
HAMMERED

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Hammered
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“Another night, another cold beer at Winchester’s,” I mumble as I glance around Blue Bay’s favorite watering hole. I drain the amber liquid from my bottle and let it hit the dented, wooden table with an unnecessary thud. I give an exaggerated sigh and pick at the label, ready to call it a night until I feel a set of eyes drilling into the side of my head. I turn to my brother Jared and arch a brow. “Do you have a problem?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m tired of all your fucking moping. What the hell is the matter with you, anyway? It’s nine o’clock, and you look like you’re ready to crawl into bed...alone,” he says, his gaze sliding to the cute brunette two tables over.

A single Owens boy spending a Saturday without a woman between the sheets is unheard of, I know. I also know my little brother will be hooking up with that well-dressed cutie tonight, or any one of the other pampered rich girls who spends their summers here in Blue Bay, Connecticut. They return every year to tan and toy with the local boys, only to up and leave for their real lives come fall. I’ve been home now for two years, retired from the MMA circuit to help out in

the family construction business after our father died, and I can't deny that I've bedded my share of women wanting a summer fling. I also can't deny that I knew better than to get attached, and a no-strings summer hook-up was, well...a hell of a lot of fun.

Was?

Fuck, man, I don't know what's wrong with me. I used to love the attention in the cage, love the string of ladies waiting for a piece of me after a hard-earned fight. But lately, I don't know... My older brothers Sean and Jamie are proving the Owens boys do have staying power. Who would have thought? Not me. Yet they're both married with kids. Heck, Sean's wife Summer is pregnant with their second child. I sure as hell hope it's a girl. If not, Grandma Nellie will be after me to get settled and finally give her the great granddaughter she's been wanting. I guess I used to be opposed to marriage, but lately I'm wondering how it would look on me. That thought brings on a bark of laughter.

My God, the eight Owens boys, five brothers and three cousins, have reputations a mile long. Apparently, we have authority issues, and the outsiders who have summer cottages here on the ocean have been warned to stay away by none other than Officer Walker. He and my late dad go way back, and the dispute between the two never ended with Dad's death. Nope, it extended to the eight Owens boys. He just better back the fuck off and keep his hands off my nephews as they grow up.

"Are you going to answer me?" Jared asks, holding his hand up to Stacey, gesturing for another round of beers. "The last time I saw you this down was when Rock Roberts beat your ass and stole your UFC middleweight title." I glare at my brother. Now why would he bring that up? I'd been hoping to leave the circuit with a bang, but Rock had other plans. "That girl over there is staring at you. Why aren't you going for it?"

Oh, just that maybe I'm getting played out, and while marriage is looking better and better, I'm a well-known MMA fighter—the bad boy women like to have fun with but wouldn't dare bring home to daddy.

Jared continues to glare at me, and I'm about to tell him to fuck off and mind his own damn business when the heavy wooden door swings open and hits the wall with an undignified thud. All eyes turn to the gorgeous blonde sporting big blue eyes the size of saucers as she jumps out of the way before the door swings back and slams shut against her small frame.

Dressed in skintight jeans that hug sweet curves, and a T-shirt that cups gorgeous tits, she glances around, almost frantically, and something niggles in the back of my brain as I take her in. Do I know her? Has she summered here before? I'm not sure, but there's one thing I am certain of—she's never been in my bed. That's not something I'd forget in a hurry.

She glances over her shoulder, like she's running from the devil himself and every protective instinct I possess roars to the surface. I push from my chair and it scrapes the floor loudly as I stand. I take a step toward her, my scuffing boots drawing her attention. Her gaze jerks to mine, and she takes one last glance over her shoulder, like she expects someone to rip the door from its hinges, before she comes running my way.

What the fuck?

Worried blue eyes latch on mine as she goes up on her toes and slides slender arms around my neck. "Please just go with this," she says quickly, breathlessly.

"Go with what?" I ask, my gaze roaming her worried face.

The door creaks open, and she gasps as she steals a glance over her shoulder. With her eyes back on me, she says in a

loud voice for all to hear, “There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

What the ever-loving fuck is going on here?

Before I can ask, or even make sense of what’s happening, she quickly pulls my head down, cutting off my words, as well as the flow of blood to my brain. My mouth slams against her soft lips and one strange thought hits. *It’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission.* But holy hell, this woman is all over me—her softness snugly against my hardness in mind-fucking ways. My dick thickens, grows, jumps up for a front row seat. Okay, screw permission or forgiveness.

I go with it, hell, there’s no way my cock won’t let me, and savor the sweetness of her mouth with my tongue, a hurried exploration that I’d love to slow down. But she’s frantic, and since I’m clueless, the only thing I know is she asked me to play along, I match her pace and actions.

For now.

With my arms around her waist, I anchor her to me, and don’t miss the little tortured moan rising in her throat—as though momentarily forgetting she’s kissing a stranger. Then again, maybe I’m not. Maybe she does know me. She links her arms around my back and holds on as I lift her clear off the floor. I turn her slightly, to glance at the door in time to see my oldest brother, Sean, enter. He’s a big, bad-assed mother fucker who’d scare any woman in a dark parking lot. Wait, was she running from him? One of the lights in the lot is broken. Is it possible he’d scared her?

I break the kiss, and set her back on her feet as Sean comes our way. A strange noise, something that resembles a wounded animal caught in a trap, catches in her throat as my bro drops down into the chair next to Jared. All eyes, including Stacey’s as she brings us our beers, are on the girl clinging to me like dryer lint.

I put my hands on her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

She's breathing fast and hard, her gaze going from me to Sean back to me. "Yeah, I just..."

My gaze narrows in on her. "Did my asshole brother frighten you or something?"

"He's your...your brother?"

"Yeah, Sean. Did he frighten you?"

She shakes her head fast, too fast. Okay, something strange is going on here and I damn well plan to get to the bottom of it. Women don't come running up to me, wrapping themselves around me and holding tight like two MMA fighters grappling in the ring. Not anymore, anyway.

"It's just..." She bites down on her bottom lip, no doubt trying to come up with a plausible story—unless she goes around kissing strangers for sport. I don't even bother entertaining that idea, though. This one has innocence written all over her. Yeah, something or someone has frightened her.

"Do I know you?" she asks, her eyes narrowing. I study her face, her perplexed expression, and I'm instantly aware the second recognition hits by the way her body stiffens, and those soft blue eyes go wide.

"Oh My God, you're Tyler Owens. The Hammer."

"The one and only." I dip my head, my lips once again inches from hers. "And you are?"

"Um..."

"You're Haven!" Stacey shrieks after setting the last beer on the table. "Haven Roberts."

I nod, as all the pieces fall into place. Haven Roberts. Sister of my MMA nemesis, Rock Roberts. I should have known it the second I saw her, considering how much Rock talks about her, and admires her acting abilities—and defends her when people call her a diva.

Movie trailers have been rolling down Main Street all week, a Hollywood cast and crew taking up residency in our small town to film some summer blockbuster. You'd think I

would have put two and two together and figured out who she was. I guess I'm kind of stunned like that, and really, I never really paid much attention to the excitement in the air or the endless chatter about the movie.

No, these days I keep my head down; my only goal is to work hard and save harder. My plan is to save enough money to afford my own building and purchase top notch equipment for the kids who take my martial arts training classes. The one I'm in now could be taken right out from underneath us, leaving us high and dry.

Still, I should have recognized her. I guess the fear in her eyes, combined with that heated kiss, messed a little with my ability for any rational thought. I stiffen, suddenly remembering the fear in her eyes. Was it my brother who rattled this famous movie star, or something else?

Haven's smile is a bit shaky as she turns to Stacey, her shoulders not quite as tight as they were when she entered Winchester's, but still tense. "That's right. I'm here for the movie shoot. Nice to meet you all." She jerks her thumb over her shoulder. "I should get going."

She slowly inches away, but I capture her elbow. Her gaze flies to mine. "Are you okay?" I ask.

Her lashes flutter, and her body relaxes even more under my touch, and dammit if I don't like that.

"Sorry about that," she says. "It was a dare. It's ah..." she rolls her eyes. "A stupid game we play when we reach a new location shoot. You know, pick the biggest, hottest guy in town and kiss him."

Now why is it I don't believe a word coming from her mouth? Her big as fuck, mean-ass brother is nothing but a liar, too. Well, not really. We all played the name calling game before a fight. We'd hurl shit against our opponents to excite our fans and build hype. The feud between Rock and me was legendary. We both could have won an Oscar for our out-of-

ring performances. When we were in the ring, there was no acting, however. Nope, we were both playing to win, but in the end the motherfucker stole my title.

Instead of calling her on her lie, I say, “You think I’m the biggest, hottest guy in Blue Bay?”

Jared snorts. “She must have lost her glasses on her way in here.”

I kick my brother’s boot and he’s about to stand when our oldest brother Sean raises his hand. “Don’t you two start.”

“I...I should go,” Haven says again.

I nod toward the door. “I’ll walk you out.”

“No need. Everything is fine. It’s not like anything bad ever happens in Blue Bay, right?” She gives a nervous little laugh. “No kidnappings or stalkers.” Her eyes go wide again, and she shuts her mouth like she’s said too much. For a girl who acts for a living, she’s not great at sticking to the script, because everything in me tells me she regrets everything that just spilled from her lips.

“Right, but I’ll walk you anyway,” I say, thinking back to the time Sean’s wife Summer was run off the road by her ex. Blue Bay is a small coastal town, but that doesn’t mean bad things don’t happen.

She puts her hand on my chest, and the heat from her touch sizzles through me. She tugs it away, and from the shocked look on her face, I can’t help but think it set off fireworks inside her, too. “No, it’s fine, really.”

I stand there, rocking on my feet for a second and she backs up, like she’s afraid I’m going to follow her. She grips the door and tugs it open. I glance past her shoulder to look for something, anything that might raise alarm bells in me, but she lets the door go and bolts.

“What the hell was that all about?” Sean asks.

I shake my head and tug on my hair. “Beats the hell out of me.” My boots pound the floor as I walk to the door, and pull

it open. I catch a flash of her hair as she hurries down the sidewalk. Most of the trailers for the cast and crew are parked at the edge of town, not too far from the old homestead where we all live with Grandma Nellie. Except for Sean and Jamie. They have places on the water with their families.

That strange sense of longing is back in my gut as I think about settling down and marriage, but I swallow it, not wanting another inquisition from Jared...or Sean. They'd never in a million years believe I was getting played out.

"I'm taking you off the Sanderson place," Sean says to Jared when I sit back down at the table.

"Yeah, why?"

"Just returned from a meeting and I need you to erect sets for the movie."

Jared grins. "That should be fun, especially if I get to hang around Haven." He shakes his hand like it's on fire. "That girl is hot."

A fierce tug of possessiveness races through me and I try to hide it. Haven is nothing to me. We shared a joke of a kiss. If my brother wants to hit on her, no fucking problem—as long as it's through my dead body.

What the hell am I saying?

"Even prettier in person, don't you think, Ty?" Jared adds.

"Yeah, I guess." I give a nonchalant shrug, but these two assholes can read me far too well.

I drink my beer and try to ignore my annoying brother, but he continues with, "Maybe I'll build a nice cozy bed on set. You know for after the shoot." He arches his brow and I work to keep my temper in check.

"You don't have a problem with that do you, Tyler?" Jared asks.

I shrug. "Why would I?"

"You have something you want to say, Tyler?" Sean asks, and tips his bottle to his lips.

I go back to peeling the label on my bottle. “Nope.”
“Good, I’m reassigning you, too.”

I’m about to protest—I don’t want to work on some dumb-ass movie set that will get torn down when it’s no longer needed—but can’t bring myself to do it. Oh, and why is that? Because there is more going on with Haven than she’s admitting, and I have this strange, innate need to watch over her, and keep my brother far away.

And no, it has nothing at all to do with my cock wanting her. I mean, come on, just five minutes ago I said I was played out, and this is a woman with a reputation for falling for her leading men. But that fucking kiss. My stupid dick twitches, and if the bastard could speak, he’d call me out so fast my head would spin—the one on my shoulders. Okay so yeah, maybe I do want her, but I *am* also worried about her safety. I’m kind of a nice guy like that.

“Fine,” I grumble.

“Have you heard?” Sean asks.

I eye my brother. “Heard what?”

“Grandma Nellie is housing a couple of the cast.”

My head snaps up. “Why the hell did she do that?”

He shrugs. “Hotels and cottages are all booked, and you know Gram, that’s what she does. She’s never met a stranger.”

“Do you think Haven is staying at the house?” Jared asks, and jumps to his feet.

“I’m not sure,” Sean says.

He arches his brow again, the brunette he’d been eyeing earlier no longer his focus. “Maybe I’d better go check.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and push him back into his seat. “Sit down, little brother.”

Jared laughs. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Stars twinkle in the velvety sky overhead, and crickets chirp in the nearby fields as I hurry down the long, dark road and try to put that awkward encounter at the Winchester behind me—not an easy task when my lips are still tingling from the atomic kiss. Who the hell kisses a stranger with a passion so off the charts it’s a wonder we didn’t blow the place up? Cripes, I can’t even imagine what his kisses would be like if he meant them, and don’t even get me started on the way my body is still responding, right around the juncture of my legs.

With trees hugging either side of the winding road, I round the corner to find a big old homestead rising up in the distance. The swing on the wide expanse of porch, along with the welcome sign above the door instantly puts this out-of-tower at ease. Everything about the place exudes warmth and contentment—a happy family—and I smile as I let it wrap around me like a comforting hug.

I grew up in California, and both my parents are managers in the movie industry. My older brother Rock—his stage name, of course—and I definitely didn’t have what I’d call a

normal upbringing. Heck, I'd been starring in commercials since I was four months old and schooled every afternoon on the set. Rock acted right along with me, until my parents discovered his fighting skills, and redirected his talents. Fame and glory, that's all they ever cared about. Raising well-adjusted kids—not so much.

In a small town like Blue Bay, and in a homestead like this one, I just bet they had sit-down dinners where they all talked—about real things, important things. They probably all swam and fished in the lake just beyond the house, and Christmas mornings were undoubtedly filled with love and laughter around a gigantic fir tree picked out by the kids and cut down by the father. I bet it was just laden with home-made decorations.

I chuckle slightly. I'm going all Hallmark here, but I can't help it. I want to picture a home with a menagerie of happy kids, because it's something I've always wanted. I love my brother dearly, and would be lost without him. Heck, with absent parents, Rock and I were there for each other through thick and thin, relying only on one another, because how could we possibly trust anyone in the cut-throat world we were thrust into? I shiver as I think about the kinds of people we've dealt with over the years.

This big homestead, however, probably housed a dozen siblings, boys and girls who fought like cats and dogs, and loved and trusted just as hard. I always wanted a sister—or even a friend who wasn't nice just to my face. Will I find that here in this big house, in this small town, or am I simply channeling that old Norman Rockwell calendar I had in my teens? Lord knows I try to romanticize everything—my way of escaping reality, I guess. But lessons learned have taught me happily-ever-after only exists in the movies.

With no available accommodations in this former whaling village, a few cast and crew members are now making this

gorgeous home our headquarters until our trailers arrive. Apparently Blue Bay Construction is run out of this place and the guys, I think someone said they were all brothers and cousins, will be working on building sets for us. Seriously though, opening your house to strangers is such a hospitable, small town thing to do, isn't it? I don't mind hunkering down here for a bit, as long as I have a soft bed tonight.

A yawn pulls at me as I take the last step up the porch and catch the voices spilling from the open window. The laughter and comradery coming from inside eases the tension inside me, although the voices don't sound familiar. But the happiness does remind me of home and hearth—safety—everything I'd imagined as a child.

As I consider my safety—my stalker—I recall the apprehension creeping through my bones earlier. I jumped to conclusions, assuming that big hulk of a man following me from the parking lot at the Winchester was the same one leaving threatening notes. He was simply Tyler's brother, and no doubt harmless.

Tyler Owens.

What were the odds that I'd run straight into his arms?

My cheeks warm, ribbons of embarrassment careening through my blood as I recall my kiss with him—my God, did I really do that? Yeah, I did and damned if I don't want to do it again.

Get yourself together, Haven!

I didn't recognize him at first sight, probably because I was so scared. Some part of me thought a solid guy like him would scare off whoever was following me. Or rather, not following me. It was a ridiculous thing to do, but I wasn't thinking with clarity, and fear was guiding my actions.

To add insult to injury, I lied about it, telling him I had to kiss the biggest guy in the place. Hello, dim-witted moth to light. Nevertheless, he turned out to be the biggest guy in the

place, and the hottest—at least to me, and to the girls two tables over. Yeah, I saw the way they were drooling over him, as well as the other Owens brothers. Not that I can blame them. The man is drool worthy, sexier than any leading man I've ever collaborated with.

Maybe you should collaborate with Tyler—in the bedroom.

No, no, no, I am not going to do that—he's my brother's enemy—and it would be in my best interest never to set eyes on him again. In a small town like this, I fear that might be impossible, though. I'm just glad I'm staying on the outskirts of town. I'm guessing he doesn't venture too far from the action at Winchester's.

I take another glance over my shoulder, and as I peer into the dark night, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge again.

You will be mine.

My God, I guess that last threatening letter frightened me more than I want to admit. By rights, I should go to the police, or even the director and tell him I'm getting letters from some crazy stalker, but after the trouble on set during my last movie, I can't rock the boat. Honestly, in this business, you're only as good as your last movie, and not only was mine a flop, the off-set feuding between me and the male lead—who just happened to be my ex—was tabloid fodder. I'm lucky any director wanted to work with me after that.

Now my motto is head down, work hard, no relationships of any kind during a shoot, and especially no relationships with anyone involved in the industry—ever. With that last thought in mind, I plaster on a smile and work to shake off my discomfort as I reach for the door to let myself in.

My hand stills when gravel crunches behind me. I turn, search the dark driveway, and see one headlight slowly coming down the lane. My thoughts instantly go back to Tyler Owens. I honestly had no idea he lived in Blue Bay, but

I'd bet my warm bed tonight that the town's bad boy drives a motorcycle. But he's probably already between the sheets with one of those girls who'd been admiring him from across the bar.

Why the hell does that bother you, Haven?

It doesn't!

Or at least it shouldn't.

I'm not about to get involved with a man who was my brother's mortal enemy in the cage. I can't even imagine what Rock would say if he knew I'd kissed his nemesis. Not that he needs to know. What happened between Tyler and me was a one-time thing. He's the kind of guy with a revolving door, and I have no desire to find myself on either side of it. Seriously I could make myself a scarf with the number of red flags he gives off.

If he's such a bad boy, why did you feel safe with him?

Why indeed?

Ignoring that inner voice, I open the door, expecting to see my co-star and director sitting around chatting, but when my gaze lands on a group of strangers, I stiffen. Oh my God, it's late and dark. Did I wonder down the wrong driveway, enter the wrong house and crash a family party?

"Um...I'm sorry. I thought this was where..."

An elderly lady stands and comes toward me. Her slippers scuff on the polished wooden floor as she shuffles close. "You must be Haven." Her smile is as warm as her demeanor. My jumping nerves settle slightly, but that still doesn't mean I'm in the right spot. Perhaps she recognizes me from my films.

"I am," I say. "I thought this was where..." Backing up, I reach into my pocket and pull out a slip of paper with the house address. The door creaks behind me, and before I realize what's happened, I back right into a brick wall.

"Whoa," a man says, his mouth by my ear, the heat of his breath doing ridiculous things to my body. I don't need to

turn to know I've backed straight into Tyler Owens. So it *was* him on the motorcycle. Honestly, what are the odds I'd run into him—literally—two times in one night, and that he and his family are the ones who will be working on the sets? Is *he* the one stalking me? I gasp at that thought and spin around. His face softens, his eyes narrowing in on me.

"Haven, are you okay?" he asks in the softest, sweetest voice, and despite his big presence, the way his strong, protective hands are touching me, all the stress of the last week, and all the threatening letters comes racing back in a whoosh.

You'll be mine.

As tears threaten, I blink my eyes to dull the vision of those words found on the sheet of the paper shoved under the bathroom stall at the airport, right after I landed in Connecticut. Someone knew exactly where I was going to be. Were they on the plane with me, or were they waiting in the terminal? A hard shiver races down my body and I shake, almost violently.

"Haven," he says again, and that's when I realize I'm causing a scene. Calling on all my acting skills, I push my hair back and fake a smile.

"Sorry, you frightened me."

He doesn't smile. Instead, he angles his head, those gorgeous green eyes of his moving over my face in a careful assessment. I stiffen, willing myself not to squirm, to show any sign of nervousness. He doesn't need to know about my problems. "You seem to be frightened a lot lately."

Shoot, I didn't think he'd be able to read me so easily.

"No, it's...I didn't expect anyone to be behind me."

"And at the bar?"

I give a dismissive wave of my hand. "Oh, like I said, that was a silly dare," I blink to hide my discomfort, but I'm wasting my time. This man can see right through me. I don't

know how, and I don't know why. I only know that I'd have more luck convincing a room full of movie critics that I was acting on a dare, before this guy.

He lifts his head, ending the staring contest, and he exchanges a look with the elderly lady beside me. Whatever they just silently telegraphed sets her into motion.

"Haven," the woman says. "Come in, come in. You're in the right place. Don't let my grandsons scare you off. They might look like ogres, but they're all sweet boys."

"Hey who's calling me an ogre?" one of the guys sitting around the table asks, and I note he has the same eye color as Tyler. In fact, all the guys do. I'm not a writer, I'm an actress, but if I had to describe it, I'd say it was the color of dark moss with speckles of molasses, everything about them reminding me of the green of spring after a harsh winter. The kind of eyes that can see all the bare patches of the soul.

Tread carefully, Haven.

"Hush, Jacob," the woman says. She smiles at me again. "I'm Grandma Nellie. You can call me Gram."

"Nice to meet you, Gram?"

She points. "My grandsons, Carter, Jace, and Jacob. There are more—"

"Really?" I ask, my heart jumping. Maybe I was right about this place. Maybe it is hearth and home and maybe there are some women I could bond with—Lord knows it's nothing but competition between women in my world. "You have granddaughters too?"

A series of groans roll around the room. "What did I say?"

"Don't ask," Tyler says, and I laugh at his exaggerated groan, instantly feeling a comradeship with these guys.

"I have grand-daughters-in-law, but one of these days, these boys will give me a great-granddaughter." Another series of groans roll across the room.

"How many grandsons?" I ask

“Eight grandsons, and two great grandsons.” A warm smile takes over her face and it’s easy to see how much she loves her family, and how much they all love her. “They’ll all be around sooner or later to say hello, or you’ll run into them on the set, but I take it you already met Tyler.”

“Tyler and Sean,” I say.

“And Jared,” Tyler rumbles. “We ran into her at the bar. Actually, she ran into us. Me specifically and literally.” He exchanges another look with Gram.

“Are you hungry, child?” She points to Jace, at least I think it’s Jace. It’s hard to think straight or remember everyone’s names with Tyler standing close. Cripes, it’s like my skin is on fire, a deep scorching burn that caresses all my erogenous zones. “Back in New York, Jace was an award-winning chef,” Gram says as she beams at Jace with pride. “He’ll whip you up something delicious.”

“Oh wow, really?” I ask, curiosity racing through me. If he was a prize chef, what brought him back to Blue Bay? I guess I can understand why Tyler is here. After losing the championship title—to my brother, no less—he returned to his roots. I’m not about to ask questions, though, or delve into their personal lives. I’m only here for a short time and really, their reasons are their own. Just like my reasons for keeping my stalker a secret are mine alone.

As Jace makes a move to stand, I hold my hand out to stop him. “No,” I say quickly, noting the way Tyler continues to stay close, all solid strength and power and damned if I don’t like it. A lot. “I think I’m going to call it an early night and you’re all doing enough for us as it is.” I stretch my arms out. “It was a long flight and I have an early start tomorrow.”

Carter jumps to his feet. “How about I show you to your room?”

A noise, a growl of sorts rumbles up from behind me, and I turn to see Tyler glaring at the man standing.

“Sit down, Carter.”

Carter smirks and my gaze goes back and forth between the two men. Am I missing some secret joke here? Does Carter know something I don't?

“Sure thing, cuz.”

Gram fills a kettle. “Don't mind them. Too much testosterone in the room. Tyler, why don't you get Haven settled in your room? You can bunk with Carter tonight.”

“Have you heard him snore?” Tyler blurts out. He rakes his hand through his hair, mussing it up and damned if that doesn't just make him look sexier. “Jesus, I need to get my own place.”

“Language,” Gram says, and I can't help but laugh.

“You're one to talk,” Carter says. “You snore loud enough to wake the dead over in Hope Falls.”

“You want to take this outside?” Tyler asks.

“You don't want me to embarrass you in front of Haven, now do you?” he asks, and places both hands on the table. That's when I notice the tattoos on his forearms. I resist the urge to scan Tyler's body for ink.

Tyler cracks his knuckles. “You could try.”

Unable to help myself, I laugh. “You're right, Gram. Too much testosterone.” I glance at Tyler. “Do you think you could show me to your room before you two take this outside?”

“You don't want to see the show, watch me knock your boyfriend down a peg or two?” Carter asks with a smirk.

“He's not my boyfriend,” I say quickly. “I just met him at Winchester's tonight.”

Grinning like he really does know something I don't, Carter opens his mouth to say something, and Tyler points to him. Through clenched teeth he says, “Leave it, Carter.” Tyler turns to me, and his voice is softer when he says, “Come on,

I'll take you to your room." He searches the floor. "Where are your bags?"

"Jonah dropped them off earlier," Gram says.

Tyler glances at me. "Jonah?" he asks.

"He's the male lead in our movie." Tyler's eyes narrow, then he nods, like he just put two and two together. What, does he think I have a thing for Jonah? I have no idea how that rumor ever started, but for some reason, everyone thinks I fall for the leading man. I only did it once and that was the worst mistake of my life. "He's staying here too, but not in my room," I add quickly. What the hell am I doing? Tyler doesn't care if I'm with Jonah or not. Why I'm trying to clarify it is beyond me. "We'll only be here until our trailers arrive. I don't want to put you out any longer than I have to."

The guys at the table chuckle, and one whispers, "No worries, Ty likes to put out."

Gram glares at them, and runs her fingers over her knuckles. "Do I need to gristle you?"

All the guys stiffen and sit up a little straighter, and a series of 'hell no' goes around the table.

"What's a gristle?" I ask, amused at the way Gram handles all her grandsons.

"You don't want to know," Tyler says, his body bumping mine as we continue to linger in the doorway, the warm night air breezing through the place, carrying the scent of jasmine and fresh cut grass.

"I put Jonah in Sean's old room, and Mason is in Jamie's," Gram supplies. "Your bags are already in Tyler's room, Haven."

Tyler gives me a little nudge, and the warmth of his flesh races through me. I bite down on my tongue to stifle a moan, or some other telltale sign that his touch, innocent or not, is messing with my traitorous body. "Come on, I'll show you to my room," he says.

We head up the long staircase. "Who's Mason?" he asks.

"He's the director," I supply as I run my hand along the wooden rail. "So, Carter is your cousin?"

"Yes."

"You guys all work construction?"

"Do now."

I nod, understanding that Tyler was a fighter before coming home. "What did Carter do before?"

"Firefighter."

"Oh, yeah, here in Blue Bay?"

"Jacksonville."

"Oh, wow, nice. Did you all grow up in this place?"

"Yes," he says again, his feet stomping on the steps behind me.

"It's gorgeous." I take in the gorgeous curve of the rail. "How long has it been in the family?"

"Forever."

"Did a family member build it?"

"Grandfather."

"Is he still alive?"

"No."

"What about your parents? Do they live—"

"Gone."

I glance over my shoulder and take in the tightness in his jaw, the way his muscles ripple as he clenches down.

"I'm so sorry."

"Thanks."

His green eyes lift, and I bite back a gasp as he zeroes in on me. Holy hell, being the sole focus of this man's attention is...a bit intimidating, and a whole lot stimulating.

"What?" he asks.

"Do you always give one-word answers?"

"No."

I laugh at that. "You're the strong silent type, huh?" I say,

hoping he can't hear the arousal in my voice. Then again, a guy like him is probably used to it. Coming from the MMA circuit, he's used to women throwing their panties at him. I am *not* going to be one of those women. Ever.

His hardened demeanor changes, and he offers me a grin that is so playful, so downright sexy and mesmerizing, it's all I can do to stop myself from ripping my panties clear from my hips and tossing them at him.

No, no, no, Haven.

I am here to work, not to get involved with a local, no matter how good looking, and...sweet, he is. Really, beneath that rough and tough surface, I think maybe Gram was right, and he is a softie.

"You think I'm strong?" he teases.

All the tension from the day spills out of me and I laugh. "I think you're something," I say.

"You're something too," he responds when we reach the top step.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He scrubs his face. "I'm just tired. I don't know what I'm saying."

I stretch out my arms and stifle a yawn, and his glance drops to take in my chest as I expand it. Holy shit, I'm not sure any man has ever looked at me with such desire in his eyes. Truthfully, most men don't look at me—Haven. They see the movie star actress, the character I played. Then again, am I ever really myself anymore? Do I even know who Haven is, or what she wants, after all these years of pretending to be someone else?

I follow him to a room, and he stands back, gesturing for me to enter. I walk past him, my body brushing his, and I'm certain he just cursed under his breath. Is he feeling this 'thing' between us too? Could that be what Carter was picking up on?

He looks like he's about to leave, and even though I should let him, I find myself saying, "Gram said there were eight of you. Cousins and brothers?"

"Carter, Ryan and Jace are cousins. They grew up with us after their parents died."

I touch his arm. "I'm sorry, Tyler." His gaze drops to my hand and I pull it back.

"Sean, Jamie, and the twins, Jared and Jacob are my brothers. I'm the middle child."

I groan. "Ugh, the dreaded middle child," I tease. "Did you feel left out?" His face drops, and my pulse jumps. Holy God, did I hit on a sore spot. I quickly try to backtrack. "Tyler, I was just—"

"Night, Haven."

He turns and I say, "I...um...do you think I could have a shower first? I feel icky after my long flight."

He scrubs his chin and angles his body. I study his strong profile when he says, "Yeah, sure."

He points to the door to the bathroom. "Shower is in there, and you'll find towels in the closet."

I put my hand on his arm before he leaves and his gaze jerks back to mine. "Thanks Tyler, for this...and earlier."

"No problem," he says, his voice a bit gruffer. "Get some sleep."

I watch him walk away, my gaze latched on his backside, pulled by the easy way he walks. The stairs creak as he descends and I back up, step into his room. A grin plays on my lips as I take in his space, and before I touch his bedding and run my hand over the sheets, I glance over my shoulder. I have no idea why I feel like I'm invading his privacy.

After a thorough inspection of his room, and the view of the lake out back, I grab my bag, toss it onto his bed, and pull out my pajamas. I hurry to the bathroom, shower quickly, and then climb between Tyler's sheets, which smell freshly laun-

dered. I close my eyes, secure in this room with all the big Owens boys milling about. It doesn't take long for me to fall asleep, but then suddenly a crashing sound outside my window pulls me awake.

I sit up, and rub my eyes, not sure if I was dreaming or not. I listen for a sound, and something creaks outside my door.

"Hello?" I say, and glance at the clock. It's well after midnight, surely everyone has gone to bed by now. Moving as quietly as possible, I reach for my phone, pad across the wooden floor, and press my ear to the door. Silence meets my ears, so I quietly open the door and glance down the long length of the hall. Swallowing against a dry throat, I turn on my flashlight app, tiptoe to the stairs and head to the kitchen for a drink.

The light over the stove provides a path to the cupboards. I turn off my flashlight app, and after searching for a glass, I fill it with cold water. The house creaks, and I nearly jump a foot off the floor when something bangs outside again. Breathing deeply, I drop into a chair at the big oaken table and take a fast drink to calm myself. The floor creaks behind me, and I spin so fast, water spills all over me, drenching my pajama shirt.

"Tyler," I gasp, as his big presence eats up the doorway.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I heard you get up."

"I didn't mean to wake you," I say quickly and work to regulate my breathing.

"You didn't. I was awake."

"Carter's snoring?" I tease, hoping to lighten the mood.

He takes a step closer, hovers over me. My pulse skyrockets as my gaze drops to take in the gorgeous man before me, dressed only in a pair of jeans, which he wears entirely too well. From the dim light over the stove, I count eight abdominal muscles.

My gaze lifts back to his, and he's not smiling. Nope, not smiling at all. There's a new kind of ferociousness about him. In fact, he's looking at me with murder in his eyes and a shudder goes through me.

"Are you okay, Haven?"

"Oh yeah, sure. I...I heard noises."

A moment passes and he finally says, "This is an old house. Things creak, pipes bang."

"Right," I say with a shaky nod, as I work to pull myself together. "That bang was probably just a water pipe. Sounded like a damn gunshot."

He sits down in the chair next to me, his solid presence offering comfort, and my shoulders relax. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

I have never in my life seen anyone this spooked. I'm not sure what's going on with her, and from the way she's wrapping her arms around herself in a defensive move, I'm not so sure I'm going to find out. All I know is something is wrong, and if she wants to open up to me, maybe I could help her. Or maybe I should reach out to Rock, let him know his sister might need him.

"What do you mean?" she asks, and I take in the dark circles under her eyes. When was the last time this woman had a good night's sleep?

I hand her a napkin from the holder Gram keeps on the table. She presses it to her wet pajama top and I do my best not to stare. I just wish my *best* was better than it is. Goddammit, what kind of man am I? This woman is frightened and I'm staring at her damn breasts.

Looking for a distraction as she dries herself, I run my thumb over the old table, touching the dents that have been made over the years by one brother or another. Warmth touches my soul as I recall the fights and fun we had around this table over the years.

My gaze cuts back to her once she finishes drying herself. "I think you know what I mean," I say.

She blinks rapidly as she sets the napkin on her lap, and reaches for her glass, swallowing what's left so hard that the sound reverberates around the big empty room. "It's just..." she begins and stops, her brow furrowed. For a second I think she's going to tell me, but then she says, "Just a big old house and I'm not the best sleeper, anyway."

I watch her for a second, note the way her dark lashes are fluttering rapidly. In the cage it's my job to read my opponent's body language, and right now hers speaks volumes. "It's not my business, but if you're in some kind of trouble, maybe I could help."

"Why would you want to help?" she blurts out, her gaze jerking upward. "What is it you want?"

My head rears back. Whoa, what the hell did I say to put her on the defense? I hold my hands up, palms out. "Okay, not my business. Just wanted to make sure you were okay." I make a move to stand and her trembling hand on my arm stops me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell like that." She briefly closes her eyes and shakes her head, obviously sorry for that outburst. "It's just...I guess it's the world I grew up in. It's tit for tat you know. No one does anything altruistic. So, I guess I just assumed..."

"Assumed I wanted something," I say, finishing her sentence. "I don't, Haven. Despite what you think of me, or what you've heard about me," I say, knowing her brother talked trash about me for years, even though that was for show. It certainly doesn't mean the world didn't believe it though, or that Haven doesn't think I'm a world class prick who preys on the dreams of innocent children. "I was raised to do the right thing."

She nods, and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. She looks down for a second and when her head lifts, the worry on her face hits harder than one of Rock's haymaker punches. My brain is still rattling around in my skull from the last one.

The freckles around her nose bunch when she says, "I...I can't really say anything."

"Okay, you can have your secrets, but you're in my house. I can't have you bringing trouble here, Haven. I have brothers and cousins to think about. I have Gram to watch over. Here in Blue Bay we protect what's ours."

She nods, and goes quiet again. "I'm sorry, Tyler. I'd never want to do anything to jeopardize you or your family, especially after everyone has been so kind, opening your home to strangers."

My heart pinches at the worry in her voice. I have a feeling Rock was right when he told me his sister was one of a kind, a girl who cares more about others life than she does herself. "There are no strangers in Gram's life," I say, and it brings a smile to her face.

"She's really sweet. She's like the grandmother I never had."

I nod, sad that Haven never had anyone like Gram in her life. Honestly, she's the glue that holds the family together. After Mom died, she stepped right in to keep us boys in line. "Yeah..." I murmur.

She glances at her hands as she twists them in her lap. "It's just if my director ever found out."

Tabloid pictures fill my brain. Ah, now I get it. Haven is worried about bringing more trouble to the set, and losing her career. Shit. She's definitely caught between a rock and a hard place. I touch her chin, lift it until those pretty eyes of hers are on me again.

"Your secret is safe with me. You have my word on that."

She nods, picks the wet napkin back up and nervously plucks at it. "I've been receiving letters...threatening letters."

Fuck. I exhale and sit back in my seat. "Did you go to the police?"

She shakes her head fast. "No, I can't. I can't do anything to lose this job. My career..."

"That's why you kissed me at Winchester's? You thought Sean was some sort of stalker, and thought if he saw you with me, he'd back off."

"After I landed, someone shoved a letter under the bathroom stall. It said, *You'll be mine.*"

"If it was the woman's bathroom, do you think it was a woman?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Well, a guy could have paid someone to do it, I suppose. A beautiful woman like you, I can see it being a guy, especially saying you'll be mine."

"Yeah," she says with a nod. "I just don't know."

As a jolt of anger rushes through me, I shake my head, my fingers curling into fists. She notices my reaction and gives a megawatt smile, like she's said too much and wants to back-track. Her switch in demeanor happens so fast it catches me off guard.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she says quickly.

I narrow my gaze. "If it was nothing, you wouldn't be so frightened."

She continues to smile, but when I arch a brow, refusing to let her off the hook, she gives in and her face falls. "Yeah, you're right."

I lean toward her, and brace my elbows on my thighs. "How long has this been going on?"

"A couple of weeks now."

"Do you have enemies?"

“I...I don’t think so. Rock does, but—”

I consider our MMA fans. Would one go so far as to threaten a fighter’s sister? “You think someone who has it out for Rock would come after you?”

“I really don’t know.” Blue eyes full of vulnerability search mine, and my gut twists. “Do you think it could be?”

“I don’t know either, Haven. Do you think you should call your brother?”

She shakes her head. “He has a big fight coming up in Vegas and I don’t want to worry him.”

“He’d want to know. You’re everything to him.”

A small smile touches her mouth. “I know. He’s everything to me too. He’s the only guy...”

Her words fall off, but she doesn’t need to finish for me to understand, her brother is the only guy she’s ever been able to count on. Well, that changes right now.

“Okay, then it’s settled. From this second until the movie finishes up and you leave Blue Bay, you’re with me. I’ll be that boyfriend you were seeking at Winchester’s. Whoever gave you that letter will have to go through me to get to you, I won’t let anything happen to you,” I say.

I’m not doing this just because Rock is my friend—yeah, we put on a good show, but he’s the guy who stayed with me all night when I found out my dad died. I’m doing it because she has no one else to turn to and I don’t want anything to happen to her.

“What do you want in return?” she asks.

“Your safety. If I had a sister in trouble, I’d hope someone would do this for her.”

Her entire body tightens, and her eyes narrow in on me. That obviously wasn’t the answer she was expecting. Confused, she stares for a good solid minute, or at least it feels like that, and then she shakes her head, like she can’t

seem to wrap her brain around anyone not wanting something from her. That totally pisses me off. What kind of world did she grow up in where she can't count on people? Christ, I could call any one of my brothers right now, for anything, even a paper cut, and they'd be here in a second.

"What's the problem, Haven?" I ask, since I'm a no bull-shit kind of guy.

"I can't ask you to do that and not do anything in return," she says. I'm about to tell her it's fine when a loud bang reverberates through the house. She just about jumps three feet in the air.

I put my hand on her shoulder, to calm her. "It's probably just an animal in the trash. You stay here, I'll go look."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." I push from my chair, and open the door, which isn't even locked. Hell, no one locks the doors in Blue Bay, but maybe we'll have to change that for the time being. Outside, I find the garbage tipped over, and I pick it back up and secure the metal lid. Back inside, Haven is still sitting in her chair, her eyes wide.

"Breathe, Haven," I say when I reach her, and she sucks in a breath. "It was likely just a racoon." I stifle a yawn and she stands.

"Thank you, Tyler. I've definitely kept you up long enough."

"Wasn't sleeping anyway."

She puts her glass in the sink, and gives me a weird little finger wave as she starts toward the stairs. I follow behind her, and try not to look at her sweet ass in those short pajama bottoms. A groan I have absolutely zero control over rises in my throat and I fake a cough to cover it. Haven momentarily stills on the steps, and I nearly crash into her.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Fine."

She starts up again and I follow her to my bedroom. She enters and I step inside with her, shutting the door behind us. She turns to me, her eyes wide. “What are you doing?”

“I’m staying in here tonight.” I gesture to the chair in the corner. “I’ll sleep there.”

“Tyler—”

“I don’t want anything from you, Haven,” I say, although that’s a big fucking lie. I want her in my bed, beneath me, but that’s not going to happen. “First nights in strange beds aren’t easy.” I almost snort at that. How many women have I gone home with and jumped straight into bed with, no problems at all? Although I never stay the night and sleep wasn’t what we were after. The women who get involved with me know straight up I don’t stay. I leave before they have to explain I’m not ‘meet the parents’ material.

She looks at the chair. “No, they’re not, but I can’t ask—”

“You’re not. I’m offering.”

“What will your family think?”

“I’m a big boy, Haven. I don’t have to answer to anyone but myself.”

She nods in understanding. “How about you take the bed and I’ll take the chair?”

Okay, so she’s not opposed to me staying with her, she’s just opposed to me being uncomfortable, and I like that about her. She’s definitely not a pampered princess like the media makes her out to be. My heart softens as she moves toward the chair.

“Not happening, Haven,” I say and capture her hand. I spin her to face me and that’s when I see it—lust in her eyes as our fingers connect. She doesn’t pull away. Nope, instead she weaves her fingers through mine, and damned if that doesn’t stroke my cock.

With my traitorous dick thickening, I stand over her, hover close, watch a streak of pink crawl into her cheeks.

"I just don't understand why you would do this," she says so quietly I have to strain to hear.

"Because it's the right thing to do," I say.

Her tongue caresses her bottom lip, like she's moistening it, for me, and so help me God, if I wasn't in that chair tonight, I'd be rubbing one out.

"Do you...always do the right thing?"

"No," I say flat out.

I let her hand go, and move around her before I show her just how often I do the wrong things. "Get some sleep, Haven." I plunk down in the chair.

She hesitates, her gaze going from me to the big bed, back to me. "I mean..." she begins. "This is your room and your bed. Maybe we could share it. Put a pillow in between us or something.

I laugh again. "You think a pillow is going to do anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Haven," I say. "If you haven't figured it out by now, I'd really like to fuck you. I'd like to fuck you into next week until you can't remember your own name, but never forget mine. But that's not part of the deal here. I'm going to take care of you because I want to. Wanting to fuck you is something different."

"Oh," she says and takes a fast gulping breath.

"Oh, is right and you need to understand this. If you invite me into that bed, a pillow isn't going to keep me from you. Fuck, a goddamn brick wall wouldn't be able to hold me back." My gaze drops, takes in her damp pajama shirt and the way her nipples are puckering so beautifully. I fist my hands and release them again, eager to touch her, taste her, put my cock deep inside her until her walls clench around me in orgasm. My gaze travels back to her face, and while I know this is my buddy's sister—bro code and all—and would right-

fully hand me my ass if I touch her, I can't help but want her. My dick has been hard since that kiss at the Winchester. But she's vulnerable right now, afraid of her own shadow and I'm not a guy to take advantage of the situation. "Do what you want with that information," I say.