



*Detective*  
**DADDY**  
*Next Door*

TESSA SLOAN

# Detective Daddy Next Door

**An Age-Gap Faking Dating Romantic  
Suspense**



Tessa Sloan

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# Contents

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15

16. Chapter 16
17. Chapter 17
18. Chapter 18
19. Chapter 19
20. Chapter 20
21. Chapter 21
22. Chapter 22
23. Chapter 23
24. Chapter 24
25. Chapter 25

# Chapter 1

Bria

I arrive at Harry Reid International Airport at exactly 11 a.m. The flight was delayed by two hours at Long Beach Airport. They gave the weather as an excuse, and it is a valid one. The sky that had been dark and cloudy in Long Beach is now filled with the bright yellow Las Vegas sun. It's a blue as deep as the bottom of the ocean and is dotted with fragments of white cloud fluff. I look around as I head to the Terminal 1 parking for the Uber I booked ahead.

My eyes catch the plate number that matches the one I booked on my app, and I walk toward the car. A bald middle-aged man in brown khaki shorts and a white button-down shirt approaches with a puffy smile on his face.

“Bria?” he asks.

I nod and tell him the name of the hotel I'm staying at. “Can we get there quickly? I need to freshen up before going to see my client.”

He nods and reaches for my carry-on bag.



“You don’t have to do that,” I say.

He shakes his head and slips the bag off my shoulder. “It’s fine. I like to help. I’ll get you to your hotel in no time.”

Perfect, I think to myself. I’m supposed to see my client in one hour.

He opens the door to the passenger side and puts my carry-on bag in. I scramble into the back as he opens the door to the driver’s side, and I sit behind the driver’s seat. Then I shift to the other side just so I can see him. You can’t be too cautious these days.

When we’re out of the parking lot, he looks at me in the mirror. “Here on business?”

I nod as I search my handbag for my handheld fan. I find it, switch it on, and hold it up to my face. “Yes.”

“Sorry about the air conditioner. It stopped working this morning. What do you do for work?”

I nod to let him know it’s fine as the fan cools me down and I reply to his question. “I’m a lawyer. A tax attorney.”

He smiles and bobs his head. “My daughter is a lawyer too. She lives in Chicago.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

He nods and smiles again, fatherly pride written all over his face. I know how he feels. The exact same look was on Dad’s face the day I graduated from law school. It’s the same look he has on his face when he introduces me to friends.

The driver pulls up to my hotel, but before I step out, he stretches a card out to me. “My daughter is a criminal attorney. Just in case you need help catching some tax evaders in Chicago.”

I find it a bit odd that he carries his daughter’s business card around and I doubt I’d ever need it, but I smile at him, nod, and take the card. I don’t look at it but drop it into my handbag and tell him thank you and goodbye.

The hotel is modern. It’s a tall brown building that looks like it’s made of steel. It’s glistening under the intense sun. The architecture is the type you see on the pages of Architectural Digest. I already know its interior will be state of the art. I shift the strap of my carry-on bag up my shoulder and walk across the cobbled pavement, up the slanted cement slab, and enter as the doorman opens the door wide for me.

“Welcome, ma’am,” he says.

“Thank you,” I reply, and make for the long reception desk.

“Welcome, ma’am. Do you have a reservation?” a woman with dark hair that’s pulled to the back asks.

“I do.”

She stops going through a file and turns her attention to the computer in front of her. “Name, please?”

“Bria Shaw.”

“Just a moment,” she says as her index finger rotates the mouse wheel on the counter.

I tap my fingers on the sleek brown counter and look down at my watch. I have thirty minutes remaining. If I miss my appointment, Micha will be pissed at me. Micha is my boss at the law firm I work for in Long Beach. I wasn't supposed to come on this trip, a colleague was, but he got sick at the last minute. So here I am.

The dark-haired woman's voice pulls me out of my head. "Yes, you're in room 745. Take the elevator up to the seventh floor and head to the right at the hallway," she says, as she slips me a card.

"Thank you."

I hold the card between my fingers and struggle with my carry-on bag and handbag. I'm looking down trying to balance the two bags on my left shoulder when I run into someone. I feel the thick chest against my arm, and its force pushes me back, making me almost lose my balance. But I'm stopped by something firm and strong on my arm. It's a hand. A large, strong hand holding me, preventing me from falling. A hairy hand with tanned skin. I rock on my heels as I steady myself and look up at the person holding on to me.

He's tall, at least six feet tall, I'm guessing as I look up at him. He has a phone to his ear and a frown on his face. He doesn't say anything, but releases my arm from his grip and steps aside. I want to say sorry to him for not watching where I was going but his back is already turned to me as I turn around. It's big, broad, well-formed, and he walks as though he's the most self-assured person on earth. I watch him as he

walks away, lost in wonderment over his body when I'm jolted back to consciousness by the ringing of my phone. Oh my God, my appointment! I rush toward the elevator and soon I'm in my room, changing my clothes and touching up my makeup. I order an Uber and a few minutes later I'm out to see our client.

When I get back to the hotel, it's a few minutes past 3 p.m. I could head to the airport and be back in Long Beach in a few hours, but I don't feel like it. Las Vegas is calling to me, and I want to see more of it. I go up to my room and reschedule my flight for the next day. I lay in bed after a quick lunch brought up by room service just to rest a little before going out to see the city.

To my dismay, I wake up four hours later. I sit up in bed, confused for a minute. Then I look out of one of the wide windows—it's dark outside. I groan and yawn then get out of bed. I know it's late, but there must be something I can do tonight. This isn't my first time in Las Vegas. The last time I was here with Micha, we worked all day in our hotel room. I've heard a lot about the city, and if there's one thing I know, I know it's a city that never sleeps.

I slip out of the pants I wore to the appointment and peel off my white shirt. I go to the bathroom to clean up, making a mental note to take a warm bath in the oversized tub when I come back later. I toss my carry-on bag on the bed and search for something to wear. Although I'd thought I'd be leaving today, I never travel with just one outfit. On this trip, I packed three different outfits. Well, the one I changed into when I got

here earlier and two others for my flight back home. I like to have options. I pull out a purple sleeveless top with ruffles bordering the center buttons and pair it with black shorts that hug my thighs. I pull the pin from my honey-blonde hair and watch it cascade down my shoulders in the mirror. I comb it from the tangled mess it became while I slept. I apply more eyeshadow, then darken my lash line with a black pencil and put on dark red lipstick. I don't know where I'm going yet, but I'm ready for the night.

When I get to the first floor, I'm amazed by how transformed the hotel is. Its wide hallways are lit by bright yellow lights that bounce off the polished black and white marble floors. My heels squeak as I walk from the elevator. I immediately regret not doing my research before leaving my room, because everyone seems to know where they're going except me. I clasp my handbag to my side and try to look as normal as possible. Then I hear music coming from my left.

I'm about to continue walking toward the big swinging front door, but the music keeps pulling me, so I turn to my left instead. The music is faint, but then I see a door open, and someone comes out of it. The music is loud now but is quickly muffled again as the door swings shut after the man who just stepped out. He has a giggling woman on his arm.

I decide to ask him a question so I know what I'm walking into. "Erm. Excuse me. Are they having a private party in there?"

The man shakes his head. "It's the hotel bar."

“Thank you.”

He doesn't respond as he walks away with the woman.

When I reach the door, I push it open. It's surprisingly big inside; bigger than I'd imagined, with a bright riot of multicolored lights blazing all over. There's a huge bar in the center of the room. A mixologist works his magic, a shaker in his hands, and a man sits in a chair at the bar. A couple of people are on the dance floor. The door swings shut behind me as I step in. As I walk closer to the bar in hopes of getting a drink, I realize that I recognize the man sitting at the bar. His back is turned to me, but I know that back. I was staring at it this morning in the lobby. I contemplate turning back and going out to the city, but it's late and the man might not even recognize me, so I walk toward the bar until I'm standing a few feet away from him.

“Hi. Can I get an apple martini, please?”

“Sure thing,” the bartender says as he slides a drink to the man, who doesn't even look at me.

I pull a stool close and hop on it. As I'm settling, the man looks sideways with disinterested eyes, but just as he's about to peel them off me, they glue back on. Now I have to apologize to him. I look at him and open my mouth to speak. But he turns away sharply.

He looks dangerously hot tonight. He's wearing a t-shirt with sleeves that stop right on his upper arm. Now that I get a good look at his face, I realize he's way older than I am. But Lord, he's so fit. He looks nothing like the other older men. Even as

he's sitting, his abs look rock-hard through his fitted shirt. His fingers are wrapped around his drink. My mind flashes to this morning when they were wrapped around my arm. How warm the touch of his hand felt, and for some reason I begin to imagine it massaging my breast. I shake my head and look away from him. But I can't look away for too long before my eyes wander back to him. I'm staring at his toned arm when he turns. He does it so swiftly that I don't have enough time to look away before he catches me.

I clear my throat. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" he drawls. His voice is deep and reverberates through my body.

"For bumping into you this morning." I expect his expression to soften as I say, "In the lobby."

He stares at me with cold eyes, then nods just once. "Yeah. That was you. I figured."

Something about him pulls me in. Maybe it's the toned arms or the deep voice, but I get off my stool and sit on the one next to him.

"I'm Bria," I say as I settle and offer my hand to him.

He eyes it with a look of distrust. He's so sexy with the expression on his face. He takes my hand and holds it. His giant hand is so gentle, I melt inside. There's something about men with big hands. Now I want to find out if what they say about large hands is true or a myth.

"Myles," he replies, and slides his hand out of mine.

I'm determined to make him talk. I'm intrigued and I always get what I want, so I press on. "I'm in Vegas for work. Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Could you show me around?" I ask, hoping he'll say yes.

He sighs and looks at me squarely. "I'm in town for work too."

"So, you only said that to get rid of me?"

"Yes."

I laugh out loud, and he loosens up a bit. He turns to look at me and I cross and uncross my legs, giving him a flash of my inner thighs. What do I have to lose tonight? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm in Las Vegas and I'm ready to let loose. It's been nothing but work for me since Chad, my ex-boyfriend, cheated on me and got the woman he was cheating with pregnant. That was almost a year ago, and though I've tried to get back into the dating game, I've failed woefully each time. Trust doesn't come easy for me anymore. It's been a hard year. I've thrown myself into work, but tonight I deserve to have fun. I don't even recognize myself lately. I've been walled up for far too long. Tonight, I'll unleash. So, I uncross and cross my legs again. I notice it's working. He tries not to look. But he fails.

He turns to face me head-on, his arm bent at the elbow with his palm on his toned, ripped thigh. The music has gone down



in tempo. A dark, sexy, melodious tone weaves in the air around us. His eyes roam my body. I look at his fingers to see if he's wearing a wedding ring. There's none and I smile. He doesn't smile but smirks, just one corner of his lips lifting up.

He cocks his head toward the door. "Wanna come upstairs?"

I nod. He pays for our drinks and helps me off the stool. The back of his hand accidentally grazes against my left breast.

I only start to think about how risky this is when we get in the elevator. What if this is a dangerous man? I haven't even finished the thought when he pushes me against the elevator wall and smashes his lips against mine. They're soft, which is surprising. He looks cold and his hands are rough against my body, but his lips are feathery and tasty, and I surrender to them.

He flicks his tongue around my mouth and pins me harder against the elevator wall. Then he cups one breast in his large hand. His breath is shallow as he struggles to keep it under control, then he slides one hand down and brings my leg up. He's about to take me in the elevator. He slips one finger into my panties and slides it into my wetness. I moan, and just when I think he'll take me, the elevator opens. We stop abruptly, thinking there are people waiting to get in. But we've gotten to his floor. He smirks and winks before getting out. I follow him, my inner thighs soaked as hell. I watch his back that had caught my attention earlier. It's one of the finest backs I have ever seen.

He reaches into his right pocket and pulls out a card that he swipes across his door and pushes it open. He pulls me in after him. He pushes the door shut and bangs his lips against mine again. This time he's multitasking. He's pulling off his shirt as our lips part and meet again. I pull at his shirt, too, as he raises his arms to get it off. He looks even better with his shirt off. I run my hands over his chest, and he pulls at my top, tugging the buttons apart.

When my top is off, he yanks off my bra and glances briefly at my naked breasts, then takes one into his mouth. His lips are warm against my hard nipple, and I let out a sigh. It's been too long. I've missed this feeling. He flicks his tongue over it with steady strokes, then pulls on it till it snaps out of his mouth.

He takes off his shorts and pulls me toward the bed.

“Do you have a condom?”

He nods as I lie on the bed and goes around it to look in a drawer beside the bed. He comes back within a second with two condom wrappers in his hand. He tosses one on the bed as he tears at the one in his hand with his teeth. Just one bite is enough to send the paper ripping. I'm turned on even more as I watch him slip down his boxer briefs and bring out the biggest cock I've ever seen in my life. The huge hands aren't a waste, I think quietly as I die inside for him to take me. He holds my gaze as his cock springs free and slides the condom on without even looking down. I shift further into the bed and lie back.

He bends down and pulls me roughly to the edge of the bed, then pulls off my shorts before ripping off my panties, leaving

my opening bare to him. He parts my legs and puts his fingers around my pussy, pushing the opening apart before entering me. A moan escapes his lips and merges with the shivering sigh buzzing out of my mouth. He's so big that I feel like he'll rip me apart.

He senses my hesitation. "I won't hurt you. Relax."

I'm breathing heavily as he starts to move again, his huge dick inching further and further into my pussy. Like he said, it doesn't hurt, it fills me instead, touching my walls and sending me into a sweet frenzy. He leans forward and holds onto my butt. His mouth is touching my right ear as he pounds into me. I'm astonished at how strong he is. At how consistent his strokes are. How masterfully he delivers them.

Las Vegas isn't called Sin City for nothing. Now I know why.

## Chapter 2

### Myles

**I**t's a sin for a person to feel this good. I hold on to her ass tightly as she writhes with pleasure underneath me. I try so hard to make it last longer, but I can't. This is the best pussy I have ever had. She's wet and warm and snug around my dick and I can't take it anymore. I burst inside of her. But I'm not satisfied.

I pull out and pull the condom off my dick, which is already starting to harden again. All it takes is just one look at her body. All it takes is one look at her firm, full breasts for me to want to go again. I run my hand down her flat belly and bend down to kiss it. The blood in my head is rushing to my dick again as I come back up to look at her. She's staring up at me, her lips slightly parted, her chest heaving up and down, her pussy open to me, calling to me again. I reach for the other condom on the bed. I tear the wrapper open and slip it on my now completely hard dick.

But I don't take her immediately. I run my hand down her belly and lean forward to kiss her navel. She tastes clean. So clean that I want to run my tongue all over her body. I trail up to her breasts and take one into my mouth. I lick at it, pulling at the beautiful pink nipple while rolling my fingers over the second one. She moans loudly. I love that I'm making her feel pleasure. I love the feeling of making someone wriggle beneath me, their whole body vibrating from the power of my touch. But the thing is, I'm not the only one with that power. She has that power over me, too. The way her body feels makes me go crazy. And now I just want to fuck her again.

I take my condom-covered dick in my hand and slip into her again. She's squirming, and this time I want it to last longer. She raises her hand to touch me.

“Don't touch. You'll make me come faster. I don't want to.”

I can see in her eyes that she doesn't want me to come fast, either. Good, we're on the same page. I spread her legs wider and look down on her pussy as I plow. She's clean-shaven. She's beautiful. Extremely beautiful down there. Like a dainty flower. A dainty flower that isn't afraid to take all of my big dick. She lifts her hand again to touch me, but I shake my head at her and flip her over. I spread her cheeks and penetrate her again. She moans into the bedsheet and pulls at it with both hands, her fingers digging into the mattress.

I know what she wants even though I know nothing about her. I know she's enjoying this, so I fuck her harder. Her cries get louder with each stroke. Then I turn her onto her side and

lift one leg up. Her head is raised now as she watches what my cock is doing to her. She moans harder and harder until she begins to shriek from her climax, and I can't control myself anymore. Her tightness around me won't let me go on, though I want to. I come hard and shout as I burst out in a feverish shiver. It takes me a while to calm down and let her leg down. She curls into a semi-ball, and I lay beside her, staring at her beautiful body. If only I could go on. God, she's incredible.

Soon, she's breathing lightly beside me. I cover her with a blanket and go into the bathroom to pee. This has been an unexpected turn of events. It's been a stressful day. I've been in town for two weeks now, and today was the most stressful of all. Little did I know that the universe was planning to de-stress me. Now I feel as light as a bird. I feel so good. I look at myself in the mirror. My short dark hair is a mess, and my brown eyes have a glint to them.

But I'm suddenly wary. What if she wants to spend the night? When I was covering her with the blanket, I wasn't thinking about that. I must go in there and wake her up, but that'd be unfair. She's probably tired and needs some rest. But I think she's staying at this hotel. She can go sleep in her own room. Is she only pretending to be asleep? It doesn't seem like it.

I go back into the room and dispose of the used condoms. I wash my hands and put on my shorts. I stand staring down at her, not sure how to wake her up. I don't want her to get the wrong message. I know how women are. She sleeps here for the night and suddenly thinks we're in a relationship. I can't

risk that. I edge closer to the bed and slowly put my hand on her leg. I shake her gently. She stirs but doesn't wake up. I shake her again, this time a little harder. She stirs and pries her eyes open, then looks at me where I'm squatting at the foot of the bed.

I squirm a little. "Umm. It's time to go."

She rubs her eyes then struggles to sit up. The blanket falls off her chest, exposing her perfect breasts. They are so beautiful that I think of fucking her again. But the look on her face stops the thought dead in its tracks.

"You couldn't even let me sleep for a while?" she barks at me. Her face tightens into a frown.

Okay. This is what I'm scared of. I thought we had a mutual unspoken agreement. But it's beginning to look like we are, indeed, not on the same page.

"You have a room here, right? I think it'd be better for you to go sleep in your own room. I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I'm not looking for a relationship and I think it's best we don't exchange numbers."

She snatches the blanket back up and looks offended. "And what made you think I'd want your number?"

I raise my hands and go to straighten up but stop halfway. "I'm just saying."

"You must think the world of yourself. You think you're Mr. Perfect, don't you?"

I'm confused by the sudden switch. "If I'm not Mr. Perfect, then why did you fuck me?"

She yanks the blanket off her body. "Why did you fuck *me*?"

I straighten up fully. "This is why I stay away from you women. I can't take the drama."

"You women? You women?" She gets off the bed, naked, her butt jiggling beautifully as she goes to pick up her clothes and puts them on hurriedly.

"Learn how to respect women!" she shouts, and snatches her bag off the floor, then slams the door shut behind her.

Phew! What a riot.



# Chapter 3

Bria

“Morning Bria, how was your trip?” Daisy, my colleague, asks as I walk into the office.

“Morning, Daisy. It was okay,” I answer as images of Myles’s hot body flash through my mind’s eye.

I’m thankful I don’t ever have to see him again. Being hot isn’t enough for me. He lacks manners, and I’m glad I won’t have to deal with that. Do I regret sleeping with him? No. It’d been a while since I let a man close to me. It was good, and I enjoyed it, and now I can close that brief chapter of my life forever.

“Is Micha in yet?” I ask as Daisy gets up from her chair to get a file from the cabinet beside my table.

“Nope. I haven’t seen her this morning.”

Just then, Micha, my boss, jabs her head through the door that’s slightly open. She never knocks and we never expect her to.

“Bria, my office, now,” she says, and pulls her head back out.

I fish for the files I need and put them in my folder, then make for the door. Daisy winks at me as I pull it open, and I giggle. As I walk toward Micha’s office, I think about my future. I joined Maestro Law Firm as a baby lawyer, just fresh out of law school. But over the last six years, I’ve grown exponentially, representing the company in many tax cases and traveling around the world to team up with other lawyers. And meeting high-profile clients. Just like when I was in Las Vegas the previous week. It’s been six years of hard work, and I hope soon I’m made a partner. I’ve given my all.

I knock on Micha’s door.

“Come in.”

I push the door open and take the seat opposite her. Micha isn’t your regular boss. She treats her staff like equals. She’s never condescending, and she pays well. There’s not a mean bone in her body.

“I’m impressed,” she says as I take the seat directly opposite her.

“Oh?” I say, stretching the file toward her.

“I talked to Nula’s team on the phone. She’s highly impressed by how you handled the case. She and her team say this is the first time anyone is putting them through with transparency.”

Nula is a pop star who made it big many years ago. We'll be handling the tax procedures for her properties in Long Beach. She's had less than honest lawyers who have been stealing from her and put her at odds with the IRS. I nod and look at Micha as she goes through the signed documents.

She raises her head. "Another new client signed," she says, beaming from ear to ear.

I smile too, waiting for her to say more. I wait for her to mention anything resembling me making partner, but she doesn't. I'll have to be patient. I've been patient for years, but a little more patience won't hurt.

"I'll get back to work," I announce.

She looks up as if she's forgotten I've been sitting in front of her all this while. "Oh, yes. Please do. Good job."

"Thank you," I say as I make for the door.

A little more patience is what I need.

At lunchtime, Daisy and I go to our favorite place, a bistro just three doors down the street. It's a place where they serve the most delicious rice, chicken, and salad.

"What are you having?" Daisy asks as we settle down in our favorite spot, a booth beside a window where we watch people go by as we eat.

I squirm as I open my mouth to answer.

"Rice, chicken, and greens," we say in unison, and both laugh.

She shakes her head and her thick dark hair swishes from side to side. “You’re like a pregnant woman. You eat the same thing every afternoon. I won’t be surprised if you do turn out to be pregnant.”

I laugh as the waiter comes over to get our order.

“Pregnant? I haven’t...” I start to say, but trail off. I’m about to say I haven’t been with a man for a while now, but that’s not true. I was just with a man last week. A man who turned my world upside down. A man who handled my body as if he’d known me for years. Sadly, as good as it felt, he’s a man I never want to see again. Men always think women are the emotional sex. They think just because you have sex with them that you automatically want a relationship. What a joke. He talked to me as though he knew for sure that I wanted to trap him. I don’t even know his last name, or what he does for a living, or where he’s from, but he already concluded I wanted more from him. Anyway, I’m glad he’s gone for good with his egotistical self.

The waiter comes back with our order and places our plates in front of us.

“Please, let me know if you need anything else,” she says and leaves.

“So, what is Micha saying about your promotion to partner?”

I take a forkful of rice. “Nothing.”

“She’s still not bringing it up?”

“No. But I’m hoping it’s soon. I’ve given so much of myself to the firm. Going on seven years now. I know it happens in most firms after ten years, but we don’t follow the rules in Maestro firm,” I say, putting the forkful of rice in my mouth.

“I hear Fern is looking to become a partner, too.”

“I heard that as well, but she’s only been with the firm for four years.”

Fern is a colleague I don’t really get along with, and I’m thankful we don’t share an office. I’m glad I share an office with Daisy, who is the sweetest person I have ever met. She has the kindest brown eyes, and her face is almost always spread in a smile.

Daisy came to Long Beach just a year ago from Philadelphia with a law degree. Micha hired her, and we’ve been friends since then. Sometimes she hangs out with me and Ava, my best friend. I met Ava about a year ago at a conference that was held in San Francisco. We chatted and found out we both live in Long Beach. We exchanged numbers and met up with each other when we got back to town. And like they say, the rest is history.

“Fern doesn’t deserve it. You do way more than she does. You just got us a high-profile client. How many high-profile clients has she brought in?”

I tilt my head. “Well, to be fair to her, she brought the upcoming artist, Ezra.”

“That’s it. And Ezra isn’t even an A-list artist.”

“He’s just starting out. He’ll get there,” I respond.

“The fact remains that you’ve done more for the company than she has.”

I laugh and nod. This is why I love her. She’s so good for my ego.

“Micha had better seriously consider making you a partner before another firm snatches you up.”

I laugh again and think about it. If I found a better offer, would I leave?



I’m exhausted when I get back home in the evening. It’s been a gruesome day of going through endless paperwork and running around town to get stuff done. I’m glad to be back home. As I pull closer, I see that the house next to mine, a cozy white house with big, wide front steps, has a moving truck in front of it. It has been vacant for two weeks now. Maybe three weeks, I’m not sure. I wasn’t really friendly with my old neighbors. We barely saw each other, anyway. But good to know there’s someone moving in now. I doubt we’ll be too friendly, anyway.

I drive into my little driveway and bring the car to a stop. I pull my handbag off the front passenger seat and get out of the car, locking it. I’m going into my house when two men come out of the other house to get a chair from the moving truck. They lug the couch, a wine-colored beauty, in. The new tenant

must have good taste, I think as I fiddle the key into the lock on my front door.

I just moved here about three months ago. I loved my old house, but it held too many memories with Chad. It had been our home together. It was painful to remain there. I wanted to flush every memory of him out of my mind. I got rid of every single thing that reminded me of him. This new place gives me peace. Nothing reminds me of him here, which was what I was going for when I went as far away as I could from my old place.

The new house is a bungalow, a beautiful one. It's just like the one next door. All the houses on the street have the same design, at least from what I can tell from the outside. I don't know if it's the exact same design inside. I look over at my blue chairs. I sold off all my old furniture and used the money to buy new stuff.

This house makes me happy—the blue chairs, the little French chandelier in the middle of the living room ceiling, the opaque center table. I miss my old transparent table, but this one is just as beautiful. Spiral lamps sit on either side of the sofa. A sliding door leads to the back of the house where there's a little porch with two cane chairs on it. I've tried cultivating a garden twice and have failed, but I have no plans of leaving the house because I'm on a two-year lease; I still have time to pursue my dream of a perfect garden.

I pull my blazer off and throw it over my shoulder. Tossing my bag on an armchair, I make for the kitchen and get a glass

out of the cabinet. I turn on the tap and begin to fill the glass as I stare at the house next door. There's no one outside. Then the two men I'd seen earlier come out, another man in tow. The glass slips out of my hands, and I fling my wet hands to my mouth. The glass is rolling noisily in the sink. I bring my hand down to stop the twirling glass, my eyes still glued to the window.

This must be a dream. A really bad one. The man standing in the front yard of the neighboring house looks exactly like Myles. He has his hair, his shoulders, his toned arms, his exact same height, and he has on the same shirt he was wearing that night in Vegas. Maybe it's his twin? But the longer I look at him, the more I realize I'm lying to myself.

It's Myles.

He's there, standing next to my house. He turns his back to me as he talks to the other two men, and I know I can't lie to myself anymore. Myles, the man I had meaningless sex with in Las Vegas, the man who was rude to me, the man I thought I'd never see again, is my new next-door neighbor?

How did he find me? Oh my God, I hooked up with a stalker. I don't know what to do.



# Chapter 4

Myles

“Daddy. Can I wear my hair in a ponytail?” Ellie asks as I lace her shoes.

“You have your hair in a ponytail, El.”

“I don’t,” she says sharply. “This is not a ponytail.”

I finish lacing her shoes and look up. It indeed isn’t a ponytail.

She narrows her eyes at me.

“But I thought...you were looking at me in the mirror when I did it, why didn’t you stop me?”

She twists her lips. “Because I thought you knew what you were doing.”

“What do you mean? Of course, I know what I’m doing.”

She gestures at her head with just one finger to dispute my last sentence.

I sigh and get off my knees, then turn her around to face the mirror fully. “Alright. Let’s fix it.”

She shifts on her pink fluffy chair covered with feathers and looks into the mirror. I pull the hair tie from her hair and twist it up, then put the band around it.

“That’s not a ponytail, daddy. That’s a bun,” she says in her tiny voice.

I sigh and take the hair tie off. “Sorry about that,” I say as I set out to do it the right way. “Better?” I ask when I finish.

She nods her head. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

I nod. “Now time to eat,” I say, and lead her out of the room.

The truth is I’m stressed. We moved to Long Beach a few days ago and I’ve been having a hard time settling in. Between the packing and unpacking—which I’m still not through with—and work, I’m exhausted. I’m realizing that I’m not as young as I used to be. I’m getting older. I miss the days when I could work back-to-back. Days when I felt invincible because I could push my body beyond its limits. I’m fit, but the body truly keeps the score. I’m not old. I’m only forty-nine, but I know I need help. A nanny for Ellie would be nice. Someone who’d take her to school, pick her up, and make sure she’s safe and happy while I work.

I’m capable of doing all of that myself, but my job makes it difficult. I’m a detective; I work on cases and stay out at odd hours. Sometimes I have to leave the house very early or come back home in the middle of the night. I get calls all hours of

the day and need someone to stay with Ellie. My wife and I are in the middle of a long, drawn-out divorce, and I just got sent to Long Beach to work on a case undercover.

I pour cereal into a bowl and pour in milk from the fridge. Cereal is the only quick edible thing we have—I can't whip up anything else right now.

“What do you think about getting someone who'd take you to school every morning?” I ask her.

“Like Dorthy?” she asks as I pass the bowl of cereal to her.

Dorthy was the nanny we'd had in Denver. “Yes, like Dorthy.”

“I'd like it. If...only if she's nice.”

“Okay, I'll find someone nice,” I assure her.

Ellie takes a while to adjust to places. Sometimes I feel guilty for uprooting her and moving her on a whim, but she couldn't stay with my soon-to-be ex-wife since she trots the globe doing God knows what. She says she travels for work, but I wonder what she does. As much as I feel guilty for moving Ellie away from her friends in Denver, she's taken well to Long Beach. She's not been crying like she did when we moved to Denver from Portland. She's been eager to go to school and has made friends already. It hurts that we might be leaving when the case my partner and I are investigating is solved. I don't have too long before I retire. I should just have a case or two left after this one, but I don't know where those will take us to yet. After that we can settle back down at home in Denver.

We're working on a fraud case. It's the same case that took me to Las Vegas a week ago, but we've been tipped off that the person we want is in Long Beach. A company that's being used for money laundering.

I look at Ellie again and make a mental note to call a nanny agency today. I'm determined to make her stay in Long Beach as pleasant and memorable as possible.



After dropping Ellie off at school, I drive to the three-story building on Aquarium Way. It's tucked in the corner of a discreet street. The place was picked as our office because it is not in the busy part of town. Since we're working undercover, we'll have to protect our identity. We can meet at a restaurant and hide in plain sight whenever my partner and I need to meet, but we need a place to store and go through our files. It's a building you can access through the back ally. A perfect place for us.

I park the car in the alley and go up the long flight of stairs to the second floor. It's kind of a derelict building that's been out of use for a while now. Both the first and third floors are unoccupied. We chose the second floor because it's not easy to get to if anyone is looking for you, and we can observe comings and goings from windows on all sides. The third floor is too far up, and wouldn't be easy to escape from if needed. So, second floor it is.

"Milley!" Jon, my partner, says as I walk in.

That's what he calls me. A bastardization of my name. Jon and I have worked together on multiple cases—he's like a brother now. The office is like a real one. It's painted bright white with chairs and tables and files and cabinets. It looks nothing like the exterior of the building.

"You're late," he says, clicking the end of the green ballpoint pen in his hand.

"School runs."

"Thank God I don't have kids. I'd be running around trying to get them to school, too."

I pull my pistol out of my trousers and put it on the table, making sure it's not pointed at Jon, and pull out my chair. "You don't know what you're missing," I joke.

He laughs out loud.

Life may be stressful now, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Ellie is my everything and has changed my life for the better. I feel like the divorce would have been harder on me if I didn't have her.

He throws a file over to me and I jump up to catch it before it falls on the floor.

"That's what we're working with," he says.

I put the file on the table and flip it open. It contains tree charts connecting cases from different states. When I flip to the next page, the picture of a woman with short dark hair comes into view. She's a bit chubby and has round cheeks, red with excess blush. She has a wide smile on her face. She looks

harmless. But I've learned in my twenty-eight years of working as a detective that sometimes the most amiable people are capable of the most dangerous things.

I flip quickly through the pictures of the other people close to the case and shut the file. "So how do we swoop in?"

Jon furrows his wrinkled forehead. "I'm thinking we go in as an artist and manager. They mostly work with those types of people."

"If we go in as clients, it'd be hard to penetrate the company," I say, and rub my fingers on my upper lip, thinking. "There are countless ways to penetrate an organization. I'm sure we'll come up with a good one, and we have to be quick about it. We need to report to headquarters in two weeks."

"Yes," Jon says, nodding, then leans against his chair. "We'll find a way."



The next day, I've just gotten back from work and am resting at home, waiting for it to near 4 p.m. so I can go pick Ellie up from school, when the doorbell rings. When I open it, a middle-aged woman with a polite smile on her face is standing there, staring at me. I'm confused. I think she's a neighbor who's come to welcome me to the neighborhood, but she's not holding anything that looks like a tray of pie or macaroni and cheese. Instead, in her hand is a folder, and at her side is a black handbag.

“May I help you?” I question.

She’s still smiling. “Yes, I’m from the au pair agency.”

I slap my hand against my head. “Oh yes. Come in. You were supposed to come in the morning.”

She steps in and looks around. “Yes, I’m sorry about that.”

I look her up and down. She looks motherly, like she’s taken care of a lot of children. She looks like she might have one or two of her own. I like her already. I know I’m desperate, but that isn’t what is pushing me to like her.

She takes a seat on my wine-colored leather sofa and puts her folder on her lap.

I take a seat and take her credentials when she hands her file over to me.

I go through it. “Impressive. You’ve been doing this for a while now.”

“Yes, when my kids grew up and left the house, I thought it’d be nice to go back to working again. I took up the one thing I love doing and know how to do best. Child nurturing.”

I have a feeling Ellie will like her. She looks a bit like Dorthy.

I nod and hand her back her credentials. “I’ll be getting back in touch with you.”

“Alright. Thank you,” she says as I lead her to the door.

I’ll be at home tomorrow, so I know I can run a background check on her. I’ll make up my mind then. Being a detective makes me extra careful about letting people into my home and

into my family, and I'll do my own research on her to know if she's clean and if I can let her near my kid. As much as I like her, that's not enough. This was a problem I had with my ex-wife, Sonya. She thinks I'm too logical and cautious. Too rigid. She always accused me of being unemotional. But years of training and working in the field have taught me that if you move in the world being overtly emotional, you'll get hurt, or worse, get yourself killed.

Sonya and I never saw eye to eye on many issues. I sometimes wonder why we ever got married. She is the polar opposite of me. But you can blame my logical way of thinking. When I found out she was pregnant, I thought the right thing to do was get married. To give the child a home with a family. Boy, was I wrong. Sonya made my life a living hell. I treated her well and gave her everything she ever wanted, but it was never enough. She wanted more and more, and I would go beyond my limits to give her just that.

Eventually, she started looking in other places to feed her hunger, no matter how much I gave her. I knew it'd be best if we separated, and she fought it at first, but gave in eventually. I suspect she never really wanted a child, and in the end we both decided Ellie would be far better off with me. She's been traveling the world since then, dropping in to see us whenever she has the time. We may not be together anymore—to my relief—but though it's been a painful experience for me, I don't regret having a child with her. Would I prefer to co-parent with a woman who's easy to get along with? Yes. But she gave me Ellie, my biggest blessing in the world.



My phone rings.

“Jon. Any news?”

“Yeah, could you come to the office right now? We’re going up to West Hollywood to check out a lead.”

“Now?” I ask, thinking about how much time I have before school lets out.

“Yes, now.”

“Gosh, I’ll be going to pick Ellie up from school in maybe two hours.”

“We’ll be back before then. It’s only 30 minutes away.”

I sigh and pull my jacket off the chair. This is why I need a nanny. I make a mental note to run the background check later in the day. I can’t keep living like this.

# Chapter 5

Bria

**K**nowing what I know now, that Myles is my next-door neighbor, I've been trying so hard to avoid him. I still wonder about how he found me. But I find one thing strange. If he's stalking me, why hasn't he shown up at my door? I mean, it's been a week now, and I haven't seen him creeping around my house or trying to look through my window. I've thought of going to the police. I know how dangerous stalkers can be. I've seen movies about them, and I've read real-life stories about them. But what will I tell the police? The man I had a one-night stand with on a business trip out of town has just moved in next door? They'll just tell me it's not a crime and that people are free to live anywhere they want.

But I know that this isn't a coincidence. This man is stalking me. He told me he didn't want a relationship, then looked up where I live and moved in next door. This is a dangerous person. I adjust my dress and look out of the kitchen window. There's no one in front of his house. This has been my routine

for a week now. I always check to make sure he's not lurking around before leaving the house. I go over to the door, open it, and rush to my car. I quickly ignite the engine and drive off as fast as I can. This whole thing has elevated my anxiety levels. I'm stressed and don't know how long I can do this. I'm off to Ava's place for lunch on a beautiful, bright Saturday afternoon, and instead of being happy, I'm scared. Because a psycho just moved in to monitor my every move and I'm afraid to go to the police.

When I get to Ava's place, I take a deep breath before getting out of my car. It's a small apartment on Hellman Street. I take the elevator up to her apartment and ring the bell. A few seconds later, she appears behind the half-open door wearing a short dress. She's salsa dancing to the music playing inside with a big ass spoon in her hand.

I shake my head and laugh. Typical Ava.

She doesn't say anything, but nods for me to join her. I step in and start to imitate her salsa steps. She nods to say I'm doing good, and soon we're salsaing our way into her living room from the kitchen. Ava has a way of lifting you from your pit of worry. This is why I like spending time with her. Her hair is held up in a bun, but a few strands are breaking free as she dances. She's so good at it, while I'm, well...doing the best I can.

“Shake those hips, Bria. Shake ‘em!”

I take her advice and start to shake my hips harder.

“Don't break yourself. Easy,” she warns.

We both laugh.

I haven't seen Ava since the week before. We've talked on the phone, but I feel like this conversation will be better in person. As I settle at the kitchen counter, the story of my escapade hangs loosely on the edge of my lips.

"I had sex," I blurt out.

She stops dancing. "Huh? With who? The last time I checked, you didn't have a boyfriend and you weren't even into anyone."

"It happened in Vegas."

"Your trip to Vegas? Is it an ex? Please tell me it's not Chad. I may not know him, but you said he was horrible to you."

I shake my head. "It's not him. It's a stranger. A crazy stranger."

"Why would you have sex with a crazy stranger?" she asks, knitting her brows together.

"I didn't know he was crazy at the time. And, oh my God, the sex was so good."

"Crazy people give good sex. I would know."

"He wasn't crazy at the time. At least, he didn't look like he was."

She's staring at me intensely.

I sigh. "Guess what he just did? He's stalking me."

"That pussy good," she says and winks.

“This is not a joke, Ava. He just moved in next door to me.”

“What? He moved in next to your house?”

I nod slowly. “I’m scared.”

“You’re the one who had sex with a crazy person. This is why I preach abstinence.”

“Stop joking! This is serious.”

She purses her lips. “Maybe you’re overreacting. Maybe it’s a coincidence.”

“A coincidence? The random stranger I had sex with in Vegas moves in next door to me. A man who doesn’t even know my last name. A man I didn’t give my number to.”

“There has to be an explanation,” Ava says, licking soup off her palm. “I hope you don’t end up on a crime show.”

I frown at her and she laughs. “Chill, we’ll find out who he is, okay? Trust me.”



On Monday morning, I’m hurrying out of the house because I woke up late. Ava and I stayed up watching movies late into the night. She’d come over to watch the other house, to catch a glimpse of the crazy man. To see what we could find out about the stalker next door. But when we didn’t see him, she decided she’d help by asking the real estate agent who handles the lease. She was the one who woke me up this morning and then rushed off to her house to get ready for work.

I'm ten minutes late already. I run outside before I realize I didn't check to see if anyone was in front of the house next door first. But it's too late, because someone is coming out of the house, and this person has seen me. I try to play it cool. He steps out with a little girl in tow and a middle-aged woman following behind them.

He slows down when he recognizes me, his eyebrows slowly knitting together. Seeing him up close again brings the memories from our night together back in full force. He's wearing a form-fitting T-shirt, and his chest is just as solid as it was the first time I saw him. Now I can see his face properly in the light of day. The first time I saw him in the lobby, I got just little disjointed glances at his face. And that night, his features were shrouded in mystery, aided by the night. Looking at him now, I can see he's even more handsome than I thought he was.

As he moves closer, I notice his full brows that sit atop his dark brown eyes that crinkle at the corners. I don't move as I stare at him, wondering why someone I can't stand is so gorgeous. His lips are sexy in a James Bond type of way. The left side has amusement written on it while the right side is expressionless.

“Well, well, well. Look who's stalking me.”

His words bring me back out of the trance I've drifted into. What? Stalk? Me? Who is the stalker here?

“I moved in before you, so I'm not the stalker here. You're the one stalking me.”

He tilts his head. “Stalk you? You must be mistaken. When I rented this house, I didn’t even know you lived next door.”

I clutch on to the strap of my bag as if it has the power to save me. Could he be telling the truth? I mean, he doesn’t know my full name. I didn’t even tell him I live in Long Beach. There was no way he could have found me. The universe is playing the cruelest joke right now. Why would it bring the man I never wanted to see again to my doorstep? Well, not technically to my doorstep, but close enough.

He crosses his arms over his chest. I look at the little girl beside him. She’s beautiful. Could she be his daughter? And the woman standing beside the girl. Is she his wife? Was he married when I had sex with him? I want to puke. I don’t do married men. But she looks older than he does. She looks old enough to have given birth to him, even though he looks older than me.

“We’ll be late. Mr. Miler,” the woman says.

“Just a minute, Garcelle,” he says to her.

Then he turns back to me. “I don’t know where you got the idea that I’m stalking you. But I’m not. Especially not after the way we parted. But I promise you I’ll stay out of your way.”

I nod. “Good. Stay out of my way,” I say, and look at the little girl, who doesn’t seem to approve of how I’m speaking to her dad. Her pouted lip tells me that much.

“Good. And you do the same,” he spits out.

“I will,” I reply, and walk to my car. I get inside and fiddle with the key. It drops and I bend down to pick it up. When I come back up, he’s gotten into the car with the little girl and the woman and is driving off.

On my way to work, I can’t stop thinking about what just happened. Maybe he’s telling the truth. A stalker wouldn’t have been as calm as he was. He was just too cool for my liking while addressing me and he seemed unbothered. And if he was truly stalking me, he wouldn’t have brought along the little girl I presume to be his daughter. Would he? I can’t wait to get to work so I can tell Ava all about it. It’s taking all the strength in me not to pull out my phone and call her right now, but I fear I’d get so carried away I’d drive into the next lane.

When I get into the building, I rush to our office, and thankfully Daisy isn’t here yet. I don’t wait to sit. I pull my phone out of my bag and just as I’m dialing, the office door opens. It’s Daisy.

“Jeez. Why are you standing in here with your phone in your hand? Have you forgotten we have a meeting this morning?”

“Shit. Yes, I forgot.”

“What’s wrong with you? You never forget things like this.”

I put my phone back in my bag. “I woke up late. And slept in,” I ramble as I check for my file in my drawer.

“You’re not making any sense. Micha is waiting for you,” she says, leaving the office.



I curse under my breath as I search my drawer. When I find the file, I grab it and run out to meet them in the conference room. Myles is trying to destroy my life when I've done absolutely nothing to him, I think to myself as I run down the hallway.

At lunchtime, I tell Daisy I'll meet her at the restaurant. I tell her I want to use the bathroom. When she leaves, I shut the door and dial Ava's number. She doesn't pick up after the first batch of rings. I dial again. I need to get this out or I'm afraid I'll combust.

Thankfully, she picks up.

"I saw him this morning."

"Who?" she asks.

"Who else? Myles?"

"Who's Myles?"

I forgot that I never told her his name. "My next-door neighbor."

"The supposed stalker?"

"Yes. Well, you were right. I don't think he's a stalker. For some reason the universe thought it'd be fun to torture me by bringing this man to where I live."

Ava laughs. "Maybe he's your husband-to-be and you just don't know it yet."

"Eww. Stop joking about that. I need to know who he is, though, and why he moved to my street."

“Fine, I’m busy, but I’ll help you find out later. Okay? Are you satisfied now?”

“Yes,” I say, but I’m not satisfied. I want to know who he is, but whatever or whoever he turns out to be, I promise myself that I’ll stay out of his way.

# Chapter 6

## Myles

I get out of bed and stumble to switch on the light. I'm thirsty and didn't have much to drink before bed. I open the door and step into the hallway. It's dark, but I don't turn on the light. I don't want to wake up Ellie or Garcelle. Instead, I guide myself by touching the walls until I get to the living room. The moonlight flooding in makes my walk to the kitchen easier. I'm filling a glass of water at the tap when I raise my head to see a room in the next house has its light on. It's probably her bedroom. Or is it her living room? Is she working late?

When the glass is filled with water, I gulp it down. I feel my way back to my room and close my door gently. I'm about to get back in bed, but I stop and go to my work table instead. I pull my laptop close and open it, but I don't turn it on immediately. I tap my finger on the table, then boot up my laptop. The sleep has cleared from my eyes, and I need something to fill my mind with. I'm not really curious about

Bria, but I need to know where she works. What does she do? What might she be doing this late at night? What's keeping her up?

I open my browser and type in her name, but there are quite a number of Brias. I decide to go the detective route. After a few minutes, her picture pops on the screen. The first thing I think is how beautiful she is. She may be rude, but the copper-colored brown eyes staring at me are probably the most mesmerizing eyes I have ever seen. I stare at her lips, her honey-colored hair, her narrow and straight nose. That smile on her face makes her look innocent. But she's far from it. It's a different look from the mean mug she had on her face the last time I saw her. This is false advertising, I think to myself.

Then I look below the picture. Bria Shaw. Attorney. Interesting.

Then something catches my attention. Maestro Law Firm.

My fingers lay still on the keyboard. This must be some type of joke. I look at her picture again, studying it hard to make sure I'm looking at the right person. But it's her. Bria works at the law firm we're investigating for fraud. I lean back and let out a chuckle. My mind races back to the pictures Jon showed me some days back at the office. How did I not recognize her? And gosh, the name Bria rang no bells in my head. I rest my hand on the back of my head, my mind trying to process what I just discovered.

Jon and I have been looking for a way to penetrate the firm. A way to get closer so we can investigate from inside. And

here, we're being offered a solution. But—and it's a big but—Bria and I aren't exactly chummy. I'd told her I'd stay out of her way, and she'd said the same. What if she's in on the fraud? What if I approach her and she informs her boss about it, enabling them to cover their tracks and making our investigation futile?

I sigh and rock my chair back, lifting the front legs off the floor. I slowly let the chair back to the ground and shut my laptop. I reach for my phone and quickly shoot Jon a text to inform him I might have found our in, but it isn't something we can discuss on the phone. He texts back to say we could meet at the office or a restaurant we frequent. I choose the restaurant because it will be easier to get to.

I go back to bed, but sleep never comes.



“Are you sure it's her?” Jon says, looking at the pictures of Bria I saved to my phone.

He's never seen her before in person, but he wants to make sure I'm sure of what I'm saying.

“Yes, that's her. You could come over today. I can see her house from my kitchen. You might catch a glimpse of her.”

“So, how do we move in? Do we go interrogate her?” he questions.

I twist my lips to the side. “We don't know if she's in on the racket. She could inform the rest of them and destroy our

lead.”

He nods and takes a sip of his coffee, then sighs.

“I’m thinking we could offer her a way out, if she’s involved in the dealings. We could get her on our side. Let her know how serious this is. If she refuses, then we can escalate the issue. What do you think?”

He nods. “That sounds fine. So, what do you have in mind?”

I rub my hands together as I prepare to tell Jon what I have planned out.



It’s 8 p.m. Garcelle is in Ellie’s room, getting her ready for bed. I pop my head through the door. “I’m going out. I should be back soon.”

“Daddy, come say goodnight to me before I sleep.”

“I’ll be back before you go to bed,” I say, and pull my head back out.

I reach the front door and pull it open. When I’m out I shut the door and look around for a second or two. Instead of going to my car, I turn left and head for Bria’s house. Her lights are on, a sign she’s in and up. When I reach her door, I press on the doorbell.

She opens the door with a smile on her face. A smile that slowly melts into a frown.

I have my detective face on, set without emotion.

“What do you want?” she demands.

I expected she'd slam the door in my face. “Can I come in?”

She looks at me with a scowl on her face. “Why do you want to come into my house?”

I put my hands in my pockets and wait for her to calm down a little. “We need to discuss something.”

She shakes her head. “Look. If you're here to apologize for being rude to me then I'm not interested. We're better off not talking. I'm fine with that.”

I tilt my eyebrows up. “Apologize? Why should I apologize to you?”

My question rattles her. Her mouth slacks a bit.

“I'm here to discuss something very important with you. It's about where you work. It's serious and it's confidential. You wouldn't want the neighbors to hear about it, would you?” I ask, cocking one brow up.

She eyes me, then widens the door. I stroll into a very nice space. The layout of the house is just like mine, which isn't a surprise considering the exterior is exactly the same. But the interior design is the total opposite. Where my living room has wine sofas, hers are light blue. Her place is more homely in every sense, and it makes me want to do more with my place.

She doesn't follow me in but stands with her arms crossed against her chest. Her arms are pushing up her boobs, and her cleavage is full and supple. I put the thought out of my head as I sit on one of the sofas, which turns out to be really

comfortable, but I don't lean back. I put my elbows on my thighs, spread far apart, and clasp my palms together. She has on a silk gown. It looks like a cross between loungewear and nightwear and it hugs her figure tightly. She doesn't say anything, but stares hard at me with one corner of her lips turned up.

I press my left and right index fingers together and run them under my chin. I decide to start with the heaviest news so I can pad it with my proposition. "The firm you work for is involved in fraud."

I study her face to see how hard it hits. She uncrosses her arms. "You're a liar. And now I can confirm you're also a stalker. How do you even know where I work?"

"Your information is on the web."

"Did you go searching for me on the web? How did you even get my full name?"

I remove my fingers from my chin. "I used your address. Look, let's cut to the chase. Your firm is involved in a huge fraud ring. We're investigating your boss, Micha. I'm an undercover detective."

She goes to sit down and stares at me incredulously. "Have you been stalking me, then?"

"No. I didn't know you worked there until yesterday. We've only had Micha on our radar. We just started the investigation. I saw a picture of you in one of our files, but I guess I didn't



recognize you because you had short hair. I only realized it was you yesterday.”

From her reaction, I can bet she’s hearing this for the first time. I’ve been an investigator for twenty-something years now and I can tell when someone is in shock. But some people are good actors, so I don’t conclude that’s it yet.

“So, why are you here? I don’t own the firm. I only work there.”

“You could be in on the fraud.”

She springs up from the sofa. “What! No. Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know you.”

“Well, I’m not involved in any kind of fraud. I’ve been doing honest work all of my life.” She pauses. “And Micha is not a criminal. She’s a genuine, hard working woman who’s built her company from the ground up.”

“How are you so sure of that? It’s not written on her forehead, is it?”

She shakes her head and sits back down.

“I’m here to offer you a way out. If you know anything about what’s going on in your firm, then all you need to do is cooperate with us.”

“Us?”

“My partner and me.”

She sighs and shakes her head. “I just told you I know nothing about any kind of fraud going on there. I’m still not even sure I believe that you aren’t playing some sort of game.”

“You can choose to believe it or not, but you’ll help us with our investigation.”

She shakes her head again, this time vigorously. “No. I’m not a detective. I don’t investigate cases.”

“Well, you have no choice now, do you? If you don’t, then you go down with them when the shit hits the fan.”

She exhales through gritted teeth.

“I need to get closer to your boss. I need to investigate from the inside. Do you get invited to functions at her house?”

She nods to say yes.

“Good. I’ll be your boyfriend from now on.”

“What? You must be crazy. I don’t need a boyfriend.”

“A fake boyfriend, I mean. That way I can go to these functions with you and get a closer look at Micha’s life.”

I can tell she’s struggling hard inside her head. She presses her lips together, then bites on her bottom lip. “I can’t do that. I’m sorry. Micha has been nothing but nice to me. I can’t.”

“You could have handled some of the fraudulent files. That means you’ve been involved in one way or another without even knowing it. That’s if you’re not lying. But I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt. I’m offering you a lifeline here. Think about it.”

She doesn't say anything more but looks at me blankly as I get off the sofa.

“Oh, and nice place you've got here. I could use some of your design ideas at mine.” When I reach the door, I open it and turn to her. “You have three days to think about it. You know where to find me when you've got your answer ready,” I say as I step out and shut the door behind me.

# Chapter 7

Bria

**E**ver since finding out who Myles is, I've been unsettled. I wanted to know who he was and why he moved to the house next to mine so badly, but now that I do, I wish I didn't. Like they say, be careful what you wish for.

But how was I to know that he came to turn my life upside down? I still find it so hard to believe that moving next to me is a coincidence. If he's investigating Micha and the firm, then surely, he should have known I worked there. Didn't they do their research? But it could also be that Myles truly didn't recognize me in the picture on our website. I don't recognize myself in that picture either. Fresh out of school, I had my hair cropped close to my head. The only thing I recognize from that picture is my honey-blond hair color. Even my eyes look like they're smaller due to the way I used to wear my makeup.

When I arrive at work, I see that my parking spot has been taken. Well, I don't have a designated parking space, but I have one I claimed for myself. The car in my spot is Fern's.

She knows it's my space. She's looking for a fight. I decide not to indulge her, so I look for another spot. The only vacant space is in the far corner. I doubt my car will fit as I maneuver into it, but thankfully, it does.

When I get upstairs, Daisy is in the office.

"Did you see that Fern parked in your spot?" she greets me.

"Good morning to you too, Daisy."

"Good morning. I'm sorry, but I can't stand her. She thinks she's all that. Everyone knows that's your spot."

I shrug my shoulders. "She can have it for today. She's begging for a fight, and I won't give it to her."

Daisy nods firmly. "Don't."

Thirty minutes later, we're on our way to the conference room for a meeting. When we get to the door of the conference room, as I'm about to push one of the black double doors open, Fern comes out. She looks Daisy and me up and down and says a casual hi, but doesn't even wait for a reply. She marches away from us as fast as she can and doesn't look back.

Daisy shakes her head and pushes the door open.

In the afternoon at lunch, I'm seated beside Daisy, pushing my food, my regular rice and chicken, around on the glass plate.

"You don't look like your appetite is intact. "

I look to the side to see that her plate is half empty already. I look back at mine that's still full, the chicken staring back at me.

"I had a lot to eat this morning," I say, knowing it's a lie. In fact, for breakfast, I only had a cup of coffee. A cup of coffee I couldn't finish. I washed the rest down the kitchen sink.

She arches one brow at me. "You had breakfast a hundred hours ago," she says. "It's a few minutes past two now. There must be something wrong with your digestive system."

I want to tell her that although I haven't eaten much today, I'm not hungry. I want to tell her that just like Judas in the Bible, I've been asked to betray Micha and the firm. But the only difference is I don't know if I'll be going down that route. Maybe, if I tell Daisy all about what Myles proposed, she could suggest a way out. She works at the firm. Maybe we could tell Micha. Maybe, Myles is lying.

But he didn't look like he was lying. He looked serious as hell.

I stop pushing some of the rice around with my fork and open my mouth to tell her everything, but then the restaurant door opens, and I shut my mouth. A few seconds later my phone rings. I drop the fork from my fingers and pick it up. It's Ava.

"Hi, Ava."

At the mention of her name, Daisy perks up. "Hi, Ava!"

"Daisy's saying hi. We're at lunch."

“Oh, say hi to her for me,” Ava replies.

I nod and wait for her to continue.

“I’m going out for drinks tonight and I was wondering if you’d want to come,” Ava says.

“Umm.”

“Daisy could come too if she’s up for it.”

I turn to Daisy. “Ava wants to know if you’d like to come out to get some drinks tonight.”

She puts a bunch of chips in her mouth and shakes her head. “No, I’m taking work home.”

“Daisy’s busy tonight,” I say to Ava.

“Alright. Are you coming though? I can come pick you up. I’ve been holed up in the house every night. If I don’t go drinking tonight, I’m going to lose it.”

I shake my head and laugh. “Alright,” I drawl. “What time?”

“7...8:30?”

“8:30 is too late for me. I’ll have to be home by 10 p.m. so I can get up for work early tomorrow.”

“Err...tomorrow is Saturday, miss,” Ava says.

“Oh yeah, right. Okay, 8:30 will be fine.”

“Alright, I’ll come at 8.”

I nod and tell her bye.

“Not only do you not have a healthy appetite, you also have suddenly lost track of the days. What’s wrong?”

I stall, searching for a reasonable answer. Myles told me he's an undercover detective. I'll wait to see how this plays out first before informing anyone at work.

I lie to Daisy again. "I'm on my period."

And I die inside a little for lying to her.



I'm in front of the mirror, blending my blush, when I hear the hoot of a car horn outside. I look down at the time on my phone. It's 7:30. I shake my head and make for the front door.

Ava is honking the horn again when I open it.

"Stop!" I scream at her.

"It's time to go!" she screams back at me.

One or two window curtains are drawn aside by my neighbors, and I run toward Ava's car. I stick my head through the passenger's side. "No, it's not. You said 8:30."

She puts on her car light and looks at her watch. "You're right. But there's traffic. Think about how long it'll take for us to get to the bar."

"Well, I'm not ready."

She squints at me. "You look ready to me."

"Please, come in while I get dressed. You wouldn't want me going to the bar looking like this," I point to my penguin print pajamas.



“Nope, you’ll scare off all the men.”

I shake my head to show I disagree with her statement. “I’m not going out to meet men. I’m only going for drinks.”

She raises her hands up in surrender. “Okay, no need to get all defensive.”

She gets out and as we make our way in, I glance over at Myles’ house. The lights are on both inside and outside.

Ava catches me. “How’s your boyfriend doing?”

I sigh and push my front door open without responding. She giggles as she comes in after me. Ava has a way of making light of things. She’s the person I go to when life gets too heavy. But if she knew what deep shit I’m in right now, she would stop snickering at me. I haven’t told her about what Myles said. I doubt I will. I doubt I can tell anyone. I thought of telling my sister, Aria, but she’s busy getting ready for her wedding that’s coming up soon. I don’t want to trouble her with my own problems. Aria and I never keep anything from each other, but I’ll have to keep this to myself for now and not burden her. I’ll find a solution.

Twenty minutes later, after a lot of grumbling from Ava about the traffic we’re about to face and how all the good men will leave before we get there, we finally leave the house. We’re maybe two minutes into our journey to the bar when her car stalls.

I exhale. “When are you getting a new car?”

“When they increase my salary. Or maybe when I marry a billionaire,” she says, winking at me.

The cars behind us begin to urge us on with their horns.

Ava puts her head through the window and shrieks at them. “Oh, stop honking at me.”

She pulls her head back in as she continues to try starting the car. “People are just so impatient these days,” she laments.

“How ironic. Who was rushing me out of the house a few minutes ago?”

“I did that for a good cause.”

I shake my head and laugh.

Soon, the car is jerking forward again and we’re on our way.

We get to Hoogles bar at 8:50 p.m. Ava blames me for delaying and I blame her car for breaking down. We choose a comfortable seat at the corner of the hole-in-a-wall bar and agree we’re both at fault.

The waiter comes for our order. “It’s been a while, ladies. What are you having tonight.”

Ava gives me an ‘I told you I’ve been away for too long’ look before looking back at the waiter. “Do you have something new on the menu? Something exotic. I need some adventure.”

The waiter nods. “There’s a summer bourbon cocktail with pineapple and ginger and a secret ingredient I can’t divulge. I think you’ll love it.”

“Amazing. Will you have the same, Bria?” Ava asks.

I’m not sure what I want, but I’m not in the mood to go through the other options. “Yeah, sure.”

The waiter leaves and I look around the bar. Some couples are dancing on the marble floor and laughing. Everyone seems to be glowing with happiness tonight except for me.

I slip my hands together and cross them on the black circular table between Ava and me.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I am,” I say, and try to bob my head to the electronic music playing.

Ava and I haven’t talked about Myles for a while now. I’ve purposely avoided questions about him because I’m not sure if I should say anything. He promised to give me immunity if I cooperate with him and his partner. It’s so hard when something is eating at you on the inside, but you can’t tell anyone. It’s like having an itch you can’t scratch because your hands are tied. I sigh and shake my head.

“There’s something bothering you. I know you. Out with it. Now.”

I sigh again. “It’s Myles.”

“Oh, I see. What about him now?”

“I found out what he does and why he’s in town.”

“Oh, is that why you’ve not been bothering me about finding out who he is?”

I nod once. “Correct.”

“I hope he didn’t turn out to be an ex-convict stalker.”

“Quite the opposite. More like the one who would track down a stalker.”

The waiter comes with our drinks, big yellow straws and cocktail umbrellas sitting in the glasses.

“Thank you,” Ava says and takes a sip. She shuts her eyes and when she opens them, they are wide. “OMG. This is really good. I might need another one of these.”

“No problem. Just signal to me and I’ll be right over with more,” the waiter says and leaves.

“Taste it, Bria. Gosh, this is heaven.”

I pick up the glass, take the umbrella out and place it on the table before putting the straw to my mouth. I sip. Then sip again. “It’s good,” I say, taking a third sip.

The alcohol in it relaxes my nerves a little.

“So, what do you mean by he’s the type to track down a stalker? Is he a bounty hunter?”

I shake my head because Ava knows damn well bounty hunters have nothing to do with stalkers.

“He’s a detective.”

She drops her glass on the table gently and picks it up again. “Uhm. That’s hot.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It totally is.”

“He’s investigating me.”

She drops her glass with a thud and doesn’t pick it up again this time. “Huh?”

“Well...he’s not investigating me in particular, he’s investigating the firm.”

Ava shifts in her chair. “Why?”

“He says the firm is being used for money laundering. Or something like that. Fraud.”

“Oh wow. Are you serious?”

“I’m dead serious.”

“Jesus Christ of Nazareth. How did you find this out?”

“He came to my place two days ago. He says he’ll give me immunity if I cooperate with him.”

Ava looks at me confused. “He should be talking to your boss, not you. I know for a fact you have nothing to do with any type of fraud.”

It warms my heart that she trusts me. “That’s the problem. He can’t talk to her. He’s an undercover detective.”

She nods as the realization hits her. “Oh, I see. He wants to use you to get them.”

I nod.

“Jeez. That’s too much. Your boss has been so nice to you.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking. Micha has been good to me.”

Ava shrugs. “But if she’s peddling drugs then she’s not so nice, I guess.”

“She’s not peddling drugs.”

“Drugs, fraud. Same difference.”

“Well, he’s asking me to be his girlfriend so that he can investigate from inside.”

Ava starts to laugh. “Wait a minute. That means you’re stuck with him?”

I nod, then shake my head. “Unfortunately.”

“And you agreed?”

“No. He gave me three days to think about it. And my three days end tomorrow.”

“This is crazy.” She picks up her glass and sips until the straw starts to make an empty sound.

I run my hand over the rim of my glass. “What would you do if you were in my position?”

“To be very honest?”

I nod.

“I wouldn’t want to go to jail,” she answers and signals for the waiter.



On Sunday evening, I press the doorbell next door. I've decided I'll do as Myles says. Fraud is not a thing of levity. If it isn't true that the firm is involved in fraud, the police wouldn't be investigating us. Whoever it is that's using the firm to launder money is trying to put us all in trouble, and I will not tolerate that. You don't put people's careers in danger like that. So I decide to stay on the side of the law.

As I press the doorbell again, the thought of seeing Myles' smirking face turns my stomach. I wish I didn't have to go through this. I wish I wasn't at his mercy, but unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about it. The middle-aged woman I saw with Myles the other day opens the door. I half expect her to shout 'Honey, the crazy woman from the other day is here!' but she doesn't. I still do not think she's his wife.

"Good evening, ma'am," she says with a little smile on her face.

I clear my throat. "Good evening. Can I see Myles, please?"

"You mean, Mr. Miler?"

I don't know his last name, but I nod since he seems to be the only man in the house.

"Just a minute," she says and shuts the door gently.

I wait for maybe two minutes then the door opens again.

"Please, come in."

I follow her into the living room. I recognize the wine sofas from the other day. The interior is just like mine, except that the position of the kitchen is on the right wing while mine is

on the left. There are toys on the floor in front of the big sofa. A dining table is on the right, close to the kitchen. I look out of the kitchen window to my house and I wonder if Myles looks out of it sometimes. I make a mental note to always have something on or have the blinds drawn whenever I'm on the left side of the house. Then I hear giggling from the left side of the living room. I look over. Myles is sitting in a chair, and the little girl who I assume to be his daughter is sitting on his lap, books spread before them. It looks like he's helping her with her homework. It's a weird sight because I could never have imagined him helping a kid out with their homework. He seems like a 'go do your homework or I'll whoop your ass' type of guy.

When they see me, they stop smiling, the little girl especially. She looks like she's still offended by how I addressed her dad the other day, and I suspect she can keep a grudge. I want to wave to her, but I stop myself.

"Do you have an answer now?"

I want to say that if I didn't have an answer I wouldn't be here, but seeing that the little girl isn't frowning anymore stops me. I could send her on a frowning fest again and I don't want that.

I nod.

"Do you want to talk in private? We could go into the library," he asks.

Thinking this might be a ruse to get me deeper into the house, I decline and tell him the living room is okay for me to



say whatever I need to say.

He raises the little girl off his lap. “Alright. Garcelle, please take her. We’re just about done with her homework.”

The little girl jumps down from his arms and goes with the woman, whose name I know now to be Garcelle. When they’ve disappeared down the hallway, Myles gets up. He has on a black sleeveless undershirt that shows off his ripped arms. I know I’ve seen him naked before, but this sight stirs something in me. Something I can’t explain. I don’t exactly hate his guts right now. But I don’t exactly like him, so I don’t know why my body is betraying me.

He moves to the sofa in the middle of the room and points to the other one opposite it. I don’t want to sit, but my legs are weak, so I take the seat across from him.

“So, what did you arrive at?”

I sigh and keep my eyes down. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

I grit my teeth and look up. “What else?”

“I want you to say it, so it’s clear I’m not forcing you. So yes what?”

I’d thought just a few minutes ago that I didn’t hate his guts, but I’m certain now that I do. I double-hate his guts. He knows what I mean by yes, but he wants me to spell it out.

I grit my teeth again. “Yes, I’ll be your girlfriend.”

He smirks. “My fake girlfriend,” he corrects.

“You—” I start, but I don’t complete the sentence for fear that he might withdraw the immunity deal.

I get up. “Goodnight,” I say, and start for the door.

“Good night, honey.”

I stop halfway but continue walking after just a second, pursing my lips until I’m outside. Once I’m out I take a deep breath and pat myself on the back for keeping it professional.



It’s Micha’s birthday on Thursday. It’ll be the perfect way to introduce Myles. I’ve been to Micha’s house four times in all the six years I’ve spent with the firm, but I’ve been thinking of ways to get closer to her. And what better way than to offer to help with the party she’ll be hosting on Thursday night?

“The decorators will be coming in the morning. I want everything ready before 6 p.m.,” she says.

I’m sitting across from her, having come into her office under the guise of asking her to check out a file I’m working on. “I could come help out with some things in the morning.”

“What about work?”

“Oh, I’ll be here to do my work, but I can still come over to help. I really want to help.”

She smiles, her rosy cheeks getting redder. “Alright. As long as you get your work done, I’m fine with it.” I’m not sure what exactly I’ll be helping with because there’ll be professionals to

handle everything, but I'm sure I'll find something to do. Anything to get closer to Micha. Anything to help move the investigation forward and put this all behind me.

# Chapter 8

Myles

“Daddy, I want to come,” Ellie says as she watches me get dressed.

I finish knotting my tie and turn from the mirror to face her. She’s swinging her legs. I walk toward her on the bed where she’s seated. “It’s a very far place.”

“Is it very far like Narnia?”

I know Narnia is fictional, but I indulge her. “It is farther than Narnia.”

She widens her eyes. “Then why are you going?”

“Because I have to. That’s one thing adults do.”

“I don’t want to be an adult right now. Will you come back today?”

“I will.”

“How?”

“It’s magic.”

She giggles and nods.

“I’ll bring something for you, okay?”

She shrugs. “I’ll be asleep when you come home.”

“And I’ll save it for you. You’ll see it tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

She hops down from the bed, and I look at myself in the mirror again before leading her out to meet Garcelle in the living room.

A few minutes later, I’m pressing on Bria’s doorbell. It’s funny, because I feel like I’m coming to pick up a girlfriend—which is what I’m doing, but not really. After the second ring, she appears at the door. She has on a short silver dress, one that hugs her body perfectly. I pull my stare from her face down to her feet. She has on equally silver shoes, heels with peep toes. She has white polish coating her nails. I pull my gaze back up and my eyes rest briefly on her cleavage. Snippets of her bare breasts flash in my mind’s eye.

She clears her throat.

“Are you ready?”

She doesn’t answer, but steps out of her house, clutching a bag to her side.

“Alright,” I say.

We walk toward my car. She makes to open the back door.

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

She scowls. “Do what?”

“Sit in the back. How do you think it’ll look if we’re supposed to be dating and we arrive with you sitting in the back?”

She raises her shoulders and drops them. “I don’t think that’ll mean anything.”

“Oh, it will. Trust me.”

She squints her eyes as if she’s fighting a battle inside of her. Then she opens the door to the passenger seat. When we are settled, I ignite the engine and we set out. With Bria giving directions, we arrive fifteen minutes later.

“Wow, this place is huge,” I say. “It’s said that a person is innocent until proven guilty, but...”

Bria doesn’t say anything, but goes to open the car door.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come get the door for you?”

“No,” she answers sharply, and gets out of the car.

Cars are pulling up and the driveway is teeming with people making their way in. As we walk up the cobbled pathway bordered by flowers, I stretch and take Bria’s hand in mine. She tries to protest.

“This is what couples do.”

“We’re not a couple.”

I sigh. “We’re supposed to be. And keep your voice down. Someone might hear you.”

“Maybe if they do then I’ll be free from this bondage.”

I hold my other hand to my chest. “Ouch. No one has ever likened being with me to bondage, but I’ll take one for the team. I’ll take it as a casualty on the job.”

She shakes her head as we get to the front door. It’s huge, just like the house.

“You need to smile more. Smile at my jokes, at least. It’s going to be an epic failure if you continue like this. And remember, my name is Jasper for the night.”

She turns to me, widens her lips unnaturally and sarcastically, then turns sharply away.

It’s an enormous house. We go in through a courtyard with a coral floor. There are four glass doors surrounding it, but only one is open. We file through it and are let into a hallway that looks like it has no end. But finally, we come to the end of it, stepping into the most spacious hall I think I have ever seen. It’s so wide that it looks like a palace. A comfortable palace, if that makes sense. Just as we step in, a woman approaches from the spiral stairs. I’ve been so engrossed in trying to get Bria to cheer up that I’ve forgotten to take in the house, but looking up now, I realize that this somehow has to be fraud money. Maestro Firm isn’t the biggest or the best in Long Beach. Well, it’s one of the best, but is it enough to afford the CEO a luxury house?

“Micha,” Bria whispers to me.

She comes down the stairs with open arms. Her cheeks are red like they were in the pictures I’ve seen. She’s on the plump

side and has on a blue pajama-like outfit. Something tells me it's not pajamas, but what do I know about fashion.

I hold on tightly to Bria's hand as Micha gets nearer.

She clasps one hand on Bria's arm and squeezes. "Thank you for coming to help earlier. I appreciate it." Then she turns to look at me. "And who is this tall glass of water?"

I force myself to smile and open my mouth to answer.

"This is my boyfriend, My—"

I jerk at her hand.

"I mean my boyfriend, Jasper."

"Oh, I didn't know you had a boyfriend."

"Yeah. Jasper, this is Micha, my boss. Jasper and I met several months ago. It's been—"

I cut in. "She had a hard time letting me in, but I'm cute, so she can't help herself."

Micha laughs out loud. "You sure are cute. Please, go in and have a nice time, okay? There's plenty to eat and drink. Take care of him, Bria."

"I will."

I stretch out my hand and Micha takes it. "It's a pleasure meeting you." We shake.

"Same here, and I hope we'll get to see more of you. And I hope you're here to stay."



I laugh and tug at Bria's hand. "If she lets me," I say, gazing lovingly into Bria's eyes.

Bria returns my gaze as Micha starts to greet the guests behind us.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" I ask.

"It was. You just made me lie to my boss. It was horrible."

"Oh, come on. You're exaggerating." I see the table of drinks. "Let's go get something to drink, baby," I say, smirking at her.

She's frowning and I'm dying inside with laughter.

When we get to the table, I ask her what she wants to drink. When she doesn't answer, I survey the options. Sauvignon blanc, pinot grigios, pinot noir. Judging just from the little I know about her, which is very little, I choose a pinot noir and pour her a glass, which I hand over to her. She eyes me for a second before taking it. I pour myself a glass and stand with my hand on the table.

She takes a sip, then takes another. "How do you know what I like to drink?"

I take my hand off the table, put it in my pocket, and cross one leg in front of the other. "I'm a good judge of character. And taste."

She rolls her eyes and takes another sip of her drink.

She looks toward the door as someone comes in. A woman with copper-colored hair. She's tall like a basketball player and

wearing a red jumper with no sleeves.

“That’s my colleague, Daisy. We share the same office. She’s the only friend I have at the firm. The rest are just acquaintances.”

Daisy’s eyes light up when she sees Bria and she hurries over.

“Phew. I was beginning to think you didn’t make it. I hate being alone at functions like this. Have you seen Micha?” Then she looks over at me. “Are you with him?”

Bria nods slowly and Daisy’s eyes widen.

I take my hand out of my pocket. “Jasper.”

“Uh, hi Jasper. Daisy.”

“Nice to meet you, Daisy.”

She looks at me suspiciously and pulls Bria to the side, but apparently not far enough, because I can hear them clearly.

“You didn’t tell me you’d be coming with someone.”

“I didn’t know I’d be coming with someone either, but I just decided it was the perfect time to introduce him.”

“Wow, you didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend.”

“Well, we met a few months ago and I wasn’t really sure about the relationship. But now I am.”

“He’s hot. Like a Greek god.”

They both laugh as they come back, and I pretend like I didn’t hear a word of their conversation.

A woman is approaching—no, she’s passing by. I notice that Bria and Daisy have a sour look on their faces as they stare her down. The woman has dark hair with a fascinator on the side of her head with a lace veil covering her face. She has on what seems like a pink Chanel suit, or an imitation of one. When she reaches where we’re standing, she only gives a slight nod with a half glance in their direction. Daisy gives her an equally cold nod and Bria just looks on blankly.

“She thinks she’s all that. And what does she have on her head? This isn’t 1922.”

“Who’s that?” I ask Bria.

“A colleague. Fern,” she answers.

Daisy puts one hand on her waist. “She’s trying to make sure Bria doesn’t make partner before she does. What a bitch.”

Bria nudges her. “She isn’t actively doing that. She just wants to grow in the firm, too.”

“Oh, please. Only one person is making partner soon. If she wants to make partner too, it means she wants to take it away from you. You really need to stop seeing the good in evil people. That’s your problem, Bria.”

I look around and get into detective mode. “I’d like to use the restroom.”

“Oh, let me show you where it is,” Bria says, and starts to take me down a hall.

“Could you just point me to it? I’ll be fine.”

She eyes me and sighs. “Alright. It’s three doors down. But please, don’t get caught sneaking around, Jasper. I don’t want Micha thinking I’m a jerk for bringing a creep to her house.”

I cork one brow at her. “Jasper. Good job staying in character.”

She rolls her eyes and walks back to the room where the party is being held.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m back to find Bria standing alone. I’d crept around the house just as Bria had predicted I was going to do. Let’s just say I ended up in places I shouldn’t have and had access to Micha’s computer, but it had a password. Time ran out and I had to get out before I got caught.

“Where’s Daisy?” I ask.

Bria nods toward the dance floor. Daisy is dancing with a bald-headed man.

“Do you want to dance?”

She looks at me with confusion on her face.

I lean closer and whisper to her. “You know, to make our relationship look real.”

“I think it’s real enough. I introduced you to the people I work with.”

“Oh wow. Does that mean I’ll never meet the family?” I tease.

“No. Never.”

“Okay, at least we can have this one little dance.”

She sighs loudly and allows me to take her hand.

I lead her to the dance floor. Unfortunately, or fortunately, it's a slow tune playing, I think a Gloria Gaynor tune. I pull her close as we start to sway.

“I have to warn you, I'm not a very good dancer and I might step on your toes a couple of times,” she tells me.

“You've been stepping on my toes since we met. I can endure a couple more.”

She frowns at me, and in that moment, she looks so beautiful. I've been meaning to compliment her look tonight, but I thought it would be unprofessional. But she really looks beautiful. And smells alluring.

“How old are you?” I question.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

She's silent for a few seconds. “Twenty-eight. What about you?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“Forty. Maybe forty-two.”

“Oh, really? I'm forty-nine. I just turned forty-nine last month.”

She nods and says nothing.

I can feel a pull toward her. Having her this close isn't easy on me. It isn't easy on my memory, either. All I can think about now is that night in Vegas. How she felt. How she smelled. The sounds she made. I remember it all.

“What were you doing in Vegas that day we met?”

*Oh, is she thinking about Vegas too? Or is it just a random question?*

“Work.”

There's a probability that she's remembering that night, and I pull her even closer to measure how she's feeling. She doesn't pull away. She doesn't resist. She falls into me; she seems comfortable. I lower my head gently and she raises hers slowly until our lips touch and we kiss. But we pull away just as our lips connect.

“I'm sorry,” she says.

“No, don't be. I think I'm a bit drunk.” The truth is, in a bid to feel relaxed, I've gone overboard and had one too many glasses of wine. I should have known better than to allow myself to drink so much on duty. The alcohol is just kicking in now.

“Do you want to sit?” she asks.

“No, I'm fine. I'm just worried I might wake up with a headache tomorrow, and I have to do some important things with my partner.”

“I can help with that. The headache, that is. I have a soup that my stepmom makes when she drinks a little too much. I

made some and I still have some left in the fridge. I made it for my friend, Ava. She came over a few nights ago when we were stalking you and—”

“You were stalking me?”

“Okay, I wasn’t supposed to say that. We...well, I thought you were stalking me, and she wanted to catch a glimpse of you. We had too much to drink and had to work the next day, so I made the soup. The only side effect is you might sleep longer and wake up late.”

“No problem. I don’t have to wake up early tomorrow. I just want to be able to get through the day.”

“Alright then. I’ll warm some up for you when we get home.”

“So, you were stalking me?”

She hits me on the arm as we continue our dance.

An hour later, we say our goodbyes and head home. It’s late when we get back. I don’t remind her about the soup because I think she’ll want to go straight to bed.

“You still want the soup?”

“Umm. Yeah. If it’s not a bother.”

She waves one hand at me. “It’s not a bother.”

“Alright. I’ll just have it and be out quickly so you can go to bed.”

She opens her door and I take a seat.

She goes over to the kitchen and takes a container out of the fridge. She spoons some soup into a pot and heats it up.

I stand up and go to the counter. “This must be some magic soup.”

“It is. You’ll feel no hangover in the morning.”

When it’s hot, she pours it into a bowl and rounds the counter to bring it to me. She pulls over a stool and sits close to me. I scoop up soup and put it to my mouth, but it burns me. She takes the spoon of soup from me and blows into it. Something about the way her lips are rounded reminds me of something sensual. The memories from Las Vegas hit me hard in the chest.

I raise my right hand up and run my fingers through her hair. She stops blowing, but doesn’t look at me. I take the spoon from her, spilling some of the soup on the floor, and I pull her closer. She doesn’t resist. She gets up willingly. I run my hands through her hair again and slowly put my face to hers. Her lips are yielding, open, welcoming mine. And they taste even better than I remember. I rip them open and stick my tongue into her. Her tongue meets mine and they writhe as though they’d missed each other. My dick is swelling against my pants. I can’t hold it anymore. I turn her around and pull her dress up. I pull her panties aside and penetrate her. She lets out a moan. A low moan that tells me she’s been waiting for this.

She’s holding on to the stool as I pump into her. I hold her dress with one hand and bunch up her hair in the other. When I



feel my release coming, I pull out quickly. She's panting hard as I turn her to face me.

"I'm not done," I say as I lead her toward a sofa in the living room.

She lies down and pulls her dress up. I slide her panties off and penetrate her again. But I don't lower myself. I want to look at her face as I fuck her. Her eyes are closed, and her lips are slightly apart. Her face is crooked in an attractive way as she shuts her lips and twists a corner to the other side. I'm finding it hard to hold on just watching her respond to me fucking her. My control is chipping away bit by bit, and I know I'll come any minute now. I haven't even finished the thought when I burst hard inside of her and fall across her body.

A few minutes later, we're still lying in the same position.

She shifts beneath me to adjust her legs. "You still haven't eaten the soup."

"I have taken the best type of soup. I'll be fine."

She hits me on the arm. "So, umm. We have to make sure this never happens again if this fake relationship thing is going to work."

"You don't like it?"

"I just think it will get in the way."

"You didn't answer my question. You don't like it?"

“I’m not answering that. I just think we should keep it strictly business.”

I nod. “Okay. Strictly business. So what function are we going to next?”

“I don’t think there’re going to be any functions at the firm anytime soon. I have an event to go to soon, but it doesn’t matter because you can’t go. It’s my sister’s wedding.”

“Why can’t I go?”

“Because my family doesn’t have to know you. It’s not my family you’re investigating. It’s the firm. If there’s a function at the firm, I’ll let you know.”

“Are your colleagues going to be there?”

“No. Just Daisy. She’s hung out with Aria and me at my place a couple of times.”

“Then I have to be there. Imagine what it’ll look like if you go alone. I mean, Daisy knows you have a boyfriend. What will she think if you show up alone?”

She sighs. “I’ll tell her you’re out of town for work.”

“Then I’ll look like an inconsiderate boyfriend. Not a good look.”

She groans. “My family doesn’t even know you.”

“Then tell them about me.”

“Am I introducing you as Jasper to my family too?”

“Yes. Daisy will be at the wedding. We don’t want any slip-ups.”

She groans again and falls back into the sofa. “I’m in deep shit.”

# Chapter 9

## Bria

I've been looking for a way to tell Aria about Myles, but it's been hard. Today I'll find a way to. The wedding is only a week away. How do I bring a man my family knows nothing about to the wedding? I didn't sign up for this, but Myles is right, it would look odd if he didn't come to the wedding with me after he came with me to Micha's birthday party. Daisy would chew my ears off with questions I wouldn't be able to answer. Plus I don't want anyone thinking I can't keep a man.

I'm going shopping with Aria today. She's looking for skincare products, hoping to up her skin glow before the wedding, as well as looking for clothes for her honeymoon. And being the more fashionable one, I'm to help her. We're going in her car, so I'm meeting her at her place. When I arrive, I ring the bell. Her husband-to-be, Connor, opens the door.

“Bria, it’s been a while,” he says as he lets me in and hugs me.

“It has been a while. Good to see you. I’ve been so busy. Life’s been crazy,” I say, meaning every single word of my last sentence.

I can’t tell him that I now have a fake boyfriend, who happens to be an undercover detective who I have also had sex with. Crazy, crazy life, it’s been.

Ethan and Ceci, their two kids, run over to me.

“Bria!” Ethan screams.

“You’re growing so big, young man.”

I turn to Ceci, who’s gotten on her hands and knees and is crawling toward me. “You still haven’t started walking yet?”

“She’s just like her mother. Scared of trying anything new.”

“Who’s scared of trying something new?” Aria says from the top of the stairs.

“Oops. Nothing, baby,” Connor says, and we all laugh out loud.

I’m holding Ceci in my arms. Connor takes her from me and carries her up the stairs. Ethan follows him up. When he reaches the top of the stairs, he kisses Aria. I love their life. I love what they have. I wish I had that, but my life with men has been an interesting one. One of pain and agony. All I can do is wish.

When Connor has disappeared with the kids, Aria jogs down the stairs.

“Hurry, so the kids won’t see us leaving. I don’t want Ceci crying or Ethan asking to go with us.”



We’re at Sally Beauty walking down the aisles, looking over the different options of face cream, when I decide to ease Aria into the conversation.

“I’m so excited for you, sis. Finally walking down the aisle.”

“I’m excited too. I never thought this would be me.” She lifts up a cream. “I’ve heard a lot of good things about this. What do you think? Should I get it?”

“Umm. No. It made me break out after just a week of using it. It might work differently for you, but I wouldn’t risk it before your wedding.”

I pick up a night cream. “This, on the other hand, is amazing. It makes your skin silky smooth.”

She adds it to the shopping basket.

“Umm. Are you okay if I bring someone to the wedding?”

She stops. “Of course, you can bring someone. You don’t even need my permission. But wait, the last time I checked, you didn’t have a man. I mean, I already know Ava is coming. So it has to be a man.”

“Well, I met him on my trip to Las Vegas.”

“The trip you were on a month ago? Wow. And you didn’t tell me about it?”

*I wish I could, Aria, I think to myself.*

“It wasn’t really serious then. But he moved to Long Beach, and we decided to give it a go,” I say, and cringe at my lie.

“That’s beautiful. You could have told me, though. I can’t wait to meet him. What does he do? How old is he?”

I ignore her first question and answer just the second one. “Forty-nine years old.”

She halts. “I thought you told me you don’t like older men? You said you aren’t running a nursing home.”

“He’s only forty-nine, not ninety,” I say with a grin.

Aria laughs out loud. “It’s fun to see you going back on your words. Never say never, sis. Do Amy and Dad know?”

Amy is our stepmom.

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“You have to tell them before the wedding.”

“I know. I’m going to dinner at their house this Saturday. Dad is going to think we’re out to get him by bringing home men who are way older than us.”

Connor is also older than Aria.

Aria laughs. “That’s all the more reason why you have to tell him, so he doesn’t make a scene at the wedding. But after seeing how well Connor treats me, I think he’s more open-minded now.”

I nod. It's Friday, but I'm dreading Sunday evening already. I know I can't opt out of dinner with Dad and my stepmom.



I leave home at 5:30 a.m. to meet Aria at her hotel room. She's staying at a hotel so she can get to the church and reception venue more easily. Ethan and Ceci are with my stepmom and dad, so she isn't distracted. It's no surprise that I am her maid of honor. My dress has been delivered to the hotel along with the bridesmaids' dresses because we will all be changing there. A couple of her friends from out of town are her bridesmaids. They had to get accommodation at the hotel, too. I chose to stay at home because getting a room would be a waste of money.

After just one knock on the door, Aria opens it.

“Thank God! I've been waiting for you. I couldn't sleep. I'm so excited!”

The makeup artist, hairstylists, and others start trooping in at 6. a.m. and at 8:30 we head for the church. Dad and Amy should be waiting there.

Of course, I invited Myles. He blackmailed me into doing it. I told Dad and Amy about him when I went to dinner at their house. Amy was thrilled until she heard his age. She asked me if I was sure about the relationship. I told her I've never been more sure about anything. When this lie comes crumbling



down, I'll deserve all the heat I get. But for now, I'm only trying to save my ass.

I gave him the invitation card and I know he can find his way to the church.

When we arrive, Dad is already waiting outside the doors to walk Aria down the aisle. I'm standing at the altar with the bridesmaids holding a bouquet of flowers when Myles walks in like he's the main character today. Heads turn to look at him. And it's all because he's tall and deviously handsome. He's wearing a navy-blue suit, his hair combed to the back. I adjust my dress and wonder why I'm nervous.

Everything goes by in a blur after that. Soon, the newlyweds are heading to the reception. Dad and Amy are leaving, too, and I guess I'll have to introduce Myles to them at the reception.

Later, I give a moving speech, and we all toast the newly married couple. After the father-daughter dance, the dance floor is open to everyone.

"Let's go meet my dad and stepmom," I say to Myles.

On our way over, I see Daisy and Ava sitting at a table. I guess they found each other at the church and came to the reception together. Ava looks stunning in a wine-colored dress with her dark hair curled and twisted into an updo.

Dad is already looking at us as we approach.

"Dad, Amy. This is Jasper...my boyfriend."

Amy looks at him and taps the empty seat beside her, while Dad looks at him like he's stolen something from him. While Amy grills him, I have a conversation with Dad. I'm not worried about Myles; I know he can hold his own. I know he will never slip and say something that'll expose the lie.

“Don't you think he's a little too old for you?” Dad asks.

I point over to Aria and Connor at the high table. “Don't they look happy?”

He squints his eyes and sighs. “You've always been the stubborn one. But if you're happy, then I am.”

They are being protective because of what Chad, my ex, did to me. I understand. I may not be a kid anymore, but I'm still his baby, and Dad just wants me to be happy. I look over at Myles, who's slapping Amy on the shoulder. They are both laughing. Okay, that was quick.

Dad and Amy go for a dance. I'm bobbing to the music in my chair when Myles asks me to dance. He leads me to the dance floor, and soon we're jumping, singing along to the music with everyone else on the dance floor.

Some hours later, I come back home with Myles. I invite him in.

“To have that soup again?”

I flush. Because I don't know what he means. I'm not sure if he's referring to the soup in literal terms or if he's referring to my pussy.

“Do you want the soup?”

He smiles and nods. “You bet. I think I had too much to drink.”

Just as I shut the door, he descends on me. His hands travel up to my hair to slide out the clip that’s holding it up, letting my hair flow freely down.

“You look absolutely beautiful today,” he says between kisses.

I giggle as I walk backward to the bedroom. As we move through the hallway, struggling with our clothes and kissing passionately, we bump into things and laugh. I push my door open, and we rush in, not bothering to shut it. He’s skillfully unzipping my dress and it’s falling off my body. I put my arms down, taking my hands off him for a second so the dress can slide down to the floor. It pools to the ground and sits around my feet. I step out of it and start to undo his shirt buttons.

His taut chest comes into view. I run my hands over it. Without warning, he pushes me onto the bed and slips off my panties, after which he struggles out of his pants with the zipper already down. I know we agreed to keep it purely business, but resisting Myles is as hard as a child trying to resist candy. It’s impossible. I know we’ve had sex twice now, but I want him more each time. When he’s out of his pants, he climbs on the bed after me and I open my legs, ready for him to take me. But he smirks and wags a finger at me.

“Not yet.”

I groan and wonder what tricks he’s got up his sleeve. He pulls a pillow from the top of the bed and puts it beneath my

butt. I reach for the other pillow to prop my head up, but he stops me and pushes me down. I'm lying down flat with my head on the bed and my hips raised high on the pillow. I can't really see my pussy, and I'm sure that's his intention. Then I feel something wet on my clit. Something wet and warm. It's his tongue. I take a huge breath and bite my lower lip. He's holding both of my legs down as his tongue glides over my clit. I'm shivering. My legs are weak and I feel needle-like sensations running through my body, I feel them all the way up to my breasts. How does he do it? No man has ever made the connection between my clit and breasts before. No man.

Just as the shivering becomes too much, signaling my release, he stops abruptly.

"Fuck!" I yell.

He wags a finger at me again. "Not yet."

I'm panting as though I just finished running a marathon and bring my legs together. "I can't take it anymore."

"You can," he says, then spreads my legs.

He removes the pillow from beneath my butt and puts it under my head. "Now you can watch."

He takes his rock-hard dick into his hand and finds my opening. He leans into me as he starts to stroke, and I hold on to him as we ride the waves of the sea of desire.

We're lying in bed, panting. Climbing down from the high.

He turns to me and runs his fingers through my hair. "I need a favor from you."

“What?”

“Is there a chance you can go through Micha’s computer in the office? I went into her home office the other day, but her laptop had a password. I need you to help me download her files.”

I hesitate. “I don’t know. I—”

“Please,” he pleads, shooting intense, deep-brown eyes at me.

I sigh. “She has a desktop computer in her office. I know the password to her desktop computer.”

He pushes himself up on his elbow. “Perfect. I’ll give you a flash drive. Are you sure you can do it without getting caught?”

“I’ll try.”



On Monday, I’m more nervous than usual. The flash drive is in my bag, a reminder that I have a job to do. I’m quieter than usual and Daisy notices.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just have a lot to do.”

“Same here. The weekend was too short for me. I need one more day of rest.”

Micha sticks her head in. “Bria, please, I need your help.”

She refuses to use the phone every single time, and she's still not gotten better at knocking. I go to meet her in her office.

"I need you to help me enter these files on my computer," she says, pointing to a stack of papers on her desk of maybe ten pages.

I go through it. "No problem. I can do that before I leave."

"You're a lifesaver. I'll be leaving the office now and I don't think I'll be coming back today. So, I'll see you tomorrow. Lock up the office when you're done." She gets her handbag and leaves.

I stand there staring at the door. I can't believe my luck. I go back to my office to get the flash drive from my handbag on the back of my chair.

"Are you ready to go to lunch?" Daisy asks.

"I don't think I'll be going for lunch today. Micha's asked me to take care of some files for her in her office. I'm not really hungry. I could grab something later."

"Should I bring something for you?"

I want her to leave so I can start quickly. "Yeah, sure. Burger and fries."

"Alright."

I go over to Micha's office with the flash drive in my pocket and sit on her chair. I decide to enter some of the files first in case someone comes in unexpectedly. I log in the first file, the second, the third, and when I look up, it's past 3. p.m.

The door pushes open, and I freeze even though I've not started downloading her files yet.

"Your burger and fries."

I'd forgotten completely about it. "Thank you."

Daisy comes over and stands at the table, staring at the computer.

"How many documents?"

"Ten. I've finished three."

"Alright. I'll be leaving for home soon. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Alright. Bye."

She blows me a kiss and leaves.

The whole office will be empty soon, and I can start downloading. I wait while I enter three more files. Then I step out of Micha's office and walk around. The building is deserted. I nod and go back to Micha's office. There's no need to lock the door. I bring out the flash drive and stick it in the port. I begin to scroll through her files and start to download.

I watch the clock on the wall. 2 percent. 6 percent. 10 percent. I watch the percentage of downloading completed go up and up and up and crawl until it gets to 99 percent. Finally, the download is complete, and as I pull out the flash drive the door swings open. My heart jumps into my throat and almost leaps out of my mouth.

“Micha!” I scream. But thankfully she doesn’t notice my surprise.

She smiles as she rushes to her table. “I know. I forgot an important file. I’ll be going for a meeting early tomorrow and I don’t think I’ll be able to get to the office before then.”

I slip the flash drive off the table where it had landed when it fell out of my hand and go to quickly slip it into my pocket, but it falls to the floor. When Micha is at the desk, I kick the flash drive out of sight with my foot and hope it doesn’t slide out from under the other side of the desk, into Micha’s path.

She pulls her drawer open and pulls out a file then peers at the computer. “Well-done. You’re doing good. You don’t need to finish it today though. You can continue tomorrow.”

“Oh, I’m almost done.”

“Alright. See you tomorrow.” She rushes out just the same way she rushed in.

My chest is heaving from my heart beating hard. I fall back into the chair and let out a sigh of relief. Then I stand up to see if the flash drive had been in view beyond the desk, and luckily it hadn’t. I pull the chair back and get on my knees. It’s getting dark, so I don’t see anything. I get up to switch on the light. I get on my knees again but do not see it. Had Micha kicked it, or had she picked it up because it was in her way? But she hadn’t bent to pick anything up. Then I see it. A black spot at the edge of the distant foot of the desk. I sigh and stick my head under to retrieve it. When it’s in my hand, I let out another sigh of relief and put it in my pocket.



I sit back on the chair and do the sign of the cross. What would have happened if Micha had come in when the flash was still stuck in the port? I don't even want to imagine it.

# Chapter 10

## Myles

I saw Bria leaving for work this morning. I was at my kitchen sink, washing some plates, when she stepped out of her house. I find it weird that I felt some type of joy just seeing her face. I'm not sure what that feeling is, but I've been having it since we went to her sister's wedding. It's a feeling I do not want. A feeling I shouldn't be feeling. And it makes me think I've been spending too much time with her. But the thing is, I want to spend more time with her. I love the way she laughs. The way she smiles. I'm beginning to see a different side to her. A more relaxed side that I didn't know she had. I love being around her. And against my better judgment, I'll be inviting her to dinner tonight.

I'm sure it won't get in the way of the investigation. I'm good at compartmentalizing my feelings. This is the first time I'm sexually involved with a supposed suspect. I say suspect because I don't know yet if she's involved in whatever is going on in her office. But it doesn't seem like it. No, I'm not

catching feelings for her. It's the sex; it's damn good. I just love having her around. It's not more than that, I tell myself.

I shoot her a quick text asking her to come over after work. She sends one back to say she will.

At 8 p.m. the doorbell goes off. I open it to find her smiling.

"Come in."

"Smells good in here."

"That's my handiwork."

"You made dinner? I can't wait to see if it looks as good as it smells."

"It does. Not just that, it tastes good, too."

She rolls her eyes.

Ellie is sitting at her spot at the dining table. She's not smiling when she sees Bria.

"This is Bria, Ellie. You've seen her before. Bria, this is my daughter, Ellie."

"Hi, Ellie," Bria says.

Ellie looks at me with unsure eyes. "Is she your friend, Daddy?"

I nod. "Yes, she is."

She looks at Bria and says a low hi.

Ellie is a smart kid, and I know she's cold because she's seen us scream at each other before, but she'll come around.

"Do you like pickles?" she asks Bria unexpectedly.

“Oh, yes. I love pickles.”

“My teacher says they’re rich in fiber. Is that true?”

Bria nods. “Very true. Your teacher is very intelligent.”

Ellie laughs. “She is. She knows everything.”

Bria laughs too. “Wow. That’s amazing.”

When we’re finished eating, Garcelle comes out to get Ellie.

“Bye, Bria. Hope to see you again,” Ellie says, surprising me.

“I hope to see you again too. Sleep well, okay? Goodnight.”

Bria lets out a huge breath after. “I thought she’d hate me forever.”

“You screamed at her daddy. You’re lucky she let it go.” I pat my lap. “Come.”

“What if Ellie comes back out?”

“She won’t. Or do you want to go to my room?”

She nods and I get off the chair to take her hand.

I close my bedroom door gently. We had not planned for her to spend the night, but it’s looking like that’s what’s going to happen. I put one finger under her chin and make her look at me.

“You’re beautiful. I wish I could draw just so I could spend hours on your face.”

She flushes and blinks at me. I know we’ve fucked a couple of times, but tonight I intend to make love to her. I intend to

slow down and take in every second we spend together. I trail two fingers down the right side of her face and make the fingers crawl to the back of her head. I pull her closer by the back of her neck and tease her lips with mine. I take the upper one in first, then move to the lower one. Then I pull away to look at her, but I don't pull away too much; we're only a few inches away from each other. My hand is still behind her neck. She's breathing hard, her fresh breath grazing my face.

I pull away completely and take off all of my clothes. When I'm done, I take off all of hers. We're naked. I put one arm around her and reach for her succulent ass, pulling her close to me again. And this time I don't let her go. I lift her off the floor and wrap her legs around my waist as I move us toward the bed.

I lay her down gently. She looks up at me lovingly. The look would have freaked me out just weeks ago because I was scared of getting in too deep with any woman, but today, I love it. I love the way she's looking at me. I love the way her fingers feel traveling down my chest. I love it all. I lean forward and she wraps her arms around me. Then I drive my cock into her wet pussy, but this time I'm gentle.

Later, she's lying on me, her hair splashed over my chest.

"So, what's your story?" I question.

"My story?" she says, running her fingers down my sweaty chest.

"Why are you single?"

“I swore off men. Well, not really. I just don’t think I can handle another heartbreak.”

“Who broke your heart?”

“My ex. He got another woman pregnant after years of us being together.”

I look down at her. “That must have hurt.”

“It did. It doesn’t anymore. But I remember it sometimes, and it makes me realize no matter how much you love someone and how much they claim to love you, they can still hurt you.”

I know what she means. I know what that pain is like. You can give all of yourself to someone and they can walk out of the door, leaving you empty. I’m in the middle of a divorce from a woman I thought once loved me. I heard stories; rumors of her bringing home other men. I never caught her red-handed, but I knew something was up. We stopped having sex and fought every single day. Every single minute it seemed like. She found fault in everything I did. When I asked for a divorce, she threatened to ruin me by taking almost everything I have, which isn’t that much. I was willing to let her have it so I could have peace. When she saw that didn’t faze me, she threatened to take Ellie away from me. She threatened to file for sole custody. I knew she didn’t really want custody, so only wanted to hurt me.

Someone who would threaten you with your child that you love so much is a vile person. But she didn’t follow through because she hadn’t ever really taken care of Ellie—it was

always me and the nanny doing it. She knew she didn't want a child to 'tie her down,' so she agreed to let Ellie stay with me. My heart still hurts sometimes because I feel like I wasted my previous years with her, but I'm glad I'm free of her now. Well, almost free of her. I only see her because of Ellie and nothing more.

I've been going through life just living for Ellie and work. Long Beach is the only place I have actually allowed myself to live a little. And I know once this investigation is done, I'll be leaving. My chest spasms at the thought. I'm used to having Bria close to me now; it hurts to know soon it won't be like this anymore. But there's nothing I can do about it for now. All I can do is enjoy the moment. I'll cross that bridge when I get there.

"So, what's your story?" Bria asks.

"What's my story? You'll find out soon," I say, and climb on top of her again.

# Chapter 11

Bria

**T**hat night we spent together in his house sealed it for me. I know I come off as a hypocrite right now. I know this may be shocking. But I think I'm falling for Myles Miler. Scratch that. I *know* I'm falling for Myles Miler. I'm eating my words. Every single negative thing I have said about him, I'm eating all of it. How does one fall so quickly? Well, not so quickly—it's been a month and several weeks since we first met. Yes, we hated each other at first; it's a surprise that this man I couldn't stand just a short while ago is the same man occupying a mansion in my heart.

I don't know how it happened or when, exactly, I fell for him. But I can take a wild guess. I started seeing him in a different light when we went to Micha's birthday party. He's still annoying to me, but in a cute way now. I don't want to bite his head off anymore. Well, I still want to bite his head, but in a different manner. Not to hurt him, but to bring him pleasure. It's been two weeks since my first night in his house.



I've spent four more nights at his place. It's something I look forward to now. He invited me over again tonight. When I get home, I'll change my clothes and run right to his place. I can't wait.

"Someone's looking for you," Daisy announces from outside the office door. She'd gone to use the restroom.

"Oh, who?"

"Umm. She's right here."

"Let her in."

Daisy widens the door. "Off to lunch. Do you need me to bring something for you?"

"Erm. Yeah, maybe a drink. Thank you."

I give the woman who's just entered the office a once-over. Long dark hair with pink strands through the top falls down all the way to her waist. I suspect it to be extensions, but I don't dwell on the thought. She has on designer skinny jeans, a pink top to match her hair, and a fur coat. On her feet are pink shoes with pointed toes. She looks expensive. A rich potential client, perhaps.

"Please, have a seat," I say, and gesture to the chair on the other side of my desk.

She sits and crosses her legs and I get out my pad and pen to jot down our conversation.

"So, how many I help you? Are you in need of legal tax counsel?" *She was probably referred to me*, I think, and pin the

cap of my pen to the notepad.

“I’m Sonya Kenning.”

“Nice to meet you, Sonya. I’m—”

“Oh, I know who you are.”

I smile and nod. My reputation as a good lawyer precedes me.

She eyes me up and down. “I see he’s got a different taste now.”

I’m confused. “He? I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

She laughs and stands up, putting her pink designer bag on the edge of the desk. She walks around the office and then comes to stand in front of me.

“He used to...” she waves her hand at me flippantly. “Never mind. I’m only here to tell you to stay away from him.”

I narrow my eyes and shake my head. “I still don’t follow you.” I’ve never seen this woman in my life and I’m not sure who she’s referring to.

“Oh, stop pretending like you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

My patience is running thin. “I don’t, and I suggest you get straight to the point. I’m a very busy woman.” I’m getting sick and tired of her condescending tone.

“My husband.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Then it hits me. The only man I’ve been with is Myles. Though he’s been reluctant

to talk about it, he's mentioned to me that he's in the process of divorcing his wife.

“You mean your ex-husband?”

She laughs. “Not yet. Still married. I can refuse to give him the divorce if you don't watch your step.”

I sigh.

“That's better. Take in a deep breath and listen to me carefully.” She puts both her hands on the desk, her manicured fingernails glistening. “Stay away from Myles. I could ruin his operation by outing his identity. And that would put him in danger. You don't want that to happen, do you?”

I take in a silent breath as she picks up her bag and walks out of the office, leaving the door ajar.

I'm still seated on my chair, confused and trying to make sense of what just happened, when Daisy comes in a few minutes later.

She drops a bottle of juice on my desk. “I'm off to see Ben. I'll be right back.”

Ben is one of our colleagues, the bald guy she danced with at Micha's party.

I sigh for the umpteenth time and fall back in my chair. Well, there go my plans for the night. And maybe my plans with Myles in general. I care about him and would not want any harm to come to him. His wife didn't seem like she was joking. Something about her tone. I'll keep it just business

from now on. No sleeping at his place. And gosh, I was looking forward to it.

I pick up the bottle of juice, leaving a ring of liquid on my desk, and take a sip.

# Chapter 12

## Myles

It's 8 p.m., but Bria isn't here. I thought we'd decided she'd be spending the night at my place. I open my bedroom door and walk to the kitchen. I look out of the window. There's a light on in her house. What could be the matter? Is she sick? The last time I talked to her was this morning when Jon and I were leaving for San Pedro. Although Jon knows we're in a fake relationship, what he doesn't know is that it's gotten more serious than that, and I intend to keep it that way.

I go into my room to pull on a shirt over my undershirt and make for Bria's house. I press on the doorbell and wait for an answer. I hear shuffling and then the door opens. She's in her pajamas.

I tilt my head at her. "I thought you were supposed to come over tonight."

"Oh yeah, that. I umm...I came down with a headache," she says, and puts a hand to her head.

"And you didn't think you could have let me know?"

“I’m sorry. I just had so much to do today at work. I’ve been swamped.”

“I thought you said work has eased up a bit?”

“It did. But it picked up again. Crazy.”

“Have you taken medication for the pain?”

“Yes. I took some aspirin.”

“Do you need me to stay over here?”

“No, I came home with work. I’ll need to be alone tonight so I can finish up.”

“Okay. Umm. I’ll call you later.”

She smiles and nods. She’s acting weird. But maybe the headache is bothering her. I kiss her goodnight and go over to my place, a bit saddened I won’t be spending the night with her.



Sonya has been in town for three days now. She’s staying at a hotel. I thought of letting her stay at my place so she can have more time with Ellie, but it seems my place is too lowly for her—I’m glad she isn’t interested in staying at my place because I don’t want to make Bria feel some type of way about it. She’s coming over today to sign some of our divorce papers. They were sent over by my lawyer. It’s been hard keeping track of her, and this is the best time to get her to sign.

I can't wait to be free. It's been a long, hard road, but I can see the end in sight. Just a little more patience.

At a few minutes to noon, the doorbell announces her arrival. When I open the door, she has a wicked smile on her face. Sonya has always been like this, and I wonder how I ever found her attractive even in the slightest way.

“Hi.”

“Hi, Bubba,” she says, and swings in while tossing her scarf around her neck. Overdressed as usual.

I shake my head as she sashays into my house.

“Ellie's gone to school?”

“Yup.”

“What a serious child. Just like her father. You two need to lighten up.”

I cock my brow at her but decide not to say what I have in mind. How does a mother not even care about her child? She sees Ellie whenever she wants. She doesn't care how she eats, how she's faring, or if her daughter loves her.

I decide not to prolong our chat. I go to my bedroom and come back with the papers. I stretch them out to her, but she doesn't take them. I sigh and sit down with the papers still in my hand. I really am not in the mood for this today.

“What's the matter?”

“Oh, there's just one little problem.”

“I thought you agreed to sign the papers. You were here three days ago and promised to come back and sign them. What’s changed?”

“What’s changed is I don’t want a certain type of person around my daughter.”

“Garcelle? You’ve seen her with Ellie. You’ve seen how good she is with her. You know I can’t do it all on my own, right? I’ve got a job. A demanding one.”

“I’m not talking about Garcelle. I’m talking about the bitch next door.”

How did she know about that? I blink at her use of the word bitch.

I refrain from sending her out. “I really do not know why you care so much about what I do in my personal life.”

“I don’t care.”

“It doesn’t look like it to me. And how the fuck did you know about her?”

She chuckles. “I have my ways.”

“Whatever I have with her is none of your business, okay?”

“It is if she’s going to be around my daughter.”

“You don’t even know her. You don’t know what she’s like with Ellie. Ellie adores her.”

“Like I said, I don’t want her around my daughter.”

“The same daughter you’ve only seen twice this year? The same daughter who doesn’t even ask about you? You know



what I think? I think you're mad I didn't break down after you left. You're mad I picked up my life and moved on after you tried to break me and now you want my life to be miserable. But you won't succeed, and I won't stay away from Bria."

"If you want me to sign that paper, you will. You'll stay away from her if you want to get rid of me."

I blow out hot air. "To what end? I've been nice to you. Why are you doing this? You think she'll stay away from me, even if I decide to stay away from her? Why don't you just sign the papers so we can get this over with already?"

"Oh, I paid her a visit at her office yesterday."

I shoot up from my seat. "You did what?" Then I sink back down. Now I understand why Bria's been avoiding me. "How did you even know where she works?"

"I told you, I have my ways," she says, smirking. "I told her I'll expose your identity if she doesn't stay away from you. And if you don't stay away from her, your identity will get exposed, and you'll never get the divorce."

I knew it was a bad idea to let Sonya know I'm working undercover in Long Beach. Although she doesn't know the exact details of the investigation, I shouldn't have told her anything. Now I risk losing everything.

# Chapter 13

Bria

**M**y heart has been hurting. It's been hurting since the day Myles' ex-wife showed up at my office. She came and colored my heart blue. My heart is clogged with sadness. It's been hard staying away from Myles. I miss him so much. I miss how calm he makes me feel. Whenever I'm with him, I feel like I'm oddly settled. "Oddly" because Myles was the last person I thought I'd find peace with. It sucks when you're getting used to someone and then suddenly have to pretend you don't want them around anymore. It messes with your head. It makes you disinterested in anything else. You just want to pick up the phone and talk to them. You want to hear their soothing voice.

I don't even know why I listened to her. I mean, she might still be married to him, but they're not together anymore. I don't know why she thinks she has the right to tell me to stay away from him. I'm not a pussy, oh no, I am not. But I care about Myles, and I don't want him outed. That's the only thing

keeping me in check. Although Myles had always been tight-lipped about her, from the little he said, I know she can be vindictive. Oh my God, my heart aches.

I told Ava about it, and she told me what any good friend would say. *Stay away from him, Bria. He's not worth it.* But how do I stay away from him when my heart longs for him every minute I breathe? How do I tell her that I've fallen deeply for him and staying away from him is taking my breath away?

"What's eating at you?" Daisy asks from her side of the office.

I didn't realize she's been watching me. I've been so absorbed in my woes. I've been trying to keep this away from her, but lately, I've been tempted to tell her about it. The urge to spill gets thicker each day. I want someone else's opinion. I need advice. That's what I think, but I know what I want is someone who'll tell me to stay with Myles. I wish someone would tell me to ignore his ex-wife and her threats. I can't tell Aria. She thinks I'm happy. She's happy I'm finally letting someone in. Well, technically I was, until his wicked ex came and set fire to it.

I shrug my shoulders at Daisy and stare ahead, rolling my fingers on my pen.

"You didn't eat anything at lunch. Well, you ate a little, but basically nothing. Something has to be on your mind."

I toss a coin in my mind. Heads, I'll tell her. Tails, I don't. The imaginary coin rolls on its side and then tips to the floor. I

peer with my mind's eye. Heads. I sigh. It really won't hurt to have a fresh opinion from someone else. Will it?

"I've been going through a lot lately."

She stops thumbing through a file. "What's wrong?"

"Okay, don't freak out. But the firm is being investigated."

She drops the file from her hands, shock slowly creeping onto her face. "Investigation? By who?"

"Law enforcement. It's a long story."

She gets up and pushes her chair back, coming to sit on the chair at my desk. "Is that why you've been down? What's going on? Why would anyone investigate the firm? And how did you find out about this?"

I sigh and lean forward. I want to tell her about Myles. I'm tempted to tell her his name isn't Jasper and that he isn't my boyfriend. Well, theoretically, we ended up dating. But I decide against giving details.

"I got an e-mail a few weeks ago and a person—an unknown person—told me about it." As soon as the lies leave my lips, I regret opening my big mouth. What's the point of saying anything at all if I can't tell the full truth? I'd thought I needed advice on how to move forward with Myles, but Myles told me not to tell anyone, so I don't say anything about him being behind the investigation.

"Can I see the e-mail?" she asks.

“Erm. I deleted it. Umm. I couldn’t keep an email like that. I mean, it scared me.”

She sighs and leans back. “What are they investigating the firm for?”

“Fraud. Tax fraud, I think. I’m not sure. I don’t know the whole story, but it’s been messing with my head for weeks now.”

“Now I understand why you’ve been zoning in and out and have been losing your appetite. Does Micha know?”

“Gosh, no. I could never tell her. She will be...” I intend to say devastated, but if truly she’s engaged in fraud, then she should be brought to justice. But I still do not see Micha in that light. She’s one of the most honest people I know. But Myles was sent here to get to the bottom of this. Something is definitely going down in the company. Something that Daisy, the other lawyers and I don’t know about.

“Could Micha be involved in tax fraud?” she asks.

“I really don’t know.”

“This is messed up. If this comes to a head, we’ll definitely lose our jobs.”

“Well, I’m still praying and hoping it’s all a mistake, that maybe they’ve got the wrong firm. It’s possible, right?”

She nods. “It is. It might be that they’ve got the wrong firm. These things happen. So, you didn’t get another email after that?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Just that one,” I say and wince inwardly.



“I feel so guilty. I feel like a bad person.”

“You’re not a bad person. Stop saying that,” Ava says from the kitchen.

I’m seated in the living room, my head on a headrest. I raise my head up. “Myles has been trying to find out what’s wrong. He’s been calling and texting, but I’ve been telling him I’m busy.”

“It’s not your fault that he has a crazy ex. She’s not even his ex yet. They’re practically still married. I know how toxic some exes can be. Trust me, you don’t want that. I told you about my ex’s ex who got me fired from my old job, right? They can be nuts.”

I nod slowly. “She looks like someone who’s nuts. I’m not really worried about her, though. The person I’m worried about is Myles. I don’t want him outed. I don’t want his cover blown.”

“Are you still working with him, then?”

“Yes. That was our agreement. It gives me immunity. I mean, we only started fake dating to aid the investigation. I think I’ve done enough already in that respect. I got him into Micha’s house. And I got copies of her files for him. If I stop

working with him completely then he could go back on his word and withdraw immunity.”

Ava comes to me with two bowls in her hands. She puts a bowl of prawn crackers in front of me and sits beside me on the sofa, taking off her slippers and tucking her legs under her.

She tosses two prawn crackers into her mouth, and I wonder how they manage to fit into her small mouth. “I still think you should get out of the deal completely. They really need to look for another way to investigate Micha,” she says muffled, holding her hand to her lips.

“Then my immunity will be pulled.”

“That’s why I’m saying you need to tell him. Tell him his crazy ex is threatening you.”

“I can’t. What if he confronts her and she gets angry and sabotages his cover?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Are you in love, like, *in love* with him?”

I nod.

“Oh,” she says and throws another cracker in her mouth. “So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just not spend the night at his place anymore. And I won’t invite him to any more functions until the investigation is over.”

She smiles and nods.

“And why the hell are you smiling? This isn’t exactly a smiling matter.”

“It’s just so funny how easy it is for you to find love. You’re the lucky one. While I’m here struggling to find one person to treat me right.”

“How about the guy you met the other day? The one you said bought you flowers. What’s his name again?”

“North?”

“Yeah, North.”

She snorts, crackers spilling out of her mouth. “I haven’t seen him since the last night he spent here. He probably has a girlfriend or a wife. I’m not lucky in love and that’s fine. I find them quite alright, but I just never seem to figure out how to keep them.”

“Don’t say that. You just haven’t found the right one yet,” I say, covering her hand with my palm.

“Look at you, cheering me up when you’ve got problems of your own.”

I smile. “And no, I don’t think I’m lucky. I mean, I have a man’s crazy ex chasing me around. Does that sound like luck to you? It’s bad luck, if you ask me. Why can’t I just get a guy without baggage? His ex is probably creeping outside my window as we speak.”

We both burst into loud, snorty laughs.





“You’ll be representing Costa in the case. The IRS is trying to play smart, and I will not let them.”

Costa is one of our celebrity clients, a rapper who made it big locally.

“Are they saying he’s been evading taxes? That’s not even possible.”

“I think this is a witch hunt against him. It’s orchestrated. They’re asking for proof, although it’s proof that they already have. I mean, we’ve been handling his taxes for four years now. They’re saying he evaded taxes five years ago, which is a lie. But we’ll prove them wrong. That’s why I want you to handle this.”

“Does he have beef with anyone?”

“From what he said, someone’s been threatening to ruin his career. It’s probably someone high up, or someone who sees him as competition and they’re just using this to rattle him. He doesn’t have all of his documents from five years ago so it’s going to be hard.”

“I mean, it’d be easier if he had all of his documents, but I’m sure we’ll find a way out. Maestro firm doesn’t leave any stone unturned,” I say.

“I hate injustice,” Micha says, an undertone of anger in her voice.

“Who’s representing the IRS?”

“Barry and Jim. Tom and Jerry, the attorneys in the chief counsel’s office.”

Tom and Jerry are our nicknames for two of the most ruthless lawyers we’ve had to go against in court. They’ll do anything they can, and I mean *anything*, to win a case.

“Oh shit. I thought we were done with them, but apparently not.”

Micha looks ahead solemnly. “I hate injustice so much,” she repeats.

I watch her as she looks away. This doesn’t seem like a woman involved in fraud. She seems so unsettled by injustice. She’s always talked about hard work and how she built the firm from the ground up. I feel guilty that I can’t tell her about Myles and the investigation. I’m holding out hope that it’s all just a mistake.



When I push the office door open the next morning it’s empty. Daisy isn’t here yet. I’m happy I don’t have to talk much and glad I’ll get a substantial amount of work done before she comes. I’d gone out to see Costa and his team yesterday and we’d gone through some files together. It was late when I left his house, leaving me no time to come back to the office.

I pull my chair out, wipe my desk clean and settle down. I hang my bag on the chair before sliding it off to get my pen, but I don’t find it. I must have left it at home or at Costa’s. I

look over at Daisy's desk for a spare pen, but I see none. I don't want to have to get up to go check her drawer. I know I didn't put any pens in my desk, but I pull it open just in case by some luck I'd dropped one in there and forgotten about it.

I don't find a pen, but I find an envelope, a brown one sitting smack in the middle of my drawer. I don't remember leaving an envelope there. Especially not a brown one. Who could have put it here? Was it Daisy? Oh, wait, is it a surprise from Daisy? I'm not celebrating anything, so I wonder what it could be. I hold the drawer open trying to figure out how it got here. After a few minutes of unsuccessful and pointless thinking, I dip my hand in the drawer and pick it up. It's crisp but it isn't sealed. I flip the flap up and open it with my finger. Inside is a piece of paper. I slide it out.

On the paper is text. **Back off or face the consequences.** I blink, then drop the piece of paper back in the envelope, toss it in the drawer, and shut the drawer with a loud bang. Is this some type of joke? It isn't the first of April, and it isn't funny.

# Chapter 14

## Myles

I stare out of the restaurant window as we wait for our food. Jon is seated across from me and is quietly scrolling through his phone. Bria's been avoiding me. She's been lying about work keeping her busy, but I know that's not the problem. I know Sonya is the real problem. After I found out that she went to Bria's office, I knew this would happen. Knowing Bria, she wouldn't want to put me in harm's way, but she could have at least told me, and I'm sure we could have found a way out together. I understand why she's staying away, but it hurts. It hurts that it's so easy for her to wrench herself away from me. It hurts that everything we had meant nothing to her. I've tried to get her to speak to me. I've called and texted and gone to ring her doorbell, but I've been met with silence each time.

“They're still working on the files we sent them.”

I look away from the window. “How long will it take them to go through them?”

“They probably only have one person doing it. And I imagine the poor guy has to work on other cases, too. I can’t wait for this case to be settled so that I can go back to Denver.”

I don’t feel the same way Jon does. He can’t wait to get to the bottom of the case just so he can be free and leave Long Beach. I feel the complete opposite—I don’t want to leave. Although I’m not in the best state right now, coming to Long Beach and spending time with Bria has made me realize that my heart isn’t completely closed off. I’d thought I’d never be able to love again. I thought that part of life was over for me. I thought I’d never find someone who’d make me open up again. But I found all of that in Bria, and though I haven’t seen her in a while now, I wish I could stay and make up with her. In Long Beach, I found out that love is possible. I found out that my heart isn’t completely frozen. Leaving would mean that I’ll lose all of that. Secretly, I hope the investigation takes longer, and I hope the man in the room Jon had referred to takes time to get to the files we sent. The same files Bria helped me get from Micha’s computer.

The waiter comes with our food, and I push my thoughts aside for the moment. As I pick up my fork to eat, my phone goes off. I look down at it on the table. It’s Garcelle. She rarely ever calls me when I’m out, so I pick it up.

“Ellie isn’t feeling well.”

I drop the fork from my hand. “What’s wrong with her?”

“We just got home from school. She says her stomach hurts. I actually didn’t want to call, but she seems to be in a lot of

pain. She needs to go to the hospital.”

“Is it that serious? I’ll be right there.”

“What’s up, Milley?”

“Ellie’s sick, I think. I need to take her to the hospital. I have to go now.”

“Alright. I’ll call you later,” he shouts after me as I rush out of the door.

I clutch my car keys in my hand and hurry over to where I’m parked.

I arrive home to see Ellie writhing in pain.

“You could have called an ambulance.”

“I did. But it’s been ten minutes.”

“Ellie,” I say as I scoop her up from the bed.

I turn to Garcelle as I rush out. “What the fuck did she eat?”

“I...I don’t know. I ate the same food she took to school for lunch. I don’t know if she ate something else at school.”

Garcelle gets the door to the backseat when we’re outside. I put Ellie in, and Garcelle gets in with her while I get in the driver’s seat. I keep looking back to see if she’s gotten worse.

“Don’t let her go to sleep, please. Keep her talking.”

When we get to the hospital, she’s rushed into the emergency department and they start to run tests. I’m not scared often, but today I am. I am scared of losing my little girl. I walk up and down the hospital halls, afraid that sitting would make things

worse. I roam around and fight the urge to burst into the room she's in.

After an hour, a doctor approaches me. "We need to operate on your daughter. It's urgent."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"She's got appendicitis. If we don't operate on her now it could be deadly for her."

I nod. "Sure. What do I need to do?"

"You need to sign some papers. Please, follow me."

After I sign the papers, I watch them wheel Ellie toward the operating room. I go toward the stretcher and follow them to the door, running my fingers through her blonde hair.

"You'll be okay, baby," I say to her. Her eyes are closed, and I doubt she can hear me.

But I don't believe what I just said. I want to believe it, but I'm terrified she won't be okay. I don't know what's going to happen. My heart is thumping fast, and my head is spinning. I walk slowly to the chair beside Garcelle, and I sit, wringing my hands, praying for a miracle. I stand up, then sit again when my legs threaten to buckle beneath me. I don't know what I'd do if I lost her. I don't even want to think about it. The thought alone is enough to drive me crazy.

"She'll be fine, Mr. Miler," Garcelle says, her kind face smiling at me when I turn to look at her.

"I hope so. I really hope so."

Ten minutes later, my phone rings. I ignore it. But it doesn't stop ringing. I pull it out of my pocket. It's Jon.

"Hey, how's the kid doing?"

I get off the chair and walk toward the opposite end of the waiting area. "She's in surgery."

"Oh, it's that bad? Sorry about that, man."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll talk to you later."

He stops me before I can drop the call. "Umm...I know this is a really bad time. But you know the files from Maestro firm that we sent to be checked through? They're corrupted, so we'll need your source to copy them again."

I sigh and rub my fingers on my temple. "How did they get corrupted?"

"I don't know, but they'd like us to resend them in a week."

"Alright, I'll see what I can do."

"Alright. I'll be over to see the kid tonight. I'm praying for her."

"Thank you, Jon. Thank you."

The line goes dead, and I hit my palm on the surface of the phone. I haven't talked to Bria in a while. Now, I have to tell her that she has to go copy the documents again. She'd told me about how nerve-wracking it was for her the first time. But she has no choice but to do it again.

I raise my phone up and dial her number. It's better to tell her than to shoot her a lousy text. I notice my heart is beating



faster. I can't tell if the anxiety about Ellie being in surgery is responsible or if the prospect of talking to Bria after a while is what's sending my heartbeat into overdrive. After three rings she doesn't answer, which isn't surprising.

I guess a lousy text will get the message across. I'll try to make it as comprehensive as possible. I type out the text, read the message more than once, and then hit send.

# Chapter 15

Bria

When I arrive home from work in the evening, I see that I have a text from Myles. He's been sending me texts and I've been reading them, but I've not been replying. But this text isn't personal. It has to do with work. And I promised myself I'd see our agreement through. He needs help. The files I'd painstakingly copied from Micha's computer onto the flash drive he'd given me have somehow been corrupted, and he wants me to copy the files again.

Thankfully, I had put them on my laptop just in case. I bought a new flash drive on my way to work this morning for something else. All I have to do is copy them from my laptop. There's no need to try to get them from Micha's computer again. After dinner, I go to get my laptop from my bag and find it empty. How fatigued am I that I came home with an empty laptop bag? I shake my head and text Myles back to tell him I'll get the files to him tomorrow.

The next morning the first thing I do when I get to work is settle in my chair and boot up my laptop that I “conveniently” forgot on my desk. I’d not been worried about forgetting it yesterday because I knew it’d be safe. The office is a safe place; I’ve forgotten a lot of things and come back to find them just where I left them. When it turns on, I stick the new flash drive in the port and scroll down to the file. I saved it in a folder under the name “barbecue.” I wanted it to be something obscure to disguise the content. Not like anyone is going to go through my laptop.

But the folder is nowhere to be found. It’s gone.

I click and click and open more folders. I do a search. The word barbecue is evidently missing. No one would go through my laptop. When I left the office yesterday, Daisy had already gone home. Did I really save the files, or was I thinking of doing it and never got to it? But I know I saved it.

I lean back, trying to think. Did I delete it? I lean forward again and do a search of the recycle bin. But it’s not there. Then my mind goes back to the threatening note I’d found in my drawer the other day. Does this have anything to do with the folder going missing from my computer? Is the same person responsible? I stretch and pull the drawer open. The envelope is gone, too. I stare in disbelief at the empty drawer. I left the envelope in here. What the heck? This is getting scary now.

“What happened? Why do you have a frown on your face?” Daisy asks as she comes in.

I didn't hear her enter. I had not told her about the envelope. I decide to tell her so I can ask if she knows anything, if she saw anyone come to my drawer.

“Someone took something from my drawer.”

She pulls out her chair. “No one comes in here but us. And I didn't take anything from your drawer. What's missing?”

“An envelope.”

“What was in it? Money?”

“No. A threatening note.”

She stops smiling. “A threatening note? From who?”

“I don't know, Daisy. I really don't know.”

“What did it say?”

“It told me to back off.”

“From what?”

“I don't know.”

“Could it be the case you're handling for Costa? You know how Tom and Jerry are.”

I lean forward and cross my hands in front of me. “You know, I never thought about that. But how did they gain entrance to the office? And why would they delete a file from my laptop?”

“Someone deleted a file from your laptop? In your house?”

“I forgot my laptop here last night. And when I got back this morning, I saw a file had been deleted.”

“Is the file about work?”

I swallow and nod. It’s about work, alright. Just not the type of work she’s thinking about.

“Gosh, that’s devilish,” she says, then her eyes widen. “What if it’s Fern? She doesn’t want you to make partner. She wants to take your place. What if she’s trying to paint you as incompetent and also trying to intimidate you?”

Could it be Fern? But if Fern had left the envelope in my drawer, did she also delete the file from my laptop? What does the file have to do with her and...a light bulb goes on in my head. What if Fern is part of the fraud squad in the firm? Well, I don’t know if it’s a squad, per se. But, oh Lord, this is all so stressful. I’ll have to call Myles and tell him what’s going on. But I also don’t want to call him. If someone had not tampered with my files, then I’d just copy them and drop them off with Garcelle. Ugh, what do I do now? In his text, he stated that it was important to get the files and that it’s urgent.

At twenty minutes past 6 p.m. I pull into my driveway. As I’m getting out, I see Garcelle. At first, I thought it was Myles and tried to dodge him, but when I see the woman’s kind face, I get out of the car.

“Garcelle,” I say, greeting her.

“Bria. It’s been a while. I’ve not been seeing you around.”

I nod and smile. “Yeah, I’ve been busy. How are you doing?”

She's standing close to the chest-high flowers bordering our houses. "I'm not doing too well, actually."

"What's wrong?"

"Ellie had surgery yesterday."

At the mention of Ellie having an operation, my walls crack a little. "What? Surgery? How? Why?"

"She had a serious stomach ache. We rushed her to the hospital. They found it was appendicitis. So, she had to have it removed."

"Oh, my God. That's awful. How's she now?"

"She's still in the hospital recovering. She's better than yesterday, but she's just a little kid, so she is not that strong."

"What about...Myles?"

"It really hit him hard. He's been a mess lately."

A pang of guilt hits me with force. Here I was, thinking about staying away from him, while he was going through a hard time all on his own. I feel so ashamed of myself. So ashamed. But I was staying away from him for his own good. I did it to protect his identity. It wasn't malicious, I assure myself. But it does nothing to lessen the guilt. At the first hint of trouble, I left him. I ignored his calls and didn't reply to his messages, except for the one that had to do with getting him a crummy file. I feel terrible.

"What hospital?"

"St. Mary's."

“Alright. Thank you.”

I go straight in and shut the door. Would Myles even want to see me now? I mean, I’ve done a good job of ignoring him. I only replied yesterday, and it wasn’t the friendliest text. But I want to see Ellie; she and I have formed a bond. That’s not the only reason I want to go to the hospital. I also want to be there for Myles. He must feel incredibly alone. I wonder if his wife is there, too. I wonder if she’ll flare up when she sees me. I’m conflicted. Should I go? Should I not? I should have asked Garcelle if his wife was there.

My stomach rumbles as I enter the house. I drop my bag on the kitchen counter and open the fridge, searching for something to eat. The past few days have been so stressful and distracting that I’ve not had time to stock up on groceries. Now, all I have is milk, half a loaf of bread, and leftover noodles. Nothing more. I pull out bread and search to see if I have butter sitting somewhere in the fridge, but there’s none. I pull out the carton of milk, pour some in a glass, and put two slices of bread on a plate. I’m standing as I eat and only sit on a stool when I’m done. I’m exhausted. Exhausted beyond imagination. Everything is happening at once, and the one person I could have talked to about it is going through his own problems.

I sigh, get off the stool and put the carton of milk back in the fridge. I drink a cup of water and slide my bag off the counter, making for my bedroom. I’m tired, really tired, and I need a soothing shower. I’ll decide on what to do after that. Maybe a short nap will help, too. I drop my bag on the bed and struggle

out of my clothes. I leave them lying on the floor and walk into the bathroom naked. The water is cool, just how I want it. It's hot inside my head. Maybe it'll help cool things down a bit. I step under the shower without a shower cap even though I washed my hair this morning. I just want to get wet from my head to my feet. I raise my face to the spray of water raining down on me and shut my eyes. When I open them, I'm crying, but the tears are indistinguishable from the shower water. Just when I thought everything was falling into place. Just when I thought I'd found a man I could open up to again, everything comes tumbling down, leaving me to pick up the pieces.

The cool shower helps a little. It hasn't calmed things in my head, but I decide I'll go see Myles and Ellie. I can't stay away because one woman he isn't even with anymore wants me to, her threats be damned. If I were admitted to a hospital, I would want Myles to come see me, and it'd hurt if he didn't show up. I'll tell him what's going on. Maybe he can talk some sense into his wife—his ex-wife.

I pull the towel off my body and go into the closet to look for what to wear. I find a yellow romper and quickly slip into it, then head to the mirror to comb my wet hair. I won't have time to dry it, but I'll towel it really well and I hope it doesn't drip water on my clothes. I'm knotting it into a bun when I catch sight of a face in the mirror. It's someone staring at me through the window. I look away from the mirror and shoot my eyes to the window, but the person is gone. I'm trembling. My hands loosen around my hair. I let the wet hair fall on my



back, the dampness clinging to my clothes. I rush out of the room, grab my car keys, and run out of the front door.

# Chapter 16

Myles

“**S**he should be ready to go home next week. Since she had some rupture, we’d like to keep her on antibiotics for a week.”

I nod at the doctor as I hold onto Ellie’s hand on the bed.

He taps his hand lightly on her leg. “You’re such a strong girl. You should be proud of yourself.”

Ellie smiles at him. “When can I go home?”

“Soon. Very soon,” he answers. “We just want to make sure you are absolutely ready to go.”

“I’m ready,” Ellie answers. “I miss my bed.”

“And I’m sure your bed misses you, too. But isn’t the bed here comfortable? It’s a medical bed. Made specially for comfort.”

Ellie nods. “It’s comfortable, but not like mine.”

The doctor laughs, then turns to me. “We’ll remove the stitches in fourteen days.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

He nods and goes to open the door to leave. But just as he opens it, someone comes in. Bria. She’s the last person I was expecting. She greets the doctor and stands at the door. She shuts it behind her after a few seconds but doesn’t move.

“Bria! I thought you’d never come. I’ve missed you so much. Dad said you traveled.”

Bria stutters. “I...yes...I did.” She moves toward the bed, then sits on the edge and hugs Ellie. “How are you?”

Ellie scrunches up her face. “They won’t let me eat normal food.”

Bria grins. “That’s because they want you to heal properly.”

“Yes, that’s what the doctor said. And I always feel like puking when I eat.”

“And are you healing? Are you being a strong girl?”

“I’m trying.”

She laughs at Ellie, then faces me. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I say coldly without meaning to. I just don’t have much energy for emotion left inside me.

It’s funny how she finally shows up, as if I should be grateful she’s gracing me with her presence. I called her and called her. I sent multiple texts with no reply. I knocked on her door but got no answer.

“I saw Garcelle on my way in from work and she told me what happened.”

I nod.

“Look...” she starts, but stops. “Can we talk?”

I sigh. She looks at Ellie and I understand she means she wants to talk with me in private. I don’t want to leave Ellie alone, but I know this conversation is long overdue.

“Will you be okay on your own for a minute, Ellie? I need to talk to Bria outside.”

She nods. “Yes, Daddy. Look, they just started Doc McStuffins.” Which happens to be one of her favorite cartoons.

I smile and pick the remote up to turn up the volume a little. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, okay?”

Bria gets off the bed and says to Ellie, “I’ll come to see you again before I go.”

“But you just got here.”

“I know, and I’m not leaving yet.”

Ellie nods and turns her attention back to the TV.

I walk toward the door and Bria follows. I hold the door open for her and step out after her.

She turns to face me and crosses her arms over her chest. Not an act of defiance—I notice she’s nervous. But she’s trying to hide it.

“I’m sorry,” she finally says.

I nod and lean against the wall.

“I really am. I wasn’t purposely avoiding you. Well, I was, but it was because your wife threatened to expose your identity, and I know how dangerous that could be for you.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

I stare at her directly. “Yes, my estranged wife came to warn me to stay away from you, too. And she told me she came to your office to warn you to stay away from me.”

Bria uncrosses her arms and lets her shoulders drop.

“I was calling to ask how you were doing. As you can see, I haven’t been doing too well. Sonya’s threatening to hold up the divorce process if I continue to see you. She says she doesn’t want you around Ellie. But I know that’s not her reason for doing this. I know she just wants me to be miserable. And I don’t know why, because I’ve been nothing but good to her.”

“Maybe she wants you back.”

“She doesn’t. She just wants to see me suffer.”

“Why would she want that?”

“I don’t know. That’s just how she is. She knows you might not stay away from me so she’s trying to use the divorce to get to me.”

“I’m so sorry about that.”

“No, it’s not your fault. If it wasn’t you, she’d have used something else.”

“I got your text about the files. I tried to get them today. I had actually copied them to my laptop just in case, which would have come in handy today, but they’ve been deleted.”

“You deleted them? Even from your recycle bin?”

“No, someone else deleted them. I checked my recycle bin and they were deleted from there, too.”

I push slowly off the wall. “What do you mean someone deleted them? Did someone else know about this?”

“I forgot my laptop at the office, and the next morning I went to copy them, and the files were gone.”

“Jeez, who could have done that?”

“That’s not all. I got an envelope with a note in it. It read ‘back off or face the consequences.’”

“What?”

She bites her lips. “I got the envelope before the files were deleted. Someone left it in my desk drawer.”

“Did you tell anyone about the investigation?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then this evening, I was in my bedroom in front of the mirror when I saw someone watching me from outside my bedroom window.”

“Oh my God. Who?”

“I didn’t see who it was. It was so quick. I didn’t get a good look. I don’t even know if it was a man or a woman.”

I shake my head. “I think I know who it is. Only one person is capable of this. She’s gone too far this time.”

“Who?”

“Who else? Sonya, my wife. Ex-wife.”



I really don’t understand why Sonya won’t just let me be. It makes no sense that when I finally find the slightest semblance of happiness, she rears her head and tries to ruin it. But I won’t let her. She’s done enough damage in my life. I sent her an email to inform her about Ellie but I got no reply. And she’s supposed to be a mother. She’s a mother who doesn’t care about her child. A mother would rather galivant around the world and not speak to her daughter for months on end. If she had custody of Ellie, I imagine she’d leave her to the care of a nanny ninety-five percent of the time. I’m taking responsibility for my daughter. I don’t want anything from her. Why can’t she just mind her business? Give me the divorce and leave me be, like I leave her be? I don’t even know if she’s still in Long Beach, but I know she’s hired people to continue her threats on Bria, and I won’t stand for it.

Bria left fifteen minutes ago. As much as I’m glad we finally talked, I’m not happy that all of this is happening to her because of me. I feel guilty for the burden I have placed on

her. I told her that it was okay if she wanted to pull away from helping us with the investigation. I'm sure she knows nothing about the fraud. She's helped us enough. I don't want any harm to come her way. But she'd insisted. "*I made a promise to help, and I want to see it through,*" was what she said to me.

I pick up my phone from a side table next to Ellie's bed. I'll try Sonya's phones since she's not replying to my emails, hoping one of her numerous numbers will go through. I'm only doing this for Ellie. No matter how horrible Sonya has been to me, I want Ellie to have a relationship with her mother. Ellie is sleeping now, so I go outside so I don't wake her up, but as soon as I'm out, I realize I don't even need to be out of the room because the call doesn't connect. I try the several other numbers I have for her. No luck. I rein my irritation and anger in and go back into the room.

Just five minutes later, she breezes in as though she's in a fashion show. Big hat, oversized coat, larger-than-life shoes. She walks noisily toward Ellie's bed, her heels clacking on the floor.

I don't wait for her to get to the bed. I get up and lead her out by the shoulder.

"Sonya, where the fuck do you think you're going?"

She shrugs my hand off her. "What do you mean? I'm here to see my child. I'm her mother, remember?"

"I've been messaging you for days and never heard back."



“I was indisposed.”

I shake my head. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I just told you, I’m here to see Ellie.”

“That’s not what I mean. What are you doing threatening Bria?”

“Oh, that. I told you the last time I came. Why are you overreacting now?”

“Overreacting? Because you’re going overboard now.”

“Going overboard? I told her that I wanted her to stay away from you. Is that so hard for her to do? I’ve not even been in town for a while now. What did that bitch tell you?”

I clench my right palm and squeeze to get the anger out of me. “You’re lying and you know it. What about the note you left in her drawer at work? What about the files you deleted from her laptop?”

She laughs out loud and throws her head back to toss pink hair extensions out of her face. “What the hell are you talking about? Note in her drawer? Her laptop?”

“Stop fucking laughing. I know what you’re capable of.”

She smirks then shakes her head. “You may think I’m this evil mastermind, but I’m not. Maybe your girlfriend has wronged a lot of people.”

“And the person watching her from her bedroom window today? That wasn’t you?”

“I just told you I haven’t been in town for a while now. I just got into town.”

“You could have hired people.”

“And waste precious money on her? Nah, I’d rather buy new Louboutins. Please, can I see my daughter now?” She wafts past me and enters.

I’m left standing here with a realization. Sonya may be vindictive, but she owns up to everything she does. I’m determined to get to the bottom of this. Someone spying on Bria at her home is the last straw.



Before Bria left the hospital, she told me about the case she’s been working on. She told me about how ruthless the opposing lawyers are. Since I now know that Sonya isn’t responsible for the threats Bria has been getting, I wonder if the opposing counsel is just trying to intimidate her so she doesn’t go on with the case. That means they are ready to play dirty. I intend to pay them a visit.

I pull up at a three-story building on Spring Street and stare up at the white shutters on the floor I’m headed to. The office of the chief counsel sits between the first and third floors. I’m a detective, but I’m not going in today as one. If I go in as a detective, it will have more impact, but that would blow my cover to smithereens. But I also want her safe, so this is the best I can do for now. It’s a huge firm. The clerk sends me up

with a tag that I'll have to submit on my way back. In the elevator, I go through what I'll say to make sure I don't make any mistakes.

When I get to the second floor, I see another clerk. I ask for the attorneys named Barry and Jim. She tells me where to go. I knock on the cream-colored door and await an answer. A rather soft voice answers, telling me to come in. I push the door open. There's a big man behind the desk and a smallish man sitting opposite him. I immediately attach the smallish man to the soft voice, but I realize I'm wrong when the big man asks me what I want. The soft voice is a shock coming from inside him.

I pull out a chair and sit beside the smallish man, who I realize has a deep voice as he says something to the big man. I stretch my hand out and shake his, then stretch my hand to the big man. He doesn't take it. I nod and withdraw my hand.

“Okay, I guess you're good at reading people and have realized I'm not here on a courtesy call. Good. I like how intuitive you are. But let your intuition tell you that if you threaten Bria again, it will not end well for you.”

The big man crumples his forehead. “You mean Bria Shaw, who's defending Costa in court?”

I nod.

“Why would we do that? Why would we threaten her?”

“Because you want to win the case.”

The smallish man laughs. “No, we prefer to threaten in the courtroom with our intellect.”

I narrow my eyes at the big man. “Anything happens to her, and you’ll have yourselves to blame.”

“And who are you to her? Her bodyguard?”

“No, her boyfriend.”

# Chapter 17

Bria

I really don't know where I stand with Myles right now. I've been to the hospital to see Ellie a couple of times, but we haven't had time to talk about us. Are we still together? Are we taking a break? Has he talked to his wife about us? He only sent a text to say he doesn't think she's the one threatening me because he spoke to her. I haven't gotten another threatening note. I haven't seen another person lurking at my window. But the past few days have been crazy, and staying in the house alone is doing my head in. Last night, I jumped at the dark shadow in the living room when I came out to get something to drink. It turned out to be the lamp in the corner, but I'd mistaken it for someone hiding, waiting to attack me. It's a Saturday, and today, I'm going over to Ava's. I can't be in the house alone; it's driving me nuts.

I have a quick breakfast and rush my way through a shower, turning the water off intermittently to listen for footsteps that are probably just my imagination. When I'm out of the house

and in my car, I let out a sigh of relief and drive as fast as I can out of the driveway.

Ava gets the door when I arrive. “You look like shit.”

“I feel like shit. I am shit.”

“Jeez. Work is that bad, huh?”

I’ve been keeping stuff from Ava because I wanted to be sure I wasn’t imagining things. I wanted to be sure I wasn’t being hysterical. I told her about Myles’s wife coming to the office, but I didn’t tell her about the envelope in the drawer and the person peering through my window. I’d seen that face in the window. I wasn’t imagining things. The envelope was in my drawer before it disappeared. I’m not crazy. The files were on my laptop before they disappeared, too. I saw them all.

I thud onto a sofa and fall back into it, lying straight. “It’s not work.” I rise up and sit slouching down. “Okay, maybe it’s work. But I’m not sure what’s going on or where it’s coming from.”

“Oh my God. You got sacked?”

“I didn’t. I’m being threatened by someone. A while back, I found an envelope in my drawer with a paper in it that read ‘back off or face the consequences.’ But a few days later, the envelope disappeared from my drawer. I got some files deleted from my laptop. You know, the one I told you I was helping Myles with? That one. Then a couple of days ago, someone was lurking around outside my window.”

Ava's mouth is slack. "All of this crazy stuff has been happening and you didn't tell me?"

"For a little while, I thought I was crazy, because I really don't have evidence to prove any of these things. But now I'm sure I'm not crazy."

"Someone was creeping around your house? Who could it be?"

"I told you about Myles's wife, yeah? Myles said it could be her. But he sent me a text to say he talked to her, and she said it wasn't. She said the last time she talked to me was when she came to my office. I don't know what to believe."

Ava sighs then sits on the arm of another sofa, facing me. "Are you sure it's not that weird girl at your office? What's her name again? The one who's trying to make partner, too."

"Fern?"

Ava nods.

"I don't know. If someone in my office is doing this, then they give me more reason to want to work with Myles. Because now, I just want to bring whoever is responsible down. I've been dreading being in my own house. Every shadow, every single thing, looks and sounds like an attacker to me. It's driving me crazy."

"You could come stay here for a while if your place freaks you out. I've got room."

I really need a place far away from my house, but I also don't want to impose on her. "I'm sure I'll get used to it. I'm

sure they'll leave me alone soon. You need your privacy.”

“I have privacy. I'm not expecting a lover, if that's what you mean. That guy I told you about finally dumped me. Well, he didn't exactly dump me. He's a coward, so he ghosted me instead. No replies to my texts, no calls. So, you're free to come stay.”

“I'm so sorry to hear that. I've been so neck-deep in my own problems that I didn't ask you about him after the last time we spoke.”

“It's fine. It hurts trying to put yourself out there and getting nothing in return. But I'll get over it. It's fine. So, are you accepting my offer?”

I nod. “I am. I'll be happy to be out of the house until I can figure out what's going on or things die down.”

She jumps up and slaps her thighs. “Great. Let's go get your things.”

“What? Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“I can go later to get them. You don't have to worry yourself.”

“No, there's no way I'm letting you go back there on your own. Let's go now. We can take my car.”

I shake my head. “Your car will break down ten times before we get there. And if someone is after us, they'll catch us easily. Let's take mine.”



She laughs and snorts. “I can’t wait to trade in my car. I can’t wait to get a better job. To be honest, I can’t wait to have a better life.”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Things will get better. And I can...”

“I know what you’re about you say. You can help me out financially. No, I think you’ve done enough already. Your friendship is enough for me. I’ll get my life fixed, okay?”

I nod and hug her.

“Let’s go,” she says, pulling away from me.

When we get to my place, I turn off the car engine and stare at the house I’ve come to really like. I can’t believe that the house I used to see as a refuge, the house I found comfort in when I was going through a hard heartbreak, has turned into a house I don’t even feel comfortable in anymore. I’d intended to stay here until I was promoted and could buy my own. I sigh and get out of the car.

I open the front door slowly, but Ava pushes it open wide.

“You don’t have to fear anything. No one’s going to attack you. Not while I’m here. If they try, they’ll have me to deal with.”

I laugh. “Really? You don’t look like you could fight off a bug.”

She tilts her head. “What? What are these hands for?” She stretches her slender hands to me. “For slapping a bitch into a coma, Bria.”

I cackle and head for the bedroom. I like that Ava is here with me. I'm glad I allowed her to come. I feel a bit safer than I would if I'd come alone.

I'm pulling clothes out of my closet while Ava is putting them in a little black bag on the bed.

"I don't need much," I say, and stop going through my closet.

"Trust me, you do. What if you decide to stay at my place longer?"

"Okayyyy," I drawl and look for more office wear.

On our way out, I notice that a mini figurine of a cat that I'd bought on a work trip is missing from where I keep it on a small table. It'd been there this morning. Or was it last night I saw it last? I stand, looking at the empty table.

"What's wrong?"

I look around the living room to see if something else is amiss, but everything else seems to be in place. Then I look behind the table. The figurine is on the floor. I lower myself and put my head through the table legs to get it. I place it back on the table and wonder how it got to the floor. That has never happened before.

"Nothing," I reply, and Ava and I continue toward the door.

Something isn't right. *Something is definitely not right*, I think to myself as we drive off.



My phone lights up. A text. It's from Myles.

**Hey, I just wanted to know if you've got the files yet.**

It's been a week, and I still don't have them. I've not had the chance to. Micha has been in her office all week. But I plan to go to the office today, although it's a Saturday.

I shoot him back a text.

**No, but I should have them today.**

Ava is making breakfast and whistling to the music playing from her phone on the center table in the living room.

"I'll be going in to work today."

"What for?"

"I need to go get back the files that were deleted from my laptop. Myles needs them."

"I told you to stop these Myles shenanigans."

"I promised to help him."

"You don't have to. He can do it himself."

"Since I'm already in the firm I can do it from inside."

She sighs. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I'll be fine. I'll just pop in and out. I'll go when it's getting dark when I'm sure no one will be there. There's a window that I can sneak through. I remember it got faulty a while back. I hope it's not been fixed yet."

“I still insist that I come with you.”

“No, I think it’ll be easier for one person to get in and out easily.”

“I don’t have to come in with you. I can wait in the car. That way, I have the car ready for you when you come out.”

“I’m not taking my car. I’ll take a bus. My car would raise suspicions.”

She throws her hands up. “Okay, as you wish.”

I laugh. “I’m going to the office. Not a war zone.”

“To the office where you’ve been threatened. And you’re going at night.”

“I’ll be fine. Stop worrying.”



At 6:30 p.m. I head out. I walk to the corner stop to catch a bus. On the bus, I think about who could have been at the office today. Sometimes, some of my colleagues go to the office on Saturdays to work on cases. I’ve done it too, but most of the time I make sure I finish my work on Fridays before going home or take my work home with me.

When I get off the bus, I pull my hoodie on and walk down the street to the office. I don’t know if I’m doing a good job disguising myself, but I hope no one sees me. I go around the back, avoiding the security camera, and gun for the faulty window. I push it up, but it doesn’t budge. My heart is racing

now, because if I'm caught trying to open a window at night, I'll get the police called on me. I push again and again. When it's still not opening, I look over to the next window. Have I got the wrong window? I walk toward the second window and push it up. To my surprise, it opens. I indeed got the wrong window. I'd made sure to wear very comfortable shoes to aid my climbing. I lift my left leg first so that I can push myself up with the right one, the strongest of the two. I jump into the office and shut the window. I look around carefully and wait, listening for any sound. But I'm met with silence.

I creep on my toes toward Micha's office. I bring out the spare key I'd nicked from her drawer and open the door. I want to switch on the light, but I decide against it and use my phone light as a guide. I boot up her computer and wait. When it's fully on, I slide the flash drive into the port and start to copy. I can't sit still, so I pace for a while then come back to look at the percentage. Twenty percent. *"Oh God, please let it finish quickly"* I murmur to myself. I pace again, then check the screen and pace again, and check and pace again until finally it's a hundred percent copied.

Just as I'm about to remove the flash drive, I hear a sound that makes me pause. I almost stop breathing. Anything to stop the heaving of my chest. I listen carefully and strain my ears. But it was a false alarm. I take a deep breath and slip out the flash drive. Then the door opens, and the light comes on, flooding the room and jarring my eyes. I gasp and snatch the flash drive quickly, trying to duck under the table. But it's too late. I've been seen already. The sudden flood of light renders

my eyesight dim for a second so I struggle to figure out who it is. Fern?

No, Fern is petite. She's slim. This person in front of me is tall. I rub my palms against my eyes. I'm happy when I recognize who it is.

Daisy.

I slide the flash drive into my pocket and remove the hood of my sweatshirt from my head. There's no need to hide. I'm sure I have a lot of explaining to do, but I'm glad it's Daisy of all people. I let out a sigh of relief. And fall back into the chair.

"Daisy. Thank God it's you."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to get something. Micha sent me. I decided to come get it today instead of coming tomorrow."

"Oh."

"Yeah. What are you doing here?" I ask her, surprised she's even here at this time. But I don't voice my surprise because if I ask too many questions then it could lead her to ask me more questions. And I don't want that.

She walks into the office slowly with her hand behind her back.

"I'll need a ride home. Did you come with your car?"

She doesn't answer, but pulls her hidden hand from her back, and in it is a gun. I stare at her, wondering what's going on.

She points the gun at me. “Shut down the computer and get up.”

I chuckle, still confused.

“Shut down the computer and get off the chair, Bria. Don’t do anything funny.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Now!” she screams.

I slam my hand on the desk quickly in search of the mouse and I shut down the computer.

“Now, get up slowly and walk toward me.”

I get up slowly like she instructed and walk toward her. When I get to where she is, she turns me around and ties my hands together behind my back.

“What are you doing, Daisy?”

“Shh. Now walk slowly out of the door. Nothing funny, okay?”

I nod. I feel the gun on the small of my back. We don’t go through the window I gained entrance through earlier. She has a key. She opens the door and looks right and left before letting me out, then she shuts it. She ushers me to her car, parked in the parking lot, and shuts the door when I’m settled in the passenger side. As she turns around, I look to see if I can find a way out, but my hands are tied. There’s little I can do. She comes around to the driver’s side and puts the gun on the dashboard before starting the car. She isn’t smiling. This

isn't the Daisy I know. As she tears down the streets of Long Beach, I think of screaming. Maybe someone would hear me and come to my rescue. But she's driving fast, and the wind would drown me out.

Then it dawns on me. Was it Daisy all along? The envelope in my drawer, the deletion of the file on my laptop? Of course, it had to be. She was the one who had easy access to me like that. Gosh, how didn't I see it all this time? I've been so foolish. Is she working for Micha? She has to be.

She doesn't say anything until we get to her house. I've only been here twice. Once, to visit her when she was sick, and the second time to get work done at her place. It's a small house on the corner of the street. It's painted light brown, and from what she told me, it belonged to her grandmother, who left it to her mom, who left it to her. I always joked that she was a homeowner and didn't have to worry about anything else.

"I'll come open the door for you and we'll walk as fast as possible, got it?"

I nod.

She puts the gun in her side pocket and then gets out of the car. This is my last chance to save myself. If she successfully gets me in the house, it'll be harder for me. I want to scream, but somehow, I can't. What if I scream and no one comes out? That'll mean more trouble for me. I sigh and wait for her to open the car door. Daisy is my friend. I can talk her into letting me go. I'll tell her that I understand, that Micha's just using her, and that I understand why she couldn't say no to Micha's



orders. She opens the door and doesn't take the rope off my hands but leads me to her front door. She quickly opens it and pushes me in.

It's dark inside. She leads me through a small door, down rickety steps, and into a passage. I don't know where I'm being led, but I don't protest.

# Chapter 18

## Myles

**E**llie came back home from the hospital yesterday. I've taken time off work so I can be here for her. Garcelle's been of great help too. She's been amazing. Sonya hasn't come back to see Ellie since the last time. When she saw Ellie in stable condition, she took off again to God knows where. Probably lounging in a hotel with a new lover. And to be very honest, I'm happy she's out of my hair. If her being here is only going to stress Ellie and me, then I think it's better for her to be away from us. I wish it was different. I wish she was here to hold Ellie's hand, but I guess it's better this way.

I slither past the hallway and open the fridge to get milk and pour myself a bowl of cereal. My appetite has been shit for days. Even last night, I couldn't eat. But I woke up to a rumbling stomach today. I sit at the kitchen counter as I eat and stare at nothing in particular. It's been a rough week. A tough month, even. Bria and I are not in a good place. We talk, but it's nowhere near what it used to be. I miss her. I miss

everything about her. I can't remember the last time she was in my arms. I can't remember the last time we kissed or the last time she ran her fingers across my chest and back. It's been strictly business between us.

Which reminds me, I've been expecting to get the files but haven't heard from her, which strikes me as strange because she's always been serious and dependable with work. I'm not surprised she's doing this. I mean, she ignored me for weeks before we started talking again. If Jon hadn't texted me last night to inform me that we needed the files because we're expected to send them in by Tuesday, I would wait this out until she's ready to talk again.

When I'm done eating, I take the bowl to the sink and rinse it off, then set it in the dishwasher. I look out of the window, over at her house. She should be home. She never really sleeps over at her friends'. I can't remember if her lights were on last night. Just as I'm leaving the kitchen for my bedroom to see if I can get more sleep in before Ellie wakes up, the doorbell rings. I look over at the wall clock above a desk with books in the corner. It's really early. It's not even 4 a.m. yet. I hurry toward the door to stop whoever it is from waking everyone in the house. They're getting ready to press the button again when I open the door.

"Hi Myles," a beautiful dark-haired woman in a blue dress says.

I remember her from Bria's sister's wedding. I can't remember her name right now, but I know she's Bria's best

friend. Why is she at my doorstep this early?

“Err, morning...” I squeeze my eyes trying to remember her name.

“Ava.”

“Yeah, Ava. Umm. Come in.”

Her hair is tied up in a white silk scarf, and she is wearing slippers. I look out before shutting the door. There’s a car parked at the edge of my driveway. I assume it’s hers. I’d been so lost in thought that I didn’t hear her pull up.

I know something is wrong, but I’m not sure what it is. “Is anything the matter?”

“Have you seen Bria?”

I hesitate because I don’t know how much she knows.

She sees my hesitation. “I know everything. Bria told me.”

“Oh, okay. No, the last time I saw her was when she came to see my daughter at the hospital. I texted her yesterday though, about getting something for me, and she texted me back that she’d get it. I haven’t heard from her since then. I just guessed she was ignoring me again like she did a while back. Isn’t she at home?”

Ava shakes her head. “No. I’ve been calling her. Her phone is switched off.”

“Really? I haven’t even tried calling her today.”

“She’s been staying at my place for the past week. Yesterday evening she said she was going to the office to get some files.

I suggested I go with her because she's been getting threats, and someone's been watching her, but she refused. She said she'd be fine. I haven't heard from her since then. She's not at her house, and, like I said, she's been staying at mine. And if she wanted to come back to hers, she'd have told me and not switched off her phone, right?"

I make for the door. "Let's go check again to be sure."

Ava follows me and we go over to Bria's house. No lights are on, and her windows are shut. I knock on the door three times. No answer.

Ava shakes her head. "I know she can't be at the office. It's Sunday. No one is at work at this time. Something's fishy."

"Let's go check it out to make sure."

She's hesitant. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's a long shot, but we have to rule out every possible place she could be, and that was the last place she said she was going."

"Alright, you're the detective."

I nod and look around. I point at her car blocking the entrance to the driveway. "Is that yours?"

She nods.

"Alright. You'll have to get it out of the way. I'll go get my keys. We'll take my car."

She makes for her car as I re-enter my house. I hear the engine of a car start as I enter my bedroom. A few seconds

later, I'm out and we're off. We get to the office when the skies are beginning to light up. The morning sun is rearing its head. We knock on the locked front door. When there's no answer we go around to see if any windows are open, but none are. Nor are any lights on.

"She isn't here," I say with my hands on my waist. Dread starts to creep through my nerves. I'd thought it was nothing. I'd thought nothing of her not texting me or calling to say she got the files. But now, I know something's wrong. She was receiving threats. Has someone harmed her? The thought immediately becomes too much to bear. I don't want to think of the possible scenarios.

We walk back toward the car and get in, but I don't start the engine. "When did she leave your place yesterday?"

"Toward evening. She wanted to go when she was absolutely sure no one would be in the office."

I press my hands on the steering wheel and grind my teeth. Then I start the car.

When we get back to my house. I can't think straight as we sit in the car, both looking confused.

"Where else does she go? Where does she like to hang out?"

"Most of the places we go to are definitely closed now."

"Is there any other friend she has that I don't know of?"

"No one that I can think of right now. And I know she can't be at her sister's place because Aria's out of town. She mentioned it."

I sigh and look out of the car window.

“Maybe she could be with Daisy?” Ava suggests.

Daisy, her colleague I met at Micha’s party. “Why would she go with her without telling you?” I question.

“I don’t know. I’m so confused right now. Maybe they met at the office yesterday and she went home with her? Gosh, I’m rambling. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, we could check out Daisy’s place. Do you know where she lives?”

“Yes, we went there once. I think it’s on...ugh, I can’t remember the name right now, but I know the directions.”

“Okay,” I say, and start the car again.

I take in the house when we arrive. It’s rather small, I think as we walk up toward the front door. I press on the doorbell, but it’s stiff to the touch and I assume it’s not working, so I knock. It takes a few minutes, but we finally hear footsteps.

Daisy appears behind the slightly opened door, peering out at us with her hair disheveled. “Is everything okay?”

“I hope so. We were wondering if Bria is here?”

“What? Why would Bria be here? Is something wrong with her?”

I sigh.

She widens the door. “Please, come in.” She lets us into a rather shabby living room. Two couches sit opposite each

other in the middle of the room and there's a beat-up table between them. Stools sit on either side of each couch.

“What’s wrong with Bria?” she asks with concern on her face.

“She hasn’t been home since yesterday. She went to the office and hasn’t come back,” Ava answers.

Daisy sits on the arm of one of the couches. “That’s strange. Why would she be at work yesterday?”

“You didn’t see her? You weren’t at work yesterday?” I interject.

Daisy shakes her head. “No, the last time I saw her was on Friday. This is crazy. I’ve seen this happen on TV, but never to someone I’m close with.”

“Alright. Please, let us know if you hear anything, okay?”

She nods. “I will. You’re such a caring boyfriend. Thank you. And please, let me know if anything comes up. Ava has my number.”

I nod, say thank you, and we leave.

Hours later, after Ava has gone back to her place to wait for Bria, I’m at home dialing Bria’s number. But each time it goes straight to voicemail. It’s switched off. What could have happened to her? Where could she be? I can only hope that nothing terrible has happened. I’ve seen the worst, and I can’t even let myself think of those things happening to her. It’s Sunday, so nothing can be done about it. But tomorrow I



intend to do something about it, and I don't care if my identity gets exposed.



On Monday morning, I drive over to her office again, this time as a detective. Bria is missing and I'm not playing games. She didn't call yesterday. She also did not turn up today. Now, it's certain that she's in grave danger.

I ask to see Micha. As I'm let into her office, I see Daisy sitting opposite their boss.

"Jasper?" Micha asks.

I nod.

"Please, have a seat. How may I help you?"

"I'm looking for Bria. She hasn't been to work today, has she?"

"I was just asking Daisy about her. No, she hasn't. It's quite strange that she wouldn't show up to work and not call." She turns to Daisy. "And you're sure she didn't tell you anything?"

Daisy shakes her head.

"I just want to say that I intend to file a missing person's report. And I intend to find her."

Daisy clears her throat. "Umm. I'll get to work now, Micha." Then turns to me. "I hope you—I mean we—find her. I'll call every person I know."

I nod as she leaves the room.

“Oh my God. This is awful. Bria would never leave without telling anyone. She’s too responsible for that. Something’s definitely happened to her,” Micha says.

I sigh.

“Have you informed her loved ones?”

“Not yet.”

“Have you tried calling her? Here. Let me try,” she says, sliding her phone off the table.

“It’s no use. I called her all through yesterday and this morning.”

Micha puffs out air. “This is so strange.”

I want to tell her Bria was last at the office. At least, it’s where she told Ava she was going, but I hold the information back. “Alright. I’ll be off now.”

“Please, let me know if you find out anything.”

“I will.”

I step out of the building and stand in the parking lot. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse. I hope she’s safe wherever she is. I’ve worked cases like this, and I know how these things typically turn out. I don’t want Bria to be a statistic. My heart won’t be able to bear it.

I look up to the sky and shut my eyes. “Where are you, Bria?”

# Chapter 19

Bria

I rise slowly from the bed in the corner of the room. Today, Daisy has left the light on. It's a bulb emanating yellow light from where it's hanging on the ceiling. It's not as bright as the white light in my house. The first day she put me in here, my nose struggled to adjust to the musty smell. It smelled of earth and unwashed things, but it's been three days since I got here, and my nose is slowly getting used to it. Now, it smells musty only once in a while. I walk toward the door and put my right ear to it. I listen for any sound. The smell of garlic travels through the space between the floor and the door. I stop myself from sneezing out loud. I sneeze inwardly, it hurts, but I prefer it to Daisy running down to check on me because I've got plans and her showing up would spoil them.

I've been here for three days, and my hands have been tied behind my back—not with the same rope from the night at the office, but a much thicker rope. It grips my hands together tightly and leaves no wiggle room. For thirty minutes each

day, Daisy comes to take the rope off, to allow for some blood flow, she'd said. Whenever she does this, she doesn't leave me alone in the room. She sits in a metal chair in the other corner while looking at her watch, I guess to count down, and once it's been thirty minutes she ties the rope around my wrists again and leaves the room, locking the door with a key. Whenever I go to the bathroom, she doesn't take the rope off, she goes in with me and helps me pull down my pants, then waits outside.

I sit back on the bed and slowly slide to the floor. I shift slowly to the left, my tied hands making it difficult. I wish she'd tied them to the front; it would have made my mission easier. Yesterday, I noticed a sharp edge on the midpart of one of the bed legs. I noticed by mistake. I was frustrated and kicked the leg of the bed hard, and it gave me a cut, thankfully a small one. When she came into the room a minute later because I had screamed, I was still reeling from the pain, but I hid it well from her. Immediately after she left, I lowered myself to the floor and tried to saw the rope against the little sharp edge, hoping it'd cut me free. But it didn't.

When I was sure she'd gone to sleep last night, I went back to working on the rope. I did the same this morning before breakfast, and again before lunch. And now that I'm sure she's making dinner, I want to have a go again. Maybe I can get myself free before she comes in to deliver dinner. Then I could keep my hands to the back as though I still had them tied, and when I'm sure I'm at an advantage, grab the gun from her and run out.

I put my wrists to the sharp edge again and start to saw. But I haven't done it for long when I hear footsteps coming down the stairs. I scramble off the floor as best I can and sit on the bed. I suspect a trickle of sweat is on my forehead, but I can't wipe it off. The one small window at the top of the wall is shut, which means zero breeze is coming in, making the heat worse. The door opens and she comes in, a tray held close to her chest with one hand and a gun in the other. She leaves the door open and puts the tray on the bed, then sets the gun on a small stool at the foot of the bed. She goes to shut the door and then comes to sit beside me, the tray of food between us.

I pray silently that she feeds me like she'd started to yesterday. On the first night, she loosened my hands and let me feed myself, but I guess she sees it as a bad idea now. As she picks up the fork to feed me, I breathe a sigh of relief internally. I know if she attempts to take the rope off, she'll see the mark the sharp edge on the bed leg has inflicted on it, and I don't know how she'd react. I shift to make more space for her.

She stabs at a couple of fries, dips them in sauce and raises them toward my mouth. I open my mouth wide and close it around the fork before she pulls it back out. While I chew, I watch her facial expression. She's not noticed the sweat on my forehead, thanks to the not-so-bright yellow bulb. Although the bulb makes the room hotter than it should be, I'm happy it's not a revealing white one.

“Like I told you before. If you tell me who sent you to get those files, I will release you.”

I swallow but say nothing.

She continues. “I know you’re not doing this on your own. I know someone sent you. I know, Bria. Do you want to be free?”

I nod.

“Then tell me who sent you?”

She notices I’m swallowing hard, so she lifts the glass of water and I take a sip. She stares at me intently, then gives me another forkful of fries and sauce. The garlic is excessive, but I don’t complain.

“I know Micha didn’t send you, because it was her files you copied. I mean, you can’t be spying on the person who sent you. Is it someone in the office? Or is it just the police? You told me the office is being investigated. What is the name of the officer in charge of the investigation?”

I don’t answer.

She drops the fork and picks up the gun at the foot of the bed. She walks slowly to the chair in the corner and sits in it. I can’t see her face properly.

“Do you want to stay here forever? You will have to give up this person or people eventually. You know that, right?”

I sigh and wish I could continue eating. I’m famished.

I can’t give up Myles. I can’t. I’d never be able to forgive myself. Yes, I want to be free. I want to get out of this airless room. I want to be able to use my hands again, but that comes

at a great cost. What if I told her it's Myles? They'll go after him, and it will be unexpected; he won't be able to defend himself. Also, he has a child. A beautiful daughter. What if they target her? I say 'they' because I know Daisy isn't working alone. Just yesterday someone came to the house. I didn't see who it was, but I knew. I heard them speaking in hushed tones. She just said she knows Micha isn't responsible, so I know she can't be in cohorts with Micha. What if I tell her and she kills me? I'm guessing she's only keeping me alive because she wants me to reveal who I'm working with. I'm convinced it's the only thing keeping me alive. It's not like she can just let me go free now, knowing what I know.

“You know I'm not a bad person, right?”

I'm still not answering. I'm not sure anymore, to be honest. I'd thought Daisy was one of the most honest people I knew. I mean, we were pretty close. Maybe not as close as Ava and me, but she was the closest colleague to me. I thought I knew her until three days ago.

“I don't know. I used to think you were a good person. But I don't know anymore,” I say, trying to goad her into talking.

She chuckles but I can hear the bitterness beneath it. “I'm not a bad person. I'm just a person trying to survive.”

I shake my head. “If everyone used that excuse as a get-out-of-the-horrible-things-they've-done card, do you think there'd be any good people around?”

She chuckles again. “I'm not using it as any card. I'm just telling my reality. And I'm only saying this to you because

you were my officemate.”

Oh, officemate. That’s what I’ve been demoted to now? Cool.

“I’m not a bad person. I’ve just been dealt a bad hand in life. Have you seen how I live? Is this shabby house befitting a lawyer? Or anyone, for that matter.”

Well, she’s right. I’d always thought that Daisy’s house was in bad shape—I never mentioned it to her because I never want to be offensive to others, but I’ve always wondered, since she earns a decent salary. But that still doesn’t excuse her getting involved in fraud.

“Is it befitting? Would you live in this type of house? Answer me, Bria. Would you?”

When I don’t answer, she continues. “I’m so grateful to my mom for leaving it to me. But I can’t even maintain the house. It’s falling apart, and if something isn’t done about it soon, I’ll lose it. I bet you wonder what I use my salary for?” she sighs. “I spent all of my money on my sick mother. She had no insurance. I was trying to keep her alive so that I wouldn’t be left alone in this world. But after borrowing and borrowing to take care of her, she died. And now I’m left to pay back all of the money I borrowed. I don’t have anything left for myself.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say in a low tone. I’d not expected her story to be this sad. I guess I didn’t know her after all. Now I know where all her money’s been going.



“No, you’re not sorry. You wouldn’t know what this feels like. You’ve never had to struggle in your life.”

“That’s not true. I’ve had to work hard for the life I have now, and I lost my own mother when I was just a kid,” I cut in sharply.

“Yeah, but...” she says, but trails off. “Anyway, when Ben approached me with a proposal, I was skeptical at first, but I saw it as a way to get out of this life.”

“Wait. Ben is in on it?”

“Yes, he’s the one who introduced me to it.”

Wow, I would never have suspected bald-headed Ben. Is that why they were close? My mind goes back to the night at Micha’s party when they were dancing together. That night I’d pointed them out to Myles on the dance floor after he just got back from creeping around Micha’s house. If only Myles had known the people he was looking for were right in front of him.

“I agreed to work with him and his squad members in other states.”

So, I was right, there’s a squad. This sounds bigger than I thought.

“The first payment I received blew me away. I’ve been settling my debt. I never meant to steal from anyone, but you have to understand that I need to get out of this situation. I have just one payment left, and I’ll be free from debt. And you think I’ll let you stop that? I intend to save up enough to leave

the country and start a new life somewhere else. I won't let you destroy the life I envision for myself. Ben has suggested we kill you and look for whoever you're working with ourselves if you refuse to talk. I'm sorry, we just might have to take drastic measures."

She gets up and puts the gun in her pocket before taking the tray of food into her hands and opening the door. But before going out she turns and says, "I'll be going to Ben's soon. I'm just telling you in case you need to use the bathroom. I won't be around."

When I need to use the bathroom, I knock on the door with my foot. But using the bathroom is the last thing on my mind right now. I want her gone so I can saw at the rope again. When she's out and the door is closed, I push away the thought that she didn't let me eat much. My stomach, which had little hunger pains in it just minutes ago, is full. Not from the little food I ate, but from the hope rising inside of me right now.

A few seconds later, I realize I'd not heard the familiar click that signifies the locking of the door. Is she trying to set a trap for me? Does she want me to wander out of the room so she can shoot me? Is there someone standing outside the door waiting to take me out? She has never forgotten to lock the door before. Why now? Then I hear her footsteps above me walk back to her room from the kitchen. I listen carefully. After a short while, she comes out of her room and walks toward the front door. I wait to hear it unlock, then she shuts the door and locks it. Is this some type of trick? Why did she tell me she was going to see Ben? She's never told me when

she was going out before. I wait and listen for footsteps walking back into the house, but I hear none. Then I hear the roaring of a car engine. She's actually leaving. But I have to be cautious. It could be part of the plan.

I sit in silence for a few minutes, waiting for the door to fling open at any second. My heart is racing, and my hands are going numb from the diminished blood flow. *To hell with this*, I say to myself, and slide down the bed to the floor. I shift impatiently to the bed leg with the sharp edge, put my wrists to it and start to saw with all my might. I saw and saw and saw and lose track of time. I feel like I'm living in a loop. Sweat is running freely down my face. I still have on the same clothes from three days ago, though my hoodie had been taken off the first night I got here. It lies at the foot of the bed. My shirt is soaked with sweat, making me realize that I've been at it a long time. Then I hear a sound. Rope untangling. I start to saw faster. Faster and faster and faster and faster until my hands suddenly break apart.

I'm in disbelief for a few seconds. I sit with my hands still behind me, afraid to bring them to the front. But then I snap back to reality. I don't have much time. I push myself up with the aid of my hands, pain searing through them as I press against the floor. But I don't let it stop me. I snatch my hoodie off the bed and head for the door. I hesitate for a second; all the fears from minutes or hours before are coming back. What if there's someone at the door? I open it anyway and slowly peek out. The passageway is dark, but I don't see any shadows. I don't shut the door behind me, but rush out of the

room and up the narrow stairs, into the upstairs hallway, bumping into things as I run to the living room and race to the front door. But it's locked and requires a key to unlock it.

A phone. I need a phone. If I don't find one then I'm certain I won't be getting out of this alive, because if Daisy comes back to see the rope off my hands, I'm toast. I run around the living room looking for a phone. A landline. A mobile phone. Anything. I'm still futilely searching when I hear the sound of a phone coming from somewhere. I follow the sound. It's coming from the couch. There's a scarf on the couch. Surely, it's under the scarf. As I draw closer, I see a dim light peering through. I yank the scarf up and see a phone on the couch. I pick it up and wait for it to stop ringing. When it stops, I wait a few more seconds while tapping my left foot on the floor impatiently. When the phone doesn't ring again, I dial Myles's number. I focus hard as I dial, trying to remember the correct number. When I'm sure it's correct, I press call.

It starts to ring. *God, please let him be with his phone.* It rings and rings and rings and stops. I'm on the verge of crying now because I hear someone outside. I run toward the window and pull the curtain aside. I'm not even trying to be discreet anymore. It's not Daisy, it's a neighbor from the opposite house taking out the trash. I try to scream to get his attention. Maybe he can call the cops. But the lump in my throat stops me. I can't make a sound. I'm numb. I watch as he goes back inside. I'm sobbing now. I quickly dial Myles's number again. This time he picks up, but I'm crying so hard that I can't say

anything. I don't have to say anything because he recognizes my voice.

“Bria? Bria!” he screams. “Where are you, Bria?”

“I...” I say, hyperventilating. “At Daisy’s,” I say, with little hope because I know Myles doesn’t know where Daisy’s house is. The time it’ll take to describe it to him might make it too late for him to come get me in time. But I’m not discouraged. “It’s at...” I continue.

“I know where it is. I’m on my way,” he says, then hangs up.

He knows where Daisy’s house is? We’ve never come here together. But I’m relieved he does. I go back to the couch and sit on it with my heart thumping. I don’t drop the phone. I’m holding it in my hand in case Myles loses his way and needs directions. I’m still not sure how he knows where the house is. I tap my feet on the floor edgily, the seconds going by like hours. The seconds slowing down the longer it takes for Myles to get here. Then I hear a car. I see the light shooting in through the living room window. I’m shaking hard. Daisy is definitely here. Myles couldn’t have gotten here so fast. If he was coming from home, it would be impossible. I walk toward the window with my knees buckling. The phone falls out of my hands when I see...when I see Myles’s car. I jump to the door and try to open it, but it’s still locked. I start to pound on it.

“Bria!” Myles shouts from the other side.

“Yes! I’m in here,” I scream.

I hear him try to open the door.

“It’s locked and Daisy will be back soon.”

“I’ll need you to step back from the door, okay? Step back. I’ll try to break it open.”

I step away from it. “Okay.”

I hear a loud bang, but nothing happens. I hear another bang. I move to the window to look. I see him go far away and run into the door with his right foot up. But nothing happens. He moves back and kicks at the door again. Then I hear a crack. I want to run to the door, but I stay put with my heart jumping into my throat. Then I hear a loud bang that sends the door flying. I run to the door and meet Myles rushing in.

“Oh my God. Oh my God,” I cry.

He doesn’t say anything, but whisks me to the car. When I’m in the passenger seat he runs to the driver’s side, and soon we’re pulling out of the street. We’re only maybe two minutes from Daisy’s house when I look down and see the deep cuts on my wrists.

# Chapter 20

## Myles

I pull the car out of the driveway and head out to the store. It's been four days since Bria was found. It's been four days of intense relief for me. But Bria's been living in fear because she thinks Daisy and their other colleague, Ben, will come for her. Since she came back from the hospital yesterday, she's been at my house. She refused to go to her home. I was the one who went to get her clothes and necessities. She's also told me everything she went through.

That night, while I was racing down to Daisy's house to save her, I did not have the time to call the police. But when we were safely out of the house and far away from the street, I called them and gave them the address. I also called Jon and told him to meet us at the hospital I was headed to, where we had Bria's room protected by an officer. There's no telling what these people are capable of.

I pull into the parking lot of the grocery store. When I get out of the car, I look around and put my hand on my gun in the

holster around my waist. I walk quickly until I get to the door and push it open. I walk down the aisles. We ran out of food this morning. Although Bria's not been eating much, Ellie will be expecting a full meal when she gets home from school. I get the things I need and go to the cashier to pay. Everyone looks suspicious to me, even the old woman pushing a cart. I can't pay and get out fast enough.

When I grab my packed-up goods and walk toward the doors, I let a few people go out before me, then step out and hurry toward my car. I rush to open the door, but just as I'm about to get in, I feel a bullet swish past me. I get in quickly, but before I'm about to pull away, I feel a bullet hit the brim of my hat. I pull my gun out of the holster and aim in the direction the bullets came from, the roof of the building opposite the store. I let out two shots through my open window and drive away quickly with just one hand.

I'd not expected that they would go after me. Bria had dialed my number through the phone she found in Daisy's house. They probably—no, not probably, they definitely checked to see whose number it was. I wish we hadn't been rushing that day so I could have taken the phone with me. I'm away from the store now and on my way to the house when I slow down for a red traffic light.

Ellie. Oh my God, Ellie. Thankfully, I'd just gotten to an intersection. I wait for the green light to come on.

“Oh, come on you motherfucker,” I scream at it.



When it turns green, I drive around the junction and head for Ellie's school. It's not release time yet, but I need to get her away now before whoever was shooting at me gets to her.

I'm sweating when I get to her school. I give the front office some excuse and we head for the car with my hand on my waist. I want to pull my gun out as we leave but I don't want to cause alarm.

"Daddy, you're here early," Ellie says as I usher her hurriedly into the car.

"Yes," is all I can murmur.

I drive away quickly. When I'm out of the school premises I bring my gun out of my pocket and put it on my lap.

When we get home, I rush her in.

Bria scrambles off the couch when she sees me come in with Ellie.

"You didn't say you were going to pick her up."

"Daddy came early," Ellie says, jumping.

Garcelle comes to the living room.

"Take her to her room, Garcelle."

Garcelle doesn't ask any questions. She takes a happy Ellie in.

"What's the matter?" Bria asks when they're out of earshot.

I'm sweating buckets. "I was attacked as I was about to get into my car. In front of the grocery store."

“It’s Daisy. This was what I was scared of. Why haven’t they been caught?”

“I need to call Jon.”

She nods and sits back down with a panic-stricken look on her face.

I dial Jon’s number and wait for him to pick up.

“Hey Milley.”

“Hey. Any word about Daisy and Ben yet?”

“I just spoke to one of the officers. No. There are no leads yet. They’ve combed the city. I think they might have left town. We have to extend our search.”

The phone is on speaker, so Bria is listening. I end the call and slump into a chair.

“If they’re out of town, then who attacked you?” Bria asks.

# Chapter 21

Bria

All of my worst fears are coming to pass. I'd wanted so desperately to protect Myles' identity. I'd wanted so desperately to protect Ellie. But one silly mistake has jeopardized it. I'd used Daisy's phone to call Myles and had not erased the history. Now they know who I'm working with. And now Ellie could end up getting hurt. I've never had to live with so much fear in my life. But what makes it worse is that I'm not only worrying about myself, but about two other people—three other people, actually. Garcelle could be caught in the line of fire too, which is why Myles told her she could take a week or two off. He promised to pay her for them. He doesn't want her to get hurt. He feels they might come looking for him at home and he doesn't want an extra person caught up in this. I've been thinking of getting Ellie out of the house too. What happened yesterday might repeat itself, and this time it could be deadly.

I'm sitting on the bed when he comes out of the bathroom. He's shirtless, his hair ruffled, his face lined with worry. He goes to the mirror to look at himself.

"I was just thinking we should get Ellie out of the house for now."

He sighs and turns to face me. "Where? I hardly know anyone in this city. I was thinking of telling her mother to come get her, you know, take her out of town. But I don't trust Sonya with anything. I wouldn't trust her with Ellie. Plus, they might start trailing her, and that would put her in danger, too. Before Garcelle left yesterday, I was thinking of putting them in a hotel together. Of course, they'd have security, but how long would they stay there? A hotel is as porous as can be, people going in and out constantly. They could find a way to sneak in."

"I was thinking that maybe we could let my dad and stepmom know what's going on and they could take Ellie."

He shakes his head. "No. I've only met them once, and that was at your sister's wedding. They don't even know I have a daughter. And doing that could also make them a target. I don't want that. I'll take care of things. Like I said yesterday, Ellie will have to stay home for now. That's the best way to keep her safe. Let me go see if she's awake."

I flip the bed cover off me. "No, I'll go do it. If she's awake, I'll bathe her, and we might go get something to eat in the kitchen."

He sighs and goes toward the bed. “Alright. Make sure to keep the curtains pulled together at all times. And stay away from the windows. I need to get a little more sleep,” he says as he falls into bed.

He’s been so exhausted lately. Last night at intervals I woke up to see him peering through the window curtains with his gun in his hand. He deserves some rest. Even if it’s just a little.



“Can I pour the eggs in, please?” Ellie asks from the chair in the living room.

“You want to help?”

She nods and I motion for her to come. I stop whisking the eggs and pull a high stool close to the stove. I pick her off the floor and sit her on the stool. She smells of apricots, the scent of her shampoo. Her eyes are beaming as I hand her the fork and let her whisk the eggs.

“Do it gently so it doesn’t spill, okay?”

She nods. I take a nonstick pan and put it on the burner. I pour in a little olive oil. When it gets hot, she picks up the bowl of whisked eggs and, with me guiding her, pours it into the hot oil. She giggles when she sees it forming a blanket. I take the fork and quickly stir the eggs so it breaks up.

She’s giggling more and it wiggles the stool.

“Careful. You don’t want to fall down.”

She stops moving and looks into the pan of eggs.

“Will you miss going to school today?”

She looks like she’s thinking. “A little bit yes and a little bit no.”

“Oh really. Can you explain that?”

“Yes, because I’ll miss my friends. No, because I like spending time with you and Daddy.”

“Aww,” I say, and hug her.

She obviously has no idea what’s going on and we intend to keep it that way.

Just as I set the food on the dining table and am getting ready to sit down, my phone goes off. I look around. It’s on a couch in the living room.

“Go ahead. Start eating. I’ll join you.”

Ellie nods and takes a bite of the toast I made to go with the eggs.

I reach for the phone. It’s Micha. When she called me after I was rescued from Daisy’s basement, I’d told her that I was in the hospital. I’d told her that I was sick and had to switch my phone off. That I didn’t want to disturb anyone. When she said she wanted to come visit, I’d come up with an excuse. I knew she’d be so devastated by what happened to me. If she knew Daisy was responsible, she’d be shattered. I’ve been thinking of a way to tell her, a way to make it less horrid. But I haven’t thought of any.

“Hi, Micha.”

“Hi. I want to come see you. Are you still in the hospital? Give me the address. I know something isn’t right. Daisy’s not been to work for days now. I need to know what’s going on.”

I hesitate because I want to ask Myles if it’s okay for her to come over to the house. “Can I call you back in a sec?”

She sighs. “Alright. But if you don’t call me back, I’ll call you again.”

I end the call and go into Myles’s room. He’s still sleeping. I walk toward the bed and shake him gently. “Myles.”

He opens his eyes, then jumps up, searching frantically for his gun.

“It’s nothing. I just got a call from Micha. She wants to come see me. She knows something is up and she wants to know what it is.”

He relaxes a little.

“Is it okay if she comes over?”

“Well, she’ll have to know eventually.”

“It’ll break her heart.”

“You have no choice.”

“Alright,” I say, and dial Micha’s number. “Yes, you can come over. But I’m not at the hospital anymore. I’m at home.”

I give her the address and end the call.

Micha comes thirty minutes later. When the doorbell goes off, Myles peeps through the window first to make sure it's her, then he opens the door. I'm seated in the living room with Ellie.

"Hi Micha, come in," Myles says.

"Hi...umm."

"Myles."

"Myles? I can't remember..."

"I was introduced to you as Jasper. But my name is Myles."

She doesn't argue. "Oh, okay. Nice to see you again."

"This is Ellie, my daughter."

Ellie waves a tiny hand at her. "A beautiful girl."

Myles reaches for Ellie. "I'll leave you two to talk."

He leaves with her and we're silent for a moment.

"What's going on, Bria? The police have been to the firm, but they won't tell me anything. All they say is if Daisy shows up, I should let them know."

"Daisy is on the run."

"On the run? I know she's not been to the office. I called her. Her number isn't going through. But why would she be on the run?"

"She kidnapped me."

"Huh? Wait. I don't get it."



I sigh. “When I went missing. It was Daisy who kidnapped me.”

She stands up with her mouth open. “How? Why?”

“She’s been involved in a fraud scandal at the firm.”

“The police mentioned fraud. But no one wants to tell me what’s going on.” She starts to pace.

“Daisy kidnapped me because I was helping the police investigate the fraud case. They’ve been filing false tax returns and stealing from clients.”

“You knew about the fraud case, and you were helping the police? Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“Because the police thought you were involved.”

“What?” She sits back down slowly. “Why would they think that?”

“I always doubted it myself. I didn’t know it was Daisy until the night she kidnapped me.”

“You know how hard I work to make sure the firm is successful. Why would I ruin that by getting involved in fraud?”

I put my head down. I will feel like shit forever for thinking she could have been involved.

“Is it about my house or the lifestyle I live? My father was quite wealthy before he passed. He left a lot of money to me. I was the only child. I got the house and started the firm thanks to my inheritance. I didn’t just want to rely on my father’s

money. I wanted to build something for myself, too. Now I have to watch it crumble.”

“Oh no, please don’t say that. It won’t crumble.”

She snorts. “What do you think will happen when Daisy is caught? Word will get out. And guess what? It will be the name of the firm dragged through the mud. I’ll lose clients. Celebrities and their publicists don’t like scandal. And I won’t fault you if you want to leave.”

“I’m not leaving, and the firm won’t crumble. I’ll make sure of that. I’ll make sure the police make it clear that you have nothing to do with it. Myles will make sure of that.”

“What has Myles got to do with the police?” she pauses. “Oh, I see. He’s a detective?”

I nod slowly.

“That was why he was introduced to me as Jasper?”

“Yes.”

She sighs. “When he came for my birthday party, he was investigating the firm then?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Now I know why Daisy is missing, but why is Ben missing, too? Is everyone intent on running my firm down?”

“Ben is also in on the fraud.”

She shakes her head in resignation.

“I’ll be coming back to work soon. But we just need all of this to be settled. Micha, I’m sorry for ever suspecting you

could be involved in this. But please, know that I never really believed it. There was always doubt in my mind.”

“Thanks for the apology. I know that it must have been hard for you. I understand. And I hope they’re caught soon.” She stands up. “I have to leave now. Please, take good care of yourself. And let me know if you need any help.”

Her cheeks are redder than they’ve ever been as she stands staring at me, although it doesn’t look like she’s got any blush on.

She slaps her thigh. “Alright. We’ll talk and I’ll see you soon.”

“Thank you for coming,” I say as I see her to the door.

When she’s gone and I’ve locked the door, I stand staring into space, the look on her face still so strong in my memory.



“So, what are they doing about it? They really need to be fast about it or she’ll get away again. They don’t expect us to do their jobs for them, do they? Alright. Alright. Thanks.”

Myles ends the call. “That was Jon. He says they traced Daisy’s phone to Chicago.”

“Chicago? She never told me she knew anyone there.”

“Well, maybe she’s trying to get as far away from Long Beach as she can. She made the mistake of turning on her phone to make a call. But it’s been switched off since then. I

don't like how slow they're being with the case. They don't expect me to go to Chicago to find her myself after all that we did here."

Chicago. The Uber driver from Las Vegas had said his daughter lives there and that she's a criminal lawyer.

"Hold on. I think I might know someone who could help in Chicago. I have her business card. She's a criminal lawyer."

"Really?"

"Yes, but we'd have to go over to my house to get the card."

After Myles tells Ellie to stay away from the windows while we are at my place, he locks the front door and we go over to my house. We don't open the blinds once we're in. I switch on the lights and make for my room while Myles stays in the living room watching both houses.

Where would I have put the card? I know I put it in my bag. I look for the bag I took on the business trip. I search the inner compartment and outer ones, but it's nowhere to be found. I search my dresser drawers, then my desk drawers. Did I leave it at the office? No. I never took it to the office. Why would I? I search and search until I hear a knock on the door. Myles pokes his head in.

"I still haven't found the card. I can't remember where I put it."

"Need more time?"

"Yes, please."

He withdraws from the doorway, and I go back to searching. I'm throwing my clothes off the hangers in the closet when something falls out of a jacket pocket. I pick it up and let out a sigh of relief. I look down at it. Winny Baldwin. Saxton Firm, Chicago. Her number is on the card.

When we get back to Myles's house, I call her. I don't know what to expect, but I hold my breath and wait as the phone rings.

A soft, sweet voice comes on the other side. "Hello?"

"Hi. Is this Winny Baldwin, from the Saxton firm in Chicago?"

"Yes. This is she. How may I help you?"

"I'm Bria Shaw. I'm calling from Long Beach, California. I met your father in Las Vegas, he gave me your card. He told me I could call you if I needed help. And I need help."

I explain everything to her, and she gives me a strong promise that she'll help in any way she can. She has a lot of connections, and promises Daisy will be fished out soon. I e-mail her the necessary documents. Pictures of Daisy and Ben, too.

A week later, I get a call from her. Her sources have informed her that they've spotted Daisy and she's passed it on to the police. By afternoon, we get news that Daisy has been arrested. She was arrested along with Ben.

# Chapter 22

## Myles

The fraud ring is bigger than we thought. What we thought could have been two or three firms turned out to be multiple lawyers from six different firms across the country. I'm still surprised at how they were able to pull it off for so long without anyone knowing. I'm glad they've all been caught.

I'm standing at the kitchen counter, sipping lemon tea.

Bria is lounging on the couch. Garcelle has gone out to the park with Ellie. Although Bria has resumed work, it's a Saturday, and she's practically moved into my house now. I'm not complaining. I love having her around. Ellie loves having her around. I empty my cup of tea and set it in the sink, then go to join her on the couch. She's sprawled on it, so I lie on top of her gently. I let out a sigh.

She runs her fingers through my hair and kisses my head.

"It feels so good to be able to relax again. Although I have more work to do, since two spots are open at the office and

someone has to do the job. Micha doesn't trust anyone to handle the documents but me.”

I raise my head. “That’s a good thing, right? When your boss trusts you.”

She sweeps my hair away from my face. “It is. But it means more work. I’m swimming in work.”

We both laugh and I rest my head on her chest, listening to her heartbeat. “What has Micha said about your promotion? About you making partner?”

“Nothing for now. We’re still trying to do damage control. We lost two clients already. But it doesn’t seem like more will be leaving. I’m just concerned about the firm’s growth right now.”

I lie still on her chest, thinking about how sad I am that the case has come to an end, because that means I’ll be leaving soon. I don’t want to leave, but I have to. More assignments will be coming up soon and I don’t know where I’ll be going to next. I don’t know if work will be taking me back home to Denver, where I have a house. I’ll be retiring soon, but I still have a few more months of work.

I’m not sure that if work takes me out of Long Beach that I’ll come back. I haven’t really made anywhere home. Even when I was married to Sonya, it wasn’t any different. I bought a house in Denver so my family would have a place we could call our own, but it never really felt like home. It was just a place where I lived with my wife and kid. A safe place I could leave them at while I traveled for work. I can’t do the same

with Bria. One, we aren't married. And two, I can't put that responsibility on her. I know she'd accept—anything to keep me around—but I can't do that. I'll have to leave when the time comes. I'll miss her so much. My heart aches just thinking about it.

I lift my head up again. She's staring at the ceiling, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

She looks at me. "What's wrong?"

I run my hand over her face. "Nothing." My heart aches so badly.

"I think your phone light is on," Bria says, breaking eye contact.

I look over at the kitchen counter. It's indeed on. I'd put the phone on silent. The constant ring was beginning to get to me. When I get to the counter, I slide the phone into my hand. It's Jon.

"Milley. Did you toss your phone in the ocean? The deputy chief has been trying to reach you. He needs to talk to us."

I see Bria leave the living room and go toward the bedroom.

"What's up? What's going on?"

"He's been calling your number. He says since we did really well with the last case, he wants us to handle another one."

"Another one. Wait. Another case in Long Beach?"

"Yes. Another case in Long Beach. Get dressed and get your ass over here."



I end the call smiling because it means more time with Bria.

# Chapter 23

Bria

**M**yles comes into the bedroom, joins me in bed and kisses me. “That was Jon. I have to go into the office.”

“Alright. Something came up?” I say and kiss him back.

He nods. “Something did.” He goes to get ready, and soon he’s hurrying out of the house.

After locking the door behind him, I walk toward the kitchen. I stand over the sink looking out at my house. I’ve not been there for weeks now, except for the time I went over to get Winny’s business card. The house does nothing for me anymore. I feel like it was tainted the day I saw the face at the window. Although there’s no face lurking at the window anymore, the house isn’t my place of refuge anymore, either. It’s now so strange to me. Despite its close proximity to Myles’s house, it hasn’t managed to ruin Myles’s house for me. In here, I’ve found peace. In here, I’ve found love. In here, I’m at home.

But at the back of my mind is the dreaded reality I've been pushing away. I've been suspending the thought as though I don't know what's to come. But I do. Myles will be leaving soon. And I'll have to go back to my house. I wish he could stay in Long Beach. I wish some sort of miracle could happen. I haven't come to terms with it yet, and I don't think I ever will. I know that when he finally leaves because he has to go work somewhere else, I'll be miserable in my house. I've been thinking of getting another place, but it's been a lot lately, and spending money on another house doesn't seem like the right decision right now. Plus, the stress I'll have to go through to find a new place and move. I'm stressed already just thinking about it.

My phone goes off. I rush for it on the dresser. It's Ava. She is wailing into the phone when I pick up.

"Ava? Ava. What's the matter?"

"I'm done. I'm so done with men. I'm just so done!"

"Calm down. I'm coming over."

I end the call and go to the closet I share with Myles to get dressed, then rush out and drive out of the driveway.

Ava opens the door with red eyes.

"Oh my God. Come." I usher her back into her living room after shutting the door.

She is sniffing and hiccupping in between sobs. "You know...I...act as though I'm so tough. I am tough...I...but I'm human too, and I have feelings. I just don't know why I

get treated like this all the time. Am I ugly, Bria? Please, tell me the truth.”

“Stop. You aren’t ugly. And you know that.”

“Then why do I keep getting treated as if I am?”

“Even if you were ‘ugly,’” I say, quoting the air with my fingers, “because I don’t think anyone is ugly, we are all just unique—we can’t all look the same, right?—but even if, you still deserve love.”

“Is this you admitting I’m ugly?”

I can’t help it. I laugh out loud. “No. I was just saying. Of course, you’re beautiful,” I say, and mean it because Ava is stunningly beautiful. “But men are just so confused. They don’t know what they want,” I add.

“If they don’t know what they want, then why is he posted all over social media with his girlfriend?”

“Who?”

“The last guy I told you about.”

“The one who wasn’t replying to your messages?”

“Yes. I saw a new post he put up today. Him and his girlfriend. They’re expecting.”

She scrolls through her phone and shoves it my way. It’s a picture of a tall man, standing with a woman with a round belly. I read the caption.

“This is probably why he wasn’t replying to your texts. He has a girlfriend. And she looks like she’s due any minute.”

“Then why did he lie to me that he didn’t have a girlfriend? Why did he have to lie to me?”

“Because he’s a dick. It’s not about you. It’s him. He’s a terrible person, and you’re lucky to have lost his ass. You really shouldn’t be going to his page. It will only hurt you.”

“Could you block him for me, please?”

I block him and hand her phone over to her.

She sniffs, wiping her eyes. “I have the worst luck, and I’m honestly so tired.”

“Don’t say that. I thought I wasn’t lucky after my ex cheated on me and got another woman pregnant. But Myles has been so good to me that sometimes I pinch myself. I still cannot believe that I’m loving another man again. You’ve just not found your own person.”

She shakes her head. “I know now that person doesn’t exist.”

“Shh. He does. And you’ll meet him someday.”

“I don’t want to meet anyone. All they do is turn out to be assholes. I’m good on my own.”

I smile because I know it’s the hurt talking. “Just be patient.”

She gets up. “I’m not going to be patient. I don’t need any man in my life. I’m going to get a drink, and we’re going to toast to the single life.”

I chuckle. “Well, I might need it. Myles might be leaving soon.”

She stops halfway and turns to look at me. “Oh my God. What an ass. He told you that? That he’d be leaving you soon? What a complete ass. I can’t believe I was starting to like him.”

I laugh out loud. Ava is always so ready to defend me. “Put your sword down, Ava. Since the case has been solved, he’ll be leaving Long Beach soon. I don’t think we’ll be breaking up, but you know what distance does to a relationship.”

“Oh. I was so ready to kick his butt I forgot about all of that. That sucks. Isn’t there a way he can stay here?”

I shake my head.

She gets out a bottle of champagne and pours two glasses, then brings them over, handing one to me.

“Well, I guess we’ll both be toasting to the single life.”

I laugh and clink her glass with mine. I’m smiling on the outside, but I’m hurting deeply on the inside.



“Can I come with you?” Ellie asks as I curl my hair in front of the mirror.

“Daddy says you have school tomorrow, so you have to go to bed so that you can wake up early.”

“I can go to school early if I don’t go to bed early.”

“You can?”

She nods.

I look at her through the mirror and laugh. “What if you start dozing off in school tomorrow? Then they’d have to call Daddy and say, ‘why did you keep her up all night?’ Do you want the school to call Daddy?”

She shakes her head furiously. “No.”

I don’t have to say anything else. The fear of getting her dad in trouble is enough to make her stop asking to come to dinner with us. Myles isn’t home yet, but he sent me a text to get ready. He said he’d be home soon.

Garcelle knocks on the door. “Ma’am. It’s time for Ellie’s bath.”

Ellie jumps off the bed. “Bye, Bria. I might be asleep when you come back.”

I turn to the side with my arms outstretched. She runs into them, and we hug. Then she runs to Garcelle. She smiles at me before leaving the room. I’m still smiling when I turn back to the mirror. I’m wearing a beautiful blue satin dress, a slanted one-shoulder dress with tiny sparkling diamond imitations around the edges. It has a band on the waist although it’s forming fitting. Whoever designed it thought it out well because it makes my already slim waist look even smaller. I stand up to have another glance at the fit. It’s perfect. As I’m about to sit down, the doorbell rings. That should be Myles. I take one more look at myself and push myself up to go get the door, but then I hear Ellie’s door open. I hear Garcelle’s slippers smack against the floor. A few minutes later, Myles is opening the bedroom door.

When he sees me, he stops short and motions for me to get up. I do, and he twirls a finger in the air, telling me to turn around so he can get a better look at my dress. I twirl and giggle. It's been a while since I dressed up. It's been a while since we went anywhere together. Come to think of it, this is our first official date. He walks slowly toward me, taking long strides, and soon he's wrapping me in his arms.

“You look absolutely ravishing tonight.” He goes to kiss me, but I point at my lipstick. He kisses my neck instead. “You smell good, too. I'll have a quick shower and we'll be out in a few minutes. You know it doesn't take me too long to get dressed.”

I nod and slide out of his embrace. “I'll be in the living room.”

“Where's Ellie?”

“In her room with Garcelle. She was asking to come with us.”

He laughs. “She wants to go everywhere.”

I laugh as well. “She's just like you, then.”

I shut the door before he catches me. I walk to the kitchen to get some water.

Myles comes out about twenty minutes later looking hot as fuck. I want to tell him we could stay at home because I just want to be ravaged by him, but I also want to be treated to our first dinner.



When we get to the restaurant we're shown to our table. I've been here before. More than once. With my ex. I'm surprised that I don't feel any sort of nostalgia. I don't feel sad about it, a sign that I'm truly healed. I'm going to experience this place for the first time with Myles. I'm going to create new memories here.

We are on our second course when Myles stops and looks at me lovingly. "Guess what."

"What?"

"Just guess."

"You won a million dollars?"

He laughs out a little too loud, making the couple at the next table glance our way.

"No, I didn't. But I've won more time with you."

"More time with me?"

"Earlier today, when Jon called, I found out that I'll be taking another case in Long Beach."

My eyes are wide. "Does that mean you'll be here until the assignment is over? Why are you just now telling me?"

"I wanted to confirm we'll really be on the case before I told you. I didn't want to get your hopes up," he says with twinkling eyes.

"For how long?"

"I think five months. It might be longer."

"Oh my God."

“I wanted to surprise you. I’m glad you’re happy about it.”

“It’s a wonderful surprise.”

He leans forward and I lean toward him. We kiss. A refreshing kiss. Now that I know that he’ll be staying longer, my heart is charged again. It was losing power. But now it’s plugged in and fully charged. When we get to that bridge in five months or more, we’ll cross it. Right now, I just want to be beneath him, literally. Or on top of him. I want to be consumed by him. He has the same look on his face, his brown eyes burning through my dress, scathing me with the fire of desire.

Soon, we’re heading out of the restaurant, into the car and on our way home. When we open the front door, he locks it quickly and pulls me into his arms.

“I’ve been thinking of doing this all night long. All day, actually.”

“Same here.”

“Oh,” he says rather than asks, tilting his head.

He runs his hands over my back, searching for my zipper. He finds it and peels it down. I slip my tongue over the side of his face. He tastes of aftershave and something sweet. I also feel his stubble. It doesn’t deter me. I like how sharp it is on my tongue. It replicates how I feel. Sharp and hot. He makes to pull my dress off my shoulders, but I stop him and step away from him. Walking backward, I edge into the living room and slip into the hallway. When I’m halfway down the hall, I see

him appear at the start of the hallway. I reach the bedroom door, open it and disappear into it. When I'm in, I quickly take my dress, my bra, and panties off and let my hair loose. He appears at the door to see me lying on the bed, naked. My legs crossed, my elbows raising me up.

“That was quick,” he comments.

“Your turn.”

He holds eye contact while peeling off his black suit jacket. He drops it on the floor and unbuttons his shirt slowly. When he's done unbuttoning it, he rips it off. As he pulls it off his body, his toned arms flex, and I just want him to hold me tight with them. He steps out of his pants and boxer briefs. He's standing in front of me, naked, his dick huge and erect. I point one finger at him and motion to him. It's been a while. The case and ordeal I went through took a toll on our sex life. I want this to be slow. I want to feel it. I want him to take me gently. But as he walks toward me, I know this isn't how it'll go. I can see his chest lifting and falling. He wants me as badly as I want him, and he's not going to be gentle. I spread my legs as I surrender to him. He kneels, then crawls to me. I draw in a shaky breath in anticipation. He takes his dick in his hand and buries it deep inside of my pussy. Only then do I let out a growly breath as he takes me away.

# Chapter 24

## Myles

I t's been seven months since I started the new case in Long Beach, and the assignment has finally come to an end. I've been thinking lately. Bria and I have gotten even closer. We're practically inseparable now. Leaving Long Beach would break me. So, I've been considering staying. I mean, it's the perfect time. I'll be retiring in two months. That means there'll be no more assignments, no more cases to travel for. I'm sure I'll find something to do, but the point is I'm no longer obligated to be at a certain place at a certain time. Of course, I'll miss being in service, and I know that if I had not met Bria, the thought of retiring would have been a big dread for me. But I'm not lonely anymore. I no longer dread retirement. I have served for close to twenty years; it's time to live for something else. But the problem is I have a house in Denver, and I'm expected to move out of the house in Long Beach soon. Am I ready to rent over here when I have a place somewhere else?

Sonya agreed to sign the divorce papers some months ago. Apparently, she's found someone who makes her genuinely happy, and now she has no need to make my life miserable anymore. She said this to me. I'm glad she'll finally let me be. The divorce will be finalized in a few days, and I'll be completely free.

Bria's stepmom and dad have invited us to dinner, along with her sister, Aria, her sister's husband Connor, and their kids. I've been to their house six times for dinner in the past few months. Bria and I decided to tell them what happened to her at the second dinner I was invited to. Her father, Charles, was perturbed. Amy couldn't believe her ears. And yes, now they know that my name isn't Jasper. I'm glad it's all cleared up now. They're an amazing family, and I'm glad to be accepted by them. Of course, Charles warned me that if I hurt his daughter, I'll not leave with any of my teeth. That's enough to keep me in line. I smile to myself as I tuck my shirt in.

"What are you smiling at?" Bria asks from where she's seated on the bed.

"Your dad."

"What did he do this time?"

"I was just remembering when he promised I'll lose all of my teeth if I hurt you."

She laughs, then mean mugs me. "And he means it."

"He'll get his knuckles broken in the process."

Bria shakes her head and laughs. “You’d be surprised how strong he is. And you don’t mess with girl dads. You are one, you know what I mean.” She gets up and comes to the mirror. “You know, they’re getting older, and it scares me. Especially Dad.”

I turn to the side to hold her. “They’ve got a lot more years left in them.”

She nods and smooths the collar of my shirt. “We need to get going. You know how Amy hates when people are late.”

With Ellie in the backseat, Bria in the passenger seat and me in the driver’s seat, we drive off.



“Ellie,” Amy says, bending down to kiss her.

Ellie giggles. “Is Ethan and Ceci here?”

“Of course, they’re at the dining table. Go on in.”

Ellie runs in, leaving us at the door. The three kids have become so fond of each other and sometimes they go for playdates at Aria’s. When we get to the dining area, Charles is seated at one end of the table, Connor and Aria sitting to the side. Ethan and Ellie are chatting animatedly while Ceci plays with Ellie’s hair. Amy always puts their seats together.

“Hey big man,” Connor says to me. We’ve bonded more than I thought we would. Him being a retired Navy SEAL and me about to be a retired detective made it easy.

“Hey, I see you got more grey hair now. I only saw you a week ago. You’re growing old, dude,” I tease him.

“Yeah? I’ve got more muscle than you, though,” he retorts.

I laugh and he laughs too.

Amy takes her seat at the other end of the table. “Come on. Time to eat.”

We exchange greetings with Aria and Charles as we take our seats.

The food is served, and we start to eat.

“So, how’re your retirement plans going?” Charles asks.

I had talked to him about it prior.

“I don’t know if I’ll be staying in Long Beach. I mean, I don’t have a permanent home here. I have a house in Denver, although Long Beach has been good to me. But buying a house here is expensive.”

Connor nods. “I understand. If I hadn’t inherited my house here, I doubt I’d have moved here when I did.

“Daddy, please let’s stay. I want to see Ethan and Ceci and play with them.”

True, Ellie has found the most peace here. But I have to factor in my pension and how we’ll live when I finally retire. If I’d not met Bria, it would have been easy to go back. Now what would I be going back to? An empty house?

Bria looks at me and smiles. I guess she’s telling me it’s okay, that whatever decision I make is fine. We’ve decided

we'll stay together no matter the distance. I'd told her about how after I found out I'd married the wrong person, I thought life was over for me. She knows what I've been through. She knows how happy I am to be gaining a family in hers, how everyone accepted me even when they found out we faked the start of our relationship. She knows how conflicted I am about leaving.

When I was coming to Long Beach, I was looking to catch some criminals. I did that, but I also caught love. It was the last thing I had on my mind. I'd thought it was going to be a cold, monotonous life for me, like it had been in the different cities I'd moved to for work. Little did I know that something amazing was being worked out for me. To think that I almost didn't want to take the case. That trip to Las Vegas led me here. I believe that we were destined to meet. This was no coincidence. This is fate. But will fate find a way for me to stay?



# Chapter 25

Bria

“**G**ood morning, Micha.”

“Morning, Bria. Come in.”

I enter Micha’s office with some documents in my hand. “I just want to drop these off. I worked on them yesterday before closing. I’d have brought them over, but you left early.”

I don’t sit down, but drop them on her desk. I turn to leave.

“Don’t forget to be at the meeting at ten,” she says.

“I won’t,” I answer.

On my way to my office, I think about my time at Maestro Firm. It’s been a little over seven years now and Micha has not said anything about me making partner. Maybe I’ll have to wait for three more years. I push open my office door and step in slowly. I look over at Daisy’s former desk as I walk toward mine. I still feel her absence. Sometimes I walk into the office expecting to see her. She’d made the office lively and less boring for me. I sigh as I reach my chair. I slump into it and

lean my head back on the headrest. I'm sure that if Daisy had asked me for help, I'd have done something for her. I never knew she spent all her money taking care of her sick mother. It's so sad to see her go down the path she took.

At a few minutes to 10 a.m. I make for the conference room. When I get there, I see Fern and some of the higher ups. Micha is yet to come. I choose a seat and sit quietly. On some days, I think it's time to leave Maestro Firm. Myles and I have been talking about his retirement. He isn't sure yet if he's leaving, but I suspect he will. He can't possibly buy another house here. He's just finished paying the mortgage on his house in Denver. I'm thinking of leaving the firm, I'm thinking of starting over again. I'm thinking of moving with Myles, of leaving everything behind and going with him. But I know that it's not easy to start over. I've given years of my life to this firm. If I go somewhere else, I'll have to start building again. Do I have the patience for that? I doubt it. I don't blame Myles, because I know how hard it is to give up everything you've built when it's not even certain that if you start over you'll successfully build something else.

Micha comes in and apologizes for keeping us waiting. One hour into the meeting, I'm still torn. Leave or stay.

Just as the meeting is about to come to an end, Micha clears her throat. "One more thing. Bria?"

I'm packing up, getting ready to leave the conference room, but I stop and raise my head.

"Congratulations on making partner."

My hearing turns off for a moment, blood pumping loudly in my ears. “What?”

Micha nods. “Yes. You’ve given your all to this company, and it’s only right that you are rewarded. I know you have the firm’s best interest at heart, and I need people like you around. You’re invaluable.”

I hold back tears, happiness encasing my heart. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. Thank you for all you’ve done.”

“No, thank you, Micha. Thank you so much.”

I nod as everyone rises, clapping. Soon, we are filing out of the conference room. Just as I’m about to step out, Fern hurries to my side. We walk into the hallway together and I try to step out of her way, but she stops and touches my arm.

“Congratulations, Bria. You deserve it.”

I’m stunned. “Thank you.”

She nods and goes ahead toward her office.

This is all so surprising. Then I pause. This is amazing. What I’ve been wanting for a long time is now in my hands. But this also means that if or when Myles decides to move after his retirement, I won’t be able to leave with him.



It's a week until Myles's retirement. I've been sadder than usual. Quieter, too. When I told him about my promotion, he was happy for me, but he noticed that something was wrong.

"You've been sulking all day. It's a Saturday, you should be happy you have a rest day."

I smile wryly at him as he wraps his arm around me and pulls the sheet over us snugly.

"I've been thinking."

I turn my face toward him. "About what?"

"About my retirement. And about moving."

Moving. I hate hearing that word.

"I've also been thinking a lot about staying."

I flip the sheet off and turn sharply. "What? Staying?"

He nods. "Yeah. It's not going to be easy, but I could sell the house in Denver, and I could use the money to put down on another one here."

"Are you for real? Tell me you're not pulling my leg."

He cackles. "I'm comfortable here. There's no point lying to myself. Houses are more expensive than they used to be, but I'm sure we'll find something nice. Me, you, and Ellie."

"Me and you? You want us to move together to a new house?"

He raises both brows. "I'm used to having you around. Ellie is, too."

“Oh my God!” I exclaim and fling my hands on his chest.

“You want that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. But I’ll have to pull my weight if we’re buying a house. I won’t let you do it alone, so we can have money for Ellie’s school and other things.”

“I’ll call my realtor later in the day, and we can start the process of selling the house. I’m sure we can find a comfortable place here for us and the kids.”

“Yes. I’m sure we will. We’ll need a place with a big garden and a wide front yard for the...wait, the kids? What do you mean the kids? There’s only Ellie.”

He winks. “Not for long.”

I laugh out loud and hug him. “You silly man.”

He pulls the sheets over our heads and crawls onto my body.



“Please, don’t break that,” I say to one of the movers.

He nods at me and wraps the vase gently.

It’s been six weeks since Myles decided to stay in Long Beach. Since then, his house in Denver has sold and I have moved out of the house next door. I’ve relieved myself of the lease and officially moved in with Myles. But today, we’re moving to the new house. Our new home. The home that we bought together. Ellie comes into the living room with her teddy bear in her arms.

“Go put Teddy in the box over there, so they can pack it up.”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t want them to trap him in a box.”

“Oh, okay. That’s fine. He’ll just ride with you in the car.”

She nods and runs outside.

I walk toward the bedroom. I open the door to find Myles packing up the last of our things.

“I think I’m set. Are you?”

I nod. “They’re loading up the last boxes. We’re good to go.”

The movers go ahead of us as we get into the car, Ellie and Garcelle in the back seat and us in front. As we pull out of the driveway, I look over at my former house then look at the one we’re moving out of. It’s so crazy how I moved here alone with a broken heart. It’s so crazy how that day I watched as my neighbors moved in, little did I know that I’d be moving out with them. Little did I know that these are the people I’d be doing life with. Little did I know we’d be a family.

“Bye-bye house. See you,” Ellie says, waving both her hands.



A few hours later, we’re in our new home with our things offloaded into the house. Ellie is in her room with Garcelle while I’m in the kitchen fixing something for us to eat. It’s been a few exhausting days. Packing up, wrapping things.

Making sure we get everything right. But it's worth it in the end. With the soup simmering on the stovetop, I walk around the living room. It's a modern house with all the features we were looking for. We lucked out. The white ceilings are high and are made of gypsum to help keep the house cool. Although the couches are set, I know we still have a lot of arranging to do. I walk toward the back and pull open the double glass doors by the handles. A gentle breeze welcomes me. The garden we said we wanted is right here before me. The former owners have done a good job cultivating it. I hope I'll be able to keep it up. I walk down the back stairs and stand in the midst of it. A bee jumps from one flower to another, buzzing blissfully as it goes. I touch some of the flowers, then walk back into the kitchen, but I leave the back doors open.

I'm stirring the soup on the stove when Myles comes out, freshly showered and looking tempting with wet hair. He looks well rested now. Since he retired, he's been getting a lot of it. But he's talked about doing something else soon, something with more relaxed hours. I know he can't stay idle for too long. The detective blood running inside of him won't allow it.

He comes behind me. "I'm hungry like a lion. I could swallow a horse right now."

"A lion can't swallow a horse."

"Well, this lion can."

I laugh and turn to face him. "Food will be ready soon. Patience."

He kisses me and smooths my hair. We walk to the living room together and stand at a window, looking out into the street as he holds me from behind.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it,” I say, musing.

“It is. When I was thinking we could get a comfortable house, I never imagined we’d get a place like this. It’s perfect.”

I turn from the window and put one hand on his chest. “It is perfect. Just like you.”

He smiles. “Just like you. You’ve made my life perfect. What more could I ask for?”

“Did you ever see this happening? I mean the night we met in the hotel in Las Vegas.”

He chuckles. “Not in a million years. You were the most annoying person I’d ever met.”

“Don’t change the story now. I wasn’t the annoying one, you were. I was the reasonable one.”

He raises one brow. “Is that how you’re telling the story at our wedding when they ask how we met?”

“Our...our wedding?”

“You don’t think I’m going to find you and let you go, do you?”

I’m sure my face is redder than Micha’s blushed cheeks right now, because I’m cheesing hard. “I’m happy you’re not letting me go.”



He stares deeply and tenderly into my eyes, the brownness of his merging into my copper-colored eyes.

“I’m never letting you go,” he says, and he puts his lips on mine as we kiss deeply.

THE END

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SNEAK PEEK—Chapter One

Giana

The hot afternoon air whipped around my blonde hair as I stared out of the window mindlessly. The coffee shops, massage parlors, boutiques, fast food joints, and people out on their lunch breaks zoomed past in a blur as tears formed behind my eyes. I slid my hand from under the box on my lap and wiped away a stream of salty liquid that had found its way down my cheek and into my slightly parted mouth.

I'd heard people talk about their hatred for Mondays, but that was never me. Monday had always been the best day of the week for me. It was a time of renewal. That day of the week when you started fresh. You were rejuvenated by the long rest of the two-day weekend and ready to go in again. But now, I wasn't so sure anymore. I wasn't so sure of anything anymore. Monday was beginning to look like the evil day a lot of people made it out to be.

Why?

I arrived at work this morning in the best mood ever, looking chic in my newly purchased green sleeveless dress that was cinched at the waist and flared gracefully through the skirt.

"Looking snatched, girl!" a colleague called from her table as I made my way in.

I twirled around to give her a 360-degree view of my outfit.

"Snatched!" the colleague repeated, snapping her fingers in the air.

I laughed out loud. “Thank you. It’s new. I got it at a shop downtown on sale for fifty bucks.”

“What? That’s a steal,” my colleague let out.

“I know,” I replied in a sing-song voice, making my way to my desk.

“I need their deets, ASAP.”

“I got you, girl. I’ll give you the address,” I assured her, and she nodded.

It was almost lunchtime, and I was getting ready to head out when Lana, my boss, stepped out of her office and summoned me.

I stuffed my files into the top drawer and made my way to her office, knocking gently on the white wood door.

“Come in,” her raspy voice called from within. She looked up from the book before her, pushed her glasses down her nose, made hard eye contact with me, and motioned for me to take the seat across from her.

I sat on the edge of it, my mind racing through every plausible reason why my boss would want me in her office.

She turned her attention to the book on her table again, thumbing through it with a stern look on her face. After what seemed like forever, she raised her head from the book, delicately removed her glasses, and clasped her hands on the slick white table.

She cleared her throat. “Giana Brookes.”

Okay, she never called me by my full name. Now I knew something was wrong. Had a client reported me or something? I didn't think so. I'd always treated our clients well.

But before I could wonder further, Lana's voice cut into my thoughts. "You've been instrumental to the growth of this company, and I really appreciate that, but I'm afraid we're letting you go."

*Letting me go where?*

Then it dawned on me. My heart started to race so fast I thought it might give out. Beads of sweat formed at the base of my neck and ran down my back.

I dug my fingers into the edge of the table and leaned forward. "What?" I asked in disbelief. "If I've been instrumental to the company's growth, then why am I being let go?"

Lana ignored my question. "We wish you the best as you move on, Gia," she said, picking up her glasses and perching them on her nose again.

A plethora of feelings coursed through me in the space of mere seconds. I couldn't scream, shout, or laugh. I couldn't process what was happening. I was numb.

And now here I was, in a cab on a Monday afternoon with my personal items in a box on my lap. Watching people bustle around the city, meeting friends and colleagues as though it were any other day. People who'd go back to work after having a filling lunch. Something I was missing out on.

I shifted the box that was beginning to slide off my lap and took in a deep breath.

Yep, I, Giana Brookes, was now officially a hater of Mondays, courtesy of my now ex-boss, Lana. Lana had never really liked me since she took over for my former boss, but the fire got stoked at an office party about four months ago when her husband complimented me. She'd had it in for me since then. The funny thing was, I wasn't the least bit attracted to her husband, nor was I the type of woman to entertain a married man.

The cab came to a stop in front of my apartment building. I swept away a few tears that had fallen down my cheek again, this time dragging with them smears of my mascara. I paid the driver and heaved myself out of the car. Propping the box against my hip I slogged up the stairs to the second floor. As I climbed the stairs and my door came into view, I could see a pink slip of paper stuck to my door. It had not been there when I left the house this morning. When I got to the top of the stairs, I laid the box on the floor, careful not to upset or break the picture in it of my mom and me that was taken eight years ago. I snatched the slip off my door and glanced over it. I already knew what it was. My rent had been due for a few weeks now.

I threw the slip into the box, then pulled my purse out of it and fished out my key. I jiggled my door open, pulled the box closer with my left foot, and crouched to pick it up. Somehow it felt like I was carrying my life's problems in my hands. The box was as heavy as my heart was.

As soon as I made it in, I plopped the box on the table with a little less care and flicked on the light switch. I moved to the window to pull open my light blue linen curtains. I lingered a little, staring out of the window. Then I moved to the other side of the room, behind my soft blue sofa, to pull apart the other set of curtains. As the curtains moved further apart, I imagined it like my life splitting in two. I stood, taking in my living room. When I got this apartment, I'd been so excited. It was a place I could call my own. It wasn't much, but it was enough for me. I bought soft blue sofas from a furniture store and bought a lot of vintage stuff, a filtered lamp that cast glows of yellow at nighttime, two white high stools that I put at the kitchen counter, a rectangular coffee table, and an Arabian rug placed in the middle of the room underneath it. I'd done quite a nice job. I looked around and let out a sigh, then walked into my bedroom.

I still felt like I was in a daze. I felt like I was dreaming. Was I really back on the job market? Or would I wake up from this bad dream soon? I came to a stop before my full-length mirror. No, it wasn't a dream. The image of myself in my beautiful green dress, my blonde hair splayed across my face, which was smudged with black eye makeup, was real as real could be.

I lowered myself onto the low stool in front of my dresser, and as my butt landed on it, a flood of tears found their way out. My head fell on the dresser, my neck unable to bear the weight as my body convulsed as I wept. After a few minutes of uncontrollable sobbing, my breathing slowly came back to

normal, and I raised my head. I thought I looked crazy when I first caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked crazier now. My hair was plastered on my forehead, covering one eye, and my eyeliner had joined my mascara in coloring my face black.

I pulled aside the hair obstructing half of my vision and put my fingers to the not-so-visible scar on my forehead that had begun to itch. I scratched at it lightly and stood up to pull off my dress. I left it lying on the floor as I made my way to the bathroom. I filled the bathtub with cool water, unhooked my bra, slipped out of my silk panties, and plunked into the water. It did well to soothe my body a little. As the water cooled and soothed my muscles, I shifted to the edge and laid my head on it.

When I came to this city after college, I thought things would play out differently. I studied psychology at Brown University, and I was excited to start my own practice, but I had to work first to save money. It had been five years, and I was still working with barely any savings. Manhattan was not a cheap city to live in, but it was my lifelong dream.

And what was worse? I was jobless now.

I lowered my head until the water covered my face, opened my eyes, and let out a scream. A muffled scream. A silent scream. My neighbors couldn't hear me because the water had cut out any sound. That was exactly how I felt right now. I felt like the universe, or something out there, was against me. I was screaming for help, with no one to come to my rescue



because no one could hear me. When I was beginning to feel woozy, I raised my head out of the water and wiped my face with my hand.

I didn't have lunch; neither did I have dinner. I sat on my sofa with my knees drawn up to my chin, my feet covered with a fluffy blanket, my left hand holding it in place and my phone in my right hand. I needed to talk to someone. Not just anyone, but Zoey, my friend back home I'd been close with since we were teenagers.

I needed to get my thoughts out or I'd go crazy.

"Gia! I was just thinking of calling you when I got home. Had too much work to do today. Just finishing up. Cakes are delicious, but boy are they difficult to make."

When I didn't say anything, she asked. "Gia, are you okay?"

I sighed hard. "I'm not. I got fired today," I said in an unsteady and resigned voice.

"Oh my God, that bitch!"

Zoey had been my rant absorber; she knew all that Lana had put me through.

"She finally got rid of me. She did."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. Did anything else happen?"

"No, I didn't do anything wrong. She called me into her office this afternoon and gave me the sack."

"Gosh," she said, and I could hear her sit on something, the sound of a chair against a marble floor.

“I only have a couple hundred dollars in my account. And the shittiest thing is rent is past due. I don’t know where to start. It’d be easier to find a needle in a haystack than to find a well-paying job in New York right now,” I said, wrapping my fingers around the blanket on my feet.

“They should give you severance, at least.”

“Nope, no severance, no benefits, no nothing. I was tossed out like an over-sucked orange.”

“You should sue her.”

“Where do I get the money to hire a lawyer? I’d rather use any money I can get now to pay my bills.”

“I could help you with some money,” Zoey said, almost quietly, because she knew how much I didn’t like to depend on people, least of all her.

“You know I can’t do that. I’m sure I’ll get a job if I search hard enough. There has to be a travel agency hiring and, with my experience, it shouldn’t be too far out of reach,” I said, even though I didn’t believe my own words.

Zoey exhaled, but she didn’t mention giving me money again because she knew I’d refuse.

“Why don’t you come back home? I mean, if you look for a job and can’t find one, you can always come back.”

I stretched my legs out, the blanket falling to the floor. “Back to Providence? What would I be coming back to? Why?”

“Why not?” Zoey asked rhetorically. “You could start over here, and when you make enough, you can go back to New York. It’s easier out here. Well, things are getting awfully expensive now, but I know it’s not as bad as a city like Manhattan.”

“You know there’s nothing in Rhode Island for me. I’m still going to be homeless over there, and you know that. You know our house was foreclosed after Mom died and I couldn’t pay the mortgage.”

“I am highly offended, Giana,” Zoey said.

I sat up. “What? What did I do?”

“How could you say such a thing when I have a house here that you can stay at?”

“I’m so sorry. You know I don’t like to impose.”

“I know, but you also know I’d never watch you go without. Why are you so stubborn about doing everything on your own? I’m your friend. What are friends for if we can’t help each other?”

I swallowed and bent to pick up the blanket from the floor. “But you never need help from me. I’m always the one needing help.”

“Well, I’m not complaining, am I? My door is always open to you. Providence is a good place to stay until things go back to normal. You could get a job here and save some money.”

“I’m not so sure, Zoey. There’s nothing waiting for me there. I grew up there just aching to get out. I can’t go back.”

“Just give it a thought, and I pray you find a job soon. If you don’t, then you’re welcome here. I have to pack up now. My assistants left an hour ago, so I have to pack up alone. I’ll call you before going to bed, okay?”

I nodded my head as if she could see me. “Okay.”

She blew me a kiss into the phone and hung up.

I stared down at the screen light until it went dark and then stood up and made for the window. I was drawn by the light filtering into my apartment through the half-open curtains. If I’d been told that I’d be considering the prospects of moving back home, I would have laughed. When my mom died, it was like the only thing pulling me back had snapped in two, severing all ties. Zoey was there, but I just never had the urge to go back; Zoey and I talked regularly on the phone, which was enough. It’d been years since I went back, and going back under these circumstances would be humiliating.

I sat on the windowsill and stared down at the flashes of light from the cabs and shops that were teeming with people. If you wanted to achieve anything, and I mean anything at all, New York was the place. People came from far and wide to achieve their dreams here. I had failed woefully. If I couldn’t make it in New York, a place where I was supposed to be spoiled with choices and opportunities, how was I going to achieve anything in Providence? It was hilarious that Zoey had even suggested it. What was I going to do there?

But the more I thought about it, the more I accepted that it might end up being my only option. If I couldn’t find a job in

the next three weeks, I was toast, and Providence, Rhode Island would be my next destination.

I shook my head. No, I had to find a well-paying job here. Providence was nothing but a dead end. There was nothing there for me.

Absolutely nothing.

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