

Brent Payton wanted some decent music while he was working.

Not this pop-rock crap the radio had been playing but real rock 'n' roll. Hell, he'd take George Thurgood right about now. Some "Bad to the Bone"? Hells to the yeah. That was better than a cup of coffee, which he could really use this Monday morning.

He'd volunteered to spring for an iPod and a docking station so he could play his own music, but his technology-inept father had acted like Brent wanted to buy a spaceship.

So that was out.

"Brent," Cal's voice called from the other bay of their garage at Payton Automotive.

"Yeah?"

"What's this shit on the radio?" his older brother asked. "Turn it down before my ears bleed."

Brent snorted. Cal was grumpy on a normal basis. But now that he'd quit smoking and wore a nicotine patch, he was even more insufferable. So Brent didn't argue and turned down the music.

A truck rumbled into the parking lot, and Brent turned around, squinting to see who it was.

Alex Dawn, the new employee they'd hired a week ago, strolled into the garage, a bandana wrapped around her head, wearing baggy jeans and a tight T-shirt. She held a banana in one hand.

Brent grinned and walked over to where she stood outside the door to the office, looking over the schedule for the day. She peeled her banana and took a bite. He leaned in and inhaled deeply. "I love the smell of estrogen in the morning."

Her lips twitched only slightly before she turned around and socked him in the bicep, hard. The woman could hit.

He howled dramatically and clutched his arm, swinging it limply from the elbow. “I’m injured! I can’t work!”

While Alex gazed at him, one eyebrow raised in amusement, he forgot about his injury, grabbed her banana, and bit off half of it.

“You asshole! That’s my breakfast!” Alex smacked him in the stomach, and he started laughing, nearly choking on the banana. “I’m so stealing the Snickers you keep hidden in the office.”

He straightened in shock. “You wouldn’t.”

She was smug, the witch. “I would.”

“That’s war, woman.”

She took the rest of the banana out of the peel and then tossed it so it landed on his shoulder. “Then don’t mess with my banana.”

“That’s some grade-D dirty talk,” he said, picking the peel off of his shoulder and throwing it in the trash can.

“Will you two quit it and get to work?” his dad, Jack, hollered, sticking his head out of the office door. “It’s like you’re related.”

Brent shrugged and walked over to the minivan to continue rotating its tires. Alex smirked at him from her bay. Brent winked back.

Working with Alex had been rocky at first. She had a chip on her shoulder—which she refused talk about—and Brent really enjoyed trying to knock it off, which only led to their sniping at each other. But when some asshole customer gave her a hard time because she was a

woman, and she told him to shove it—Payton and Sons Automotive didn't really have that customer-is-always-right policy—Brent developed a newfound respect for her. When Brent backed her up in front of said asshole, she began giving him some respect in return. And so they'd fallen into this brother-sister type relationship that was actually kinda fun. Brent didn't really have friendships with women and especially not women he'd never fucked.

And the thing about Alex was . . . he didn't want to fuck her. It wasn't because she wasn't hot, because she was. But the chemistry between them was . . . lacking. Which surprised Brent. Because he was like hydrogen; he reacted with everyone.

Brent worked quietly for the rest of the morning, singing to himself when decent music came on, taking care of the minivan before moving on to the next job.

He was draining oil from an old Toyota when he heard voices from the front of the garage. He spotted Dick Carmichael talking to Alex. She pointed toward the back room, where Cal had disappeared. The Carmichaels had been coming to the shop since before Brent had started working there. Dick was a retired accountant, and his wife still cut hair in an add-on at their house.

“Can I help you, Dick?” Brent asked as he walked closer.

The man turned to him. “Hey, Brent. Uh, no, that's fine. I'll just wait for Cal.”

“Oh, well if you need—”

Dick waved him on. “It's fine. You can get back to work. I'm sure you want to break for lunch soon.” He patted him on the shoulder, like he was a kid, and chuckled. “Your dad always says that's your favorite part of the day.”

Brent tamped down the irritation. First, whatever Cal could help him with, Brent could too. Second, yeah, Brent liked eating a hell of a lot, but that didn't mean he didn't do his job.

So he nodded and walked back to the Toyota. He didn't look up when he heard Cal return, when Dick spoke with Cal about some work he wanted to do to his car—work that Brent would probably be assigned to, but he wasn't Cal, the responsible one.

Nor was he Max, their younger brother, the first of them all to become a college graduate.

Brent was the middle brother, the joker, the comic relief. The irresponsible one.

Never mind that he'd been working at this shop since he was sixteen. Never mind that he could do every job, inside and out, and fast as fuck.

Never mind that he could be counted on, even though no one treated him like that.

A pain registered in his wrist, and he glanced down at the veins and tendons straining against the skin in his arm, where he had a death grip on a wrench.

He loosened his fist and dropped the tool on the bench.

This wallowing shit had to stop.

This was his life. He was happy (mostly) and free (no ball and chain, no way), and so what if everyone thought he was a joke? He was good at that role, so the typecasting fit.

“Why so glum, sugar plum?” Alex said from beside him as she peered up into his face.

He twisted his lips into a smirk and propped a hip on the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. “I knew you had a crush on me, sweet cheeks.”

She narrowed her eyes, lips pursed to hide a smile. “Not even in your dreams.”

He sighed dramatically. “You're just like all the ladies. Wanna piece of Brent. There's enough to go around, Alex; no need to butter me up with sweet nicknames—”

A throat cleared. And Brent looked over to see a woman standing beside them, one hand on her hip, the other dangling at her side, holding a paper bag. Her dark eyebrows were raised, full red lips pursed.

And Brent blinked, hoping this wasn't a mirage.

Tory, Maryland, wasn't big, and he'd made it his mission to know every available female in the town limits and about a ten-mile radius outside of that.

This woman? He'd never seen her. He'd surely remember if he had.

Gorgeous. Long hair so dark brown it was almost black. Perfect face. It was September and still warm, so she wore a tight striped sundress that ended mid-thigh. She was tiny, probably over a foot smaller than he was. Fuck, the things that little body made him dream about. He wondered if she did yoga. Tiny and limber was his kryptonite.

Narrow waist, round hips, big tits.

No ring.

Bingo.

He smiled. Sure, she was probably a customer, but this wouldn't be the first time he'd managed to use the garage to his advantage. Usually, he just had to toss around a tire or two, rev an engine, whatever, and they were more than eager to hand over a phone number and address. No one thought he was a consummate professional anyway, so why bother trying to be one?

He leaned his ass against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. "Can I help you?"

She blinked, long lashes fluttering over her big blue eyes. "Can you help me?"

"Yeah, we're full service here." He resisted winking. That was kinda sleazy.

Her eyes widened for a fraction of a second before they shifted to Alex at his side and then back to him. Her eyes darkened for a minute, her tongue peeked out between those red lips, and then she straightened. "No, you can't help me."

He leaned forward. "Really? You sure?"

"Positive."

“Like, how positive?”

“I’m one hundred percent positive that I do not need help from you, Brent Payton.”

That made him pause. She knew his name. He knew he’d never met her, so that could only mean she’d heard about him somehow, and by the look on her face, it was nothing good.

Well, shit.

He opened his mouth, not sure what to say but hoping it would come to him, when Alex began cracking up next to him, slapping her thighs and snorting.

Brent glared at her. “And what’s your problem?”

Alex stepped forward, threw her arm around the shoulder of the woman in front of them, and smiled ear to ear. “Brent, meet my sister, Ivy. Ivy, thanks for making me proud.”

They were both smiling now, that same full-lipped, white-teethed smile. He surveyed Alex’s face and then Ivy’s, and holy fuck—how did he not notice this right away? They almost looked like twins.

And the sisters were looking at him now, wearing matching smug grins—and wasn’t that a total cock-block? He pointed at Alex. “What did you tell her about me?”

“That the day I interviewed, you asked me to re-create a Whitesnake music video on the hood of a car.”

He threw up his hands. “Can you let that go? You weren’t even my first choice. I wanted Cal’s girlfriend to do it.”

“Because that’s more appropriate,” Alex said drily.

“Excuse me for trying to liven it up around here.”

Ivy turned to her sister, so he got a better glimpse of those thighs he might sell his soul to touch. She held up the paper bag. “I brought lunch; hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it is,” Alex said. “Thanks a lot, since *someone* stole my breakfast.” She narrowed her eyes at Brent. Ivy turned to him slowly in disbelief, like she couldn’t believe he was that evil.

Brent had made a lot of bad first impressions in his life. A dad of one of his high school girlfriend’s had seen Brent’s bare ass, while Brent was lying on top of his daughter, before the dad ever saw Brent’s face. That had not gone over well. And yet this impression might be even worse.

Because he didn’t care about what that girl’s dad thought of him. Not really.

And he didn’t *want* to care about what Ivy thought of him, but, dammit, he did. It bothered the hell out of him that she’d written him off before even meeting him. Did Alex tell her any of his good qualities? Like . . . Brent wracked his brain for good qualities.

By the time he thought of one, the girls had already disappeared to the back room for lunch.

“Do you think we hurt his feelings?” Ivy picked at a stray piece of lettuce hanging out of her sandwich.

She didn’t meet her sister’s eyes, not even when Alex started making choking sounds across from her at the small table in the back of Payton and Sons Automotive.

“E-excuse me?” Alex stuttered.

Ivy bit her lip and lifted her gaze to her sister’s. Alex had talked a lot about Brent, and while there was an underlying platonic affection to her words, most of her talk was complaining about how much of a pain in her ass he was. Maybe Alex hadn’t been looking at Brent close

enough during their conversation out in the garage, but Ivy had been. She'd noticed the flash of frustration over his face when they'd shut him down.

What made her pause was that it seemed like frustration directed at himself, not at her.

Crap. Ivy dipped her gaze back to her sandwich. This would not do. She and Alex had basically stamped a big red X over all dicks—literal and figurative—for a good long time. They'd already moved twice to get away from men who had ruined their lives. Tory was supposed to be where they settled in, got their lives straight, and raised Violet.

Ivy's defense mechanism was to immediately be cold to Brent. She could have gotten bees with honey, but she didn't want bees. Or honey. Or whatever. So she was all stinger.

She and Alex didn't need men. The two of them and Violet would be just fine.

And yet at this moment, Ivy couldn't stop thinking about Brent. Alex hadn't warned her that he looked . . . like *that*. Like six-feet, two-inches of hotness straight out of a Mechanics of Your Dreams calendar. Jesus. That dark hair, those full lips that smirked, those slate eyes that did nothing to hide the fact that this man was trouble with a capital T.

"Iv-eeeeee." Alex drew out her name in that way only big sisters could do when they planned to interrogate.

Ivy poked the wheat bread of her sandwich. "What?"

"Why are you concerned about Brent's feelings?"

She didn't know. Honestly and truly, she didn't know, but she couldn't forget that momentary flash of emotion that passed over his face before he covered it with a smirk. "I don't know; he's your coworker and—"

"I know he's basically sex on legs, Ivy, but he knows it. And I'd be hard-pressed to find a woman who hasn't taken a ride in this town."



Ivy pressed her lips together, chastising herself for letting her soft heart show. She needed to focus on finding a job and raising her daughter. Those were her priorities. Not going toe-to-toe with some cocky hot guy. “You’re right; forget I said anything.” Ivy held up her index fingers and crossed them in an X. “No men.”

“Ick,” Alex spat.

“Gross,” Ivy said.

Alex grinned at her, and Ivy returned it, sipping from her iced tea. “So, work going okay?”

“Yeah, I like it here. Cal’s fair. Brent’s fun to work with. Jack’s still a hard-ass but I think he’s warming to me.”

Alex had told Ivy that Brent and Cal’s dad was a brick wall of gruff and stubborn.

“Good.”

“Violet off to school okay?” Alex asked.

Ivy’s daughter was in first grade at White Pine Elementary School in the Tory school district. They’d moved in time for her start at the beginning of the school year. “Her teacher called me again, saying Vi cried on and off this morning.” Ivy knew moving was hard on her, but they hadn’t had much of a choice. “I hate this.”

Alex squeezed Ivy’s hand where it rested on the table. “It’s school. You’re not torturing her. She’ll get used to it.”

Ivy’s stomach rolled, thinking about it. “I hope.”

“She’s a good kid. She just needs time.”

Ivy sighed. “I guess.”

“Alex,” a deep voice said from the doorway. Ivy craned her head to see a man who looked a lot like Brent but . . . wasn’t Brent.

“Yeah?” Alex answered.

The man nodded at Ivy. “I’m Cal.” He turned to Alex. “Sorry. I know you’re eating lunch, but got that customer of yours out front from last week. I tried talking to her, but she likes you better.”

Alex laughed. “Greta Sherman?”

“That’s the one.”

She balled up her empty sandwich wrapper. “I’ll be back in a couple of minutes,” she said to Ivy.

Ivy looked down at her half-eaten lunch. “I can leave—”

“Nah, I’ll be right back. You finish eating.”

Alex tossed her trash into the can on the way out.

Ivy took a sip of her tea and picked at her sandwich. She’d spent all morning on the computer, applying for jobs in and around Tory. It wasn’t necessarily a mecca of job opportunities, but Alex had found a place she fit in, and the pay wasn’t bad. Ivy had some savings, but it wasn’t going to last forever, and she wanted to pull her weight in the little family they’d created.

Her résumé was a bit slim. She had a high school diploma but no college degree, having spent her early twenties raising Violet. Her job options in Tory were working as a secretary for a lawyer, selling furniture at a department store, or being a nanny.

None was appealing.

But at least they all paid.

The chair across from her squeaked, and she lifted her gaze, opening her mouth to tell Alex about her job options.

Except Alex wasn't sitting across from her.

Brent was.

He leaned back in his chair, feet up on the table and crossed at the ankle. He held a packet of peanuts and tipped it so a couple fell into his mouth. He chewed, steel eyes on her.

She clenched her jaw shut.

He swallowed. "You looked like you were going to say something."

"Sure I was. To Alex. But you're not Alex."

"No, I'm not. But I'm a great listener."

"I'm sure," she said drily.

His lips quirked. "Want to hear about what other things I'm good at?"

"Not particularly."

"Because I can do this thing with my tongue—"

*Good God.* "I don't do this."

"Don't do what?"

She waved a hand between them. "This. Flirting."

He raised his eyebrows. "Babe, I haven't even begun to flirt."

She took a deep breath to calm her rising blood pressure. "Don't do that either."

"Jesus! Now what?" His exasperation might have been cute if she still had a heart.

"Nicknames."

"Babe?"

“My name is Ivy. I-V-Y. Three letters. Two syllables.” Even she wanted to cringe at how much of a bitch she was being.

He was studying her now, his face a little less amused and more . . . thoughtful. She didn’t like thoughtful Brent. Amused, flirting Brent? Harmless. Thoughtful Brent, who tried to look deeper? Dangerous as hell.

He ran two fingers over his lips and then dropped his hand to the table, cocking his head. “You’re just thorns everywhere I touch, aren’t you?”

She froze at his words, like a deer in headlights because yes—yes, she was a whole lot of thorns because she’d learned long ago they were necessary to protect all her soft parts.

Brent wasn’t done, though; his voice was softer when he spoke again. “You born that way, or something make you that way, Ivy?”

She swallowed. Yep, Brent Payton was dangerous in a sexy-as-hell package. His words were seeping past those thorns, hitting all the spots where she was weak. So she gathered herself and clenched her fists at her sides. “You’re just acting like this because I’m the first woman who hasn’t fallen at your feet.”

He laughed at that. “Fallen at my feet? Nah, there are plenty of women who’ve told me to go to hell. My percentage is good, though. Maybe eighty-twenty.” He grinned that shit-eating grin. “But you got me curious now. I wanna keeping prodding until I find a place that isn’t a thorn. How long do you think that’ll take me?”

Shit, no; that’s exactly what she didn’t want. With those eyes that were smart and trouble at the same time.

She swallowed and straightened her spine. “You’ll never get close enough.”

He cocked his head. “No?”

“No.”

He hummed a little and leaned back in his chair again. He threw a peanut in the air and caught it in his mouth. Then he chewed, with those steel eyes daring her to look away. “Guess I gotta plan my attack better next time, huh? You better work on those defenses.”

She heard Alex’s voice as her sister made her way back to the lunchroom. Ivy smiled and lifted her chin. “Who says I’ll be the one who needs defense?”

He laughed sharply, like he was surprised. “Oh, babe, bring it.”

She gritted her teeth. “Ivy.”

“Babe. I call it as I see it, and you’re definitely babe.”

Ivy growled.

He smiled, and then he was up out of his chair and walking out the door as Alex made her way in. Her eyes trailed Brent as he retreated to the garage.

Alex turned to Ivy, eyes concerned. “Was he bothering you?”

Bothering didn’t even touch it. “No, he’s fine. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Alex shrugged. “I can talk to him—”

“Alex, I swear, it was nothing, and even if it was, I could handle it.”

Her sister eyed her and then stole a bite of her sandwich. “Fine; now eat. You’re getting skinny.”

“Quit mothering me.”

Alex pointed to the sandwich with raised eyebrows, and Ivy glared at her as she took a bite.