



# CROSSING LINES

**KD WILLIAMSON**



# CHAPTER 1

Kelli took a long swig from her beer and flipped through the channels on Nora's TV. She stopped on *Sex Sent Me to the ER*. She had to give it to The Learning Channel; there was always something interesting on. Despite that, Kelli yawned. She was tired as hell and still getting used to marching the concrete trail through the city for work. Thank God, she didn't have a lot of open cases. Or maybe the lieutenant was going easy on her. Good thing Nora's bed was the expensive kind of comfortable. Not that they did much sleeping... Not at first, anyway. They had settled into a routine over the past couple weeks, especially with Kelli back on active duty. No matter how late Kelli worked, they made time to be together. As far as Kelli was concerned, it was the best way to end her nights, especially after dealing with the shit stains of Seattle.

Dinner smelled incredible. She didn't know what it was, but the aroma made her mouth water. She was smart enough to stay out of the kitchen. Anything Kelli touched usually turned out like hot garbage. She was fine with take out, but cooking was Nora's way of taking care of her. Kelli should have felt smothered by all the attention, but she didn't. There were times when she still wanted more...more touching, more laughing, just *more*. Twenty-four hours wasn't long enough to fit it all in. Kelli had no problem admitting that she was a greedy fucker when it came to Nora. Needing...*wanting*...someone like that was definitely new.

The doorbell rang.

Kelli glanced toward the kitchen and called out, "You expecting anybody?"

Seconds later, Nora poked her head out. She looked surprised and a little confused. "No. I have no idea who it could be. Would you take care of it, please?"

Kelli nodded and stood, but she instantly went on alert. It could be family dropping in, but that was unlikely, so she checked the camera feed on Nora's iPad.

Taylor Fuller, the intern who had sued Nora for sexual harassment, was standing at the front door. “Holy shit.” Kelli wished she could melt her with heat vision or, better yet, drop a piano on her, cartoon style. She enlarged the image to get a better look. Fuller was very fidgety. She couldn’t decide whether to cross her arms over her chest or leave them hanging. Taylor shifted from foot to foot, and her hands were balled into fists. She sure as fuck wasn’t coming over for high tea. Kelli studied Taylor, searching for obvious weapons and bulges in her clothes. There were none, but her mouth was moving. It looked like she was muttering “bitch” over and over again.

Dammit all to hell. No one could be this stupid. Nora didn’t need this. For the first time in weeks, things were going well for her. Kelli would deal with this herself. She retrieved her gun from the lockbox Nora bought for her and clipped the holster to her belt.

Seconds later, she jerked the door open. “Have you lost your goddamned mind?” Kelli didn’t wait for a reply. She grabbed a handful of Taylor’s shirt, dragged her back a few steps, and closed the door behind her.

Taylor’s eyes went wide and, for a minute, she looked scared as hell. Good. “Didn’t count on me, did you?” Kelli gave her a little shove.

Taylor pushed Kelli’s hands away and put her nose in the air. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care that you’re here.”

“I’m a cop, dumbass. You’d better care. Now, get the fuck outta here.”

Taylor’s face reddened, but she had the balls to stand her ground. “No... no! She was always on my ass. She ruined...everything. I made friends here! Now I have to—”

If she didn’t think Taylor coming here was dumb as fuck, Kelli might have been impressed with her nerve. “Listen here, little girl.” Kelli deliberately got in her face and thoroughly enjoyed watching her flinch. “Grow the fuck up. Sometimes you have to work for shit. Obviously, you didn’t want to. That’s not Nora’s fault. Get your shit together and move on. You lied. You were caught. Now you have to pay for it.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? You don’t touch me. And you don’t tell me what to do.” Taylor took a step toward Kelli.

“I’m going to touch you all the way into a pair of handcuffs if you don’t back the fuck up.” Kelli crossed her arms over her chest and smiled.

“Don’t you fucking laugh at me. I’m not going to just let this go. This is the last time someone treats me like shit.” Without warning, Taylor lashed out and threw a punch at Kelli’s face.

Kelli dodged the swing and almost laughed when Taylor pitched forward. Before she could try again, Kelli caught Taylor, twirled her around, and wrenched her arm behind her back.

Taylor cried out in pain.

“Assaulting a police officer is up to five years in prison. Is that what you want? Is it worth it? Is it?”

“No, please!” She turned to look at Kelli. The pain and fear in Taylor’s gaze was obvious, but Kelli didn’t expect the tears.

She wasn’t moved at all. “You sure? I’d be more than happy to oblige. If you come anywhere near Nora... Let’s just say I’m not a good person to cross.”

Taylor stopped struggling, and Kelli let her go.

“Believe me?” Kelli asked.

Taylor wiped at her face with the back of her hand. Kelli had no doubt that the tears were real, but Taylor didn’t look all that scared now. She glared at Kelli, but had the common sense to step away. “Yes, I believe you.” She smiled, and Kelli expected to see a snake’s tongue flick out. It was that slimy. “But you should believe me, too.”

Kelli threw her hands up in the air. “Oh come on! Don’t be so fucking clichéd. Let it go. You’re young enough to start over. Be smart and be done with the dumb shit. It didn’t work out the first time, and it won’t now. You probably wanna tell your boyfriend too.”

Taylor laughed. “He got me into this mess. He can rot in hell for all I care.”

“Well then, you got a shit load of enemies, little girl, and there is just one of you,” Kelli continued.

“Whatever. I think I’m going to do just fine on my own.”

“Uh-huh, it’s good to have high self-esteem. Now, get outta my face,” Kelli said. This fake sparring match had gone on long enough. Kelli had won, hands down.

Taylor backed away and continued to glare.

Kelli waved and smiled. That girl was a bad egg, but they were easy to get rid of... Just throw them in the trash. Taylor was full of shit, but there was

always a chance that she was serious. Kelli was just going to have to stay here every night to make sure she didn't come back. She snorted. Like she needed an excuse in the first place. Kelli watched Taylor's car disappear up the road. After a few more seconds, she turned back toward the door. When she opened it, Nora was waiting just inside. The soft look in her eyes made Kelli's heart turn over in her chest. "I'm not sure if we need to watch out for her or not, but I didn't want her to ruin—"

Nora interrupted her with a kiss.

Kelli smiled and pulled Nora closer to deepen the caress. Slowly, they parted.

"I can go smack around a few more people if that's what it gets me," Kelli said teasingly.

Nora grinned. "Dinner's ready."

"Mmm, don't know if it's gonna be this tasty," Kelli said, as she nibbled on Nora's neck.

Nora laughed even as she turned her head to the side to give greater access. "Did you just say—"

Kelli groaned and steered them toward the kitchen. At least she could help dish everything up...maybe. That didn't really take skill. "Yes, I did. Who knew I was so goddamned corny?" What was next? Poetry? She remembered a couple dirty limericks.

"It's not the first time, but I won't complain," Nora said.

"Good to know. What's for dinner? Because that smell—"

"Flank steak with chimichurri sauce, fingerling potatoes, and honey-glazed carrots."

"I have no idea what a chimi-what's-it is, but you had me at steak and potatoes."

"I knew I would."

Nora had her even if she'd made gruel.



Nora was not one to cuddle, but that didn't keep her from snuggling closer to Kelli. She certainly wasn't prone to waxing poetic, but that didn't keep her from taking advantage of the tiny bit of moonlight that filtered inside the

bedroom to watch Kelli in slumber. She was an ugly sleeper. Kelli's mouth was wide open, and Nora even saw a glimmer of drool. Her forehead was wrinkled as though she was deep in thought, even while asleep.

Nora smiled into the semidarkness. That she thought it was truly adorable said volumes about how deeply Nora was wrapped up in Kelli. She traced the contours of Kelli's face with her gaze and then reached out with her fingertips to do the same over the crinkle in Kelli's forehead, to her nose and her cheeks.

Kelli mumbled, "Wassit...huh?"

"Shhhh." Nora made comforting noises, hoping to lull Kelli back to sleep.

Kelli grumbled, fidgeted, and threw a leg over one of Nora's before she stilled again. Nora wiggled to adjust, until their naked bodies were flush against each other. Even in her sleep, Kelli shivered and moaned in reaction.

Nora took a deep, shaky breath. She had never affected someone like this before and vice versa, but that was obviously what led them here...now. She wasn't sure why she was awake. Perhaps, she just wanted to bask in what she had, something incredibly special. As a lover, Kelli could be commanding, but she was gentle when Nora needed her to be, which helped to ease Nora's fears of losing herself in this *thing* between them. As a result, Nora felt safe enough to let Kelli into the deeper parts of herself. Kelli was also a generous, caring person and, somehow, she always knew what to say...what to do to make things better, to make Nora laugh, to make Nora feel. All of this was starting to be too good to be true. She pressed her face into Kelli's neck and refused to allow doubt to creep up on her.



Nora covered her mouth as she yawned. Residual sleepiness was a small price to pay for her late night pondering. She rounded a corner in the ICU. The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps caused a moment of trepidation layered with irritation. Rader was gone, and Taylor was...she didn't want to think about that. Kelli didn't seem too worried, so she wouldn't be either. When she realized it was Kelli's brother, Sean, trying to get her attention, Nora's nerves settled. She waited for him to catch up to her.

"This is ICU." Nora deadpanned.

Sean rolled his eyes. His sister, however, had perfected that gesture. “Yeah, I know. I was just going to see Travis. I was gonna come find you after, but here you are.”

Curious. “Do you see anyone else running and yelling in the hallway?” Nora bit the inside of her cheek and attempted to keep a straight face as she continued her teasing.

His eyebrows shot upward. “Uh no.” Sean grinned. “Do I get a spanking?” He paled. “Um...I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Nora sighed. The McCabe charm... It just oozed. “I’m sure.”

“You could get one of the nurses to do it.” He smirked.

Nora tried to glare at him, but she couldn’t hold her smile back. “I think your sister has probably sullied the McCabe name.”

“She always steals the show. Speaking of...” Sean pulled an envelope from his pocket. “Saw her at the precinct. She was sure it was gonna be late when she made it to the hospital. Said something about not breaking the pattern?”

Nora melted, and her face heated as she took the letter.

“I was really tempted to read it, but I was scared it was going to be something dirty.”

So much like his sister. “I appreciate that.”

“Thought you would.” Sean smiled and stood there.

“Was there something else?” Nora looked at him and waited.

“You’re not gonna read it?”

“In the privacy of my office,” Nora said, and started walking again. Sean fell into step beside her.

“Aww, where’s the fun in that? I would love to see the look on your face. I need ammunition for the next time you come to dinner.”

“That’s... I’m not sure how to respond.”

Sean laughed. “Very carefully.”

Nora grinned. “Yes, you McCabe’s are *very* dangerous.”

“You’d better believe it.” He paused and moved toward an open doorway. “This is my stop.”

Nora peered into the room. Gerald Travis Jr. waved at her, and she smiled in return. “I see.”

“Later, Nora,” Sean said.

“Have a good day, Sean.”

She really did like him, but it was odd, in a way, to engage with a man... with anyone, really, whom she had no intention of having sex with. Yet, she was enjoying the process. Nora looked at the letter in her hands. Anticipation got the better of her. She walked quickly toward the on-call rooms at the other end of the hallway.

A few minutes later, she opened the envelope carefully. There were only a couple lines written on the paper.

I must really like you. That's the fourth time I've caught you watching me while I'm sleeping, and I don't mind it at all. Tell you what, though, I know for a fact that you look way better.

Nora laughed as the habitual warmth she associated with Kelli filled her. It was amazing how she could be amused and so completely touched at the same time.



Kelli glanced at her watch as she entered the hospital. She only had thirty minutes until visitation hours were over, but it was better than nothing. She had talked with Travis throughout the day. It was their own little ritual, and it made her feel better to see him. Kelli had to *know* he was getting better and witness it with her own eyes. Williams had always been a good partner, but Travis fit her perfectly. She wanted to show her appreciation by visiting him daily. Kelli crinkled the bag in her hand. This time she came bearing gifts—chili-cheese fries.

When she got on the elevator, Kelli was pretty much alone. She pressed seven and leaned against the railing. She was glad to be back at work. Really, she was, but she was tired as fuck. Getting shot had taken the wind out of her, and she needed some time to get back to where she used to be. She hadn't done much today besides some canvassing and evidence review, but that was enough.

Kelli exited the elevator and made her way down the hall. She didn't bother looking for Nora, because she was at home. Kelli smiled. How weird and great was that? There was a woman at her place...waiting for her. Shit was



awesome. More than she ever thought it could be. Kelli waved at the wary-looking nurses when she passed their station. She leaned against the doorway to Travis's room and watched him for a few seconds. He was sitting up and flipping through the channels on TV. In other words, he looked supremely bored, but the eye roll and the sigh really sold it.

"They should have DVD players in this place," Kelli said, as she walked in.

Travis smiled. "I know, right? Or porn. It's kinda like a hotel. Why don't they have porn?"

Kelli chuckled. "There's a suggestion box right outside your room. You want me to get you one of the forms to fill out?"

"We'll see. You must be going full steam at work. You're visits are getting later. You don't have to come, you know?"

Kelli held up the white paper bag and tossed it on the bed. "Yes, I do." She sat down.

"You can if you're bringing contraband of the greasy variety." Travis reached into the bag, took out the Styrofoam container, and opened it. He stuffed a fry in his mouth. "Seriously though, Kel, I'm fine and you have better things—"

"You give Sean this speech when he comes to visit?" Kelli stared at him. She knew the question would give him pause.

Travis shrugged. "Well...no, but he doesn't have a life. You do."

Kelli was slightly aggravated by his statement. "So I must be coming here out of obligation, right? You know me better than that."

He shook his head and looked her right in the eyes. "I do. I just want to make sure that I'm not doing anything to hold you back."

"I'm living my life, and you're a part of it. Understand?" She knew what it felt like to see life just go on, so Kelli had to reassure him.

"Yeah, I got it." He ate another fry. "These things taste better with beer."

Kelli snorted. "Yes, they do."

"You're taking it easy, right? Getting enough downtime? And I don't mean just with Nora."

Kelli smiled sheepishly and scratched at the back of her neck. Nora relaxed her really, *really* well. "I don't have time to bar hop right now."

"Bullshit. I know Sean and Williams have been trying to get you to go out. It's a beer, Kelli, and some laughs. You have to reconnect with these guys."

Maybe he was right...a little, but it wasn't the same. "Yeah, probably, but you're not there."

Travis brought a hand to his chest. "You're waiting for me? Aww, that's sweet and everything, but no fucking excuse. Put a beer and some cheese sticks in front of an empty seat. I'll be there in spirit. Hell, until these holes in my head heal, I could probably get you on radio too."

He really was an ass sometimes. She laughed. That medieval contraption they'd had him in after his surgery saved his life, but at least they could laugh about this part now. "Whatever."

"I'm serious, and you can bring Nora along."

Kelli glared. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"That's not her scene. Those places are a little low rent."

"So are you, and she likes you," Travis said wryly.

Well...damn. "True."

"You'll be there. I've seen the way she looks at you. She'll be fine."

Nora would brighten any cop bar. Could be an interesting experience. "Something to think about."

"Mmm-hmm. You do that. We'll talk about it tomorrow when I'm in my new room."

"Your new room?" Kelli was a little confused.

"Yep, I'm done with ICU. I should have been moved last week, but they were being overly cautious."

"Well shit. It's about time. You tell your dad?"

"Yeah, he's back to his stoic routine, but he was here. I guess that's all that counts. He's leaving next week."

"Don't forget, you have my mom to smother the crap outta you. Balances shit out a little."

"I know, right? I'm not worried, but let me put this bug in your ear. Tomorrow, when you come to visit, just know that these fries are lonely without a bacon cheeseburger." He looked at her with hope shining in his eyes.

Kelli laughed. "You'd better start kissing my ass now then."

## CHAPTER 2

On autopilot, Kelli drove toward their latest crime scene, in the Holly Park area. There was no need for GPS; she knew every bump and turn in this city. Kelli's mind was free to roam, and her thoughts went straight to Nora. Things between them were going good, and Kelli wanted to believe that she'd earned a reprieve after all the shit she'd been through. That didn't stop the creepy, little voice in the back of her head that warned that the other shoe always dropped. Shit was ridiculous. It had to be. The way Nora touched her...the way she looked at her. All that was real. So that voice? Didn't know what the hell it was talking about.

Taylor Fuller's surprise visit, though, that made the voice even more persistent. Fuck it. Just because she was a cop didn't mean she had to be cynical about everything. Yeah, she'd seen some heinous shit and had even lived some of it. That made going home every night to a woman like Nora, so much sweeter. Thinking about it brought a smile to her face.

Williams cleared his throat in the most loud and obnoxious way possible.

"We're on our way to a crime scene, and you're grinning like an idiot. Are you aware?"

"Yep." Kelli smiled wider.

"Well, unless you're going to share, can you stop? It's kinda freaky," Williams said.

"Maybe." Kelli glared at him. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I've been staring at you the past ten minutes. You're in your own little world."

"That staring thing? So not healthy," she said.

"Uh-huh. Thought you were going to drool on yourself a time or two. I was concerned."

"Were you always like this? I don't remember you being this annoying." Kelli tried to take her enthusiasm down a notch, but she couldn't. She was too

damn happy. Her next best option was to distract Williams by going on the offensive.

“A man can change.”

“Do you have a point?”

He shrugged and grinned. “So...you can tell me. Dirty thoughts about that doctor of yours?”

Poor guy. He was putting himself through an unnecessary identity crisis, trying to act like Travis. But Travis’s shoes were way too big to fill. There was nothing young and hip about Williams. He was more like Old Faithful. It was a nice gesture, though, and amusing as hell. “I want the boring old Williams back, please.”

“Hey now, I thought I was doing pretty good. If you squint hard enough, I’d pass for forty-five. Isn’t that the new thirty?”

“No, it’s the new forty-five.”

She stopped at a red light. Williams glared at her.

Kelli’s mouth twitched.

“I saw that.” His grin was triumphant. “I must be doing something right.”

Kelli rolled her eyes. “Listen, I know what you’re trying to do and thank you. You can stop now, before you strain yourself.”

Williams didn’t say anything.

Kelli glanced at him to see that he was looking out the window.

Shit, did his feelings just get hurt? “Bruce?”

“Hmm?” He looked at her, but he had his poker face on.

“Just be you. I know it’s been a while since we’ve done this, but when we were partners, you were the boulder to my rock. That’s who I need you to be now, too.”

He smiled slightly. “Yeah?”

Kelli smirked in his direction. “Yeah.”

Williams nodded and looked out the window again. “Okay, I can do that.” He paused. “Just because I’m a middle-aged man doesn’t mean I can’t suddenly be into the whole lesbian fantasy thing. So...spill.”

“Jesus Christ.” Kelli sighed and looked heavenward. Instead of responding, she turned the radio up.



Kelli glanced at her watch. It was time to go. Her eyes were starting to cross. The case they'd caught earlier had pretty much solved itself. There were way too many stupid people in the world. The phone records she was combing through for one of last week's cases weren't going anywhere, and she had a feeling in her gut that it was a dead end anyway. Her gut was usually right. Kelli stood and stretched. As she moved from side to side, something popped, followed by another crack farther down in her back. Felt good as hell. Kelli opened her desk drawer to get her keys, gun, and cell.

"You cutting out?" Williams asked.

"Yeah, nothing is gonna come from this." She nudged the stack of papers.

Williams shrugged. "Probably." He closed the thick folder that he had been looking through. "Beer?" He held up a hand. "And if you say no, I'm probably going to shoot you."

"Aim for the shoulder." Kelli smirked.

Williams rolled his eyes. "Oh c'mon. What is with you? Is she that good?"

God yes. Kelli glared instead of answering him.

Williams glared right back and laughed. "You're going to be one of those people, huh?"

"What people?" Kelli posed the question, but she had a pretty good idea what he was about to say.

"One of those people who gets in a relationship and forgets about everybody else."

Well, he was never one to mince words. "Ouch, goddammit."

He shrugged. "Needed to be said."

"It's not that. Going out like that... It's not the same without Travis."

"We'll put a beer in front of an empty seat and get him on the phone if we have to." Williams looked at her expectantly.

Kelli chuckled. "Travis pretty much said the same thing. This little posse has been together too long if *you* two are thinking alike.

"Well, he's fucking right."

Kelli threw up her hands. "Okay, fine. Just not tonight. I need to prepare Nora for something like that."

"Really? We're not that bad. It's just me and Sean for christsakes. Didn't she have dinner with your mother?"

“Yeah, she did. I definitely had to get her ready for that, too.” Kelli didn’t think he needed to know that it was the other way around.

“All right then. We’ll be at Beck’s if you change your mind,” Williams said. He sounded disappointed. Why the hell did Travis always have to be right?



Kelli leaned against the kitchen island and watched as Nora bent over in front of the open refrigerator. The skirt she wore tightened around her hips and ass, giving Kelli quite the eyeful. Yes, she was indeed a pervert, and she loved every second of it.

“What do you want?” Nora asked.

Kelli chuckled and kept on looking.

A few seconds later, Nora glanced over her shoulder at Kelli. Her eyebrows shot up on her forehead as she tracked Kelli’s gaze. She smiled slightly. “To drink.”

Kelli laughed out right. That statement didn’t improve matters any. “Surprise me.”

Nora pulled out a bottle of Sweetwater 420.

“Good one.” The brand was Kelli’s beer choice at the moment...anything Sweetwater. Except for the blueberry kind. There was something about fruit in beer that didn’t sit well with her.

“Thank you.” Nora slid the beer across the counter toward her.

Nora watched her as she popped the cap with the opener on her keychain and took a swig. Kelli set the beer on the counter and stared right back. Nora looked a little ruffled. Her face was red and there was a faraway glint in her eyes. She’d seen that expression several times the last couple weeks. “What is that look for?”

Nora cleared her throat. “I’m sorry? What are you referring to?”

“When I...” Kelli glanced down at her beer then back to Nora. A light bulb turned on. “You get off on watching me drink beer?”

Nora’s face reddened even more. “Just out of the bottle.”

Kelli smirked. “And here I was thinking *I* was the pervert.”

Nora walked around the island and reached for the beer. “Not at all.” She took a small sip and grinned.

“Thank God.”

Nora took another drink.

“Can I have my beer back?”

“I actually like this one,” Nora said.

“I know. You drank half of it last time.”

Nora took a larger swig. She looked so damned dainty, but then, it hit Kelli. Nora may *appear* delicate, but she wasn't some wilting, fucking flower. Somehow, Kelli knew she would fit into her life wherever she wanted her to and dress it up real nice. With that notion in mind, Kelli said, “The guys have been bugging me about going out. You wanna come with me?”

Nora just stared. “Have you been rebuffing them because of me?”

“Well, no.” Kelli smirked. “Trust me when I say, I like what you do so much better, but that's so not the point.”

Nora's lips quirked into an almost smile. “When?”

“Well, Travis bitched at me about ‘reconnecting with the guys,’” Kelli made air quotes, “a couple days ago. Williams and Sean are actually out having a drink right now. So I guess tonight. It's early still.”

“You mean...*right* now? Are you sure you want me there?” Nora sounded and looked a little reluctant.

Kelli chose her words carefully. She wanted Nora to feel welcome, and she wanted her to understand that her life and the people in it were open to Nora if she wanted it. “Hell, if you were with me sifting through dumpsters for evidence, it would be a good time, and I hate that.”

Nora laughed, and her expression changed to something soft and full of wonder. “How do you do that?”

“What?” Kelli asked.

“Know what to say.”

Kelli shrugged. She didn't. But this was Nora. Somehow her words just came out that way.

Nora picked up the beer and took a long pull. Then, she gave the bottle back and bent forward to brush her lips against Kelli's. In turn, Kelli deepened the kiss, chasing the flavors of two of her favorite things...beer and Nora.

Nora pulled back slightly and said, “Let me change my outfit and feed Phineas. Then, let's go.”

“I got him. You go ahead.”

“Okay, give me ten minutes.”

A few seconds later, Kelli stepped outside and into Phineas’s fenced-in habitat. It was large and clean, but Nora had a guy for that, so it wasn’t surprising. There were a few bales of hay in the corner, and his huge-ass bowl was next to it, similar to the one in the house. Phineas, himself, lay nearby on a huge, cushy mat just like the one in his room. Kelli held up the bag filled with vegetables and grass pellets, and shook it.

“What’s up big guy? Look what I got.”

Phineas didn’t waste any time. He got up and trotted toward Kelli. He was a fast fucker for his size. He nudged Kelli’s leg and brushed against her.

Kelli laughed. Phineas made a huffing sound and headed back toward his bed.

“You can’t tell me you’re not hungry.”

Kelli watched as he picked up one of the large stuffed toys that was near his bedding. He came back toward her. Phineas pressed the stuffed frog against Kelli’s leg. She’d learned a while back that he wasn’t into playing catch, but it was his way of sharing and being social. Kelli scratched him on the snout.

“Even trade? But why don’t you keep both?” She filled his bowl. He abandoned his toy for the food.

“He’s always more playful with you. I’m really glad you two get along.”

Kelli turned to find Nora behind her. “Probably because he knows I’m a big-ass kid.” Kelli smirked.

“I think you could be right about that,” Nora said.

Kelli glared.

Nora grinned. “I might have to keep the video feed and put it up on YouTube.”

“Uh-huh.” Kelli headed for the door, but as she walked past Nora, she smacked her on the ass. “Let’s go.”

Nora laughed.



Nora stood outside and glanced up at the Beck’s Bar and Grill sign. There was nothing ostentatious about the building itself. The brick construction



blended in with the others next to it. Even the sign was plain. She didn't know what she was expecting. Someone exited, letting out the sounds of laughter and low strains of music. This was sure to be an experience, and she wasn't worried in the least.

"You okay?" Kelli asked, as she snaked her arms around Nora from behind. Always protective. Nora turned to look at her. "I am. Are you?"

Kelli smirked. "Touché, but yeah."

Kelli stepped away but kept a hand pressed to Nora's back. When they entered, the smell of stale beer and fried food wafted toward her. It was a potent combination, but not unexpected. Rock music filtered in from the sound system, yet it wasn't overwhelming. Nora scanned the area. A majority of the tables were full, and there was no space left at the bar. Everyone looked as if they were having a good time. Most of them seemed to be laughing and in various stages of conversation. The mood was instantly contagious. Nora wanted to be part of the revelry as well, especially with Kelli present.

A familiar figure stood and waved.

Nora waved back. "There's your brother."

"I see him." Kelli guided her forward.

When they arrived at the table, both men stood.

Kelli chuckled. Nora glanced over her shoulder to see Kelli rolling her eyes.

"What?" Nora asked as she sat down.

"They suddenly have manners. Last time I checked, I'm a woman too."

"I prefer to think of you as just McCabe." Williams tipped his beer toward her.

Sean laughed and drank from a bottle of Blue Moon.

"The name's Bruce Williams by the way." He offered his hand to Nora. "Heard a lot about you, but we've only met in passing."

Nora shook his hand and smiled. His skin was warm and calloused. For some reason, he reminded Nora of an older, distinguished looking walrus—big, but seemingly harmless. "Nice to meet you."

"Would you look at this? More manners. Aren't you supposed to be burping and leering at women half your age by now?" Kelli couldn't help but to tease.

"Shut up, McCabe. I can be nice." Williams glared, but his smile showed through.

“Yeah, only when you want something.” Kelli smirked, scooted closer to Nora, and threw an arm over her shoulders. “So, she’s mine. Remember that.”

Williams roared with laughter. “Doesn’t she have a say in this?”

Nora didn’t expect their antics to start so soon, but she was enjoying the banter, nonetheless. “Yes, doesn’t she?” Nora asked and looked at Kelli, who was grinning and her gaze was full of affection.

“Oh, look out. This one is quick.” Sean pointed at Nora.

“She has to be around you assholes,” Kelli said.

“Yep, she does.” Williams nodded.

A waitress appeared.

Nora asked for a bottle of Sweetwater. When everyone was done with their drink order, Kelli leaned closer and said, “You didn’t have to order beer.”

Discreetly, Nora looked around the table. She wanted to fit in. “It’s appropriate. And you’ll drink whatever is left over.”

Kelli shrugged and smirked. “Probably.”

“What kind of food do they serve here?” Nora asked.

“Burger, fries, wings...stuff like that.”

“I thought so. I’m starving.”

“You’re gonna eat this shit?” Kelli was surprised.

“If it’s good.”

Kelli shrugged and grabbed a menu from the middle of the table. “Decent, but the bacon-wrapped, red jalapeños are excellent.”

“Let’s start with that then.” Nora didn’t mind spicy.

“Share some fries? You’re not a ketchup person are you?” Kelli stared at her as though the answer would decide the fate of their relationship. Her mouth was in a grim line, but her eyes held a sparkle of amusement.

“Not at all.”

“Knew there was a reason I liked you,” Kelli said.

Nora smiled.

A throat cleared rather loudly.

Nora looked up to see Williams waving and grinning. “Forget about us?”

Truthfully? She had. Sometimes it was like they were in their own little world. Heat rushed to Nora’s face, but she powered through it. “Get your own jalapeños.” Nora gave him a mock glare.

Williams blinked.

“Well damn,” Sean said.

Kelli laughed.

Their drinks arrived, and they put in food orders.

From the corner of her eye, Nora watched as Kelli drank from a bottle of Sweetwater IPA. This was a fairly recent obsession for Nora, and she had yet to figure out what exactly appealed to her about the act. Kelli smirked in what Nora assumed was quiet acknowledgement as she set the beer down and glanced at her.

“We should just get our own table,” Sean said to Williams.

“I know, right?” Despite agreeing, Williams made no move to leave.

Kelli rolled her eyes for the hundredth time. “What are you trying to say? I can’t help it if I got a life.” She grinned.

“You implying that I don’t?” Williams’s eyebrows shot upward.

“Yup that’s exactly what I’m doing.” Kelli turned to Nora. “Hell of a grip he has there, isn’t it?”

*That* was certainly a fascinating question.

Williams’s mouth dropped open.

“Ohhhh shit.” Sean laughed.

“Did you...did you just insinuate that I masturb—”

“Draw your own conclusions,” Kelli said with a smile.

Williams glanced at Nora and leaned forward to whisper to Kelli. “There’s a lady present. It’s not okay to talk about a man’s—”

“Are you kidding me?” Kelli asked through her laughter.

“Ah hell, she’s used to Kelli’s mouth by now.” Sean waved his hand, fanning the topic away.

Yes, she had to agree. Kelli’s mouth was capable of such interesting things. Nora glanced at Sean, only to realize Kelli and Williams were staring at him, too.

Sean took a swig of his new beer. “Wha—” He turned bright red. “Dammit, you know what I meant!”

Williams and Kelli laughed uproariously.

Sean hid his face in his hands.

Nora smiled and decided to add to the madness. “As a doctor, I can recommend a regular masturbatory schedule. Research shows it prevents cancer and strengthens the penile muscle.”

Kelli laughed even harder. She banged her fist against the table. Sean looked away, but not before Nora saw his smile.

Williams groaned.

“The more you know,” Kelli said between chuckles.



“Fuck!” Kelli cried out. She almost choked when water filled her mouth. That little incident didn’t stop the way her body was quivering. She felt that particular orgasm all the way to her toes and back. The warm pulsing jets of water all around her made it worse...or better. Kelli couldn’t decide. But it was Nora...doing that thing with her tongue that was really dragging things out. Blessed be. Instead of holding Nora’s head between her legs as she had been a minute ago, Kelli tried to pull her away. She didn’t think she could take anymore.

“Fuck...stop. Don’t touch it.” Kelli looked down, but she couldn’t see a damn thing. It was like they were in the clouds or something. Next thing she knew, Nora rose out of the steam like some sort of pagan goddess, brushing every inch of her naked, damp skin against Kelli. Blessed fucking be. Kelli moaned. Nora’s lips grazed her neck, before Nora nipped at her chin.

Kelli could see her now, blond hair slicked back and positively dripping. To make matters even more interesting, Nora was smiling.

A residual tingle shot through Kelli, but she still smirked. “You...ah, like watching me drink...*that* much?” She asked breathlessly.

“Mmm.” It was the only sound Nora made before kissing her.

Kelli wrapped her arms around her and held on.



Kelli stood at the printer, waiting for her two pages—a witness statement to add to a current file. She looked at the stack of paper already in the tray and the shit ton still printing. Kelli picked up a few pages and glanced at the number at the bottom to see how much was left. She groaned.

“Dammit, Johns! You couldn’t print this shit out in the morning?” Kelli stared him down from across the room.

Johns picked up the can of Coke off his desk and took a long swig. He burped and said, “Nope.”

Kelli shot him the finger.

Johns grinned.

“I would like to go home early at least one night this week.” Kelli scanned the room. There were still quite a few people around, and she really didn’t want to be one of them. She was surprised to see Sean walk through the door. He glanced at her and then made a beeline for her desk where he practically threw himself into a chair.

Kelli abandoned the paperwork and walked toward him. He didn’t look right. She sat down and stared, waiting for him to lift his head and look at her. Kelli couldn’t take his silence anymore. “I thought you were going to see Travis.”

Sean cleared his throat. “I did.”

He sounded horrible, as if there were rocks in his mouth and it hurt to talk.

“You and Travis fight about something?” Kelli asked. That didn’t make sense, but it was all she had at the moment.

He shook his head.

“You gotta give me something to work with. What’s going on with you?” A sinking feeling started in her stomach. “Is Travis okay? Is it Mom?”

Sean shook his head again and finally looked up. His eyes were red rimmed and swollen. “They’re fine.” He sucked in a breath. It was loud and shaky. “I wanted to come here and tell you myself.”

Antony.

This had to be about Antony.

Kelli stood. She had to do something to get rid of the crushing weight sitting on her chest. “No, no, no.” Each instance of the word got louder. The sudden blast of misery that shot through her was almost a physical pain. It tore through her chest and landed in her stomach, sitting there like a block of cement. She hovered over Sean. He looked up at her. She hadn’t seen her little brother look this helpless since their father died. “He...left, didn’t he?”

Sean nodded once.

“Fuck!” Kelli banged her hand against her desk. For a fraction of a moment, she wished him dead. He would be at peace. They all would. Guilt smacked her hard. She didn’t mean it. She didn’t. Kelli desperately wanted things to be like they were before their dad died. They were all happy. Weren’t they?

Suddenly, Kelli was aware of everyone's eyes on them, but she just didn't give a damn.

"I know a security guard there. He...called me. Tony didn't even discharge himself. He just walked out." Sean wiped at his eyes.

On second thought, maybe they shouldn't do this here. If she was going to lose her shit, she didn't want it to be in front of everybody. Kelli grabbed Sean. "Let's go somewhere we can talk in private."

After making sure they were alone, Kelli closed and locked the door to one of the interrogation rooms. She took a deep breath and tried to center herself or at least give the illusion that she was okay. "We don't have time to wallow." Kelli sat on the edge of the table and squeezed Sean's shoulder.

"I know. I wanted you to know first. No more secrets. I'm gonna go check out his old haunts."

"Good, I'm coming with you," Kelli said.

"No, you're not." Sean's tone was firm.

"Yes, I fucking am!"

"Fucking listen to me for once! I got this. He has to be somewhere binging. I did it before and I can do it again. You don't need to see—"

"Sean, I was in the Drug Enforcement Unit, for God's sake." Kelli knew that world well. She didn't need to be sheltered.

"He's our brother! It's different. You've never seen him like that. I have."

They quieted, but continued to stare at each other.

"I know," Kelli said. "That's why you need—"

"No, I'll do the canvassing. You can see if anyone in the DEU has some info. We're doing this together, just from different angles."

Kelli nodded. They were so much alike. Just like her, when Sean wanted something, he got it. She was counting on that determination. It was pretty much all they had. What he said made sense. They could cover more ground that way, and if Tony was dealing, someone in her old unit would know who the big players on the street were now. "Please be careful."

"I'm not gonna go near the dealers. Not 'til we get something solid. Tweakers have their favorite places. You know that." Sean sniffed. "What are we gonna tell Mom? We can't keep it from her. Not this time."

"No, we can't. I don't think we've been helping him by hiding things. This is the third time he's left rehab. She needs to know. Like you said, no more secrets."

“She’s working late. It gives us time to figure shit out. I’ll find him.” Sean stood.

Kelli didn’t say a word, just shook her head miserably. Shit was about to hit the fan. What the fuck was up with the universe? How could everything be golden one minute and headed toward *FUBAR* the next? That voice in her head came back with a vengeance.

“I will!” Sean tried to reassure her, but didn’t sound confident at all.

“I hope so.” Kelli’s voice quivered. She wanted to have faith, but she was tired. So fucking tired. It was as if all the hope had been sucked out of her with this one piece of news. Kelli couldn’t remember ever feeling so empty.



When Kelli was home, it wasn’t unusual to find her door unlocked. Nora shouldered the bag of Chinese takeout and let herself in. The living room and kitchen were quiet and dimly lit, but she could still see everything, including Kelli. She was stationary and hunched over the sink, staring at something only she could see.

Nora felt a sense of unease.

“Kelli?” Nora walked slowly toward the kitchen.

Kelli didn’t answer.

As Nora got closer, she took note of Kelli’s body posture. Her strong shoulders were sagging, and her usually tall frame seemed diminished somehow.

Something was very wrong. Nora set the bag on the counter near the refrigerator.

“Kelli, please tell me what’s going on.” Nora kept her tone calm while on the inside she teemed with urgency.

Finally, Kelli acknowledged her presence. She glanced up and whispered, “Hey.”

Kelli’s eyes were rimmed with red, and she looked disoriented. Nora pushed away her own rising anxiety in order to focus on Kelli. “Just talk to me.” She closed the distance between them and took Kelli’s hand. Nora traced her thumb over Kelli’s knuckles before entwining their fingers.

Kelli swallowed loud enough to hear. Nora grew even more concerned. Still, she waited.

“Antony... He left rehab.”

Nora gasped but did her best to remain silent, knowing there was more to come.

“I was sure it was gonna work this time.” Kelli closed her eyes and sighed. “I don’t know what to do anymore. He hates me. I could hear it in his voice the last time he called. What am I supposed to do with that, huh? How am I supposed to fix it?”

Nora saw the helplessness etched into every line of Kelli’s face and heard it dripping from her voice. Instead of answering, Nora slid her hand around Kelli’s neck. She wanted to return some of the strength Kelli had given so freely to her when she’d needed it. Kelli melted into her. She held on tightly, pressing her nose into Nora’s neck and inhaling deeply.

“He’s not gonna stop,” Kelli’s voice was muffled but still understandable, “until he’s dead or locked up again.”

Nora’s heart lurched in her chest. There were no words strong enough. So, she poured everything she had into what seemed adequate. “I’m sorry.”

Kelli trembled.

“How...can I help?”

For several seconds, there was nothing.

“I—I don’t wanna feel like this. Just...make it stop.”

This was a large request, and Nora had no idea how to fill it. A splinter of panic worked its way down her spine. “I—I’m not sure—”

Kelli brushed her lips against the skin just below Nora’s ear, and Nora gasped.

Kelli bit into her flesh and raked it with her tongue in a rough imitation of comfort. But, there was nothing soothing about Nora’s sudden flash of arousal. When Kelli nibbled at Nora’s earlobe, she shuddered hard. Kelli tangled her fingers into Nora’s hair, prolonging her body’s reaction.

“Nora,” Kelli said her name with such need.

In an instant, everything changed. Her attempt to provide solace transformed into salaciousness.

Nora’s breath caught and turned ragged. Her stomach tightened fiercely. This happened so quickly. Didn’t they need to talk? Sex wasn’t going to fix anything.



If she didn't stop this now, she might not be able to later. "Kelli, maybe we—"

"Let me have you," Kelli said hotly.

Those words nearly derailed Nora completely. Every nerve ending came to life, blistering her with a vicious charge. Her nipples hardened, and the pull between her legs reached an epic intensity. For a few seconds, Nora couldn't speak...couldn't breathe.

Kelli didn't wait for permission. Before Nora could find herself, Kelli swooped in. When their lips met, everything went nova. Kelli's hands tightened in her hair. She was ravenous. She nipped at Nora's mouth and demanded entry.

Nora was drowning in need, losing herself to it. Despite the circumstance, she needed to reassert herself, and Kelli had always allowed her to do so. She cupped Kelli's cheek and attempted to gentle the kiss.

Kelli growled in refusal. Nora's body betrayed her and arched toward the sound. Kelli grabbed one wrist and then the other, pulled them behind Nora's back, and held them there. There was no teasing. Her grasp was tight, painful. Apprehension swam up to meet Nora. Her heart pounded against her chest as her arousal careened higher, usurping her rising sense of panic.

Nora had no control over this situation.

And even though her mind screamed for it to stop, there was no denying how much her body liked it.

As Nora surrendered, Kelli groaned and devoured her once more. Kelli's grip loosened, and then her wrists were free. Nora should have pushed Kelli away to regain some semblance of herself, but her body and her brain were not working together.

Abruptly, Kelli propelled them backward into the opposite counter. Effectively trapped, Kelli's hips rolled into her own. There was little stimulation, but the act alone sent Nora's arousal toward inferno. Kelli's hands blanketed her thighs, moving upward along with her skirt. Then, Kelli lifted her onto the counter, and Nora opened her legs wide. Kelli stepped in as Nora's body gave her an open invitation.

She started thrusting again, this time making powerful contact in all the right places.

Nora cried out at the abrupt change in friction and the increased speed that sent electrified tingles to her swollen sex. Needing more, she clutched at Kelli. Her fingers dug into Kelli's pumping hips and slid over her buttocks.

Kelli moaned. The sound was muted, but shared between them.

Dangerously close to being overwhelmed already, Nora sobbed as the constant stimulation of Kelli's undulating hips sent her reeling. Nora couldn't understand how she could be so high on pleasure and, at the same time, so distraught by the fact that her body no longer belonged to her. Kelli played her like a well-oiled instrument.

There was no space between them. Somehow, Kelli was still able to find a way. Despite Nora's clothing, Kelli's fingertips teased her nipples. She plucked and pulled at the hardened tips, and the rough touch sent shock waves through Nora's body, culminating between her thighs. Greedily, she arched into the caress.

The kiss ended abruptly. Kelli pulled violently at her shirt. The material ripped and buttons went flying. Cool air rushed over the heated skin of Nora's torso. With a hard tug, the front clasp of her bra gave way. Literally and figuratively, Nora was exposed and laid bare. One of Kelli's hands slid to the small of her back and pulled Nora toward Kelli's descending mouth while she continued to tweak her aroused flesh with her fingers.

Then, Kelli bathed her nipple in wet heat.

"God!" Nora was in no way prepared for the jolt of arousal Kelli's mouth sent through her body.

She sucked hard, and flicked her tongue rapidly. There was an answering pulse in Nora's clit. Kelli moaned and it heightened Nora's pleasure as well as her sense of urgency. Nora tried to keep her eyes open, but it was useless.

Kelli trailed her mouth upward and captured Nora's in a searing kiss. Her hand slithered up the inside of Nora's thigh, trailing over her silk stockings. Kelli didn't tease when she arrived at Nora's panties. She yanked the material aside. The scent of her own arousal pierced the air and amplified Nora's desperation. Hungrily, her hips canted forward, seeking contact. Kelli obliged, as her fingertips smeared the viscous moisture that clung to Nora's skin.

Kelli shuddered.

A moment later, Kelli plunged her fingers deep inside Nora.

She cried out and clawed at Kelli's shoulders.

The pleasure coursing through her was thick and heavy, trickling over Nora with unbelievable intensity.

Then, she was empty again. Her inner muscles clenched, helplessly, at nothing.

Before she could take another breath, Kelli sent her soaring, raking over her sensitized walls with each subsequent thrust. Shamelessly, Nora met each movement with her own, causing the tips of her breasts to rub tantalizingly against the material of Kelli's shirt.

With each breath, Kelli whimpered, betraying her own enjoyment, her own need.

The loud, wet slap of flesh mingled with their harsh breaths and low moans. The symphony took Nora higher.

Their lips clung hotly to each other, broken only by the play of their tongues.

Nora locked her legs around Kelli, opening herself wider and pulling Kelli in deeper.

Jagged white light flashed behind Nora's eyelids, as the hard smack of Kelli's palm against her clit brought her to the precipice.

She embraced the burning ache that filled her belly. Her thighs quivered, and her whole body felt liquefied. Sounds she had never heard exited her throat...vulgar, desperate, and keening.

Kelli whispered her name.

Nora broke apart into tiny pieces.



Nora blinked. It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the dimness of the bedroom. Her brain, slower to awaken, came to life in increments, putting everything together a short time later. Lethargy claimed her limbs, and a deliciously satisfying soreness settled between her legs.

The room was quiet except for her own breathing. Nora was alone. Nevertheless, she continued to listen, hearing nothing that signified Kelli's presence. She turned toward the other side of the bed. The sheets were cold, but the smell of sex lingered.

Reality set in.

Nora had no idea who that woman was in the kitchen...in the bedroom. The way that woman sounded...the way that woman acted was not synonymous with the Nora Whitmore she knew or was comfortable with. That woman was completely out of control. She had wanted to give. Not lose herself in the process. But what shook Nora the most was how very much she enjoyed every second of it. Panic threatened to swamp her senses, but Nora tried to breathe through it.

She sat up in the bed and pushed the covers from her body, intent on regaining dominion over herself before irrational emotions took over once more. Nora scanned the room in search of her clothes, but remembered that most of them were in tatters on the kitchen and living room floor. She spotted a folded piece of white paper on Kelli's night stand. Nora reached for it. She needed to know what it said, but at the same time, she had to steel herself against the power of Kelli's words.

*Went to my mom's for a while. Wait for me. We're not done.*

Fervently, she concentrated on her breathing. Her hand trembled. Disliking the involuntary reaction, she folded her fingers to make a fist and crumpled the note with the action. Somehow, those three sentences sparked both arousal and anxiety, simultaneously. She wanted neither. Instinct urged her to flee. Nora took another stilling breath. If she disappeared now, the damage she left behind could very well be irreparable. She had gained so much—a family and Kelli—who needed her now probably more than ever.

Her need to leave, to go in search of herself, was selfish.

Nora's eyes burned. She was a mess. What good could she be? She was no rock, and she never claimed to be. At the moment, Nora didn't know who she was at all, and that took precedence over everything else.

She scurried out of Kelli's bed and threw on one of Kelli's T-shirts and whatever else she could find to fit. The voice in her head that urged her to run was louder than ever.

Nora obeyed it.

## CHAPTER 3

Kelli leaned against the elevator railing as it slowly moved toward her floor. She ignored the people around her and pushed her cell phone closer to her ear.

“You sure you’re okay with staying? I wasn’t trying to push Mom off on you or anything—”

“No, it’s fine. I’m too beat to drive home anyhow.” He yawned, proving his point. “I hate that I didn’t find him tonight. We coulda stopped this shit-storm before it really got a chance to start.”

“Yeah, true.” Kelli struggled to keep her own eyes open. She’d stayed a lot later at her mother’s than planned.

“Hell, I should just take more time off to concentrate on this. He’s our baby brother. We have to do something.”

Kelli figured a miracle was due. Too bad she didn’t believe in those. “I know, but I’m so tired of this shit. It’s hard not to give up. I feel so—”

“Helpless?” Sean finished for her. “I got your back with this. You know that. I’m just glad that Mom took this better than I thought she would.”

“She did. Granted, she’s allowed to be pissed at us for lying to her, but I guess this is bigger than all that.”

“She’s holding it together for now, Kel, but you know how she is.”

“Yeah, that’s why she shouldn’t be alone.” The elevator stopped on Kelli’s floor. She got out and walked quickly down the hall to her apartment. Kelli was glad she wasn’t alone either. Not now with all kinds of shit being thrown at her. It felt good to have someone to lean on who was outside this whole... She didn’t even know what the fuck to call it. Kelli stopped at her front door. Her heartbeat doubled...hell...tripled as if she’d just jumped hurdles, but this wasn’t a nice feeling. She may have...no, she knew, she’d pushed Nora too hard last night.

Sean yawned again. “Okay, I’m gonna try to get a little sleep and head out again later in the morning. Maybe daylight will shake him loose.”

“I hope so,” Kelli said, as she opened the door to her darkened apartment. “When you leave, I’ll come stay with Mom.”

“Okay, you try to get some rest too.”

Kelli snorted. “Yeah, right.” She ended the call and stood in the middle of the living room, staring into the bedroom. Her guts twisted. She wasn’t sure how Nora was going to react to last night, but she had to face it. Kelli kicked off her shoes and headed toward the open door.

Stopping abruptly, she stared at the empty bed. Fuck. Apprehension rattled in her chest. Kelli glanced over her shoulder to the living room to search for the trail of Nora’s clothes. With the exceptions of shoes and underwear, the rest of it was still there. Her gaze swung back toward the bathroom. Light shined from the small space at the bottom of the door. Kelli breathed. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so fucking relieved.

“Hey, Nora?” Kelli knocked once and entered.

The bathroom was empty.

Water dripped from the faucet. It sounded so loud.

Kelli’s guts clenched, keeping pace with her growing anxiety. The feeling crawled its way to her throat and made it impossible to swallow. Maybe there was a hospital emergency? Maybe... Goddammit. Who was she kidding? Nora would’ve called.

“Fuck!” Isn’t that what got her into trouble in the first place? Kelli sat on the bed. The sheets rustled. She could smell her. She could smell *them*. An ache formed in the pit of her belly. It spread quickly. Kelli reached for the covers, planning to rip them from the bed. The sound of crumpling paper caught her attention. Kelli followed the noise to find her note wadded into a ball as if it meant nothing.

That ache? Blossomed into all-out pain, and it hurt like a motherfucker.



Kelli tried to blink away the grit in her eyes. She leaned against her bedroom door. The bed was still unmade. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to touch it. Last night’s events were rooted there, both the good and the bad. Sleep had passed her over, but she still needed to be alert and ready for anything. Kelli drank so much coffee that her eyelashes felt as if they’d been taped to her

forehead. The clothes she wore, yesterday's jeans and T-shirt, were rumpled and uncomfortable. That part was easy enough to ignore. There wasn't a damn thing she could do about all the emotions—anxiety, anger, disbelief—beating her ass. Taking deep, slow breaths, Kelli did the best she could to center herself, to keep from being ripped apart.

Her family was in the forefront of her mind, but Nora was there, too. Kelli expected Nora, the woman, to retreat a little, be pissed as hell, and get over it. They were in this relationship thing together, no matter what. But, she also thought the friend she'd found in her would stay, especially now when she needed her the most. They had come too far for anything else, or so she thought.

It had always been difficult for Kelli to ask for help or even admit that she needed it, for that matter. With Nora, reaching out was easy, and that made Nora a big, important piece in her life. Kelli was disappointed and hurt. She felt abandoned. Yes, she knew she had crossed a line. Nora was a complicated woman, and to keep her walls down, Kelli couldn't steamroll through things like she usually did. Nora needed room to breathe, and last night, Kelli had pretty much smothered her. She hadn't thought running was an option for Nora anymore. She was wrong and that fucking sucked.

All this shit was way too hard to swallow. Kelli shook her head to clear it. It all seemed so surreal. She expected more out of the people she gave her loyalty to. She had been there for Nora through the whole lawsuit bullshit. Kelli scoffed. Obviously, it was ridiculous to assume she would get the same in return.

Kelli refused to feel guilty. She took what she needed, and Nora enjoyed it *big time*. Her blood heated with the recent memory. Nora clung and clawed at her, leaving imprints on her skin and much deeper ones inside. Her breathy moans still teased Kelli's ears. She closed her eyes as images of Nora, sweaty and writhing, danced behind her eyelids. Kelli's stomach twisted ferociously, reminding her of what she still wanted, despite it all. Exhaling shakily, Kelli took one last look at the room and turned away.

Her body was stiff and full of tension. The emotions that she was trying to keep contained threatened to break free. Heat rushed to her face, and a trickle of ice inched down her spine. Kelli wasn't the type of person to sit on

her ass and wait for things. When she wanted something, she went after it, and right now, she needed answers. She *deserved* answers. Part of her wanted to understand, but there were parts of her that were too damned angry. She had to get it all out. Determined to do just that, Kelli started searching for her shoes.



Nora wiped away the steam from the bathroom mirror. She peered at her reflection. Her eyes were bright, wild, and her lips were still swollen from the previous night's activities. She looked away quickly. She didn't want to see herself like this, but something else caught her eye. Nora paused at the sight of a reddened bruise on her collarbone. She traced over it with trembling fingertips. The resulting sting was enough to cause her stomach to clench. Nora turned away, burying the feeling. It paved the way for a deeper introspection that she wasn't ready for.

Kelli's patience and understanding had fostered trust and a sense of safety, which were two of the three things that helped Nora to function within the confines of their relationship. The third concept was simple. She needed to maintain a modicum of control. Kelli had taken that from her. As a result, Nora didn't trust herself, and her trust in Kelli was teetering. Was she so broken that all it took to send her over the edge was one intense, unrestrained encounter? Clearly, the answer was yes. And that made her pause as much as anything Kelli had done.

She swallowed for the tenth time, but couldn't dislodge the lump of emotion stuck in her throat. Nora had some idea of the damage she probably caused when she left, but she never intended to hurt Kelli. Fight or flight was instinctual. Fleeing hadn't been a choice. It was the only clear route that led to self-preservation.

When she left Kelli's apartment, Nora expected the crushing weight on her shoulders to dissipate, but it was still there, anchored by her own shame. Kelli had reached out in a moment of need. Nora wanted to give. She *tried* to give. In the end, she took it all away.

A sharp pain pierced her chest. Finally, it passed and became slightly more manageable. This was her natural state, being alone. Her heart and mind would



eventually remember. In Nora's opinion, there was no other alternative. It was either lose herself in Kelli or retain what remained and deal with the inevitable fallout. She couldn't be the person Kelli wanted or deserved. In time, Kelli would see that. Nora was sure. She steeled herself. Eventually, Kelli would come. She needed to be ready for the confrontation she would bring with her.

Later, Nora entered the living area. Intent on getting back to routine, her plan was to take the rest of the weekend to prepare herself for upcoming surgeries. Her front door swung open violently. The fact that Nora had left it unlocked was a testament to her scattered state of mind. Kelli entered and took away Nora's ability to breathe with the finality of her movements. Startled and apprehensive, Nora's heart thudded, but warmth filled her just the same. It was too soon. She was nowhere near ready for this.

A muscle in Kelli's jaw flexed, and her gaze held enough anger to start a fire. Nora's insides tightened. Kelli walked toward her. In reaction, Nora stepped back.

Kelli made a sound in the back of her throat. It sounded dangerously like a growl. She moved quickly, slamming Nora against the wall. She gasped as her back made contact, but the sudden heat that blanketed Nora made her forget about everything else. The woman standing in front of her had owned her not too long ago. A hard shudder rocked her. Kelli gripped Nora's upper arms, digging slightly into her skin.

"Is this what you're running from?" Kelli's voice was thick, gravelly. Then, without warning, she descended, kissing Nora with bruising intensity. Kelli nipped at Nora's bottom lip until she whimpered. Kelli forced her way inside her mouth, and Nora was helpless. Anger and pain emanated from Kelli. Still, Nora's body leapt to attention, making way for a thick swell of arousal.

Nora melted. Her thought processes muted. She wrapped her arms around Kelli's neck. Kelli wedged her thigh between Nora's legs. Nora cried out as her swollen flesh found both relief and continued stimulation, simultaneously. Her hips began to undulate.

Abruptly, Kelli ended the embrace. Her own breathing was ragged, her expression needy. She took a step back, grimacing as if she'd been wounded.

"Is it?" Kelli hands were fisted, but the rest of her was trembling.

Mind clouded, Nora had no idea what Kelli was referring to. "I—"

“Answer me! You can’t be that selfish or self-centered to just leave me like that! So just tell me, why?”

Nora snapped back to reality. She didn’t know what to say. “Kelli, I—”

“We fucked, Nora. It was hard and dirty.” Kelli leaned in brushing her lips over Nora’s ear. “We did, and it was so *fucking* good. Wasn’t it?”

Unable to stop it, a whimper escaped Nora’s throat. Everything inside her felt scorched by the heat between them. Her body arched forward just as it had the night before.

“It terrified you, but you know what?” Kelli traced Nora’s ear with her tongue. “I could do it again, right here...right now. And you would let me.”

Nora was blown away by the audacity of Kelli’s words, as well as her primitive reaction to them. The statement was true and very difficult to swallow.

“Be mad at me, but tell me why you left. Talk to me...why?” Kelli pulled away. The anger had seeped from her voice, and pain filtered in.

Nora’s lips parted. Kelli’s gaze was penetrating, fathomless. Words clogged in Nora’s throat.

The seconds ticked by.

Kelli nearly vibrated with tension. “We still haven’t found Antony, in case you’re wondering.” Sarcasm dripped from her every word. The patience that Kelli usually displayed was gone.

Nora’s own fury began to germinate. Was it rational to feel this way? She wasn’t sure, but it was easier to handle than the pain and shame Kelli’s words wrought. “I know I’ve hurt you, but you could at least give me time to gather my thoughts and speak!”

Kelli looked incredulous. Her eyes were wide and her mouth was parted slightly. “You don’t think I’ve given you enough time?”

Nora closed her eyes and looked away. Kelli had given her all the time in the world. They wouldn’t have made it this far otherwise. “That isn’t what—”

“What did you mean then?” Kelli asked.

Nora opened her eyes. Kelli’s gaze was penetrating, steady. She wanted answers. “I don’t know!”

Kelli moved back even more. Nora immediately missed the warmth.

“I can’t do this right now. We need to...” Kelli paused and swallowed. “Step away from this. I can’t keep chasing you, Nora. Especially if you don’t wanna

be caught. My family needs me. You come to me when you figure your shit out. Maybe I'll get the answers I need then. Maybe we..." Kelli put additional distance between them. She sounded so tired. "I need to get outta here."

Their gazes met once more. Nora tried to decipher Kelli's thoughts, but her eyes gave nothing away. A few seconds later, Nora watched the front door close. The urge to follow was so strong, but it wasn't strong enough. Her heart continued to race. Her body cried out, and every inch of her tingled. Nora remained still until it felt like the wall she was up against was closing in on her.



Kelli pulled her car into her mother's driveway. Instead of getting out, she sat there. She needed to breathe and at least *try* to pull her shit together. Her hands gripped the steering wheel hard enough to turn her knuckles white, but she couldn't let go. Inside, she trembled. The confrontation with Nora had not gone the way she expected. After seeing Nora just standing there, Kelli couldn't help herself. She was compelled to touch and taste. It didn't matter if doing it tore her to shreds even more.

None of her goddamned questions got answered. Kelli knew there was a chance that they never would. Today, she didn't have the patience to wait, to coax, and she suspected that she wouldn't have it next week or next month either. Kelli had an out, and she'd given Nora one as well. All of this could be a sign that it was time to move on while she still had some of her heart left.

Kelli snorted, but the shit wasn't funny. Without effort, she could recall the intensity between them. It was potent as fuck. What they shared was unique and lightning usually didn't strike twice. So maybe this was it. Maybe this was all she was going to get. Somehow, Kelli had to fight through this and get to the other side. She could either forget Nora or accept her for who she was. Kelli leaned back in the driver's seat and finally released the wheel. Her shit wasn't together, but she could look the part.

The knock on her window made her jump. Kelli looked up to discover Sean staring at her. Kelli took a deep breath and put everything else in the back of her mind. Just like always, her family came first. Kelli rolled down the window.

"You okay?" Sean asked as he leaned against the car.

"Yeah, just tired. I didn't sleep last night."

He studied her for several seconds, making Kelli uncomfortable. “I can see that, but you sure you’re okay? You look... I don’t know. You didn’t look like this last night. Maybe Nora—”

“I said I’m fine.” Kelli didn’t have the stomach for twenty questions or any of his observations.

Sean’s eyes widened. “Oh.” He cleared his throat. “Okay then.” He glanced away and back again, looking irritated. “What did you do?”

Kelli glared. “That’s none of your business.”

“It’s just, she was different. She was good for you. I’ve never seen—”

“Drop it!” Kelli snarled. She wasn’t all that shocked by his words. Sean was very much on the Nora bandwagon. “Finding Antony is all I care about right now.”

Sean’s lips thinned. “Fine.” He shoved his hands into his jean pockets. “I’ll text you if I find something.”

“Yeah, you do that.” Kelli waited for him to pass before getting out of her car.



Nora didn’t really feel like eating, but she finished her lunch anyway. She put her plate and utensils away. As Nora closed the dishwasher, she heard the telltale rustle of Phineas’s entry into the kitchen.

He paused to look at her and snuffled in greeting. Nora smiled at him and watched his progress toward his bowl. It was empty. Phineas sat down in front of it and placed the tip of his snout on the dish. Nora almost laughed. Kelli thought that was the funniest thing ever. The wave of sadness that flooded her was almost unbearable. Nora moved mindlessly toward the refrigerator to get his food. When she turned back to him, Phineas was looking at her.

Nora froze. “She’s gone.”

There was no response. The house was quiet...too quiet.



The hospital was a safe place, a neutral place, or it was close, which was just what Nora needed it to be this afternoon. It was strange for her to be here on a Sunday, but her home was a little too big right now. Here, at the hospital, there was noise and people. Being here wasn’t going to cure her loneliness, but

it was a good Band-Aid. Nora took a stack of charts off the desk at the nurses' station, intent on completing some paperwork and scheduling upcoming surgeries as far out as she could. It never hurt to be prepared.

"Dr. Whitmore, what are you doing here? You're not on the board this weekend. I've been on vacation the last couple weeks. I heard you were back. Nice to see you." The nurse smiled.

Nora blinked. With a couple of nasty comments, she could reestablish herself and become the person she used to be. It would bring her another step closer and spread through the hospital like wildfire.

The nurse continued to smile, but it was beginning to dim.

Nora made her decision. "I—" Her mouth snapped shut. Those particular words were stuck in her throat, but others came out instead. "Thank you." That felt right. Nora was actually relieved.

"I guess it's a good thing you're here. We're actually short staffed in Peds and ER/Trauma. So, feel free to help out."

Nora glanced down at the stack of charts in her arms. She couldn't go to her office with these. That was the last place she wanted to be. Too many memories. "Let me get situated in an empty on-call room, and I'll head down to trauma within the hour. If they need me for an emergency, just page me."

The nurse nodded. "Will do."

Nora walked down the hall. A chart fell from the top of the stack. She bent to get it and the others started to slide from her arms, as well. Nora sighed loudly and kneeled. A few seconds later, she almost toppled over as someone plowed into her from behind.

"Oh God! I'm so sorry. I was paying more attention to my shirt than the hallway. Are you okay? Here, let me help," the nurse said, as she swept gray hair out of her face and helped Nora pick up the charts. "Spilled soup down my scrubs, and now I almost took out a doctor in the hallway. My shift just started. Can't wait to see what the next eight hours will be like." Her tone was filled with laughter, and her blue eyes sparked with humor. "You okay, Dr. Whitmore?"

"Yes, thank you." Nora paused. The nurse looked familiar, just like the rest of them. She glanced at the nurse's name tag to see Susan Collier. "Yes, Susan. I'm fine."

Susan gazed at Nora thoughtfully. "Are you sure? I mean, you don't look like you are."

Nora assumed Susan's observation had nothing to do with their collision. She knew her inner disarray was bleeding outward. Nora stepped back and retreated into herself a little. "I—"

"I wasn't trying to pry or fish for gossip. Believe me, there's enough misinformation floating around about you. You look completely human to me." Susan's grin took the sting out of her words.

Nora was still taken aback. She had no idea what to say, so she remained quiet.

Susan scrunched up her nose. "That was me...trying to be friendly. I blew it, didn't I? Did I make it weird?"

Surprised that the conversation was continuing, Nora nodded. "Yes, this is a bit strange." The oddness of the encounter was the perfect segue for escape. "So, if you'll excuse me—"

"Listen, I know you don't have many friends at the hospital, and that's our fault just as much as it is yours." Susan crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Nora as if daring her to refute it.

Well, that was blunt. This put Nora slightly at ease. "I agree."

"Good. So we're officially not strangers anymore. You know that I'm weird, and I know...absolutely nothing about you." Susan smiled.

And for Nora that had always been best. Susan waited and continued to smile. The least Nora could do was be cordial. "Split pea?"

Susan glanced down at her scrub top and back up again. "Yeah, made it myself."

"I'm more partial to lentil."

"Ack, I won't hold that against you." Susan backed away. "I'll let you get back to work."

Nora adjusted the stack of charts and mulled over the decidedly odd encounter that had just occurred. It was completely out of her comfort zone. Despite that, the sky didn't fall, and Nora was in one piece, relatively speaking. But she wasn't going to overanalyze. Nora didn't have the energy. All of it was currently being used to figure out ways to stop thinking about Kelli. Work was the most obvious choice, and Nora was more than willing to immerse herself in it.



A little over an hour later, Nora stood at the ER nurses' station, flipping through charts.

"Dr. Whitmore?"

She glanced up at the sound of her name. "Yes, Dr. Gibbs?"

"I could use you in Trauma One. We had two GSWs come in. The police said it happened during a liquor store robbery. The shooter is stable, and an officer is in with him now. The victim is the messy one. GSW to the chest. There were no lung sounds on the right, but we were able to relieve the pressure from the pneumothorax. I'm trying to intubate, but there's so much blood. I thought a smaller tube would work. Dr. Simmons sent me to get it." He held up the wrapped package. He barely met her gaze, and he fidgeted as if nervous.

Nora was a little taken aback by the amount of detail she was just given. Regardless of the information and his demeanor, Nora said, "Let's go."

They entered Trauma One to the sound of blaring monitors. The medical personnel already around the patient moved in a blur. Dr. Simmons barked out orders for epi and the crash cart.

Nora quickly pulled on gloves and inserted herself into the chaos. When she saw who it was, the shock paralyzed her. An icy chill slid its way down her back. The moment passed within seconds, and everything came into sharp focus. Nora moved quickly, and was able to successfully intubate James Rader.

The heart monitor beeped, showing signs of life.

Nora's insides quivered, and she wasn't sure why. On the outside, she presented herself to be the epitome of calm.

"Let's get him to surgery." Dr. Simmons gripped the bed railing and pushed.

"I'll take over from here." Nora moved in front of the gurney. Given Simmons's recent record, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Simmons stared, as did everyone else.

Yes, this was an odd situation. Maybe she had something to prove. Maybe she just wanted to show that she could rise above. Or maybe saving Rader's life would make her own feel less in shambles.

"I can handle this." Dr. Simmons looked defiant and confused at the same time.

“No, I need to see this through,” Nora said, as she waved one of the residents over. “Dr. Gibbs, you’re with me.”



Nora dropped the bullet from Rader’s chest onto the metal tray next to her. “The bullet nearly bisected his lung.” She pointed to the damage. “Would you recommend repair or partial removal Dr. Gibbs?”

“He’s young and in good shape otherwise, which lowers his chance of infection. I’d go for repair.”

“Good call.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I should have told you who it was. Given you the choice—”

“It doesn’t matter who he is.” Nora meant every word. This man had nearly ruined her career and her life. Despite her animosity, right now, he was just a patient.

“Suture.” Dr. Whitmore glanced up as the apparatus was placed in her hand. This wasn’t her usual surgical team, but they were efficient. “Thank you.”

The surgical tech smiled behind his mask, making his eyes crinkle at the edges. Nora smiled slightly in return.

“Tell us, Dr. Gibbs, about the other possible complications Dr. Rader could face.”

“Um—”

“Take your time. We’re going to be here a while. If he could hear it, Dr. Rader would enjoy your display of knowledge.”

Someone chuckled. The act was misplaced, yet, it was also a relief.

“Pulmonary embolism.” Dr. Gibbs cleared his throat. “There could be a second lung collapse. Not to mention, there is a chance of significant scarring that could hamper his breathing for the rest of his life.”

“Yes, possibly,” Nora said, as she checked James’s vitals. He was holding steady.

Time seemed to crawl by, but finally, her work was nearly done. Her internal organs were in knots. Nora’s composure was cracking even though no one else was aware. “Dr. Gibbs? Would you like to take over from here?”

His gaze met hers. She could almost smell his enthusiasm.



“I’d like that. Thank you, Dr. Whitmore.”

Nora nodded. “Great work, everyone.”

Without looking back, she walked briskly toward the exit. She threw her gloves in the biohazard container and removed her hairband before washing her hands. Then, Nora left the area completely. Her need for solitude was overwhelming. After trying two doors, the third opened easily to a supply closet. She turned on the light, and the trembling inside her forced its way out.

Kelli’s presence alone could have soothed her frayed nerves. Her misplaced attempt at humor could have provided much needed levity, and her touch would have relieved everything else. She didn’t have that anymore. Barely two days had passed, but Nora had never felt more alone.

A sob fell from her lips. Nora pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to stifle the sound. Her chest contracted as it happened again. She leaned against the wall and slowly slumped downward. The weekend could have ended differently if she’d just stayed in Kelli’s bed.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# CROSSING LINES

BY KD WILLIAMSON

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)