

Combust Excerpt

Preoccupied with a text on my phone from my agent, I walk into the kitchen and suck in a breath when I come face to back with Grady. He's standing with his hand on the refrigerator door, head leaned inside, and his back fully exposed to me. It's broad and strong and scarred immeasurably.

I stare.

I can't help it. The marks are a dizzying array of dark and light and ridged and smooth. And they're undeniably burns. Goosebumps chase over my skin as I imagine the pain he must have endured when he got those. I think of his habit of wearing unbuttoned shirts but never going shirtless and the hint of scars just visible above his collar that I never could have imagined led to this roadmap to hell on his back.

A part of me instinctively wants to reach out to touch them, bring some kind of comfort. It sounds ridiculous, even to me, but that doesn't abate the urge.

"Not pretty, huh? Get a good look while you can." His voice is gruff as his spine stiffens and body stills, emotion woven through the words.

"Thank God not all of you is pretty. I was beginning to feel majorly insecure having to live with perfection like you," I say off the cuff, trying to make this situation less awkward. My attempt to settle the sudden tension sparking in the air around us.

"Perfection?" he asks as he turns to face me with a smile that masks the emotion swirling in his eyes.

"Yeah. You have scars. I have mermaid thighs."

"Mermaid thighs?" He laughs. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Thighs that touch from the top all the way to my knees." I shrug as if it doesn't bug me, as if I'm not highlighting one of the insults Tara threw at me. It's a whole lot easier to make fun of myself so long as it puts him at ease.

"Do you ever give yourself a break?"

"*Do you?*" I ask the question, sparking a silent battle of wills as we stare at each other and wonder what to say next about the other's insecurities. Coming up empty, I shift gears. "I think there is some type of rule about how many abs are fair for a guy to have when the rest of us are just struggling to find one of them."

His smile rings more genuine as he steps toward me, and I step back, my hips leaning against the counter now.

"Is that so?" His voice lowers as his eyes flick to my lips and then back up. "I'm sure you have some under your shirt there."

Why does the simple action make it seem so hard to swallow?

He takes another step.

"What are you building outside?"

“A playroom.”

A nervous chuckle falls from my lips as I think of all of the versions of playrooms I’ve read about in my romance books. My cheeks stain red as I imagine Grady with a flogger in one hand standing beside a St. Andrew’s Cross.

“A playroom?”

“Yeah.” He takes a step closer so we’re breathing the same air, his voice husky enough to cause every part of my body to grow alert. “A playroom. You know . . . a pool table. Foosball. A real man cave.”

I exhale a shaky sigh, suddenly more than aware that he’s so close, shirtless, sweaty, and smelling like sun and soap mixed together. But it’s his eyes that make my thoughts falter. There’s an intensity to them I don’t expect from the perpetually cheerful Grady Malone.

“Ah, that kind of playroom . . .” But my words trail off as he steps even closer and braces his hands on the counter on either side of me. I can hear his intake of breath. The music floating in from outside. The pound of my pulse in my ears.

“Hey, Dyl?”

“Yes?” Our eyes hold, my lips fall lax.

“I need you to open up.”

“*What?*” I question as his hand brushes against my hip and his fingers pull on the drawer handle I’m standing in front of.

“I need the bottle opener. You’re standing in front of the drawer it’s in.” His lips spread into a full-fledged grin as I scramble away from the counter and, of course, run smack dab into the hardness, all six foot plus of him.

And then I rebound off him again in a flustered state that has him laughing and me stuttering. “Sorry. I wasn’t—I didn’t . . .” His arms hold on to my biceps to steady me, which prompts me to look up and meet his eyes.

“We need to stop meeting like this,” he murmurs, the heat of his breath hitting my lips.

“We do.” *Brilliant, Dylan. Freaking brilliant response.* “I’ve gotta . . . I’ve gotta get back to . . . to writing.”