

PLAYING WITH FIRE

by Tara Ann Bradley

Prologue

in the time before

*F*ive years earlier....

After just three hours, twenty-one minutes and fourteen seconds, twelve people in a closed room changed my life forever.

Three hours.

Twenty-one minutes.

Fourteen seconds.

I felt it all over me.

In me.

Through me.

Around me.

A metamorphosis.

I twirled the neck of the chilled bottle of champagne between my fingers. My victory bottle. I bought it the day I got my acceptance letter into the law program at UIC. I'd been waiting five years to break it out. Finally, it was my turn to taste the sweet fizzle of success.

I was giddy, I'd admit that much. But, who wouldn't be. My first big case out of law school, a huge one for the entire state, had been a screaming success. Three hours, twenty-one minutes and fourteen seconds and the jury had come back with a unanimous verdict.

Guilty on all charges.

I did that.

And, with it, I'd open a door that had been closed for far too long—a door that I wished had never shut in the first place.

I threw a quick glance towards the silent office phone. It'd rung nonstop all night—the congratulations poured in like a summer storm, over as suddenly as it started, but none of them was the call I'd been waiting for. The one I'd been waiting fifteen years for.

Any moment now.

In the meantime, I sunk into the warm glow that had been building since the jury came back with their verdict. Before the foreman read from the little slip of plain white paper, my stomach was so knotted that I thought I was going to pass out from the tension. Fortunately, once I heard the words I'd only hoped that I would hear, that knot slowly unraveled, replaced by something that wasn't unpleasant at all. It felt good—like a warm, dry bed on a rainy day or a new pair of soft cotton pajamas in winter.

The feeling of victory was foreign to me—not often had I gotten what I wanted in life—but after feeling it for the first time, I was already hooked. Like a heroin addict after her first hit, I wanted this feeling over and over again.

This feeling.

I spun around in my squeaky, uncomfortable desk chair, the seat shaking as it struggled to turn in a full semi-circle. Normally, I hated this chair, but tonight it felt like the best chair in the world. Even the worn-out cushion, allowing the hard edges to poke up and grind into my ass, felt amazing.

Ever since the third fire, when it was dubbed a serial arsonist case, the media had been all over it. The media's fascination was only escalated by the arrest of Ben Greadley, the fire chief of Firehouse 49. From that

moment, Greadley had been all over the news, and with him, me as the lead prosecutor.

I welcomed the cameras, thrived in the unexpected spotlight that had been cast upon me. I granted every interview request, waved to every camera. All the attention—I embraced it, sought it, desired it. Only I knew that I was really waving to one person in particular.

She had to have seen me.

How could she not? Especially tonight when you couldn't throw a pebble into a group of reporters and not hit one that was talking about my big win. Therefore, I knew she'd learned where I was now and how to get in touch with me. It was only a matter of time before she did.

I just needed to be patient. I'd waited this long—fifteen years—a few more minutes was cake.

I continued swiveling until I faced the makeshift, small yet functional entertainment center in the corner. The 19-inch color television and the DVD-player belonged to the department—nothing about it was remarkable but it served its purpose. The cd player with wireless surround sound speakers, situated all around my office, were mine.

I snagged the remote from my desk and pointed it towards the entertainment center. Instead of turning on one of the ten thousand interviews with me playing on repeat, I pressed the button to power on the stereo and then turned up the volume to a level that was inappropriate during normal business hours. However, it was well past normal business hours, and I felt like dancing.

I forwent the Nina Simone cd that took up permanent residence in the cd player and switched to the radio. Other than the talk news station I listened to on the ride in to work, I didn't usually listen to the radio. So, I only knew of 103.5, the contemporary pop station that Hope often left blasting whenever she stayed with me.

I was unfamiliar with the song that was playing, but it fit my mood—up-tempo and happy. Therefore, I allowed it to play. I blocked out the sappy, cliché lyrics and horrible auto-tuned female voice, and I allowed the beat to filter through me.

It started as a toe tap and the bobbing of my head. The happiness pumped through my blood with every beat of the drum until every inch of my body was vibrating with it. Before I knew it, I was up, in front of my desk, swaying my hips as I turned in circles in the limited space my small office afforded me.

I'd move to a new office soon, a better office, maybe one of the big ones on the thirteenth floor with the big dogs. My recent victory assured me of that.

On that thought, I threw my head back, lifted my arms in the air and continued moving my hips from side to side. The euphoria inside of me exploded through to my face, and I couldn't stop it from showing on my lips.

The song ended, immediately replaced with another one. This beat was even faster, more energetic. I giggled as my body easily adjusted to the faster drumbeat, caught up in the perfect moment to end a perfect day at the start of what is going to be a beautiful career.

I couldn't remember ever being this happy.

"Pleased with yourself, aren't you, darlin'?" a harsh tone resonated from the doorway.

My body jolted mid-hip swirl, my heel snagged on the ugly brown carpet and I yelped as I was thrown off balance. I stumbled to the side and gripped the edge of the desk to steady myself.

Embarrassed and a little teed off, I swung around to the door, but then my body locked up. My breath caught in my throat. And I wasn't sure if my heart was pounding double-time because of the dancing, the fright or the sight of who was standing just outside of my office door. There, taking up most of the doorway, was fireman, Devin Michelson.

The Devin Michelson.

Handsome. Tall. Lean, muscular body. Wavy, dark hair. Glowing, permanently tanned skin. Hooded, dark green eyes. Deep dimples that made you want to stick your tongue in them.

Mmmmm.

Not that those dimples were ever aimed at me. He hated me, but that didn't mean I never caught sight of them when he was being charming with a beautiful woman or just shooting the shit with his firefighter buddies.

I wish I could say that this was our first encounter or that any of them had been even semi-pleasant enough to see a ghost of those dimples aimed down at me, but that would be an enormous lie.

No, this is the only the third time I'd been in Devin Michelson's immediate presence, each of them less pleasant than the last.

The first time I met him was at the scene of the third fire. He'd been part of the crew tasked with putting it out, and I was just assigned the case. I was eager (a little too eager, I must admit) to get there, dive elbow-deep into everything and get my hands dirty.

I stepped out of my car with my three-inch, peach heels and dry-cleaned, cream pants and peach blouse, trying to look as important as I thought I should. Immediately, my eyes went to him. Crowds of people stood by—cops, firemen, reporters, bystanders—and I homed in on him like I was a heat-seeking missile and he was an inferno. Like his mere life force called out to me.

I cut through the bystanders, flashed my credentials to the cops to get past the yellow tape, zigzagged through a dozen firemen and headed straight to him.

Like I had no other choice.

He was partially turned away from me, chatting with an older gentleman, who I didn't pay much attention then but learned later was Ben Greadley. The closer I got to him, the more I felt him all over me. And, he felt me too. Or, maybe I just wanted him to. Either way, halfway to him, he turned and pinned me with those eyes.

Those eyes...oh, God, those eyes.

Sonnets could be written about his eyes alone. Interesting, clear green with gold flecks. Hooded. Lines on the sides that said he laughed often. The best part? The thick, curly dark lashes. I knew women who paid thousands for lashes like those, and they still didn't look half as good as his did.

He was beautiful. Even with tossed, helmet hair and a snoot-stained face, he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid eyes on.

And, he was looking right at me.

I nearly stumbled, but I pulled it together and made it to him. The closer I got to him, the more intense his eyes held me. I was nervous, and I was never nervous. He caused a quivering in my belly that was so severe I could barely talk.

Of course, as soon as I opened my mouth, the magic of the moment was gone.

I made the stupid mistake of sharing my theory that the string of fires was started by a fellow fireman. That was the exact moment his dislike for me sparked.

The second time I saw him was when he came to plead his friend's case just after Greadley's arrest. The intensity I felt in his presence was no less severe. He still made me nervous, and apparently when I was nervous I said a bunch of stupid shit. Let's just say that his dislike for me grew to full blown hatred.

I may have only spoken to him those two times, but I'd seen him, day in and day out, sitting behind the defense table with Greadley's family. His essence took up the entire courtroom. His dark green eyes bore into me the entire time. I had to block him out just to get my job done.

Although I'd seen him often in the past few weeks, I was surprised to see him now.

"Mr. Michelson," I started but then pressed my lips together. I had no words. What could you say to someone after their friend had been sentenced to life in prison for murders connected to the fires he'd started—fires that he'd been trusted as a fireman to extinguish—and you'd been detrimental in putting him there.

He didn't move away from the doorway. His face was partially hidden in the shadows, but I could still make out the hard set of his jaws and the heated intensity of his eyes.

He still had on the Class 'A' dress uniform he'd worn earlier today in the courtroom—the one he'd worn every day during the trial—with his white hat tucked underneath his right arm. I admired that about him, admired that he'd had that much respect for another man. I just wished he'd chosen a better man to respect.

Neither one of us said anything. We just stared at each other for long beats, until I got caught up in his energy.

One thing about Devin Michelson was that no matter what he was feeling, his energy overpowered

everything around him, reaching out and pulling you in. The energy that was reaching out to me now was a combination of confusion, anger, vengefulness, uncertainty and sadness.

It was the sadness that delivered the hardest punch. Everything else was expected.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked, and I belatedly remembered the radio playing loudly in the background.

I reached over to my desk, snatched up the remote and powered it off.

Taking several deep breaths before turning back towards him, I said, "I'm sorry." I didn't know what I was apologizing for—for doing such a good job prosecuting Greadley, for being happy that I won or for him catching me relishing in that happiness.

Or, maybe it was because I knew I was the reason for that sadness behind his eyes.

The guilt at my role in his sadness pulled me away from my desk, gave me the courage to take a few steps towards him and say again, "I really am sorry about your friend, Mr. Michelson."

"No, you're not."

That harshness in his voice crawled up my spine and flipped on a switch. No more was I Mercy Collins, the human being who could empathize with someone in pain, but I was now Mercy Collins, the prosecuting attorney who shouldn't be ashamed that she'd done her job—pretty damn well, I might add.

I straightened my spine to my full height and put my hand on top of my hip. "No, I am sorry. I'm sorry that you thought you could come in here to guilt me for your friend being an awful person. Ben Greadley is a killer, and now everyone knows it." My voice had gone so cold that even I shivered.

He dropped his head, his eyes going down to his shiny black shoes, and he let out a harsh, yet quiet, scoff. "Killer," he muttered, almost to himself.

His head snapped up, his eyes back on me, and he finally moved, taking a step further into the room. "That awful person, as you called him, saw a kid in pain, making life-altering mistakes, and he took him in off the streets. Fought hard to get through to him. Gave him a family. A life. A purpose. What type of killer does something like that?"

"A narcissistic one," I returned. "Ben Greadley started those fires for the sole purpose of getting recognition of putting them out. It doesn't surprise me one bit that he'd reach out to a kid like that just so he could pat himself on the back every time he thought about how he saved someone else, so he could convince himself that he was a good person."

He shook his head and took another step in. The light from the lamp on my desk hit his face, and I could see him more clearly. The sadness I'd only caught a hint at was no longer a hint but the dominating emotion vibrating off him—from his downturn eyes to his slumped shoulders to the somber way his body moved when he walked.

My chest constricted, and I don't know why, but in that moment, I felt something for Devin Michelson. Something more than the pure lust and animalistic attraction I usually felt. I felt compassion and empathy, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around him until that sadness was gone.

Then, he ruined it.

Again.

"It amazes me how blind you are."

Again, my heckles went up, as they did a lot around him, and my shoulders stiffened. Thus, I got defensive. "No, Mr. Michelson, out of the two of us, I'm the only one who can see things how they are. My conscious is clear."

"I hope it stays that way once the truth comes out."

With that, he turned and strolled back towards the door.

"Wait," I called out. He paused in the doorway, turned his head to the side, but he didn't face me. "Who was the kid that Greadley saved?"

"You don't deserve to know."

Then, he was gone, and that would be the last I'd see of the beautiful Devin Michelson.

Or, so I thought.

Chapter One

I See You

"*M*rs. Becker, stop fuckin' around."
"Watch your mouth, Mercy Collins."

I took a deep breath and reminded her, "We're not swimming right now. We're exercising."

"What's better exercise than swimming?" she replied, whipping her chicken wing arms through the water as she circled me for the fifth time. "I don't really get this water aerobics crap, anyway. Is it aerobics? Is it synchronized swimming? Is it epileptic fits? Who knows."

I bounced-hopped to the side as her bony hip bumped my leg. I swear, the woman was a headache most days, but today...today she was a full-blown migraine.

Two mornings a week I taught my water aerobics class to the seniors at the Woodlawn Community Center, the little recreation center that I helped run with my friends. Two mornings a week she usually sat in one of the lounge chairs alongside the pool, reading one of her erotic novels. Why she arose early in the morning and came all the way down to the Center just to sit and read on the new Kindle her daughter bought her was beyond me, nor did I care. She was preoccupied, which meant that for the 25 minutes it took to teach my class, she was out of my hair.

But, for some reason, she threw on her purple bikini (yes, I said bikini, on an 81-year-old woman) and

joined us in today. That wouldn't be a problem if she hadn't ignored my every instruction and decided to do her own thing, irritating everyone in the pool, myself included.

She attempted to go around me once more, but I grabbed her waist, heaved her up to her feet and locked her wet, thin body against the front of mine. She struggled against me, flailing her arms and legs and sputtering like she was drowning even though she was out of the water.

"Mrs. Becker, stop," I chastised. She went still in my arms and glowered up at me, blinking water out of her eyes. "Listen, I'm thrilled that you want to join in today, but do you see these people? They get up early for each of these classes and you're being a disruption to them."

She rolled her eyes from me to the many angry eyes behind her and then back to me. "Pffft," she huffed. "You're all a bunch of fuddy duddies. I'm outta here. Faith is more fun, anyway." She wiggled her way out of my arms and turned towards the stairs to exit the pool. She stopped just before grabbing on to the top wrung and twisted her head back towards me. "And to think, you used to be my favorite." She made another disgusted sound, threw her nose in the air and pulled herself out of the pool. Then, without grabbing a towel to attempt to cover up or dry her gray, short hair. In her dripping wet purple two-piece, showing plenty of caramel, sagging skin, she padded out of the room and down the hall, leaving a trail of watery footprints in her wake.

I shook my head, laughed under my breath and continued on with my class.

Twenty minutes later, freshly showered and dressed, I headed to the main room, where I knew that the others would be.

After Faith's abduction, we'd settled into a routine of sorts. Every weekday morning, after my early morning water aerobics class, before Faith's first self-defense class, before Happye and Hope (and Grace before she officially went on maternity leaves few days prior) went to work, we ate breakfast together. It was a way for us to carve out time for each other during our increasingly busy schedules and to keep our connection strong.

It was important to all of us that we did that.

But, instead of Hope, Happye, Faith and Joie waiting for me to walk up the street to Daley's together, I found Hope, Happye, Faith, Joie, Mrs. Becker...and Devin Michelson.

Eff me.

He sat in one of the high-back, firetruck red chairs we had all over the place. Mrs. Becker lounged in the chair next to him. My friends were scattered here and there. All of them were focused on Devin while he regaled them with one of his tales. All of them had huge smiles on their faces.

I stopped in the mouth of the hall, where the bright yellow walls curved into the hallway, and contemplated turning back around before they saw me.

"A man who gets my body gets all of me."

Since a forbidden night that shall not be named, I limited my time around Devin. Most functions that would put me into close proximity of him I'd either made an excuse not to show up or left not long after he got there. And when it couldn't be helped, such as at Happye's wedding, I just ignored his existence all together. I knew it was a coward's way out, but I couldn't look at him without feeling the sting of his rejection.

"You nearly had more than that."

Even now, seeing him cut deep. That night came rushing back, making my humiliation anew. But, for the life of me, I couldn't tear my eyes away from him.

He looked good, but then Devin always looked good.

He wore a tight-fitting, black t-shirt and light blue jeans. I couldn't see them, but I knew his fire marshal badge hung on one side of his waistband and the holster carrying his CFD-issued sidearm hung on the other. While sitting, the thick material of the jeans stretched across his muscular thighs. And I knew that they looked just as good on him standing.

Devin wore dark colors—he kept his wardrobe stocked in blues, greens and grays—but this was the first time I'd seen him in black. It made his dark coloring that much darker, giving him a dangerous edge.

My eyes strolled up from where they'd been glued to his thighs to his face. His head was tipped down, and he smiled down to where Mrs. Becker was slouched in the chair next to him, both dimples deep and prominent on his face. His eyes shining. His expression open. His posture relaxed.

He felt at home here.

It wasn't often that I ran into Devin at the Center, but that didn't mean that he didn't come by. His sister-in-law, Happye, was the official owner of the building and the park, given to her as a wedding present from her billionaire husband and Devin's foster brother, Drake Powell. So, of course, he would come by; I just never saw him.

With my workload, I didn't spend as much time here as I would've liked, only finding time in the mornings and on weekends. Therefore, there were plenty of hours in the day for Devin to come by, get acquainted, settle in and become a part of this place, like everyone who'd ever stepped through those heavy green doors.

So, him feeling at home in the Center, *my* Center, wasn't a shock. What shocked me was that not one of my friends informed me of that fact.

I told no one about that night back at the beginning of June, but they still knew of the hostile, eruptive relationship I had with that man. This was *my* safe place, and Devin spending time here would make it no longer safe. They knew that, and they knew not to let me just stroll in unaware that he was hanging around like he owned the place.

"Merce, you okay?"

My eyes snapped to Hope, but not before noticing that all eyes were on me.

Crap.

How long had they been watching me watching *him*?

So much for making my quiet, quick retreat without anyone knowing.

I took a deep breath and focused once again on Hope, using all of my energy to block out Devin's pull and remember what she asked me.

"Yeah," I said. My voice sounded too breathy, too weak, and I hated that. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I'm good. Why you ask?"

She tilted her head slightly to the left. "You had a weird look on your face."

Yeah? Maybe because I was wondering why my friends let me walk into a minefield blindfolded.

I waved away her statement and said, "I was just thinking about something I forgot to do at work yesterday."

During all of this, I never stepped one foot away from my spot by the entrance. Even from across the room I felt Devin's eyes on me, doing a slow move up and down my body, his gaze feeling like a physical entity caressing my body. My skin tingled from just knowing he was watching me, and I couldn't stay still anymore.

Therefore, I moved.

Taking controlled, hurried steps over to the reception desk by the front door, I reached for the locked bottom drawer where I kept my purse and keys. I removed the key ring from where it hung around Joie's wrist on a bright orange bungee cord key chain without her permission, and then I bent and turned the key in the lock.

"What's up, chickee?"

I tipped my head back and gazed up into Faith's honey eyes. She stood directly across from me on the other side of the desk; her hands sprayed out on top of the counter to support her weight as she leaned in.

"Not that shirt," I retorted. My eyes traveled pointily down to her dark blue t-shirt. It had blurry white letters that read, "If you can read this, you've had one too many, my friend."

She arched one eyebrow. "It's way too early in the morning for all of your bitchiness."

I smirked at her, snatched my purse out of the drawer and slammed it shut. I placed it on the counter and started rummaging through it for my keys, sunglasses and phone. "It's too early in the morning for all of your butchiness," I retorted.

That was a running barb for Faith and me. She called me a bitch. I called her a butch. Life goes on. She

didn't take it to heart, and neither did I.

"Where you're going?" Hope asked when I finally found my shades and dove back in for the other two items.

"To work," I said without looking up. I pushed aside my gold, round compact and a small can of hair spray, but still couldn't find my phone or keys.

It was time to change purses, which I only did when the one I was carrying was out of control. It was the only way I could erase the chaos I'd accumulated over the past few months.

"We're going to breakfast," Faith stated, which sounded more like a demand.

"Not me," I replied. I took out my leather-bound day planner and a half-eaten cinnamon roll, turning my nose up the pastry that was now a disgusting gray rock. Who knows how long it had been in my purse. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd visited a Cinnabon. "Not today."

"Every day," she emphasized. "We made a pact. That shit is binding."

"We didn't make it in blood," I scoffed.

"We might as well have."

With my head still tilted down at my purse, I cut my eyes up at her. "You're being a little dramatic, don't you think?"

She stuck out her hip and hiked her hand on top of it, showing that attitude that she was famous for. "Says the woman that threw a hissy fit over one little kidnapping and called for this daily, early-morning 'Come to Jesus'."

"One *little* kidnapping?" Devin asked incredulously.

I ignored him and continued on Faith. "Yes, I felt that we needed to stay connected. We were drifting away in our own lives, and in the process, we had no clue that an internationally-infamous psychopath was stalking you. I, however, did not say that our breakfast dates were set in stone, that neither of us couldn't bail if need be."

"What's so important that you need to bail this morning?"

"I told you," I answered her. "Work."

I dropped my head and continued rummaging through my purse.

Where the hell are my keys?

This conversation was starting to get uncomfortable. Not because Faith was drilling me. Not because the rest of them were watching me a little too closely. It was uncomfortable because one particular pair of green

eyes was boring through my forehead, analyzing my words and observing my actions, deciphering all of it. Making out of it what he wanted to.

I gritted my teeth, locked my knees and tried to block him out, but his eyes felt like fiery fingers, crawling up my spine and leaving a trail of heat. The longer I stood there the hotter I felt.

Getting increasingly frustrated, I tipped my purse over and dumped everything out on the desk. The clang of loose change rolling around the mahogany wood echoed in the unusually silent room. Everything known to man fell out of that purse, but still no keys or phone.

"Where the hell are my keys?"

"Why are you so fidgety?" Faith asked, in a voice that said she knew exactly why but was having fun messing with me.

"I'm not fidgety," I defended. I didn't look at her, knowing that if I did, she would see the truth in my eyes. "I'm just frustrated that I can't find my damn keys."

"Really? Okay. Sure. This is *just* about keys." Although I still couldn't bring myself to look at her, I could hear the upturn of her lips and the sarcasm behind her honey eyes.

I decided to ignore that too.

My mind told me what was obvious, that my keys and phone weren't there, but my hands frantically kept pushing around the immense amount of crap I'd accumulated in the past few months—paper napkins from every eatery within a mile radius of the courthouse, makeup, about a hundred business cards, tampons, over \$20 in loose change, the paper wrappers from a dozen straws, balled up receipts, six packs of gum even though I never chewed the stuff and not one but two stun guns.

Utter and complete chaos, just like my life—especially if I had the type of life that required for me to carry around two stun guns.

"The office," Joie blurted out. I gazed to the side, to where she was sitting beside me in a black, leather swivel office chair. "Don't you usually keep your keys and phone in the office during your classes?"

Damn, she was right.

Every day I locked my purse up in that bottom drawer and then took my keys and phone to the office. *Every day*. It was as much of a ritual to me as long, hot baths at night and eggnog at Christmas. How could I have forgotten that?

Because of *him*, that's how.

He scrambled my brain whenever he was near (and sometimes when he wasn't) with those damned jade eyes. And that lush, thick dark brown hair. And that wide, plush mouth. And that tall, lean muscular body.

And the way his voice sounded like black forest cake—deep, rich and divine.

Ever since that night, at the most inopportune times, which was all the time, all I heard was that voice, saw those eyes, felt that mouth, and craved that body. And now, having him in same room with me was making the imagery that much more lethal.

Joie stared back at me. Her head slightly tilted to the side, her brows furrowed with confusion.

I wanted to kiss her.

In fact, I did kiss her.

I bent towards her, gripped the sides of her face with both of my hands and pulled her the rest of way, laying a loud, sloppy smack on her forehead.

Then, I was off.

Without another word to anyone else, without a backwards glance at anyone, especially at *him*, I double-timed down the long hallway, hurrying to the modest office in the back.

Every step I took out of his sight, the relief was palpable. My shoulders relaxed. My skin calmed. My breathing evened. My hair follicles resumed the natural state of growing and falling out. Every organ in my body once again functioned as they should.

I felt *me* returning.

Still, I couldn't completely let go. Not while I was here. Not while he was here. Not until I was safely behind the wheel of my vehicle and breaking multiple traffic laws getting as far away from him as I could.

I know it was irrational. I know it wasn't like me to run from anything. But, it was *him*. He took me away from myself and made me this crazy, irrational woman who daydreamed about green eyes, lush mouths, lean bodies and deep voices. As long as I was around him, I would stay this mess of a woman.

"Thank you for tonight, Sweetheart," his phantom voice from that night popped into my head, making my center quiver and then clench.

"You're beautiful every second of the day, darlin', but I gotta tell you, when you laugh, your beauty is surreal."

I swung open the simple wood door with the frosted glass inlay with a little too much force and rushed inside, jogging to the large glass desk against the opposite wall. I kept my phone and keys in the top left drawer, and my fingers inched to wrap around them. They were my lifelines, my freedom, and I knew I wouldn't be able to breathe until I had them in my hands. I'd never been so desperate to be out of the Center, but with him here this was the last place I wanted to be.

I was halfway to the desk when I heard the door swing open and then click close again.

I sighed. I should've known she would follow me here. They didn't call Faith a bulldog for nothing. She never just let shit go.

"Listen, if you let this one go," I called back to her as I continued to the desk, "I promise to never miss breakfast again. In fact, for the next month, breakfast is on me."

"Mighty kind of you, Boss."

My entire body locked up. That wasn't Faith's voice. That voice made me hope for Faith's voice, even if it was used to bust my chops. That voice...that deep, gravelly voice...was the voiceover for every dream I'd had in the last four months—some good, some bad, some erotically sweet, some bordered on hardcore porn. That voice haunted my every waking hour. Therefore, it wasn't a welcomed voice. It wasn't the voice of anyone I wanted to talk to. Not now. *Not ever.*

Definitely not alone behind a close door.

I forced my body to become unstuck, and the first thing I did was take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever was about to happen. I continued towards the desk, but this time my steps were slower, steadier, more calculated. I watched my feet take each step, counting them in my head—anything to distract me from his scent filling the small room, suffocating me with the memories that came along with it. But, mostly because I didn't want him to see that he rattled me.

"You lost?" I asked, not hiding the cold bite in my voice.

The air was charged, sparking, as it always were when we were forced to share the same space. The same electric air that had me withering underneath him that night, despite our volatile history, and made me avoid him ever since.

"Not anymore," he answered me from somewhere by the door. "I found exactly who I was looking for."

I made it to the other side of the desk and placed my palms flat against the cool glass. Despite how hard I tried to fight it, I succumbed to the pull to look up at him.

I was right, he never left from by the door. He leaned back into it, his arms folded across his chest, and looking, for all intents and purposes, like he was just leaning nonchalantly against a door. But, I knew better. He was blocking my exit.

His hair was longer than it was when I had it gripped in both hands months ago. The ends curled around his ears and on the back of his neck. The front of it fell onto his face and laid against his forehead. The rest was wild, like he'd run his hands through it repeatedly and only the front was discipline enough to fall back into place.

He was taller than I remembered, by about six inches. Which was ridiculous since grown men didn't grow six inches in a little over four months. Somehow, in my mind, I'd shrunk him. Made him less larger than life to lessen his influence on my every stray thought.

I didn't remember his eyes being as green, his mouth as attractive, and his scent as intoxicating.

Even though the imaginary version of him wasn't as tall, eyes weren't as green, and didn't smell like the epitome of maleness, the diminished memory of him still packed one hell of a punch.

Which made the close-up and live version that much more lethal.

I dropped my head, busied myself with opening the drawer and fidgeting with my phone and keys. I told myself that I wasn't hiding, that I didn't look away because the sight of him was too much to withstand. That the pain in my chest was due to Luigi's deep-dish pepperoni pizza I ate the night before and not the ache of wanting someone I couldn't have, not in the way that I wanted him.

I told myself that a lot over the past few months.

I swallowed a few times, hoping my voice came out normal when I asked, "You were looking for me?"

"Yep."

I raised an eyebrow. "For Chrissakes, why?"

He shrugged. "I figured it was time."

"Time for what?"

"Time for you to stop running from me."

My head snapped up, but before it did, I cooled my expression, my emotions, my thoughts. Basically, I gave him a piece of ice. Showing nothing. Giving nothing away but the harsh, short laugh pushed through frozen lips.

I pointed to my chest. "I'm running from you?"

"We both know you are, so spare me the bullshit."

"What bullshit?" I scoffed.

He pushed off the door and took a step into the room. "All of," he swiped his hand through the air, from my head to my torso, "this. The way you're trying to keep yourself detached when we both know that's impossible." He took another step forward. Then another. And another. "That blank look on your face. You're putting a lot of effort into hiding from me, Boss, even while standing right in my goddamned face."

Another step.

And another.

Until he was standing on the other side of the desk, right in front of me.

Close in front of me.

So close I caught the smell of coffee with a hint of hazelnut on his breath.

"Do you wanna know what I see when I look at you, Merce?"

I didn't want to know, but, despite whatever I said, I knew he was going to tell me anyway. Therefore, I pressed my lips together and said nothing.

He placed both hands on the desk, palms against the glass, and he leaned in closer. "I. See. You," he whispered.

My head jerked. My stomach clenched to the point of being painful. Each breath caught in my throat before being forced out, and no matter how much I tried to regulate it, my breathing wouldn't return to normal.

Still, I said nothing.

"I know why you've been avoiding me. That night was confusing for you—it was confusing for me too. But, now you gotta stop. I don't like you hiding away from me. I like seeing *you*. I didn't know how much until now, seeing you for the first time after not seeing you for too damn long."

My breath caught again, and I didn't force it out this time. I held on to it. It felt important that I did. Important that I didn't miss what was happening.

Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

He moved in closer, his face just a breath away from mine. I don't know how that was possible. The desk that separated us was wide, the width of two desks put together. Devin was tall, but not tall enough that he could lean his top half across that incredibly wide desk and be in my face. Not unless I'd subconsciously moved towards him too.

One of his hands came up and wrapped around the side of my neck. His warm hand was rough but it felt like cashmere against my skin. It was also familiar; it felt like coming home to a burning fireplace after being in the cold during a long winter's night.

It felt right.

Devin felt it too. His eyes changed. Darkened, yet became softer. Like a shield had been lowered.

My own shield melted away. My body relaxed, yet my heart accelerated, and I finally let out that breath I'd been holding.

Everything that was him was overtaking all that was me. It would be so easy to fall into his eyes, merge with his warmth and just disappear. At that moment, everything that was me wanted that.

It was pathetic how my body reacted to him still. The months away from him did nothing to relinquish

his hold on me.

I didn't like being pathetic. I'd spent a lifetime of cycling through various degrees of pathetic, waiting on someone who didn't want me.

I guess I was just tired of waiting. And the thought that for a second, I was willing to disgust me.

That's why when I felt him moving in, felt more of his essence swallowing up mine, I pulled back. I balled my phone and keys between the fingers of one hand, slammed the drawer shut with the other and took a step back.

This time when I stared up at him I hid nothing. I don't know what he saw on my face, what I was giving away, but whatever it was caused a change in his.

The softness left his eyes, his mouth pinched, and his jaw hardened. His hand fell away from my face and he took a step back. His arms refolded over his chest.

He laughed harshly and without humor, and he shook his head. "You disappoint me, Boss."

My head tilted, and I frowned up at him. "What are you getting at now?"

"I didn't take you for the type to tuck your tail and run away."

I copied his stance and folded my arms, that deep irritation that only he could cause crept up my spine. "I didn't take you for the type to disregard the facts for the sake of your own ego. Why the hell would I run from you?"

"You tell me."

"I never ran."

"Sweetheart, you literally ran into this office just a second ago. Took one look at me and booked it. Even now, you're running. Your legs may not be moving, but you're still running."

I opened my mouth to deny his claim once again when something came to me. All this time, I'd been so preoccupied in hiding my cards from him that I didn't notice his tells.

So, I studied him.

I studied the thick, dark, almost black hair falling across his forehead and curling around his ears and neck. Studied the thick, long lashes encasing rich green eyes—which I still didn't know their true hue because they changed so frequently. Studied the straight nose, strong jaw and slumped forehead that, when placed perfectly together on the perfect face of a perfect male specimen, was almost too attractive to look directly at. I studied the stubble on the beard he'd only recently started growing, but it was already thick and dark. I studied his wide, thick, pink lips that was downright lickable. Everything about him—his lips, the deep dimples that popped out for no damn reason, the corded neck, the strong shoulders and muscled chest, the dimples in his

hips and the deep V in his G.I. Joe-esque Adonis belt—was just so fuckin’ lickable my tongue tingled whenever he was within ten feet of me.

Like it was doing now.

I gave myself a mental shake and continued my studying.

Observing other's people body language was what I did. It was how I knew I was getting somewhere with a suspect during an interrogation or when to put on the pressure on the witness stand. If I'd done that, I would've caught the corded neck, the skin bunching around his eyes and the thumb tapping against his bicep. I affected him just as much as he affected me.

I smirked at him. "Your slip's showing, Michelson."

He tried to hide it, but I caught the twitch in his right eye and the tightening of his mouth. "You think so?"

"I know so," I replied, feeling my groove come back.

My body relaxed. My breaths evened. Renewed confidence swirled in my belly and poured out of my pores. I hadn't felt this powerful around him in a long time.

I stepped from behind the desk, feeling the normal sway in my hips. I nearly smiled when his eyes dropped to my hips as he watched me sashay up to him, close to him, so close that we were only a breath away from touching, and I parked my butt on the desk while facing him.

His head jerked back, not expecting me to get so close, close enough that if I took a deep breath we would touch.

"I see you, too." I didn't mean it to, but my voice dropped to an intimate whisper.

"Yeah? What do you see?"

"I see a man that is also running," I replied. "From what, I don't know. Nor do I care."

I leaned in closer, patted him twice on the chest, lifted my ass off the desk and sauntered around him, deciding to have breakfast with the girls after all.

I got two steps when my arm was caught in a vice grip, and I was yanked back in front of him. I stared up at him with wide eyes, my breaths coming out uneven, and I closed my eyes against the shiver that rushed through me at feeling his warm hand against my skin. It thrilled the shit out of me to be manhandled by him, which was weird because I was never into the rough stuff, but images of all the ways Devin could be rough with me fluttered through my mind.

My eyelashes lowered, and my eyes roamed his body, from his thick thighs to the hard wall of his chest, all the while feeling my body weakening from the warm fluttering in my belly. My mouth and center flooded

with moisture, and in that moment, all that I wanted was to feel all of him all over me. To taste him with every part of me. God, the reactions he pulled from me with no effort whatsoever was almost embarrassing, but in that moment, I didn't give a shit.

My eyes roamed up to his face and then his eyes, and my body locked to find him staring back at me. He'd watched me perusing his body lustfully, and he had a look on his face that I couldn't decipher. It was only there for a second, and then there was movement behind his eyes and he frowned, as if he'd just remembered something.

"Listen," he said, his voice deep and rumbly. His dropped his hand from my arm and took a step back. Instantly, I mourned the loss of his heat on my skin and in my space, but I hid it behind a blank look as I waited for him to continue. He stuffed both of his hands in the front pockets of his dark denim jeans. "I actually came here to give you a heads up before you went to work."

I tilted my head and frowned up at him. "A heads up about what?"

"It's about Ben," he warned me as a precursor, and, just like that, all the good feelings he invoked in me melted away like a block of ice in the middle of the desert, replaced by the same frustration I'd been feeling for five years whenever the subject of Ben Greadley came up.

Ben Greadley was a fire chief who mentored Devin and convinced him to join the fire department. Five years ago, I was the chief prosecutor on Greadley's arson and murder case. Devin didn't take his buddy being locked up very well, swore that the guy was innocent, and he hated my ass for doing my job and taking a criminal off the street. Five years later, Greadley was doing three consecutive life sentences, Devin was now a fire marshal, and he still hated my ass.

My entire body went frigid, and I took a woolen step back. I pressed my butt into the corner of the desk, putting as much room between us as I could in that limited space.

I couldn't believe we were still having this argument.

"Really, Devin? Isn't this getting old?"

God, why couldn't he get over this?

His eyes flared at the frostiness in my voice. "I just wanted to warn you_"

"Warn me?" I scoffed. I crossed my arms underneath my breasts and speared him with a hard look. "In order for you to warn me, there has to be a threat. Are you threatening me, Michelson?"

A dark shadow moved over his face. His eyes darkened to a deep, dark green—so dark they were nearly black. It was amazing to watch from this close up, seeing his eyes filter through all the shades of green until they landed off on a very dark, a very pissed-off hue.

The muscle in his right cheek ticked, and his jaw was tightly clenched when he forced out, "I don't make

threats, Boss. I make promises, which I always keep.”

With the stillness of his body, the hardness in his eyes, the anger radiated off him and smacked me in the face. Instead of taking heed and backing down, I let it feed my own.

I took two steps forward, getting into his face. Leaning up on my tiptoes, I warned him, “Well, Michelson, I do make threats. All the time. But, you need to listen up because this here is a promise. You keep shoveling this Ben Greadley crap down my throat, it’s going to make me very angry. And, I get very bitchy when I’m angry.”

His face twisted into a sneer that was.... oh, shit....so sinfully attractive that I felt the need to go to confession, and I wasn’t catholic. “You mean it is different from your usual sunny disposition?” he asked sarcastically.

I raised higher on my toes, leaned in further into his space, and pushed my face closer to his. With my jaw tight and my teeth clenched, I *promised*, “Push me and find out.”

Then, I rolled back down to the heels of my feet. This time when I stepped around him and stalked off out of the office, he didn’t stop me

Chapter Two

You're Pushing It, Little Man

I'd barely stepped one foot off the elevator when I heard, "Collins, you're late. Again." Scott Burros. The bane of my working life. The reason why my asshole clenched every time I stepped into the State's Attorney Office, or the SAO, as we liked to call it.

His fast and furious dark cloud of Polo Sport hit me ten seconds before his obnoxious, high voice did—which was about three seconds before the elevator door completely opened.

Like every other time, the irritation rushed up my body. Every damn day, no matter what time I strolled into the SAO, he was there, standing on the eighth floor, hovering near the elevators. Every damn day, I fought the urge to palm his greasy, small face and mush him out of mine.

I huffed and forced my way out of the elevator without laying so much as a finger on him. I didn't have to. With every step I took towards him, he took a step back.

Scott was like that. He barked all day long, but as soon as you stepped too close to the fence he backed the hell up.

Short and prematurely balding at the ripe old age of thirty-three, he was a non-funny, even less attractive, poor woman's George Costanza. A very unpleasant man—he had the personality of a menstruating tree troll, with the permanent stench of too much cologne and bad breath.

He wore an off-white button up shirt that looked as if he'd slept in it three nights in a row, but I knew

he'd put it on fresh that morning. His pants were brown, as usual, tight around the waist and hips and hung long over his beaten up brown loafers.

"Remind me again, Scott, what exactly is your job?" I took three steps away from him, stopped and then swung back to face him. "Because the only thing you excel at is standing in the halls and announcing when people show up for work. If this is what the taxpayers are paying you for, then you're highly overpaid, my little, bald, annoying pain in the ass. Though, going by how you dress, they're not paying you nearly enough."

I scrunched up my nose, pivoted on the toes of my beige Jessica Simpson's again and continued down the carpeted hall.

"You missed this morning's staff meeting," he called out, relentlessly buzzing after me like the gnat he was.

"You mean the morning staff meetings where you drone on and on about someone stealing your chicken salad sandwich three years ago?" I asked, not slowing down or missing a step. "Bummer."

"You, of all people, would've found this particular meeting interesting, Collins," he called out again, raising his voice because I'd made halfway down the long hallway.

That made me stop.

I swung back towards him a little too fast, and then had to hop to the side to avoid colliding into Diane, the new law clerk. She gasped and crushed the big, obnoxious bow in the front of her beige, shiny-satin shirt in her right hand. At the last minute, she sidestepped out of the way and hugged the wall as she scurried away.

It seemed like a bit of an over exaggeration, but...okay.

I got it.

Scott was the hydrogen peroxide to my sodium iodide. Sometimes we mixed together without anything disastrous happening. Just a colorless, drama-free string of words that left the room virtually untouched. But, most of the time, times like this, Scott threw dish soap into our mixture that sprung up a colorful explosion that burned everyone not smart enough to duck for cover.

Therefore, I couldn't blame Diane for grasping her hideous blouse and getting the hell on, as anyone should. In fact, the hallway was only semi-empty when I stepped off the elevator; it was completely empty now.

I took the twenty or so steps it took to get back into his space and said, "If the main agenda wasn't your resignation than I don't give a rat's ass."

Scott was the managing attorney for Major Crimes, so technically he was my boss, and I was being insubordinate talking to him like that. But, I took comfort in the fact that I was hired by the State's Attorney, Ellen Bryant, and only Ellen Bryant could fire me. It was in my contract.

Therefore, I wasn't frightened for my job. The only thing my insubordination would earn me from Scott was for him to make things difficult for me. But, Scott constantly made things difficult for me, so I didn't care.

"Like I said, you should've come to staff meeting."

My head jerked back, and I eyed him up and down with narrowed, distrusting eyes. I hiked the straps of my purse and briefcase further up my shoulder and crossed my arms over my chest. My voice had a disbelieving tint when I asked, "You resigned?"

He rolled his eyes in his overexaggerated way, where he wanted you to have no doubt that he was rolling his eyes. Where his eyes practically disappeared into his skull and he looked like the little girl from *The Exorcist*. "No. Not technically."

I couldn't stop the small, satisfied grin that curved my lips or the bubble of giddiness welling up in my throat. "You were sacked?"

"No," he answered, twisting the side of his mouth with disdain. "So, you can take that smug look off my face."

I huffed. The smile snapped off my face, and the ball of giddiness hardened and lodged in my throat. With irritation crawling up my skin, I leaned into him, my eyes narrowing even more. "You really shouldn't mess with me before I've had my third cup of coffee. I can be a real bitch between cups two and three."

He scrunched up his mouth into something that was supposed to show amusement with a hint of teasing but translated into something highly unattractive and petty. "More of a bitch than normally? I find that hard to believe."

See. That's why I didn't bite my tongue to *my boss*. He called me a bitch on a daily basis, so he deserved everything he got. Though, this was the second time today someone hinted that my personality was less than.... *sunny*. The last one stung; this one...not so much.

My hand was up before I could stop it and my finger was in his face. "You're pushing it, little man," I warned.

Once again, I was on the move, heading to the safety of my office before Scott goaded me into another altercation that I really wasn't in the mood for.

Or, that I had the time for.

Like he said, I was late. I'd spent most of the night in the hospital waiting room dealing with yet another one of Grace's false labors. I had very little sleep. I couldn't remember the last time I ate anything that didn't come out of a paper bag. And, I had an unrelenting headache for the last two days. On a day that was turning out to be exponentially shitty, where I had to already deal with Devin Michelson, the last person I wanted to deal with was Scott Burros.

"I'm not done talking to you," he yelled just as I made it to the threshold of my office.

"But, I'm done talking to you," I threw over my shoulder before entering my office and slamming the door behind me.

I sighed with relief to see Glenn, my intern, already there, sitting in one of my high-back, lime green leather chairs with a manila folder open in his lap. As much as I loved seeing Glenn there, I loved seeing the two cups from Cup 'o Joes and a brown paper bag on the desk in front of him even more.

"Scott being an ass?" he asked without looking up.

"When is Scott not being an ass?"

I threw my briefcase on the beige, leather sofa I had pushed against the far-left wall and strolled to my desk chair.

I loved my office. Beige, leather sofas. A long, off-white desk with cypress wood side panels. Lime green accents, chairs and office accessories to give the room a splash of color. Slick, modern and stylish, so unlike the dim, dull offices that my coworkers were forced with. Of course, they could purchase everything themselves like I did. I didn't mind it. I spent a lot of my life in my office, I needed to be comfortable in it, for it to fit me in order to give my best when I was in it.

By the time I was seated in my office chair (mine was also beige and leather but it had a swivel seat and high arms), Glenn had already pushed over one of the cups and the paper bag.

My stomach growled, and my mouth watered as the first whiff of strong Americano and glazed donuts hit my nostrils. "Ummm," I moaned after the first sip of coffee. "Glenn, you are an angel."

The 'Best Coffee in Illinois' award still belonged to a little diner in my hometown of Lincoln. Whenever I went back, I drove straight to Mamie's for a large cup, even before I went to my grandparent's farmhouse. But, Cup o' Joes had to be the second best. Nothing else I've found in Chicago measured up, and in the eight years I've lived here I've tried tons. Lucky for me that Joes was just across the street from the courthouse, a few blocks from our offices.

The donuts at Joe's were just as good. Soft and sugary, they practically melted in your mouth. I could name at least three times where I'd huffed down a half of dozen without chewing once.

While I couldn't function without my daily dose of Joes' coffee, I didn't indulge in the donuts often. I considered them a delicacy, and like all delicacies, they were only saved for special occasions. Like days where I've been up all night in a hospital waiting room and had another long day ahead of me.

While days where I needed Joe's donuts were few and far between, Glenn always knew. It was times like this that I was eternally grateful to have him as my clerk.

"You know he's leaving, right?"

My head jerked up from where it was buried deep into the paper bag. "Who? Joe?" I asked around a mouth full of donut. I didn't stop to think about how disgusting and unladylike that was. I was just praying that he wasn't saying that my favorite coffee shop was moving closer to the Dan Ryan like so many other businesses these days.

Glenn smirked but he didn't look up at me. He tapped his fingers against the back of the folder he was holding, his loud breathing the only thing heard for a few seconds. Then, he peeked up at me and said, "No, Scott."

I leaned into the desk. Tilting my head to the side, I raised my eyebrows and steadied a look on him. "Are you sure?"

"They announced it in the staff meeting this morning. He's going to Special Crimes."

I bit the corner of my lip and rolled my eyes. "Well, I guess, technically, transferring isn't resigning or getting fired. So, he wasn't messing with me just now?"

While I was irritated that Scott didn't just come out and tell me this in the hallway, a sliver of excitement formed in my belly. If Scott was transferring, that meant a supervisor's position was opening up in my department.

Maybe this day wasn't so shitty after all.

"They introduced his replacement and everything."

Or, maybe it was shittier than I thought.

The donut I was still clutching between my thumb and forefinger dropped back into the bag with a thud, causing the bag to slip from my other hand and hit the edge of the coffee cup. The cup tilted over and spilled coffee all over my cluttered desk, the carpeted floor and, unfortunately, my lap. The scorching hot coffee seeped through my lightweight, linen slacks and burned my upper thighs, dangerously close to my crotch.

"SHIT," I screeched while jumping up from my desk. I held the stained fabric away from my aching skin with my thumb and forefinger, all the while shaking off the excess liquid. None of this did anything to stop the burning of my skin around my private area.

For some strange reason, a segment from an old MTV comedy news program that Hope used to like to watch popped into my head. In that segment, they hilariously mocked some guy calling Lindsey Logan "fire crotch." This was most likely not what he was referring to, but those were the words running around in my head as I waved the front of my pants, trying to get some relief for my crotch that felt like it was on fire.

I hadn't noticed, but at some point, Glenn had also rose from his seat. He had a large roll of paper towels in one hand and a wad of them in his other hand, dabbing at the spilt coffee on the desk. However, he wasn't quick enough to catch a rolling train of coffee barreling straight for the files on the edge of the desk.

"You okay?" he asked, and I nearly laughed because I was this close to relaying the fire crotch statement.

"I'm fairing much better than my pants," I answered instead, frowning down at the dark brown stain in my light khaki pants. The bright side, if I choose to find one, was that at least it wasn't in the back. Then I would look like I had a bad case of diarrhea and hadn't made it to the bathroom in time.

"I picked up your backup suit from the cleaners yesterday," he muttered, unrolling more towels and going back to work on the desk. "It's hanging up in your closet."

I sighed with relief. I was already unbuttoning my slacks on the way to the closet. I usually kept an extra outfit in my office for this very occasion. But, since I had worn my backup a week ago when we did an all-nighter and was due in court the early next morning, I was sure that I was shit out of luck now.

Thank God, I had Glenn.

I needed to express that eternal gratitude to him but something he said earlier needed clarification.

"They already hired someone for the supervisor position?" I asked him, kicking off my shoes so that I could remove my pants.

I pulled the door slightly closed to block my semi-naked self from Glenn's view. I removed my stained slacks and replaced them with the black ones out of the hanging garment bag. I also grabbed the matching jacket but skipped putting it on. Instead, I grabbed my shoes and went back to my desk, hanging the jacket on the back of my chair.

Glenn finished cleaning the desk and strolled across the room to dispose of the stained, soaking wet paper towels. What he didn't do was answer me.

"Glenn," I called out to him. He dropped the dripping paper towels in the trash and cut his eyes to me to let me know that he heard me. "They already hired someone?"

Another reason why Glenn and I worked so well together was that he could read me, probably better than anyone else that I knew. His hazel-brown eyes moved over my tilted, blond head to my rapidly-blinking eyes, to the right corner of my bottom lip that was trapped between my teeth and then to the way I was fidgeting with the lapel of my peach shirt.

His eyes came back to mine and he nodded. "Th...they didn't g...g....give you a ch..chance to apply?" he asked.

I loved Glenn, but his nervous stuttering irked my nerves. It was a testament to our close working relationship. When I was in distress, he was in distress. My distress came out in avoidance and overworking; his caused stuttering.

I needed to calm myself so that he could get calm.

I scrunched up my mouth, the hurt making my throat tight. I never showed that particular emotion at work; now wasn't the time to start.

I dropped my hand and sat up straighter in my chair, crossing my legs and arms. I blanked my face to give the impression that I was fine, and I dropped my eyes to the coffee-stained files in front of me to further perpetuate that illusion. "No. I had no idea he was leaving, remember?"

Glenn frowned and scratched his temple. "I...I...um...I thought Ellen s...s...said that the n...next supervisor p...po...position was yours."

"I thought the same thing," I mumbled, frowning down at my desk.

I had a specific plan for my life, a trajectory that I needed to follow to one day land the State's Attorney position, which was my ultimate goal.

Like most people who previously had the top position in our office, Ellen had political ambitions that would one day lead her to Washington.

Not me.

My life's goal was to be the State's Attorney. Then, I could really do some good in this city, make a dent in the steady rising murder rates. That was my goal. The next step to one day being the state's attorney was to land a supervising prosecutor's position.

Ellen had promised me that position. How could she give it to someone else?

"So, who got it?" I asked Glenn. I folded my body into my chair and leaned into the desk until my folded arms settled on the wood. "It isn't Mark, is it?"

Mark Jones, son of a state's senator, was the poster boy for nepotism. Incredibly lazy and impossibly good-looking, he was our resident pain in the ass. He's lost so many cases, easy cases, that I wondered if he worked for the mob, and I'm pretty sure that he had at least three sexual harassment complaints filed against him.

The guy was Teflon in our office, all because of the sperm that knocked up his mom. So, regardless of his flawed record and that he started at the office the same time as me, it wouldn't surprise me that he was now my supervisor.

"Ummm," he drew out. He dropped his eyes to his lap, and he picked pretend lint from his houndstooth trousers. "N...no. They brought in s...s...someone," he finally looked up at me and mumbled, "from outside."

They hired someone else?

They brought in a stranger?

They looked over everyone, especially me, deemed us unfit and went looking for an outsider to be our

new supervisor?

What the fuck?

"They brought in someone else?" I asked around the tightness in my chest. My voice croaked when I inquired, "Who?"

So much for calming myself.

I didn't want to be hurt. I really didn't want to be hurt, but I couldn't help but to be hurt. And the worst part, I could no longer hide it from Glenn.

He cracked a nervous smile in what I could only assume as a way to lighten the mood. "A frat boy from Washington. You're going to hate him."

That stupid smile stayed on his face the entire time he was talking, but at least he got over the stuttering.

I lifted my mouth to return his smile, digging deep to make it convincing. "Of course, I will."

He took my job; how could I not hate him.

I kept that thought to myself and picked up the pen I was fiddling with. "Sooo...ready to get to work?"

"Mercy, I'm sorry," Glenn said. That smile was still in place, which made his apology seem less sincere, but I knew that he meant it. "That promotion should've been _"

I waved off his comment. "It's fine, Glenn. Really."

"Maybe you should talk to _"

"Glenn," I warned. "Drop it."

Not getting the promotion sucked. What sucked even more was not being told the position was coming available let alone given the chance to apply for it. I thought I had earned at least that much.

But, apparently, I was wrong.

My emotions over this issue was all over the place. The last thing I needed was for Glenn to stoke the fires that were brewing just below the surface. I was still an assistant state's attorney, and we had work to do.

I took a deep breath, rubbing my sweaty hands up and down my thighs. I needed the added seconds to pull myself together. Once that was done, once I knew that I wouldn't let that piece of disturbing information deter my entire day, I held out my hand to him. "What were you working on when I came in?"

"The Crane case," he scooted to the edge of his chair and held out the file. "We finally got that DNA report back from the lab."

"Perfect." I took the folder from him. Just what I needed to put all that other mess out of my mind.
"What's the verdict?"

Focusing on work was what Glenn needed also because that stupid, nervous smile was finally gone, and his voice sounded more confident. "It's a match."

Now, that was good news. The kind that almost made up for the bad news I got earlier.

"I knew it," I said, a genuine smile stretching across my face as my eyes roamed the piece of paper. I'd been waiting on this piece of vital evidence for almost a month. "Time to draft that warrant."

I turned on my computer.

"I'll notify Judge Dreyfuss and Detective Mills," Glenn stated, pulling his cell phone from his inside jacket pocket.

I fired up FullCase, the software our office used to type up warrants, while Glenn chatted on the phone. I plugged in the information and printed out the document just as he was wrapping up his calls.

"Mills will meet us at Crane's place of work. Judge Dreyfuss is waiting for us at the courthouse to sign that warrant. But, we need to hurry. He will only be in his chambers until 10am."

"Great." I jumped up from my seat and snatched my jacket from the back of the chair. I circled the desk, stopping only long enough to retrieve the warrant from the printer and grab a blue document jacket from the shelf, and then I headed to the door. "Let's go."

I was halfway down the hall to the elevator when I heard Glenn coming up behind me. "Now that we have the warrant, we need to get started compiling the case and working on our strategy."

"True," I stated. I pressed the elevator's call button. I let out a hard sigh and push the hair back off my shoulders. "Like we need any more work added to our crazy workload."

We stood shoulder to shoulder, waiting on the notoriously slow elevator to make it to the eighth floor.

"But," I continued. "If it means taking the scum off the streets who drugged and raped five little boys, then I say pile it on. Who needs sleep anyway?"

"I agree," he replied. "So, your place tonight? I'll bring the Chinese food."

"Ummm..." The elevator doors dinged open and I stepped inside. "Actually, I can't tonight."

He stepped in after me and threw me a confused frown. It was rare that I turned down a night of working and Chinese food. But, lately, I've been doing it more and more.

I pressed the button for the ground floor, cut my eyes to him and shrugged. "It's Halloween."

He chuckled. "What? Now you don't work on Halloween? Since when? We once brought in the New

Year knee deep in depositions, and I can't remember the last Christmas we had off."

That was also true. In fact, my catchphrase was "crime didn't take off for holidays, so neither did I."

I dropped my head to proofread the warrant in my hand, even though I knew it was perfect, and tucked a piece of blonde hair behind my ear. "We're throwing a party for the kids at the Center tonight."

Why I felt bad telling him that, I don't know. I made a mental note to contemplate on that later.

"Ohhh," Glenn drew out, the hurt tone in his voice reminding me of why I was hesitant to tell him in the first place. "It's a Misfits thing. G...g....got it."

It used to irritate me when people called me and my friends that. Now I embraced the name, often using it myself. Let's face it, we were misfits...and a little bit crazy. We'd been shot at more times than most of the CPD.

But, Glenn was right. It was a Misfits thing, but that wasn't the whole reason why I couldn't bail on the party.

I turned to him and explained, "Glenn, I'm not choosing them over you," I held up the warrant, "or this. We just...this is for the kids."

"Of c...c...course," he replied, but he didn't sound convinced. Then, he dropped his head and stared down at his shoes.

Looking at his drooped shoulders and downturned face, the guilt ate at me.

This was my fault. Before the girls and my new extended family came along, almost all my free time was spent with Glenn. That was because work was my life, and Glenn was work. But, since meeting the Misfits and the people at the community center that we ran—and after having two brushes with possible violent deaths—I realized that there was more to life than work. I wanted more from my life than work. I still loved my job, but I made sure to make time for life now. In living that realization, Glenn kind of got pushed aside. Although we mostly just worked, he was my friend that I'd spent a lot of time with, and he didn't deserve that.

"Hey," I said, playfully bumping him with my shoulder. "Why don't you come? You can wear one of your Star Trek costumes. It will be like being at Comic Con but, you know, cooler."

He laughed and, with his head still hanging, he threw a look at me out the side of his eye.

"Maybe. We'll see," he said, returning the shoulder bump.

We rode the rest of the ride down in silence, the only thing that was heard was Glenn's loud, nasally breathing.

Although it seemed like I'd smoothed things over, the air still felt strained.

Chapter Three

Gingerbread Man

Three hours later, after successfully serving the warrant on Albert Crane at the youth center where he was still coaching young boys, I made it back to my office building. This was after I interrogated him, after I'd threatened to kick his testicles out through his asshole, after he refused to talk any further without a lawyer being present, and after I personally help escort him to the county jail and watched him being booked.

I loved that part. Loved taking scum off the streets. Loved instilling that initial fear, giving them a sneak peek into what they could look forward to in court. Loved watching the reality set in their eyes as the heavy, metal bars clank shut on them.

Therefore, I was riding a high. I even gave Glenn permission to take a long lunch with his girlfriend, Chloe. That was partially because I was in a good mood and partially because of the guilt at having to bail on him later that night.

The entire ride over, I sang along with the radio. I hummed all the way from the parking deck. My step had a bounce to it that wasn't there this morning. Yet, as soon as I stepped into the building, all of that went away. The memory from earlier that day came rushing back, and without Glenn being there as a buffer, my animosity was magnified.

That's why, when the elevator finally came, I pushed the button for the tenth floor instead of the eighth.

I didn't prepare a speech on my way up. I didn't gather my thoughts or take a deep breath as I strutted down the long hall to my boss' office. I didn't try to reason with myself. The only thing running through my mind was that they brought in a frat boy from Washington to take a job that was rightfully mine.

"Ellen, I need to talk to you." I burst in without knocking, something I never did, but I came up short when the two men sitting in front of her desk turned and stared at me. I frowned at one of them. "What are you doing here?"

"Mercy, just the woman I needed to see," Ellen said from behind the desk. She rose from her seat but didn't move from her spot.

She wore her usual armor of red, this time in the form of crimson slacks and light, coral shirt. I couldn't see her shoes, but I knew they were red and high. She thought that red made her look powerful, but with her almost black, short hair and smooth porcelain skin, it also made her look amazing.

She held out her arm towards me and made the introductions. "ASA Mercy Collins, meet Elliot Serani and Devin _"

"I know who he is," I snapped. I took three more steps into the room and stood just behind Devin's chair. Fixing him with a look, I asked again, "What are you doing here?"

He didn't answer, just kept leaning back in the chair like he didn't have a care in the world, and he grinned up at me in that obnoxious way that he did.

He had on his department-issued, wrinkled, blue t-shirt with the CFD shield etched over his left chest and slightly-faded, well-worn blue jeans. The bottoms of his jeans were halfway tucked into his black boots, which weren't laced all the way up, and he had a blue cap, even more worn than his jeans, tucked low on his head, partially blocking his dark green eyes.

For someone who looked like his clothes had been bunched up in the dryer for a week, he looked good.

Too damned good.

He looked like he tasted of Merlot and smelled of fine cuisine. He looked like a model for the Man's Man magazine, if there was such a thing, and the image that thousands of women jacked off to at night.

But I couldn't think about how good Devin looked right now. I only had room to wonder what the hell he was doing in my boss' office.

It was Ellen who finally explained. "These gentlemen are here on behalf of Ben Greadley. Do you remember him?"

I scoffed and rolled my eyes to the side.

'Of course, I remembered him,' I thought as I stared out of Ellen's window and attempted to recite the preamble to the Illinois State Constitution. *'Especially since a certain someone kept throwing him in my face.'*

I didn't make it to "We, the people of the State of Illinois" before my eyes were drawn back to Devin. Even without saying a word, he had a way of commanding my attention.

"Is that right?" I asked Ellen, but my eyes stayed on Devin. My next question was for him. "Mr. Greadley finally got around to filing that appeal, did he?"

"Not yet," he answered, the obnoxiousness in his smirk turning up a notch.

"This is more of a preliminary discovery expedition," the other gentleman explained.

For the first time, my attention went to him. I was so thrown to see Devin sitting in my boss' office that I forgot that someone was with him.

He was good looking...in an extremely pretty type of way, with his low-cut wavy hair and deep caramel skin. His lips full and pink, and his skin was envious-worthy smooth. I had hundreds of dollars' worth of skincare products in my medicine cabinet. I could lather on every last one of them, one on top of the other, and my skin would never be that smooth.

He was tall—I could tell that from the way he also leaned back in the chair with his long legs relaxed out in front of him. He wore nerdy brow line glasses, which just added to his attractiveness.

"Mr. Serani, is it?" I asked after calling up the memory of his name from when Ellen introduced him earlier. I stepped to the side, closer to his chair and held out my hand to him. "Mercy Collins."

He folded out of the chair with so much grace and ease I questioned if he'd ever been sitting at all. And I was right; he was tall. Very tall. Almost as tall as Devin, and Devin was NBA-quality tall.

"Elliot Serani," he verified.

I smiled up at him because he had the type of face that you couldn't help smiling at. No words needed. Just goofy, ridiculous, embarrassing smiling.

In fact, I continued that ridiculous smiling for an embarrassing long time. I saw his mouth moving but I heard no words. I had no comprehension other than how pretty he was.

So, so pretty.

He mesmerized me. Not in an attraction type of way. I just marveled at his prettiness.

Although I might not have heard Elliot, but I couldn't help hearing Devin loudly clearing his throat.

My spine stiffened. The smile snapped off my face, and I cut my eyes back to him. "Got something crammed in your throat, Michelson? I can choke that right out for you."

Elliot chuckled, but something told me that Devin found nothing amusing.

His grin was gone. That amusing light in his eyes was now hard and piercing. His mouth was stretched in an annoyed straight line. His jaw was tight when he announced, "We're here to get information on Ben's case, not for you to get a date."

"You sure?" I teased. "Cause the look you're giving me right now says that you're dying to take me out for Thai food."

I'm allergic to peanuts, and many Thai dishes are made with some type of peanut sauce or oil. Thus, a dish at a Thai restaurant would probably kill me.

He knew that.

Other than myself, he was the only other person in the room that knew it. Therefore, the others didn't get the joke. Devin, however, his lips twitched. It was slight, and he tried to hold it in, but I caught it.

"The files?" he asked again.

"Have you tried Greadley's attorney?" I sneered at him.

"We got what we needed to get from him, and now we are coming to you. Wanna look over what you got. Just making sure Ben's civil rights weren't violated, darlin'."

I stepped away from Elliot and closer to the chair that Devin was still reclining back in. As in preparing for a fight, he sat up straighter, and he twisted his body to fully face me. I glared down at him, pointed a French manicured finger in his face, "Don't call me darlin', you obnoxious son of a _"

"Mercy," Ellen warned. "Please provide these gentlemen everything you have on the case."

I pressed my lips together, closed my eyes and breathed deep. I hated being called darlin'. I hated it even more when *he* called me darlin', because it wasn't condescending like when most men called a professional woman that to put her in her place. No, it was truly a term of endearment when Devin said, and he said it to a lot of women. Devin loved the ladies, but he knew that I didn't want to be clumped into the category of his conquests.

When I opened my eyes again, all three of them were staring at me. I focused on Elliot because out of everyone in the room he was the only one I didn't want to currently strangle...and he was so pretty.

"Sure. I can get *you* the files," I agreed with another smile. "But, as you know, it is a five-year-old case. I'll have to get them from the archives and, of course, have them copied. It may take a while."

"I can wait," Devin injected, and I felt my back go up again.

"But, I can't," Elliot said. "I have another appointment." He smiled down at me—oh, my, what a smile—and then turned to Devin. "You don't mind collecting everything and meeting me back at my office later this afternoon?"

"Not at all, man," Devin replied, and even those simple words were used to taunt me. He jumped up from his chair and came to stand beside Elliot and myself. "Go ahead and take care of your business." He turned his head to me and gave me the sweetest, fakest smile I'd ever seen. "I'll just stay here with Mercy."

If my boss and this beautiful man wasn't in the room, I would've done something completely unladylike and given him the finger. Instead, I assured Elliot, "I'll get everything together for you."

"Thanks," Elliot responded. He clapped hands with Devin, nodded at Ellen and then extended his large hand to me. "Nice to meet, Ms. Collins."

I took his hand. It felt warm and soft, not an extremely masculine hand but it was comfortable. For some reason, it soothed me. "You too. And, please call me Mercy."

He nodded to the room again and then told Devin, "Walk me out."

"I'll meet you back at your office," Devin told me as a warning, and both gentlemen exited the room.

As soon as they were gone, Ellen pointed a finger at me and commanded, "Give them only the documents filed in court, that are part of public record."

"I know the drill, Ellen. Not my first rodeo." I stepped up to her desk and lowered my voice; I didn't want the busybodies in the hall to hear what I had to say next. "What I don't know is why you would give an outsider the job you once promised me."

She sighed and returned to her seat. "Don't overreact. It's only temporary."

I tilted my head to the side. "Don't overreact?"

I hated being talked to like a hysterical female. I especially hated it coming from her.

"Don't overreact," she repeated, once again causing my hackles to rise. "Like I said, it's temporary. Steve's transfer caught us off guard and we had to act quick."

I narrowed my eyes and said slowly, "It was quicker to wait for someone to give notice and relocate from D.C. than to just come down two floors?"

"We didn't take the job from you, Mercy."

"Then, what's with bringing the guy in from D.C.?"

"That was the Governor Moore's idea?" Strange. Since when did Governor Moore give a crap about personnel issues at the SAO? The mayor kept his nose in our business but not the governor. "He thought that bringing in someone fresh would revitalize the office."

"What?"

"I tried to fight for you, Mercy, but he also thinks that you've been a bit preoccupied lately."

"Preoccupied with what?"

"It's no secret that you've had very publicized outside interests in the past few months."

So, that's what this was about? While the governor's approval rating had been steadily decreasing due to the rising crime rate in his state and a very tumultuous public divorce to his second wife—who incidentally was his mistress during his first marriage—I'd been getting a lot of favorable media coverage due to my help in the capture of Corvi and Mabika.

"I wasn't aware that bringing down an international war criminal and rescuing several young boys was considered an interest outside of the law."

"That wasn't our case."

"So, what? It was *our* city that asshole was trying to invade. It was *our* kids he was turning into child soldiers."

She took a deep breath, leaned back in her plush, leather chair and intertwined her fingers on her stomach. "Look. The supervisor position could still be yours, but we must see the same dedication to this office that you had a year ago. The same drive that prompted me to promise you the position in the first place."

"So, I'm on some type of probation?"

"If that's how you choose to look at it, then so be it."

A wave of heat moved through my body. "Is my conviction record not still damn near perfect?" I asked her but didn't give her a chance to answer, because we both knew that it was. "Do I not still come in earlier than everyone else on most days? Here, working, later than anyone else, even you? Is it not me that you give the big cases to because you know I will get the win? Hell, my workload is three times as much as anyone here? So, I think I can afford some little distractions."

"Nevertheless," she retorted, her voice still calm and colorless, even though I'd raised my voice increasingly with every word. "We're not giving you a promotion until we see some changes." She stood up and came around her desk, her face softening. "I love your fire, you know I do. But lately, your fire has been focused on the wrong things. We have enough cases coming through this office without you going out being a vigilante and finding us more. That's the behavior of a maverick prosecutor, not a supervisor nor someone who hopes to be state's attorney one day."

I understood where she was coming from—no matter how much I hated the politics, it was a political game. Either I conform and played it, or I go about things my own way, a road that led nowhere near towards state's attorney. But a part of me wanted them to conform. To forget the fundraising, handshaking, baby-kissing bullshit and just went out there in the filth and went about cleaning up our city.

"Got it," I told her even though I didn't, not really.

I turned on my heels and headed for the door. Even though nothing felt resolved, I still had another problem to deal with.

"You can start," she said, and I paused by the doorway and turned back to her, "by shutting down this Greadley issue."

"I thought you wanted me to cooperate with them," I said snidely.

"Cooperate by giving them what they came for but don't entertain their delusions. They are not going to find anything in those files that will exonerate their friend. The sooner you shut it down the better."

I nodded and left to do just that.

I found Devin already in my office, sitting in one of my lime green, hi-back chairs I had for guests, leaning back like he was in Ellen's office. Like he had in the Center a week ago.

Like the world was his to lean against wherever, whenever, however he saw fit.

"I can't believe you're actually doing this," I told him as I strolled into the room. "But, I called down to archives and arranged for some interns to make those copies for you. They will be ready momentarily." I sat in my chair across from him, propped my forearms on the desk and leaned into them. "You're welcomed to wait for them downstairs in the lobby."

He grinned in that charming way that he did, where only one side of his mouth turned up, but both of his cheeks dimpled. "Trying to get rid of me, Boss?"

I tilted my head and asked, "Boss?" He'd called me that several times and I just had to ask.

He shrugged. "You can be bossy. Like now, where you're trying to put me out of your office."

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms across my chest. "I just thought you're be more comfortable in the lobby."

"Did ya, now?" It didn't seem possible, but he reclined back even more. "Don't worry about me, Boss. I'm completely comfortable."

"Great," I sneered at him, and then I muttered, "I'm thrilled."

"You don't seem thrilled. You seem irritated."

"Do I?" I dropped my arms and leaned towards him again. "You don't think it has anything to do with you coming in here and trying to make me look like a crook in front of my boss."

This time he crossed his arms. "How did I do that?"

"I know you think I mucked up the case. You've been saying that for years. But, now I framed him?"

I didn't realize how much those words hurt until they came out of my mouth. I knew that he didn't think much of me, but I thought he thought more of me than that.

"I never said that," he defended himself.

"No, you implied it when you brought up his civil rights being violated."

He alerted, sitting upright in his seat. He put his elbows to his thighs and leaned forward. His patented amused expression was replaced with something solemn and deadly serious.

"I never intended to assume that you railroaded him."

"Well, you did."

"I do, however, believe that someone did."

"SOMEONE LIKE WHO," I yelled. My body heating up, my skin feverish.

"I DON'T KNOW," he yelled back. He clamped his mouth shut and shook his head, like he was reprimanding himself for reacting to my outburst with one of his own. He pushed both hands through his dark hair, pushing the fallen tresses out of his face, and just glared at me with those narrowed, jade eyes.

I stared back. Mostly because I couldn't figure out what that look was on his face.

I was good at reading people. Success at my job relied on my ability to read the expressions and emotions of others. I read their body language, picked up the subtle cues in their speech, but Devin wasn't most people, and the innerworkings of his mind mostly alluded me.

The small, lime green clock on my desk clicked away the long seconds that our eyes stayed locked. The silence was cluttered with all the things our eyes were screaming at each other.

Finally, I closed my eyes and sighed. The loaded silence was easier to take that way. I took a deep breath and whispered, "You could've come to *me*. You could've said something to me before showing up here with your fancy attorney."

"I tried that, remember? I tried to warn you a week ago and you blew up in my face."

“So, you do this? You’re allowing your emotions to cause you to chase baseless delusions.”

“And I think you’re letting your pride stop you from seeing that this isn’t baseless and that I’m not delusional.”

My eyes moved over his face. Over his unyielding green eyes and the determined set to his jaw. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know Ben, and if he's a killer than I'm the gingerbread man."

My eyes roamed over his angular face and chiseled jaw. Over his corded neck down to his strong shoulders and arms. His chest wasn’t massive, but it was muscular, and the fit of his work tee accentuated that.

My eyes kept going. Over a stomach that I knew was just as muscular, his thick thighs and long legs.

He definitely wasn’t the gingerbread man.

I pressed my lips together to keep from pointing out, in excruciating detail, how unlike the gingerbread man he was. If I did, that would only humiliate me and blow up his ego more than it already was.

Fortunately for me, Devin had more to say. "But, I also know you. Framing innocent men isn't what you're about. When I said Ben’s rights were violated, that wasn’t what I was talking about. So, get that out of your head right now."

My head jerked back, and I stared at him with my mouth slightly open.

He tilted his head again. His eyes softened, just a bit, and the corners of his mouth twitched. "What’s that look for?"

I closed my mouth...and then open and closed it again...and shook my head. Once again, the atmosphere changed. Got lighter. I don’t know if the change was because of him or me. My mouth itched to return his slight grin. "I’m shocked. It almost sounded like you no longer believe that I am evil incarnate."

He called me that once.... actually, more than once. He’d said it so much that it was now a joke between our shared group of friends.

He didn't smile like I thought he would. Instead his eyes steadied on me and the ghost of a grin on his lips straightened out. He folded his hands in his lap and leaned in even more.

"You’re not getting me. I don't think that you did anything intentionally malicious, but don't get me wrong, No Mercy." He spat out my nickname as if it was a gnat that flew into his mouth. I’d embraced the nickname by now, but I hated it when he said it. Especially now when he said it with so much disdain. "What you did was just as bad. Because of your blind ambition and inability to see reason,

I believe that you overlooked some things that were vital to this case. Ben is wasting away in federal prison because of you"

That was a slap to the face.

No, it was kick in the teeth, and I feared that if I opened my mouth to defend myself my teeth would fall right out. Not like I hadn't heard those words before. The man had made his opinions on what he thought of me loud and clear every time we were in the same room. But, I hadn't heard them in months, and for some perverse reason, I had thought (hoped) that night had changed his mind about me. The incriminating and hate-filled way that he said them now proved me wrong.

His eyes didn't move away—I don't think he even blinked—and he stared me down, challenging me with a look. Like he'd done many times before. He knew that he'd struck first blood in a familiar fight, a fight that we kept having, a fight we would always have, and he was waiting for my comeback.

He was right to brace.

Especially on this day of all days.

Words swirled in my head. Glenn's words of someone else getting a job I thought was rightfully mine. Ellen's words of the governor's displeasure in my inability to overlook injustice in my city. And now Devin's words of me being incompetent at my job.

So many words.

All of them enough to fuel me.

My jaw tightened so much that I ground my teeth. Blood pumped through my quivering muscles. My pulse accelerated.

"Blind ambition and inability to see reason," I repeated his words through a curled lip. "I can say this about you, *Gingerbread Man*, no one can accuse you of originality. So nice to keep hearing the classics, repeatedly, but they are getting a little tired, and I got shit to do. So, how about we cut to the end where you call me a bitch and then get the fuck out of my office."

His eyes tightened, and his lips thinned, a look I'd seen more often than not.

This time I braced. While I admit that my verbal claws were sharp, but so were Devin's.

I gave.

He pulled.

I reacted.

And then so did he.

It was a vicious circle that we danced in repeatedly in the past few years. A game, I had to admit,

that wasn't as fun as it was before "the night that shall not be named." Something changed that night. I felt it every time I was forced to be in his presence, and I knew that he felt it too.

Maybe that was why he didn't strike back, not right away, anyway. He just leaned back once again in his chair, his eyes not once leaving mine. His expression changed again. What frightened me was what it changed into.

His entire face softened, and it threw me. It was not what I was expecting. While his green eyes stayed on me, they squinted, just a little. His mouth relaxed, and then turned up at the corners.

"You're thinking about that night, aren't you?" he asked, jerking his chin up at me.

He promised not to ever bring that up.

My hands balled up into fists. My jaw once again clenched, but this time painfully so.

"No," I lied around the croak in my throat.

I tried to swallow but found it difficult with the new pain in the back of my throat. I tried again, sitting up straighter as if that would somehow help. I couldn't show him that what he said was getting to me.

"I don't think about that night," I informed him. "Ever."

"Is that so?"

I lifted one eyebrow, and I challenged, "How can I think about something that never happened?"

His eyes roamed over my face. Searching. Assessing. Reading. This went on for a painfully long time. So long that it became almost unbearable to keep my blank expression intact. Then, suddenly, he whispered, "I see you."

"What?" I breathed out before I could stop myself.

His mouth transformed from the half smirk he was giving me to a full smile. "I think you're lying. In fact, I think you think about that night a whole lot."

Smug son of a bitch.

I wanted so much to deny his claim. To tell him that night meant nothing. Forgettable. Not worth a second thought. But, for some reason, those weren't easy words to get out.

Good thing for me, an aide popped up in the doorway with two thick, 9 x 12 clasp envelopes tucked underneath his arm.

The sigh I released was palpable. I knew that Devin caught it when his smile brightened, but in that moment, I didn't care.

I waved in the aide. "Jordan, please give those to Mr. Michelson and then escort him out."

Devin laughed a deep, not-unattractive laugh, and my eyes cut back to him. I hadn't forgotten how his laugh felt to my ears and against my skin. Oh, how I wished that I had. I wished that I'd forgotten a lot of things.

He rose from his seat, slowly and methodically. He didn't grace Jordan with his jade eyes when he held out his large hand for him to place the envelopes in it.

That's because his eyes were too busy piercing through me.

He anchored his other hand on the edge of the desk, and he leaned his tall body until he was practically in my face.

I held my breath as he got closer and closer, so close I swore I felt his warm breath against the side of my face when he whispered, "I see you."

In the next breath, he was gone. It wasn't until then that I was finally able to breathe again.