

DON'T CLOSE YOUR EYES

SAMPLE

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LYNESSA LAYNE

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Spotify playlist: Don't Close Your Eyes by LYNESSA LAYNE

PLAYLIST

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

- **Klive Henley King** – mysterious anti-hero, Also known as Complicated Moonlight & Kinsley's pirate, Double life as businessman & hired gun
- **Kinsley Fallon Hayes** – Protagonist, bartender, college student in graduate school, Renowned sprinter dubbed Micro Machine
- **Jase Taylor** – Navy SEAL, bar singer, lifeguard
- **Rustin Keane** – Jase's childhood best friend, combat veteran, cop
- **Nightshade** – Crime Syndicate
- **Inferno** – Biker gang / motorcycle club comprised of sinister firefighters rivaling with Nightshade for power
- **Joey** – Klive's Personal Protective Detail (bodyguard)
- **Tyndall Taylor** – Jase Taylor's little sister, Kinsley's best friend

- **Andrew (Andy) and Clairice (Claire) Hayes** – Kinsley’s parents
- **Bayleigh & Garrett** - Kinsley’s co-workers
- **Marcus** – Kinsley’s boss/manager
- **Jarrell & Gustav** – lead bouncers at the bar
- **Rock – N – Awe** – Jase’s band
- **Constance** – co-lead singer with Jase, Kinsley’s friend
- **Ian Walton** – Kinsley’s personal trainer and track coach
- **Lucy (Looney Lucy)** – track team manager
- **Sara Scott** – Kinsley’s co-worker, Patrick Scott’s wife
- **Patrick Scott** – Inferno prospect, Sara Scott’s husband
- **Adrian Miller** – Kinsley’s elective art professor

CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW

 = KLIVE KING

 = KINSLEY HAYES

 = JASE & RUSTIN



CHAPTER ONE



Murder was never my intended occupation. Twenty-seven stories below, the *Jose Gasparilla* anchored in the center of the glittering water of Tampa Bay. Through a scope, I searched scores of smaller boats dotted around the majestic pirate ship until spotting the bright yellow cigarette boat dubbed *The Banana Hamick*.

I scribbled precise grid points onto a small notepad, shook my head.

This idiot can't spell hammock, yet stole two million worth in cocaine?

The take, disguised as cheesy gold coins, brimmed from an open treasure chest at his feet where he stood waving to the crowds gathered onshore.

I rolled my eyes and collapsed the scope.

Too easy. Where was the challenge, adrenaline, thrill of the hunt? Why hire me to kill this arrogant prat when a Dade City meth head would do the deed for a fraction of the price?

As I locked my office, a lone janitor paused his vacuuming.

“Wow!” he gushed. “Great costume, Mr. King. Enjoy wooing the wenches at Gasparilla. You’ll have a hard time keeping them away.”

“Thanks.” I chuckled. “But I plan on enjoying the festival from the safety of a parade float.” *And sharp shooting from a crow’s nest.* I boarded the elevator. “There’s a bucket of beads calling my name. Cheers, mate.”

He waved as the doors closed. I leaned against the wall and fished a Bowie knife from my coat to check my eyeliner in the shine. Coal smudged beneath my finger when the elevator halted only five floors down.

“What the?” My words died as the doors divided on leather pants, round hips, corset, cleavage, slender throat, parted lips. The knife fell to my side while my mouth dried and fell open.

“Whoa!” She backed away. Beautiful green eyes, clouded with smeared mascara, widened. “I didn’t expect anyone else.” She shook her head, top hat firmly in place. “I’ll catch the next one.”

“Nonsense, I don’t mind sharing,” I said, swallowed.

“That’s okay,” she said, “I’d rather be alone. Thank you.”

The doors closed, but I shoved the blade between them, sliced them apart.

“Oh, no!” Her palm shot out while she stumbled back. “No! No, thank you! You go!”

“Wait. It’s not what it looks like!”

“You leave, or I’ll call the cops!”

“No, love, I didn’t mean to use the bloody knife to open the lift! Gah! I mean *elevator!*” After living in the United Kingdom, certain words still slipped out.

High-heeled boots dashed behind the vacant reception desk. "I mean it!" she yelled. Fingers fumbled with the phone until the receiver clattered off the edge. "Oh, shit!" She sprinted down the hallway, tested office doors like a bimbo in a B-movie. The cell phone in her hand made little sense considering the phone she'd left dangling from the desk.

"Look, I'm leaving!" I pressed the elevator button for the next floor down. "You have *nothing* to fear!" I sheathed the knife. *Pathetic girl. I ought to shake some sense into her! Show her how to escape a killer rather than cornering herself!*

I shouldn't have gone after her. I didn't allow her to know I was, but no way I'd risk a police report bearing my description when I had a target to paint. The hell if I'd forego tonight's bounty when I relished ridding the world of that stupid criminal, retrieving the drugs and taking his boat as a bonus.

Exiting the elevator, I jogged back upstairs into the reception area. I padded across the lobby to re-cradle the screeching phone receiver. In the silence a woman's voice drifted as a distant echo. *The lavatory!*

Office doors were locked tight. Darkness showed beneath sets of closed vertical blinds subtly shifting with the blowing air conditioning.

Every whispered step closer to her amped up an adrenaline rush so exhilarating, I refused to heed the voice of reason shouting at me to flee as if *I* were prey.

My ear pressed to the door of the ladies' room. Overhead, a florescent light twitched. The buzz mixed with the young woman's voice leaching through the wood.

"Daddy, something—" She strangled a sob. "*—awful* happened at the festival!" Sob. "Nate, he, well ... gosh ... I have

no idea where to begin or what to do!” Whiny, squeaky, hoarse cry. I jerked away from the wretched pitch before braving the door with my ear again. Throat clearing. Sniffing. Stronger tone. “Look, I’m okay. Emotional, but okay. My phone is dying. If you can’t reach me, don’t freak out. I might stop at a friend’s place before I come home. Wanted you to know. Love you.”

The beep of disconnection echoed off the tile walls. Unable to see her, I assumed the smack afterward was her phone against the granite countertop.

“Stupid, Kinsley! Stupid! Stupid! *Stupid!*” She shouted as if her voice might shatter the mirror. I cursed under my breath.

Silence. Sniffles. Lower tone.

Kinsley

I pressed harder to hear her, hoping she wouldn’t scream again. She released a heavy exhale. “Okay, Kins. Quit being a coward. Call the cops. Let them deal with those creeps and the psycho with the knife, then go home. No one will know it was you. Totally anonymous.” *Shit. Cops?*

Anger scorched my gut as I clutched the door handle. *Was I the psycho with the knife? I hadn’t done anything!*

She blew her nose, sniffled again. I lost my give-a-damn and strode to the lift.

Let the foolish girl report a pirate in a building! The police had thousands to sort through tonight. She wasn’t the daft fool, I was in thinking her fear mattered. Screw taking the stairs. I had nothing to hide!

I pounded the call button, pulled my pocket watch and cursed about how long the damn thing took to travel back upstairs. The halves of my watch snapped shut in my fist at the sound of her gasp.

“You said you were leaving,” she said.

“And *you said* I was a psycho with a knife. Therefore, we are both liars.” The lift arrived with a ping. I kept my back to her as I boarded, then turned with a scowl on my face to inspire something real for her to fear. “I came to check on you, however, I now find it best to leave you to your assumptions. Good evening.” *And good riddance.*

Under my unconcealed disdain, her eyes dimmed with shame. They weren't a mess anymore, but her nose was pink. The color bled into her cheeks.

“You followed me?” *Dumb question.*

“Did you need to go downstairs then? Because I do.” I stabbed the ‘door close’ button.

What the hell? I jerked when the girl rushed inside just before the doors sealed. She reached for the panel of numbers. Without thought, I threw my arm out to block her.

She yanked back. “What the hell?”

“Your makeup was a mess before I startled you.”

“What?”

“Your eyes.” I gestured with one hand, pocketed the other. “You fixed them, but your mascara was all over your face. *Before* I came along. Wasn't me you needed to call the cops about. What happened tonight?”

She stared, her only movement a swallow and an artery jumping at her throat. She'd stopped breathing. Several red splotches painted her chest and neck that had nothing to do with embarrassment.

“Please answer the question.”

Her chest fell with a harsh exhale of all that trapped air. “No.

It's none of your business. Why are you carrying a knife like that in a place like this?"

My head angled. *Was that all she could think of? My knife?*

"Perhaps this *should* be the business of the one carrying the knife. You see, love." My hand rested on my costume. "In case you couldn't tell, I'm also attending a festival and plan on protecting myself while I'm there."

"You use Mace to protect yourself at a festival, not a machete."

The space filled with my unexpected laughter. "Pepper spray? Is that what you used to fend off the bloke who left those fingerprints on your arm?"

She gasped and slapped her palm over the exact spot. A pink glow expanded up her temples. My jaw clenched and lifted while I stood straight to look down on her.

"Who hurt you?"

Her gaze collected worry as she studied our confines with the dawning of a cornered creature cursing her stupidity.

"It's not like that," she argued.

"Then what *is* it like?" I all but growled. The thief in the *Banana Hamick* may not be tonight's only target.

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't even know you."

Determined, she reached around me for the button. Again, I prevented her by stepping between her and the column altogether.

"Ugh! Come on!" she pleaded.

"Hey. If someone did something, I'd rather take care of it than not. You're safe with me, but don't protect some asshole."

She narrowed her eyes with a mute implication that I was the

asshole for the moment. A brave sign she was willing to test my word.

“Nothing happened. Not in the manner you’re thinking.”

“Right.” I clenched my jaw as I held firm. “We’re not moving until you elaborate.”

She drilled a scowl through my skull like her problem was hers alone. I stalled, allowed silence to expand the interrogation. She caved in less than a minute. “Fine. My boyfriend stood me up. I put on this stupid outfit because he loves Gasparilla. We arranged to meet three hours ago. I waited for two-and-a-half past that and admitted defeat.”

“How did you end up here?”

“Good grief,” she spat. “You want my life story, too? My father works here. So, you see, I was running to Daddy because my boyfriend hurt my *wittle* feelings. Happy now? I guess I should apologize for wounding your precious pride.”

On an aggravated whistle, I hammered the button for the car park, then balled my sweaty hands inside the deep pockets of my pirate coat. If she were going to a different floor, she could press her own button for grating against mine.

“I’m sorry.” She deflated.

“So, pout about it.”

“Hey, you asked! I told you I didn’t want to talk about it.” She peeked at the red indicator, then pressed the next floor. “I don’t need your trash.” Seconds later, she jumped off like I was diseased. The doors closed, and I let them. I didn’t need her garbage either. What did that little wench even matter? *Leave her be!* But I couldn’t. Nor could I define why I shattered the silence on a slew of curses and stabbed a button three floors further down.

The moment the doors cracked, I darted into the stairwell. Racing heels clacked down the stairs. The concrete echoed with her hoarse sobs. I let the heavy metal door slam. She cursed as I heard her turn to jog the other way.

“Come on! It’s only me!” I shouted up through the space where the railing wound around each level. The clattering paused. She leaned over from two floors above.

“Oh, and that’s supposed to make me feel better?” she shouted. “Leave me alone.”

“Yeah? And leave you at the mercy of a pervert lurking in dark places like these?” I snapped back.

“You mean like *you*?” she asked.

“I mean like the wanker you’re covering for! Blast!” I leapt out of the way as she spit. Her saliva missed me and continued down the fifteen remaining flights. A moment later, a steel door slammed. No more footsteps. *Hell no! Now it was personal.*

I ripped the exit open and stormed to the elevator, mashed the button. The floor indicator ticked down. Once the doors split, I half-expected her not to be inside, but there she stood, hands curled around the bar against the back wall. Her glare blazed with anger, but there flashed something challenging. Mine mirrored the sentiment.

“I didn’t deserve that.” I gave her my back while I pressed for the garage once more. “Any of it.”

“The hell you didn’t,” she stammered. “You shouldn’t have left the elevator, I told you to leave me alone, and I’m not covering for anyone. You were chasing me for goodness sakes!”

My eyes flared, and I turned with incredulous disbelief at her foolish bravery. “*Chasing you?* Shame on me for trying to be chivalrous.”

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“*Chivalrous?*” She scoffed. “You call that chivalry when you practically wore the inconvenience of all this upstairs? I wasn’t planning on you interrupting me either, bud.”

I shook my head, unable to help my disgust. “No wonder your bloke stood you up.”

She flinched like I’d slapped her. The heaving in her chest returned. Lunging forward, she halted our progress just to grate on my nerves, then twisted to face me, bucking-up. Her bravado soon wavered under my silent scrutiny.

“Young lady, I haven’t time to play these childish games.” I reached toward the panel. She jolted back against the column of buttons before melting down on the marble beneath our feet. Multiple floors lit, but that didn’t strike me as much as her presumption that I’d strike her. *Was I that scary?*

“You’re right.” Her voice cracked as her face fell into her hands. “I deserved it. I’m a terrible girlfriend.”

I hadn’t an umbrella adequate for this absurd rain of emotion. With a sigh, I knelt and cupped my hands beneath her arms to lift her to her feet, bracing for the spit likely to splat in my eye.

“Forgive me if I scared you again, love, but why not spit in his face instead of mine?”

“Why would you assume I won’t?” she asked in bitterness.

We stopped on the first of twelve additional levels. She stared at me, I stared at her until the doors closed once more. Interesting. She’d just conceded a perfect moment to escape. With eleven bloody floors to go, I prodded her places of pain.

“Let’s pretend I believe you. Why meltdown over this bloke? Were you together long?”

“Long enough, or so I’d thought. I guess in light of tonight,

we were together too long.” She looked everywhere but at me. “I wasted so much time on him.” Her eyes ran out of space and traveled up to mine, big, beseeching, apologetic. “I’m sorry I’ve wasted yours.”

That look loaded the bullet in a mental game of Russian roulette.

Drop this pistol and leave the risk!

Fresh tears added to her a different vulnerability that unsettled my normal control. Even if I knew she was lying, I’d been an insensitive asshole. *Fix it. But how?*

The doors opened again. *No way was I was doing this ten more times.* I herded her from our cell to press the button for the other one. She argued the whole way out, bargaining for using the extra floors for contemplation.

“You mean for wallowing? There’s nothing to contemplate. If something is finished, let it be, and move on,” I commanded. The indicator counted from the parking level. The bell chimed. The doors split open, but she didn’t budge.

“I’ll wait for the next one,” she said. “Thanks.”

Pfi! No way in hell I’d concede with the visual and emotional target she’d painted on herself. Add the foolish fight-or-flight responses, she was prime for the wrong prick. *Not on my watch.*

“Nonsense. Come now.” Plying her was like taking a stubborn jackass for a walk. After another verbal battle with her attitude, the bloody doors that kept trying to pinch us, my patience snapped. I spun her and cinched her waist in my grip.

“Oh!” She gasped while she grabbed my shoulders. I somewhat lost my head as the ribbons crisscrossing the length of her spine danced like feathers in a bow over my fingertips. Her body shifted closer. Whether I’d tugged her, or she’d leaned in, I

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couldn't say. I only knew I wasn't getting enough oxygen as her chest brushed mine. Her fingers laced together at the nape of my neck. My lips parted to release a long steady breath. Her eyelids fell a fraction as she watched. When I stroked my thumbs against her waist, she bit her lower lip as I felt a tremor travel through her having nothing to do with fear. Tension compounded as the doors sealed us inside the private cocoon. My tone firm yet gentle, I powered through.

"Look at me, love." Look at me, she did. Up close, her irises heated like the blood pounding my veins. My gaze strayed to her gnawed lip for relief.

I hardened my expression and resolve while I warred with pressing her against the wall to taste the cinnamon of her breath.

"Enough of this," I said almost to myself. "Don't waste your time drafting excuses for someone else's misbehavior. Quit looking for your father to coddle you. For the sake of your self-esteem, stop dating little boys. They've no fortitude." My mind clouded with dangerous inspiration while she searched my face. Angry tears glazed her eyes like puddles of gasoline, while my desire sparked like a pyromaniac holding a Zippo lighter. One strike may cause a beautiful explosion.

No woman had ever looked at me like I had the power to put away her pain, even though I'd had a hand in causing hers. *Why did she?*

"I swear," I whispered aloud what ought to remain in my mind, "you would be so strong with a real man." *With me*, I finished with my eyes.

She gasped, conflicted and offended. Her brows dipped while she read my eyes like she understood the words written in my mind. I sensed the same about reading hers. *This* young woman

didn't need a kid causing drama. She needed the adrenaline rush of being shoved to the precipice of a cliff, then yanked back to safety by someone who couldn't resist her before he brought her to combustion.

"Come to Gasparilla with me," I blurted, mutinous against my priorities, my bad side, those who controlled me.

"No." She released a shaky breath.

Curse that damn word again!

She broke my grasp to push the garage button I'd neglected.

"I don't date strangers," she said like she'd hardened her own resolve.

"Perhaps you should."

She arched her eyebrow. "Nope."

"Coffee then?" I asked. "To get to know one another?" The floors ticked down like a time bomb closer to detonating and obliterating every conflicted second with her!

"The coffee shop is closed on Saturdays."

"I know. We don't have to go to this shop or the festival. We can go anywhere you want." I shifted to close the small distance between us, desperate to be near her once more, but she shook her head.

"I think you've gotten the wrong impression of me."

"Ditto."

She scrunched her nose. "No, I mean this." She added space between us and gestured to her attire. "This isn't me. For starters, I don't dress like a 'ho', I'm not easy and dating isn't that simple. I don't need a consolation prize. I need to get away from *you*."

Ouch! How could she say that when she'd been wanton in my grasp moments ago?

The lift opened on the parking garage. Humidity glued to

our skin as thick and uncomfortable as the chemistry between us. We surveyed the dimly lit expanse. Few cars remained. She was lucky I was here, though my pride ached to hell.

“Great,” I said. “I’m too complicated to give you consolation, nor do I date. I was merely softening the bruise to your ego.” I propped one hand against the door. My other gestured she exit first. Under normal circumstances, I’d have relished wounding someone who’d wounded me, but I loathed the flush of pain in her expression. No different from what she’d done to me, but this stung.

“Anyone ever tell you what an asshole you are?” High heels hammered the concrete as she left.

I swallowed. “All the time, love.”

“I hate this. I’m done with men and their drama. It’s all the same. And *you’re*” She trailed off in search of a word that might match how low I measured, inspecting me for flaws. Rosy blossoms on the apples of her cheeks betrayed her. *That’s right, love, I’m not alone in this inexplicable attraction and misery.*

“I’m what?” I taunted. “Grown up? Mature? Too big a prick?” Better if she hated me to escape my attention. Safer for both of us.

“Too *old?*” The corners of her lips lifted like that mental Russian roulette revolver. Her expressive eyes spun the cylinder as I stared like a victim realizing too late his own number was up. Victorious knowing fired from her irises, nailing my contempt, bleeding my strength. She turned and stalked away, determined to hold the power over me tight in her little fist. *Not so fast.*

“You’re not done. If you’d had a man instead of a boy, you’d be done with drama, because real men don’t have time for theatrics. Nor do real men hurt women. You’re finished with

temperamental kids. Maybe ring me when you're not one anymore." I strolled behind her enjoying the line of her legs in Puss-in-Boots stilettos.

"What are you doing?" She spun so fast I stumbled into her. Her squeal echoed off the concrete pillars while I grabbed her to keep us both from falling. Warm hands wrapped around my neck. Fiery eyes blazed mine with accusation. *Uh, huh. Two can play this game.*

"Did you do that on purpose?" I grinned.

"Ha! You wish." She stabilized and threw a finger in my face. The weak girl vaporized to re-materialize into a dominating woman. Pure beauty. This young lady, *Kinsley*, was *the* Anne Bonny to my Calico Jack ... *Kinsley King has quite the ring*

"I asked you a question." She interrupted my reverie. "What are you doing?"

I blinked hard. *What was I doing? Hell, what was I thinking?*

"Dangerous to be alone in a parking garage at night dressed so sexy." I nodded toward her costume. "Here. Take this." I shrugged out of my pirate coat.

"Oh, the chivalry angle again?" She stared at my offering with a stubborn lift of her chin. When I raised my eyebrows, she grimaced and yanked the heavy crushed velvet from my hand. She shrugged into the sleeves much longer than her arms. Anne Bonny looked mighty adorable in my coat. Too adorable to sport such a venomous attitude.

"Lead the way," I told her.

She snorted. "I don't think so."

My finger rose this time. "I'm walking you to your car."

"Why? To put me in my car seat and buckle my belt?"

"If you need it, sure, but I figured you'd at least graduated to

a booster seat.” She was so frustrated I barely contained a grin. “In those heels, I bet you can even reach the pedals.”

“Insults coming from Peter Pan in a Captain Hook costume? That’s cute.”

I winced like she’d burned me before my wicked smile spread. “Oh, come now, love. At least grant me a solid Captain Morgan.”

“Yeah, I could use a few shots of rum after being around you.”

I chuckled. She turned to keep walking. Her pace quickened. I kept up, and she grumbled as we narrowed in on a shiny green Civic. The unmistakable feeling of watching eyes skittered over my back, raising goosebumps on my neck. Glancing around like she sensed danger, too, she pulled the coat closed. Her eyes held mine for a ghost of a second. We were being observed. She rushed to her car with new urgency while I scanned for threats.

She had my knife. I’d rather not pull my pistol unless I had to. Improvisations formulated as she unlocked her car, the lights flashing once. I reached for her door, but she spun with a scolding index pointing at my face again. A great effort with the sleeve.

“No,” she said. “You don’t get to open my door. Funny how you don’t have time for childish games, yet you’re the one playing them.”

“Am not—”

“Are, too. Know what I’m done with? Fear. Everyone knows boys have a fear of commitment. I shouldn’t be heartbroken about being stood up. It’s always *coming* as long as they’re not allowed to. And here I have a man—” She poked my chest. “—arguing like a child while lecturing me like I’m the weak one,

when he'd likely walk away for the same reasons? It takes real strength to hold out for what you want, so admit it. Which of us is weakest? Who's the kid? Be honest." "Whoa!" I stammered, amusement confiscated. Hers was, too.

What had this bloke done to her? Dumped her over sex? Forced her without permission after she'd changed her mind?

Her finger stayed in place. I wrapped my hand around her fist and leaned in to convey the severity in my gaze. "You're wrong."

She snorted and speared my eyes with a dare to prove otherwise. "You're weak. You're afraid. You're all the same." Anne Bonny shoved me aside to open the car door by herself and plunked into the driver's seat. I grabbed the door before she closed me out. My bravado challenged, she was testing me, but I was too angry at my imagination and her comparing me to that boy.

"No," I measured, "I'm not. It's complicated. *I'm complicated.* I will say no more on the matter." *But I wanted to!*

"Ha! Well, that makes two of us. Walk the plank or call me when *you've* grown up." She tossed her hat at my feet before yanking the door from my grasp.

"I need a number for that!" I shouted as she drove away. The peal of tires cut off my retort.

No more banter. No more ball-busting bitchiness or vulnerable softness, sweet perfume, coconut-scented lotion. No more cinnamon on her breath near my lips. *No more Anne Bonny and Calico Jack!*

I cursed the empty silence while my eyes drifted to the ground. *How to proceed?* She wanted proof, action over words. Impossible for too many reasons, but if I failed to act, someone

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else would, or worse, she'd ignore my wisdom and run back into the arms of someone who may have attacked her in his need to have what she'd refused. *Did he stand her up before or after? Or had someone else attacked her after she'd been stood up? Why would she protect them?*

Who the hell cares because she's gone!

Gone!

Why did she matter?

Was I a bloody masochist because she made my palms sweat?

After long years on the job, nothing rattled my cage. She not only pried at the bars of my prison but sent an earthquake through the very foundations setting free the possibilities of life. I was so damn screwed.

I grabbed the hat and dusted off the brown felt. A burst of bay breeze carried her scent from the accessory. Instead of emasculating myself and lifting the perfume to my nose, I trudged to the Range Rover to drive away from here and this experience. I opened the door as a shield, yanked the gun from the holster at my back, pulled back the hammer, and spun to take aim on another pirate.

"Freeze!"

"Shit! Easy, King!" Joey cried. My personal protective detail's hands flew up beside his temples. The feather on his cavalier hat waved in the wind. My barrel poised to fire two inches from his face, but he whistled with the wry grin of a card sharp holding a royal flush. He may as well have been. He had enough to run to my superiors and out my interlude with the girl.

"You're mighty brave, mate." I lowered the gun and thumbed the safety in place. "Lucky you didn't come any closer."

Joey dabbed sweat from his brow. "I'd say you're the brave

one. She's mean. Aren't you lucky I caught these in case you needed a witness?" He held his phone up as I holstered the Sig. His display lit with several images of Bitchy Bonny flaying my heart. I masked my excitement. "She looks cute and harmless," he said, "but for a second, I thought I'd need to step in and defend you. Especially when you armed her. She has the coat. The coat has the knife."

"Maybe I prefer a fair fight," I joked. In truth, I was glad she kept the weapon in case she needed to castrate whoever left the prints on her arm.

Joey chuckled as he emailed the photos to my inbox, then deleted them until arriving on the final picture.

"The good news is ... drum roll please ..." His thumb scrolled. Kinsley's license plate centered on the screen. "Guess you got that number after all."

Regret replaced with promising reprisal as he sent the photo then hit delete.

"Ready to go hunting?" he asked.

My lips spread into a villainous smile. "Damn right."



CHAPTER TWO



Coach Walton roared across the track, “Faster, Micro Machine!” My spikes dug harder against the rough texture. “Dammit, Kinsley! Where the hell is your sprint?!”

The girls beside me gaped as we ran across the finish line together. I glared. They looked elsewhere while I swiped an arm over my forehead to curb the sweat dripping into my eyes.

The women’s track coach inspected me, but allowed Ian Walton, my personal coach and trainer, to dole the scolding while she focused on the hurdlers.

“Kinsley Hayes, you *see* this garbage?” The vein between Walton’s eyebrows protruded from his red face while he shoved the stopwatch too close. “This is NOT scholarship timing! Any high school superstar could outrun you! What am I doing here?” He threw his hands and the question out to the rest of the team.

“Great question since I’m not going to the Olympics!”

Walton ripped the hat from his head and held the brim as he pointed at me.

“Keep up the attitude and see what happens,” his voice dipped.

“That a dare?”

“That PMS?” He placed the cap back over his sweaty hair then gripped his hips and waited for me to pop off again. I forced my lips into a thin line. He nodded his triumph in having the last word and sauntered to the water cooler. When I growled, three fingers waved over his shoulder. I cursed and gripped my knees. He may as well have flipped me the bird.

My father watched from the stands, having taken the afternoon from work to offer motivation. Without looking, I sensed him jogging down to ‘coddle’ me, though I wanted to be alone with my angst. Instead of waiting on him, I changed into cross-trainers and started the three-mile punishment Walton had flipped me off with.

Daddy joined in the next lane a moment later.

“Kinsley Fallon. This isn’t like you.” Both names. Yay.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Nope.” I pushed faster, forcing him to speed up to punish him for his concern.

“This about Valentine’s?” he pressed. He didn’t stick his nose in my business when he figured I’d come clean on my own, however today his nostrils seemed brown. “Nate didn’t get you anything?”

Ha! Unless the rose tucked beneath the windshield wiper on my car was his idea of resting a flower on the grave of our relationship.
“No.”

Nathan wasn't worth mentioning or speculating and seemed a minor issue with the new chaos scrambling my thoughts.

"Daddy, I suppose it should be, but this is about me growing the hell up."

Dad winced at my curse. "I'm not sure what that means."

"Don't you?" I gazed at him in accusation, ponytail slapping my shoulder. Unfair, but in my current mood, I resented that he'd raised me to expect better of men. What a crippling fairytale. And I must appear a fickle child if he figured a lack of Valentines from an ex could turn my sprint to crap. *Couldn't he be honest?*

Daddy ignored my tone but quickened his pace in retaliation. "Didn't he apologize?" He metered his breathing. "It's not like him to leave you hanging. Perhaps he had car trouble? There must be a reasonable explanation. He wouldn't just abandon you."

"It's been three weeks since he stood me up." I spoke between controlled huffs. "No apologies other than a lame voicemail. Nathan's silent, and driving fine. I'm reciprocating. Besides, I've got two more years of graduate school. Screw giving it up because I misjudged a jerk lacking the balls to break-up with me."

"Easy on the vulgarity, Kins. Love isn't sacrificing your dreams. They can co-exist. Just because he wanted to get married doesn't mean dropping out. He might've lost his nerve."

"Lost his nerve?!" I screeched to a stop. Daddy halted and tugged my elbow, which I effin' hate, so we were out of the way. "*Marriage?*" The word tasted like Dial soap in my mouth. *Hadn't matrimony been what I'd daydreamed of only a month ago?* "Does it appear that he was thinking of proposing?"

“Well, I think it was a reasonable step after over a year together. And” He worked to form words. “Nate loves you, Kinsley. He’s a good man. It makes no sense for either of you to give up a great thing over one missed date. Forgive him. *Fight* for him. I don’t understand your defeatist attitude. It’s out of character, even if he upset you. You’re not a quitter.”

“Pft! Fight for him? Forgive him? No. I’m not quitting. If something is finished, let it be and move on.” He looked stung, but how did he think I felt? He had my mother and a white-picket-fence relationship, the freedom to entertain romance. My generation seemed intent on murdering what remained of men willing to work for a woman’s attention, not to mention the women who still made them. If he learned the true reason Nathan stood me up, the danger he’d led me into, I doubted he’d push the issue.

“It’s simple,” I said, “Nate doesn’t have what it takes. He’s a coward. When the right guy comes along, I’ll fight for him. Until then I won’t awaken love before it so desires. Shouldn’t *you* be spouting this?”

“I’m sorry, honey. You seem ... *different*.”

I was different. That pirate had effed up my entire world when he’d called me to the carpet and revealed the type of alpha male I’d thought had gone extinct to really be an endangered species.

How had a stranger ripped to shreds the relationship I’d viewed as perfect the day before Gasparilla?

Psychoanalysis didn’t punch a dent in reasoning why the encounter haunted me, or the rationality of co-mingling fear and attraction. The less sense this made, the more I tried to make up a sensible explanation and the more I obsessed about

the pirate. This was ridiculous, but psychological definitions had nothing on a host of undefinable sensations. My whole Psychology major seemed upended, like seeing photos of a roller coaster and reading a person's account of their rush. Coming away from those things thinking you're an expert on their experience because you've studied the evidence to the fullest.

When the pirate had lifted me to my feet, gripped my hips, tugged me close enough to touch, the caress of his thumbs against my waist, looked ready to kiss me ... I'd fallen down the first rapid drop before several loops and corkscrews and now walked in the shoes of the roller coaster rider with the disheveled hair and huge smile, lingering butterflies and nausea in my belly. Whether I rode the ride again wouldn't erase the experience and the craving to get back on. Not once had Nathan's full kisses made my toes tingle or knees weaken the way the Pirate's touch had. Never before did I have the desire to kiss a stranger. I'd like to blame heartache for a lapse in good judgement, but was that fair?

Nothing about the encounter lined up with the person I'd created myself to be. Now, I thought of my every action and reaction compared with my peers'. I thought of my standards and questioned whether they were too high or low. Picked myself apart to be someone better than before. Wondered what made me a kid versus a woman in his arrogant, condescending eyes. *Why the hell would my body thrill at such an attitude problem? What the hell was wrong with me?*

Dad eyed me, and I realized I'd spaced out.

"I see why your trainer is angry. Something more than Nathan is bothering you, and your sprint is suffering the

consequences. I'll respect your privacy, but I'm always here. Don't harden your heart again, baby. You've come so far."

I sighed in defeat, knowing I wouldn't hold out for long before confessing. We didn't keep secrets. "I hate crying, Daddy. Bitterness is easier. Give me some time. I'll come around."

"If that's what you need, I'll give you space."

"Yes, please. And thank you."

Work, school, track, repeat. For two years I found my adrenaline in winning races, climbing the ranks and amplifying my moniker's reputation. When I wasn't training, interning or studying, I lost myself serving Jack, Jameson, Jim, Johnny, Sailor Jerry, and ignored the lasting image Captain Morgan left in my mind.

"What cocktail does Frat Toy look like?" I now asked my fellow bartender, Bayleigh, her opinion. She giggled at my label for a regular flirt who frequented weeknights.

A group of his fraternity brothers gathered at the bar around him, each of them waiting for their drinks based on our evaluation of their personalities. Bayleigh narrowed her eyes on a hot one and began her assessment.

"Kamikaze, baby. This is for you."

The headliner slapped money down, interrupting our playtime. He licked his lips, and they lifted at the corner. "Sorry, guys." Jase Taylor was a lot of things, but sorry was never one of them. He gloated because they hadn't a shot in hell at hook-ups when he was in the building, although Bayleigh and I seemed the only two he didn't aim for. Jase assessed the group as I pushed his drink across and thanked him for the tip.

"Thank *you*, sweet Kins." He kissed my cheek to spite them and flutters engulfed my belly. When he pulled back, Jase

focused on the frat brothers while I collected my breathing with feigned indifference. “You boys keep your hands to yourselves, ya hear? Would hate to schedule a meeting with you in a dark alley after work.”

“All right, Jase. You’ve made your point,” I told him. “You’re welcome.” He grinned, zero shame in scaring them away. “Any song requests?” he asked as he picked up the drink.

I cocked an eyebrow. “How about ...” My finger tapped my chin. “*Cold Little Heart?*”

That got a hearty laugh from him. If Jase had the choice, I’d have empty pockets and no dates.

“That your boyfriend, Micro Machine?” Frat Toy asked as Jase headed for the stage. I giggled at the absurdity.

“No way. He’s my best friend’s older brother. She’s attending FSU. When she’s away, he extends the relation,” I explained. “He’s home on leave, but y’all better do what he says, because you don’t want his trouble, especially in Kamikaze mode. There’s a reason I dubbed him with that drink.”

They weighed my seriousness and whether their pride was worth defending.

To distract them, I leaned close to Bayleigh again and dubbed the frat boy of choice, “LIT and make it strong.” He nodded his approval like I’d given a flirtatious compliment. She chuckled at the inside joke. Long Island Iced Tea was almost all liquor, but in my experience, the drinkers always requested I make theirs ‘strong’ like they had something to prove.

“We’ll all have one on me, but water theirs down. The pledges can’t handle their alcohol like we can,” the hot guy said. His buddies laughed, and throughout the evening honored Jase’s threat, aiming further flirtation at Bayleigh. None of them asked

me out, but not only due to the hulking singer hiding lethal skills greater than performing the panties off patrons. Rumor was, 'Micro Machine' was scary on the track, therefore undatable.

Rumor also was, Jase Taylor might be home for good this time.

In that case, I'd better prepare to be a poor old maid.



CHAPTER THREE



Two days later, I dodged cat calls from the day-drinking fogies playing cards and dominoes as I trotted into the bar.

“Tell Marcus we approve of that new uniform, Kins,” one teased. “Yeah, yeah, go for the full house,” I told a veteran, peeking at his cards in passing. He cursed and they folded while I rushed to the register behind the bar to clock-in.

“Hey, powder puff,” barked a voice box full of gravel. “Make me a proper Rusty Nail when you get a chance.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed and pounded the buttons harder than necessary. A glance over my shoulder, I regretted agreeing before assessing the Inferno biker sitting at the bar. He needed cutting-off.

“Thanks for coming.” My manager strode from the hallway and paused to stare. A dumb whistle followed. “You look ...”

“I don’t want to hear it. My uniform is in my locker. When Mommy has a tea party, girly dresses the way Mommy wants or

else she might have to move out and pay rent.” He chuckled and held his hands open.

“What? You look hot. Mommy needs to have more tea parties before I call you in early.”

“Marcus.”

“Not the dress, but the rest, yes, please. Taylor’s gonna eat his balls for breakfast when he sees you this way.”

I rolled my eyes at his referencing Jase Taylor. Marcus wasn’t going to butter me up. “Had to skip track practice *and* teatime with my mother and her froufrou friends ...” I trailed off and looked up into his face, pretending I wasn’t thrilled to be relieved of the obligation. Too bad I couldn’t have changed clothes first.

“What’s the delay?” The biker slapped the bar. I no longer had to act irritated.

“I’ll make it worth your while.” Marcus lowered to a whisper.

“Water his drinks down after Sara leaves.”

“She’s still *here*?” I asked in kind. *Why was this a secret?*

“In the back with a friend of Taylor’s while she grabs her stuff.”

I finished with the buttons and looked at him like he was the crazy one. No one goes in the back but employees, and what was one of Jase’s friends doing here? Jase wasn’t even on the clock to perform for a few hours, and they all knew Sara was married.

“He offered to walk her to her car. Given the current audience, I’m cool with that. Feel me?”

“Marcus, is her son sick, or was I called in because she’s bailing on yet *another* shift? I hate being lied to.”

He sighed. “Name your price.”

“Really?” He knew what I wanted. I quirked my eyebrows.

“Dammit, Kins, you know Valentine’s Day is always packed.”

“I can clock-out and leave you till my real shift begins. After all, winning doesn't happen on its own, and my mother was threatening to vis—”

His hand chopped my voice. “Deal. Find someone to take your shift that day, though. I don't know why you don't want all the extra tips, and you know you'll be spoiled with gifts. Girls love junk like that.”

“Mmm, most girls love junk like that,” I corrected and walked over to the liquor counter. Pretending to stash my clutch, I grabbed an empty bottle of Drambuie from the recycling bin and slipped the new one behind the fluff of my dress, swapping the full with the empty. “Think you can handle this long enough for me to change?”

Marcus rolled his eyes and waved me past him to the hall where I handed off the bottle. “Brilliant move, Little Red. See why I need you?”

“Right.” I paused before the hallway to peer at the biker. “When I'm in uniform I'll make you a fresh drink, okay?” He nodded. The

veterans started a fresh round of cards while I promised them a fresh round when I was changed.

At the end of the hallway, Sara pushed through the door to the rear parking lot, a man following. I couldn't park back there today because of my stupid attire. Gravel and heels don't mesh well.

I sighed after stuffing the froufrou dress inside the locker. Either her son had a new immunity issue, or Sara was hiding something. She'd been flaky for the past three weeks. Since I was the only one available on short notice, I took the hits.

“Oh, come on!” I pleaded, ready to boot the lower locker

with my stupid heels. Since I didn't go home or to practice first, I didn't have a spare set of tennis shoes. My toes were already complaining. This was going to be a long shift. *No good deed, eh?*

I stuffed my arms inside the top to stretch the Lycra as much as possible, but the fabric molded back to every curve. I spun in the mirror to see my back in the reflection and shook my head. "This is too risqué for off-season," I muttered. Even when we had to wear heels when Spring Break hit, I skated by with platform wedges. "Ready for a new type of unwanted attention, Micro Machine?"

"Red heels go great with that new embroidery," Marcus goaded in open appreciation a few minutes later. He smiled at my deadpan, knowing how I hated I couldn't remove a name tag to swap the new shirt with a larger size. Grrr.

"If my parents ever catch me in this, they'll kick me out into the real world and I'm blaming you."

Marcus's laughter faded as he disappeared into his office. When I moseyed behind the bar, I noticed the biker's heavy eyes fall like anvils to the high heels.

"Oh, no," I whined and produced the biggest innocent eyes I was capable of. His face changed as I turned the empty liquor bottle upside down trying to pour a drop into his cup. "Marcus, do we have anymore Drambuie?" I yelled.

"Are we out already?" he called back. "The next shipment won't be in till Tuesday."

"Looks like you cleaned us out, sir." I shrugged with empathy. "I'm sorry. You come in tomorrow and I'll make you a proper Rusty Nail.

Deal?" I never worked Tuesdays. He'd be Marcus's problem.

The wasted biker wavered on his stool and stared like awful

things ruminated in that mind. My palms tingled as I evaluated the room in case this guy did something stupid.

The cowboy who'd followed Sara through the back door now leaned beside the digital jukebox in a pair of vacuum-sealed Wranglers. A toothpick churned circles between his lips while he, too, watched. He tapped the touch screen a couple times, and I stifled a laugh when his song selection began, the genre opposite his appearance. His voice joined Nick Jonas's to provide comic relief. He sidled upon a stool beside the biker, singing *Chains*, rather well, by the way. His radiant eyes followed my movement as I made a till for my lap apron.

The biker's slow stare bent to consider the cowboy with disdain. He called him a foul name, then stumbled off the stool, curses about our bar and staff flooding from his slurring mouth all the way out the door. *Thank you, Jesus!*

"It's a shame he had to leave, eh?" Country flirted, pausing his idiocy.

"A true shame." I nodded and tugged the tap to fill a pitcher of beer for the vets. "Seemed a sure thing among the oldies, but I guess I was wrong."

He chuckled as I went onto the floor to deliver orders and clean vacated tables littered with empties. The best way to keep in touch with town happenings was to listen to old men gossip, and the moment I bent to wipe a table, I hit pay dirt.

"That hick right there's gonna get himself tangled in a nest of vipers flirting with Sara first, now Kinsley," one old-timer said to another. "Everyone knows whose turf this is. I don't have to agree with 'em, but Nightshade takes out the trash."

"Yeah, but they're all criminals."

"Now, Ned, you know the rumors just like I do. Nightshade

been dealing Oxi to the locals like Robin Hood. We elderly need to have something to kill the pain of old age. Not like we're sniffin' or cooking somethin' on a spoon or what have you."

"Shhh, lower your tone, brother."

"Marcus don't care. He knows the difference between the way Nightshade conducts their company versus the company Inferno keeps. And by keeps, I mean imprisonment for sex trafficking. I don't care what you say, bad may be bad, but at least Nightshade don't sell humans."

"Well, I heard Sara say she had trouble with one of those damned hooligans that comes in wearing an Inferno vest like the one on the guy that just left. I think that was one of his friends. Trouble flocks together."

"Nothing new," another injected. "You ask me, the Infernos are a disgrace to fire departments and bikers everywhere. A gang of firefighters who can't control their hoses, spraying corruption on the good reputation of honest emergency responders. Ruins the whole system."

"Greed, politics and bad actors always do," an oldie said in bitter wisdom. "Selfishness is the root of all evil, and the men in those vests care nothing for saving any lives but their own."

"Amen, brother. Then you have these girls holding their lives in their hands when they work jobs like these in uniforms like those."

A stern finger pointed right at me. I hated when they talked as if we weren't in the room, or like we were 'asking for it'. Guess in their minds men had no control over themselves in the face of cleavage? Although I agreed with their views on selfish desires and the trashy reputation of Inferno. Interesting perspective on Nightshade, although in my mind, wrong was wrong.

DON'T CLOSE YOUR EYES

“You’re looking’ mighty pretty today, Kins,” the older veteran told me, sheepish for the trash talk I overheard.

I bent to retrieve his glass. “Thank you, sir. My mama made me look like a proper lady, but I don’t think these heels convey in this uniform quite the same as they did with my dress. Since I got called in before I could grab my tennis shoes, I’m stuck marching like Minnie Mouse.” I kicked up a heel. He and his pals exchanged glances and nodded. I almost pressed them for details on Sara but decided to mind my own business. “Don’t y’all go getting me into trouble with my daddy for it either.” My gaze met the eyes of the guilty parties one at a time, and I earned a salute from a Vietnam cap.

“Yes, ma’am.”

A pair of shriveled fingers from the Korean cap handed me a dollar bill to keep. My smile came like he’d gifted five dollars, and I traveled back behind the bar. The singing siren on the stool spun to face me again, a new song playing that I crinkled my nose to. He scoffed and stood like I’d issued a challenge. My head shook as he went back to the juke box.

“Hey, girl. This here’s musical communication at its best.” His smile radiated hayfields and sunshine while his cocky walk in those tight jeans spelled a certainty in his ability to get into any girl’s pants he desired. He’d best take those snakeskin boots out the door if he thought to aim for my panties.

“Hey, *boy*, how many guys do you think we get in here trying to serenade us with that machine? And if that’s the best, guess I’m left with something to be desired.”

With a call of my name, the corner table lifted their empties. I dug inside the cooler for a couple Buds.

Country ignored my tone. “Worked didn’t it?”

All right, he had me there. “It did. Thank you.”

“If you don’t like *Chains*, what do you like?” He squinted to read my name. Or gawk at my boob. Hard to tell which. I covered the embroidery. “Ah, come on, that’s not fair. How will I order from you?”

“I don’t take orders, I make them.” I grinned while several veterans lifted their hats and nodded their approval. Barn boy howled with a hand over his heart.

“Quick on your toes, ain’t you, Red?”

“You might say that.”

“Was that your sister?”

“No.”

“Better be careful. A man may confuse the two of you in dim lighting, flirt with the wrong woman.”

“That’s what she’s got *me* for, Jarhead.” Jase Taylor’s voice boomed as he walked into the bar from the employee’s hallway with the swagger of a champion boxer ready to deck a challenger in his ring. “This perv giving you a tough time, baby?” I swallowed hard as his honey irises glazed over my face before squaring up on the stranger.

“Hey, Squid, I don’t want no trouble. She wanted a song. Gotta give the girl what she wants if she can’t get it from the singer.” *Oh, hell.*

“Now I *know* you’re full of shit.” Rather than throw a punch, Jase’s hand clapped loud against the blond’s, and they pulled each other into a guy hug. *Wait— whaaat?*

“Kins, put a round for them on my tab, please?” a veteran asked in a one-eighty shift from his previous disapproval.

“Sure. Um ... anything else?” This made no sense until I recalled Marcus saying this was Jase’s friend.

“Yeah, you keep these boys in pain, ya hear? Don’t let either of them steal your virtue.”

I laughed and saluted the man in his Vietnam cap the way he’d done me. “Yes, sir. No worries there.”

“She always knows precisely where to aim to take a man down a couple notches,” Jase joked with the veterans as he and his friend traveled to the table to thank them for the drinks.

“Ah, son, be grateful for the dose of humility,” the veteran teased. The group shifted into acronym style military speak I didn’t comprehend, but Blondie’s fluency proved he was a military man who now claimed his flirtation with Sara and me was a diversion against the bikers.

When Jase walked back to the jukebox, the blond said he was trying to find a song that depicted *Red*, then said, “Did you realize there were twins working here, and *you* didn’t tell me? Two stacked redheads and nothing but oldies to entertain them? You’ve been holding out.”

Jase’s laughter filled the space, making my breath stutter. “Why do you think I called you?” He winked over his shoulder while I fought a blush, then he turned back to his friend. “And *I’m* not old. Sara isn’t natural. Kinsley is. That’s Red’s name, and you don’t choose a single tune for this chick, she’s too colorful. Why do you think I’m here singing twice a week? Always hunting for the right song.” He grinned in my direction, but I resumed wiping the bar as if unimpressed, praying the blood would drain from my cheeks in the meantime.

He asked the vets for requests and one called out a mixed drink. Jase selected non-committal blues tracks for them, then glanced at his friend. “Gotta set the tone before I set the stage.

The band should roll in soon if you're interested in singing some blues."

They claimed the stools across from me. Jase removed his cap with the flourish of someone who could just as easily remove his burdens. He laid the hat between us and leaned onto his muscular forearms just as I left to deliver the drink. "Well, butter my biscuits." His eyes shot to the heels, then traveled slowly back up as I pretended not to notice or hear, though I wanted to pump my fist. *Score!* Guess I could tell my mom that her torture paid off in unexpected ways.

"You want your norm, sir?" I rounded behind the bar and posed against the polished wood knowing he would do his best to focus on my face. Even if he'd just checked me out, he cleared all appreciation as fast. This horn dog didn't mind his manners with anyone else. He played, but kept me at a distance, then allowed sluts to climb all over him on performance nights. This was a rare moment of female monopoly on his attention.

"Meh, I'll do beer later. What's your read today, baby? Do us both." He grinned, one side of his mouth tilting up. Jase could stop the pacemaker on an old lady's heart with that grin. I licked my lips, then gnawed my lower in contemplation of Jase's current assertiveness. His lips mimicked mine, but his silent gesture baited like a lure tossed into a lake.

"Hmm" I grabbed the top shelf vodka since the band wasn't on the clock yet. Jase would have to pay for his own drink, and I'd make him pay for false flirting. After shaking the ingredients in the tumbler, I faced them and poured each an expensive shot, then slid Blue Ribbon cans beside them, snapping the tabs with a smug mug. "Kamikaze shots and cheap beer, gentlemen." My empty hands found the edge of the chunky

wood surface and held tight like I could hold to this faux confidence the same.

“Aw, I don’t get anything different?” Jase pouted.

“Not when you refuse to change,” I quipped. His friend held a fist over his grin.

“The cheap beer is different, what’re you trying to say, baby?” I didn’t answer, just tapped my temple and smirked.

“Well, Rusty, I see you’ve made a lasting impression on my future wife.” Jase grinned at his friend.

Tease!

“Or mine.” The friend grinned back. They clinked shot glasses in a toast, then downed them in tandem. Country boy hummed at the flavor of the shot, then winced when he sipped the Pabst. “Should go down on one knee seeing you make him pay for his pain, but something tells me you’re the type to take it slow.” He winked. “Rustin Keane, at your service, Miss. Pleasure to meet the one woman Jase *can’t* have.” He removed the ever-present toothpick. His smile beamed radiant and clean. His free hand gripped my own in a shake I respected. No jelly. He returned the sentiment. “Firm grip. Nice.” Rustin’s eyes smiled as I rolled mine and made Jase another at his request.

The bell jangled over the door while I pushed Jase’s glass in front of him. They turned to study a biker vest striding up to a stool. “Well, well, well. Kinsley. You’re here early, darlin’ and looking mighty fine!” He ordered a draft, and his fingers danced bare from the tips of leather riding gloves in a taunting wave at Jase. “So is tonight’s jester. Wonder why.” Silence expanded between the five stools that separated them.

“Because I asked my favorite *headliner* to keep me company,”

I lied, knocking this perv down a notch. Jase quirked his eyebrows at him, then cast his smile at me.

“Where’s Sara?” the biker asked, all business.

Rustin piped up before I could answer. “She had to leave.” “What’s it *your* business, corn-fed?” he demanded.

“She’ll be back tomorrow,” I offered to stifle the brewing pissing match. “Want peanuts with this?”

He glowered at the guys for a long moment as he decided whether to pursue his issue. *What was his issue, though? What was Sara’s?*

“Yeah. Sounds good.” His gaze roamed my body. I didn’t have to look. I felt the disconcerting sensation when I bent for the nuts beneath the bar, wanting to twist his in my fist and hear his pitch rise in panic.

“You should come in early more often, Kins. Wouldn’t hurt my feelings or my eyes none.” My skin crawled as I slid the bowl to his chest, then grabbed a towel to begin wiping tables.

“Don’t count on it,” I told him as I walked away from the bar. “This isn’t my crowd.”

I’d only been here for an hour and hated day shift already. *Why was Sara doing this to herself when she was the star who’d trained me?* None of this made sense with her character.

He whistled and cursed as he twisted on his stool to watch my advance on a vacated table. “Specially in them shoes. Could stand to see you and Sara together again. Tips must pour in when twins are onduty.”

“Ugh, why does everyone keep saying that?” I muttered. Sara was four inches taller, ten years older, two cup sizes larger, and had a good fifteen-to-twenty pounds on me. I wasn’t trying to be a snob in my own mind, but I didn’t work out for

twenty hours a week to be compared to someone who barely did.

“Who said I was meaning you and Sara?” the jerk asked.

I discreetly wrapped my fingers around the neck of an empty bottle. Jase didn't miss the movement.

“That's enough.” His stool scraped across the wood as he stood. The veterans lowered their cards. “Kinsley, say the word, and I'll deck him.” He didn't look at me, though. His gaze trained on the biker in ways that went deeper than this one instance. “It'll cost ya lip action instead of that cheek tonight, though.”

“If he keeps it up, I'll do it myself, and you can kiss my cheek for doing you a solid.”

“Everyone wins.” The biker grinned at my threat, his glance prancing over the bottle in my hand. He tapped his cheekbone to show where to aim. “You hold his leash? I always assumed it was the other way around.”

“That's it.” Jase moved, but Rustin did, too, like a man bent on diffusing a bomb, to block his friend. His eyes warned me to stay put and ease my white-knuckled grip on the glass.

“Jase, he's not worth spilling blood Kinsley will have to clean up.” The anger in Jase's eyes held and trained on his friend's face while the biker snickered. “Save it. Go prep the stage.” Rustin's voice remained level. Jase's eyes shifted to mine for permission that I subtly nodded. He did, too, then resigned and patted a watchful veteran's back as he went to the stage.

“Yeah, go play with your instrument,” the douche poked. “It's all you're good at.”

“Hey, he's not the only one. If we're keeping score, *I'm* the best at beating off!” Relief hit as Jase's drummer, Mel, slapped the

A-hole's vest in greeting, then wove his tatted arm around my waist. His pierced lips warmed my cheek, and his mouth drew close to my ear. "Someone needs his ass kicked. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Glad to see you. Is Marcus back there?"

He nodded and drew in again. "The rest of the band is out back unloading the trailer, but we scoped three other Infernos in the lot. Marcus's out there keeping score and making sure the one doesn't drive drunk." *The other one never left? Creepy.* "I'm gonna make a phone call so Jase doesn't get dirty. Sound good?"

"Damn right."



CHAPTER FOUR



The snowbirds and vets trickled out. Twenty-somethings mixed with middle-aged patrons as the early evening crowd filed in. While I looked for cops or Mel's connections, Jase's irritation simmered down as his local fan base filled tables near the stage. Rock-N-Awe's Blues gig drew crowds to this place on Monday nights, but their Thursday night Alternative performances produced twice the turnout. This crowd spelled great things for the upcoming tourism season.

At the far end of the building, Jase's buddy aided the band in setting the stage, making small talk with the other members and curious barflies. I marveled at his ability to keep Jase in check and make him smile again. Jase's sister, Tyndall, might be envious, and I itched to call her and ask about him.

Bayleigh clocked-in, then shuffled to my side to catch up on orders until she spied him across the way.

"Who is *that*? And can we keep him every week? Is he part of the band?"

“His name is Rustin, I don’t know if you get to keep him, because I don’t think he’s part of the band. And from what I have gathered, he’s an old bestie of Jase’s from some hillbilly town in another state. With a drawl like that, I’m guessing Tennessee or Alabama.”

“He has a twang to match those jeans? Aye! Might be Texas” Her hope trailed with a bite to her lip. She had a thing for Texans.

Garrett, the other bartender on shift, clocked-in and scoped Rustin with narrowed eyes lined in Urban Decay thicker than my own. He wound his thumbs beneath a set of red suspenders and snapped them, the definition in his biceps flexing with the movement.

“Straight?” he asked. His chin lifted as he grabbed a rum bottle, tossing and catching it behind his back for the ladies. Garrett always made that flair look easy.

Bayleigh beamed, seconding Garrett’s question.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “He’s straight. Keep rocking that eyeliner, bud. Your buns are safe.”

We giggled, and Bayleigh leaned against the liquor counter, ogling Rustin unraveling cords he plugged into amplifiers. “See how TDH handles those cables. Bet he does wonders with rope.” “Bayleigh! Shame on you.” I grinned. “Should be TSH.” “What do you mean? What’s the S for?” She smiled.

“Instead of Tall, Dark, and Handsome, he’s Tall, *S*tupid, and Handsome. He would flirt with our mop if we convinced him there were boobs somewhere in there.”

She cackled, earning gawks from a group that bellied up to the bar with an open tab. “All those boobs are paying him ample attention, though. Makes sense,” she told me as she scooped ice.

“Bet you he crooks a finger and they come running to save a horse. I sure would,” she admitted. I chuckled at her allusion to a popular 90’s country song. After doling refills, she cupped her chin in her palm with a girly sigh. I knocked her elbow from beneath her. She snapped out of her appreciation and shot a glance at the hallway.

“What’s up with Marcus tonight?” she asked.

Between mixing drinks, I filled her in on the biker’s behavior and the Rusty Nail who came before him.

“Okay, uncomfortable, but it’s not as if we don’t deal with bikers, and you know anyone with testosterone is going to test Jase’s. He’s too muscular for Neanderthals who want to see who has the biggest club.” She backhanded my abs and nodded at where Marcus stood. He had both meaty arms crossed over his chest evoking the bouncer he used to be. “He looks extra pissed. Did the guy actually scare you?”

“Meh. I was more nervous about Jase wasting his energy on a bark with no bite. Just another scuzz, ya know?” I shrugged, then turned to thank one of the bar-backs for lime refills. She nodded and echoed my thanks.

A guy in a Tampa Bay Buccaneers cap muscled through the cacophony. “Coke. Cherries on the bottom, grenadine, please, love?” “I’ve got it.” Bayleigh filled the Brit’s order while I poured a quick row of shots.

“Now *that’s* an accent, woman!” I told her without looking at the Brit at the bar. “The other’s a slower form of speech so TSH’s mouth can compensate for his brain.”

“Brutal!” She giggled and tossed Garrett a towel when there was a sloppy spill near the end of the bar. The night was shaping up to be busy, but I found my eyes following our manager more

than the musicians. Bayleigh made a good point. Marcus gnawed his toothpick hard enough he could shoot splinters at the next person to piss him off.

I leaned in on a free moment. "It's possible Sara had an issue with another guy from what I'm guessing is Inferno. The oldies were here gossiping about it earlier. They mentioned a vest, but you know how the rumor mill goes. Don't quote me on that."

"Makes sense, though." Bayleigh cringed and peered at Marcus. "Two Inferno assholes in one day? Wonder what Nightshade thinks about it."

"Excellent question." We tried to spot Nightshade members surveying the damage. Unnerving, because members were difficult to discern, but I'd be willing to bet that phone call Mel made was to someone connected since I didn't see a single cop in the crowd.

"No way they aren't involved somehow," she mused. "Turf wars are ugly. Let's hope the scumbag keeps his hands to himself. Marcus looks ready to throw punches."

We shared a knowing glance. He had to restrain himself anytime an Inferno jangled the bell over the door since they had their own bars. Inferno came for the pure enjoyment of causing a stir. For the time being, Marcus was talking with the guy Bayleigh said she'd just served. "Oh, Kins, did you see him?"

"Who?" I asked, distracted with drinks.

"The British babe! He was definitely TDH."

I scoffed and shook my head, rarely the double-take type of girl.

"You should have," she said, "it's the perfect contrast: Rustin is Neutrogena clean like pure sunshine, but the *other one* is dark

and broody like he's shrouded in moonlight. Damn hat hid his eye color though. Wonder how Marcus knows him."

"What do you mean?" I asked and garnished a pair of mojitos with mint sprigs before passing them across the bar.

"I mean Marcus is chatting with him like they're familiar."

When Marcus caught us staring, the man's head snapped our way as if we'd shouted his name. "Yikes," we said in unison. "That's our cue to deliver drinks."

We loaded a tray full of the band's faves, and I lifted the heavy disk over my shoulder to begin the bumper car trek through the crowd.

"Check. Check. One-two," Jase chirped into a microphone. His fans clamored for seats and tables like a mad game of musical chairs. Those at the bar held mugs and bottles up with shouts and cheers. Jase took his stool at the helm of the band as they settled into their places and tuned instruments. "Thanks, baby," he said as I set the tray near his feet. I turned for more drinks, but his sharp whistle pulled me back. My cheeks heated, knowing what was coming. "Kiss, please?"

A twinge of excitement rushed to the palms of my hands as Jase swung his guitar to the side to dip down to me. I angled my cheek, prepared for the familiar warmth of his cushy lips and the scratch of stubble. Instead, warm fingers curled around the nape of my neck, and heat prickled the corner of my mouth. My eyelids fluttered closed on a deep inhale. My head tilted against his hand. Tingles shot through my chest depriving my lungs!

"Do I get one next?" Rustin's voice sounded too close.

I opened my eyes and pulled away, determined to pass drinks around like all was chill, controlling the release of my breath. "Ha! That's his for good luck. Our kiss is ritual. *Not free.*"

“Guess I should start singing, then.” He smiled. I had the uncomfortable urge to back up for how near he stood. I could smell his cologne, see the fine lines at the corners of his mouth, the variations in his vibrant eyes. His pale hair enhanced the bronze tan on his skin. He snagged a brew off the tray and handed the bottle up to the bassist. His arm hadn’t needed to brush my breast. God bless Jase, he reached between us and cupped my cheek to thank me and reassure that he would have a great night.

“Yeah, you better.” I smiled at him and turned a ‘kiss my butt’ glare on Rustin. He propped against the stage with a bottle in hand and held eye contact with a smile in his eyes as he took a sip. *Give me a break.* “You guys signal when you’re empty.”

Jase teased the strings on his guitar, his tatted-up bicep and forearm flexing with every tantalizing stroke. He nodded, and his gaze rested on mine longer than usual like he was doing math in his head. I tilted my head, puzzled by why Rustin’s flirting with me didn’t bother him, but everyone else’s did?

Meh, I had orders to fill and no time for dwelling.

Drink requests shouted my way at the same rate song requests were thrown into the large Mason jar at Jase’s feet. Greenbacks colored the band’s tip jar beside the requests, and my pockets filled well for an offseason Monday. The band’s cover music became the soundtrack to my work while they warmed up. Jase made a game of prodding men to call out songs for their significant others, ones that got away, or ‘bitches who’d broken hearts.’

Bayleigh applauded when one came in for her from a regular with a crush. He loved the pain, she loved shooting him down, then picking him back up. This was fun. The same fun that kept

me from quitting on the bad nights, or the nights when I felt guilty for all the skin my uniform showed.

"I'm tagging someone else in," I told the bartenders when at last I returned behind the bar. "I need a breather."

Jase finished another song, then dug through the papers in the request jar. "Hold, please!" a nearby voice shouted.

"Hmm ... what might *that* one be requesting?" Bayleigh hummed with a finger at her lips. Marcus's friend waded through the mayhem waving more than a few dollars in his hand. Jase joked with his band mates about big spending.

As the guy reached him, Jase leaned down and whistled when the wad of cash and written request exchanged hands. "We've got ourselves a high priority tune, ladies and gents." Jase's eyebrow lifted as he read the title. He looked back at the band like *you've got to be kidding me*. "No wonder you gave me so much scratch for this, man. Gonna make me go there. I may have to kiss that barmaid again afterward to resuscitate my masculinity." The crowd laughed with uncertainty, and I grinned on a wave of my finger. He was very flirtatious with me tonight. Made me curious. "I'm gonna bring in the extra help of my way-back-buddy, Rustin, who knows this song much, *much* better than I do."

Rustin hopped on-stage, showing as much curiosity as the rest of us, but introduced himself with a country flourish and took a mic and guitar from the nearby stand. The audience welcomed him before he leaned over to hear the song title from Jase.

"To be clear, does that say what I think it says?" he asked.

"That it does, my friend, that it does" Jase trailed off while Rustin guffawed. *Hmm*. "Think you're up for it?"

The duo shared a nod and warmed the horde with small talk while they adjusted instruments. Someone from the floor offered Rustin a stool of his own. Marcus was in my ear checking to be sure I had nothing to report. I tugged bottle caps in quick succession while downplaying my earlier discomfort.

“We need you safe, all right, Little Red?”

“Safe from what, Marcus? Perverts? What else should I expect with the new uniforms?” I shrugged and flashed a bright smile. He ignored my dig and didn’t buy my blasé explanation. I focused on the band to dissuade him from pressing for more. He delivered bottles to the barstool patrons and cut me slack.

“Hey man,” Jase called out to his requestor, “who is this for?” The patron’s muffled voice broke through. Jase snickered, then came back to the mic. “He says it’s complicated. Did you break her heart?” Everyone struggled to hear the response. “Ah, someone else did. He endured the fallout. Hey, we’re here for you, boss. Marcus ought to make sure you aren’t attacked in the parking lot if she’s in here somewhere.” The entire place erupted in laughter, me included. There was another muffled exchange. “She’s *here*? You’ve got balls of *steel*, dude.”

Everyone looked around for this mystery woman, wondering if this would end in happy reunion or a drink tossed in the brave soul’s face.

“Who is Complicated Moonlight, and does he do therapy sessions for broken hearts?” Bayleigh mused as she towed beer foam off her hands. Jase looked over at Rustin as they worked out the notes to a song that had the masses in riotous laughter. Jase’s huge smile stole his ability to get the first lines out.

“*Big Girls Don’t Cry*?” she snorted. “Fergie? That’s messed up.”

“Agreed.” I giggled. “This is happening. Keep an eye out for claws to mar what *you* say is a pretty face.” I choked on another laugh when I caught Jase zeroed in on me. Bayleigh didn’t miss his focal point, either.

What the hell?

He closed his eyes to belt the chorus.

“Ouch. This plot thickens” She trailed off, trying to stay light for me, but knowing something more was brewing. “Is it disturbing that Jase knows these lyrics and notes like he does this one on his own time?” She had a point, and I smiled, but what was up? Shouldn’t that offend me if he was staring at me while singing that song?

“Holy crap, Kins! Are the claws *yours*?” Bayleigh snatched my wrist to halt my reach for a liquor bottle. “Moonlight! He’s looking over here! What if it’s for you? Do you know him? What’s complicated? Did you break down and punish him for it?” She shook me as if I held information she needed to save the world.

“No way” The breath whooshed from my lips like a pregnant woman in Lamaze. Peering where she insisted he was, I didn’t have a clear view of the man she’d dubbed Moonlight. He was back-lit. His face was a mystery.

It’s complicated.

But ... *what if?*

I’m complicated.

“Nope. No. No. No. Not possible,” I told myself. Bayleigh clung to every morsel. “Wait, didn’t somebody call me love earlier?” *A British accent! Oh, hell! No one with an accent had ever called me that before the elevator or since! Until tonight! What an idiot, Kins!*

I wanted to rush out into the crowd and rip the hat from his head! To glimpse the face that haunted my decisions for the past two years without the veil of a costume! The asshole who was just dick enough to come to my job and call my childish crap even still! *He recognized me?*

When I skirted around the bar, the man vanished, and I spun until connecting with Jase's hawkish eyes. *What was happening?* I sensed turbulence, although everything appeared the same on the surface. The hidden undertow scared me. Jase was deeper, more flirtatious, and that kiss had been the furthest he'd ever dared. Rustin seemed to be pushing Jase's envelope. Three men in competition all at once. Two passively telling me to grow up. One doing so from his screwed-up sense of humor, or who the eff knew?

Forget waiting for the end of the song! I collected my things and clocked-out for the night before anyone could convince me to stay. I hustled to the car, grateful I'd taken an earlier shift rather than staying for Jase's break. Not to mention, the questions Bayleigh wanted to ask about the developing dynamic, but I didn't think she'd have to ask to understand what had just happened.

The ultimate in agonizing encounters had found me, and I wasn't sure how our future would play out.

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BY LYNESSA LAYNE

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