

A man with a full, dark beard and mustache is shown in profile, looking towards the right. He has dark hair and is wearing a dark-colored shirt with a small, repeating pattern and dark suspenders. The background is a blurred, natural setting with green foliage and a dark, textured wall.

Shyla
Colt

Kiss
&
Tell

Kiss And Tell

Shyla Colt

Chapter One

Marlee

A bead of sweat traveled down her neck and disappeared into the back of her new AC/DC T-shirt. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand and rolled her neck. The kitchen smelled like heaven. The freshly baked rolls and the ones currently finishing in the oven gave off a fragrant aroma that never lost its charm. The shiny surfaces of the fridge and counters were as pretty as any Christmas ornament, and a new recipe felt like opening a present. The hum of

the industrial sized mixer filled her soul with joy.

Cooking was her Zen zone.

There was one small drawback to the tiny kitchen in the privately owned bakery on busy days such as this one. It felt like hell. The constant firing of ovens morphed the shoebox sized room into a sweltering tropical environment that held none of the perks of an island. Still, she wouldn't change a thing about Dela's Sweets. The home away from home had saved her in more ways than she could count. Besides, it was necessary to stay stocked up.

Their rolls were a frequently sought

after item on a regular day. The festival starting Friday, would have the shop selling bags and boxes of the fluffy goodness by the boatloads. Every year, the town held a fall celebration where they collected a generous amount for a cause someone connected to their town. This year it was for little Georgie Anderson who had open heart surgery not long after his birth. His parents were swimming in hospital bills, and they hoped to relieve the burden greatly with their fundraising.

Closing the oven, she walked out of the small room and headed to the door that lead outside. The timer would buzz once they were ready to pull to baste with a

light coat of butter before they went back into brown.

The local owner, Dela, had a system, one Marlee knew like the back of her hand after all the years she'd put in. When she started at Dela's Sweets at seventeen, it was a job to give her extra money and more freedom. There was nothing like owning your own green to make you feel independent. Then she realized how much she loved every aspect of the job. Luckily, she recognized this as her calling. An epiphany some spent a lifetime trying to find. Cooking had always been something she enjoyed, but getting paid to do it and learning more about the

world of sweets, bread, and more, opened her eyes up to a career field she never considered before.

There weren't as many opportunities in this small town as there were in larger cities. Plenty of people left for college, and never returned. Personally, she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. The quaint township with its artistic flare, tight-knit community, and countless traditions enchanted and bewitched her. There was a special magic here that held her in thrall. She'd visited enough other places to know how rare that kinship with an area was.

Cool air caressed her face. She tilted her head up to the crisp breeze, admiring the

clear blue sky. The sun warmed her skin keeping the chill from being too much. She loved fall. The beautiful colors, brisk weather, and cozy things like hot chocolate, and oversized-sweaters struck her as charming. Still, her feeling of completeness wasn't all the way there yet. There was a missing piece to her perfect puzzle.

Footsteps sounded in the distance. She turned her head to the right and spotted her long-limbed, dark-haired best friend, Eliza gliding toward her. A grin spread her lips across her teeth. All these years later, and it was still like they were in high school with her best friend popping in to say hi.

She frowned. *Why isn't she at work at the paper?* “Hey, Eliza. Not that I’m not happy to see you, but why are you here right now?”

Eliza shifted her weight from one leg to the other and nibbled at her bottom lip.

She needs to ask me for a favor. After over twenty years, she knew the signs.

“Well, that’s sort of what this visit is about,” Eliza said.

“Okay, you want to be more specific?” Marlee asked, disturbed by her friend’s strange behavior. Neither of them made a practice of beating around the bush.

“So, I got a story, out of town—”

“Oh my God, that’s fantastic! Congratulations,” Marlee said, thrilled for her best friend’s progress at the local paper. She rushed over and gave her a massive hug. She received a lackluster squeeze in return and frowned. *What the hell?* Pulling back, Marlee lifted a brow.

“It’s for this weekend,” Eliza said sadly.

“Oh no, so you’d miss the festival?” Marlee asked wondering if this was, why Eliza seemed bummed.

“It’s more than that. I can’t do it unless I find someone to replace me at the booth I’m working. I could never bail when I know how much the money we bring in affects those in need. Plus, you know

how this town is. I'd never live it down."

"Well, what are you working? I'm at the booth for Dela's most of the day on Friday. But she left my Saturday free. Forced me to take it off actually," she said with a laugh.

"I know, I checked with Dela before I came out here. My shift is Saturday afternoon, so you could do it, technically speaking."

"Then what's the problem?" Marlee asked exasperated. "You know I'll do whatever I can to help you succeed. You've worked your ass off to get noticed since you graduated and got

hired after your internship.”

“I know, but-it’s-the-Kissing-Booth,” Eliza said breathing the words out. They blurred together in one almost indistinguishable run on sentence.

Still, Marlee heard it loud and clear. She huffed. She loathed the outdated tradition. The money it brought in, however, was indisputable. By far, it was the top earner year after year. *Who knew there were so many men in this county so hard up for a kiss?* “Eliza—

Eliza held out her hand. “I know, I know. I wouldn’t ask, except that I’m desperate. Who knows when this chance will come again? It’s not even a fluff

piece, Marlee. It's serious reporting about a rash of break-ins they've had recently. The boss is testing me. I have to rise to the occasion.”

The hopeful expression on Eliza's oval shaped face slayed her. Her almond-shaped hazel eyes shone with excitement. If she beamed any harder, Marlee might go blind. “All right, all right, I'll do it. What are your hours?”

“Yes, you're the best friend, ever!” Eliza squealed, wrapping her arms around Marlee and hugging her close.

Marlee laughed. “I love you too. Please don't suffocate me in your ample bosom,” she choked the words out.

“Well.” Eliza released her death grip.

“That’s the last time I try to offer up a free motorboat to you. I’ll have you know these beauties are well sought after,” Eliza said gesturing to her Double D’s.

“I know, I’ve seen it. You’re like the Damn Pied Piper of tits.”

“Hey, not my fault. *I got these from my Mama,*” Eliza sang.

Marlee laughed. “You owe me so big for this,” she said.

“You might find you like it,” Eliza teased wagging her arched brows. “It’s the perfect way to get over you know who.”

If only it were that easy. She ignored her comment. “No, I will not, because kissing random people is not now or ever...been on my bucket list.” She pushed her glasses back up onto the bridge of her nose and scowled.

With a beautiful tall, slender frame, chestnut brown hair that fell around her shoulders, her peaches and cream skin that made her hazel eyes pop, Eliza had no clue what it was like to be the unattractive one...Eliza was gorgeous.

Marlee never stood a chance. An older sister already took all the good looks with flawless skin, a svelte size two figure, dark curls that tumbled around a heart shaped face with fine features and

a Cupid's bow set of lips. She took after her father's side of the family with her round face, button nose, wide hips, and dangerous curves that put her firmly in a size fourteen. Her chin length hair refused to be tamed. Thick, coarse, black corkscrews added to what she'd come to think of as her comfy chic style. The large black square glasses and her love of quirky t-shirts and jeans were a part of who she was. Different and proud of it.

The thought of standing in front of God and everybody, offering her lips up for kisses for a price made her stomach ache. It was like begging to be rejected and humiliated. *I won't let the ghosts of*

the past keep me from helping my best friend achieve her lifelong dream.

She'd made peace with the way she looked. No, that wasn't what she did. She made peace with the fact that her sister was a raging bitch, and her mother was a perfectionist who cared far too much about petty things. Her appearance had never been a problem for her. Marlee liked the way she filled out a pair of jeans and rocked a body-skimming dress. It was trying to live up to her sister's legacy, and her mother's expectations that almost drove her insane.

Self-involved, shallow and narcissistic, her sister was a mean girl to the fifth

power, groomed by their uber-Southern belle of a mother. Kenna got high on the ability to make others feel inferior. It turned the two of them into arch enemies when they should've been thick as thieves. As Irish twins, only nine months separated them.

Pushing thoughts of her sister who'd be working the kissing booth non-stop out of her mind, she refocused her attention to Eliza. "I'm excited for you. This story is the break you've been waiting for. I can feel it in my gut. Go out there, be the badass reporter we both know you are, and don't worry about a thing. The kissing booth won't be my favorite thing to do, but it won't be the worst thing I've

done either.” Marlee grabbed Eliza’s hands in her own and squeezed. “You’ve got this girl. I have all the faith in the world in you.”

“But you’ll hate it,” Eliza said.

“I don’t—” The timer buzzed. *Saved by the bell.* “Like I said, don’t worry about that. Go prepare your things, and I’ll call you when I get off work, okay?”

Eliza nodded.

Marlee then fled back to the sanctuary of her bakery.

Of course, today would be perfect. Seventy-eight degrees, with the sun

shining and a gentle breeze to take the edge of the heat generated in the sunny patches, the day could only be described as idealistic. She opted to wear a pair of ripped black skinny jeans, black tennis shoes, and a reconstructed Led Zeppelin T-shirt. She flat-ironed her hair. The silky strands kissed her shoulders, and her makeup was on-point.

She slowed her walk to check out the booths boasting cotton candy, funnel cakes, and hand-churned ice cream. Everyone knew the best part about festivals was the food. *Later, you'll be mine.*

The kissing booth took center stage in all its gaudy white and red striped glory.

The large glittery lips that hung up above it, took the tackiness over the top.

The sight of her sister on one side of the booths made her stomach drop into her shoes. *Oh, fucking fantastic. I thought she would be gone already.* No wonder the line is halfway to the entrance. She couldn't say if her sister was as sexually experienced as she alluded to being or a if she were a huge tease. Both options made her roll her eyes. She was such an attention whore. It seemed to be the main reason she did anything in her life.

I wonder if she even knows what she wants anymore, she's so lost to this impossible image she has created for herself. Adjusting her satchel, Marlee

held her head high as she strolled up to the kissing booth.

“What are you doing here?” Kenna asked wrinkling her nose.

“Liza got called away and asked me to stand in for her,” Marlee replied.

Kenna rolled her eyes. “Whatever.” She turned back to the eager looking teen standing in front of her with a dollar.

“How old are you?” Kenna asked narrowing her eyes.

“Old enough,” the red head replied. His freckles stood out on his pale face, and his blue eyes were as round as saucers.

“Right.” Kenna tapped her cheek.

He leaned forward and pecked her lip, tossing the dollar onto the stand in front of her and rushing off like a wounded animal.

Marlee snorted. If anything, this was going to be an entertaining day. She walked around back of the booth, ignoring the eyes trained on her. She'd flossed, brushed, and gargled until her mouth felt like the Swiss Alps in there, so cool and minty. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her palms grew sweaty. She flipped the sign from closed to open and waited.

A few people got out of line. Then the first man came up. In his late twenties with gauged ears and a Mohawk...he

was mouth watering. He gave her a wink and a sly grin. “How’d they rope you into this?” he asked.

“What, I don't seem the type?”

“Your eyes say, *I'm counting the minutes until I escape,*” he replied.

She chuckled. “You got me. I’m filling in for a friend of mine. She got a once in a lifetime chance.” Marlee shrugged.

“Good friend,” he observed.

“I try.” Their repartee put her at ease.

He handed over a dollar. “Let’s do this super cheesy. Pucker up.”

Giggling, she pursed her lips, and they

had an over exaggerated smack exchange. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all.*

He stepped back. “Maybe I’ll see you around?”

“Stranger things have happened,” she said. He walked away, and she settled back on her stool. The line beside her continued to move as she got a few stragglers.

Ren

“Isn’t that your girl?” John asked.

Ren glanced across the fairgrounds and froze. *What the fuck is she doing?* The thought of Marlee Hurst sitting at the kissing booth was a foreign concept. It wasn't her style. "I think so," he answered scowling.

They'd been off and on since she turned twenty-one, despite the fact that he was way too old for her. Forty-five to her twenty-five. Also, with his rap sheet as long as his arm, and a reputation that preceded him, they never should've mixed. There was something compelling in the depths of her brown gaze that got to him. He could never give her the committed relationship she deserved, so they kept things on the down low

between them. Small towns were harsh and unforgiving. She would be talked about and treated like she'd become lower class. He didn't want that for her. They were on a definite off period right now. He cracked his knuckles and rolled his neck. The pops gave tiny seconds of relief.

If he saw another motherfucker laying lips on her, he might just rip their heart out. *I'm forty-five I ain't getting no younger.* His refusal to label them had nothing to do with sowing his wild oats, and everything to do with the man his father had been. He couldn't trust himself not to ruin her. He inherited the anger and the attitude from his old man.

It felt like tempting fate to take on a serious girlfriend, or God forbid...a wife. The things his father did to his mother until he was old enough to step in, still haunted him.

“Okay dude, I’ll see you later,” John said as he walked away.

Yeah, John already knew his intent. He would get Marlee back with him and no one in their right mind better get in his way.

A preppy blond with a polo and a slick grin walked up to the booth.

Fuck it. He strolled up to stand just behind the blond. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll walk away right

now,” Ren warned.

“Wait your turn, dude,” the blond shot back.

Marlee gasped.

“You might want to look at me and re-think that response.”

The blond polo kid turned. His face immediately drained of color, and his blue eyes grew comically round. He took a step back and held up his hands.

“Hey, man. I don’t want any trouble.”

“Then leave and don’t look back,” he said staring him down.

He nodded and rushed off.

Smart boy.

Marlee blinked. “What the hell are you doing?”

“This.” He leaned over the booth, tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her to his lips. The minute their mouths met, his dick swelled. Her lips parted as she yielded to him. Blood rushed to his head. His heart thumped against his chest. He tilted his head, spearing his tongue between her lips, exploring her mouth like it was the first time, and staking his claim in front of everyone. They broke the liplock, surfacing air. He watched her lift her lids and blink slowly. He reached into his pocket and dug out the wads of cash he had in his

pocket. He peeled off a few hundreds, and set them on the counter in front of her.

“You son of a bitch,” she spat the words out like they were something rotten.

His face exploded with pain. The sound of a hand meeting his flesh echoed in his ears. He turned his head back to face her and grinned. “You’re done here little girl. You can pack your shit up and leave peacefully, or I can do it for you.”

She lifted her hand.

He grabbed her wrist. “Once is all you get.”

“I’m not some whore you get to pay off.”

“You want me to throw you over my shoulder and smack your ass before I carry you off in front of the entire town?” He liked her spunk, but he would only let her take it so far.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she whispered.

He laughed. “You forget who I am?”

“I’ve been trying.”

“Bullshit.”

“You were the one who didn’t want more, Ren, Not me.”

“Now, I do. “

“No.” She shook her head. “You just don’t like the thought of anyone else

playing with your toy.”

“Marlee...now.”

She disappeared below the booth and shot back up a second later with her purse slung across her body. Her eyes shot invisible fire as she flipped the open sign to close.

He watched her ass in those tight jeans as she stalked over to her sister's booth slapped down the money down and returned to him.

The shock on her sister's face said everything about the town's reaction.

“Hey, you okay?” a burly redheaded guy asked her.

Ren balled his fists, itching to burn off some of his irritation with a good knockdown, drag out.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Marlee said, never sparing him a glance as she hurried by him in power-walk mode.

Ren stalked behind her amused. At six foot four, his stride was damn near four steps of hers.

His boys hung back amused by the blowout they’d all been predicting for years. They all came from nothing and met in the pen. You get to know one another when you run in the same circles. It was their love for bikes and cars that saved them. When John got out

and started up the shop that became their lively hood, he'd given them all something to focus on. They stuck together, forming their own family. It'd been a bunch of wild years, but now that they were getting long in the tooth, shit was changing. Bobby had gotten himself hitched and had a baby girl a few years back. Then Shaun had followed in his footsteps a year ago, taking a long term girlfriend and buying a house.

He and John were the last ones holding down the single life. *We used to be.*

There was no doubt in his mind what his next move would be. "Where you going, Marlee? You know the only way you're leaving here is on the back of my bike."

“And what about my car?” she asked, placing her hands on her curvy hips.

“One of the boys from the shop will get it,” he said.

She shut her mouth. Her jaw ticked.

He loved that fire she had deep inside. It was something she hid well until it boiled over and singed him. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to his side. “Much better. We don’t want people thinking we’re not together.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“You knew that from the beginning. You said it was what you liked about me most. That I didn’t care what anyone

else thought.”

“I was a child.”

“You were twenty-one and persistent. I remember because I tried to leave you alone. You remember what I told you then?”

“You were no good for me, and once we started, it’d be hard to stop.”

“That’s right. I knew then you weren’t the type I could fuck and walk away from.”

“Funny. You did it plenty of times before.”

“No, we took breaks, we never parted ways.”

“Yes, we did. You just seem to have forgotten,” she said.

“You told me you couldn’t stay if things remained the same, so I’m here changing them.”

“No, you’re posturing.”

The sadness in her voice cut him deep. He’d done this, made her doubt herself, and what they had. So, it was his job to fix it. There was no one else he wanted long term with other than Marlee. She knew him, accepted his rough edges, and never bitched when he needed his space. The only thing she asked him for was a commitment. Funny, how that shit was crystal clear now. Three months ago, it

felt ridiculous and stifling. There's something to the saying, 'You never know what you have until it's gone.' *I'm going to get her back and keep her by my side where she belongs.* "You know me well enough to know I'd never put this much time and effort into something I wasn't one hundred percent about."

"No, Ren, I don't know that. Not anymore."

He guided her to his bike and paused. "You're pissed at me right now. I get that. But you were asking for something I wasn't prepared to give. So...I thought on it."

"No, a few weeks, maybe a month is

thinking about it. Three months is giving the firm answer of no. If you hadn't been here tonight, I doubt we'd even be talking."

"That's where you're wrong."

"Right."

"When did you get so damn cynical?"

"I learned from the best," she replied.

"Oh, your sister."

She gasped.

"You want to throw stones? I'm going to chuck them back, babe. I'm not the sit and take it type. I've always been up front with you about everything. It'd

have been crueler for me to dangle the relationship carrot when I wasn't sure. I have a lot of things I want to say, but right now ain't the time or place." He climbed onto his bike and handed her a helmet.

She placed it on her head, fastened the strap and climbed behind him.

When she mounted his bike, the feeling of rightness damn near took his breath away. For the past months, nothing had felt right. He'd missed her. She had a gentle way about her that soothed him. A sense of humor that made him laugh when shit got overwhelming, and an openness that allowed him to trust her in a way he'd never done with another

woman. He started up the bike, and she wrapped her arms around him pressing close. The feel of her full breasts against his back and her warm breath on his neck filled in a missing puzzle piece.

He pulled out of the parking lot, thinking of the things he would say once they reached her house.

Twenty minutes later, they walked inside her one-bedroom apartment, and he inhaled the scent of apples and cinnamon. “You been baking pies?” he asked.

“Yeah, I had a bunch of apples I donated for the Pie Walk, and I couldn’t help but make a few apple tarts for myself since I

had a surplus of Granny Smiths.”

His mouth watered at the thought of flaky crust, tangy, sweet apples with a light glaze.

“You want one?” she asked.

She acted so polite it irritated him.

“Please.” *Two can play this game.*

“Take a seat at the table, and I’ll bring one over.”

He nodded and did as he was asked. His boys would never believe him being so domestic. He glanced around the house, searching for signs of another male in her life. Maybe she moved on. His muscles tensed, and he ground his teeth.

Marlee returned and set a tall glass and a tart in front of him. Her phone rang.

“And it’s already starting,” she whispered with a sigh.

“Is that so bad?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I thought this was what you wanted.”

“For the right reasons, when I was sure it would stick. The last thing I need is the entire town seeing me fall flat on my face and fail. I’m going to catch hell for this as it is. We both know it.”

“What happened to the girl who didn’t care about wagging tongues and harsh

opinions?”

“She grew up, got lonely and tired of not having what she wanted.”

“And now I’m here to give it to you, babe.”

“Hmmm.”

“You don’t believe me?” he asked.

“I had four years of getting my hopes up Ren. Don’t act shocked that I’m not about to make the same mistake again.”

“I deserve that. You should've gotten better than that from me. All I’m asking is that you allow me to fix that.”

“How, Ren?”

“By being the man you should’ve had this entire time.”

“And it’s that easy?” She snapped her fingers. “Your commitment phobia just disappeared?”

“No, but my missing you didn’t.” He opened his mouth and choked on the words that wanted to come out. He shoved the tart in to keep his past from spilling from his lips. He’d never gone into detail or explained why relationships made him twitchy. Logically, he knew telling her would make this whole process easier. But his pride kept him silent.

“You’re not going to let this go until I

agree, are you?”

“Uh-uh,” he hummed shaking his head.

“Fine, we’ll try this your way. But when I decide I’m done...”

He nodded his head, letting her think she had the upper hand. It might be his job to show her he was serious, but she could end it when she got enough. The past four years had been about him. It was time he changed that. He finished his tart while taking her in. She lost weight over the past three months. *We’ll have to fix that too.* He liked her curvy and soft.

She sank into the chair and sat sideways.

“What’s been going on?” he asked

between bites of pastry.

“Same old, work, hanging out with Eliza and thrifting.”

“How the hell did Eliza get you to stand in for her?”

She laughed.

The musical sound enchanted him.

“Oh, that? She had a shot at a lead story out of town. I couldn’t tell her no. It’s a breakthrough for her.”

He nodded. Eliza was important to her, but there were times he wanted to strangle the girl for getting Marlee into messes. He grunted.

“What?” Marlee said.

“Did you miss me?”

She pursed her lip. “I tried not to think of you at all.”

He popped the rest of the tart in his mouth and licked his finger clean.

“That’s not what I asked you. Did. You. Miss. Me?”

“Does it matter if I did?” she asked, crossing her arms beneath her chest.

That’s a yes. “It does to me. I missed you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” she mumbled.

“I was trying to do what was best for you by staying away to let you find a better man. One you could be proud to be seen with. A man who could give you normal.”

“And I don’t get a say in what I want?” she asked.

“Not when I think it’s what’s best for you. Shit girl. I’m old enough to be your Daddy.”

“But you aren’t.” Her voice was husky, and her eyes darkened to a near black with desire.

He stood from his chair, walked over to her. He stroked the backs of his knuckles over the petal soft skin on her cheeks

and down to her neck. He caressed her pulse point and watched her heartbeat grow erratic. “Were you able to?”

“Able to what?” she whispered.

“Forget about me?” He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. Her chest heaved. The rise and fall of her breasts drew his gaze down to the swell of her cleavage. He kissed his way down her neck, nipping gently at her flesh. She shuddered. A small whimper slipped free from her lips. *I'm getting to her.* He cupped her full breasts, and she moaned. “You didn't answer me yet,” he whispered millimeters from the flesh above her breasts.

“I—”

His tongue darted out to sample her skin.

“Oh...”

Her breathy response urged him to continue. He used his thumbs to circle her hard nipples. She shifted in her chair. He could practically smell her arousal. His mouth watered. He bit her nipple through the fabric. She jerked.

“You didn’t answer,” he said.

“No.”

“Good.” He released her breasts and spread her legs. “Not a day went by where I didn’t wonder where you were, who you were with, and what you were

doing. I picked up my phone a million times wanting to hear your voice. You're an addiction I can't kick. Shit, let's be honest. I don't want to." He pressed the palm of his hand against her center and rubbed. Her breath shuddered out of her mouth. "I'm the only one who will see you like this. I want to watch you come apart, build you up, and do it all over again." He continued to massage her through her pants.

Her head fell back, and her hips began to move in time with his rhythm. Her face was a work of art, carefully painted in passion, surrender, and pleasure. Her full lips were parted.

Her choppy breathing was music to his

ears. He wanted everything she had to offer and more. He wanted to push her to heights she'd never imagined possible. Increasing his speed, he moved in and sucked a supple nipple into his mouth. She cried out, and he knew she was close. He sucked harder, and she bucked her hips. She gripped the side of the chair and let out a strangled cry. He popped the button of her jeans and slid down the zipper. Slipping his hand beneath her silken underwear, he moaned at the wetness that coated his fingers.

She watched him from beneath lowered lids.

“You’re so wet for me baby.” He

removed his hand and sucked his fingers, devouring her salty sweet taste. “You’re the best kind of candy.” He hooked his fingers in the sides of her jeans. “Lift your hips babe. I need to taste you properly.” She rose up, he pulled her pants and panties down around her ankles. She spread her lips, and he growled at the sight of her neatly trimmed lips, glistening in the light. “So fucking beautiful.” He trailed his fingertip down her slit. She gasped. He could tease her, but right now, he was desperate to be face first in between her legs. He nudged her swollen clit with this nose and inhaled her feminine fragrance. The scent went to his head,

and he licked a path up her slippery slit, collecting her sweetness.

She buried her fingers into his hair, and he thrust his tongue into her tightness.

“Oh, yes, Ren.”

He alternated between thrusts and licks. She trapped his head between her legs and he traced his name on her clit over and over. She fucked his face, and he knew he was home. This was what he wanted for the rest of his life to be surrounded by the woman who gave him everything she was.

Chapter Two

Marlee

She rolled onto her back and stretched her limbs, yawning. Her body felt boneless, and her heart felt a million times lighter. Ren shocked her. He made

her come until she could barely keep her eyes open, tucked her in and told her he would be back tonight to take her out to dinner. Denying himself pleasure, and agreeing to take her to a respectable place did funny things to her insides. They would be seen as more than a dalliance

He really means it this time.

Rapping came again from her front door. *So, that's what woke me.* Could Mom have already heard? Her father was more laid back. He would take it in stride as long as she was happy, but her mother...She would be scandalized. *I am not looking forward to this conversation.* Wiping the sleep from her

eyes, she glanced out the window to the twilight that held the world between day and night. She threw back the covers, swung her legs over the side of the bed, and forced her relaxed limbs into motion.

I haven't felt this good in ages.

It was impossible to hide the smile that pulled her lips back from her teeth. Her man was making good on his long time promises. Maybe, if he worked hard enough and convinced her this would stick, she would tell him what she'd known for years. He held her heart. She walked to the door, peered out the peephole and sighed. *Kenna*. She opened the door. "I'm alive, accounted

for, and alone, in case you were worried,” Marlee said stepping back and letting her sister walk inside.

Kenna spun on her heel and poked her with a bony finger. “What the hell was that about? Are you so desperate, you’d let anyone touch you?”

“Ren Savage isn’t just anyone, and you know it,” Marlee drawled, grinning as her sister’s nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed into slits.

Kenna tossed her hair and huffed. “No, he’s the worst kind of man, and now everyone is putting the two of you together. Tongues are wagging, and I’m sure Mother has heard about it by now.

How could you embarrass this family like that?”

“Wait. Suddenly, I’m the embarrassing one? Oh, this is a role reversal,” Marlee countered.

“God, you’ve always been jealous of me. I understand why. I mean look at you. All those things you bake have gone straight to your hips, thighs, belly, and ass, and not in a good way. I never thought you’d think you’d sink so low to get a little bit of limelight for yourself.”

“No, you always wanted me to envy you, but the truth is I’m just fine where I’m at. I love my career. I have a nice apartment I’ve tailored to me, a best friend who

always has my back. What's there to look to you and envy? Your rail thin frame you constantly deny yourself to keep? Or maybe the carefree lifestyle that still has you living at home at what? Twenty-six? For all that man chasing, and luring in you do, I haven't seen a ring on your finger yet. So, who's the desperate one?"

"You little bitch," Kenna hissed stepping forward.

"I thought we just established that I'm not little. You might want to watch how you come at me." Marlee stared her down, daring her to make a move. "For the record, I like Ren. He treats me well, never lies, and keeps me satisfied. This

isn't a fling or a desperate attempt at keeping a man I know loves the road more than me. That was a tiny window into what's been going on for years. He's the one pushing the publicity issue. That's right, a man is fighting for me and proving his worth."

"It's never going to work out. That man isn't one to be tied down. He doesn't want babies, marriage, and growing old. It'd bore him to tears."

"Funny that you believe you know him better than I do," Marlee said, refusing to engage.

"Oh, I do," Kenna said.

Marlee threw her head back and

laughed. “Funny, he told me a story once of you in the bar he and the boys own. Do you want me to go into details?”

Kenna glanced away.

Marlee knew she was blushing under the rich mahogany skin tone.

“I came here to try to warn you, so you could save face. Now I think I’ll enjoy watching you crash and burn,” Kenna said.

“You know, I never understood why we had to be enemies, Kenna. What is this animosity you hold for me, huh? I’ve never been in your lane. I like books, all forms of geekery, and baking. It’s clear, there’s no real competition. We’re on

two different planets, and I'm okay with that. Why aren't you?"

For a moment, Kenna's walls lowered.

Marlee instantly became privy to a world full of pain so poignant she was stunned.

"You know nothing about me," Kenna finally answered.

"Yes, because you never wanted me to," Marlee replied.

"I'm out of here." Kenna stalked out.

Her appearance and leaving left Marlee more confused than ever. She acted so wounded and wronged. Why? When she was always the one out for blood?

Flummoxed, she closed the door behind her sister and scratched her head. Sometimes, life made one's head hurt. She locked the door, and her phone rang. *And it begins.* She walked over to the landline. "Hello?"

"Marleen Marie Hurst...have you lost your mind?"

"Hello to you too, Mother."

"No. Don't you *Mother* me."

"Okay, Frances."

"You think you're so damned smart! What the hell happened today? My phone hasn't stopped ringing. You were accosted by that—that—hoodlum, and

then you leave with him?”

Her shrill voice made Marlee flinch.

“Ren is a successful business owner.”

“Huh, you mean that den of sin?”

“It’s a bar, and a car garage, not a bevy of strip clubs,” Marlee said rolling her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sure the criminal has that too. Who knows what illegal activities he has going on under the table. And don’t think I didn’t realize you avoided my questions. Since when is he...*Ren* to you?”

“Do you honestly want the answer to that?”

“Little girl, you are not too old to get your ass spanked.”

Marlee held back the perverse comment dancing on the tip of her tongue. It would only make things worse. “Listen, mom, this isn’t new. We’ve been off and on for years and kept it to ourselves. He did this today because he wants to go public and get serious. He treats me well, always deals in truths, and makes me happy. That’s all you need to know.”

“Oh my God, you’re involved with him.”

“I love him, mom. Unless he screws up badly, he’s not going anywhere. So, I suggest you get used to it. Whispers, stares, and small town gossip never

bothered me much. It won't start to now."

"You're so selfish. Think of what it'll do to our reputation."

"I imagine it'll have everyone clamoring for information. You'll be the most popular woman in town, up to your ears in hosting parties, and concerned friends dropping by. You should be in heaven."

Her mother huffed. "How can you talk to me like that? This isn't funny."

"No, it's not. You've been after me for years to get a man and settled down. I'd think you'd be happy."

"Not with someone like him!"

“Sexy, older, and successful? You’d rather I get a boy who has yet to figure out who he really is or what he wants in life? So I can be a victim of the sixty percent who end up divorced in the first five years.”

“You and your facts. They don’t protect you from reality. You’re in for a harsh wake-up call. There are things we do in this town, and things we don’t. You’re doing more than rocking the boat, you’re capsizing it.”

“I wonder if you’ll admit what bothers you most. The fact that he’s older, or the fact that he has a past. Which doesn’t define who he is now by the way. People are more than the mistakes they make in

their youth. Especially people who had it as hard as he did.”

“Hah. Is that what he told you? I figured you to be smarter than that.”

“No, mother. That’s what I observed. But let’s talk about the elephant in the room. Is it the fact that he’s white that really burns your toast?”

“W-what? No, of course not. Why would you think something like t-that?” her mother sputtered, doing her best impersonation of a woman appalled.

“You’re the one going on about what we do in town, and what we don’t. It’s not lost to anyone how segregated we are. This is the heart of Kentucky after all. I

guess the color lines shouldn't blur just like people from different sides of the tracks should stick with their own.”

“I never said that.”

“You really didn't have to. Don't think I didn't read between the lines of your accusations.”

“I don't know why you have some sort of vendetta against me. I tried with you, but I couldn't relate. You are your father's child through and through.”

“Thank God for that. Otherwise, I might be a hot mess like Kenna. Pretty on the outside, but completely screwed in the head.”

“You are so spiteful today.”

“No, mother, what I am is tired. Tired of being punished for not fitting into your mold of what a good, southern girl should be, and how she should behave. You made it clear you didn't like who I was from a young age. I used to try to fit in to please you. Now, I just want to be happy.”

“At the expense of everyone else?”

“This will not affect you. We don't live in an Amish community. You won't be shunned and sent to fend for yourself until you've earned good standing once more. I hope in time, we can both just learn to love the other as they are and

where they are. Until then, I simply ask you keep your negative opinions to yourself. We're figuring this out. Once I know something for sure, I'll let you know."

"Are you dismissing me?"

"No, I'm making a stand. I love you mom. I'll never disrespect you. I know how hard you and Daddy worked to provide for us, and raise us right. What I can do is respectfully disagree with your beliefs and go my own way. What does Daddy say?" she asked.

"Like he ever denied you anything you wanted," her mother replied.

"Did I want so much?" she whispered,

hurt by her mother's attitude.

“Always had to be different and hard to understand. Your desires, style, and quirks all come together to make up a child I feel is foreign to me. How could none of who I am seep into your genetic make-up? I think this will end badly. Then what?”

“Then I'll know it wasn't meant to be. Things are changing. We're not in the fifties when women had no choices. If a man was intimidated by my past, he's not the one for me anyway.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it is. I'd like to have a companion if he's the right one. If not,

I'm okay by myself. I'm only twenty-five. I have my entire life ahead of me. I knew this might upset you, and I'm sorry that it has. But I wouldn't regret my time with Ren for a second. One day soon, you'll meet the man behind the rumors, and I hope you can keep an open mind and judge him on his own merit."

"I hope so too," her mother whispered.

"I'm going to now, Mom," she whispered ready to distance herself even further from the woman she never understood.

"Goodbye, Marlee."

The disconnection felt like a knife cutting a chord. This showdown had

been a long time coming, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

Ren

The minute I walked into the shop the catcalls started.

“Where's M? Did she let you know about yourself and send you on your way?” Shaun asked laughing.

Ren flipped him the finger.

“That was quite a display from our former shy girl,” John said.

“Yeah, she wasn't happy. But I can be persuasive. She's willing to give this

thing a shot.”

“Good, don’t fuck it up this time,” Bobby said sliding from underneath the car he’d been working.

“I’m going to try, brother,” Ren said.

Bobby grabbed a rag and began to wipe his hands as he got to his feet. “Step into the office?”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you there,” Ren said walking over to one of the boys he was teaching the trade. They made a point of hiring and training troubled youths trying to get their shit together. It made him feel like he was giving them a chance he never got. “Hey Jackie Boy, can you get my old lady’s car from the fair and drive

it to her place?”

The young boy smirked. He'd been around the shop for the past two years being groomed for a managerial position. He knew damn well who Marlee was and where she lived. It was part of how they managed to keep things on the hush-hush. “Yeah I got it, boss. Keys in the mailbox?”

“Yep.” He tapped his fist on Jack's shoulder. “Thanks, brother.” He walked into the small office and closed the door.

Despite being older than Bobby, his friend had become a mentor of sorts. He had a relationship that was thriving, and he'd walked the same hellish path Ren

had. It gave him hope.

“Where you straight up with her?”

Bobby asked.

“Always am.”

“Good. Now how about with yourself?”

“What do you mean?” Ren asked, shaking his head.

“From what I’ve been hearing you were determined to leave her alone. Why the change of heart?”

“Because I realized someone else could easily slip in and take what I’ve come to think of as mine, and I don’t say that in an egotistical way. Me and Marlee work. We get each other. We click. I

know how rare that is, especially for a man like me. I always assumed we'd come back together like we always did. But that last time, she was serious. She's changed man."

"Yeah the slap heard around the world proves that." Bobby snickered.

"Yeah, you're never going to let me live that down are you?" Ren asked.

"Fuck no." He laughed. "It's good, though. I always thought she let you get away with too much. Men like us have to have a line to toe."

"Speak for yourself," Ren mumbled.

"Uh huh. Trust me. Boundaries clearly

drawn out are a good thing. It's like an idiot's guide to a happy relationship.”

Bobby paused. “You know you're going to have to come clean about your past, right? Even the gory bits.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Because it's the only thing that ever held you back from commitment. Once it's all out in the air, there's nothing to make you stumble. I know it's not easy. We grew up with the mentality that you don't nark, and you sure as hell don't air your dirty laundry. But you can't keep letting him win, man.”

“How is he winning, huh? He's locked up somewhere dying slowly in a cell day

by day, and I have two successful co-owned businesses.”

“And a big empty house. A girl you can’t convince you’re staying put.”

Ren speared his fingers through his hair and growled. “I don’t need you playing shrink.”

“Listen, man, I’m not. I’m on your side. You know that. But this is real talk. I’m trying to tell you how to get what you want. What I think you’ve been wanting but found terrifying for the past couple of years.”

“She was too young.”

“When you first started, maybe. But that

excuse got old a while back.”

Ren balled his fists. The old Ren would trash something or get into it with his best friend. The older Ren was mellow and thought with his head instead of his anger and testosterone. The truth hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, and his past was a bloody wound, coated in salt. It burned like nothing else and never seemed to heal completely.

“Just think about it, all right?”

“Yeah. I’m taking her to dinner tonight.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bobby said, looking impressed.

“I know how to properly date. I just

never felt the need to before.”

Bobby laughed. “Your ass is so gone already.”

“What the hell? You’re the one tied down and fathered up,” Ren commented.

“Which is why I know the signs,” Bobby countered.

Ren rolled his eyes. The fact that babies with Marlee didn’t scare the piss out of him was terrifying. This wasn’t a route he ever thought he would travel. *Can I really do this?* He pictured another man walking with Marlee on their arm and saw red. *I have to.* “Guess you’re right, cause here I am trying to date for the first time at fucking forty-five.” Ren snorted.

“You’ve never been stupid, Ren. I get that it’s new and uncomfortable. We spent most of our lives after we escaped the hell on earth, doing whatever we wanted. We sowed our oats a million times over, did shit that could’ve gotten us arrested, and pushed our bodies to the limit. We’ve done enough living for one-hundred men. The real adventure is going to be settling down. It’s the next step.”

“How were you so sure?” Ren asked.

“Because in all that I’d done. I still hadn’t found the one thing I was looking for.”

“What was that?” Ren asked.

“Love, acceptance, a chance at my own family. Though, I didn’t know it at the time.”

“And was it worth it?” Ren wondered, eyeing his friend skeptically. *Airing all your secrets and risking your heart?*

Bobby glanced at the ceiling and let out a deep breath. “Yeah, and if I hadn’t done it, wondering what if for the rest of my life would’ve eaten me alive.”

Bastard always knows just what to say.
Ren nodded. He got the picture.

He drove them to Roy’s. The local Mom and Pop’s was set on the river, and

boasted the best seafood.

“You remembered, this is my favorite place,” she said softly.

“I listen and retain when you talk. I like the things you say and who you are. *Us* not working was never about that.”

“No?”

He cut the engine and turned to meet her curious gaze.

“Then what was it about?”

His throat went dry. “We’ll get to that before it’s all said and done. But not tonight. Give me a few more dates. What I have to reveal isn’t something I’ve talked about in years. It’s a part of my

life that damn near found me buried six feet deep. It's never been about anything to do with you. It's the fact that you're way too good for me.”

“What?” She snapped. “Are you kidding me? I thought we were past this, Ren? Is it the age?”

“No, but it's something to consider too. When you're thirty-five, I'll be fifty-five.”

“As long as you're still putting it on me and keeping yourself healthy the way you are now. It's not going to matter.”

He chuckled. His girl always had an answer for him when it came to doubts about longevity. Her persistence was the

reason he'd agreed to start up with her in first damn place.

Past

He'd been tossing them back at the bar and observing the crowd. The bar had been open for six months and was doing better than either he or Bobby had anticipated. They often sat in and observed to make sure the staff was up to par, and the customers were enjoying themselves. It was how they kept the edge over the competition. Despite the town's small size, they had plenty of bars and pubs to choose from.

The girl across the bar in the red and

black plaid shirt winked at him.

He smirked at her boldness. She couldn't be more than twenty-one with her fresh face, clear skin, and an air of innocence he'd never possessed.

She turned back to her friend and whispered into her ear.

It flattered him. He was getting closer to middle-age every day. But the young girls loved a bad boy. They wanted him to slap their ass, pull their hair, and fuck them within an inch of their life before he sent them on their way. Who was he to deny them?

She got up from her stool, and he pretended not to watch her from the

corner of his eye. When she stopped beside him, he couldn't help but be impressed. She hadn't seemed the type approach a man. *Maybe I read her wrong.*

“Hi,” she said.

He turned his head and grinned. “Hi, yourself.”

“How about I buy you a drink?” She arched an eyebrow.

He threw his head back and laughed. “I like you...”

“Marlee,” she said.

“Marlee.”

“Good, that makes this so much easier. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Ren, but I think you know that.”

“Hmmm, you know what they say about assuming, Ren. It makes an ass of you and me.”

His lips quirked upward. “I’ve heard that a time or two, Marlee,” he said rolling the e’s.

“So, can I get you that drink?” she asked.

He threw back the rest of his scotch on the rocks. “Sure, darlin’.”

She gestured to the bartender, Andrea, who sauntered over swaying her hips, and pushing out the tits that threatened to

overflow from her T-shirt.

“Can I get another Scotch on the rocks for the gentleman?” Marlee asked.

Andrea raised an eyebrow and looked over at Ren.

He nodded, silently willing her to keep her mouth shut.

“Coming right up, hon,” Andrea said slinking away.

“Listen, doll. I’m flattered by the attention, but we both know I’m too old for you,” he said trying to let her down easy. She wasn’t his normal type. A hit and run would break her little heart.

“Oh, you’re having those kinds of

problems?” she asked lowering her voice.

“What?”

“You know, ED.”

He frowned. “ED?”

She leaned in.

Her breasts brushing against his arm, setting it on fire. Tingles ran through his body, and his heart accelerated. She would be explosive in bed.

Her lips brushed the shell of his ear.
“You know, Erectile, Dysfunction.”

The words were cold water to his libido. He sputtered. “What? Fuck no.”

“Then we have nothing to worry about.”

He'd decked a man for less, but this girl was different. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one, pushing twenty-two in a few more months.”

I've been with younger. “In that case, Ms. Marlee, why don't you take a seat next to me.” He pushed out the stool with his foot.

“I thought you'd never ask, Ren.”

~

Present

It was the start of and off and on that had

brought them to this point.

“Where did you go just now?” Marlee asked.

“Just thinking of how this all started,” he said.

She laughed. “I had your number even then.”

“I never asked what made you come over.”

“Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?” Marlee asked.

He snorted. “Come on, it was more than attraction. I know you well enough to know that wasn’t your usual M.O.”

“Because I lied. I knew exactly who you were, and you were the type of man I wanted. One who didn’t give a shit about small town gossip, and the politically correct bullshit they shovel into our mouths from the moment we’re old enough to talk. I’ve always been different. It’s made my life harder in some ways and easier in others. I knew you would take me as is. I mean if you took me at all. It was a crap shoot.”

“How’d you know it’d be more than a fling?” he asked.

“Who said that’s what I was looking for?”

His jaw dropped and she winked. After

all these years, she still managed to keep him on his toes. “Dirty little girl,” he said.

She finished the final piece of her pumpkin pie and moaned. “Only with you, Ren.”

“You keep asking for it, and I’m going to give it to you,” he cautioned.

“Here?” She rolled her eyes. “Please, I know an idle threat when I hear one.”

Ren glanced around, dropped his fork on the floor and disappeared beneath the table-cloth. She clenched her thighs shut. He chuckled, and pried them open, thanking the universe for her skirt. He shoved it up her thighs, pulled her

panties to the side, and dove in. His tongue lashed her clit and his finger slid into her wet center while he crooked them. Her legs trembled and he knew she was close.

After all this time, he knew how to bring her to orgasm swiftly. There was something to be said about quickies. He sucked her swollen nub in and pounded her pussy the way he wished his dick could about now. Her slick walls, contracted and she gripped him tight as she came. He imagined her clutching the tablecloth as she bit down on her lip and did her best to keep her face normal.

Don't dare me girl. You know I'll always do what it takes to win.

Chapter Three

Marlee

Their lips mated as they stumbled inside his house. She felt a change in him. He was open in a way he'd never been before. Hope swelled in her heart, and lust flowed rapidly throughout her body. Tiny fires licked at her flesh as her world narrowed to the pleasure he brought. They made it to the living room, and he spun her around and bent her over the couch. She shivered with anticipation, raising her ass and wiggling it back and forth.

He delivered a firm slap, and she cried out.

“I missed this ass.”

His raspy words yielded a fresh gush of cream. She peered over her shoulder. “It missed you too.” Her pussy throbbed as he removed his belt.

“Assume the position like a good girl. You know what I like.”

She placed her arms behind her back. The cool leather looped around her wrists and pulled tight. Her heart pounded. Her nipples turned to stone. He lifted her skirt around her waist and trailed heated bites down her back. She arched her back and moaned. The sound of a zipper lowering behind her made her bite her lip to hold in the whimper.

Sex with Ren was anything but dull or predicable.

He trailed his fingers up her legs and traced the rim of her underwear. He dipped his hands in cupping her ass. “You’ve lost weight. We have to change that. I can’t have you losing that ass I love so much, can I?”

“No,” she said. *I’ll say whatever you want right now as long as you fuck me and stop drawing this out.*

He loved to play the control game. It got him off knowing she needed it badly enough to ask. Their quiet battle made for explosive endings. He removed his hands, gripped the sides of her

underwear and pulled. The elastic broke under his calloused fingers.

The sting heightened her arousal. Cool air caressed her heated center, and she jerked.

His fingers ran down her dripping sex and circled her clit. “Oh, yes.” He spanked her pussy.

Sharp bursts of pleasure shot through her body.

He slipped his swollen cock between her lips, rocking his hips. “You’re so wet for me.” He buried his fingers in her hair, pulled it taut, and thrust home.

She screamed and flexed around his

thick dick. The nine inches stretched her, reminding her how long it'd been since he'd laid pipe.

“So fucking tight,” he pulled out and slid back in. “And hot.”

Her mind went blank. “Please.”

“Please, what?” Ren asked.

“Fuck me.”

A heartbeat passed. “Remember you asked for this.” He pushed her head down, gripped her hips and pounded into her core.

She took it, handing over control. Every stroke went deeper than the one before. After so long apart, he was a missing

puzzle piece clicking into place. *He's my home.* The realization had her flexing her muscles and seeing white as she exploded. She came back to him rubbing her wrists.

“You back with me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He helped her stand and their lips reconnected.

She relearned his body with her fingertips as they shed their clothing. He was beautiful, muscular and lean with pops of silver threaded through his dark brown hair. His body was a map of struggles. She traced the scars of puckered flesh from a bullet wound on

his shoulder and kissed her way down to the jagged scar by his hip from a knife he'd taken once in prison. Her man had lived a hard life. But he'd gained wisdom and an insane calm that drew her like a moth to the flame. He had so much to offer. She continued to worship his body with her mouth, wishing she could show him the way she viewed him. "I missed this...the way you taste, salty and sinful. Your scent."

He massaged her scalp and peered down. The gentle smile that graced his lips was one she'd come to think of as being for her alone. "Oh yeah? What do I smell like?"

"Man, motor oil, and leather. It's

addicting that scent. I took a shirt when I left, and I slept with it for weeks until your scent dissipated.”

“Now you can have the real thing,” he said sternly. His gaze held a promise.

She wanted to believe him. She could see growth. But her head begged her to wait and see. This man had damn near broken her once. She would be a fool to charge back in head first with no backup plan or caution. “For how long?”

“However long you want,” he whispered.

A protest rose on her lips. *Don't ruin the moment.* “How about the way I want?” she asked, wrapping her hand

around his cock. She pumped him slowly.

“You want to take control?” he asked.

“I want to ride you and make you come this time.”

He grinned. “You sure you’re ready? It’s been six months. Got a lot of pent up aggression to work out.”

“You’re not the only one.” She curled her hand around his bicep and squeezed. With Ren, she was sexy, daring, and open to anything. They fit.

“You got mouthy while you were away.”

“I had a lot of time to think about what I really wanted,” she said, squeezing him.

He scooped her into his arms and stalked to the bedroom.

His aggression made her giggle. “Not bad for an old man.”

“I’ll show you old, little girl.” He bit her bottom lip, and she retaliated, slipping her tongue in his mouth and scratching the nape of his neck. His eyes darkened, and his nostrils flared. He was sin incarnate, and she wanted a reason to say a few Hail Mary’s. They continued to battle with their mouths until they reached the bedroom. He sank onto the bed, and she moved to straddle his hips, gripping his base. She lowered herself onto him, and they both moaned. He filled every inch of her, leaving no

emptiness. She placed her hands on his chest and began to move. This was more than sex or lovemaking. It was a pledge with their bodies. This time, they were really in it for keeps. She saw so much in his eyes.

He gripped her hips hard enough to bruise. “I’m never letting you go again, Marlee.”

“I—I don’t want you to.” She rose up and slammed back down over and over. His dick went impossibly hard, and she knew he was close. They linked fingers, and her body began to shake. She held back. “Let go for me, Reynard.”

He filled her with a hot stream, sending

her over the edge and she collapsed onto his chest, buried her nose into his neck, and breathed him in.

As their bodies cooled, he stroked her back and arm. “I owe you a story. It’s not one I like telling. You know I had a hard time growing up. My father was a mean drunk. It wasn’t a secret, and back then, no one gave a fuck about spousal abuse. I watched him tear her down mentally before he’d start in on her physically night after night. The more he drank. The worse it got. You know why he went to jail, attempted murder. The scandal still hangs over our heads.” His voice was even, and he looked at a point across the room, as if he had to remove himself

from the situation to speak on it.

Her heart bled for him. No child should have to witness that.

“I hated him, but that emotion drove me to be like him. I got in trouble in school, ended up in the court systems by the time I was sixteen. My anger led me to make a lot of shitty choices until I turned my life around after that first adult prison sentence for aggravated assault. I got a lot of my father in me, Marlene. That’s why I steered clear of relationships. If I found out, I was capable of that shit...I’d eat a bullet before I made a woman’s life a living hell.” His mother had a permanent limp and lost a kidney to the vicious attack he’d laid on her.

“That’s not you, Ren,” she said horrified that he could believe himself anything like the monster rotting in prison.

“I’m capable of some fucked up shit—”

“If it’s necessary. To keep the people you love safe. You came from a violent background where you felt helpless. It’s not surprising that was your way of dealing with it. That’s what you learned to do as a child. You turned yourself around. That shows the measure of the man you are. Let the past stay there where it belongs. Don’t let him win.”

“You willing to bet your safety on that?” he asked.

“I’m willing to bet everything on you,

Ren. Don't you know that by now?"

He glanced away. "I don't deserve it."

She grabbed his face. "The fuck you don't. Is this why you always held back?"

He nodded.

She sighed. They all had scars and baggage. He just hid his better. "Thank you for trusting me with this. I always thought before it was me. That I wasn't enough for you to commit yourself to. That you thought you might grow bored of me, or didn't believe I was worth it. It's fucked up, I know. But I'm used to being second best."

“Babe, I don’t hit women, but I’ve wanted to deck your sister and your mother since we first started this thing and I got to know you better. They made you feel like that, you know.”

She laughed. “And that is not the voice of a man who would harm me intentionally in any way. Let alone physical.”

“God, I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am.”

“I’m willing to try this with you. I want it to work. I want this to be the final ride for both of us, but if I find I put you in danger.” He shook his head. “That’s it.”

She rolled her eyes. “And if you don’t?”

“Then you’re stuck with me. You ready for that babe? ‘Cause I’m too old to be doing this shit a second time.”

“So romantic. How could I say no?”

“You want flowers and sugary ass words, you got the wrong man.”

“No, I have the right one,” she said feeling giddy. It wasn’t a ring. They weren’t ready for that yet, but it was solid agreement she could stand by. “So, I guess you’re my man now?”

“Babe, I’ve been your man for a long time now. Everyone else finally knows it.”

“I don’t think everyone.”

His eyes flashed with fire. “They will soon enough.”

The possession in his eyes made her weak in the knees. For the first time in four years, she felt secure and at peace with the relationship they formed.

“I love you, you know?” he said.

She smiled into his skin. “I love you too.”

He twined their fingers, and she knew this was the beginning of permanence. They would have their ups and downs between her family and his fears, but together, she knew they could conquer

anything.

THE END

Author Bio



Shyla Colt grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, but has lived a variety of different places thanks to her wanderlust, interesting careers, and marriage to a United States Marine. She's always loved books and wrote her very first novel at the age of fifteen. She keeps a

copy of her first submission letter on her desk for inspiration.

After a lifetime of traveling, she settled down and knew her time had come to write. Diving into her new career like she does everything else, with enthusiasm, research and a lot of prayers, she had her first book published in June of 2011. As a full-time writer, stay at home mother, and wife, there's never a dull moment in her household.

She weaves her tales in spare moments and the evenings with a cup of coffee or tea at her side and the characters in her head for company. A self-professed rebel with a pen. Her goal is to diversify romance as she continues to genre hop, and offer up strong female characters.

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