

Caged in Winter: A Reluctant Hearts Novel

By Brighton Walsh

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Book One in the Reluctant Hearts series

In this emotional and sexy New Adult debut from Brighton Walsh, the only thing more frightening than commitment is hope...

Aspiring chef Cade Maxwell is immediately, viscerally attracted to Winter Jacobson. But it's not her mouthwatering curves he's drawn to--it's the strange emptiness in her eyes. When Cade saves her from a drunken customer with grabby hands, he's shocked at her response...

Winter doesn't need Cade's help. After a lifetime of getting by on her own, she's happy to rely on herself. She's exactly seventy-six days away from graduating college, and if she can hold it together that long, she'll finally be able to rise above the crappy hand she was dealt.

But now, every time she turns around, Cade is there, ready to push her, smile at her, distract her from her plans. Winter knows she can't afford to open up--especially to a man she's terrified to actually want...

Full length new adult novel featuring a fiercely independent college senior and the tattooed chef who gets under (and over, and on) her skin.

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Caged in Winter: A Reluctant Hearts Novel By Brighton Walsh Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
Caged in Winter was named as one of the top 10 romances for 2015 and one of the top 101 romances of the past decade by Booklist.

"The slow build of Winter and Cade's relationshipis satisfying and real. Walsh's debut raises the bar for NA books andwill leave readers hungry for more." -*Booklist Starred Review*

"Walsh's latest offering is wonderful. She combines great characters, real-world situations and strong language in this charming-yet-steamy plot. Readers will love this book and eagerly anticipate the next one." -*RT Book Reviews Top Pick*

"This is why I love New Adult! Everything about Caged in Winter felt real. And Cade? Perfect book boyfriend." - *Jennifer L. Armentrout, #1 New York Times and USA Today bestselling author*

"With characters so real I feel like I've knownthem all my life, CAGED IN WINTER is pure, sweet, hot romance. It's amust-read!" -*New York Times bestselling author M. Leighton*

About the Author
Brighton Walsh spent nearly a decade as a professionalphotographer before deciding to take her storytelling in a different directionand reconnect with her first love: writing. When she's not pounding away at thekeyboard, she's probably either reading or shopping--maybe even both at once.She lives in the Midwest with her husband and two children, and, yes, sheconsiders forty degrees to be hoodie weather. Her home is the setting forfrequent dance parties, Lego battles, and more laughter than she thought possible.Visit her online at brightonwalsh.com.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONE

winter

Seventy-six days.

The number repeats as a mantra in my mind, echoing like a drumbeat with every hurried step I take.

Seventy. Six.

Seventy. Six.

Stale air and dim lighting greet me as I tear down the hallway of my apartment building, jamming my key into the lock of my door and rushing inside. If I don't get my ass in gear, I'm going to be late. If I'm late, I could get fired.

I *can't* get fired.

I toss my bag on the floor, already stripping off my sweater and searching for the minuscule articles of clothing my employer considers a uniform. I find them piled in the corner of my tiny studio apartment. Like tossing them to the side and burying them among a hundred other things would somehow make them disappear. I hate this nightly routine. I hate walking out knowing what awaits me. Knowing what kind of front I'll be putting on. Knowing it's my only choice.

Still, it beats living on the streets, and I'm about fifty bucks from having my ass kicked to the curb.

As fast as I arrived, I'm out of there, grabbing a banana on the way. It's not much as far as dinners go, but it's all I've got. I inhale it as I head across campus, a hoodie and a pair of yoga pants thankfully covering the parts of me I don't want to show every horny college guy I pass. Not that being in the pub is any better. But at least there it's expected, and I feel somewhat protected while surrounded by other people. They can look their fill, but don't touch.

Usually.

When I'm working, I paint a lifeless smile on my face. Laugh. Flirt. Engage. It took me a day to figure out that smiling got me bigger tips. Took me a week to figure out that flirting got me even more.

My head's down as I book it two blocks from the outskirts of the opposite side of campus. Having to stay behind at my last class, I missed the bus I usually take to get to work, but I don't mind walking. It's warming up, the first traces of spring in every newly budded tree, in every sprouted flower. New beginnings, some would say. The season of love and light. The opposite of winter, when everything is harsh.

Dark. Cold. Hollow.

Fitting, really, my mother would name me that.

It's like she already hated me, even then.

• • •

I'M ONLY TWO minutes late, but to Randy, my boss, two minutes might as well be twenty. I keep my head down as I blow into the pub, trying not to draw attention to myself. I head into the back, clocking in and peeling off my armor before stuffing my hoodie and pants into my locker. I tug on the hem of my barely there shorts and crop top. Like all that adjusting will magically add three inches of material.

I pause just inside the door of the break room. Walking out is always the hardest step. Coming into the pub, with my regular clothes on, my face down, is nothing. I'm still me. I'm still invisible.

It's hard to be invisible while wearing nothing but this. Hot pink top smaller than some sports bras I've seen. Black boy shorts that cover less of my skin than some of my underwear.

I can hear the raucous laughs of the patrons already. Tuesday nights aren't usually too bad. We have a few regulars, and sometimes people celebrating birthdays, but I generally don't have to worry too much about guys getting handsy with me, or hanging around and waiting for me after closing to see if my flirting actually meant something. Those nights are the worst.

Knowing I can't put it off any longer, I push through the door.

"Hey, sugar," Annette says as she mixes up a drink behind the bar. In her late forties, she's the floor manager-slash-bartender and the only one of us lucky enough to wear jeans and a T-shirt with the pub's logo on it. What I wouldn't give for that much coverage. "Randy's in the office. He didn't notice. You're fine."

I breathe for what feels like the first time since I left class. "Thanks."

She nods and tells me what tables I've got, and I go to work.

Shoulders rolled back. Shell in place. Smile plastered on.

Seventy-six days to freedom.

cade

This is the reason I wanted to become a chef. This feeling right here. The rush of adrenaline, the high that comes from a well-done dinner service. The sense of accomplishment when someone compliments your dish. That's me on a plate, every time, and there's nothing in the world that feels better than when someone loves what I've created for them.

The energy in the kitchen is buzzing, everyone pumped up after a great night, and I'm one of them, knowing we kicked ass tonight. I concentrate on cleaning up my station at the end of my bistro class, listening to my classmates bustle around me, excitement in the tone of their voices.

"Hey, Cade," Chef Foster says when he stops in front of my station. "Come see me before you leave."

"Sure thing." I wipe down the stainless steel table and then pack up my knives. Once they're secure in my bag, I head to where I see Chef Foster just as he finishes with another student.

He glances at me, then tips his head to the back corner of the kitchen, the only place that'll allow us a modicum of privacy. Once we're there, he slaps a hand on my shoulder. "Excellent work tonight, Cade."

"Thank you, Chef."

"I really mean it. I always knew you had talent, even when you were little, but what you've developed into is more than I could've hoped for."

I stand a little taller at his words, pride swelling in me. Chef Foster—Mark when we're not in school—is an amazing teacher and someone I'm lucky enough to call my mentor. Hearing that from him feels like winning the lottery. "That means a lot."

"Well, you know I don't bullshit." A grin lifts the side of my mouth as I nod, and he continues, "You know these last couple months are crucial for your future prospects. Do you know yet what you'd like to do after you graduate?"

I swallow, a million thoughts bombarding me. Tessa and Haley and working in a kitchen in New York or

L.A. and studying in Italy . . . My responsibilities battling with my dreams. Though it's not really a battle at all, because there's no competition. "Well, my long-term goal will be to open my own restaurant. Before that, I'd just be happy to work my way up to executive chef somewhere."

"Are you looking at strictly Italian cuisine?" he asks, referring to my specialty.

"No, but all the better if that was where I ended up."

"Have you started looking?"

"Not yet. Should I be?"

"Probably not, but I'd start mid-May. And, of course, you know you'd increase your chances if you were open to different locations."

"You mean—"

"Outside the state."

I stare at him, unsure of what to say to that. In the past year, he's been hinting at me broadening my horizons for where I'd look, but it's never been anything quite so blunt. If anyone knows how difficult that would be for me, it's him. He's been a family friend for as long as I can remember, and he witnessed firsthand the devastation that rocked my family. Leaving now . . . leaving Tessa and Haley? That's not an option.

"You know I can't do that."

He stares at me for a moment, his jaw ticking. Knowing him as long as I have, I have no doubt he has something he wants to say. Rather than doing so, he eventually gives a short nod, blowing out a breath. "Well, let me know when you need some recommendation letters. I'd be happy to send them."

"Thanks, Chef."

"I'll see you tomorrow. Keep up the good work."

I nod, shouldering my bag and heading out of the kitchen after offering good-byes to a few friends. I'm not even halfway to the parking lot before my phone buzzes with a text message.

Come out 2nite

I roll my eyes and quickly type out a response to my best friend before pocketing my phone. I haven't taken five steps when my phone rings.

Knowing it's him, I answer, "Yeah."

"Why do you have to be such a pussy all the time?" Jason asks.

I laugh, shaking my head as I walk toward the street. "If that's you trying to talk me into going, it's not working."

Someone shouts in the background and Jason yells back before talking into the phone again. "Well, what the fuck else am I supposed to do? You haven't been out in *months*."

“You’re an asshole. We just hung out when Adam was home a couple weeks ago.”

“Hanging out on your couch playing *Call of Duty* does not constitute going out, dumbass.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been doing this thing called going to classes and studying and working. Not all of us have parents willing to foot the bill through four changes in majors and the extended college plan.”

“Hey, I’ll graduate one of these years.”

I snort. “Maybe.”

“And if you’re trying to sound like less of a pussy, you need to work on your tactics.”

I chuckle, knowing exactly what he’s doing. Goading me used to be effective, back when we were fifteen, sixteen. Seven years later, not so much. “Still not working.”

He groans. “Come on, man. It’s Sean’s birthday. Everyone is out. I’ll even buy you a round.”

Heaving a sigh, I drop my head back as my shoulders slump. After four hours on my feet in the kitchen, I just want to relax. I feel like I haven’t showered in a week. I feel like I haven’t slept in even longer. Even still, he’s right—I could use a night out.

“Yeah, all right. Gimme an hour. Where are we meeting, Shooters?”

“Not sure. Sean wants to barhop. Give me a call when you head out. I’ll let you know where we are.”

“’Kay. Later.”

I hang up, pocketing my phone as soon as I reach my motorcycle. It’s still a bit cold for it to be an enjoyable ride, but Tessa needed the car, so I didn’t have much of a choice. I straddle my bike and button up my coat before I rev the engine to life. The loud roar echoes around me as I peel out of the space and rumble down the street.

Riding is my escape—the one thing I take for myself. I forget about my responsibilities—classes and bills and the people who depend on me. My mom always hated this thing, hated it the first day I brought it home, but I think she’d understand my love for it now.

When I ride it, it’s my peace.

• • •

I STILL FORGET, sometimes. Even after four years. When I walk through the front door, sometimes I expect to hear her in the kitchen, the smells of her cooking greeting me. The sound of her laughter filling my ears. The sense of security and ease I always had before everything changed.

Tonight the house is empty, not even the sounds of Tessa or Haley echoing down the hallway. I check my watch, then shoot Tess a quick text, making sure everything is okay. They probably went somewhere after Haley’s ballet practice, but there’s still lingering doubt that gnaws at my gut. After living through the kind of tragedies I have, it’s hard to turn it off—that constant worry that’s always there, lurking under the surface.

As I wait for her text, I jump in the shower, then throw on whatever clean clothes I can find scattered around my room. I’m ready to go sooner than I expected, and I grab my keys and coat on my way out the door,

checking my phone for a reply. Finding one there, my worries fade, and I reply, letting Tess know I'll be gone till later tonight.

Before starting up my bike, I call Jason to find out where they are. He's already well on his way to being shit-faced, and I'm not sure this was such a good idea. I love him like a brother, but I can't help that bit of jealousy I get as an outsider looking in at his life. Wondering what it'd be like to be a normal, carefree twenty-three-year-old guy. Where the only thing I had to worry about was where I was going drinking that weekend and who I was going to fuck. Instead I'm worried about keeping my scholarships and paying bills, all the while attending school full-time and holding down a part-time job.

Still, even if I had a choice, I wouldn't have it any other way. I love Tessa and Haley more than anything.

By the time I get to The Brewery, I know the guys have already hit several bars before this one. I spot them in the back by the pool tables. They're loud and obnoxious, roaring over the only other group taking up space inside.

I head over, seeing Jason at the pool table, curled over the bent form of his latest conquest, no doubt "improving" her shooting skills. He notices me, tips his chin, and grins before returning his attention to the girl he's probably hoping to get in the pants of tonight.

I flag the waitress, ordering a beer, and get pulled into a conversation between Sean and Dave about last night's game.

After a while, a hard slap lands on my shoulder. "Hey, pussy."

I look over my shoulder and straighten to my full height. Jason is tall, but I'm taller, and I stare down at him. "You really want to start this? I kicked your ass in third grade. I can do it again."

A laugh rumbles out of him. "Yeah, only because you sucker punched me." He shakes his head, landing another blow on my shoulder. "I can see you're still pissy as hell. We need to get you laid." Before I can retort, he continues, "You get a beer already? What'd ya think of Mandi?"

With a furrowed brow, I ask, "Who?"

"Our waitress. The food here sucks, but the uniforms definitely make up for it."

I stare at him for a minute, before shaking my head. "You're such a jackass. I don't understand how you even get girls to sleep with you."

"Charisma, my friend. *Charisma*. And speaking of getting girls to sleep with me, where's Tess?" He waggles his eyebrows, and I shove him so hard he stumbles back, laughing.

"Fuck off."

Holding his hands up in surrender, he says, "I'm just playing." He's been *just playing* regarding Tess for as long as I can remember. The first time he said something like that, I ended up with swollen knuckles and he had a black eye. He tips his beer in my direction. "Drink up. You need to relax."

A-fucking-men.

winter

Sometimes I daydream. Think about what it will be like after I've graduated. Once I have a steady job. A *real* job. Something that doesn't require ninety percent of my skin showing. I picture myself in Maine or South Carolina or Texas. New York, maybe. I've become so good at this, I can almost smell the scents of my nonexistent apartment in some far-off city, can name the colors of paint on the walls, can count the number of dirty dishes in the sink.

When I'm working, it's my escape. When I have to smile and bend over to pick up a customer's napkin or get him something from the kitchen for the fourth time so he can watch my ass as I walk away . . . it's what I think about to get through the hours, the minutes. It helps to remind myself why I'm here. What I'm working for. Why I put up with jackasses who smell of whiskey and cigarettes and cheap cologne. Who smell exactly like my childhood.

"Sweetheart. Hey, sweetheart!"

I'm so wrapped up in my fantasy, it takes me a moment to realize a guy from table seven is talking to me. I hate this part of the night. Those thirty minutes before last call, when everyone is drunk on alcohol and the prospect of getting lucky. The men get rowdy and restless . . . never a good combination.

"What can I get you?"

He crooks his finger at me, beckoning me closer. Internally, I roll my eyes, but my face holds the mask I've perfected in the time I've worked here, and I lean forward until his whiskey breath whispers across my cheek.

"You can get me your number."

This isn't the first time I've been propositioned, and it's definitely the tamer kind I've heard. By now, I have a system in place. In the time it takes me to imagine what I'd do if this asshole told me that outside these four walls, I keep my eyes down and allow a hint of a smile to curve my lips, shuttering my real thoughts from him. When it seems like I've had long enough to actually contemplate his words, I offer him a regretful look, the corners of my mouth turned down. "I'd love to, but we're not allowed to give our numbers to the customers."

"Just pretend you're not working, then."

I'm standing close enough for his arm to snake around my back, his hand settling on my waist. After thirteen months of working here, I've gotten pretty good at reading people. I know from fairly early on which guys are going to hassle me, which ones are harmless flirts, which ones will get handsy by the end of the night. I called this guy as the latter when he was two beers in . . . six drinks ago. It makes my skin crawl, but I've had a long time to practice this façade. I could win a freaking Oscar for the performances I put on here.

I lean into him slightly—just enough to make him think I'd actually be interested . . . if only we met at a different time, in a different place—and point to the back corner where a mirrored window reflects back at us. "I'd love to, but my boss is watching. I can't afford to get fired." The latter, at least, is true.

Sometimes they're satisfied when I feed them the whole "my boss is watching" line. Sometimes all I need to do is flirt a little bit, bat my eyelashes, flash a smile, bite my bottom lip. Sometimes that's not enough, and I need to lean into them, touch their forearm or their shoulder. Those nights aren't so bad. I still feel dirty after I leave, and I take a shower as soon as I get home, attempting to wash the disgust off me. And then I mark off the days on my calendar and remind myself this isn't for nothing. I'm paving my path the best way I can. The only way I can on my own.

But sometimes none of those work. And this is one of those times. Even though I was expecting it, it's still jarring when his hand slides from my waist until he's got a handful of my ass. If I felt threatened, I'd whip out one of the half-dozen self-defense moves I know, call for Randy, hope he actually did something, and walk away. In all the time I've worked here, I've only had to do that once, though. And even then, it wasn't Randy who came to help, but Annette. Usually, like now, these guys are harmless. Disgusting, perverted pigs, but harmless. Sure, he smells like cheap cologne and alcohol and he's got something stuck in his teeth, but he's too wasted to prove to be a real threat to me.

I do a quick scan of the table, noticing the three other guys packing up their shit, divvying up the check, paying no attention to the dickbag with his hand on my ass. They've been here taking up one of my tables for three hours. Three hours of lewd remarks they think I can't hear. Three hours of leers and whispers about my ass or my boobs. And now it's down to five minutes . . . ten, tops. That's all the longer I need to make it, and hopefully the show I gave them will be enough to warrant a tip large enough to justify feeling dirty. Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be better off heading to Roxy's, the strip club down the street, and just getting it over with. At least there, there are no pretenses. Take your clothes off, rake in your tips, go home. And there'd be no touching. I'm not the thinnest or the most voluptuous girl, but that doesn't seem to matter to the guys. If my mother taught me anything in the seven years I was with her, it's to use your body to your advantage if you can.

Before I can smile or bite my lip or laugh, lean in and rest my fingers on his chest and tell him how much I wish I could bend the rules, he yelps and his hand is gone from my ass. I whirl around to a brick wall of gray cotton, and look up, up, up until I get to the clenched jaw of some guy I've never met. His dark hair is buzzed short, the bulk of his body nearly obscene, the forearms peeking out of his sleeves covered in ink, but that's all I notice before I'm focusing on the fact that he's got Handsy Asshole's arm bent and twisted up and against his back, and he's whispering something in his ear. Something too low for me to hear.

And while I don't have my customer's hands on me or his breath in my face or his eyes fucking my body, I can't focus on what relief I feel because all I can think is that this guy—this asshole who got a little handsy—was how I was going to buy groceries.

And any chance I had of getting a tip probably vanished the second this giant of a man swept his way into something that's none of his business in the first place.

cade

I spotted her somewhere between discussing the shot made in the final three seconds to win last night's game and the latest version of *Halo*. It would make me sound like more of a guy if I said I was drawn to her because of her tits in that nonexistent shirt or her ass hanging out of those shorts that might as well be panties—which, yeah, I noticed both. But the truth is, her eyes were what drew me in.

They look . . . lifeless.

Sure, she's got the smile plastered on. She's got the glances down—the slight lift at the corner of her mouth, the lip bite—but she's got this air of disdain surrounding her. She's not like the other waitresses—the ones you can tell love working here. They flirt and laugh and touch. It's obvious they thrive on the attention they get in a place like this.

Not her.

She hates it here.

Someone who isn't really looking, who isn't really paying attention to her, might not notice, but I do. Her dead eyes give her away.

I can't blame her. Working here, surrounded by half-drunk men when you're wearing less than some people wear on the beach, has to be tough. The thought of Tessa or Haley ever having to do this makes me sick, and I have to remind myself I'd never let it happen. That's why we're so careful with our money, why we scrimp and save even though we don't have to. Why I work part-time even though the house is paid off, even though my mom made certain we were taken care of. Just in case. If our past has taught us one thing, it's that anything can happen.

All night, I've sat quietly, watching a group of four guys a few tables over getting progressively louder and more aggressive. I've gotten bits and pieces of their conversation—when she's been near, and when she's been out of earshot—and it's done nothing but ignite my temper. I'm waiting for one of them—probably the douche with the fedora—to grab her and pull her into his lap or spill his drink all over her shirt and mop it up with his napkins for an excuse to feel her up. I'm sort of hoping he does, just so I have a reason to confront the shithead.

Jason is bitching about some basketball player and everyone around me is groaning, but all I can see is the table three over from ours. The girl with the dead eyes comes back, and my skin boils as I watch Fedora Asshole beckon her forward and whisper in her ear. She shakes her head, points toward the back corner, and offers him a sad smile, though I can tell it's insincere. She's not sorry about whatever she just turned him down for. And based on the conversation I've caught bits and pieces of, it wasn't anything tame. He probably asked her to suck him off in the bathroom.

And then clumsy as all shit, this drunk ass slides his hand down until it rests on her ass. She stiffens subtly, and I'm out of my chair before I can blink, my legs eating up the space between us until I'm right next to him.

I don't think as I grab his hand, twisting it up and behind his back, pressing until I hear him groan. The image of Tessa or Haley in a place like this with a slimy jackass groping them hits me once again, and I push against this asshole harder, feeling a sick sense of satisfaction wash over me as his pained protests meet my ears.

I lean in, my voice quiet and controlled as I say, "If a girl says no, you listen, fucker."

TWO

winter

The whole thing takes maybe two minutes—from the second the sleazy guy puts his arm around me until he's practically falling out of his chair to leave. Two minutes. After three hours of waiting on them. Of smiles and flirtation and not slapping them across the face when they placed their orders straight to my nipples.

All that effort . . . gone. Erased. In two fucking minutes.

My customer scrambles out of his chair, his friends following behind, eyes wide as they toss money onto the table and walk out. Before they're even out the door, I'm counting it and checking it against the total of their bill, praying that even with this behemoth next to me, obviously threatening them, they managed to leave me

a little something. Hell, I'd take five bucks at this point. Five bucks could buy me breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner.

When I've triple-checked my math, I hang my head, my eyes closing, shoulders slumping. I take three deep breaths, hoping for a calm I know won't come.

Seventeen cents. They left me seventeen cents.

I try not to panic, reminding myself I've gotten through worse than this. I've gone longer without any money on hand. Rent's due tomorrow, and with my other tables, I'd made enough to cover it—just barely—but these guys were my meal ticket.

I'm off tomorrow and don't have another shift until the following night, which means I'm going to have to last two days on whatever I can scrounge up in my kitchenette. Which isn't much. I'll have to ask Randy if I can pick up an extra shift tomorrow, even though he gets off on saying no, like he knows when I need it and refuses to help.

"Hey, are you okay?" A large hand settles over the expanse of my shoulder, pulling me out of my thoughts.

And all at once, my day catches up with me. The classes that are kicking my ass and running late tonight and having wasted three hours for a measly seventeen fucking cents, and I snap.

I whirl around, jabbing my finger into his too-large chest as I glare at him. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

cade

Her sharp words and the fire in her eyes surprise me. I thought she'd be grateful, maybe offer a thank-you, but if the set of her jaw and the flattened line of her lips—*Jesus*, those lips—are any indication, she isn't just mad. She's livid.

Did I read it all wrong? *Was* she interested in that slimy asshole? Did she welcome his hands on her? But I know I saw her spine stiffen when he grabbed her ass. I saw her inch away from him. I *know* I did.

I open my mouth a couple times to say something, but nothing comes out. Which is probably good, because it seems she has a lot to say.

"I asked who you thought you were, dickhead." She pokes her finger into my chest again, and even though the top of her head doesn't even come up to my shoulder and she can't weigh more than a buck ten, she exudes a don't-fuck-with-me vibe like some of the biggest linebackers I ever encountered when I was still playing football. "You always go into people's places of employment, shove your way in with your too-big shoulders and your giant arms, and manhandle whatever issues you see until you're satisfied?"

Her voice gets louder with every word that comes out of her mouth until I feel nearly every pair of eyes in the pub looking at us. I still can't find any words, dumbfounded by a reaction completely opposite of what I expected. And struck mute by the sight of her. She looks like an avenging angel, with her long, dark hair, the flush of her cheeks, the fire in her eyes, and the rage rolling off her.

If I thought she was hot with her mask in place, it has nothing on this pure, concentrated version of her.

She's fucking gorgeous.

“Oh, *now* you don’t have anything to say.” She throws her hands up and walks a tight circle before she faces me again, pointing an accusatory finger at me. “Do you think I work here for fun? Do you think I like having my ass grabbed or my tits ‘accidentally’ grazed by these drunk, perverted assholes?” Before I can answer, she snaps, “No! I work here for the fucking money, and now I’m out—” She snatches the bill off the table, and her lips move almost indecipherably before she glares at me again, spitting, “Thirty-eight dollars, thanks to you.”

“I’m sor—”

She holds up her hand, stopping me before I can finish. “I don’t want your goddamn sorries. Go hop on your horse, Prince Charming, and save some other girl. I don’t need your help.”

She spins, her short legs chomping up the floor space between me and the back of the restaurant, and then she’s gone, disappearing behind a swinging door.

I stand there for a couple minutes, vaguely aware of the rumbling laughs coming from my group of friends. Before I can think too much about it, I grab a couple twenties out of my wallet and toss them on the table. They were supposed to be for yellowfin tuna to make seared ahi tuna steaks, but I’ll have to make them next week. It’s practice anyway, not for a grade, and it’s clear this girl needs the money more than I do.

“Bet that didn’t go how you expected,” Jason yells, and the rest of the guys crack up.

I flip him off, glancing to where she disappeared into the back, remembering the heat in her eyes and her rigid stance, and Christ, everything about this girl is getting under my skin. “Not exactly,” I mumble to myself.

THREE

winter

The campus is always busiest this time of the day, with so many classes just starting. I generally avoid it like the plague, getting to the Arts Building earlier, but I was running behind, having spent too much of my morning thinking about the events of the night before. I can’t believe the balls on that guy. First, he jumps in without prompting, attempting to rescue me—*me*! I snort, shaking my head as I dodge a group of students on the sidewalk. I can’t remember the last time I needed rescuing. When you grow up alone, passed around from foster home to foster home, you learn really damn quick to get self-sufficient.

And then after he “rescues” me, after I tell him to fuck off, he has the balls to toss money on the table for me?

There isn’t a doubt in my mind it was him, either. Who else would it have been? The rest of the girls, while they watched the entire sordid affair, wouldn’t have given up forty bucks of their own tips just because I got screwed out of mine.

And those dickbags who bailed didn’t come back in. The one who had his hand on my ass looked like he was about to piss his pants as he scrambled out of his seat. No way was he setting foot inside again, especially so soon after he made his escape.

That pretty much seals the deal that Prince Charming swooped in, trying to save me again. Apparently he didn’t hear any of the words of venom I spewed at him. He was probably looking down my shirt while I was

losing my shit, too engrossed in my boobs to pay attention to anything I said.

The anger fuels me all the way through my walk across campus, daydreaming what I'd do, what I'd say, if I saw him again. I don't know if I ever will, but the cash he left is stuffed in my pocket. Just in case. Just in case I get the chance to slap it against his chest and give him a piece of my mind—*again*—since he was obviously too thickheaded to hear me the first time.

Until I do, though, it burns a hole in my pocket, thoughts of what I could buy flitting through my head. And it isn't even anything fun. Instead of thinking about buying a new pair of shoes or books or name-brand shampoo, I'm thinking about groceries. Bread, meat, maybe even those soft, frosted cookies I love but only let myself indulge in if I've got more than a hundred-dollar cushion for my bills. Even still, I refuse to spend it.

I've gotten by on my own for fifteen years. I certainly don't need anyone's help now.

cade

"Cade. Cade!"

I snap my head up and glance toward Tessa. "What?"

"Haley's been talking to you for five minutes. What's your deal?"

"Sorry." I shake my head and turn my attention to my niece. "What's up, short stuff?"

"Wanna play dolls?" Her big brown eyes—the only thing she got from her deadbeat father—implore me, and like always, I can't say no.

"Sure. Go get 'em ready. I'll be right in." Before I've even finished talking, she climbs down from the chair, her stumpy legs pounding the carpet as she runs as fast as she can down the hall.

"Seriously. What's with you?" Tessa asks.

I toss the game controller next to me on the couch, letting my head fall back as I close my eyes. "How do you know anything's with me?"

"Well, for one thing you've died five times in the last ten minutes on that stupid game. For another thing, you've been quiet all afternoon."

"Maybe I just don't want to talk to you."

She laughs and swats me against the back of my head. "Please. You *live* to talk to me."

Thankfully, she doesn't prod any more and walks down the hallway toward her bedroom, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

The thoughts that have done nothing all day but revolve around the firecracker at The Brewery. I can't remember the last time I've let a girl get to me like she has. If I'm interested, I get the girl's number, go out a few times, sleep with her if it goes that way, but that's it. I'm definitely not one to sit around and fucking *pine*, constantly thinking about someone.

Even so, I can't get her out of my head. She held so much confidence, so much poise in her small frame,

even when she was telling me exactly where I could shove my chivalry. The details of our encounter kept me up last night, and have kept me company all morning. The fire in her words, backed with heaps of pride. Watching her dead eyes spark with life.

I mentally flip through my schedule for the next few days. I don't have much leeway, but it doesn't matter.

I'll be back in that pub before the end of the week.

winter

I rank talking to my boss lower than cleaning the toilet bowl. With my toothbrush. He's an asshole, and it's like he takes this perverse pleasure in seeing me—seeing any of us, really—struggle and ask him for his help. Part of me thinks that's why he hired me in the first place. So he could keep me under his thumb, knowing the job he could take away at any moment is the only thing keeping a roof over my head. Keeping me fed.

I'd rather swallow a handful of razorblades than ask him for anything, but I don't have a choice. When I talked to him last night, I had to clench my hands behind my back, gnawing on the inside of my cheek as I asked if I could pick up an extra shift. By some miracle, he agreed, and even though it's only three hours, it's something, and I'll be able to make back what I lost in tips last night. At the expense of time allotted for schoolwork, but when making the choice between an A or a B in the class or eating, sometimes a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

The professor dismisses my last class for the day, and I grab my laptop, stuffing it in my bag as I glance at the clock while the rest of the students shuffle out. I have forty-five minutes to get home and change before I need to head to the bus stop. I usually stay behind in this class, working on coding and designs and geting a head start on next week's classes, but I can't today.

So wrapped up in getting out of here, I nearly rush right past the couple standing at the bottom of the steps outside. A guy is leaning against the railing talking to a girl I recognize from my class. His face is familiar, and it only takes me a moment to realize where I've seen him before. He was the loudmouth from last night at the pub—the one who's friends with Prince Charming. I stuff my hand in my pocket, clenching my fist around the money there. And before I know what I'm doing, my legs have carried me forward until I'm standing directly in front of him.

"Excuse me." I butt in mid-conversation, and I can't even dig up an apology, too fueled by righteous indignation. I slide in between the two of them, and the girl gives me a narrow-eyed glare, the guy looking at me quizzically.

"Uh, yeah, hi?"

"You were at The Brewery last night, right? With some friends?"

"Yeah," he drags out the word, his eyes flicking to the girl he was talking to before returning his gaze to me.

"You friends with the jackass who left me this?" I hold the bills between two fingers, waving them in front of his face.

"Umm . . ." He scratches his head, looking at me quizzically. "You're—wait. You're the pissed-off waitress?" His eyes travel the length of me from head to toe, and I don't blame him for not recognizing me. My hair's not down like I wear it at work, instead pulled back into a messy ponytail, and I've got on a pair of

jeans and a sweatshirt. The fact that he doesn't recognize me without all my skin showing tells me loud and clear exactly what parts of me he was focusing on.

"That's me." I slap the money to his chest, a thousand retorts running through my mind. A thousand things I'd say to that guy if he were here in front of me. But he's not, and his friend wasn't the jackass who cost me three hours of work, so in the end, I sigh and settle on, "Give this to your friend. And tell him I don't need his goddamn money."

I wait until he reaches up and takes the bills, nodding slightly, before I spin around and leave.

I weave my way through the sea of bodies, zigzagging around the slow walkers and the meanderers and the talkers, adrenaline driving my path.

My pride has always been my downfall, and it's bitten me in the ass more than once. For as long as I can remember, it's the one thing I don't bend on. I do everything on my own. I *want* to do everything on my own. If I count on no one but myself, I'm not going to get let down. The minute I start relying on others is the minute I'm undoubtedly disappointed. The minute everything I've built comes crashing down around me.

And even though this isn't new to me, I still wonder if what I did was stupid. I think of all I could've bought with that. Milk and cereal and a whole fucking case of ramen, but even with these thoughts running through my mind, I don't care.

I straighten my shoulders as I march home, confident in my decision.

I don't take handouts.

cade

"Good work tonight, Cade," Chef Foster says, patting me on the back. "I loved the addition of the Sriracha sauce. Bold choice."

"Thanks." I smile, offering him a nod. "I forced Tessa to be my guinea pig at home. Took me a few tries before I got the right balance."

"Well, you hit it out of the park. Everyone loved it. Nice job."

I can't keep my grin from spreading. If there's one thing I love to hear, it's that people enjoy the food I make. In the kitchen, there's no better compliment; nothing makes me feel higher than that. And hearing it from him, from someone who's known me most of my life and whose professional attributes I strive to emulate, is the highlight of my week.

I clean up my station before slipping my knives into their carrying case and tucking it all away in my bag. Shouldering it, I wave to a few people, then head out the door and into the cool night.

It's late—just after ten—so it surprises me when a voice cuts through the dark. "Cade."

My head snaps to the right, and I spot Jason sitting on the steps just outside the building. He stands as I descend the stairs two at a time until I'm in front of him.

I jerk my chin toward him. "Hey. What're you doing here?"

"I talked to Tess earlier. She told me where you were." He leans against the cement pillar at the base of the

stairs and reaches into his pocket, pulling something out. “I have a message for you from an admirer.”

Raising both eyebrows, I rock back on my heels. “Admirer?”

He laughs outright. “Okay, not really. She’s *definitely* not a fan of yours.” He holds up some cash and slaps it in my hand. “The girl from The Brewery. She found me this afternoon after class. Did you know she goes to school here?”

I shake my head at him, my eyebrows drawn together.

“Yeah, well, she told me to tell you to fuck off.”

My mouth drops open and my eyes widen as I stare at him. The asshole’s smirking. “Seriously?”

He laughs, hitting me on the shoulder. “Basically. I think her exact words were she doesn’t need your goddamn money. But damn, it’s a good thing she found me and not you. I think she would’ve killed you with just the fire coming out of her eyes. Either that or had an introduction of her foot to your junk.” He shakes his head, smiling. “She does *not* like you.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that.” I stare at the cash in my hand, my brow furrowing. After the tirade she went on about the money she lost thanks to me, I’m genuinely perplexed as to why she would go out of her way to give this back. When she was calculating how much those assholes left her, I could’ve sworn I heard her mumble something about buying groceries. She obviously needed the cash. Why didn’t she take it?

But if anyone can understand exactly why she didn’t, it’s me. I *know* why she didn’t. It’s the same reason I’ve worked so hard, scrimping and saving since Mom died so we’d never be in that position. I don’t want to take anyone’s help. I can do this on my own.

It seems the two of us have something in common.

He starts walking, and I follow, heading to the parking lot. I clear my throat. “She say if she’s working tonight?”

A choked laugh comes from him, and he stares at me, his eyes wide. “Are you serious?” He shakes his head, focusing on the sidewalk in front of us. “Dude, just drop it. She doesn’t want the fucking money. Let it go.”

I know he’s right. I *should* let it go. I should forget about her and her dead eyes sparked to life and the passion I saw boiling under her skin. Should forget about her touching me, forget about the fact that it was done in pure, undiluted anger.

But I can’t get her out of my head, and whether she knows it or not, she’s just given me the perfect excuse to see her again.

FOUR

winter

Classes are killing me this week. I lost out on a solid four hours of study time since I had to pick up that shift, and I’m suffering for it. My entire schedule is out of whack now, and I’ve had to shuffle everything around so I still have time to get in what I need. Working full-time and going to school full-time is more

demanding than I ever thought it would be. But I’m in the home stretch now. Fantasies of moving away from here, going to New York or Miami or Chicago, flood my mind. Seventy-four more days, and I’ll be free.

I grab the handle and pull open the door of The Brewery, the smell of grease and beer nearly choking me. I walk in, keeping my head down until I’m out front again, stripped of my armor and ready for my shift.

Once I’ve gotten my tables settled and am at the bar, getting drink orders, Annette says, “Someone was in here looking for you earlier.”

Users Review

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