

Chapter Two

Jack

What the hell? War had a date with *Ray*?

Was he fucking mad? I had to make the dumb idiot see sense. As gorgeous as she was, Rayen Logan had a mouth that could insult a person to the next state, to never want to cross paths with her again. I steered clear of the pretty but sharp-tongued little bug.

War was asking for trouble. We had both stuck to Max's elicited warning to keep our tainted claws off her. He'd treated her like his little sister pre-Ila—the sibling relationship now a reality because he was about to marry *her* sister—and we heeded the caveat that family was off-limits.

Sure, we kept an eye on her, so the sleazeballs in here knew to watch it. The asshole who'd slapped her backside earlier was on my radar, preferably with a broken jaw before the night was over.

The brunette near me continued spinning drunken promises, I barely heard or had any inclination towards. Irritated, I waved her off. "I'm not interested."

"What the hell are you up to, War?" Max demanded, while Ila nailed him with a dark glower before she stomped off after her sister. "I told you to lay off Ray."

"Hey, it's just one date," he protested. "We're...er, testing the waters, so to speak. My career's going well, and I think she'll keep me calm, help me not get into fights."

Max's brow lowered like a bull about to charge. Yeah, the bastard was pissed. Hell, I wouldn't want to face my best friend when he let that temper of his loose.

"Warrick, I don't give a fuck about your anger issues right now. This is Ray," Max snapped, cutting a sharp look at Ila, who was trying to talk to Ray. But the thorn in my side sported a stubborn look, one I knew too well.

War slouched back in his seat, his gaze fixed on Max. No, he wasn't relenting. Max shot to his feet. "You do anything to her, friend or not, I'll hurt you."

As he strode off after Ila, I narrowed my eyes at War. "What's going on with you? And don't give me that crap about a date."

War's mouth pressed into a hard line, and I knew he wouldn't say shit. Frustrated and needing to work off the anger still roiling through me, one not even a vigorous afternoon surfing session could eliminate, I lurched to my feet and headed for—I paused—I had no fucking clue *where* I wanted to go. I strode to the restroom.

Since this morning's debacle with my family, every damn thing pissed me off, and now this.

On my way back, my gaze lit on Ray walking in front of me, untying her apron. I jogged after her and grabbed her arm. She spun around. When she saw me, she rolled her hazel eyes and grimaced as if she'd tasted something sour. "I've clocked out, Griffin. Get another waitress to tend to you."

Sometimes, I wondered what it would take to have her smile at me. Just smile because she didn't dislike me. My mood dropped lower. "What the hell are you up to, Rayen?"

Her eyebrow cocked in the way Max's did. And she'd gone and gotten another piercing, on her tongue, as if the marching row of gold studs on her left ear wasn't enough metal to disturb the gorgeous lines of her face. Hell, she was sexy and damn hot regardless, with striking eyes and naturally tan skin due to her mixed heritage. But why would she go and add all that metal?

"You're acting like I'm going to go rob a bank or something." She sniffed. "If you really must know... War's setting me up with someone."

"Why?"

“You’re clever, or so I’ve heard,” she taunted. “But considering the blank look that takes over your expression, and probably your gray matter, with the slanks you hook up with, it seems highly doubtful.”

Goddammit. I wanted to shake her. “Ray,” I barked.

“Ugh!” She expelled an exasperated breath, disturbing the overlong, purple-streaked bangs falling into her face. “Go away, Griffin.”

I grabbed her wrist. She cut me an aggravated glare. She might be tall, but I was taller and used my six-feet-two height to loom over her with every intention to intimidate.

She bowed back, the counter behind her stopping her from completely tipping over. Pity, maybe a fall would knock some sense into her rock-hard skull. I rested my palms on the counter, caging her. “Talk, Bug.”

“That aggressive caveman threat won’t work on me. I’m not one of your floozies. And don’t call me that!” She slapped her hands on my chest and shoved. It did little to move me. But a sharp buzz streaked through me like lightning, sending my mind off-focus. And then I realized why. She’d never touched me before. In all the time I’d known her. Then, stunning the hell out of me, she leaned in close as if coming in for a kiss, but her lips missed mine by a mile and went to my ear. The stab of loss startled me.

“If you must know the reason for my plans,” she whispered, her breath warming my skin, “it’s so I can get laid. I wanted an escort, no awkward morning-after convo and disappointed faces because the other won’t call. But War didn’t agree. So, he’s setting me up with a hockey player. Heard they’re the best in the sack. You know what’s even better? I don’t have to see them afterward.” She pulled back and grinned, catching her tongue piercing against her teeth.

It took a moment for what she’d said to sink into my sluggish brain, pulling my mind away from the fantasy of her tormenting tongue doing wicked things to *my* body—

The air suddenly rushed out of my lungs. I stood there speechless, stunned by the craziness of what I’d just heard. “*What?*”

“You heard me.”

“When?”

“Really?” She arched a feminine brow. “I don’t ask you when you’re getting laid. I gotta go, I’m delaying War and *my* date.” Smirking, she ducked under my arm and disappeared down the corridor. I stood there, clenching the counter like a frozen idiot.

No fucking way. We always kept an eye out for her. She was my best friend’s girl’s sister, and I wasn’t letting her get herself into trouble. I knew what assholes men could be. Hell, I probably led the pack and deserved the names she tagged me with, but this shit wasn’t happening. She’d thank me when she got that damn hard skull of hers on straight again.

Before I could go after her, the brunette who’d dropped her napkin on my lap, one I’d tossed away, swooped in with a sultry smile. “You changed your mind, yes?”

“I’m busy.” I sidestepped her, my attention fixed on the dim hallway and the staff entrance through which the pain in my temporal lobe had disappeared.

“Asshole,” the woman bit out. “He’ll never get a piece of Eva now.” She stomped off.

Did she just refer to herself in the third person? I shook my head. In the past, she would have been perfect for a meaningless fuck. Now, she didn’t even ping my interest. In the last year, nothing had.

As I glanced back to where Ray had disappeared, my gaze stalled on Cliff, my grandfather’s caregiver, seated at the counter. He nodded and resumed nursing his soda. The guy didn’t drink, but he appeared to like hanging at the bar on his nights off.

Ray strolled out from the back. She’d changed into a sleek, dark blue dress that hugged every inch of her sexy body and glided right past me as if I were part of the furniture.

“Hey, Griffin.” Two former university buds cornered me, yakking about some surfing event, which, right then, I didn’t give a damn about. “It’s being held in Main Break—Australia. You gonna do it?”

“I don’t know. Gotta go.” My attention zipped back to the entrance, except Ray had vanished. Dammit. I took off after her, but people kept getting in my way. A guy bumped into me and shoved me back, hiking my already buzzing temper.

Growling, I pivoted and was about to take off when I realized who it was. The drunken asshole who’d felt up Ray earlier. Anger surged. My fist flew into his face before my brain connected with my thoughts, sending him crashing into his pals. “You ever touch Ray like that again, I’ll break both your fucking hands.”

Fingers clenching, blood pounding in my ears, I stormed outside—wishing I could tackle my other problems as easily. In the brisk night air, I halted on the crowded curb, inhaling harsh breaths of exhaust fumes. Chatter crowded my ears as I scanned the sidewalk. No sign of her. Goddamn these Logan sisters. They sure knew how to garrote a guy by the balls.

I should just go home. But spying War leaning against his new Ducati, I jogged over. “Where is she?”

His expression hardened. “Leave her alone, Jack. Yeah, she told me you interrogated her. She’ll be fine with Cal.”

“Calum Moore? That fucking manwhore?”

“What are we? Saints?” War snorted. “At least he’ll give her what she wants. I’m waiting for her call when they’re done.”

For some reason, his words landed as if someone had sucker-punched me in the gut. They were doing *it* tonight—*now*? I yanked War off his bike by his shirt collar, despite him being taller and bigger. “Tell me where she is, or I swear you and I will make tomorrow’s news.”

War eyed me like I was some sad loser and shook his head, his mouth turned down in pity. “You’re in way over your head, man. Let it go. Keep her at a distance like you usually do. It’s best for everyone, especially *you*,” he said, as if I’d asked for his goddamn advice. And what the hell was he talking about? This was about saving Ray from her own foolishness. Not me.

“You’re too fucked up—”

“War!” I snarled.

A growl rumbled free as he glared in irritation, then muttered, “You’re a goddamn bastard, Griffin. She’s meeting Cal at the BlackRock.”

At the mention of her hooking up in our hotel, my teeth ground down. “Give me your keys.” I tossed him the ones to my Porsche.

Minutes later, the bike vibrating between my thighs, I cut through the thick traffic and headed for the BlackRock downtown. Parking at the front of the hotel in what felt like hours later, I leaped off the machine, flung the keys to the valet, who nodded when he saw me, and took the stairs three at a time. I sprinted into the foyer and headed for the busy bar. They’d better be here, or Calum Moore would be scrapings on the floor, and Ray would wish—

There she stood, near the low-lit counter, talking to the smirking asshole.

What was it with her and blonds? Biting back my irritation at the shit this girl so carelessly stepped into, I strode across the room, grasped Ray around the waist, and dragged her to me. “Sorry, bud, a misunderstanding with my girl here,” I flung a hard smile at Cal.

Ray’s gaze snapped to me. Her mouth fell open, snapped shut, then opened again. Before she created a scene, I hauled her away, wanting to get out of this place.

“What the hell are you doing?” She yanked at my hold, halting me. “Let me go!”

Guests turned. Shit. Lowering my voice, I bit out, “Create a scene, and I’ll give the guests something to talk about. My way, or yours?” I released her wrist.

Her eyes spitting fire, she pressed her lips together and crossed her arms. With one hand at the small of her back, I propelled her to the reception desk. It was best to talk to her in a quiet place and make her see the foolishness of her actions.

Ignoring the curious stares from the personnel behind the desk, I got the keys for the penthouse, then headed for the private elevator and steered her inside.

“What the heck are you doing?” She jerked away from me as the metal door rolled shut.

“We’re going to talk—”

“Go to hell!”

I gritted my teeth and remained silent, watching her as the elevator whooshed up. The moment it halted, and the door slid open, Ray folded her arms again and skewered me with a death-glare, refusing to move.

My patience flat-lining, I swept her up and dropped her over my shoulder. Her breath escaped in a rush, and the blissful moment of silence shattered. She slapped my back, finally finding her voice. “Put me down!”

I let her spend her fury, then she pinched my back, and she didn’t let go. It might only be a tiny little nip, but the thing stung like hell. I slapped her ass. Hard.

“Oww—” An outraged gasp. She rubbed her backside. “I’m going to kill you, Griffin, I swear. I’ll call the cops and charge you with abduction and assault!”

“Go ahead.” I stepped out of the elevator and headed for the penthouse. Using the key card, I flung open the door and then slammed it shut, walking into the suite of rooms. At least she’d stopped with the hitting and pinching. I strode through the living room into the bedroom and tossed her on the bed. She bounced once and then shot to her feet, her hazel eyes sparking a furious green—a stunning contrast to her light, honey-hued face.

“Take me back this minute!” She shoved back her inky hair falling in a striking, wavy mess to her shoulders. The fact she’d undone the silly pigtails she usually wore at the bar and that she’d dressed up for the dumbass jock of a hockey player irked me more than it should.

“Not until you listen.”

“To you? Never!” Her chest rose and fell in fury. “Why are you doing this?”

“Saving you? Because you have no sense of self-preservation. You just throw yourself at the sluttiest of men—”

“I *want* slutty,” she spat.

For some reason, that set me off.

“You want slutty? Do you? Very well.” I undid a few buttons of the gray dress shirt I’d worn to the office, grabbed the back collar, and dragged it off.

Her mouth formed a shocked O, eyes rounded like saucers. Then the words rushed out. “Wait-wait—Jack, what are you doing?”

“Oh, so you do know my name.”

Those lush lips thinned into a mutinous line.

“According to you, I’m a *player*,” I continued, “sluttier than all the alley cats put together. Why go to some amateur when *I* can give you what you want?” I flung the shirt onto the bed.

She blinked. The delicate curve of her throat moved as if she’d swallowed a boulder. Yeah, she finally realized I was dead-serious. Good. Maybe some sense would finally reclaim its space in that stubborn head of hers.

Except her gaze drifted over my body, following my hands to my pants as I unbuckled and got rid of my belt. Slowly, I tossed it on top of my shirt, and her gaze rushed to mine. I prowled closer. She hurriedly stepped back as if that would stop me from making my point.

The bed halted her retreat. She glared. “I don’t want you.”

“Too bad.”

I lowered my hands on her waist. Her eyes popped even wider. For once, she seemed at a loss for words. Satisfied she hadn't pushed me away, I lowered my head and brushed my lips along her jaw. She didn't have to know I wouldn't do anything more than this.

Her breath hitched...in anticipation?

Was she actually that damn curious about sex...or was it with Cal? Something inside me coiled like a spring at the thought that she would seek out a dickhead like him to fulfill whatever lusty fantasy she had—

Hell, she smelled amazing. Like flowers...and apples. The fragrance seeped into me, lodging in my olfactory cortex or whatever the hell it was that trapped smells in my senses. At the sensation of her peach-smooth skin beneath my mouth, the air caught in my lungs, and the swirling emptiness—even the shitstorm that had plagued me since this morning—quieted.

As if her mind finally caught up with her brain and waded through her shock, she slapped her palms against my bare chest, a touch I felt right in my solar plexus, stunning me senseless once more. “Don't you dare, Griffin,” she choked out. “Or...or I'll tell Max.”

“Go ahead. Here's the thing, Bug. Max, your idol? He asked us to keep an eye on you. War must have lost his fucking mind looking into those limpid hazel eyes of yours. Go ahead, shout it from this hotel rooftop to all of San Francisco. It makes little difference.”

Her jaw dropped. If looks could kill, her favorite boy and I would be skewered by now.

“Max?” she choked out, breaking free of my hold. “Max put you up to this?”

Not this time, but no need for her to know that. I shrugged. “What's it gonna be, Bug?”

“I don't even like you.”

And she was still arguing with me.

“Still don't care, as long as I've saved you from your own foolishness.”

“Saved—foolishness?” she sputtered, her cheeks taking on a tantalizing shade of pink beneath her tan skin, her eyes a furious, striking gold-streaked emerald.

“Yes,” I retorted...then I relented. “Very well. Since I saved you, I'll take your gratitude as payment instead.”

“Gratitude—pay-payment?”

“Why do you repeat everything I say?” I asked, knowing it would irritate her.

“Because I'm so freakin' furious, I want to—I want to—”

“Is that your way of telling me you want me to fuck you, Rayen?” I cocked a brow, hiding my amusement. “Very well, I'm ready. Undress.”

RAY

Undress? My breath tangled in my throat.

No-no, I had to be in some alternate universe. I wasn't really in this hotel room with Jack, but home in my warm bed and with my cranky cat.

Jack and I were like the North and South Poles, repelling magnets, never the twain shall meet and all that crap. Yet my unruly eyes did a quick downward glide from those inked right biceps and pec to trail over his ripped abs. Even the five-inch scar low on his left oblique didn't mar his male beauty.

Ugh. This had to be another bad dream—okay, a sexy one, I wasn't blind. The guy oozed sex appeal like God hadn't known where to shelf the abundance and used Jack to shore up all the looks and hotness. But that was neither here nor there right now. Not when the wretch had me trapped in this penthouse.

“Yes? No?”

I blinked. At his amused stare, I wanted to slap myself upside the head. Great. He'd caught me checking him out. My body suddenly too warm, I shifted uneasily.

“You are out of your freaking mind, *Griffin*,” I stressed his last name in case his Neanderthal brain was on hiatus. “I had no plans to sleep with Calum tonight. Not that it’s any business of yours, but *it* was to happen...er, later.” A lie. “We were simply meeting for drinks.”

“Fine, I’ll make myself available then, too.”

Jesus. I rubbed my eyes in frustration. “Says the player who never sleeps with the same woman twice? Yeah, right.”

He shrugged those tanned, muscular shoulders that were seriously distracting me. I wanted to run my tongue over them—gah! Stupid big muscles. I had a thing for a man’s shoulders. And these suckers made me weak in the knees. Just as well he had no clue about my thoughts.

Jack was well-built, but not overly packed with muscles like a bodybuilder. A light trail of dark hair ran down his sculpted abs to disappear into his pants—holy shit.

Hastily, I averted my gaze from the bulge in his pants and back to his tonal tattoo, a remarkable depiction of a demonic-looking crab entwined with Celtic runes that started on his right pectoral and trailed over his shoulder and biceps... It appeared similar to the demonic ram Max sported.

Of course. Their star signs. But a Cancer? Ah! Jack was as stubborn as a mule. Should have been a bull. Heck, I’d had no idea he sported any ink at all. It just added to the dangerous, moody air surrounding him.

“BTW,” he drawled the acronym, “I don’t *sleep* with my hookups. I fuck and leave.”

And that hauled me out of my dreamy hallucination. I glared up into Jack’s impossibly handsome face and met his glittering ice-gray eyes. Fingers clenched, I pushed at his warm chest with my fists. “I’m not interested in your tails. Your life. *You*. Now, get the hell out of my way—”

“No.” He grasped my wrists and tugged me close. His cool stare lowered...to my lips.

My heart pounded. Surely, this caveman could hear it. “Don’t you dare—”

His mouth came down on mine.

I’d been kissed before, along with a couple of drunken pilfered ones, but never like this. It stole my breath, my strength. My knees wobbled. His arms tightened around me, supporting me.

As if under a spell, my lips parted. Instantly, his tongue licked inside my mouth, then stroked mine in a dance of dominance, willing my submission. And I lost whatever common sense I possessed and kissed him back.

A groan of satisfaction rolled out of him as he drew my tongue into his mouth. He licked around my piercing before sucking on my tongue—a tug that went straight to my core, stirring my arousal. He kissed me as though he were thirsty, and I was his life-giving liquid...then took me deeper and deeper into a sensual storm of need.

His warmth wrapped around me, his hard body, his erection pressing against me. I squirmed, wanting to feel him moving inside me, ready to drag him to the big bed behind me—

A cell phone erupted like gunfire, breaking the spell. Reality slammed into me like a wrecking ball. I yanked free, gasping for air, blinking at him in sheer horror.

No-no! What have I done?

This was Jack.

He lived to torment me, while I pretended that he didn’t exist. It was safer that way.

Now, he stared at me, his eyes molten silver as if seeing me for the first time... Did he think I was easy now because of what I’d planned to do? Embarrassment lent a heated layer to my face. I dodged him and rushed to the living room, desperate to escape.

“Ray, wait.”

“Why?” I wheeled around, anger sweeping through me. “You had your fun. If this was payback for me making you pay the bills, or for the names I tagged you with, you made your point. Now, leave me the hell alone!”

I yanked the door open and sprinted for the elevator in my heels, praying he wouldn't catch up. A single stab of the button, and the door slid open. I ducked inside, grateful that he had to stop to grab his shirt first.

As my cage shut, his furious shout reached me. "Dammit, Ray, wait one damn minute! Get out here!"

With the penthouse being on the thirtieth floor, he'd have to wait for the elevator's return. It would give me time to disappear.

"This isn't over," he snapped, his voice muffled by the steel barrier.

Over? What the hell was he talking about? *Over* would imply that we were actually involved to some degree, having conversations lasting longer than five seconds. The last half an hour didn't count.

"It never even started," I yelled back as the elevator descended. "There's no freakin' 'this isn't over' crap going on!" I didn't care if he couldn't hear me, as long as I got that out.

Back in my dorm, my home for another two weeks, I paced the small open-plan living space—a postage stamp, really; the kitchen, study area, and bedroom smooshed inside. The confined space seemed to be closing in on me. My irritation grew.

How in the hell could something be *over* just because of a stupid unexpected but mind-blowing kiss? My contact with Jack Griffin usually amounted to "where's Max?" or with my pen poised over my pad, "what will it be?"

Gah! I dragged my fingers through my hair. How could this have happened? Now, he was in my thoughts. I wanted to kill him. I didn't have time for distraction.

Dammit, Max! This is all your fault with your stupid rules.

I flopped onto the small couch near the open window and glared at the ceiling.

Movement had me glancing back. A scrawny gray-and-black cat leaped down to the floor and sauntered off to the kitchen area. A loud, annoyed grumble reached me seconds later.

"Hello to you, too."

Wilbur the Cranky had returned from his alley-cattin'. When I first came across him several weeks ago, he loitered outside the dorm. I'd given him my lunch sandwich. After a few days, he'd somehow found me on the sixth floor. I had no idea how the heck he'd scaled the walls to get there, but he'd snuck in through my window. Ever since, he'd made my place his, and I didn't have the heart to shut him out.

He was company. Company who hated me.

A dish clattered, the sound reverberating in my quiet studio, and I sighed.

The stubborn creature refused to eat anything but tuna—the sandwich I'd first fed him. He wouldn't even touch the kibble. Lord knew I didn't always have enough money to feed the bottomless pit, not when I had to feed myself, too.

I sat up and found him sitting amidst the mess he'd created near his overturned, blue plastic bowl. He eyeballed me with unblinking pale green eyes as if to say, "*how dare you?*"

"Really?" I growled, glaring at the kibble littering the floor. Thankfully, he didn't leave any gifts of dead birds or rats. I got the small brush and dustpan out from the cupboard under the sink. At least fighting with Wilbur kept my mind off Jack as I cleaned up.

"I have to get two jobs, one just to feed you," I grumbled.

Thinking about jobs, I still had no feedback from any of the positions I'd applied for. At this rate, I'd probably end up working full-time at the bar because I didn't want to accept help from Dad. Not with Mom's continuous medical bills. He didn't need the added pressure.

Exhaling roughly, I stored the brush and dustpan, consoling myself that Dad would call if anything had happened to Mom—

Wilbur suddenly struck, swiping at me. *Dammit!* I reared back, but not fast enough to escape him. A stinging burn on my forearm was the thanks I got for caring about the feline from Hell.

“Really, cat?” I muttered, rubbing my arm. “I should just throw you out of the window you slunk in through. Argh. I don’t know what I did to attract both you and Jack into my life!”

Still fuming, though not at the feline, I opened a can of tuna and tipped it into a clean dish, flaked it with a fork, and set it down. The king of my studio circled it once, probably making sure I didn’t poison it, and then settled in for his meal, happy with his offering.

Hands washed, I forayed into my near-empty mini-fridge and got out the last of the cold meats and left-over pizza. While the microwave reheated the latter, I made a sandwich, then I grabbed a large glass of water. I mean, I had to have something healthy to offset my feast, right?

Setting my food on one side of the two-seater couch, I sat down and got out my laptop, opened Netflix, and scrolled through the lists. Movie selected, I settled in to watch *Tangled*, a show I’d seen like a gazillion times. Hey, one could never get too much of a good thing. And I needed the distraction.

As I took a bite of my sandwich, my phone buzzed. I reached for it, and at the name, *TomCat* on the display, I frowned and glanced at the message.

This isn’t over.

Jack.

My breath caught, and the nest of wasps buzzing in my stomach rampaged into an uproar as my traitorous mind hurtled straight back to that kiss. Grrr!