



Call on Me (A Loving on the Edge Novel)

By Roni Loren



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Pike isn't about to let Ms. Prim and Proper shut him down so easily, especially when he stumbles upon Oakley's sexy night job. She's only playing a role on those late night calls with strangers, but when he gets her on the line, all bets are off. He won't stop until that sultry voice is calling his name for real.

But as they move from anonymous fantasies in the dark to the flesh-on-hot-flesh reality of the bedroom, the risk of falling in love becomes all too high. And the safe, quiet world that Oakley's worked so hard to create is about to be exposed to the one person who could ruin it all.

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Editorial Review

Review

"...sets the pages on fire. The romance is as sweet as the action is hot, and there's something deeply satisfying about the way this couple comes together." --*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for the novels of Roni Loren

"Loren writes delicious, dark, sensual prose."—*USA Today*

"Revved up and red-hot sexy."—Lorelei James, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Sure to have readers begging for more!"—Jo Davis, national bestselling author

"Hot and romantic, with an edge of suspense."—Shayla Black, *New York Times* bestselling author

"A mix of blistering (and kinky) sexuality, emotional angst and dangerous suspense."—*Romance Novel News*

"A must read!"—*Nocturne Reads*

"[A] steamy, sexy yet emotionally gripping story."—Julie Cross, author of the *Tempest* novels

"I dare you to even attempt to put it down."—Cassandra Carr, author of *Burning Love*

About the Author

Roni Loren is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Loving on the Edge* novels which include *Nothing Between Us*, *Not Until You*, *Need You Tonight*, *Fall into You*, *Melt into You*, and *Crash into You*. She lives in Dallas with her husband and son. If she's not working on her latest sexy story, you can find her reading, watching reality television, or indulging in her unhealthy addiction to rockstars, er, rock concerts—yeah, that's it.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONE

"Are you touching yourself?" The voice in Oakley's ear sounded labored and overeager—like a Saint Bernard attempting phone sex. He was probably drooling, too. Lovely.

"Yes, you make me so hot . . ."—she quickly checked the sticky note she'd put on the kitchen island—"Stefan."

Stefan. Literature professor. Single. Six foot five.

That's the info he'd given her. Which probably meant: *Steve, unemployed, married, and five-six on a good day.*

He groaned. "You're so sexy."

Sexy? *Two points off for lack of originality, Mr. Lit Prof.* Though, even the suave guys tended to forget their vocabulary when they got to this point in the conversation. Oakley covered the mouthpiece on her headset

and turned off the timer on the oven. If nothing else, she was impressed the guy had lasted through the full baking time.

“Thanks, sugar,” she said, letting her tone drop into a lower register.

“God, your voice is so fucking hot.”

That she heard a lot. A record company exec had once deemed her voice “smoky, X-rated perfection” when he’d heard her demo. At the time, she hadn’t considered how inappropriate it had been for a grown man to tell a fifteen-year-old kid that. But her raspy voice had gotten her the gig then, and it had gotten her this one now. Though, admittedly, the bar wasn’t set quite as high for this current one.

“I’m gonna give it to you so hard, Sasha,” Stefan ground out. “I can feel your hot mouth closing around me.”

Oakley donned oven mitts and leaned down to pull out the tray of brownies. The smell of chocolate and the heat of the oven hit her with full force. She inhaled deeply. “Mmm, that’s *so* good. I could just lick up every last bit.”

“Yeah,” he panted, the sound of his slick, pumping fist obscenely clear through the receiver. “That’s right. Show me how much you want it.”

There you go, Steve, you go on and get your money’s worth. Oakley set the tray of brownies on a trivet and tugged off the mitts. Her stomach rumbled. She’d stayed up late enough that her body was looking for dinner number two. But these weren’t for her.

She glanced toward the darkened hallway and the stairs beyond. Well, maybe one little corner piece wouldn’t be missed. She cut a small square and dipped her fingers in to grab it. But as she lifted the brownie, her knuckles grazed the searing hot pan.

“Ah, shit!” she hissed, jerking her hand back.

“Oh, yeah, let me hear it,” Stefan said on a moan. “Come with me, baby.”

Oakley shook out her hand, sucking air through her teeth, and tried to keep the pain out of her voice. Her phone companion thought she was mid-orgasm. She threw in an *oh, oh, oh* and ran to the sink to plunge her fist into the dishwater she’d drawn to soak the mixing bowl.

Stefan made choked sounds as he reached his own release. In another world, maybe it could’ve been an erotic moment. She’d talked a guy into an orgasm. He was calling her name. But the name was fake and so was the talk. And though she held nothing against the guys who called—after all, they helped her pay the bills—her libido had long ago crawled into a dark corner to die a quick, peaceful death. Even if she imagined the guy on the other end of the line looked like Johnny Depp or Justin Timberlake or something, she couldn’t drum up one ounce of interest.

Stefan panted heavy, wet breaths right against her ear, resuming his resemblance to a Saint Bernard. Maybe she should offer him a “good boy” or a Milk-Bone.

“That was amazing,” she said, using her husky, after-sex voice as she soaked her hand in the water. “Thank you, Stefan.”

Panting. Panting. That was the only response.

Then a tight, high sound—whistling.

No. *Wheezing.*

Uh-oh. “Stefan? Are you okay?”

Those squeaking breaths continued for a few seconds then: “Yes . . . I’m . . . fine.”

He didn’t sound fine. “Stefan, if you’re having an asthma attack or chest pains or something, you need to call for help.”

“Can’t . . .” He gave a ragged cough. “My wife . . . can’t know . . . I’m down here this late. She’ll know I’m up . . .”

He coughed again.

Jesus Christ. Oakley shook the water off her hand. “What’s she going to think when she finds you dead in the basement? Hang up the phone and dial 911.”

“I—”

“Stu?” a sharp voice said in the background. “What are you doing down here? *Stu?*”

“Oh, shit,” Stefan/Stu said between wheezes.

The dial tone buzzed in Oakley’s ear a second later.

She pulled off the wireless headset and sagged against the fridge, exhaling a long breath. Okay. It would be all right. Stu’s wife might kill him when she found him with the phone to his ear and his underwear around his ankles, but at least the guy wouldn’t die of a heart attack on Oakley’s watch.

She could handle a lot of stuff—callers threw all kinds of bizarre shit at her—but she couldn’t be responsible for helping kill one. It was bad enough that she’d just contributed to strife in another marriage.

Gold star for her.

It shouldn’t bother her. The guys who called were grown men making a conscious decision to seek out paid phone sex. She was simply the tool of choice. Another night, they may download porn and watch a dirty movie instead. If she’d learned anything during her years of doing this job, it was that it wasn’t personal. She had a job to do. The callers needed a faceless someone to fill in for their fantasy that night. The relationship was purely transactional. And hell, she’d been used for free by enough people in her past. Now she was at least paid for it and not getting emotionally annihilated in the process. But still, sometimes she felt like the drug dealer, giving addicts easy access to their vice.

She rolled her shoulders, trying to shrug off the stress of the call, and dug a tube of antibiotic ointment out of the junk drawer to slather on her burned knuckles. It was past two and she really needed to get to bed, but there was no way she’d be able to sleep after that burst of adrenaline from the call.

Plus, she’d never gotten her dessert. And right now, she could use a big honking piece of chocolate.

She went back to the brownies. They’d cooled enough by now, so she cut herself a bigger square than the original corner she’d planned and took a bite. She closed her eyes. *Yeah, that’s the stuff.*

After pouring a big glass of milk, she brought that and the rest of the brownie to the table. She glanced at the walkie-talkie she'd placed on the table, the soft white noise relaxing her, and leaned back in the chair to enjoy the solitude. She was used to pulling the night shift by now, but usually she fell into bed after the last call, grasping for any shreds of sleep she could get before the alarm went off to start her real job. But it was nice to sit for a moment and simply be.

She polished off the last bit of brownie and milk and brought her glass to the sink. The exhaustion was settling in full force now. She braced her hands on the edge of the counter and eyed the soaking dishes. Her mother had always had the rule to never go to bed with a dirty sink—as if a bright, gleaming, empty sink was some sign of how together the household was. Maybe it was.

Oakley turned away from the dishes. They'd have to wait until tomorrow. She didn't have it in her.

She put foil over the rest of the brownies and grabbed the walkie-talkie and her headset. She should be able to get at least four hours of sleep. But right as she flipped off the light, the walkie-talkie beeped.

“Mom?”

Oakley halted, startled by the sudden break in the quiet. She pressed the button on the side of the device.

“Yeah, baby?”

“What's that smell?” Reagan asked, her voice groggy from sleep.

Oakley shook her head and smiled. She should've known the bionic nose would pick up that scent even in her sleep. “It's just the brownies for your bake sale tomorrow.”

“It's not my bake sale. It's the school's,” Reagan corrected.

“That's what I meant.”

“But that's not what you said.”

Oakley leaned against the wall in the hallway. This was an argument she'd never win. Reagan was into exactness. When Oakley told people Rae was eleven, Rae would jump in and specify how many months past eleven she was. “I'm sorry I said it wrong the first time. Now go back to sleep, sweetheart. I don't want you to be tired in the morning.”

“Did you put nuts or caramel in them?”

“Of course not. I know you're a brownie purist.”

“Okay. Good,” Reagan said, and Oakley could almost hear her daughter nodding. “Thanks, Mom. Love you.”

Oakley pressed the walkie-talkie to her chest for a moment, warmth filling her. “Love you, too, Rae. Good night.”

Oakley headed to her bedroom, listening to the footfalls upstairs and the flush of the toilet as Reagan made a quick trip to the bathroom. She must've really had to go because Rae hated getting out of bed in the middle of the night. And she outright refused to come downstairs after dark—a phobia she'd developed years ago and hadn't been able to shake yet.

Hence the walkie-talkies. Oakley had gotten tired of Reagan yelling from afar anytime she needed something at night. And leaving every light blazing through the house all evening wasn't an option either. The electric bill was already high enough.

Bills. No, she wouldn't think about that now. Even though she could see the stack staring at her from her desk. The gas bill. Rent. The quarterly installment for Reagan's private school and therapies. She couldn't face that tonight. Plus, she knew the due dates by heart so she could hold on to her money until the very last minute without being late.

She closed her bedroom door and walked over to her computer to wake the screen. Her sign-in page for the service she used to get her calls was still up. It showed how many minutes she'd logged tonight. Not bad. But she was six minutes shy of hitting the bonus level where she got an extra fifty bucks for the night. Stu's health scare had cost her more than stress.

She sighed and sagged into her desk chair. Fifty extra dollars could pay for that pair of lime green Chuck Taylors Reagan wanted for her birthday.

Oakley yawned and checked the box that indicated she was available to take a call. Her cell phone rang within seconds and she slipped on the headset again. "Hello, this is Sasha. Ready for a fantasy night?"

"So ready," said the deep-voiced caller. There was male tittering in the background.

Great. A frat-boy call.

"What are you wearing, Sasha?"

Oakley looked down at her oversized T-shirt and yoga pants. "A sheer robe with nothing underneath."

"Aw, yeah," the dude said. "How big are your tits?"

Oakley put her head to her desk. Six minutes. She only needed to keep them on the phone for six more minutes.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

They hung up at two, laughing in the background as the phone went dead, their Truth or Dare game complete.

And she was short.

She lifted her head and checked the Available box again.

"Hello, this is Sasha . . ."

TWO

The chick in his living room was taking a selfie next to his gold record. Pike leaned back, watching her through his half-open bedroom door. “Fantastic.”

“What’s fantastic?” his friend Gibson asked on the other end of the line. “Did you even hear what I said?”

“No, I didn’t. And what’s fantastic is that I have a seriously hot B-list actress in my living room, who was all kinds of cool after the show tonight but is now snapping duckface selfies in front of my shit.”

Gibson snorted a laugh. “At least she’s not using you just for your body.”

“That I’d be okay with. But this . . .”

“Hey, if there’s no selfie for proof, the event never happened. At least that’s what my niece tells me. It’s like a tree falling in the woods.”

Pike sighed. “Observation: Duckface is a friend to no one.”

The longer Pike watched, the more he regretted his decision to bring this woman home with him. He’d been buzzing off the energy of the performance tonight and had wanted to keep that feeling going. Darkfall had kicked ass on stage and had impressed the promoters who were putting together some of this summer’s biggest tours. If Darkfall landed a sweet opening spot with some big-time band, they’d have a chance to recapture some of the traction they’d lost when their lead singer had taken extended time off between albums to get surgery on his vocal cords. In some ways, tonight felt like a rebirth of the band, and he wanted to celebrate.

And usually the only thing more exciting than pounding the drums, making thousands of fans scream, was making just one scream. But as he watched his date take another photo of herself, he was losing his enthusiasm for his plan.

Maybe a chill night at home with the dog would’ve been a better idea.

Monty barked from somewhere in the living room, protesting the fact that Pike hadn’t given him his requisite belly rub and dog biscuit when he’d come home. He’d been too busy pouring a drink for his guest.

“What’s her name?” Gib asked.

Pike scrubbed a hand through his damp hair. “Why does that matter?”

“Come on, tell me that you’re not that big of a dick and you remember her name.”

Pike grimaced at Gib’s tone. This is what he got for hanging out with businessman types instead of fellow musicians. The suits had a different code of conduct. With the guys in his band, remembering names was only expected *after* you slept with someone. Luckily, Pike’s memory was good. “Lark Evans.”

“All right. Hold on a sec.” The clicking of a keyboard sounded on the other end.

“Gib, look, can we talk about whatever you were calling for tomorrow? I’m ignoring my company.” He walked away from the door and dropped the towel from around his waist to pull on a fresh pair of well-worn jeans. “I told her I’d only be in the shower for a minute.”

“Ha! I knew it,” Gibson said, triumph in his voice.

“What?”

“Your girl’s on Instagram. And guess what pics are making their way around the world as we speak?”

Pike sighed.

“Damn, she is hot, though,” Gibson said. “Duck lips notwithstanding.”

“Which is why—”

“Ah, shit. You’re gonna love this. Wait for it . . . Caption to the pic: *Hanging out with Spike, the drummer from Darkfall!* Hashtag: *hawt.*”

“Hold up. *Spike?*”

Gibson burst into laughter. “Spike! Man, she doesn’t even know *your* name. How very rock star of her.”

Pike looked to the ceiling, letting that sink in. Karma was a fucking bitch. “You are totally ruining my hard-on here.”

“Now don’t kid. I know my deep, brooding voice makes you hot,” Gib said. “Want me to talk dirty to you, Spikey?”

Pike grinned. “So it’s finally happened. You’re going gay for me. I’m flattered. Of course, it was inevitable. I mean, have you seen me? But I hate to break your heart, Gib, I only play for one team.”

He sniffed. “If I were gay, I’d have way higher standards than you. That record would need to be platinum.”

“Aw, love you, too. I’m even making my duckface for you.” He made a loud kiss sound. “Now I’m letting you go because, unlike you, I’m about to get laid, son.”

“Fine. But call me back in the morning. I have a charity thing I need to run by you.”

Pike tucked the phone between his shoulder and ear and pulled his bedside drawer open to check the condom supply. “The Dine and Donate event? I told you the band’s in again this year, if you need us.”

“No, this is for something different. More of a favor than anything else.”

“Sounds ominous. But yeah, call you tomorrow.”

“Cool. Now go rock her world, Spike.”

Pike snorted and disconnected the call. He tossed his phone on the chair by the window and padded to his closet to grab a T-shirt. But when he stepped out of his room, ready to block out all the information he’d learned—selfies, Instagram, Spike—in order to enjoy his date, he was greeted by a shriek instead.

Lark hadn’t seen him come in because her gaze had zeroed in on a growling Monty.

“Give it back, you stupid mutt!” she yelled and jabbed a closed umbrella at Monty, catching him right in the side. Monty yelped.

“What the fuck?” Pike hurried forward and grabbed her wrist, stopping another poke. “What the hell’s going on?”

She pointed at Monty, rage twisting her pretty face into something ugly. “Look at him! Your idiotic dog is eating my *Jimmy Choos!*”

She said it like Monty was murdering her kid. Pike glanced at Monty, who was in defense mode, baring teeth, two little paws on one of Lark’s high heels. Pike shrugged. “Well, the brand does say *Choo*. Maybe he’s just following directions.”

Lark gasped and looked at Pike like he’d lost his mind. “Do you know how much those *cost*? What is wrong with you? Do something!”

The grating tone of her voice made his teeth clamp together. Being yelled at by anyone pushed his buttons. But messing with his dog pushed the ugliest of them. He took a breath, trying to keep his cool. “Do you know that my dog was *abused* as a puppy? And that jabbing him with a sharp object is fucking traumatizing to him? I’ll buy you another pair of your goddamned shoes.”

Her head snapped back a bit at that, and she had the decency to look chagrined. She glanced down at the umbrella still clutched in her hand. “Oh. Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

And he didn’t care. Abused or not, you don’t poke an animal with something that could hurt them, especially over something as stupid as a shoe. He could put up with her using him for his fame or whatever. They would’ve both been using each other. They each knew the score. But he wasn’t going to let anyone fuck with his dog.

“Monty, release,” he said in the firm, dominant voice that worked best on the feisty dachshund/schnauzer mix. Monty looked up with big, sad puppy eyes and backed away from the shoe. But just when Pike was about to send him off to his bed, Monty trotted over to Lark and gave her the I’m-sorry look.

Lark’s expression softened, and she reached down to pat his head awkwardly. “It’s okay, buddy . . .”

Monty lifted his leg and pissed all over her bare foot.

“Monty, no!” Pike said.

But chaos ensued after that. Lark hopping and shrieking. Monty barking and spinning in a circle. And Pike doing his damndest not to laugh.

He wasn’t entirely successful, and that earned him a glare from Lark and a happy, yipping bark from Monty. Finally, he gathered himself together enough to direct Monty to go to his crate so he could help Lark.

He showed her to the bathroom so she could rinse her leg off in the tub, and he cleaned up the mess in the living room—after sneaking Monty his treat and a belly rub.

He was halfway through a beer when Lark stepped into the kitchen a few minutes later, wearing nothing but a pair of lacy pink panties and a bra that made her breasts look like icing-covered cupcakes. His dick jumped to attention—the response automatic.

She leaned in the doorway, posing like she was at a Victoria’s Secret cover shoot, and gave him the inviting smile she’d given him from the audience tonight. “Sorry about all of that. How about we start over and get back to why we’re here, hmm?”

Pike still had the bottle of beer pressed to his lips. He lowered it and set it on the counter.

Lark's smile spread wider and she sauntered over with a heavy sway in her hips. She pressed her hand to his chest. "I have all kinds of ways we can apologize to each other. For getting mad at your dog, I was thinking this would make it up to you."

She dragged her hand down his chest and lowered to her knees. Pike stared down at her. She looked like a fucking porn star at his feet—pouty lips with a fresh coat of pink lipstick, blond hair flowing down her back. A wet dream of a woman. But when she put her painted fingernails to the zipper on his jeans, he put his hand over hers. "Stand up."

She blinked, the sultry look shifting to a perplexed one. "Huh?"

He helped Lark get to her feet. "Be right back."

Her smile returned, though it had a confused tilt to it. "O . . . kay."

He headed back to his bedroom for a minute then returned to the kitchen. She was drinking his beer, putting lipstick marks on the bottle. He draped her dress on one of the barstools, set a pair of his flip-flops on top of it, and handed her a few hundred-dollar bills. "For the shoes and a cab."

She stared down at the money in her hand. "What?"

"This isn't going to happen tonight."

"Wait, you want me to *leave*? But I thought—"

"It's time for you to go." He was tempted to take a co-selfie with her. Hashtag: *HookUpFail*.

She stiffened like a rod had been shoved up her back and she made these little sputters of disbelief—like she was trying to come up with a really good insult but couldn't think of any.

When she obviously couldn't string anything worthy together, she shoved on his flip-flops, which looked like flippers on her small feet, and yanked her dress over her head. "I can't fucking believe this."

He dumped the beer in the sink, bored.

His lack of response brought a new level of hatred glowing in her eyes. "Is this about the dog? Because that's just stupid. How was I supposed to know he was abused?"

He walked to his front door and pulled it open. "You never know where anyone's scars are hiding. Doesn't mean you get a pass to hurt them."

She reared back like he'd slapped her. Then her lips pressed together, and she flounced out the door, muttering something about hoping that the dumb dog kept him warm tonight.

He shut the door without watching her go and leaned against it, absorbing the quiet of the condo, relief instead of disappointment settling in. Hookup fail, yes. But even he had standards. He'd rather fuck his fist than spend another second with Duckface the Puppy Poker.

A year ago, he might've just written it off and taken her to bed anyway. What did it matter if a woman was shallow? It's not like they'd be seeing each other again. Plus, he'd always hated sleeping alone in a house. But now he couldn't stomach the thought of spending another moment with a woman like that.

Maybe he was getting used to being by himself. After his roommate, Foster, had moved out to live with his girlfriend last year, Pike had felt that old need to always have people over. Mostly of the naked female variety. But for the last few months, he'd been so busy with band stuff and working at his music studio in between that he hadn't sought out that brand of companionship very often. He hadn't even gone to The Ranch, the kink resort he and his friends belonged to, in at least three months. Tonight had been the first night he'd done the hook-up-after-a-show thing in a while.

Now he remembered why he'd backed off from this kind of thing. He had no issue being someone's one-night stand. Most of the time, he preferred things that way. But now that he'd seen how Foster and Cela were together, how explosive the chemistry could be when two people connected like that, he could see how superficial this other shit was in comparison. Women fucked his type. The bad boy. The drummer. Whatever. They didn't fuck *him*.

And he'd been guilty of the same. He'd fuck the groupie, the model, the B actress. If not for Monty chewing Lark's shoe tonight, he would've never known that the woman was capable of hurting a dog for something as inconsequential as a shoe. Because he didn't *know* her.

For some reason, that dug into him like a burr, annoying the shit out of him.

He sank onto his bed and Monty jumped up to join him. He scratched behind Monty's ears. "Good job, Monts. You're making me grow a goddamned conscience."

Monty licked his chops. There were pieces of red shoe leather stuck in his teeth.

Pike chuckled and kissed the top of his pup's scruffy head. Monty rewarded him by releasing some noxious gas and dog-grinning at the effort.

"Jesus, Monts." He put his hand over his nose and mouth. "Take that stuff somewhere else."

Monty, of course, took that as his cue to settle next to him on the bed. Pike waved the poisonous fumes away, coughing, and grabbed his cell phone.

Gibson answered on the second ring. "Please tell me you last longer than that because, seriously, any thoughts of going gay for you are definitely out of the question otherwise. I require stamina."

Pike let his head fall back to the pillow. "Shut the fuck up and stop flirting. It's not going to work."

"So you kicked her out?"

"Yeah."

"Good. You're better than that," Gib said, no sarcasm in his voice. "You need to stop dipping into the groupie pool, anyway. You're too old for that shit. Find yourself some normal women your own age."

"Normal women have too many expectations."

"What? Like remembering their names and calling them the next day?"

"Exactly. Plus, I'm best in limited doses. I'd send normal women running for the hills after too long."

"I don't know. You haven't scared off your friends yet. I mean, yes, I thought you were an egotistical douchebag when I first met you, but now you've grown on me. Like a fungus."

“So you’re saying I should try to infect some normal woman with my fungus? Good talk, buddy. Good talk.”

“Dr. Phil gets all his best stuff from me.”

“Just tell me about this charity thing so I can get to bed and think about the sex I won’t be having tonight.”

Gibson paused as if ready to push the topic, but then relented. “Fine. The charity project. It would involve music.”

“Excellent.”

“And would be helping my lovely sister-in-law out.”

“Making sexy Tessa happy. Good.”

“You’d be working with kids.”

“Aaaand . . . I’m out.”

Gibson scoffed. “You have something against kids?”

“I’m inked up, curse like a convict, and have piercings in questionable places. Parents don’t want me near their children, and kids freak me out.”

“Bullshit. How can you be freaked out? You’re one of them.”

“Sorry, Gib.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“I’m not a kid person.” He could still smell the stench of the house he’d grown up in. The overstuffed diaper pails. The spoiling government-issued baby formula. His younger siblings seeking him out when their mom had to work or when her boyfriend of the month was in a vengeful mood. That deep, terrifying feeling that lived in Pike that he was in over his head. That he’d never be enough to make it okay for them.

And he’d been one hundred percent right on that.

“This would be the older group, not the little ones.”

The dredged-up memories sent a sick feeling rolling through him, making his skin go clammy. “Can’t I just write a check or donate proceeds from a show or something?”

Gibson blew out a breath. “No, they need your expertise not your money. Just hear me out. Tessa has a great idea for a fund-raiser, but she needs someone with experience in producing music. All the money would go toward the college fund and resources for the after-school program. You know what the charity’s about. These kids don’t have a lot, man. You and I both know what that’s like.”

Fuck. “You’re really going for the jugular here, Gib.”

“Just speaking the truth.”

Yeah, that, and Gibson was a brilliant PR guy who knew how to pitch things. Monty laid his head on Pike’s chest, and Pike scratched behind Monty’s ear. “You’ve even got my dog giving me the don’t-be-a-bastard

look.”

Gibson chuckled. “I sneak him treats when I’m there. He’s on my side.”

Pike ran a hand over his face. This was a bad idea. But even he wasn’t a big enough asshole to turn his back on kids who needed help. It was places like Bluebonnet that had helped his family when they needed it. He and his siblings probably never would’ve gotten a Christmas gift or decent coats if not for community programs. What kind of hypocrite would it make him if he said no? But the thought of working with children made him want to run for the damn hills. “What exactly do they want me to do?”

He could almost hear Gibson’s victory grin over the phone. “It won’t be a big deal at all.”

Pike closed his eyes. Famous last words.

THREE

Oakley fought to keep her eyes open as she transcribed information from the millionth file of the day and added it to the new thirteen-page government form that Bluebonnet Place needed to keep on every child. She polished off the rest of her coffee and glanced at the clock. Only half an hour before she got to take a break from the office work and go have her session with the kids. She could make it without a refill. Maybe.

She traced her finger down the convoluted form, trying to figure out where this information should go. “*If yes then go to line 7B. If no, go to line 10A. If neither, rip up this frigging form and forfeit any remnants of your sanity.*”

“You know, I’ve always wondered if the people who create government forms spend their free time tying people up and torturing them.”

Oakley’s skin prickled at the low, smooth voice, the melodic sound like a soft stroke to the back of her neck. She spun in her office chair, poised to say *Excuse me?*, but nothing came out when her gaze collided with her visitor. At least six feet of lean, tattooed, blond bad boy was lounging against the counter and looking straight at her.

The guy gave her a conspiratorial smile and leaned a little closer, cocking his head toward her pile of papers, his eyebrow ring glinting underneath the lights. “I mean, only a sadist would make anyone try to fit letters into those little boxes.”

He was talking about documents, but he may as well have asked her if she’d like to go out back and get naked for the way her body responded to the comment. Oakley swallowed past the dryness in her throat, trying to regain her professional composure despite her rogue hormonal reaction to the man’s presence. This guy clearly was in the wrong place. Who walked into a children’s charity and started making jokes about tying people up? Maybe he wanted the tattoo shop down the street. Though there didn’t seem to be any spare spots on his arms to fill with ink. “Can I help you, sir?”

Yes. Good. That sounded calm and professional. Go her.

“No need for the sir.” His lips tilted, mischief sparking in gold-green eyes. “I didn’t say *I* was a sadist. But yes, I bet you can help me.”

Yes, she could. Right out of that tight T-shirt.

No, no, no. Stop. What the hell was wrong with her? Hello, libido, meet Mr. Not My Type.

The man kept close, like this was some secret conversation. "I'm here to talk to the leggy blonde who runs this place. She here?"

The words snapped Oakley out of her lust haze. Leggy blonde? Oakley straightened, affronted on behalf of her boss. "If you mean *Mrs. Vandergriff*, she has a parent in her office right now. Name, please."

He tilted his head at her cool tone. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Name, please."

He rose to his full height and hooked his thumbs in his pockets, vague amusement on his face. "Pike."

She was about to ask his last name, but with a name like Pike, she doubted it was needed. "You can take a seat, and I'll let her know you're here when she's done."

He glanced at the row of chairs in the small lobby. "Or you could take a break from the torture and give me a tour of the place. I'd like to know what I'm signing up for."

She lifted a brow.

No way did he have a kid who qualified for services here. She'd taken a good long look at him now that he'd given her some breathing room. His worn jeans and vintage Dead Kennedys T-shirt may look thrown together, but she recognized expensive threads when she saw them. She'd taken that course in looking artfully casual once upon a time. Plus, imagining him with a kid just didn't compute. He looked like the guy you'd try to keep your kids away from.

"You do realize that you or your child have to be under eighteen to sign up for anything? And we don't give tours. We protect children's privacy here."

He grinned, undeterred. "I can see why Tessa puts you at the front."

Oakley straightened the file on her desk and gave him a tight smile back. "Because I'm so welcoming and warm?"

"Exactly." He eased forward again, challenge dancing in eyes framed by sooty lashes. "What's your name, o' powerful gatekeeper? Something about you seems so familiar."

Her fingers tightened around the file, his nearness and evaluating look making her heart skip a few beats, but she kept her reaction off her face. It was near impossible that anyone could recognize her these days. She'd changed her hair color from blue back to the natural dark brown, was a decade older, and at least fifteen pounds heavier since she'd been anyone worth recognizing. "Oakley Easton."

His eyes narrowed as if trying to place her. The name wouldn't be familiar to him even if he were close to the mark. But he gave up soon enough. "Guess we haven't met."

"I just have one of those faces."

"No, you don't," he said, his gaze drifting over every inch of her features. "I'd remember your face. I think it might be your voice. There's something about it."

Oh. Shit. She swallowed hard. No way Pike could be one of her callers. She didn't know much about him, but she had all the information she needed by looking at him. Tall. Confident. Sporting a body that made her want to stand up and hang over the desk so she could get a better look. He could walk into any bar or club and make panties drop with a smirk and a head nod. This would not be a guy who'd pay per minute for phone sex.

She attempted an air of nonchalance. "Lots of people have similar voices."

"True. But I have an ear for them. And yours is unique—smoky with some rasp in it. I like it."

Somehow the simplest, most innocuous words sounded illicit rolling off his lips. *I like it* sounded like *I'd fuck you* in her head. Paired with his intent focus, she was fighting hard not to squirm in her chair. She cleared her throat. "A voice fetishist. That's new."

The words slipped out before she could stop them. Dammit. Nighttime Oakley was not supposed to make an appearance at the day job. She worked hard to keep them separate.

Pike chuckled, the sound rich and full, like cashmere brushing over bare skin. "Maybe I am. Kind of comes with the territory."

Territory? That's when it clicked.

She should've pinned it from the start. Tattoos. Piercings. Attitude. She'd known enough of the type to last her a lifetime. Distaste filled her. "You're a musician."

He eyed her. "Wow, clearly, you're impressed. You look like you just smelled something bad."

"It's not . . ." But it was, and she didn't know how to finish the sentence without sounding even ruder. She picked up her phone and hit a button.

Tessa answered on the first ring. "What'cha got for me?"

"Was just checking to see if you're done with your meeting. There's a guy here to see you—a mister . . . Pike."

"Seriously?" Tessa said, triumph in her voice.

"Uh . . . yeah."

"Amazing. Bonus points to my brother-in-law. He actually got him here."

Pike reached over the counter and plucked a butterscotch from Oakley's candy dish. She gave him a you're-invading-my-personal-space brow lift, but Pike only grinned and dragged the wrapped candy between his teeth to suck it out of the cellophane. Obscene. Especially when he didn't look away from her the whole time. Her body stirred in a way it hadn't in longer than she could remember. Very, very stupid thoughts entered her mind.

She smoothed her lip balm and tried to tamp down her body's ridiculous response. Maybe she had some genetic malfunction. This was exactly the type of guy who shouldn't flip her switch. She'd already been burned by this kind of wildfire. No, not burned. Incinerated. "Would you like me to send him back?"

"Sure, that'd be great," Tessa said, the sound of shuffling papers in the background. "Is Ella coming in to

relieve you this afternoon?”

“She should be here any minute.”

“Great. Because there’s something I need to run by you after my chat with Pike.”

“No problem. I’ll be in the music room when you need me.”

She exchanged a quick good-bye with Tessa and set the phone in its cradle. Pike was still half-draped on her counter, making everything smell like butterscotch and male arrogance. Damn but she needed to get this man away from her.

“Mrs. Vandergriff is available now. I need to get a copy of your ID before you can go back there, though.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He pulled out his wallet and handed her his driver’s license. Pike Ryland. So he did have a last name.

She ran it through the small desktop scanner and handed the card back to him. “Just go through that door. Her office is the last door on the right.”

He tucked his wallet back into his pocket, which made that worn T-shirt stretch tighter across his lean chest. “You’re not going to escort me back there? I may get lost or violate privacy laws or something. Plus, you never gave me that tour.”

His tone was teasing, playful, but there was a dare in those wicked eyes. She pretended to busy herself with the papers in front of her. “I can’t leave my desk until someone else covers it.”

He glanced behind him. “It doesn’t look like there’s a line forming to get in or anything.”

“Someone could come in.”

He rolled the candy in his mouth. “You always so strict about following the rules, *Miz Easton*?”

“Yes.” She didn’t know why she was being so bullheaded about it. She could leave her desk for a few minutes if she needed to. One of the volunteers could watch the front. But Pike’s presence had her off balance, and she didn’t want to extend that feeling any longer.

“Mmm, shame.” He cocked his head toward the door. “Then go ahead and buzz me in, Lady Gatekeeper. I wouldn’t want to get anyone in trouble.”

“I have a feeling that’s not true at all.”

He laughed. “Touché.”

She hit the button under her desk to unlock the door, and Pike gave the counter two raps with his knuckles, like a warning that they weren’t done here, before disappearing into the hallway.

She sagged back in her chair and expelled a breath she’d been holding. Then as soon as she determined he was safely ensconced in her boss’s office, she opened up a search box on her computer, typing in *Pike Ryland*.

A page of results filled the screen in an instant, including a short line of thumbnail images. *Pike Ryland*,

drummer of the hard rock band Darkfall.

Ha. She should've known. He had drummer written all over him—cut biceps, lanky frame, that I-own-the-world swagger. She had yet to meet a humble drummer. You had to be a big personality to make your presence known when you were stuck behind a drum kit and the rest of the band on stage.

Unable to resist, she clicked through a few of the images. Pike on stage. Pike shirtless, dripping with sweat, as he banged the drums. Good God. She shifted in her chair and clicked some more.

But the next few featured Pike with a rotation of supermodel-gorgeous women on his arm at parties and events. *Ugh.* That effectively cooled her jets.

She clicked on the Wikipedia entry. The page listed two albums and a gold single from a few years ago. She vaguely recognized one or two of their songs. Hard rock really wasn't her musical poison of choice. But everything she read and saw in the photos confirmed why she'd gotten that bitter taste in her mouth when she'd figured out he was a musician.

They were all the same. And it only got worse when they had some success.

She closed out all of the windows and went back to her forms, vowing to not give Mr. Ryland another thought. If nothing else she'd learned a few things this afternoon.

Good news: Her libido was not dead after all.

Bad news: It still had destructive taste.

And like a recovering alcoholic, she knew to stay far, far away from that brand of temptation.

FOUR

“Local children’s theatre?” Pike settled back in the chair, focusing on Tessa and trying to ignore the raucous sound of children playing in the yard outside her window. He tugged at the collar of his T-shirt. After his run-in with the hot, uptight receptionist, he’d almost managed to forget what he was walking into. Now it felt like the walls were closing in on him. “No offense, but you’re not going to make much money from that.”

Tessa frowned from behind her desk. “The guy we were supposed to be working with—the one who had to back out—was going to mentor the kids and polish them up musically. He said if we did a couple of shows, charged ticket fees, it could be good.”

“I don’t see that happening. The only people who will want to see kids sing live are their parents.” Pike hooked his ankle over his knee. “And I know that most of the families you’re working with don’t really have the money to pay a high ticket price. It’ll be a waste of time.”

Hers. The kids. And most of all, his. Maybe he could get out of this after all. No use helping with a dead-on-arrival idea.

“You’d make a lot more holding a benefit concert again and having some local bands play. I could get the guys to do a show, and I could reach out to a few other bands in the area.”

Her frown stayed in place, and she tapped her fingernails on her desk, thoughtful. “We could do that, but I

was hoping to do something where the kids are more involved this year. It's their college funds at stake. I think it means more if they feel like they've had a hand in earning it."

"Have them work the shows, sell tickets."

A line appeared in her forehead. "These kids have talent, though."

His eyebrow lifted.

"Yeah, yeah, I know I'm biased." She gave him a what-can-ya-do smile. "But we've got some strong singers, a couple of guitar players, and a burgeoning drummer. Plus, the woman I have working with them is amazing. She's helping them to write their own songs and has really invested her time with them. I want to see the kids share what they're creating with the world."

The earnestness in her voice was killing him. He didn't know Tessa all that well. He'd only been around her when she was with her husband, Kade—and then it was usually at The Ranch where she was in submissive mode. But he could tell this wasn't simply a job for her. Lord knows she didn't need to work. Kade was a goddamned mogul. So this was all heart for her. And it was making him feel like a dick for wanting to get out of it.

He sighed, an idea coming to him that could be a perfect solution but a pain in the ass. "Having a performance at the children's theatre isn't sharing it with the world. Maybe you should think bigger."

"Bigger?"

He shifted forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs, trying not to talk himself out of what he was about to say. "I don't know if Gibson told you, but I've opened up a small studio in town. It's kind of a side project for me when I'm not doing Darkfall stuff. I cut demos for people and have started to produce some local start-up musicians."

"Yeah, he said something about it. Aren't you working with Colby's boyfriend?"

"Keats? Yeah, talented kid."

She smiled, her amused gaze flicking over him. "I didn't know you were into country."

"I'm into good music, regardless of genre." Plus, if Pike wanted to make a real go of producing in the future, he needed to attract talent now, get some buzz going. Keats had a real shot at breaking out.

"So what does this have to do with the kids?" she asked.

"Well, I'm thinking that if you want the kids to be heard, maybe that's the way."

"Meaning?"

"There's no bigger world stage than the Internet. I help them cut a record. They can put a few tracks together and put them for sale online. The proceeds could go to the fund. Then once the songs are out, maybe they can put on a small show to promote it."

Her eyes lit. "You could do that? They could have real-deal songs out there?"

Fuck. Me. He forced a smile. "If they have enough material and patience to put together a track or two.

Recording can be tedious.”

She clapped her hands together. “Oh my god, that would be fantastic. They’ll think they’re stars! Imagine how proud they’ll be to have an actual song out that people can buy. I love this idea.”

Great. Fantastic. *Shoot me*. All he could picture was little kids running around his studio, screaming into the mics and climbing all over the expensive equipment. “How far along are they with having a full song ready to go?”

Tessa rolled her chair back. “Why don’t you go see for yourself? They’re working on it now in the music room.”

“We don’t have to—”

But Tessa was already cruising around the desk and grabbing for his hand. “Come on. They’ll be thrilled to meet you. They were so bummed when the other guy had to bail. But now they get to work with a genuine rock star!”

He snorted. “Marginally popular at best.”

And if his band didn’t get it together soon, they would be candidates for *Where Are They Now?* shows in the not so distant future.

His stomach knotted as Tessa led him down a hall filled with colorful drawings and finger-painted artwork pinned to the walls. He rubbed the back of his neck, finding sweat there. This was so not his scene.

But when they rounded the corner and Tessa stopped in front of a window that looked into a wide room, he forgot his discomfort for a minute. Ms. Uptight Receptionist was sitting in the middle of a circle of older kids, strumming a guitar and singing something. He couldn’t hear anything from outside the room, but the way her fingers moved over the strings was all confident elegance. Huh. The woman who had sneered at the idea of him being a musician appeared to be one herself.

And the tight-lipped, steel-spined posture she’d maintained during most of their conversation was gone, replaced with this sexy sway and bright-eyed smile. He let his eyes linger on her profile then travel down, watching the way her throat worked when she let out her notes and the way the swells of her breasts rose and fell with her breath. He adjusted his stance, willing his body not to react. Then Tessa cracked open the door, and Oakley’s sultry voice hit him in the gut—smooth water over jagged rocks. Every ounce of his blood traveled straight south.

Goddamn. If a voice could be fuckable, hers was. And the woman attached to it wasn’t hard to look at either. Dark hair and eyes that went cat green when she was annoyed—which had been about ninety percent of their interaction. He’d wanted that tour more than he’d let on just so he could keep teasing her and making those pink lips of hers purse. He put a hand on Tessa’s shoulder. “Don’t interrupt her.”

Tessa looked over at him with a knowing smile. “I told you she was pretty amazing.”

“Is that who I’m going to be working with?”

“Mmm-hmm. She works reception in the mornings, but once the kids get here after school, she helps out with them. If we do this project, I’ll find someone else to cover the desk so that she can take this on fully.”

“We met up front. I don’t think she likes me very much,” he said, keeping his voice low and his eyes on

Oakley.

“Let me guess. You flirted with her.”

He glanced over at Tessa, feigning an innocent Who-me? expression.

Tessa sniffed. “I knew she sounded weird on the phone. You Ranch boys are a menace.”

“Hey, you’re married to a Ranch boy.”

“I stand by my statement.” She glanced at the room and the woman in it. The singing had stopped and Oakley was directing the kids on something or other. “If you want to get along with Oakley, lay off that kind of thing. She has a lot on her plate and likes to keep things professional. She doesn’t strike me as someone who’s looking for a walk on the wild side, anyway.”

“Who says I’m the wild side?”

Tessa gave him a withering look.

“Fine. If she wants to keep things professional, I can do that.”

Mostly. Maybe.

Tessa’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but then she shook her head. “Come on, let’s go in and do introductions so y’all can start planning.”

When they walked in, the kids were all chatting at once. But one voice rang above the others.

“I swear to God, if she mentions another One Direction song, I’m going to puke,” said a young girl with short-cropped black hair and a Runaways T-shirt. “That’s all we did last week. Their songs make me want to punch someone in the face.”

Pike had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

“Reagan,” Oakley said sharply. “That isn’t how we share our opinions here. Be respectful.”

Mini Pat Benatar turned her green-eyed gaze to Oakley. A little bit of a staring contest ensued, then Reagan finally gave in and turned to the girl she’d been addressing. She let out a heavy, dramatic sigh. “I’m sorry. One Direction songs make my stomach hurt, and I would really like it if we could do something different.”

She punctuated the sentence with a toothy, plastic smile.

Pike instantly liked her.

The boy-band fan clearly did not, though. The blond girl crossed her arms and sneered. “At least it’s not as bad as your weird music. No one’s even heard of the stuff you like.”

“Okay, let’s get back on task,” Oakley said, a tired edge to her voice.

Tessa stepped forward out of the shadowed back of the room. “Sorry to interrupt, guys. But I wanted to introduce you to someone.”

Oakley turned and her gaze landed heavy on Pike. For a split second he caught her raw reaction—lips

parting, gaze flicking down the length of his body as if she couldn't resist a full look. But as quickly as it was there, she reeled it in. Wariness descended over her face, but like the younger girl, she managed to fake a smile, clearly more for the kids' behalf than his. All the other heads in the room turned toward him, too—most of the kids staring at him with open curiosity. Tension coiled in his neck and shoulders.

“Everyone, this is Mr. Ryland. He's going to be taking Mr. Gull's place and has kindly offered to help with your song project.”

“You're in a band,” Reagan blurted out. Not a question.

The outburst startled Pike out of his stiff posture. Oakley turned to correct Reagan. But he interrupted her before she could. “How'd you guess? You know Darkfall?”

Reagan crossed her arms, her eyes not meeting his but looking at the rest of him instead. “No. But your ears and eyebrow are pierced and you have lots of tattoos. Some have music notes and drumsticks in them. It'd be pretty dumb to get those if you weren't in a band.”

His lips tilted up. “Yeah, I guess it would be.”

“My mom says all tattoos are pretty dumb, though.”

“Reagan,” Oakley corrected, pressing fingers to the spot between her eyes.

He laughed. He liked that the kid didn't mince words. Plus, the fact that this girl had plucked out details from his intricate full sleeve tattoos from across the room was pretty impressive. “I guess your mom would think I was a big dummy then.”

Some of the kids in the group giggled and others started to announce who had tattoos in their family.

Oakley shook her head at the quickly deteriorating order in the group and then clapped her hands. “All right, all right. Let's get quiet so Mrs. Vandergriff can talk.”

The kids settled after a few more seconds, and Tessa went on to explain what Pike had proposed—making a real record. Controlled chaos broke out again after that, the kids cheering, tossing out suggestions on songs, and planning their mansions in the Hollywood Hills for after they became famous. The only ones who weren't bubbling with excitement were Oakley and Reagan. Reagan was sitting quietly, a thoughtful, intense expression on her face. And Oakley looked as if she'd just been told she had a meeting with an executioner.

“Ms. Easton, can we steal you for a minute so we can work out some details?” Tessa asked.

Oakley instructed the kids to gather into two small groups and to brainstorm on what songs they wanted to work on the most, then she headed over to where Pike and Tessa were.

Tessa put a hand on Pike's shoulder. “Oakley, I know you two have already met at the front, but I wanted to officially introduce you. Pike's a good friend of Kade's brother, Gibson, and he's also the drummer in Darkfall.”

Oakley didn't look a bit impressed by this news. She stuck out her hand formally. “Nice to meet you.”

Pike took her hand. It was ice cold as he wrapped his fingers around it. She tried to pull back quickly, but he wasn't letting her get away with that. He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand. “Likewise, Ms. Easton.”

He released her hand when she gave another minuscule tug and flashed a warning with her eyes.

“Pike is doing us a huge favor to take time out for this,” Tessa said. “So I really need you to help him in whatever way you can on this project.”

He smiled. He could think of some interesting ways she could help him. Oakley wouldn't look his way.

“This will be our flagship project this year,” Tessa continued. “And it'd be great to unveil at least one song at the annual benefit dinner. It's important for those who donate to us to see what we can do.”

Oakley nodded. “Of course. I'll do whatever I can to help.”

“It may take extra hours,” Tessa said, looking over at the kids and missing the barest wince from Oakley.

“Extra hours?” Oakley asked.

Tessa nodded. “I was thinking you can make use of your time in the mornings. I'll find someone to cover the desk in the meantime. But I have a feeling this will end up being a lot of informal time not here at the office since, Pike, I'm assuming your schedule is a little erratic.”

“It's not nine to five, for sure,” he said, watching Oakley shift and her shoulders droop. The woman did look tired. Maybe extra hours were a hardship.

“I figured. So, don't feel like you have to keep everything here at the office within a certain time slot. You two do what you need to do to get this done on a schedule that works best for you. Let me know whatever overtime you log and keep me up to date.”

Oakley gave a curt nod and smile to Tessa. “Of course. I'm sure I can get most of it done on my own and won't have to bother Mr. Ryland too much.”

He smirked. So she was trying to get rid of him already. And though when he walked in, he would've happily taken the opportunity to have as minimal a role as possible, now he wasn't so sure. “It's not a bother at all. I'm looking forward to working closely with you. No use of bringing me in if you're not going to take advantage of my skills.”

Her small smile radiated sarcasm, but she managed not to say anything snide in front of her boss.

“Fantastic,” Tessa said, oblivious to the silent exchange. “Well, I'll leave you to it. And dinner's on me. Take tonight to make up a rough plan of what needs to be done and when and we'll go from there.”

Oakley's gaze darted back to him. “Tonight?”

But Tessa was already strolling out the door.

Pike hooked his thumbs in his pockets. “Guess it's a date, then.”

Her lips thinned. “Not a date. Work.”

He grinned, unperturbed by her chilly response. “How can you not like me already? Usually it takes women at least a time or two to give me that look. And usually they get something out of the deal first.”

She blinked, then that cat-eye green came back into her eyes. “You really have to ask?”

“Yeah. I’m asking. What did I do to you?” He leaned a little closer. “Well, besides make you think really impure thoughts at work. Because let’s face it, that totally happened. It may be happening right now. With children present, no less. Are you thinking impure thoughts, Ms. Easton? You can tell me.”

“Does wishing bodily injury upon someone count?”

He laughed. “Kinky.”

She stared at him for a long second, looking as if she may maim or dismember him, but then she blew out a breath. “Look, I’m sure you’re having fun, but I’m not playing this game. You’re here to volunteer. Great. The kids are going to love it.”

“But you’re not.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s not about me.”

“You’re saying you don’t need the help?”

She glanced over her shoulder at the kids, her expression softening before she turned back to him. “We always need the help. Sure. But this job means a lot to me. These kids mean a lot to me. And to be frank, I don’t have time to cater to some celebrity who’s here to put in time with the poor kids for the sake of a press clipping.”

He frowned, all playfulness draining out of him. “You think that’s what this is about?”

She shrugged. “Why else would you do it?”

He opened his mouth but then shut it again. If he said he was doing it for the sake of the kids, that’d be a lie. It’s not like he would’ve strolled down here on his own out of the goodness of his heart. But he sure as hell wasn’t doing it for the press. “I couldn’t give a shit what the media says about me.”

She crossed her arms, unconvinced.

He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m doing it as a favor to my friends, all right?”

She considered him a moment longer then gave a brief nod. “Fair enough. You really want to help, then I’ll be done at six. We can go to the Italian place on the corner. But I need to be home by eight.”

“Hot date?”

She leaned closer than he would’ve expected, right near his ear. “Yeah, with my daughter.”

She gave him an angelic smile when she stepped back, then turned on her heel to head back toward the kids, leaving him staring after her. When she passed mini-Benatar, who was cross-legged on the floor, she ran her hand over the child’s head and smiled down at her.

Well, hell.

Oakley had a kid.

At least now he knew which mom thought tattoos were dumb.

FIVE

Oakley smiled to herself as Pike rattled off timelines and tasks in between bites of calzone. He'd been all business since they'd sat down in the back corner of the little dive restaurant. Her tactic had worked. It usually did. Childless men found out she was a mom and ran away like their ass was on fire.

Pike seemed to be no exception. Since she'd informed him that she had a daughter, he'd turned off the flirt. A small, selfish part of her was disappointed. Not that she had any interest in pursuing anything with anyone right now, especially with someone like him, but it had been kind of heady getting that kind of attention thrown her way. If nothing else, it had reminded her that the sexual part of herself wasn't totally dead. Even now, that warm energy hummed through her as she surreptitiously watched Pike lick a dollop of red sauce off his thumb. He had a pouty bottom lip that would look feminine if not for the hard angle of his jaw and the scruff. She kind of wanted to bite it—see if it felt as plump as it looked.

He glanced up, caught her staring, and smiled. “So, wanna screw in the bathroom?”

She startled and stiffened, instantly yanked out of her less-than-PG thoughts. “*What?*”

He leaned back in his chair, vague confusion on his face. “I asked if you wanted to keep working in that back room? We could rehearse at the studio once they're close to being ready to record. But until then, it's probably more trouble than it's worth to cart everyone over there. It's not that big of a place.”

“Rehearse in the back room?” she repeated, running the words back in her head to make sense of them. “Oh, right, yes, that's fine. I'm sorry. I thought you said something else.”

She eyed the small Bellini she'd ordered with her meal. Maybe that had been a bad idea. She was hearing things now.

Screw in the bathroom? How the hell had she gotten that out of what he'd said? Of course, now all she could think of was him doing just that—taking her by the elbow and leading her to that dark alcove at the back of the restaurant, pushing her up against that wall with the faded Italian flag on it, and putting his hands all over her. She licked her top lip, tasting the sweet remnants of her drink. *Pull it together, woman.*

Apparently, once her libido had been brave enough to peep its head out, it had decided it was Groundhog Day and needed to run around, declaring spring was coming early. She hated to break the news, but nothing and no one was coming anytime soon.

“What did you think I said?” Pike took a long sip from his drink, his snake-charmer eyes never leaving hers.

She followed suit, hoping the fruity drink would cool off more than her throat. “Doesn't matter.”

His lips twitched. “You're all red.”

“I think it's the Bellini. I don't drink very often.”

“No way.” His expression turned smug. “You thought I said something dirty, didn't you?”

“Huh?” She smoothed her napkin in her lap, trying to loosen the tightness in her voice. “No. Why would I think that? You've been very professional since we got here—which I appreciate, by the way.”

His gaze slid lazily down her body, like butter melting over toast, and goddamn it all to hell, she could feel her nipples go hard and obvious beneath her bra. No wonder he'd figured it out. Her body was waving all

kinds of flags in his face. *Hey! Over here! Horny girl, booth eight!*

“I am capable of being professional, you know,” he said, but his tone was all sex and sin. “I’m also more than happy to turn that off when the occasion calls for it. So why don’t you tell me what you thought you heard and why it’s gotten you all flushed and nervous?”

“I’m not nervous.”

He grinned.

Dammit. She schooled her face into a stoic expression. “The music is too loud in here. I thought you propositioned me to defile the restroom.”

His eyebrow ring twitched. “Now you’re just trying to turn me on with those big, stiff words of yours.”

All she heard was *big* and *stiff* at first, but she managed to rein in her temporary insanity. “We’re so not going to do this.”

“Well, probably not here, you’re right. I saw those bathrooms. But—”

“No, I mean, any of this. Flirting. Teasing. Whatever this is.”

He leaned onto his forearms, looking all too pleased that he’d gotten a confession out of her. “You got a guy?”

“No,” she said before she could get wise and fib.

“Then why can’t we do this?”

“Because I’m not interested.”

“Liar.”

She huffed. “Are you always this cocky?”

“No, it’s dialed down right now. I can get way worse.”

She stirred her drink. “Not. Possible.”

His lips spread into a menacing smile. “Challenge accepted.”

“No, that’s not—”

But he was already getting up from his side of the booth. He slid smoothly into the spot next to her on the cracked vinyl seat. He put his arm along the back of the booth, near to touching her, and leaned in close. “I dialed it back because what I could’ve said was how if you heard what you heard, it must’ve been on your mind already. That those pictures must be there in your head. Were we in a stall? Or bold as you please up against a wall?”

“Stop,” she said softly, somehow frozen in place, the clean scent of his shampoo mixing in with the heavy oregano smell of the restaurant and making her head spin.

“So that was it, huh? Against the wall where anyone could’ve walked up and seen? That would’ve been hot.

Legs wrapped around my hips. I could've unpeeled all these layers you've wrapped yourself in." He touched the collar of her blouse but not skin. "I could've also said that I saw the want in your eyes before I knew what question you'd thought I'd asked. That your body jumped to attention like I'd stroked you. That you can tell me no and to shut the fuck up. But you can't tell me that you're not interested because I can see that truth all over you."

She swallowed hard, fighting her body's response as he let his gaze drift down and over her curves. No way was she going to let him get to her like this. She did this for a living. She talked dirty to men every damn night and they talked dirty back. But never had words rushed through her system like these. Every part of her was now achingly aware of just how long it'd been since she'd let a man touch her. But there was no way she'd allow herself to act on it with him. She cleared her throat.

"Does this usually work for you? A little dirty talk whispered in a woman's ear and she's all over you? Or maybe you just tell them you're in a band and that's enough." She turned to send Pike a frosty look. "Back off, Mr. Ryland. You've entered a restricted area."

His eyes flared with heat, like her attitude only turned him on more, but he moved back and gave her space. "If you think that's dirty talking, you've been seriously deprived."

She pointed. "Back to your side."

He raised his palms. "Not a problem. All I want to know is why not?"

Because attraction clearly wasn't the issue. Her traitor body had announced that loud and clear to him.

"Because this is my job, and this project is important to me. I'm not going to muddy the waters by crossing any lines with you. Plus, I'm a mom."

"So? I've heard rumors that moms get lives, too."

No, they didn't. Not really. Not when there was no dad in the picture, two jobs, and a kid with special needs.

She barely resisted rolling her eyes. "Come on, Pike. I know we don't know each other yet, but why in God's name would you come barking up this tree? The groupie business running low? You've got to have women with much simpler lives who want to play the hookup game with a big-time drummer."

His jaw tensed, expression darkening.

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