

# DARLING

*Kkk*

KENYA GOREE-BELL

# DARLING NIKKI

BLOOD LEGACY SERIES BOOK THREE

KENYA GOREE-BELL

EDITED BY  
MANU VALESCO

GOREE BOOKS

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*This book is dedicated anyone who has ever found themselves adrift, alone and with no where to stay. Love sees you for who you really are —bright and shining, gifted and GOOD.*

*I want you to know today no matter what your situation is it is temporary. The universe wishes you no ill will. There is a love of a lifetime waiting just for you. All you have to do is believe in yourself and work toward your goals and you will have everything you desire. You have to tell yourself, I deserve all the good things. You will rise like a phoenix from the ashes of despair and fly. ~KGB, Bestselling Author of The Mogul & Blood Legacy Series.*



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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

## **YOUR MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS.**

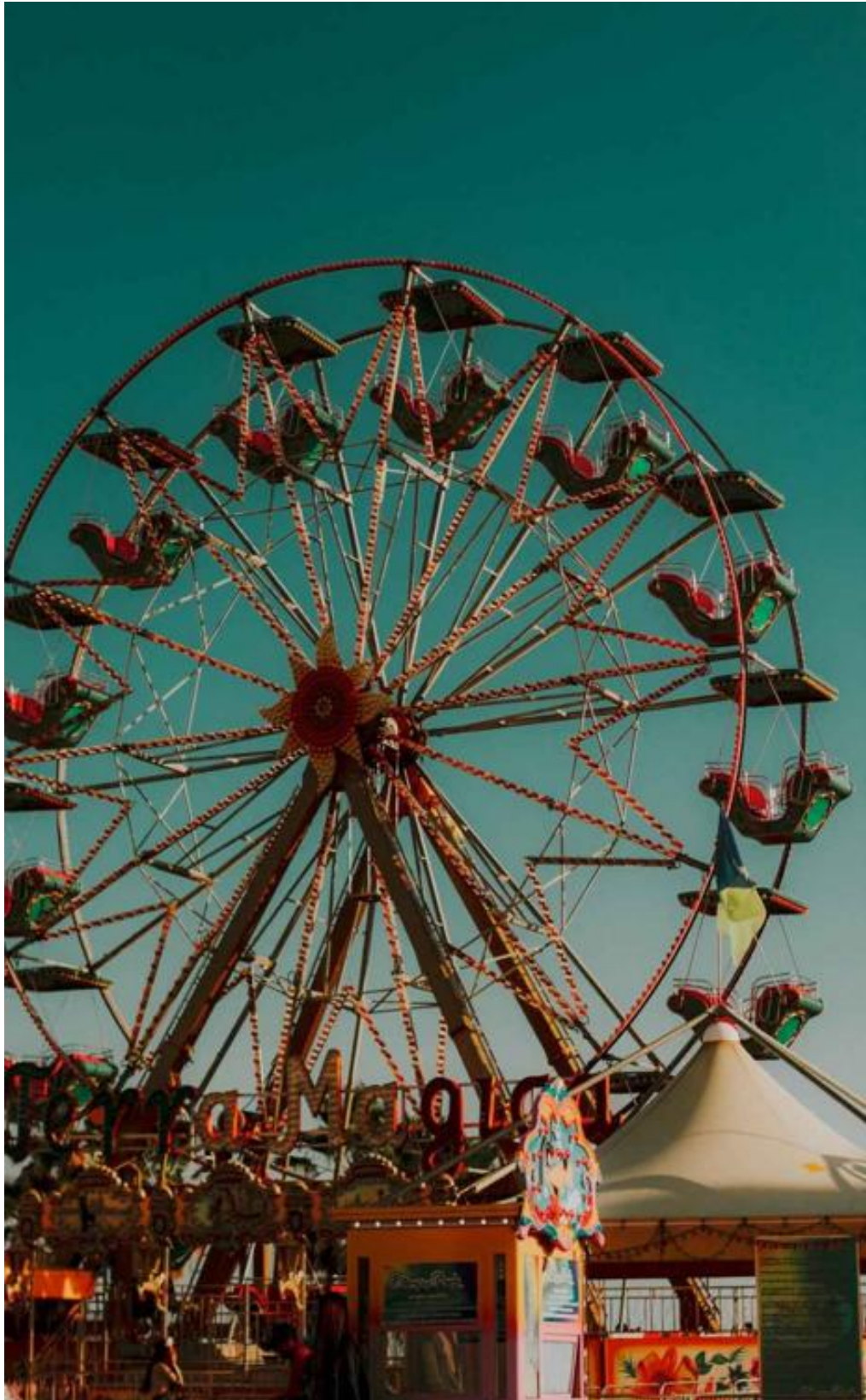
**This is a DARK ROMANCE featuring a VILLAIN HERO. He will not be redeemed, he will not grovel or ask for forgiveness.**

**PROLOGUE contains SA of women and children please skip this if you have triggers around this subject. Murder of a defenseless man.**

**CWs: Please be aware this is and AGE GAP ROMANCE with and the heroine is underage when the book starts. The hero in this book is mean and cruel to the heroine, so if your feelings are easy hurt by mean words please pass on this book.**

**Other more serious CWs: The hero is a villain and does villainous things like murder and burying people alive.; manhandling (groping) of FMC, Graphic violence, Virgin kink, breeding, breath play, intimidation of FMC by MMC, OTT, yelling, profanity, hunting of FMC by MMC, voluntary leaving (running from a crazy mfk), pushing sexual boundaries, light dub-con, trafficking of humans, trafficking of children for sexual purposes (inferred), physical abuse of children on page (I may take it out), Spousal abuse on page (not by hero), talk of SA, coercion, forced marriage, rough penetrative sex, rough oral sex, anal play, spitting (often referred on page as skeet) killing, blood and gore, ambiguous non-con, light drug use (weed), talk of criminal enterprises as a way of life. This list may not encompass all of the CWs. On page child SA & murder**

**(In prologue) this is a last minute addition and can be skipped. ON PAGE Partner Abuse (not main characters). Mental illness but not used as excuse for bad behavior. Medical abortion as a preventive measure (on page). Death of parent. There is no use of condoms in this book, and no use of any sort of barrier methods of any kind. This book should in no way be used as a guide to safe sex practices.**



# BRAZILIAN & PORTUGUESE TERMS

Let's start with body parts!

- Cock: pau, caralho, rola, pinto.
- There are many, but I'll say a man usually call it pau (wood)
- Pussy: Buceta (this one is dirtyyyy like cunt) but there's nothing really sexy for vagina unfortunately. I actually googled this one cause I was like how come we don't get a pussy equivalent??? But we don't.
- Legs: Pernas
- Ass: Bunda, bumbum
- Neck: Pescoço
- Cum: Porra (also a very normal cursing) instead of saying "this fucking thing" we'd use porra in the place of fucking.
- I love you: Eu te amo
- I know I am not worthy but I will devote my life to becoming so: Eu sei que não mereço, mas eu vou passar o resto da minha vida tentando.
- Eyes on me: Olha para mim.
- Why the fuck are you running? : Porque que você está fugindo? (I took running here as escaping/running away. If it's literally running the word is correndo instead of fugindo)
- Good fucking girl: Boa garota. (The fucking wouldn't really work here and not sound aggressive)
- Mine: Minha.

- He calls her darling and the direct translation would be querida but it's a women's thing really. Other nicknames I think would work and be sexy;
- Amor (love), Meu amor (my love)
- Coração (heart), meu coração (my heart)
- Pequena (super cute!! Means little), minha pequena (my little one)
- Family members:
- Mom: Mãe (when little we say mommy so mamãe)
- Dad: Pai, (daddy: papai)
- Grandmother: Vó
- Grandad: Vô
- Brother: irmão
- Sister: irmã
- Cousin: it's latino so I assumed there's always a cousin lol Primo (male), prima (female)
- Someone he hates: filho da puta (son of a bitch), desgraçado (disgrace) this one is a good one and it would come out like "that disgrace" or "Aquele desgraçado".
- People who are close to him (males) : meu irmão (my brother), amigo (friend).
- Brazil is the land of nicknames so everyone has a nickname to a point sometimes we don't know their real name. So a man would come up with stupid ass nicknames for their friends and only call each other that.





# PROLOGUE

Villains are born, they are blooded...

MATHIAS SHELBY (AGE twelve)

The soil underneath my body is so moist it's almost soaking through my shirt and Wranglers. My boots are sinking and if anyone catches me hiding under this barn I'm not going to be able to get out fast enough.

But I have to be here tonight. I need to know what's going on. My dad's been way too nice since Mãe's accident. I'm forbidden to say what really happen by Mãe most of all. I can deny her nothing. It's mostly my fault anyway. I gave the wrong answer and my beautiful mother paid the price.

The only thing good that came out of it is that he stopped hitting her. I guess there's no fun it anymore. Mãe says he's changed but I know better. He's a monster.

SOMETHING CRAWLING on my face wakes me. Scrambling, I swipe it off bumping my head.

The thud has my ears ringing and my head hurting. I rub the knot I feel starting to form, noticing the light is brighter now. They must mae back from the pick-up points.

Crawling forward, I stop to see a pair of booted feet leave. It's Lester if the heavily scuffed toes of the boots are any

indication. The other field foremen always rag him about his old boots. That's as far as it goes though. because he's the meanest som'bitch on this land besides my father and that's saying a lot.

A lot of people wonder why my dad is so hands on when he's a billionaire and has hundreds of people looking after his interest on thousands of acres between here and South America. I could've told them the reason — he likes nothing better than bossing folks around.

Getting as close as I can, I stop just beyond the point where they can see me. I'm an expert at hiding. I have to be. Been good at it since Mãe whispered to hurry and find a safe place when I was three.

My stomach drops when I hear groaning. I squeeze up just a little closer.

My father's massive form is blocking my view but I know that sound, have heard it when he did it to my mom and me.

Jessie Carrington, a local teacher who used to volunteer here is on his knees, face so bloody, he's barely recognizable. The slightly shorter but just as broad form behind him makes my stomach lurch. Angel. My best friend is tied-up back to back with his stepdad.

I feel bad for the text I sent him earlier cussing him out for never showing up to come check to see what they are doing late at night in this barn out with me.

He turns like I called his name and looks in my direction. We've hidden here before, so he knows I'm here. His face is bloody but not so bad. A busted lip and a purple bruise on his cheek is all. One of the men pulls him by the hair, making him face forward again.

“I warned you but you wouldn't listen did you, Teach?” My father gives him another hard thwack making his head snap back into Angel's. His head lolls and he slumps forward.

“Fucking weakling,” my father mutters going around to face Angel. “What your momma see in him anyway? Then had the nerve to let him get her pregnant.” He slaps Angel hard

across the face. He starts beating him. “After I kill you and this motherfucker, I’m going to be real nice and consoling to her. She was the best piece of pussy I had in a long time but then she had to take up with this uppity asshole.” He pulls back his steel toe boot kicking Jessie in the head, making a sickening crunch.

“Uh-oh, did I kill ’em?” he chuckles with sick humor. “Go check Russel.” he commands the lowest man on authority, calling him by the name he hates most. Lowest to also mean the worst. None of the men who help my father run Shelby Sugar and live on this land are anything other than mirror images of him. He hires the lowest of the low and they prove it everyday.

I can tell from Jessie’s vacant eyes he was already dead. My father just killed him again.

“Okay that ended way too fast. I promised my *wife* I’d come read to her tonight after I played poker with y’all. Bring out that young pussy, so I can go be a dutiful husband.” Turning back to Angel he looks down with pure malice. “I hear you’re gonna have a sister. I want you to know I’m going to have her too. Set her up like I did your momma in my house tending my wife. Only I’m not even going to wait till she starts bleeding,” He says cruelly. “Think about that when you as you die.”

“Ah, boss—” Russ says pointing where I am.

“You ruined my moment.” He roars at the junior foreman, already sheathing his Bowie knife in annoyance.

Scrambling back, I hope he doesn’t pay Russ any attention. The man is known for his stupid gimmicks to get attention.

“What?” He asks moving forward but it’s too dark under here for him to see me.

“I-I thought I saw something.” I hear the man stammer, obviously afraid of my father’s wrath.

“No pussy for you.” My father sighs. I hear his feet move back to Angel.

“Here they are boss.” I hear Don, another foreman say. I don’t dare go back to the edge. My stomach sinks at what I can do. Nothing. Everyone on this side of the county is in my father’s pocket. Not even the state police will intervene. And the other side? The Love side? I wouldn’t even know who to go to. Maybe they’d help since Mr. Carrington teaches at the elementary school and Angel’s mom now works at the little town clinic as a nurse. By the time I got there, even I could steal a truck parked in front of the barn, it would be too late for Angel. But I know I have to try.

A hard hand slams down on my ankle dragging me from under the barn. I start kicking like crazy. “Motherfucker,” is all I hear before fist smashes into my head.

“Didn’t know it was him.” Lester says not the least bit bothered. “Can’t tell in the dark. He ain’t got no business out this way no way.” Disapproval laces every word.

“You let me deal with him,” my father says dragging me to a sitting position. “You’re bout the dumbest motherfucker on the planet.” He smacks me the rest of the way lucid. The sight that greets me is the stuff of nightmares every man Don, Carter, Russ, Lester and Tim all have young girls some who don’t even have full breast yet, strung up on beef hooks raping them.

“Want to see something cool?” My father follows my horror filled gaze. “Russ?” He calls over. “Want some boy ass? We know you like ’em.”

My gaze swings to him. “Not you. Your little friend here.” He nods to Angel’s bound hands and bloody face. “Shelbys don’t get fucked. We do the fucking. Since you want to be the big man. You can have the new one over there. The rest of them already been broke in.” He shows me a girl bound and struggling on the floor. She’s not an immigrant though. She’s the daughter of one of his top competitors.

“Saw her, had to have her.” He gets up going over the girl dragging her up by her strawberry blond hair. “What do you say son? Want a go? I bet she’s sweet.” He rips the gag off her

mouth , plunging his tongue in. “Ow, bitch” He pulls back. She spits out blood from her mouth.

“You taste like a pig, Shelby.” She gives him a wild smile.

“Bitch,” He start punching her even harder thane did Jessie. I have to look away.

“Aye,” I look up into the midnight misery of Angel’s gaze. “When Russ comes over here, get the gun he’s always carrying wrong.”

I nod focusing on him instead of the sound of the grown men raping young girls and my father beating another one to death.

“Who’s next?” Russ calls in a singsong. “I’m bout spent but I got enough for a pretty boy.” Taking a swig of what can only be moonshine in he swaggers over to us.

“Just his mouth. I want his ass.” Lester says from where he’s brutalizing a girl.

“Fucker,” Russ mutters but nods in acceptance.

Just as he reaches us, I shove my hand in his holster taking his Smith and Wesson semiautomatic.

“Get the fuck back,” I say more calmly than I feel. I keep the gun in front of me. “Come on.” I say to Angel, helping him up.

“Give, Angel your keys.” I tell Russ. Watching him place the keys in Angel’s bound hands.

Slowly we start backing up to the barn door.

“Son, now you know I can’t let you leave here,” my father says in a sick, cajoling voice.

“Wanna beat?” I swing in his direction firing off a shot.

“Fuck,” He says grabbing his shoulder blood already seeping through his fingers.

Just then Russ charges but I’m quicker. I shoot him square in chest. The look shock right before he collapses is forever engraved in my memory.

“Get him.” Lester shouts. The rest rush forward.

“No.” My father shouts. “Let’s go. They can’t tell anyone. Not with both their mom’s at my mercy.” He says with the confidence as only a man holding all the power can.

Half dragging Angel’s battered form with me, I make it almost out the door weeny father calls to me. “You killed your first man tonight, son. I’m proud of you.”

## *SIX YEARS LATER...*

“Last one.” Angel’s dark shadow looms beside me as we watch Lester struggle in the pit we dug for him.

“Good. I’m glad you got it done before you left for college,” he says with dry amusement. “It’s good to get it out your system.”

“Yeah, no business left undone but that one thing.” I remind him.

“You need to let me do it. It’s my right as much as it is yours.” he grumbles knowing he won’t convince me.

“If I die you can do it.” I pat on him the back. “You promised, fiiho.” I remind him of the night I saved him and we promised to avenge all the people my father and his men hurt. Angel said I saved his life and he owed me his. “Let me be the one to kill my father.” I told him knowing he had no choice.

Picking up the shovel, I toss dirt on the grimy form of the bitch ass coward who thought by going to Alaska he could escape my wrath once we got control of the land.

A few months after we escaped, Angel’s mom died in childbirth. The community rallied around him but he was essentially his sister, Lourdes’ guardian.

I look at the man now wearing the El Diablo biker cut with PROSPECT emblazoned on his shoulder. Some people think he’s just going to end up dead or in prison. I know better.

“You’re not going to die. Neither am I. We are the one’s who live,” he says, joining me as bury this worthless piece of shit. “Plus, he’s hardly here. He got scared after your mom passed. He knew you were a wild card then.”

“And always has security with him but never fear, I’m patient. I’m going to make him suffer first.” I nod down at the evidence of my determination squirming like a worm in dirt.

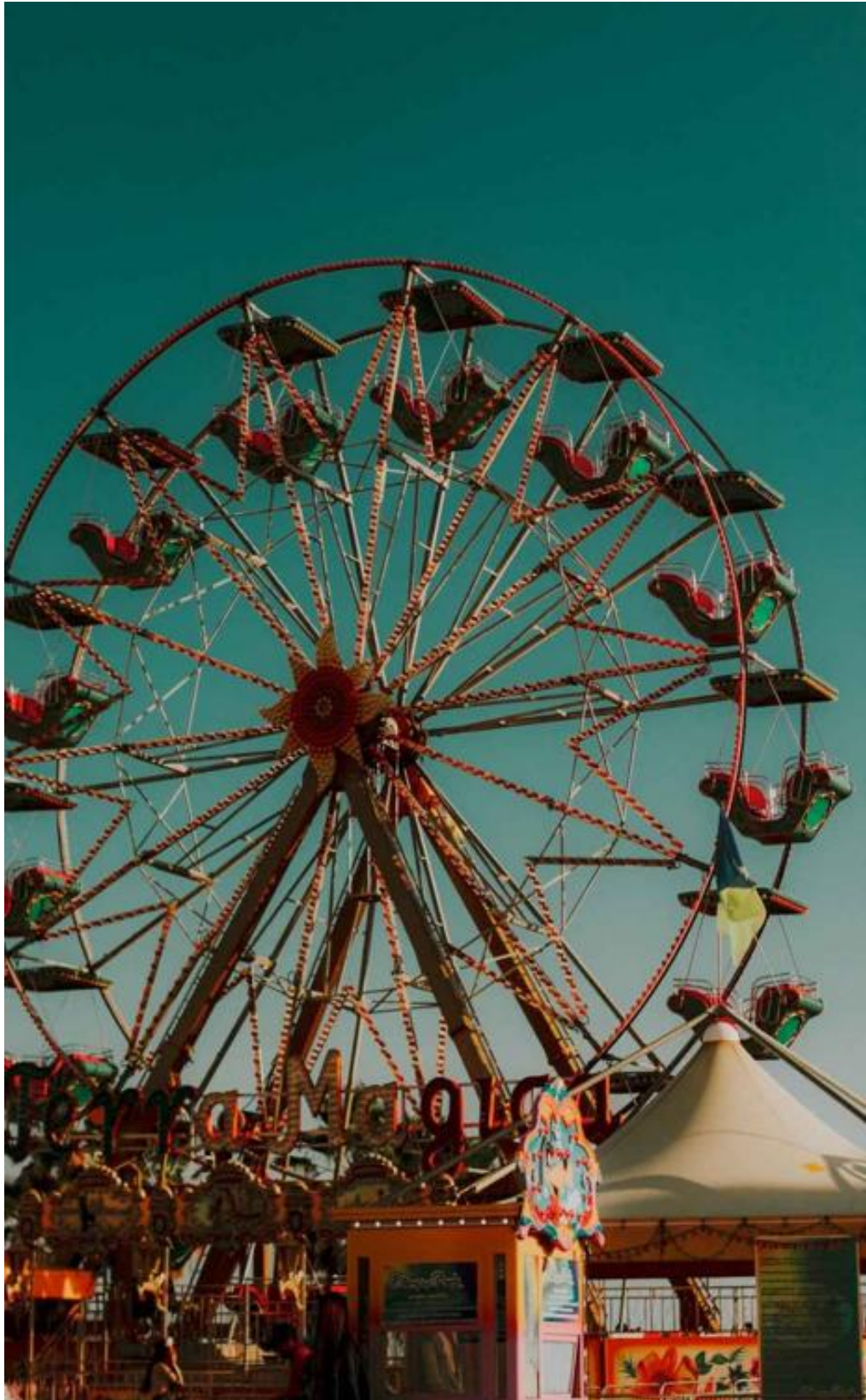
“I-Is that a tear?” Angel asks bending to look closer at Lester who starts to out right bawl through his gag.

“Hilarious,” I chuckle, looking at the four neat rows beside him and the three behind, Every man who was there that night except my bastard father, the others — all abusers who worked on this land terrorizing workers for years under my father’s control until two years ago when Angel and I staged a strike that turned into a bloody war until we prevailed.

We lost good men and women but we won the freedom and better life for the people who work here. My father still runs the company and own the land but he knows as well his days are numbered. Now, he stays far out of my reach. He now works on the corporate side jet-setting as a merry widower. I know he hasn’t given up his little hobby.

I take a little solace as I continue my task knowing one day I will catch him slipping.





CHAPTER  
**ONE**

**M**athias ~ Six years ago

I'M BLAZED AS FUCK, driving down the back road toward the Love side of town with two things on my mind: getting more blazed and getting to fuck. Rather than finally fucking my girlfriend, Natalie Spencer. We've been together—all arranged by our families since we were born, but they finally told us in tenth grade we were going to marry.

Tonight, after all these years, she's promised to let me hit it. I did the whole bullshit grand gesture at graduation earlier today, giving her the Shelby Emerald that's been passed down from generation to generation, since it was snatched off the neck of an African princess, one the first Loves, when she was bought by one of my heinous great-great-parents in the late sixteen hundreds.

Natalie, her hazel-green eyes shining with glee, flicked her long tresses and whispered "reparations" in my ear before kissing me—her effort at an inside joke, knowing full well that, of all the Black residents of Shelby-Love, Alabama, the seat of the Shelby empire, her family, the wealthy Spencers, who made their money in timber and paper, is the least in need of any type of reparations. They've been the cohorts of the Shelbys since before the Civil War, freemen who'd been granted manumission by Shelbys for some great deed they'd done in the seventeen hundreds. They've been tight ever since.

Our families are so closely intertwined, I would be surprised if we aren't related down the line. The Spencers definitely have my family's same penchant for avarice and evil. They also hate the Love family with as much passion as Shelbys do, though why is lost in the annals of time.

Since the moment I was a child, I've been taught like every good Shelby that Loves are anathema to everything Shelby stands for. They breed like locusts, outnumbering us five to one. They have land they don't deserve, some given by northern elites after the Civil War, the rest swindled during Prohibition. Honestly, I don't give a fuck. It's all nonsense to me. I have no interest in the Love-Shelby feud or the Shelby-Spencer alliance, other than what it means to my future and my vengeance.

Drawing heavily on the blunt I came down here to get from my El Diablo connect, I think about how fucking sweet it's going to be to rip my motherfucking father's heart out and stomp it to bits when he sees his son destroy everything he worked so hard for, thought he groomed me for. Yes, I'll marry Natalie, the pretty Black heiress of the Spencer line, and I'll go to law school and run for Congress, but there's where my father's plan for my life ends. Instead of being the fourth Republican Shelby to hold office, I will switch and become a Democrat and his worst fucking nightmare.

Everything he sought to gain from me will die, become ashes in his mouth. No longer will he be able to use his position to manipulate the government and twist regulations in his favor. No longer will he be able to indenture migrants on his vast Shelby estate, exploiting the most vulnerable. I laugh just thinking of the full-on fit he'll throw. I hope it sends him into a massive heart attack. No one deserves it more than that som'bitch.

I hit the curve of the road, making toward the Shelby-Love City Center so I can reach the Shelby Country Club, where the Shelbys and Spencers are gathered, waiting for me to celebrate my engagement and graduation. Senior's going to be pissed when I show up high as hell, but that's the only way I can deal with these monsters.

There's no way anyone but a complete psychopath can be around them for any length of time and not lose their mind. Natalie is good at faking, but I'm wondering who's the act is for. Me or them? I think she's on the side of her cousins Leon and Lex, both doctors who tolerated the family, even loved it, but made a point of forging their own path. Theirs in particular was in service to others, being physicians. But remarks like the ones she made today about reparations and other little superficial things, like disparaging students on scholarship—like Leon's fiancée, Mimi—make me see a side of her I don't like. When I told her how awful her take on people being on scholarship was, she hurried to assure me she was kidding, but I still wonder.

Opening a window to let some of the smoke out, I take another curve down the alley by the diner and the apothecary, both Love establishments. Two more quick turns, and I'll speed all the way to the country club. The first turn comes, and then I go three blocks and make another when something darts out in front of me. My reflexes are fast, but the weed plays a part, and honestly, no one could react that quick—I can't avoid it. The mass is a blur bouncing off the hood of my car. I stop in time not to run it over. Praying it's animal but knowing the way my stomach knots tells me it's not, I try to catch my breath.

I'd like to say as I sit here, I'm not thinking of just backing up and getting out of here. I'm high, had some shots with my frat earlier, too. Can see the headlines now—MATHIAS SHELBY JR. HITS HOMELESS MAN WHILE HIGH AND DRUNK. I can say goodbye to politics, a law license. I'll be relegated to working under my father's thumb for the rest of my days. Might as well eat a bullet now. Bile rises in my throat at the thought.

Unthinking, I shift the gears of my BMW, a high school graduation present from the father I hate, but I needed a new ride. Just as I'm about to back up, a small hand touches the top of the hood.

I freeze. It's a kid. I'm immediately thrown back to the soft, insistent voice I do my best to forget. *Always be a*

*protector, filho.*

A fissure starts in my chest. After shifting into park, I unlatch my seat belt, open the door, then get out. Walking around to the front of my car, I see the crumpled figure.

“Hey, are you alright?” I stoop, looking at the top of a gray hoodie.

“Yeah.” A soft voice reaches my ears. I can’t place the accent, but she doesn’t sound Southern. “Just got the wind knocked out of me. I’ll be fine.”

Pulling her knees close to her body, she pulls herself up in a smooth movement. I stand along with her. She’s a little thing. Too young to be out alone even in this relatively safe town.

“Where were you going?” I ask, looking down, trying to get a good focus on her face. She keeps her head down.

“Nowhere really, just around.” She shrugs, edging away like she’s getting ready to put distance between us so she can bolt. I don’t know why that bothers me, but it does.

I step back instead, giving her some space. “Okay. Just hanging out?”

She nods, throwing a furtive look over her shoulder. I see it then. A backpack stuffed full, like she’s carrying around her life. A runaway. We don’t get a lot of them around here. Most of the time, they pass through or end up having their family members take them in. It’s just how it is down here. People help when folks have trouble, especially young people.

“Do you have people around here?”

She stills, wary. Instantly, my protective instincts kick in.

“You don’t have to worry. I’m not going to narc on you.” Easing back on the hood, I cross my legs. “I hit you with my car. I just don’t want you saying shit about it because I’m a little fucked up.” Shrugging, I give her a sheepish look. “I don’t need that type of drama in my life right now.”

“No worries. Nobody’ll care what I have to say.” She lets out the softest chuckle that manages to sound self-deprecating

and twists a huge-ass knot in my heart at the same time. Suddenly, I care very much about what she has to say. Despite how inconvenient this situation is, I want to make sure she's safe and taken care of. It is obvious she has nowhere to go.

“Are you hungry?”

Her head pops up before she can stop the reaction. I might have as well be blasted with a freeze ray because in that moment, I stand frozen, staring. She has the face of an angel. A young bedraggled, starving waif of an angel, but an angel nonetheless.

Now, the inconvenience becomes a mission. I've seen that same face on kids coming to our property, forced to work early before school, never given enough to eat. It wasn't until a damn rebellion in the sugar fields that workers forced my father to treat them and their families better. There were casualties on both sides. Many people think my mother was one. I know better. Bitterness eats at me as I look at this girl, knowing I'm going to get her fed and somewhere safe.

“The truck stop on Highway Seventeen has the best burgers and peanut butter pancakes this side of the planet.” I can see her debating, but she didn't make it this far by trusting strangers.

“Thank you, but I'm good.” She starts moving.

I scoot back to the driver's side and open the door.

Just as she reaches the curb, I call, “Hey, catch.” I've never seen reflexes so quick unless it was a division-one athlete like my cousin Ulysses. She catches the item, looking down. “It's pepper spray,” I say. Then I toss another object, which she catches with her other hand. I can't help but wonder what circumstances in her brief life made her so quick. probably nothing good.

Tension tightens my gut at the possible danger this kid faces even here. We are not immune to evil—hell, it spawned me and my cousins. Thinking of a sick fuck like my father or some of the old El Diablo heads like Rudy possibly running up on this girl scares me, there's no telling what they'd do to her.

“A knife?” Both her brows rise, the girl looking at me with surprise. She hefts the bowie knife, looking at the craftsmanship, unsnapping the clip, and pulling it free of the leather holster, admiring the gleaming sharp blade.

“Keep it in case someone fucks with you. You can use it or the pepper spray on me if you need to, but I can tell you could maybe use that burger.” I leave it up to her to decide, knowing she probably doesn’t want to take me up on my offer, and no, there’s no way I can convince her I’m not some perv.

I return to my car, starting it, hoping she doesn’t have some internal injuries I can’t see. She fidgets with the pepper spray before stuffing it and the knife in the hoodie’s front pocket. She grabs the backpack before coming over to the passenger side of my car. I unlock the door. She opens it then gets in, shoving the bag between her knees.

She looks ahead, not even acknowledging me. I don’t say anything as I pull away, a waterfall of relief cascading over me. I don’t know why feeding this girl matters so much. It’s not like I’ve never been hungry, but there’s something compelling about the fear she’s trying so hard to hide. Yeah, I know what that shit feels like up close and personal. There’s also shame there, like it’s her fault she’s been put in this situation. Like a kid being homeless is ever their fault and not that of a sorry-ass caregiver.

The ride is mostly quiet. She has her hand on the door latch like she’d open it and risk dying if I gave her a reason. I don’t want to give her one.

It takes us a good twenty minutes to get to the truck stop. There are three trucks idling outside. It’s a slow night, being a Wednesday. Not that this place would get a lot of business anyway, with this area being so rural and nearly landlocked. They get most of their business from truckers from Shelby Sugar or Spencer Wood.

“They know me here, so we won’t have any problems,” I tell her, pulling up to the well-lit nineteen-fifties-style diner and truck stop. There’s a weigh station on one side, along with

several rows of gas pumps, then a small diner on the other side.

“You don’t need that,” I tell her when she moves to grab her bag. She hesitates for a second before grabbing it anyway.

“I don’t want to trouble you more than necessary.” She shrugs, the bag on her shoulder, following me.

I hold the door open for her, giving her a nod. She’s prickly as hell—as she should be.

“Alright now, Mathias,” Ms. Sherry calls from behind the counter, nodding at me and giving my companion a curious look.

“Good evening, Ms. Sherry.” Smiling to the woman, I usher my new friend over to a booth.

“Hey, there, Matty.” Mr. Rufus peeks from the window he’s shoving hot plates through, calling me a name he pinned on me at the age of five and can’t be persuaded to abandon no matter how grown I’ve gotten.

“Hey, sir,” I nod to him. There are just a couple of other booths filled, but none of the occupants lift their faces acknowledging to me. The truck stop is also a place where lovers come to meet. This place is open twenty-four hours, so it makes for the perfect late-night rendezvous.

No sooner do we take our seats than Ms. Sherry comes over. “Here are your menus. Would you like to start with some drinks? It’s on the back, honey.” She smiles genuinely at us, obviously guessing what’s going on but being too kind as usual to ask probing questions that would make my runaway afraid.

“Thanks. I’ll have a coffee. You still got that praline creamer?” I ask, already knowing I need it strong like she makes it, but with the added sweetness to cut the bitterness.

“Sure do.” She gives me a wink before turning to my companion. “What about you, honey?”

“A coffee, but with just regular half-and-half,” she says, looking briefly at Mr. Sherry, before her gaze goes back to the



diner's menu.

Ms. Sherry brings coffees to our silent table, along with water with crushed ice, before giving us more time.

"Do you know what you want?" I say, putting down my menu and looking over at the girl.

"Burger." She shifts uncomfortably. "I can't pay you."

"Almost killing you and you not calling the cops is payment enough." I wave her words away with snark. "It's the least I could do for you keeping me out of prison."

She rolls her eyes, looking down with a low chuckle. "So, you know them?" She nods to Ms. Sherry and Rufus.

"Yeah, since I was about five." I tell her, "Coming here was a special treat." I leave out that it was an escape from the hell of the Shelby compound.

"Mathias, huh?" The way she says my name stops me. She has a lilt to her voice, not a sweet Southern twang but almost like she was around someone who had one, yet she never quite picked it up.

"Yeah, care to tell me yours?" I ask low, just between us.

"Nicolette, Nikki for short." The smile breaking through on her face is so small, so brief, I almost miss it.

"Ready?"

I start, my head jerking in the direction of the voice, not realizing Ms. Sherry came back. "Two burgers, fries, and a peanut butter chocolate chip short stack for dessert." I hand her the menus back.

"I knew it. Mr. Rufus, you owe me two dollars." She hoots. "He swore you were going to order something different. I tol'em that boy had been asking for the same thing since he turned sixteen and got his first burger here. Always the short stack on the side." Chuckling, she takes the menus, leaving us.

"Ain't giving you nothin'. It was a setup. You, the one who, came in here saying he had a gleam in his eye and was

looking at the menu hard,” he grumbles, heading back to make our order.

“That ain’t nothing new,” she calls back to him, taking her position behind the counter again.

Raising my hand innocently, I tell Nikki, “Creature of habit.” She’s relaxing for maybe the first time in a long while.

“So, what’s next for you?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Maybe go back from where I came. Coming down here was a mistake.” She looks around like she’s searching for options and finding none.

“Why’s that?” Immediately, I regret asking when a shadow falls over her face.

“It just was.” She looks out into the parking lot, then back to me, her stony resolve letting me know not to press.

The food comes shortly after. We both inhale the burgers and fries, washing it all down with water.

“I was right, wasn’t I? It’s the best burger you’ve ever had.” Feeling full and more satisfied than with any food I could have had at the country club tonight, I practically demand her agreement.

She’s already nodding. “Facts. Hands down the best I’ve ever had.”

“Peanut butter chocolate chip pancakes,” Ms. Sherry says, placing the plate and two forks between us.

I cut the stack in half as Nikki looks on skeptically. After piercing the fluffy deliciousness, I eat, groaning at the mix of chocolate and peanut butter decadence.

“So good,” I say around a mouthful, closing my eyes in the delighted happiness this particular dish has given me since I was five years old.

Nikki’s amusement greets me when I open my eyes.

“Try it,” I dare.

Still doubtful, she gets a small forkful and tries it. Her eyes spread wide. Then she's nodding, grinning, saying, "Wow." She digs in for more.

It's gone in no time. Normally, I would never share this indulgence with anyone. It was something special between mom and me. A precious, sweet thing we shared amid rippling despair. But at this moment, I'm glad to share them with a girl who has no one. She's as utterly alone as I feel.

"I'll be back," she says when I take out my wallet. I nod, not looking up, thinking she's going to bail. Immediately I can tell this is when the tenuous trust between leaves. She's obviously okay. We've been here for more than an hour. If I leave now, I can still make the tail end of the graduation dinner Natalie's parents and my dad planned. I haven't even bothered to text anyone to say I'm going to miss it. So, why am I waiting on her even after I come back from paying for our food and her backpack is gone, and she is too?

Waving goodbye to Mr. Rufus and Ms. Sherry, I leave, going to my car. She's not there. I look over my shoulder. And around the lot. Nothing. She's a little escape artist. Probably hiding until I'm gone. Telling myself I've done everything I could, I start the ignition before pulling away from the diner.

That's when I see her in my rearview. Only she's not alone. She's pressed against the opposite side of the building by a behemoth of a trucker, near where there are full showers and vending machines to dispense soap and deodorant.

I make U-turn, then drive until I pull up right beside them.

"Ah, darling, don't be like that. I can take you anywhere you need to go—"

"Come on, Nikki," I say in a hard voice.

The trucker's head jerks around, and there is instant recognition.

"Clive." I nod to the forty-something year old trucker who's trying to pick up an underage girl.

"M-Mathias." He drops the tree trunks he calls arms, which are caging Nikki in.

“Come on, Nicolette,” I say, turning back to the car, not giving him the dignity of more of my attention.

After opening the passenger side door, I wait until she’s settled into the front seat. Then I close the door with a hard snap before heading back to my side.

“I’ll be sure to let Rita-Ann know what you were getting up to when I see her.” I throw him a wave, determined to ruin this motherfucker’s life. “I figure she deserves to know why your sorry ass got fired.”

I pull off, watching through my rearview as he rips the John Deere hat off his head and stomps it into the ground.

“You, okay?” I ask, heading not in the direction of the city center, but in the direction of the Shelby Estate.

“Yeah, I just needed a ride out of town,” she mumbles, looking out the window.

“You know what he wanted for that ride.”

She lifts one shoulder in response, and I feel sick.

“Listen. I have somewhere you can crash tonight. It’s totally safe. No one is going to bother you. If you still want to leave tomorrow, you can. After hitting you with my car, I need to make sure you don’t have any internal injuries, anyway.”

“I’m fine. Where are you taking me?” She’s finally realized we aren’t going back to the city center but likely resigned about her limited options. I assume she’s willing to go with the devil she knows.

“My home.”



CHAPTER  
TWO

Nikki (six years ago)

HIS EYES LOOK like liquid mercury. At least that's what I remember mercury looking like when I convinced Daddy to send me to regular school that one time. I've never seen it in a person before.

He's probably the most beautiful being I've seen in my whole life, and that's including Bacca, the white tiger we had in the Russo Circus. The only thing marring his beauty is the barest hint of a scar slicing through his left eyebrow. It's pencil-mark thin, barely noticeable except when the light hits it.

I know I'm a dang fool for listening to him. For trusting him. He could be like *American Psycho* crazy; he's dressed like him in that fancy suit. I'm probably going to be chopped up into a million bits by morning, but not without a fight. He gave me two weapons.

Wait a minute. He probably just gave them to me so I'd lower my defenses. Then he plied myself with all that delicious and heavy food so my reflexes would be slow.

Ugh. Dumb-ditty-dumb-dumb.

Daddy ain't been gone a month, and I'm already making bad moves. *You think you're grown, but you're not. You need to make it down there to my people. My people, not your*

*mom's. They'll look after you*, he urged me as he lay dying from the cancer eating him from the inside out.

I did what he said after things got rough with the circus, with him no longer there to intimidate people with his large, imposing figure; the vultures started circling now that I am almost grown. So, I came down here and checked out my father's side. Seeing the Loves, I knew I'd never fit in with the big boisterous family. There were so many of them, making up more than half the population of Shelby-Love. Some are staid conservative Christians, the other side criminals, with some in the middle who seem to not gravitate to either side. Still, none of them are like me—different, raised almost feral in the circus/carnival circuit. None of them were raised in a circus by a sometimes trapeze artist, other times lion tamer. I'd stick out like a sore thumb just like Daddy and Mommy did, which is why they left—or tried to after their families split them apart, took my older sisters, and tried to lock them up away and keep them from each other at Bryce Hospital, a place where they stuck eccentric folks like my parents.

After watching the Loves for nearly a week and running out of the little money I had left over after having to slip away before even getting my last check, and with nowhere to stay, I decided it was time to go back and take my chances with the folks I've known all my life. Until Mathias—what an epic name—hit me with his sleek black BMW.

“Here we are,” he says, way too casually for my liking, as he pulls up to the yellow cottage-style home. It looks like it's right out of a fairy tale and already has me looking for the witch that's gonna try to eat me. I look at the little house long and hard, not sure if this is my salvation for the night or if he's going to drag out killing me over days or have me locked up here like that movie where that girl's dad had her in a room for years after making folks think she ran away.

Still, there's never been a lock I couldn't pick or a box I couldn't contort my body enough to squeeze out of. Daddy saw to that, making sure I was the most versatile kid on the circuit.

I notice how strong Mathias's hands are as he turns off the ignition. "I promise you'll be safe here."

I drag my eyes to his gaze. He looks so dang solemn, sincere. His eyes beg me to believe in him. I can't, but I don't have a choice. I've come this far. Hell, I was gonna go with that big burly trucker, knowing exactly what he wanted in return, and he was gross.

I made my bed when I took my chances on Mathias, and if I have to fight, even kill him to get away, then I have to stay ready. *Stay ready, sugah, so you don't have to get ready.* My heart squeezes at Daddy's words said in lighter times when he was teaching me how to bend and flex my body so I'd have the agility and balance not to fall off a tightrope. Not that I think I'll win. Mathias is really big and has the body of an NBA player, over six feet tall, and even with the suit on, he looks super strong.

I nod because he expects it. He looks at me a little longer, then gets out. Something in his eyes, the set of his face, compels me to believe him, though I know I shouldn't. Daddy would be so disappointed. He'd taught me to be careful always, always, always. This is why my stomach is so queasy. I feel like it's about to give up the burger and the peanut butter and chocolate chip pancakes. Like a lil' dummy, I follow Mathias as he opens the door.

My first impression is honeysuckle. The smell is light and airy when I enter, looking around at the space. The living room is so small, it feels like Mathias is taking up all the space. He stands by the door, looking around, his eyes soft, like this place means a lot to him.

"Um." He stalls for a moment, clearing his throat, scanning the small cottage. "My grandmother lived here after my grandfather died." He spreads his arms wide. "This is the living room." He heads to a kitchen that has relatively new appliances, all stainless steel.

"Kitchen. It has everything, even a dishwasher. There's a stacked washer and dryer right here." He points to the rear



facing a door that leads outside. He looks at me then. “Can you cook?”

“Yeah, pretty much everything. So, where’s your grandma?” I look around. The place seems empty.

“She died a few years ago, but I keep it up. I used to come here when I came home from school.” Now it’s his turn to not want to share anything. I can see a big Antebellum mansion off in the distance. It’s obvious that’s his family’s house, so why was his grandma stuck out here in the middle of nowhere?

“You live here?” Immediately I’m uncomfortable. If he lives here, what is he going to expect from me even if I just stay the night? I’m already thinking about how I can sneak out of here or make a run for it, like I planned on doing as soon as I got to next stop with the dumb truck driver. I had the knife, and the pepper spray Mathias gave me and would have used it if I had to. But here I’m at his mercy.

“No, not really. I just come here when I need a break from the big house. I’m going to law school, so I’ll be staying in an apartment up in Tuscaloosa.”

Then he comes back out to the main living area and points to a short hallway leading to the rear of the house.

“The only bedroom is on the right, and the bathroom is on the left. It has a claw-foot tub and one of those handheld showers.” He gives me a brief glance before looking away, color tingeing his high cheekbones.

I immediately feel the dirt and grime all over me from days of not having a proper bath. If he smells me, he doesn’t say anything. There must be a look of longing on my face, because he adds, “If you want to take a shower, go ahead. I promise nothing’s going to happen to you.” He shoves his fists in the front pockets of his dress slacks, looking all innocent. I can’t stand it. My already frayed nerves have had it.

“Then what the hell did you bring me here for? In the middle of nowhere, instead of to your real house, where there are people who can see me and know I’m with you?” The

words come out hot, bitter, and scared. It's not until I see the muscle ticking in his jaw that I realize I'm crying and yelling loudly enough to probably be heard at the main house.

He takes several steps back while I dash the tears away. He sighs, raking his hands through his dark locks. His silver eyes darken a little bit. I don't know if it's anger or guilt. I'm in no shape to make out anyone's emotions right now despite how good Daddy said I was at reading people.

"Maybe I should just go," I mumble, feeling tired and longing for that bath.

"No, I'll go. If that'll make you feel safe." He takes a key off his key ring. "This is the only key to this place, and I'm giving it to you. That door will take an army to get through. This place may look small, but it was built to withstand F-5 tornadoes. You'll be safe here."

He breathes deep, looking around again before settling on me. "I don't know what you've been through, but I know you're beat. Just rest tonight. As for why I brought you here: It's the safest place I know. That house up there—" He nods in the direction of his home. "Ain't. Trust me on that."

It seems like I'm going to have to. My body feels like it's gonna shut down any second.

"Alright." I go over to my bag before riffling through it, trying to find something—anything—to put on that's not soiled from being too close to dirty clothes that it's begun to smell foul. "I need to wash my clothes first because I don't have anything. Unless there's something back there?" I sigh, dreading having to put on one of his dead granny's muumuus.

"Nah, hold up." He turns and is out the door before I can blink. He returns just as I'm coming back from dragging my backpack into the laundry room. He's standing like he's a guest in his own house with a stack of clothes.

"You can wear these instead of waiting for your clothes to dry." He hands me two shirts, a pair of shorts, and a pair of joggers. "It's all too big, but they'll do the job for tonight."

"Th-thanks," I say, clutching the items close to me.

“Alright. I’m heading out.” He looks at his watch, and I can see it’s well past 10:00 p.m. Dang, have we been together almost two hours?

“No one should come by, but if anyone does, don’t answer the door. Like I said, this place is safe, and no one can get in here.” He turns to leave, and I honestly don’t know what makes the fear of being alone trip my heart or create this sudden newfound trust I have in him, but I manage to squeak out a “wait” in a small panicky voice.

“Can you stay till I finish taking a bath? It feels weird being in a new place all by myself.” I look around, feeling like such a coward. Why now? When I came all the way here from Chicago on my own?

“No problem.” He sits on the sofa facing the TV, pulling out the video game controllers. He powers on the TV and seems to dismiss me.

Backing up, I make my way to the room where he says the bathroom is in. “Wow,” I whisper when I step inside, flicking on the lights. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. It’s sleek, pristine, and all black. I doubt this is the bathroom his grandmother had. The tile floor is black, the claw-foot tub a matte almost-dull gray black, the vanity matching the farm sink—a light gray. I notice small striations in the tile matching the color of the sink, with a faucet and knobs that are shiny platinum, as well as the spigot on the tub and the elongated handheld shower all coordinate creating a sleek but clearly masculine atmosphere.

Making quick work of my clothes, I run the water in the tub. Scared to touch anything because I’m so dirty. I notice a cabinet stocked with hand-milled soaps and hair products in Portuguese I get what looks to be shampoo and conditioner. Getting in the bath, I dunk my head beneath the water. It’s been almost a week, so I tackle my hair first. I inherited the looser curl pattern from my mom, Daddy always said, so it’s never been a hassle to comb, which is good, since I am incredibly tender headed.

After I'm done washing and conditioning, I run more water and take the honeysuckle-smelling soap, lathering and rinsing my body three times until my skin squeaks. I don't care about washing away my body's oils. I need to feel clean. I saw plenty of moisturizers in the cabinet anyway.

Once I towel off, I use a honeysuckle lotion and pull on the shirt and shorts Mathias gave me. There's a brand-new toothbrush in the cabinet, so I use it. I comb and plait my hair into two ponytails. The shirt is voluminous, but it still shows how top-heavy I am. Mouse, one of the performers with Russo Circus, told me I'll be gorgeous when my hips and ass come in. Right now, I just look like a stick with two honeydew melons on the top.

"Ugh," I say, wishing my hoodie were clean. I hope Mathias doesn't notice.

After gathering my dirty clothes, I trudge out past the living area to the laundry and deposit the hoodie and sweatpants on the pile. There's no point in washing anything tonight just so the load can spoil because I've fallen asleep.

"Hey," I say to him, sitting on the far side of the couch.

"Hey." He barely glances my way, too absorbed in *God of War*.

I catch myself falling asleep, but I'm scared he's going to leave. And what if someone comes? What if they call the police or whoever is in charge of security? What if they notice some strange Black girl on rich white folks' private property in Alabama? I can't see that going over well at all.

"I'll stay on the couch if you want me to," he says. I could hug him for not making me have to ask.

"Okay," I say way too fast, sitting up from where I slumped.

"Well, I need to make sure you wake up and don't change your mind and press charges." He chuffs, turning the game off and standing. "I'm gonna change. This is a pullout bed."

I hop up. "I can sleep here. You don't have to give up your bed."

“Nah, I always sleep out here.” He goes over to the closet behind a recliner passing picture window with its shutters closed, then pulls out a thick comforter and pillows.

I step back, watching him pull out the bed and fix the covers in short order.

“You go to bed this early?” Skepticism laces my words.

“Hell no, but you’re exhausted, and I know you won’t sleep until you feel safe. Plus, I’ve had a long-ass day too,” he tells me, finally taking off the suit coat and lying it in the chair beside the sofa.

Jeez Louise, he’s even better looking now. Blushing, I turn before he can catch me looking at him.

“Well, okay. Good night.” I wave and hurry down the hall to the room he designated for me.

I am greeted by honeysuckle and softness after I pull back the covers and dive into the bed, barely notice the soft white and beige tones of the room

WAKING up in a strange bed will never not be weird. As much as we traveled, Daddy always managed to keep the little Airstream trailer he’d bought third hand. It was home, tailored to our personalities. Inside, he’d made my little space every little girl’s, then teenager’s, dream. All the pink, purple, and robin’s-egg blue my heart desired. Frilly things and kaleidoscopes of color when I was younger later gave way to more subdued tones because that’s what kept him calm during his episodes.

I want to bury my head in the pillows and sob for the loss of my daddy and the mom I never knew. He did his best even when he battled demons no one else could see. That wasn’t what ended up taking him from me, though. The bitch-ass cancer ate him alive in less than a year after they found a spot on his lungs. He didn’t even smoke.

I sit up, pushing the fresh wave of despair away. I don’t want to feel it. It’s stupid. He was sick. I knew it was too late

even when he finally went to the doctor after losing so much weight. I'm an idiot for even crying about it now. Now that I'm safe. But for how long?

I told Mathias I was going to leave today. And go where? I'd have to find out where the Russos are. Then beg to get my job back after I coldcocked Vladimir, the asshole, who gave me no choice. Petre, his dad and the circus owner, would probably say to let bygones be bygones, but the mom, Ingrid, was spitting mad that I'd knocked the spoiled piece of shit she raised the fuck out. I could probably stay with Mouse or one of the other girls, but a lot of them have boyfriends, meaning more than one, and that could get uncomfortable.

I'm thinking about how limited my options are when I get a whiff of bacon. My tummy growls. Yes, I ate like a heathen last night, but it was the first solid meal I'd had since well before my daddy died.

I go use the restroom, wash my face, and brush my teeth, then follow to the smell of the food.

"I knew you'd be out when that aroma got back there to you," Mathias says, leaning against the counter, drinking a cup of coffee. He changed into a T-shirt and basketball shorts. The same as what he's given me, only his clothes fit. Mine hang down nearly to my ankles.

"Want some?" he asked, moving to get another mug.

"Sure." Feeling awkward, I sit at the small table he already set for two.

He sets the mug down, then hands me milk and sugar. "Sorry no half-and-half. I do have praline creamer if you want some."

"No thanks. Milk is fine" Shaking my head, I doctor up my coffee just how I like.

"Listen, Nikki," he says, all affability fading away. A grown man has shoved aside the frat boy from last night as if he were never there. "I don't know what your story is. And you don't have to tell me. I know you must have come from a pretty tough situation to find yourself down here, of all places.

I'm also guessing whatever reunion you planned didn't go as intended." He pauses, waiting for me to give him something or anything to go by. I nod for the sake of all the thinking and effort he's putting in whatever he's proposing. "I want to help you—"

"Why?" I cut in with more challenge.

He stares me straight in the face and says, "You remind me of a kid I knew when I was little who needed help and none came."

"You?" This challenge causes a wry expression to cross his face.

"No, not me."

"So what happened to this kid no one helped, and why does that make you want to help me?" I still think it's him, but I just don't say it.

"He became one of the baddest motherfuckers you'll ever meet with no help. Sometimes I wonder what he could have done had he gotten any. But both of you are clever and have what a lot of people don't, what I didn't for a long time."

"What's that?" I'm more curious about what he thinks he lacks. He has beauty, money obviously, and brains—hello, law school.

"Courage," he says, pushing away from the table like he doesn't want to meet my eyes.

Silence drops between us as he brings me a breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, and grits.

"Alright." I cave, looking at the plate so hard, my eyes sting. "Wh-what..." I have to pause and clear my throat to start again. "How are you going to help me? What do I have to do?" I know there has to be something. Never is kindness for kindness's sake.

"Nothing." His voice is hard. "I don't expect you to believe me—hell, you'd be a fucking idiot if you did, no matter what I say. But I promise I'm not like that. I—I'd never..." He swipes his hand through his thick curls, looking

away, this jaw working something terrible. Finally, he looks back at me with fierce determination. “I’m going to let you stay here in this house and help you get your education.” He smiles at me like it’s a gift and not the scariest thing in the world.

“I’ve only been homeschooled.” I tell him so he won’t get his hopes up about being able to enroll me in any kind of school. “I don’t have a birth certificate or any of that stuff. We lived totally off the grid.” I lift my chin, waiting for disdain and judgment.

“You’ll be surprised to know that’s not all that uncommon down here. Areas like this are where folks come to live off the grid. We can get you papers. That’s also not hard for us, since we have a lot of migrant workers without the proper documentation.” He means fake papers.

I look at him like he’s nuts, but a little well of hope springs up as I watch him take out a pen and notepad from the counter drawer.

“Full name?”

“Nicolette Miranda Love.”

He pauses a long time like he’s trying to decide something before he asks, “The name *Shelby* mean anything to you?”

I shake my head. “You mean other than the huge sign above the gate we passed last night? No.”

He expels a breath. “Not that it matters, but our families don’t like each other.”

“All my family is dead.” My voice sounds hard.

“You might change your mind about that one day.”

“All my family is dead, Mathias. I grew up in the circus with my daddy after he and my mom ran away from their families. The only reason I came down here was because he begged me to. But the minute I saw some of them, I knew I’d never belong.” Shrugging as I try to shove off the harsh bitterness of my words so they don’t sting so much. I start



shoveling the food in my mouth just in case he changed his mind about letting me stay.

“We can’t pick our family.” He sighs, like being part of a rich family and having everything he could ever want was a burden. Rich people, I swear. My parents gave up those comforts for the freedom to live like they wanted but it wasn’t without some hardship. Their families have a little money, but nothing compared to the generational wealth of his. Still, I know money is not the key to happiness or love.

Picking up the pen, he starts back with the questions. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” I say between bites.

“You look twelve,” he mutters.

“I was on the road, man. Daddy always said Love women run small.” I roll my eyes.

“Yeah, Mimi, my friend Leon’s fiancée, is a tiny thing.” He arches a speculative brow my way before looking back down to his sheet of paper.

I perk up at the mention of a possible cousin. But if she knows Mathias, then she’s probably highfalutin and has no use for a girl like me no matter if we are related.

“That would put you as a junior in high school.” He scribbles more. Just as I finish eating, he stands, having gotten all the information he needs. “Just hang out here. I’ll be back later, and we can get the ball rolling on your new life here.”

Jitters rack me. So many what-ifs. “I’m scared,” I rush to say. I was supposed to be with my family. Instead, I’m relying on a total stranger who hit me with his car. Maybe this whole plan is just to get me to shut up.

“Because you’re smart.” Taking my shoulders, he squeezes them. Immediately I feel calm and safe under his touch. “Give it a chance. You take a chance on me, and I’ll take a chance on you. Okay?”

“Okay.” I nod, seeing the promise in those silver depths. A promise that squeezes my heart so tight, I have to bite the

inside of my lip not to sigh in wonder.

“Good.” He says, giving me a gentle squeeze. “I cooked, so you have to wash dishes.”

“Ugh. Nobody asked you to cook, dude.” I stomp, turning my back on him and gathering the dishes.

“Wake up earlier the next time then, darling,” he drawls in his long Southern twang, making me look over my shoulder and laugh at how ridiculous he sounds.

“I know you were wondering when my Southern accent was going to come out.” He laughs. “I’ll see you in a bit. I’m going to let the grounds people know you live here now. No one should come here. If they do, you call me.” His tone turns deadly serious.

“Alright.” I nod, loading the dishes in the sink.

He takes a long moment debating, then says, “Nikki, when I say you can trust me, I mean only me.”

I nod. “Just you.” Other than Daddy, I never had anyone be that intense about keeping me safe. The look that comes over Mathias’s face is that of a protector. At the moment I know he’s the one person on this earth I can trust above all others.

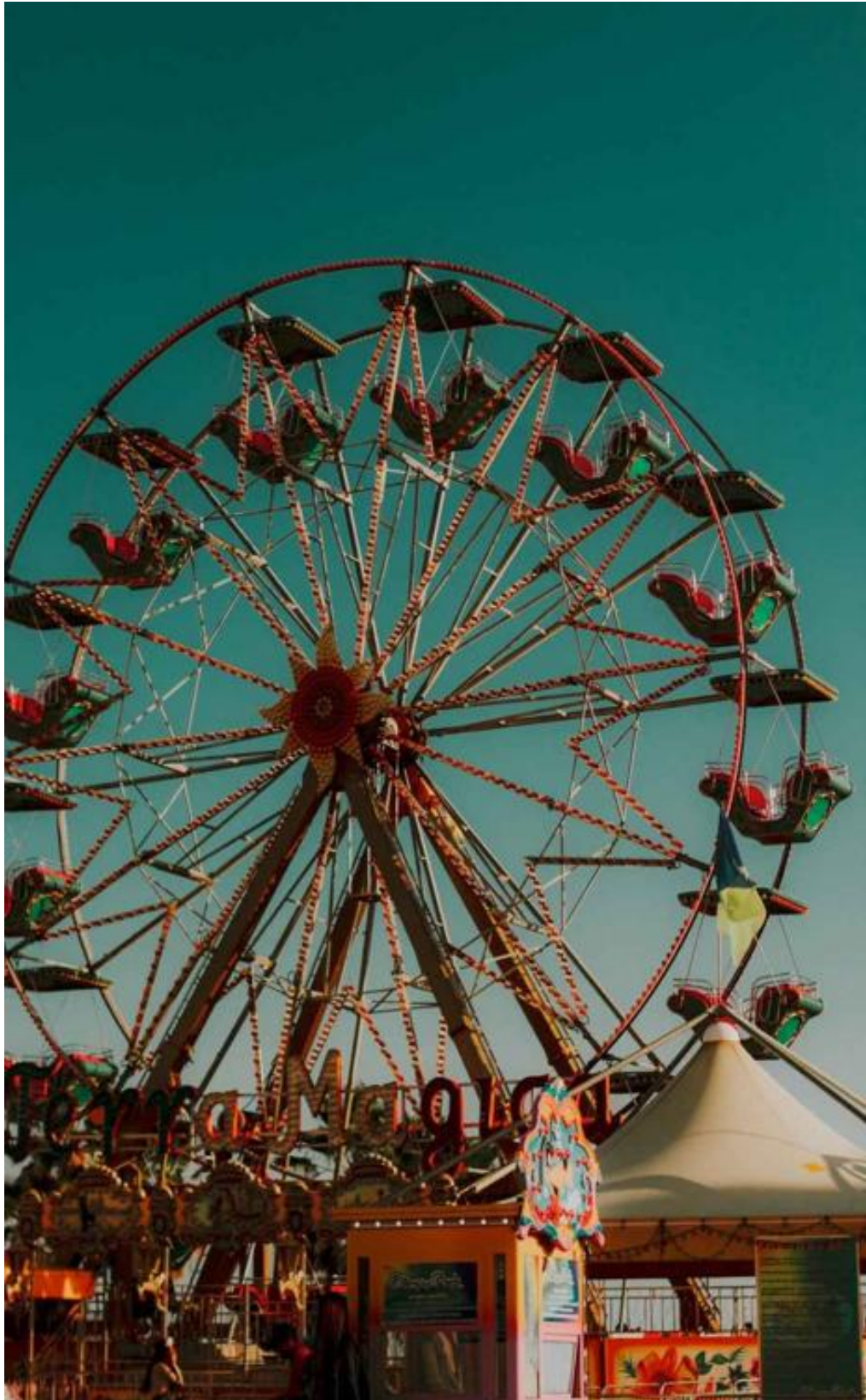
In a flash, I rush over and hug him.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much, Mathias.” Shaking and trembling, I let the tears I held from the moment I watched my daddy go to heaven flow freely.

He doesn’t say a word while he holds me as long as I need him to. When he steps back, his smile is beatific, as if I’ve given him a gift rather than him saving my life.

“I’ve got you, darling. We are in this together.”

At this moment, I know we were.



CHAPTER  
**THREE**

**M**athias ~ 6 Years Later...

“NICOLETTE LOVE.”

Pride swells in my heart at hearing her name. I love the way she has her cap perched atop her massive curls as she walks across the stage toward me to get her degree. She’s so small, curvy, beaming with joy. *You can’t think of her as curvy, motherfucker.* I snatch back the thought with a ruthlessness I’ve come to welcome in years since she turned eighteen.

Like what the fuck is wrong with me? She’s a kid, or was when I met her the night I graduated college. But now... I force my focus on the scene before me and not the excitement vibrating between us. It takes everything in me not to swoop her up in my arms and spin her around and cheer, especially when she turns her amazing smile on me. Just for me.

There is a riotous cheer as Loves erupt en masse in the audience, cheering their long-lost relative recently brought back into the fold. The open, overflowing joy and love they show her lets me know I’m doing the right thing in stepping back and allowing her to be fully embraced by her huge extended family. I have nothing to offer her anyway but despair and disappointment.

This is what she deserves. To be cared for out in the open. To be able to stand in the sun. Not hidden away in a little

cottage like she's some dirty little secret.

She turns away after sneaking me a cheeky little wink I couldn't help but return, waving to the Loves, who outnumber any other family present. The fact a Shelby is here is no surprise—we founded the school. I came today for my own special reason. To celebrate Nikki. We did it. I kept my promise, seeing that she got her education. Even created a scholarship especially for her with no one being the wiser. Now I get to see all that we worked for come to fruition. The amusement of seeing her family in rare form is an unexpected joy. I'm a special guest, largest benefactor to the university with the Isabella Shelby Scholarship. From my position right beside the university's president, handing out diplomas, I don't miss a thing.

I even see Angel with his new wife, Ezekiel-Jane, among the horde of Loves looking like a mountain of menace. The way he keeps looking down at his little ball of fluff of a wife and scanning the room lets me know that he's absolutely fucking gone for the little librarian.

“Congratulations, Miss Love.” I smile down at Nikki, watching the lovely smile stretches across her face. She is fucking immaculate. Such a change from the elfin little creature I hit with my car. The best decision I ever made was keeping her with me.

“Thank you, Mr. Shelby.” Her voice stumbles a little over my name. *Mr. Shelby* is nothing she's ever called me. Always *Mathias* or *Thi* with her mix of Southern and Northern accents. I hand her the diploma. We talked about this. About being careful. How no one can know what we mean to each other, what we've been to each other. It would make the career I want in politics untenable and her life miserable.

Being associated with a Shelby is a boon for everyone except a Love. We can't control what families we are born into, but the animus between our families runs deep and is not without cause. And not some long-ago bullshit either.

My father seems to like causing problems every fucking chance he gets. And he's only gotten worse now that the Loves

are associated with the second-biggest employer in the area—the Creative Chaos Plant. Rap mogul FADE Carrington is married to one of the Love cousins, Delightful, and wanted the computer-chip plant here to give back to the community from which both their families hail. None of the families, including mine, who've had a stranglehold on the livelihoods of people here welcomed the change, and they've been conspiring to derail them ever since the plant—and the influx of businesses that followed—came to Shelby-Love.

Adding to that, the Spencers have been actively campaigning for the demise of any and all Loves. Once it was discovered the child they'd thought was their grandson, Mateo was not their son Leon's child, but in fact, he the son of the rock star, Santiago Rosas. I feel for their loss, but I never recall Dr. Mimi ever saying the kid was Leon's, her husband who perished in Iraq. In fact, I remember Mrs. Spencer crowing about it to my father, who, though he hated everything Love, was happy for his friends.

Other rich landowners who held a grip on this state all have a reason to hate the Loves and Takedas for everything they represent, the twilight of the landed elite. My reason for going into the snake pit of politics is to hurry them on into their inevitable extinction. I couldn't give a fuck about who rules as long as I see the fruits of my mother's vengeance drench this bitter earth I was born into.

Watching Nikki walk past me and leave the stage, I feel slight a nudge from President Fane reminding me to congratulate the next student. After an interminable amount of time, I call the final name, all are congratulated, and we now have a new class of graduates who are getting well-wishes for future endeavors.

“Will you join the president's reception?” The low drawl of Fane, my friend and sometimes nemesis, draws my attention, which has once again snagged on the one person it should not. I need to get my shit together before I out myself. There are shrewd eyes about.

“You mean the pompous bullshit you're hosting, Mr. President? It's enough you've strong-armed these good people

into making you the president of the university, but you're now making me attend this nonsense?" I charge without heat, but the truth is having a billionaire British lord take the position of the head of our elite private university is a huge change. A welcome one but still out of the norm, not to mention he's not of an advanced age but in his early thirties.

"Someone had to do it. They are not pleased with the happenings." He waves a negligent hand. "There are a lot of potential donors you need to influence and whose money you need to take before you stab them in the back and switch parties." His cold eyes assess me as he gauges my expression.

"I see your spies have been busy," I murmur, falling into step beside this bastard, heading to the reception that is now in full swing.

"Hm, no worries. Your little secret is safe with me." He lays a winning smile on me for anyone who would care to be looking. "Just be mindful of the ones who can ruin everything." Arching an eyebrow, he gives a little jaunty smirk, leading me into a group of well-heeled business owners and socialites.

"Hi."

I almost cringe when I hear Nikki's voice. Not because of the way it makes the deadened thing in my chest twist, but from the pain coming from knowing this is one of the last times I'll get to hear it.

"Hey, darling." I turn, smiling down at her. I have to shake myself to keep from getting lost in amber eyes of the deepest whiskey and the beautiful smile blossoming, making two dimples appear on her cheeks.

"I was thinking..." she starts.

"When do you not?" I tilt my head, giving her a wink to continue. The party's thinning, and I should have left a long time ago. Especially since I'm supposed to be meeting Natalie later tonight to strategize about the DC move. We almost broke up the night I hit Nik with my car. She took forever to

forgive me for standing her and my family up on that night. Natalie and I got engaged soon after and that mollified her. Since then, we have forged a powerhouse team that will get me into Congress and her into the powerful circles her family deems necessary to solidify their legacy. The only little hiccup in that plan is standing right in front of me.

“Anyway.” Nikki presses her lips together in the way she’s always done when she gets ready to ask me for something she thinks I’ll deny her. She’s never gotten the fact that I can deny her nothing. She’s my best friend. More. *No motherfucker*. I savagely cut myself down with a vicious reprimand. *Not more*. Arching my brows, prompting her to speak, I listen.

“I think we can use this to justify our acquaintance. I can volunteer to help with your campaign.” Her eyes are filled with so much hope. So much fucking fear. She keeps a beautiful smile painted on her face, but I can tell what it’s costing her to ask. We’ve never talked about having an open friendship for the simple fact we both know the lengths we—I—went to keep it secret. How the fuck was I going to explain keeping a kid at a house on my family’s property, keeping her from her family, who lived a couple of miles away? No way could the news be navigated after documents had been forged to enroll her in school. After a while, it just made sense to keep it between us.

“How about I drop by later?” I tell her, noticing the matriarch Mama-Pete looking our way before whispering something to the little curvy cousin Angel married, Ezekiel-Jane.

Nikki nods. “Sounds good.” Her gaze follows mine in time to see her cousin whisper to her husband. “Shoot. They stay minding business that don’t belong to them,” she mutters.

“They are supposed to look out for you,” I murmur to her.

“That’s what I got you for, Thi.” She bites her lip, looking up through the dark fringe of her lashes, making my dick start to rise to meet those luscious fucking lips. She steps back, holding my gaze for a moment too long. “See you later?” she asks one last time.



“Yeah,” I say, dragging my gaze away before somebody catches me watching her walk away. That’s the last thing I need—being seen eye-fucking a Love when I’m engaged to a Spencer.

Making a note to have my staff look for and erase all references to me and Nikki at this event, I head to my truck.

“Senator.”

I turn, hearing the drawl of Angel, my best friend since childhood, just as I successfully ease out of the venue without anyone stopping me for more conversation or alluding to more favors they expect when I become the senator, he just called me.

“Yeah.” I smirk at him, not stopping on my mission to be free of sycophants. My reason for being here is currently surrounded by people who only want to love and protect her. I won’t ruin her celebration by making it about me. I’d be unwelcome among her people. They hate me without even knowing me, but with justification. Our families have done nothing but seek death and destruction against each other for centuries.

“I think you’re running for Congress as a Democrat just to get back at your old man, switching after you get the nomination to break his heart,” he says, falling into step beside me as I head out to my truck. Even billionaire scions of one of the oldest sugar producers in the world have trucks down here.

“What gave me away?” I chuckle bitterly. *Complicated* is not the word for my relationship with my bastard father. We actively loathe each other. Angel is the only person alive who knows.

“It’s pretty obvious. Democrat when every Shelby to hold office has been a Republican since the Civil Rights Movement.”

“Yeah, there’s that. Plus, at heart I’m a Democrat just like my mother,” I tell him, opening the door to my truck, hating the way he watches me and sees entirely too much.

He knows my history—my father marrying the daughter of a wealthy Brazilian landowner to secure the deeds to over one hundred and fifty thousand acres of prime sugarcane, then proceeded to treat her horribly until she died at his hands.

So there is no love lost between father and me for many reasons, but it mostly stems from his poor treatment of my mother—how he tortured her until she died. How he killed her.

“Your mom was an amazing woman. You honor her.”

Both of us lost our mothers, but only one of us holds the blame for them dying—me. Despite what Angel feels about his mom being disappointed, I know how much she loved him. He’s nothing like my father, a man who uses his privilege to run a cartel. Though sugar is legal, everything about the business my father runs is a crime. Mathias Shelby Sr., for all his perceived philanthropy, is a ruthless, cruel killer and proud of it. Worse, he made sure to make his son one as well.

“Thanks, man.” My voice sounds gruff. I swallow past the knot in my throat. The words aren’t just platitudes to me. He knows what our life was like in that house of horrors. He witnessed and was subjected to it, no different than me. Our differing statuses didn’t make what I had to endure at the hands of my father easier. If anything, it made it worse because what boy doesn’t love his father? Doesn’t want to emulate him in some way? He doesn’t have to imagine what blooded me. He is my witness.

“So, what’s up with you and the girl?” he asks before I can haul myself up into the cab.

“I hear congratulations are in order. You married a Love. Ezekiel-Jane, is it?” There’s no heat behind my words, no disdain. I’m happy because I know he has to be gone for her if he married her. Angel de la Muerte doesn’t do shit unless he wants to.

He also knows that though I’m part of one side of the two families embroiled centuries old, feuding I couldn’t care less about the Shelby-Love feud.

Thanks to my mother's fortune being the most lucrative part of Shelby Sugar, I'm wealthy enough to be removed from the machinations of the syndicate and due to inherit part of a multibillion-dollar fortune. Me and my older brother, Ananias, chose to allow our cousins Jackson and Jericho to head the company. Our other cousin, Ulysses, is the local sheriff and also has no interest in furthering our family's sugar syndicate.

"I did. Seeing you with her cousin has her worried." Quirking an eyebrow, he waits.

"I'm not him." The words erupt out of me. I drop from the truck, my fist tight.

"I know," he says calmly. "I know." He's eyeing me, my tight fists. His face shows me more compassion than I know I deserve. He obviously saw something between us. Something I felt—had no business feeling.

"I'd never take advantage of her that way. Nikki—" I cut myself off. "She was awarded a full scholarship on behalf of the philanthropic arm of Shelby Sugar." I give the information tonelessly, hoping he'll drop it.

"Which you ensured was awarded to her." He fills in the blanks. "Why?"

"When I met her, she didn't have anyone. Needed help." I shrug.

"And you never...?" he demands.

"Hell no, man, she's a kid." I scoff.

"She ain't no fucking kid, man," he reminds me. "She graduated college today."

"Well, to me she is." I scrub a hand through my locks. He can see the fight in me. It's like he recognizes himself in me. He shakes his head like he knows I'm going to lose this battle. I can't lose—if I do, my whole world will possibly implode, tanking my career and everything I've worked for. It will hurt Nikki too. I can't allow anything to happen to her. I've been protecting her for too long to stop now. Even from afar, I will always watch over her.

“You need to stay away from her if you aren’t going to wife her. I know you’re still engaged to Natalie.”

I draw a breath, settling my gaze on him. Angel knows Natalie Spencer, and I have had an understanding and have been together since high school. The Spencer and Shelby alliance has been spoken about from the time we were kids. It will merge two of the most powerful families in the South. One white, the other Black. It will help the Shelbys finally shed their racist image to the public, and the Spencers will have access to the Shelby fortune and their vast resources. A win for everyone but the workers—their true source of wealth.

“Fuck you, puto,” I snarl.

“You know I had to say it. When’s the wedding? I know she’s planning it.”

Rolling my eyes at my words, I grumble, “Win or lose, a week after the election.”

A marriage of convenience. I can tell he almost pities me—well, I don’t need his fucking pity. I made my choices long ago, and nothing and no one will get in my way.

“What do you know about what’s going on at Creative Chaos?” he calls out as I turn back to the truck, not stopping this time. I got shit to do that doesn’t include being lectured and pitied by my best friend.

For a minute I debate answering after I pull my door closed. I watch him standing there, his arms crossed over his massive chest, waiting, knowing me better than anyone. I slide the window down. “Nothing other than my father is knee-deep in it.”

I see that register on his face as I pull out, hitting the road.



CHAPTER  
FOUR

Nikki

HE NEVER SHOWED. He always shows. I guess he's well and truly done with me.

Thi: Sorry something came up. Rain check?

Me: Sure

Thi: Give Bernice a kiss for me

Me: Ew. Do it when you see her.

Thi: ...

Thi: ...

And just like that, I'm ghosted. Never happened before. Not with him. I've had guys dump me because I wouldn't give it up or because I never told them enough about me. I have too many secrets, I need to keep protecting my friendship with Mathias. Not that I mind. Thi has done so much for me. Took me in when I felt I had no one. Never judged me when I didn't reach out to my family. He risked a lot. I just wish... Wishing doesn't matter. Not now anyway, I think, looking around my things packed in the living room and ready to load in my car.

The same BMW Thi hit me with that night six years ago, the night that started it all.

“Well, there’s nothing for it,” I mutter, grabbing one of the long garment bags I have my neatly pressed suits in, then heading to my car. I have interviews with several graduate programs and at least three law school programs. I passed both my GRE and LSAT with scores good enough to take my pick. I just have to make the best decision. I’ve been offered a paid summer internship at Creative Chaos. I’m taking it so I can see the inner workings of a corporation. This is the chance of a lifetime. I even get to shadow Mr. Takeda one day a week.

The six grueling interviews were worth it. If I take this position and it’s extended while I’m grad or law school, I can have my pick of jobs when I’m done. Maybe even a junior executive position at Creative Chaos.

My phone is chiming on the sofa when I come back in from my car. My hopes are dashed when I see it’s my cousin Joi instead of Thi.

“Hey, chick,” I say, putting it on speaker so I can get more bags. “Make it quick. I have to get my stuff loaded.”

“Are you coming out with us tonight to the Shack? Kandie says it’s her treat.”

Pausing for a minute, I consider texting Thi to see if he’s going to swing by. “Um—”

“Girl, fuck him.” She scoffs.

“Wha-what are you talking about?” My hands actually claw up my chest to my throat.

“I know it’s some guy, Nik. Ain’t no way you about to throw us off for some dude,” she all but yells.

“There’s no guy.” My heart stops racing once I realize she’s making assumptions with her nosey self.

“Uh-huh, then why we can’t come to your place? You’ve been there for how long?”

“I don’t know... Um, two years? Since I moved out the dorms,” I hedge, knowing I wasn’t even living in the dorms

when everyone thought I was. Thi couldn't come hang out with me in the dorms.

“Girl, I know you didn't know, but you should've never gotten a place on the Shelby side. I know your daddy didn't tell you how it is between them and us, but people on that side live to try to mistreat us,” she chides for the fifty-eleventh time.

“I know.” I roll my eyes, having long since decided not to try to argue with my extended family about the Shelybs or the Spencers, even though Mathias and his fiancée, Natalie, have been nothing but nice to me. My heart still hurts every time I think of them together, but then it stops, stands still and craters. I know I have no right to be upset, no real claim on him. He's my best friend, nothing more.

I plop down on the sofa, dropping the duffel bag on the ground between my feet and the table. That's where he is. He's with his fiancée; that's what—or rather who—came up. He's with her, probably knee-deep in her. I've seen hickeys she leaves on him. Sometimes he just wears a T-shirt and joggers because he does all the upkeep around the little cottage since he didn't want any of the workers or house staff coming here. I've seen purple bruises all over his neck like she was marking him, warning all the other girls to stay away or at least that she was his main thang.

And it worked for the most part. I still shudder, thinking about the one time I forgot to be careful and one of foremen saw me and mentioned to his dad. He came that night banging on the door, threatening to burn me out. I had to call Thi, and he came just in time to stop them from burning me alive.

I push the nightmare of that night down and the image of him being with Natalie aside. I have no right to be mad. Their relationship outweighs and outranks anything I have with him. He's marrying her. I'm just a girl he hoped wouldn't tell anyone he hit her with his car.

“Yeah, I'm coming. I can't let my favorite cuz and my big sister down.”



“That’s what I’m talking about. Hey, you care to give me a quote about graduation? I have a really cute pic of you getting your diploma.”

“Sure, I will send it to you.”

“Good. It’ll be on the front page of the Sunday paper’s *Living* section.” Our paper may be small, but my cousin takes her job as a journalist seriously. She stays busy reporting on all the happenings in our community, not to mention keeping the local gossip blog section exciting with messiness going on in our small community. The *Shelby-Love Chronicle* was struggling just like every local paper in the country until Joi came home during the pandemic after being laid off by some foreign news dispatch and joined the small three-person team. She single-handedly turned the little paper from reporting about the local games, PTA, and city council meetings into a hot sheet that reports all the local shenanigans. It was a stroke of genius putting all the juiciest bits of a paywall, including news about our outrageous city council, which has gone viral on several sites. We have whole memes about our council president, Digger Jones, who’s always cussing one of the snooty Spencers out.

After hanging up with Joi, I give the little house I’ve called home for the past six years another good perusal, making sure I have everything for this first trip over to my cousins Summer and Valentine’s house. That’s where my giant turtle Bernice Sanders is convalescing, and that’s where I need to be—with my emotional-support reptile.

Thi told me to take my time moving out, but after last night and him not coming to hang out after he looked me dead in my face and said he would—twice, I know without him telling me that yesterday was goodbye.

Thinking back on his hesitancy at the graduation reception, I feel like an idiot. He never answered when I said we could use that meeting as a catalyst to start an open friendship.

“Yeah right,” I chide, softly shaking my head as I pull the door closed. I’m incredibly dumb when it comes to this man.

“Hey, darling.”

Startled, I snap my head around to see Mathias leaning against his truck with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Sorry about last night.”

“Humph.” I pull the duffel tighter over my shoulder. My throat is so tight right now, I don’t know what to do. I know my cheeks are burning, and unfortunately, I didn’t get the luscious, toasty-brown skin of my cousins, thanks to my mom’s extremely light skin. So, he can clearly see my cheeks burning with anger and embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not,” I mutter, ducking my head, going over to my car that he’s blocked in. That is, unless I want to ruin the beautiful flower beds I have bordering the house. I’ve been keeping them up just like his gran had them.

“I am, though.” He cuts me off just as I reach the door of my car.

“Umm, don’t be.” I press my lips together in a smile, trying to convey despite my hurt that it’s no big deal. Because, really, should it be? *He’s not yours*, screams my mind. It’s the constant reminder I’ve given myself from the moment I saw that ring.

*HE LOOKS down somberly at the beautiful sapphire that seems to have more than a dozen diamonds surrounding it.*

*“What’s that?” I ask, sitting quietly beside him. He’s quiet for a long time, just looking at it, the muscle ticking in his jaw. Finally, he cuts his eyes over to me. They are so cold for a moment, I edge back a little. He looks as if he hates me. Then he squeezes his eyes closed really hard. When he looks back at me, the hate is gone but sadness, so much sadness, replaces it.*

*“My mother’s engagement ring. It was my grandmother’s before her and her mother’s and so on until it can be traced back to the Portuguese aristocracy.” He sounds almost wistful, and he gazes at the ring sitting on the dark velvet of the antique box.*

*“Why do you have it?” I almost regret drawing his attention back to me. It’s like the ring is a talisman.*

*“I’m supposed to give it to the girl I love.” He snaps the lid closed with a cold finality, then tucks it into the dinner jacket he was wearing before he came over to shower and change.*

*It has been three weeks since he let me stay here at his gran’s house. He enrolled me in the same elite private school he’d gone to: Shelby Academy. There are like five Black kids and maybe a dozen total nonwhite. Money is what rules, and if you’re there, then you have it, no questions asked. There has never been a Love ever admitted to the school, but people just assume since I’m from out of state that the name is a coincidence, and I don’t correct them. There’s a kid, oddly named, Nebraska Soaring-Hawk, who looks at me oddly from time to, but he never says anything.*

*After a week or so, my life eased into normalcy. Everything seems fine. I mostly go to school, study, and keep a low profile. Mathias comes by every day. Sometimes he cooks; sometimes I do. We eat, hang out, and talk about everything going on in our lives and around the world, or he plays video games, teaching me new moves and cheat codes. He’s never gotten mad until tonight.*

*I swallow any questions I have. Curling my hands into my pocket, I look away from him. Worry and recrimination slide over me with unwelcome familiarity. I never should have trusted it. Since my daddy died, I realized way too quickly that I can wear out my welcome. People are cool till the money runs out or they have no use for you. Mathias is cool and all, but he’s a grown man with plans of his own. I knew sooner or later, he was going to realize I don’t fit into any of them.*

*He’s about to start law school, and I know he has this humongous ring—*

*“I can already see your mind working overtime.” His dry tone cuts into my thoughts.*

*My head snaps around, snagging on the molten silver gaze I’m still not used to. I keep seeming to get lost in its depths.*

*“Sorry?” I press back in the corner, needing to create some distance even though I’m the one who sat beside him.*

*“What’s got you ready to pack and leave for the fiftieth time?” Sighing, he stands, buttoning his jacket. He looks so classy in the navy blazer, tan slacks, and crisp white shirt. He looks the part of the scion of a billion-dollar sugar fortune. Which is why he’s right. I am looking to get out of his hair before he realizes the huge mistake he’s made.*

*“I’m not trying to leave for the fiftieth time.” Standing to face him, I rock back on the balls of my feet.*

*“But you are thinking about leaving?” A shadow falls over his eyes. “We promised no secrets, no lies.” His mouth sets in a grim line. His gaze strips away all pretense as it bores into me, daring me to lie, daring me to say I want to leave him.*

*“You have your own life to think about. You’re doing all this stuff for me.” I wave crazily at the space. “You can’t keep it up. Running back and forth trying to take care of stuff for me, it’s—it’s not right, okay? You don’t owe me anything.” I’m trying to get him to understand I won’t be mad if he changes his mind, that I have options. Before he can deny it or say anything about the car incident, I hurry to add, “I can go to the Loves.”*

*Immediately I regret saying it. Real anger lights his features. He stares at me for a full minute and nods. “If that’s what you want to do.” Color rises high on his cheeks.*

*I swallow back the knot in my throat. I wasn’t thinking. He said yes so quick, it’s like I backed us both in a corner.*

*My tummy starts to ache. I nod, not knowing what else to do. “Okay, umm...”*

*“What about school? You’re already enrolled up here,” he asks, using the term to describe the Shelby side when the Love side in on the southern portion of the county and referred to as down there.*

*“I can still go. I can say my daddy enrolled me.” Mathias paid my tuition two years in advance. “I still can come hang*

*out if you let me know when you're in town visiting from law school."*

*He looks at me as if I am naïve. "The only reason I'm here is because you're here. You're out of your mind if you think they will ever let you see me." His low, thunderous words drop in the room between us.*

*"A twenty-three-year-old man spending time with a sixteen-year-old kid ain't gone over well down here since the seventies." Looking down, he sighs so deeply, his whole body moves with it. "Look, I know I was acting fucked up a little while ago. It's this dinner I've got to go to tonight, the one I told you about. I know what's expected of me. I was all set to do it the night I hit you with my car. I don't even know what's making me feel so weird about it now." He looks at me for a long time, then shakes his head. "I've been promised to marry this girl, Natalie Spencer, since I was your age. That's where I'm going after I leave here tonight. And—and I don't know, darling..." He looks out the picture window he tells me to keep closed unless he's here.*

*"You don't know what, Thi?" Calling him the little nickname I gave him the third day makes him smile.*

*Another deep sigh. "Why hanging out with you—some kid I hit with my car and shared my favorite meal with is the only thing that feels right anymore."*

BEING my friend is what felt right all those years ago, but he asked her to marry him, anyway. Has copious amounts of sex with her, anyway. Chooses her every time over me, as he should because she's his fiancée, whom he obviously loves since he promised his mom to only give that beautiful sapphire ring to the girl he loves.

The following Monday I was crushed as everyone at school talked about the proposal at the Shelby Country Club and how beautiful it was, how he and Natalie danced all night looking so in love.

I never asked him about it, and he never said anything when we hung out. He never talks about their relationship, though she knows about me and is even supportive of our friendship. I think, though he's never said it, he made promises to end our friendship long before now, but this would be a natural end. A clean break, so to speak.

Those are the thoughts swirling around my head as he stands, blocking my way to the door.

“Why are you here, Thi?”

His eyes flare at my demand like he's about to remind me this is his house. I wish he would.

“I said I would be.” His voice is low. I can't catch this tone. It borders on angry and something else. Why? I don't know if it's regret, guilt. I don't care. He doesn't owe me anything. *Lie*. I shove the thought way down with all the other emotions I shouldn't have for my best friend.

“It's fine.” I shrug, stinging nose and all. “This is getting kinda heavy. Can you let me pass?”

He takes the stuff from me. “I got it.” Moving back so I can open the car door, I make room for him to pass, watching as he puts my things in the back seat.

“We can put the rest in my truck,” he says, as I start heading back into the house.

“Nope. I got it.” I pull bags over my shoulders. “You never know who is out at Valentine's clinic. We don't want word getting back that you're slumming it with me.”

“Why are you saying that when just yesterday you suggested we use meeting at the graduation as a way to say we're friends now?” he demands, snatching the bags roughly from me.

“Well, you were looking very uncomfortable with the idea. Then not showing up for the first time ever and ghosting me kinda drove the point home. I get it. The expiration date is up on this friendship.” I push the door open, waving him out of his own house.

He gives me a look mean enough to wilt his gran's flowers if he focused it on them. Yet he can't deny it because we both know it's true.

Silent and wrathful, we load the rest of my stuff in the car. I can't stand that we are ending on bad terms like this.

I go back through the house, memories bombarding me of all the fun we had here: Him teaching me video games like *God of War*; me showing him circus tricks, with him marveling at how I can contort myself and balance on just about anything. All the breakfasts and late-night runs to the truck stop for peanut butter chocolate chip pancakes.

Sorrow engulfs me like a wave. I barely see him through the blurriness of unshed tears as I step out onto the porch. I wish I could just drive off, but I have to give him his keys. There won't be a second trip back. We somehow managed to get all my things—not that I had much—into my car.

I freeze mid-step as I come down the porch steps. Pressure builds in my chest like he dumped a whole load of sugarcane on it. He's standing by the grill of his truck, then steps forward, his arms spread wide.

In seconds, I'm running into those outstretched arms. He swoops me up. My arms and legs wrap around him.

"I'm gonna miss you." I breathe my words against the tan skin of his throat. He smells of clover, earth, books, and spun sugar. Unable to resist the olfactory pull, I bury my face there, inhaling him for the last time. I've always loved the way he smells, everything with a hint of sugar mixed in. My heart squeezes. The sadness of knowing what never can be finally bursts free from being caged in my heart, finding its release.

"I'm so sorry, baby girl," he whispers gruffly into my ear as I keep my face buried in his neck.

I try, I really try, but I can't stop the choked sob barreling from my sore, aching heart, ripping through my vocal cords and out of my mouth like the rush of a waterfall.

He stills, his arms tighten, wrapping me so tight, as if trying to protect me from the pain I'm feeling at our parting.

So tight, he's sure to bruise me. But I don't care. I don't ever want him to let me go, and I fool myself into thinking for this little while that he doesn't either. His ragged groan, so long and forlorn, meets my sobs.

"Shh, baby, don't cry. Please don't cry. I promised myself I would never make you cry." His hand spears into my hair. "I hate being the reason you're hurting. Don't hurt for me, little one. I'm not worth it."

A soft kiss, delicate as gossamer, brushes my temple. Then another just below that one. In return I kiss where I've cried: the lovely indentation at the hollow of his throat. Tasting the delicious warmth of his skin mingling with the salty brine of my tears, I close my eyes, shuddering. Together, we taste like heaven.

More kisses trail from my hair line along my jaw, each one heavier than the last. Lasting longer than the one before. Then my mischief must mingle with his mayhem, because his tugging my earlobe into his mouth, then sucking, only to let it pop free is followed by my licking the tear-drenched skin along the long corded column of his neck until I tug his earlobe into my mouth, returning the gesture.

The firm hands holding me shift to squeeze my ass. He pulls me in line with the hard, heavy ridge of his dick.

I pull back to meet the storm of silver gazing at me. Leaning in, I give in to six years of temptation, tugging his lower lip, sucking it gently into my mouth. I suck. I savor. Releasing him, I pull back to look at those scarily stormy eyes again. Moving my hands up from his shoulders and spearing my fingers through his thick hair, I look back down to his plump, wet bottom lip, then back up to his beautiful face.

"Can I have a goodbye kiss, Mathias?" I feel his dick throb at my use of his full name.

"Fuck yeah," he growls.

I'm not the one to take over. His mouth covers mine with tender savagery. Taking, tangling, slaking all at once.



My body melts into him more. He slants his mouth over mine as his hands move me over his hard dick. His hands slip inside my shorts to cup my bottom. I gasp.

“So fucking wet for me, darling.”

He turns, repositioning us so that I’m pressed against the truck, angled so my shorts are pulled tight against my pussy. The only things separating us are his jeans and the sliver of material of my stretched daisy dukes.

“These little-ass shorts fuck with me every time I see you in them.” His hips pump against me, grinding his hard length against my pliant center.

Our lips press against each other. We pant, our mouths open, our lips touching, our breaths mingling, lost in the heated sensation of him stroking his hard dick against the soaking-wet lips of my pussy.

“Thi,” I cry as he keeps brushing against my clit.

“Let me give you this, darling,” he urges, tasting my lips a little in encouragement.

And he does. Goodness, he does, rubbing right where I need him. His kiss consumes me, taking everything I haven’t already given him, leaving me raw and open to his torment.

Again, I cry out, arching into the incredible sensation of my first orgasm with a man.

“Fuuuuuck,” he growls. I feel a warm gush, realizing he’s coming right with me. “Got me nutting like a fucking boy.”

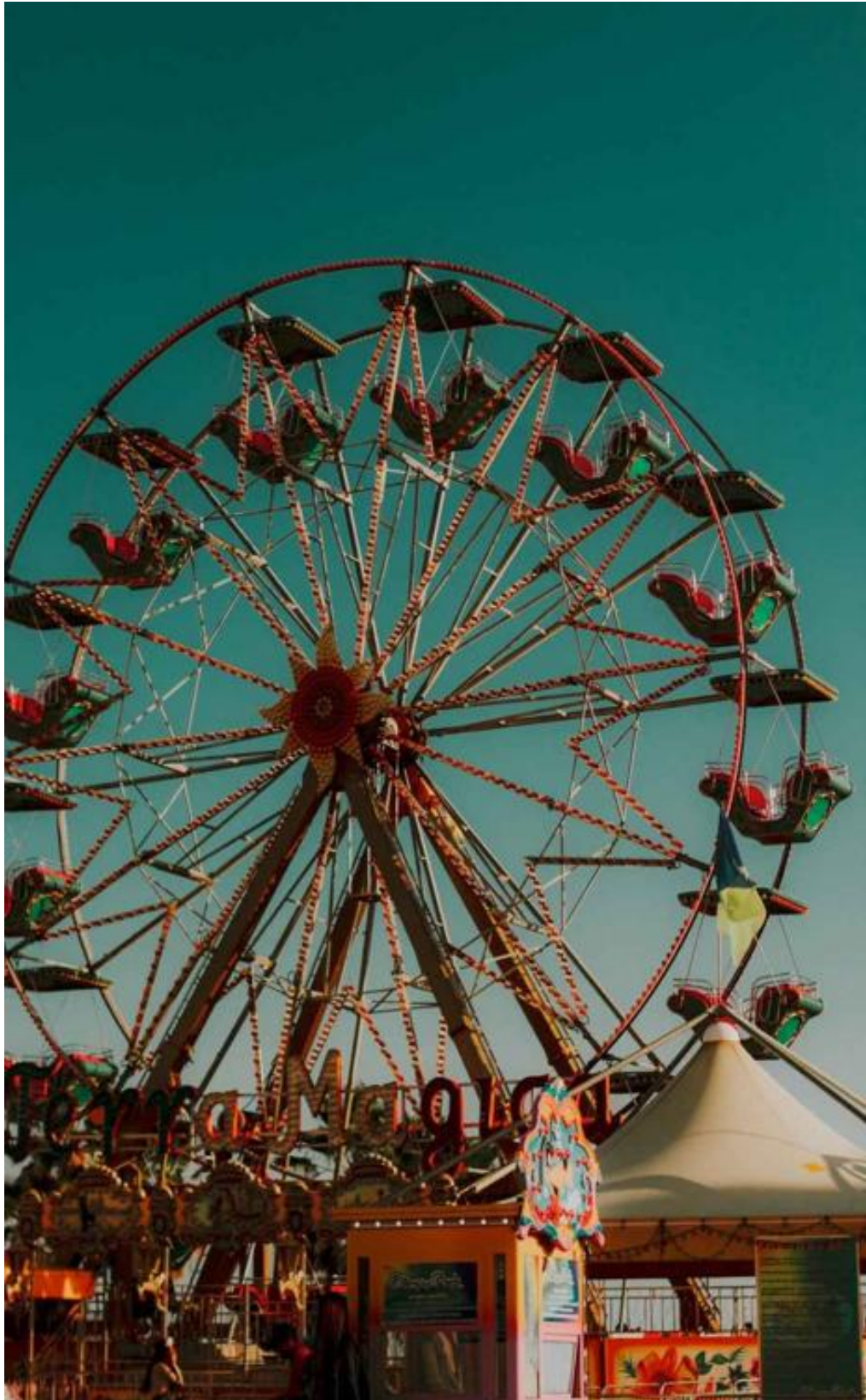
He presses a kiss to my head, letting my legs drop. His arms loosen a little but still keep me caged in his warmth. He keeps me pressed between him and the truck for a long time.

I feel the cold press of the keys in my palm.

“Go freshen up. Valentine doesn’t need to see you like this.” He kisses me again on my crown.

Taking the keys, I nod, stepping away to do as he says, stopping by my car to get a change of clothes before I head inside to the bathroom.

When I come back outside, he's already gone.



CHAPTER  
FIVE

M athias

“WELL, this is going to be awkward as fuck.”

I dead eye this motherfucker who’s supposed to be my best friend in the whole wide world as I watch Nikki finally join the wedding party.

“It’s your fault, asshole,” I mutter under my breath, turning away but not soon enough to miss her rising to the tips of her toes to kiss Marcus Sommerland, VI.

“Nope, you can take that up with my beautiful wife and her scary grandmother, but I know you won’t do that because you love Easy too much to upset her about her choice of maid of honor, and I know you like being topside way too much to say anything to Mama-Pete about us having this unnecessary-as-hell wedding in the first place. You’re just going to have to deal, man.” He turns away from the offending sight along with me, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Yeah, I knew that when you asked if I’d stand by you,” I tell him, looking out at the field of the Heirs Property, where all the Loves have their weddings. This is the first time in more than a century a Shelby has set foot on it. Angel laughed when he told me how the elder aunties in the family put protection all around the land when they heard a Shelby was invited and would be his best man. He fully believed I would

drop dead and incur some grave misfortune the minute I stepped past the wards. I don't believe in any of it, but having to see Nikki for the first time in over a year has the same effect. I'm gutted. I can barely look at her. She looks fresh and lovely from her trip with Marcus to Great Britain and Madrid. Rumors were swirling of a secret elopement. If it's true, neither of them have confirmed it.

For the last year, I've watched her gallivanting around with her sister, Kandie, cousins Joi, Summer and occasionally Mimi, and Krie and Easy now that they were all married. Joi and she seem thick as thieves. Not letting that night at The Shack slow them down they'd been regulars there and everywhere else around town and probably in the state. Her social media was full of all the daring things they got up to, sometimes with a blond bastard staring and her like a lovesick swain.

"Oh goodie, everyone is here." Summer, one of the innumerable Love cousins, claps her hands a couple times to get everyone's attention. "Let's go over everything one more time. Nikki is up to speed because I sent her a video of the rehearsal since she just got back in the country. So, let's do a quick little practice."

What follows is misery and hell as I have never known. I've been lucky to avoid being in any weddings since none of my cousins nor my brother, Ananias, is married. Weddings have never been something I've ever enjoyed since in my set they are rarely about the couple but the connections being made.

I knew the moment I saw Nikki walking toward me, my heart would stop. In her face I can see none of the anger and sadness of that night, but she's always been so good at hiding her true feelings for me. A small smile plays across her face, letting me know she's forgiven me. I nod, knowing I don't deserve it. Not after that night. Never after that...

*A YEAR AGO...*

*"Why are we here?"*

*“Calm the fuck down. You can go back to the country club and Nat in a bit. I just need to check something out,” Ulysses mutters as he pulls his truck smoothly behind the Shack. I don’t bother to tell him I have no intention of seeing Natalie tonight despite the fact she promised me her ass if I came by. Not even that could make me want to do anything other than get a single malt scotch and go back to my gran’s and get fucked up.*

*I don’t bother asking my cousin why he’s come to the club again. As a former army ranger who’s still kind of fucked up about it, he’s not a sharer. In fact, he’s the opposite—if he shares, it’s probably the worst possible news and doesn’t bode well for anyone.*

*He slams out of the truck with a purpose. He’s off duty tonight and looks like a regular ol’ cowboy in wranglers, a Henley, and a black Stetson, but that’s where the cowboy stops. His shoes are army-issued Gore-tex, a throwback to his days as a special operator.*

*In contrast, I have on the slacks from my earlier dinner with Natalie and our parents, as is required once a week. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. My mind is still on what happened between Nikki and me earlier today when I went to help her move. I never should have touched her. Never.*

*Every fucking second since, I haven’t thought of anything but how she fit against me. How good we were together. What she tastes like. I sucked her taste off my fingers when she went in the house to freshen up and was on the porch, ready to rip the door off the hinges and bury myself deep in her tight little pussy until neither of us knew when the other ended and they began, but then I stopped.*

*What the fuck was I doing? I’m engaged. I’ve been engaged. Promised to a woman who is my friend and lover. A woman I fuck on the regular, but who’s never made me come like that. It’s not lost on me as I follow my cousin into Shelby-Love’s hottest club that I’m no different from my bastard father, panting over some young thing when I’m in a committed relationship and have nothing to offer her but my*

*dick and misery. I have to leave this girl alone before I end up making her hate me.*

*She didn't call to ask why I left. She knows why. Any hope of us ever being friends in the future, something I want with every fiber of my being, would be ruined if I touched her the way I was so desperate to do on that porch. No, leaving like I did was for the best.*

*Those thoughts, and any thoughts of what I could anticipate coming to the Shack, are obliterated when I almost ram into Ulysses, who's stock-still on the edge of the dance floor, watching two women riding a mechanical bull. Kandie, the owner of the town's bakery aptly named for its owner, is gyrating on the bull alongside Joi, another Love cousin, while "Pony" by Ginuwine plays. As the women hit splits and change position on the bull in time with the music, I riveted every man here. Ulysses and I are no different but for two entirely different reasons. While I'm marveling at the sheer skill it takes for them to accomplish those moves, Ulysses is brimming with rage.*

*"The hell is wrong with you, man?" I come up beside him, watching his jaw jump like a bullfrog on asphalt. I follow the gray eyes so similar to mine and see them trained on Kandie.*

*"This little motherfucker is always showing out," he says through gritted teeth, fury marking every word.*

*"C'mon, let me buy you a drink." After clapping him on the back, I head back to the one of the smallest VIP sections of any establishment I've ever been in. Rumor is the owner, Jedi, thought it would be a great idea to cut a third of the place off just in case any of the recent transplants decided to frequent the place. Only a few of the Creative Chaos folks ever use the area.*

*Seeing the place empty, I headed over and handed the attendant the entrance fee. Settling in after he removed the velvet rope I people watch until Ulysses finally brings his ass over.*

*"What can I get you, sugah?" The soft lilting voice of who I can assume is another Love cousin has me lifting my eyes to*

*a cute little thing wearing a cutoff T-shirt that has 'Tip Me' scrawled across the front.*

*"Uncle Nearest." I nod toward Ulysses.*

*"Same," he mutters.*

*The girl laughs. "She stays messing with you." Which earns her a scowl that she takes in stride before turning and giving us a view of her bottom cheeks bursting out of very tiny shorts and the back of her shirt, which says Top Me.*

*"What's up with you?" I ask my cousin now that I have a clearer view of the situation.*

*The heavier beat of the same song starts, and for a moment, I think I'm hallucinating. Nikki is a motherfucking sight to behold. Slowly I come to my feet, barely aware of my actions. Astride the mechanical monster like Queen Dihya, Nikki is all things glorious. Her body shimmers under the lights. She's attired similarly to her cousins, though her cutoffs are much shorter, riding high on her ass, the bottom cheeks beckoning to be smoothed, plundered, kissed, fucked. My dick starts to lengthen, hard as granite in my pants. I spy several men in the crowd easing forward to get a better look. Her T-shirt is torn strategically, the hot-pink bra peeking through; the material must be thin because the diamond-hard nipples poking through can't be missed. Her eyes are closed, her body arched like she's fucking the bull. Briefly, I wonder if she thought of me—us—this morning. As she glides back, her legs splayed, we're all gifted a teasing millisecond of the vee at her hot center, covered by the frayed edges of her shorts.*

*"Fuck me," I groan aloud, captivated by the sight of her. Angel's words come crashing back into my mind, reminding me she's not a kid anymore. My mind finally catches up with what my body has known and fucking struggled with for a while now. Nicolette Love is a grown-ass woman. A sweet, hot, fuckable woman, and I want her more than anything in the world.*

*After what seems like a slow ride through hell as I'm battered by one realization after another, the song finally ends. No sooner than she comes to a stop is she approached by some*



*big blond guy and her cousin Nebraska Soaring-Hawk. As they approach, the blond puts his hands on Nikki's waist, plucking her from the saddle. Just as he holds her in midair, her gaze meets mine over the throng of people cheering her. Something snags in my soul as our eyes connect. It washes over me viscerally; the muscle in my chest tightens. For a moment I feel seen truly seen, shredded and ripped asunder, only belatedly realizing that this is how it has always been between us.*

*Then she's put on the ground with the blond blocking my view. I can see how animated she is talking with them as Kandie and Joi join them. Kandie wavers a little, attempting to get back on the bull.*

*"Like hell," Ulysses mutters before he shoves past me, cutting his way through the crowd. Sighing, I follow him. Being the sheriff of Shelby-Love hasn't stopped this knucklehead from knocking heads. His deputy Janis even had to arrest him a time or two.*

*I watch as Ulysses snags Kandie none too gently beneath her arm, which she hastily assures Nebraska is fine. He drags Kandi into a far corner of the room and crowds her in. There are various Loves about, but no one seems the least bit bothered by my Shelby cousin putting his hands on one of them.*

*"Hey, Mathias."*

*Dragging my gaze away from the odd pairing, I have to stop myself from groaning at the soft lilt of Nikki's voice. The innocent way she sounds belies the way I touched her. The way she came so beautifully in my arms earlier. I shift, feeling my dick start to thicken, anticipating round two. Never. Not again, I ruthlessly tell myself. Lie, whispers the back of my mind.*

*"Hey there." I try to keep it casual, light—something I feel so far from at this moment.*

*"You know my cousin Nebraska?" Then she smiles over to the other man, and insanely I want to snatch her little ass up, even knowing she's just being courteous. "And I just met his friend Marcus."*

*“Pleasure.” The posh bastard smiles down at her before throwing me an assessing glance. “Shelby, is it?” This motherfucker is way too pleased with himself for my liking.*

*I quirk an eyebrow. “Indeed.”*

*In my periphery I can see Nebraska cross his arms in mild interest, but he doesn’t pick a side in what is fast becoming a territorial fight.*

*“I hear you’re running for senate. Bored with subjugating the local poor, are we?” Smug disdain drips from Marcus’s every word. This is not the first time the taint of my family’s legacy has reared its head.*

*“Bored no, but seeking do better than those who came before me.” I shrug. “Not that you’d understand, of course. Sommerland Banking, is it? How many homeowners did y’all make whole after the crash?”*

*“Hey.”*

*I turn right in time to catch the keys Ulysses tosses my way. Face hard, he jerks his head, turning, dragging Kandie with him through the crowd and out the door.*

*“Now I’m going to have to walk—unless you want to give me a ride, Neb?” Joi complains and cajoles.*

*“Sure, but don’t call me that,” he says dryly.*

*“Dance with me,” I say to Nikki, taking her hand, pulling her to the floor as soon as the strands of a slow song start, not about to give Sommerland or her cousin a chance to offer her a ride.*

*I let the music envelop us, pulling her body flush with mine. The song is old, sexy; it wraps us in a lush mix of eroticism and heat. We are lost among the couples. The floor rapidly filled up. The singer croons about making a love scene, making my mind spiral back to earlier when I had Nikki’s hot little body pressed up against my F-150, her hot little pussy wet for me, her tongue tangling with mine.*

*She swerves her hips. Hearing the whimper she tries to bite back, I become a man possessed.*

*“Come on.” I groan in her ear. Before I can even register what’s happening, I’m dragging her out the way I came.*

*We take two steps, and some rough asshole reaches out and slaps her ass.*

*“Hey.” She shoves him hard, making him pinwheel his arms, while simultaneously holding me back. “Tim-Bob Mitchell, keep your fucking hands off me, boy.”*

*“Nah, I don’t think so, sweetheart. But I can wait.” He backs up, catching the promise of pain in my face, but still having the nerve to blow her a kiss.*

*“Come on, don’t worry about him.” She tucks into my side, trying to distract me. Making a mental note of his features, I allow her to steer me away.*

*The funny thing about small clubs is the music can still be heard for at least a mile. As soon as I open the passenger door of Ulysses’s truck, I’m shoving her back and ripping those fucking shorts down her legs.*

*“Mathias,” she gasps.*

*“Let me.” I push her legs open. Her pussy is soaking wet. Her smooth mound glistens with her essence. Her lips are plump, with her fat little clit poking through. “Is this for me or for all those motherfuckers you were turning on when you were riding that fucking bull?” I cover her, sweeping my hand over her fat-ass pussy like I have a right to.*

*“I was thinking of you, Thi.” She moans.*

*Our gazes meet as I rub my hand over my face, bathing it in her wetness.*

*Her eyes widen, then smolder.*

*I lower my head, inhaling the sweet heady scent of her sex. Licking her mound, I lap at the smooth skin. Not enough. I suck her flesh into my mouth in long pulls. Mine, whispers deep in my head. More. I sup like she’s my last meal. I want to devour her. A hum of need becomes a roar of satisfaction when I pull her legs over my shoulders and start tongue fucking her.*

*Her pussy is my peace. All I have ever endured ceases to matter. Nothing matters in this moment but Nikki.*

*Her sweet, delicious taste tempts me to lick her again and again. She arches beautifully to meet me each time my tongue dips inside. She rides my tongue like she did the bull, with an erotic grace that would make a man who didn't know her doubt her innocence. But I know my girl hasn't fucked anyone. I know it shouldn't matter. I know I have no right, but every messed-up part of me loves the fact that I am the only one to make her break apart.*

*When I start sucking and tugging on her fat little clit, she fucks my face, grinding her lush, slick pussy against it, making me take all of her. "Thi." Her strangled plea is met with a ferocity of tongue flicks and swirls until she's gushing and coming all over my face.*

*I take my time, cleaning her with long strokes of my tongue. My mouth kicks up in satisfaction when she comes again. Moving back, I look at my handiwork. Her pretty little pussy is plumper, thoroughly plundered. I could come just looking at her.*

*After pulling my shirt over my head, I lay the material over her lap. Dazed, she sits up, her pupils blown.*

*I close the passenger side door and go around to the driver's side. Then I get in the car, pulling her against my side so she's sitting in the middle. Ulysses's truck is a relic he inherited from his granddad on his mother's side, so there is no middle console preventing a middle passenger in the front. As we leave the Shack's parking lot, I'm glad for the truck because I don't want Nikki anywhere but right next to me.*

*"WE'RE HERE." After stating the obvious, I turn the car off at the bottom of Valentine's drive. I look down at the crown of curls tucked into my side because I forced Nikki to stay there. She's been quiet the whole time. Looking around, I see there are no lights on, not even at the vet clinic. Ulysses's truck is recognized easily enough, but I doubt any lookie-loos will know it's me—they'll even doubt their eyes seeing me this far*

*into the Love side of town, not to mention on the very land at the heart of the feud. Still. I know I made a huge fucking mistake in that parking lot. Anyone could have seen us. My head was between her legs, bringing her to pleasure not once but twice. I was more than fucking reckless. My dick has never led me, but here I am having nearly fucked this girl twice in one day. Nearly thirty years of discipline gone because of this curvy little minx of a girl.*

*“Alright.” She eases away from me like she’s trying to ward off a bear or some rabid animal. Her movements are slow and methodical as to not incite the beast. She pulls on the shorts under my shirt, which she keeps over her waist.*

*“Are you mad at me?” I snap.*

*Her hands still, and she finally looks up at me. Her eyes are back to their regular hue and size. She’s fully come down from the bliss I gave her.*

*“No, I just never—” She shrugs.*

*I know. Shame at how I took her boils the back of my throat. I slam my head on the steering wheel. It shouldn’t have been me. It should have been anyone but me. That makes pure fiery rage slide over me like lava.*

*“So, you were hoping Sommerland could do the fucking honors? Is that why Nebraska was there, shoving him down your pretty throat?” Looking out the window, I turn a wrathful gaze her way. “Are you looking for a new best friend?” I make it sound something other than the sweet platonic friendship we’ve had for the last six years. It’s not that anymore. Can never be that again. I ruined what we had the moment I touched her.*

*“N-no.” She rears back as if I smacked her.*

*“What do you think grinding on that bull like that would do? Hmm?” In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say. I sound like the worst motherfucker in the world, but I’m not bothered by that, I’m more concerned about what she’s getting up to.*

*“Why do you care, Mathias? You have Natalie. Unless you’re not still engaged.” She comes back with that sharp comment, leaning in hard; our faces almost touch. “At least he can offer me real friendship.”*

*I hate that she is using what we have the much the same way as I did. Knowing that I can offer her nothing makes darkness spread inside me with wave after wave of hatred for Sommerland and all he can offer and for her wanting more than I can give.*

*“You’re right. I can’t offer you friendship because our families would balk, not that I give a fuck, but you love yours. I’m already under the spotlight as it is, about to run for office. Then, if we were more...” I drag my gaze from her back out to the darkness, seeing the void her loss would cause in my life. Bitterness toward my best friend crowds out reason. “It could only be like this. You’d be my whore.” I turn to her, reaching out to hold her hand in a grip that makes her flinch. “My whore to use in every way, and you’d love it. I can’t offer you anything but darkness. Despair. If you care about yourself at all, you’ll run from me now and never look my way again. At this moment, darling, there is nothing I want to do more than to split your little virgin pussy open and have you weeping on my dick. And I won’t stop, not until I own every part of you—until your every thought is of me and how I make you feel.” My breath saws in and out, mingling with hers. I can see the rapid butterfly pattern of her pulse. Belatedly I realize she wants this. Thinks I will rise above and be the hero in her story, something I know I can never be. I’d be her tragedy.*

*Pulling the last modicum of decency, I have left, I shove her away. “Get the fuck out, Nikki,” I ground out through clenched teeth, fighting the desire to crash into her. She hesitates for a second, then is gone.*

*TWO HOURS LATER, I pull Ulysses’s truck up to his mother’s house.*

*“The fuck took you so long?”*

*“It anyone asks, I brought the truck directly,” I tell him, tossing the keys as I make my way up the stairs. I grab the mason jar he’s sipping moonshine from, taking a sip.*

*“Ooh, wee, this is strong. Who you got it from, your girl or Digger?” I ask, watching his ice-blue eyes go cold.*

*“She ain’t nothing to me but a fucking headache. Digger.” He takes a long sip and falls quiet. I don’t ask. We’re not the type of family that asks questions.*

*“Dirty-ass cop,” I say, lighting up a joint, taking a drag, then passing it to him.*

*“Is there any other kind?” he asks, unbothered.*

*“Not in this family.” I say, “Except your dad.”*

*He’s quiet for a long time before he answers. “And you see where the fuck that got him.” Then: “You smell like sugar.”*

*“Yeah, I needed to get some last-minute fertilizer to the south field,” I say, thinking of how Tim-Bob looked like a trussed-up pig when I buried him alive.*

FINALLY, Nikki’s gaze shifts away as she takes her place on the opposite side of the preacher. One by one the other members of the wedding party walk down the aisle, followed by Easy, escorted by LL, her cousin, and my campaign manager. Once they make it up the aisle, the rehearsal resumes, the minister going over everything he will say. The couple, in true grumpy-sunshine fashion, pantomimes their expected responses for the ceremony. Then we all file out, with Nikki looping her arm through mine.

“Hi,” she whispers over to me like nothing untoward happened between us. Like I haven’t tasted her and loved her body.

“Hey.” My voice sounds monotone to my own ears. I can tell by her crestfallen expression she hoped for better. “Sorry,” I mutter, not want her to think I blame her for anything that happened between us. It’s all on me. “About everything,” I add as we near the edge of the aisle.

The smile she gives me nearly knocks me on my ass. It's like she's been waiting for this moment. In that moment I realize I have too. I've missed her. Maybe we needed this break to get us back on track.

"Um." I clear my throat, leaning a little her way. "Maybe we can snatch a moment to talk after the ceremony."

"I'd like that, Thi." She tilts her head a little, beaming up at me.

A little hum races through me at that look. It looks like I have my best friend back.

My jacket pocket starts buzzing incessantly. Annoyance sparks briefly as I dig out my phone. I almost hit Do Not Disturb, but I see all the Google Alerts and my campaign manager rushing at me, waving the latest edition of *Shelby-Love Chronicle* like he's trying to put out a raging fire.





CHAPTER  
**SIX**

**N**ikki

I DON'T KNOW what the hell I was thinking. I shouldn't have kissed him that night. I 110 percent should not have kissed him. Not on the cheek. Then, after he froze and looked at me with those silver eyes all hot and moody, why did my silly ass go lean in—never mind that he met me halfway nuzzling me, sucking on my lobe—never mind that, why did I lean in, touch my lips to his? Then I proceeded to let him snatch me up and eat at my mouth. It was supposed to be our goodbye forever. He was engaged to someone else. Someone in his league. Rich like him, gorgeous like him—not me.

Then there was what happened later that night at the club. I let him... I still shiver at the thought, can never stop dreaming and thinking about his dark curls buried between my legs, how he held me down and spread me before him like a buffet. I could have stopped him. I should have stopped him. But I didn't. I didn't want to. It was my last and only moment to have him. To let him take me. To have him be mine. It's sad and pathetic when I think about it.

Mathias was my friend. For a long time, he was my only friend in the whole wide world. He saved me. Okay, he hit me with his car first and was totally not trying to get in trouble with a DUI, but he was my only friend. He gave me my giant

turtle, Bernice Sanders, who we at first thought was a boy and named *Bernie*.

Mathias was my friend when I was lonely, when I missed my daddy so much, I thought I was going to die from heartbreak. My movie-night friend. My everything. Now he's about to be my husband, and I may have lost him forever.

*AN HOUR EARLIER...*

“You did this. You’ve fucking ruined me, you ungrateful little bitch.”

Stepping back, I shake my head, not understanding what I’m seeing. Mathias Shelby Jr. slams the *Shelby-Love Chronicle* down in front of me on the desk of my cousin Easy’s parlor, raging with all six feet and four inches of his being. His face is hard, and he’s looking at me with nothing but pure hatred and disbelief.

I read the headline: SHELBY SCION, MATHIAS SHELBY, CAUGHT AT SUGAR BABY’S LOVE NEST! The article is by Joi Love.

In horror I read how my cousin Joi reveals the history of Mathias and my friendship in the most sordid way. The article makes it seem like he’s been keeping me in a secret bungalow on his massive Shelby Sugar estate as his underage lover.

“I didn’t do this,” I say to him, my throat tight.

“How the fuck else does she know you lived in a house on our property? How does she know so many details of our relationship? You. That’s how.” His words are raw with betrayal. Everything we had as friends is being stripped away right before my eyes.

Alone. Abandoned. Cast aside. It’s all happening again.

“Mathias—”

A hard knock sounds on the door. Both our heads snap around as my cousin and Mathias’s campaign manager, LL, strides through the door.

“New plan.” He claps his hands together, looking at us with grim determination. “I just spoke to Angel and Easy. How about a double wedding?” He waves some papers in his hand.

AN HOUR later it feels like my spirit has left my body. It’s like I’m hovering over the scene watching a nightmare unfold. The fact it’s a twisted version of something I secretly wished for makes it that much more terrible.

I balked when LL rushed at us with the newspaper just as everyone looked at us in shock. Seconds later I could see the judgment and outright condemnation in people’s eyes as they looked from their phones to Mathias and me.

Now the solution and only way to save Mathias’s campaign is, as LL says, “To lean into the story. Make it your own. And—”

“Hell, no.” Mathias seethes. His gaze arrows in on me. “I’m not letting anyone force me into doing anything I don’t want. I just need time. There is no fucking way I’m doing this to Nat.”

“You don’t have a choice, Mat.” All our heads jerk around at the sound of the of Natalie Spencer’s posh tones as she closes the door with a soft snick.

“Nat.” Slowly Mathias walks over to her, then envelops her in a hug.

She pats his shoulders gently yet very briefly before stepping out of his arms and facing LL and me. “My parents just informed me on the way here that they are withdrawing all monetary support from your campaign, and they’ve lobbied their friends to do so as well. You know they never forgave you for switching parties after the primary. This added betrayal is too much to bear. You won’t have any of our parents’ high-powered friends jumping at the chance to help you out.” She looks at us continuing. “People love a love story no matter how huffy. If they see we are amicable about it—everyone was always skeptical of our arranged marriage

anyway—then they won't have any team Nat versus Team Nikki.”

“That’s asking too much of you,” Mathias says to her, and I can’t help but agree. She doesn’t have to do any of this; she’s the injured party, but here she is making sacrifices on his behalf.

“The work you can do is bigger than all of us,” Natalie says firmly. “You need to win this election, Mathias, because James Fitch is a knuckle-dragging troglodyte unfit for office and will take Alabama back to the ‘good old days.’ Don’t let everything you worked for go up in flames over this.”

My spirit slowly starts reconnecting with my body. Mildly inspired by her big-picture thinking, I’m starting to believe maybe this is not such a horror show.

“What do you say, Mathias? It’s obvious you can muscle your way through this.” LL says, tapping the papers I have yet to see. Mathias strides over to the desk, but not without sending me a hate-filled look.

Once he’s done signing, LL looks over to me. Smiling his thousand-watt smile, he says, “Nikki, are you ready to become Mrs. Mathias Shelby?”

Turns out Ellie—one of Easy’s bridesmaids in this official wedding Mama-Pete is insisting Angel and Easy have, since she was not invited to the first, which was a biker wedding they were forced to have at El Diablo’s clubhouse—just so happens to be a justice of the peace, and soon after we sign those papers she already notarized, we are headed to marital bliss.

Everything is all turned upside down Mathias is supposed to be the best man since he and Angel grew up like brothers in the hellscape of the Shelby Sugar Estate. While I’m Easy’s maid of honor. We’re close as close as I am to anyone, except my older sister, Kandie, and Mathias. But no one knew about Mathias and me. Until that article showed up kissing and hunching on his truck.

I mean they must have used a zoom lens or something because how could they get that close. Shelby Sugar is private property with all kinds of security.

Our secret is out now, thanks to my traitor-ass cousin Joi. I know better than to trust her with anything, knowing how she did Mimi and Santiago. I thought we were better friends than that. We all thought she'd learned her lesson when she was almost disowned for doing Mimi so dirty. She made all the right noises, apologizing and everything. Then bam! Here she goes again selling another Love out, and for what? To drive traffic to her newspaper's website? Not to mention everything was supposition and lies. She never once mentioned to me she knew anything about Mathias and me. She never asked about him, and I never told a soul. So how she knows and what trusted source she kept quoting in the article, I don't know.

I understand why Mathias thinks it's me. So much of it hit close to home. Things only he and I would know. Like how he gave me Bernie—now Bernice Sanders, my giant turtle—as a birthday gift. Still, him thinking I could do anything to harm him is like a cold, bitter dagger piercing my heart. I'm stunned. Hatred—pure unvarnished, unapologetic hatred—is in every sweep of his gaze. He studies me as if I am a frog he is about to vivisect in biology class. Something to be cut open, like he is trying to figure out how I could have fooled him, the great Mathias Shelby, for so long.

Rubbing my forehead, I feel a tension headache blooming. My chest hurts from the way Mathias looks at me. The horrible things he said. Shame lances through me. he trusted me and I let him down is all that I can think about.

I just never thought folks finding out about us would take this nasty turn. Thi told me it would time and time again, but I didn't believe him. Deep down I thought maybe the reason he didn't want folks to know was because he was ashamed of me—some waif he'd taken under his magnanimous wing, showing pity by giving her a home and an education. My guilt comes from my secret wish. Something I keep so hidden and pushed down deep, I wouldn't even allow myself to think it.

“I guess.” I mumble, taking the pen and signing my life over to a man who hates me more than anything right now.

“It’s going to be okay, I promise. Angel and I got shotgun married the first time too.” Easy reaches out to reassure me, across LL, who’s walking us both down the aisle in a double wedding that was never supposed to be.

“Humph.” He mutters, “This is where keeping all these Love secrets gets you.”

“Boy, hush,” Easy tells him. “Look at me and Angel doing just fine. We’re getting married for the second time.”

“Yeah, after he tore all these folks’ stuff up from Alabama to Africa over your little trifling tail.” He sighs, rolling his eyes toward heaven. “Don’t think they don’t want reparations for it. They’re just giving you time to get settled in with the baby.”

The wedding march starts, and my heart drops to my tummy like a hot brick.

As we walk, Easy and LL fall silent. The chapel is full of people. Both sides are packed with family and friends, there for Angel and Easy. Shock registers on the faces of the guests when they see both of us coming down the aisle, Ezekiel-Jane in buttercup yellow and me in a beautiful white gown my cousin Summer had made for Easy’s and Angel’s wedding party, which she had to basically rip apart and take in for my smaller but still curvy frame.

It’s not the audience I notice. It’s the two men standing in front of us on the raised dais. Both have deep-sandy skin, with one slightly lighter and just a hair shorter than the other. They could be brothers, save for the cognac-colored eyes of one and the ice-cold silver of the other.

The differences don’t stop there, though. Angel is looking at Easy like the sun rises and sets at her feet. Mathias Shelby Jr., the man who has been my best—and sometimes only—friend since I was a teen, the man I secretly dreamed to share this day with, looks at me with cold, unmitigated hatred...and lust.



ONE THING about Mama-Pete is she can, on a dime, turn vinegar to wine. With an added bride and groom setting and an added couple topping the cake and references to just Angel and Easy removed, she's turned this reception from a single to a double wedding.

“Talk about shotgun married, cuz.” Easy winks over to me, cuddling her baby, Judah, in her arms as he sleeps peacefully among the boisterous group that is our family.

“I know everything worked out for y'all, Easy, but please don't misunderstand—he is mad as hell. He proposed to and was engaged to someone else two hours ago. Their wedding was being planned, girl.” We're huddled together, with the men on either side of us. Mama-Pete, aware of how everything went down, doesn't want the focus divided between the two couples.

This wedding was the hottest ticket in town. LL, savvy campaign manager that he is, thought it would be a great idea to give people their phones back after Angel insisted on them being confiscated when it was just going to be Easy and him; now our guests are flooding social media with the story of the swoon-worthy double wedding.

Natalie, who was Mathias's date to the wedding, was quietly ushered away. Everyone knows and was probably invited to their upcoming wedding that will now never take place.

She's the campaign's chairperson and has been heavily involved since he announced his candidacy. Everyone was already saying how they were going to be the Washington powered couple with their beauty, grace, and wealth.

Now she's heading back to the campaign headquarters to put out the fires this story caused and get ahead of whatever his opponent has to say. Mathias's war room is already getting ahead of the story, turning the tables on Joi's piece and hyping



our supposed love story. The only problem is Mathias's poor job of hiding his rage. Every look my way is wrathful.

The kiss at the altar was a barely there brush of his lips. I stood stunned by the events of the day, but then the smooth brush of his lips shocked me out of my daze, causing me to look up into mercury silver of his gaze and the promise of retribution within.

"We have to dance now," Easy tells me as Lourdes, one of Angel sisters, comes over to take Judah out of Easy's hands. "This was my parents' favorite song. I hope you don't mind." Easy smiles down at me, taking my hand. She pulls me out to the dance floor. I have never seen her so delighted. Love animates my sweet, demure cousin. She radiates life like the buttercup blossoms she loves so much, twirling me around and around.

I laugh with her until she stops abruptly, and just as the strains of the old-school song "Love Ballad" come on, I'm caught in the arms of my new unwanted husband.

Strong arms cover my back, pulling me into the hard chest of the man I longed for during these six years. I look up and up to reach the cool gaze of my new husband. He looks down with a smile that doesn't reach those eyes. It's for the public. Within the depths, I can see the unbridled malice meant solely for me.

"Smile, wife. Show the people how happy you are to get what you wanted."

I try to paint a smile on my face.

"Not like that. You look like you're trying too hard." He turns us to the gentle sway of the song.

I make an effort to soften my smile just a hint, keeping my eyes on him the way Easy is looking at Angel in my periphery.

I can't stand to look at Mathias. He's too cold, too calculating. This is not the man I know. Not my best friend at all. Now I fully understand what it's like to be someone he abhors, the target of his wrath and revenge. My tummy flips with dread. I have to make him see.

“I didn’t do this, Thi.” I grip his shoulders. Then I hold him tighter, trying through touch to make him see. “You know I would do nothing to ever jeopardize your career.”

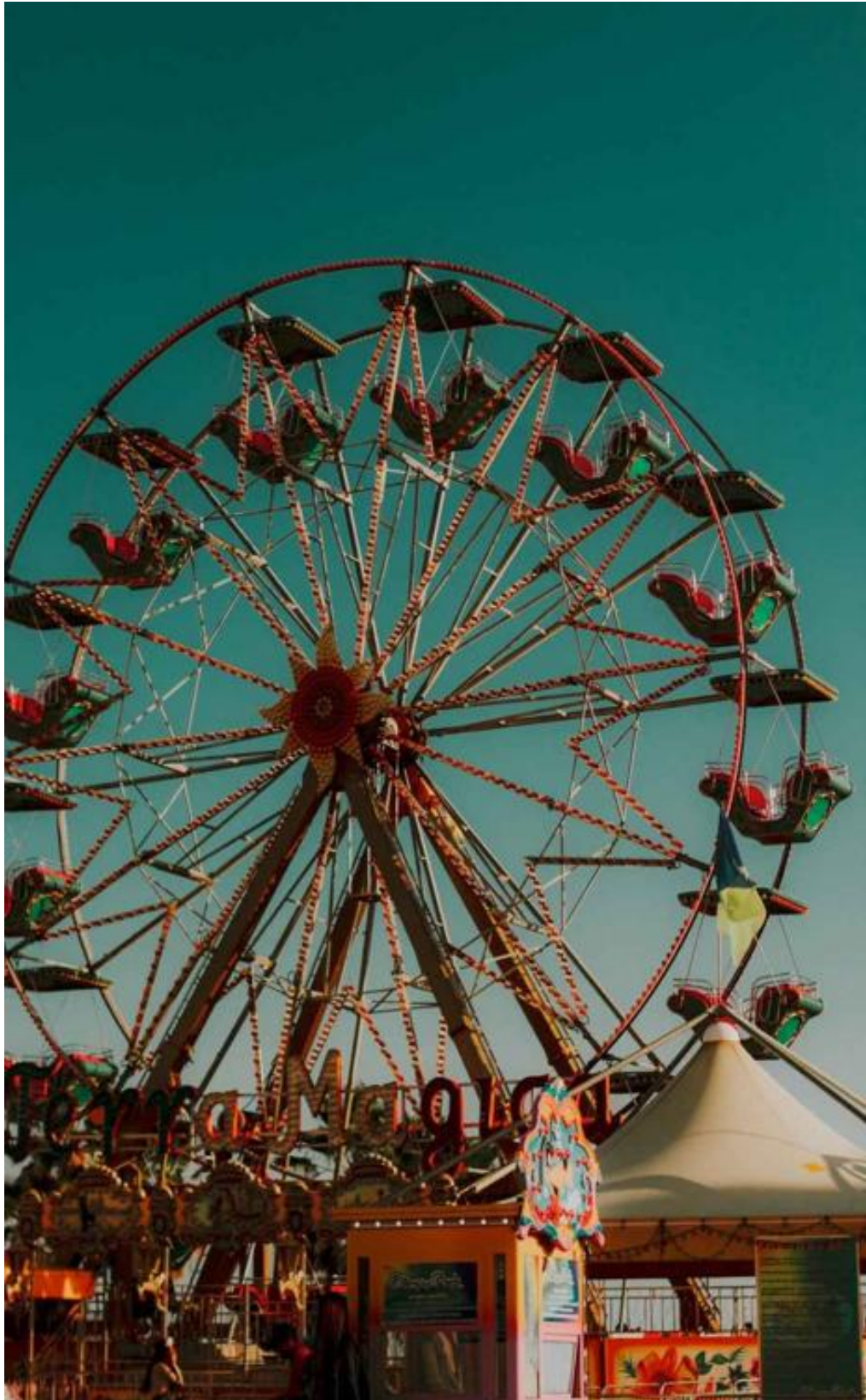
The side of his mouth quirks up sweetly. The man who taught me how to win *God of War* is back. His gaze is softening like it did so many times when we shared something special and private just between us two.

He bends to whisper in my ear, “Shut your lying-ass whore mouth.”

I’m too stunned to speak, my heart racing with every smooth turn he takes on the dance as another melodious love song fills the air. This man is different, unknown and scary. Not the cold, calculated lawyer who is rumored to be coldhearted and malicious on behalf of his clients, the main one being his best friend, and billionaire businessman, Angel who owns Cruz Construction and Transportation and rumored cartel kingpin; another is Shelby Holdings, the corporate and philanthropic wing of Shelby Sugar. Now I can fully see him as he is: the man he claimed he never wanted to be, the son of the devil that was Mathias Shelby Senior.

When his daddy died last year, I said nothing when Mathias used that tragedy to launch his campaign. I knew as he told the press a few days after his father died in a plane crash, he was heartbroken but still intended to throw his hat in the ring. It was the farthest thing from the truth. First, Mathias couldn’t care less that his tormentor died, and two, he was the first Shelby since they switched from Dixiecrat to Republican after The Civil Rights Movement to be a Democrat, and his father would have disowned him for it, which is what he wanted—to humiliate his father, then systematically destroy everything he built.

As the song comes to an end, Mathias pulls back to smile softly down at me. “Tell me, little wife, is it everything you dreamed when you plotted with your cousin?”



CHAPTER  
SEVEN

Mathias

STEERING my curvy little liar off the dance floor, I see a throng of people gathered at the edges to wish us well. And wouldn't I know it, among them is Marcus, Nikki's jilted boyfriend. I almost admire the cool assessing stare he trains on us.

I can feel the moment my wife notices him. She barely had time to explain to her date what was going on before we were swept away to the war room LL set up to deal with the fallout of those pictures.

"Mathias," she whispers to me as I make no move to change direction. We'll see if her boyfriend gives a fuck enough to make a scene. I make no move to hide the fact I find him loathsome.

"Sommerland." His eyes narrow slightly at the quirk of my lips. Not that it was ever a competition, but when he fucked her, I know she thought of me. He was a mere stand-in for what she really wanted.

"Shelby." He gives me a brief once-over as if he's barely tolerating my presence. "Mrs. Shelby." He's all indulgence as he moves to take her hand.

I block him, taking his firm grip in my crushing one. He doesn't even flinch. I feel a modicum of grudging respect at that, but still. "Don't touch my fucking wife." I give him a

smooth smile in case the press is watching from the area where we have them cordoned off.

Nikki's aghast look a moment before she covers it is blocked by me. Thankfully, she's nearly a foot shorter than us both, so no one can see her. I make a note to start her media training immediately. It won't do us any good if she keeps showing her every thought on her face.

"Nikki, I know today has been a lot for you." He slides me a glance. "But I want you to know you can always consider me a friend." He actually looks sincere. The fact he is even here is a sign he didn't deserve her—to be so easily swayed to give her up? Laughable.

"Th-thank you, Marcus." Her eyes are shining, and damn if there isn't a little sadness there.

*Collateral damage never felt so good*, I think, watching his somber face as he gives her a nod of acknowledgment before walking away.

"Hm. Your boyfriend took it well. You seem really torn up about it, little wife." My snide remark makes her look away.

Several more well-wishers follow Sommerland, all exuding real surprise at the union, unable to hide their curiosity around the salacious story.

One of the numerous aides to the wedding planner sidles up beside us. "Time to cut the cake." How they orchestrate these things with military precision never ceases to amaze me.

My mind strays to Natalie's excitement a few days ago, when she was telling me about some odd thing or another she and the planner had come up with to pay homage to my bastard father during our wedding, which will now never take place.

Oddly enough, the only feelings I have on that front are relief and regret that Natalie got hurt because of this.

Taking my place with Nikki, Angel, and Easy, I slice the cake before taking a piece and pressing it into the lush pillows of my wife's mouth. I shove down the fact I'm happy as hell I'm not fucking Natalie tonight as my dick lengthens and

hardens when Nikki's wet lips cover my fingers, licking away the buttercream.

WE ENTER THE BRIDAL SUITE, hastily booked but well-appointed, at the Shelby Hotel. It's a cute little boutique place run by one of my father's former mistresses, Yvette, a retired Swiss model he somehow cajoled into giving up her career—probably with promises of becoming the next Mrs. Shelby, which I would have gladly told her was a pipe dream.

“Allow me,” says the handsome older woman ushering us into the room, which overlooks the city center on the Shelby side of the county.

Everything here speaks of old Southern charm. We were able to keep a lot of our historic buildings in Shelby-Love due to the Union Army not making it this far from either Birmingham or Mobile.

“This room is beautiful for a night as special as this.” She beams at us both.

I nod encouragingly to her. Nikki is trembling beneath my touch on her shoulder.

“The most exceptional feature is the balcony overlooking the entire city.” Her smiles softens as she looks at both of us. “It's perfect for breakfast.”

I'll have to text LL and tell him to get someone out here in the morning to take pictures of the newlyweds having a romantic breakfast.

“Thank you, Yvette.”

She nods demurely, passing us as she heads out.

Stepping away from Nikki, I shoot off a couple of texts to my staff and campaign team. I'm responding to LL calling me a genius when I look up and see her rooted in the same spot.

“You can go get ready, through there.” After nodding to the en suite, I look down, texting back, *I KNOW*.

She hasn't moved.

“Nicolette.” The hard edge to my voice makes her jump.

“Yeah?” Her wild eyes meet mine. She looks like a doe caught in the headlights.

“I said you can use the en suite to get ready.” I nod in the direction of the bathroom again.

My irritation gives way to anger when she starts shaking her head. “Umm, I don’t think so, Thi—”

“Don’t fucking call me that.”

She steps back as if struck, then tries again. “Mathias. I think it’s best for us to take a step back and rethink all this. Everything happened so fast. And you’re still very angry. I really don’t think we should do anything else to compound this mistake.”

“Take a step back and rethink all this?” I take several steps in her direction until I stand squarely in her space.

Biting her lip, Nikki arches her neck up to take my gaze head-on.

“Hm... Were you not in the war room with us for over two hours, agreeing to all this?”

“Yes.” With her head bobbing like one of those bobblehead dolls, she adds, “We were under a lot of stress and duress because of that hit piece. We should get an annulment. Take some time. Maybe you could suspend the campaign. Well, not suspend it, but maybe take a pause? Then we can make a joint statement and—I don’t know.” She says all this in a rushed pleading voice that does nothing to alleviate my anger or my desire to strangle her treacherous ass right now where she stands, mere inches from me.

“You orchestrate my destruction, then you want to run from me?” I’m not surprised to find my hand manacled to her neck. No. The surprise is saved for the flare of heat I see emerging from those dark amber orbs. A flush steals over her face, cascading down to her chest. I squeeze more. Her chest rises and falls faster as she tries to catch her breath. I can see her aureolas about to spill over the lace edge of her borrowed dress. She’s trapped under my gaze and my hand. My dick

swells so hard, I have to bite back a groan. Reaching up with my free hand, I start pulling the pins out of her hair, daring her with the quick ruthlessness of my actions and hardness of my gaze to try and stop me.

Once I'm done her hair falls around her in luscious dark waves, scented of vanilla and rose. The sight and scent of her makes my chest tighten in a way I've never experienced in my almost thirty years.

“Ma—”

“Don't fucking speak,” I say through clenched teeth. I'm like a beast who's scented wounded prey.

“Talk to me, and I'm throwing your ass out of here. You will never see me again, but you will never be free of me, darling girl. I will annihilate everything you love. Nothing and no one you cherish will be spared. How do you think my bastard father's plane dropped out the sky? Hm? You think Takeda did all that on his own? How'd he know the flight plan? How'd he get the device on board?” I make the confession I never did or could to Natalie even if she were my wife. She doesn't even know the depth of my hatred for the man who sired me. Only Angel and Nikki—the people I trust most in the world—know my truth. Yet only one betrayed me. Now she's my wife, and it's a done deal. She's mine. Mine to share the truth. Mine to punish. Mine to keep. Mine to do with as I please.

“Will you stay or go?” I watch her eyes well, biting back a curse when I see a tear spill free, then another. I wait longer than I should, watching her little ass struggle and game out the repercussions.

Finally she swallows, looking at me squarely. “Stay.”

I can't say what comes over me. *Mine*, roars through my mind like it's a long-awaited ache finally being assuaged, a thirst finally ready to be quenched, the first morsel of food after a fast. The massive need writhes and unfurls until it fills me with an insatiable desire to claim what is mine.



Removing my hand from her hair, I reach inside her dress, rending the bodice, tearing it to the waist. Bowing over her, I take one hard pebbled nipple into my mouth, furling my tongue around it tasting the vanilla and rose of her skin. What ambrosia they put in it, I don't know, but that shit is making me crazy. Her anguished moan makes me suck more greedily as I pinch and twist the other nipple, training her for my demanding touch.

She shudders, curving into me, loving every filthy thing I do to her. Moving to the right, I take the other nipple, it's deliciously hard. I work it with my tongue, lapping it gently only to suck hard. She whimpers but slides against me like a dirty little kitten seeking more of my attention. It makes my dick kick. I suckle at her. Laving, tasting, losing myself in the taste and texture of my motherfucking wife. She's mine. The satin of her skin beckons me to lick every delicious inch of her. She is magnificent, arching into my mouth, denying me nothing, like she knows she's owned by me completely. Mine to protect, pleasure, and provide for.

Dragging my lips over soft, plush skin, I nip, marking her so there will be no doubt as to whom she belongs. Then I reach the delicious plump mound of her sex. So fucking fat. The hot musk mingles with the vanilla and rose, creating an apex of desire. Helpless to resist, I cover every inch I can with my mouth.

"Damn it, I want to cannibalize this sweet little pussy," I tell her on a groan. I'm helpless to stop. Her pussy beckons me, begs me to savor, suck. I can deny her nothing.

"Ahhh..." Nikki whimpers when I lick the seam between her lips. Dipping my tongue, I tease her plump clit hidden within. She arches into my mouth, tangling her fingers in my hair, anchoring me. I groan in response. There is nothing about this that has not aroused every part of my being. I'm drawn taut by every sigh. Pierced by every whimper. I'm reveling in this experience. Pressing her thick thighs apart, I slip my tongue between her fat juicy lips. She's dripping for me.

Pulling away, I look up into the eyes watching my every move. "Sommerland likes you bare?" Shock flares in her eyes.

I pull her outer lips apart with my thumbs. “I like my women to look like grown-ass women,” I tell her. “Don’t shave it again.”

Covering her hardened glistening clit with my mouth, I suck. And suck. And suck.

“Ma—”

“Thi—”

“As—”

My dick kicks so fucking hard at the way she cries my name. Her nails are digging into my fucking scalp like she’s clinging to a cliff. She is. I’m taking her to the precipice of bliss, and I’m going to drop her ass off.

Slowly, almost tentatively, she starts fucking my face. I lash her with my tongue over and over. Punishing, pleasuring, drawing her out further and further. I pull back, tugging those plump lips into my mouth. I cover her with long swaths of my tongue. Her legs are trembling. She’s coming undone. Triumph roars within me like a gale. She’s shuddering, begging me, patting me with trembling fingers.

“You’re so greedy, so needy. Such a needy little brinquedo de fuder. Tell your husband what you need.” I growl against her flesh, which is slick, glistening, and wet for me—my perfect little fucktoy just as I claimed in my mother tongue. Only for me from here on out. No more Sommerland. Mine is the only dick her pussy will curve around, and by the morning she will know it.

“You,” she says on almost a whisper. Not good enough. But the way she arches, showing me that hot little hole, convinces me to make her come, so I pierce her pretty flower with my tongue.

Turning all my attention to her pretty little pussy, I flick, lash, and swirl her clit with the tip and flat of my tongue.

She pumps against my mouth crying, “Thi,” on a raw scream, her hot cream spilling.

Coming to my feet, I catch her just as she crumples. She's made me lose my mind. We're still standing in the living room, facing the balcony of the suite. I haul her up over my shoulder; she's naked except for her heels.

After striding into the bedroom, I stop, looking at the pink rose petals strewn all over the bed. If I were with anyone else, I'd roll my eyes. But for some reason, I want to see Nikki surrounded by flowers when I drive into her soft, curvy body.

I toss her on the bed. She bounces from the force. Pulling herself up on her elbows, she looks at me warily as I slip the knot of my bow tie free, kicking off my shoes. I subsequently toss my cuff links on a nearby dresser. I make quick work of my shirt, which smells of her sex and the vanilla-rose scent she loves to wear. I unbuckle my belt before tossing it to her.

"Hold that." I give her a nasty smile. "You should have checked before you decided to fuck with me, darling. You'd have found out I like to fuck dirty, hard, and without remorse."

Her swallow of trepidation is so pretty, I muse, stepping out my pants, taking off my dress socks. I leave my T-shirt on, not wanting to scare her or see any pathetic pity. My eyes never leave hers. She has her legs pulled closed, hiding what's mine.

"Open your legs, Nikki, darling. Let me see what you were so ready to give that blond bitch." My dick springs free, slapping against my abs just I catch her shaking her head. "Open. Your. Legs. Wife."

She flinches like the words are an epithet. Which in this moment they are.

I prowls over to her, pushing her hesitant legs apart. "You will never deny me. This pussy is mine for as long as I want it." I position myself at her sweet little hole, rubbing the head of my cock between her slick lips. "You are mine. Mine." I thrust hard, deep, until I bottom out.

I see the moment pain flashes in her eyes; tears spill out the corners of her eyes, trailing down to her mouth before

slipping sideways onto the duvet. Her bottom lip is bruised and bleeding from where she bit it trying not to cry out.

I feel no remorse when I realize I split her cherry. I know I wasn't gentle. Telling myself not to care about her tears, I touch her forehead with mine, whispering, "This is what you wanted, right? What you planned. You saved this pussy for me. It was always supposed to be mine. You were always supposed to be mine." Elation thrums through me like a victory cry. Only me. She saved this pretty pussy for me; it makes my heart thump harder in my chest.

I lick the tears on each side. "So pretty when you cry," I growl. Then I groan, feeling her muscles tightening around me. "You got some good-ass pussy. Thank you for saving it for me, darling." She tightens more. So tight, so slick. Giving her time to breathe through it and take this dick, I don't move.

"Such a good fucking girl, keeping this pretty-ass pussy for me." My dick kicks. She shifts. Easing out, I watch the way her pupils dilate.

"You like?" I ask on the return.

Her head bobs. "Y-yes."

"Thank your husband for making you feel so good, minha pequena." I move within her lush sweetness with purpose.

I can feel my seed already rising.

"Thank you, husband," she whimpers, moving her hands around my neck. She's so close, too close to me, offering her mouth to kiss. My heart, the fucking betrayer, kicks.

Moving close, I don't give her what she wants. Snatching her hands away, I trap them above her head. Anything to avoid giving in.

Driving into her, I try to find her G-spot. Angling her, I brush it, hearing her gasp. Her muscles squeeze me so hard, she almost makes me come.

There's no way I can last like this. Pulling out, I flip her over before shoving a pillow under her stomach.

Pushing her legs up froggy style, I get an unobstructed view of her ravaged pussy. I see her blood slicking my dick. The monster in me howls like the beast it is seeing the claim I made. Bending, I lick her from slit to ass.

“Ahh.” She shudders, arching, letting me tongue her pussy.

“Hell, yeah. I’m going to like fucking your little freaky ass.” I slap her left cheek then her right making them jiggle.

I bend, sucking her pussy from the back, tongue fucking her hole until she’s climbing the fucking walls, screaming my name, coming on my tongue for a second time.

Her pussy is a glistening wet welcome when I thrust inside again to the hilt. Soft, warm, pliant flesh accepts me, taking everything I have to give. Nikki melts into the bed. Her pretty ass shakes as I plow into her. I grip her hips in a crushing hold I know will leave bruises. Driving, pounding, fucking, I’m mad with lust, an unhinged desire to claim and conquer every part of her. Even though she is mine, claimed in front of both God and man, the need stabs into my chest, pushing me beyond mere want. It’s a dark possessive need to own her body and soul, the same thing that drove me to push her away because I knew that path led to destruction. Knew I would be sick with it. She makes me ravenous. There is no part of her I will not consume with delight. Now that I have her, I will feast. I want to push it away, yet still it snakes into me, hooking, leashing, claiming me as well.

Our bodies slam into each other as she starts fucking me back.

“Yes, Thi,” she moans. “Take it, take it baby, kill it, kill ittttt.” I can imagine how many times she dreamed of this. Just as I did. As the realization slams into me, I reach beneath her, stroking her clit.

“Come for me,” I urge, hitting that plump raised spot inside Nikki, driving into it over and over while I play with her.

She keens, “Thi,” strangling my dick, wringing out of me the hardest, most mind-bending orgasm of my life. I see

fucking stars.

She collapses on the duvet.

I fall beside her, dragging her rapidly cooling body into mine.

“At least we have this,” I mutter, looking at the ceiling with my former best friend, now wife. An enemy I never knew I had. Never knew I’d want so much.



CHAPTER  
EIGHT

Nikki

I DON'T KNOW how long we stayed wrapped together. A breeze makes me shiver a little. He pulls me close nuzzling my hair. Our bodies start to chill under the cool air-conditioning. He smells so good, a hint of honeysuckle, clover, sugar always sugar, spice, and earth.

My pussy squeezes, much as it had last year—heck, than it did when he took me earlier. He's so dang mean. Everything about him is as ruthless he's rumored to be. He was never this way with me until tonight. I never knew this side of him existed.

Tonight, I learned differently. Thrust out of the safe cocoon he created just for me to bask in and enjoy the great friend he was. I am no longer the girl with stars shining in her eyes for a man I knew I could never have. No, that illusion is shattered into a million pieces today.

Now, I know what it's like to have his complete predatory focus on you in unrelenting anger. Still, he never hurt me. Well, except when he pushed inside me. Then he waited until I got comfortable. He made sure I came. He didn't have to do that. It was sooo rough. So right. I feel the flush spreading from my face to my breasts just thinking about all the things he did to me, all the things he made me like. I curl tighter into him, feeling like I'm about to drift off.



He hugs me close for a split second before he stiffens. He pulls away. I can feel him looking down at me. Swallowing, I don't dare look up into his hate-filled gaze. I'm done crying over him.

Moving and taking his warmth with him, he mutters, "Come on." Grabbing my hand, he drags me to my feet. With my legs still shaky from earlier, I walk ahead of him, and he pushes me through the bedroom to the bathroom.

Heading to the toilet, I hesitate, looking over my shoulder at him.

"G'head, it's not like it's going to be the last time we have to share a bathroom." Then he busies himself with starting the shower and ignores me while I see to my lady business.

"Get in the shower," he instructs, stepping in front of the toilet to use it.

Hurrying to look away, I step under the steaming water, letting it sluice over my aching body. I don't know what came over me to let him have me like that, but I can feel every twinge and ache now. I get the fragrant honeysuckle soap and mesh towel, then lather myself from head to toe. My body is already covered in luscious white foam when Mathias steps in, his T-shirt still on.

"Why are you wearing that?" I ask, seeing the material dampen from the spray of the shower.

"I don't let people see my scars," his tone is clipped, guarded. "I can still get clean with it on."

He looks at me for a long time, his eyes hooded, as if he's deciding what to do with me, trying to gauge my reaction. Scars? He never told me he had scars. From where? How had he gotten them?

The muscle works in his jaw, his face hardening to a dramatic degree. His top lip curls with malice. "Bathe me." All questions die on my tongue at his demand.

"Okay." I press my lips together at this impossible task, squeezing more suds through the sponge. "We need to switch."

He acts like it almost pains him to death to do even this little thing, so I roll my eyes. His hand shoots out, gripping my chin in a firmer-than-necessary grip.

“Uh-uh, I won’t have any of that from you, little wife.” He growls, his hand squeezing just a little for emphasis before slipping down over my décolletage to cup a breast.

“Ahh,” I gasp when he pinches my nipple hard. My pussy clenches and floods. This mean motherfucker knows what he’s doing. He has the nerve to smirk when he sees me squirming.

Ignoring him, I begin making gentle circles over his unexposed skin. I get on my tiptoes because I know without asking that he won’t bend, intending to make this as difficult as possible. I start at his neck, making huge swathes over his shoulders and down his arms. He grunts when I intertwine our fingers as I wash them. Then I make my way down the taut ridges of I his body cast through his clinging tee shirt using smaller circles, skipping his hard dick. I go down one hard thigh, then the other, his strong calves flexing. Then I take care of his feet.

“Turn,” I say, watching him quirk a brow before he turns to do as I say. Moving to his back, I scrub hard through the shirt, making his head fall forward and groan as he releases the tension.

“Fuck,” he says, like he didn’t know he just got himself into. If he’d paid attention enough throughout our friendship, he’d know I never missed how he holds stress in his neck and back. I’ve given him more than one shoulder and neck massage. When I press into the pressure points in his lower back, he groans louder. Smoothing the cloth over his naked ass, I watch as his muscles flex. He groans stop when I wash inside his hole. *Now who’s smirking, motherfucker?*

Getting on my tiptoes, I press against his back as I slip my fingers free. “Turn around, big boy.”

His dick is throbbing and pearled with come when he turns, bobbing well past his navel and curved to the left. I’ve never seen any other dick in real life, but this has to be the prettiest one on planet earth.

“Darling,” he warns when I take him in my warm, soapy hands. Slicking up and down his dick, I take command of him like he did me earlier. His dick is a massive column of flesh. My fingers and thumb don’t touch from tip to base—no wonder.

“No wonder what?”

My eyes shoot up to meet his stare briefly before he returns his gaze to me washing him.

Cupping his sac, I roll his balls gently between my fingers. “No wonder it hurt so bad.”

Silence drops between us like a bomb — heavy and all-encompassing. His hand grips my wrist, stopping me. “You know I didn’t know.” His eyes search mine, demanding confirmation.

Looking away, I try to tug my arm out of his tight grasp.

His grip only tightens. He moves us both under the spray. Water washes sudsy foam from our tightly pressed bodies. “You were with Sommerland for over a year and never let him have you,” he accuses.

I bow my head, resting my forehead on his chest, whispering miserably, “He wasn’t you. He’s nothing like you, Thi.”

Oh, how I tried. I wanted to exorcise Mathias Shelby from my mind, body, and heart, and who better for that role than another billionaire scion? Still, no matter how beautiful Marcus Sommerland is in all his well-over-six-foot glory, for me he doesn’t hold a candle to Thi.

“You didn’t have to do all this.” He sounds so wounded. He releases his hold on me, dropping his hands to his sides. Head falling back, he lets the spray spill over his face, his jaw working. Tilting forward until our gazes’ snag again, he snarls, “Show me.”

My confusion must play across my face.

“Fucking useless virgins.” Hard hands press my shoulders down.

I descend until my knees touch the water-warmed tiles of the shower. “I don’t know how.” His dick is looming over me like Goliath, and I’m David without a slingshot or any weapon in my arsenal.

“Open your fucking mouth,” he rumbles.

Tentatively, I obey. Hard velvet slides over my tongue, then farther and farther still.

“Breathe. Breathe through that shit.” He cups my head, not letting me give up. His cold words make my pussy clench even as I gag at the intrusion in my throat. Breathing through my nose, I eventually adjust.

“You look gorgeous with my dick in your mouth, darling.” Praise falls from his lips like a curse. “I bet you’re going to be even prettier when I paint your face with my come.” He starts to move with slow, methodical thrusts. His legs are spread. I can see from the periphery that his thighs flex with the drive of his hips. The steady strokes across my tongue mimics how he pressed inside me earlier. My body responds like he’s still pounding inside my pussy. My muscles squeeze and clench. Working my mouth over him, I welcome him deeper, harder, to take my mouth like he took my pussy. I’m ravenous for him.

“Gotdamn, you’re such a good little cumslut of a wife. Take this dick down your throat, darling.” His heavy strong hands tangle in my curls as he fucks my throat. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, take it, take it,” he commands. Hot jets of come spill onto my tongue just as he pulls out and finishes on my face and open mouth.

“So beautiful,” he whispers. His eyes have taken on a liquid, almost-iridescent hue. He pulls me to my feet. My eyes round when he licks my cheek, then transfers his come from his mouth to mine.

“You so nasty,” I tell him as he rinses the rest from my mouth.

“You haven’t seen nothing yet, little darling. You had the good Mathias, but you didn’t want him. Now you got the bad

one.”

Before I can deny his words, he’s already dropping to his knees, pulling one of my legs over his broad shoulders, and burying his head in my pussy.

I KNOW it’s late but don’t know what time it is. All I know is I’m cold. After we finished in the shower and performed our other ablutions, Mathias brought me back to bed, and I fell asleep spooned in his arms. His demeanor changed after the shower. I doubted he wanted to even lie beside me.

“I can sleep on the sofa. I’m sure there’s a pullout.” I cringed at how hesitant my voice sounded.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight. I left your little ass alone for a year, and look what you got into.” He then strode over to the bed before ripping the soiled sheets off. Together we set the bed to rights, then got in on opposite sides. After a few moments of holding as still as a rabbit in a fox’s stare, I gasped when he dragged me into the warmth of his arms.

Getting out of bed, I notice the air conditioner is off. The white noise of its soft drone shutting off was probably what woke me, along with the absence of Mathias’s heat at my back.

I pad over to the outer chamber. The room is completely black, except for the light shining in from the balcony.

The barest sound—almost like a brush against smooth wood—draws my head around. There, sitting in the darkness, is Mathias, his phone in one hand, while in the other, he swirls a liquid undefinable in the darkness. I can only assume its whiskey from the motion of his hand.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Nat,” he whispers into the phone. I’m facing him, but he’s so focused on his phone that he doesn’t see me standing slightly behind and to the side of him.

“I’m sorry you’re going through this. Maybe we moved too quicky to squash it. It’s not too late, Mat. Just get an annulment. We can say it was a prank. My parents are willing

to call in any favors they need to.” Her pleading makes me step back a little. The pain in her voice is obvious. I never asked him if he loved her after he gave her his mom’s ring. But I didn’t need to because he does. I feel a thousand times a fool, although I had nothing to do with Joi’s sick little game. I tried to text her, but she never responded to any of them. Why she did it remains a mystery for the time being. I can’t understand of the life me why she would do this to me. I let her in my life and opened myself up to her, only for her to not only hurt me and Mathias but Natalie, who is innocent of all this and has never been anything but kind to me.

“At what cost, though? Your parents almost lost their minds when I switched parties after I got the Republican nomination. Plus,”—he pauses, sighing deeply—“it’s too late for an annulment.”

The air goes dead between them for what feels like an eternity. My face heats.

“Well, I’m sure she’s ecstatic.” The icy words cut through me. “You know she’s always been in love with you, from the moment you saved her from that trucker. I never thought she’d be so desperate to do this. Bless her heart. I would say it’s so Love of her, but she was never really around them, was she?” She titters.

*He told her. He told her everything* is all I can think, taking another step back, clawing my throat to stop the choked cry threatening to explode from me.

“I know you’re upset, Nat, but let’s not pretend you and I were anything other than occasional plus ones and business partners. If you plan on remaining with the campaign, as you assured me and LL that you were, then I expect you to make the necessary adjustments around your pride and never fucking speak of my wife that way again. I’d hate to lose you when we are so close to getting everything we’ve worked so hard for.” His tone is as hard with her as it was with me earlier. Icy control laces every word, brooking no argument.

“Of course, Mathias,” she says, hurrying to reassure him.

“Good. I want you to head the media training for Nicolette. Every expression plays across her face. Plus, she needs some mock interviews and a new wardrobe. You are the best. Despite how we came to be, she and I must show a united front if we are going to weather this storm and win the election.” It’s insulting, the way he speaks with such matter-of-fact assurance about replacing his former fiancée with me as if we are interchangeable.

I wait, thinking—heck, hoping—she’ll tell him to go to hell. She owes him nothing. Surely she doesn’t think she’s so easily replaced.

“Sounds good. When do you want me to start? Are you going to take time to enjoy your honeymoon?”

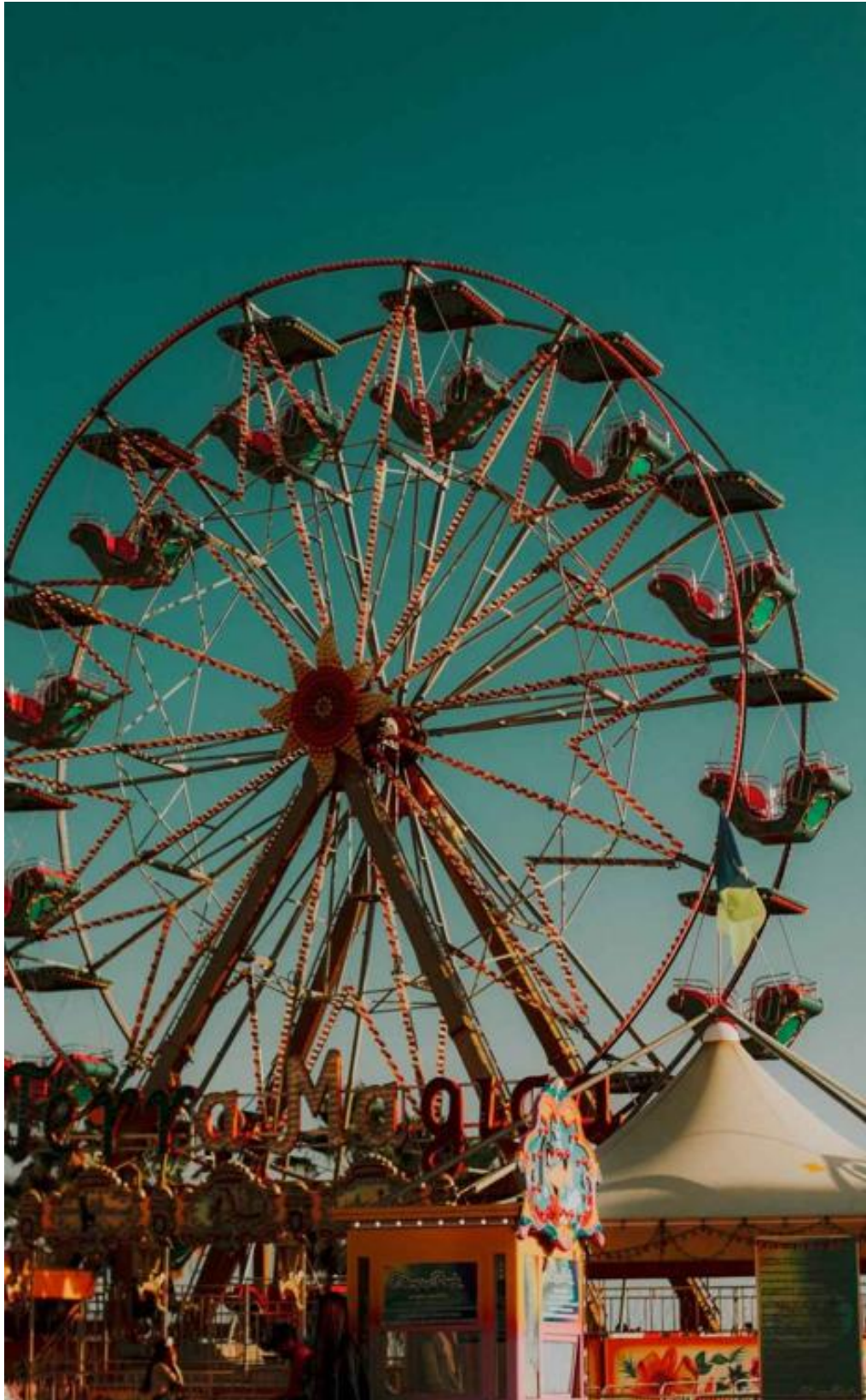
“Tomorrow. We go back on the campaign trail tomorrow.”

They continue to more mundane topics about the campaign. I’m honestly too stunned to move. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t any of this. They are both mercenary as fuck.

“Why are you here?” Mathias’s biting words draw my attention to his hand swirling the contents of his glass before he takes a sip.

“I was cold. I woke up—” I feel silly even coming out here. I don’t know what made me do it or what made me stay and torture myself listening to their conversation.

“I wasn’t there.” He fills in what I’ve obviously left out. He stands, his eyes and face both inscrutable, then tosses back the remains of the drink. “After you, little wife.”





CHAPTER  
NINE

M athias

MY FIRST SENSATIONS are the smell of vanilla and rose tickling my nose and the feeling of my unwanted wife's tight little pussy squeezing my dick. Instinctively, I pull her tighter, surging inside her. Who found whom is irrelevant.

"Thi." Her gasp is sweet, reverent, which makes me pause. "Did you take my dick without permission, wife?" I nip her ear for emphasis. *When did she become the person who takes?* I muse, driving hard into those hot, wet walls strangling my dick.

"I—don't—know." She whimpers with each hard thrust of my dick.

"Sorry if your pussy is still sore—" I cut my words short. I don't make a habit of lying. "No, I'm not. This pussy is too good. I'm not sorry." I pull her thigh over mine so I can get at her pussy with my fingers. My dick feels like a brick as I drive into her honeyed warmth again and again.

"You're so fucking wet for me, darling. Your pussy is so ready for me."

"Yes," she cries, arching into every slam of my hips.

"Fuck yeah," I mutter, driving into her hard, claiming what's mine. She's mine. Again, the thought roars though my mind with a rightness that shouldn't be there. She betrayed

me. She's not for me. I was never meant for her. This was never supposed to be. Still. The way her body curves to mine, the way she fits into me as if she were designed by the gods just for me makes all resistance seem futile.

Our bodies dance to a rhythm of desire, seeking the bliss we shared so recently last night. I touch her sensitive clit, rubbing the slick wetness of our mixed essences, playing and circling her little nub in ever-tightening rings, until she cries my name like it's a blessing; her pussy clutches me so tightly, I see heaven as I pump my nut deep inside her.

I know I've found my home.

“EAT. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

She looks up in question from her seat on the balcony. We have an unobstructed view of the city center. And anyone looking has a view of us.

“As you heard so well eavesdropping last night, we are back on the campaign trail today. Nat is coming by this morning with some staff to get you ready, and we will be heading out around noon. So eat up,” I snap. I've never been a kind taskmaster. Learning cold ruthlessness at the hands of a psychopath will do that to you.

I sit beside her, making sure I'm facing the direction I told LL to have the paparazzi posted. This exclusive will hit the news blogs before we even finish our coffee. I want so much attention put on how much we supposedly love each other that everything else—like how long we've actually known each other—falls to the wayside.

“Here, little wife.” I take a blackberry and press it to her lips. She opens for me so prettily. My dick lengthens watching the way those lush pillows she calls lips cover my fingers.

Uncaring of who is watching, I lean over and take her lips with mine. I capture her gasp, savoring the delicious flavors of berry and Nikki mingling on my tongue.

“So good,” I say, giving her a wink, chuckling to myself as I see confusion flit across her face.

It’s no more than she deserves. Serves the little menace right for causing me all this fucking turmoil.

In a blink the fury is back. I lean back, crossing my leg over my thigh, watching her in quiet malevolence. “Tell me, little wife. What did you hope to gain from all this?” I pause for effect. “My love?”

The words end on a humorless scoff as if the possibility of ever loving her is an absurdity. Which it is. Before her betrayal it was possible—hell, more than possible. Now? It’s never happening and I mean never ever. I don’t tolerate liars, especially not liars who would use our friendship as the method to gain power over me.

“I told you I had nothing to do with this, Mathias.” She visibly bristles before me with hot indignation.

“Are your cousins not your new best friends? Haven’t y’all been a feature at the Shack? Having guys stacked eight deep to watch y’all grinding on that bull?” I spear her with a look I know is heated by the way she blanches.

“I didn’t know you were keeping tabs on me. You’re the one who threw me away like so much trash.” She can’t hide the hurt from her words or the tremble of her fingers as she reaches for her coffee.

“So that’s why? I hurt your feelings, so you destroy my life? Pathetic.” I shake my head in slow disgust.

She freezes looking aghast. The color drains from her face again. Her brown eyes are round pools of misery as she rises slowly from the table. A small smile plays across her face. Her face is a mask of passivity when she whispers, “Fuck you, Thi.”

I put my arm out, stopping her before she turns away from the table. “Oh, you definitely will be doing that, little wife. Often. Don’t call me that again.” I bring her curled fist to my lips and kiss her knuckle.

Silently she watches me kiss her hand, confusion playing on her face. I let her hand drop. She brings it to rest on her tummy, cradling it in her other hand, covering it. “Okay.” She breathes. Then: “Motherfucker.” She spins on her heel before I can grab her little ass, flouncing off.

“THEY’RE HERE,” I tell Nikki a little while later, after showing the style team and Natalie in. While they set up, I search social media, seeing all the articles relating to our great love affair. How we connected at her graduation and, though the connection we felt was strong, the obstacle of our family history stopped us from moving forward until my father’s untimely death showed me how short life was and I could no longer deny my feelings.

I have to give it to LL—he crafted a masterful story for the press and blogs. It has just enough truth to make it believable. I almost believed it myself. I smirk, looking at the responses from one particular shade-throwing site. They even took a poll to gauge if people like us being together, and we are winning by an eight percent margin.

Our marriage made national news as well since I’m the front-runner and likely next senator from Alabama, the first Democrat in a long time. People are rooting for rather than maligning us, which is always a good thing.

“We took the fire out of Fitch’s attack with this marriage,” LL told me moments ago. “Now you have nothing to explain. And since Nat is seen as a team member with no hard feelings, everything is on track. Now just play the happy couple, and Mathias, friendship and campaign aside, don’t hurt my cousin, man.” He hung up before I could tell him I’ll handle my wife as I see fit. Not that it matters. Nicolette Love Shelby is my wife to do with as I please, and I will allow no one, no matter how well meaning, to interfere.

As for her obstinance at the moment...I exhale, watching as she makes no move to remove herself from the pillow fort she created and has her iPad propped on so she can read hands-free.

“The stylist are here with Nat to get started on your wardrobe.” I tell her looking down at her curvy petite frame, remembering how prettily she came for me in that very spot.

“No thanks.” She barely looks up from her device.

“Nicolette. Get up.” I stride over to her before dragging her up from the bed. “You’ve already earned a spanked ass. If you want it now instead of waiting until the staff is gone, it’s up to you.” I tug her behind me. I stop just as we approach the door to the bedroom. “What is it going to be?”

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes.

I drop her elbow, open the door, then nod so she can precede me.

When we enter the living room area, I put my arms around her waist. “Thanks for coming on such short notice.” Then, looking to Natalie, I ask, “How do you want to proceed, Nat?”

She smiles. “I was thinking we could start with some of the pieces we brought. Have Nikki try them on. Decide on some signature pieces, and then do something with her hair. Maybe a smooth coiffure?”

“A what?” Nikki cuts in, looking at Nat like she’s just blasphemed.

“A smooth—”

“Oh, hell no.” Nikki shakes her head. “I heard you. I was wondering if you heard yourself. And how were you planning on achieving this smooth look?” The challenge drops heavily between them. I’ve never seen Nikki with anything other than curly hair. I love her curls and would never ask her to change them. I also know better than to tell a woman what to do with her hair.

“A blow-dry and silk press today, then maybe go over to the salon and get you a much-needed relaxer.” Patting her own silk tresses, Nat nodded for emphasis. “We all want what best for the campaign, right? Focus groups have said they like me with a smooth look in comparison to celebrities with natural hair.”

“Oh, okay.” Nikki shrugs.

“Okay?” I look at her in surprise.

“Yeah, okay. It’s okay for her to be governed by what other people think. I, for one, couldn’t care less. I’m not ruining my hair for a campaign, Mathias. And if you think I will, you are sorely mistaken.”

Pride suffuses me watching her stand up for herself. Natalie would always fret over the public’s opinion. Nikki’s reaction is refreshing to say the least. She’s always felt like an outsider. That’s why I wanted to be her soft place. *Only for her to betray you* whispers like a cursed litany in my mind.

“I couldn’t care less.” I eye her, letting my look convey the deeper meaning to her alone.

Pressing her lips tight, she turns to Natalie. “You heard him. He doesn’t care. So what clothes did you bring?”

An hour later frustration licks at me. I’ve sat through the hell of Nikki’s fitting, abandoned hair styling, and barely tolerated makeup application.

“Are you going to order the casket?” she asks snidely when she emerges in a polka-dot tea dress with some type of sweater around her shoulders.

“What are you’re wearing?” I ask, rubbing my forehead. Is it possible each outfit is getting worse?

“It’s a cowl neck. They haven’t been in style since the early two-thousands. I think your girlfriend got these clothes out her grand-mammy’s closet. I think I smell mothballs or maybe just balls.” She twirls for emphasis.

“It’s coming back in style.” Natalie seethes from across the room along with the two assistants she brought.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Nikki quips with saccharine sweetness. “I, however, shall not be wearing this or any of the other monstrosities you brought. I am twenty-three, not seventy, and although you may be able to look good in these getups, they make me look dowdy.” She whips the dress off right in front of us all.

“Now, I can breathe.” She sighs dramatically. Everyone in the room is stunned for entirely different reasons. Natalie and her crew because of the impropriety of Nikki’s actions and me for the raging hard-on I have from the wife I never wanted standing before me in nothing but her bra and panties.

“By the way”—she hooks a hand behind her, unsnapping the bra—“you can keep these old-lady bras.” She drops it in on top of the dress, then shimmies out of the panties, “And these granny panties you call foundation garments.”

Surging to my feet, I scoop her up in my arms before rushing for the bedroom. “That’s all for today, ladies. Thanks for your time.”





CHAPTER  
TEN

Nikki

“WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM?” Thi—no, Mathias—yells at me, looking like he’s about to explode, tossing me on the bed.

“What the hell is your problem? You know I’m not wearing that stuff. If you care how I reflect on you, then having me look like an old church lady who’s fallen on hard times, ain’t it.” I move into a sitting position, my legs folded in front of me, until I realize he can see all of me. I pull a pillow on my lap to hide behind.

“It’s a little too late for that.” His mouth pulls down in disapproval. “As for how you reflect on me, I’m sure your little stunt will be all over the blogs in about fifteen minutes unless Nat had the forethought to get a nondisclosure agreement from her assistants.”

“I’m sure she did. She’s very efficient,” I assure him calmly. “I see the Nat of yesterday who was all rah-rah for this marriage has been replaced by the petty bitch of today. You know she did that on purpose,” I tell him. Sure, she knew about our friendship, but the moment she realized she was usurped by me, the orphaned waif, she decided to get petty. I’ll be damned if I let her play games with me.

“She actually dresses conservative like that,” he says, his visage still dark, still forbidding, still hot.

Walking over to the side of the bed he tossed me to, he snatches the pillow, then tosses it on the other side of the bed.

Pushing me back, he leans over me, pressing my body into the soft down of the bed. “Throwing a tantrum of any kind, for any reason, is not acceptable behavior.” As he positions himself between my legs, I feel his hardness grinding against me. His big body has me spread open for him. My thighs are spread so wide, I can’t move them. He’s heavy. I’m trapped beneath him.

His dick is throbbing against me, pressed against my opening. My wetness makes me feel more and more of him through his pants I’m drenching.

“Stripping like a hoyden getting ready to go skinny dipping with your carnival friends is also forbidden,” he growls. I gasp when my pebble-hard nipples brush the cool cotton of his shirt.

“I hate that I told you that story.” I mean it. He never stops teasing me about it.

“I hate that I picked you up that night,” he says scathingly.

And just like that my throat tightens so hard that I can’t swallow against it. Hurt—pure, unadulterated savage pain—eviscerates me. I bite the inside of my mouth until blood blooms on my tongue. Still, I can’t swallow it. I feel like I’m going to choke. I can’t look away from the cold mercury of his eyes. Devastation wraps around me, sending me into a spiral of desolation I can’t see my way out of. The vulnerability of my situation is not lost on me. I’m naked, while he is fully clothed. I was making a joke, while he’s ready to flay me alive with his words and his body.

“I need you to let me up.” I try to make it sound hard, but it doesn’t. It sounds like a plea for the opposite. Like I’m begging him to plunder me.

“No.” If anything, his body hardens more.

“Let me go, Mathias.”

Something flickers in his eyes. Something primal. “Never. You’re mine.” He bends his head, inhaling along my neck. “I can smell your fear. See your pulse ticking in your throat. I can scent you now, you know that? I can smell your pussy, too. It gets sweeter the more afraid you are—wetter, too. This doesn’t happen to every girl. Uh-uh, just special ones like you. The kind who gets off on the way I’m going to treat you, punish you.”

“N-no. I don’t want this, Mathias.” I try to push against the hard wall of his chest. He’s unmovable.

“Your pussy says different.” He smirks, grabbing my arms, pulling them high above my head, holding my wrists together in a tight fist.

That’s when I make the mistake of bucking against him. Instead of having the desired effect of jostling him enough to unsettle him, I only succeed in drawing his hard dick deeper between my legs. He grunts, pressing hard at my entrance.

“I see you need fucking, wife.” He licks the soft indentation of my neck, then sucks me there—hard. With my toes curling, my pussy flooding, I arch into him, bringing his still-clothed dick inside as far as it can with a barrier between us.

He starts fucking me, still covered. “Grind that hot little pussy on me, girl.”

Rolling my hips, I do as my husband demands. It doesn’t matter in that moment how we came to be; it doesn’t matter that he hates me; all that matters is that he’s mine, and right now, when it matters, we fit.

“That’s it, pretty darling.” Pumping his hips, he meets me, hitting my clit and grinding hard against my opening like he’s trying to fight his way in.

“Ohmygoodness,” I keen, coming apart in the arms of a man who says he wished he never picked me up. I’ll hate myself for my weakness just as soon as I catch my breath, but right now?

He rises to his knees, unzipping his pants. He grips my head and drags me into a sitting position. “Open your mouth,

little wife.” As soon as I do, he’s pumping hot come in my mouth. His hand tightens in my curls. Holds it there. His molten gray eyes shine bright as he looks down at me, my mouth filled with his passion. “Swallow,” he demands. I do. “Such a good little cumslut.”

His mouth devours mine. Groaning against the taste of himself, he sucks my tongue into his mouth. I moan against the flavor of him mingled with his essence on my tongue. Pulling him to me I suck his tongue into my mouth. We eat at each other. My heart pounds. Somehow, I always knew it would be like this between us.

Cupping my face, he slows the kiss until he’s placing soft ones on my lips, cheeks, eyes. He looks at me for a long time, his face a myriad of emotions. Pulling away like it’s costing him everything he looks away.

“We have to get ready for an interview. You don’t have to wear the clothes Nat brought. But you need to find a suitable alternative within the hour.”

After walking over to the dresser he placed his personal items, he gets his wallet. “Here.” He hands me his black card. “Get whatever you need. I’ve already had you added to all my accounts.”

Unable to hold his gaze, I take it and place it in my lap. In that moment I want more than anything to erase the awkwardness between us. It shouldn’t be like this. He’s my best friend. Now my husband. We can’t—at least I can’t—go on like this, having sex with someone who hates me.

“I’m sorry about everything, Mathias,” I whisper, looking down, not even sure why I’m saying it. I didn’t do it. Joi did for reasons known only to her, but she used me to do it. Now, for some reason, I feel like it’s on me to make it right.

*I learned a long time ago, forgiving people who’ve done you wrong is a bad idea,* he told me once when some mean girls from Shelby Academy apologized and invited me to the lake. Because of his advice, I didn’t go and later found out from Nebraska they’d planned to take me out there and leave me. Lesson learned.

A shadow looms over me. I can't bring myself to look up. He drops to his haunches. "Hey."

I look up to stormy gray eyes tangled with emotion.

"Let's start fresh, yeah?"

Now it's my turn to look at him for a long time. Maybe he's not willing to throw our friendship away. Maybe we have a chance.

"Okay." I smile, my heart easing for the first time since this bomb was dropped in my life.

"Alright, I have calls to make." Rising, he kisses my forehead before heading out into the living area.

Rolling off the bed, I grab my phone, then scroll until I find the icon I'm looking for.

"How's the honeymoon, cuz? Do you need a shovel?"

"Nah, Summer. I need your help. I need a whole-ass Michelle Obama wardrobe. Mathias gave me his black card."

I hold the phone away as she screams.

TWO HOURS later I'm clothed in a raw silk platinum-gray pencil skirt, a pale pink sheer cotton blouse, and a small sweetheart ruffled neckline.

"We are accentuating the positives, so giving a peek of those gorgeous titties ain't hurting nobody," Summer giggles, and I can't help but laugh. The matching jacket sets off the outfit perfectly.

"This is a good start for last minute," she says, handing me several tissue-wrapped parcels. "Everything I make for you will have some platinum running through it to match his eyes. No matter the color. Honey, it's going to be so subtle, that shit is going to be subliminal." Her excitement is contagious. "Of course, you need bags and shoes. You have to look like you married a billionaire senator."

Hugging her close, I breathe in the calming vanilla-rose scent she wears. "Thank you so much. I know it was super last

minute.”

“No worries, cuz. But I have an appointment at the mayor’s house. His girls want some dresses made.”

“Ohhh, wow, that’s awesome.” I’m impressed with my cousin who dropped out of veterinary school to be a designer. In a short amount of time, she’s already in high demand.

“I know.” She twirls in a pink confection she made herself. “They like my fashion.”

“Nikki, are you ready we need to—” Mathias stops when he enters the bedroom, his eyes going wide as he takes me in. “Leave.” He sounds like air is whooshing from his lungs.

“Yes—”

“Wow.” We cut each other off.

“Summer, you are incredible.”

I smile, watching my cousin blush from his praise.

“Thanks.” She dimples. “Well, I have to be off.”

After she hugs us both, she practically skips out of the suite.

“You made her day.” Grabbing the small pink and gray clutch, I give him a tentative smile.

“Then we are even because she sure as hell made mine.” Crooking his elbow as an offering, he asks softly, “Ready, Mrs. Shelby?”

“Yes, Senator Shelby.” The smile he gives me makes hope explode in my heart.

“MATHIAS, Nikki, tell us how you met.”

“Nikki, was it love at first sight?”

“Nikki, why does it look like you were living on Shelby property?”

“Mathias, were you cheating on Natalie?”

“Nikki, care to respond to the allegations that you are a gold-digging sugar baby?”

The crush of press outside the little boutique hotel is like nothing I’ve ever seen, except for the times FADE, my cousin Delightful’s husband, came to visit and the first couple weeks after it was revealed that rock star Santiago was my cousin Mimi’s, aka Dr. Everything’s, baby daddy.

It’s weird being the focus of all the press attention. I sympathized with my cousins, but I didn’t really appreciate the amount of strain this kind of scrutiny can have on your mental health.

By the time we reach the caravan of SUVs Mathias’s campaign uses, I’m shaking like a leaf from the sheer aggression. I freeze as he helps me into the back seat. In the seats facing us are LL and Natalie. Normally, I wouldn’t be bothered by either of them being there, but it’s just jarring after the gauntlet of press we just endured.

A strong arm wraps around my middle. “It’s okay. G’head.” Mathias then grips my elbow, ushering me inside. I get in, turning my body away from the other occupants to look out the window on the opposite side.

“You okay, cuz?” LL asks after we pull off away from the press rushing to their cars to follow us.

“Peachy,” I return dryly, not bothering to look back at him. I’m not hiding, not really—I just need a moment.

“Hmph.” He says, “Let go over today’s agenda. Are you listening, Nikki?”

“Yep.” I nod, trying to keep it together. *GOLD DIGGER* keeps ringing in my mind like a litany.

Out of nowhere his strong grasp covers mine. After a moment, Mathias’s fingers interlace with mine. He gives me a gentle squeeze, then just holds my hand.

I half listen thanks to Mathias. He brought me back from the brink of a complete collapse. I’m pretty sure he just did it so I won’t ruin this interview we have coming up. Still, I can’t

help the way my heart swells at his touch or the comfort it gives me.

We pull up the Shelby Country Club, where the interview is supposed to take place. The same place where he asked Natalie to marry him after he met me, giving her his mom's ring, which she's still wearing. None of this is lost on me as we pull up to a place I'd never be invited to if I weren't married to him.

"Can y'all give us a minute?" Mathias asks them.

They both nod.

"We'll meet you guys inside," Natalie says indulgently. My breakfast curdles, though she's done nothing wrong, other than offer me her granny's clothes. I'd say it's insecurity, but I've never been intimidated by her before. Something about this whole situation doesn't sit right. She made us focus on the big picture, and I admired her for her eyes-on-the-prize mentality—then this morning happened.

My daddy's teachings are never far from my mind: *Don't let a snake bite you twice*. The entire situation with the stylists felt like a setup. She's conservative in her dress, but she is always in the height of fashion, so having them try and dress me so dowdy doesn't add up if she meant well.

"You don't have to do this. This interview was supposed to just be me, but the campaign thought it would be a good idea to get in front of the story by having us both sit down and talk about our relationship."

"Which relationship is that?" I snap. "The one where we fell in love at first sight at my graduation, then met for lunch at your gran's house the next day and you nearly fucked me on your car? That story?" Sucking my teeth, I wave him away, regurgitating the story he gave me earlier. "Nobody is going to believe that, Mathias."

"Look at me." Taking my face in a firm grip, he says in a clear controlled voice, "The public believes whatever we tell them if we stick to it."

"Really?" I raise a skeptical brow.



“Bet.” He winks. Then: “They already love you — love us. LL sent me a poll from one of those gossip sites. I can always tell them you’re resting after yesterday’s excitement.”

“Uh-uh, no sir. You’re not about to have these people out here saying you railed me within an inch of my life.” I shake my head, pressing the intercom. ‘I’m ready,’ I tell the driver.

Mathias laughs before getting out, then jogging around to my side, waving the driver away, and opening my door.

Holding his shoulders when he takes me by the waist and sets me down, I notice the paparazzi is being kept back to the edge of the country club’s property line.

“I’ll make sure the logistics are better going forward,” he tells me, following my gaze. “What happened earlier with them getting so close to you shouting all those won’t happen again. Promise.”

I can’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. “Okay.”

“Now, Mr. and Mrs. Shelby, congratulations again. Some say it was a bit hasty, but Mathias, you say it’s fate. Yet fate at Natalie Spencer’s expense? Does that seem fair, sir?” I watch the once-bubbly host of a national news outlet turn adversarial against my husband and do my best to remain calm.

“Well, Dana,” he starts smoothly. “When you come from a family like mine, there are certain expectations you have to meet. When we were sixteen, Natalie and I were told what those expectations were. She and I were to marry. We are good friends, and I’ve seen enough high-society marriages to know what a blessing that is. Then I met Nicolette.” He smiles with practiced ease, taking my hand in his, then looks at me with such unfettered adoration, I almost believe him. “And everything, and I mean every damn thing, changed in my life. I tried to make it work. I went along with the marriage plans. But even Natalie knew something was amiss. She was the one to tell me a love like this was too rare to pass up.” Taking my hand and kissing my knuckles, his gaze snags mine, and there’s something in his gaze—it could be a trick of the light,

but I see for a split second the striped-bare, raw hurt of what he thinks I did to him there.

My nose stings, and a tear slips free. Shocked embarrassment pummels me like an F-5 tornado.

“Ah, darling,” he mutters, wiping away my tear. I know it’s just for me even though we are doing a live interview.

“I think I need a break.” I smile at the woman whose eyes are alight with the sheer joy of capturing this very private moment and the number of views she’s likely to get.

“Sure. We’ll be right back,” she says to the cameraman.

The feed fills with a commercial.

“We just have a few more questions.” She beams at us.

“One,” Mathias says with deadly finality.

“IT WAS AGREED the interview would be an hour.” The interviewer bristles, looking like a chicken about to squeak. He is unimpressed. “If I have to choose between your show and Nikki’s comfort, no matter how many viewers you have, I will choose my wife every time.”

My heart swoons hearing him say that even if it’s just for show, I remembering how he once told me his mother was never the one his father chose to protect and how he was often the cause of her discomfort further.

“If you have a problem, then we can leave now.” Mathias tone is cold, condescending, and unapologetic.

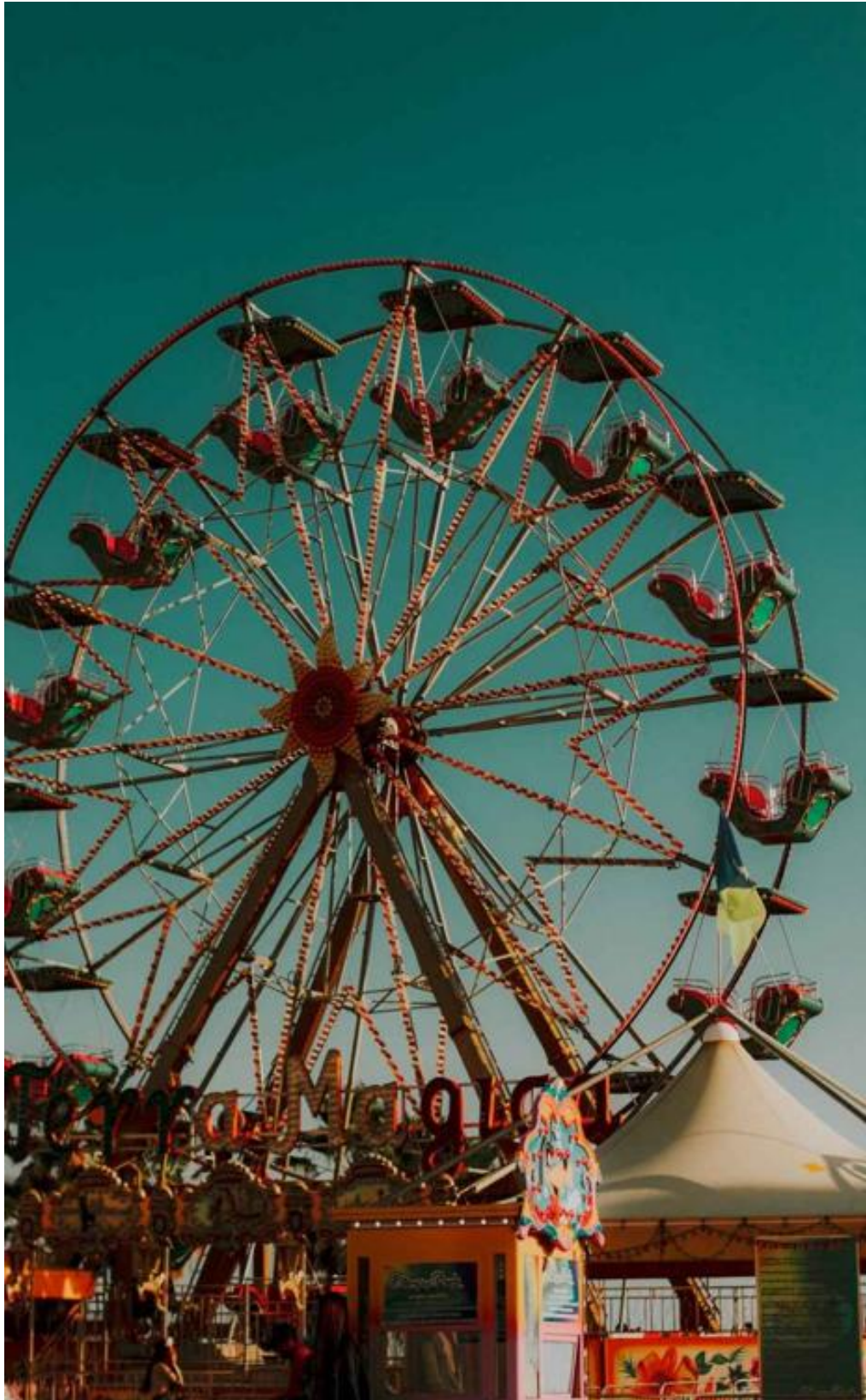
“Thi.” I whisper, he looks down at me and I nearly get lost the silver gray iridescence of his eyes. “I can do a few more questions.”

My statement garners a hard stare from him. Can he not see this bitch is trying to sandbag him?

“I can do it. Promise,” I affirm, nodding for when he looks skeptical then pride shins through focused on me.

“Okay.” He squeeze my hand in encouragement.

“We’re back in five, four, three, two...



CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

Nikki

“THAT DRESS IS to die for. Who are you wearing?”

“Summer Couture,” I respond for what seems like the hundredth time to yet another socialite, this time one of the most prominent Democratic senators in Congress.

“Please give me the details,” she coos, eyeing the rose-gold-and-platinum confection Summer sewed me into two hours ago.

Mathias made her my official designer, complete with a press release, after she impressed everyone with the outfit I had on for the interview.

“My phone has been blowing up all afternoon since the interview aired. Are you sure he’s mad at you? Because he sure as heck didn’t look like it when he comforted you. It wasn’t an act,” Summer said earlier, while pinning and sewing as I stood like a statue on a makeshift dais made by one of Mathias’s guards, Padre, loaned to him by Angel for my protection detail.

It seems my cousin’s outlaw biker husband is taking no chances with my well-being because Easy told me she’s worried about me. He sent one of his best guys to be my bodyguard. Mathias was already using some of the guys from

the El Diablos from the moment he began his senate candidacy.

“How was your fitting for the mayor’s daughters?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“Intense. Moving along.” She waved me away. “On the off chance anyone asks, tell them the dress and your clothes are Summer Couture. They won’t see it anywhere else. Bespoke creations made exclusively for a select clientele. Consultations begin at ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand for a consult,” I whisper to the senator, as though I’m speaking of some posh fashion house and not the cousin with whom I’ve been sharing a house since I moved out of Mathias’s granny’s house.

“Wow. That’s reasonable.” She smiles at me.

Smiling, I cover my shock at a her easy acquiesce.

“Excuse me.” I turn to the deep baritone, looking up into the ice-blue eyes of Marcus Sommerland. “Care to dance, beautiful?”

I can’t help but smile at the teasing lilt of his voice. “Sure.” I smile at his beautifully handsome face, allowing him to lead me onto the dance floor. The fundraiser is on behalf of the Alabama Autism Society. My cousin Maxim is the keynote speaker tonight.

“You look amazing,” Marcus murmurs, swinging me into the waltz. There is nothing inappropriate about his touch, but his eyes convey more than what he says.

“Thank you.” I give me my first genuine smile of the night. If nothing else, Marcus is a friend. We kissed, touched a little, but it never went further because we never felt a spark. We both thought it was just us needing to get to know each other better. Now that I have experienced the intensity of love making with Mathias, I know we never had a chance. I can’t imagine touching Marcus the way I do Mathias or wanting him so much, I can barely breathe.

“I want to apologize for the way I left things,” I tell him, meaning it. He’s been nothing but kind to me. “You didn’t

deserve the abrupt end to our relationship on the day of my cousin's wedding, which turned into a double wedding featuring your girlfriend — me..” Making myself look into the ice blue of his gaze, I don't shy away from the anger I'm prepared to see there.

Feeling his heavy hand squeeze me a little as I grip his shoulder, I hope my clumsy words come across better than they sound.

“You know”—his mouth quirks on the right side a little —“I always wondered who held your heart. I would have tried harder if I'd known it was a Shelby.” He twirls me in a dramatic flourish, one I remember my sorority took great pains to have us master.

Taking the necessary steps, I meet his every turn. Ever the competitor, I know I will not best him, but I'm determined to keep up.

“It was always him, wasn't it?” he muses with a small pensive smile playing across his gorgeous face.

“Yes,” I whisper, not knowing why I can't lie to those ice-blue eyes.

He nods. “I would have loved you to distraction, Nicolette.” His tone deepens. “I still could, but I know a lost cause when I see one. You love that bastard.”

He gives me one last spin as the song ends.

“I'm sorry.” I almost choke on the words, not able to deny anything. Marcus sees too much. He is so preceptive. I guess he would need to be as the scion of a cutthroat financial dynasty.

“Ah, as I figured, your husband arrives on cue. I bid you adieu. Always know you have a friend in me, Nicolette. Guard your heart, little one, women never fare well with Shelbys.” He murmurs, with that warning he kisses my knuckles before turning a sardonic brow on Mathias.

“Shelby, your wife is as delectable as I remember.” Marcus makes sure his voice carries just enough to draw attention from other guests.

“Indeed, too bad she chose me then,” Mathias quips, pulling me into his grip. This time the music slides into a sultry melody.

His hard body presses against me, hitting every curve of my body.

He pulls me close, circling the dance floor in broad circles, with controlled, elegant moves. My body molds to his as he commands me, bends me to his will, masters me in a way I belatedly realize Marcus and no other ever could.

We are one being on the dance floor. Obvious lovers. It’s evident in every movement how well he knows my body. He is my maestro. In my periphery I can see mouths agape. Not that we are doing anything lewd. It’s just that we are so in sync, so made for each other, that onlookers can barely tell where he begins and I end.

As the final strands of the song fades, I see he’s moved us to the edge of the ballroom and we’re facing the outer doors.

He makes no excuses, nor does he try to hide us slipping out of the terrace doors.

Cool breeze and honeysuckle greet me as he leads me out to the veranda. He moves us to a darkened alcove. We can see the gardens before us, but thanks to a humongous, ostentatious potted plant situated cleverly in front of the window behind us, we are hidden from any prying eyes.

Positioning me so I face the garden labyrinth, he tells me, “I’m tempted to take you out there, strip you naked, and fuck you on the grass, but I saw your cousin and Takeda heading that way moments before. It would seem a little incestuous for us to join them.”

Inhaling the honeysuckle mingling with the light breeze, I take in the lovely garden and the night. It would be perfect, were it not for the obvious rage I hear in every syllable he utters.

“Sommerland touched you.”

The last part is said so wrathfully, I still at his words. He cages me in his arms. I can feel his hard length pressing



against me. The balustrade is blocking my front, and my hot angry husband is as unmovable as the Citadel of Saladin at my back.

“The first man I killed was trying to fuck a kid. I don’t regret putting that worthless motherfucker down. Don’t think for a fucking minute I’d lose any sleep over a bitch who touches you. Be careful, little wife.”

“I—”

“You let him touch you,” he whispers viciously into my ear, nipping my lobe. The sting of pain sends shivers down my spine. I squeeze my thighs tightly, trying to quell the throbbing pulse in my pussy.

“We just danced,” I begin, explaining to him the waltz was harmless. Way more harmless than the dance Mathias and I did moments ago. Even as I foolishly try to explain, something tells me he’s too far gone. Dangerous energy permeates the air.

A hard band of steel snatches me close, while his other hand pulls my beautiful dress up, his hand snaking between my legs.

“Tell me, little wife, and don’t lie because I will know, who are you wet for?” His voice is nasty and cruel as two long fingers spear into my pussy.

“Thi—” I pant, my heart feeling like a panicked bird slamming against a cage to free itself.

“What the fuck did I tell you about calling me that name?” Hot rage pours through every word as he finds the spot deep inside me, bringing me to my knees. “Coming already?” he taunts, knowing full well he’s hitting my spot with every thrust of his fingers.

My pussy is a puddle. He finger fucks me with ruthless purpose, and I am powerless to stop him.

“Little cumslut. Who is it for? Me or your blond bitch?” He adds his thumb menacing my clit with torturous swirls. “Who?” he demands. His hot mouth sends quakes of pleasure down my spine. His hard dick is pressing so hard against my ass, I’m on the cusp of coming.

“You, only you.” I pant, turning my head to the side of his face. Our breaths mingle. He licks my lips, tugging, sucking on my bottom lip, worrying it with his teeth, before licking the sting away.

“It better be, little wife.” After ruffling the hem of the dress, he bunches it at my waist, then frees himself from the confines of his suit pants. His dick is like granite as his thrusts inside me, driving me to my tiptoes.

“Nah. No running, baby. Don’t act like you can’t take it, darling. Take this motherfucker like you own it. Like it owns you.” Sucking my neck hard, he fucks into me. Owning me, marking me, making me his again.

“I’m going to fill you with my come,” he promises. “You’re my wife. Mine.” He thrusts for emphasis. His body is a powerful force of emotion—anger, fear, passion. I don’t know why I sense his fear, but I do, and that more than anything bends me to his will.

My hand covers and interlaces with his, subtly reminding him I’m his, allowing him to take me, marking me with his dominant claim.

“He never touched me like this,” I whisper into the night.

“I know he didn’t. That’s the only reason he still breathes.”

Looking up, I take in the promise in his eyes.

He was never like this before. Is the idea I betrayed him making him like this? Or was it always lingering under the surface? Would he have been this possessive with Natalie? He is like a dragon obsessing over his hoard of gold.

What made him like this, or has he always been like this and kept it hidden? The thought barely registers before he angles me and takes me higher.

“You belong to me. This is what you wanted, yeah?” He thrusts, groaning when my muscles tighten in response, giving him an answer I dare not say aloud.

I dreamed of him being my lover, even husband. I touched myself countless times with his name ringing from my lips.

Never Marcus, never any man but Mathias Shelby; he is all I have ever dreamed of. All I have ever wanted.

“I want only you, Mathias,” I say, making sure I don’t say the pet name he allowed me use when we were friends. I can’t help the way my heart hurts that he denies me saying his name in the way I used to when it was just him and me. It smarts every time he tells me.

“You better.” He bends over me, manipulating my body to give him the access he needs. He brushes my clit in gentle swirls. I buckle. I break. I combust in his arms. He destroys me and reanimates me all at once. I’m his creature. His to do with what he will.

“Such a good girl for me.” He thrusts as he makes me come, raining my pleasure down on him in blissful abandon.

“Ma-thi-as,” I cry, coming on his still-hard dick as he fucks me into another orgasm right behind the first.

“Darling,” he groans before grabbing me, taking my mouth ruthlessly, furiously, dominating me in his kiss and in his possession of my body.

Helpless to do anything other than submit, I allow him this. In this moment I am his willing toy, his supplicant, his whore—anything he demands. I am his.

Consumed by his kiss, I give him everything he desires, and he ruthlessly wants it all. Ripping his mouth away, he puts his fingers, wet with my essence, in my mouth.

“Suck them clean.”

I do as he commands, watching his eyes smolder. Flexing my hips, I feel the hot jets of his come flooding me. He teeth flash with a feral victory as my muscles clench around him again when he wrings another orgasm from me.

“Good fucking girl.” His praise has me whimpering like the sick little fiend I am for his man.

AN HOUR LATER, I make my way to the bathroom, finally having a moment to myself. After laying his claim on me on

the veranda, Mathias didn't let me leave his side the entire night.

As guests of honor, we were obligated to stay for the entire event. Though the purpose of it is to benefit young people transitioning to college from high school, Mathias can use an event like this to secure donations from other avenues and gain endorsements for influential groups.

This one was particularly important since his opponent, a true and utter ignoramus, describes disabilities as a curse from God.

I was so proud to hear my husband sincerely say earlier, "The rhetoric of my opponent is not only ableist but wrong. As Maxim so eloquently said, God made him perfect for an imperfect world. I agree."

I hope what he said goes viral like the kiss on the balcony this morning.

I see the good Mathias can do when he wins his senate seat. My only hope is our hasty marriage doesn't negatively impact his chances.

I feel sick to my stomach every time I think about what Joi did to us.

"Hey, girlie."

My head pops up as I enter to see Krie over by the sink, looking like she's taking a quick hoe bath.

"Um, what are you doing, cuz?" I smirk.

"The same thing you need to be doing." Her statement has me checking over myself with a critical eye, wondering if Mathias was wrong to reassure me I didn't look like he'd just ravished me within an inch of my life when he helped set me to rights before we rejoined the gala.

"Oh no. You're good, but Kiyoshi and I noticed y'all on the terrace when he came back from exploring the labyrinth."

"Exploring, my ass," I tell her.

We both giggle.

“So how is married life?” Her eyes cloud with concern. My shotgun wedding is no secret among my family. As humiliating as it was, most of them were present when the news broke of Mathias and me kissing against his F-150.

Mama-Pete took it all in stride and commanded everyone else to fall in line. Not wanting to get on the wrong side of our family’s matriarch, no one said a word as I married our family’s enemy.

“It’s just been a couple of days.” I can’t hold her all-too-knowing gaze. “I really have to use the restroom.” I give her a smile, looking away, moving past her with an urgency I actually feel.

I close the door on her and relieve the aching pressure in my bladder.

“Oh,” I gasp when I come back out, and she’s still there. I go over to the sink. My face flushes when I look up in the mirror, seeing soft compassion in her gaze.

“It’s so messed up, Krie. He hates me now.” I sniff, my embarrassed confession spilling from me like metaphorical tea. Telling her the abbreviated tailored version of our truth, I watch her expression change from compassion to determination.

“This family, I swear. You know how Kiyoshi and I came to be, right?” she asks, continuing when I nod. “Thad’s actions put me in an untenable situation. Kiyoshi was going to kill his little ass, and everything fell on me to make it right. If we made it through, then trust me, you and Mathias can too. If you care for him, you have to be patient.”

“I don’t know—” Doubt makes my tummy cramp, has me shaking my head.

“Then leave his ass,” she quietly suggests, then huffs. “Be careful, though. By the way he’s looking at you, I can tell he’s not going to be easy to hide from. Don’t forget what happened with Easy.”

“Yeah, and he and Angel are best friends.” Patting my face with pressed powder, I reset my makeup.

“Don’t put anything past these men. See?” She shows me her vibrating phone with

Kiyoshi—WHY ARE YOU TAKING SO LONG?  
ARE YOU OKAY

—before typing a quick

I’M FINE. ON MY WAY

and tucking it back into her bag.

“Girl—” I say just as my phone buzzes.

Mathias: COME ON. WE’RE LEAVING

I don’t respond, just tucking my phone away. Quietly she chuckles, looping her arm through mine.

“I JUST SENT you the agenda for the rest of the campaign,” Mathias tells me later as I sit across from him in the blacked out SUV taking us back to the hotel.

He’s been different since I came out the bathroom and found him talking with Natalie and LL. It seemed innocuous, but from the moment I joined the small group, Mathias has been cold.

“Okay...wow.” I take in the sheer number of cities and events we have planned.

Saying nothing, he quirks a brow, as if to say, *This is what you wanted.*

“One bite at a time,” I murmur, repeating the saying his granny would tell him when he had a seemingly insurmountable task: *How do we eat an elephant, neto? One bite at a time.*

“Humph.” His grunt has me looking into his stormy gaze. I can almost hear him about to say not to ever say that phrase again. Everything from our time before seems to be off-limits now that he hates me so much.

“What were you and Krie talking about in the bathroom?”  
The molten silver of his eyes is hot with accusation.

“Wha—” My confusion is cut off when he snarls, “Don’t fucking play with me, girl.” The warning is like blade across my skin.

“M-Mathias.” His phone interrupts us.

Glancing down, he sighs. “Jackson,” he says almost boredly.

“You married a fucking Love—are you crazy, or are you smoking the opium y’all motherfuckers are smuggling as well?”

My brows climb all the way to my forehead at hearing his cousin curse him out on the phone.

“First of all, you are in my business, cuz.” He flicks lint I can’t see from his tailored pant legs.

“At least tell me she brought some of that land they stole with her.”

My mouth drops open. It’s no secret the Shelbys have been mad ever since my ancestors triumph over them. The land was entailed, with so many heirs that no one person could sell it. It could only be passed down from generation to generation.

Once I reunited with my family after I graduated high school, Mama-Pete gave me my daddy’s portion of the inheritance, which was only symbolic since I share it with my sister, Kandie. *We couldn’t sell it if we wanted to*, Kandie told me. *You can use it, though. I had the Kandie Shoppe built on that land I claimed. This whole town sits on Love land. Just pick a spot, but don’t be a bitch and take someone’s house.*

“No, it’s all entailed. What do I want with it when I have millions of acres in Brazil and the rest of the world? You have sugar all over the world. What the fuck do you want with land that’s not even good for sugar anymore?” He pins me with a stare that reminds me he’s not forgotten our conversation and I better have an answer he likes.

“My grandmother cares.” Jackson sighs.

“We told ’er to let it go,” someone else chimes in.

“Ah, Jericho, why am I not surprised that you’re listening in like a little bitch?” Mathias’s chiding is met with a flood of profanity-laced comments.

“Anyway, I have a campaign to win and a wife to bed. I’ll be expecting your small donations for wasting my time.” He hangs up on them.

“Now I’m giving you one chance to tell me the truth.” His words trigger the memory of his, LL’s, and Natalie’s heads together a little while ago when I was exiting the bathroom.

“She was making sure I was okay. She saw us earlier on the terrace.” I try to keep the embarrassment from my voice.

As he cock his head to the side, his eyes are slits of distrust and budding hatred.

Fear pulses in the air around me. I don’t know what he wants me to say. I have no idea why me talking to my cousin would make him so mad.

After a long silence where he lets me die on the vine, he leans forward, his voice a wrathful indictment. “I sent Nat to check on you to make sure you were okay. She came back very upset, letting me know your cousin was encouraging you to leave me and offering to help you hide from me.”

In a move so swift he knocks the breath from my body, he snatches me to him. “Make no mistake, little wife. I am not Angel. I won’t waste my time going after your family, trying to wring your location from them. No. I will hunt you. You will have no peace. You did this to us. You got me, and I won’t you discard me like trash. You’re mine.” His eyes search mine as if trying to figure out a million-piece jigsaw puzzle. Like I’m some unsolvable equation he doesn’t have the formula for.

With me trapped before him on my knees, between his thighs, with his hand manacled my throat, my breath trembles between us. With the cold eyes of a predator, he tracks the pulse in my throat, the way I nervously lick my lips.

“You’re mine.” He shakes me softly as if he is testing the pliability of my neck. His mouth curls. “I promised I would



never be like this.” His eyes slide away. “But you’ve made me like this. You fucking did this, little wife.” He squeezes, gradually increasing the pressure on my throat, careful not to bruise my windpipe, keeping his hands just beneath my jawline, expertly cutting off my air.

Tears spill from my eyes down my cheeks and onto his hard hands. His teeth flash again in a menacing smile. “See how quickly you break?” He tsks, every word laced with mock sympathy. “You had the best of me, darling. But you had to be a grasping, conniving little bitch and aim for more. Mathias wasn’t enough. You wanted the Shelby too. Now you have him.” He brings his mouth close to mine. “I almost want you to run. Just so I can hunt you to ground and fuck you in the dirt.” He tugs my lip into his mouth, drawing blood.

“Ah.” My gasp is swallowed by him. Groaning, he slants his mouth over mine. He gives me the breath he stole. Inhaling, I take deep drags of his scent. He fills me with his aroma of clover, earth, and sugar. His hands, so scary a moment ago, anchor me. My pussy floods, getting ready for him again.

Pulling back, he takes me in. “Look at my pretty little, slut. Open that needy little mouth.”

I do, parting my lips wide for him. Pressing his teeth together, he skeets our mixed kiss in my mouth.

“Mine,” he says, devouring me again, claiming me with his filthy kiss. Dragging me into his lap, he makes me straddle him.



CHAPTER  
TWELVE

**M**athias (*three weeks later*)

“JEEZ, look at her, Mathias—it’s a disgrace.”

Trying to hide my irritation, I smile at the mayor of Birmingham before turning to see what Natalie is saying about Nikki now.

Following her nod, I look to the field where the carnival has been set up to see Nikki dead center in the splash pad area, waving a gigantic bubble wand, capturing children with the bubbles. She’s gone off on her own yet again, with Padre hanging back—her only protection detail, as she deliberately ignores all the campaign and etiquette advice she’s been given by my staff.

For the fifty-eleventh time, I watch as she defines her own path and does exactly as she sees fit.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, preparing to move on to the next constituent.

“How can you say that, Mathias? She’s making a spectacle of herself. She is hurting the campaign. Everything we’ve worked for is at risk because of her antics.” Nat waves her phone, showing yet another blog disparaging Nikki: **THE SOON-TO-BE SENATOR’S DARLING IS A DISGRACE.**

“Don’t let her see that,” I warn, turning to a county commissioner who’s been a vocal supporter from the

beginning of my run for senate.

“It’s not like she’ll care. It seems like she’s doing everything in her power to make you lose,” Nat murmurs.

“Well, she is failing miserably if that’s the case,” I tell her. “I’m up twenty points in the polls thanks to that little leak about Fitch having several secret affairs with male and female escorts.” I smirk to her. We know it’s a done deal; we’re just keeping the obligations we already committed to.

“No more stops for the next day or two. Nikki’s exhausted.” I make a mental note to inform LL myself. Since our wedding three weeks ago, we’ve been going nonstop. Not that I mind, but Nikki’s not used to this life. She hasn’t complained, why her comfort matters so much to me, I don’t know. She’s not the woman I thought she was. I still want to kick my own ass for the way she played me. My jaw clenches as I think of her deceit and how blindsided I was. I’ve never been one to think too much about our families’ feud. Let Natalie tell it, her parents have a whole theory behind Nikki’s presence in my life—revenge of the Loves.

“It’s almost like you don’t want this anymore, Thi.”

My head snaps around at the nickname Nat uses. “Mathias,” I correct her, spearing her with a hard look. She can’t know Nikki only ever called me that. Where did that even come from? Nikki stopped after the first couple of days. She doesn’t even have to correct herself anymore.

“You know I want this. We have been in this together for over a decade. The question is are you still on board? I understand if you’re not,” I tell her sincerely. “I know what it must cost you to be here every day.” I don’t have any illusions that Nat ever loved me. No. There was no love between us, and the mild attraction we had faded when I graduated from law school and traded the long hours of study for the grueling schedule of my practice. Natalie’s business degree led her into the corporate offices of Spencer Paper, which she claims to hate but still somehow manages to excel at, climbing over veteran executives with her innovative ideas and savvy strategies.

“I’m fine,” she cuts in smoothly, looking more like the posh executive and excellent campaign operative she’s become in the year since we launched the campaign. I see the touch of brittleness melt away as she shoves away the nervous ninny wit and become once again the confident woman I know.

“Oh my goodness.” We both turn at the strangled exclamation from somewhere in the crowd.

My heart thuds as my first thought is something happened to Nikki. It slowly calms to its regular beat for almost a second before it ratchets up again when I see people pointing and gesticulating in the direction of the Ferris wheel ride brought here by the carnival.

Slow horror descends upon me as I walk in what seems like a morass of fear as a break in the crowd shows Nikki in deep conversation with the Ferris wheel’s operator, who is manually letting people off the ride. People pour off in waves.

I watch the nightmare unfold as she points to a pair of kicking feet high above the crowd. Just as she becomes more animated, the safety door swings open.

She snatches one of his pin locks and a harness off his smock, then ties the five-thousand-dollar one-of-a-kind sundress Summer made between her legs and starts climbing the ride.

The crowd surges forward, but it still seems to part for me as I watch her ascend with the agility and grace of a gymnast. Using her upper body, she pulls herself through the rungs, and her bare feet find purchase on the equipment. As I get closer, my worry rises. The Ferris wheel is ancient, obviously in its hundredth paint job to cover the years of patina and wear and tear. It’s rusty in places and greasy in others.

By the time I’m just beneath her, I can see she’s made it to the seat the child is on.

“Did you know she could do that?” Looking over, I see LL has made his way over to me.

“No,” I say, just as much in awe of her as he seems to be.

“The people love a hero.”

Tilting our heads up, we watch as she tells a girl of about eight or nine to get on her back. Once the child does as she instructs, Nikki straps them together.

That's when I realize this kid is as long as Nikki is. My stomach twists in knots. Perspiration beads my forehead and my upper lip. *Reckless little idiot.*

"Dammit." I bite back another curse, watching her painstakingly make her way down rung by rusty, greasy rung. There are huge swaths of rust and grease stains ruining the beautiful lavender and platinum creation.

"I've already got a press release ready to send out to the local pastors. *There is no greater love than for a young woman to risk her life for a little friend.* The press is going to eat that shit up." He's beside himself with the endless possibilities like my wife might not still end up broken on the ground with one wrong move. "This is gonna hit the national news and probably go viral. You know people are showing it live right now on social media. Keep looking concerned, though," he coaches.

"Have a care for your damned cousin, man." I'm unable to take my eyes off Nikki as she makes her way back to earth, her progress slowed by her burden.

Minutes tick by as a hush falls over the crowd. A slight disturbance greets us as the Birmingham Fire and Rescue comes in. They move close to the Ferris wheel, creating a protective barrier with emergency equipment.

"We need you to move back, sir," one of the fresh-faced firemen tells me.

"That's my wife—" I start.

"This is Mathias Shelby," LL says, once again earning the enormous salary I pay him as my campaign manager.

The fireman, to his credit, shrugs. "Doesn't matter. We have to create a safe zone in case anything happens to Mrs. Shelby."

Respect for the young man has me nodding. I step back to give them room, though LL still has more he'd like to say. I

ignore him, directing my attention on Nikki as she reaches the bottom rung of the ride.

After hopping down, she unlaces the kid, who runs crying to her parents, her blond hair flying behind her like a wild halo.

The crowd erupts in cheerful shouts and applause. In that moment relief and terror give way to rage that she put herself in so much jeopardy.

I can tell she doesn't want the attention surrounding her. Too fucking bad. "You going to her?" LL asks by my side.

I debate for a hard moment, but people have already taken note of me being here, and all it takes is one candid shot of me not supporting her in her moment of heroism for me to be branded as a bitch-ass hater.

"Yeah." Giving him a brief nod, I head over to her. Keeping my expression of proud concern, I bite back the desire to snatch her little ass up. I don't know if I even trust myself to be close to her in that moment.

The short distance it takes me to reach her seems endless when she finally looks my way. She does it as if I'm her life raft after she's found herself adrift.

"Mathias." She breathes my name like it's her salvation, her body trembling from the effort of carrying the child and navigating the Ferris wheel's precarious rails. "This thing is not safe. I don't know how they even got a license to set up."

I hug her close, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head.

"A few questions?" asks one of the legitimate reporters from a local news outlet.

"Are you up to it?" Looking down at her luminous eyes, I know that she's not. I turn to tell them no.

"I can do it." She grips my hand like she needs me to anchor her. A woman who just climbed twenty feet in the air is holding my hand like I'm her haven. The contradictions she presents have my teeth gritting. What the fuck possessed her to climb that decrepit monstrosity? *The same nonsense that had*

*her thinking she could trick you into a marriage.* It sounds similar to something Natalie has been saying lately.

“Mrs. Shelby—Nicolette, how did you know to act so quickly?” Light shines on us as television and phone cameras train on us.

“Well, I grew up mostly on the circus and carnival circuit. My parents were trapeze artists, aerialists, and sometimes operated machines like this. So I knew I was small and strong enough to make it to the top before help came. You never know with these machines, and little kids often panic. I knew I had to hurry before she tried to climb out.” Shrugging, she looks at me sheepishly. It does nothing to calm my ire. But for the masses, I give her a dotting smile.

“My wife’s a hero.” Flashes go off. Waving away any more questions, I tell them to talk to the campaign for more details tomorrow.

“Get a biography together for her,” I tell LL when he catches up with us. I know it will be only a matter of time before the press goes digging into her past. “Up till now they thought she was a little country girl from Shelby-Love.” I help her into my Maybach, which I elected to drive since my penthouse in the John Hand building is mere blocks away.

I don’t look at her, closing the door and turning to LL and an agitated Natalie, who’s just made her way over to us.

“We’ll meet at my penthouse in the morning to deal with the fallout of this new revelation,” I tell them.

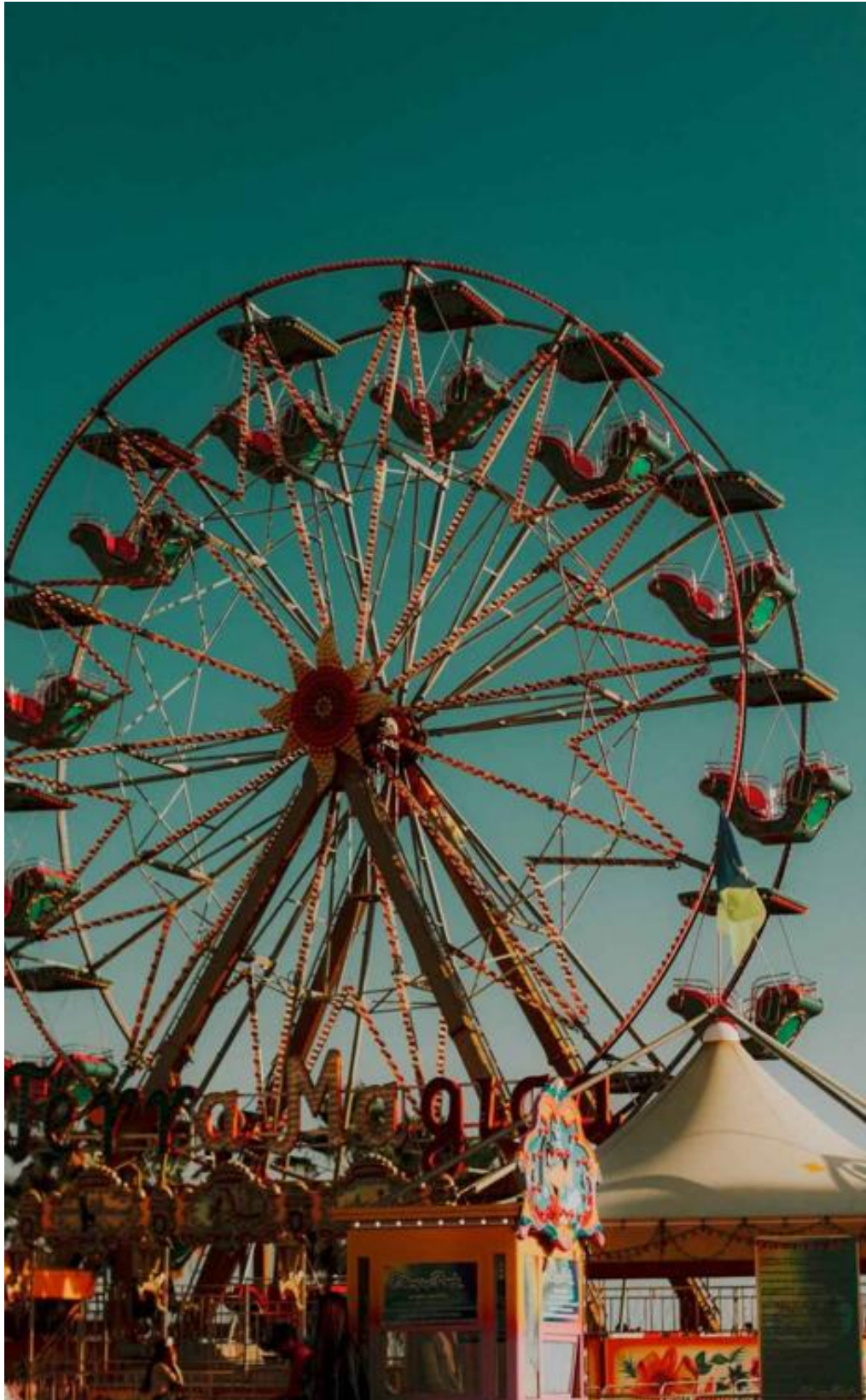
“This is a good thing. She’s a hero.” LL beams, totally unaware of the repercussions of Nikki’s revelation. He, like everyone else, thinks she and I only met last year at her graduation. Natalie is the only other person who knows I hit Nikki with my car the night I graduated college.

“She is. We still need to know how to answer the questions of her growing up as a carny,” Natalie chimes in, snide humor playing across her face until she catches both our looks. “Hey.” She holds up both hands, apologizing. “I still have work to do on my snobbery.”



“Mm-hmm,” LL says. “You’re getting steadily worse.”  
After waving bye to Nikki and Natalie, he daps me up.  
“Tomorrow.”

I nod, quietly fuming as I head to the driver’s side of the car.



CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

**N**ikki  
Silence. All through the short trip to the John Hand building. Silence as we take the private elevator up to the penthouse suite. Silence as we enter. Heavy angry silence that has my tummy twisting in knots by the second.

Panoramic views greet me as we enter the suite, giving me something to do other than worry about an angry husband who hates me. The ceilings are at least twenty feet—maybe more. There’s a gray wraparound sofa with soft-looking pillows covering it from end to end, facing the window with cluster of tufted ottomans sitting in the center of the living room. Candles are atop glass trays on them convey simple elegance.

“Natalie did an excellent job decorating this place,” I acknowledge, assuming this is where they lived together when they were both living in Birmingham.

His face swings to mine, and he looks at me for a long moment. “You are the only woman I have ever brought here, little wife.” His voice is hard as he ushers me farther into the room.

“Oh,” I mumble, kicking off my ballet flats.

“You need to stop giving her fits. I’m tired of hearing about the shit you’re doing. It’s getting annoying as fuck.”

Slowly, I turn to him. “I’m giving her fits?” I throw up my hands. “You know what? I’ll be damned if I fight with you about another bitch being in your ear.”

Leaving his silly ass standing there, I go over to the sitting area and sit down.

Sitting in an ice bucket is a bottle of Armand de Brignac with a card attached. I pluck it out. *Congratulations, Mathias & Nicolette on your wedding, J & J.* Hmm, despite all the pettiness the other night, his cousins sent a us nice little gift.

He comes over and plucks the card out of my hand. “Humph, bastards.” His eyes genuinely warm for the first time today.

Every time I looked his way and our glazes clashed, he seemed livid. Now I know why—Natalie.

The campaign has been stressful as hell despite him being in the lead by twenty points since the unfortunate discovery of his opponent’s extracurricular activities. Mathias is always gone, taking meetings throughout the day with constituents, interest groups, backers, and staff. Always staff. It’s like they live with us. I wouldn’t be surprised if LL or Natalie popped up with some last-minute detail they forgot to mention earlier. I wouldn’t be surprised to find either of them hiding under our bed.

He pops the top off the champagne with expertise garnered from years of posh living. He hands me a flute before pouring one for himself. “Cheers, little wife.” His eyes are slits of silver gray.

Ignoring the condescension in his tone, I take a tentative sip. It’s cold, delicious, and potent. Downing the rest, I allow the cool effervescence to pour over me, calming my frayed nerves.

Pouring myself another drink, I scoot back, crisscrossing my legs, letting my dress fall between them.

“You ruined your dress with that bullshit you pulled earlier.” Standing over me, he looks like a god damning a cretin to hell.

Eyeing the smudges on my dress, I know the grease will never come out. “That little girl’s life was worth it.”

His face flushes with rage like I've never seen before. "The fuck you mean her life? What about your life, you silly-ass girl?"

Pushing back to the edge, I stand, only to have him shove me back down.

"Sit the fuck down."

My heart is hammering. "I knew what I was doing. I used to climb rides all the time."

"When you were a kid, which you couldn't wait to tell the press. I can't wait till they start digging into your past. What the fuck were you thinking? What was all this for if you're just going to pop off like that?" he practically yells.

Embarrassment and heat flood my face. "I wasn't thinking. I was—" I can't come up with the words to express how overwhelmed and jittery I was climbing the ride after so many years on the ground.

"Damn straight you weren't. You could have broken your neck." He scoffs.

"I've done it hundreds of times." I don't dare mention how scared I was, not now. He'd only get madder.

"You were a kid, and your dad should've never let you do that crazy shit anyway." Talking about my daddy, whom I loved more than my life and lost way too early, is a low blow.

"I guess he couldn't be father of the year like yours."

He looks like I slapped him. I shove past him, walk-running in the direction where I assume the bathroom is.

"You better run," he calls after me.

I barely take in the bed facing the cityscape of Birmingham lit up like Christmas at dusk. I bypass the huge walk-in closet already stocked with clothes. When I reach the opposite side of the room, I step into the bathroom. Unsurprised at the spa like quality of the room, I go over to the shower before turning the spigots to the desired heat level.

After using the restroom, I pull my hair into a topknot, then place a shower cap over it. I have no desire to fool with these curls tonight.

The bathroom is filled with steam. In quiet and peace, letting the water beat down on me in a steady rhythm, I allow the tears to come. My bestie would have never said anything so insensitive about my daddy. We respected each other's pain around our fathers too much. But this fucking guy, this goddamn monster, he doesn't care what he says. In that moment something happens I never thought would in a million years—I start to hate Mathias Shelby a little, the man who saved me and made me his best friend. He keeps breaking my heart, and I keep letting him. As I lather my body, I resolve to stop letting him.

HALF THE BOTTLE of champagne is gone. I have some lightly buttered and salted popcorn to go with the delicious beverage while I cuddle up with my iPad, reading a Tristan and Isolde retelling by one of my favorite authors.

When I came back, he'd left, probably to go bitch about his unwanted wife to Nat or LL. I try not to let it bother me, but it does. Disloyal-ass motherfucker. I guess he feels like he doesn't owe me anything. Rage pierces me. He said all was forgiven. Not to mention he should have never thought I was capable of betraying him, let alone tried to punish me for it. He should know better. Not for the first time since all this happened, I sit up straighter while thinking, champagne induced or not, that he should know me better than that. and her should never take his ex-fiancée's side over mine in any fucking thing.

I'm still fuming when he comes in, his shirttails pulled out. He looks faded. As he approaches, I can smell the sativa on him.

“Wow, you are fucked up, Senator,” I sneer when he strides over, ignoring me, grabs the bottle, then turns to quirk a sardonic brow before tilting the alcohol into his cruel mouth. I feel my body responding, watching the way this throat works

as he drinks the liquid. He's so fucking sexy despite being an awful fucking husband.

“*Fuck*, that's the operative word. That's why I'm here, darling, to fuck my little wife. To bow your ass up and make you take this dick until you learn how to watch that smart mouth of yours.” He starts shedding his clothes like it's a done deal.

“Umm, I think not.” Shaking my head, I turn back to my iPad, purposely ignoring his ass. His eyes flashing, he stands, having stepped out of his pants and boxers. His dick is full, hard, reaching past his navel, drifting to the left. It's so fucking pretty. My mouth waters as I think of the last time we had sex. It was the night of the gala. From then on it seemed like he made a point of not touching me unless it was for show, for the public.

He's punishing me for what Krie advised me to do, which I still haven't confessed to. Why would I? Leaving him never crossed my mind. I'm sure newlyweds get all types of advice. With my family, leaving a husband or laying his sorry ass down also comes with the territory. Matriarchal as the Loves are, we don't hold with putting up with any mess from our men. They either fall in line or fall off. Period. More than one sorry, no-good-ass man has met an untimely demise. Mathias is lucky she didn't give me the other suggestion.

I can't believe Natalie spied on me. That's when I stopped dealing with her. For all her talk about the bigger picture, her actions say she's a bitter Betty about the whole thing. The fact Mathias can't or refuses to see it makes me mad as hell. Just one more thing to add to my growing list of his crimes.

“You're telling me no?” The question comes out low and deadly.

“Yes.” I toss back the rest of my champagne, tucking my knees under the long silk night gown I found in the enormous closet sent by Summer.

She doubles as my stylist. I like her choices of materials for my public outfits. I immediately hired her over the people Natalie tried to push on me. I knew their taste would have me

looking like a short Mrs. Doubtfire. Umm, no thanks. Summer has me looking like I'm in my twenties, the posh wife of a billionaire, not a bumpkin.

“Ah.” He puts down the champagne bottle with a snap. He lowers his body until he's kneeling before me where I'm curled in the corner of the sofa. “Oh, yeah?” He stares at me.

“Yeah.” I manage to keep my voice strong even though my body is already betraying me.

He grabs my right ankle, slowly drawing me forward. I could kick him, I probably should but I don't. Grabbing my other ankle, he pulls my legs apart, spreading them widely. Looking down at his obvious effect on me, his eyes darken to slate gray.

“Yeah?” His voice is guttural, rough with need.

“Yeah,” I whisper, meaning something entirely different this time. “Mathias.” The word comes out on a whimper when his hot mouth covers my mound. My pussy pulses as he sucks me so greedily. After laving me, he pulls back to look at his handiwork.

“So fucking pretty. I love having this fat motherfucker in my mouth,” he confesses, pushing my thighs up, until he's pretzling me.

“Ah.” My gasp becomes a cry when he licks me from front to back, then back to front. Over and over again he does it until he buries his face in my ass.

“Ohmygoodness.” Wetness gushes out my pussy when he tongues my bottom hole. My muscles clench so hard it's almost like a cramp.

“I got you, baby,” he murmurs, pressing two fingers inside, working me, plowing in and out of my pussy. Arching into him, I meet every thrust of his as he finger fucks me.

“So good, so good.” I pant, riding his fingers. He spears his tongue in and out of my bottom, brushing my clit with his other hand.



“Thi—” Screaming, I come hard, feeling pressure releasing from me as I wet his face and the sofa with my essence.

“Fuck,” he groans. “You’re so beautiful when you come for me.” Wiping down his face where I drenched him, he rubs it in like he can’t get enough of it.

“Turn for me, darling,” he whispers, his voice a seductive force all on its own.

Turning, I curl over the plush pillows, arching my body up to his. I feel a dip as he places a knee on the sofa.

“Still so tight.” He pushes the thick head of his dick into me. “So fucking tight. I should be fucking you more, wife.” He works the head inside. “Relax your back more for me, that’s it. Open my pussy up for me. I know she misses me.” Slowly, he fucks into me. Inch by delicious inch, I take him until he’s bottoming out.

“I can’t take it.” I sob. I’m so full, stretched to the max, almost to the point of pain. I thought it would get easier after he took my virginity.

“Yes, you can.” His words are hard. Palming the globes of my ass, he massages them before spreading them wide. “If you see how pretty this motherfucker is stretched on my dick, you’ll come hard like you did moments ago.”

His assurance does nothing to alleviate my fear.

“Grab this cheek.”

When I do as he says, replacing his hand, he reaches around and begins to rub my clit. My muscles squeeze at the pleasure. Pressing against the fullness, I begin fucking myself on his hardness, the pain and pleasure becoming an amalgamation of bliss. I’m helpless to do anything other than respond to his touch worrying my hard little nub, his hardness filling me.

“That’s right, get your dick, darling,” he urges me, driving long and hard inside me. Every inch of me is open to him.

“So fucking pretty, taking me like a good little wife,” he praises, fucking me so hard, my teeth rattle. “Down,” he commands.

I cry out when he moves his fingers, instantly wanting him back playing with my pussy.

“I got you,” he croons, pressing me until my face is buried in the seat cushions. Pulling out, he says, “Remember what I said about that mouth?”

He covers my mound again, his long fingers scissoring my slick clit. I don't even remember what he's talking about. It doesn't matter because when he slams home, I can't speak. I can't see when he withdraws and his hips thrust. I can't do anything but take it as he drives inside me again and again. Pleasure ripples through me.

“You're my goddamn wife. Mine. This is my pussy,” he chants as if in devotion.

“Yes, Thi—” I cry, absently wondering if he's going to tell me not to call him that, but it seems not to matter while he's taking my pussy to church. We are one in our lust despite the animosity raging between us. At least we have this, but even as the words cross my mind, I know that it can never be enough. In that moment, though, it is. He is. He's my husband. I don't care how it came to be. In that moment all I care about is how deep he is inside me, filling me up until we are one in the truest sense.

“Nikki.” Calling my name, he draws me close, his heavy body covering me, his dick pistoning like he can find the answers to life's mysteries if he can get deeper inside me. “Be a good fucking girl and come with your husband. I can't hold on. I'm about to come in your hot little pussy.”

His words, fingers, and hard pounding dick take me over the precipice. Ecstasy explodes around me as my husband's seed bursts in hot ropes, filling me to the brim.

Panting, he stays, my walls pulsing still gripping with the aftershocks. I realize to cause me less discomfort. After he softens, he slowly pulls out, falling back on the sofa, tugging

me with him until I'm half on top of him. "Wait. Hold up." After pulling my iPad from beneath him, he hands it to me.

He grabs the champagne from a nearby ottoman, then tilts it toward my lips. "Drink."

With my eyes never leaving his, I take long pulls from the bottle.

His gaze narrows on the way my throat works. He pulls the bottle back, shaking his head to himself.

"Ew," I say, feeling my body push his come out of me.

"What?" He looks down at me quizzically.

"I feel icky." Making an awkward gesture to my lower parts, I shrug, embarrassed.

"Lights," he calls out, and the room is immediately shrouded in darkness as the lights switch off; the windows must be synced with the light command because they darken a well.

Seconds later he pulls his T-shirt off, then presses it against my sore, messy pussy.

"Better?" he asks, sounding distracted, tucking me in the crook of his arm.

"Yeah," I say against his chest, thinking my body isn't the biggest mess. Our marriage is.

HEAVY PRESSURE in my tummy wakes me. I'm alone. It's still dark, but it won't remain so in a few minutes, if the pink band on the horizon is any indication.

As soon as I get up and start walking, more of Mathias slips out of me and down my thighs. Speed walking, I hurry to the en suite.

He's in the shower. Paying him no mind, I rush past the shower, heading to the toilet. Closing the door of the little room, I hurry to sit, easing the pressure in my abdomen.

I hear the shower stop as I marvel at the quiet flush of the Tekmoto toilet. I have to tell Krie her husband's company makes cool products.

There's no point in thinking I'll get away with trying to get more sleep. I might as well go ahead and bathe. Heading straight over to the shower, I try not to bother him, unsure of which Mathias I'll get—the guy who is coolly polite and distant, or the one who is cool, cruel, and distant. I've given up hope of ever getting the man with the ready smiles and kind words. He's gone forever. Lost to me thanks to Joi and whatever her agenda is.

I still can't fathom why she'd do this to me. No one has seen her since she dropped that little bomb. When I see her, I'm going to beat her ass. If anyone in my family mumbles a word about it, I'm going to remind them she had it coming. I still want to know how she found out about us.

Just as I step into the shower, I freeze. Mathias has his back to me. Why he never took off his tee shirt is answered like a vicious punch in the gut.

His entire back is scarred. He looks like he's been beaten repeatedly within an inch of his life. I don't know how long I stand there looking at his back.

He's paused in his shaving, his gaze locking with mine in the mirror. His face is perfectly blank as he watches my expression. I don't know what he expects from his look—it must be revulsion or pity.

I swallow the scream of anguish bubbling in my throat. His daddy did this to him. I know it just like I know my own name. No one else could have gotten away with this kind of abuse.

My feet move of their own volition until I find myself standing behind him. He doesn't turn. Up close the injuries are worse. Deep raised scars crisscross his back from the top of his butt to his nape. They wrap around his shoulders like a hug of horror.

“Oh, friend.” Getting on my tiptoes, I kiss the scars at his nape. Symbolically I kiss away his hurt. With my kiss, I push away the cruelty. “I’m so sorry this happened to you,” I whisper too softly for him to hear against his skin, nudging away the pain. No wonder he doesn’t trust. Taking my time, I kiss every twisted line. Kissing him becomes my ministry. He didn’t deserve this. I can only imagine the small boy he must have been, crushed under his father’s depravity. Following the path down his body, I don’t stop until my lips have touched every part of him marred by the person who was supposed to protect him most in the world. Still he doesn’t turn; he’s gripping the sink counter like the fate of the world depends on him hold it up, so I wrap my arms around him and rest my head on his scarred back.

I don’t know how long we stand with me draped on his back, nor do I realize I’m crying until he disengages my arms from around his waist. “Don’t cry over me,” he mutters, wrapping his strong arms around me.

“I’m not crying over your mean ass.” My words are muffled in his chest.

He scoffs, his arms encasing me. “I mean it.” His words sound gruff. I hold him closer, snuggling as close as I can.

“You were just a kid. It’s not right what happened to you.” I pull away, noticing his front is just as marred. There are several burned-out circles on his chest.

I push him away a little so I can look at him fully.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his eyes shrouded again.

“You had to endure it. I won’t dishonor you by looking away.”

His jaw flexes, and this time he’s the one swallowing his feelings.

I start to kiss the scars peppering his chest.

“You don’t have—”

Pressing my lips against his, I shut him up. Then I return to my task. Getting on my tiptoes, I try to come close to his line

of sight. He angles his head to meet my gaze.

“I’m sorry, but I’m glad that motherfucker’s dead.” The wrath in my words has the solemnity falling from his face.

“Don’t be sorry. I already told you what I did.” He smirks.

“Well, good. Eep.” The last part is a gasp when my bare bottom hits the cold marble of the sink. He moves to stand in between my legs.

“Look at you being a bloodthirsty little minx,” he grumbles. I can feel how hard he is because he’s pressing against the juncture of my thighs. The towel is doing nothing to hide his enormous bulge.

For a long moment, we both battle internal wraiths. For the first time in all these years, we are wary of how much we should show the other. It’s almost as if our trust is so broken that my soft place to fall has become a patch of briars.

“Well, minxes can be fierce protectors.” Ready to weather his rejection, I tip my chin up.

Wariness gives way to a deeper, darker emotion. “Fierce, huh?” Reaching out with one finger, he tugs my bottom lip free from between the teeth abusing it.

“Yep.” I nod for emphasis.

“I’m starting to see that,” he muses, obviously troubled by what he knows of me and the treachery he believes me guilty of. Though I understand more why trust is a fragile friend for him, I can’t help the hurt that lances through me.

“Show me how fierce you can be, little wife.” His mouth claims mine. I kiss him back with all the fierceness I feel from seeing what he endured at the hands of his father. Our tongues tangle, suck, savoring every breath mingled. He captures me by my nape, holding me as he angles his mouth over mine. He makes me take him. I do. Taking all he has to give, I demand more. He tastes like fresh mint and me. He pulls back, his eyes smoldering. “So pretty for me.”

We meet in the middle; the kiss is hot and greedy. I tug his lip into my mouth, sucking the pliant bottom, then move to the

top, biting the corner a little. In turn he bites me, making my pussy squeeze. Spearing my tongue into his mouth, I make him take my tongue back. He sucks my tongue, holds me deep in his mouth. His kiss is an experience—a whole sex act all on its own. My body responds in kind. The marble counter is wet with my juices. Squeezing my thighs reflexively against the hardness of his hard thigh, I arch into the pressure. He presses, grinding his heavy dick into my pussy.

“I need you, Nik.”

My heart stops. He hasn't called me that in so long, I don't know how to take it. There's a quiet vulnerability in his eyes for a moment. He looks away like he's trying to gather the strength of ten thousand men.

“I—I need to shower,” I say, squinching up my nose. “I stink.”

He shakes his head. “You smell like me. Like us.” He leans in, his breath ghosting ear as he makes me feel every inch pressed against my pussy. “You smell mine.” His voice is a deep growl. “Don't make me make you give me my pussy, little wife. I'm not asking.”

Tugging the towel away from him and dropping it on the floor, I meet his gaze.

“Good little wife, always keeping my pussy ready for me,” he praises me, pushing his thick, hard length inside me.

“Mathias,” I hiss, feeling the burn and stretch of his magnificent dick. “So good, so good.” I sound unintelligible to myself.

“Fuck.” He draws the word out on a long moan as he surges into me until he bottoms out. “This motherfucker is so good. You got some good pussy, wife. Wrap them thick-ass thighs around me.” The minute I do, he's pounding my pussy to oblivion. Giving me no quarter, hitting my delicious spot again and again until I see stars.

“Yes, Mathias, fuck me,” I cry, coming all over his pounding dick.

“Uh-uh, show me that fierce bitch. Fuck me back,” he demands, driving into me again, angling back so we can both see him taking me. “Look how well we fit, Nik.” His eyes go from me to where we are joined; I look down, and my pussy squeezes around him at how right he is.

“We’re so good together.” I pant.

His eyes snag mine. With his eyes on me, he reaches between us. “Show me how good.” He plays with my pussy. I work to meet him, doing my best to show him, and I must do it right because we come together, our eyes locked as we shatter.





CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

Nikki

“THAT’S ALL FOR TODAY. Nikki, meet me in the car. We have a meet and greet with the Small Business Association down in Shelby-Love.” Mathias is like a general barking orders. Staff members start filing out of the suite, walking past the living area and the throws strategically placed over the evidence of what took place on the sofa last night.

I nod, finding his cold and remote demeanor jarring after the closeness we shared this morning. I stare his ass down for a long moment, noticing Natalie is hanging back. “Sure.”

His jaw tightens when I roll my eyes.

“C’mon, baby cuz,” LL soothes, hanging by the door.

I follow him out to the blacked-out SUV we use for long travel.

“Hey, you have to give him time with this type of stuff,” LL advises as he holds the door open. “You’ve only known him for a little over a year. I wish you’d told me about him because then I could have warned you about how he is in private. He’s not to be fucked with. Joi’s little ass was smart to go into hiding after that bullshit she pulled. This motherfucker is just as ruthless as his daddy, but not evil. Trust, if he really thought you were in on it, you’d be in one of those sugar

fields.” He’s looking at me hard. “So tell big cuz if you need to disappear, li’l girl, before it’s too late.”

Stunned, I look at him. “Wow. LL, I thought you knew me better than that.”

He flashes a ruthless smile. “I know better than anyone how much dirt this family gets into. Plus, you grew up different. I don’t know what being around all them transients taught you—them motherfuckers crafty.”

“Forget you.” I roll my eyes, pulling my legs into the car. “You can close my door, butler.”

“Woow.” He drags the word out, shaking his head. “I see Nat’s bougie ass is rubbing off on you.” He closes the door before I can cuss him out.

After pulling out my iPad, I start reading, taking my mind off everything going wrong in my life.

What was the closeness we shared this morning only to have him acting funny in the meeting? Somehow, I feel like it’s for Natalie’s benefit. He’s never told me he didn’t want her anymore. In fact, his behavior indicates that he still does.

Unable to concentrate, I look at the time. Fifteen minutes have passed. I exit the car. “Mrs. Shelby,” the driver calls as I start walking back to the elevator leading to our suite.

“Oh, I forgot my ID in another handbag.” I wave him off like it’s no big deal. It’s really not. The security is for the wackadoos who hate Mathias for betraying the Republican Party by switching when he never telegraphed that he was one in the first place. I know why he didn’t broadcast it. He hoped to drop that bomb on his father when he announced his candidacy, but his father died before that little twisted dream of revenge could come true.

Nodding to the driver and security, I step into elevator. The ride up is smooth. No one is about when I exit. No security nor other staff. My tummy drops as foreboding sits like lead right beneath my heart. I straighten my spine, determined to face it head-on. My daddy always said it was better to rip the Band-Aid off rather than allow it to get dirty and fester. And that is

exactly what this situation with Natalie has been: a puss-filled oozing wound that won't heal.

It's quiet when I open the door to the penthouse. After taking my shoes off, I follow the hushed tones, walking to the office on the other side of the open kitchen.

I listen at the door, which is ajar.

"All I'm saying is once you win, you can get an annulment or a quickie divorce. If yesterday showed us anything, it's that she's not going to do well in DC. What?" She pauses, scoffing. I can't see their faces, so I don't know the look he's giving her. "The next thing you know, Thi, she'll be scaling the Washington Memorial." I hear a soft pat on his shoulder. "It's a mercy really. She's miserable. You said so yourself. She's too out of her element."

"Then what?" he asks smoothly and way too nonchalantly for me. "You're going to take her place, step back in as Mrs. Shelby? Be my arm candy and help me navigate the shark-infested waters of DC?"

It sounds like he's considering it. A sick feeling makes that block of lead into a two-ton bolder. My mouth is ash, I feel heat rising in my body, but I can't make myself move from this damn door.

"That was the plan," she tells him cheerfully before her voice dips into a conspiratorial whisper. "I may even forgive you for not ever bringing me here, among other things."

"What things?" Intrigue colors his tone. Even not seeing his face, I can imagine how the curiosity is playing across his features.

"Hmm...has she seen you completely naked?" I hear the jealousy in her voice. Does she want to know what I think of his scars? Is she mad that she's not the only one he trusted with his secret?

"She's my wife." He claps back with a ferocity I've never heard him use with her.

"Oh," she says quietly, like she has the right to be jealous of an arrangement her ass was down for until she stopped

getting all the attention. “Of course. Well, let’s not keep your precious wife waiting.”

I hear her move past him to the door, and my heart starts pounding out my chest. I take a step back, but I know I can’t flee before she opens the door.

“Natalie, hold up a sec.”

Hearing her move back in his direction, I turn and rush out of the suite before they catch me eavesdropping on their diabolical plans. I can’t stand their asses, I swear

“YOU GOOD?” Mathias asks me hours later as we pull up a couple of minutes late to the event my cousin Ezekiel-Jane is hosting for Mathias at the Shelby-Love Library. He eyes my honeysuckle-yellow outfit Summer made sure was shot through with platinum thread and had embroidered camellias, the Alabama state flower, along the hem. It stops just above my knees and has fluted bell-like ripples that make it look like a flower. The heart-shaped neckline accentuates my positives without being too sexy. Mathias is in a black silk suit with a tie Summer made to match my dress, along with a platinum pocket square to match his incredible eyes.

“Fine.” I don’t bother to look at his trifling ass. I look down to make sure my clothes didn’t get too wrinkled on the drive. We had to rush to make it in time. This event is planned for the whole Black Belt Small Business Association. Several of my cousins are members, not to mention Kiyoshi and Hishashi Takeda, my mentors who partnered with our cousin Delightful’s husband, superstar rap mogul FADE Carrington, to bring the tech conglomerate to our small little town and give the people here a chance at better life.

“Hey.” Mathias tugs at my chin, making me look at those incredible eyes. He sees everything; I have to guard my heart and my head against this man who determined that we are now enemies. “What’s wrong with you? You didn’t say anything the whole way down here. Then you hopped in the shower and been giving me the silent treatment the whole time.” He’s

talking like he's hurt when he knows full well he was just hours ago planning—and still intends—to get rid of me.

“I was reading a good book. Plus, in that meeting earlier, you went back to acting like bitch ass so, I thought it was better to leave you alone. Let you deal with the people you feel are on your level and worthy of your time.” I don't let any emotion cloud my words. I keep it simple.

His hands slip to my throat, giving it a little squeeze. “Are we going to have a problem tonight, little wife?” His words are cold, deadly, while his hand steadily squeezing my damn neck emphasizes he's not fucking playing and he doesn't have any problem breaking my neck if I fuck him over again.

“N-no.” I smile even though his touch trips my heartbeat, making it erratic. Feeling the effect he has on me, his eyes smolder. Now a hotter emotion has my pussy getting slick. I would have never thought the kind young man who provided for me and kept me safe for years would become this villain who likes to dominate me, who makes me like his dominance, even crave it.

“*No, husband,*” he commands, his hand closing off my breath.

I barely get the trapped words out before his mouth slants over mine.

“Fuck,” he groans, covering my moan, swallowing it and the minuscule resistance I could muster. This is my problem. I'm too weak for him. All he has to do is crook his finger, and I come—literally. Press me and I fold. I know I can't sustain this. Yet even as I think it, I lose myself in his kiss, even though we should have been inside the event five minutes ago.

“YOU HAVE pink lip gloss on your lips,” LL says, handing Mathias a handkerchief, walking up two minutes after the news reporter took pictures of us as we were greeted by Easy and her former colleague Blay, who is moderating the event.

“All the better to play into your narrative, my friend,” Mathias says dryly, waving him off. Reaching up, I wipe the

smear below his lip. When I reapplied my lip gloss, I was shamefaced by how easily I submitted to him after hearing his plan to do me dirty.

“Thank you, baby,” he says, not quietly, the look in his eyes confusing the hell out of me.

“You’re welcome,” I say, letting everything in the world fall away. For a few seconds, there is no one but us. Caught up in the cyclone of emotion, we’re in a battle neither can win but nor do we want to give up any ground.

“Welcome the next senator of the great state of Alabama,” Easy says to the gathered crowd.

Squeezing my waist, Mathias whispers, “Showtime,” and heads to the front of the crowd before taking a seat across from Blay onstage.

Easy tells everyone what to expect from the town hall format. “Blay will start with a series of questions we had submitted by some. Then we will open the floor.”

Watching Mathias field questions mainly about business, I can’t help but feel a surge of pride. His intentions obviously weren’t just to avenge his mother. He clearly has a desire to serve. He didn’t shy away from his family history, nor did he make excuses for it. “Shelbys have been bad actors from the inception of this country. I won’t excuse that. For generations we were lauded for our contributions to the state of Alabama and to the country, yet in all that time, we have caused harm. Today’s generation of Shelbys is determined to atone for the wrongdoing of our ancestors.” I know he means it, but I can tell many people, my family in particular, doubt him.

“And a step in that direction was making a Love, whose ancestors were enslaved by your forefathers, a modern-day bed wench?” The challenge comes from a young man I’m not familiar with. “Thomas Barkley, from the *Shelby-Love Chronicle*. Mr. Shelby, how did you and Miss Love meet? Some say it was well before her graduation. It seems odd that the episode by your truck would happen so soon after you met. It says lot about both your family values if it’s true that you were able to seduce her so quickly.” Low murmurs start filling

the room. I hold my head up higher, looking straight at Mathias.

The media training drilled into me by Natalie and LL since I joined the campaign is like muscle memory at this point. I don't faint or falter as Mathias fields the question with a cool aplomb I could never attain. He keeps his answer short and sweet, making the guy look like an idiot. "When someone like Nicolette Love comes into your life, it can't be ignored. I wish that for everybody." He finishes his statement with a smile so warm, it fills me up with joy even though I know it's not real.

Soon more questions abound about bringing more industry to our area, like growing marijuana for medicinal use since the soil here is prime for it. Then the questions lead into educational opportunities and community policing. The two hours it takes go over the thirty or so minutes Easy told us to expect. Then the Kandie Shoppe brings out sweets, and The Camellia's staff offers hors d'oeuvres.

"He's a lucky man."

Swinging around at the deep baritone, which is what I imagine rough whiskey and freshly mown grass come to life would sound like, I see a soft smile playing across Blay's handsome face.

"Aww, thanks." I smile sweetly at him. "You made him look really good up there."

"It's easy when a candidate is the real deal. I followed your husband for years when he was in Birmingham, giving corporations hell for their environmental pollution on the west side. When he made them honor the settlement and build green spaces and monetize the cancer fund, I knew he meant business. I don't care how coldblooded he claims to be. He gets shi—stuff done." He tips his lemonade at me with a rueful smile. "Ezekiel-Jane did me favor. She knows how much I admire your husband."

"That's Easy, always trying to make people happy." I smile remembering how she encouraged me that day a little over three weeks ago when my whole life was coming down around my ears.



He nods. “So how’s married life treating you?”

I’m not quick enough to cover the flash of intense emotion that plays across my face his warm sincerity brings out all those hours of media training going up in wisps of smoke.

“Awww, baby girl, it can’t be that bad,” he says softly,, his face full of compassion. He squeezes my shoulder encouragingly.

“It’s not that.” I pat his hand to reassure him. “It’s just... the campaign trail is grueling.”

He’s immediately nodding. “I can’t imagine. My fiancée, Tk, would be losing her mind.”

“Wasn’t she y’all’s boss, the head librarian?” I query, a knowing smirk playing across my face until I think of how closely Mathias and Natalie work together. How she’s always there. Not that it matters now that he’s planning to rid himself of his troublesome wife. I should be glad he’s not thinking of a deadly solution like King Henry The Eighth.

“Well.” Blay pauses for a long moment, as if trying to find the right words. “Ezekiel-Jane and Angel helped us more than they know on that score.” His words hold a lot more meaning that is lost on me.

Staring at him blankly for a moment, I’m puzzled when it comes to my super-innocent, saved-by-grace cousin. “What?” I ask, giggling even though wanting to be messy even though that is another big media training no-no.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it.” He waves me away.

“Mm-hmm.” I give him a skeptical look.

“It’s nothing, I promise.” The mischievous twinkle in his eyes belies the statement, though.

“Uh-huh, I got your number buddy.” I poke him in the shoulder, smirking.

“So where are y’all headed next?” he queries with true interest.

“More local stuff and community events. A few more fundraisers. I used to wonder why people were raising so much money, but now I realize how expensive campaigns are. Mathias is paying his people a living wage, and a salary for the more seasoned people. And don’t get me started on the ad buys.” Of all the events we’ve attended so far, this one in Shelby-Love is the most welcoming and down home despite Joi’s little plant. I look around to see if he’s lurking and trying to get more dirt or if LL and the campaign’s security team showed him the door.

Scanning my surroundings, I don’t see the young man. I only see people mingling. Krie waves and starts making her way over to me, along with Mimi. My cousin Valentine’s here talking to everyone but pointedly ignoring her sister, Summer. I guess she’s still mad Summer dropped out of Tuskegee’s veterinary program to pursue her dream of becoming a fashion designer.

Summer doesn’t seem the least bit bothered, though, working the crowd for more clients. Her bright effervescence has everyone flocking to her. I’m going to have to tell Val that sometimes following your own dream is best.

“Well,” Blay says, all Southern charm, patting my back. “I won’t monopolize all your time, Mrs. Shelby.”

“Boy, stop calling me that like I’m some old bitty. *Nikki* is fine.”

He smiles, moving to the side to pass and allow Krie and Mimi to come close. Just as he moves to my left, I see what he was blocking: the furious countenance of one Mathias Shelby.

The fury on his face makes me step back apprehensively.

“Whoa, cuz.” Krie stops me from stepping all over her. She comes and looks me over. “You okay?” Both my cousins’ heads swivel, trying to find the cause of my upset, but Mathias has already turned away, talking a group of men that includes their husbands.

“It’s nothing,” I tell them, shoving my unease away. Changing the subject, I ask, “How did y’all think he did

tonight?”

“Good,” Mimi says as they both nod. “He’s going to be a good senator. I think he means business about bring more jobs and opportunities to the rural areas.”

“How’s he treating you, though?” Mimi doesn’t mince words. “I know what Joi pulled was some mess, but he can’t think you had anything to do with it. Everybody knows she put my business all out in the street.” It took Mimi and the entire family a long time to forgive Joi for the exclusive interview she did that almost ruined not only Santiago’s and Mimi’s career but their relationship as well.

“Yeah, and me too.” Krie adds, “Talking about, ‘it was for the public interest’ that she cover what Thad and his friends did. Never mind it almost cost me my restaurant. Then she straight did Kiyoshi dirty, not even interviewing his team when the strike went down.”

“That was the dirtiest ever.” Mimi seethes, sucking her teeth.

“Y’all, stop,” I tell them. “I don’t know what she’s up to, but trust, when I see her, we are going to have a misunderstanding. It can be in five days or five years, but it’s happening.”

They laugh, but they know I am deadly serious. I’ve been nothing if not nice to Joi. I was the first one to deal with her after she pulled that stuff with Mimi and pled her case when she did it to Thad and Krie. I feel silly for telling people how she had no choice, being the only new reporter around these parts, added to the fact that she professed to be a “just the facts, ma’am” type of journalist. But this thing with Mathias was salacious and gossipy.

“She went too far. She could have given you a heads-up. Especially after you confided in her.” Krie huffs and Mimi nods.

“I never told her anything.” I shake my head vehemently, hurt they think that of me. “I would have never told his

business like that.” I lower my voice but make no effort to hide my affront.

“Then how did she find out?” Mimi leans in to ask, while Krie makes sure we’re not being overheard.

“I don’t know,” I say miserably. “And he doesn’t believe me.”

“I didn’t believe Santiago either,” Mimi says miserably. “It wasn’t until his ex confessed that I had to face the fact I put the man I love, and who loves me and his baby to distraction, through hell over a damn lie Joi helped perpetuate.” Her breast heaves as she gets mad again just thinking about it.

“He’s gonna want to kick his own ass forever for doubting you.” Krie arches a sage brow. “Trust me. Make him buy you a Maybach as an apology gift. I got a whole new set of knives, some other toys, and a whole brand-new restaurant.” She winks.

We all laugh, and for a moment, I visualize myself like my cousins, happily married to a man who adores me, but for the life of me, I can’t see it right now. He was just trying to get rid of me this morning, and I still don’t know if he’s still in love with Natalie.

We chat more, and eventually Valentine and various other cousins join us, and we are all talking and laughing. Still, every time I see Mathias watching me, his eyes are hard as stone.

Eventually the men join us. “Thank you for postponing my internship until after the campaign, Misters Takeda.”

Krie’s husband and his more austere brother bow slightly to me.

“We think it will be more beneficial to have you work on behalf of Takeda in DC as a registered lobbyist, after training of course,” Kiyoshi says with cold calculation smooth as a hot knife through butter.

“There is only so much one senator can do,” Hishashi affirms. So they already have a path set for me within the company. “This will be an accelerated path, and we still must

insist you attain your MBA, just as you were going to do working here at the headquarters, but we know this is the best way forward.”

Excitement infuses me at hearing how much confidence they have in me. “This sounds amazing.” Looking at Mathias, I add, “I have to talk about it with Mathias first, though.”

“I already told them it’s whatever you want,” he says in a calm enough voice that has my cousins smiling because they don’t know any better. Heck, I didn’t know any better a few years ago. I didn’t know the villain lurking beneath the surface.

“Wonderful.” I beam at him for their sake, my heart sinking. Will I be able to keep my job at Takeda in DC if he divorces me, setting me aside for perfect Nat? I’d have to come back here and ask for my original job back. Probably get Krie to help. I can’t even think about the humiliation I’d have to endure.

After hearing their conversation today, they’d probably be laughing their asses off thinking how they got me back for being such a nuisance, causing them so much trouble with my childish infatuation.

“Thank y’all for having us and giving me a chance to explain how I plan to help local business and the community. Sorry we can’t stay longer. We have to get an early start in the morning,” Mathias tells the group, ushering me out of the library.

When we reach his car, he opens the door. “Get in the fucking car, Nikki.” He sounds so wrathful, I hesitate. Just then I see Easy getting in Angel’s truck; she waves, *bye* to me.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he says, stepping smoothly in front of me. “Get. In. Wife.”

“You so fucking dumb,” I whisper hatefully, sliding into the seat.

“True,” he says, then reaches to buckle me in. “For ever trusting your ass.”

He snaps the door closed and goes to his side of the car before pulling off without another word to me.

“GO TAKE A SHOWER. Get that motherfucker’s scent, who you kept letting touch you off your body.” His words boom in the darkness of the barn he converted into a sleek modern house. He decided to come to his house on the Shelby estate since we were so close to the Shelby -Love Library.

“What?” Confusion makes my voice high and thready. The light is dim but bright enough for me to make out the fury etched on his face. “Are you talking about Blay?” I barely remember him touching me, and there was nothing inappropriate about it.

Mathias’s face is a cold mask of rage. He looks about ready to snap.

“Six times,” he says, tilting his head to the side. “Then you touched him.” His jaw flexes like he’s grinding gravel. “Skinning and grinning in that motherfucker’s face like he hung the fucking moon. The fuck you think you were doing?” His voice is barely above a growl.

“All we talked about was you, Mathias. He is a big admirer of how you got the settlements from the polluters for Birmingham’s west side residents.” I hate the way my voice sounds pleading. I hate how dirty he’s making my interaction with the nicest person I’ve met on the campaign trail.

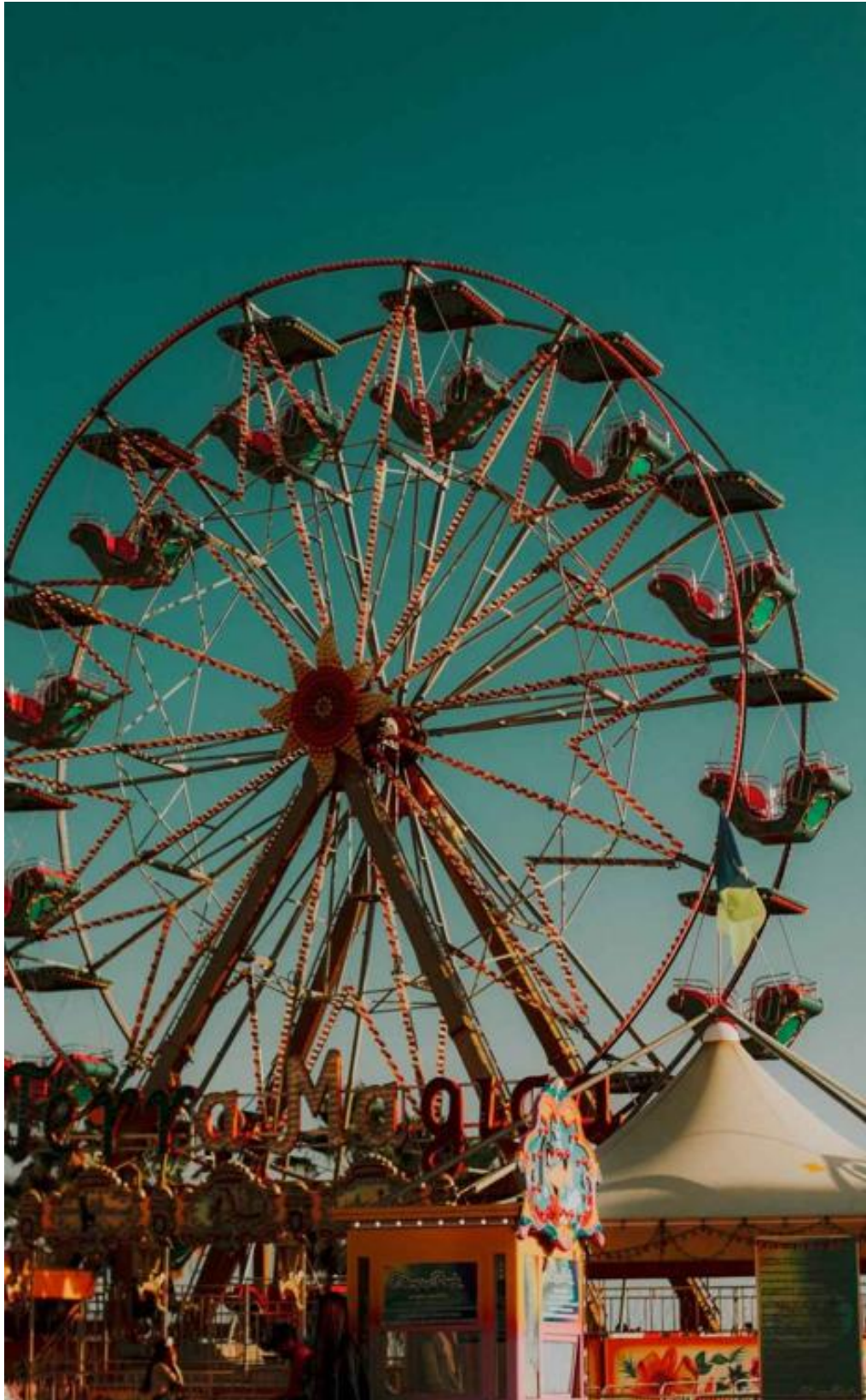
“I don’t give a fuck what he thinks. Why the fuck did you let him keep putting his hands on you?” Every word sounds like bomb. He’s become unhinged.

“What the fuck do you care, Thi?” I scream at him. “You’re divorcing me or annulling our marriage to be with Nat, the love of your fucking life.”

He stands stock-still.

“Yeah, I heard your little plan with your assistant campaign manager, or is she your side chick now?”

Brushing past him, I go to take the shower he's demanding.





CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

**N**ikki

HOT WATER from the rain shower rains down on me like a melody of darkness and sorrow. Hot tears burn my throat. I'm so tired of crying over him.

Exhaustion I just now allow myself to feel eats at me. How dare he accuse me when he's carrying on with that girl? Sure, she's beautiful—tall, with tawny skin coupled with striking hazel Spencer eyes—but I never tried to compete with her. He was hers. I respected their relationship even when I became old enough to do something about it.

Kissing him last year was the biggest mistake of my life. I lost my best friend and possibly my future. I've lost my husband—if I ever had him. Who wants a marriage like this? We are living a lie.

While I lather my body, I resolve not to wait for him to throw me away. "I'm leaving him," I say aloud to myself, making it real.

"Oh, yeah?" he asks way too casually as he stands fully clothed, save for his socks and shoes. He's swirling a whiskey, his eyes knife blades slicing into me.

"Yeah," I affirm, turning my back to him to wash off. I hear him sit the glass down. Seconds later, he's pressing me against the warm tile.

“The fuck you are,” he says viciously through gritted teeth in my ear. His clothed body gets drenched as he pushes his taunt strength against me. From in front of Mathias, I feel every hard ridge of him against me. I’m trapped between a wall and a harder place.

“Yes. I. Am.” I mean that shit, bucking, trying to no avail to budge my burden. “I’m done with this bullshit. You are carrying on with your ex, disrespecting me.” Hurt burns through me like hot acid.

“What do you expect me to do, huh? Not talk to her? She’s the assistant campaign manager. Natalie staying on to play her part is why we even still have a chance. She’s the one hurt by this shit you and your cousin pulled.” He grabs me by the nape.

Sick of Mathias, I elbow him in his side as hard as I can, shoving him in one direction as I move in the opposite one. The water makes him slip, and as he catches himself against the wall, I scoot right on past his bullying ass.

Hearing the slap of his clothes hitting the tile, but doing my best to ignore him, I moisturize my body and detangle my hair. I put my leave-in conditioner on my curls and twist them into two ponytails.

Just as he comes out of the shower, still seething, I whirl on him. “Y-you said you forgive me,” I accuse.

“I lied.” His eyes might as well be dead for as much life he has in them. “And give me my goddamn turtle back—you’re not fit to have her.”

“And you are? Your mean ass will let her die out of spite.” I try not to let him know just how much his words wound me. He gave me Bernice Sanders when he first moved to Birmingham for good to keep me company when he wasn’t around. Neither of us knew at the time the pet he got illegally from one of Angel’s suppliers was a giant turtle.

*You knew better*, my mind whispers. He’d had the rug pulled out from under him too many times by his malignant narcissist of a father who played cruel games with both

Mathias and his mother, then had them forgive him, only to do something worse. Now, he thinks I'm doing the same thing. He believes I pretended to be his friend only to get access to his wealth and power.

*If someone wrongs me, they will never get a second chance,* he said one night we were hanging out on his gran's porch. *I don't have to worry about that from you, do I, darling?*

With what I know was probably hero worship and the first buddings of unrequited love, I looked him in the eyes and said clearly, *Never.*

"I didn't do it. I don't know how she found out about us, Thi," I tell him. "Now I see you really believe this, and that hurts worse than anything. Because you know me better than anyone. You should know I would never do you like that. We're supposed to be best friends." I'm so proud of myself for being able to keep my voice steady.

He remains stoic as I start leave him there heading to the bedroom. "I told you not to call me that name ever again."

I turn back. "Hm, I guess that's now only reserved for Nat, who never called you that before. That's okay. Blay is fine with me using his nickname." Forcing a laugh, I flounce off.

My body takes flight before I even realize he's touched me. I hit the bed in a tumble, rolling head over tail until I come to a ball near the middle of the king size bed.

"I see you forgot who the fuck you married." He sneers down at me like a god looking down on a pitiful sinner.

"I don't know who I married. You are not the guy I thought you were," I yell at him, coming up on my elbows, slowly creeping away from the furious beast he's morphed into.

"The dumb motherfucker you had fooled? No." He gives a slow shake of his head. "He was only for the person I thought you were. A good girl who fell on hard times. Not a lying little bitch who deserves my hand on her ass."

I try to quicken my crawl away, but he grabs my ankle, dragging me back to him.

“Where the fuck you going? Talk that shit now. Call that motherfucker’s name again like you did a moment ago.” Dragging me over his knee, he waits, daring me. I promise I don’t know what makes me do it. I know what the result will be and maybe that spurs me on.

“Blay,” I say loudly, infusing sexy breathiness into it, letting the name drop like an anvil on Wile E. Coyote’s head.

The silence is tense and palpable.

“Ahhh,” I cry when his hard, heavy hand connects with my bottom. Reaching back, I try to stop him. He grabs my wrist before pinning it high behind my back.

“I see you think I’m the motherfucker to play with. I have never been that guy despite what you think. I don’t care if it takes me all night to show you who you belong to.”

“Fuck you,” I snarl.

“Oh, you definitely will, little wife,” he growls, his hand coming down. Again, it makes contact with my burning flesh.

“Stop.”

He pauses, rubbing my cheeks in firm strokes, soothing and deepening the ache at the same time.

“Now, see. That could happen if you really wish. If I stop, I won’t touch you again because that means you were serious about defying me and you want that cheesing sycophant, not the man you let be the first to split this pussy open. The one you’ve been wanting to fuck since you were sixteen.”

I gasp.

“Oh?” He chuckles lowly and cruelly. “You thought I didn’t know? Yeah, another reason I should hate you.” He slaps my ass so hard, my teeth rattle. “I’ve spent my whole life trying not to be like him—a fucking predator—but your fucking lies have made me exactly that. I will never forgive your ass for that.”

He spanks me so hard for the next few minutes, tears are streaming down my face, but something else happens in the process. My pussy starts pulsating to the steady rhythm every

time he makes contact. It feels like he's shoving his heavy dick inside me.

Wetness slips out of me and down my legs.

"Look at your nasty little ass loving it." He smears his fingers in the evidence of my arousal. "Taste how much you like my discipline."

Pushing his long slick fingers into my mouth, he doesn't give me a chance to move my head, only tightens his hold where he's held my arms high on my back. After gasping at the ache, I moan when he shoves his fingers past my tongue, making me taste my own juices.

My tummy drops, and my pussy clenches, making me squeeze my thighs in response.

"See how pretty you cream for me. It will be my name you scream when I split this motherfucker open tonight. I going to break you, little wife," he cruelly promises.

Why does my body spasm so deliciously hard to the prospect?

"No." Wiggling, I try to get out.

"No?" He spanks me repeatedly in response, hard and fast. "No?" he demands as he wrings a soul-shattering orgasm from my body.

"Oooh," I cry, my body shuddering as my come rains down my legs.

Pulling me off his lap, he lays me on the bed. Squeezing my legs closed as I shudder from the aftershocks, I curl into a fetal position, my thighs tight after the sensations he's wrought.

"Let me see that pretty-ass pussy." He grabs my thighs, spreading me before him like a banquet.

Watching him like in stunned amazement, I don't miss when he bites his lip nor when he closes his eyes and fists his big-ass dick.

“Damn girl, she’s gaping, begging me to fill her up. She knows who she belongs to. You’re the one with the problem. Say his name again,” he taunts, daring me like I won’t.

Bet. “Blay,” I say through clenched teeth.

It’s like his eyes shimmer. His body pulls taut like he’s been strung back on a bow. His face hardens to beyond granite; he’s laser-etched diamond, and he looks down on me with a feral ferocity.

He falls on me, burying his face in my pussy like it’s a feast. There are no gentle nuzzles. He pulls my clit into his mouth, lashing me repeatedly. His tongue swirls, sucks, and laves, only to pull back and skeet all my juices back on my pussy to then lick it up again, and again, and again.

“Mathias,” I scream, arching into the fast flicks of his tongue as I come.

“Uh-uh, don’t call me now, little wife.” His laughter has an unhinged quality.

I realize then I pushed him too far.

“Yeah,” he sneers, seeing the realization I’ve come to. “You’re going to learn tonight.”

Leaning down, he blows a cool, soothing breath on my mound. “So pretty, so fat,” he praises. “Play with her. Rub your hand down the seam.”

Falling back in his haunches, he grabs his dick at the base, watching lazily as I do as he says.

“Ummm.” I pant, letting my fingers graze my slit.

“Play with your pussy lips, little wife.”

Again, I rub down the center. Instantly I feel wetness slipping free, making my fingers drip with my essence.

I suck my tummy in, trying to quell my reaction. I just can’t stop looking at him watching me, his eyes going from my face, trailing down my body, missing none of my response. His dick rises hard and proud from the nest of his curls.

“She’s hungry. Push a finger into her greedy little hole. Feed her,” he growls, his eyes trained on my pussy like she holds the secrets to the universe.

“Ah,” I gasp, stroking my finger inside, my muscles clenching greedily like he said. I start finger fucking myself, loving the way he bites his lips, slowly jacking his dick, unable to tear his eyes away from what he’s making me do.

“Your finger looks lonely, and your greedy-ass pussy needs more. Add another, baby. Give her what she needs.”

I add another; its way has already been eased by my other finger.

“Don’t hide from me. Open wider.” His hands move faster. His voice has dropped so low, it could be coming from the depths of hell. “Yeah, just like that. If only you could see how your pretty little pussy’s sucking your fingers in. I can’t wait to push my dick in you and watch how you take me.” His eyes are like smoke now, watching my fingers move in and out of me. “Press that raised patch, rub it while you fuck yourself.”

“What?” I don’t even know what he’s talking about.

“It’s just inside, behind your clit, press there.”

Confused I try. It feels good, but I don’t know how to do what he’s asking, I don’t feel anything different because I’ve never touched myself like this. “I can’t reach it. I can’t—”

He’s there in an instant, staring at me intently. “I got you, little wife.” He moves my hands, replacing my fingers with his.

He has me squirming in seconds. His strong fingers have no problem finding the spot. He pistons in me, dragging across it again and again. Then he’s twisting his fingers and, with his other hand, thrumming my clit. “So innocent, so sweet, but you’re going to be a little whore for me, yeah?” Applying just the right amount of pressure, along with insistent attention to my hard little nub, he pushes me shattering over the edge. I might as well be a space cadet because this mean motherfucker I married thrusts me into another stratosphere.

“My turn, wife.” Pulling me to my knees, he makes me sit on my haunches. He comes to his knees, our height difference never more evident because even now, he rises over me.

His dick is level with my face. It’s the most magnificent thing I have ever seen. It rises from his thick nest of curls like the Tower of Pisa, drifting a little to the side, far past his navel. Dusky and tan, long, thick, its veins full, pulsing, ready to take me in any way he desires. The tip pearls, and when a drop slips free from the crown, I lick it before it can roll down the side.

“You’re so attentive, little wife.” He cups my chin, making me look into his hypnotic gaze. “I knew you’d be. Always so eager to please me.”

His mouth holds no kindness, and I know he doesn’t mean it as a compliment, nor can he deny the effect I have on him. It’s like he resents me for it. Like he wants to punish me for him wanting me so badly. Some sick part of me is glad he can’t find the will to deny me any more than I can deny him.

“Open your mouth.” He applies pressure to my cheeks, making me comply. He needs to take it. I show him I’m willing to give.

Opening my lips, I offer him my mouth, flattening my tongue, letting him slide his dick all the way to the back of my throat.

My eyes sting, my nose burns, my throat spasms, but I’m not a quitter. When he grabs my ponytails, wrapping them around his fist, and holds me there with his dick pressing into the back of my throat, I don’t buck. I relax my muscles, willing myself to breathe through my nose. I inhale the scent that is purely him, the soap, the musk, the faintness of his seed.

My needy pussy aches, swelling, wanting to be filled. Tears form and spill down my cheeks and into my curls as I work to take him.

“There she is,” he whispers, his eyes clocking every nuance of my expression. Slowly he drags his dick almost all



the way out. With cool deliberation, he pushes back in, only to repeat the movement again and again, unhurriedly and methodically in and out, then out and in until wetness is running from my lips and filthy slick sounds fill the room, along with my moans and his groans.

“You’re so beautiful like this. I love the way you suck my dick, babe,” he praises me, his hands a heavy caress in my hair. The muscles in his thighs strain as he takes his time gliding his dick over my lips, tongue, and down my throat.

I want more, though. My body is craving the roughness he made me love earlier.

He doesn’t stop me when I pull away. His dick is wet and messy from my efforts. I turn my gaze to his. I can’t read him. Not like I used to. He says nothing, just watches me with the same intensity from earlier.

“Fuck my face.” The words are out my mouth before I can be embarrassed or ashamed I uttered them.

Surprise colors his features for a moment. Then his hand snakes out, cupping the back of my head. “Flatten your tongue. Don’t swallow until I tell you to.”

The moment I do, he shoves his dick down my throat in one fluid thrust. Capturing the other side of my face as an anchor, he starts driving his shaft into my mouth. He fucks my mouth like he does my pussy—without mercy.

He takes ownership of this wet opening like he’s taken my body: careful not to break me but using me as he desires.

“Such a good little brinquido parro for your husband. You take my dick so well, querida.” He starts to slip into Portuguese as he fucks my face.

The long strokes of his dick are delicious, fierce strikes down my throat; he shows me no mercy. “Take it, beautiful, take all of me.”

My eyes water from my efforts. He is relentless as he drives harder. I hum over him, the vibration making him quake in response.

“So good, little wife. So fucking good.”

My pussy is so wet. I reach to touch myself.

Immediately his hands tighten. “Did I say you could to that?” He tangles his fingers in my hair, fucking into my mouth as he chastises me. “You were doing so good.” He fucks me ruthlessly. “You don’t touch my pussy unless I tell you to. Every hole is mine to fuck, to lick, and to suck. Mine.” Holding me, he uses me like a doll, and damn if I don’t love it. He pumps into me, Speaking English mixed with his mother tongue. “Swallow me down, take all my come down your naughty little throat.” After one last thrust and his balls tighten as his come shoots into my mouth and down my throat, soothing what he ravaged.

My pussy spasms as an orgasm takes me so unexpectedly, I fall against him, my own pleasure ripping through me.

“So responsive.” He pushes me away from him, and for a moment, I’m bereft. Then his mouth is on my pussy, licking my release from my aching lips. He tongues my hole and starts tongue fucking me, burying his face between my legs. I’m not recovered from my last orgasm when I feel the beginning of another one. He spreads me wider, slicking his finger in my wet center before moving it lower until he’s at my other hole.

“I’m going to take you here, once you learn how to take my dick, but for now, I need to train you.” He rubs me gently there. Easing his finger in. “You’re beautiful everywhere. I can’t wait to see you stretched here, taking me like a good little wife.”

“Ah,” I whimper against the pleasure pain of him easing inside my tightest hole.

“You’re going to let me have this too, aren’t you, baby?” He works me, driving me out of control, making my bones melt and my body sing. “You’re going to give me that ass.”

My face burns even as I whisper, “Yes. Y-yes, Thi.”

“Good fucking girl.” He growls in triumph, sucking my whole pussy as a reward. His finger starts working my bottom, and I detonate, my whole body arcing like I’m the tensed bow

this time. I pump into his mouth, meeting his tongue while he devours my pussy and finger fucks my ass.

I must have lost consciousness. Because I come to with a start as he presses a compress to my forehead and offers me a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” I say, not meeting his gaze, eye level with the scars marring his lovely skin. I can’t help the anguish I still feel for all he’s gone through. Still, it’s not an excuse for what he did to me tonight.

I drink from the bottle, not saying anything to ease the silence. When I’ve had enough, I dare to look at him.

His gaze is shuttered, his jaw ticking.

“I guess you remembered you hate me.”

He takes the bottle and downs what’s left. “Have you remembered who the fuck you married?” he challenges instead.

I can’t believe he’s still on this. “For the record, as you said, I don’t know this man who is my husband.”

“I said I didn’t show you this side. You were just a kid when we met. Innocent. You needed a chance. Deserved one.” His eyes are steady on me, seemingly to come to terms with what he thinks of the girl who was worthy versus the wife who is obviously not.

“And now?” I challenge, scooting, girding myself for the blow I know is coming. “What do I deserve now?”

In a flash his hand is covering my throat, holding me steady as he climbs over my awakening body, easing me down into the bed until he’s settled between my legs. “You’re getting what you deserve, little wife.” He nips my lip, making it sting. “Punishment. And you love every moment, don’t you?” He licks away the pain, sucking gently, making my pussy wetter. “Because you know you’ve been bad. You deserve to be split open by my dick.”

I gasp when he does just that. He takes his time working his way inside my tight sheath until he can go no farther.

“Know you deserve me filling you up with my seed. Being bred by me.” He starts fucking me. Hard. So hard, I try to brace on the headboard, but he snatches my arms, pinning them above my head with one hand.

“I was never going to let you go. I’m going to keep you. Breaking you on this dick every night until you can’t even breathe without me. Calling my name and no one else’s with that smart-ass mouth.” His eyes glint at the reminder of the earlier fight. I should have known he wasn’t going to let that pass. His other hand tightens on my neck. His mouth is sucking, biting, marking me as his.

Already ensnared, I pull him to me, soaking in his passion, giving him mine in return.

“Who do you belong to?” he demands, driving his dick into me, making words nearly impossible.

“You.” I barely get it out as he lets my wrists go, then lifts my thigh, hitting an angle that drives him past my G-spot with an intensity I never thought was possible.

“Who am I, wife?” He pounds my pussy at a punishing pace that leaves no possibility for peace, only piteous pleasure that permeates every part of me.

“Mathias,” The words comes out in a staccato cadence.

“Say it,” he demands, fucking me into another dimension.

“I belong to you, Mathias.” I say it against his lips as his hips grind hard against my pelvis, the rough curls surrounding the base of his dick rubbing my overly sensitive clit, making me fracture. He fucks me through the orgasm. Flipping me over, he fucks me from behind like a rag doll, grabbing my ass and watching me clench around him, playing with my pussy until I’m coming again. Then, when I’m pliant and spent, he pumps his hot come into me, filling me until it overflows.



CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

Nikki

“TAKE THESE,” Mimi tells me as she hands me a cup of water and some pills.

“What are they?” I ask, my voice hoarse, my tummy cramps like nothing I’ve ever experienced.

“Percocet. No, take them,” she demands, shoving the pills back to me. “You’re not going to have problems just because Uncle Josiah had problems, Nik.”

“I guess you haven’t seen my habitually tipsy sister sashaying around town,” I say dryly, tossing the pills back in one swallow.

“Yeah, there is more to Kandie’s drinking than that. Stuff she doesn’t share with anyone. Plus, after losing Kareina, you, and your parents, she had to find a way to cope.”

“I know. I wasn’t shading her. I would never.” Shame making my tummy clench harder.

She nods. “I know. Still. A few days of taking Percocet ain’t going to make you into an addict or a drunk. There’s only so much I can give you anyway, as prohibited by law. Now you need to cancel whatever events you have over the next couple of days and rest.”

Trepidation skitters through me at having to explain to Mathias why I can't go with him—I had Misoprostol implanted and a copper IUD implanted. His words about breeding me scared the heck out of me. Easy was pregnant before she even left Angel last year. She'd just found out before having to run away from him. And my daddy's side of the family is known to be fertile; we're one of the largest families in the state.

"I'll manage," I hedge, looking away from her all-too-knowing gaze. "I can't let him down when he was forced to marry me or lose the campaign. He's ahead, but how the public views this marriage is one thing that moves the polls."

I think of how the numbers went through the roof after the Farris wheel incident despite Natalie coming in the next day with blogs claiming it was a publicity stunt. The local news interviewed the little girl's family, who verified never knowing me before that day, and no, they weren't part of any carnivals or circuses my parents used to work for.

"I've known Mathias since college, and he never struck me as the type of man who'd hold this against you or make you attend events when you didn't feel a hundred percent." Reaching out, she takes my hand and squeezes it.

I can't do anything but nod, not having the heart to tell her that person is gone and the man in place is a mean motherfucker who couldn't care less. The campaign and his ex's hurt feelings are all he cares about.

I woke up in his arms, my head on his chest, and he seemed mad about it, though I started out the night on my side, having fallen asleep immediately after he took me that last time. When I lifted my head, it was to meet his silver gaze. Silently he rose from the bed. "I have a lot of things to see to for the Shelby estate. Be ready tonight at eight p.m."

I sat where he on the bed me until he showered leaving without a word, knowing what I needed to do—protect myself.

My parents loved each other; even though my mom died when I was still too young to really remember, I know they did from the way my daddy spoke about her. In the face of both

their families doubting their love, they had three daughters and fought to keep us all together.

“You don’t believe me.” Mimi says, “Just like you thought the family wouldn’t accept you when you first came here. We didn’t even know anything until Nebraska told us you were at university with him.” Her whole aura is *I’m not mad, only disappointed*. “I get it. We all do. You were a kid, and your daddy and mom were mistreated by some of this family. But Mathias is not them, and we ain’t the old folks. You have to decide to trust us. We are waiting. Trust me, it was a hard lesson to learn for me as well. I almost lost Santiago.”

With that, she rises from the table we are sitting at and starts fixing us some food. After a few moments of quiet, I confess, “He’s still mad at me.”

“It won’t last. If it does, you know what to do.” Mimi places a hot dish of homemade chicken potpie in front of me. “Nothing makes ’em get some sense like missing you.”

I smirk, shaking my head. “Last resort—let’s not forget what Angel did. Mathias is just as powerful, if not more so.”

“Yeah, but he cares for you just as deeply.”

I blink at her in shock.

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you, cuz.”

“Wow.” Mathias’s deep sensuous tone has me looking over my shoulder.

“I just passed Summer as I was coming in. She said, ‘Be prepared to be wowed.’” He takes in the high-neck webbed lace dress that is my first attempt at anything bodycon. I don’t often like my curves squeezed in. I don’t want to look like a stuffed little sausage. So I was quick to refuse Summer, but when I saw it was perfect, I tried it on.

“She’s a genius,” I say, looking back at my reflection.

“You know the country club is notorious for always being hot.” His eyes darken with concern.



“No, I didn’t know. My family’s not in the membership.”

I have him chuffing at the irony in my voice. The Shelby Country Club is the last haven for the old money in these parts. It’s still lily white, save for the Spencers and maybe one or two Black politicians.

“Yeah, I guess not. I love the dress, but I know you’re going to be too hot.” After going over to his walk-in, he takes his evening clothes out and starts disrobing.

“You’re not going to shower?”

He looks at me, puzzled. “No.”

“Ugh, dirty white boy.” I crinkle my nose.

“You like this dirty motherfucker.” He winks, tossing his clothes on a chaise across the room.

“Humph.” I’m rolling my eyes, but our banter makes me feel like I have my best friend back.

Turning from him, I pick up my shoes and bag. “I going to go wait out front.”

“Alright.” He looks me over one more time. “Just don’t faint on me.”

“I didn’t want to show too much skin.” I roll my eyes again.

“Why are you worried about that? You always look sexy and classy. You know I’m not a knuckle dragger who gets jealous over what you wear.” He pauses while doing up a couple of buttons on his shirt.

“Well, these marks on my neck will cause more questions than we need right now. We only have, what, two more weeks until the election?” Immediately I see my mistake when his hands drop to his sides.

“Marks? Let me see.” He sounds gutted.

“It’s nothing.” I sidestep him to go to the living room.

Cupping my elbow, he stops me. “I need to see what I did to you, Nik.”

Turning my back on him, I lift the hair off my nape and wait until he unzips the back of the dress.

Once he's done, I turn back to face him and pull down the front, giving him an unvarnished view of last night's ravishment.

His face loses some of its color. "Are you okay?" He looks haunted.

No, I'm not okay because we aren't okay, but that's not what he's asking. I rush to reassure him. "Yes, I'm fine. It looks worse than it is. I don't even feel it." Maybe I should've taken Mimi's advice and told him I don't feel well.

"What about other places? Did I hurt you?"

I look away. Does my heart count? Again, not what he's asking. "I'm fine, Mathias." Dropping the emphasis on his name making sure I say it the way he demands, I give him my back and wait; after a few seconds, he zips me back up. I can't call him the nickname I made up anymore. And it's fine. He hates me and it's fine. I hate it here.

He's pensive as I leave and on the drive to the Shelby County Country Club.

"THE FUTURE SENATOR of the great state of Alabama, Mr. Mathias Shelby, and Mrs. Shelby."

"Wives don't have names here," I whisper with wry amusement to Mathias as we enter, garnering me a smirk from him.

I hope this is an improvement on his attitude. He seemed shook by the marks he saw. I wanted to remind him that at no point last night did I tell him to stop. I wanted to tell him how much I liked what he did to me. But I held back, not really understanding why until we were halfway here—I don't want him to have more power over me. What does it say about us if the person I'm supposed to trust most in this life isn't my safe space? That I can't tell him I don't regret last night?

We walk in the multi-chandelier ballroom that has French doors on all sides.

his is the singular whitest event I've been to; most of the nonwhite people here are servers . It reeks of old money and good ol' boy energy. Ugh. Everywhere I turn I see flushed faces and avarice. I don't know what Mathias senses, but he pulls me closer, letting me know he's here and not to leave his side.

He doesn't have to worry. I won't be wandering off by myself at any point.

"Mathias." A high posh Southern lilt has us both turning to a well-coifed older Black couple. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Spencer, Natalie's parents. My tummy twists and rolls.

Imperceptibly Mathias gives me a little squeeze.

"Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, so good to see you," he says to them. Every person in the place gives us a respectful berth, but all eyes are on us. They needn't have bothered; the Spencers are relics of the Respectability Politics era, thinking that you can be treated fairly if you play by the rules and gain power through merit.

"It's very good to see you, son," Mr. Spencer says, deliberately leaving me out with his emphasis on Mathias.

"And you, Nicolette." Mrs. Spencer looks at me hard for a long moment.

"Thank you." I smile at her nervous meeting the beautiful woman who smiles warmly after a moment.

"Maybe we can have tea next week?" Her eyes seem warm.

"I'd like that," I say, forgetting for a moment that this is Natalie's mom—she must hate me for ruining her daughter's engagement.

"Hmph." Mr. Spencer eyes his wife, who pointedly ignores him. "We won't hold you up, son. We know you have funding to secure," Mr. Spencer says, letting Mathias know not so subtly that he can expect no help from him.

“I hope I can at least count on your vote, sir,” Mathias says coolly, unruffled.

“Of course. Your father was one of my best friends. I could do no less, no matter how unfortunately things turned out.” Mr. Spencer nods, then casts a scathing gaze my way before moving.

“I’m not telling you what to do with your time, but I wouldn’t eat anything she served me,” Mathias whispers in my ear.

“I’m sure she was just saying that for show or to be polite,” I tell him.

For the most part, everyone was nice. Partly due to Mathias being so far in the lead with only two weeks to go. No one was overtly mean, in fact, a lot of them made it their business to invite me to other functions, even baby and bridal showers.

“Welcome to the new South.” A deep voice that sounded familiar had me turning to two men who looked exactly alike, except one had ice-blue eyes and the other had silver Shelby eyes like Mathias.

“Jackson, Jericho,” Mathias mutters.

“Hello, Cousins.” I smile at the men, gauging their reaction to my claim to kinship. “You’re practically Loves now. Thank you so much for the champagne. It made for a very interesting evening.”

A slow smile crawls up the face of the brother with the silver eyes, while blue eyes of the other spark with mischief. Even with the different eye colors I still can’t really tell who is who.

“I see you picked well, Mathias.” The blue-eyed one slyly pulls me into a hug. Damn, he smells good. Then he pushes me into his brother’s arms.

“Yeah, sweetness, are there any more Loves like you?” A seductive baritone wraps around me. His voice is full of mirth. I can feel him looking over my head to Mathias.

“Jackson, if you want to keep those tree trunks, you’ll keep them off my wife,” Mathias snaps, pulling me back into the protection of his arms.

“That’s the problem with children raise apart from their siblings,” Jackson laments. “They never learn to share.”

My gaze swings between the brothers. I know they didn’t just imply they share their women.

“It’s very nice to meet you, little cuz,” Jericho with the blue eyes says to me. “This is the first time I’ve seen this coldblooded bastard tied in knots.”

“We can’t all be prone to hissy fits, big boy.” Mathias smirks. From the expression clouding Jericho’s face, I would say he’s the more emotional of the twins.

Jackson remains coolly stoic for the next few minutes as the cousins chat about Shelby interests and how they can help the campaign.

I glean from the brothers they plan to make Shelby Sugar and Mathias’s newly acquired arm of the company to better corporate citizens.

“We have to offer people more than just good pay. People want a path to citizenship, education. We have to increase the number of people we can sponsor until we can have real immigration reform,” Jackson says.

“Agree. That’s going to be one of my main priorities,” Mathias promises.

“Make sure it is. Your old man is the reason nothing moved on this for years. As one of the biggest employers of migrants, he did so much harm. Our family members were the biggest opponents of any kind of progress in this area. We have a lot of work to do.” Jericho’s eyes are alight with passion. Maybe being the more emotional one is a good thing.

After a few more moments, the orchestra strikes up. “We have to give them a dance,” Mathias informs me, escorting me to the dance floor.

At least they hired a good local band to sing oldies. The strands of “If This World Were Mine” fill the room. His strong arms pull me into his embrace. I want to lay my head on his chest, but this is not the place.

“You did good.”

I look up into his silver eyes. Immediately I’m lost. I don’t want to be found. We glide and sway, and the singers hit the notes. It’s like the song was requested for us. Mathias’s eyes never leave mine. In that moment I feel our old connection, but it’s deeper than it’s ever been before.

“You were magnificent,” I tell him, meaning it. “The way you defended your position and even swayed those you thought couldn’t be moved... I’m proud.”

For a millisecond he pauses, looking down at me, his eyes a swirl of emotion. “Nik—”

“Mr. Shelby, you have a call. They say it’s urgent.”

Mathias looks down at the attendant who smoothly sidled up to us before dancing off. Wow, the country club even has people who know how to interrupt a dance without making it look awkward.

Mathias escorts me over to his cousin. “This is not me sharing.” He eyes Jackson. “Keep Nik company while I see to this call,” Mathias tells him before pressing a kiss to my crown.

“You may not like sharing, but we’ll let my little cuz decide,” Jackson taunts, pulling me onto the dance floor. “I’m going to wow her with my moves.”

For the next twenty minutes we dance, and four songs later, I have to beg off. My medicine is starting to lose its potency, and I need to find a glass of water and a chaise or have Mathias take me home.

As I’m walking to the ladies’ lounge, I see the tall form of LL along the edge of the ballroom. I make a beeline to him.

“When did you get here?” I ask, seeing him texting furiously on his phone.

“Bout two hours ago, right before you.” He doesn’t look up.

“What? Where?” I ask, puzzled. He looks way too comfortable.

“Business here is done in the back rooms, baby cuz.” He gives me a wolfish grin. I see why Mathias asked him to take a sabbatical from his law firm to come run the campaign. My cousin loves this. He’s in his element making deals.

“How are y’all doing? Y’all look beautiful together on that dance floor. I thought Natalie was going to implode.” He gives me an unwavering look. “Watch out. I never thought I’d have to say it because they never had what you and Mathias have, but I’m getting the feeling she doesn’t like looking like she’s losing.”

I nod. “I know.” Looking around, I don’t see her tall form lapping up the attention from her friends. “I’ll see you.” Without anyone having to tell me, I know that when I find my husband, I’ll find his ex.

I leave as LL returns to his phone, texting like his life depends on it.

After walking along the edge of the ballroom, I take the first exit that leads to the notorious back rooms LL told me about.

The hallway is full of dark open rooms. I see and hear no one as I walk down the plush carpeted hallway, my toes sinking into the thick soft loom of fibers probably handcrafted by some artisan in some remote area of the world. I follow the dimly lit corridor, peeking inside seeing nothing but the odd card game and gentlemen smoking. It’s not until I get to the last two rooms that I hear Natalie’s voice.

Oh, here we go again, but this time I won’t hesitate—I’m going to walk right in.

But then I hear it. “I still love you, Thi.” She sounds so broken, devastated, hurt.

“Nat,” he sounds anguished. “I love you too.”

I push into the room as she throws herself into his arms, smothering his face with kisses.

Slowly, way too fucking slowly, he peels her away from him. “Listen—”

“Yeah, because I want to hear it too,” I say calmly.

He steps past her.

“You know what?” I say, throwing up my hand. “I don’t want to hear it. I’m not doing this anymore.” I storm out, ignoring his calls. I get to the end of the corridor.

“Nik,” he calls to me.

“Fuck you, Thi,” I say, wrathfully, running away until I get to the edge of the ballroom.

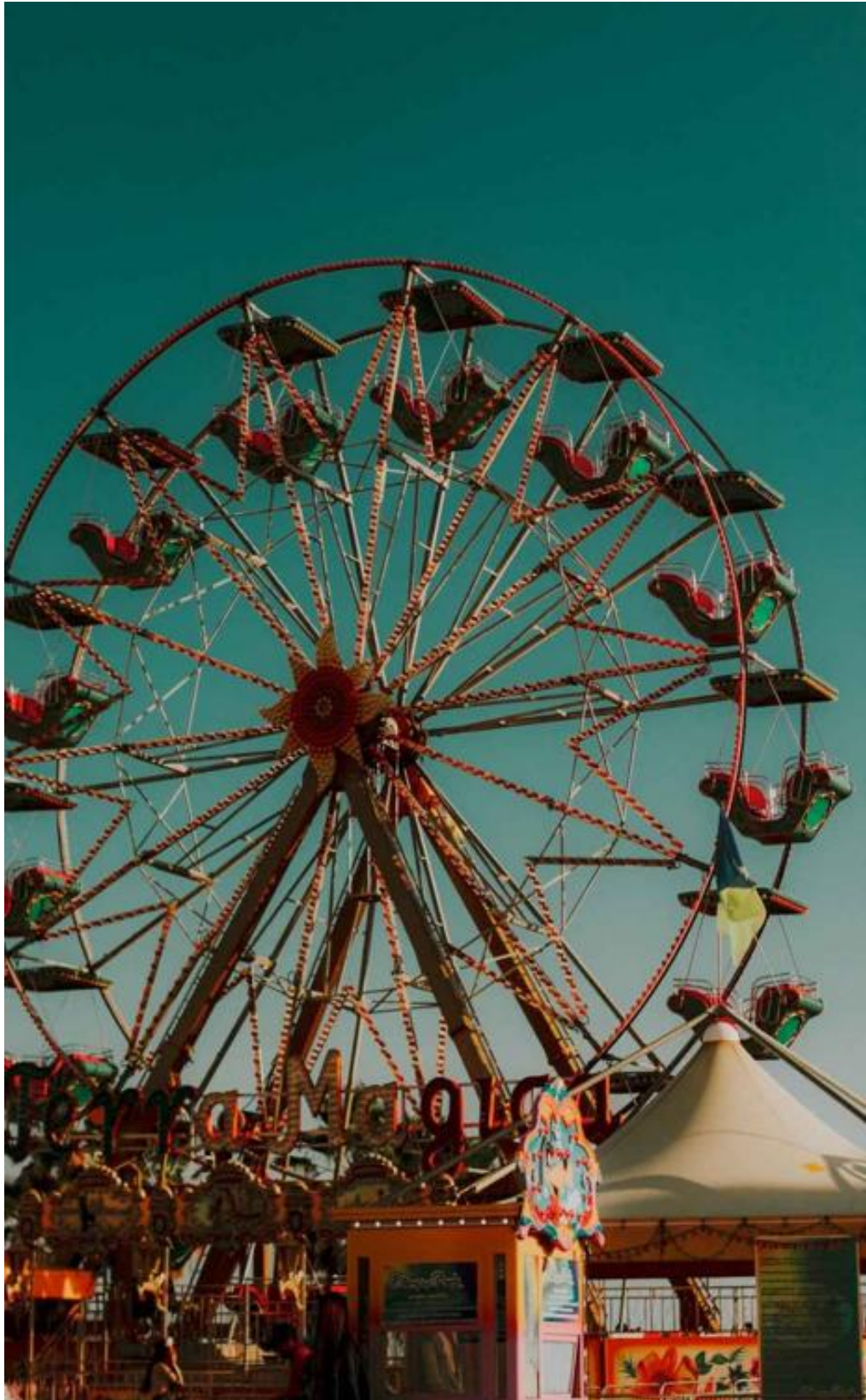
I walk sedately back into the crush of people, finding prominent businessmen and whispering, “I think my husband is looking for you.”

By the time I’ve made my way back over to LL, Mathias is practically surrounded.

“I need you to get me out of here,” I tell my cousin.

He takes one look at my face and steers me out of the Shelby Country Club.





CHAPTER  
SEVENTEEN

Nikki

WHEN I FIND YOU, I'M GOING TO SPLIT YOUR PUSSY IN TWO. YOU'RE GOING TO LEARN YOU CAN'T RUN FROM ME LITTLE WIFE. THERE IS NOWHERE YOU CAN HIDE.

I ROLL my eyes at today's threat. It's been a week, and the person they are already calling the senator elect is no closer to finding me. I've been getting text from him nonstop. Wasn't there when he won the election. I thought he'd be mad enough because I left his silly ass to leave me alone but here he is still bothering me.

He's had less luck than Angel, largely due to the fact he has to keep the fact he's looking for me under the radar. It wouldn't do for people to find out his bride of a month left his ass because she caught him kissing his wannabe side-chick, who just so happens to also be his assistant campaign manager. Gross.

All this has played into the peace and serenity I'm forcing on myself this the last week. Nothing to worry about but what food I need to order my way. Most days I don't want to cook, so delivery has quickly become my mainstay. Drowning myself in my reading addiction has also helped. Anything that keeps me from thinking about him, his silver eyes, waking up in his arms. It doesn't matter that I cry myself to sleep every

night feeling broken. I can't help but think this is what he meant by that promise when he saw me chatting with Blay. I belong to him irrevocably. I can't shake him. He's too much a part of my existence, has been such an integral part of my life for so long.

I don't let myself think of what he was about to say on that dance floor. It doesn't matter at this point anyway. Natalie jumping in his arms like that's where she belongs was enough. You definitely don't have to tell me. I saw it with my own eyes. If he were choosing me, he would have caught me in the hallway. He's faster than me, his legs longer, which can only mean he stopped to talk to her, perhaps to tell her to wait for him. He made his choice. That was the last time. He won't get the chance again. Not that he ever wanted me.

Wretched sobs wrack my frame, and for the hundredth time, I vow to block him, put my phone away. Sometimes I manage to, only to have him email me, claiming I'm his. Sure, I was his, but was he ever really mine? I doubt it.

Grabbing my phone, I shoot a message back to him.

GOOD LUCK WITH THAT.

Then I block him for the fifty-eleventh time. Hopefully this time it will stick.

Just as I'm about to toss the phone on the other side of the sofa, it buzzes.

Seeing the name, I answer. "Easy?"

"Yes, sister wife," she says, being silly. I don't mind; she didn't have to make space for us in her wedding to Angel, especially after everything they'd been through in their relationship.

"What's up?" I ask, looking around her town house she let me stay in when I asked how she got away from Angel. She told me not to go to those extremes but immediately offered me her this place which she'd kept as a rental property after she and Angel reunited. Thankfully she was between renters just when I needed it.

“Girl, Mathias has been meeting with Angel. I don’t know what it means. They are like brothers, so of course he’d confide in Angel, but honey, be careful. He may have asked Angel to help find you.” Dull dread skates across my heart at her words. Then I realize if Mathias knew where I was, he’d already be here making good on his threats.

“Hmm, I’ll stay here for another day or two, then I’ll contact Flower’s friend Prosper. I hate that I left in such a rush and didn’t get my journal. That’s where I keep all my important stuff.”

“I think I have it. Or rather, I know Krie has it. Girl, I hate to involve her. Her husband got downright severe when she helped me. I know she’ll do it, though. Cousins come first. Well, except Joi’s trifling ass.”

I smile, loving her loyalty. “Well, I don’t want you to get in trouble with Angel.” In all seriousness, her husband is way scary, though maybe not as scary as Krie’s man.

“I can’t ever be in trouble with Angel. He loves me too much, and he wants like five more kids, so he can’t be bothered with being upset.” She laughs.

We talk about mundane things and family gossip, like Summer taking less money to make the mayor’s kids a wardrobe. “You know she loves the kids,” Easy tells me.

“Yeah, but she also loves huge commissions.” I laugh.

After giving each other our love, we get off the phone, and I feel good for the first time since this whole nightmare started. Though this situation has been thrust upon me, I had the courage to walk away before it became untenable. I saw what I needed to see. But I could kick myself for not putting a stop to it sooner when he never asked for the ring back; his mom had said for him to give it to the woman he loved. Natalie still had it. She had it on the night she jumped in my husband’s arms like he was hers. For all her talk of propriety, she has no problems stepping out of those bounds to stake her claim on someone else’s husband. I don’t blame her, though. He allowed it. He was the married person in that equation. Despite their past, he should have never been kissing her.

Yeah, fuck all that and him.

I switch channels to the local broadcast so I can watch Masterpiece Theater. Instead they are showing a local town hall here in Birmingham with Mathias.

I'm unable to change the channel, too wrapped up in seeing his face the first time in a week. He looks tired to me, though to the public he probably looks as healthy as ever. I can see some of the campaign staff dispersed in the crowd, but this venue is packed. I watch for more than an hour as he fields questions on every possible issue from environmental justice to his favorite sports team.

"Where is Mrs. Shelby tonight, Mr. Shelby? She's been missed at several events lately." I would tell the inquirer she's minding business that doesn't pay her, but I'm not the one running for office, and that's a good thing.

Mathias smoothly deflects. "She's been feeling under the weather these past few days. It's not COVID related." He adds the last part to reassure everyone. It wouldn't do for one of the top advocates of vaccination to have his wife come out as sick. Not that he'd ever have to worry about me; I like living.

"Is it something that will resolve itself in, say, nine months?" The nosy heffa asks. Wow. How uncouth.

"We'll see. It's too early to tell. But I promise our constituents will be the first to know," he says with smug assurance.

Hot rage boils inside me. In seconds I'm firing a text off to the one person I know who will tell him exactly what I said.

Me: TELL YOUR FRIEND I'M NEVER HAVING HIS TROLL ASS BABY.

I don't get a response for a long time.

Angel: I will let him know personally, querida.

Well, that ended rather anticlimactically. Taking the champagne I bought and the popcorn that's somehow now my favorite snack, I watch TV until I fall asleep on Easy's plush sofa like I have for the past week.

*THREE DAYS LATER...*

HEAVY BANGING HAS me jumping up like a chick startled out of its nest. I actually grab where my heart seems to be trying to lurch out of my chest. I take a few deep breaths, making my way over to the door.

When I step up to the peephole, I jump back.

“Little wife.” I can hear him outside the door.

I’m shaking my head to myself. How did he find me? Has he known all along? Angel.

“It took me a minute, because just like rabbits, there are just so many of y’all,” he says casually answering my silent question to myself. “Even went by Joi’s, thinking you’d run to your partner in crime, and that was interesting to say the least. She really doesn’t like me, and I can’t ever remember meeting her but that one time at the Shack.” He stops for a long moment. Then, in horror, I hear a key in the door before the knob begins to turn. Slowly, I start backing up.

He pushes the door open, and it catches on the chain lock. “You have three seconds to open this door, or I’m kicking it in.”

“No you won’t. Someone will call the police. Then it will be all over the news that I was hiding from you, and you’ll lose your campaign, which is the only thing you care about besides your precious Nat.” I spit the words out with so much venom, I surprise myself. There’s silence, then a hard boom as the door splinters. The chain is left dangling where it was ripped from the wall.

With wiped clean of all emotion, Mathias walks me down as I stumble back from him. Standing between a jut in the wall that separates Easy’s living room from the dining room, I hold my hands in front of me to ward him off.

His face gives nothing away. It’s chilling. Like he could crush me now and not lose a moment of rest over it. If I hadn’t

seen his rage and knew despite what face he wears outwardly how he's vibrating with wrath.

I'm corner. Trapped between him and the wall. Moving left or right will only push me farther into his arms, I don't want that. I want nothing of him and more. At least that is what I tell myself as his big body shoved hard into my body, pressing me hard against the wall.

"Why the fuck did you leave me?" He pushes his face so close to mine, our lips almost touch. I would think he was hurt. I know better. For the short time we were together, he more than let me know he didn't want me. He hated me in fact.

I rear away from him. "Why are you here? Go to your girlfriend." I move to get away, but he grabs my arms. My heart is beating so hard, I can hear it pulsating in my eardrums.

"Let me go, motherfucker." I'm not letting him manipulate or bully me into coming back to that nightmare.

"Answer me," he demands, giving me a hard-as-fuck shake.

"You know why. You were kissing another woman!" I don't even want to say her name. It's better than giving her any energy on any level. He doesn't deserve it either.

I wretch so hard, I almost dislocate my shoulder. Tears sting my eyes.

"You know good and fucking well I didn't kiss her back." He looks so offended.

"Oh-ho," I say. "This is rich! You're demanding I give you the benefit of the doubt."

His hold lightens, allowing me to snatch my hand away.

"Sure. The great Mathias Shelby maintains he is innocent, so it must be so. He gets the benefit of the doubt. Damn my lying eyes." I scoff. He must be crazy.

He could be grinding glass the way his jaw is flexing. "She jumped me. I was not kissing her back. Stop doing this stupid shit."

“Sure, Jan. Yeah, and you took your time peeling her off, and when I left, you stayed back. Why?” I see the something in his eyes, a hesitation, a guilt, and it does more to hurt me than anything else because it confirms exactly what I thought—he could have chased me down, caught me, but again he chose her. Decided to make sure she was okay, not his wife.

“You chose her.” I nod to myself for confirmation.

His face gets impossibly harder. “You are piece of work, you know that? I came for you. You made sure to throw roadblocks in my way, and to do what? Run your ass up here, two blocks away from the Shelby County Library.” He laughs bitterly when I look at him like he’s crazy.

“Oh, you trying to act like it’s not convenient that community dick Blay is around the corner? I’ve heard there’s an interlibrary loan program, but this is ridiculous.” The snide, nasty-ass, mean smirk on his face is too much.

I don’t hesitate, slapping the shit out of him. His head snaps back, and a trickle of blood pools in the corner of his mouth. He’s going to learn today that *violence is not the answer* is not one of the tenants my daddy taught me. We are more the *fuck around and find out* kind of people.

He slams me back against the wall. His face is etched in glacial fury. I close my eyes, waiting for him to hit me; he wants to so badly.

One hand leaves the arms he restrained moments ago and circles my neck. His hold is steady. He doesn’t add any pressure. Instead his body comes close to me. His forehead dips, pressing against mine. My eyes pop open to see a fan of lashes closed tight. He’s breathing deep like he’s trying to mediate.

“I vowed to myself when I was twelve that the next person who put their hands on me trying to hurt me or discipline me in any way, I’d kill and bury their ass alive in my sugar fields. The last person I buried there was that bitch who smacked your ass that night at the Shack. So I’m going tell you this one time. I’m going to give you this one chance. Never fucking hit me again unless it’s out of love or passion, little wife.” He



presses a kiss to my forehead. He drops his hands to his sides. Lethal promise in every cell of his body. A slow smile spreads across his face bloody and cruel. Eyes never leaving mine, he takes his thumb he wipes the trickle of blood trickling beneath lip and sucks it clean.

I cover my mouth with trembling hands. After pushing past him, I run up the stairs and throw myself on the bed in the guest bedroom, burying my head in the soft down pillows to muffle my sobs. He's said he's going to break me, and I see that he's determined to do it. He won't be happy until I'm a shell of a person.



CHAPTER  
EIGHTEEN

M athias

I WATCH Nikki run up the stairs, making no move to follow her. I don't trust myself with my anger, her, and a bed in the same vicinity. Her slapping me was uncalled for. It took years of therapy for me to realize touching another to hurt them was wrong. What happened to me as a kid was wrong as fuck, and though I couldn't protect myself then, we are a far cry from there. If scaring her little ass keeps the peace, then peace we shall have. I'm not letting anyone put their hands on me.

Realizing the door is fixable, I go to the garage to get a toolbox. I text LL, letting him know where I am and to cancel the last few events leading up to the election.

Me: IF ANYONE ASKS OR COMPLAINS, TELL THEM I AM TAKING SOME TIME OFF TO BE WITH MY WIFE.

LL: SOUNDS GOOD

Using a drill and some wood, I spend the next hour fixing Ezekiel-Jane's door. Irritated with myself after having to measure twice and cut to make a new side panel, I make sure I do a good job. No one asked for their door to be kicked in, and Angel told me his wife uses this property for added income. Not that she needed it, being married to a cartel boss who's

also a construction and transport billionaire. “She just likes having her own shit,” he said with wry amusement when he let me know someone was at the supposedly empty property.

“It can’t be anyone but your girl. Easy tells me every time it’s rented. She didn’t, so that was her way of helping her cousin and not lying to me,” he informed me dryly. “You know how this family shit goes, man.”

I do; there is nothing I won’t do for my brother Ananias or even Jackson, Jerricho, and Ulysses, but the rest of my family is useless. So there’s a limit for them. Still I can’t be upset with Angel’s wife for looking out for Nikki. Hell, I wanted her family to look out for her.

As long as she was safe, I was okay, I thought, until I came home that second night and couldn’t sleep without her. Then I started blowing up her phone with promises of what I’d do to her when I caught up with her.

After a week I was pretty sure she was done with my ass. I can’t blame her. It took a long time to realize she was right about Nat.

*CONFUSION at why Nat had called me away from the dance floor gave way to stunned disbelief when she said she was in love with me and couldn’t stand seeing Nikki and I together.*

*“This was never about love, Nat. We were partners, friends,” I tried to remind her gently.*

*“It could have been more if not for her,” she spat, her eyes alight with venom.*

*“You said you didn’t have a problem with it,” I said quietly.*

*“What could I say when you were so determined to have her? I thought once you did, you’d realize how ill-suited you were, and you’d come to your senses. But no, just like a man, you let her lead you by your dick. You only ended up wanting her more. Well, I won’t have it.”*

*My brows shot up at her words. Then, a split second later, she glanced over my shoulder—I know now she saw Nikki—and said, “I love you, Mathias.”*

*I responded more out of habit of us always saying we loved each other as friends.*

*Then she jumped in my arms, kissing me with a passion she never could muster even in the early days.*

*After Nikki left, I paused long enough to tell Nat she was fired.*

*“She won’t take you back.” She laughed in a kind of malicious way.*

*Not bothering to answer, I followed Nikki, only to be caught up in all the traps she’d thrown in my way.*

WHEN I FINISH THE DOOR, I grab my phone and make a food order. I tidy up the lower part of the town house, seeing how she’s been comforting herself with the champagne Jackson introduced her to, popcorn, and not much else. I fold the throw the blankets she’s been using before getting out new ones. Then I vacuum and load the dishwasher. I’m used to doing most of the chores between us. Gran’s house was mainly my responsibility, so I never made Nat really clean up. I see I handicapped her in a way because she clearly hasn’t picked up since she’s been here.

There’s a soft knock on the door, and I answer it. The deliverywoman’s eyes grow wide as she recognizes me. “An extra fifty if you keep this quiet,” I tell her. “My wife is not feeling well, and the press crawling all over us wouldn’t be good right now in her condition,” I say, milking the whole unconfirmed pregnancy rumor even though I know there’s no way she could be pregnant. Another thing we need to talk about—her keeping secrets.

“No problem. You can request me so no one else will know. And you don’t have to give me any extra tip. You deserve your privacy too.” She gives me the prettiest dimpled

smile, reminding me of another person I knew that was once her age. Though nows, she hiding from me upstairs.

“I’ll do that,” I say, taking the food, doubling her tip. After closing the door softly behind her, I place the bags on the table.

I hear Nik’s muffled sobs the minute I hit the landing. The door squeaks when I open it. Her whole body stiffens. I sit on the edge of the bed, not touching her.

“I’d like to be alone, please.” Her body shudders under her laborious attempt not to let me see her in this state.

“Okay.” Clenching my fist in the effort not to touch her when she obviously doesn’t feel safe with me, I continue. “I ordered some real food whenever you’re ready.”

She doesn’t say anything but gives me a small nod after a few seconds.

I go back downstairs and set the food on trays I found inside an ottoman. I guess Easy concedes not many people would use her small dining room off the kitchen.

“Hey.”

I look up to my freshly showered and fresh-faced wife at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hungry?” I ask, sipping a glass of Cooper & Thief.

“Yeah.” She gives me the cutest *well, duh* look.

“Good. I got your favorite. Sit.” I nod to the sofa, my stomach tightening at her apprehension. I bite back a curse, knowing I was too rough with her. Her heart, her body, you name it. I’m sick with it, but I don’t know how to make it right. Men like me don’t ask for forgiveness. We don’t fucking beg.

“Eat.” My words sound gruffer than I mean them to be, but I can’t make myself take them back. She hasn’t been taking care of herself, and I don’t like that shit one bit.

She takes the plate, saying a quick grace like she always does, and starts twirling her fork around the fettucine.

She hums, loving the food. I watch, hungry for just the sight of her as she cuts into the pork chop Marsala before popping a juicy piece into her mouth.

“I was going to cut it up for you, like I used to, but I didn’t want it to get cold on you.” I clear my throat, watching her look up to me, still hesitant, still hurt.

“I don’t need you to do that for me anymore.” She looks down, swallowing hard like the meat is suddenly tough. “I never did, really.”

“I know. I like doing things for you.” I take another drink, not eating yet, content to watch her, getting full on the sight of her. People say you don’t miss something until it’s gone. That’s a lie; I miss what we had when we were still together—this—and I resented her for it. Blamed her for what she and Joi did to us.

Her eyes meet mine for a long moment. She chews her lips like she does when she wants to say something awkward. Instead she drags her gaze away, searching until it falls on the remote. Then she clicks the TV on.

“I fired Natalie,” I blurt out.

She pauses, keeping her face turned away. “Why?”

The night at the country club, Nat was the “emergency phone call,” only I didn’t know it was her until I was shown to the back room. Nikki turns to face me. As quickly as I can, I explain to her what happened between us and why I hung back—to let Nat go.

“Okay,” she says simply. Still there is something in her, a demeanor, a wedge that wasn’t there before, even at the beginning of the marriage.

Picking up my fork, I watch her as we finish the meal in silence. After taking her plate once she’s done, I add it and mine to the dishwasher.

She’s flipping through movies and shows when I join her.

“Did you think I was going to strike you?” I demand, not liking her reactions to me. It’s like she’s waiting for me to

detonate at any moment.

She pulls back surprise coloring her features. “No.”

I look at her skeptically.

“At least not with your hands. Your words are bad enough, Mathias. If I’m here for community dick, what does that make me, community pussy?” She slides her gaze to me in her own demand.

“There is no excuse for saying that bullshit,” I say, looking at her.

“Why haven’t you ever taken me to the estate? Your gran’s house, your barn-turned-bachelor-pad, yes, but never your ancestral state.”

Stunned by her question, I charge, “Is that why you did it? Because you saw that house in the distance, saw the lavish parties and the soirées? Knew Natalie could come and go?”

“Mathias,” she actually screams my name like a bomb exploding from her little body. She turns from me, shaking so badly, it’s like she’s about to implode. But she’s silent, so silent.

Slowly she turns to me. She dashes away her tears. Her voice is calm when she starts talking.

“Yeah, Thi, that’s exactly why.”

It’s then that I realize how fucking dumb I sound, what an idiot I’ve been.

She continues, her voice unwavering and hard, convicting me with every word. “Yeah, that’s why. Because you risking everything for me wasn’t enough. You see, I want it all. Isn’t that what I’ve been showing you all along? That I’m a selfish, grasping bitch who will do anything to get the name Shelby? A name my family despises, by the way, but what do I owe them? They didn’t run me over and take me to a diner and feed me peanut butter and chocolate chip pancakes.” My chest caves in when she hiccups tears clogging her words. “No, Thi, having you is worth their ridicule and pity. I’d just felt worthy enough to join the Love fold, and what did I do? Hook up with



a fucking Shelby. One who hates me and keeps choosing another bitch over me on a daily basis. I'm good enough to fuck and parade around but not to trust. Even after realizing what Natalie did, you still think me capable of the worst. Because you want to, Thi. You'd rather I betray you than be the friend you know me to be." She steps away, looking at me with knowing eyes, calling me on all my bullshit.

"All this time I was so careful to keep our secret as to not harm you, but you not only thought I'd betrayed you but you'd been waiting on it. Prepared for it. You had everything lined up. Sure, you were caught unawares that day, but you had a convenient justice of the peace and lawyer for a prenup. Then planned on breeding me—"

"Which you made sure to nip in the bud."

I watch her face harden. "You left me no choice. I'm not bringing a kid into this mess," she says unapologetically, lifting her head.

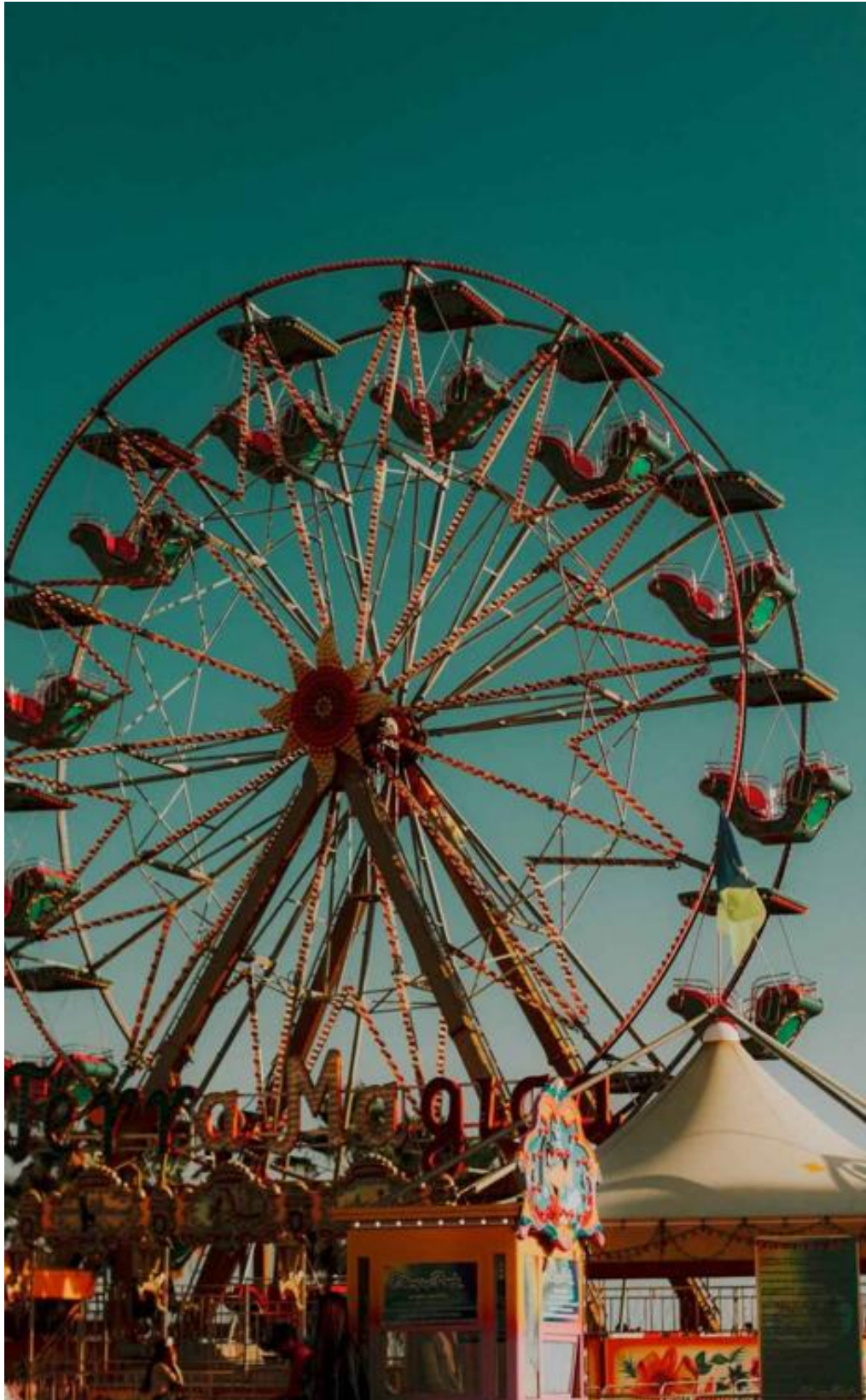
"That's your choice." I sneer. "I guess you know what lengths I will go to keep you."

"You don't even want me." She holds her hand up in pathetic attempt to stop me.

I fold her hands behind her, dragging her up my body. "Then why am I here, little wife? If I wanted Natalie, I could have had her that night. I could have made up any number of things to get out of marrying you. We could have paid an innumerable amount of people to discredit your cousin. Why do you think, of all the alternatives I had, I chose you?"

I let her go.

"Get your shit. We're going to Shelby. Since you want to see it so bad."



CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

Nikki

THE DRIVE to the Shelby Estate did not seem to take the two hours it did. Mathias drove like a man possessed. Like this is some type of quest he needs to see accomplished. He barely kept the speed limit. Then, when we were free of the more populated cities, he floored his F-150 like the hounds of hell were at his heels.

The last time I saw him this bothered, it was the night he showed me the ring his mom wanted him to give Natalie. The smothered anger that broke free that night was frightening to the young teen I was then. Now, after being served his wrath on a daily basis, it barely registers other than the fact there is more than rage there. Dread is another emotion he seems to be expressing.

When we finally arrive, the truck idles while he enters the security code into a panel. The well-oiled hinges of the main gate barely make a sound as they slowly swing open. I notice there are guards by the gate. They wave, recognizing the truck, calling out, “Hey, Mathias,” and “Sup, boss,” then tipping their Stetsons when they see me sitting in the passenger seat.

The drive to the house takes almost twenty minutes, the property is so vast. The house I saw in the distance for year was way farther than I realized. As we get closer and closer, I

understand why it was so well defined on the landscape—it's massive.

The mansion sits atop the high point on the property so the owner could look down and survey all that he owns. I can imagine how that once included my people.

“Awful, isn't it?” Mathias says, and I look over to find him looking at me, his face awash with understanding. Not guilt—he knows that's a useless emotion—but empathy. He turns away, his jaw working, and I continue to look out on the acres and acres of land as beautiful as it is grotesque. The sweetness of the sugarcane colors the air, and I can't help but wonder how much blood in the soil adds to that bouquet, that of the modern-day workers as well as those who were forced onto this land in the past.

Just as we get closer, I see something that has me looking at Mathias in wonder. Row after row of new construction is being raised on the land behind the massive mansion.

“Homes for the workers. Shelby Sugar is now a co-op—farmer owned. We are shifting the business model.”

I look at him, stunned. He's never been particularly proud of his family's history, but it's incredible to give up so much of his considerable fortune. “What about your cousins? Won't they fight you on this?” I ask, knowing how messy family's get when it comes to money. Most of my family held land passed down from generation to generation, but we could only work it; no one person could sell their property. Everyone had to agree, and when you had almost two hundred people with opinions, then you got nowhere.

“They were on board from the day I suggested it. But they have no claim to this particular land. This is my and Ananias's inheritance. The land they would have inherited now belongs to your family and their grandmother's been wanting it back since her grandfather lost it.” He winks at me. “My brother and I never wanted this, but rather than sell it to an unethical sugar company or my family, a more unethical sugar syndicate, we decided to bring some new blood.” He pulls onto the road leading up to the main house.

“How does it work?” I ask, seeing the dozen or so nice one- and two-story houses being built.

“Every worker now has a stake in the company. And this land. Plots were given by lottery to those who work for us, with priority given to those lured or trafficked by my father and the previous foremen.” Disgust drips from his every word.

“Wow.” I touch his hand, not knowing if he’ll welcome it or not. He looks down, lacing his fingers through mine, giving me a quick squeeze before releasing me.

“We have limited space since we’ve registered with the African American History Museum to allow excavation of the land that once housed enslaved people. They are sending surveyors next summer. It should have been done before, but my father would never allow it.” We pull up to the dimly lit mansion. He looks at it grimly for a long time, his jaw working.

He turns, his eyes hot, his face furious on me. Then he gets out and comes around to my side of the car. “C’mon,” he snaps, taking me by my waist and lifting me from the car.

He walks off a little before realizing I’m still standing behind him, looking at the huge edifice. It’s hard for me to comprehend he grew up in this place.

“Nik.” Looking up into his silver gaze, then down to where his hand is open, waiting on mine, I put my hand in his. Allowing his much bigger hand to engulf mine, interlacing our fingers again. I can’t help but think this is more to anchor him than anything else.

We walk up the half a dozen wide tiered steps before landing on a wraparound porch that has huge potted plants strategically placed every few feet between settees I’m sure no one ever sits in anymore. I remember looking out my window at his gran’s house to see people milling about. All that stopped when his father died, though. I can’t remember Mathias throwing one party here.

He pushes open the twenty-foot double doors. “Welcome to the Shelby Estate, Nik.”

I step into the sheer opulence that sugar, blood, and bondage bought. The entire entrance looks like one of those châteaux in France; the floors are white marble with very thin pink veins running through them. The foyer is as huge as two of Mathias's gran's houses. We walk down the hallway, bypassing portraits of distinguished gentlemen, some alone and some with families and hunting dogs. In nearly every background, there is an enslaved person, sometimes a butler but most times a woman. There are many with them holding obviously biracial children along with kids I assume are Shelby heirs.

Finally we come to what must be the first Shelby portrait; it's old and has the patina of age on the gilded edges. This man is alone, rougher than the rest. He looks like a viking with white blond hair, hard chiseled features and cold eyes. His boots are scuffed, and he has the look of someone who can and will do anything to gain wealth and power. He is sitting in a chair that his towering frame dwarfs. He has on a rough-hewn leather coat.

"Malachi Shelby, the one who started all this, a hero to some. Though truthfully, and even my bastard father would admit it, the man was a genocidal maniac. He killed every Native in this area to claim this land," Mathias says matter-of-factly, as though without the dark looks his mother gave him notwithstanding and changing the hard Norse features for the more elegant Portuguese, he would be the man's twin, silver eyes and all.

The man even sprawls back like Mathias does, the king of all his domain, Malachi's big right hand sporting a huge emerald.

"The Love," I whisper, walking closer, knowing the story like every Love—how he captured our ancestor rumored to be a princess, or maybe a thief who was caught, and took her with him back to America. He found the emerald she'd thought to use to buy her freedom by keeping it on her.

A girl who looks no older than me stands behind him. Her head is held high, her skin blacker than a thousand midnights, her hair in tight glossy coils surrounding her head. She doesn't

look broken or bowed; she looks proud. I can nice dimples like so many cousins and I share. She has the Love body. She's dressed in a white dress and apron yet holds herself regally.

Then I notice something that nearly stops my heart; in her pocket, just barely noticeable, is a rose, and beside it are three vanilla beans. And her eyes—her eyes are burning with fire and retribution.

I get another surprise when I see the inscription: *Malachi Shelby and his servant, Luvie.*

“Oh my goodness,” I say, looking at the portrait that holds so many secrets, yet is telling so many more.

“What?” Mathias asks, looking at me quizzically.

“Nothing. This is just a lot,” I tell him, making myself look away from our shared family history.

“I know.” He takes my hand again, bypassing the stairs we move through to the parlor, study, and solarium, stopping when we get to the ballroom. “In the winter, when I was very little, when my father was gone, my mom would let me ride my trike in here. She said she'd been allowed to when she was little at her house. She'd grown up in a mansion much like this. Her father wanted the best for her, so when my father came, promising the world, my grandpa believed him, not knowing that the minute he married his daughter off that his days were numbered.”

“That was so cool of her. That must have been so much fun.” I try to focus on his words of love for his mother, watching his profile.

A small quirk of his lips forms as he acknowledges, “It was.” Then, a millisecond later, he says, “Until my father came back from a trip to Brazil and saw me here with my mom cheering me on and beat the ever-living shit out of her. I—I tried to stop him, and he dislocated my arm. At least that made him stop. He hit her like she was a fucking MMA fighter. And she was probably no bigger than you.” He looks down at me, his eyes a storm.

“Oh. M—”

“That’s why I couldn’t touch you after I bruised you. I’m so sorry, babe.”

Burying my head in his chest, I tell him firmly, “That’s not the same. You never hurt me. You know that.”

“I do. My mind does, but tell it to my heart.” He sounds gutted, whispering his regret in my curls.

I pull back. “You are not him.” Cupping his face, I reiterate, “Not in any way. Tell me you know that.”

He pulls back and away from me, driving distance between us. “I can be exactly like him. It’s easy really. Soaking up all that power and pussy. It’s so fucking easy and seductive. I’ve done things...”

“To survive.” I charge over to him reaching for his shoulders. “You did it to survive.”

“No.” He snatches away. “I’m the fucking reason she’s dead.”

Grabbing my arm, he tugs me back to the stairway. We go up one flight of stairs, and there’s a landing, then another, and he stops by a dumbwaiter and points. “I used to hide here.” He opens it; on the inside I can see just enough room for food trays and maybe a load of laundry and sundries.

“My mom suggested it when he was in one of his rages. She had her hiding places too. But this time she couldn’t get away because she was sick because he’d made her lose another baby from his beatings...” His eyes glaze over with a faraway look. Then he starts speaking in a monotone, almost childlike, like he’s reciting an Easter speech he learned by rote. “He was drunk, wild with rage. Cussing her out for failing him and not giving him another child. For some reason he wanted a daughter. Then he started telling her she was trying to poison me against him. He started hitting her. I could hear it through the dumbwaiter. I crawled out and yelled for him to stop.” He takes a deep pause, his eyes like bruises as he looks at me with so much sorrow. “He did. I thought he respected me because I was big for my age and getting



stronger every day. It was becoming harder and harder for him to beat me.

“Then he lifted her high and demanded I choose. Thinking he’d kill her if I chose her after he’d just accused her of turning me against him, I told him, ‘You, Dad. I choose you,’ and I even added that I wanted to be just like him when I grew up, strong and brave. And you know what he did?” He looks from the ghosts haunting him on the stairs to me, his voice breaking. “That motherfucker said, ‘See, Isabella? Not even your son wants you.’ Then he threw her down the stairs.” He blinks away the tears that started to fall when he told me that last part. Mathias covers his face, raw muffled sobs wracking his broad shoulders.

I hug him from the back, pouring my strength into him. It seems to be enough to make him continue. Draping a strong arm around me, he pulls me under the crook on his arm and takes me down the hallway, then opens a door. The room is bright and airy; the scent of honeysuckle permeates it. It has been well-kept. There is a beautiful four-poster bed in the center with cleverly concealed medical equipment around it. It has been sealed in the state it was in when his mother lived. Deep sorrow flows through every inch of this space. The room is heavy with the energy of despair.

“He kept it like this. Once she was paralyzed and he could take no pleasure in destroying her, he was actually kind. He saved his depravity for me and his victims. Girls young as twelve, never over twenty. He’d have them shipped in from all over the world. It was his sick little secret. Then there were the workers he’d use—those fields are filled with his victims. He was a serial killer, Nikki.”

He pulls away from me, looking around the room his mother was trapped in. “He would come here and read to her. Play the lovelorn swain. Brought my grandmother to live in the cottage. My mom—she even loved him in the end, forgave him—and I—I lied to her. Told her he’d stopped hitting me after the stairs. The truth is it only got worse because with her not around, I learned what all those trips were for: trafficking his victims. Wh-when I tried to stop him or help someone,

he'd do this s to me." He waves to his torso. "But I didn't have the courage to tell her. She finally had a little happiness, and I didn't want to take that away, and he'd promised to kill her if I did."

"You gave her a mercy," I say to him.

He pulls back, his eyes troubled. "That's why I never wanted you here. This place was not a home for me. It wasn't because of who you are but me. Who I am, what I come from. What I have the potential to be. I'm not a good man, Nik."

"No, you're not. But you're not him. You could never be him. Not with the mother you had. Not with a mother who would fight for you. Help keep you safe and be ready to lay down her life for you. No, you are not his legacy but Isabella's." Walking back to him, I say, "Let's go home."

"I want to burn this motherfucker to the ground." He looks at his own personal nightmare, stripped bare hiding nothing from me as we stand before the beautiful home he grew up in , experiencing his mother's love and his father's evil.

Everything falls into place. Why as soon as he could, he renovated one of the barns out of view of the mansion instead of living in the house. Why he only came to visit me and never his father, whom I knew he hated, but I never knew why. The extent of his father's evil was so far-reaching, Mathias feels like he can never atone enough for his sins.

"Were there more like him—like your dad?" I pull my gaze from the onyx fields being allowed to lie fallow this season to look at my husband, whose face has relaxed back to its normal lines.

His eyes cut to mine, his mouth hardening as he nods. "Yeah, every other generation or so, we get an evil motherfucker in the ranks. Ready to kill at birth, which is how it starts—they killing their mothers when they are born, tearing them clean open and making them bleed to death. Which is why Ananias was so fascinated by it," he tells me. I recall him saying his brother is a psychiatrist and lives out in Seattle researching serial killers and consulting with the FBI.

We take a right to the road leading to the barn. “My family believes it’s a curse put on us by one of your ancestors—not that we don’t deserve it.” He smirks, and I can’t help up laugh at his silly ass.

We laugh together until he tells me quietly, “I just want you to know it was never about you, Nik. If he ever found out about you, knew what you meant—” He focuses back on the road.

I don’t press. I don’t push. I just sit in the ensuing silence, taking everything he said in. Finally, he pulls up the dark sleek farmhouse.

“What did Natalie say when you told her all this?” I don’t know what little insecure bitch inside me made me ask, but when I catch her outside, it’s going to be on.

“Nothing,” He glances my way, pausing like he’s about to give the whole store away. “She doesn’t know. She doesn’t even know how much I hate my father. Only you and Angel know because he lived in the house since his mom was my mom’s nurse and had to be on call twenty-four seven.”

“But Natalie saw your scars—she had to have questions,” I say, thinking back to that day when she seemed mad that I’d seen them too, and he reminded her that I’m his wife.

“No, little wife,” he drawls. “You misunderstood, which is why you need to stop eavesdropping. She asked if you saw me completely naked because she never has. At first, I didn’t want to scare her or make her upset. Later we stopped having sex altogether.”

I let that settle for a moment before asking, my tummy twisting like swirls on a candy cane, “When did y’all stop having sex?”

He takes a deep breath, sighs, hanging his head, then lets it fall back, staring up at the ceiling of the truck. He turns his eyes, looking at me. This time they are hot with another emotion—desire so hot, he scorches me with his gaze. Reaching over, he tugs my chin, leaning in, coming so close, our lips touch when he starts to speak.

“Before the day I first kissed you at Gran’s house. You’re all I can think about since.”

It takes me a moment to process what he says.

“Oh,” I whisper in wonder, waiting for him to kiss me.

“Oh?” he asks, his mouth kicking up on one side.

When I nod, he leaves me hanging, getting out and coming around to my side. Instead of helping me down, he drags me over his shoulder before slamming his palm down on my ass, making a loud smacking sound and my bottom jiggle.

I gasp, twisting to look at his profile. “What’s that for?”

“I believe I made you a promise when I texted you.”



CHAPTER  
TWENTY

Nikki

AS SOON AS he shoulders his way through the door, he drops me on the floor. I don't know why I'm out of breath. And I really can't be bothered to wonder. Not with the way he's looking at me. Like I mean something to him other than an unwanted burden—a wife he never asked for, who almost ruined everything he ever wanted. Why is he now looking at me like I'm everything he ever wanted? I can't allow myself to trust it. I need to gird myself against him weakening me. I need to cling to the strength I gained when I was away. At least that's what I tell myself, even as my treacherous body threatens to melt under his scrutiny.

His eyes shine with the iridescence of the moon as his gaze hits me.

I swallow at the intensity and the increased ferocity he seems to have gotten from what he shared earlier. "So you plan on making good on your little threat from the other day?" I ask in the face of his sexual prowess. I have no weapons in my entire arsenal that work against this man, so I just call it him out in the only way I know.

"Little girl, you should know by now that there is nothing little about me and I don't make threats—only promises." Mathias steps closer to me. He pauses. Instead of snatching me to him, he waits. Seemingly to give me a choice, but what

choice is there for me to make? What choice is there when all I've ever wanted since we met is him?

I'm backed against the wall, craning my neck up to his magnificent tall form, searching—for what, I don't know. Getting on my tiptoes, I press a soft kiss to his mouth, and when he bends to meet me, his lips are pliant and welcoming.

The kiss is as intense as it is slow. Like we are relearning each other. He pulls back, his mouth hovering over mine. The air mixes between us in a heady welcome, making salivate. Making me want more. Want him.

His breathing is labored; mine pants out of me to match. Our bodies line up so the height difference is apparent by his dick pressing against the high part of my belly. He dips, lifting me under my thighs. Wrapping my thighs around him, I pull him close. I feel all of him. He molds me to him so every nook and cranny of my body is married to every sinew of his large frame.

“Mathias,” I breathe, burying my head in his neck, inhaling him. Unable to resist the temptation of his clover, earth, and sugar scent. First, I dart my tongue out for just a little taste of him. Then I lap. I suck. Hard.

“Stop,” he orders on a groan, his dick acting like it wants to punch through his pants. “Stop before you make me nut right here. That would be a sorry-ass way to get my wife back.”

I know he sees the shock on my face when I pull back, looking at him. “Get me back?”

“Yeah.” Showing me that adorable quirk of his mouth and his dimples slashing the slides of his face, making him look even sexier. “You think I just go around randomly kicking doors in? I went there for you.”

Now it's my turn to look at him for a long minute. I never allowed myself to think for a moment that he came after me for anything other than to keep me in line for the campaign. Now he's almost making me think he came for himself.

Because he wants me, not just for his senate bid but for him. Like he wants us to be together.

My heart is beating so hard in that moment, I dare not acknowledge it. I can't allow myself to believe for one minute he wants us to be together, that he wants me.

I start shaking my head—

“Nik.” He groans my name like he's in agony and only I can assuage his pain. Then he's on me. And I'm on him. He rips off my pink yoga hoodie, pulling it above my head, then tossing it to the side.

After pulling his black T-shirt over his head, I toss it in the corner, following the direction in which he threw mine. We divest each other of our pants, kicking off socks and shoes, leaving a puddle of clothes at our feet.

His body is beautiful in the moonlight. His sun-kissed tan skin is pulled taut, the silver-edged scar tissue doing nothing to take away from the virility and sensuality of his body. He looks like one of the battle-worn fae kings I read about. He stands before me no longer the broken little boy who watched his mother suffer and fought valiantly in the face of sheer evil but a man who rose like a phoenix from the ashes of despair, forging his own destiny, determined to break free of the torment and breaking the shackles that tried to claim his soul.

In this moment I know I love this man. I know it with my whole heart, but I dare not say it. Something tells me he's not ready to hear it, not yet. Not while this thing with Joi still hangs over our heads.

“Take me to bed, Thi,” I whisper.

He scoops me up, cradling me, pulling me close to his chest. My own feels like it's about to explode. Hearing his heavy tread with each step he takes in the direction of the bedroom makes my heart beat a smidge faster. It's funny. I press my ear to his chest to see if his heart has picked up its beat. I smile to myself, hearing it has.

Once we get to the bedroom, he lies on his back, pulling me on top of him. “Kiss me.” He's being bossy, but I like it.



Tugging his lower lip into my mouth, I suck on him. I let it pop out, then run my tongue on it.

“Delicious,” I mumble, covering his mouth with mine. The kiss is heavy and deep. Taking my time, I lick inside him. I take his tongue when he offers it to me, sucking, licking, sliding, tangling.

While I’m busy there, he groans into my mouth. His large hands cover the globes of my ass, squeezing them, manipulating them like I’m a doll he can use. He grinds me on his dick, making sure to rub against my distended clit.

“Ohmygoodness.” I pull away from the kiss, gaping my legs so he can hit my spot. “Thi.” I shudder. “I’m so close, so close.”

“I got you, babe.” He angles his dick so he’s sliding against my slick flesh, hitting my clit directly.

Covering his mouth, I tongue him deep as I come.

My body is still in the throes of an orgasm when he drives his dick into my pussy.

“Ah,” I cry out as he pounds up into me, slamming my soaking-wet pussy down to meet his driving hips, hitting my spot, making me come again. I fall forward, and he rubs my back in long sweeps, but I can still feel his hard-as-steel dick pulsing inside me like a python waiting to strike.

“Pull your legs up to a squat,” he says, pausing for a moment. As soon as I do, it’s like I can feel this motherfucker in my chest. “You got it, you’re in control,” he tells me, easing back, letting me take the reins. “Take your time and find what feels good to you.”

I rise up and down, pressing my hands on his abs for leverage. He feels good, but it’s too much. Then, like Goldilocks testing bowls of porridge, I move through different positions until I start to rock back and forth with my feet planted firmly on either side of him like that story, “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” which I didn’t know was about masturbation until I was in college. I find whether I glide back or forth, he hits my spots with equal intensity.

“Ohhh.” I moan on a particularly good return stroke.

“Yeah?” He grins wildly.

“Yes.” I grin, dragging the word out on the retreat. It’s like I can feel every thick ridge and vein of his dick pressed against my sensitive flesh. I’m so filled up with him. He is part of me, it seems. There is no beginning and no ending—only us. I use his dick. My nails create half-moons in his flesh, but I can’t bring myself to care that I’m marking an already scarred man.

“I’m sorry for scratching you, Thi, but I promise to fuck you good,” I tell him, popping my hips on his big-ass dick like it wronged me.

“Then ride that dick, baby. You’re doing so good. You look so beautiful fucking me.”

His praise makes me work harder to please him. I want his toes curling. “I want you to fill me up, Thi,” I tell him, adding a little swerve to my hips.

His grip on my hips tightens. He pistons up inside me with hard snaps of his hips. His fucking is brutal, making my teeth snap with the force of his possession.

“I’m going to come, come with me,” I beg, feeling the pleasure.

“That’s it. Fuck me back,” he urges, fucking me, moving his hand to cover my mound. When he touches my clit, I almost lose my rhythm, satisfaction slicing through me. This time he does snatch me to him as he takes over, thrusting up with hard, smooth strokes.

“Spit in my mouth,” he growls against my lips. I clench my teeth and comply, then lick into his mouth. He rumbles low and guttural, his dick kicking like mad, and his come paints my womb.

I MUST HAVE DOZED because when I come to, there is a steaming mug beside me. “Here.” His voice sounds rough.

“Did you just wake up?”

“Yeah, I never sleep good after I’ve been up there.” He doesn’t have to say where *there* is because I know. That house of horrors he grew up in. Then I think back to all the times he slept over at Gran’s to keep me company.

“Was it like that when you came to visit me? Were you just making me think you were getting a good night’s sleep?” I ask, distinctly remembering his tousled hair in the morning. Obviously I missed something—a lot of things. How did I never notice he’d not once took his T-shirts off in the hot Alabama sun, especially when he did yard work or fixed stuff around the house instead of having one of the workers do it? I honestly thought it was just to not make me uncomfortable or weird me out, but now I know he hid his scars all along.

“Nah, I always slept good when I stayed with you at Gran’s,” he says, looking pensively at me before gazing out to the property.

“Were you and Nat going to stay here?” I could kick myself for blurting it out. Internally cringing, I try to keep my face neutral, but who am I fooling? He knows me too well.

He turns his silver gaze on me, seeing too much. I know I sound thirsty, desperate even, but I force myself not to look away. She was a big part of his life and mine through his. I need to know where she stands with him.

“No.” He takes my chin, looking unwaveringly into my eyes. “She’s never been here, Nicolette. She’s never seen my scars, and she doesn’t know about my past. We were partners, friends, a powerhouse couple.” His gaze searches mine. “But she was never you.”

My heart stutters, then stops. Pulling him to me, I kiss him with all the love I’m still too scared to express, with all the hope that I have my best friend back and we can possibly have something real.

*She was never you*, sings in my head and heart as I claim his lips before peppering kisses all over his neck and chest, finding my way down his body until I take him in my mouth.

“Fuck,” he swears, arching into me. “Just like that,” he says, grabbing my curls, drawing my mouth along the length of his dick as he pumps. “So fucking good. Show me what that mouth do,” he growls as I hollow out my cheeks, going to work on his slick, steel phallus. He praises me as he drives into my throat. “Good fucking girl, such a pretty little cumslut.”

I make it messy, and he loves it, fucking me so hard, he makes me gag on it, then ruthlessly holds me there until the reflex passes. Then he’s back to stroking deep. “Open wide and take my come like a good little slut.”

I scramble to do as he says when he pulls out and pumps heavy ropes of come in my mouth and over my breasts.

Seconds later he’s dragging me over him. “Ride my face like you rode this dick earlier,” he says, making me kneel over him. He draws me down and begins to lick my plump pussy lips and swollen clit. He lashes and swirls his tongue around my little gem; it’s hard as a diamond, and he worships it like it’s just as precious to him. He sucks on it in long pulls, making me shudder. Then he dips lower, lavishing my wet hole with delicious licks, teasing his tongue inside, fucking me with it, lapping up all the wetness from it until he has me keening with pleasure, my juices raining down. Lower he goes, his tongue circling, delving into my back button.

“Oh my goodness, Thi.” I sob when he starts tongue fucking me while his fingers delve into my pussy, plundering its depths in long thorough strokes until he finds my spot. He pumps in, making sure to hit it with very pass as he tongue fucks my ass. I’m helpless, wrung out, ruined. His fingers playing in my pussy and his tongue thrusting in my bottom hole—the combination undoes me in way that I’m totally unprepared for. My body seizes as my climax bursts through me like a supernova.

I pull myself away. The aftershocks are still wracking my body.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Strong hands haul me back, positioning me with my ass hitched up.

Moving between my legs, he spreads me open for him with his huge thighs. He taps the head of his dick on the crevice of my ass. Precum drips between my cheeks. His long fingers mix his come in with my juices.

“Relax your ass for me, baby,” he murmurs, seemingly fascinated with his task. “That’s my girl.” He probes with one long digit before easing it inside. He starts a slow rhythm. “Such a good fucking girl for me.” I feel the head of his dick at my front entrance seconds before he pushes in.

I whimper, feeling vulnerable and open as he works both my holes. Slowly, he starts fucking me in both. His finger’s stretching me, filling me. His dick is plowing through my walls, battering every ounce of pleasure out of me, making me love the filthy things he’s doing.

“M-Ma—” I can’t get his name out when he picks up the pace. He doesn’t stop.

“Oh god,” I cry, and the pleasure and pain coalesce. I edge up, trying to relieve the pressure from the onslaught.

“Uh-uh, what you running for, little wife? Come on, take this dick.” He meanly slaps my bottom with the hand that was holding me steady, making my ass reverberate with pleasure. I feel it deep in my womb. Liquid evidence of my pleasure coats his dick, easing his way. The loud slapping sounds of him fucking me deep make my muscles squeeze him tightly.

“The way this tight little pussy keeps sucking me in, trying to keep in her, she missed this motherfucker,” he says, spitting on my rosette, adding another finger. His slick fingers move in and out of my tight asshole. “Say sorry for keeping us apart. Running off—”

“I’m sorry.” Hell, I’m too far gone to quibble at the moment. I’m loving what he’s doing too much to care about anything but the satisfaction he’s offering.

“Nah,” he says, “you just don’t want me to stop. Tell it to the pillow, little wife.” He presses my head down into the pillow, fucking me in deliciously punishing drives, he holds my head steady pressed down. I can barely breathe. Soon he’s

moving so vigorously, I keep forgetting to, so caught up in the sensations he's evoking with every drive of his powerful hips. Soft honeysuckle surrounds me. The hard press of his thighs meets me with every hard stroke. Every moment I think I can't take more pleasure, he proves that I can handle a little more.

"You're doing so good, your pretty ass taking my finger. I knew you were going to love it. Squeezing my finger and my dick like a champ."

The breath seizes in my chest, and he keeps fucking me. I can't breathe.

"You're about to dance among the stars."

He slams into me in a hard relentless beat. I'm helpless to do anything but take everything he gives me. My eyes roll as he starts hitting the spot just inside making gasp as my body seizes with pleasure. "Ohmygoodbess, Thi." I don't even sound like myself.

With a twist of his fingers in my ass pushing me past every boundary I can imagine he praises, "Just like that give me all of you, like you promised."

Then he's pounding my pussy and fingerfucking my ass with one intent — to ruin me. My mind disconnects as stars sparkle behind my eyes. My ears are filled with cotton. My nipples brushing against the down send sparks of energy that all seem to meet like magic in the middle. My climax seizes me with a blinding intensity. Indeed I am dancing among the stars seconds before my conscious mind floats away.

WHEN MY CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNS, I open my eyes to see the iridescent silver of Mathias's gaze. For the first time since this whole thing began between us, his gaze is soft.

"How are we doing, beautiful?" His voice is gruff in that sweet way that tells me he's dealing with emotions neither of us can handle right now. He strokes damp curls away from my face. Placing tender kisses on my forehead, he waits patiently, but I can tell he expects an answer.

“I’m good,” I say, looking away, snuggling close, as close as I can get. Inhaling, I take in the sweet muskiness sex has left in its wake. Rapidly cooling skin makes me shiver, and my nipples harden, pressing against his chest. Reaching over he pulls the covers around me.

“Would you like to shower now or wait?” He’s still stroking me. I can’t gather my thoughts enough to make a sound or the simplest decision.

“I don’t know.” My voice sounds small to my own ears. Vulnerability shatters me, and a tear slips free, then another and another until he wraps me fully in his arms, sheltering me.

Quietly I sob as he holds me close to his heart. Minutes—I don’t know how many—tick by, and still he holds me. When my tears eventually cease, he stands, pulling me from the bed into his arms. Gathering me closer he kisses me again, “Let me take care of you.”

Naked, he pads over to his bathroom instead of mine on the opposite side of the room. When we enter, we’re surrounded by pristine stainless steel on every surface save the floor. There’s a slate-gray shower and a modern bathtub of the same color.

He takes me over to the shower before sitting me on a bench inside.

“It has a sauna,” he tells me, hitting buttons. Moments later warmth surrounds me as the sauna comes on. “It will ease all your aches. You’ll be good as new in the morning. This is my biggest campaign secret.” He gives me a small smile, quietly assessing my well-being.

By the time he turns the shower on, I’m feeling more like myself but still disconnected. After testing the water, he draws me under the spray, then washes and conditions my hair as well as my stylist. After rinsing the conditioner, he takes a sponge and bathes me, lathering me in big swaths from head to toe twice, with a thorough rinse in between. It’s like in this short time, he’s noted my routine and committed it to memory.

“Sit,” he tells me, turning to the full blast of the waterfall shower he increased the pressure on. His glutes flex as he stands before me lathering his body in quick efficient movements. In deft strokes he uses the same sponge, washing himself.

“Do you want me to do your back?” Languid muscles and a thorough bathing at his hands have me sounding sultrier than I intended.

“No. We both know where that will end up.” He turns his back on the shower, facing me. Taking himself in hands, he strokes the soap from root to tip, slowly jacking his tumescent dick. Reaching beneath, he grabs his sac, massaging soap there before turning back to the shower to rinse.

Stepping out, he wraps a towel around himself and brings two for me. After wrapping the large one around my body, he takes the other and wraps it around my hair.

“How do your legs feel?” he asks, preparing our toothbrushes.

“Like jelly,” I say sheepishly.

Nodding, he plops me on the counter so I can brush my teeth. After giving me a cup to rinse, he leads me back into the bedroom, where he lotions us both.

“Be right back.” He winks before going into my bathroom. I can hear him rummaging around, I assume to bring me my comb and wet brush. He does, but instead of handing them to me, he starts painstakingly parting my curls.

“I’m a little rusty,” he murmurs.

Shock makes me sit stone still, but that doesn’t prepare me for his next heartbreaking confession.

“Mommy never like the way the nurses did her hair. They were too rough. She had very curly hair, and they—except Angel’s mother—were always too rough with her hair. So she talked me through the process.” Sounding so solemn, he adds, “I wasn’t very good at first, but I was determined not to be the source of any more of her pain.”



“You’re doing great,” I tell him, turning to look at his deep concentration while he combs my hair, then plaits it in two long braids like I prefer.

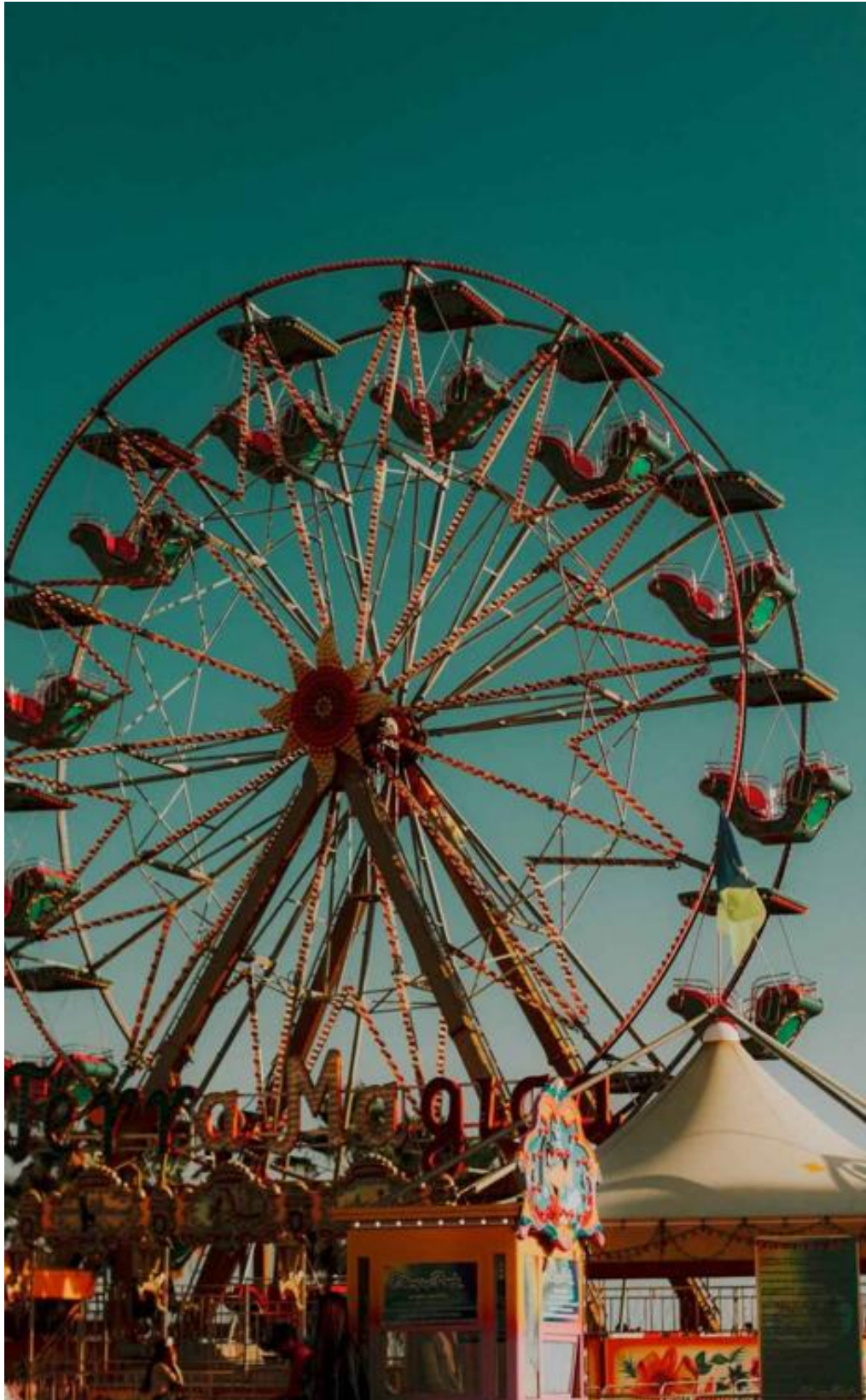
Climbing into the bed while he puts my grooming tools away, I can’t help feeling awkward and exposed. This whole day, from the moment he showed up, kicking my door in, feels surreal.

His phone starts buzzing. He looks at it briefly, but instead of answering it, he turns it off.

“It could be important,” I tell him when he pulls me into the crook of his arm.

“Nothing in this world matters more than you right now,” he murmurs.

Heat burns behind my eyes, and I feel silly for wanting to believe any of this is real.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE

Mathias

NIKKI and I sit out on the veranda with a view of the natural pool I had put in because she said she'd always wanted one.

"I'm glad you got your appetite back," I tell her, watching her pretty lips wrapping around the chocolate croissant with relish.

She hums around the delectable pastry. "You keep feeding me all this good food. You know your girl loves to eat." She pats the soft flesh of her tummy. I can't help the way my dick jumps at her benign gesture. This girl doesn't know what she's doing and how she's driving me crazy with her lush curves.

It's still warm, though fall has made a solid showing the past few days. The campaign has a comfortable lead on my competitor. There's nothing he can do at this point to eke out a win. I'd have to literally turn into a spree killer or a child molester to lose at this point.

"One day," she muses, "I'm going to be able to show how much I appreciate everything you've done for me, Th—Mathias."

I hate the way she cuts off the nickname, but I can't blame her after the way I cussed her out for using it. "You don't have to do that, Nik." Reaching out, I take her hand, not giving her a chance to pull back. Seeing there are still a couple of crumbs

on her fingertips I leap forward, taking her pretty digits into my mouth one at a time. “And you don’t have to do anything to earn me. You already own me, little girl,” I say with my whole chest, watching her swallow and look away, shaking her head.

Pulling her hand away, she curls it beneath her heart. “See, that’s the thing. I don’t want to own you. I want what is freely given. I never had to make you do anything. Hell, I had to make you stop. I just thought you knew I’d never back you into a corner no matter how I felt.”

“And how do you feel?” I demand.

She gives me a chiding glance and remains silent. “Cautious,” she says eventually. I can tell that’s not the answer, but I understand.

“I see I have to work to earn your trust again.” I watch her reaction. Her fist curls into a tight ball.

“You wanted to get me pregnant. Like, why would you do that?” Her eyes are glassy; she waves away whatever she’s about to say.

“I know about the Plan B—what else is it, Nikki?” I look at her, a sick feeling curling in my gut.

“I had a Misoprostol implanted.” She hunches her shoulders, then looks back at me with an unflinching stare. “You left me no choice, trying to take mine away.” She furiously swipes a tear away. “I’m just starting my life, so I did what was best for me. You know how both my parents suffered. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to have kids.”

Sorrow eats at me. Not because she did it but because she didn’t trust me and had every right not to. I failed her that night and every night prior.

“I should have never let you think for a minute that I was going to divorce you.” I curse myself for allowing her a moment of doubt. “Hey,” I tell her, watching her curl into herself. She’s not even looking at me, her gaze firmly on the land and fields beyond like she can find answers to all that plagues us out in the distance. “Come here.”

She turns, her gaze locking with mine. I see her visibly soften when she finally notices my hand out for her. As soon as she puts her hand in mine, I tug her over to me.

“Listen to me, Mrs. Shelby, I put you in an impossible position.” Massaging the tight muscles in her neck, I seek to soothe her as best I can. “In the future we have to commit to make all such decisions together.”

I kiss her on the crown on her head, then tilt her face up to mine. I give her a chaste kiss on her supple lips.

She pulls back, already putting me to the test when she says, “I had Mimi give me the Paraguard, a ten-year copper IUD. I can take it our prior to that but I don’t think I will.”

I look at her for a long time. “You are just twenty-two,” I say, pushing aside the selfish urge to see her big with my child, plump and positively radiant with my baby in her belly. A dream deferred for the moment.

Disappointment shoved into the deep recesses of my heart, I say, “You made the right decision for us both. These last weeks, I have been a motherfucker to you.” Grumbling against her ear, I feel her shiver against me. My dick immediately rises to meet her soft heat. Damn, this girl has some good-ass pussy. If she knew the power she has over me, she’d be leading me around by my dick all day.

Her shiver and her budding nipples let me know that she’s not immune to me. Pinching one, I roll it between my thumb and forefinger. “You like the motherfucker in me, huh?” The corner of my mouth cocks up, and a blush infuses her face. “You’re so fucking pretty, little wife.” I reach over, continuing to pinch and roll my other little friend.

Her breath hitches.

“Up.” Such a good little wife I have, one who immediately does as I command. I maneuver her around so she’s straddling me. Her sleep shorts have ridden up her thick-ass thighs. Her fat-ass pussy print is pressing against the fabric, threatening to burst free.

“No more secrets,” I tell her.

She looks at me, all doe-eyed innocence.

“I should have never doubted you, Nik,” I confess.

She visibly swallows. Her eyes are luminous when she pulls me down for a kiss. I groan not only at the luscious, wet kiss she lays on me but how wet she is when I slip my fingers into her shorts and move them aside.

“Take me out.”

She does with no hesitation, jacking my dick, making precum spill from the tip.

I don't have to tell her to ride me. No, my little freak is an expert on this dick after her first time astride.

Such an expert, in fact, that all I have to do is hold her steady and let my head fall back and my eyes roam over her gorgeously curvy little frame as she fucks me into oblivion.

“THIS IS SO GOOD,” Nikki coos, eating a second helping of the grilled duck I placed on her plate.

I love watching her eat. I always have, from the moment I took her to the diner that first night when I almost ran her over. The night I thought would eventually lead to my downfall has instead become one of the biggest blessings in my life. The reason is sitting right in front of me, at our little garden table laden with duck and a seasonal vegetable salad.

“Here.” I wipe a smudge of grease from the corner of her mouth, watching her eyes flare when I suck the juice off my thumb. “Little greedy ass.”

“Still delicious, though,” she quips, “since your nasty ass can't stop eating me.”

“And I'm about to eat your ass again.” I wink at her, adding, “Literally.”

“Boy,” she exclaims, laughing at me.

“Let me go get more vegetables,” I tell her, standing.

“Okay, Farmer George.”

“Who?” I look at her in what must be sheer confusion because she falls into peals of laughter.

“Oh this, I cannot not allow.” She stands, telling me in a posh British accent, “Sorrows, sorrows, and prayers.”

Then, tugging me by my hand, she leads me into our bedroom. We spend the rest of the evening binge-watching the tragic love story.

“You know they did that to both my parents,” she says quietly, nodding toward the shock treatments they were giving the king. “They still do people like that.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, pulling her more firmly into my arms, trying to ward off the pain she’s feeling. “When we get to the senate, we will have hearing on it,” I promise.

She looks at me like I’ve hung the moon, and damn if I don’t feel as if I have.

That night our lovemaking is just that: a thing of love. As I tuck her into me, I pray to a God I gave up on a long time ago that this lasts forever.

MY PHONE RINGING when I get out the shower is an indication of hell breaking loose.

The message is from LL: CODE RED. CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS

The next message is from Nat:

YOUR WIFE LIED ABT HER AGE. CALL ME ASAP.

IT MAY NOT BE TOO LATE TO FIX THIS.

“What’s going on, Thi?” Nikki comes into the room dressed and looking fresh. She was going down to visit her sister while I was going to check in at the campaign headquarters in Shelby-Love to strategize how best to bring the win home.

“I don’t really know,” I say, quickly brushing my hair into some semblance of a style. “LL texted me code red and to get to headquarters. Nat texted saying something about your age.

Then said to call her. I won't," I hurry to reassure Nikki. Listening to Nat was how I almost lost my wife last time. "Don't worry about it. C'mon. I'll drop you off.

The drive down is mostly quiet. "I don't see how anyone can claim you're lying when I looked all over for your birth certificate. I found nothing. Did Mama- and Pa-Pete have it?" I quiz her as I pull up alongside the Kandie Shoppe.

"No." She's looking down, obviously upset to be seen as causing more problems for my campaign.

"Nicolette," I say firmly, making her look my way. "This is not on you. It's just some erroneous opposition research. We'll get to the bottom of it."

After getting out, I come around to her side to help her down from the truck.

"Don't worry." I walk her to the door of the bakery before giving her a kiss. Once I'm back in the truck, I pull off, determined to put out this last fire.

"IT'S GRAINY AS HELL," LL says. "There is no way to prove its authenticity. We need the original document." He waves at the digital birth certificate that's marked as exclusive to the *Shelby-Love County Chronicle*, posted by none other than Joi Love.

It seems Joi not only hates me but seems determined to hurt her cousin as well. My mind goes back to our brief conversation when I confronted Joi while looking for her cousin.

*The little loft apartment over the Shelby County Chronicle was a mess, packed to the gills with old editions of the Shelby-Love Chronicle.*

*"What do you want, Shelby?" Joi cocked her head, crossing a leg over the other like she had not a care in the world.*

*"Where's my fucking wife?"*



*She was already shrugging and moving to close the door in my face.*

*My strong arm stops her.*

*“Dude, she’s not here. I haven’t talked to her since before she married your sorry ass.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe she actually did it.”*

*“She did. She’s mine, and I want her back.”*

*“Umm, a Shelby not getting his way. Well, MA-THI-ASS, you can’t have everything and everyone.” She smirked.*

*“My, how far we’ve fallen from a Pulitzer nominee. What happened to you, sweetie? Got run through by a dick you couldn’t handle?” I asked in mock sincerity. “You do have that look about you. Used up and tossed away.”*

*“Fuck you.” She slammed the door in my face.*

*“Well, that’s one vote I don’t mind losing.” I called to her through the door before heading back to my truck.*

NAT TOLD me later that she knew a little about Joi, and she’d always seemed, in her words, *unstable*. There were plenty of unstable people living exceptional lives; that was no excuse for what she did to her cousin. From the woman’s vitriol, I knew there was nothing she wouldn’t do or anyone she wouldn’t use. Nikki had no part in her plan, I surmised.

Looking now this latest post, it isn’t hard for me to deduce Joi is back to her old tactics.

“Get your firm on it. Unless they can provide the original document, I want it taken off the site immediately. Get a court order if you need to.”

“Sure thing, he tells me, snapping the MacBook closed.

“We’ll meet in the morning to go over everything.” I’m unbothered. The wording on the document is shaky at best, the state seal barely visible. It’s laughable the lengths this woman is going to for either relevance or revenge. I’m still not certain what her motives are. Something tells me that me being a

Shelby is not the only thing that has her acting in such self-destructive ways. There was an aura of sadness around her that had nothing to do with her alienation from her family. I'm sure the Loves are already divided on the fact she came for a prominent Shelby's throat, especially after my father almost had Mimi fired from her position at the hospital and used his workers to burn down Krie's restaurant, the Camillia, and caused problems with the Creative Chaos plant, using my half sister as a pawn in the process—the latter of which prompted Krie's husband to see to his timely demise. So the Loves would hardly be upset by Joi using her cousin to hurt me, especially if it meant denying me something I desired above all others. Hurting her cousin was a necessary evil for Joi, which is anathema to Nikki. She would never be so callous. There was no way I could continue to blame her for Joi's actions.

My resolve is firm as I leave headquarters. It remains strong as I traverse the roadways leading to the Kandie Shoppe.

The crowd outside the establishment gives me pause. There are at least a dozen people craning their necks like they are trying to get a better look of what's going on. I park my car across the street.

My height affords me an advantage in this as it does in most things. As I approach I get a clear view, which spurs me to shove my way through the people assembled. One or two people try to buck up until they see me, and more notably my face, and pipe the fuck down.

"It's Mathias Shelby," someone says into the crowd. A collective "whoa" resounds, and I make my way to the edge of the throng facing the store.

What I see has my mouth falling open. Kandie is drubbing Joi on the floor of the bakery. Nikki is on the side, trying to pull her sister off her cousin. "Stop, Kandie. You're going to end up in jail again." Nikki's yelling at her sister, trying to reason with her.

“Uh-uh, I’m sick of this trifling-ass hoe.” Kandie’s voice rings out with the hardest of Alabama twangs. Not the soft modulated tones of the new South. No, it’s a pure, raw cadence that gets to the grit and gift of the South. It denotes the hard work and perseverance of a people who work all their lives, good food, abundant curves, and pride. Pride in ourselves and our people. Kandie is our gifted self-taught local baker and lives her life unapologetically. Even the snooty Shelby Country Club orders her cakes and pastries, and though Krie has a renowned party chef, it’s still Kandie everyone requests for events.

At the moment she is none of those things—she is an avenging angel, snatching the hell out of the woman who hurt my wife. It takes me a full minute of Kandie beating Joi’s ass before I step in. I don’t miss Nikki’s look of consternation when I take a few moments too long to separate the women.

“Bitch!” Kandie lunges.

“Drunk bitch.” Joi swipes her bloody mouth. I can see the flesh beneath her left eye is already swelling.

“You came over here acting like a friend, a cousin, then used what I gave you to hurt my baby sister. You so dirty.” Kandie shakes her head, fire in her eyes. For a split erroneous second, I think she’s talking about breaking the story about me kissing Nikki—that is, until I glance at my little lying-ass wife and see the truth.

“What are you saying?” My voice sounds hollow.

“This low-down dirty hoe came over here pretending like she real family, got me drunk, then had me show her Nikki’s birth certificate.”

“Bahaha!” Joi’s brash laugh greets Ulysses just as he enters. “When aren’t you drunk, bitch?”

Kandie snatches from me before I can stop her from cold cocking Joi, who must be stronger than she seems because after stumbling a few steps back, she jumps at Kandie, tumbling both to the ground.

It takes a good two minutes to get them separated again. Kandie's beautiful face is a mask of rage, and Joi's equally striking face is the same. But only Kandie's shows real hurt; Joi's expression is that of steely resolve.

"Both of you are under arrest," Ulysses informs them both, taking out zip ties.

"Dirty-ass cop," Kandie says, louder than anyone else would dare to a man I don't even fuck with that often.

My cousin looks at her with solemn eyes that give not an iota of his thoughts away. "We can't all love jail like you do."

"Ow," she gasps. "At least give my sister the key to my shop."

Ulysses goes over to the register and types in a code he shouldn't know before taking the keys out.

"Here." He hands them over to Nikki. "The bakery's closed tomorrow. She'll be in my custody till the day after," he says cryptically.

"Give me a hug, baby sis," Kandie says with sad eyes on Nikki.

All I can make out is "I'm sorry," then more muffled words before they break away.

Ulysses leads the arrested women out, and Nikki and I are both silent. "Where is she keeping your birth certificate?" I ask, hearing the deadness in my voice. If the way she flinches is any indication, then I know nothing about me in this moment invites comfort.

"Upstairs in her apartment," she says.

"Go get it," I bite out.

She's already doing my bidding before I finish my sentence.

Minutes later she returns with an envelope heavily marked with violet circles.

She hands it to me, her eyes never leaving mine.

Opening it, I pull the form free. It's identical to the one shown on the internet by the *Shelby Chronicle* only this one is pristine, like Joi deliberately obscured the other one.

Nothing prepares me for the soul-shattering news within.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-TWO

Nikki

THERE IS one thing and one thing only on my mind when we get back to the farmhouse: *Get my stuff and get the hell away from this man before he buries me in one of his fields.*

After getting the information, he called LL and told him everything as a client, not just a candidate. LL was furious with me and even threw out the word *annulment*, to which Mathias cut his eyes to me, immediately responding, “Fuck, no.”

LL’s response was quick, a true testament to his savvy as a lawyer and a political operative. “Okay, new plan. We won’t address it. No one has evidence of it. You have the only copy. The fact she was born in Bryce Hospital is good because mental health records fall under the patient privacy clause, and the hospital can be liable for one of their patients getting pregnant, so no wonder you could never find anything.” Then he continued matter-of-factly. “We will put out a statement that we are not falling for any distractions at the last moment of the campaign. We are not Change You Can Believe In ’08 giving credence to birth certificate allegations. If it matters so much you to be honest with your constituents, then release a statement next year once you are a United States senator and you’ve started delivering for the people and see if they still

care. For now, y'all just need to stick to the plan and present a united front. Can you do that?"

"Yeah," Mathias snapped, not even looking at me, focusing on the road instead.

I've been off the campaign trail for nearly two weeks. It's obvious he doesn't need me, I surmise as we pull up to the house. I need to leave. Perhaps go back to Valentine and Summer's house and steer clear of Mathias until he's elected, then move to DC on my own and do the job Creative Chaos expects of me. I know this is a bridge too far. This betrayal—this lie—is worse in so many ways now that I know the whole terrible story with his father.

Mama- and Pa-Pete's house is vacant now that they moved into Angel's hidden mansion with Easy, maybe I can go there or back to Summer and Val's. I missed Bernice Sanders. Anyway, I haven't seen her in weeks since I joined the campaign.

"Get out," he says, making me look up from my mental planning after he's opened my side of the car. I comply, then jump when he slams the door so hard, the whole truck shudders.

Trudging the distance to the house, I note how different we are tonight than the last time we came here. I don't think we will ever be like that again—so open, trusting.

He leaves me to close the door. I do, the soft click so final that my tummy drops to my toes. A fully illuminated living room greets me when I enter.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks, his face a cold mask as soon as I come to the seating area where he looks up at me, his face an amalgamation of anger, hurt and disappointment. It's a large U shape of the deepest gray. Big soft cushions allow you to sit and watch the huge TV. Inside alternating cushions is an alcove housing game controls and books, now that he's moved my things in. I remind myself to make sure I pack my new special editions I got through a Kickstarter campaign featuring some of my favorite authors.



“I was scared,” I say simply, shrugging. I’m shutting down, helpless to do anything other than watch as my world comes apart before my eyes. For a moment I watch sheer consternation flood his face before it’s supplanted by a paroxysm of fury.

“Six years,” he roars. I swear the rafters shake from the sound. “Six fucking years of being my best fucking friend, and you decide to tell me on the eve of the most important accomplishment in my life that you have been lying form day fucking one?” His eyes are more thunderous than the outer rim a tornado. He’s looking at me like I’m foreign to him, some obscure artifact he can’t wrap his head around. Like he doesn’t know me. “Ain’t no fucking way, man...” His hands cover both sides of his head. His fingers rip through the inky-black locks of his hair.

I step back, and he stops me with a furious glare.

“Why didn’t you say anything when you turned eighteen and graduated high school? You were free to do what you wanted. Oh, wait.” He shakes his head ruefully with a bitter chuckle. “You just turned sixteen four years ago, I forgot. You were only *sixteen* when you graduated and *fourteen* when we met.”

Then he looks like he’s going to be sick. He drops down on the sofa like he’s been sucker punched. His face ashens like his gorge is rising, and he’s likely to throw up all over the Alabama red oak floor.

For a moment I wonder why. Then it dawns on me. When he thought I turned eighteen, he started to look at me differently. Like a man looks at a woman he’s attracted to. I was only sixteen then, and even though it’s the age of consent in Alabama, he’s still grossed out.

“Thi,” I say, my hands splayed in my defense. “I’m sorry, okay? I was still a scared kid.”

“Why, though? When have ever I showed you anything other than kindness?”

Silence falls between us, and he looks at me intensely, waiting for an answer.

“I don’t like repeating myself, *wife*.” He says the last word like an epithet.

“Of losing you.” I squeeze my eyes closed. Hear the pounding in my ears as I build my courage to say the rest. The backs of my eyelids burn so badly, I swear I’m going to make myself blind. “I—”

“You never had me, you silly little bitch. You were just some kid I helped to get out of trouble. Just a means to an end, so I wouldn’t derail my future.” His gaze rakes me with disgust.

“I know,” I whisper miserably. I knew that. He said as much at the time, in an offhanded joking manner. I guess he really meant it.

“Now, ah...now, you’re just good, convenient pussy at my beck and call.” His mouth curls with cruelty.

“You got your fucking ex-fiancée at your beck and call. She’d come right now if you called her. What the fuck do you want with me?” I cut in, not about to take his bullshit. He knows I had nothing to do with that story leaking—that was all Joi. “All those late-night meetings—and you’re the bitch, bitch. An unfaithful one too.” My throat is raw with unspent anger and bitterness over how he keeps going to her, defending her.

He bursts out laughing like I said the funniest thing on the planet. My hands curl into fists at my sides, ready to attack him, not caring about the conversation.

“I knew your little ass was jealous. I guess it won’t hurt to tell you the truth, since you can’t seem to figure it out with that big-ass brain of yours. I’ve never had sex with Nat. That’s something we led people to believe. We just don’t click like that. She at first said it was because she couldn’t get past how I humiliated her the night I met you. Then, after she forgave me, we decided to just be friends and partners.” He chuckles in a cruel, wrathful way. “News flash, baby. We’ve never fucked

—no fingers, no tongue, nada. Before you I had discrete partners who knew their place. Too bad you never learned yours.”

“And where is that?” I demand. My heart pounds harder as he slowly rises. Instinct has me backing up, but he slowly walks me down. I stand still, knowing how fruitless it is. If he buries me alive, I won’t be able to stop him. Coming to a stop in front of me, he grasps my chin in an unyielding grip. His fingers are hard, unyielding as his eyes, filled with an amalgamation of emotions—fury, regret, sadness, lust.

“Under me. Know this, little wife: You are the only one I’m fucking. And you love it.” His mouth curls with diabolical intent.

Swooping down, he devours me. His mouth slants over mine, taking my breath, giving nothing back. His hard grip doesn’t allow me to move from the onslaught of his rage-filled passion.

I surmise he has to be lying. Nat always acted like they were so intimate, made such a big show of being so openly demonstrative of her affection.

I push back, smushing his face away with both hands. “Liar! You said y’all were—”

“Partners, a powerhouse couple.” His eyes drop down my body, then back up. “Never lovers.”

“You had hickeys.” I step back.

“For appearance’s sake at her insistence.” He pulls the tails of his shirt up. “It was to convince our parents we were serious. It worked all the way up until you and I almost had sex against my truck.”

Shaking my head, I back up more. “Mathias—”

Quick as a cottonmouth viper, his hand flies out, necklacing me. “Shut the fuck up,” he growls low, pulling me to him up on my toes. “You earned this. You lied so prettily for years. Because you didn’t want to lose me. Well, now you have me, my pretty little liar.” Bowing his head, he puts his mouth against my ear, his warm voice making me shiver.

I press my hands against his chest, pushing against a wall of granite, telling myself I don't want this. This is toxic. It's twisted on so many levels. Then his tongue swirls in my ear, almost causing my knees to buckle.

"Thi," I whimper.

"I know your pretty little pussy is already drenched for me. Those lips are pouty, ready to be kissed. That big-ass clit is hard and poking out, ready to be sucked and flicked. Your tight little hole is slick and ready to be filled. I'm going to split her open, spank her, beat her for your lying ass. And you know what?" He pulls away to slowly shake me, his fingers tightening ever so slightly. "You're going to let me. You belong to me now. There will be no annulments. No divorce. You're mine."

Slowly he draws me closer. The air constricts in my throat. I open my mouth, trying to breathe, but nothing comes. Just before our lips touch, he releases his hold slightly. As I draw in the air I've been denied in greedy breaths, he licks the seam of my lips with delicate, whisper-soft swipes, lighter than a butterfly's wings. Barely there but enough to have me reaching for more, longing for his full attention.

My hands go from pushing him away to pulling him closer; my fingers curl into the crisp linen of his shirt. He groans, moving from whisper soft to a kiss with more intensity, taking full advantage of my acquiescence. He dips his tongue into my mouth with teasing swipes. The quick darts are too fast for me to catch, driving me to distraction. Wanting, needing more, I mimic his actions with my own teasing thrusts. Eventually he gives in, until our tongues are tangling, sliding, sucking.

Letting go of his shirt, I move to my tiptoes, wrapping my arm around his neck, pulling him to me. I want him. Tomorrow he may not even want this, may move to DC alone and want to live separate lives, but tonight, for this little while, he's mine. With that thought in mind, I open my mouth, taking his tongue, sucking it like I suck his dick. That promised part of him jumps, pressing hard against my tummy.

“Greedy little slut,” he growls, pulling back, his eyes cold as fuck. “Get on your fucking knees.”

Without hesitation I drop to my knees, unzipping and pulling his gorgeous thick flesh out as I descend. As soon as my knees touch the smooth concrete, I circle the head of his dick with my tongue. Swirling, twirling, I lavish him with my tongue, just teasing. Looking up at him through my lashes, I can see the hard cast to his face. His eyes are shuttered, and his mouth is cast downward. I let none of this deter me because right now he’s mine. There won’t be an effort on my part to gain him back. Why should I try to get something that’s already mine? Whether he knows or accepts it or not, he’s been mine the whole time. In my heart and his. Fuck his anger.

“I want you in my throat, big daddy,” I say, whispering around the head of his dick, batting my eyes up at him. Though his face remains the same, his manhood tells me the truth. It jerks, and a gorgeous drop of precum pearls and drips from the tip. Industrious little wife that I am, I stick my tongue out to catch it just in time. We can’t go wasting good come, can we?

Placing my arms behind my back, I lean into him, covering him with my mouth. I have to squeeze my thighs tight because my pussy is already purring. He tastes like earth, clover, cotton, and sugar. Mine. Always mine.

Moving my lips along the length of him, I continue my efforts. Licking along the shaft, wetting him up, I have to rise as high as possible on my knees, and my uncooperative husband isn’t making it any easier for me. His face is still a mask of unrepentant rage and lust. He’s determined to make me work for every drop.

I sit back on my haunches, marveling at my handiwork. After a moment, I skeet the liquid pooling in my mouth on his dick. Hurrying to not miss a drop, I cover him with my mouth and start deep throating him like my life depends on it. He never said he would kill me. He just said no annulment nor divorce. I didn’t hear anything about no grieving widower.

“Fucccck.” Heavy hands cup my head. He starts fucking my mouth with brutal deep thrusts. “Nasty little motherfucker. Suck my fucking dick.” He rocks his hips forward in whiplash movements. “Take it down your lying-ass throat.” He angles over me.

I can feel him all the way to the back of my throat. He slides out and drives right back in, barely giving me a chance to take a breath in between.

Tears pool in the corners of my eyes. I’m surrounded by his taste. The texture of his dick fills my gaping mouth ridge by hard ridge. My pussy throbs hungrily. I hope he doesn’t leave me like this, though I know he probably thinks it’s no more than I deserve. Wetness runs from the corner of my mouth down my neck and over my breasts in rivulets.

“Dirty, lying, little cumslut.” He pulls my head back. “Open your fucking mouth.” I do, already knowing and not surprised when he spits in my mouth. He plunges his dick into my mouth after that visual. He keeps fucking my face, pulling out to repeatedly to skeet into my mouth. “Now you.”

I return the favor to the head of his cock, which he smears over my lips before pushing into my mouth.

“I may just keep you for this, little wife.”

My nails cut into the flesh of arms at his words. I moan.

He pushes deep. “Take that shit down your throat like a good little whore.”

My pussy spasms as his grip tightens in my curls, and hot jets of his come coat my throat.

My whole front is wet when he pulls me to my feet. He seems to take a quick assessment of my well-being before stripping the shirt over my head. Reaching between my breasts, I unclasp my bra under his inscrutable gaze.

After pushing my pants down, I step out of them and kick them free. I look back at him, unflinching at the mix of hatred and lust mingled there. I’m used to it at this point. I may as well make myself at home with his animosity.

Mathias takes off the rest of his clothes in much the same fashion, even kicking the pants aside like I did.

He walks me back until the backs of my knees hit the sofa. I move to scoot back, but he plucks me up, placing me on the top edge of the sofa, pushing my legs until they're in a split. "Okay, Little Miss Acrobat, let's see if you can hold that position."

Stepping back, he looks at me splayed before him, totally bare, open and ready for him. The sofa cushions dip when he places one knee and then the other on the edge. Bending, he swipes his tongue along my right, then left inner thigh, lapping up the juices spurred by sucking his dick.

"So fucking sweet." He muses, "Who knew a curvy little liar could taste so good?" His eyes meet mine for a long moment before he bends his head. His mouth covers my whole pussy, and he sucks and sucks. Taking me in long drags like he's trying to gain sustenance, Mathias groans, and I can see his hand moving to jack his dick. His tongue lashes and swirls, teasing, taking me higher. He doesn't let me get to the highest height, moving away just as my orgasm approaches. His clever mouth sucks and nips my pussy lips, making me shudder. He blows warmth onto my hard clit before bypassing it, licking around it, dipping into my hole, tonguing me for endlessly.

"Please," I beg when he denies my orgasm the third time.

"No, little wife. I have to be thorough. You're a liar. How do I know you haven't lied about this? How do I know you're not faking?" He shakes his head coldly, with mock pity, bending his head to continue this torture.

"Mathias," I urge, pumping my hips meeting him as he tongues fucks me. "Never about this. Baby, I promise. Never, ohmygoodness." Little shudders wrack my body but nothing like what I need.

"That's my pretty, needy little wife. Fuck my face. Beg me, and I might let you come." He chuckles wickedly, fisting his dick, squeezing the base.

“You’re not being fair, you petty bitch,” I growl, out of my mind with edging.

For a moment, I think he’s going to stop; instead, he slowly eases two long fingers inside me.

“Petty bitch?” He quirks his brow, finger fucking me in languid strokes. His eyes are like mercury when I meet them. The only thing that gives any indication he’s bothered in the least is the clenching of his jaw. Ever so slowly he fucks me. “Look at how pretty she is, taking my fingers.” He flashes me one of his beautiful smiles. He bites his lip as he concentrates on his task.

“Oh, please.” I pant as he picks up his pace. “Please.” Rocking into his hand, I fuck myself on his fingers, meeting every thrust.

Soon his hand is slapping against me as we collide. Then he twists and curves his fingers just so in fast movements making an incredible pressure rise low in my pelvis. His mouth covers me, his tongue lashing my clit in vicious licks. I spiral out of control, my body spasming as liquid gushes from me. Mathias continues to lick as my come squirts all over his face and down his chest.

I slip down the couch like a melted ice cream on the sidewalk.

“Uh-uh, you were probably lying just then.”

I’m not even looking at him, but I can imagine the sarcasm etched on his handsome face.

Pulling me back up, he puts me on my hands and knees over the ottoman. “Petty bitch,” he murmurs, standing in front of me. I watch as he runs his hand down his front, rubbing in my juices. He takes the two fingers he used to make me come with and pushes them deep into my mouth. Without hesitation, I suck. Moving them in and out, he says, “You’re so good at this. I knew you would be, little wife.”

Pulling them free, he moves behind me, trailing his hand from my nape to the top of my ass.



He lines up behind me. I feel the big velvet-smooth head of his dick against my pussy's dripping entrance. With slow deliberation, he presses in while his other hand plays with my other tight hole.

"I love splitting this pussy open." He presses inside both entrances, using my wetness to ease the way. "If I keep this pussy, mouth, and ass filled, maybe your little ass won't lie to me again." He slams home with enough force to make my breath rush out and my eyes roll back. He pistons inside me with a relentlessness like never before. His hands move from my waist to my throat as he holds me down, fucking me, possessing me down to every fiber of my being.

There is cognitive dissonance in the way he's ruthlessly fucking me and giving me pleasure at the same time. Both my pussy and ass feel so full. He going to break me, and I'm going to let him. Hell, I'm cheering him, saying, "Yes."

Meanwhile, his big-ass dick slams home, trying to pulverize my pussy.

"Mathias!" I sob. "I can't take it. Please let me come." Begging, I'm hoping he'll take mercy on me. Still, like the nasty little thing I am, I meet his every thrust, loving the way his heavy sac slaps against my pussy. Loving the messy sounds of my wet pussy taking him. Loving the feel of his nimble long fingers playing in my ass.

"Thi," I say, breaking into a billion little pieces as bliss overtakes me.

He fucks me right through my orgasm, his dick giving me no mercy. He's putting me through my paces. His body covers mine, crowding me, blanketing out everything but him. I'm in a cocoon of pleasure, inundated by every sensation he foists on me.

Feeling like jelly, I slip losing my grip on the ottoman, but he pulls me flush against his body. His long dick slides in and out, slick from me coming on him again. He stands, working my body on his dick like a rag doll. Leaning back on the sofa, he starts bouncing me on his lap. I can do nothing but brace my hands on his knees.

“I’m going to use you. Your pussy is mine. This ass.” He drives his fingers in, making me arch. Making me love it. “Open your mouth.” I do. Leaning forward, he skeets in it, then licks it. “This mouth. All of you is mine.” Taking his fingers from my bottom, he pulls me back against his chest, holding me close while he’s stroking me. His free hand moves and plays with my clit.

“Who do you belong to?” he growls, his gaze never wavering.

“Y-you.” I mean it. Lust, regret, and yes, love mingling.

“No more lies,” he demands, his fingers swirling over me to distraction.

“No more lies,” I promise.

Faster, his fingers move in maddening butterfly strokes. The sensations are so intense, I don’t know if I want to squeeze my legs closed or if I want to open them further. Mathias takes that decision from me. By spreading his legs wide, he forces mine, which are draped over his, wider. His hips are like a machine thrusting into me. “Still so tight, gripping my dick, sucking it in.” He growls in my ear. He sucks on my earlobe, his fingers just holding my clit before giving it more torturous swirls, then repeating the process.

“So fucking wet.” He pulls his dripping fingers away along with a connected strand of my essence, bringing them to his mouth. Mathias sucks one finger, then presses the middle one into my mouth, making me suck it clean. “You like that shit, huh?” he whispers with smutty relish when my muscles clench around his dick from what he’s making me do.

His hand clamps firmly around my waist. Then, harder and harder, he fucks into me.

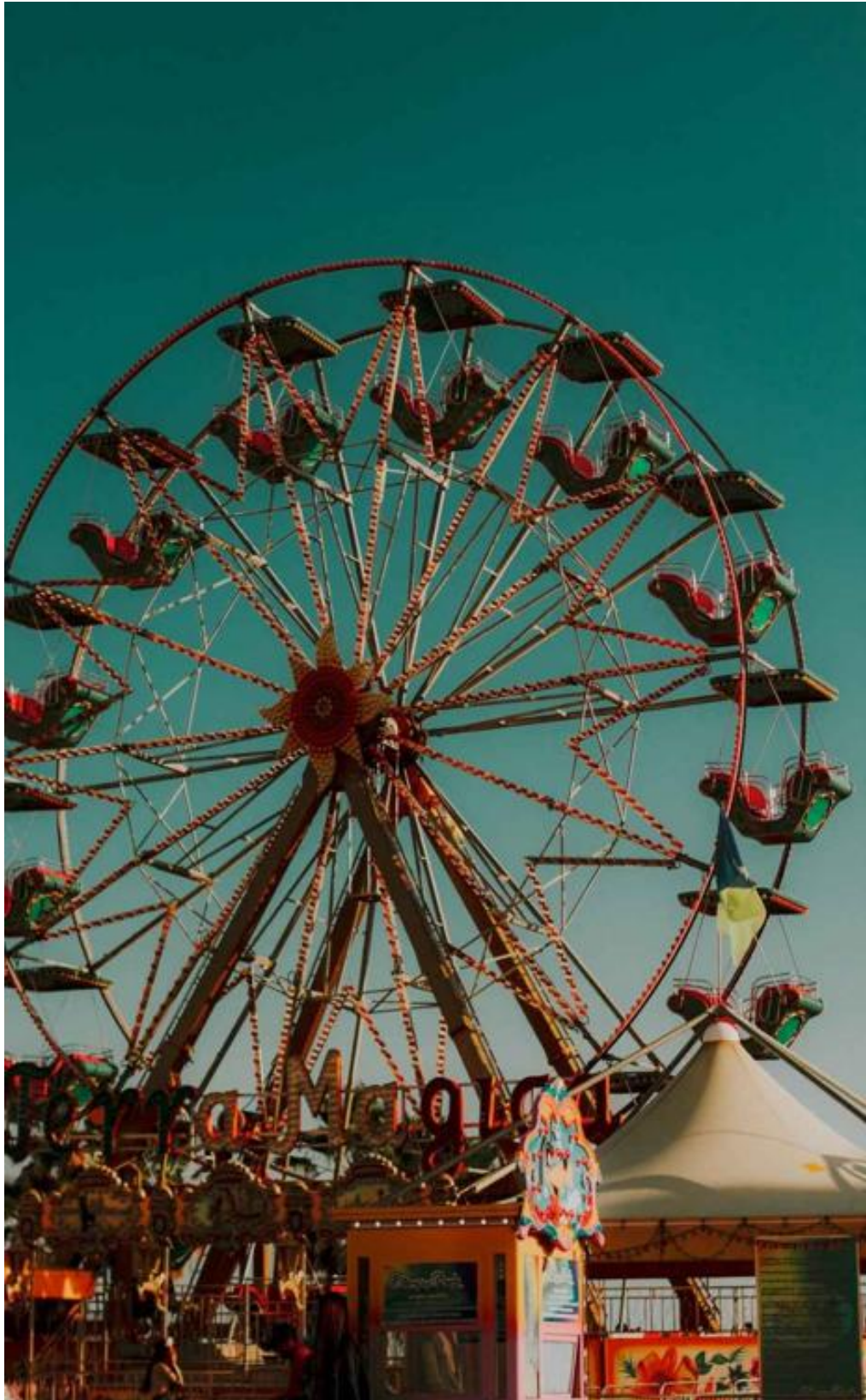
“Minha,” he growls in Portuguese.

“Yours,” I confirm.

His fingers start their destruction again.

“Come for me, minha pequena,” he whispers, touching his nose to mine. Our eyes lock, and he fucks me into oblivion.

And I come, my back arching like I've been struck by lightning, pleasure cascading over me like pinpricks. With a hard thrust, he clamps his teeth down on my neck so hard, I see a kaleidoscope of stars, my pussy tightening around his jutting dick, his come filling me to overflowing.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE

Nikki

Husband: CHECK YOUR EMAIL

I OPEN my email to see three letters of recommendation for graduate school. One is from the university president, Fane, the other from Dr. Lexington Spencer, a local surgeon, and the last from my cousin Mimi's brother-in-law Hishashi Takeda, the vice president of Creative Chaos. With these prominent members of my community vouching for me, I'm guaranteed a spot in the fall. I know without having to ask that Mathias did that for me.

Me: THANK YOU

Getting up from the newly covered sofa, I slowly make my way over to the kitchen to make a hot chocolate. Fall is in full swing. The election is a few days. Mathias left to make the rounds with the local and not-so-local news stations. He's going to a football game at Shelby University and said he wants me to go, but honestly I don't know how I'm going to be able to.

"I'm sore," I told him when he was getting ready to take care of campaign business.

“Take an ibuprofen.” He gave me an unwavering look. “I know you didn’t in fact sign up for this. I get that, Nik. But you still promised last night to stay with me. That means being the wife of a senator. Is that something you want to do? Can do?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, but I don’t think either of us believed me.

He let me off the hook for this morning, but I’m not sure how much more leeway he or the campaign will be willing to give me.

I take some cut-up fruit left over from breakfast and warm up a croissant. Once my midday meal is set, I go back to the seating area so I can start the application process for the schools I want to attend. I add Howard University to the list, since I will be living in DC for the next six years.

My phone buzzes from an unknown number. I ignore it. By the third time, I answer just so I won’t be blocking anyone.

“I thought I was going to need Ezekiel-Jane to send her man, Angel, over there to make sure that boy ain’t buried you out in them fields,” chimes my grandmother on the other line.

“Mama-Pete,” I chide.

“Don’t *Mama-Pete* me. Kandie and them told me all about that mess over at the Kandie Shoppe. I see my grandbaby LL hushed it up too. I hope y’all paying him good.” I can tell she’s chewing on her corncob pipe and probably sitting on Easy and Angel’s vast veranda, having made herself at home in the billionaire’s hidden mansion—you have to agree to be blindfolded to travel there and have no tech while visiting his property. Trespassers and violators are never seen again. Angel takes the protection of his family seriously, and he should, he has a lot of enemies.

I rub my forehead at the direction of this conversation. “I’m sure he is being very well compensated, Mama-Pete. What can I do for you, Ms. Ma’am?” I smile indulgently despite my soreness, knowing she’s about to get tight with me.

“It’s not what you can do for me, lil’ girl. We see y’all had a dip in the Latino vote around here.”

“Ma, we’re ten to fifteen points ahead.”

“Mm-hmm, and that was before the news came out about your birth certificate. People are gossiping, saying he messed with you when you were too young to consent.” She huffs. “Now, I know he ain’t like his daddy. So I won’t even disrespect y’all like that, but since y’all deciding to handle it the way you have, you need to bring the biggest part of his base home. This part of the constituency has been sorely lacking.”

“Alright. I’ll let Mathias know,” I say, dismayed at what’s going on with the grassroots of the campaign. Mathias has such a top-notch staff, I can’t imagine how this slipped past the team.

“No, ma’am, you are going to do more than that. We are going to have a big hometown barbecue meet and greet at the city center, in two days, with the our new senator so he can get to know the people.”

Biting back the groan, I say, “We’ll have to check with the campaign.”

“Ain’t he your husband?” she challenges. Then: “You putting it on him good, ain’t you?”

“Mama-Pete,” I exclaim, hollering, not believing the direction this conversation is going but not surprised in the least. My granny is nothing if not direct and unapologetic. “I thought you’d be mad at me for being with, let alone marrying, a Shelby, and Mathias is Shelby as Shelby gets.”

“Pshaw.” I can see her waving away my concerns. “You ain’t the first of us Love women to slip and get caught up by those ice-blue or gray eyes and definitely ain’t going to be the last, sugar drop. Besides, anytime one of us fell in with one of them, we managed to drag them into the light with good pussy. Just keep laying it on him, baby. Alright, let me know if two days’ time is too soon. Keep in mind we don’t need to be too last minute.”

“I will,” I say, trying to digest the information she let drop about my family’s history with the Shelbys.

“Alright, then.” She says goodbye, sounding every bit like the sweet granny she is and not the OG she was moments ago.

“Yes, ma’am.” Smiling, I hang up, shaking my head. “Wow.” For the first time, I want to know more about this history between our families. I’ll make sure I sit down with my gran soon to find out.

AFTER LOOKING over the MBA programs Mathias sent me along with the letters of recommendations, I start dinner.

Then I go out into the workout room where he set up my arial hoop and bar. My reaction this morning when he told me was nothing less than shock.

*“When did you have it put in?” He never mentioned it before, and since traditional exercise is not really my preferred choice, my brow puckered in confusion. We came here shortly after the hotel, so when did he order it? When did he get all the stuff I needed installed?*

*He pressed his lips together, his eyes going cold as marble. “Just enjoy the room, Nicolette.” Pushing away, he left me standing there in confusion. I followed him, but he didn’t stop his pace nor look back as he got in his truck and peeled off down the drive.*

I do some much-needed stretching. My trepidation around climbing that Ferris wheel let me know that I need to keep up my acrobatics skills. Not only do the exercises keep this curvy body of mine flexible, they keep my parents close to my heart. Though I can’t remember my mom, my dad used to tell me I got a lot of my agility from her. How the staff could never keep her in the hospital where they’d both been committed as teens because she could fit into anything and kept escaping.

From the pictures I’ve seen, my mother was beautiful, just misunderstood like my dad and not getting the proper help. They weren’t bad people, and they were great parents. My



dad's spells, as he called them, were often debilitating, but he loved us—all of us.

With those thoughts in mind, I go through the moves he taught me, being gently forgiving of my raggedy body, allowing myself the grace to do what I can, pushing myself when I need to.

With care and precision, I go through some of the advanced moves, flipping myself upside down, pulling my legs into a stretched inverted spilt.

I see socked feet, letting my eyes travel up the athletically trim body, snagging on the slight budge, then hips, waist, concave stomach, the form fitting shirt I know is hiding an Adonis line and tightly ridged abdomen, then up to his broad chest and gorgeous visage.

“Hey,” I say, watching him quietly assess me as I hang upside down.

He says nothing for a long moment. “Hey.” His face is shuttered, and I can't think it's all about my question from this morning. I'm fairly certain he's still mad, rightly so, about my not telling him my secrets until they were revealed. I know he needs time, so I don't even allow myself the hope of his forgiveness for the foreseeable future.

Flipping myself forward, I sit on the hoop facing him. “Are you hungry?” I swing back and forth, refusing to let his coldness bother me one bit.

“Yeah, I'll go wash up.” He doesn't bother to really look at me after that first long glance.

Dinner is mixed greens and grilled chops. By the time Mathias comes in like a mean motherfucker on a harsh wind, it's almost gone cold. I tried to eat earlier but didn't have much of an appetite.

He's later than I expected. He comes in, his hair still slick from his shower, and sits at the table with nary a word. Then he starts in on the food with gusto. He's in a ribbed T-shirt and basketball shorts.

“How was the game?” I ask, pretending I’m reading but unable to do anything other than look at this beautiful mean-ass man.

“People asked about you. Na— It was suggested that you not miss any more events. Folks are taking notice.” He stabs at the food like he wants to kill it again. I don’t know if it the idea of me joining him for future events or the awkwardness of me not being there that’s added to his list of grievances about me.

It’s also not lost on me that he was about to say his ex’s name.

“Who made the suggestion?” I ask, sitting up straighter, looking over at him.

He presses his lips together dispassionately. “You’d know if you brought you ass with me this evening.”

*Okay, so we are deflecting*, I think, not bothering to answer that. “When were you going to tell me that Natalie is back with the campaign?” I ask quietly. *They never had sex. They never did anything other than kiss.*

“You mean like you told me you were fourteen when we met?” Standing from the table, he takes his plate over to the sink, rinses it, then puts it in the dishwasher.

“Forget it.” I lie back on the couch, ignoring his dumbass. I want to say, *Die mad, bitch*. So I do, just loud enough for him to hear it, turning my back on him, going back to my Tristan and Isolde retelling.

A shadow looms over me. “What did you say?”

I shrug. “I don’t like repeating myself.” I don’t bother looking at him. I just keep my eyes trained on my iPad, rereading the same sentence at least four times.

I feel a dip when he sits at the other edge down by my feet. After pulling out the game console, he starts playing his video game, and eventually I start getting absorbed into the story.

I’m so engaged in the story, I don’t notice for a while that the room has gone quiet. I look over my shoulder, and he’s

sipping cachaça, a liquor he imports from Brazil. “Would you like some?”

“You know I’m a lightweight.” I curl up close into myself, feeling drawn to him despite his anger at me, my guilt, and the knowledge that nothing, maybe not even time, will fix this chasm between us.

“I’ll make you a caipirinha if you’d like to try it.” He moves to stand before me, this time not threatening. Maybe he just needed to decompress? I don’t let myself believe it anymore. He’s told me more than once that I know who I married. I do. I know why he’s this way. Hoping won’t make the path I’ve chosen for myself easier.

I take his olive branch and offer him one in return. “Okay, you can show me how to make one.”

Following him into the kitchen I can’t take my eyes off his beautifully strong body. My tummy clenches as I remember last night, how he took me so ruthlessly and completely.

The center of my tights is getting wet just looking at him take out the ingredients. Knowing he’ll soon be able to see with the light pink of the material, I mumble, “I’ll be right back.”

“Alright,” he says, heading into the pantry, blissfully unaware of what he’s doing to my body.

I bypass the bathroom by the kitchen, heading straight to my own. Inside, I take care of my lady business, swapping out the light pink for dark gray, changing the top to a matching razorback for good measure. I took a shower earlier and have done nothing since, not even the hoop, to make a stinky enough sweat to need to change clothes. I feel silly, but for some reason I’m too vulnerable to freely allow him to know I want him so badly when he’s on the verge of hating me, and rightfully so this time.

For six years, I didn’t tell him the truth about my age. It was unforgivable. After the first year, he would have probably helped me reunite with my family. He probably would have done it right away, if I’m being honest, but after he told me our

families didn't like each other and they'd frown on our friendship, I realized I didn't want to give him up because I already considered him mine. *Minha*, that's what he called me when he said I was his.

Pain squeezes my chest as I think back to the way his face looked when he saw my birth certificate. This is the first time I really let myself think about it. Until this very moment, I was in survival mode. Not seeing him all day allowed me to push aside everything but the grief I felt at losing him all over again but now—now I can fully appreciate the pain I cause him.

*Love is not fear. Love is living out loud. Never hiding. Being bold and brave and uniquely you no matter the package you come in, my daddy would say, when he talked about the love he and my mom had and how it surpassed all understanding. How they were willing to leave everything they knew just so they could be together. How hard they fought to keep their family together. It was all worth it in the end to love her everyday I was free to love her, he whispered right before that. One day you are going to have that, my darling Nikki, and don't you ever let that go.*

I can forgive myself for loving Mathias so much I never wanted to let him go, not even for a little while. I just don't know if he will ever forgive me for it.

Body dry, coochie calmed down and clothes changed into non-sticky tights and a razor back top, I head back into the kitchen.

Mathias is standing by the long stainless steel counter with all the accoutrements to make the drink in front of him. He has a cocktail mixer set in front of two glasses.

“Ready?” he asks, doing a quick assessment of me yet saying nothing about my change of clothes. I don't know why relief washes over me the way it does, but I feel like I can breathe.

“Yep.” I nod, keeping my gaze on the ingredients and the supplies. Anything but the mercurial man I pledged my life to.

“Okay, I’m going to talk you through it as we go.” He hands me two limes. “Muddle the limes like this.” I follow as he presses the limes into the glass along with two teaspoons of sugar. We squish them, pulverizing them and the sugar. When a sweet scent emanates and the citrus is barely recognizable, he drops some round ice cubes into our glasses. “Now the cachaça,” he says, measuring two ounces of the beautiful clear liquid. Then he adds the unnecessary lime wheel as a garnish.

“Cheers.” He raises his glass, finally letting his gaze rake over me admiringly.

“Yummy.” I breathe, sipping the delicious drink. “I can see why people love it.”

“It’s the national drink of Brazil.” His mouth kicks up. “I’ll take you to my family’s estate there.”

I try not to choke at his words. I don’t let myself do anything but keep my glass steady while I sip the sweet aromatic libation.

“Do you want to go?” he asks, looking so earnest.

“Of course,” I say, putting down the drink, mindful that I haven’t eaten a lot today. Crossing my arms over my middle, I add, “I’m just not sure where my place is in your life anymore.”

“By my side, Nik. What the fuck,” he swears, exasperated. The anger is back, and everything in me is like, *Get the hell gone*.

“Alright, then why is Natalie back?” I take my drink, leaving him in the kitchen. I sit back in the spot I lounged in earlier, rolling the highball glass between my hands. Part of me doesn’t think I have the right to demand answers from him because of my deception. Yet another stronger part of me says I damn well better.

He makes quick work of cleaning the area we made the drinks in, then comes over and sits beside me, the silver gray of his gaze unwavering. “LL brought her back because she is the best fixer in the business. Olivia Pope ain’t got nothing on Natalie Spencer when it comes to cleaning up messes. She

may have lost herself for a few days, but she's back swinging in full force. She even wanted to reach out to you and apologize, though I didn't feel comfortable with that. As campaign manager, LL made the decision to rehire her. He reminded me that because of our past association and the recent news dropping, though unsubstantiated, it wouldn't look good to fire her at this time."

Everything he says makes perfect sense. "I don't accept her apology, and when the campaign wraps up, I want her gone. You can put in a good word for her in DC, but it ends there." I take a sip of my drink to punctuate my demand.

He nods immediately. "I already told LL that."

"Okay, well..." I was expecting to be in for a fight.

"Okay, well what?" He smirks my way.

"Umm..." I say, thinking of something quick to say but remember I promised not to lie to him ever again. I ask instead, "Did you like dinner? I can make you more."

He looks at me hard, his mouth in a firm line. He takes my glass out of my hands. "Dinner was delicious. Thank you, little wife." My pussy gets wet when he calls me that. He pushes me back on the sofa, sneaking his long fingers into the waistband of my tights, then pulls them down and off before dropping them to the floor.

"I'd rather eat you," he whispers, settling between my legs.

My eyes roll back when he proceeds to do so. "Thi," I moan.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FOUR

*M*athias

“HOLA, COMO ESTAS?”

I listen to my pretty little wife meet our future constituents, totally winning them over. She effortlessly chats and mingles with the crowd of people at the barbecue Mama-Pete, along with Angel’s construction and transportation company and Creative Chaos, put together on my behalf.

I knew Nikki spoke Spanish, but she does so effortlessly, with none of the stiltedness of nonnative speakers. Since I grew up on Shelby Sugar land, it was a must that I learn and become fluent early, not to mention both my parents spoke that along with Portuguese and English in our home. I feel so much pride watching as she engages with people with a genuineness Nat always seemed to lack. People can tell inauthenticity in seconds, so Nat always avoided them when we were a couple.

Today she’s here in her capacity as the assistant campaign manager. The bonds of our friendship unfortunately are broken. Choosing Nik wasn’t hard. She makes my heart beat. The hurt and anger I feel at her deception are still there and may even take counseling for us to get past, but there is one thing I know for sure—I don’t want to go the rest of my life without her in it.



*Why haven't you told her that?* asks a sweet melodic voice unlike my own in the depths of my mind. The same one that told me the Sousa Vasconcelos family sapphire belonged to the woman I loved.

Touching Nik lightly on the waist, fulfilling my need to just touch her and keep her close, I still marvel at the success of this event. I can't believe they pulled it off in the brief time they did, and it couldn't have come a moment too soon. With such solid backers, I should be doing better than I am. There's been a dramatic slip in the polls after the revelations of Nikki's birth certificate and her possible underage relationship with me. Neither of us is naive enough to believe anyone will ever believe we were strictly platonic until we kissed that day in front of my gran's house.

Together we form a formidable team mostly because nothing about our relationship seems forced. I realized this morning as we got ready to come to this event that I didn't dread it. I want to see her in her element around people, being her effervescent, joyous self. All those admonishments I was getting when we first embarked on this endeavor were false. She's not embarrassing me. She doesn't need more poise or media training. People flock to her just based on who she is.

"Mrs. Shelby, can you show us some of your trapeze tricks?" asks a cheeky little boy.

"Tomas, I can't right this minute because I'm in a dress, but I promise I will the next time."

Still, he's not having it. "You had on a dress that day you rescued the girl on the Ferris wheel." He adds a little stomp for emphasis.

"That was an emergency, so I had to hurry and get to her quick. She maybe isn't as brave as you and didn't know how to sit still for a long time."

Watching his little chest poke out at her praise, I know she's won him over to her side of the argument.

After a few more pleasantries, I tell the people, "We'll be around all day, but let me get my wife a plate of food, folks."

They part, giving us a much-needed moment to ourselves.

Tugging her along beside me, I look down to see those brown-as-molasses doe eyes staring up at me with a little trepidation. I can't blame her. The last two days since we made love on the living room sofa have been a break from everything but each other. It's like we are relearning each other again.

We've had nearly every meal on our back porch that leads out to land steeped in the history of both our families' blood. We are their unlikely legacy, as strange as that may be. Nothing about us these past few weeks has been easy, and I'm not sure I want it to be. Because right now I know it was all worth it. I refused to let her go, and she's agreed to stay. That's as good a start as any.

Still I hold the words I should be saying to her away. Waiting for...not the right moment even but for another scandal to unfold.

This is my first time running for office, but I'm no neophyte when it comes to shenanigans and slinging dirt. I learned that ruthlessness from a master of the game—my father. There was no one more diabolical than him. The ways in which he took joy in the annihilation of people's lives was a thing of beauty if you got off on it. Repulsive if you didn't. I was the latter, but I use the ruthlessness he taught me to break those who hurt the ones I love. How did this little curvy thing walking beside me become one of those people? More than a friend and lover. My wife.

“What was your favorite thing to do with the circus and carnival? What do you miss the most?” Taking her hand in mine, I let our linked arms swing lightly between us.

“You're not going to believe it.” Giggling a little, she sneaks a glance up at me.

“What?” Her laughter is contagious, so my question gets caught up in the lightness of the moment.

“Getting cotton candy.” She shrugs a little.

“Really?” I challenge. “All the daredevil feats, the trapeze, helping your daddy tame lions, yet your favorite thing and what you miss most is cotton candy?” I chuckle in disbelief, shaking my head.

“Well, my dad was not big on me eating candy nor having food coloring and dyes in my food. We were surrounded by all the deliciously terrible food like funnel cake, fried ice cream, donuts, and hundreds of other concoctions. He had a hard time keeping me away from cotton candy. I loved the bright colors. It’s so yummy.” The way she closes her eyes and licks her lips thinking about it has me staring like a man starved. Which is terrible since we made passionate love this morning and all day yesterday as a way, I figure, to press reset again on this relationship.

But sex has not been the problem since our wedding night. No, navigating this new dynamic of us as a couple is what’s frightening.

From the moment LL came to me with the proposition, I’ve railed against it. Fought it because I was waiting for the betrayal—to be caught flat-footed, looking the fool. Hurt and pain have been my long-time companions. Nik was my only safe space, and to have her ripped from me through what I first believed was her betrayal was not to be borne. Now this new discovery... It’s just a hard fucking reality I have to accept. But the alternative is leaving her—losing her—and that will never happen.

“I get it,” I tell her, steering her in the direction I saw the cotton candy vendor.

We walk through a couple booths, one with Saban, one of Angel’s people, giving temporary tattoos and face painting. Behind her is her shadow, Snake, standing guard like he’s daring anyone to approach, which is negated by the work she’s doing.

Two more stalls down, we hit the cotton candy vendor. “What color do you want?” I ask my little wife, who seems to almost be dancing with excitement. I don’t think there is any

such thing as cotton candy flavor. All I can remember is the overwhelming taste of sweetness.

“The rainbow one, please.”

After insisting on the vendor accepting my payment, I hand Nikki a stick of cotton candy as big as her head.

“Thank you.” She pulls off a long strand, holding it out to me. Leaning down, I catch it with my mouth.

“There,” she says, pressing it into her mouth. I deliberately cover her finger with my mouth, sucking the remaining sugar from her finger, loving the way her eyes blow wide with passion.

“If I didn’t have to give this speech, I’d be buried inside you right now.” I growl, tugging her to me for a kiss. “Have I told you how beautiful you look today?” I whisper in her ear.

“Uh-uh.” She shakes her head, the curly ponytail swishing prettily from side to side. I elected to wear jeans with a cowboy buckle on full display and a black Henley with some cowboy boots. Meanwhile, she’s what she proudly claimed was in an A-line, three-quarters sleeve vintage-inspired dress in periwinkle trimmed in platinum thread that puts me in the mind of the fifties’ television shows. She has on platinum Converse. I couldn’t care less but I must say she looks fun and adorable.

“It’s time.” LL appears like a wraith beside us.

“Alright. Give me just a second.” I’m unable to take my eyes off the vision in bobby socks in front of me. “I told a lie.”

Nikki’s eyes widen a little at my solemn tone. I have no idea what she expects, but she simply nods and says, “Okay.” Like she’s ready to take whatever revelation I have to say on the chin.

“When I said I regretted ever picking you up that night and taking you home, I lied. I was out of my mind with hurt and anger, and I lashed out. It was a complete and utter lie.” I cup her face in my hands. “You’re the best thing, my best thing, the best of me, and I’m thankful every day I ran you over with my car.” I swoop down, taking her laughter and her lips.

“I love you, Thi.” She whispers it so softly, I barely hear it. “I know it’s not fair for me to say it after all the problems I caused, but I do.” She steps away. her eyes brown pools of sorrow.

“Nikki,” I say, flummoxed. I knew—God, I knew she wanted me, was infatuated, but love?

“No, go do your thang,” she says, slipping into the Southern twang she’s been growing into more and more since the day I picked her up. “We’ll talk afterward. At home.” She smiles bravely like she’s waiting to be rejected.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, the man of the hour and the next senator of the great state of Alabama, Mathias Shelby.” Santiago, who just sang one of his hit songs, throws out an arm, and I come onto the stage.

When LL and Natalie brought me up here, I lost sight of Nikki, so I scan the crowd looking for her. For a moment I thought I saw her on the edge of the crowd, hidden by her gigantic cotton candy. She must be finished with it, and her small form is lost in the throngs of people/

After giving the audience another sweep, I launch into the speech I’d been prepared to give since I saw those kids trapped on our property as my mother languished in the confines of her gilded prison.

“I’m Mathias Shelby, running for senate for this state, and I don’t deserve your vote.”

The crowd gasps, murmurs fill the people as I let my words sink in. I can see my monied supporters look askance at me, all save for Mama-Pete, who looks at me shrewdly over the corncob pipe she has clamped between her teeth, Pa-Pete, who’s standing beside her, wiry and strong, belying his advanced age, and Angel, who’s regarding me with a quirked eyebrow.

“No. I don’t deserve your vote, but I’m going to ask for it anyway. This is not about who is more deserving. It’s about who can deliver. Who cares. Who owes a debt to this

community the most and is ready to serve, and that is me. Story time, as they say on the clock app.” After the laughter settles, I say, “My family, the Shelbys, have been a bad actor around these parts for a long time, but it didn’t start that way. Our patriarch Josiah Shelby began this community as something of a co-op. It was his dream to form a simple community where everyone thrived. A former sea captain, Josiah saw how greed and power corrupted in the noblest men. Some people in my family say Josiah saw the light, that time and circumstance changed him into the man he should have been all along. That when he died and bequeathed his sugar farm to his nephew Mathias, my tenth great-grandfather, he told him our family’s motto: *By will, by might*. I don’t know the real story, and it’s lost to time, but as we know, history is told by the victors. Regardless, even before I inherited a fortune no person could possibly spend in ten lifetimes, I knew *by will, by might* has no place in our society.

“I saw how one man’s will brought families with small children across the border to be exploited in our supposedly free land. How women were trapped in abusive relationships with no place for comfort. I vowed I would be the change I wanted to see. I would do everything I could to make my mother, Isabella, proud of me.

“Isabella Sousa Vasconcelos, the daughter of a wealthy Brazilian family, was promised to the Shelby family at age sixteen. She once told me she fell in love with my smart, charming father the moment they were introduced.” I have to swallow. “Y’all, she was the best mom.” I take out my handkerchief, wiping away a stray tear. “The very best. I watched her care for the people who worked our land. She created a school, a clinic, and housing for them. Many of you only know that she was paralyzed. What you don’t know is the accident was because she was trying to save me.” I pause, looking at the crowd. “If she gave everything to me. I can do no less for you. I humbly put my name forward and ask for your vote. My vow to you all is to be someone she would be proud of and to work hard for you.”

I step away from the wave of applause from the crowd.

“Man, that was something. You had them eating out of your hands,” LL exclaims, thumping me on the back with his heavy hand.

“I mean it,” I say over my shoulder. “There are too many politicians making promises, then caving to big money once they get into office.”

“I wouldn’t have joined you otherwise,” he tells me. “You just brought it home.”

I nod, accepting his congratulations but not seeing the one person I want to share this moment with.

“Hey.”

I turn to see Angel approaching, Mama- and Pa-Pete on his heels. We clasp hands, and he pulls me in for a tight hug. “Proud of you, irmão,” he says for my ears alone. “Your mãe and vó would be too. Trust me on this,” he continues in words I taught him many years ago when we were both boys helpless to do anything to save the mothers we loved from being hurt by the man I idolized when I was little above all others.

My chest is full of emotion. He knows more than anyone save Nikki what I endured and the guilt I still carry.

“I’ll make sure I’m worthy of it,” I tell him.

“I know you will.” He confirms with a nod of his head.

I pull away and greet the well-wishers and campaign staff.

Nat organized another meet and greet with what she termed the “bring it home” donors many of whom were from out of state. Though I know the stage of this campaign is national, it still seems wrong to have them come here instead of somewhere out of sight. Making sure to include local partners and businesses in the endeavor, I did what I needed to assure them I’m the better, safer bet. LL smooths over any questions about Nikki, who I’m starting to get irritated about not being there since the speech.

As soon as I find myself free, I go in search of my wife, pretty sure I’ll find her under a pile of children, doing some type of acrobatic trick for them.

After asking the fifth person, I begin to worry.

“Have you seen Nikki?” I ask Krie, who’s manning The Camellia’s tent after volunteering to provide sides for the barbecue.

“Nope.” She shakes her head, consternation playing across her features. “I thought y’all were coming over to eat. I set aside some food special for y’all.”

“We will as soon as I find her,” I promise, pulling away, nodding at Kiyoshi, who’s sitting at an empty table, seemingly working and keeping an eye on his wife.

I scan the crowd wondering where Nikki can be. In my periphery I notice Kiyoshi whisper something to Krie, then fall into step beside me.

“What is she wearing?” he asks, already typing into his phone.

I take mine out, not thinking of contacting campaign security until now. “A periwinkle nineteen-fifties vintage dress,” I tell him, still scanning the crowd, worry eating at me like gnats in the summer on sweaty skin.

“My men will find her. I have all of Krie’s cousins looked after for her peace of mind,” the tech billionaire informs me.

“I appreciate it,” I tell him, yet I know it has more to do with the women in the Love family’s penchant for disappearing into thin air more than it has to do with regular safety.

“No problem,” he says. His next words prove my point. “May I ask if you were on good terms with your wife today?”

“Excellent.”

He arches a patrician brow in doubt.

“We resolved the issue from the other day.” Though I pause, thinking we didn’t really say any more about Nat joining the campaign other than I’m letting her go once we’re done with it. Surely that wouldn’t be enough to make her leave me. The last time she left, it was obvious she was highly upset. She’d stormed out after confronting me. I can’t see her leaving



after sharing her cotton candy and the naughty promise I gave he afterwards. She's not a deceiver. She'd leave me and do nothing to hide it. And she'd know without a doubt I would hunt her down just like I did last time.

"They will still try it," Kiyoshi tells me, as if reading my thoughts. Knowing what they risk, they still will leave if given enough cause, my friend. You have to make sure you stop giving her reasons. I saw the ex-fiancée is back on the campaign. Nothing you do on that front will ever assuage your wife. I made sure all such loose ends were severed but not soon enough. Cut them and burn them." He falls silent after dropping that gem.

I don't need him to speak. I'll heed his words. LL meant well, was trying to look out for the campaign and my political future, but I knew in the last meeting that Nat is no longer a good fit for our team.

*She literally said that the Latino-Hispanic vote was a lost cause and waste of time. The implications she made and the disparaging tone she used were insulting to say the least.*

*"I'm Latino as well, Nat," I reminded her.*

*"Yes, but—" she started before I cut her off.*

*"Not like those other dirty boys, though, right?"*

*It was over teleconference because I didn't want to leave Nik's side, but Nat leaned back as if I were towering over her. It was then that I knew I should have never agreed to bring her back.*

Resolved to tell Nik my decision when I found her, I keep the search on for her.

Soon we're joined by other members of the family; Angel brings Snake, Rocco, and Padre along, taking the east side of the park, which is more than ten acres, though we're only using a small section for the barbecue. Santiago puts up his guitar, falling into step with me and Kiyoshi, taking the west.

"You lost my sister?" Kandie yells, running up to me, shoving me in the chest.

My arms pinwheeling, I turn to glare at her just in time to see Ulysses rush up and stand in front of her.

“What’s going on?”

“None of your business,” she yells at him, already spiraling. “I told you to keep that crazy bitch locked up, that she has some kind of weird fixation on my baby sister, but you let her go.”

“Who?” Cold dread drops over me like an avalanche.

“Joi, that’s who,” Kandie says, hugging herself as she shakes gut-wrenching sobs. “I—I remember her getting me to drink and grilling me about Nikki’s business. I didn’t know anything about y’all, but she wanted to know all about how she grew up and who our mom was. Like she was writing a book or something. Then, when all that stuff was coming out, I caught her on going through my stuff and taking pictures. Then, when the thing about the birth certificate happened, she came back to steal it for evidence, she said, talking about how she was saving Nikki from you.” Shaking her head and looking defeated, she turns from us, heading in the opposite direction.

“We’ll take the south,” Ulysses says, his eyes following her with a troubled expression.

Another half hour passes with still no sign of her. Folks are taking a break, drinking water and trying to recall the last place they saw her.

“I thought I saw Joi lurking around, but I can’t be sure,” Mimi says, handing little Mateo a bottle of water. “I was too busy in the medical tent. But I could have sworn I saw her.”

“She was here.” Kandie pulls out a flask and takes a fortify sip before sliding it back into her jeans pocket. “I looked her dead in the eyes. If I didn’t have a double line, I would’ve walked her tail down.”

I listen to them chat as I text Nikki’s phone for what seems to be the thousandth time.

Me: I’M REALLY WORRIED HERE LITTLE WIFE.

YOU NEED TO HIT ME BACK ASAP. WHATEVER IT IS,  
WE CAN WORK IT OUT. PROMISE.

I KNOW EVEN as I press send I won't receive an answer. Not three seconds later, Mateo points west, farther than I know Angel and his men are searching. "Pire, PIRE, Mommy." We all look at the billowing black smoke coming through the trees.

Running like hell is on our heels, we all set out in the direction of the blaze. Ulysses is on his walkie, calling all available volunteers to the fire station. Soon alarms are sounding. We cut through the field before coming upon the burning barn. It's old but obviously a working barn or at least used for storage of hay, which is highly incendiary. The whole building is a loss. My heart drops because I know that's where she is. I know Nikki is trapped inside that building, which only increases the speed in which I approach.

"Mathias, no." Kiyoshi tries to grab me, but I throw him off, continuing to barrel toward the barn.

Ignoring the screams of my name and the sweltering heat, I move like an unstoppable locomotive to get my wife. I don't think of how much she means to me, what my life would be like without her. None of that crosses my mind as heat blasts me when I approach at full speed. All I can think is, *No, this can't happen to her. She's been through, endured, and overcame so much. She deserves only good things now. She's already lost so much. I won't let her lose her life. Not like this.*

Just as I'm stepping away from my likely death due to the heat radiating from the barred-from-the-outside doors, I'm knocked off my feet by what seems like an eighteen-wheeler.

The momentum causes us to tumble head over ass, then ass over head, until I am locked in the strong bands of arms I can't fight my way out of.

"Let me go," I scream at the only man I've ever called a friend.

“It’s too late,” he says, soothing me. The same way I soothed him the night his mom died.

“Let me go, motherfucker.” I buck, I elbow, I claw, I swing, catching him on the side of his face. He takes it all.

“She’s gone,” he says just as the front of the building collapse in burning timber and ash.

“No.” My voice sounds broken. My chest feels cleaved in two.

A bloodcurdling scream has us jerking around. Two figures obscured by black smoke are at the barn window.

We both scramble up, racing to that side. Nikki thrusts Joi out the window, then hurls herself out just as the back part of the barn collapses much like the front.

Skirting around the people making room for me, I rush to her side.

“Nikki,” I say like a prayer, scared to touch her. She looks like a broken doll crumpled on the ground.

“Ow.”

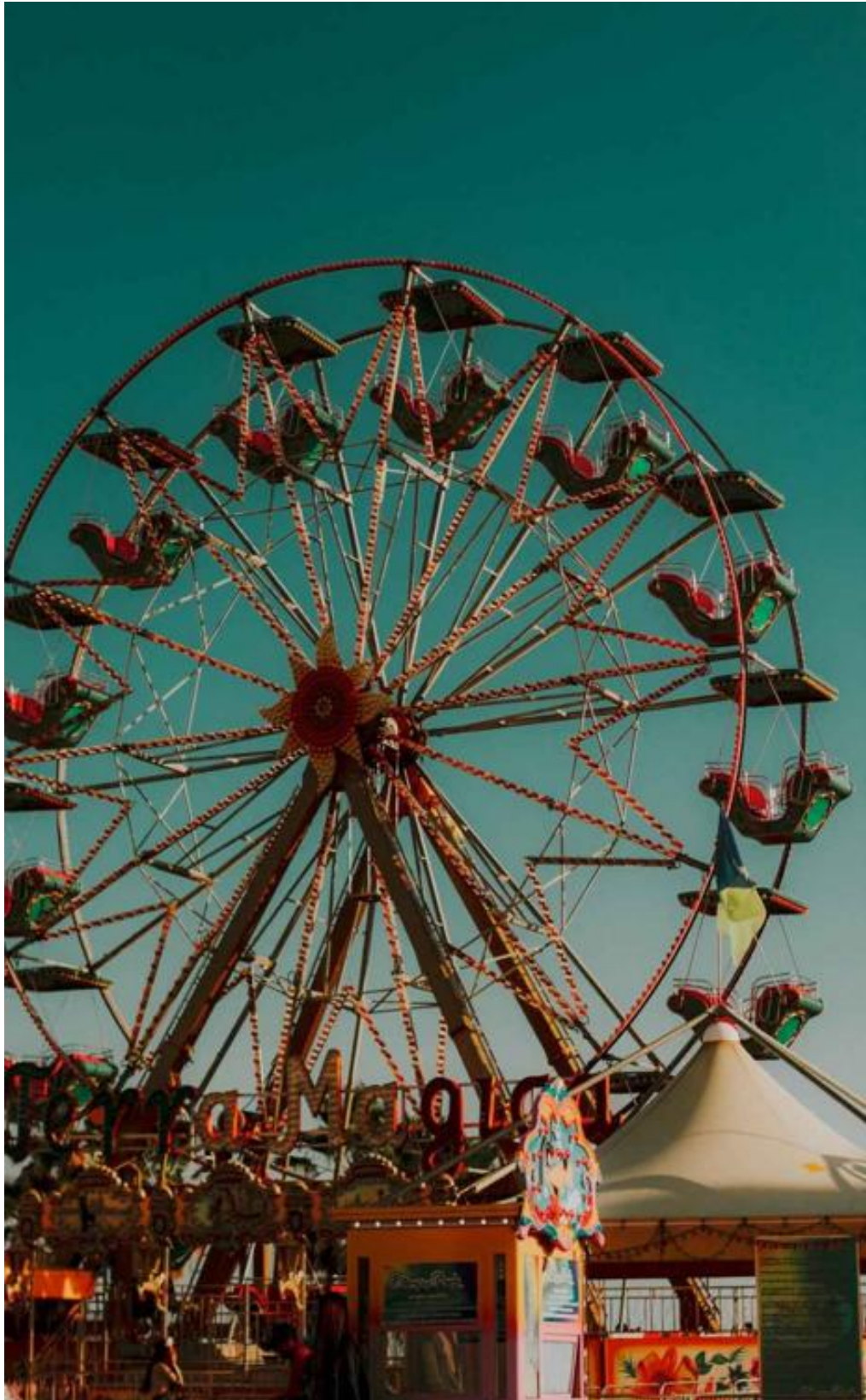
I swing around to face Joi, her leg obviously broken, her arm dislocated. “I—I’m so-sor—” She crumples back to the ground.

“Let me pass,” Mimi says, pushing through the people. Carefully and slowly, she assesses Nikki. “Her neck’s not broken. She’s been shot.” “What’s the ETA on the EMTs?”

No sooner than she asks do they arrive to put both women on spine boards and load them into separate ambulances.

I get in beside Mimi after they load Nikki into the ambulance. Reaching over, I take her limp hand, noting how thready her pulse is but grateful there is one.

For the first time since I gave up having my prayers answered that day my father threw my mother down the stairs. It’s not for me —the fervent hope— I know I’ll never be worthy—but for her, this beautiful light that somehow decided to shine on me, I plead, “Let her live. Please let her live.”



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FIVE

Nikki (*a few hours earlier*)

“HAVE I told you how beautiful you look today?” I can’t see Mathias’s face, but I hear the urgency in his voice. Then LL is there, telling him they’re ready for him. Pride bursts in my heart when I hear him launch into the speech. His sincerity and strength shine true just as it did yesterday when he first went over it for me.

The man I love is going to do great things for all the people in this community. That knowledge makes me stand taller. My five-foot-two frame feels all of six-foot-two as I watch him weave his childhood experience with the immigrant experience and his mother’s tragic love for a man who never deserved her; the fact Mathias does so with dignity and grace is not lost on me. He deserves this. I don’t for a moment regret doing what I can to help him attain his goals.

He’s not a good man. I know this. He Is my man though and I’m going to stick beside him. I’m easing back from the growing crowd so I can quickly get to the stage when I see something that stops me in my tracks. If the people weren’t so crowded around the stage, having left the vendor stalls empty and the whole festival grounds free of people, I probably would have missed it.

Way on the other side of the festival grounds, I see a glimpse of the bright red pantsuit Ms. Wannabe Olivia Pope

has on today with white pumps, of course, beside the platform high-top Converse in green, boyfriend jeans, and a T-shirt pulled in a knot, which is what my cousin Joi tends to wear. I don't have to wonder or worry what's going on. Everything slides into place. This isn't a Scooby-Doo mystery; I can tell by the way they are trying to hide out of the way of everyone that they are up to no good.

I take off after the heffas to confront them. Lifting my phone, I take a pic, then curse myself for not getting the upgrade when it comes out blurry.

I track them behind the vendor stands, following them through the copse of trees. A couple of times, I think I lose them, but then I hear one of them speak. Are they arguing? I frown, keeping up my pace until the little wooded area opens up to an old barn.

The smell of dry hay is strong as I approach. Skirting around the entrance, I head to the back, knowing these type of barns have at least two side back doors. When I get there, I twist the knob. It's well greased, so this barn is still being used by someone—and it's locked. "Dang it." There are hundreds of nondescript barns and buildings like this around here because one thing folks down here will do is have an illegal side hustle. The most conservative of people run outlaw bingo and gambling business. The barn could be anything, a place they run pot liquor out of, weed, or even harder drugs. Last year, Angel and his men, along with Ulysses, rescued a bunch of kids being held in a place like this. So there is no telling what it is being used for until I get inside.

Stepping back, I survey the outside for a way in. I dip around the side, immediately seeing a window has been left open.

"Please don't squeak," I whisper, slowly pushing it up. It makes nary a sound, which has me wanting to shimmy. Tucking my voluminous skirts into the front of the shapewear I wore because I was feeling bloated, I pull myself through the window.

Thankful my upper body is strong enough to lift these curves, even with a fair amount of effort, I land quietly on the floor of the barn.

I hear raised voices and walk toward them, my brow puckering. Stopping behind three towering bales of hay—I guess this barn is being used as intended—I see Natalie standing over my cousin like a menacing schoolmarm and Joi looking at her in doe-eyed supplication.

For some reason I came into this thinking Joi would be the aggressor. Either blackmailing Natalie or using some other form of intimidation. Yet the sight I walk on is jaw-dropping in its dynamic.

“Listen, babe, I’ve done everything you asked me to. None of my family will have anything to do with me. I can’t get the birth certificate at this point. Kandie has it locked away somewhere or gave it to Nikki.”

Natalie swings out mercilessly, slapping Joi full on the face. My mouth drops.

“Argh.” Joi covers her face at the attack but otherwise doesn’t budge. Tears fall from her eyes in long rivulets.

“Look what your stupid ass made me do!” Natalie charges scathingly, looking down at Joi with disgust. “It’s like you don’t even love me. I finally see that you don’t care about us anymore.” I watch aghast as Natalie works up some tears of her own, turning from Joi, and I can clearly see the cold calculation in her hazel-green eyes.

“You know that’s not true,” Joi pleads. “For the last ten years, I have been solid. I waited while you dated and got engaged to Mathias. I did everything you asked. I went against my family.”

Natalie swings back around, grabbing Joi’s face in one hand and squeezing so hard, Joi’s face forms a moue. “Your family? I’m going to give up everything for you. I gave Mathias gift wrapped to your worthless cousin for you. I could have been a senator’s wife, but I listened to you.” Natalie then shoves her so hard that Joi goes flying, falling on her butt.



She used her hands to stop her fall, so they come up bloody. She lifts them. From this angle I can see the sick satisfaction that plays across Natalie's face before she looks pityingly down at Joi's hands.

"Aww, sweetheart." She rushes to her knees by my cousin, who's sobbing quietly. "See what she caused? She never belonged here. You have to get that birth certificate—that's the only way we can have everything we want. If I had it, I could have Mathias resign once he's elected and endorse me. Then we can run DC. You can come on as my press secretary, and then we can eventually tell everyone how we fell in love over time just like they did." She's all tenderness as she kisses Joi's brow.

Joi is quiet. She looks at Natalie for a long time as if seeing her for the first time. She shakes her head and sighs deeply. "I don't believe you."

*Wrong move, cuz*, is all I can think as Natalie pulls back with false concern.

"What do you mean, Joi?" She withdraws, putting herself again in a position towering over my cousin.

"You've been promising me that since you said you fell in love with me when I was fifteen that we'd be together. We'd go to prom. We never did. We'd be roommates in college when I got there. You joined a white sorority and moved in with them. Then became president. Pressured me to give up my job with the *Times* because you missed me so much, but when I came home, you followed Mathias to Birmingham." Joi shakes her head as if finally understanding something she missed for years now. "You're a narcissist. A malignant narcissist. I see that now. My therapist told me as much, but I denied it. Defended you." She steps around Natalie, moving to the door. "I'm done. This is over."

Why did this dummy turn her back on a person she just called one of the most destructive personalities? I will never understand. No sooner than she turns does Natalie get a hay bale, raising it over her head to smash Joi over the head.

"Joi!" I scream.

Joi turns with a quickness she hasn't shown until this moment, dodging the death blow.

Natalie turns, looking at me in shock, then turns to Joi. "I—I didn't mean it. I just got angry. You know I love you." She holds her hands up in supplication.

"Nah." I shake my head at Joi. "Get her. Don't let that hoe out your sight."

I hurry over. "You did all this because you wanted to be my husband so bad. You've been stringing my cousin along all this time. If she was fifteen, you were twenty messing with her. Using her as your little minion since she was a kid." I turn to Joi and tell her with a kindness I'm far from feeling, "She's ensnared you, Cousin. She's made you her thrall. Don't even look at her."

Immediately I see denial as Joi shakes her head. "No." The words are caught on a sob. "She loves me. She just needs help."

"No," I say emphatically. "She doesn't. She doesn't love anyone but herself. She just used you. Claimed you. Made you her creature. She caught you young, before you had any experience with anyone, and created a soul tie. You are not to blame, Joi—not then, but now you know the truth. You know you need to break free of her influence. And you do know now, don't you?"

She turns fully to me, bruised but not broken. "Yes." Fragility encompasses every part of her being. Her eyes well as she looks at me, seeming to seek strength.

"You are pitiful. Is this how you turned Mathias, with lies about me?" Natalie heaves. "You act like he hasn't been fucking you since you were fourteen. He's a child molester. He's sick. A thrall? What did he do to make you? His bed wench, you needy little whore?" She snarls, her hazel-green eyes flashing with jealousy.

"All this time you have been fucking with my cousin, but you wanted my man?" I scoff derisively. "You actually out here turning little girls out but wouldn't give him no pussy. He

said it was mutual, but I now see he just didn't want your ass. He was being nice even then." I watch redness race up her features. Being so bright has its downsides. All her emotions play out on her red blotchy skin as anger and humiliation show on her features.

"I never wanted him." She shrugs. "He's pleasing to look upon but too dominant. Two dominants don't play well with each other. Now Joi"—she smirks—"she's a very good girl for me."

Immediately I step in, blocking her from Joi's line of sight. "She's not yours to hurt anymore, bitch."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk." Natalie shakes her head in fake lament. "Umm, that's unfortunate. I was going to let you try some boys with me." She says it to Joi as if I'm not standing there. "We can have so much fun in DC, Joi. I will make you my queen. Just help me get rid of this silly rabbit." In one fluid motion, she pulls out a big-ass gun like she's Rick from *The Walking Dead* or something.

"Courtesy of the Kandie Shoppe. It looks police issue. So, maybe your town drunk or a cousin stole it from the sheriff—anyhow it won't be traced back to me." She chortles like she's so clever. "Come on, Joyous. Let's finish this. She came out of nowhere. She's not even a real Love. She was here for years and didn't even acknowledge you until it was convenient for her." Her words are an indictment as she cocks the pistol trained on me. Everything I believed about myself, all the doubts I have about my relationship with my family...nothing she says is true, nor is it an outright lie. It's a gross distortion of what I felt when I was a naive and afraid fourteen-year-old girl who lost the only family she knew, not knowing at that the time I had a whole group of people who would be glad to claim me and love me as their own.

I feel Joi stiffen behind me, then ghost past me like a wraith. She goes to stand beside Natalie. Her hand covers the gun, taking it out of Natalie's hands.

"I'd never kill my cousin, Nat." Joi pulls the gun away.

“She’s going to ruin our lives—you can’t let her. She’ll tell Mathias everything.” Natalie lunges for the gun, but Joi successfully hold it away from her.

“You mean that you like girls? I’m sure he couldn’t care less, Nat. He loves her. Have you seen the way he looks at her? Have you?” Joi challenges loudly.

That makes Natalie blink at her tone. “I couldn’t care less about that, sweetheart.” Natalie cants her head in sympathy. “You were just my useful idiot. “I don’t like girls. I only need them and men for their usefulness. Now you’ve proven less than useful.” Then she rears back and headbutts Joi with so much force, blood gushes from my cousin’s nose. It takes a moment for the shot to register, but then the pain shatters my side.

My legs give out, folding me like a rag doll. I watch, stunned, as blood blossoms on my periwinkle dress. “Stupid bitch.” Natalie snatches the gun from a stunned Joi before bringing it down hard on her head.

“No,” I gasp, watching Joi crumple to the ground in right in front of me.

“Too bad. I hoped she’d do it to keep my hands clean. She’s been such a good little helper these past few years. All you Loves are so eager to be loved. You’ll do anything. Like marry a man who wouldn’t even acknowledge your dumbass for years. Not even as a friend. You’re so fucking stupid.” She leans down at me, hatred bracketing her beautiful face, her mask of smooth sophistication slipping, revealing the true evil beneath. “He was so mad to even acknowledge you, to marry you, yet you stayed. I thought you’d have some self-respect, but no. You let him fuck you silly and dog you out. I could never.” She stands to her full almost-six-foot height. “But I will be there for him when he grieves. Then we will get married as planned, and I will be his wife, creating policy to better people’s lives. After I make him president, I will run for senate and win and eventually be president, or maybe I can become a widow after his first term. I owe him for the disrespect he showed me giving me this fake and keeping the real one. He didn’t think I knew.” She flashes the ring, the

sapphire Mathias told me his mom made him promise to only give the woman he loves.

“He—he doesn’t l-love me.” I gasp, my heart pounding so hard in my ears, harder than a drum, harder than bombs going off. I can barely make out her next words.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re dead.” She drops the gun beside Joi before leaving in a swish of red tailored pantsuit.

I DON’T KNOW how long I lie there. I probably black out for a time, but a tight grating and painful pressure around my middle wakes me.

“Argh,” I scream, but it’s pitiful.

“I’m so sorry, Nikki.” Joi kisses my forehead. “We have got to go. Like right now.”

She doesn’t wait, pulling me to my feet. “We have to get the fuck out of here.” She nods to the back of the building that’s already up in flames.

My natural survival instinct must be kicking in because a surge of energy seizes me. I scan upward, knowing Natalie locked all the lower exits. “There’s no point in trying to get out here.” I nod to the rickety staircase to the far right where they pull bales of hay in and out.

Hobbling over seems like it takes precious minutes we don’t have.

When we finally reach the steps, I make her stop. “We aren’t going to make it to the top.” There are too many steps we have to traverse.

“I want you to know I love you no matter what,” I tell her. Tears fill my eyes. My heart breaks for the pain and sorrow I see in her eyes. The fifteen-year-old girl who is still there, hoping for love that never was true. I realize now how blessed I was to find a Mathias and not a Natalie. Someone who protected me when he could have easily used my naiveté against me.

“I love you too. No matter what.” She flips up my skirts, tearing the cotton into strips, covering our faces with the makeshift handkerchiefs.

Once she wraps our faces, we make a slow upward climb of what feels like an eternity of steps. Joi is squeezing the hell out of me as we near the top. Flames are eating up the stairs like kindling. “You don’t have to hold me so tight.” My fucking side is killing me, and she’s not making it any better by taking every ounce of my breath with her hold on me.

“Confession: I’m scared of heights,” she deadpans.

I look around the top level.

“There’s no other way out if here,” she says, resigned.

“There is—it’s just behind one of these towers,” I assure her. “Let me go. And check that side. You’ll see a beam of light.” I limp to the other side.

“Okay,” she says, jogging to the left, not sounding confident.

“How do I know more about barns than you and you were born down here?” I ask over my shoulder. I can barely see; it’s so dark and the smoke is rising so fast. I can hear Joi coughing hard on the other the side. And no sooner than the sound registers, I am coughing too.

I double over in a fit of coughing. Tears spring into my eyes, and my lungs burn, suffocated by the black smoke from the fire. I hear a crash, and there is an empty space where the front of the barn was, but it’s all blaze. The stairs are going to be next.

*I never told Mathias that I love him.* The thought blazes in my mind. It doesn’t inspire me or provoke action. It’s a lament. Despair. An indictment.

My head hangs. A glow, almost a sparkle catches my attention.

“Joi.” She must have already gone down her side and, seeing nothing, came over to mine. I point a shaky finger. “There.”

She pulls me to my feet and carry-drags me down the tight space of the bales of hay.

The window is made of wood and latched from the inside. When we push it open, heat and flames explode up through the barn. Simultaneously the stairs and the top portion of the barn fall away and the force of the heat pushes Joi out the window. Casting a glance over my shoulder, I see the flames licking up the walls, eating their way toward me.

In a whoosh the flames consume the hay. The bottom of my feet heat like I've been cast into the bowels of hell. I know the barn is going to fall away just as I take flight, using all my circus knowledge and the last reserves of my strength to tuck my body into a tight ball. As I hit the air, the concussive force of the collapsing structure hurtles me harder than I intended. Losing all control, I do my best to prepare for the impact. Then there's nothing.





CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SIX

M athias ~ (*A week later*)

WHEN MIMI COMES into the waiting room of the Shelby-Love Medical Center, her white coat flaps behind her like an angel's wings. She walks to our small group and says, "They're going to bring her out of the coma today."

"Thank God," Nat whispers. Clasp ing her hand over her mouth, she sobs softly into her hands.

She pulls LL and me into a tight group hug.

"Senator, do you want to make a statement now or—" LL asks over Nat's head. She's let him go and is hugging me tightly.

"Not until she's awake and I know how she's doing," I tell him, not allowing for any argument.

In a scant number of days, both my greatest dream and nightmare have come true. Two days after Nikki was brought here in critical condition from a gunshot wound and smoke inhalation, I won the senate election. People celebrated and were prepared to mourn at the same time. There was a subdued party election night, but I didn't attend, have not even stopped to thank well-wishers, family, constituents, or donors. I have been here by Nik's side from the moment I found her broken beside the barn after she threw herself and Joi out the window to save both their lives.

In that she proved she's better than me in every way. There is no way in hell I would ever save the life of someone who tried to kill me or ruin my life.

Yet Joi lives, though put in a drug-induced coma due to the extent of her injuries. Unlike Nikki, her prognosis is good. Once her fractures and lacerations heal, she will be fine, ready to stand trial for her crimes, which is the best she'll ever get. She's lucky in fact. Because if I had my way, the bitch would be buried alive on my property along with the others who've wronged me or the people I care.

The irony isn't lost on me that my father and I have the same burial grounds for our victims. The difference is mine deserve to be there. His were innocent.

Pulling back from LL and Nat, I look at both their haggard faces. Despite disagreements, some pretty big fights, and mistakes on all sides, these two have stuck by my side through it all. No wonder I choke up a little when I say, "You two go get some rest. When she wakes I'll give you a call."

They both are shaking their heads.

"I mean it. I need you both ready for the transition." I don't mention going to DC. LL only lent me his services while I was running, having spent nearly two years away from his successful practice and family to help me simply because he knows I'm sincere in my desire to help the people of Alabama. Nat, on the other hand, will probably go to DC with my blessing but not as my chief of staff as she anticipates. No matter what has transpired in the past few days or how dedicated she's been, Nikki's wishes come first. She is the woman I love. The woman I live for. She doesn't want Natalie around. She doesn't trust her, with good cause, and I respect that.

They both pull away, Nat squeezing my waist in what I assume is leftover affection from when we were closer.

"Okay." LL nods. "Call us first thing. I'm staying just around the corner at Mamma-Pete's old place."

“I’m at my mom and dad’s if you need anything,” Nat says unnecessarily, then shrugs, embarrassed. “You know that, though.” She gets on her tiptoes to press a kiss on my cheek in another unnecessary move. It reminds me so much of how Nik always kisses me that I take an involuntary step back, gently pressing Nat away.

“Yeah, I do.” I give her a brief smile as she and LL move past me before I turn to Nikki’s assembled family.

I don’t miss the little frown all her cousins are sporting or the cold blankness of Kiyoshi’s visage. Angel’s frown is more pronounced as he holds Easy and her new baby bump in his big hands. Santiago is rubbing soothing circles on Mimi’s back since she let her professional shield drop for a moment to seek comfort from her husband. Mama- and Pa-Pete stand together, his arm draped around her much shorter shoulder, absently rubbing her it, while she’s reached across to rest her hand on his chest. Then there is Kandie, sitting alone in handcuffs, her face stony. She was arrested again for threatening to kill Joi. Ulysses has snuck her in every day so she can watch over her sister after she escaped twice from the county jail. How she keeps getting out, no one knows.

Seeing all the people gathered here for Nikki makes my heart swell. I swallow the knot in my throat.

“Y’all should go get some rest too,” I say to the group writ large. “I’ll call as soon as she wakes up.”

“Nope. Nopity. Nope. Nope,” Kandie says, rocking from side to side, shivering from what could be exhaustion or alcohol withdrawals, I’m not sure.

“I’m good. I have Tk & Tk handling the kitchen,” Krie says in reassuring tones, but not to me.

Kiyoshi looks down at her with a stern impassivity that brooks no argument, yet his tone is gentle. “You promised just the other day that you would rest once we got the news, little chef. You also promised a feast for everyone at the Camillia when she wakes. You have much to do in order to accomplish these things you have promised. You will keep your word.”

Pouting, she lets him envelop her in his arms, then place a cashmere coat around her arms preparing to leave.

“I think—”

“Don’t you even try it,” Angel growls. “I’m going to report you for elder abuse. Got your grandparents out here when I told you Mathias had it handled. Judah misses his mom. Lourdes is good, but she’s not you, Ezekiel-Jane.”

“Baby, come on, you know he’s serious when he uses your church name,” Mama-Pete then looks to Mimi asking, “How’s my other grand baby?”

“She’s doing good. We’ve brought her out of her coma.” Mimi raises her hand. “She’s still intubated and got really agitated when I told her who all was waiting for her. So we had to sedate her again because her blood pressure was going through the roof. It’s going to be a little while before she wakes.”

I try to tamp down the rage spiraling through me. Part of me wants to stalk in there and strangle Joi as soon as she opens her treacherous eyes, but I know Nik would never forgive me for killing her cousin when she risked her life to save her. The fact she saved Joi still baffles me; Nikki was going into shock by the time the ambulance got there and it was touch-and-go for the first twenty-four hours even though the gunshot went through the skin. The fall was the major concern. Her spine was bruised not broken, and because of that, they put her in a coma to flush her with frozen saline, then packed her with ice keep her from becoming paralyzed.

*The prognosis is good, but she will need at least four to eight weeks of intense therapy.* I will never forget my relief when Nat’s cousin, Dr. Lex Spencer told me that. We clasped hands and he walked out, reminding me so much of his brother, Leon, but with a much harder edge.

Grateful as I am for my wife, I hold none of that feeling for her cousin. “As soon as she wakes, you need to let Ulysses interrogate her and get to the bottom of why she targeted Nikki.”

“Jealous, she’s jealous. Period.” Kandie pipes up from where she’s sitting. “All those questions about Nikki, like she was concerned you were using her—doing her dirty. Every time I told her that y’all only knew each other from graduation, she started saying that was a lie. She wouldn’t tell me how she knew, but she just did.” Kandie rolled her eyes.

“That’s because Nikki’s been here since she was fourteen, living in this boy’s granny’s house. She came down here looking for her family just like her daddy told her to. But she got afeared ’bout somethin’ and ended up on the Shelby side with him.” Mama-Pete drops that atom bomb like it’s nothing.

“What?” she asks me with a cheeky wink. “Did you think one of my grand-babies would be in the same state, let alone town, without me knowing about it? I was just about to have one of her cousins swoop her up and bring her to me when you picked her up. Then you got her in that fancy school, so I had my baby Nebraska look after her up there. And...” She pauses, looking at the rest of the grandchildren sternly. “T’weren’t none of y’all business. Plus, everything ended up as it should’ve, except a few licks.”

All mouths, including mine, clamp shut. No one is going to go against the stern matriarch. I again open my mouth to speak, but she cuts me off.

“Plus, if he proved foul, like his ol’ daddy, we would’ve laid him down.”

“Ha,” I exclaim, laughter pouring out of me, knowing the tiny little woman means exactly every word she’s saying. The rest join in laughing, knowing it too, especially the men who would have done exactly as she asked, even Angel if I proved unworthy by hurting one of the precious women this family holds so dear.

In short order they all leave, save for Dr. Everything. “You should go and get some sleep,” she tells me. “Plus you stink.”

“How about you let me go get a change of clothes out of my truck and come back up here to shower, then slip me some extra blankets so I can be here when she wakes up? You know I’m not going to be able to rest anywhere but by her side.” It

sounds like I'm pleading because I am. Mimi holds all the power here. She's the primary on Nik's case which normally would be against policy but Shelby-Love only has this medical center serving our and several other rural communities. I can't go around her; I already tried.

The ICU is very protected, and there are checks after checks to get to this wing. Everyone on our team and the family needed special badges to get on this floor. So there was no mistaking who was cleared to see the senator's wife and a prominent member of the Love family. Joi's security was even tighter because she had actual police personnel outside her room, and none of us could see her but Mimi, because she was also her primary-care doctor, Mama-Pete, and Pa-Pete.

The rest us were deemed to hold too much resentment to keep her safe until she faces the consequences of her actions.

"Okay." She sighs, looking at my forlorn expression and giving me another key card. "Here, use the shower on the second floor in the doctors' lounge. This is the key card to get you inside. There is another code—KMGB0925—that you need to put in to get access after you swipe this one so that you don't have to do a fingerprint scan. Then take the stairs using this same card and code, go to her room, and don't come back out. I'm going put some warm blankets and a pillow in there for you now."

She pats me on my shoulder like it's goodbye for the charge nurses, RNs, and other ICU staff. Then she heads back down the hallway to Nik's room.

Hurrying, I go down to my diamond black crystal pearl coated Maybach, which I decided to drive because it still holds Nikki's scent from the last time we rode in it.

After retrieving my suit from the back seat, I close the door. An eerie feeling slides up my spine. I snap the door closed, then think about getting my Sig out of my glove compartment, but I stop myself. If the cops see it, they will naturally assume I'm carrying it for Joi. There has been no small amount of speculation about what I want to do to the little witch.

I head up to the second-floor doctors' lounge just as Dr. Mimi instructed. After letting myself in, I hang the bag LL packed for me the first night. Natalie offered, but I declined, knowing Nik wouldn't want her in our home, let alone a place as sacred as our bedroom. Nat continued to offer, asking if there were particular things Nik wanted to wear or things that would bring her comfort. Nat's face was crestfallen when I told her the cousins and Nik's sister had already seen to those needs.

While washing my body with sure strokes, I pause, touching my scars, remembering the way she kissed each and every one like she was bestowing a blessing. She was healing me in ways neither of us recognized. Our bodies finally came together in the ties our souls had long ago forged. This woman was made for me. Her humanity, her soul, all mine.

A ragged sob escapes me before I can stop it. There, under the fall of the shower in a hospital where I stood helpless as the woman I love with all my being fought for her life just days ago, I give myself to the emotions I've never allowed myself to embrace, not even as a boy.

DRESSED in a blue-black hoodie and jeans, make my way to the fifth-floor intensive care unit. I slide the key card and hit the code. The door opens onto the hallway that houses the suites of the most critical patients. Down the hall I see the sheriff's deputies still guarding Joi's room, but that isn't what interests me. Nik's room is on this end of the hall. In fact it's a few steps away.

I go to turn the knob, but the door's locked. Knowing these doors are built to withstand everything, I hurry down to the nurses' station.

"Senator, h-how did you get on this floor?" the charge nurse asks, her face a mask of shocked outrage.

"My wife's door is locked. I need the key." Holding out my hands, I wait the precious seconds it takes her to make a decision.

“Patient’s privacy is a priority—”

“Are you daft, woman? She was in a coma, and her spine is bruised. She can’t fucking walk because someone tried to kill her. Now give me the fucking key before I put you in the fucking ground.” Unleashing all the wrath and ferocity in my body, I snatch the keys from her hands, ignoring her calling security.

Just as I silently slip the key in, I see three figures coming out of the private stairs—Padre, Rocco, and Snake. I knew Angel had men stationed here, but they were like ghosts. I press my hand to my mouth, then quietly open the door. They stand sentinel outside.

My mouth falls open at the scene before me.

Nikki and Nat are struggling, over what, I can’t make out for a second. Then I see the needle in Nat’s hand flash. Rushing forward, I body slam into her, making her crash against the wall. She falls into a heap in the corner, seemingly unconscious.

Nik is heaving, struggling for breath. “It’s okay,” I say, coming to sit beside her, smoothing her damp curls back from obscuring her face. Grabbing the thermos on her bedside, I place the straw beneath her mouth for her to sip.

“Not too fast,” I admonish, watching her eyes, tracking every movement of her face, every flutter of her lashes. Her eyes close as she savors the refreshing wash of liquid down her sore and parched throat.

“It—it was her,” she croaks. “Sh-she tried to kill Joi and me. Poor Joi,” she sobs, covering her mouth, shaking her head at the horror she must have discovered. “Is—is she okay? Please tell me she’s okay?” she pleads. Her whole face is awash with anxious hope.

“She’s fine. She’s down the hall. Babe, we thought she did this to you. Are you saying she had nothing to do with it?”

She’s already nodding, taking a fortifying sip. “No. It was that evil bitch.” Cocking her in the direction of an incapacitated Natalie. “She’s had some kind of fixation on me



and thought she would be a better senator than you. She's been planning this for like ten years. Used Joi, started messing with her when she was really young, and has been mentally and physically abusing her ever since. All those stories about my family, about me and you—" She takes in the shocked disbelief on my face and touches me with trembling hands. "It was her, Mathias. All of it. There's no telling what she did. Joi was her creature. Totally ensnared by her until Natalie tried to get her to steal my birth certificate. When that didn't work, she tried to make her kill me. Then she set the barn on fire. Something is really wrong with her." She casts furious eyes over to Natalie. "You should have seen the way she was abusing Joi." Her voice cracks then as she breaks down in heart-wrenching sobs.

Leaning over her, I pull her into my arms. "Shh, babe, it's over now. I got you. I won't let anything happen to you again."

"I can't feel my legs, Thi," she whispers, fear etching every word. "There were tingles when I woke, but I felt a sharper pain when we were tussling and now nothing." The last little bit is caught up in more weeping.

"Listen, we will do everything we can, okay? All that matters is you are alive. I love you, Nikki. Nothing matters other than you being alive." Bringing her back to me, wishing I could take this pain and burden from her, I rub her back, telling her how proud I am of her and how much I love her.

When she stiffens, at first I think it's out of doubt until I feel a sharp sting in my neck. Then I hear an "oomph" and a crash.

Several things happen at once. Reaching up, I take the needle Natalie stuck in my neck but didn't get a chance to plunge because Nik used what little strength she had to bring the patient monitor down on her head. Snake, Padre, and Rocco come in. After a quick assessment, Padre and Rocco go back outside, and Snake locks the door staying with us.

The angle she attacked me in left Natalie's neck exposed, so when the machine came down, it broke her neck.

Snake takes her broken form and goes into the bathroom.

“I didn’t—” Nik starts, shaking her head, his eyes following Snake’s retreating form.

“I know. You saved my life. I’m sure whatever was in there was meant to kill you and then me.” I smooth a hand over her brow. “None of this is on you. This is all her,” I assure her with soft words.

There is a brief knock on the door, then Angel steps in. “Where is she?” he asks dispassionately. He never liked Nat, never trusted her, so his reaction was expected.

“It’s good to see you awake, querida,” he says in a tone I’ve only heard him use with his wife. “Easy will be so happy to hear this. You were so brave. You are a hero,” he says, as if he witnessed everything that transpired in the last few minutes, but he’s a man with eyes and ears everywhere, so I am far from surprised.

“What do you want me to do with it?” Snake says, coming out of the bathroom where he took Nat’s body so it wouldn’t further upset Nikki.

“I’ll bury it. She can just disappear.” I tell him.

“No.” Angel tsks, shaking his head. “You need to find another outlet for your little hobby.” Then he looks at Snake and smiles. “Make it look like an accident. You know what to do.”

Snake’s smile is wicked when he murmurs a quiet “sí.”

A few minutes later, there is a quiet knock, and Padre comes in dressed as an orderly. He pushes a cart into the door of the bathroom. I make Nik look away as they place Nat’s lifeless body inside with more care than she deserves.

I listen to my wife’s soft crying as I watch Nat’s vacant eyes descend into the cart with hospital linens. I feel nothing watching the woman I called a friend being erased. Any and all feeling I had for her was eviscerated the moment I saw her trying to harm what was mine.

I gather Nikki close. As close as I dare. Snake rights the patient monitor and follows Padre out of the room.

“See you, irmão.” Angel squeezes me on the shoulder and gives Nikki’s head a soft pat. “You’re an amazing woman, Nicolette Love-Shelby.”

His words have her looking up through her tears. Her smile causes my heart to tug harder. He follows his men without another word. I don’t have to worry. He’ll take care of everything, with no one being the wiser.

Nikki turns from watching them exit, then wraps her arms around me, nestling her head against my throat.

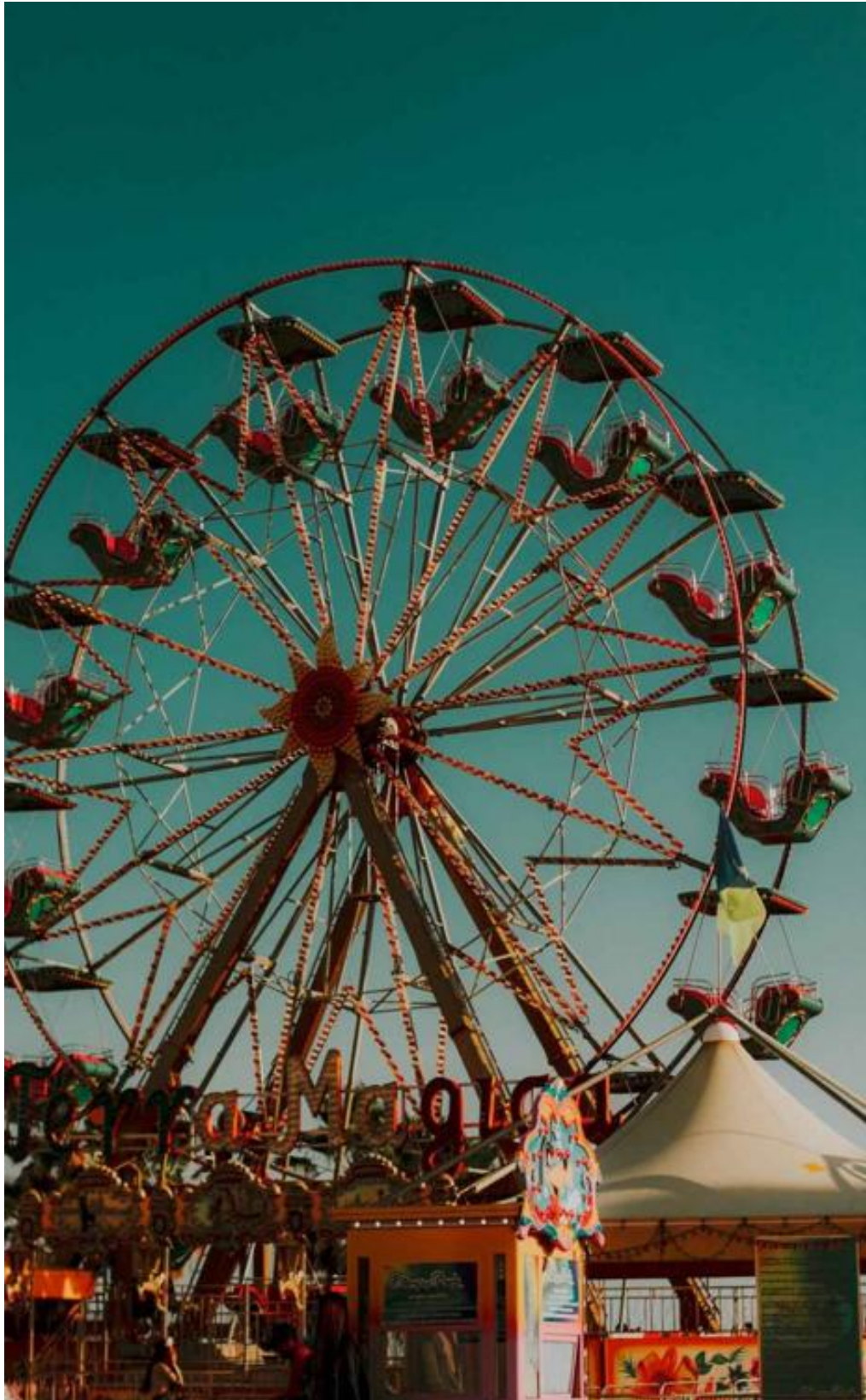
After a few quiet moments, she stiffens, pulling back, drawing her arms away. She looks down for a long time. I say nothing, my eyes trained on her bowed head. Silence encompasses the entire room. It is a movement, a song all on its own. This silence has a cadence, a beat, a rhythm; it’s in this silence that she looks up from the sapphire on her finger. “But you gave it to Nat.” She chews her bottom lip. “She said it wasn’t real. The one you gave her—she said it wasn’t real.” The revelation neither of us could accept all those years ago settles between in the silence.

“I just knew I couldn’t dishonor my mom by giving it to her. Especially after I met you.” I cup her chin, letting the implication sink in for both of us. “I knew I couldn’t have you—wasn’t worthy. I knew it was wrong to even think about, but I could never give her the ring. Not when you spoke to my heart even then. I just wanted to be your friend. To watch over you. To guide you, help you. I just wanted to protect you. *Eu te amo*,” I tell her, watching her eyes swim with emotion. “*Eu sei que eu não te mereço, mas eu vou passar o resto da minha vida tentando. I know I am not worthy of you, but I will devote my life to trying.*”

“*Eu te amo, Thi*,” she whispers against my heart as I drag her as close as I dare.

Later, after she’s checked by Mimi, who schedules more tests after privately hearing the whole story and warning about possible re-injury, there is nothing for us to do but hold each other until sleep finally takes us.

For the first time since the attempt on her life, I fall into an exhausted slumber, the first real rest I've gotten since she was hurt, holding my little wife.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SEVEN

Nikki (*eight weeks later*)

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?”

Looking over my shoulder, I see Mathias standing in the doorway of my studio, looking like a demon risen from hell, ready to slay me.

“Mimi gave me a clean bill of health two and a half weeks ago,” I remind him, taking my time going from my inversion pose to come face-to-face with the menace that is my husband.

His face doesn’t move; in fact, he seems angrier. “What happens if you fall and hurt yourself? You’re not even all the way healed.” His voice gets louder. “I swear you don’t give a fuck about your well-being at all.” He storms off.

I don’t say anything. I don’t move. I just wait. Moments later, he storms back into the room. “Are you coming?”

“Nope.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Eep,” I say, slapping his back as he pulls me over his shoulder.

“Stop it.” He slaps my bottom hard twice.

“Sure. You want to tell me what has you so mad?”

“You mean other than your little ass wreaking havoc on my nerves by not keeping your feet on the ground?” He grumbles, sitting me on the floor of our bedroom, then starts ripping his clothes off in quick efficient movements.

“You know...” I sit on the bed, looking at his tall frame as he strips naked in front of me.

“Don’t even start with that shit,” he growls before storming into his bathroom.

“Mimi said we were good to have sex. Senator Shelby, would you care to comment?” I ask, walking over to the shower, watching the taut cheeks of his ass flex as he looks over his shoulder.

“No,” he snaps, then turns away, facing the full blast of the shower.

I pull off the unitard I’m wearing and get in with him.

“What are you doing?” he asks, rubbing his body like he’s mad at it.

“Taking care of you, Senator.” I kiss the hollow of his back. I watch the scars and muscles bunch and flex together.

“I don’t need you to do that,” he says with cold finality.

“Mathias.” All the cajoling is gone from my voice.

He turns. His dick is hard and jutting; the tip is pearled, but that only holds my attention for a few seconds. It’s his beautiful eyes that hold me prisoner. They are stormy, tormented; the beautiful iridescent gray is clouded.

“Babe.” I reach up, touching the light scruff of his jaw. He bows his head to kiss the center of my palm. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

Stepping closer, I press my body into him and feel his heavy erection. “How have you been taking care of this big fella?” I ask, taking him in hand, slowly jacking his dick before catching the fluid pearling at the tip and smearing it over him.

“I haven’t.” He groans, fucking into my hand.

“Ah, no wonder you’ve been so grumpy,” I tell him.

“I’m always grumpy,” he counters, running his fingers down my back, light as a butterfly’s wings.

“True, but you’re always good to me. Let me be good to you.” I look up at a less aggrieved face this time.

“I haven’t always been. I—”

“You will be.” I give him a quirk of my eyebrow.

“Yes, I will, little wife.” He drops to his knees. “Let me taste you.” He buries his face in my pussy. My eyes roll back when he starts softly sucking on my clit, bypassing my lips. Licking me in delicate circles, he takes his time lavishing his lust upon me. Methodically, decadently, his beautifully cruel mouth worships me.

I’m trembling when he pulls back his mouth wet with my honey.

“I know she’s so tight right now.”

I gasp as he pushes his finger inside me and starts to slowly fuck me. “Yeah, we’re going to have to open you up before I split this tight little motherfucker to gape.” He adds another finger. Deliciously slow, and with all the filthiest of his depraved soul, he drives his fingers in and out of me, his gaze narrowed on the work he’s putting in.

“Thi,” I gasp when he starts scissoring his fingers, hitting my spot. He covers my pussy with his mouth, lashing me ruthlessly with his tongue. My body shatters, the orgasm making my knees buckle.

Thi stands, lifting me in one smooth move. It’s not lost on me how he started weight training more soon after the incident. I figure he thought he’d be carrying me a lot. Thankfully, after the initial shock, my body rallied, and I was up and about by the end of the first week. That’s not to say it wasn’t painful or grueling. Yet the whole time, he was there, taking care of me, making sure all my needs were met.

Thi dealt with my fits and pettiness without a word. He let me cuss him out and blame him. Took it all, even when I said things that were wrong and hurtful. He bore it, holding me as I cried myself to sleep in his arms. Some nights, I don’t even think he slept. When I asked, he’d shrug and say, *I just don’t want to miss a moment with you.*



“Hey,” he says, bringing me to his eye level.

“Hey,” I say as I feel his shaft hard and throbbing between us.

“We’re going to take this slow.” He holds me up higher. “Put me inside you, little wife.”

Positioning him at my entrance, I hiss when he slowly impales me on his dick.

“How we doing, Nik?” He pants after working me up and down on his hard length a few times.

“Good. So good.” Moaning, I love the way he’s stretching me out. I can feel him everywhere. Adoring the way he takes his time, working his long, thick dick.

“Yessss.” He drags out the word, working me up and down. He starts a slow steady ramming into my pussy that gets harder and harder until our bodies are slapping together in a messy erotic cadence.

“Rub your pussy, little wife. Come with me.” He groans, jacking me on his dick, using me like I’m a doll. I really don’t need to. I can tell by the way my muscles tense. “Do it,” he growls, fucking hard up into my needy pussy.

Meeting his eyes, I do as he says, rubbing my slick bud with trembling fingers.

“Fuck, yes,” he hisses, as my head falls back. “No, look at me, little slut, when I fill my pussy up.”

My head comes down, and I’m lost in his gaze, lost in his touch. Lost in everything Mathias Shelby, my best friend, husband, lover.



“WHAT DOES SHE WANT?” I ask Mathias the next morning as we sit on the veranda overlooking in the harvested sugarcane fields.

“She didn’t say. She came to the hospital that first night wanting to know how you were, and she stayed for a long time, until they told us they were going to put you in a drug-induced coma. Then there was the accident, and she was burying her daughter.” Mathias lifts his coffee to his lips, his eyes never wavering, nor the conviction to never speak Natalie’s name again.

He offered to make breakfast, but I didn’t have an appetite once he let me know I have a guest coming, one he didn’t tell me about until today because he didn’t want me anxious and upset.

Natalie’s betrayal lies sharp and bitter between us. He blames himself, even though I have told him there was something seriously wrong with that girl. She showed people only what she wanted them to see. To him, she was a colleague, almost lover, friend. To the public, she was a steadfast champion of the people. To me, she was always his fiancée, then his ex, then my wannabe rival, and an unmitigated bitch when I became his wife.

We sit enjoying the beautiful morning just enjoying the morning. After a while, he goes to make a couple calls, while I sit lost in thought. My tummy twists in anticipation of the meeting Mrs. Spencer requested.

“Nik.”

I know by the tone of his voice that he’s not alone. He sounds so protective. Like if she said one word out the way, he’d bury her in that field he loves so much just beyond sight of our home. I think that’s why he built this house here—to be near his work.

“Mrs. Spencer,” I say, firmly rising.

“No, don’t get up, honey.” She waves and hurries to sit down, her eyes seemingly doing a thorough inspection of my well-being. It’s disconcerting.

“Ahem.”

My eyes skate to Mathias as she sits opposite me. She has an uncanny resemblance to her daughter, except Natalie

inherited her eyes from her father. “Can we get you anything to drink or eat? We didn’t have breakfast, but Mathias can make you something, and there are still warm homemade biscuits from yesterday morning.” I know my smile is a little strained, but in my defense, her daughter did try to kill me, though Mrs. Spencer doesn’t know anything about it. I guess I forgot my media training because I can tell when she notices just how uncomfortable I am. If anything, her face softens more.

“I’m fine. Mathias, will you sit with us? It’s important that you hear what I have to say.” She pats the seat beside her.

“Mathias said you wanted to talk to me?” I ask.

“Yes. How much did your father tell you about your mom?” she asks kindly.

“Just that she was a Spencer, and they met when they were sixteen and she was committed to the state hospital. He’d gone when he was fifteen and couldn’t get the voices in his head to be quiet.” I tell her, almost verbatim, the brief history my daddy relayed to me. “Daddy said they were both in and out of the institution for the next ten years. He spoke of how they fell in love and how their families tried to keep them apart because they thought their love was a byproduct of their illnesses. He said at first they lived off the grid here on Love land he claimed and were fine until someone from the Spencer side reported them. My mom was pregnant with me, and they took my sisters, Kandie and Kerania, but the place was a nightmare, so they were determined to get them out, but by the time he and mom got safely settled and came back, the place was burned to the ground and Kandie was with my family. They hid for her safety from the cult who ran the place.” I know the story backward and forward, so it took nothing for me to tell it. The expression on Mrs. Spencer’s face says she hadn’t, though, and if the tears she gets her elegantly embroidered handkerchief out to wipe away are any indication, then she hadn’t heard it often enough, or maybe she was still hurt by it.

“Yes—yes, your story is exactly how it happened. Your mother, Astra was my best friend and my husband’s sister. He loved her dearly and wanted to protect her. Mostly from

herself and her illness. He quietly supported her and your father, but his first wife, Natalia Spencer, a distant Spencer cousin, however, was more concerned about appearances. She suffered from the same personality disorder as Natalie. She became obsessed with ‘protecting’ your mother from herself and keeping her and your father apart.

“I wasn’t part of the family then, and there was nothing I could do to help them since I had no influence. I watched as they were driven further and further into the margins. I cheered at their resourcefulness. I’m happy you know the story of how lovely and real their love was.

“Mathias, can you bring the box I brought in?” she asks, her nose red but her eyes so warm.

Quiet and calm, my husband gets up to retrieve it. When he returns with the large box, I immediately remember it from my childhood. Daddy said he was sending it to my fairy godmother during one of his highs, and though I begged him not to, he would not be deterred. I gave up on ever seeing it again.

“You had it,” I say, greedily looking at the box that held so many of my family’s treasures I thought were lost.

“Yes. The night we met, this is why I asked to visit with you.” She smiles, patting the top of the box. “Your daddy asked me to keep it safe because y’all were moving around so much.”

Unable to stop myself, I come to my feet, removing the box’s top. Inside are photo albums, letters, notebooks, and journals. I pick up a framed picture. It’s my mom—pregnant with me—beside Daddy and my sisters.

“Thank you for keeping these memories safe.” I ask, “Why didn’t you give it to Kandie? She’s right at the bakery.”

“I tried several times, but she didn’t trust me, with good reason.” She looks apologetic. “My husband’s family has done more than their part in this blood feud. Hopefully that will change. I don’t know if you want to claim us or not, but your mother’s inheritance is yours. My husband, for all his

disappointment that Natalie was not marrying Mathias, took one look at you and knew you were his sister's little girl. He's already given Kandie her part, though she won't touch it. This is your paperwork, conferring Vivianne Spencer's inheritance to you. You and your sister own thirty percent of Spencer Wood's stock and have seats on the board of directors."

My mouth hangs open as I take the manila folder from her hands.

"It is yours to do with what you will, but it is our hope that you will join the ranks of the Spencer family," she says, hope brewing her eyes.

"Why didn't your husband come if he's so on board with everything?" I ask doubtfully.

Mrs. Spencer looks away, pressing her lips tightly. "He's still struggling with Natalie's death. He blames himself." She turns back to us with an unwavering gaze. "We knew what she was. Knew she would fixate on things. We urged her to use it for good. Spent thousands on private therapy. When she became great at everything she tried, we thought of it as a gift, a testament to proper treatment. We didn't know the depth of her fixations or how destructive they turned until we gained access to her Birmingham apartment." She shakes her head in disbelief, then rummages through her phone. "This is just a snapshot of what she had going on."

"Oh my goodness," I say when the phone screen fills with images of Natalie's apartment. It shows just how disordered her mind was. There was not a single clear wall. Pictures of Mathias and me going back years. My face or eyes were scratched out or outright replaced by us. There was a picture of her hand wearing the sapphire, with *FAKE* scrawled over it. The picture Mathias and I kissing by the truck was blown up to life-size proportions, with stab punctures all over my body, the knife hanging out the final one, which was one plunged into my head.

She pulls the phone back, her face flaming with embarrassment and shame. "After her mother passed..." She presses her lips together as though there is more of a story

there. “Spence vowed never to marry again. I was in college and already in love with him—my best friend’s older brother—when I became his nanny. Eventually we grew closer, and he fell in love with me. We got pregnant with Atticus, and he married me.” She blushes, dropping this little bit of tea. “His heart is broken because he lost his daughter, and then there is guilt that he could have done more.” Tears fill her eyes as she looks from me to Mathias and back again. “We are so sorry all this happened. We think Natalie’s ‘accident’ was on purpose because she failed to kill you and you were due to wake up. Yes, we know she tried to kill you. We are so sorry and hope that, one day, you’ll forgive us for our part.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You did everything you could for your daughter.” Reaching out, I cover her hand with mine. “Tell Mr. Spencer there are no hard feelings. I grew up with a parent who struggled with his illness all my life. He was courageous and strong, but I know how seductive the darkness can be.”

“Okay.” She nods, standing. “I will let him know.”

After she and I embrace, Mathias and I walk her to the door.

“Natalie was evil. It’s nothing to do with her illness,” I say, watching Mrs. Spencer pull off. “My daddy and mom never hurt no one. I just didn’t have the heart I tell Mrs. Spencer. Natalie was just evil. There was no excuse for what she did to Joi,” I whisper, thinking of how my cousin is still struggling, closing herself off. She says it’s self-care, but it feels more like isolation.

“She’ll find her way to healing and love just like we did,” he says, turning me to him.

Tilting my head, I let his kiss consume me. “You know what I’m in the mood for?” I give him a cheeky wink, then giggle when I feel the immediate rise of his interest between us.

“Yeah, what, little wife?” he growls, sexily pressing his mouth against my ear, nipping my lobe.

“Peanut butter and chocolate chip pancakes.” Putting everything I can into my doe eyes.

“Yeah, I’m always ready for peanut butter chocolate chip pancakes,” he says, sweeping me into his arms. “But how about I get a before-breakfast snack, pequena esposa?”

“I guess.” I giggle, burying my head in his neck, inhaling the clover, earth, spice, and sugar of him. So much sugar. Yum.





# EPILOGUE

**S**enator Mathias Shelby ~ *Six months later, opening day of the Isabella Shelby & Astra Love Women's Center.*

“YOUR MOM WOULD BE SO proud of you,” Angel says as I step down from the podium at the re-dedication of my family’s historic home and it’s repurposing to a women’s wellness center.

I pause looking at him for a moment thinking of the man I am not sure that is true. “Maybe in another ten years of loving this woman to distraction.”

“I get that.” He nods clapping me on my back as we walk toward our wives, who are sitting at one of the tables set up on the lawn. Easy’s watching Judah pull up only to topple onto the blanket strategically placed on the grass to catch him.

Nikki watches him in amusement off and on as she chats with her cousin.

“Have you thought of a name for this son yet?” Asking trying not to let jealousy keep me from enjoying my friends obvious joy.

“Yep,” He smirks striding forward not giving me an answer.

“Easy,” he says coming to stand behind his much more diminutive wife, caging her belly with his big hands. “Mathias wants to know what we are naming our son.

“Ahem, Mathias Ozymandias Cruz,” She says proudly.

“Like hell,” Angel cuts in.

“Little ears,” Easy admonishes him. “You got to pick the first name and stated clearly I could pick the second. Plus, this will go a long way to heal the breach between you two.”

“No way in hell,” Angel makes sure to whisper the last part.

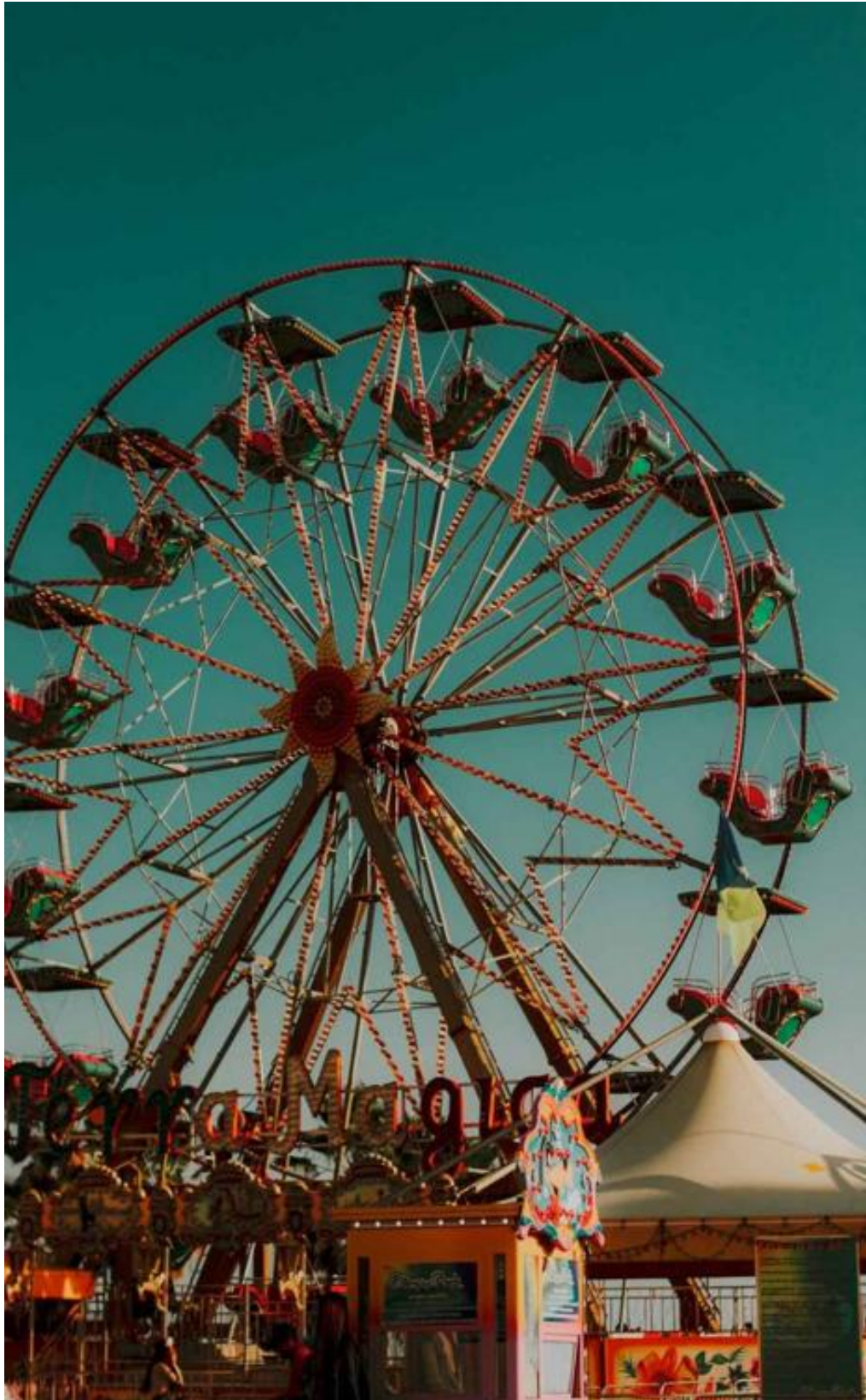
“I’m a fan of both,” Nikki says rises to wrap her arms around me.

I kiss the top of her head looking at the second person who loves me most in the world. Both of them have seen all my scars and never shied away.

“It means gift from God,” Easy singsongs from behind us but I’m lost in my darling, little wife’s eyes.

“Indeed he is,” Nik says, pulling me down for a kiss allowing me to bask in vanilla-rose, love and her. Yum.

THE END, is it ever really the end? You’re going to see them again.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book poured out of me.

Mathias is half Brazilian. My friend, Amy Oliveira helped to make this possible with sharing their language and culture with me. I love you to bits! Any mistakes are mine as well as the artistic license I took throughout the book. Mathias a fictionalized over the top, obsessive hero. This in is no way to represents any man or any culture, so don't think you are going to go out there and find anyone this darkly perfect.

Bethany Hagan is the best person on the planet. Her heart is gold. She uplifts me and helps me soar. I'm honored just to know her, let alone write with her till the wee hours of the morning. When I send her vague naughty lines asking her advice, she always says, "DOOO ITTTT" and "That's HOTTT". I wish everyone had a Bethany but you cannot have mine. Vampires forever! You always tell me I can do and for some reason I'm starting to believe you.

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Kenya Goree-Bell lives in Alabama with her former warrior husband and three kids. She is the author of the Harem Diaries Series and the bestselling Mogul Series and Blood Legacy Series. When not writing she is a romance novel influencer, lifelong bibliophile and can be seen weekly on Instagram and Facebook Live interviewing other authors on her IG: TheKGB — The K's Grown and Sexy Book Club. She believes that Happy Ever After belongs to everyone and writes about worlds where everyone deserves love.

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