

## CHAPTER 1

*Las Vegas, Nevada~ 6 years earlier*

“I’ll be in the car!” Berrill Clayton stalked toward the curving brick drive outside the spacious town home. The click of her pinprick heels gradually slowed before silencing altogether when she was only halfway to the vehicle.

Only then, did she slip out of the layer of stony confidence she’d been fortifying since the beginning of the nightmare she’d gotten her three friends involved in.

The use of the word ‘nightmare’ may’ve been a little presumptuous, she thought, mouth curving on a tremulous smile. She had a feeling that the nightmare aspect was only about to begin. God, why didn’t she just tell that bitch to go to hell when she approached her with that envelope full of cash? An envelope full of cash, and the method of repayment being by way of the oldest profession.

Berrill closed her eyes and spoke the answer inside her head. *Because you were broke, that’s why, Stupid.* Ramen noodles and white bread- dry toasted when they were feeling fancy. That had been their nightly meal for the last 6 weeks. The money they’d taken to leave Virginia was all but a memory now. They’d all managed to secure jobs, but those incomes went pitifully short distances when work had to be scheduled around classes-and not even full loads, at that.

They’d lived comfortably, but frugally for about 3 years before frugal lost its allure and began to nudge against impoverished. They focused on working to keep a roof over their heads and some semblance of food in their stomachs. It had been the way of things for the last 4 years. College dreams had been scrapped long ago. College-Berrill snorted quietly. What a joke. A good intention, but a pipe dream without the dollars to fund it.

Loans were out of the question. Her friend Prin feared the applications would lead to their whereabouts. Why the fuck that mattered, Berrill had no idea...at first. It was a story best saved for another time anyway. There were bigger concerns at hand. Concerns along the lines of what the approaching evening would do to them- the toll it would take not only on their bodies, but on their emotions.

Sex for money. How did crossing that line shape a woman’s view of herself? What kind and how many demons did it allow to fester?

“Hey?”

Berrill gave a jolt at the hand on her elbow. Stony confidence back in place, she fixed the man at her side with a smile and hoped it boasted the certainty she sure as hell didn’t feel.

“You okay?” Caleb Stein could guess the answer even before the tall, caramel complexioned beauty nodded the affirmation. Her lush, mocha eyes held a cool confidence. Caleb however, had been on hand for enough of such trips to recognize the stricken look of a woman who had run out of options. It was a look he resented- resented the part he played in putting it there.

Still holding onto her arm, Caleb took a step closer. “Listen-” he broke off at the sound of the front door opening to release a tangle of female voices.

Berrill looked to the townhouse and her friends as they left Diversion. The brothel’s owner, Dorinda Patterson, stood waving them off like a mother bidding her children a great day as they headed off to school.

Berrill guessed the four of them were in for an education of sorts. The thought made her want to vomit. She watched her friends Etienne Shaw, LuCarolyn Young and Prin Holland heading her way. The chatter they’d shared with Dorinda silenced quickly once the door closed at their backs.

Berrill wondered if they were as terror stricken as she was. Their expressions practically screamed, Yes! She remembered the guy next to her then. Caleb. He’d introduced himself when he and his partner arrived at the brothel. Dorinda had been proud to tell them their ‘dates’ had sent a car and bodyguards to collect them. She’d said it like they’d earned a prize, Berrill recalled.

Caleb had taken hold of her arm. Now, he squeezed it. Berrill wondered if it was her nerves that had her imagining the sense of urgency she felt behind his touch.

"We're gonna take you there and bring you straight back," Caleb gave the explanation with soft encouragement. He slid a look to his partner Luke Robb who was already escorting the others into the back of the Mercedes Limo that would whisk them into the night.

"We'll take you to the hotel room door and we'll wait outside in the hall until you're...done."

Berrill gave a shaky nod. "Right," she cleared her throat on the ragged sounding word. "So um...do these things usually go smoothly?" Her tremulous smile made another appearance when she caught the truth in Caleb's pale gray eyes before he could mask it.

"It's fine if you want to lie," she said.

"Listen," Caleb's grip firmed on her arm once more as he tugged her a bit closer. "Just do what you have to and get out of there and never look back."

Berrill nodded, the gesture fueled by the same grim determination she heard in Caleb's voice. Never looking back was the only thing motivating her to see the night through.

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"Berrill? Berrill?! Take this."

Berrill snapped to enough to hear Caleb Stein's voice again. It was later-much later and they were back in the car. Caleb and Luke had told them to stay there before they'd headed back into the hotel. They were back and she was just able to register that Caleb was pushing something into her hands. Discs?

"Put these in the bag," Caleb ordered when Berrill's eyes met his. He could see that the earlier stricken look had inched aside to leave room for blankness-something utterly hollow. Caleb didn't know which rattled him more, the sight of her stricken or hollow.

Berrill made a mediocre attempt to take the discs. Caleb took it upon himself to put them into the bag that was already half filled with the discs they'd taken from the room...where they were being recorded.

It was then that other sounds began to register. Berrill heard her friends-LuCarolyn's breathing came out in shudders. Prin's silence seemed to carry on its own frequency. Etienne-Tee-seemed, to be the only one capable of speech.

"What are those?" Tee asked Caleb.

"From the hotel's main security hub. We needed to wipe all traces of you being there. We at least needed to hide your faces," Caleb said. "You have the discs from the room. There were cameras all over the hotel that could've caught you guys leaving."

"And us helping you leave," Luke Robb added as he settled in behind the wheel.

'All traces of you being there,' the phrase started a loop inside Berrill's head. She would've loved to have wiped all traces of having been where she'd spent that night.

"The gun," she took Caleb's hand in a death grip. "The gun I gave you-"

"Shh...it's alright, it's alright," Caleb patted her hand until the hold eased. "I took care of it, don't worry. Now let's get you guys out of here."

Though it could've, in no way, been classified as a 'run of the mill' kind of night, the events of that evening had gone beyond anything Berrill had imagined or dreaded. There would be no forgetting any of it.

Her plans to never look back...well that was all shot to hell. Following a hearty round of drinks; she'd been sure would put her in a sublime state and ready for anything the night might bring, the overdone hotel suite had filled with 10 men. They'd arrived ready to receive their money's worth and they'd gotten it.

The evening started with a round of heavy groping, mingled with lurid chatter and demeaning compliments. Berrill thought she'd withstood it admirably. She could've chalked it all up as just an unpleasant experience if that was all that was in store. It wasn't.

Hours later, she and her friends had been the party favors and enjoyed over every square inch of that tacky suite. No...there would be no forgetting that and yet...as nauseating as that experience had been, she would've considered herself a lucky woman had they been able to walk away at that point.

How had it all gone so completely off the rails? Berrill would've liked to have said that was all a blur, but that would've been a lie. She remembered everything with crystal clarity. The blood, the knives...there were even a few silenced gunshots. It was the *why* of it, though.

The way it had all began had her and, she supposed, her 3 dearest friends in the world, suspended in a state of confusion. Had all the tension and desperation of the last few months-

Ha! *Months*...if only her tension and desperation had merely been a recent occurrence. She'd fought that battle longer than she wanted to remember.

Still, she had to wonder if this evening of depravity had been the catalyst that set her-set them all-off simultaneously? They had just committed murder-multiple murders and left the scene wearing nothing but remnants of blood on their skin and the robes embroidered with the hotel's logo.

As if reading her mind, Prin asked what happened. Her voice was small, brittle even, Berrill thought. Nevertheless, the sound of it was a relief. Prin hadn't spoken since they'd found her being... enjoyed by one of their dates.

Perhaps it was finding Prin's blood on the sheets or the chains on the bed that had set the spark that had Tee slicing the throat of the man with Prin and leading to the deaths of the others who lay slumbering contently after enthusiastic sex.

"We killed them," Prin said before anyone provided an answer.

Tee, sitting closest to Prin on the back seat, pulled her near. Squeezing Prin closer, Tee brushed a kiss across her temple and then smoothed a hand across her hair- a mane of natural honey wheat blonde. The tone, accentuated by honey brown skin and an unexpected cornflower blue gaze, gave Prin a rare look. In that moment however, it was a 'look' that exuded terror.

"We killed them all, honey," Tee hoped her words would reassure her friend that they were safe.

Prin's expression remained stricken. "Not all," she murmured.

LuCarolyn toyed with a coarse lock of her hair as her light eyes further dimmed under the weight of emotion. "Did we really do that?" she pulled her hand from her hair suddenly as if remembering what had touched it. She studied her blood-stained palms as though she could still see the acts they'd carried out that night. "Why'd we-why'd we do that?"

"Seriously Lu?" Berrill heard herself snap. "Did you see what that muthafucka was doin' to Prin?"

"Bear. Don't." Tee urged, before LuCarolyn could form a retort.

Berrill closed her eyes, remorse immediately pooling. "I'm sorry, sorry," she whispered, tugging Lu close.

Silence carried in the dark, spacious rear section of the long car.

"I'm the one who's sorry. Sorry for tonight," Tee's voice was haunted, weary.

Berrill, Prin and LuCarolyn looked over in unease.

"Now it's *you* who needs to stop." Berrill used the same tone of reprimand Tee had moments earlier. "A lot of people are at fault for tonight. You aren't one of them."

"I don't know why or where it came from," Tee continued to dissect her actions. Shuddering, she raked her nails across the close crop of ebony waves capping her head. They carried a healthy lustre and almost matched her skin, a flawless molasses, for darkness.

"I just...I walked in that room and...saw what that garbage was doing to Prin-"

"Realized you had the strength to stop him and you did."

"Bear...they paid us to be there," Tee argued Berrill's point.

That was a truth Berrill wouldn't allow to weigh on her-she *couldn't* allow it. After all, what did it say about her? They didn't have to be there. So what if there was money to be repaid? They could've told Dorinda and her *ten* to go fuck themselves and hit the road. That she hadn't even suggested it to her friends...

"There were chains on the beds, weapons all over that trashy suite, whips...who knows what those assholes had planned for us when they woke up? They didn't pay us to be there for that," Berrill's words were biting-a testament to how pissed she was with herself. "We did what we did and we're done with it," she sighed.

"We're done with it," LuCarolyn reiterated.

Tee nodded slow, but didn't voice her agreement. Prin was silent as well.

Berrill leaned her head against the seat rest and wondered if she'd ever believe her own words.

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### ***Outside Kenwood, California~ 18 months later***

"Is it just me or is anybody else's head spinning?" To emphasize his despair Slayte Miltiades dragged a hand through the hoard of blue black curls crowning his head.

Grinning, Rutger Eliades' whiskey colored eyes sparkled with sly amusement when he clapped Slayte's shoulder. "You're just ditzy enough for that to be the case, but no, it's not just you. Patch, for the love of all, enough with the percentages already."

Patroclus Kostas gave an exaggerated sigh. "I've never met a group of people less interested in discussing the tons of cash they're about to make on top of the tons of cash they just made."

Rutger reciprocated Patroclus' sigh as though the question were a mystery for the ages. "As the only math prodigy among us, Patch, I'd say you're interested enough for all of us."

"A calming rumble of laughter stirred among the 5 men looking out over the expanse of land- an unending sea of rolling green. Moments earlier, they'd all joked about being able to detect the hint of citrus in the air. The spot was located in the upper part of Sonoma Valley considered to be wine country. Therefore, no one argued that the fragrance detected was most likely accurate.

"It's a helluva place, Merc." Patroclus reached out to pat the back of the man who dwarfed his height by well over a foot.

Mercuri Nikolaides spread his hands and gave an exaggerated shrug. "It was Pope's eye for property that's responsible," he deferred to the other man who towered over Patroclus by a similar margin of height.

Pope Apostolou's ultramarine gaze seemed to glint more vibrantly against the late afternoon sunlight when he graced his friends with a satisfied grin. The gesture triggered the single dimple ideally spaced alongside a beautifully sculpted mouth.

"You said you wanted peace and quiet," Pope reminded Mercuri. "If you can't find it here, I'm fresh out of ideas."

Mercuri took another look over the property. "Nah...this is it."

Pope studied the area he'd scouted, though not with as much awe as the prospective buyer. "I don't get it," doubt narrowed his gaze. "All the shit you could buy now and all you want is a house?"

"This from the guy who already has three and in three different countries," Patroclus spoke out while everyone else laughed.

"And counting!" Slayte added.

"Investments." Pope clarified with haste. "For monetary purposes only."

"Well the place I want to put on this land will be for family purposes- a place we can call home wherever we are in the world- in whatever house we're in at the moment." Mercuri sent a playfully agitated look in Pope's direction before his face set into sober lines.

"Wherever we are, we'll know we've always got a place to call home."

Silence held for a full 30 second span before Slayte chuckled. "You're a real sap, you know?"

Mercuri merely shrugged, drew Slayte close. "Every idiot should have a sap for a friend."

Laughter held for a time, but the men all felt the weight of Mercuri's words.

"You're a good man, Merc," Rutger said.

"Damn right he is," Slayte added, "it's because of Mercuri that we're done. Done all the way."

“That’s the damn truth,” Pope scanned the property again. “If it wasn’t for him, none of us would be standing here on five hundred plus acres and talking about putting a house on it.”

They were true words that echoed of a chilling past-one they’d escaped (fought their way out of) thanks to Mercuri’s planning and commendable strategizing. Not long ago, none of them could see beyond their lots in life- soldiers for hire. Not even for hire, actually.

The GAN never *hired* them. Never *asked* them to join up. They’d been more...indentured (enslaved). Perhaps that phrasing was more accurate. The GAN had practically raised them, trained them- molded them into experts at the most detestable of occupations- murder.

It was Mercuri who had seen a way out when a night like any other had ended in the brutal slayings of The Ten- The GAN’s governing body. Such a bold move against a powerful entity like The GAN demanded retaliation.

Ten months after the murders, GAN soldiers descended on the home of the man held responsible. It had been Enrique Royá who often supplied The GAN’s demands for diverse entertainment. He had provided the women who’d carried out the deed. Not only had they murdered The Ten, they’d left the scene with discs containing evidence of what had transpired and who had been present. Present, not only at the scene of the crime but at the hotel itself. Such social circles, could have been damning to a great many high-profile careers.

In short, Royá had The GAN by the proverbial balls which made ending his life all the more necessary. They were going to lay waste to all the man held dear. His family was at the center of the plan.

When Mercuri told him what he was planning, Pope thought his best friend had lost his mind. Still, Pope had to admit it was the gutsiest thing he’d ever heard of.

Many GAN soldiers felt the same and had Mercuri’s back when the mission within the mission commenced. Having forewarned Royá of the impending danger, the man fled long before The GAN’s arrival. To show his gratitude, he rewarded Mercuri and his closest friends with a monetary ‘thank you’- a substantial ‘thank you’.

Now, there they were, Pope thought as a bold, aromatic wind whipped black jaw-length waves about his face. He observed the land drenched beneath a low hanging California sun. They were there and it wasn’t just Patroclus who seemed over-the-moon happy.

Mercuri, Slayte, even Rutger’s lovably gruff persona seemed to reflect more mellowed shades. They’d all fought their way out of hell and come through better for it on the other side. It was like they were all done with it. Sure, he knew they still had their own personal demons to battle, but that particular demon-their sentence and subsequent escape from The GAN was one demon defeated. End of story. Done.

So why was he still harboring doubts? Because he didn’t believe it? That’s what all the crazed property buying was really about and that was a thing he’d admit to no one but himself.

He wanted to grab what he could, while he could. He took a closer look at his friends then- the four men he’d give his life for if it would save theirs. No way would he break their spirits with a dose of reality.

No way would he tell them he thought this was all folly- that they weren’t ‘done’ not even close. This was only a break, an intermission, before the real battle began.

## CHAPTER 2

*Las Vegas, Nevada~ 6 years earlier*

Christopher Morrow's shamrock green stare glazed over from worry to fury when he saw the two burly men heading his way. Spreading his hands, expectancy wedged in alongside fury.

"Where is it?" He hissed.

"Take it easy," Jake Grodins, the fairer of the two, urged. "It's safe," he promised.

"Where?" Morrow demanded.

"We were just upstairs checking out the area," Brody Alberts, the second of the two, explained.

"We left the bag in the suite, the surveillance closet's there."

"Jesus," Morrow looked faint. "That's where they'll be later."

Heirs to The GAN fortune, Brody Alberts and Jake Grodins exchanged grins and knowing smiles.

"Just calm down," Brody insisted. "Upstairs is the safest place for it, trust us."

"Exactly what is this 'leverage' you think will get us what we want?" Jake sneered.

Morrow wasn't offended by the clear disbelief. "Just trust me when I say it's good. You'll know in due time."

"Well trust *us* when we say you don't want something that supposedly that valuable floating around down here," Brody retorted.

Morrow bristled, but didn't argue the point. Besides, Alberts was right he thought, eyeing the hotel lobby with cool disdain. He fixed a glare in the direction the men had just come from. "Is your guy in place?" he asked.

"We're all set," Jake's brown eyes sheened with suspicion. "You sure you wanna go this route? Isn't Tommy Doyle your guy?"

"Thomas Doyle is my employer," Morrow's tone was dry, callously so. "His time has passed."

"If that's the case," Jake posted up on the toes of his boots and seemed to gear up to play devil's advocate. "Won't people see that and vote him out?"

Morrow's smile resembled one a parent might reserve for a child who had amused them. "How lucky you are not to know how democracy really works. Mr. Grodins. Senator Doyle is the incumbent, an incumbent who's held his position for the last eighteen years. A senator's constituents rarely vote him out

of office unless he's publicly disgraced which would be bad for us. Terms last six years and we're on the brink of a new election. Unless the fucker dies, he'll be gearing up to be sworn-in for a new term. I'm not waiting another six years."

"What makes you think you'll get his seat?" Brody asked. "You're only an aide, right?"

"I see you two also have no idea about the idiocy of voters," Morrow shook his head. "I'll ride in on the good senator's coattails. In situations like this, I'd be just as good as the incumbent. Everyone knows we're like this," he twisted his middle and index fingers to indicate closeness.

"Many view me as Doyle's apprentice. That, plus sympathy over the man's *hoped for* demise... I'm a shoe-in to take the seat."

"Hope you're right," Jake drawled, still sounding unconvinced.

"Gotta admit, it's risky," Brody added.

"Can you guys think of a better way to get this product marketed? The senator's high moralistic code has cost him a lot of friends over the years."

Jake grinned. "High moralistic code?" He thought of the man he'd seen on more than one occasion with his face in the pretty crotches of countless whores.

Morrow shrugged. "It's the public image that matters, and mostly during election time. We've got a lot of support for this product. With the senator gone, it's only a matter of time before those who followed his lead come over to our side. Just make sure your man's up for the job and not getting lost in the night's entertainment.

Again, Brody and Jake exchanged smiles, those less grim and more relaxed.

"Jake, I think the Senator's aide could stand to lose himself in some of the...night's entertainment," Brody moved to take Morrow's elbow.

"Shouldn't we wait to make sure everything goes smooth?"

"Don't worry," Jake grinned, seeming to appreciate the man's unease. "It's all good."

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It was most definitely not 'all good'. Morrow stood cursing himself hours later. Awe had rendered his jaw slack, his mouth dry as he studied the scene across the nearly deserted lobby. While the special hotel's varied sex salons were exceptional, they hadn't been mind blowing enough for him to forget the task at hand.

No one had heard a peep from the group in the penthouse suite and Morrow had grown more than a little antsy. This had to go off without a hitch. Doyle had to die if his plan had the slightest chance of working. His plans might be dead in the water anyway if what was transpiring across the lobby, meant what he thought it did.

If he weren't dead sober, Morrow would've sworn he'd been seeing things. He wasn't. There was no mistaking the sight of the 4 women all garbed in long white robes, leaving the hotel. One carried a distinctive black bag with a chrome bottom.

"Oh Jesus," Morrow moaned.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Burlingame, California~ The Present*

Burlingame was about a half hour's drive from San Francisco and the place Berrill Clayton had called home for almost 6 years. When she, Tee, LuCarolyn and Prin left behind the madness of Vegas, they decided to try their luck further west.

Trying their luck was easier given the fact that they'd left Las Vegas millionaires twice over. Enrique Roy, Dorinda Patterson's boss; and the go-to man for establishing high class entertainment for high class clientele, had been surprisingly grateful when he'd discovered Berrill and her friends hadn't walked off the job with only the robes on their backs.

Roy had been more than a little interested in the contents of the bag they'd smuggled out with them. What he'd seen on the discs inside, was something he was willing to pay dearly to acquire. The young women in possession of the valuable information weren't so dazed over the night's events that they didn't realize the seriousness of their situation. Given that, they were unwilling to hand over leverage that might very well be their only bargaining chip.

It was a bargaining chip that was valuable not only with the authorities, but with those seeking to avenge the deaths they were responsible for. When the girls arrived in California, they arrived with the discs as well. As Prin nor LuCarolyn wanted to be within a foot of them, the bag and its contents remained in Berrill's and Tee's care. After a while, Berrill became the sole caretaker. It was the sensible move considering the security of the place she called home.

New found wealth, had allowed Tee to start an interior design business. LuCarolyn used her portion to wisely invest, though she made her living in Hollywood- a career path in which she thrived. Prin had taken barely a quarter of her portion which was no big surprise. She'd repaired the relationship with her estranged parents and started collecting on the substantial allowance they provided her.

Berrill wanted space and a business that was something altogether different. Eclipsing pines formed a natural fence around a vast outlay spanning 60,000 acres. Besides an astounding 10,000 sq ft. estate, the property boasted another marvel which made it a perfect place to secure what was most valuable to Bear and her friends.

Bear Arms Gun Ranch provided generous spacing for indoor and outdoor target practice. Defensive firearm use training was popular with law enforcement professionals across the state. Bear Arms had gained its immense popularity however, for its free range shooting packages. Armed with the most advanced weaponry-loaded with paintballs or rubber bullets- participants in groups of 4 or more set out on missions to take down opposing groups.



Participants were required to complete their missions within a specified timeframe and were limited to no more than 3 missions per week. The shooting soirees were the ranch's most popular ticket. Groups had their run of the entire ranch over the course of a 4 day weekend. Registration included accommodations at the ranch's exclusive lodge. Missions ran from dawn to dusk. The group with the fewest members hit, won a complimentary ranch weekend and first refusal to take part in the next soiree.

Berrill Clayton was a woman unafraid to toot her own horn. She'd damn well earned the right to. She'd had to demean herself and get bloody to do it, but she'd damn well earned the right.

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"I've damn well earned the right," Bear muttered, silently cursing the fact that she still needed to encourage herself with that phrase after 6 years following a lifetime spanning 31 years.

Though old ghosts had made room for newer ones, the fact had not rendered her a shell. Moreover, she was a capable woman at the helm of a respected business most people believed had been envisioned by men.

Sighing, Bear considered her present attire and wondered whether a respected business was worth the discomfort.

*California Business Magazine* was a big fucking deal and a respected entity that carried undeniable weight. Each year, the publication devoted its glossy, high quality pages to a photo spread featuring the best of the state's entrepreneurs. Bear's shoot was that day. She had been part of the CBMs Best In Business spread many times. Now, she had made the cover.

Hence the attire which; while not actually uncomfortable, was far from Bear's preferred style of dress. The gown was a creation of silk, satin and chiffon in tones of beige and cream. The empire bodice was a twist of fabric that accentuated a generous bustline that appeared more ample given the slender frame it adorned. The folds of the gowns skirt swept the ground in a shimmer of beige beneath a cream chiffon draping that flowed into an elegant train.

It was a killer dress, but Bear would've given anything for a pair of worn jeans and a T-shirt. Still, she was content. Thankfully CBMs head photographer had a playful streak. His concept had called for Bear's 'killer' dress to be offset by a pair of her favorite hiking boots.

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"Mr. Apostolou?" Shaun Oates approached the man who stood just outside the designated area for the photo shoot. He approached with a measure of caution. Shaun wasn't one to scare easily, but his trusty sixth sense warned it would be unwise to sneak up on (to *try* to sneak up on) the man in his sights.

Pope turned, eyes narrowed amid mid-morning sun as a smile curved his mouth. "Mr. Oates," he accepted the man's extended hand for a shake. "Lively morning," he took a look at Oates' dapper tux. "Am I underdressed?" he tugged one cuff of the black shirt he wore with a steel blue suit coat and matching trousers.

Shaun seemed confused for only a half second before glancing at his attire and grinning. "The photographer wants group shots, he's going a little overboard setting the scene."

Pope turned back to observe the bustle of people and camera equipment along one side of the property's east end. "Looks like a big deal," he noted.

"Agreed," Shaun's grin spread. "The boss is being featured in the magazine. She's the cover girl."

A smile hinted at Pope's mouth. "She sounds like quite a lady. Guess I should've picked a better day to try meeting with her for a tour."

"Today would've been a perfect day actually," Shaun squinted against the sun while taking in the excitement. "The shoot had to be rescheduled at the last minute, Ms. Clayton had some things going on that she needed to handle."

Pope didn't need to guess at what those 'things' might involve. He knew well enough. The GAN news feature over a month ago; put in place with a little help from his old friend Mercuri Nikolaides, had sent many people into a tailspin.

Though he was equipped with his own share of the details into the matter, Pope could only imagine how the revelations in that news broadcast had affected the woman he'd stood admiring for the last 10 minutes.

10 minutes...Pope felt his jaw tensing over the inaccuracy. Berrill Clayton had been on his mind since they'd met, er-encountered-one another over a month ago at his favorite restaurant. The extraordinary ultramarine of his stare, harbored a more jolting quality as he followed Berrill across the portion of her yard that then resembled a photography studio.

"So what are my chances for at least getting an introduction?"

"Quite good, actually," Shaun included a nod in response. "She loves meeting new clients especially when they come with the kind of business you're offering." He looked down suddenly at the mobile vibrating in his hand and grimaced following a brief check of the screen.

"They need me over there, but this is the last series of shots," Shaun explained. "We've been at this since last night but we should be wrapping in another twenty or so. I should be able to get you in to see her then if you don't mind waiting?"

"No problem. I appreciate it."

Shaun waved toward the patio. "Help yourself to anything there. It's the least crazy place around."

"Got it." Pope accepted another of Shaun's handshakes and then made his way to the covered patio.

The L-shaped structure boasted ceramic tiled roofing and spanned the southern and eastern ends of the stunning house. The area was furnished with wide, cushioned seating that made for a comfortable and breezy, waiting place.

Pope helped himself to one of the beers on tap at the hot and cold beverage bar provided in the patio's kitchenette area. He settled down, content to watch the shoot wind up. Looking on, he returned to Shaun Oates' comment regarding the kind of business he was offering.

Of course the business offered was just a ruse to get closer to the woman occupying his thoughts with unrelenting prowess. He'd done his best to keep his distance after they'd parted ways at Rascals. After learning who she was connected to, he'd commanded himself to hold back. That was especially true after the broadcast that had spilled many of The GANs darkest secrets.

He was done waiting now. Besides, he knew very well that there was never an absolutely perfect time to do anything. There was always a new challenge, a new battle to fight, a new fire to douse. He saw Berrill Clayton and, God help him, he wanted her.

She was a type he tended to steer clear of. It had nothing to do with her race. He'd lost count of how many times he'd indulged himself in the arms of a black woman. Berrill Clayton, with her skin the tone of dewy caramel, was a treat he very much wanted to sample.

Unfortunately, she was both strong-willed and outspoken. That much he'd gathered from their meeting in the Rascal's lounge area. The qualities, though admirable, were two he tended to avoid when choosing his next bedmate.

For Pope Apostolou, there was never an absolutely perfect time to do anything except fuck. It was a pleasure he'd pretty much denied himself over the last few years. He'd been more interested in acquiring every piece of land he could scope out. Now that he was actually working to draw sex back into his lifestyle, he had no desire to spoil that kind of perfect time with the strong-willed and outspoken.

He'd *had* no desire for such things. Now...well now he didn't know what the hell had changed or why it had.

Bullshit. He knew why it had. The 'why' was sex. The 'why' was usually sex. Hadn't that attraction tugged and powerfully when he'd first seen her lose her temper during the phone call he'd walked in on when they met? Was that all it took? Had it been so long since he'd enjoyed a woman that a loss of temper was all it took to have him wanting to toss her into the nearest bed.

He took a steep swallow from the long-necked bottle, sighing when the brew relieved a measure of the heat inside his chest. She'd probably try to beat the shit out of him if he was just honest with her and told her what he really wanted. She'd have every right to do just that and would he really be honest

giving her that line? He wouldn't admit that any of his recent uncertainty questioning his outlook on women, had anything to do with what Mercuri had found with Berrill's best friend Tee.

Etienne Shaw, all 5'2 inches of her, had thrown Mercuri for a loop the moment he'd set eyes on her. They'd been going strong since that moment and Pope was sure Mercuri would be going ring shopping soon, if he hadn't already.

Pope couldn't be happier for his old friend, but such things weren't for him. He didn't have the time for it.

*Mercuri does.* Pope gave a silent snarl for the voice issuing the helpful reminder, to shut up. *He* didn't have time for it. Nor did he have the patience- it wasn't how he was built. He had such a hard time with the strong-willed and outspoken because he was every bit of that. Long ago, he'd convinced himself that no woman could match him there- not in the way that would captivate and make it all worth his time.

Was Berrill Clayton's display of temper all it had taken to have him *this* infatuated? He saw the object of his current desire being positioned for her next shoot and he smiled. She was a gorgeous little thing. He supposed she would be considered tall by most standards. Those standards fell far short when countered by his own 6'8. She was leggy though, slender yet built...Yes, it had to be the sex- the lure of another conquest.

Pope stretched his legs, reclined a bit more in the wide Adirondack chair he'd selected on the patio. Yes, the lure of another conquest was a much easier concept to handle than anything more.

Besides, *anything more* was dangerous. As he'd already noted, there was always a new challenge, a new battle to fight, a new fire to douse.

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### ***Memphis, Tennessee~***

"You and I both know it was Pope and the rest of those bastards behind this. Those sluts wouldn't have known to pull Rand's name out of a hat, let alone reveal the choice bits of info that show leaked." Jake Grodins ranted, referring to Randall Cafrey, GAN Alum and current VP of Programming for the Feature News Network.

Cafrey's award winning news show *In Scope*, had broken the story that had become the latest in a string of publicized scandals.

Brody Alberts hissed a curse and shoved out of the easy chair he occupied behind the big desk in the room. The latest publicized scandal had been his father's suicide 2 weeks earlier in that very room. The room used to be Nathan Alberts' office.

"Pope and the rest of those jackasses may've set the story in motion," Brody growled, "but those sluts were at the top of things. The exchange, the hit would've gone off without a hitch had they not gone crazy and murdered the room."

"You still buyin' that they murdered them all? All ten?" Jake's expression was as dubious as his tone of voice.

Brody gave a flip shrug. "I don't see how there's any question. Besides, Zoo would've said something, right?"

Jake shrugged that time. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe he was cool with ducking for cover and letting them handle it."

Brody looked stunned. "Why didn't you ever ask him about it?"

"Would you?" Jake was incredulous, his mouth curved on an outraged smile. "The man was psychotic. We were there over a month ago, remember? You saw what he did to Roya."

Brody went silent as he dug up the gruesome memory of Grant Zubin slicing Enrique Roya's throat with one of his beloved carving knives. He put the memory into a deeper hole and cleared his throat. "You said he *was* psychotic. Do you think he's dead?"

"No one's heard a peep in over a month from him or Van Deer and those two were thick as thieves."

"What about Caleb or Luke?" Brody argued. "Maybe they-"

“Cale and Luke have been on vacation for the last month. You know as well as I do, that we aren’t prone to leaving breadcrumbs when we split for sun and fun. They’re dead, Brody.” Jake said in a resolved tone. “My brother and his cocksucking friends are totally responsible.” He referenced his half brother Rutger Eliades.

“They’re responsible for whatever happened to Van Deer and Zubin just like they were responsible for putting together what happened at that hotel. We already know Patch was supposed to handle taking out my old man and yours.” Jake prowled the office, massaging his neck.

A muscle flexed in Brody’s jaw. There was no denying that bit of intel. Patroclus Kostas had admitted as much when they’d tracked him down living the quiet life in New England. They’d seen to it that he was now living the quiet life 6 feet under.

“So what now?” Brody spread his hands, let them fall to his sides in a resounding slap. “We would’ve had a real shot at taking charge of this place six years ago had it all gone as planned.”

“What do you think your old man has in store for you?”

Brody looked ready to laugh off his old friend’s question. “I prefer not to think about it. If the S.O.B. was anything it was unpredictable.”

“When’s the last time you heard from Morrow?”

Brody gave into a grin, but the gesture was hollow. “The senator’s finally gotten around to doing what I expected him to do- not returning my calls.”

“Son of a bitch,” Jake switched his neck massage to one at his temples while reclining on the back of a gleaming brown leather sofa. “What’d he say the last time you talked to him?”

“That he was working on a plan to recover what we lost and it wouldn’t do to have a lot of ears involved.”

“What the fuck does *that* mean?”

“Beats me, that’s all he’d say.”

Jake snarled a curse and slammed a fist to palm. “Circumstances are dire. I’d say it’s long past time for our old partner in crime to ante up on the details.”

Brody gave a full shrug then. “He’s not returning my calls, remember?”

“No prob,” Jake drawled. “I’ve always preferred the face to face approach.”

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“Guys don’t forget! The tuxes leave when the photographers do!” Bear sang the reminder from her relaxed pose in the cushioned scoop chair where she’d spent the last half hour of the magazine shoot.

“Seriously Boss? After all we did to make you look good out here?”

Bear laughed, but didn’t look up from where she worked on her phone. She’d grabbed the wide mobile within 60 seconds of the photographer announcing they were wrapped.

“Thanks Skip!” She called to her lead assault weapons instructor Skipper Autry. “And thanks to the rest of you!” Her voice carried well across the busy yard.

“I appreciate you guys wearing the monkey suits. You looked adorable in them, but your checks will be devastated if they aren’t back on the truck in an hour’s time!”

“Utter destruction?” Skip, still devoted to his unofficial role as the group’s spokesman, set his attractively weather beaten face into a skeptical mask. “Or just slight shock?” He finished the query.

“Total annihilation,” Bear looked up from her phone to favor the grinning redhead with a sly smile.

Skip replied with a quick salute. “Tuxes back on the truck in an hour, guys!”

With the soothing rumble of laughter and conversation on the air, Bear returned to her phone. She’d managed to put in 3 minutes worth, before she was interrupted again.

“I’m about to make your day.”

“You already have,” Bear didn’t look up when she heard Shaun Oates’ voice overhead. “Just keep standing there and blocking out all that sun,” she told her assistant.

“I can do better than that. There’s a guy waiting who wants to book the ranch for a weekend for a friend of his.”

“Great,” Bear’s voice was light with the satisfaction new business always brought. Still, her major focus was the phone.

Brows beginning to knit, Shaun squatted next to his boss’ chair. “He’s already put in a deposit- the wire transfer came through this morning.”

“Great,” a hint of laughter colored Bear’s voice then. “Have him talk to booking and make sure we have the dates to accommodate his request.”

“B,” Shaun put his palm over her phone, “his deposit was fifty thousand dollars.” Satisfied he had Bear’s attention then, Shaun pushed to his feet.

“Fifty K?” Her voice was like stone. “What the hell does he think he’s buying?”

Shaun’s guileless grin broke free on his round handsome face. “A weekend at the business on the cover of California Business Magazine, that’s what.”

Bear snorted, hackles rising as they tended to do when she encountered people who squandered sizable portions of their wealth, instead of using it to make statements that mattered.

“I’ll tell you what he thinks he’s buying,” Settling back deeper in the chair, Bear threw her leg over the side. The cut of the dress protected her modesty. “He thinks he’s gonna plunk down his wad and come out here for his long weekend to have us jump through all kinds of crazy hoops. Elitist jackass. How many times have we dealt with folks like this?”

“Come on, Bear you’re probably as rich as he is.”

“Only I wouldn’t drop fifty k of my hard earned money for a weekend I don’t even know if I can book or not. You know what that says to me? It says he expects us to jump every time he makes some stupid request like letting his grandkids use our rifle collection to play cops and robbers.”

“Actually, I was just hoping it’d get me the courtesy of a tour from the owner herself.”

Recognizing the voice of the gentleman currently under discussion, Shaun’s back went rigid beneath the rented tuxedo that was suddenly sweltering beneath the midday sun. He worked to soften the smile that felt as stiff as his shoulders and then turned to offer the man a nod.

The move gave Shaun the chance to regard the potential client with a mix of admiration and pity. Few had the nerve to interrupt, let alone approach his boss when she was in the midst of a rant. Shaun observed the man who was focused on the woman seated quietly then, but who Shaun guessed had one hell of a tongue lashing in mind. He then felt another element wedge in- amusement.

Shaun was sure to wipe away any trace of it before he turned back to his boss and made the introductions.

“Berrill Clayton, Pope Apostolou.”

## CHAPTER 4

“Thank you, Shaun.”

Like a man reaching out for a life vest, Shaun accepted Bear’s permission for him to excuse himself.

“Shaun,” Pope spared an appreciative smile for the man before looking back to his employer. “Got ‘em well trained, don’t you?” He glanced in the direction Shaun Oates had all but run toward.

Bear maintained her relaxed pose on the chair. “I like a man who knows his place.”

“I’m afraid I never learned that trick.”

“Obviously,” Bear gave herself a moment to study the work of visual excellence before her eyes. God, how tall was he? It wasn’t the first time she’d wondered. That day, standing beneath the brilliance of a high California sun, he cast a more formidable presence. She realized that he was patiently waiting on her to complete her assessment and she smoothly, albeit reluctantly, retasked her thoughts to the discussion requiring her participation.

“You seem to have a knack for eavesdropping on my conversations, Mr. ...” She winced and snuggled her bottom a little deeper into the chair “Apos-stow or stew? Shaun’s got such a way with pronouncing people’s names- I’m afraid I might massacre yours.”

“Stow-stress is on the third syllable. Apostolou,” he supplied without hesitation and waited on her to make the connection. He could all but see the coincidence hitting home and felt the tug of attraction stir same as it had when he’d first met her. The mocha hue of her gaze was so lush, he thought he could drown in it if given the chance.

“Apostolou,” Bear nodded during the pronunciation, noting its uniqueness. “Italian?”

“Greek.”

“Right...one of my best friends is dating a guy whose Greek- Nikolaides? Mercuri Nikolaides-know him?”

He moved closer then and Bear prided herself on not panting. Her disappointment weighed in over the fact that he’d bound his hair that day. The low ponytail only emphasized the patient craftsmanship of a darkly beautiful face. Still, she’d have enjoyed seeing the jaw length waves of black framing it.

She had to wonder how long a woman lasted in this man’s presence before throwing herself at him. Silently, she threatened herself with bodily harm if she so much as swayed in her chair.

“Shipping guy, right?” Pope was saying. “Yeah, I’ve heard of him. I always follow those who give the rest of us Greeks a good name,” he waited, watching her enchanting face closely to see if she’d

find it worth her time to question him further on that point. There was an inward sigh of satisfaction for him when she appeared to decide against it. Though remaining mute on just how well he knew the esteemed Mr. Nikolaides didn't sit well with him, Pope decided to worry later about the ethical ramifications of his decisions.

"So are you saying you're a Greek without a good name?" Bear had already moved on to a new topic. She took the time to size him up while he considered her question, easing his hands into his trouser pockets as he sidled closer to her chair.

Christ, he was a big son of a bitch. *No swooning, B*, she heard the silent command languish inside her head.

"Well I already told you I have a hard time staying in my place. Guess that would put me in the category of Greeks who could use someone to make them look good."

Gathering the folds of her gown, Bear pushed elegantly from the suede scoop chair and put it between she and the giant who had so boldly invaded her space. When he smiled, her eyes fixed on his brilliant sea blue orbs deep set beneath long brows black as pitch. Somehow, she resisted curling her hands over the back of her chair or even fisting them at her sides. She relied on her suspicions to keep her level.

"I don't buy that you came all the way out here just to become a new client, Mr. Apostolou." Bear saw the probing intensity of his gaze give way to something lighter- Surprise? Amusement?

Feeling a bit more at ease then, she folded her arms at her chest and waited patiently for that stunning gaze of his to complete its survey of her breasts elevated a smidge by the move.

"I have lunch in a place I rarely visit."

"You should," he inserted.

"And you're there."

"It's my favorite place."

"And I find you eavesdropping."

"It was an open space. No door."

"And now here you are. Coincidence? No one drops fifty k for a tour."

"They do when they want it from you." Pope saw some of the confidence eek out of her expression and immediately regretted his response. What's more, he regretted trying to get her attention by using the business she'd had to demean herself to build.

"I'm not for sale," her glare was as frosty as the brief but meaningful phrase.

"I promise it wasn't my intention to imply that you are," sincerity rang true in his expression and the canyon depths of his voice.

"Oh I believe you, Mr. Apostolou," her smile was tight, knowing. "So why don't we continue on this level of honesty and discuss who really sent you here."

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### *Harve de Grace, Maryland~*

"I appreciate you coming up, Coop."

Senator Edgar Cooper squeezed the younger man's hand in a firm clasp. "No trouble at all, Chris. Specially when I'm out for fishing. By the way, I'd like to see you on the next outing, so would a few of our other colleagues."

Senator Christopher Morrow's grin developed traces of curiosity. "Are folks worried about me?"

"Nah, nah, nothing like that," Cooper waved a pair of beefy hands. "Only we've all been there, kid. The first election after the freshman term. We all know how it is to be on edge, wondering if you've got what it takes to do it again- secure the voters' trust and reclaim the seat."

Morrow dropped his gaze, nodded. It was an election year and though his term had been a fairly successful one, he hadn't accomplished half the things he'd wanted to. Not on a personal level anyway.

"I appreciate your concern, Coop," Morrow told the 3-term senator whose hand he shook. "But I have to admit I'd feel a helluva lot better with Doyle here to help me navigate."

Cooper's rotund frame shook when he laughed. "My boy! If Tommy were here you wouldn't need to worry about being navigated!"

Hearty laughter livened the hall.

"On that note, I'll be sayin' goodnight to you." Cooper reached out to shake Morrow's hand again. "Should I call with details on our next trip?"

"I'm actually planning to head back to the home state for a few weeks. Catch up with you when I get back?"

"Sounds good!" Cooper gave Morrow's shoulder an approving clap. "Just don't spend all your time campaigning. The invite you wanted me to wrangle from my friends out there should help with that, eh? Go get some of that California sun- it'll do you good. Might even do some good for that marital status of yours."

"Oh yeah?" Morrow voiced the query in a chuckle.

"You can hold off on that 'til after the election I suppose, but then use the time to find yourself a lady to give a ring to. Hell, at least find somebody to take with you to that shindig," Cooper leaned closer to shrug bushy brows at his younger colleague. "Fancy parties are a sure fired way to get a yes to a marriage proposal."

"Marriage..." Morrow drawled with exaggerated slyness. "That another trick to keeping the seat secured?"

"It was in my time, son." Cooper sounded nostalgic. "That's not so much the case, these days. Folks are still comforted by the idea of voting for a family man, but the allure of the single man is quite the draw. When he's got some cute 'lil thing on his arm, they're even more intrigued."

"So long as he doesn't have too many, right Coop?"

The tease stirred the elder Senator's jovial laugh and then he was clutching Morrow's hand in another shake.

"Be seein' ya, kid!"

Morrow saw his colleague to the front door where the man was met by members of his security and escorted to the imposing SUV idling in the brick drive. Following one last wave, Morrow headed back inside the sprawling 2 story he'd called home since acquiring his seat. There, he dropped the facade of the easy going young senator.

"Fat fuck," Morrow hissed when he entered the den.

"Having problems with the Gentleman from Washington State?" teased the man seated in one of the high-backed black leather chairs before the tall windows.

Morrow bounded over to a black chrome bar cart trimmed in gold. "Where's it written that you have to socialize with your co-workers?" He waved an envelope which he dropped to an end table near the bar. "At least all those hints I dropped were worth it."

"The way the game's played," Rich Lehman sighed from the chair where he worked at his tablet.

"It's bullshit," Morrow tossed back the bourbon he'd poured, smiling in approval as the liquid awakened his gullet. "At least the clown will lay off a while. I told him I was headed home- campaign trail and all."

Lehman nodded, his eyes still fixed on the tablet screen. "We're gonna be hitting it hard. I've just been making sure there aren't conflicts with your upcoming events out there."

Morrow refilled the stout glass with another hit of the bourbon and then made his way across the room. Standing before the room's floor to ceiling windows, he absorbed the view of the pier leading across the Susquehanna River from his backyard. Contentment slid through him as it often did when he studied his boat docked there. The spoils of success, he thought. He'd been determined to have far more to show for it than a sailboard by the time it was all over.

"Thanks Rich," he told his event manager before taking another taste of the liquor. He sipped lightly instead of devouring it all in one long gulp. "Jer's gonna make a fine campaign manager once he learns the ropes, but I thank you for having his back until then."

Rich nodded, smiling at the mention of his younger brother Jerome Lehman. He shut down the tablet. "It can be a nightmare keeping the office running smooth. Then there's dealing with the press and



staff. It'll be a real load off his shoulders to not have to worry over event schedules and locations," he shrugged. "Besides, this was the part I enjoyed most when I had the job, so it's great to do it fulltime."

"Well I appreciate all of it," Morrow raised his glass in toast. "Your brother damn well has his hands full out there with this Berrill Clayton mess."

Lehman's expression tightened. "Any new developments?"

"Nothing more since what was revealed during the *In Scope* broadcast," Morrow helped himself to more bourbon. "The silence isn't doing anything to boost my confidence though. At least getting chummy with that fat bastard Cooper was worth it." He strode to the end table, reaching for the envelope containing the invite Edgar Cooper had pulled strings to obtain.

"Think she'll honor it?" Lehman asked.

Morrow grimaced, regarding the now empty glass as though he had intentions to hurl it through the window. "I'll worry over Ms. Clayton when the time comes. Right now, it's a matter of principle with her. She wasn't gonna let me set foot there given all the bad blood between us." He set the glass down hard on the end table and moved past it. "Now more than ever, I'm desperate to get some eyes on that place."

"You've done it before," Lehman noted.

"Yeah...the first of my mistakes."

"You couldn't have known it would go down that way."

"But when it did," Morrow stroked his round jaw and bristled. "When it did, I should've kept quiet instead of trying to use what happened to launch a search for what she stole. That definitely didn't put me on her list of favorite people."

"Is it really so important to have it back?" The potent shade of Lehman's gaze lent urgency to his question. "We don't even know if she still has it. Three years is a long time."

"Yeah..." Morrow spent half a minute pondering that aspect before shaking off his doubts. "But I can't walk away from all the work and time it took to get it. Besides...the ones left, still hold the kind of power we need." He gave Lehman a hopeful look. "Do you know what that kind of leverage could be used to accomplish?"

"You could always reacquire it," Lehman's response was tinged with the same kind of hope.

"It took us long enough to get it the first time," Morrow argued. "The people we had to put in place to make it all possible...we aren't going to have it all come together that way again," he smirked, leaning against the window to gaze out at the pier hazy beneath a sky filling with clouds.

"Coop would be easy enough, the babbling shit. All it'd take is joining him on one of his fishing trips to get what I'd need. But the others..." Morrow shook his head again. "After what happened in Vegas, it'd take too much cajoling, reassurances and...fuck...*money* to convince them to put together another batch of that kind of leverage. I've invested too much to walk away from this."

"It could come to that, you know?" Lehman turned on the chair to study his employer. "Berrill Clayton giving you an invite to her soiree is one thing. You being able to get out there- use what Duncan found out about where she keeps that bag...well that's another thing entirely. Not to mention, the bag actually being where Duncan saw it."

Morrow began a slow pace of the den. "The problem is that I've spent too long pussy footing around this. As soon as I have a way set, I'm stopped in my tracks. Bolder moves are needed, Rich," he stopped to aim a finger in the man's direction.

"You need to remember you're in the midst of trying to reclaim a senate seat." Lehman left his chair. "Whatever new plan you come up with, needs to stay on the sidelines of that."

"You're right. You're right, Rich," Morrow worked all ten fingers into his nape as he resumed his pace. "You'd think I'd learned my lesson on that by now. Going there under the assumption that our package is still with her is foolish, but still worth the trip."

At Lehman's blank look, Morrow smiled. "There were cameras all over that tacky hotel, Rich. Ones that caught me doing things I'd as soon as leave in the past. It was dumb of me to leave all damn bit of leverage I had with those idiots."

"You had no other choice. You'd only just gotten the material that night outside the hotel. It would've been unwise to walk around with it in plain view. Sad you had to leave it with those two, but dumb to let too many people see you waving it around." Lehman noted.

"Yeah, dumb..." Morrow sighed. "It was dumb luck my face didn't show on that In Scope broadcast. Berrill Clayton may not have that bag, but she has those discs."

"Or she knows who does," Lehman added.

Morrow's pacing slowed. "Maybe it *is* time to bring the GAN back into this..."

"Chris..."

"Relax Rich," Morrow signaled with a raised index. "I don't need the whole rotten bunch yet, just two of its members." He tapped an index to his chin as though settling on a decision. "Get me a meeting Rich. I need to see Jake Grodins and Brody Alberts."

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"A senator?" Pope allowed laughter into his response to Bear's allegation.

When she merely stood there, arms still folded beneath what, to him, looked to be a very excellent pair of breasts, he released another quick rasp of laughter.

"Jesus, you really know how to insult a guy."

Bear remained rigid despite the semblance of a roar she heard beneath his words. The element had held his voice at a softly consistent octave, but seemed boosted somewhat then. Bear wondered if it was a tell, signifying when he was pissed. She was curious to know what other circumstances might encourage the gesture.

Pope was too preoccupied over being tagged a senator's lackey, to notice how intently he was being observed. Habit had him raising a hand to take through his hair, but he fisted it remembering that he'd worn it bound that day.

"Do I look like I work for a senator?" His tone was patient with the barest flavor of an edge.

Intrigued by his reaction to her simple query, Bear indulged in a more leisurely perusal of her guest. More than 6'5 that was for certain. Despite the finely crafted jacket and trousers, she could tell that his frame was packed with muscle. He wore his considerable height and weight with the ease of a man familiar with putting it to lethal use, yet pleased when the opportunity to rest, presented itself.

Cool curiosity still on simmer, Bear leaned into the back of the chair. "I'd think a senator could find all kinds of uses for a man like you."

"I'm not a leg breaker, Ms. Clayton."

"Anymore." She tacked on helpfully as though he may've forgotten to add the qualifier.

Pope felt his budding agitation throttle back then as though he'd realized she was intentionally goading him. Though she might be suspicious of his connection to this senator she seemed to hate, she seemed more interested in getting a rise out of him than real confirmation to her allegations.

He didn't know if he was amused or unsettled by her ability to unbalance him the way she had. Correction. He didn't know if he was amused, unsettled or pleased by her ability.

"I don't work for your senator, Ms. Clayton."

"My place is exceptional, but fifty thousand is an awful lot to put down for a deposit for a tour of the grounds."

"Would you have taken me seriously otherwise?"

"I take all my clients seriously."

"Enough to give them personal tours?" He countered, the ultramarines narrowed in challenge. "I'm guessing folks don't get on the cover of California Business Magazine without doing a lot of business. You wouldn't get much done granting tours to everyone who came knocking at your front gates."

"Your friend must be pretty special for you to go through all this?" She couldn't help but smile when she saw his grin emerge. The gesture was totally without guile and almost made her regret giving him such a hard time. She wasn't absolutely ready to buy his story, but perhaps he hadn't come to do Morrow's bidding.

“My friend is a huge hunting and gun fanatic- it’s like a religion for him,” Pope smiled as Rutger came to mind. “He’s been hinting around for almost a year that he wants to come here for a weekend. I love him a lot and I wanted to make it special for him,” he spread his hands. “I couldn’t tell from your website whether you took bookings to reserve the entire ranch. I decided to let my money speak and wound up insulting you by going that route. I apologize. I just really wanted to make this happen for him...” he couldn’t decipher her expression and figured his explanation was ample enough.

While this was all just a ruse to get close to Berrill Clayton, he was serious about granting Rutger’s wish. Chances were strong she wouldn’t give him the time of day-not the kind of time he wanted, anyway. If he could salvage the trip for Rut, that’d be something.

Bear’s expression was most definitely set, but with shock being its motivating factor. She’d been on edge ever since questioning his connection to Mercuri Nikolaides. Mercuri’s connection to Tee made him the only one, aside from the late Enrique Roya, who had seen the replay of the murderous events 6 years prior. She would’ve preferred Pope Apostolou being sent to do Morrow’s work, to him knowing Mercuri- knowing things that still made her sick inside.

But now...on edge didn’t even skim the fringes of what she was feeling. Booking her lodge for the friend he loved a lot? What the hell? How had she missed that? Had there been even the slightest hint of that the first time she’d met him?

She was sure there’d been *some* sexual innuendo at play during the brief conversation they’d shared in The Rascals’ lounge. Clearly, she’d read *that* wrong. Just as she’d misjudged him checking out her tits moments ago.

Jeez...grimacing, Bear tapped fingers to her brow in some attempt to soothe the mad scramble inside her brain. There was little that truly stunned her anymore, but this? Accepting that the man before her- this giant, this...*god*, this work of physical perfection was...gay? She swallowed and then decided to clear her throat before attempting to try her voice.

Pope had closed a bit more of the distance between them. “Are you okay?” His wickedly dark features were sharp with concern.

“I...” she nodded. “Yes um, thank you,” her tone was weak. “It’s uh, it’s been a long day.”

Pope began to nod. “Yeah, Shaun let it slip that you’ve been shooting since last night.”

“Yeah, but that’s not it, I-” her lips twisted on a sour smile. “I’m just feeling a little disgusted with myself right now.”

Pope wasn’t quite sure how to respond, so he opted for silence.

Bear moved from behind her chair and closed the remaining few feet of space between them. “I’m sorry,” she could’ve laughed over the surprise claiming his face, if she weren’t so miserable.

“I value my clients because they trust me and allow me to do what I love,” she continued. “Some of them are a bit harder to take than others.”

“Ah,” Pope flashed his single dimpled grin, “the guy who wanted his grandkids playing cops with your guns.”

“He’s real,” Bear gave a weak smile, weaker nod. “In his defense, he’s a pretty dynamic grandfather.” She sobered after a moment, returning to the situation at hand.

“In spite of the kinds I come across, I’ve never treated any of them as disrespectfully as I have you. I apologize for that.”

His gaze filtered with more concern. “It’s okay, really-”

“No. No it’s not,” she insisted. “Things have been a little crazy lately, but that’s no excuse- not when you’re being so sweet.”

For a second, Pope was sorely tempted to put a hand to her forehead and check for fever. *Sweet? Him?* He’d done a better job of masking his true motives than he’d realized.

Only a second ago, she seemed to despise him. What had changed?

“It won’t take me but a minute to get out of this,” she slid her fingers inside the gowns’ bodice.

“That um,” Pope followed the move helplessly before shaking his head- at first dazedly and then with more rigor. “That’s not necessary. Like you said, it’s been a long day.” He put space between them. “I only wanted an intro, we can do the tour another time.”

"I honestly don't mind," she responded with a small, defensive wave. "It's the least I can do after treating you the way I did."

She meant that. She felt like a heel for treating him so callously when he was just trying to do something nice for the man he...loved.

"I promise you haven't upset or offended me," Pope put a hand to his chest to stress the sincerity of his words. More words failed him when she moved closer, curling her fingers trustingly around his.

"That's because you've got a lot more manners than I do."

Now he was well mannered? Pope silently marveled. Boy, she had no idea.

"I accused you of having ulterior motives for being here," she squeezed his hand. "I treated your business like it was unappreciated and all the while you were just trying to put together something special for your friend. I feel like crap."

Pope used his free hand to cover hers where it rested on his other. He bent slightly toward her, praying he'd stop before jerking her high as his hormones were demanding.

"Please forget it. I already have. I'll call and arrange the tour some other time. I should get going."

It took Bear a few seconds to realize he was waiting on her to release him. Doing so, she moved back, absently realizing she'd been standing on her toes.

"Walk me out?" he asked.

They fell in step once Bear obliged with a smile. As they walked; skirting members of the photography crew packing up, Pope took time to survey the property.

"Quite a place."

"Thanks," her smile widened in appreciation and pride. "I grew up somewhere similar to it. When I saw this...I knew nothing else would do. I wanted it."

His brow quirked. "You always get what you want?"

"Not always," she gave him a lingering sideways glance. "Not always," she repeated with a sigh.

They took the rest of the walk in easy silence and were soon rounding the side of the house.

"This is me," Pope waved toward the wide gravel drive where a muscular navy truck waited. "I'll be seeing you soon about that tour."

"Mmm..." Bear let her hand slip inside the one he'd extended. "Well you've already talked to Shaun so just connect with him and he'll set it up."

"I will," his voice was as steady as his gaze. "Thank you for your time Ms. Clayton."

"Call me Berrill or Bear-mostly everybody calls me Bear."

"Doesn't fit you."

She wouldn't-couldn't let herself read anything into the way his marine blue eyes traveled her frame. Briefly, she closed her eyes to break the spell cast by his.

"I can be pretty grizzly," she warned.

He responded at once with a sly grin. "I haven't forgotten the conversation I walked in on."

"Eavesdropped on." Habit, had her biting her bottom lip when he laughed over her intended tease.

He spent another few seconds studying her. "I'll see you soon, Bear."

She watched, until the massive truck carried him away in a flurry of dust and gravel. Regretfully, she shook her head. "What a goddamn waste," she sighed and headed back the way she'd come.

## CHAPTER 5

Bear could be found most mornings somewhere on her property reclining on the hood of her Jeep and taking in an exceptional view. It was the part of her daily routine that she enjoyed most.

Things at the ranch didn't get started 'til around 7am when early bird shooters started their day. At present, they had no clients scheduled for that time, so Bear felt quite secure taking in the sunrise from the Jeep's hood.

She had nothing on tap for that morning-not even the usual meeting with Shaun Oates and his counterpart Mike Hough. Both men served in dual roles as her Operations Managers- necessary posts given the work required to keep a place like Bear Arms running smoothly. At any rate, the morning was hers and she planned to enjoy it.

Low grinding filled the air and she was cursing herself for tempting fate moments later. Her mobile vibrated on the hood. Shaun.

"I'm not coming back, no matter what," she sang upon answering.

"No need," Shaun chuckled. "I only wanted you to know we're sending company your way. Mr. Apostolou. He uh-doesn't seem like the type who'd appreciate being asked to wait any longer," Shaun added the last as if expecting his boss to argue over the intrusion to her morning.

"No-no Shaun it's fine," Bear inched up a bit on the hood. "I told him it'd be fine to come back any morning this week."

"Well we offered to drive him out, but he said he was okay heading out to find you on his own. We told him you were near the rec stop-told him to follow the signs."

"Yeah I uh-I'm actually parked right near the cottage."

Shaun hesitated before continuing. "I figured it was alright since there were no early morning sessions-"

"Shaun? I'm fine. It's okay, you did fine." Bear's tone was reassuring in its softness. "I'll check in with you and Mike later."

"Should we have the kitchen prep lunch for you guys after?"

"No need," the hint of an edge crept into her voice. "I'm sure he won't stay long once we're done looking around."

Shaun disconnected moments later. Bear eased her phone into a back jeans' pocket and spent another minute with her view. The rec stop marked the end of her property and was where clients usually stopped for rest and refreshment especially if their time wasn't done. They would save themselves the exhaustion of heading all the way back to the lodge for a quick drink or a few minutes of downtime.

She and her newest client could just as easily have lunch there as opposed to dining at the house. The rec cottage boasted a full service kitchen and was always well stocked. Sadly, it was as she'd told Shaun, she doubted Mr. Apostolou would spare any more time than necessary once they'd completed his tour.

She could at least delight in the fact that she'd have time to indulge in the provocative image he cast. His was an image far more preferable than the one presently in her midst.

During their chat, Bear didn't think to ask Shaun if there had been any new developments pertaining to her purchase. *Hoped for* purchase of the rec cottage. Though it was an enchanting place with a view of land, sky and trees from virtually any angle, she wanted it for one reason only: to raze it to the ground.

An engine cut through the sound of wind, birdsong and her heated memory. Bear smiled as her tour date approached. The gesture deepened when she saw that he'd arrived alone. She was of course pleased that she wouldn't have to share him with his significant other just yet.

Quietly, Bear berated herself but delighted when pleasure made its next stab as Pope Apostolou left his truck. His hair was loose that day. The wind stirred thick locks of black around a remarkable face.

From the Jeep's hood, Bear watched admiring the unhurried stride as he approached. His manner of dress was far more casual than when they'd seen each other 2 days earlier. Hiking boots that managed to appear rugged as well as casual, showed beneath the cuffs of dark fleece pants. They matched the lightweight hoodie he wore beneath an open denim shirt.

A waste indeed, Bear mourned but managed to cease her inner panting by the time Pope's long strides brought him to the Jeep.

"Ms. Clayton-Bear." He corrected when she gave him a look.

"Mr. Apostolou."

Pope responded with a look of his own. "If I can call you Bear, you can definitely call me Pope."

"Pope." She said and indulged in another scan of his face- the sapphire eyes, broad staggering face comprised of sharp angles and a bone structure that spared him the anguish of being called 'pretty' by scarcely a hair.

"So did your mother have plans for you along those lines?" she probed.

Her query had him turning to scan the horizon and squinting against the sun that climbed higher against a pale sky. Bear instantly regretted the probe. It was easy to see she'd brought unwanted thoughts to mind. He shut down the reaction easily enough, treated her with a look she couldn't quite puzzle out.

"My mother had a lot of plans for me," he shrugged. "I think I did the complete opposite of everything she wanted. My last name is Greek for apostle-messenger," he shrugged again. "Guess she was just making sure the first connected with the last. Maybe she'd predicted I'd need all the help I could get."

He spoke in a way that made her think his mother hadn't played a role in his life in quite a long while. Something in common? Bear supposed she'd never know. Conversations about mothers and the lack were ones she worked hard to steer clear of.

Pope appeared to be done with the topic as well. Once again, he scanned the land. "This place really is somethin' else," he leaned against the Jeep's hood. "You were very lucky to get it, place like this...I can't imagine the former owners letting go of it easily."

"It was a property tax thing," Bear scooted from the hood. "Kept changing hands among the family until they finally decided it was too much of an expense. I came to the rescue-right place, right time."

Pope smiled. "It's the way most deals get closed."

She leaned beside him against the Jeep. "You know a lot about that?"

"Some."

"Any good at it?"

"Some would say I am."

"I wouldn't mind your help acquiring that place." With a sigh, Bear sent a rueful look toward the rec cottage.

"It's not yours?" Pope frowned at the structure.

"My land ends a few yards away from it. *Those* owners don't seem to have money problems-not the kind that have them eager to sell, anyway." She shook her head, fidgeting with a long tendril that curled beneath her chin. "I don't even know that for sure. I've only been in touch with the real estate company. They've been gracious enough to let me rent it."

"Gracious?" Pope turned, propping his elbow on the hood. "Why aren't the owners involved?"

"Beats me," Bear folded her arms over her chest. "The realtors aren't sharing that info. Apparently they aren't obligated to tell me who their clients are. Guess I can understand that, being an entrepreneur myself."

Pope studied her closely, fist clenching on the hood as the need to touch her funnelled up like a twister. The sensation, was unexpected and urgent. "But you want it?" He asked instead.

"I want it," Bear confessed simply. "But..." she couldn't resist another quick scan of him. "I don't always get what I want, remember?" Smiling off her despair, she moved from the Jeep.

"But you didn't come here to listen to my sob story," she went to the driver's side. "If you don't mind, we'll tour the cottage when I bring you back to your truck. That is, if you don't mind me driving?" She knocked on the Jeep's door.

Pope grinned. "So you really can move this thing?"

She slid behind the wheel. "Fasten your seatbelt."

A minute later, they were speeding toward the opposite end of the ranch.

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### *Memphis, Tennessee~*

"Why the hell is he on this list?"

"I think that's pretty clear, don't you Jake?"

Brody and Jake turned to the small, slender man seated on the other side of the modest desk along a quiet corridor of Womack, Mebane and Urnst Attorneys at Law.

Reading the expression on the faces of his larger guests, Cory Sumner stood- hands extended to urge caution. "It's all I know fellas-"

"The hell it is," Jake's voice was a snarl. "Why's Pope's name on that list?"

Cory swallowed after a few attempts, praying he wouldn't get his face smashed in for stating the obvious. "That list names everyone I've been instructed to contact about Mr. Alberts' will reading."

"So he's in the will?" Jake persisted.

Cory took another moment to compose his reply. "These are the people my bosses need to be there. If they're being asked to attend-"

"They're in the will," Brody finished. "Thanks for the heads up, Cory," he pushed a bulging envelope across the man's desk, and then nodded to Jake.

"Gentlemen?" Cory slipped the cash payoff into a drawer, calling out as his associates prepared to leave. "The back exit leads to a rear stairway. Please?"

"Of course," Brody gave a half smile, understanding the need for discretion.

Jake kept his silence until he and Brody were in the private corridor leading to the back of the stately brick building. Then, he loosed a string of curses- the majority were directed at Pope.

"Are you forgetting your father's still alive, man?" Amused incredulity held the question. Brody shook his head. "It's *my* dad who's most likely left me out in the cold."

"If your father betrayed you, I'm sure to be in line for the same treatment," Jake began to pace the small area. "The man's a shell right now," he said of Lorne Grodins.

"He and Daddy were real close," Brody said of his father's partner.

"Old fucks," Jake continued the insults as his pacing gained speed. "They'd rather leave the keys to the kingdom to the bastards who conspired to kill them instead of to their own natural blood-"

"Jake!" Brody sliced the air with a fist. "Shut up. We don't know that's what this is about."

"I think we both know it is, Bro. The question now is what to do next."

Brody joined in with the pacing then. Gradually, distress emerged beneath the cool mask he'd managed to keep in place. "We still have the meeting with Morrow-

"Fuck that!" Jake spat. "Whatever that jackass is dangling don't mean shit if what we have a right to is given away to those two freaks of nature our fathers worshipped." He moved into Brody's pacing path.

"You know what it means if that happens. I'm not interested in working my way up from the bottom, Bro."

Some of Brody's calm had returned. "Do you know why men without power hate men who have it?"

Jake's ill-humored smile prefaced his reply. "Because they don't have it."

Brody appeared satisfied. "I know why you're on edge, J but I'm not so quick to think my dear brother's gonna tear it all down once he has it."

Jake's smiling face turned into a scowl. "Givin' a shitload of credit to one of the S.O.B.s who tried to kill your father. Who *did* kill our cousins. Barely in their thirties and already sentenced to their graves."

"He won't have the power to destroy it, Jake. If Daddy does...leave it to him he-he'll put restrictions in place-

"Okay, so he won't destroy it. How does him keeping it help us?"

"Everyone who found working for us so reprehensible, high-tailed it out of the GAN when Mercuri came up with his master plan to fuck us over." Brody said.

Jake looked bored. "I'm still waiting for you to tell me why your outlook's suddenly changed? A month ago, you were as ready to put Pope and Rut in their graves as I was."

"If Pope comes back here to keep his inheritance, it's because he'll think he can reform it. I say we hear Morrow out, but hold back until we know what Pope's planning. All I have to do is wait for him to fail, to reclaim what's mine."

"So why wait?" Jake seemed both bored and confused.

"Because you know like I do that there's still some on the inside who sympathize with what Mercuri did. Even after all that's happened, they'd stand behind Pope if he worked to reform it. He won't succeed- the sympathizers will see that and when he's out of the picture, I step in with no argument."

Brody moved closer, hands clasped in an uncharacteristic pleading gesture. "Jake, we can't afford another mess like six years ago. It's taken us *this* long to get back to half our capacity. If we're to keep our outside interests and friendships going, they've got to see us united. With The Ten out of the way, we're gonna need those friendships, if anything else gets revealed from those hotel recordings. This is a game full of uncertainties. I'm just trying to navigate us through it until we know where we stand. Tell me you get that, man?"

Jake's expression was unreadable then. "I get it, Brody, but understand that if this shit doesn't play out the way you expect, that's it," he raised a cautionary finger. "No more waiting- not for you and your united front or Morrow and his secret interests. We tried this once before, waiting...and you see what a mess we wound up with. I'm sick of bowing down to these traitors. If that means pissing away my inheritance, and our connections, so be it."

Jake brushed past Brody with enough force to send him slamming against the wall.

"Jake!" Brody waited for his old friend to give him the courtesy of eye contact. "I'm with you- you've got my word on that. I see this thing flyin' off the rails, that's it. We hit 'em and hard regardless of what they're holding over our heads. Pope, Mercuri, Slayte, Rutger, we get rid of 'em once and for all. Damn the consequences."

Jake regarded Brody with a long look and then bolted down the creaking back stairway.

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"So? What do you think?"



Pope was already nodding in response to the questions Bear rattled off from behind the wheel of the Jeep. At ease, he let his head rest back on the seat and scanned the outlay of property beyond the windshield.

"This'll do just fine. He'll love it out here."

Bear gave a single, satisfied pump of her fist. "We'll head over to the last stop now," she said.

"Hold up on that," he suddenly straightened on the seat, one hand going to her knee.

Bear realized she was holding her breath while studying the smothering capacity of his hand where it rested.

She'd done a worthy job of keeping her mind off his...size during the tour, but the simple touch-commanding yet gentle, threw her thoughts right back to what she'd already known. Pope Apostolou was a man of considerable power, considerable control, considerable appeal.

"Why don't you tell me about this place and why you hate it?"

She blinked, catching tendrils of her long bangs with her lashes. His words had her shaking her head in denial. "What makes you think I-"

"Forget it," he spurned her attempt.

"You didn't come out here to discuss my property issues," she said.

"I don't do very many things to be polite, Ms. Clayton and I don't ask questions I'm not interested in knowing the answers to."

He'd decided not to tell her that he'd already glimpsed the haunted shadow that held her eyes before they left the site earlier. He was, by no means, a mind reader, but he recognized a haunted soul all too easily when he encountered one. Somehow, he didn't think the tough as nails beauty seated next to him would approve of such an accurate assessment coming from a stranger.

He noticed her gaze fixed on where his hand covered her knee and gave a squeeze. He released her, but not without a great deal of reluctance. He smiled as she mouthed a curse and wondered how hard it was for her to stifle what he'd already witnessed of her dynamic temper.

"You know you could easily Google this story," she said softly and with practiced restraint.

"I'd like to hear it from you." Although he was most intrigued by what put the shadows in her mocha eyes, he was grateful for anything that lengthened the tour that was quickly reaching its end.

He'd hoped she'd start speaking soon and give him the chance to just sit and delight in the flawless texture of her skin. It was like dewy caramel beneath the morning light. She'd gathered up her shoulder length hair in a high ball that left several wispy strands clinging to her nape.

Her breathing was a touch elevated which caused her very excellent breasts to strain against the capped sleeved khaki shirt she wore. With a wince, Pope silently scolded himself for objectifying her when she was about to bare her soul.

"I'm not sure if you noticed we didn't run into any of my female employees during the tour. There aren't any- except inside my home."

"Coincidence?" He asked.

"Necessity. Two of my female employees were raped inside that cottage. One was killed."

A silent scolding didn't seem adequate then. Pope drew a fist that he was sorely tempted to use against himself.

"I'm sorry Bear. I wouldn't have pried if-"

"Don't apologize. It's a matter of public record." She put the Jeep in drive and resumed the trip. "One was approached while she worked at the lodge. She had a friend who worked inside my offices in the training sector...encouraged her to come along."

"I would've rathered getting this by public record than having you remember it." Pope continued to kick himself.

"It's alright," her voice was elevated over the Jeep's engine though sadness claimed it. "I think about it every day," she frowned as the familiar pressure of tears twinged behind her eyes.

"I want to buy the cottage so I can tear it down."

Pope observed the inviting construction coming into view a quarter mile away. "You've put a lot of work into something you want to destroy."

“Well, otherwise it becomes an eyesore- makes the whole situation even more intolerable. The asshole owners sure don’t seem to give a shit about it.”

“Did they ever catch the guys who did it?”

“You bet your ass they did,” a measure of triumph stamped out her sadness. “The place is still there as a reminder, though. I’ll rebuild, but I need that one gone.”

“I get that. I’m still sorry about asking you to dredge that up.” Doubly sorry, he added in silence, considering what an incident like that must’ve had her remembering.

“Keeps me from getting complacent about what needs to be done,” Bear said after a few silent moments of her own.

“How about we skip this part of the tour?” Pope suggested once weighty quiet held the Jeep’s cabin for another full minute.

Bear put the Jeep in park as she rolled up to the side of the cottage where Pope had left his truck. Dismay pooled her eyes when she half turned on the seat to face him.

“You’ve got to see it,” she urged. “It really is a great place in spite of what I think of it personally.” When he didn’t look convinced, she gave a determined smile. “You know, I bet your friend would enjoy using it instead of having to hoof it all the way back to the lodge or the lounges inside the practice halls.” She gave a quick shrug of her brows when he gave her a considering look.

“You sure?” Pope asked.

“Absolutely.” Without waiting on further discussion, Bear hopped out of the Jeep and headed for the cottage at a fast stride. A stride that seemed more like a shuffle when paired against Pope’s.

“Booking the place for the whole weekend, you guys will have the cottage to yourselves but it may still seem pretty cramped if he’s as uh...”

Pope’s brows lifted as he waited for Bear to continue, intrigued by what she wouldn’t say. His expression hinted that he had a good idea.

They were heading inside and Bear was still searching for the most appropriate phrasing. “It could get pretty tight in there if your friend’s your...size.”

Grinning then, Pope nodded. “I don’t think we’d spend much time inside.”

“Well he’d still need the downtime. The man can’t shoot twenty-four seven.”

Pope’s grin glided into a chuckle. “You don’t know my friend.”

“You’ve at least got to sleep-oh!” Bear snapped her fingers and broke into a light sprint toward the back of the cottage. “You should see the bedroom!” She called over her shoulder.

Pope followed, taking in the cottage with its cozy living area, full service kitchenette and dining nook. He supposed it was...cute, but only for one-maybe. The place might work for Rutger alone, but for the 2 of them or the 4 of them if Mercuri and Slayte joined in...nothin’ doin’...

He found Bear at the end of a short hall. With a flourishing wave, she encouraged him to take a look inside.

Pope laughed. “Does it open up into another room?”

“Not exactly,” Bear’s smile was cheery and unoffended. “It’s bigger than it looks and there’s a pullout in the livingroom. It’s actually the largest space in the cabin, but the beds still aren’t as big as the ones in the lodge. If you and your boyfriend want a more private getaway, then the cottage is-”

“Excuse me...what?”

He’d leaned forward and Bear wasn’t sure if he was moving to hear better or about to faint.

“What did you just say?” Furrows had formed between Pope’s long, jet brows as he appeared to be in heavy concentration.

“You um,” Bear pressed her lips together, briefly considering her reply. “You won’t have to share the cottage with other guests...so it’d be perfect for-”

“Me and my-my boyfriend?”

“Dammit I-I’m sorry,” Bear realized her mistake then. “Is it sig-significant other is-is that...what you uh-use?”

Pope didn’t know whether to laugh or swear, both reactions seemed to fit.

Bear watched as he raked a hand back through the ebony waves of silk covering his head. Her fingers ached to test the texture. Another tell, she mused, recalling when she'd riled him a few days prior and he'd reacted in similar fashion. The fact had her regarding the cramped confines of the cottage. The space seemed smaller than a matchbox against 6 feet 8 inches of heating temper.

"Boyfriend."

Hand still tugging at his hair, Pope muttered the word like a curse. He was pissed alright and Bear could feel her skin heating as her own emotions flared. *She* was the one who should be pissed. What woman wouldn't be, faced with the sad reality that she had absolutely no chance of enjoying what was unarguably a walking orgasm.

"Boyfriend..." Pope put a bit more feeling behind the word that time.

"Look, I'm sorry, alright?" Bear latched onto her temper. She fisted her hands at her sides to resist shoving his excellent chest. "How am I supposed to know the proper etiquette? Shit! You walk in here, looking like the fuck of the century and I'm supposed to wrap my head around the fact that you're gay?!" She heard then, what sounded every bit like a roar stirring low in his throat and looked on in fascination as he tousled his hair again.

"Goddammit, Bear," he squeezed his eyes shut before turning on his heel to head for the front door. "Fuck," he hissed and turned again, grabbing her that time. Cuffing her throat in his hand, he used his thumb to tip back her head for his kiss.

Bear decided there was only one thing to do when being kissed by a walking orgasm. Pray brain function would resume so that the moment could be fully appreciated. For the time being, nothing appeared to be working except her mouth...that was just fine, she realized.

The kiss was a force which she met-*tried* to meet with her own brand of fire. She did her best, considering all she wanted to do was savor. The act was tireless and sultry. Pope Apostolou kissed her like he'd been doing it all his life. He knew just how long to rotate his tongue around hers before she shuddered in the midst of consistent moaning. He used just the right pace to time his thrusts as he claimed her mouth.

While he had no way to confirm it, he seemed to know just how deep to drive his tongue to have her panties go damp. More than damp, they were saturated. The sensation was so overpowering, Bear clenched his open denim shirt in hopes of supporting her suddenly useless legs.

His hand at her throat was in no way uncomfortable. Still, it unsettled and in a way she found terribly satisfying. For a woman who made her living being in command, all she wanted then was to relish the quiet possession of his touch.

Pope was praying his manner exhibited the control he sure as hell did not feel. Her soft, steady moans every time he probed her mouth, heightened rather than tempered his need to claim-to conquer. He was sure there were cautionary voices trying to reason with him, but he couldn't hear them- didn't want to hear them. Her mouth was as sweet as the caramel tone of her skin. All he wanted...was more.

Bear felt her feet leaving the floor, but she didn't open her eyes to investigate where she was being taken. The shift in elevation put her at a better height from which to enjoy his kiss. Her moans intermingled with gasps echoing need and she shamelessly suckled his skillful tongue. Sensation radiated from her breasts crushed high against his chest. Hungrily, her fingers tunnelled through his hair and she shuddered over the realization that the mass of glossy onyx was as luxurious as it appeared.

He broke the kiss and Bear felt herself being lowered. Yet, she refused to open her eyes for fear that the fantasy would end. The decadence of the bed beneath her back registered-she kept her eyes closed. Though pleased that the encounter had not yet reached its end, there was something a little *surreal* about being on her back in a bed she'd raved about moments earlier as though she were a salesman relaying the finer points of a product.

She would've never gone on and on about it-never would've led him back there, had she known he wasn't...what she thought.

The sound of snaps popping, tucked her deeper into fantasy and she risked opening her eyes. The man was extraordinary, as it pertained to his looks. The skin, a flawless and sun kissed copper made the

ultramarine of his eyes all the more staggering. As was his body. The need to feel him closer, had her achy and anxious.

Arousal stormed her from the simple act of his nose outlining the swell of bosom above her bra cups. Shuddering a curse, Bear moved to unhook the front fastening and found both her wrists shackled by one of his hands before she could complete the act.

Despite the fact that his pitiful reserves of control were almost totally drained, Pope waited-studying Bear's sensational eyes. He watched for any signs of uncertainty or intimidation. She exuded a tough exterior but he'd already glimpsed the softness beneath and prayed he hadn't unsettled her with the restraining move. His bright eyes skimmed her breasts seconds before he closed his mouth over one of the lace clad mounds. He started to suck, which forced gasps from her throat and a long groan from his.

He refused to take her out of her bra, but he refused to deny himself the treat-no matter how brief-of sampling what had him feverishly curious since the first time he'd seen her. She braced against his hold at her wrists, but made no real attempt to free herself.

Pope was glad. If she touched him again, he'd take her there. That much he knew. He couldn't-not there-not after what she'd just told him of the horrors that had occurred in that very place-perhaps in that very room. He'd have her in time. Knowing that, was enough to have him tethering his hormones and stonily refusing to give her more of what she'd begged for with her gaze when he backed off. Gently, he raked the soft curve of her jaw beneath his knuckles.

"Thought I should make myself clear," he said once the storm in her eyes had eased. "I've known my friend since before we could talk. I love him because he's like my brother-*only* my brother." He smiled at the eager nod she gave to convey her understanding.

Pope braced off the bed, but not before skimming his thumb across her covered nipple and enjoying the way arousal sent her lashes fluttering.

"You're right," he leaned closer to speak against her ear. "This is bigger than it looks."

Open mouthed, Bear watched him leave the room. She didn't move- not even when she heard his truck engine ignite to signal his departure.

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