I can’t think of the witty comeback I know is there. His hands slide down my torso and grip my bare waist, causing my breath to stutter as he yanks my body into his. His impressive hard-on presses against my lower belly, causing the ache simmering there to intensify.

Becks leans in close, his lips grazing my ear in a move that causes chills to chase over my skin. “Rest assured, Haddie, I know how to fuck you. I know how to make you come.” His teeth tug on my earlobe to reinforce his words. “I know how to make this hot-as-fuck body of yours tremble, tense, and beg for more . . . so lie back, and let me taste you.”

And just when I think my body can’t coil any tighter from desire, from the explicitness of his words and the taste of his tongue on mine, he picks me up at the waist and throws me back on the bed. I giggle as I hit the mattress, the air escaping from my lungs, and before I can take a breath, Beckett’s on me. I try to wriggle away—try to flip over as we both laugh in our alcohol-infused state—but I’m no match for him.

“Sweet Haddie,” he taunts as his arms pin my wrists to the bed on either side of my head. He leans down and teases my lips, tracing my bottom one with his tongue before slipping it into my mouth, his erection pressing exactly where I want it to be. I wriggle my hips; patience is so not my virtue. He pulls away and sits on his knees, between my thighs. My eyes scrape down the defined lines of his torso—a torso that I’ve seen so many times before—but tonight, with him sitting in front of me like this, holy hell, do I realize I’ve never taken the time to appreciate just how hot he really is.

I work a swallow down my throat as he angles his head to the side and stares at me for a beat. I’m so entranced by the unsated need pooling moisture between my thighs that when I feel his fingers trail up the outside of my panties, I gasp. “The question is,” he asks with an arch of his brow as he leans down, “how many times can I make you come?”

And with those words, his hands press my thighs down, and his mouth closes over the fabric covering my clit. The warm heat of his mouth causes me to grip the comforter beneath me. The seduction of his words already has me craving his touch, and now the silk barrier between his tongue and my flesh drives me insane. Giving me and not giving me what I want all at the same time.

“Becks” is all I can manage as I throw my head back, close my eyes, and allow myself to absorb the pleasure. Fingertips trail up the inside of my thighs, and I can feel the cool air on my heated flesh as he uses a finger to pull my thong to the side. And when his mouth makes contact this time, I cry out as the liquid heat flows through me, my arms and legs tensing.

“God, you taste good,” he says, his voice hitting my ears as I’m being pulled under a tidal wave of sensation. His tongue continues to lick while I feel his fingers spread my flesh apart so he can slide inside me. He moves them so subtly, but whatever he’s doing has me moaning instantly when they find the spot that sets my nerve endings ablaze.

He continues his tantalizing barrage on my senses, rubbing and laving with just the right amount of friction to cause the wave of sensation to rise up and crash all around me in a flurry of breath-stealing ripples. His name falls from my lips, over and over, as I ride out my climax, his mouth still buried between my thighs, licking his way into me until the sensation is almost too much to bear.

My eyes are shut tight, the room spinning from the heady rush of desire, and I feel him slide his way up my body. Then his mouth is on mine again, tongue delving between my parted lips. "Can you taste how sweet you are? Can you taste what I just did to you?"

My response is an incoherent moan as he moves his knees to either side of my hips. He brings his hands up to cradle my head and control the depth and angle of his kiss, holding nothing back until I am left breathless from the intensity when he pulls away and looks in my eyes.

"That's one . . .," he teases, his voice trailing off as I reach out to his waist. He sits with such a delicious weight on my lower belly and I start to undo his trousers. My body may still be pulsing from my orgasm but I want more.

Becks hisses as my hands slide between his boxer briefs and his heated skin, gripping onto his erection and pulling it free. I slide my hand up and down, my thumb rubbing the drop of moisture at the tip around his length. He angles his head up to the ceiling and emits a groan of satisfaction that leaves my core tingling for more.

"One, huh?" I tease, trying to keep this playful because fuck if his mouth alone isn't worth coming back for seconds. I take his length in my palm and slide back down him, enjoying watching his abs tense. "Please, tell me you'll keep your promises because I need to come more than once," I tell him, delighted at how he's pushed away my thoughts from earlier. "And, Becks, you've had more to drink than me, so please tell me you won't suffer from a case of whiskey dick right now."

His head snaps forward, and his eyes hold mine, that chuckle falling from his mouth again. He shakes his head as he closes his hand over mine on his cock and says, "Demanding, are we? Is that not hard enough for you?"

I fight my smirk, because if he's going to throw out promises, he sure as fuck had better keep them. "It's hard all right, but I just wanted to make sure it stays that way."

"I believe you're insulting me," he says, running our joined hands up and down again, eyes closing momentarily from the sensation.

"It's not an insult if it's true."

He continues to stare at me, and within a beat, he's off the bed. I push myself up on my elbows, trying to see what in the hell he's doing. *Please, tell me he didn't get offended by that comment.* If he did, he can just keep on walking, regardless of his magical tongue. I don't need a man who gets his feelings hurt by a little teasing.

But then again, his tongue is *pretty* fantast-orgasmic.

A small part of me sighs in relief when Beckett stands still with his back to me and doesn't walk to the door. The other part of me frets that if he stays, he just might be the completely unexpected but perfect combination of naughty and nice that has the ability to make me go back on the promises I made to myself. Promises about what I will or won't do in the long term. *No strings, Haddie.* No ties, I remind myself.

And then any rational thinking I've been doing is vaporized when Becks drops his pants and turns around. I know his eyes are on me, but mine are focused on him and his condom-covered erection. The alcohol has most definitely not affected him. I tear my eyes away from the impressive sight and take in the whole package as he walks toward the bed in a predatory, purposeful manner. His eyes are filled with a combination of amusement and lust, and his body signals that I'm his for the taking: shoulders broad, gait confident, and smirk goading me to tell him otherwise.

He reaches the edge of the bed and, without comment, grabs my calves and pulls me toward him so that his hips are nestled perfectly between my thighs, which are hanging off the bed in his hands. He reaches down to slowly slide off my thong and then steps back to pull it over my heeled feet and tosses it carelessly over his shoulder. I am more than turned on by watching his eyes take in every inch of my body, completely unashamed as he watches his fingers play over my sex and run their way up and down my seam. His breath stutters, his nostrils flare, and his lips fall lax as his eyes observe his finger slide slowly in and then back out.

We both gasp, me from the sensation and him from the sight. His fingers rub and slide in a slow, even rhythm that has my already sensitized flesh on high alert. A moan falls from my lips as my body starts to heat up and Beckett's eyes flash up to meet mine. His tongue darts out and licks his lower lip as his fingers withdraw, but keep me open as he lines himself up with my entrance.

His eyes hold mine when he slowly enters me, every thick inch of him, filling, stretching, engaging every single nerve within me. He seats himself fully root to tip; his jaw clenches in restraint, and his eyes darken with desire as it takes everything I have not to roll mine into the back of my head at the sublime feeling. I want to watch him. Want to stare into those eyes and take in his incredible body as he works mine into a fever pitch.

I clench my muscles around him, silently telling him I'm ready for what's to come when he surprises me by leaning over and kissing me. A slow, hypnotizing dance of tongues as his cock presses even farther into me until I don't think I can take it anymore. My body surrenders, and just when my head starts to fill with so many thoughts of how this unexpected action is tying the strings we're not supposed to have, he leans back, face inches from mine, and smirks. "Is that hard enough for you?"

I focus on that arrogant grin instead of the thoughts in my head, and release a soft groan when he withdraws a fraction as he stands up. He holds still, eyes locked on mine and he pulls out ever so slowly until just the tip of him is inside of me. "Well, is it?"

God, yes, it is. God, yes, I want him pounding into me, driving me to the oblivion just beyond the horizon. I open my legs wider and reach my hands up to squeeze my own breasts. My muscles tighten around him in response to the moment, to the anticipation, in reaction to him withholding what I want the most.

"Fuck me, Becks." It's all I can say, because before his name is out of my mouth, he rears back and thrusts into me, my body rippling with a shock wave of pleasure. His hands grip into the flesh of my thighs as he begins again, each drive in and sensation-inducing withdraw out, allowing me to climb the ladder at a maddening pace.

My pulse pounds and my breath chases after it, on an endless race toward the finish line. My senses feel drugged, overwhelmed, scored with his possession of my body. My muscles tense and chills dance across my flesh, despite the sweat misting it as he drives into me harder and harder. My hands snake down my torso to part myself and allow my fingers to add that little extra friction to push me over the precipice.

I bring my eyes up to his to watch his reaction—to see if he's one of those assholes who think only he's allowed to bring me to climax—and I see his eyes dart down and focus on me pleasuring myself. His fingers

dig deeper, his hips pound harder, and the muscles in his shoulders grow tenser.

I cry out as the dynamite detonates within me. An explosion of liquid heat paralyzes my body—legs tense, arms stiff, breath held—as I succumb to my orgasm. And even though my body feels like it's so overloaded I can't possibly take any more, Becks keeps going, keeps raking his head over my walls that are sated with such a pleasurable pain I'm not sure if I want him to stop or keep going to see how much farther he can take me.

"Becks." His name is a broken cry on my lips as my body begins to shake from the force of my climax. He slows down some but adds a grind of his hips as he thrusts into me.

"Hold on, hold on," he moans out before rearing back and driving into me a few more times. A groan falls from his lips as his head drops back and his hands hold my hips still. I can feel his dick pulse inside of me as he claims his own release, his body rocking subtly as he rides out the feeling. I lay my head back and close my eyes, allowing him a few moments to come down from his high.

I feel him shift, and then I cry out in surprise when his five o'clock shadow scrapes over my abdomen as he kisses his way up the midline of my chest. He stops beneath my jaw for a moment, as he collects his breath before murmuring, "That's two."

"That was most definitely two," I tell him as the deep timbre of his laugh is muffled against my skin. I stop my hands from reaching out and running up and over his back as his weight rests comfortably on me. A touch like that is too much, too intimate when I'm just trying to keep it casual.

We remain like this for a moment, unspoken words replaced by our labored breathing, when all of a sudden Becks starts to move. I assume he is going to slip out of me and go wash up, put an end to our unexpected nightcap, so I'm surprised when he kisses his way back down my neck. He stops and takes one nipple in his mouth while his hand palms the other, both lips and fingers manipulating my tightened buds until I'm writhing again.

He slips out of me and I sigh with audible satisfaction. His mouth starts the slow descent down to the apex of my thighs, and I whip my head up to look at him.

Again?

Holy fuck, he's trying to kill me.

He kisses the top of my sex and looks up at me with a salacious look in his eyes. "I've read a woman comes harder the second or third time," he says. "Be sure to let me know."

He kisses my skin again and chuckles. "Oh, yeah, here comes three."

Chapter 3

My eyelids are closed but it's still so damn bright from the sunlight streaming into the room. I squeeze my eyes tighter to try to block it out, trying to clear the haze from my thoughts. I struggle to remember details from last night. How is it possible that I drank enough I can't remember, but my head isn't pounding like a damn tom drum?

I decide to snuggle farther into the down comforter, not wanting to wake up just yet. Wanting to forgo the

headache that will inevitably hit me at full force the minute my body acknowledges it's awake. But the fog starts to dissipate, and my thoughts replay the perfection of yesterday and what an incredible day it was. Smiles and laughter and love. Dancing and drinking and . . . oh fuck.

... *fuck playing it safe* . . .

... *here comes three* . . .

The words flicker through my mind and now I'm completely alert and cringe from the sun when my eyes flash open. I blink against the harsh light, and when I can focus, I'm staring straight at Becks. *Oh shit!*

His head is angled to the side on his pillow, the lines of his face relaxed and his hair sticking up every which way. There's a five o'clock shadow where I'm used to seeing his clean-shaven skin, and I vaguely recall the feel of it grazing against my abdomen. My eyes admiringly trace the line of his throat down his chest to that sexy-as-hell infinity zone, which disappears beneath the sheet right where I want to look the most. The sight of him undressed is even more overpowering now that I am completely sober.

I admire the view momentarily and wonder if I pull the sheets a little tighter around me, will they slip far enough off of him to grant me the view I want? I start to slowly draw them toward me when last night comes flooding back to me in full high-definition color.

Whispered words and moaned sighs. The heady combination of playful teasing, unfettered need, and insatiable desire. His adept hands and skillful mouth creating an ache so intense, I felt as if my body was on fire.

I remember how he gave me exactly what I wanted—to feel physically so that I could be numb to emotion. How when I looked into his eyes, I pleaded with him to bring me to the brink, push me into that oblivion of sensation. And when he finally entered me, he was a considerate yet demanding lover who left me breathless, sated, and confused.

My thighs tense, and my core clenches as I recall all of the sensations he evoked in me. I lay my head back down on the pillow and close my eyes to try to push away the desire that's already burning anew.

It was a onetime thing.

Sex without strings.

Exactly how I wanted it.

So why is my mind focusing on what he murmured into the silent room as I lay curled up against him when he thought I'd drifted off to sleep? His sighed words were laced with frustrated confusion. "*Goddamn strings.*"

The alcohol-blurred details continue to play behind my closed eyelids like a slide show, and all I keep thinking is: What the fuck was I thinking? But I know I wasn't really thinking at all. I was so busy trying to mask my grief that I selfishly never considered the harm I might do to him in the end.

Fuck. Damn. Shit.

I also can't help but think what a truly good guy he is. This is all my fault—even though my mind is floating with fuzzy bits of our time together, I can still piece together the fact that Becks tried to do the right thing. He tried to put me to bed, let me sleep it off, prevent me from getting behind the wheel.

This is on me. Completely on me. Why couldn't I have followed through with my plan to leave and go screw around with someone who wouldn't have given a shit if I left in the morning without another word? Why last night of all nights did I need to feel something just a little bit more? Was I afraid that the dam I'd built around my heartache might break and maybe, just maybe, I wanted someone around who I knew would take care of me if it did?

And so I used him.

Used a good man who didn't deserve to be used. Guilt eats at me until I force myself to open my eyes again and face Becks. I take in his handsome face and all-American good looks. He's the quintessential good guy—most definitely not my stereotypical go-to tattooed bad boy. I study him for a minute, my eyes drifting back down to where the sheet rests low on his hips . . . because he may not be my type but that doesn't mean I can't admire his hotter-than-hell physique. Soon my mind wanders back to the feel of his muscles bunching beneath my fingers, and I can't help but wonder if I could ever get used to him. To this.

I am so used to thriving on the wild, volatile but fun-as-fuck drama-filled relationships—*well, if you can really call them relationships*—with the rebels in my past.

I can't help my hushed chuckle when the thought hits me: Who would've thought that Ry would have spent the night—shit, married—the reckless bad boy, while I spent it with the Southern gentleman? Talk about switching places. Something was most definitely screwy with the world.

When I look up, I startle as I meet Becks's blue eyes. We stare at each other for a moment as we struggle with the awkwardness and figure out where to go from here. He looks at me from beneath half-closed eyelids and says, "Morning." He yawns softly but never takes his eyes from mine as if he's waiting to gauge my reaction before saying anything else.

"Good morning," I murmur back, my fingers tracing idle lines on the sheet. A slow, sluggish smile turns up one corner of his mouth, and my heart stutters in my chest.

And panic starts closing in on my throat.

I don't want to feel the warmth that just spread throughout my body at that lazy, boyish grin of his. I don't want to feel the contentment I feel right now. And most of all, I don't want to see that look in his eyes that tells me this could be so much more if I let it.

That's what Lexi did.

And look where that left her and Danny. *And Maddie.*

I shake myself from my thoughts and try to swallow the lump of anxiety taking hold. I avert my eyes quickly as I calm my overactive imagination and stop freaking the fuck out. I remind myself that I took my batteries out of my biological clock and put them in my vibrator for a reason.

I can do this. I may not remember all of last night, but I recall telling him that it would be sex without strings. He understood up front what this was. No matter what the fuck last night was, it was just a physical connection between two willing adults. So why am I afraid to look up from my fidgeting fingers and meet his eyes?

"Hey?" The rasp of his voice, laced with concern, pulls at me until I can't stand it anymore. I look up to his eyes. "What are you thinking . . . ?" His voice trails off as I find mine.

I gather the sheet around my chest, “Becks,” I say his name with a shy smile on my face, “this is okay.” I shake my head for emphasis. “We may have been drunk last night, but, one, I’m never too drunk to not remember and enjoy . . . and boy, did I enjoy.” I can’t resist adding that last part because, casual or not, the man’s got some moves. Number three was definitely more earth shifting than number two. And hell if four wasn’t pretty damn good too. My comment causes the lazy smile on his face to spread into a sheepish grin, which instantly has me wanting to melt into him. And I can’t. It’s not an option, regardless of how much my insides are warmed by the thoughts I refuse to welcome.

“We agreed no strings. No complications,” I say, shrugging my shoulders to let him know that I’m more than okay with this. Something flickers in his eyes, and I can’t quite get a read on it, so I continue. “I’m not the typical, clingy female that—”

“You’re anything but typical,” he murmurs sleepily.

I just stare at him for a beat before I tell myself to get my point across before I say something stupid. “Thanks, but all I was trying to say is that I’m not the type of girl to turn into a psycho stalker after a night of casual sex.”

“Coming *four times* is not exactly casual sex,” he teases with a playful smirk, which has me laughing nervously.

“Becks, I just don’t want this to be awkward. . . .” I shake my head, needing to say this to remove the guilt from my conscience. “I’m sorry that I pushed you last night . . . I didn’t mean for . . .” I sigh out loud as the thoughts I want to convey aren’t forming into the words I need.

“No one pushes me to do anything. Especially sex.”

His eyes search mine like he wants to say something else but he doesn’t. So I continue blurting out the first thing that comes to mind. “Thank you for taking care of me.” I cringe and avert my eyes immediately, embarrassed but glad I said it.

He continues staring at me for a moment with his quiet intensity, before nodding his head subtly and shifting to sit up. “Well, I’m glad we got that straight,” he says, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed so that his back is facing me. He scrubs a hand through his bed head, leaving it sticking up all over the place, before rising slowly. “No strings,” he repeats, standing up completely naked before walking toward the bathroom. I swear he mumbles something about a lasso, but I’m too busy looking at the view to care.

I may want no strings, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate one last lingering glance of that fine ass of his before he closes the bathroom door.

I smile smugly, understanding why Colton says Becks is the best pit crew chief in the business. He sure as hell kept my motor revving with perfection last night.

I roll over on my back and stare at the ceiling as the toilet flushes, and then the shower starts. I hear the muted sounds of the ocean outside and stare at the shadows playing across the ceiling. I exhale as my thoughts turn to last night, my mind recalling and my skin remembering all too well his touch, his taste, his scent.

And then I start giggling. Wave after wave of laughter rolls through me as I realize that this is the first time in a long time I’ve woken up without the constant grief from Lexi’s death heavy on my thoughts and smothering my spirit.

I wipe the smudges from under my eyes, asking myself why today I finally feel like I can get through this: the grief, the loneliness of Lexi being gone.

And even though my mind keeps wandering to the fine-as-fuck man occupying the shower, I push those thoughts away, push him away. There is no possible way I could suddenly feel all of this because of him, and how he treated me last night or how he made me feel.

It was just the physical release that did this to me. It had to be.

Whatever. Who cares about the why, right? Because I'll take the four orgasms he gave me and do my walk of shame with an enthusiastic bounce in my step.

* * *

"So, how do you like running your own business? You keeping busy?"

Becks's question pulls me from my thoughts as the world outside flies by the passenger side window. I shift in my seat so I can study his profile. God sure as hell didn't skimp in the looks department on him. So why am I all of a sudden just noticing it?

"It's pretty cool working for myself." I shrug, glad he's keeping this casual and trying to avoid any awkwardness. "I have a couple events coming up with that company Scandalous that bought some of the older nightclubs around town to revamp them. They hired me to do the promotion for the reopenings, and if they like how things turn out, they'll retain me as their premier promotion company."

"So, you'll have a high-profile client that will attract other clients. Nice," he says, drawing out the last word and absently nodding his head.

"I haven't clinched the deal yet. This chick doesn't count her chickens."

He snorts out a laugh. "Well, you should start counting because we both know it'll be a success just because it's *you*."

A part of me is pleased he thinks so favorably of me, even after last night. He flicks on the blinker and glances over at me, before looking back to the highway in front of him.

"So what's your story?"

I furrow my brows as I stare at him, thinking the question odd since we've known each other more than a year, but then I realize in all that time, aside from superficial questions, Becks and I have never spoken about our pasts, how we got where we are. And then it bugs me because I can't figure out why he's asking me. I mean this is supposed to be casual, so we shouldn't weigh it down with any history.

"Becks," I sigh out his name. "Look, I appreciate you trying to make this situation so it's not awkward, but we don't have to do the whole 'twenty questions about your past' thing."

He chuckles low and shakes his head like he's trying to process what I just said. "You must have dated some real winners in your past. First of all," he says, looking over to me and then back to the road as I try to not appear irritated by his comment. "I'm not asking you because I feel obligated. I find you intriguing and am curious about what got you here to this point, so humor me. . . ."

"And second?" I ask, a little taken aback by his interest.

“Second? Hm. Second, I don’t have a clue what I was going to say because those sexy legs of yours distracted me.” He laughs, and how can I be anything but flattered? “But I assure you it was damn good.”

“Smooth,” I tease, enjoying the ease between us.

“Oh, there’s still a whole helluva lot of rough.” He smirks and reaches over to pat my knee. “So humor me?”

I sigh loudly, not getting the point of this exercise since there isn’t a future between us. “Grew up in Long Beach. Pretty normal childhood. One sister, Lexi,” I say as if he didn’t already know and glance over at him to see if he noticed the waver in my voice, but he’s looking at the road ahead of us. “Was okay in school, nothing stellar. My mom got sick my junior year and—”

“Sick?”

“Breast cancer,” I tell him as I watch the shock flicker across his face that more than one person in my immediate family has been afflicted with the devastation of this disease. “She was in and out of treatment, surgeries, whatnot well into my senior year but I managed to get into UCLA.” I smile at the memory of how torn I was because Lexi went to Arizona for school. How I’d wanted to follow her and fulfill our goals of getting an apartment and living on our own together, but I wasn’t accepted there. “I walked into the dorm freshman year and there was this brown-haired girl with curious eyes and a shy smile sitting opposite of me.”

“Rylee.”

“Yep. My parents left after I’d unpacked, and Ry and I have been inseparable ever since. We went through the freshman fifteen together, boyfriends, heartbreaks, so much during those four years and everything life threw at us after. I graduated with a degree in PR and got lucky right off the bat with an internship at a company called PRX. Worked my way up from gofer to managing my own events. I loved my job there and was able to build a decent reputation after proving that the cute little blonde was more than just a decoration.”

“That’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one.” The words on my tongue falter at his oddly satisfying compliment. “So, why leave and start HaLex, then?”

The smile tugs at the corners of my mouth while my heart aches with the sadness of the truth. “Because Lexi and I always wanted to do something together. . . . Even when we were little, we’d pretend to have a business where we scheduled our Barbies for photo shoots or had our Cabbage Patch Kids doing commercials.” I laugh at the memories that flicker through my mind. “So, we decided with her business degree and my established connections we’d try it. What did we have to lose? I had a few clients offer to give me some smaller jobs, so I quit PRX . . . and two months later, Lex was diagnosed.”

“Had . . .”

I shrug, try to act like it’s no big deal when in fact it was my whole world tumbling down. “Yeah, well . . . now . . .” I let the thought drift off, unsure exactly what else there is to tell of my heartbreak. I clear my throat of the emotion, and the car falls into silence.

“Your mom is okay now?”

The shards of heartbreak spike anew. “She was in remission for four years and then it relapsed. The second time was bad.” Chills chase one another over my skin. “Double mastectomy, endless chemo and radiation . . . just bad.”

He reaches out and holds my hand in his, a silent show of support that's unexpectedly welcome when I'm so used to shunning it. I appreciate his avoidance of the word *sorry*, the most overused word on the face of the earth when someone becomes ill or dies. The quiet falls again, both of us lost in our thoughts.

After a bit Becks brushes his thumb back and forth over the top of my hand, and while it's a simple, nonverbal acknowledgment of my grief, it's also a subtle reminder of the damn good sex we had last night. My body reacts without thought, that ache between my thighs reawakening unexpectedly. I steal a glance over at him, but his attention is focused completely on the road ahead of us.

Does he feel it too?

Ah crap. *Lock it down, Montgomery*. No need to be thinking with your crotch when this was a onetime deal. It's not a budding flower, for God's sake. Think snapdragon. Think Venus flytrap. Think shutting it down to prevent his dick from dominating your thoughts.

"Last night . . ." It's all he says, his voice trailing off as he glances behind him to change lanes.

Dick dominance gone.

Hello, awkwardness.

No need to cool the ache of desire between my thighs now because that sure as hell was the jolt I needed to pull my thoughts and body from the edge of desire.

I feign that I need to scratch my other arm, an excuse to pull my hand from his and break our connection.

His sigh tells me he sees right through my bluff, so I stare at him, waiting for him to look my way again. I need him to see the expression on my face that says I'm totally cool with what happened. But he doesn't look at me—not even a glance—so that I can figure out what it is he's getting at.

"Was it about Lexi? I mean, you've got to talk to someone eventually or else—"

"Nope," I'm quick to respond, a knee-jerk reaction. I'm not doing this right now. Don't want to; don't need to. *Please, don't ruin my feel-good mood, Becks*. "Sometimes don't you just want to have a little fun without complications? You know how it goes, Becks. Shit, vibrators are cool and fun, but nothing gives more satisfaction than the mighty tongue."

He barks out a laugh, and I know I've chased the question away for now. "I don't know from your perspective, but from mine, tongues are most definitely welcome." He glances over at me with a suggestive look before shaking his head and laughing again.

"What?" I ask, raising my eyebrows. "You know it's true." I'm about to make another smart-ass remark, but I stop when I realize we've just pulled into my driveway.

I grab my overnight bag from between my feet on the floor and reach for the door handle when his voice stops me. "Are you going to be okay?"

His question can be taken several ways. Am I going to ever be okay with Lexi's death? Am I going to be okay with Rylee gone? Am I going to be okay no longer having the two people I relied on the most in my life every day?

I opt for the question I'm comfortable answering. "Okay? You mean living on my own? It's not like Ry's

really been staying here for a while anyway. . . . Now it's just official." I say the words calmly, but a bittersweet feeling comes over me at the thought that my best friend will never be my roomie again. Talk about a year of changes. Shit. It's time for the whirlwind to calm some so I can catch up to everything. "It'll be nice to live on my own for a bit. To be able to walk around naked when I want . . . stuff like that." I flash him a smile as I open the door and start to scoot out of the SUV with my overnight bag in one hand.

I feel like I should say something else—some parting wisdom, but nothing comes to mind. I begin to stand up when I realize my phone is still in the center console and reach back in for it. Becks grabs my wrist and startles me. My eyes flash up to meet his, and I can see the sincerity in them, the kindness, the honesty, and I'm unable to look away, no matter how much I want to. I can see so many things in his eyes, and I don't want him to say any of them, so I try to pull my hand back, but he just holds tight.

"You know you can call me if you ever need me, right? For anything," he says in that slow, even cadence of his that pulls at so many things deep within me, and I can't think of a witty retort to lighten the mood.

"Okay. Thanks." It's all I can manage. With our eyes locked on each other's, I reach down and fumble for my phone before exiting the car. I shut the door and exhale a sigh of relief, as I turn my back and head toward my house.

Chapter 4

I'm not sure how I'm feeling as I step inside and lean my back against the door—listening for Becks to pull out of the driveway—but once I'm inside, I take a breath for the first time in what feels like forever.

What the fuck is wrong with you, Montgomery? It was just sex. Just mind-blowing, multiple-orgasm-inducing sex. So get over it. Get over your thoughts of him. Move on.

My head wants to, but hell if my body does.

I drop my bag on the floor and toss my keys and phone in the basket on the table in the foyer and head toward the kitchen. I hit the button on the voice mail and tune out the telemarketer's message as I open the fridge and look for a Diet Coke. The machine beeps, and Maddie's voice fills the empty kitchen.

"Hi, Auntie. I hope your fancy wedding was loads of fun. I bet it was better than all of the Sour Patch Kids in the world put together. Can't wait to see you tomorrow. I have the whole day planned out for us."

I automatically smile at the sound of her voice, and my love for her swells like always. I can only imagine what her plans for us are this time. Last week it was mud pies and Barbies, with pretend tea served by Strawberry Shortcake.

The doorbell rings, and my heart immediately skips a beat at the thought it might be Becks. Maybe I left something in his car.

And why in the hell is my pulse thundering?

Crap. We really just need a little time apart so that we can let everything from last night settle and fade away. So I can let the taste and scent and sound of him dissipate from my memory.

I grab the handle and pull the door open, prepared for Becks, and am completely thrown for a loop by who stands there.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you too.” It’s that same gravelly voice that used to turn me inside out. Those gray eyes that can be cold as steel or soft as silk from one second to the next. That muscled torso that my fingers and mouth memorized every incredible inch of. The sight of him invokes images of wild, against-the-wall, rip-your-clothes-off sex, and at the same time, schizophrenic emotions and volatile tempers surge through my mind.

And yet his pull on me is still there, still as magnetic as ever. This is the man I once upon a time thought could be *the one*, could be worth the fight, until he disappeared just as quickly as he appeared.

Just like he does every time.

“What do you want, Dante?” I huff out a breath and put my hands on my hips.

“What, no kiss? No hug? That’s all the welcome I get?” He shoves his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans, his biceps bulging, and he leans a shoulder against the doorjamb. I try not to look twice at the new ink peaking up from under the collar of his shirt, but I find myself wondering what he chose this time. My eyes rise from his neck to his face when he runs his free hand up and over his goatee. Between the smirk on his lips, and the look in his eyes, I swear he does it on purpose to evoke thoughts of how exactly that patch of hair can tease and tempt me when positioned between my thighs.

I take hold of my thoughts and am able to recall the hurt he inflicted on me, which still scars me deep inside. “You’re lucky that your welcome doesn’t include a swift kick in the nuts.” I fold my arms across my chest and raise an eyebrow at him.

He laughs, that arrogant smirk strengthening the intensity that always etches his face. “Ah, there’s my girl, spirited as fuck, just how I like you.”

“I’m not your girl. You lost the chance to call me that when you walked away without a word.” I absently look over his shoulder at the neighbor kid running down the sidewalk, before looking back at him.

“You afraid lover boy’s going to come back and get pissed I’m standing here?”

“Lover boy?”

He lifts his chin. “Yeah. That your boyfriend who dropped you off? You switching things up, Had? Going from the reckless to the refined?”

I laugh. Beckett refined? That’s not exactly the first word that comes to mind, but I guess in Dante’s view, Becks’s lack of tattoos makes him just that.

“He’s just a friend, and besides, what he is or isn’t is none of your damn business.”

“You’re always my business.”

I snort in response. Does he actually think that he can show up on my doorstep after disappearing over a year ago and that I’d welcome him with open arms? “C’mon, babe, are you really going to bust my balls? Besides, you know how much I like it when you’re rough with me,” he teases, trying to get to me in that way that always seemed to work before.

But I’ve been here, done this, and don’t plan on having a repeat performance. Heartbreak is not my thing.

“What do you want?”

He shrugs sheepishly. “I’m back in town.”

“Good for you. What for? Chasing the dream fail or something?”

He laughs with a shake of his head, his dimples deepening. “Babe, I’m always chasing something. . . .”

“Yeah, but chasing tail and chasing dreams are two entirely different things.”

He takes a step toward me, and I take one back, leery of him getting too close, the proven weakness in my armored heart. “I wasn’t that bad,” he says softly. “We were good together.”

I bat away his hand when he reaches out to touch my arm. “Yeah, and the good was only about twenty percent of the time,” I tell him. “I seem to remember the other eighty percent a whole helluva lot more.”

“But that twenty percent? I’ve got fond memories of that twenty percent.” He grins at me, trying to get me to remember the damn good sex we used to have. I figure I’ll beat him to the punch.

“I don’t.” I lie without batting an eyelash since he’s the king of telling untruths.

He stares at me for a moment before taking another step toward me. I tell myself not to be affected, and then of course his cologne hits me, causing memories to surge to the forefront of my mind. “It seems you’ve gotten all hard on me, babe.”

And I can’t help it: My mind immediately flashes to last night. The word *hard* makes me think of the look on Becks’s face when he wanted to prove just how hard he was. I shake my head and exhale in exasperation, thinking about how different Becks and this man in front of me are.

But both dangerous.

He tilts his head down, smile still in place, and looks into my eyes. “Ahhh, she’s giving in. You know you can never stay mad at me. Resistance is futile, babe.”

And I’m so pissed because he’s right. I never can. Of course, I respect myself and all that shit, and would never allow myself to go back down that path with him again, but I swear to God, Dante can make me bend my rules like no one else can. I fight the smile that threatens to curl up one corner of my mouth, knowing it’s basically useless to even try. “Dante . . .” My voice trails off, my internal war waging within me, as I try to figure out what he wants this time. “Why are you here?”

His smoldering smirk surges to a megawatt smile because he knows he’s got me now. “I need a place to crash for a bit.” His eyes darken with an unexpected solemnity that throws me, but with him, you never know what’s the truth and what’s a game.

“And you see a vacancy sign on my porch or something?”

He blows out an audible breath. Used to taking without asking, he doesn’t like having to explain anything. “C’mon, babe, I know Ry moved out.” I raise my eyebrows, causing him to pause and explain. “It’s not like speculations over her wedding details weren’t the buzz all over *TMZ* last night or anything.” He rolls his eyes and flashes that smile at me again, but I stand my ground, arms crossed, impatient. “I just need a couple of days, a week or two at the most, so that I can straighten some shit out.”

There is something about the way he says it—something about the stress lining his face—that has me angling my head and looking past his tough exterior and wondering what he’s really doing in town. “So, you came here? You think you’re charming enough that I’m just going to forget all of the shit from before?”

“You suck.” I almost laugh at the grade school response coming from this big, bad rebel.

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