

CELEBRITY FAKE DATING, BOOK THREE

SKYLA SUMMERS

FAKE DATING

Daxton Hawk

DON'T FALL IN LOVE WITH
YOUR ANONYMOUS PEN PAL.
CHANCES ARE, HE'S THE
JERK YOU'RE FAKE DATING.



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Daxton Hawk

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Fake Dating Daxton Hawk

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Fake Dating Daxton Hawk

SEX!!!

Now that I have your attention... *Fake Dating Daxton Hawk* is the 3rd book in the *Celebrity Fake Dating* series but can be read as a standalone novel. The fake dating in this book revolves around paid dates/escorting, opposed to the fake boyfriend/girlfriend trope you'll find in books 1 and 2 of this series. Oh, and yes, there are lots of open door sex scenes in this book. You're welcome :)

To anyone who has ever told me how excited they are for Daxton and Jordan's love story, you don't know how much your words have inspired me. This book is for you.

Chapter One

Jordan

“Please, *please*, don’t go on this date tonight, Jordan.”

I swear Mina will never tire of saying those words. I can’t blame her, she’s only trying to be a good friend, but her relentless pleading won’t change my mind.

“I need the money,” I say, twisting the curling tongs through my hair while standing in the shitty bathroom of my shitty Manhattan apartment.

“Zac and I are happy to lend you money. Don’t resort to escorting.”

“You’re making a bigger deal of this than it is. I’ve told you a million times Daxton is my only client and there is no sex involved. All I have to do is pretend to be his date while we attend a dinner for some business meeting of his.”

“Okay, but you hate the guy.”

That’s true. I do hate that jerk.

“Plus, it’s only a matter of time before Daxton starts pressuring you for sex.”

I roll my eyes. A black curl of hair tumbles down my shoulder as I release the tongs. “I’ve been on three escorting dates with Daxton over the last four months and he hasn’t once made a move on me. Believe me, he’s made it *very* clear he doesn’t want to have sex with me.”

Mina folds her arms, occupying the bathroom doorway. “I don’t believe you. You’re gorgeous.”

I twirl another lock of hair around the curling tongs. “You’re required to call me gorgeous. Best friend duties.”

“Babe, you *are* gorgeous.”

“I overheard Daxton talking about me with one of the businessmen on our first date. Surely you haven’t forgotten the story. *She’s not the kind of girl I fuck. My tastes are very particular.*”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten. You never shut up about it. Anyway, I don’t hold merit to his statement. The guy sought you out to be his escort. He wanted *you*.”

“Wait,” Zac calls from my even shittier living room. “Jordan, I didn’t realize you overheard Daxton talking about you. What happened?”

Mina steps out of the doorway, giving me a view of her fiancé leaning against the couch. God, he looks so out of place in this dump. Too handsome, for starters. His suit is probably worth more than all my belongings. Dark hair. A jawline to die for. I still struggle to wrap my head around Mina being engaged to one of the most successful Broadway stars today when a few months back she used to live in this run-down apartment with me.

Mina and I left our homes in Australia four years ago when we turned twenty-two to follow our dreams in New York City. I’d like to say Mina’s path to success is an inspiration—that she could go from being a nobody in her career and is now as famous as Zac, singing on stage with him every night and crazy in love—but I’ve pretty much lost all hope for myself. All good opportunities that come my way have a habit of leading to disappointment.

A few months back, I got a dance solo at Club Noir, then ownership dropped my act because it wasn’t right for the club’s clientele, and I returned to being a backup dancer. This all happened around the same time I made it to the final audition round for a reality show called *Search for the Next*

Burlesque Dancer. Then I received an email rejection where they couldn't even spell my name right.

No matter how hard I push myself and reach for my dreams, I'm standing still in life. I'm the side character, never the lead. So, yeah, I've learned to stop getting excited about life.

I sigh at Zac's comment and continue curling my hair. "Please don't make me repeat the story of my first date with Daxton."

"I'll repeat it for you," Mina says, sliding an arm around Zac's shoulders as she joins him by the couch. His right hand draws her in closer by the waist, his other hand mindlessly playing with her long, pink hair. Goddammit, they are perfection together.

"Basically, on Jordan's first escorting date with Daxton, she thought things were going well between them. They flirted and Jordan thought he liked her as more than just a paid date, you know, since he saw her dancing at Club Noir and decided he *needed* to have her as his escort. She let her feelings get involved, which is why, babe, you really shouldn't be an escort. Then she overheard him talking to his potential business partner who was, like, some gross old dude. And the guy said to Daxton, *I wouldn't mind claiming her ass with my cock.*"

Zac covers a snort of laughter with his hand while I cringe at the recount. "You can't be serious."

I meet his gaze in the reflection of the bathroom mirror. "One hundred percent serious."

"Who even talks like that?"

"The men Daxton Hawk associates with, apparently."

"There's more," Mina tells him. "So, after the old guy made that gross statement, he then said, *I'd like to fuck her but I won't overstep my boundary if she's yours.*"

"A true gentleman." Zac smirks with sarcasm. "Respecting the bro code. How did Daxton respond?"

“He said, *She’s not mine. I’m paying for her by the hour.*”

I laugh, because honestly, the situation is so ridiculous there’s no other option than to laugh. “Mina, if you’re going to tell Zac this story, you need to tell it properly. You forgot the *definitely* part. Daxton said, *She’s definitely not mine.* He emphasized the word as if it were preposterous that he’d be dating me. So, the old guy asks if Daxton has fucked me yet—his words, not mine—and if I’m any good. Daxton gives the infamous response: *She’s not the kind of girl I fuck. My tastes are very particular.* And then...” I clap my palm to my forehead, cringing all over again at the memory. “No, I can’t say the rest.”

Zac raises an eyebrow. “It gets worse?”

“Yup,” Mina answers. “The old dude asked Daxton for Jordan’s contact details and said, *I’ll hire her cunt for the night. Her ass too.*”

He laughs harder than I’ve ever seen him laugh. “Okay, now I’m convinced you’re both making this up.”

“We’re not!” I flip him the bird, laughing at my pathetic situation too. “Daxton handed over my number without hesitating. So, yeah, that’s why I hate the bastard.”

Zac shrugs. “I’m missing the logic in why you continue to be his escort. Tonight will be your fourth date with him, right?”

“I need to pay rent.”

“I thought they paid you decent money dancing at the burlesque club.”

I finish creating the last curl in my hair and reach for the red lipstick to perform the finishing touches to my appearance. “I guess Mina hasn’t told you, but I got dropped from Club Noir last week. Too many dancers. I’m a no-name so I got axed.”

“Damn. But you’re also waitressing.”

Oh, boy. The details of my life keep getting better and better. I apply the lipstick and smack my lips together in a

screw-it attitude. “I lost that job too, as of today.”

Mina gasps. “Babe, what? How did that happen?”

“The manager said I’m not reliable. I canceled three of my shifts last minute to go to dance auditions.”

“Fuck.”

“You’re judging me.”

“As if I’d ever judge you. I used to cancel waitressing shifts all the time to attend Broadway auditions.”

The difference is that all those auditions paid off and she’s now a famous Broadway star. On more than one occasion, I’ve thought about accepting defeat and becoming a stripper. Stripping isn’t *that* different to burlesque. The money is better. But my pride never lets me. Just like how I’ll never sleep with a man for money.

“Let us give you the money,” Mina says.

“No. Friends and money don’t mix.”

“What about your parents?” Zac asks.

My molars grind together at the mention of my parents. Zac and I are good friends, but in the several months I’ve known him, this is the first time my parents have been mentioned between us. So, I offer him a quick explanation of an entire childhood filled with trauma. “I don’t talk to my parents. Even if I did, they wouldn’t have the funds to help me. Vodka is their priority.”

“Oh?”

“Mina can tell you the details later.”

Zac takes the hint and drops the topic. “What about your brother? Ryan has enough money to lend you a hand.”

I blow out a huff of air, saddened by mention of Ryan—the only member of my family I’m close with, but have no means of contacting. “Sure. If you figure out how to find Ryan, let me know.”

The last time I heard from my brother was about four months ago before he embarked on his latest spiritual journey in the Himalayas with his girlfriend, Hannah. He said it was a technology detox, with the exception of his camera to film for his popular YouTube travel channel. It's not unusual for Ryan to disappear like this for months at a time. It just sucks not being able to talk to him when I miss him.

"Stop worrying about me. I'll be fine," I tell Mina and Zac. "I'll apply for another waitressing job and hopefully one of these auditions will land me a dancing job. In the meantime, I have Daxton's money. He's paying me two thousand dollars for tonight's date."

Tom Sanders is a safety net for money too. My name seems to be floating among the elite businessmen in New York City—thanks to Daxton handing out my number. When I mention to each of them I don't do sex, they all back out. Except Tom, who I escorted for the first time last week in order to pay for electricity. But if I tell Mina and Zac about Tom, they'll think I'm spiraling out of control. Which I'm not. I have everything under control. Everything is fine.

My phone vibrates on the bathroom counter, creating a burst of excited flutters in my chest. Okay, so there is *one* thing that gets me excited in this life. One guy.

When I see who the message is from, my excitement disappears. The resting bitch face returns and I scowl at my phone.

DAXTON "DICKHEAD" HAWK

I have a request. Wear the red dress again tonight.

Jerk. Of course he'd say something like that. The red dress has a plunging neckline and also barely covers my ass. The businessman we had dinner with last time couldn't stop staring at my cleavage and sending me smiles. No surprise, Daxton closed his business deal with the man that night.

The bitch within me wants to wear a black dress, just to spite Daxton. But I can't jeopardize this source of income, so I

fluff up my curls and head to my bedroom, finding the red dress, all so some guy can leer at me and want to *hire my cunt and ass for the night*.

What the hell is my life?

Chapter Two

Jordan

STEEL WEST

I'm in Manhattan. Landed in New York earlier today.

I smile as Steel's message appears in the Secret Santa app on my phone. My one reason for excitement in this world: Steel West.

"Boyfriend?"

Startled by the voice, I look up and find the male Uber driver watching me in the rearview mirror. He's some seedy dude with a thick, black mustache. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"That smile on your face, it's not the kind of smile reserved for family and friends. He's a lucky man. You're a beautiful lady."

Creep. Male attention isn't new for me, being a burlesque dancer. But the attention goes unwanted when I'm minding my own business. I blame the red dress. Daxton and his ridiculous requests. He's inconsiderate too, asking me to wear this tiny dress in May, with tonight's temperature on the cooler side.

"Yeah, my boyfriend texted me." I tell the driver a lie so he thinks I'm unavailable and leaves me alone.

Out of all the male attention I receive in my life, I only want Steel's. Which shows how messed up I am about men since I've never met Steel, seen a photo of him, or heard his voice. We only communicate through Secret Santa—an app designed to spread holiday cheer and foster new friendships during the holiday season.

When the app launched a few years back, I thought it sounded suspicious. The premise was bizarre to me—chat with an anonymous stranger, your Secret Santa. No gift exchange necessary, just the company of an online friend. Surely people were using the service for quick hookups and to send unsolicited dick pics. But then I discovered Secret Santa was founded by a charity in support of mental health, that all users must submit three pieces of ID to receive membership, and applications only opened during November and December. Oh, and there's no photo sharing options, making dick pics a no-go. If people want a one-night stand, there are more accessible apps out there.

I joined Secret Santa three years ago when spending my first Christmas in America, alone, because I couldn't afford the airfare back home to Australia with Mina. What could have been a lonely and super depressing December turned out to be the month where I met one of my closest friends. Steel and I hit it off from the moment the app matched us.

JORDAN HART

You've been in my city all day and waited this long to message me? Super pissed off.

STEEL WEST

Busy day filled with meetings. Trust me, you haven't left my mind once. I met a lady at the airport. She was blond, beautiful, and asked for my number, but all I could think about was how she's not you.

My smile deepens. I lick my lips, loving the way Steel speaks to me. That he feels this connection too.

All Secret Santa users are given a set username to protect their identity. At the end of the holiday season, users can choose if they want to reveal their real name to their match. Considering I was given the username *Sugar Plum Potato* and Steel's was *Mr. Gingerbread*, we made a deal: share our real names, replacing our ridiculous usernames, but never search for each other on the internet or social media.

We've continued our friendship on the app, and only in recent months has Steel asked to meet me. I like the idea of meeting, but it also scares me. What we have going on in cyberspace is a good thing—the only good thing in my life, actually—and I'm afraid meeting in person will spoil our connection.

We message all day every day and it's the most exhilarating feeling. He's kind, funny, and always knows what to say when I'm upset. Though we're not dating each other or anyone else, I basically treat him like a boyfriend. I could meet Steel if I really wanted to. It's just... the fear again. What if we only work on Secret Santa? I do trust Secret Santa's security measures, but every once in a while, a slight fear surfaces that I'm being catfished and Steel isn't really a thirty-year-old guy living in LA and working in real estate.

Perhaps I'm sabotaging something that could be amazing. But I've been burned too many times, believing in my parents—the two people I'm meant to trust most in this world—only to be disappointed time and again by their lies. As much as I've tried to cut them out of my life, the emotional baggage and trust issues follow me everywhere. Is it so wrong of me to want to protect this little bubble of perfection I have with Steel, even if that means we only ever exist in cyberspace?

JORDAN HART

Maybe this woman at the airport was me.

STEEL WEST

I'm being serious. I want to meet you. Jordan, what the fuck are we doing?

Every time Steel brings up this topic, my skin prickles, my heart beats faster, and I grow flushed all over. Mina and Zac are always hounding me to meet him too. Though I won't commit to meeting Steel, I often wonder how it would feel to be in his arms. To kiss him. *Sleep* with him.

A rush of excitement swells at the peak of my thighs. I haven't admitted this to Steel, but I've touched myself to the thought of him. Many times.

JORDAN HART

Meeting you is a lot of pressure. We've let this online relationship drag out for too long. Now I don't know if I'll ever be able to meet you.

STEEL WEST

Don't say that. The thought of meeting you is all that gets me through each day.

What if we ruin everything?

What if we're perfect together? I have a business meeting tonight but I'll drop everything if you agree to meet me. I want to know how beautiful you are. I want to hear your laugh and see you smile.

That's the thing. What if we meet and I'm not the kind of girl you're attracted to? What if our personalities clash and we only mesh well on the internet? We've discussed all this before.

Then at least we'll know.

Say we do hit it off, what can realistically happen between us when you live in LA?

Stop searching for excuses not to meet me. Location issues can be solved. If we don't get along in person then we'll just continue being friends online. Please meet me tonight.

I can't tonight. I have a date thing.

...

Insanely jealous right now. Since when do you date?

Don't be jealous. It's not really a date. The situation is complicated.

Explain.

The Uber comes to a stop. I look out the window, realizing I've arrived at my destination—The Hawk Grand Hotel, owned by the one and only Daxton Hawk.

I'll fill you in on the details later. I'm running late.

Seriously? You're going to leave the conversation like this? Who's the guy?

No one. I shouldn't have mentioned anything. I really have to go.

I'm in New York for the weekend. Please just promise me you'll think about meeting me.

Ok. I'll think about it.

A low battery warning pops up on my phone. Dammit. I tuck my phone into my purse and reach for the door handle. Before I can pull the lever, the door opens and a white-gloved hand offers me assistance like I'm royalty. The service at this hotel is something I'll never get used to. I take the doorman's hand and step out of the car, met with the magnificent view of the hotel's marble entrance. The Hawk Grand is hands down the nicest hotel in the Upper East Side.

"How may I assist you this evening, madam?" the doorman asks.

The title of *madam* takes a moment to compute in my brain, and by the time I manage to tell the doorman I'm dining in the hotel's restaurant, he's looking at me like I'm strange. Compared to the other guests arriving in designer outfits and with Louis Vuitton luggage, yeah, I don't belong here.

"Let me escort you up to the restaurant."

I smile at him. "That's okay. I can manage by myself. Thank you."

Grateful to be rid of his assistance, I enter the lobby, where greenery drapes from the ceiling and shallow pools of water line either side of the walkway. The lobby bustles with people. Some lounge on the plush sofas with expensive cocktails in their hands. Others line up at the reception desk, waiting to be served.

The elevator takes me to the twentieth floor. The doors slide open and Daxton is instantly all I see, standing on the far side of a lonely corridor. He's waiting for me in our usual meeting spot, right outside the restaurant entrance, and is occupied with a phone call. The deep tones of his voice send shivers along my skin, authoritative with whoever he's speaking to. He's talking in business jargon I can't understand, but what I do sense is the frustration in his voice.

My stomach tightens with nerves as I approach him. Like always, Daxton is dressed in a three-piece Italian suit and his dark hair is slicked back. As much as I don't want to admit so, Daxton *is* handsome. The first night we met, it was all I could think about. He approached me at Club Noir after my feather dance performance, was all charming by saying I was beautiful, that he would pay me generously if I accompanied him to a business event while pretending to be his date for appearance's sake, and that the evening would be strictly professional.

I had no idea of his identity or his wealth. All I knew was I was pinned beneath his intense brown gaze, could barely think straight due to his velvet-clad voice, and that I'd be lucky if I ever saw a man that beautiful again. For once, Steel wasn't on my mind. This handsome stranger had all my attention.

Look how well that turned out.

Honestly, I have no one to blame but myself. What kind of delusional idiot is flattered by a man asking them to be a paid date? Me, apparently. *I* am a delusional idiot, which makes perfect sense since I'm delusional enough to have romantic feelings for Steel. But regardless, Mina is right—I'm not cut out to be an escort. I should *never* have let my feelings get involved where Daxton Hawk is concerned.

My heels click across the marble corridor, my heart beating faster with every step I take closer to Daxton and his tall frame of muscles. He doesn't acknowledge my arrival until I'm standing right beside him. Daxton's eyes lock onto me and trail down my body in a lazy gaze—an inspection, deciding whether I look appropriate for tonight's dinner. With a few more deep words, Daxton finishes his conversation and slides the phone into his pocket.

“Delphine.”

Though his voice doesn't rise in volume, he sounds angry when he says my name. My *stage* name—the one I gave him that first night at Club Noir. I have never shared my real name with him. Separating my identity from burlesque dancing is a lesson I learned the hard way, years ago in Australia when a guy from the audience tracked down my address and kept leaving lingerie on my front doorstep.

“Thank you for joining me this evening. How are you?”

I raise an eyebrow. Seriously, I can't deal with this guy pretending like he's a gentleman. “Let's just get this date over with.”

His gaze lingers on me, examining me after my clipped response. “Bad day, baby?”

I suck in a sharp breath of air at the pet name. He chuckles at the shock I'm sure is visible in my eyes, then places a hand on my upper back. “Come on, let's go.”

The exposed skin on my back burns at the touch of his palm. I wiggle out of his reach and he laughs again.

That goddamn laugh is so infuriating.

“I’ll follow you into the restaurant,” I say.

“Suit yourself.” Daxton heads inside, leaving me to trail behind.

The quiet chatter of elegant guests fills the restaurant as soon as I step through the entrance. Wine glasses are clinking. There’s laughter. A jazz pianist plays background music on a grand piano.

“Mr. Hawk.” A young blond and busty seating hostess appears by our side, smiling at Daxton. She’s beautiful. The kind of woman you’d see on a runway. “I saw your name in the reservation book and was pleased to know you’re back in town. We need to catch up over dinner soon.”

I never knew Daxton was out of town. We don’t talk about our lives to one another.

He smiles at her, which is enough to annoy me because I never get a smile from Daxton unless he’s acting or it’s some smug gesture. “I’d like that, Amabella. Send me a text and we’ll set something up.”

Wow. He’s stooping to a new low, picking up women right in front of me. I don’t know why I’m so annoyed. I don’t even like the guy, and he sure as hell doesn’t like me. But I *am* annoyed. I guess these billionaires think they can do anything when women are involved.

“Is the other half of my party here yet?” Daxton asks her.

“You’re the first to arrive. Let me show you to your table.”

Amabella doesn’t spare a single glance at me. We follow her through the restaurant, weaving among the many guests already dining. My guess is Daxton is sleeping with her. He’s probably sleeping with every woman he can get his hands on, which would be a lot, considering the way women throw themselves at him.

I did a Google search on Daxton before I first agreed to be his escort. He’s in the media more than I anticipated, not only for being a billionaire in hotel development at the age of thirty, but also for the number of women he’s seen with. A new woman every week. Sometimes multiple women in one week.

I'm pretty sure Daxton was even asked to be on *The Bachelor*. He probably turned it down because he didn't want to commit to one woman.

Once Daxton and I are seated at our table, Amabella places a hand on his shoulder and leans in, whispering, "Let me know if there's anything I can do for you, Mr. Hawk."

He smiles at her then is instantly on his phone again, his thumbs speeding across the keyboard. A tightness forms in his jaw and his brows draw together, much the same look as when he was frustrated outside the restaurant a moment ago.

As soon as Amabella leaves us, I roll my eyes and echo her words, mocking her sensual tone under my breath. "*Let me know if there's anything I can do for you, Mr. Hawk.* God, does every woman talk to you like that?"

It was a rhetorical question, which I thought was spoken quietly enough for only my ears, but Daxton responds, not sparing a glance from his phone. "Every woman except you."

My cheeks flush with the embarrassment of being heard. Daxton's eyes flick to me for a mere second, finding my pink face. He chuckles ever so slightly and continues typing.

"You're in a mood tonight," Daxton says with zero care, still consumed by his phone. "To be more accurate, you're in a mood every night I hire you. Have I done something to offend you, sweetheart?"

The mocking nature in which he calls me *sweetheart* itches beneath my skin. "Oh, that's real funny, *pumpkin*. I was about to say the same thing about you being in a mood. You sounded angry on the phone before. Business plans falling through? Some girl doesn't want to see you?"

Finally, he puts his phone down and looks at me with a smirk on his lips and amusement dancing in his eyes. No words.

I grow even more flushed under his intense stare but refuse to back down and let him win. "What's that look for?"

"Your attitude toward me is amusing. I don't know where it came from. Please, enlighten me. On our first date, I

received nothing but smiles from you. All I can assume is you got your feelings hurt because I haven't taken you to bed."

I laugh at the arrogance of his comment. "Oh, please. Your bed is the last place I want to visit."

His smirk broadens, like he's enjoying this back and forth between us. There's something dangerous about the smug shape of his lips that makes my pulse race. I feel naked beneath his gaze. My head tells me to back down and not say another word.

"And besides, I only sleep with my handsome clients."

Oh God, what am I doing speaking like this to him? I lick my lips and grab the hem of my dress, attempting to inch it a little farther down my thighs. Daxton's gaze follows my movements, from my lips to my legs, and I'm suddenly hot all over. There's an ache at the top of my thighs that has no business being there, especially when caused by Daxton.

Before either of us can say anything more, Amabella returns to our table with a large, old man behind her—the businessman we'll be having dinner with tonight, I suppose. Montgomery Wallace.

Daxton and I rise from the table, both with fake smiles on our faces.

"Monty, it's good to see you again." Daxton shakes the man's hand. "Please, meet my date, the lovely Delphine."

My stomach does a little jump when Daxton calls me his date.

Monty smiles at me and takes my hand in his, his touch cold and wrinkly, lingering for too long. "My, my, you are beautiful." His gaze travels to my cleavage and he adjusts the crotch of his pants. Jesus fucking Christ.

The money. I'm here for the money.

Daxton can be a jerk all he wants and this creep can stare at my breasts if it means I can pay this month's rent.

Chapter Three

Daxton

Jordan hasn't replied to my latest message. *Why* hasn't she replied? *Who* is this guy she's on a date with? That last question has been on repeat in my mind all throughout dinner with Delphine and Monty Wallace, eating away at my sanity. I rest my forearms on the restaurant balcony and refresh Secret Santa again.

Nothing.

My last message to Jordan stares back at me, ridiculing me.

STEEL WEST

How's your date going?

I keep telling myself to be patient. The message was only sent five minutes ago. But those five minutes are enough to cause alarm. Jordan is the kind of girl who always replies within an instant. In the three years I've been speaking to her, not once has she gone on a date. I've been the primary man in her life, and I hate that someone else might steal that role from me. It will be just my luck that the one time Jordan does go out with a guy, she ends up hitting it off with him.

I exhale a breath of smoke. This cigarette is doing nothing to calm my nerves nor is the fresh air on this cool evening. Everything is chaos in my head, animated by the muttered

sound of voices from inside the restaurant and the traffic twenty floors beneath me.

“You better be done with your business call. I’ve had enough of Monty leering at my chest.” Delphine’s voice comes from behind me, spoken with her distinct accent of something classy you’d find in London but with a mixture of something else I can’t distinguish.

Her words confuse me for a few seconds, then I remember the lie I fed her and Monty back at the table—the business call I had to step outside to make.

She puts on a breathy, high-pitched voice. “Amabella is wondering where you went.”

I laugh quietly to myself. Amabella is my cousin. I got her the seating hostess job here and she lives in this hotel free of charge—my way of helping her escape an abusive ex-boyfriend. All hotel staff refer to me as Mr. Hawk, which Amabella and I laugh over in private.

“What, have you gone mute all of a sudden?” Delphine asks. She joins me at the railing. “Ugh, you’re smoking.”

“You got a problem with cigarettes?” I exhale the smoke right into her face, amused when she scowls at me. It’s too fun playing with this girl. Even more fun whenever I make her nervous.

“I hate smokers. Your attractiveness has dropped from a four to a two.”

“Only a two?”

“You wear nice suits. But I guess that’s an attribute to the clothes, not you. So you’re really a one.”

I return the cigarette to my lips to stop myself from smiling. Delphine glances out at the city right as a cold gust of wind sweeps by us, ruffling her curls. She clings to herself for warmth, half her body exposed in that tiny red dress. Doing the polite thing, I slide my jacket off and wrap it around her shoulders. After all, I’m the one who asked her to wear something revealing, so it’s my fault she’s cold.

She glares at me as soon as the jacket touches her skin. “What are you doing—Oh.”

“Trying to keep you warm.”

She accepts the offer and throws me another insult. “The jacket smells like smoke. I’m surprised you’d give up your jacket for me. I guess you can be a gentleman when you want to.”

I smile again, for some reason enjoying her insults. I can’t deny Delphine has sex appeal. She’s gorgeous and captured my attention among twenty other girls dancing on stage when I found her at Club Noir. I would have asked her out on a date right then and there, a *real* date, if I weren’t so set on Jordan being the girl for me.

Where appearances are regarded, Delphine is exactly my type of woman. She looks like a pinup model with her porcelain skin and long black hair that is always curled. I’ve never seen her without red lipstick. It looks incredible on her, but Delphine’s eyes are her best feature—a hypnotic snake-green, always framed with sleek cat-eye makeup. There’s a seduction to them that says “fuck me,” no matter what mood she’s in or how much she dislikes me. She’s thin and tiny, with amazing breasts. And more than once I’ve been fascinated with the impressive sleeve of ink on her right arm. The tattoos are a colorful collage of flowers and pinup models. It’s the kind of tattoo I could examine for hours and keep finding hidden gems inside.

She’s brilliant. She’s sexy as fuck. She’s just...

Not Jordan.

I don’t want anyone but Jordan, which is crazy, because how can I be so... in love with a girl I’ve never met? But I am. I’m fucking obsessed.

My phone vibrates and I pull it out of my pocket in a rush, desperate to see Jordan’s reply in Secret Santa. Instead, it’s a message from Felicity. For fuck’s sake. If *she’s* messaging me, it can only be about one thing. She’s trying to mend the damage between me and my brother so I’ll attend their

wedding. Not going to happen. How do I say in polite terms *Fuck off. I don't want to speak to either one of you ever again?*

“Whoa.” Delphine’s voice draws me out of my mind and back to the balcony with her. “You look like you could murder someone. Who texted you?”

“Just this... girl,” I grit out.

“Oh, a girl. Spill the details. You were checking your phone constantly at the table. Is she why you’ve been in such a bad mood all night?”

“It’s not like that.”

Delphine is the last person I want to share this information with. Aside from my family, I’ve never felt comfortable speaking about the Brad and Felicity drama with anyone other than Jordan.

“There are no details to share.” I take another puff of my cigarette and change the subject. “You weren’t free the other night.”

“Yeah, because you requested me last minute and I was already booked to escort Tom Sanders.”

God, I hate that prick. I’ve heard he’s rough with women in the bedroom, and not in a good way. “You should stay away from Tom Sanders. He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

She gives me a strange look, as if wondering why I care. Delphine may be just a paid date, but I don’t take well to any woman being physically abused.

“Tom was fine,” she says.

“Good. Look, is there some way we can avoid this availability issue in the future? I couldn’t find another escort on such short notice. I had to bring a real date to a business dinner.”

“Oh, how terrible for you.”

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. “The issue is she expected something romantic from me. Every woman does, even other escorts I’ve hired in the past, no matter how clear I

am about the date being only business. That's why I like hiring you. For whatever reason, you clearly don't like me."

She grimaces. Fair enough, my words were a little brash. "This may shock you, pumpkin, but I have a life outside of escorting for you and am not available at your beck and call. Why do you even need a date for these business dinners?"

"My advisors tell me I have a tendency of being intimidating when discussing business. They say a feminine presence helps ease the atmosphere."

"Here's an idea." Her voice is sharp. She steps back from the railing like she's done with this conversation. "You've been glued to your phone all evening, I assume messaging some girl you like. Why don't you get *her* to be your date?"

As Delphine returns to the restaurant, I blow out a breath of smoke and mutter, "Believe me, I'm trying."

Chapter Four

Jordan

The mafia boss's cock was long, thick, and heavy in her mouth as she sucked and listened to him moan her name.

“Boyfriend texting you again?”

I look up from my e-reader, finding my Uber driver peering back at me through the rearview mirror. Christ. It's the same mustached driver from earlier in the evening.

“I'm reading a book.” I raise my Kindle for reference, the screen glowing like a phone in the night. We're stuck in traffic and my phone is dead, so I thought I'd make use of the time instead of being bored.

“You look like you're reading a good book.” The driver's tone edges on flirtatious.

And then I realize...

I was totally caught smiling at the sex scene. Mina always teases me for having the worst poker face and tells me to never read romance books in public. Unlike her, I can't read an explicit sex scene with a blank face. I get too excited.

Okay, so maybe there are two things I get excited about in this world: Steel West and smutty romance books. A girl needs to get her romance fix somehow, and in my experience, fictional men are far better than real ones. That's probably why I like Steel so much.

“Oh, ah, yeah. Great book,” I tell the driver.

“I’m in need of a good book. What are you reading?”

Porn.

“Um... Harry Potter. Hey, are there any other streets we can take? Traffic isn’t even moving.”

“The GPS tells me all streets are gridlocked.”

Goddammit. My apartment is only a few blocks away but at this rate I won’t be home for hours. “You know, I’m not that far from my apartment. I can walk the rest of the way.”

“Are you sure? A pretty lady like you shouldn’t—”

I step onto the sidewalk and slam the door before I hear another one of his creepy compliments. West Harlem isn’t the safest neighborhood to live in. I don’t like walking the streets alone at night, especially when I’m wearing such a revealing dress, but I keep my wits about me and stick to the main roads. When a cool breeze sweeps through the street, I have big regrets about giving Daxton his jacket back, but I refuse to hug myself for warmth because that will only make me look like easy prey.

A couple of blocks later when I’m nearly home, the number of people on the street grows dense, far more than to be considered normal. My first thought is that there’s some street festival I’m unaware of, but that scenario doesn’t fit the tense faces of everyone around me. I peer ahead, unable to see beyond anyone except for the red and blue siren lights flashing across the buildings.

The scent of smoke suddenly hits me. With each step forward, the roar of flames begins to overpower the city noises of traffic and pedestrians.

My stomach clenches into a knot. *Please don’t let the fire be in my building.*

I squeeze through the people, my mouth turning dry when I find my street taped off from the public and police guarding it. Ducking under the tape, I catch the attention of a middle-aged female officer.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” she says. “There’s been an apartment fire. The whole building is in flames. No one is allowed beyond this point.”

“I live on this street. Which building is the fire in?”

“Number twenty-three.”

Mother fucker!

The silver lining from this inferno? At least I’m not cold anymore.

Whoever says I’m a pessimist is lying.

It’s twelve a.m. when the fire is extinguished and the same female police officer reports back to me on the side of the road. “Firefighters believe the fire started in your apartment from an electrical appliance.”

Jesus. The curling tongs. Did I leave them on?

I don’t say a damn word and act oblivious, but I know the fire had to be my fault. I’m a walking disaster. I’m just thankful all residents were evacuated well before the fire grew out of control and that no one was harmed.

“Do you have anywhere you can spend the night?” the officer asks me. “With family? A friend perhaps?”

“Ah... yes. I’ll figure something out.”

“Very well. Please do take care. Authorities will be in contact with you over the following days.”

The officer walks away, tending to someone else. I pull out my phone to dial Mina’s number. It takes me a few seconds of tapping the screen to remember the battery is dead. “Oh, screw you.”

A mother and her young child walk by, looking deeply offended by my words.

I send them an awkward smile. “No, not you. I was swearing at my phone. It died.”

The officer returns to my side. “I can lend you my phone if you need to call someone.”

“Thank you, but I don’t know anyone’s number.” Panic begins to creep up inside me once I speak those words. I have nowhere to go. No one I can call for help. My mind races with thoughts of sleeping on the streets.

I’ve made many friends through my dancing career, but don’t know where any of them live. As for Mina and Zac, they work late nights on Broadway and told me they’re attending the afterparty of some show tonight. Who knows what time they’ll be home to let me stay with them.

I sit on the front steps of a nearby apartment building and claw my hands through my hair, mentally running through my options. The stress of it all gets to me when I realize there are no options. Tears fall down my cheeks and I can’t stop myself from sobbing. I’ve lost everything in that fire and I’m literally going to be sleeping in a gutter tonight.

A soft hand pats my back, followed by the officer’s voice. “Can I at least drive you somewhere? A family member’s or friend’s house, perhaps?”

“I have no one.” I unzip my purse in search for a tissue. I always have a couple on hand to blot my lipstick, but keeping in line with tonight’s luck, I’m all out.

And then I see it.

Daxton’s business card stares back up at me, tucked into one of the pockets of my purse from the night we first met. The sight of it makes me laugh, because no way am I really considering turning to him for help. But as the seconds tick by, reality sinks in. Daxton is literally the only person I can turn to in this moment.

I look up at the officer. “Ah... actually, I would like to make a phone call, if that’s all right?”

“Certainly.” She passes her phone to me.

I swallow back my pride and dial Daxton's number. This is truly rock bottom.

The phone rings for upward of twenty seconds. I'm about to hang up when I hear Daxton's smooth, deep voice. "Hello?"

I clear my throat, assuring there are no traces of weakness in my voice. "It's me. I'm calling from someone else's phone."

The line goes quiet and I realize Daxton still has no idea who's calling him.

"It's Delphine—"

"I know your voice, Delphine. You don't need to clarify."

The way he speaks my name does strange things to my chest. My name sounds intimate on his lips even though I'm sure he doesn't intend for that at all.

"Look, there's a water leak in my apartment and I need a place to stay tonight." The lie slides out naturally, a defensive barrier, because I don't want Daxton knowing anything about my life and I'm afraid that if I speak the truth, I'll crumble with tears again, which I will *not* let him witness. "I would have called one of my friends and asked to stay with them, but my phone died so I've lost all my contacts. Is there any vacancy at your hotel?"

"I don't manage reception. I wouldn't know."

His smug tone is the tip of the iceberg that pushes my stress over the edge. "A real great help you are. I could really do without the attitude, but apparently you don't know how to communicate with someone when they're in a stressful situation."

He sighs and says, "I'll call reception and sort out something," then he hangs up.

Chapter Five

Daxton

“Good evening, Mr. Hawk. You’re speaking with Suzanne. How may I help you?”

“Hi, Suzie.” I step out of the elevator with my phone to my ear. “I have a business associate in need of accommodation tonight. Are there any rooms available here?”

The sound of typing travels from Suzie’s end of the phone call. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hawk, it appears The Hawk Grand Hotel is fully booked out.”

Shit.

“Alright. Just... send her to me in the penthouse when she arrives. Her name is Delphine Fox.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll send her your way.”

I end the phone call and unlock the door, entering the penthouse—my home away from my home in LA. I don’t like traveling, but it’s necessary at the moment with The Hawk Grand Hotel in LA soon opening and a second New York hotel on the way.

Flicking a wall switch, the lights welcome me into the main living area. Out of all the hotels I own, this one is my favorite. Perhaps because it’s the first business venture that landed me real success. I feel at home here.

The penthouse has everything I need and more, a large open living area with a kitchen and dining area attached. There are five bedrooms, a gym, movie theater, and a private outdoor pool area with Central Park views.

Despite being tired after a long day, I can't go to sleep now that Delphine is heading my way. Even without her arrival, I can't get Jordan out of my head. Five hours have passed since texting her, asking about her date, and I haven't heard one word from her.

I toss my phone onto the couch and head for the shower, each step sending me more out of my mind with this foreign feeling of panic and jealousy. It's been so long since a woman has had this hold on me. There hasn't been anyone since Felicity.

I stand beneath the rainfall shower and hold my breath for as long as possible to try and forget about Jordan, but I can't stop wondering what she's doing this very moment. Whether this guy she's on a date with is kissing her. Or worse...

I hate the thought of her being with someone else. Fuck, I wish I could meet Jordan already. Meet her and be honest about myself, because there are so many things I want to tell Jordan. I want her to know who I am, the real me, Daxton Hawk. She only knows my legal name which I haven't used since I was eighteen, aside from signing up to Secret Santa because the app required ID. When the two of us stopped using our Secret Santa pseudonyms of *Sugar Plum Potato* and *Mr. Gingerbread*, I decided I wouldn't correct Jordan when she saw my new default username of Steel West. I never wanted her searching for me and discovering I have money, because the bad thing about money, it stops people from seeing the real you. They become attracted to the wealth and luxurious lifestyle. Women flocked to me the moment I started making money. I fucked around a lot, indulging in the sex, but they were all surface-level relationships. I thought I'd found something real with Felicity, but clearly, I was wrong.

With Jordan, I want her to meet me based off desires that have nothing to do with money. I want her to want *us* as much

as I do. As for me, I know I'll love everything about Jordan when we meet, whoever she is.

If we meet.

If she's even interested in me after her date tonight.

Fuck.

My lungs burn and I gasp for air when thoughts of Jordan sleeping with this guy intrude on my mind. I slam the tap off and dry myself, changing into a long pair of black pants for bed. Once returning to the living area, I grab my phone off the couch and check my notifications for the fiftieth time. The front door opens and Delphine walks in.

She pauses, her face pale upon seeing me. "What the hell? You have *got* to be kidding me."

I'm about to reply with some smart comment but decide to hold back when I notice her eyes are puffy. She's been crying. "The hotel is booked out. There are plenty of rooms in the penthouse. You won't know I'm here."

"I will when you're walking around half-naked like that." Her eyes lower to my bare torso and her cheeks turn red. Her gaze shifts to my shoulders, and I know she's staring at the tattoos trailing down my arms.

I can't hold back teasing her this time. "Baby, I'll put a shirt on if it makes you feel more comfortable."

Her eyes flare. "Do *not* call me that. And as if a shirt will solve the problem."

"I'm doing you a favor by letting you stay the night for free. Be my guest and sleep on the street if you like."

Though I can see she's bursting to come back with something snarky, she holds her temper. "Which room can I stay in?"

"How about that one?" I point to the room near the kitchen. "It's the farthest one from mine, which I'm sure you'll appreciate since I sleep naked."

Her blush grows stronger. I'm tempted to laugh, letting Delphine know I'm joking. But fuck, it's entertaining messing with this girl.

Without speaking another word, she speeds toward the guest bedroom. A strong scent of smoke follows Delphine as she passes by me, the smell lingering in the air after she slams the door shut behind herself.

Lovely.

I sit on a bar stool at the kitchen counter and check my phone again. Still no response from Jordan.

Delphine's bedroom door opens and she sticks her head out. "What kind of penthouse doesn't have bedrooms with a bathroom attached?"

"Your bedroom happens to be the only one without a bathroom. Choose another room if you prefer."

"No, it's fine. Where's the bathroom? I need to shower."

"Door across the hallway from you." I nod in that direction.

"Oh, and do you have an iPhone charger?"

"There should be one in your end table. I'm going to bed. If you need anything, there's twenty-four hour room service."

"Noted." She crosses the hallway and disappears into the bathroom.

Before I make a move for my bedroom, a work email arrives on my phone. I take a few minutes to answer it, and right when I'm about to lock the screen, a notification banner for my personal email account appears. I open the email on autopilot, swearing when I realize who it's from.

You are invited to celebrate the wedding of Brad West and Felicity Rhodes.

My hand clenches around the phone and my whole body is instantly swarming with anger. I delete the email, unable to stomach reading the rest.

Where is Jordan when I need someone to talk to about Brad and Felicity?

They're the reason I joined Secret Santa in the first place, because I needed to talk with someone about their betrayal, someone I didn't know in real life because the humiliation was too raw.

It was a real nice surprise to walk in on my fiancée riding my brother's dick a month before our wedding. The cheating had been going on behind my back for months prior. They claimed they were planning to tell me they were in love with each other before the wedding arrived, but I have my doubts.

What makes me even more furious is that my family supports their relationship, Amabella being the exception. The support didn't come at first. Four years ago, when this all took place, they were upset with Brad and Felicity for doing this to me. But a year later, when my brother proposed to Felicity, my family realized their romance wasn't a fleeting affair and that they needed to accept the relationship. That's when I cut ties with all of my family. They chose my brother over me, though they don't see it like that. They told me I don't need to like my brother's relationship with Felicity or approve of it, but that I need to accept it.

So, I told them to all get fucked and haven't spoken to them in three years. The year I cut out my family, Secret Santa was all the rage and I joined for the hell of it, wanting someone to talk to.

I got lucky being matched to Jordan. She understood me. She was the only person I could talk to about the betrayal because she was a stranger. Someone I felt no shame in sharing the humiliation with. I spoke to her every day. I grew dependent on her. She became my best friend and was the reason I stopped feeling so lonely. And then somehow, I fell in love with her, this person who doesn't exist outside of my phone. That's when I decided I need to meet her.

The bathroom door opens. My attention flicks to the movement and I find Delphine crossing the hallway in a lacy

bra and panties, and with her black hair wet and slung over one shoulder. Oblivious to my presence.

My jaw ticks at the sight of her. I'm not interested in pursuing anything with Delphine, but there's no denying she has a good body.

I clear my throat, not knowing how else to announce myself. Her eyes shoot to me and her face turns bright red again.

"Don't look at me," she squeals, running for cover in her room.

"Why were you giving me shit for being half-naked when you're no better?"

She calls out from behind the closed door. "I don't have any clothes to sleep in. You said you were going to bed. I didn't think I'd see you again tonight."

I groan and head for my room on the opposite side of the penthouse, not having the energy to engage in a back and forth with Delphine. Sleep will be impossible, though. Visions of Jordan with another man plague my mind. How is there still no reply from her?

I really don't want to be *that guy*—the one who can't give a girl space—but I have to know what Jordan is doing. I lie across the foot of my bed and open Secret Santa.

STEEL WEST

No reply. I guess the date is going well.

JORDAN HART

Ah! Sorry, I meant to message you sooner. My phone died and I've been occupied. Oh, and the date was terrible.

I smile at the screen. A thousand pounds are lifted off my chest and I feel like I can breathe again.

What's got you so occupied?

My apartment burned down.

I sit up quickly, unsure if this is a joke or not.

What the fuck? Are you serious?

Yep.

Shit. Are you ok?

No. My life is falling apart. Nothing is going right for me. I spent the last hour crying.

STEEL WEST

Where are you right now? Are you safe?

I'm fine. I'm just being dramatic.

You're not being dramatic. Please tell me where you are. Let me help you.

We're not meeting under these circumstances. I'm at the lowest point of my life. It's embarrassing.

I don't care about any of that stuff. I don't want you alone right now. At least give me your phone number so we can talk.

I'm not alone. I'm staying with a friend.

You are so stubborn. I wish you would let me help you.

JORDAN HART

You can help by distracting me. How was your night?

Amazing night. I got an invitation to my brother's wedding.

Oh, damn. What are you going to do? Also, good job at distracting.

I deleted the invitation from my inbox. You know what, the situation with my brother doesn't compare to how worried I am about you.

Seriously, I'm fine. Please continue distracting me.

So, this guy you went on a date with... Nothing I have to be jealous about?

Absolutely not.

STEEL WEST

Too bad. I'm fucking jealous. He knows what you look like. He knows what your voice sounds like. But I don't. Explain why my girl was on a date with a guy who wasn't me.

I can't. It's a really embarrassing situation.

Nothing can be more embarrassing than your fiancée leaving you for your brother. I'm not judging.

Our back-and-forth fast conversation comes to a stop while I wait for her response. Two minutes pass and there's still no reply from Jordan. I type another message, encouraging her to share the story of this date, but before I can hit send, I'm interrupted by a knock on my bedroom door.

"Yes?" I call out.

"Can we talk?" Delphine's muffled voice travels through the door.

Now isn't a great time for a conversation, nor do I feel like dealing with Delphine's dislike toward me. But there's nothing

defensive in her tone. In fact, the complete opposite. She sounds... defeated.

I hop off the bed and open the door, finding Delphine with a white bedsheet wrapped around her body. “Interesting attire.”

She wraps the sheet tighter around herself and shrugs. “I told you, I don’t have any clothes. I lost them in the... flood.” Her voice is quiet. Her eyes drop to the ground like she’s embarrassed.

“Wait here.”

“Where are you going?”

I disappear into my walk-in closet, returning with a clean black t-shirt. “Wear this.”

She pulls the shirt over her head. The bedsheet falls to the ground, and before the shirt is fully covering Delphine’s body, I get a glimpse of her panties and their pink font that says *Lick my pussy*. Above the words are two cat ears and a set of whiskers.

I would *love* to tease her about these panties right now, but it doesn’t seem appropriate.

“Thanks for the shirt,” she says.

With her petite frame, my shirt is oversized on her. I won’t lie, seeing Delphine wear my clothes is not the worst sight I’ve ever seen. I’ll even go as far as saying she looks cute in my baggy shirt.

“So, you wanted to talk,” I prompt.

“Yeah. I know I was a little intense when I stepped through the front door. I’m just really stressed.” Delphine scrunches her hands through her hair. She’s trying to stay strong, but there’s no hiding how glassy her eyes are. “I don’t know what I’m doing with my life. I’ve got no place to live. All my belongings are gone. I don’t have insurance. I’ve got no job. My only option is to start escorting more men. Tom Sanders just sent me a message, asking if I’m available for hire next weekend. I guess I’ll say yes even though I hate the guy—”

“Delphine—”

“But all of this is beside the point. I just wanted to say thank you for letting me stay here tonight.” She turns and walks away from my bedroom.

I watch her walk farther away, not sure what I’m meant to say. She’s in a bad position, that’s for sure. And she’s turned to me for help. *Me*, of all people, when she clearly doesn’t like me. That can’t be good. Does she not have anyone else? Regardless, I have a girl close to tears in my home. I can’t just return to my bedroom and move on with my night.

“Delphine.” I follow after her, having no clue what I can possibly say to improve her situation.

She glances back at me and a stray tear falls down her cheek. “Seriously, Daxton. Thank you and let’s leave it at this. Good night.” Delphine enters her bedroom and closes the door. I hear the lock click and the light goes out beneath her door.

I contemplate whether to push this situation, but respecting Delphine’s privacy is probably for the best right now. We’ll talk in the morning. Daylight always provides a new perspective on things. Hopefully she’ll be feeling more at ease by then.

I return to my bed and check the Secret Santa app, finding no reply from Jordan.

STEEL WEST

Where did you go?

JORDAN HART

Sorry. I’m just overwhelmed by the fire. I’ve been thinking about what you said, about us meeting while you’re in New York, and I can’t. Not this time, at least.

It’s okay. I’ll wait till you’re ready. I’ll wait for as long as it takes.

Chapter Six

Jordan

Waking up in silk sheets and on a cloud-like mattress should have me in a good mood. A breathtaking view of the city lies right beyond the window of this guest bedroom. But reality kicks in and I remember I lost everything in the fire and have no home to return to.

I roll over in bed and unlock my phone, finding a text from my mother.

MOM

I know you don't want to hear from me, and rightfully so. I just wanted to let you know your father and I are making changes. We will be attending a rehab facility, starting this week. Hope you are well.

Yeah, right. I'm tempted to reply with *why is this time any different to the last four?* But as I've come to learn, no communication with my parents is best for my mental health. The eight-year-old version of me believed their lies when they told me they would stop drinking. An eight-year-old shouldn't even know what an alcohol addiction is. I believed them time and again throughout my childhood and adolescent years when they promised me and Ryan they would go sober. I loved them and believed they would change even after all the days they forgot to pick me up from school because they were passed out, the days when I would have to take care of them because

they were so hungover, when they decided alcohol was a more important expense than paying the bills, when I was sixteen and they stole money from me to buy vodka, when they missed my high school graduation.

No, I can't do it anymore. So many hurtful lies have come out of their mouths. There are so many trust issues they've scarred me with. I hope they're telling the truth this time, that they'll get help. But I'm not holding my breath.

I close the text from my mom and find an email waiting in my inbox. When I see the email is about one of the dance auditions I'm waiting to hear back from, my heart flutters with adrenaline and hope. This will be my moment. My luck is about to turn around. I always hear success stories of how people find their big break when they're at their lowest.

I open the email and read the first line. *Thank you for your audition. Unfortunately...*

That's all I ever need to read to know I've been rejected again. Fuck my fucking life.

Of course I shouldn't have been hopeful. How foolish of me to believe this email would be any different from all the other rejections I've received. I am *never* going to make it in this world. Okay, universe, I get it. I was a murderer or something equally terrible in a past life and need to be punished. But when is enough enough?

Despite wanting to stay hidden in bed all day, I need to get out of Daxton's home. I'll embarrass myself some more with the ugly crying at Mina's apartment, but not here.

I slide back into my skimpy red dress, put on my heels, and tame my hair with my fingers. As soon as I exit the guest bedroom, the most delicious smell of pancakes and maple syrup wafts past me. I look to the kitchen and find Daxton leaning against the island counter with a cup of coffee in one hand and his phone in the other. He's dressed in a suit, looking sleek and professional, all while I look like a shipwreck. I have flashbacks of him last night with his bare chest on display. Of how defined his muscles are and the ink covering his shoulders. I'm ashamed to say how good the sight was.

Ridiculously good. Daxton without his shirt on is a masterpiece.

On the island counter beside Daxton is an assortment of untouched food ranging from fruits and cereals to a hot breakfast. He looks up from his phone, greeting me with a nod. “Are you hungry? I don’t know what you like for breakfast, so I ordered everything off the room service menu.”

He did... what? For me? Why?

I’m starving, but I don’t think I can stomach having breakfast with Daxton. “I should be getting home.”

His lips twitch with the hint of a teasing smile. “To your flooded apartment? Delphine, sit down and have some food.”

The deep way he speaks my name has a hold on me, and I follow his instructions, taking a seat at the counter. I rest my purse on my lap and serve myself two eggs, then peer at the rest of the food, searching.

“What are you looking for?” he asks.

“The condiments.”

Daxton slides a tray toward me and lifts the lid. I choose the tomato chutney, chili flakes, and dried herbs, then drown my eggs in all three.

Daxton’s brows pinch together. “Interesting way to have your eggs.”

“I always eat my eggs like this. You should try it.”

He dismisses my words with a question. “Did you sleep well?”

“Not really. Too much on my mind. And you?”

“What’s your plan, Delphine?”

“My plan?”

“With your living and working situation. Last night you said you have no job. Are you not dancing at Club Noir anymore?”

No time for chit chat, then. I shrug at his question. “They let me go recently. It’s fine. I’ll take more escorting jobs. As for my living situation, I’ve got a friend I’ll stay with.”

Daxton sips his coffee, keeping his eyes on me. His dark gaze is always so intense and heavy. Normally, I have no issue keeping eye contact with people. With Daxton, the way he looks at me sends hot tingles all along my skin.

I stare down at my food to avoid him. The silence is uncomfortable, so I take a bite of my eggs and try to dissipate the tension by bringing back the chit chat. “What are your plans for the day, dressed so formally? It’s Sunday. Surely, you’re not working.”

“You can stay here.”

My gaze shoots back up to Daxton and I almost choke on my eggs. “What?”

“The penthouse is empty ninety percent of the time. I only stay here when I’m visiting New York.”

“I’m confused.”

“You need a place to live. I’m offering you one, free of charge. Hopefully this relieves some of the stress the flood caused you. You’ll only have to share the penthouse with me when I’m in town. Considering how big this place is, I’m sure you won’t even know I’m here.”

“Okay, but *why* are you offering me your penthouse? We don’t get along.”

He chuckles. “I get along fine with you. You’re the one with the issue. I’m still trying to figure out what I did to offend you.”

I roll my eyes and take another bite of my eggs, not wanting to have that embarrassing conversation with Daxton.

He gets the hint and changes the subject. “Along with offering you a place to live, I’d also like to pay for your exclusivity. I’d like you to escort for me and only me.”

My food goes down the wrong way again, so I push the plate away from myself, deciding I could do without the

choking hazard. This whole conversation with Daxton is triggering alarm bells in my head. He's being nice and I don't trust it one bit. Up until now, he's been using me to please the eyes of lustful men and close business deals. He's handed my number to them, knowing their intentions.

I fold my arms and am immediately on the defense. "Why are you doing any of this? You're suddenly being nice, trying to take care of me. I don't understand. There has to be some ulterior motive."

"You were upset last night. Understandably. No one would want to be in your situation. I spent the night contemplating how I can help you—"

"But *why*?"

He places his coffee on the counter and watches me for a long moment, observing, before answering in a calm manner. "Despite what you may think, I'm not a total asshole. If you need help, I'll help you. There is no hidden motive. You're in need of money and a place to live. I can offer you both. As for me, I want to avoid the situation I was in last week where you weren't available and I had to find another date. On a more personal note, you mentioned Tom Sanders wants to hire you, which I *cannot* allow. The man hits women and I won't let him hit you. Also, if Tom has his eyes on you, it will please me to piss him off. He's a big name in hotel development and is convinced I stole a deal from him, which I didn't. As a result, he's always speaking bad about me among our crowd, trying to sabotage my success. So, there you go, Delphine. Full transparency."

I rub my eyes with the heels of my palms. My mind is running a million miles per hour trying to keep up with Daxton and whether I can trust his word. How is he so concerned about my physical safety, yet had no qualms spreading my number around town?

"I want *you* to be my escort," he continues, seeing my hesitation. "I explained this to you at the restaurant last night. No matter how clear I am about being strictly business, the women I hire always want something more from me. But not

you. You're only after a paycheck, which I appreciate. That's why I'm offering you this deal. I'm happy to pay any price you see fit."

"How long would this arrangement be for?" My hands twist in my lap, growing more clammy by the second. Why am I even asking this question? I can't possibly tell him *yes*.

"Ongoing. Either of us can cancel when the arrangement is no longer working for us."

"And the conditions?"

"You'd get to treat this place like your home. Do whatever you want with your time, just be available for dates when I need you. How does ten thousand a week sound?"

"Ten thousand what?"

"Dollars. That's how much I'll pay you for your availability."

Shocked by his offer, I swallow the wrong way and choke on my saliva this time.

Daxton watches me with a smirk, deeply entertained. "Unless you think ten thousand isn't adequate?"

"Um... ten thousand is good," I say once I've managed to compose myself, the words leaving my mouth like a squeak.

Holy shit. How is this actually happening? A few moments ago, I was convinced accepting Daxton's offer was preposterous. But with ten thousand dollars a week... That's forty grand a month. If I held up this gig for a few months, I would be so loaded in cash I could buy my own home. I could buy anything I want.

"Can I accept your offer but live elsewhere?" I can't imagine sharing a roof with Daxton and having more encounters like last night where he basically saw me naked. Even without the nudity issues, I'll take every opportunity to get as far away from him as possible.

"Sure, you can live wherever you want," he says, preoccupied with his phone again. "But seriously, I won't be here often. The penthouse is available if you want and it has

everything you could need. Room service, housekeeping, your own private pool, gym, movie theater.”

Daxton *does* make a tempting argument. Who wouldn't want those things? Plus, we're in the Upper East Side. This penthouse is gorgeous. Literal heaven.

It's either live here or crash at Mina's house—for the next little while anyway, until I've earned money. Mina and Zac will be accommodating. I know they will, but I also don't want to impose. They're in their newly engaged, loved up stage. For them, that means constant sex, which I could really do without hearing.

I take a deep breath, attempting to calm my pounding heart. I must be out of my mind because the next words to leave my mouth are, “Okay, let's do this. I'll live here and be your exclusive escort.”

“Perfect.” Daxton slips his phone inside his jacket and pulls out a wallet, placing a Mastercard in front of me.

“What's this for?”

“I'm giving you my card.”

“I can see that. But why?”

“I assume you lost a lot in the flood. Use the card to buy yourself anything you need.”

“But...” I stumble for words, still confused. “You just said you'll pay me ten thousand dollars a week. I can use that money to recover from the flood.”

“Money really isn't an issue for me. Take the card and go shopping.”

My eyes switch back and forth between Daxton and the card, until finally I can manage words. “What's my spending limit? I don't want to overstep my boundaries.” God, this is weird.

“Delphine.” He laughs, placing both hands on the countertop in front of me. “There is no limit. All I request is that you buy expensive outfits for our dates so you look nice. Other than that, buy anything you like: clothes, books,

makeup, dance costumes, more panties that say *Lick my pussy*. Whatever you want, sweetheart.”

I gasp and sit a little taller, feeling the skin on my neck prickle. “Mina—my friend—bought those panties for me as a joke.” I swear I could kill her right now. The panties have been sitting untouched in my drawer for over a year. The one time I wear them because every other pair is in the wash, Daxton of all people sees them.

He’s still chuckling over the comment. I meet his gaze, finding something playful within it instead of the cocky jerk I expected to find. I don’t understand this guy at all.

“Ah... okay. Thanks.” I tuck the card into my purse. “Um, one last thing. When do you leave New York next?”

“This evening. I’ll be returning in a fortnight. Make yourself at home here. Invite friends over if you want. Do whatever.”

I get this place to myself for two weeks? I try hard not to smile but there’s no stopping it. “Should we um... shake on the deal? Make it official?”

The left side of Daxton’s mouth tilts upward. He extends his hand and a jolt travels through me as our palms touch.

I’ll keep my wits about me, but gosh, I really hope I know what I’m walking into.

Chapter Seven

Jordan

“Babe, why are you wearing the same dress from your date last night?”

Crap. I should have known Mina would be onto me. I stand from my seat at the boutique coffee shop in the mall beneath The Hawk Grand Hotel and greet Mina with a hug. She’s wearing a pink sundress matching the pastel color of her hair and has a pink Birkin handbag hanging off her arm.

“Rich bitch.” I nod at the Birkin. We both laugh and take our seats.

“So, what’s going on?” She points at my day-old dress while placing her handbag on the table.

“I slept at Daxton’s place last night.”

“What?” She yelps the word at the same time as a dog yaps, the two sounds blending into one. The Birkin moves, then a furry little head pops out.

I laugh at the sight of Mr. Fluffy—the toy poodle Zac adopted for himself and Mina last year when they were in a fake relationship to promote their Broadway show. “Since when have you started carrying your dog in your handbag?”

“Mr. Fluffy loves sleeping in this bag. He was sleeping in it before I left my apartment. I didn’t want to break his heart, so I brought him along. And hey, let’s not get off topic here.

You spent the night with Daxton? I *knew* he wanted to sleep with you.”

“Relax. I slept at his place because my apartment burned down.” Only now that I’ve finished speaking do I realize the irony of mixing *relax* and *my apartment burned down*.

Mina’s lips part in disbelief. “Are you joking?”

“I have a better sense of humor than that.”

“You poor thing.” She pulls Mr. Fluffy out of the bag and shoves him into my arms. “Here. Puppy cuddles make everything better.”

“Thanks.” I stroke his curly fur and play with his ears, needing all the comfort I can get.

A young waitress arrives at our table with drinks, placing a coffee in front of me. For Mina, I took the liberty of ordering her signature drink: hot chocolate with pink baby marshmallows.

The waitress realizes who I’m sitting with and lets out a fangirl squeal. “Ah! Mina Midnight. I loved you so much in *The Velvet Cigar*. Your voice is incredible. And I’m so excited slash jealous you’re marrying Zac Delavin.”

The shock from hearing about my apartment fire is still plastered to Mina’s face. I can tell she’s about to gently avert the waitress in order to comfort me, so I shake my head and smile. “You two talk. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Mina asks me.

“Yes.”

Fan interaction is important for Mina’s career. I sit back and let the two of them chat, listening to the waitress ask about how Zac proposed. Mina retells the story of how it happened while vacationing in the Whitsundays for their friends’ wedding, Verena and Adrian. She then stands up and takes a selfie with the waitress.

Being approached like this in public is a regular occurrence for Mina and one I can’t ever imagine happening to me. Okay, so I did get recognized at the gym a couple of

weeks back due to a paparazzi shot of me holding Daxton's hand, but it hardly counts because I wasn't recognized as a burlesque dancer. I was recognized as *the girl dating Daxton Hawk*.

As soon as the waitress leaves us, Mina stirs her drink and gets back to the topic of conversation. "Sorry about that. Babe, a fire? What happened?"

"I don't know. But I've lost everything. I didn't have insurance."

"Why didn't you call me? You could have stayed with me and Zac."

I blow on my coffee and take a sip. "My phone died. I didn't have any of my contacts, just Daxton's business card. I called him from a borrowed phone, hoping for a room here at the hotel. It was fully booked. So he let me stay in the penthouse with him. It was fine."

Mina places her hand on mine. "You'll stay with me and Zac from here on out. We'll help you find a new apartment. We'll also help you find a job."

"About that..." I retract my hand, my palms growing sweaty because I know she won't approve of what I'm about to tell her. "I've found a solution to both."

"You have?"

"Daxton has offered to let me live at his place for free."

Her face scrunches with disapproval, as I knew it would. "You have *got* to be kidding me. Men don't let beautiful women live in their home for free. Tell me what's really going on here."

"This *is* the truth, and it's not as bad as you're making it out to be. Daxton will be out of town most of the time, so I'll barely have to share the place with him. Plus, he's paying me ten thousand dollars a week to escort exclusively for him so he doesn't have to deal with the hassle of finding another date. Some weeks I probably won't see him at all. It's free money."

Her eyebrows lift with surprise. “You’ll be earning ten thousand a week? Why would he pay you that much? It’s suspicious.”

“It would be suspicious for the average person, but ten K clearly means nothing to Daxton.”

She brings the hot chocolate to her lips. “Is there any way I can talk you out of this?”

“No, babe. Do you know how much money I’ll save after doing this for a couple of weeks?”

Mina nods. “Just be sensible, okay? I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Can’t get hurt when there are no feelings involved.”

“Feelings can creep up on you fast.”

I place my hand on her shoulder and look her straight in the eyes. “Mina, I’ve got this.”

“Okay, I’ll trust you.”

“Thank you. Now, can we please talk about something else?”

“Have you seen Ryan’s latest YouTube video? He uploaded it this morning.”

“No. What was it?” I race for my phone and open my brother’s video, snorting at the title. *Naked Yoga in the Himalayas. Spoiler: I got frostbite on my junk.*

Got to love him. He’s always doing something crazy, like living in a nudist colony or the video that made his career where he went naked bungee jumping.

I press play, watching Ryan and his girlfriend, Hannah, talking to the camera about their travels. He looks so damn happy with her that it makes me smile. She’s wearing a bikini. All I can see of Ryan is his bare chest, so my guess is he’s naked.

Mina and I watch his video quietly, laughing whenever my brother does something ridiculous. Six minutes later, he’s saying goodbye to the camera. “*So, yeah, I don’t recommend*

naked yoga in the snow. But I've got kombucha on hand and it will fix everything right up."

"Oh my God." I laugh, stroking Mr. Fluffy. "Ryan and his kombucha." He believes in the power of kombucha so much that he's created his own kombucha line. Despite paying him out, I am proud of him. And at least he's got his life together.

Ugh, I miss him.

"Thanks for watching, guys. We'll try to upload another video soon, but sometimes we're offline for months at a time. Namaste and peace out."

I close the video and take my chances, calling his number. As with every other time I've tried calling, the line rings out. With a frown, I place my phone back in my purse.

"He'll be fine," Mina says. "He's always fine. You, on the other hand..."

"What happened to you trusting me a few minutes ago?"

"I've changed my mind. I'll trust you under one condition. You let me meet Daxton."

I sigh, knowing something embarrassing will come from Mina and Daxton interacting. "You met him when he first introduced himself to me at Club Noir."

"I mean, properly meet him. Like, hang out with him so I can see what kind of person he is, because I don't trust him at all."

I tilt my head back and groan. "Introducing a guy to your friend is something you do when you like the guy."

"Will you just ask him to meet me? This is the only way I'll feel at ease about your situation."

"Fine. But I can't promise he'll agree."

"I'll make it happen." She spoons a bunch of melted baby marshmallows into her mouth. "Have you told Steel about this arrangement?"

"Of course not."

“I guess this means you’re not planning to meet Steel any time soon if you’ll be occupied with Daxton?”

“Yeah, I guess not. *If* I decide to meet Steel, it will be when I have my life back on track. I’m a disaster at the moment.”

Mina scoffs. “As if Steel will care. I’ve read some of his messages you showed me. He’s in total awe of you. I think you should meet him.”

I finish my drink and place Mr. Fluffy back in the Birkin. “Babe, we’re done here. I can only deal with you hassling me about one guy today. You’ve already used up your quota on Daxton. It’s time to go shopping. I would like to own a pair of panties that don’t say *Lick my pussy.*”

Chapter Eight

Daxton

I'm working out in my gym when I notice Delphine has returned from her morning of shopping. It's impossible *not* to notice her when the gym sits right next to my outdoor entertainment area and Delphine is walking along the pool in a black bikini. With a body like that, seriously, how the fuck is she single?

She arrives at a daybed with her phone, a Kindle, and a tube of sunscreen. Delphine does a quick stretch, then suddenly bends backward, contorting her spine, and drops into a handstand.

Impressive. She made the move look effortless.

I take a seat on the gym bench and watch her, intrigued by what her next move will be. To my surprise, she stays in the handstand for upward of one minute before returning to her feet. She pulls out her phone and starts talking to someone on the camera. I'm about to return to my workout but keep watching when she climbs onto a daybed and sits with her legs in the splits. I don't know why that makes me smile. Probably because I had no idea she was so athletic. Her skill is impressive.

I give Delphine her privacy and push out another set of lifts. Half-way through the set, a Secret Santa message arrives on my phone and I abandon the workout, laughing when I read Jordan's message.

JORDAN HART

Do you think time travel exists?

STEEL WEST

Why? You ruminating over the fire and wishing you could go back to prevent it?

No. I'm contemplating whether I should go back in time to see the dinosaurs or if it would be a more rewarding experience to discover how the pyramids were made.

Like this is an actual decision you need to make?

Don't tell me you've never thought about it.

This exact scenario? No. Choose the dinosaurs. We already know how the pyramids were made—many years of slavery.

JORDAN HART

Cough, cough Aliens.

We've spoken about this before. Aliens don't exist.

Let me have my fun. And yeah, I have been ruminating. This is my way of trying to distract myself.

Ok, how about this scenario: travel back in time to see Atlantis or to the 1600s when pirates and mermaids were a thing?

Delphine laughs, the sound catching me off guard because I don't think I've ever heard her genuine laugh and the sound is so... beautiful and feminine. I glance out the window, finding her in the same position as before, lying in the splits and texting on her phone.

Fuck. What I would do to hear Jordan laugh. To know what she looks like. All I have is an image in my head based off the few descriptions she's given me over the years. Long, black hair. Pale skin. Green eyes. Short and thin. Based on our conversations, I picture her as someone cute and girlish. Sweet.

I peer back at Delphine. Ironic, really. I've never thought about it till this moment, but I chose an escort who matches Jordan's description. Except the cute and sweet part I've concocted in my mind. Delphine has bite and an aura of seduction.

This whole set up with Delphine feels a little strange when Jordan is the one I'm trying to pursue. I wouldn't like it if Jordan was living with a male escort. I barely managed when she went on that date last night. Part of me wonders if I should tell Jordan about Delphine. But how do I explain the situation to her without sharing that I'm a high-profile businessman or that Delphine doesn't mean anything to me?

JORDAN HART

I'm glad you've got the hang of this game. That's a hard scenario to choose between. I'm going to say the 1600s because there's nothing like a good pirate/mermaid romance.

I smile at her answer and send another scenario. That's how the rest of my day proceeds. My workout gets placed on hold. Lunch goes uneaten. My plans of catching up with Amabella get canceled, all so I can text a girl I've never met, but who has me completely wrapped around her finger. I'll do anything I can to help take her mind off her stresses.

Come late afternoon, I've lost track of time and realize I need to leave the penthouse within the next ten minutes if I want to catch my plane on time. I rush around my bedroom and gather all my belongings, then knock on Delphine's bedroom to let her know I'm leaving New York.

She opens the door in a satin robe, holding her hand over the speaker of her phone. "Hey, what's up?"

“Am I interrupting something?” I nod to her phone.

“Chatting with my friend.”

“I’ll make this quick. I’m leaving New York now. I just wanted to check that you’re all settled in.”

“Yeah, I am. I’ve barely had a chance to explore this place. I’ve been on the phone all day dealing with the fire.”

“Fire?”

“Oh, yeah. Um... it was actually a fire that destroyed my apartment. I wasn’t thinking straight when I rang you and asked for a place to stay. I had this idea in my mind that if I told you the truth, I would burst into tears. I didn’t want you to witness me crying, so I made up the lie about the flood.”

A... fire?

What are the chances of that? This is the second time I’m hearing about a fire in twenty-four hours. Not to mention, this girl has some serious issues with me that I’ve yet to get to the bottom of.

“Shit, Delphine. A fire is significantly worse than a flood. Now I understand why you were so upset last night.” I rake a hand through my hair, contemplating how to say this next part without sounding rude. “Ah... okay, look, I hate to bail on this conversation but I’m running late for my plane. Can we discuss this later?”

“There’s not much to discuss. See you in a few weeks.” She returns the phone to her ear and closes the door.

Well, I guess that’s settled.

I grab my belongings and head out the front door. There’s no time to dwell on my conversation with Delphine, but even as I make a mad rush for the car, something about her apartment fire plays on my mind.

Chapter Nine

Daxton

After the long flight back to LA, then being stuck in traffic on my drive home to Malibu, I finally step through my front door at midnight, exhausted. I climb two flights of stairs for my bedroom and strip down to my briefs, then open the glass sliding doors to my beachfront balcony. After one deep inhale of the salty sea breeze, I switch the lights off and slip into bed. But sleep doesn't find me. Normally, the sound of the ocean helps me relax. Tonight, I can't stop tossing and turning.

Something about these apartment fires still pesters me. It seems a massive coincidence that two women I know have a fire destroy their home on the same night, in the same city.

Maybe it's not a coincidence at all...

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling as my mind wanders. Could Jordan and Delphine live in the same building?

What if the connection between the two women is even closer? Could they...

No.

They can't possibly be the same person. A laugh finds its way out of my throat at the concept. A *ridiculous* concept.

But the possibility lingers in my mind, and the smile slowly fades from my lips. The more I think about it, the less ridiculous the idea becomes. Now that I draw a comparison,

there *are* similarities between the two women. A *lot* of similarities.

My heart rate picks up and my entire body tenses. Jordan told me she moved from Australia to New York City to pursue her dreams of dancing. I always thought that meant dancing on Broadway. Why else would a dancer come to New York? Fuck, was I wrong?

Based on Delphine's accent, I assumed she was from London. I'm no expert on accents, though.

I've never asked Delphine her age, but she looks to be the same age as Jordan. Twenty-five.

Jordan told me she went on a date last night but that she didn't like the guy and wouldn't explain the details because they were embarrassing. That scenario fits Delphine's escorting perfectly.

Was *I* the guy Jordan went on a date with?

The guy she doesn't like.

Fuck.

Adding to all those similarities, I even had thoughts earlier in the day of how Delphine matches Jordan's physical description.

I press my hands to my forehead, panicked and also wondering if I'm going mad. But now that this idea of Jordan and Delphine being the same person has entered my mind, I can't let it go. I *need* to find out the truth. The only question is how. Asking Jordan outright if she is Delphine could be a disaster. Delphine *hates* me.

Which means *Jordan* will hate me.

I could lose Jordan. She's been adamant not to meet me, Steel, because she's afraid we'll ruin our connection. And she's right. I'll be lucky if she ever talks to me again, all because of whatever Delphine holds against me.

My phone vibrates on my bedside table, the screen glowing in the dark room and interrupting my spiraling thoughts.

DELPHINE

Hey, I want to buy some dance equipment and feel weird using your money since this equipment isn't a necessity. Just wondering when I can expect to receive my first payment.

I type back a quick message, telling Delphine to save her money and use my card. But a thought comes to mind before I hit send.

Delphine Fox is a stage name.

I asked for her real name on our first date. She told me she prefers not to share her real name because Delphine Fox offers a layer of protection in her dancing career and that she'd like to carry that protection into escorting. I respected her wishes and paid her in cash for every date. But now... this is my way of knowing if she is Jordan.

DAXTON

I'm about to transfer the 10K to you. No more cash transactions with this sum of money. What are your bank account details?

DELPHINE

Sure. Here are the details.

AN: 28395552738

RN: 039204555

Account Name: Jordan Hart

I rip the bedsheets off me and sit up, not believing my eyes as I stare at the account name. My pulse turns into a deafening thump in my ears. My skin itches with a burning heat.

It's her. Delphine is Jordan.

Delphine is the girl I'm in love with. She's living in my penthouse. I spent the day with her in arms' reach, with her waltzing around my penthouse in a bikini and last night in a

bra and panties. She's been in my life for months, and this whole time I was oblivious that she is my girl.

I should be ecstatic. I should be rushing straight back to New York to be with Jordan. But all I feel is dread.

This girl hates Daxton Hawk.

Everything will be over between us as soon as she discovers who I am.

A sharpness forms in my chest, one I haven't felt in a long time, but am all too familiar with. So familiar it takes no effort to identify—the pain I felt from losing Felicity. It was debilitating when I first experienced it years ago. Jordan was the one who made that pain go away. Now, the thought of losing Jordan is the cause. Only this time, the sharpness is amplified. I can't go through all that devastation again, losing another important woman. I may own hotels all around the world, a private jet, a beachfront property in Malibu, but none of that shit means anything to me. Jordan is the one thing in this world that makes me happy, and I can't be without her.

I lean back against the headboard, taking a moment to let the reality of this situation sink in. Along with panic, I can't deny being shocked. Jordan is not who I expected her to be at all. She's not the sweet girl I created in my head. I'm not dumb enough to have thought the Secret Santa side of Jordan is the only side of her that exists. I just didn't think the difference would be this extreme.

But if the online version of Jordan exists inside Delphine—the deep, intellectual, funny, and caring side—then I want it. I want all of Jordan. Delphine doesn't present herself as having any of those attributes. Though the truth is, I don't know much about Delphine because I haven't taken the time to know her.

I can change that. I want to learn every side of Jordan. I need to find out why she doesn't like me, then I need to fix the issue so I can tell her who I am.

Despite how royally fucked I am, one piece of information stands out to me: I now know what Jordan looks like.

And my God, she is... magnificent. Sexier than I ever could have imagined.

Blood travels to my dick, thinking about those long legs and the curve of her ass. The memory of her in that bikini stirs me.

All arousal disappears when another realization hits me. Jordan is an escort. Although *I* never slept with her, I passed her number on to one other businessman during our first date. He has to be the reason many others in the industry received her contact details and hired her—all men who would have slept with her. *Degraded* her, like that fucking asshole, Tom Sanders.

Anger overpowers me, boiling over my threshold and needing an outlet. I slam a pillow to the mattress and punch it. Five times. Ten. I have never been more furious at myself. *I* did this to Jordan. *I* introduced her to the world of escorting. *I* am the reason she has been selling herself to men and having sex for money. I may not know Delphine, but I know Jordan, and this isn't the life she wants for herself. She's not the kind of girl who would feel empowered by this line of work. All she's ever wanted is to dance. Desperation has pushed her into dangerous territory. I can't believe I had no idea she was struggling so much.

A Secret Santa message alert pulls me out of my full-blown rage and I race to read it.

JORDAN HART

You're probably asleep right now but I have to say this. I'm going through a really rough stage of my life. Everything is falling apart for me. But you know what? I'm lying in bed, re-reading our messages from today, and I can't stop smiling. This will sound crazy, and maybe I am crazy, but sometimes I think I'm in love with you.

My whole body freezes when I read the last sentence.

Love.

Jordan has never used that word with me before. She is so damn precious. I want to tell her everything so there are no barriers between us. But I need time to sort through this situation and make sure I'm approaching it in the best way possible.

JORDAN HART

I can't be in love with you, though. The rational side of my brain tells me these feelings aren't real. I don't truly know who you are. I think I'm in love with the image of you I've created in my head. A fantasy.

She's right to have those concerns. The three typing dots appear in the app. I wait with my heart beating in my throat, needing to know what she says next.

JORDAN HART

You know what? Fuck it. I'm sick of living my life in a fantasy land. I want to meet you, Steel. When do you leave New York? I need to know who you are.

Shit. I reread her message, not believing my bad luck. For months I've been asking Jordan to meet, and *now* she wants to meet, at the worst possible time? A few moments ago, if she'd asked to meet, I would have been ecstatic. Now, I don't know how to reply.

Chapter Ten

Jordan

I didn't think it was possible to feel any worse than I did after the fire. Welp, here we are. Last night, I told Steel I think I'm in love with him and that I want us to meet, and he left me on *read*.

Steel *never* leaves my messages unanswered. He's been begging me to meet him for the longest time, and the one time I let down my guard and agree, he disappears. I don't want to start doubting Steel, but I can't avoid the negative feelings creeping in. He's married or something. Or worse—the catfishing fear again—he's some kid who's been playing a prank on me all these years.

No, stop it, Jordan. Not everyone is full of lies like your parents.

In my desperation, I sit up in bed and send Steel another message.

JORDAN HART

Are you dead or something? Or you just don't want to meet me anymore?

After ten minutes, when there's still no reply, I force myself to get dressed for the day and leave the confines of my room. Despite Daxton telling me to make myself at home, I've barely left my room since arriving here. Yesterday felt a little

odd, sharing the same space as him. I kept to myself, still coming to terms with the fire and this new arrangement between Daxton and me. But now that a new day is here, and I really do have this penthouse all to myself, I take the initiative to explore.

Daxton wasn't kidding when he said this place is big. It has everything I can imagine. My bedroom opens straight out to the rooftop garden, where the pool is the main feature. Only now that I'm alone do I have the chance to fully appreciate the design of the high ceilings and oversized windows. Along with five guest bedrooms, there's a gym, sauna, and movie room. There's even a grand piano in one corner of the living room which I imagine is for decorative purposes unless Daxton is a musician. Highly doubtful.

I stop outside of the last room unentered. The master bedroom. I stood in the open doorway of this room on my first night here, thanking Daxton for his hospitality, but I was so stressed that I don't remember what the bedroom looks like. Despite manners telling me not to enter Daxton's personal space, curiosity gets the better of me. It's not like I plan on snooping through his belongings. I just want to see what the master looks like.

I push the door open and peek inside, finding a pristine bedroom. Aside from the luxurious bedspread and furniture, I could be looking at any hotel room. There's nothing in here that signifies the space belongs to Daxton. Nothing personal, and to be honest, I'm a little disappointed. It would have been interesting to see photographs of him having fun with his friends and family or to know what kind of books he reads.

Maybe this is to be expected; he did say he barely stays in New York.

I close the door and head back out to the living area, wondering how to occupy myself this morning. Ten thousand dollars is sitting in my bank account as of last night. I plan to save most of it so I can move out of this penthouse as quickly as possible. But I do want to purchase the dance equipment I spoke to Daxton about. It will level up my skill and hopefully land me more success with future auditions.

Before making the purchase, I send Daxton a quick text asking him if he minds me hanging the equipment from his gym ceiling. He gives me the green light, so I open Instagram and visit one of my favorite accounts—a company here in New York that sells aerial dance equipment which I have always wanted to purchase, but A: haven't had the funds to spend, and B: nor the space in my tiny apartment to install the equipment.

Three thousand dollars later, I've ordered Russian silks and a lyra hoop, scheduled to arrive at the penthouse later this week.

Next, I visit the gym for a workout and spend thirty minutes running on the treadmill. Once I'm warmed up, it's time to stretch. The weather is nice today, so I head out to the rooftop and begin my splits routine by the pool, starting with a hamstring stretch.

To pass the time, I pull out my phone and open TikTok, then start recording myself for my small following of one thousand people. In all honesty, the number of real people following me is more like eight hundred since there are so many bot accounts in my follower list claiming to be Nicolas Cage or Keanu Reeves. But that's beside the point.

Being a burlesque dancer, I spend a lot of time stretching, so I figured what better way to utilize the time than creating TikTok videos about my art form. My TikToks rarely hit three hundred views, but whatever, it's a bit of fun.

“Story time. You guys will never believe what happened to me. My apartment burned down. I lost everything. Long story short, I'm now living in this amazing penthouse. I won't get into the details of how this happened because it's complicated. I don't want to say I'm pleased about the fire because, seriously, finding out my home burned down was a nightmare. But...” I turn the camera around and show off the city views. “Maybe I can find some good in this situation. I'm living in the Upper East Side. Things could be a lot worse. In other news, I just ordered some aerial dance equipment, so keep an eye out for future videos of me using it.”

As soon as I post the TikTok, a message from Steel arrives and my stomach churns with anticipation as I open it.

STEEL WEST

Sorry I haven't replied until now. Something came up and I had to leave New York immediately.

And now I feel like a bitch for assuming he ignored me.

JORDAN HART

Is everything ok?

Not really. I'll try to explain later.

I'm sorry to hear that. Did you read my messages from last night?

Yeah. Let's talk later, ok?

What the actual hell? Maybe I'm being a bitch again. Maybe something terrible happened to Steel and I'm only thinking of myself right now, but his behavior is off. He's being evasive, which he never does. And, what, he has no reaction to me confessing my feelings?

JORDAN HART

I'm trying to be understanding but you're not giving me much to work with. I tell you I want to meet up, that I think I love you, and then you start acting weird. Please tell me what's going on.

STEEL WEST

I'm sorry, I do want to meet you. And I care about you too. You know I do. We'll try again another time.

I scared you off by mentioning love, didn't I?

I spend thirty minutes waiting for Steel to reply, and when he doesn't, I give up on waiting and dive into the pool, letting the water wash away my tears.

Chapter Eleven

Daxton

“You look like shit, Mr. Hawk” is the first thing Amabella says to me when answering my FaceTime.

“I feel like shit.” Normally, I would be laughing with her over the professional way in which she addressed me, but not today.

The camera view of Amabella wobbles as she takes a seat on the couch inside her apartment at The Hawk Grand Hotel. Her blonde hair is combed back into a neat bun and she’s wearing her restaurant uniform. “Where are you?” she asks. “It sounds loud and I don’t recognize your background.”

A waiter places a glass of whiskey on the table of my booth. I thank him before he leaves. “I arrived in LA last night. I’m on a lunch break at a beach restaurant that opened this week. Is Ally at school?”

“Yeah. Hey, my shift at the restaurant starts in ten minutes so I can’t talk for long. Why do you look like you got no sleep last night?”

“Because I didn’t sleep last night,” I say.

“Let me guess. You received an invitation to Brad and Felicity’s wedding? I got mine too. I’m not going if you aren’t.”

“Don’t get me started on the wedding. But no, that’s not what this is about.” I take a sip of my whiskey and end up

gulping down the whole thing at the thought of what I'm about to say. "I met Jordan."

Amabella gasps, covering a smile with her hand. "Dax, that's incredible. How did it go?"

"Terrible." I scratch my neck in irritation and groan. "The situation is *so* fucked up."

She cringes. "Don't tell me Jordan catfished you. I thought Secret Santa prevented that stuff?"

"No. It's nothing like that. Jordan doesn't know we've met. She doesn't even know who I am."

"I'm confused."

I take a deep breath, wishing I had more whiskey. "Jordan is the escort I've been using. She's Delphine."

Amabella's mouth hangs open. "How on earth did that happen?"

"I don't know. Dumb luck."

"Okay, but this isn't all bad. Delphine is beautiful. It's actually amazing luck."

I glare at Amabella on my phone screen, unconvinced. "She hates my guts."

"Yeah, that's a bit of a problem." Amabella knows all of this. I explained the Delphine situation a while ago when she asked why I'd started hiring Delphine consistently and whether I was developing feelings for her. "So you still don't know why she hates you?"

"No. And it gets worse. Jordan is living in my place in New York because her apartment burned down. On top of that, I'm paying her to be my exclusive escort. This all happened before I realized who she is."

Amabella uses the phone camera to apply lipstick. "That's messed up. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." I claw at my scalp, stressed out of my mind. "I have to tell her I'm Steel, but I don't know how to do that without ruining our relationship."

“Okay. Calm down. We just need to find a way to fix this.”

“How the fuck am I meant to fix this?” A group of people pass my table, giving me strange looks when they hear me swearing into my phone. I slide out of my booth and head to the smoking section out on the balcony.

Amabella scolds me as soon as I arrive and place a cigarette between my lips. “Don’t smoke that! You’re going to get cancer and die on me.”

I ignore her words and flick my lighter with the hand that isn’t holding up my phone, cussing when the strong ocean winds kill the flame. Annoyed, I throw the cigarette over the balcony.

“Great, now you’re littering. Just another reason to give up smoking.”

“Amabella, please, give it a rest.” I pace back and forth on the balcony. “You know what Jordan said to me last night on Secret Santa? She wants to meet me. She said she thinks she might love me.”

Amabella’s mouth lifts into a smile. “How did you reply?”

“I panicked and didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to keep talking to her as Steel. It would have felt deceptive. Then this morning I was vague and said I had to leave town.”

“Looking at it that way, I think you did the right thing. You need to cut ties with Jordan on Secret Santa. Don’t reply to her again. You can’t continue talking to her as Steel now that you know who she is. If she finds out, she’ll feel betrayed. The next thing you need to do is tell her you’re Steel. Tell her as soon as you see her again.”

I shake my head, my chest aching with fear that I’ll frighten Jordan away. “The truth will ruin everything. I keep thinking about Felicity and how much it hurt to lose her. I can’t lose Jordan. The pain will be unbearable.”

“You can’t lie to her. The truth is the only way forward. She may hate you for a while, but she’ll come around.”

“She *really* doesn’t like me as Daxton.”

Amabella clicks her tongue, leaning back on her couch. “What’s your plan, then?”

“I don’t know. Find out what her issue is with me then re-evaluate. See if I can rectify the situation before telling her I’m Steel. That way, I have a chance at keeping her.”

“How can you have no idea what you’ve done to offend her?”

“Trust me, I’ve been up all night thinking about this. The only conclusion I’ve made is that maybe she hates me because I introduced her to escorting.” Visuals of Jordan prostituting herself return to my mind, boiling my blood with self-loathing. My pacing on the balcony speeds up. “I am *such* a piece of shit. The confident way Jordan presents herself as Delphine made me believe she was in control of escorting. I was selfish when I approached her at Club Noir, thinking of no one but myself.”

“Stop with the negative talk.” Amabella’s scolding returns. “You’re not a piece of shit. You’re the best person I know. You saved your family from your father. You saved me and Ally from my ex and have given us a safe home. I will never stop being grateful for everything you do for us.”

I groan and rest my forearms on the balcony railing, meeting Amabella’s eyes on my screen. “Doesn’t mean I’m a good man. What I’ve done to Jordan erases all the good I’ve done for other people.”

An alarm goes off on Amabella’s phone. She stands from the couch and grabs her handbag. “That’s my alarm to leave for work. I’m sorry to leave the conversation like this, but here’s what you’re going to do. When do you return to New York next?”

“Not for a while. Two weeks.”

“Can you rearrange your schedule to get here sometime this week?” she asks.

“Work is busy. Maybe I can manage an overnight trip on Friday. But I have to be back in LA the next day.”

“Perfect. Ask Jordan to have dinner with you on Friday. I’ll make a reservation at the hotel restaurant. While you two are sharing a nice meal, find out why she doesn’t like you. Hopefully there’s a quick fix to the problem, you tell her you’re Steel, then bam, you two are all lovey-dovey and happy together.”

“Let’s hope it’s as simple as that.” My head hangs between my shoulders in defeat and I sigh. “Fuck. Okay. Friday night.”

Chapter Twelve

Jordan

“It feels kind of odd that we’re using this random guy’s hot tub,” Mina says, stepping down into the water and finding a seat on Zac’s lap.

He kisses her cheek and slides his arms around her waist. I have massive regrets inviting them to Daxton’s. I’m not usually one to be bitter over other peoples’ happiness, especially not Mina and Zac’s, but seeing them together makes me think about Steel and I’m instantly miserable. That’s a feeling I never thought Steel could invoke, but three days have passed since saying the L word to him and that I want us to meet, and he’s gone completely silent on me.

“I know, it is kind of random that we’re at this penthouse.” I sip on the strawberry mocktail I ordered from room service and let the air jets of the hot tub massage my back. “But Daxton told me to make myself at home and invite friends over. The situation is strange, though. I live in a penthouse in the Upper East Side. Never saw that coming.”

What’s even stranger is that I’m surrounded by luxury, money is not an issue for the foreseeable future, and yet I’m still miserable.

“Hey, I was wondering if you can pull a favor for me.”

“Are you talking to me or Zac?” Mina asks me.

“Both of you, I suppose. Zac, Verena is your closest friend. And I know she adores you too, Mina. I want to buy some of her designs.” Maybe retail therapy will help get my mind off Steel.

Reluctance rises on Zac’s face. “Verena’s designs are expensive. Don’t blow your money on them.”

“It’s not my money I would be blowing. Daxton gave me his card and specifically said to buy expensive outfits for our dates.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Zac says. “So, what’s this favor you want from us?”

I chew on the ice from my drink. “Shopping at Verena’s store is only by appointment. I checked the availability and there’s none for three months. I’m sure I could get an appointment with Verena much faster if one of you were to ask her.”

“Consider it done,” he says.

“Seriously? Thank you so much. I owe you one.”

“It’s no issue.”

The doorbell chimes, sounding through the outdoor pool speakers.

“Expecting someone?” Mina asks.

“Actually, I am.”

I climb out of the hot tub and dry myself off, then head for the front door. This will be the tradesmen to deliver and install my Russian silks and lyra hoop. I thought I would be excited about the arrival of the equipment since I’ve wanted these items for years, but again, my mood pales because of the stress with Steel.

I open the door, and sure enough, three men greet me, one with a toolbox and ladder, the other two holding the aerial equipment.

I force a smile and step aside, allowing them access to the penthouse. “Come in.”

“Where do you want us to install this?” one of them asks.

“The gym is through there.” I turn around and point, realizing Mina and Zac have joined me. “Find whichever spot you think is suitable.”

“I’m so confused,” Mina says as the tradesmen head through to the gym to start their installation work.

“I bought silks and a lyra. You know I’ve always wanted them to include in my burlesque routines.”

“And Daxton approves of you drilling them into his ceiling?”

“Yeah. He had no issue about it when I asked him.” I grab my phone off the kitchen counter where I left it charging, nervous to see if I have any new messages. My heart drops all over again when I find nothing from Steel.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” Mina asks.

“Nothing. I’m going to order another mocktail.” God, I wish I didn’t have such an issue with alcohol because I could really use the distraction right now. But I don’t want to be like my parents. “Do you guys want another drink?”

“Jordan.” I can’t remember the last time Mina called me by my name instead of babe. I look back at her, finding real concern in her eyes. “Clearly something is wrong. Has Daxton —”

“This isn’t about Daxton.” I sigh and take a seat on a kitchen stool. “It’s Steel. He’s gone weird on me. I agreed to meet up with him—”

“Ah, finally! You know I’m on team Steel.”

“Yeah, but then he went silent.”

I don’t have the courage to mention the “love” part. Honestly, what is with the people I care about disappearing on me. My parents were never there for me growing up. Their behavior was so bad that some nights they went out drinking and didn’t return till sunrise. Once, when I was nine, they disappeared for two days before stumbling through the front door with liquor breath.

Ryan... ugh, I don't want to take my anger out on him. He's living his life and earning good money with his travel vlogs. But after the terrible few months I've had, it would be nice to talk with my brother and have his emotional support. Yet I don't have any method of contacting him. And now there's Steel, as good as gone.

Mina is the only constant person in my life.

I rub my eyes. "I haven't heard from Steel in days and it's so not like him. I don't know whether to be concerned about his safety or what. My gut tells me something isn't right, that he's lying to me."

"I'm sure there's a good explanation," Zac says. "From everything you've told us, the guy seems crazy about you."

"Yeah, I don't know about that. I feel like an idiot for liking him so much. I'm starting to think Steel was too good to be true."

Mina grabs my shoulders and gently rocks me back and forth like she's trying to shake sense into me. "That's not true. You two are destined to be together."

My phone vibrates and my eyes shoot straight back to the screen. I swear when Daxton's name appears. A phone call.

"What does *he* want?" I say to myself, annoyed that he got my hopes up and isn't Steel texting me. "Hello?" I answer, the word leaving my mouth a little too aggressively.

"Delphine." The same greeting he always gives me, deep and somehow intimate. Even in this low mood I'm in, his velvety voice manages to stir up heat low in my belly. "How has your week been?"

"Fine, I guess. Look, just call me Jordan now that you know my real name."

"Okay, *Jordan*."

The sound of him speaking my real name sends another spark of heat through me. Not knowing how to react to the feeling, I try to get this conversation over with. "I'm in the middle of something. What's wrong?"

“Nothing is wrong. I’m returning to New York on Friday. Will you have dinner with me?”

“Sure.” I don’t understand why he’s asking. It’s not like I can turn him down. Our agreement was that I’m available whenever he needs me to be his date. If he’s got a business dinner Friday night, I’ll be there, no questions asked. “Text me the details. I have to go shopping for appropriate clothes. Do you have any requests?”

“Requests?”

“You told me to wear the red dress on our date the other night. Do you want me to find something similar?”

“No, Jordan. You look beautiful in anything you wear.”

The call ends and I’m left staring at my phone in shock. Aside from the night we met at Club Noir, this is the first time Daxton has complimented me. I should be flattered by the remark, but all I can think about is Daxton handing out my number to other men and his degrading phrase *She’s not the kind of girl I fuck.*

Chapter Thirteen

Daxton

Friday night arrives quickly. Once my jet lands in New York, I take a car service to The Hawk Grand Hotel and head straight for the restaurant. I'm waiting in my usual meeting spot for Delphine outside the restaurant entrance, only this time I know it's Jordan I'll be meeting, and my nerves are out of control.

The thumping in my chest goes into overdrive as soon as I see Jordan step out of the elevator. She's so incredibly beautiful. I've always thought Delphine was gorgeous, but knowing that she's Jordan makes her even more stunning. I can't believe I've had my girl in front of me this whole time yet never knew who she was.

Tonight, Jordan is dressed like she's stepped straight out of a Marilyn Monroe film. Her black hair is curled and her lips are the brightest red, popping against her pale skin. She's wearing a knee-length black dress that hugs her voluptuous figure, the bust area red with sleeves that drape off her shoulders and obscure part of her tattoos. Her long legs are propped up on heels that have bows over the toes.

Never, throughout all our Secret Santa communication, did I imagine Jordan would dress like this. I always thought she would be cutesy and the kind of girl who follows current fashion trends. But the real Jordan has her own style. She

doesn't blend in at all, and I find myself smiling at that knowledge.

As soon as Jordan notices me, she walks my way. I clear my throat and stand a little taller, adjusting my suit jacket. The nerves are overwhelming, yet I can't help but feel some small amount of joy from this moment because no matter how difficult our upcoming conversation might be, I'm right where I want to be—with Jordan, my goal for so long.

“Jordan.” I smile. Speaking her name to her face feels surreal and incredible. “You look beautiful.”

Her gaze darts to me as soon as the compliment leaves my mouth, but she's the farthest thing from flattered. Frustration sits in her eyes.

“Is everything all right?” I ask.

She glances off to the side and shakes her head with a look of disbelief. When I receive no response, I gently speak her name, but she cuts me off in a low and guarded tone, almost like she's struggling not to break down in tears.

“I've had a terrible day. More like terrible year. The last thing I need is you giving me fake compliments.”

“I wasn't being fake.”

“Yeah, okay,” she mutters, the words heavy with sarcasm.

I take a closer look at Jordan's features, narrowing in on her eyes. She's done a good job concealing the truth with makeup, but the whites of her eyes are an irritated red.

“You've arrived upset. Please tell me what's wrong.”

She groans quietly. “I'm holding myself together by a thread right now. Talking about the issue will only make it worse. Can we just get on with the night. You're paying me to be your date, not to get emotional and offload my baggage onto you.”

Well, this isn't starting off great.

“Is your business colleague here yet?” she asks.

Her question leaves me confused until I realize the miscommunication. I asked Jordan to have dinner with me and she assumes it's for business. "We're not meeting anyone else."

"What are we doing here, then?"

"I asked you to have dinner with me. Just the two of us."

"Why?"

"I'd like to talk with you." But now I don't know if discussing her issues with me, then revealing our Secret Santa connection, is a good idea for tonight, considering her current state. I nod to the restaurant entrance. "After you."

Looking slightly confused, she heads inside and I follow close behind. The restaurant is busy, with a hum of conversation spreading from guests dining at their tables. The crystal chandelier sheds gentle light across the room. In the center of the restaurant, a pianist plays smooth jazz background music.

The two of us come to a stop when Amabella approaches us with a smile. "Good evening. I have your table ready. Follow me."

"Actually," Jordan cuts in. "I'd like to stop by the bar for a glass of wine first."

Now I know something is seriously wrong because Jordan never drinks. She's told me about an entire upbringing filled with trauma from alcoholic parents and how she's sworn off alcohol out of fear of turning into them.

"Jordan..." I contemplate how best to address this delicate situation. "I think we should stay clear of alcohol tonight, especially if you're having a stressful day."

"You don't need to drink, but I'd like to order a wine."

Amabella glances between Jordan and me, unsure how to proceed. Before I have the chance to say anything else, Jordan leaves my side and heads for the bar.

I share a concerned glance with my cousin as the two of us follow her.

“Abort the plan,” Amabella whispers.

Yeah, no kidding. I have more important things to worry about tonight, like making sure Jordan doesn't end up hating herself for drinking. And if I can't stop her from consuming alcohol, I at least have to be here to take care of her.

Jordan arrives at the bar, propping herself up onto a stool. She's fast to order a wine and hands cash to the bartender before I can stop her.

Taking a seat beside Jordan, I nod for Amabella to leave us. While the bartender is busy serving up a glass of wine, I place a hand on Jordan's stool and swivel her to face me. The movement temporarily brings my face closer to hers, and I can tell from the sudden stiffness of her body she is displeased. At least I've got her attention on me.

“So, you've had a bad day,” I say. “I'm happy to listen if talking about it will help you.”

“It won't help. Let's talk about you instead. What was that thing you wanted to discuss over dinner?”

“It can wait.”

She folds her arms. “Patience isn't my strong suit. Is it something about our arrangement?”

“Honestly, don't worry about it.”

“Speaking of our arrangement, I'm curious to know something. Do you have women in other cities?”

She's being polite with her wording. I don't know the extent of details she's requesting, but I lay everything on the table for her. “I don't have any other escorts. No girlfriend. I don't do casual flings or one-night stands. I'm not seeing anyone.”

She laughs beneath her breath, the sound bitter. “You're lying. You're a handsome and powerful man, loaded with money. I've seen the way women throw themselves at you. It's not like you're short of options.”

So, she thinks I'm handsome—at least I've got that working in my favor, if nothing else. But the tone of this

conversation isn't one to be flattered by.

The bartender slides a glass of white wine to Jordan. Before she has the chance to drink, I distract her with more conversation. "I was in a long-term relationship." I sigh, rubbing my jaw. "She cheated on me. I've remained single ever since."

"Ouch. Now I have to wonder why she cheated on someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"A billionaire. Were you a dick to her?"

Something about Jordan's sharp tongue makes me chuckle. Our dynamic is not at all like this online. This is the Delphine side of her—the girl I enjoy teasing and making blush. Oddly enough, I'm not mad about it.

"Was I a dick to my ex?" I repeat. "You mean kind of like how you're acting right now?"

There it is, the pink cheeks. She doesn't play back, though. When Jordan speaks again, her voice is sad, but at least I'm distracting her from the wine. "Maybe you were too caught up in business and weren't meeting her needs."

"I gave her everything. I suppose she had a stronger connection with someone else."

"Okay, sorry, I am being a bit of a dick."

I smile softly at her. "I'll forgive the behavior on one condition. You've disliked me from our first date. I'd like to know what I've done to offend you so I can make things right between us. Please tell me."

Her gaze meets the ground. "No. It's embarrassing."

"How about this, then. Tell me why you're having a bad day."

She looks back up at me in contemplation and sighs. "Nothing ever works out for me. I lost my job at Club Noir. I keep being rejected from auditions. Also..." Her shoulders rise with a deep breath. "There's this guy. I hate him. I hate the

entire male population. You're all jerks. I thought this guy was different, but he isn't. Long story short, I met this guy called Steel on Secret Santa."

My chest tightens at the mention, not only from the negative way she's speaking, but also at the sound of my legal name. I haven't heard it spoken in years and hate the meaning behind the name, being named after my father—a man I've tried so hard to detach myself from.

Jordan continues with her explanation. "Everything between me and Steel clicked."

The moral compass within me knows this is wrong, to let Jordan speak about this when she doesn't know who I am. I search for some way to change the topic of conversation, but nothing comes to me.

"Steel became my best friend and then... I don't know, I guess I started getting attached to him in a romantic way. I know what you're thinking, that I'm stupid for forming feelings toward someone I've never met. Well, you're right. I *am* stupid. I'm the world's biggest idiot and it's embarrassing. I shouldn't have let myself like him so much, but I did. I thought Steel cared about me. He's been begging me to meet him. The other night I finally agreed to it, and then guess what, he basically ghosted me."

"Jordan..." Shit. I have messed this situation up so badly. Not only does Jordan hate me as Daxton, but now she's turned against Steel. My mouth is dry and every muscle in my body is tense. I can't stand seeing her so upset, knowing I'm the cause of her pain. She needs to know the truth.

"So, yeah, that's why I hate Steel," she murmurs with such sadness in her voice. Her attention shifts to the glass of wine sitting on the bar.

"Jordan, I..." The confession is on the tip of my tongue. "It's... I'm..."

Jordan's chin trembles as she stares at the wine. A look of deep pain lies within her eyes. "You want to know something else? My parents are alcoholics. They would always drink to

forget about their problems. I want to forget about my problems too.”

“Jordan, don’t drink the wine.”

A tear falls down her cheek and she pushes the glass away. “I’m not going to. I ordered the wine to prove a point to myself. My life is falling apart. Temptation is sitting right in front of me. But I’m stronger than my parents.”

Her face crumbles and she bends forward, elbows on the bar and sobbing into her hands.

My insides ache at the sight of her like this. If I tell Jordan the truth about myself right now, it could be too much for her in this state of mind. Would she give in and turn to alcohol? I won’t do that to her. I’m not going to be the reason Jordan drinks and mirrors behavior of the two people who have hurt her most in this world.

“Let me take you back upstairs.” I place a gentle hand on Jordan’s shoulder. She doesn’t respond. Her crying continues, her soft whimpers attracting the attention of nearby people.

Needing to get Jordan out of here, I take her hand in mine and rise from the barstool. “Come on, let’s go.”

I keep her close by my side as we exit the restaurant, shielding her with my body from prying eyes. Not a word is spoken between the two of us as we enter the elevator and travel up to the penthouse. But I watch her the entire time, feeling terrible over how upset she is.

When we enter the front door, Jordan heads straight to her room. There’s no way I’m letting her be alone, not with how distraught she is. I grab a bottle of water and a sleeping pill from the kitchen, then knock on Jordan’s door. After a few seconds of silence, I poke my head in, finding the light off and Jordan lying in bed. Enough light streams in from the hallway to find my way to Jordan’s side. I kneel next her and place the water and pill on her nightstand.

“My head hurts from crying so much today. I could fall asleep right now,” she mutters, no doubt mentally drained. I can hear in her voice how tired she is. I suppose there’s no

need for the sleeping pill. Thankfully the sobbing has subsided. “I’m sorry to be so depressing. You didn’t sign up for this. I promise I’ll be happier in the morning.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“What’s that?” she asks, noticing the pill.

“I brought you some water and a sleeping pill. You don’t need to take it. I just thought it might help.”

“I’m not taking medication from you.”

Her mistrust is warranted. We don’t have a rapport. I just wish I knew why. “Please tell me what I’ve done to upset you.”

“You humiliated me,” she mumbles, her eyes closed and her words slow.

My brow furrows. “What? When?”

“The first time you paid me to be your date.”

“Can you give me more details?”

“I guess I’m just like every other girl you’ve hired. I liked you. I thought you liked me. I know it wasn’t a real date, but I thought there was something between us. You acted like you were attracted to me. So I felt really... caught off guard when I... heard you talking about me with that businessman, William Anderson. I was so humiliated.”

My stomach drops and I feel the blood draining from my face. “What did I say?”

“Don’t make me repeat it. You know what you said.”

“No, I don’t. I speak a lot of bullshit to please these men. Please tell me.”

She opens her eyes and looks at me with heavy lids. “The man wanted to know if we were dating because he wanted to hire me. You handed me right over. You said I’m not your type.”

Shit. I bring the night to mind. The conversation with William Anderson returns to me. It was vulgar. *Extremely*

vulgar.

“Jordan, I’m really sorry.”

“If I’m not your type, tell me what is?” she whispers, her voice is so exhausted I can tell she’s close to sleep.

I rub my forehead and sigh. This situation is *so* messed up.

A soft snore interrupts my thoughts. At least she’s at peace now.

I lift the back of Jordan’s hand to my lips and press a gentle kiss to her skin. “I’ll fix this, Jordan. I promise.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jordan

The smell of a hot breakfast wakes me up late morning. I squint through the bright sunlight as I walk out of my bedroom and find Daxton in a suit, cooking eggs at the stove. What is with this guy constantly looking amazing and me like a train wreck? My hair is a mess, I slept in last night's makeup, and my dress is crinkled from sleeping in it.

"Hey," I croak, my voice adjusting from sleep.

Daxton glances over his shoulder at me. "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, you know. Fantastic."

"Sit. I've cooked breakfast for you."

He... what?

Daxton *cooked* me breakfast. He didn't order room service like last time.

He turns the stove off and places a glass of water and plate of eggs on the island counter. Not any eggs, either, but eggs topped with tomato chutney, chili flakes, and dried herbs. Exactly how I like it. He remembers.

I can't find any words in this moment. I can't even move, I'm so shocked at his attention to detail.

"Did I get the portions wrong?" he asks.

“No... The eggs look good. You... made this for me? Where’s yours?”

“I ate earlier. I wanted to make sure you were taken care of before I leave.”

“Oh, um... thank you. So... you cook.”

“You say that like it’s a shock.”

I take a seat at the counter with the eggs. “It is. You don’t really look like the kind of guy who would waste time in the kitchen. I mean, you have more than enough money to pay for a personal chef.”

“I do dine out and order a lot of takeout food. But I also enjoy cooking when I have the time. My mother taught me how to cook when I was a kid.” He leans back against the opposite counter and folds his arms, watching me. “Do you want to talk about last night?”

My cheeks grow hot from all the embarrassing memories. I cut into my food to avoid Daxton’s gaze. “Not really, except to say I’m sorry for offloading my emotional breakdown onto you.”

“Don’t apologize. I don’t mind.”

I swallow a mouthful of eggs. “So, what are your plans for the day? Need me to be your date for anything? I promise there won’t be a repeat of last night again. I can be professional.”

“Actually, I need to be back in LA. Something has come up with business. I leave in a few minutes, but I can postpone my flight if you need company.”

My mind is thrown into a loop of confusion again. This is so unlike the Daxton Hawk I’ve come to know, sounding genuinely concerned about me. “You feel sorry for me. Seriously, I’m fine. Last night was a moment of weakness. I had let my emotions get the best of me. It won’t happen again.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“Don’t delay your flight for me.” I bring another bite of eggs up to my mouth then change the topic so he doesn’t fight me on this. “Can I ask why you travel so much?”

“LA is my home. It’s where I primarily run business. I have a hotel opening there within a few weeks but I’m also traveling to New York a lot for another hotel I’m developing in Manhattan.”

“Oh... that sounds... interesting.”

He sees right through my lie and chuckles. “Riveting.”

“So, when should I expect you back?”

Daxton lets out a heavy breath, like I’ve somehow asked a stressful question. “I’m not sure. I’ll keep you posted. In the meantime, try to enjoy yourself. Don’t stress about guys or auditions.”

My fork stops halfway to my mouth. I place it back on the plate and meet Daxton’s gaze. “You’re being nice to me. Really nice. I’m sorry, I just don’t understand it or trust it after you pimped me out to every man in the city and his dog.”

Daxton cringes, pinching the space between his eyes. “Jordan, I am so, *so* sorry about the conversation you overheard. I was a complete asshole, I know. I shouldn’t have passed your number on—” The self-loathing in his voice is replaced with shock. He lowers his hand from his face, looking at me with confusion. “Wait. You said *every man*... You think I’ve continued handing out your number? Shit. No. I haven’t. It was just that once.”

So, that businessman on our first date spread my number around town? That makes me feel a little less icy toward Daxton, if it’s the truth. But I still don’t know what I’m meant to say in this situation.

I reach for my glass of water, but Daxton slides it from reach, earning my eye contact. “There’s something else I need to clear up,” he says. “You *are* my type. You’re beautiful. Why else do you think I approached you in Club Noir? What you overheard was me being a jerk, trying to butter up a potential business deal.”

There's so much sincerity in the way Daxton looks at me when speaking those words. I can see in his eyes the apology has weight and meaning to it. His voice alone shows me how sorry he is.

You are my type.

Heat creeps up my neck and blossoms along my cheeks. The air is thick with tension and I don't like it, so I ease the moment between us the only way I know how, throwing some lighthearted humor in the mix. "Jeez. You're really laying it all out in the open, aren't you. Keep groveling. I like it."

Surprisingly, my tactic works and Daxton grins at me. "My apology probably doesn't mean a lot to you. I really do feel terrible about the way I talked about you. I know it will take some time to earn your trust, but I'd like us to be friends, if possible."

Friends? I've had my guard up around Daxton for such a long time that it feels only natural to dislike him. I certainly don't trust him, that's for sure. But his actions from this past week are hard to hate on and he's apologized for that first date. Maybe it's time to move on.

"Okay." I nod. "I suppose we can try for friends."

Chapter Fifteen

Daxton

“Uncle Dax!” My niece grins at me from the front door of her apartment. Being Amabella’s daughter, technically Ally is my cousin, but we’ve never referred to each other like that. I swear this kid turns more into her mother every time I see her. She’s a replica of Amabella but in a fifteen-year-old girl’s body. Long blond hair. Beautiful. All you have to do is talk about Mozart or Beethoven and she’ll be your best friend. Not a day goes by where she isn’t practicing classical music on the piano.

“Get over here, Ally.” I hold my arms open and she gives me the biggest hug. “How have you been?”

“Pretty good. Come in. Mom’s just fixing her hair for work. You want some coffee?”

“I can’t stay long. I have a flight to catch.” I enter the apartment and close the door behind me.

“Mom!” Ally calls out. “Mr. Hawk is here.”

I laugh and scruff up her hair.

She pushes my hand away and grins. “So, give me the latest gossip. How’s life treating you? Is the stock market being kind to you? Have the workplace health and safety checks been approved? You know, all that exciting jazz.”

I shake my head, chuckling. “Don’t get smart with me, kid.”

A bedroom door opens and Amabella joins us in the living area, dressed for work. “Dax, hey, I’ve been dying to know how last night went with Jordan.”

“What was last night?” Ally asks. “Who’s Jordan?”

My phone vibrates. I retrieve it from my pocket to avoid Ally’s questions, but the Secret Santa message waiting for me is hardly a better alternative.

JORDAN HART

Steel, what is going on? You haven’t spoken to me properly in days and it all started when I said we should meet. You know what, it was a mistake agreeing to meet you. But what’s worse is that I feel like I’m losing one of my closest friends. I miss you so much.

Shit.

It kills me that I’m causing Jordan so much pain, yet at the same time, I know I can’t reply. At least not in any way that will please her. I’ve drafted so many messages to her and deleted them all.

“That’s Jordan now, isn’t it?” Amabella asks. “Oh, shoot. The look on your face tells me last night didn’t go well.”

“Can someone *please* tell me who Jordan is,” Ally begs.

I slide the phone back in my pocket. “She’s no one you need to be concerned about, Al.”

“Jordan is a *she*? You got a new girlfriend or something, Uncle Dax?”

“Or something.”

Ally places her hands on her hips. “Details. Now.”

“Honey.” Amabella laughs at her daughter. “This is an adult conversation. Can we have some privacy, please.”

She sighs and marches off to her room. “Okay, but I’m dying inside.”

We watch Ally in silence until her bedroom door is closed and the sound of her practicing scales on the piano fills the

apartment.

Finally, Amabella sits on the couch. “Ally loves you so much.”

She’s a great kid. I’ve spent a lot of time helping Amabella raise Ally after she left her ex a few years back. And even before that, when Amabella was a single teen mom. “How is Ally?”

“The same.” Amabella lowers her voice to assure the privacy of our conversation. “Not many friends. She still struggles to connect with people her age. Completely boy obsessed, but lucky for me, the only male interaction she has is with book boyfriends. But get this, her latest crush is this classical composer from the 1800s, Johannes Brahms. She won’t stop raving about how amazing his music is and that he’s handsome.”

I sit on the other end of the couch from Amabella, laughing. “Your daughter is certainly one of a kind.”

“I worry about her, socially.”

“She’ll find her feet.”

“I hope so. Anyway, Jordan. What happened with her last night?”

Any happiness I received from seeing Ally disappears as my own problems close in on me. I explain all the details to Amabella, and by the end of my recap, I’m feeling close to hopeless. “Jordan doesn’t like me at all and I can understand why.”

“So can I if she overheard your conversation about her. That was a dick move on your behalf.”

“Believe me, I know. On top of all that, she’s turned against Steel for ghosting her.”

“Ugh, this doesn’t sound good at all. What’s the plan moving forward?” Amabella asks, brushing a piece of lint off her shoulder.

I rest both elbows on my knees, deep in thought. “I have to let Jordan warm to me a little. Then I’ll explain everything and

hope she understands.”

“Won’t it be hard for her to warm to you when you’re out of town?”

“Space from me is what Jordan needs right now. I’ll be back in New York soon enough. I know myself and I won’t be able to stay away from her for long, no matter how hard I try.”

Chapter Sixteen

Jordan

Madison Avenue. This is not a dream. I'm here, staring at the storefront of Verena Valentine Designs.

I squeeze Mina around the waist and kiss her cheek. "I love you for getting me this appointment."

"It was easy enough. Come on, let's go inside."

As soon as we enter the boutique, the sweet scent of freshly cut flowers and the soft glow of a chandelier greet us. Classical music plays softly. Racks of carefully curated clothes are displayed like works of art. I feel like I've been transported to an Italian villa, with limestone walls and intricate carvings on the ceiling. A blend of old-world charm and modern sophistication.

"Welcome." A female attendant steps out from behind the counter to greet us with a warm smile. "Mina and Jordan?"

"Yes, that's us," Mina answers.

"Lovely. Verena will be with you both in a moment. In the meantime, please make yourselves comfortable. Feel free to browse the designs and let me know if there is anything I can assist you with."

"Thank you." Mina turns to a nearby rack and slowly flicks through the hangers, admiring the clothes. "So," she murmurs, keeping our conversation private, "you were saying you broke down in front of Daxton on Friday night?"

“Yeah. It was pretty embarrassing. But he was nice about it and also apologized for that first date. Now we’re trying to be friends.” Although, four days have passed and we’ve barely spoken.

Laughter comes from a different room and I recognize the voices of Verena and her personal assistant Darius. A door opens, then they both step out, their laughter softening into smiles the moment they see us.

“Ah! You’re here. Excellent.” Verena hugs Mina then passes her on to Darius as she greets me. “It’s great to see you again, Jordan.”

“You too. Thank you so much for fitting me into your schedule.”

“Anything for a friend of Mina’s.”

I’ve met both Verena and Darius a couple of times through social events Mina and Zac have hosted, but I know them best from their fashion reality show *Valentine’s Day*. Verena is intimidatingly beautiful, and not just because of her gorgeous Mediterranean features, her luscious brown hair, and voluptuous figure. There’s a certain confidence and grace to the way she carries herself, as if she knows she’s a force to be reckoned with. She has a magnetic charm about her that makes people instantly like her.

As for Darius, I’m equally a fan of his. He’s handsome as hell like a male model, dresses in designer suits, and always has his dark hair slicked back without a strand out of place. I’ve secretly had a celebrity crush on him for years. Never knew he was gay until he recently came out to the public and found himself a boyfriend.

Watching Verena and Darius on screen together literally has me choking on my food with laughter. The show is a dive into the fashion industry mixed with observational humor.

“What were you two laughing over when we arrived?” Mina asks.

“Stupid shit,” Darius says. “The time we pretended to be a couple and Adrian honestly believed it.”

Verena's husband. I've met Adrian a few of times too and have to ask the obvious question: what is with Mina knowing all these handsome men but none of them being available?

"So, Jordan, what kind of designs are you interested in?" Verena asks.

"Everything. I don't know if Mina explained my situation to you, but I'll be attending some sophisticated events and I'd like to look as though I belong among the crowd."

"Say no more. Let's try on some dresses."

Two hours later and twenty dresses wrapped in the prettiest of boxes, my appointment with Verena comes to an end.

"How's Adrian?" Mina asks as we all gather by the cash register.

"Amazing, as always," Verena says.

Darius pretends to retch. "They're trying for a baby and won't stop fucking."

"Oh, like you can speak?" Verena fires back at him. "Darius and his boyfriend are always at it too."

Darius winks at Mina. "Let's not leave Mina and Zac out of this. Have you two made any wedding plans?"

"We want to elope somewhere beautiful," Mina says. "But we haven't set a date. There's no rush. We're enjoying being engaged."

I slump onto a nearby couch. "So, what I'm hearing is everyone in this room has an amazing sex life except me."

"Still no word from Steel?" Mina asks.

"I love how I mention my sex life and you immediately think of Steel."

"You want me to think of Daxton instead?"

"Ugh. No."

“Why are you blushing?” Mina asks.

“I am *not*.”

“Hold on a second,” Darius says, leaning an elbow on the counter. “You’ve got two men on the go? Explain.”

“Mina, you do the honors.”

She spends the next ten minutes recounting my history with both Steel and Daxton, and by the end of it, Verena and Darius are even more invested in my love life than Mina is.

Verena sits next to me on the couch, draping an arm around my shoulder. “I’m team Steel. Imagine if you two end up together. What an amazing love story. I’m sure he has a valid reason for being absent right now.”

Darius joins me on the other side, with him too placing an arm around my shoulders. I feel like I’m in for a pep talk, squeezed between the two friends. “Um, hello, Verena, have you seen what Daxton Hawk looks like? Plus, he’s a billionaire. Problem solved. Mina, what team are you on?”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “This is not a game, you guys.”

“Of course it’s not,” Mina says. “But I am on team Steel. Maybe I’ll change my mind if you introduce me to Daxton, which you promised to do. When will that happen?”

“I want to meet him too,” Darius says. “You know, out of all our friends, I’m sad I’m the only one who hasn’t lived the drama of fake dating.”

We all laugh, which I can’t believe I’m even capable of right now.

Mina gasps with excitement. “How about I organize a party and you bring Daxton along?”

“No, babe.” I shut her down. “I said I would introduce *you* to Daxton. I’m not introducing him to everyone else. That would be embarrassing, like he’s my boyfriend and I’m introducing him to important people.”

Verena retracts her arm from around me and sweeps her hair over one shoulder. “Wouldn’t introducing Daxton to one

person say a lot more? I totally agree with Mina about this party idea. Let's do it. It will be a casual event. Daxton won't think anything of it."

I sigh, having heard about this crew of friends and know they won't give up. Maybe Verena does have a point. "Okay. Mina, set something up and let me know the details. But I don't know when Daxton will be back in New York. And I can't promise he'll attend your party."

"Don't worry." Mina grins at me. "I'll figure everything out."

"Dammit, I'm excited now." Darius returns to the register and taps my purchases. "Okay, getting back on track. How will you be paying for these today?"

I pull Daxton's card out from my purse and hand it to Darius. "Daxton is paying for it."

Darius raises an eyebrow. "This guy is okay with paying fifty grand on clothes for you?"

"Fifty—" I gasp. Wow, the cost accumulated fast. "Daxton said he was okay with me spending his money." He specifically told me to buy expensive clothes. But fifty thousand dollars? Surely that's crossing a line into inappropriate territory.

"Maybe I should double check with him before making the purchase."

I grab my phone and dial Daxton's number. The call rings out but a second later a text arrives from him.

DAXTON "DICKHEAD" HAWK

I'm in a meeting. Are you ok?

I see the *dickhead* part of his name and laugh to myself, making a mental note to change that later.

JORDAN

Just checking, am I still good to use your card to buy clothes?

Yes.

We're talking expensive clothes. Thousands and thousands of dollars.

I told you to buy whatever you want.

“I’m all good to use the card,” I announce, right as another message appears.

How are you?

“What’s he saying now?” Mina asks.

“He’s asking how I am.”

The three of them all side-eye each other with smirks. Verena is the first to speak. “He’s into you.”

I scoff and shake my head. “He is not. Daxton told me he hired me because nothing will happen between us.”

She shrugs. “Feelings change. Take me and Adrian, for example. I spent years hating him.”

Darius adds, “And now she can’t get enough of him. Look, Jordan, this guy told you to spend his money. That tells me everything. How are you going to reply?”

I shrug. “The money thing doesn’t mean anything to him. And I don’t know how I’ll reply. I guess I’ll just say I’m fine.”

Darius tuts and steals my phone off me. Before I can stop him, he sends a text to Daxton on my behalf.

I read it and whack Darius across the arm, horrified by the message. “Are you insane?”

JORDAN

Missing you.

I'm quick to send a follow up message. The last thing I need is for Daxton to think I'm into him.

My friend sent that message. Sorry.

DAXTON "DICKHEAD" HAWK

Cute. You're talking about me with your friends. I'm curious to know what you've told them.

Not much. Just the basics of our situation. They already know who you are. Seen you in the media.

When no reply comes through, I send another message.

How are you?

Wow. This is progress if you're asking how I am.

Shut up. You said you want us to be friends. I'm trying.

"She's smiling at her phone," Darius says.

I look up from the screen and realize all three sets of eyes are on me, and that yeah, I am smiling.

Goddammit.

Chapter Seventeen

Daxton

JORDAN 12:29 PM

So, what are you doing?

DAXTON 12:29 PM

In a meeting.

Still? You were in a meeting an hour ago.

These meetings can drag on. What are you up to? Something fun I hope.

Just got back from shopping with my friends.
About to go for a swim.

12:31 PM

Enjoy.

DAXTON 2:01 PM

How was the water?

2:02 PM

Refreshing.

You out of your meeting yet?

No

Mustn't be a very important meeting if you're texting me.

Or I'd just rather speak to a friend.

Ok, there's something I need to clarify so I don't make even more of a fool of myself than I did last Friday night. When you said you want us to be friends, did you mean friends friends—the kind who braid each other's hair, paint nails, and have slumber parties? Or friendly acquaintances?

Hm...

The slumber party kind.

Glad we cleared that up. By the way, you didn't answer my question. How are you?

2:05PM

Amused by this conversation. Mostly just glad you're talking to me.

2:30 PM

Or at least you were talking to me. Where did you go?

JORDAN 2:59 PM

I was rehearsing a dance routine. Then I went for a sauna and shower. You still in your meeting?

6:23 PM

Finally going home. Trying to decide what to cook for dinner. What are you having for dinner?

I ordered mushroom risotto from room service.

That sounds good. I'll make that for myself.

Jealous of your cooking skills. My parents never taught me to cook.

That's probably why you destroy your eggs with those condiments.

Hey, the way I serve my eggs is delicious. It's one of the only good things I can cook.

I'll teach you to cook.

JORDAN 6:26 PM

Really? That would be nice.

9:13 PM

How was the risotto?

9:13 PM

Good. I was going to message you again but I didn't know if it would be overkill.

We've been texting for most of the day. I'd say we've passed the stage of overkill.

Fair point.

Do you seriously not have anything better to do than text me?

Honestly, I'm enjoying the company. Was going to ask you the same question.

Oddly enough, I've enjoyed the company too. You were a good distraction for me. It's late here, though. I guess we should call it a night. Talk later.

Sleep well.

DAXTON 7:00 AM

Good morning.

JORDAN 7:15 AM

Hey, I just woke up. How are you?

I'm about to leave for work. Tell me I have another day of texting with you during my meetings and I'll be good.

Sure, but I don't want to distract you from your work. What if you're not paying attention to something important and end up signing off on a terrible decision for your upcoming hotel like showers with no detachable shower head. Or spa baths with no jets. Not a single woman would be pleased and I can assure you your hotel would go bankrupt.

Kitten, I promise you there's no way I'm making a mistake like that.

Hahaha. Well, in that case, yes, you can expect periodic messages from me throughout the day. Also, kitten?

DAXTON

Constant messages, please. Otherwise I might die of boredom. And I didn't think kitten needed an explanation. Seems obvious to me.

Not obvious at all.

More fun for me then if you don't know. So, about these constant messages, you said it yourself last night that I'm a good distraction for you.

Ok, you win. When I'm not rehearsing my new dance routine I'll send you constant messages. Tell me what kitten means.

Not a chance.

Chapter Eighteen

Daxton

My balcony doors are open, letting the sound of waves lull me into a relaxed state as I attempt to fall asleep. No surprise, I'm failing miserably. My body is itching for a cigarette. I've never been a heavy smoker, but Jordan thinks the habit is unattractive, so I've quit. I quit the second I found out who she is. Along with the withdrawals, I can't get my brother out of my mind and the text he sent me earlier this evening, asking if I received his wedding invitation. The text went straight into the trash folder.

I glance at the clock on my bedside table, groaning when I see it's past midnight. Sleep is not happening any time soon, so I turn a lamp on and sit up in bed with my laptop, clearing work emails. One email in particular catches my attention, sent from my personal assistant and with the subject line *Jordan Hart Mastercard*.

Good evening, Mr. Hawk,

The bank was in touch earlier regarding unusual spending habits yesterday from one of your business accounts. I have no reason to be alarmed, as I know this is the account you gave Jordan Hart access to, but to appease the bank's concern, I have attached the account statement to this email for you to review. Please let me know if there is an issue and I will be in touch with the bank.

Regards,
Marissa Larson.

I open the statement and skim through the list. Each purchase is worth a couple hundred dollars. But then I stop on one purchase of fifty thousand dollars spent at Verena Valentine Designs. A grin spreads over my lips. I like that Jordan is spending my money.

I send her a text, playing with her.

DAXTON

50k spent on clothes. I'm impressed, kitten.

JORDAN

Eek! You said you wanted me to buy expensive clothes. Did I go overboard?

No. I like it. Keep spending.

Yes, sir.

Yes, *pumpkin*

I just spat my drink and am choking with laughter.

I smile at my phone, liking that I make her laugh. As promised, we texted all day during my meetings. These last two days of back-and-forth messaging have been amazing, to say the least. I didn't intend for us to communicate like this. I'd barely spoken a word to Jordan all week, wanting to give her space. But then she messaged me, asking what I was doing. It was such a simple message yet with so much meaning. *She* was initiating conversation. *She* didn't hate me for once. Jordan kept asking me questions and making jokes. Before I knew it, the day was gone and so was the next. She was a mixture of my Jordan from Secret Santa and the Delphine side I'm still learning about, and it was incredible.

I'm glad I make you laugh. At the risk of bringing up a bad topic, how are you feeling after everything that happened on the weekend?

You mean my embarrassing meltdown?

Surprisingly, I'm ok. Even more surprisingly, texting you has been exactly what I needed.

But I am lonely.

Can I... call you right now? Say no if that's weird.

My jaw twitches. A phone conversation at this hour, while I'm in bed, is far more intimate than the way we've been chatting. But it has to be a good sign. She's warming to me quicker than I had thought possible.

Instead of texting back, I dial Jordan's number. "Hi," she answers in a soft, relaxed manner, sending tingles throughout my body. The number of times I've wanted to call Jordan over the years, just to hear her speak that one word and know how beautiful her voice sounds, is uncountable.

"What are you doing up this late?" I ask. "It must be three a.m. in New York."

"Lying in bed, trying to sleep."

"Me too."

She laughs, the breathy sound traveling straight to my groin. "You're not off partying somewhere?"

"Jordan, do I look like a partier to you?"

"I don't know. I don't know much about your life."

"It's pretty simple. I have no life outside of work. I don't party."

There's a moment of silence between us where all I hear is Jordan's breath, and I wonder how something as simple as the

sound of her breathing can keep me on edge, begging for more. “What do you do for fun?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Watch movies. Practice the piano so I can play duets with my fifteen-year-old niece.”

“Seriously? That is so cute.”

“She’s the kind of kid that doesn’t have many friends. She loves playing the piano, so I do what I can to have a connection with her. What else—I read thrillers, I cook when I can, I work out.”

“You have an amazing gym here. I’ve been living in it all week.”

That knowledge makes me smile, knowing Jordan enjoys something I can give her. “You like to work out? I guess that makes sense. I saw you holding a handstand by the pool for a crazy amount of time.”

“Stalker.” She laughs again. And fuck, it is the most beautiful laugh I’ve ever heard. I wish I was there with her in New York so I could see the smile that matches.

“I wasn’t watching you in a creepy way. Your handstand was impressive.”

“Pumpkin, that was like the least impressive thing I can do. Hang on, I’ll send you a couple of photos.” She’s silent for a few seconds, then two photos arrive on my phone and I’m speechless.

I’m staring at professional images of Jordan in lingerie, contorting her body in the most incredible ways. The first is of Jordan performing a handstand with her toes touching her head. In the second image, she’s in a giant martini glass, arching her back. Both images, though sensual in nature, are classy and beautiful.

“Fuck, you’re magnificent.”

“Thanks. I try. We should work out together sometime. See who can run faster on the treadmill. Not to boast, but you’ll need to bring your A game. I won five Age Champion medals for sprinting when I was in school.”

“You’d win. Cardio isn’t my strength. Where did you go to school?”

“Sydney. Mina and I moved here from Australia when we were twenty-one. I lived there from the age of twelve. Before that, I grew up in London.”

“Do you like it here?”

She sighs. In that one sound, I can hear I’ve steered the conversation away from a lighthearted topic. “Yes. My time in the US has been challenging, but it’s where I want to be.”

The line goes quiet again, but the silence isn’t awkward. It’s the opposite. Comforting, hearing her soft breath and knowing she’s there.

“Daxton?” My heart pounds faster at the sound of her speaking my name. But her voice is sad. I hate when Jordan is hurting. “Do you get lonely?”

“All the time.”

“I still don’t believe you, you know, about what you said the other night.”

“What did I say?”

“That you haven’t been with anyone since your ex. You’re a man and men have needs. Don’t tell me you go to bed alone every night.”

With just that one question, our conversation has turned even more intimate, the two of us lying in our beds, talking about sex.

“Believe it or not, Jordan, I do go to bed alone. Sex only cures loneliness for so long. When you have money, you can never trust people’s intentions and whether they’re being nice only to get something from you.”

“You’re right, that would be a lonely existence. But tell me this. Are you lonely now? Right this second?”

I take a deep breath and contemplate her words. “Not while talking to you on the phone. Not when we text all throughout the day.”

“Yeah. Me either. Will you...” Her words trail off, the end of her question disappearing with what sounds like nerves. But then she pushes forward. “Will you do this every night while you’re out of town?”

“Do what?”

“Call me. Just to chat.”

“Yes, Jordan.” I smile. “Of course I will.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jordan

For a week now, I've been waking each morning with a smile on my face. I tell myself it's due to me finally relaxing and enjoying all the luxuries of this penthouse, not because I spend each night talking to Daxton on the phone. And certainly not because it's become a new routine for me to wake every morning and find texts from him, wishing me a good day.

I know I'm lying to myself when, on the seventh day, I'm disappointed because there's no message waiting for me when I wake up. I don't know how I landed myself in this position, from hating Daxton to now enjoying his company. I'll even go as far as saying "enjoying" is an understatement. Talking to him is basically the only thing that makes me happy these days. We tease each other. We have inside jokes. Daxton even plays my silly hypothetical scenario game with me. Last night on the phone, he had me in fits of giggles because I asked whether he would rather die from quicksand or being submerged in Jello. He chose Jello, with the argument that he could eat his way to freedom.

I want to learn more about him—topics I have no right asking about, like what really happened between him and his ex who cheated on him. How deep do those scars run and has he moved on from her? This man has me fascinated.

Excuse me but where is my good morning message?

DAXTON "DICKHEAD" HAWK

I was waiting to see if you noticed my absence.

Fuck, I really need to change his name on my phone. But the title is kind of funny now. A joke with myself. Maybe I won't change it. Regardless, his message brings the smile back to my face.

I get my day started by reading another chapter of my smutty mafia romance book while drinking a protein shake, then change into workout clothes and head for Daxton's gym.

My God, I love how I have access to my own gym. I love everything this place offers me. When I first agreed to be Daxton's exclusive escort, I told myself this living arrangement would only be for a week or two before finding an apartment to move into. But now that I'm all settled in and am friends with Daxton, the only way I'm leaving this penthouse is if he kicks me out.

I grab a yoga mat and unroll it on the gym floor, starting my warmup stretches. Only now, when I'm balancing on my hands and feet in a plank position do I think of Steel for the first time today. My mood takes a downturn as a bitter mix of emotions consumes me. Anger, sadness, embarrassment, the list goes on, and I hate that Steel has this power over me. I hate not knowing whether I'm being selfish and if something is truly wrong for him.

An overruling urge takes a hold of me to search Steel's name on the internet and social media. But the truth is, I don't have any way to identify him out of all the Steel Wests that exist. I'm completely powerless in this situation.

All I know is I deserve better, so I push Steel out of my mind and reply to Daxton's text, trying to recapture the happiness I've felt these last few days.

JORDAN

I definitely noticed you didn't text me. You know what this means? I think you're growing on me. I'm ruining all your plans to have an escort who hates you.

DAXTON "DICKHEAD" HAWK

Dammit. I revoke my offer.

Speaking of which, when are you coming home?

Crap. I just meant when will I be escorting you again? I know this isn't my home.

I don't know. And the penthouse is your home, Jordan.

I roll onto my back and stare at Daxton's last message, hearing his deep voice in my head. *The penthouse is your home, Jordan.* Warmth blooms in my chest.

What are you doing this morning?

Sweating all over your gym equipment.

Jealous.

Of me working out?

No. I'm jealous of the gym equipment.

I laugh at the sarcasm and get on with my stretching routine, but then stop and wonder if his words were a flirtatious joke.

Surely not.

Our dynamic isn't flirtatious.

And then I realize this is the second time I've lied to myself this week about Daxton. Yes, I do wake with a smile

every day because of him. And secondly, our dynamic *is* flirtatious. It always has been, even when I hated the guy.

Chapter Twenty

Daxton

“So, I’ve been thinking about your situation with Jordan.” Amabella’s voice comes through my phone as a car service drives me home after work.

“What about it?” Right as I ask the question, a text arrives from Jordan.

JORDAN

Did you ever play Tomb Raider as a kid?

I laugh at the randomness of her question.

“What’s so funny?” Amabella asks.

“Nothing. Just something Jordan texted me.”

DAXTON

Yes. How come?

I gaze out of the backseat window, my attention returning to Amabella’s phone call as I watch passing traffic. “So, what were you saying about me and Jordan?”

“You know the guy who owns Palermo Towers in Manhattan? Josh Miles.”

“Of course.”

“He’s hosting a pool party in The Hamptons this weekend and asked me to be his date.”

“Oh?” That catches me off guard. I switch the phone to my opposite ear and rest my elbow on the window frame. “I didn’t realize you were getting back into the dating scene after what happened with your ex.”

“I’m not rushing into anything. But I think I’m ready to start dating again. It’s been three years since I was with my ex, and Josh seems like a nice guy. I thought I’d accept the invite.”

“He’s a great guy. So, how does this tie into my situation with Jordan?”

“I was thinking you two could come to the party as well. Bring Jordan as your date.”

JORDAN

I bought myself a laptop and decided to play the OG Tomb Raider that came out in the 90s. I don’t know why. The game gave me nightmares when I was a kid and is giving me nightmares again now. I almost had a heart attack playing the underwater levels.

I laugh even louder this time.

DAXTON

I have never related more to something you’ve said.

“Seriously, what is so funny?” Amabella asks.

“Nothing. Sorry. So, this party in The Hamptons... I don’t know. The Jordan situation is delicate.”

She scoffs. “It can’t be that delicate if you’re laughing over her texts. Bring her to the party. You’re paying her to be your date so you may as well take her places. Once you’ve had a nice day together, tell her the truth about Steel.”

Perhaps Amabella is right. Things between me and Jordan are going well. Jordan will be ready to hear the truth about Steel soon, I'm just dreading that moment because I can't imagine it will be butterflies and rainbows. She'll still feel a little tricked and upset. Probably even mad. I'm just hoping Jordan will be able to deal with the truth better now that we're friends.

"Have a think about my invitation," Amabella says. "In the meantime, I'm sending you a TikTok video."

"You know I don't use TikTok—"

"Just watch it, okay? Bye."

The call ends and I receive the link to a TikTok video from Amabella. I really don't have the time to be messing around on the app, until I see the link has *Delphine Fox* written in it. Curious, I open the link, finding a video of Jordan in my New York penthouse, dated from three days ago.

Jordan is on her elbows and knees in my gym, with the camera getting a clear view of her cleavage. I can see far more than that too. Her knees are spread in preparation for the splits, making her ass look fucking incredible.

"Today's pose: Toad on the Road," Jordan says into the camera. "This helps you get the straddle splits. Okay, so I'm making this video because I need to gush about a guy. These TikTok videos get like three hundred views. Barely anyone sees them. So, no harm done. Anyway, I'm kind of sharing a house with him. It's a complicated situation so I won't bother explaining the details. All you need to know is he is unbelievably attractive and is always wearing these crazy expensive Italian suits. But I saw him without a shirt on and I keep replaying the image in my mind. He is next-level hot. Like, you'll get third-degree burns from looking at him without a shirt on. And he has tattoos. Clearly I'm a lover of ink." She points to her own ink sleeve. "But I can't emphasize this enough: a man with tattoos is my weakness."

Jordan finishes the TikTok laughing. I watch it back again, stunned to know she feels this way about me. This girl is seriously perfection. That breathy laugh. Her personality. It

makes me so damn happy to see her smiling as opposed to how miserable she was not so long ago.

And Jordan likes my tattoos. She thinks I'm attractive.

No, she thinks I'm "next-level hot."

Fuck.

I *need* to get back to New York.

DAXTON

Okay, Amabella, let's do this Hamptons thing.

Chapter Twenty-One

Daxton

The New York penthouse is dead quiet when I arrive Friday night.

“Jordan?”

No answer.

When I texted to inform her of my return, she said she'd be here, but I've arrived a little earlier than expected. A pang of disappointment hits me at her absence. My entire workday has been a write off, unable to achieve basic tasks due to anticipating tonight's reunion. I'm like an adolescent kid with a crush, wanting to run up and hug Jordan, lifting her into my arms and spinning her around. I want the two of us to talk for hours on end. To make her laugh. Hell, I'll compete in that ridiculous running challenge she suggested even though I know I'll lose, if it makes her happy.

But I don't know what to expect when we do come face to face again. Although these last two weeks have involved almost constant texting and phone calls, our in-person dynamics could be different. She doesn't know how much I fucking adore her. So, I'll play our interaction by ear.

I close my bedroom door behind me and store my suitcase in the closet, then head for the adjoining bathroom, needing to freshen up with a shower after my flight. With the hot water running, the bathroom steams up quickly. I strip out of my suit

and step into the shower, letting the warmth of the water trickle down my body and help me relax.

Despite my best efforts to calm down, I can't get Jordan out of my head. Her feminine voice is all I hear in my mind every day. Those green eyes that always say *fuck me*. I've spent so many hours imagining what it would be like to get her in bed. What sounds she makes. What she looks like when coming. Fuck, I want to have sex with her *so* badly.

Soap suds glide down my torso, trickling down my cock. Even that light stimulation is too much for me to handle. I give in to the temptation and grip my shaft, needing release *now*.

Slow strokes to start with. My mind wanders to more images of Jordan and what she'd look like naked. Her perfect ass and breasts. The curve of her hips. I've jerked off to the thought of her many times since we started growing more intimate on Secret Santa, regardless that I didn't know what she looked like. This is the first time I've done it since knowing who she is and having a proper visual. The two versions of Jordan merge into one within my mind—the girl I know from Secret Santa, and the girl I'm learning about now. And fuck, my dick feels *so* good when I do think of her while stroking it. I want all of her. I *need* her to be mine.

I let the fantasy take control and imagine pushing Jordan onto my bed then removing her clothes piece by piece until she's naked beneath me. A rough sound travels from deep in my throat. I'm so backed up that I already feel the build of release. I could come right now, but I want more. I want to live in this moment forever, where Jordan is my girl. That her legs are wrapped around me and she's begging me to fuck her.

Allowing my mind to go there, I groan at the tight curl of heat that grows from the visual of sex with Jordan. The feeling is too intense, making me place my free hand against the shower wall for support as I continue pumping. My cock finds her entrance and thrusts deep inside, the two of us gasping as I stretch her open.

My hand speeds up in the shower at the thought of thrusting into Jordan faster and faster, until she's moaning my

name and coming on my dick—

“Ah!” Jordan yelps. A real yelp, not in my mind. “Oh my God.”

I stop immediately and glance to the side, finding Jordan in the bathroom doorway, her eyes wide and her face bright red. Her gaze is pinned to my cock in my hand.

Fuck.

Before I have a chance to do anything, she’s blurting out a nervous apology. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize you were here. I came into the bathroom to... I can’t even remember now.”

Jordan doesn’t run away, nor does she abide by common etiquette and avert her gaze. She’s just staring at my naked body. After what seems like an eternity, she visibly gulps and backs out of the bathroom.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jordan

I'm sitting at the kitchen counter, fidgeting with my phone and trying to distract myself from the awkward shower situation I walked in on, when all of a sudden, Daxton's footsteps approach.

Cringing, I shut my eyes tight. "I am *so* sorry. I didn't know you were here. My earphones were in. I'd been working out and wanted to take a shower—"

"There are five showers in this place and you chose the shower in *my* bedroom?"

I open my eyes and realize I should have left them closed. For the first time ever, I'm seeing Daxton in loungewear and it's an amazing sight. He's not the sharp businessman I know him as, but a normal guy dressed in black tracksuit pants and a gray t-shirt with his tattoos peeking out from the hem of his sleeves. His dark hair is damp and messy. Heat blooms in my groin at the very sight of him. I can't stop watching the way the muscles in his back move as he opens the fridge and pours himself a glass of orange juice.

Daxton turns to me, waiting, and I realize he asked me a question.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He laughs softly at my incoherence. "I'm interested to know why you were wanting to use *my* shower?"

I gulp, my voice meek. “Your shower is the most luxurious. You said to make myself at home, so I explored the place.”

“Jordan.” Why does my name have to sound so good coming out of his mouth? “I’m fucking with you. I don’t care that you were in my room.”

“Well, anyway, the shower next to my room doesn’t have good water pressure.”

“Duly noted. I’ll have your shower upgraded to meet your standards,” he says, then drinks the orange juice.

I watch the way his lips move, the way his Adam’s apple bobs with each gulp, and have to look away. How is the act of Daxton drinking orange juice making me all hot and flustered? Needing a distraction, I bury my head in my phone.

He laughs again, the sound smug. “Christ, Jordan. Surely you’ve seen a man jerk off before?”

My God, how is he not embarrassed about this situation at all? Is he that sexually confident that a girl walking in on him in a raw moment means nothing? Obviously, yes. A man of his power would have no shame.

“No, actually. I haven’t seen a man do... that.” Another cringe. He did *not* need to know that information.

Daxton’s eyes linger on me but thankfully he changes the topic. “Have you been using the home movie theater?”

“I’ve been in there most nights this week.”

“Yeah? What did you watch?”

“The *365 Days* movies.”

He quirks a brow, the beginning traces of a smirk pulling at his lips. “You watched porn?”

Just like that, my cheeks are burning. “There’s a few sex scenes in those movies but they’re not porn. How do you even know about the *365 Days* movies? They’re for girls.”

“Come on, those movies have more than a few sex scenes. I hear things from friends. Why don’t you choose a new movie

and we'll watch it tonight.”

“Um... okay. You don't want to go out?”

“I've had a long week. A movie could be fun. I'll make popcorn while you take a shower.” He opens the pantry and grabs a packet of corn kernels. Something within the pantry captures his attention and he stares at it for a few seconds.

“You all good?”

Daxton grabs the item and I realize it's a packet of cigarettes. The packet is brand new, still wrapped in plastic. He tosses it in the bin and smiles at me. “Perfect.”

“You're flushing money down the toilet now?”

“I quit smoking.”

“Why? I mean, that's good. But why?”

He shrugs. “You hate smokers, right?”

“I...uh...” *What?* He quit for me? Surely I'm misunderstanding something.

“Go take a shower, Jordan.”

Speechless, I follow his command and grab my pajamas from my room. Acting on autopilot, I head toward Daxton's bathroom, hearing him laugh when he realizes where I'm going.

I shower quickly, mostly because my nerves are running wild being in a shower Daxton touched himself in. Did he finish after I left? I get warm wondering about the answer.

When I'm all clean, I change into long pajama pants and a hoodie, and find a text waiting on my phone.

DAXTON “DICKHEAD” HAWK

Meet me in the theater when you're ready, kitten.

The theater lights are still bright when I arrive. Unlike most movie theaters, this one doesn't have individual seating. There's one massive daybed that spans the back wall, covered in cushions. Daxton sits right in the middle, reclined with a

bowl of popcorn next to him and is searching through movies with the remote.

“I still have no idea why my name is kitten.”

His eyes flick to me and he grins. “Come on. Think. In all the time we’ve known each other, only once have we spoken about cats.”

My mind jogs through every conversation I’ve had with Daxton. Nothing comes to me at first, until...

My eyes flare at the memory. I grab a nearby cushion and throw it at Daxton. “The panties?” *Lick my pussy.* “I can’t believe you, Daxton.”

He laughs, dodging my pillow attack.

I fold my arms, laughing too. “You take pleasure in teasing me, don’t you?”

“Are you kidding? Of course I do. It’s too much fun making you blush.” He throws the cushion back at me. “You just going to stand there? Come sit down.”

I climb onto the daybed. It’s so massive that I have to do an embarrassing crawl across it to get to Daxton. When I do reach him, I’m unsure of how close to sit, so I leave a good few feet.

“I see you’ve made your own user profile on my Netflix,” he says.

“Yeah. I didn’t think you’d like me messing up your recommended watches with all the porn I consume.”

He chuckles. When I look at the screen, I realize he’s scrolling through my to-watch list. “You are *such* a girl. *A Cinderella Story. She’s the Man,*” he names a few of the movies I saved. “Oh, here’s one keeping in line with your porn habits. *Magic Mike.*”

I roll my eyes and laugh at his teasing tone. “You are the worst. I’m a dancer. I like that movie. And I’m not shying away from enjoying a good male stripper.”

“Noted. So, what movie do you want to watch? Your choice.”

I grab the remote off him, my fingers tingling as our skin touches, and scroll through my to-watch list. “Oh, I love *Burlesque*. We’re watching this.”

As soon as I hit play, Daxton presses a button on his phone and the theater turns dark, with only the dim flickering of the screen animating the theater.

“Impressive,” I say as the main character starts singing the opening song. “I’ve been living in the Stone Age all this time using the light switch.”

“Pass me your phone. I’ll link it to the lighting system.”

I unlock my phone and hand it over, realizing too late that I left open the last text message from Daxton. He presses his lips together to resist laughing. “You saved me in your phone as *Daxton ‘Dickhead’ Hawk?*”

“You were a dickhead.” I grab my phone off him and change his name to *Daxton*.

“That’s no fun. Surely you can come up with something more creative. How about pumpkin? Or what was that thing you called me on TikTok? Oh, that’s right. *Next-level hot.*”

My eyes pop open wide. Thank God the room is dark because I can feel myself going red. “You saw my TikTok?”

“A friend sent it to me. It was cute.”

He takes my phone from me and messes around with the settings, syncing it up to the lighting system.

“*Cute* isn’t really the word I’m going for with my TikTok. More like seductive and sexy.”

“Obviously. I didn’t think that needed to be stated.” Daxton returns my phone as the opening dance scene of the movie ends. He sinks into the cushions and watches the screen. “You don’t need to try for seductive and sexy. Those things come to you naturally.”

Daxton thinks that about me? Blushing again, I settle into the couch and try to pay attention to the movie, but it's impossible after all that Daxton just said. If he saw my TikTok, he knows how attractive I think he is. He would know I have a thing for tattoos.

Is that why he's wearing a t-shirt right now?

I gulp at the thought. When Daxton originally offered me this exclusive escorting deal it was because I had no interest in him. He wasn't interested in me either. But now that our dynamics have changed, I'm not sure what he wants. I don't even know what *I* want.

I *can't* like him. That would complicate everything, considering the exchange of money between us. He's not even emotionally available. I'll end up getting hurt like every other time I've been interested in a guy.

But right now, none of those concerns seem relevant. All I know is that the dark movie theater makes me hyper aware of every little thing Daxton does, from the rise in his chest as he breathes to each time he brings a piece of popcorn to his lips. I know that I've been looking forward to his return all week. That I can't stop thinking about Daxton masturbating in the shower and how hot the sight was. I'm treading in unfamiliar water here. He has me so on edge it's like a fuse has been lit inside me and I'm about to explode any second.

Is it possible that he was thinking about... *me* while getting himself off?

The question brings an ache between my legs. Maybe, just maybe, I want him to have been thinking about me.

Daxton shifts, and I feel the heat of his eyes on me. I lick my lips as a nervous tic, commanding myself to stare forward at the screen and not to meet his gaze.

"You can sit a little closer. I don't bite," he says, sounding amused, like he's aware of his effect on me.

I do a stiff shuffle toward him and grab a handful of popcorn, asking a question to try and ease the tension. "So,

um, you said we're going on a date tomorrow. What are the details?"

"Pool party in The Hamptons."

"Sounds like fun. Unexpected, though, considering all the expensive dinners you've previously needed me for. Are you performing business there?"

"Not specifically. The host is in hotel development too. It's good to make an appearance at these things, you know. Network."

"Oh, networking. Everybody's favorite thing to do."

He laughs, still watching me in the dark theater. "Do you have many friends in New York? I've heard about Mina. Is she the one who stole your phone while shopping and started sending me love messages?"

My breath hitches. It takes all my effort to continue watching the screen. "That was Darius. I'm friendly with him but we don't know each other well. I was with him and Verena Valentine that day because they're friends with Mina."

"Verena Valentine, the reality star? You weren't just purchasing her clothes, you were hanging out with her?"

My self-control bursts and I meet Daxton's gaze, finding a surprised look in him. "Yeah, I told you, Mina—"

"How did I not know you're running with that crowd?"

"I wouldn't exactly word it like that."

"You got any other big-name friends I don't know about?"

"Well, there's my brother, Ryan Hart. He's a famous travel vlogger known for naked bungee jumping."

Daxton snorts. "Ryan Hart is your brother? Yeah, I've heard of the guy. I can't believe I never knew any of this about you."

"You say that like you've known me forever and I've kept this massive secret from you."

“I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t know how I meant it. You just surprise me.” He brings another piece of popcorn to his mouth and my eyes follow, dropping to his lips. From the grin fighting to make an appearance on his face, I know I’ve been caught. Daxton looks back at the movie screen. “So, you and your brother are close?”

“Yeah. We lived together for a while last year but now he’s off traveling the world with his girlfriend. They’re living their best life, off-grid in the Himalayas.”

“You miss him.” It’s not a question but an observation, spoken so gently it catches me off guard, and a lump forms in my throat.

“I...ah...yeah. Is it that obvious?”

“Yes. I can hear it in your voice.”

I watch the movie, barely focusing on it as I explain the situation with Ryan. “My brother and I have been through a lot together. We grew up with two alcoholic parents. That time in our life wasn’t easy for either of us. We always supported each other but he’s impossible to reach now. The last few months have been difficult without him, given all the recent struggles I’ve been through.” Sensing Daxton’s eyes on me again, I turn my head, finding his gaze boring through me. The intensity makes my cheeks burn. I shake the heavy moment off with a laugh. “Sorry, I’m getting too deep. What about your friends and family?”

His jawline stiffens and his expression turns guarded. “I’m sure you’ll meet some of my friends tomorrow. As for my family... I don’t have any contact with them, nor do I like to talk about them. You can ask me anything you like, but my family is a topic I don’t discuss.”

“Now I’m intrigued.”

Daxton’s reserved stance only makes me want to ask further questions about his family. They obviously have a negative impact on his life, and I’m curious why. Ever since we started texting frequently, I’ve found myself wanting to know more about Daxton, and not on a surface level. I want to

know what kind of things make him happy, sad, and all the past experiences that have shaped him into the man he is today. I want him to trust me with important information, the same as how I'm starting to trust him.

"Something really serious must have happened for you to cut off contact with them," I say. "Whatever it is, you can tell me. I won't judge. Families are complicated. Mine certainly is. I don't talk to my parents either."

His brows draw together, studying me with confusion. "I didn't realize."

"Yeah. It's a long story."

"As is mine. I'm sorry to hear that." He clears his throat and focuses back on the movie. Conversation over, I suppose. Family is clearly a sore topic for Daxton. But he mentioned a niece earlier, so he must still have some family around.

"What do you think of the movie so far?" I ask.

The tension in Daxton's jaw softens. He grins, glancing sideways at me. "I think you're better than all of these performers."

"You're just saying that."

"I saw you perform at Club Noir. You caught my attention out of all the other women on stage."

I exhale a sigh. "If I could only get someone else to feel the same way and hire me."

"Have you gone to any auditions this week?"

"No. I've been busy practicing this new dance routine. I'll start auditioning with it soon."

"Show me."

"Really?" I've posted dance routines on TikTok for the world to see. I've danced in clubs in front of complete strangers. But my palms grow clammy at the thought of performing such a sensual dance for Daxton.

"Yeah. I'm interested."

“Ah... okay. We should go to your gym, then.”

Daxton pauses the movie and we climb off the daybed. Once we enter the gym, he approaches the new installation of Russian silks and the lyra hoop, examining both.

“Fancy.” He takes a seat in a nearby leather armchair. “All right, let me see this routine.”

I look down at myself dressed in my long pajama pants and a hoodie. The clothes are baggy and not at all suitable for dancing on the aerial hoop. I always practice in a sports bra and tiny pants. “I can’t dance in these clothes. Do you mind if I take them off?”

A muscle in his jaw twitches and his voice comes out a little strained. “Of course not.”

Daxton’s eyes remain on me, his arms spread over the chair’s armrests as I slide out of my clothes, stripping down to my black bra and panties. I don’t know why his gaze makes every inch of me feel like I’m on fire. I’ve worn less than this while performing on stage for a crowd. But my breath grows shallow and I’m buzzing with adrenaline. Perhaps it’s the act of undressing in front of Daxton. Or that I keep visualizing him in the shower and replaying the sound of his deep groans. I spoke true when I said I’ve never seen a man get himself off. Despite being in a sexualized profession, my sex life has always been vanilla. But after that display in the shower...

I’ve never seen anything so hot. I’m not sure *vanilla* will be enough for me anymore. I’ll be reliving that shower scene in my mind later when I’m alone, imagining a different ending where Daxton finishes.

Trying to focus on something other than what Daxton might sound like when coming, I dim the lights to set the mood of my dance, then play music from my phone, the song amplifying from the ceiling speakers. The tune is a slow and sultry melody, hypnotic in nature and filled with deep bass beats and breathy vocals.

Feeling the intensity of Daxton’s eyes still on me, I pull myself onto the aerial hoop and begin the routine. My body

twists and contorts, becoming one with the music. Each movement is fluid and sensual as I showcase my flexibility and strength.

I fell in love with burlesque dancing when I was a teenager, watching beautiful women on stage be the focus of everyone's desire. I dreamed of being those beautiful women and how it would feel to make a man weak for me. The dream turned into a reality when I started dancing at eighteen, and while I've felt adored each time I've performed, I'm certain I've never felt the heat of a man's desire more than right now while dancing for Daxton.

Before long, a thin layer of sweat glistens on my skin and I know it's not purely from physical exertion. I dare to glance over my shoulder at Daxton and find his half-lidded gaze pinned to me. Though the lighting is dim, I can see in his eyes and from the rigid angle of his jaw how much he likes what he sees. There's something so empowering about Daxton being such a dominant man in every aspect of his life, but that I have this effect on him. *I'm* the one in control right now. *I* have his full attention and can make him bend to my way.

I tumble backward for my next move, my hair cascading beneath me as I hang upside down. With my legs being all that connects me to the hoop, I squeeze my thighs tight to hold on. The tension in my muscles shoots straight to my groin and I let out an unexpected moan. This is the first time I've performed such a physical routine while so aroused, and I'm not expecting the tightness in my muscles to build into something pleasurable. An approaching orgasm.

My peripheral vision catches Daxton readjusting in his chair. I glance his way, finding his eyes narrowed on me. He definitely heard the moan. Does he know I'm on the brink of coming?

A dark side of me is tempted to see this through. To clench my thighs tighter and reach my climax in front of Daxton.

But the sane part of my mind won't let me go there.

I release the tension in my legs and swing back up to sit on the hoop, finishing my routine. The music ends, and before I

have a chance to lower myself to the ground, Daxton stands from his chair and stalks toward me. He steps up to the hoop and holds onto both sides to stop it from spinning. Our gazes align and he's standing so close that my body trembles as his warm breath brushes against my face.

"Well?" I murmur. "Do you like what you see?"

"Very much so. The routine is... To be honest, I stopped paying attention to the routine a while back. You're very mesmerizing."

"Maybe I should dance for you more often."

His gaze lowers to my lips, making the heat return between my thighs. Does he... want to kiss me? I wouldn't stop him if he did. Something inside me craves to know how his lips and body would feel against mine.

"I don't know how to read you," I whisper when he doesn't advance. "You hired me because you knew nothing would happen between us. I have to wonder if that's still the case."

He thinks about my words for a long moment, then replies in his own deep whisper. "Things are complicated. But yes, the situation has changed."

Complicated? He's right about that. None of this is professional. I'm working for him and money is involved. I can't be getting invested in feelings for Daxton. But that doesn't stop any of my attraction for him. And he... likes me too?

The intensity of his gaze pulls me in deeper, and before I know it, I'm asking a question I never thought I'd have the nerve to. But this moment, this dance I've just performed for him, gives me the strength to be bold. "What were you thinking about in the shower?"

He smirks. "Guess and I'll tell you if you're right."

My cheeks blush. *Me*, I want to say. The word sits on the tip of my tongue, but my confidence doesn't extend *that* far.

“Not brave enough to play with me, are you, kitten?” He lets go of the hoop and walks toward the gym’s exit, calling back to me, “I’m locking myself in my bedroom before I do something extremely inappropriate with you. See you in the morning for our date.”

My bedroom is dark when I return from the gym a little while later, all but for the moonlight trickling through a gap in the blinds. I’m about to turn on the lights and change back into my pajamas but pause when seeing movement beyond the window. With my index finger, I peek through the blinds, finding Daxton out by the pool.

So much for locking himself in his bedroom.

He’s shirtless and walking along the edge of the water in swim trunks. I watch the way the muscles in his back move, admiring the ink that covers them and how strong he looks. The way his muscles flex with each movement reminds me of how they flexed when I walked in on him in the shower. A flutter of arousal swells in my lower tummy at the memory. I’m already turned on from the way Daxton watched me as I danced for him. The denied orgasm still teases me.

Craving a release, I lower my hand to my panties and apply light pressure, shivering as I imagine that Daxton was jerking off to the thought of me. He dives into the water and does a lap of freestyle. I should go straight to sleep. The last thing I should be doing right now is watching Daxton while touching myself. He’s paying me to be his date. The power dynamic is off balance. There’s no way this newfound infatuation I have with him can end well.

I release the pressure of my hand with every intension of going to bed, and yet the ache within me only intensifies. There’s no way I can sleep tonight without making myself come. Usually, I can get myself off with no fuss, hidden beneath the covers of my bed with my hand. Plain. Simple.

Boring.

Maybe it's the memory of Daxton jerking off that won't leave me alone, or the orgasm I nearly had while dancing for him, but I'm suddenly begging to taste something richer than vanilla. I want what I shouldn't, and that's to watch Daxton while touching myself. Foolish of me? One hundred percent. But right now, I don't care. I just *need*.

Giving in, I slide my hand to the wetness beneath my panties and stroke. A spark of heat ripples through me, sending my knees weak. I can't continue while standing up, but if I leave the window, the blind will obstruct Daxton from sight.

So, I take this a step further, careful not to alert Daxton while he's swimming, and slowly raise the blinds. Though there is outside lighting, my bedroom remains dark enough to be confident Daxton won't see inside if he looks my way.

I take a seat on the edge of my bed and slide my hand back down my panties, continuing to watch Daxton while I circle my clit. He hoists himself out of the water in an effortless pushup, the display of strength sending another rush of blissful heat through my core. I stroke faster, my breath accelerating at the pleasure.

Water trickles down the chiseled contours of his torso. Daxton swipes the dark hair out of his eyes with one hand and the other reaches down to his groin. When he turns to the side, I realize he's hard. He's worked up right now and I hope it's because of the dance I gave him.

All I can think about is how his dick looked in the shower, so long and thick. The ache in my center tightens, growing unbearable. I've teased myself enough and slip a finger deep inside. A fantasy forms in my head, that Daxton is above me. *In* me. The moan that comes out of my lips is untamed. One finger is not enough, so I work two inside, stretching myself open to imitate the feeling of his cock.

Daxton looks to my bedroom and I instantly freeze. For a moment, I panic, scared he can see me. Yet the fear only heightens my arousal, making me cup my free hand to my mouth to muffle another moan.

I know I'm safe in the dark when Daxton looks away. He grabs a towel and dries himself, so I slip another finger inside, hissing in a sharp breath as an orgasm flirts with me. The feeling builds, so strong that my inner walls clench around my fingers. It may be wrong of me, but I continue watching Daxton, letting the very sight of him push me over the edge until I can no longer control myself. My climax arrives and I moan louder than intended, bliss spreading all throughout my body in hot waves.

I know Daxton has heard me when he looks back in my direction. I wonder again if he can see me. The thought only intensifies my orgasm, making my muscles contract tighter around my fingers. The darker side of me returns from in the gym, and as I ride out my orgasm, I hope Daxton *can* see me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Daxton

I didn't expect to attract this much female attention, but fuck, this is bad. We arrived at the pool party five minutes ago and I've already been approached by multiple women despite Jordan standing beside me, playing the role of my date. Many more have their eyes on me. We haven't even made it through the living room yet, and everywhere I look I'm faced with women in tiny bikinis that barely cover their ass and breasts, all flirting with men who have money. I should have known better than to take Amabella up on this offer.

I glance down at Jordan beside me, finding a scowl on her face. "You alright?"

"I'm just... surprised. I don't know why I'm surprised. You're Daxton Hawk. I've seen how females react to you in the media."

A flash goes off, startling Jordan. I search for the camera, finding a girl on a couch taking my photo. No doubt that photo and many more from today will do the rounds on social media. I need to get Jordan away from all of this, to someplace I can be alone with her.

"Let's find some privacy." I place my hand on Jordan's back and guide her out of the living room.

Today isn't my first time visiting this property. I've been friends with Josh Miles for a while and have attended a few of his parties here over the years. The mansion is exactly what

you'd expect from expensive real estate in The Hamptons. Expansive floor plans and multiple levels on a large plot of land. Gardens for days and a spacious pool house.

As Jordan and I step out onto the back patio, the sound of the pool party hits us like a wave. The air is thick with the scent of sunscreen and the sound of laughter and music. The pool is massive, with guests lounging on pool floats and sipping colorful drinks with tiny umbrellas. Multiple cabanas line the right side of the pool, and to the left is a cocktail bar.

Jordan and I make our way over to an empty cabana. A daybed lies within, and white curtains are tied to each of the four posts. Once we're inside, I draw the curtains shut for privacy and remove my shirt, placing it inside a shared bag between me and Jordan. I take a seat on the bed, dazed when I turn in Jordan's direction.

She pulls her dress over her head, her black hair tumbling over her shoulders and framing her body. She's wearing a black bikini that shapes the curves of her ass and breasts perfectly. Her skin looks so smooth and all I want to do is run my hands over her. No matter how much I try to distract myself, thoughts of last night return—the dance that Jordan gave me and how I've never been more turned on in my life. That little moan she gave while hanging upside down, as if she was moments away from an orgasm.

When I first discovered she was Jordan, I had concerns she would be completely different from the girl I knew online. But she's not. Somehow, Jordan manages to be the gorgeous, sweet, funny girl I know from Secret Santa, while having this sexier side I never could have foreseen, and quite frankly, have a new obsession for.

After her performance in the gym, I went for a cold swim to distract myself from how badly I wanted to get her naked and personally be responsible for making more of those sweet sounds leave her lips, but the swim only made my need for Jordan worse when I heard her in her bedroom. She *had* to be touching herself. The moan I heard from within her dark bedroom was enough to make me lose control. I instantly

returned to my room and fucked my fist for the second time in one night over Jordan.

“Dax!” a familiar voice calls out. I slide open the curtains, finding Amabella heading our way in her white bikini and carrying a cocktail. Her blonde hair is damp from the pool, pushed over one shoulder. “You made it to the party!”

Jordan mutters something under her breath that I swear sounds like “For fuck’s sake.”

I’m about to stand up to give Amabella a greeting hug, but Jordan’s arm slides around my shoulders and she sits on my lap. Not once has she acted this affectionate on our previous dates. I don’t know what’s happening right now, but having Jordan this close to me—feeling her breasts graze against my chest—is fucking heaven, so I go with the flow and wrap my arms around her waist.

“Hey, Amabella,” Jordan says. “We haven’t officially met. I’m Daxton’s girlfriend.”

The words travel straight to my dick. Jordan shifts slightly on my lap, which does nothing to help the situation in my pants. She’s obviously acting. But Jordan has never staked her claim over me before now. She’s never referred to herself as my girlfriend on all of our pretend dates. Jordan sees Amabella as a threat and I fucking love it.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jordan.”

“Amabella.” I jut into their conversation before this situation has a chance to escalate in the wrong direction. “I don’t mean to be rude. Do you mind giving me a moment alone with Jordan?”

“Sure.”

Amabella joins the cabana beside us, where Josh is chatting with a few people. He smiles at her and holds her hand.

Jordan makes a move to climb off my lap, but I hold her in place. She sighs and stays put. “How does Amabella know my real name?”

“Because I told her.”

“Why have you spoken to some random woman about me?” Jordan laughs at her own question with bitterness. “She calls you Dax. She’s not random at all, is she?”

“You’re right. She’s not random. Amabella is my cousin.”

She blinks several times with confusion. “What? But you two... You’re always flirting—”

I snort, never having heard anything more ridiculous. “We do *not* flirt.”

“Last night you said you don’t talk to your family.”

“Amabella is the exception, along with her daughter. They’re both very important to me. I’m going to call her back over here so you can meet her.” I catch Amabella’s eye and wave her over.

“Wait,” Jordan says. “You spoke to your cousin about me? What did you say?”

There’s no way I’m handing over that information. Before she presses me for an answer, Amabella arrives at our side, taking a seat on the daybed with us.

Jordan gives her a guarded smile. “I just learned you two are cousins. Sorry if I ever seemed rude.”

Amabella’s returning smile is all too consuming. Jordan is still sitting in my lap, and Amabella can’t stop looking at the two of us like we’ve just gotten married. “Don’t worry about it. I’m so happy to meet you. Dax has told me so much about you.”

What the fuck? I send Amabella a warning glare to lay off with the intensity.

Jordan gives me a curious look.

I shrug and tease her. “I spend every night with you on the phone. I’ve got to complain to someone about how boring you are.”

Jordan grins, hitting me playfully on the shoulder. My whole body tingles at her touch. Fuck, I love her smile. I love

that she's playing back with me.

“So, Jordan, I hear you're a dancer,” Amabella says after a sip of her cocktail. The alcohol content must be strong because the next thing out of her mouth is, “I actually stalked your social media and found your TikTok account. I love it.”

To my relief, Jordan responds with enthusiasm, and they ease into a conversation about burlesque dancing. I take a back seat to the discussion, feeling a surprising sense of happiness that the two most important women in my life are getting to know each other.

My gaze wanders across the party, enjoying the sound of Jordan laugh at something Amabella says. The pool looks refreshing on this warm day. An arched bridge crosses the middle of the pool with a waterfall cascading down each side, sheltering swimmers from view. Visions enter my mind, of getting Jordan alone beneath that bridge with me and kissing her in the water.

My mood is spoiled in an instant when I spot Tom Sanders across the pool. Just like any other wealthy businessman here, women are gathered around him. Aside from money, I can't see his appeal. Tom's physique is decent, I suppose. He's in his mid-thirties and has dirty blond hair. I guess those attributes seem like a catch to a person if they're unaware he's rough with women.

For a moment, I think Tom is looking at me. The man has serious issues with me and has no doubt been slandering my name to guests, claiming as always that I stole business from him. But the foul, leering expression on his face doesn't make sense, and I realize it's Jordan on my lap, wearing her bikini that has his attention.

A mixture of rage and jealousy boils inside me, knowing Jordan has escorted for Tom before. Whether she slept with him, I don't know, and the unknown is eating away at me. I'm almost certain she would have. I set clear boundaries between me and Jordan when I first asked her to be my escort—that there would be no sex. But I'm the anomaly. When men in this industry hire an escort, they expect sex.

I wish I could outright ask Jordan if she slept with him. I want to know every man who paid her for sex, because I need to know how much I fucked up with her. I *hate* myself for being the one to introduce Jordan to the world of escorting. But asking Jordan such an intimate question is not something I've earned the privileged of yet. The unknown is probably best, as there's no saying how violent I would turn toward these men.

It takes everything in me not to punch Tom in the jaw right now. The next time we speak, I'll tell him to stay the fuck away from Jordan, and that if he ever so much as looks at her again, I'll make him regret it. But for now, I keep my cool because we're at a party.

“Daxton?”

Jordan is watching me, waiting for an answer to a question I was too distracted to hear.

“Sorry, what did you ask?”

“I asked if you feel like a drink?” She nods at the cocktail bar on the other side of the pool.

“Sure. Stay here and chat with Amabella. What would you like?”

“I don't mind. Non-alcoholic, though. Choose something you think looks good.”

Jordan

“I can't believe you thought I was into Daxton.”

“Is it really that hard to believe?” I ask Amabella, the two of us laughing over the topic as we lounge in the cabana and wait for Daxton to return with drinks. “He's handsome, rich, and powerful. Have you seen the way every woman is looking at him today?”

I search for Daxton among the pool party, finding him in line at the cocktail bar. Women approach him, but all he offers them is a polite smile. I'm baffled at how there's no engagement on his behalf.

"Can I just say, Dax really likes you." Amabella leans in to me, lowering her voice. "He would be so angry with me if he knew I told you that. But I want you to know he's a good guy and you're the only woman he's looking at today... or ever, really."

My skin prickles and my heart thumps faster from Amabella's words. Clearly, there's something happening between me and Daxton. What it is, I have no clue. But hearing someone else say Daxton likes me? My stomach tightens with... I don't even know what this feeling is. Excitement? Happiness?

Infatuation?

That must be it because I am crushing hard on this guy.

"What does he say about me?"

Amabella swirls her straw in her almost empty cocktail. "He says he loves talking to you. That he struggles to connect with women because it's all superficial conversations but not with you. Seriously, do *not* repeat any of this. He also says you are absolutely beautiful, which you obviously are."

I bite my bottom lip and smile. I don't know how I found myself in this position, miserable over Steel not so long ago, to having a new man who has stolen all of my attention.

Amabella laughs again out of the blue. Snorts, more like it. "Sorry, but I can't stop laughing over how you thought me and Dax were involved."

"In my defense, Daxton told me he doesn't speak with his family."

She nods, her smile lowering into a solemn line and bringing a dampened tone to the conversation. "Yes, I barely talk to them either."

“Daxton hasn’t spoken much about his family,” I say, unsure how else to respond to the sensitive topic. “He kind of shut down when I asked about them.”

“It’s complicated.” Amabella sighs. “I’m sure Daxton will share our family dynamics with you when he’s ready. But I will say this. Daxton saved me and my daughter’s life. After that, I owe him everything and I will have his back forever. I’m only telling you this because I want you to know how amazing he is.”

“Saved your life?”

“A domestic violence issue with my ex.” She waves her hand to dismiss the topic while sucking up the last of her drink with her straw. “Oh, shoot, I’m all out. I better tell Daxton to order me another one. Be right back.”

Amabella hops off the mattress and wanders over to the cocktail bar. As soon as she’s gone, someone else swoops in and occupies her spot—a familiar blond-headed man, one I don’t care to see again but knew this moment was coming ever since I arrived at this party and saw him eyeing me.

“Tom.”

“Delphine. What a pleasant surprise.” His deep voice is slow and laced with all kinds of sleazy undertones. “So, you’re here with Daxton Hawk.”

“Good spotting, Sherlock.”

Tom leans in and places a hand high on my thigh. “And if I wanted to hire you later?”

I push his hand away. “I’m not available.”

“Too bad. You know, I’ve been thinking about you a lot since I last hired you. You’re exquisite and deserve to be shown off. I’d like to offer you a job dancing at one of my clubs.”

I wouldn’t sleep with Tom when he hired me. I warned him upfront, but I guess he thought he could sway me. When that time of the night came and I maintained my ground, he asked me to dance for him instead. I did, performing one of

my burlesque routines to earn a couple of hundred bucks. That was the extent of our night.

“You own strip clubs. I’m not a stripper.”

Instead of responding to me, Tom’s gaze shifts to the left and he smirks. I follow his line of sight, finding Daxton at the bar watching our interaction. From the sharp angle of Daxton’s jaw and Tom’s satisfaction, I’m guessing Tom has achieved whatever he wanted from this engagement with me.

“Tom, do you really want me to dance at one of your clubs, or are you only talking to me to piss off Daxton?”

Tom turns back to me and smiles. “Don’t be ridiculous. I want you. My clubs are very elite. Think about it. I pay all my girls well. I’ll pay extra if you ever decide you want a good fuck.”

“Watch your mouth, Sanders.” Daxton’s entrance into the conversation startles me, especially how fast he got to me from across the party. I look up from my seat on the daybed, finding two drinks in his hands and a murderous look in his eyes. “If you ever proposition my girlfriend for sex again, I will fuck you up.”

Tom glances back and forth between me and Daxton, surprised. “Girlfriend?”

I’m surprised too, but for other reasons, like this warm sense of pleasure blooming in my chest from Daxton calling me his girlfriend.

“Yes, you heard me,” Daxton says, the muscles in his arms straining. “Get the fuck away from my girlfriend. If I ever see you talking to her again, I’ll make sure no one ever finds your body.”

A sleazy grin creeps over Tom’s lips, as if he’s one-upped Daxton somehow, pleased that he’s getting under Daxton’s skin.

“Don’t test me, Sanders.”

Tom chuckles then sends me a wink and walks off, calling back, “Lovely seeing you again, Delphine.”

Daxton sits beside me, handing over my drink. He doesn't speak and I can tell it's because he's holding back his temper.

"So, pumpkin," I say, attempting to lighten the mood with humor. "I've been promoted from your fake date to fake girlfriend?"

He huffs, not playing into my humor. "Did Tom Sanders hurt you or say anything else inappropriate to you?"

"I'm fine. What was that all about between you and him?"

"He was trying to taunt me, implying that he's fucked my girlfriend."

I nudge Daxton with my shoulder, still attempting to lift his mood. "I guess that's a *yes* to the fake girlfriend promotion?"

"Jordan..." He groans my name.

"Listen, Tom is a jerk. Don't worry about him."

Daxton scowls, clearly annoyed I haven't denied the accusations about sleeping with Tom.

"Nothing happened between us."

He raises the drink to his mouth and looks away from me, barely convinced. "Regardless, I don't take well to men being a jerk to people I care about. Especially you, Jordan."

Me?

My cheeks tingle at the protectiveness of Daxton's words. At the same time, I'm a little thrown off balance.

Daxton peers back at me when I awkwardly clear my throat. "You okay?" he asks, observing my face. "Sorry, I'm being intense. I can back off."

"No, I don't want you to. I'm just not used to people being so caring. Growing up, my parents..." My mouth grows dry and I stutter, thinking about the emotional scars they've left me with. I take a deep breath to calm myself. "I often need to tell myself not everyone is like my parents and there are genuine people who I can trust in this world."

With another steadying breath, I push away my insecurities and take Daxton's hand in mine. His brow furrows as he looks down at our hands. I'm dying to know what he's thinking. Before I can ask, he twines our fingers and brings the back of my hand to his lips, placing a gentle kiss. Every inch of my skin buzzes at the newness of this intimacy between us. A moment ago, I made a joke about being his fake girlfriend. But the truth is, I don't think there's many fake feelings between either of us.

When Daxton meets my eyes, a softness lies within them. "I'll always care about you, kitten. Would you like to go for a swim with me?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jordan

Daxton picks up a pink flamingo pool float abandoned by the side of the pool and places it in the shallow end of the water, steadying it with his hands. “Hop on.”

“You getting on with me?” I ask, climbing aboard and sitting cross-legged on the flamingo’s back.

“Not enough room for two.” He plunges into the water then grabs the flamingo’s neck and guides me through the other people swimming, directing us toward the pool bridge.

“Fancy. First class service.”

“Only the best for my lady. Watch out, we’re going through the waterfall.”

“Goodbye to my cute hair. Okay, I’m ready.”

He laughs at my joke. I hold my breath and feel the cold stream of water pour over me for a second before we’re beneath the bridge. It’s a little darker in here. We’re alone and I like it. The bridge separates us from the rest of the party, cocooning us in our own world where the trickling of the waterfall on each side of us blocks out the music.

Daxton rests his forearms in front of me on the flamingo’s back, giving me full view of the ink on his shoulders.

“I’m kind of obsessed with your tattoos, but you already know that,” I say, thinking back to my TikTok he watched.

“When did you get them?”

“I got the first one when I was eighteen and have been adding to it ever since.”

“Nice. I got my sleeve when I was eighteen too. Is there any symbolism behind your tattoos?”

He glances at each shoulder and shrugs. “I chose whatever art I liked the look of. But I started getting the ink done as a way of recreating myself from a childhood I want to forget about.”

“Jeez. That’s... kind of intense to drop during a flamingo ride. What didn’t you like about your childhood?”

He answers with a humorless laugh. “How much time do you have to listen?”

“All the time.” I shuffle forward, dangling my legs into the water by Daxton’s body. I want to know everything about him. The good and the bad.

Silence settles between us. From the distant look in Daxton’s eyes, I can tell he’s gone to a dark place. Perhaps this pool party isn’t the best time for such a heavy discussion.

“So, Amabella is pretty nice,” I say.

Daxton breaks away from his deep thoughts and looks up at me. “I wasn’t dismissing the topic of my childhood. You want to know about my past but I don’t even know where to start.”

“Maybe you can start with Amabella. She mentioned something that took me by surprise. I don’t want to overstep my boundaries, but she said you saved her and her daughter from a domestic violence issue.”

A troubled line forms between Daxton’s eyebrows. “I did. My father was abusive toward my mother. Growing up with him has made me in tune with the warning signs of an aggressive man and I could see Amabella was in a dangerous situation with her partner. She often had bruises she tried to conceal. He was controlling and would always gaslight her. He wouldn’t let her have financial independence. I encouraged

Amabella to leave him for years, not only for her safety but her daughter's too. Amabella didn't have any ties to him. He wasn't Ally's father—he'd passed away when Ally was young. Amabella wanted to leave but would never make the final move. Then one night about four years ago..."

Daxton's eyes shut tight as if trying to rid a memory. When he looks back up at me, I see from the pain in his eyes how truly difficult this conversation is for him.

"Amabella turned up on my doorstep in LA and it was the worst I'd ever seen her. There were massive bruises all over her body and she had to be hospitalized. Doctors told me she was lucky to be alive. From there on out, we took legal measures to keep her and Ally safe. I let them live with me. After a few months when Amabella had the confidence to live on her own, I set her and Ally up with permanent residence at The Hawk Grand in New York where they could have a fresh start away from everything. Poor Ally was traumatized by what happened to her mother, but they're both doing well for themselves now."

"My gosh. I don't know what to say." I place my hand on Daxton's to offer support. The gesture barely seems adequate, given the scale of everything he's just shared.

"Jordan, it may appear like I overreacted with Tom Sanders in the cabana, but I can't turn a blind eye to an abusive man. Not after what happened to Amabella, and not after my... childhood." He sighs that last word and rakes a hand through his wet hair.

Right when I think Daxton is about to continue telling me about his childhood, a girl squeals just beyond the waterfall and a large wave travels beneath the bridge, as though someone has cannonballed into the pool. A moment later, a twenty-something-year-old girl with ice-blond hair surfaces beside us, wearing a bikini that barely covers her breasts and has a smile only for Daxton.

"Sorry to interrupt. I'm Katie." The girl winks at him. "I saw you two come in here and wondered if I can get a flamingo ride from you next."

Daxton answers her with a polite smile. “The flamingo is all yours. But you’ll have to find someone else to give you the ride. I’m busy with my girl.”

The next thing I know, Daxton pulls me into the water with him. “Goodbye, Kate.”

The girl glares at me and leaves with the flamingo.

“*Katie*. Not Kate,” I correct Daxton.

“Like I care.” He draws my legs around his waist.

My breath shallows at this new position. I must look like a blushing mess because Daxton chuckles softly, gazing at my hot cheeks. When time catches up with me, I wrap my arms around Daxton’s shoulders.

“You play the role of my girlfriend well,” he whispers.

“It’s not a hard role to act.”

“I like this position better anyway.” He pulls my legs tighter around his firm body, sending tingles low in my belly. The water laps around our shoulders. My face is right in front of his, the two of us level now. “Much better for such a personal conversation.”

All intimacy is lost from his voice, his words turning flat and lifeless as he continues. “My childhood was a hard time. I didn’t have a lot of confidence as a kid. I struggled socially. Was more interested in books and numbers. It led to being bullied. My brother was my only real friend. I loved my parents very much, especially my father. He always took the time to connect with me over my interests. As a family, we were seemingly happy. My parents had money. We lived on the vineyard they owned in California and my parents took pride in teaching us about the business. When I turned thirteen, I realized not everything within my family was as perfect as it seemed. Behind closed doors, my father had anger problems.”

Daxton pauses, his jaw tight as he takes a moment to regroup. My heart breaks for him, knowing this story is only going to get worse.

“I can’t be sure when the violence began because my parents never fought in front of me and my brother. They were good at faking a smile. But I started to notice things like... my mother applying makeup over her bruises. I’d come home or play close to the house and hear them arguing.”

He stops again. I caress his cheek, trying to offer some sense of comfort through his recounting. Torment sits in Daxton’s eyes as he stares at the waterfall, but I remain silent, giving him space to retell the story at his own pace.

“One time when I was fifteen, I watched my parents fight through a crack in the door. My dad slapped my mother so hard that she fell to the ground. I wanted to intervene but I was so shocked that I couldn’t even move. I idolized my father and could barely comprehend that he was capable of harming my mother. He left her on the floor that day, and when I went to help her, she told me it was her fault she’d been hit. That she’d aggravated him and shouldn’t have pushed his boundaries.”

Daxton’s grip tightens around my waist. He swallows hard and continues speaking. “When I was seventeen, there was one night when I came home early from an outing without telling my parents. What I saw... Jordan, I thought the bastard was going to kill my mom. I grabbed a baseball bat and knocked him out with it. I called the police and... well, they took him away. After that night, we never saw him again. He was put behind bars. A few years later we found out he... passed away in there.”

There’s a lump in my throat. It takes me a few seconds before I’m able to find the words to express my sympathy. I pull Daxton into a tight hug, clinging to him in the water. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that. Thank you for telling me.”

Daxton speaks softly against my ear. “We moved on from those years. My mother still owns the vineyard. My brother works closely with her. There were many years where I was close with them. But then... my brother...” He clears his throat. “My family is a painful topic for me. I saved my mother’s life. I was her support network. My brother was my best friend. And then they stabbed me in the back.”

I pull back from the hug to meet Daxton's gaze. "Figuratively?"

Somehow, he manages a slight smile for me. "Yes, Jordan. I have no literal stab wounds."

"Sorry. I just wanted to be sure. What did they do to you?"

He exhales loudly. "I want to share the truth with you. I just... can't. Not yet. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You shared more than I was expecting. I'm really sorry you have so much pain surrounding your family. And here I was thinking I have issues."

Daxton lifts a hand from the water and brushes a piece of hair back from my face. "Now it's your turn. Tell me about your parents."

This moment between me and Daxton is so unexpected. I thought we were spending a fun day at a pool party in The Hamptons, yet here we are, beneath a pool bridge and having one of the most meaningful conversations of my life. I mentioned my alcoholic parents to Steel but never in any depth. Aside from Ryan and Mina because they experienced my parents firsthand, Daxton will be the only person I've ever shared this information with. And it feels right. I know he will take care of the information.

"To keep the story brief, I witnessed a lot of poor behavior at a young age," I tell him. "My parents always prioritized alcohol over me and Ryan. They could barely care for us. They kept promising they would get sober. I'd believe them. Every single time they made the promise, I trusted them and had hope. They *always* let me down. They stole money from me as a kid to buy alcohol. They missed important milestones of mine because they were hungover. They abandoned me for days at a time and I would never know if they were coming back. I'm so messed up because of them."

I pause to take a calming breath, realizing my hands are shaking with nerves. "Eventually, it got to the point where Ryan and I had to cut them out of our lives. I know alcoholism is an illness and you might judge me for cutting out my

parents, but it hurt too much to continue putting ourselves through that heartache. Daxton... my life was full of lies. I *hate* lies and decided I don't have time for dishonest people. Now... thanks to my parents... I have so many trust issues."

By the time I finish explaining myself, the lines of Daxton's face are stiff. Something in his eyes looks almost... panicked. I guess my explanation was a little intense.

I attempt to ease the moment with a smile. "It takes a lot for me to trust someone. I'm really starting to trust you. You helped me out after my apartment fire when you didn't need to. Aside from Mina, I've never had anyone... support me like you have. Amabella said you're a good guy and I can see it's the truth."

Daxton shakes his head slowly. The unease remains written all over his face. "In some ways, yes, I've done good for people. But I've done you wrong and I hate myself for it."

My nose crinkles with confusion and a laugh slips from my mouth. "How have you done me wrong?"

Daxton gently releases my legs from around him. "By introducing you to the world of escorting. That night when we met at Club Noir, I thought... No, I wasn't thinking about anyone except myself. I didn't stop to think that I was introducing an innocent girl to a dangerous world, that things can get out of hand quickly and before you know it, she's escorting several men and doing things she never wanted to."

"Wow," I laugh, shocked that Daxton feels so strongly about my involvement in escorting. And he... thinks I had sex with all those men? Amused, I shrug off his concerns and play with him a little. "When have I ever given off the impression that I'm an innocent girl? And as for those several men, maybe I wanted to have sex with them. Maybe I enjoyed every moment of it."

His gaze turns harsh and I know he doesn't like my answer at all. Jealousy lies within the way he looks at me.

I bite the corner of my lip and grin, kind of enjoying this reaction from him. "For your information, I only ever escorted

you. Oh, and Tom Sanders once because I was short of money. But I didn't sleep with him. There haven't been any other men."

Daxton's eyes widen with surprise. "You're serious? I thought..."

"Yeah, I know what you thought. Your impressions were all wrong."

"Shit, Jordan." He groans, submerging his head beneath the water, then resurfaces with a laugh. "You have no idea how... *relieved* I am to hear that. I was beating myself up about it."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, but I hate the thought of you sleeping with a man you don't want to sleep with. To be honest, I hate the thought of you sleeping with any man."

I chuckle and splash him with water. "Any man, including you?"

One side of his mouth tips up into a grin. "No, kitten, I don't hate that thought at all."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Daxton

I have so many trust issues.

I don't have time for dishonest people.

I cut them out of my life.

I hate lies.

Jordan's words have been on repeat in my head all day, ever since she spoke them in the pool.

It takes a lot for me to trust someone. I'm really starting to trust you.

Fuck. I have screwed up this whole situation with Jordan. *Complicated* doesn't even begin to describe the mess I've gotten myself into. While I knew from Secret Santa that Jordan had issues with her parents, I had no idea of the extent. I didn't realize how scarred she's been or that she stopped speaking to them.

I've got to find some way to tell her the truth about Steel, but I have no clue how. Before today, I anticipated the reveal would be rough. Now, I have no doubt it will mean the end between us. I can't have that happen. I *can't* lose her.

Jordan glances around at our isolated surroundings from where we sit on the side of the pool. "Are we overstaying our welcome?"

The sun has set and the party has died down with the exception of Josh's closest friends lingering throughout the house. Jordan and I are the only ones out by the pool, chatting with our legs dangling in the water.

I check the time on my watch. "Josh doesn't care how long we stay. But it's nine o'clock and we probably should be getting back to the city."

I text my driver to meet us out front. While doing so, Jordan pulls her dress over her bikini and checks her phone. I don't think anything of her actions until my own clothes are on and I'm ready to leave, but her mouth hangs open and her eyes are plastered to her screen.

"Everything okay?"

"My TikTok video got fifty thousand views."

Barely using the app myself, I have no conception of how impressive that number is. Considering Jordan's reaction, I take it this is an achievement for her. "Well done. What's the video about?"

"I posted that aerial dance routine I showed you."

"I'm not surprised, then."

"Daxton, you don't understand, I've never had more than a thousand views on a TikTok before. Even a thousand is rare for me." She squeals and has the cutest grin on her face. "Okay, sorry, let's go."

Jordan walks ahead of me, back into the house with her nose in her phone the whole time. I follow silently behind, stuck in a world of my own. We discussed some pretty heavy details about our pasts today. It was nice to be open with Jordan about my childhood; I never spoke about the domestic violence on Secret Santa. There's so much more I want to share with her—the reason why my relationship fell apart with Mom and Brad—but I can't. Not yet, anyway. I shared those details with her on Secret Santa. She'll piece together that I'm Steel.

A large group of guests are standing by the road when we step out to the front verandah, a clutter of frustrated voices

traveling among them. Cars are dense, all at a standstill in the street.

“What’s going on?” I ask someone passing by. They shrug and continue walking.

Jordan looks up from her phone for the first time in minutes, only now noticing the hold up. She returns her phone to her bag. “What happened?”

I spot Josh and Amabella a few feet away leaning against the veranda railing, the two of them laughing and flirting. It’s nice to see Amabella enjoying herself with a good guy. I don’t want to interrupt them, so I quickly call out from where I stand.

“Hey, what’s the issue with the road?”

They both look my way. Josh takes Amabella’s hand and they join me and Jordan. “There’s been a massive crash,” he says. “A truck rolled over and all the roads are closed. No one’s leaving here until the morning.”

“Shit.”

“You two can stay here for the evening. It’s no issue.”

“Fun. More time for us to all hang out,” Amabella says before any of us have a chance to discuss accommodation arrangements. “Speaking of which, Dax, I need to steal you away for a moment.” She winks at Jordan then grabs me by the sleeve, guiding me to the far end of the veranda. “I promise I’ll have him right back by your side.”

“No rush.” Jordan turns to Josh and starts chatting with him about the day.

“Everything all right?” I ask Amabella once we’re out of earshot. “How are things going with Josh?”

“Really well. I like him a lot. Things might progress to the next level with him tonight, if you know what I mean.”

“Good to hear. Just make sure *I* don’t hear it later tonight.”

She laughs, pushing my shoulder. “How about you and Jordan? What’s the latest update?”

I lean both forearms on the railing and sigh, gazing out at the night. “Not good. I mean... we’re getting along great. I definitely fixed her impression of the Daxton side of me and I was planning to tell her the truth about Steel this weekend. But today... Shit. Jordan opened up to me about some really personal details. I had no idea until today how traumatic her upbringing was and—” I groan, unable to put words to the shitstorm I’ve found myself in.

Keeping my voice low, I scratch my jaw in irritation and continue the explanation. “In simple terms, Jordan has severe trust issues and has cut important people out of her life for lying to her. I thought mending Jordan’s impression of me would make the truth about Steel easier for her to hear, but I was wrong. I was so *fucking* wrong. Amabella, I’ve screwed up so much. I should have been honest with her from the start and just hoped we could work out our issues. Now...”

I groan again, reining in my temper and stopping my voice from growing too loud. “I’ve lied to Jordan by omission and once the truth comes out, it will trigger past traumas for her. Today she told me she’s really starting to trust me and that trust doesn’t come easily for her. Instead of being pleased, all I felt was guilt because I know this bond we’ve recently formed will feel fake to Jordan when I tell her the truth. She’ll cut me out too. I know it.”

Amabella leans against the railing with me. “Okay, this definitely complicates things. But you can’t keep lying to her.”

“Obviously,” I drone.

“How are you going to tell her the truth?”

“I don’t know.” I close my eyes and press my fingers to my temples. “I’ve got no fucking clue what I’m doing with Jordan.”

“Hey, guys,” Josh calls out, heading toward us with Jordan by his side.

I lift my forearms from the railing and stand tall, wiping the tension from my face. When I look at Jordan, I find her eyes already on me and she’s smiling. All that passes through

my mind is that I'm going to miss that smile so damn much once the truth is out.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Josh says. “I’m running numbers in my head. There are more people needing a bed than I expected. Jordan, Daxton, you two are good to share a room, right?”

Jordan gasps, her cheeks instantly red. “What’s the bed situation?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jordan

Of course there's only one bed.

It must be some kind of universal law that when there's sexual tension between a guy and girl, they have to be placed in even closer proximity. All the confidence I've previously felt around Daxton has vanished and I'm basically hyperventilating as we walk into our room. While there's clearly something between us and I've been letting myself get carried away with these new feelings of infatuation, there's no denying that sharing a bed with Daxton is a dangerous move. Afterall, I *am* working for him. He's technically my boss and blurring the line of professionalism is foolish.

Luck is not on my side tonight. The room is the size of a shoebox, for God's sake. Even the bed is tiny. We're in a luxurious Hamptons mansion, and of course we get the one room that has a double bed. No queen or king size.

"Would you like to freshen up first?" Daxton asks, the polite tone making me wonder if he too is nervous.

"Sure." The word squeaks out of my mouth. Clutching my bag, I head for the adjoining bathroom. It doesn't take me long to wash up, and when I step back into the bedroom, I find Daxton reclined on one side of the bed, busy typing something on his phone.

Do I... join him? Visions enter my mind, of the two of us sitting in an awkward silence next to each other, avoiding the

elephant in the room of sex. Maybe I'm overthinking this whole thing. Maybe Daxton isn't nervous at all and sex hasn't entered his mind once since entering this room.

Deciding to just get this over with, I clear my throat. "Bathroom's free."

Daxton looks up from the screen, every inch of his body frozen the second he sees me. My muscles tighten, along with my breasts, hot under his gaze. I realize a moment later why he's looking at me like that, and give an awkward laugh, peering down. I'm wearing his shirt. My bare legs are on display. All I have on beneath the oversized white shirt is a pair of panties, no bra, which I'm certain he's noticed from my peaked nipples. The look in Daxton's eyes is sordid as he drags his teeth along his bottom lip.

Debate solved. Daxton *definitely* has sex on his mind. The realization makes me squeeze my thighs together. His gaze follows, lowering to my legs.

"Ah... I didn't bring anything to sleep in and I'll need to wear my dress again tomorrow," I tell him. "Your shirt was in my bag. I hope you don't mind me wearing it."

"Of course not. You look good in it."

I *feel* good in it. His scent is all around me, intoxicating spice, leather, and all *man*.

"Uh... All right, I should shower," he says.

Daxton is quick to take the bathroom, his shoulder brushing against mine as he passes, sending a thrill through me. The door closes behind him and it's not long before I hear the shower running. Memories of that *other* shower return to me. Daxton's deep groan. His muscles flexing. His... cock.

Fuck. There's no way I'm going to survive this night.

My phone rings, pulling me from the heated visuals. "Hey, what's up?" I answer, seeing Mina's caller ID and thankful for the distraction.

"Just checking in. I saw some photos of you and Daxton at a party in The Hamptons. Looked like fun. How was it?"

“I’m still here. There was a bad crash and the roads are closed. We’re sleeping at Daxton’s friend’s house tonight.”

“Oh, okay. Any word from Steel yet?”

Mention of Steel brings a frown to my face. Despite being angry at the way he disappeared on me, it doesn’t change that I miss him. He hasn’t replied to me in weeks, and yet I still check Secret Santa every day, hopeful. “I haven’t heard from him.”

“Ouch. I’m sorry.”

“Can we please not talk about him right now.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m really calling to tell you two things. I found a book you’ll love and sent it to your Kindle.”

“What’s it called?”

“That’s a surprise.” The amusement in her voice makes me suspicious.

“Okay...? What’s it about?”

“That’s also a surprise. It’s better if you go in blind. All I’ll share is that Darius told me about the book. It’s one of these stories where you can insert your own name as the main character before purchasing the book. The second thing I’m calling about is that Zac and I are throwing a party at our place on Wednesday night. Bring Daxton with you so we can meet him.”

“Daxton is leaving New York tomorrow.”

“So? You said he’s got a private jet. Ask him if he’ll fly back for the party.”

I sit on the edge of the bed and sigh. “Mina, I’m not asking him to fly somewhere for a few hours so my friends can grill him.”

“We’re not going to grill Daxton. We want to know him. You said you would introduce me to him and that still hasn’t happened. Just ask him, okay? No harm done. If he says no, we’ll arrange another get-together.”

“Ugh, fine. I’ll ask him.”

“Yes!” she squeals. “Okay, this is going to be so much fun. I’m assigning him the role of Dracula. You’re Dracula’s wife. We’ll all be going overboard with our costumes so tell him the pressure is on.”

“What are you talking about? A costume party? There’s no fucking way, Mina.”

“Oh, did I not mention it’s a murder mystery party? The theme is supernatural.”

I laugh beneath my breath. This is so typical of Mina. “If there’s one thing more embarrassing than a costume party, it’s a murder mystery party. Please tell me there’s not going to be cringy acting we have to get involved in?”

“There will be acting. Babe, it will be fun. Invite him. Bye. Oh, and read the book!” She hangs up before I can argue or find an excuse to back out of the party.

While I wait for Daxton to finish in the bathroom, I grab my Kindle and climb into bed. A second later, when I find the book Mina sent me, I can’t resist laughing at the title. *Octodick: an erotic monster romance between Jordan Hart and a half-man, half-octopus.*

But what was meant to be a nice day swimming in the ocean turned into Jordan’s worst nightmare when something slimy wrapped around her ankle and pulled her deep below the surface. Jordan kicked and squirmed with determination to be freed but it was no use. The mysterious sea creature dragged her farther into the depths of the ocean. She held onto her breath for dear life, but when the creature showed itself, every last ounce of air shot out of Jordan’s lungs in desire. This was no ordinary sea creature but a beast. A beautiful beast.

He was man on top, muscular and handsome with chiseled cheek bones and long black hair, with even darker eyes. Below, he was octopus. Except those weren’t ordinary tentacles. The beast had eight throbbing cocks that danced around him in the

water, looking for a hole to enter. Jordan knew in that moment that she wanted to be that hole. No, she needed to be that hole.

“What are you grinning at?”

I yelp at the sound of Daxton’s voice, never having heard him open the bathroom door. And, Jesus Christ, he’s not wearing a shirt. Of course he isn’t, I took his only clean one. His dark hair is damp and tousled from the shower. How the hell am I meant to sleep next to him looking like that?

“Ah... I wasn’t grinning at anything.” I switch my Kindle into sleep mode and shove it under my pillow. The last thing I want is Daxton discovering a book about me and this Octodick dude.

“What’s your book about?”

“Nothing. Um... How was your shower?”

Daxton studies me for a long moment, no doubt seeing my rosy cheeks. His lips twitch with amusement. “You were reading porn, weren’t you?”

“It wasn’t porn.”

He climbs onto his side of the bed and reaches beneath my pillow for the Kindle, but I clutch his wrist in panic and push him away, mentally kicking myself for disabling the passcode feature.

Daxton’s eyes meet mine and a devilish smirk plays on his lips. “Now I *need* to know what you were reading.”

He overpowers my grip on his wrist.

“No, stop!” I squeal, laughing as I fight off his next attempt to grab the e-reader. Daxton is stronger than me, though, and grabs the damn thing, so I push him onto his back and climb on top of him, wrestling the Kindle out of his hands.

As soon as I grab the device, I realize the position I’m in, straddling Daxton’s chest with my crotch only inches from his face. His shirt has risen up around my thighs, revealing my lacy panties. I’m on all fours and my breasts are right above his line of vision.

I climb off him, composing myself. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to, ah…”

“Sit on my face?”

“Yeah, that.”

He grins. “Come on, show me the story. I’m not giving up. I want to know what kind of books you like.”

I roll my eyes and pass Daxton the Kindle, instantly regretting the decision once he gets his first proper look at the device. There are two stickers on the front—two comedic stickers melded to the plastic that Mina stuck on when we still lived together but that I’ve learned to ignore. The first is a cartoon dick wearing a merkin. The second is a cartoon dick and balls wearing sunglasses and a hat.

“I didn’t put those stickers there,” I rush to clarify. “Mina did and I can’t get them off.”

“Sure. Blame Mina.”

“It’s the truth!”

“I’ll buy you a new Kindle if you want, but I have to advise against that. These stickers are invaluable.”

“Oh, you’ll *love* the book you caught me reading.”

I receive another teasing grin from him. “Let me guess, you’re going to blame Mina for the book?”

“She sent it to me!”

Daxton opens the Kindle and the first thing we both see is a massive *CHAPTER 2: DICKS. DICKS EVERYWHERE.*

“I *knew* you were reading porn. *Octodick: an erotic monster romance between Jordan Hart and a half-man, half-octopus.*” Daxton side-eyes me, holding back a laugh.

I’m the one who cracks with laughter, my face molten with embarrassment. “I swear this is all Mina’s doing.”

“I believe you. But now I have to know what happens between you and this Octodick monster. *Jordan’s body burned in two places, but she wasn’t sure which sensation was more*

dominant: the burning in her lungs as they begged for air, or the ache between her legs which burned to be full of the monster's octocock—"

"Oh my God!" I giggle, covering my face with my palms. "Do *not* read that aloud."

"Then, when Jordan could fight against her lack of oxygen no more, she opened her mouth. But instead of the gulp of water she expected, a dick tentacle torpedoed deep into her mouth and ejaculated oxygen into her lungs."

Despite my protests, Daxton sinks into the pillows at the headboard, making himself comfortable as he continues reading, chuckling every few words.

"Jordan sucked on the dick tentacle and with each suck she found life. It was like breathing from the mouthpiece of scuba diving equipment. So she sucked and she sucked, and it was not lost on her how the beautiful monster's body squirmed with pleasure. His eyes rolled back in his head and that was the last she saw of his face. His hands clawed through her hair, pushing her mouth farther onto the dick tentacle, her eyes watering as she deep-throated the beautiful beast."

I'm not sure how, but at some point during those last few sentences of the book, all traces of laughter have disappeared from the room and I'm left breathless from the deep and erotic tone of Daxton's voice as he reads each word. The book may be comical, but the fact that *Daxton* is reading a sex scene to me...

I'm turned on. Even more turned on when a smirk curls his lips as he describes me sucking a monster's dick. All I can think about is sucking Daxton's—

Stop. Those... *desires* aren't appropriate. This story has gone down such a bizarre tangent that I'm half convinced Daxton is ad-libbing to tease me.

"You can't be serious. It does *not* say that deep-throating part."

"It does, kitten."

“Let me see.” I stretch for the Kindle but Daxton holds it out of my reach. The only way I can grab it is if I lean across his naked chest, which I will *not* do.

“In one lightning-fast motion, all of Jordan’s clothes were ripped off by the seven unoccupied dick tentacles. Before Jordan could contemplate anything, one of the dicks thrust deep inside her pussy and began working fast to relieve that burning ache of hers. But six tentacles were left unoccupied, leaving the beast with much desire.”

Fire ripples through me, all the way down to my clit as Daxton describes me getting fucked. Again, all I can think about is *Daxton* fucking me. A slickness has formed between my thighs and I’m confident my panties are soaked.

“A tentacle shot into either of her hands, and she began pumping with all her might. Two more came to her bare chest, the heads tickling her nipples. Two unsatisfied dicks remained, so another one of them burrowed its way inside her pussy that was already being fucked. Two dicks in one hole. The last dick swam for Jordan’s ass—”

I snatch the Kindle from Daxton’s unsuspecting grasp. “That’s where I draw the line. I’m not sure I’ve ever been more embarrassed in my life.” Or turned on. Not one clear thought is traveling through my mind and all I want is for Daxton to relieve this ache in my groin.

His tongue glides along his top teeth as he examines me. “You sure you’re embarrassed?” When I don’t reply, he chuckles. “Oh, come on, kitten. The story was just warming up.”

“We should go to sleep.” I place the Kindle on my bedside table and turn my lamp off. The room dims, all but for the glow of Daxton’s lamp on his side table. I pull the blanket up to my waist and rest my head on the pillow, wondering how I’m ever going to lower my body temperature and relax in this bed.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m all hot and bothered by *Octodick*. There’s no way I can fall asleep.”

I swat his leg and manage a laugh. “Shut up.”

Daxton slides beneath the covers and turns to face me, propped up on his forearm. “Jokes aside, what kind of books do you like to read?”

I roll away from him. “Goodnight.”

“Wait, is it books like *Octodick*?”

“No.”

“Then why won’t you answer the question?”

“Fine. I read romance.”

“I knew it! You read porn.”

“Not all romance novels are porn.” I roll back to face him, my voice growing feisty as I get defensive about my reading choices. “And so what if I do read porn? It’s better than watching it, like I’m sure you do. Men in romance books are better than real life and give me better orgasms than any real man can.”

Daxton’s eyes widen a touch. The smartass he was a moment ago vanishes into something shocked. “You...?”

“What, you’re all nervous now that I mention I’ve touched myself?”

“I’m not nervous. I’m... turned on by the thought of you doing that.”

His words make the muscles at the top of my thighs quiver. I clench my legs together, shuddering from the burst of heat that spreads through me. The excitement.

“I guess you just haven’t met the right guy yet. Trust me, Jordan, sex with the right person is better than anything you can get from reading a book.”

The intense way his eyes hold me, and his deep voice which speaks such intimate words, catches me off guard. Before I can find my voice, Daxton turns his lamp off, leaving us with only a trickle of moonlight streaming in through the window.

The darkness surrounding us amplifies all my senses and I notice every little thing about Daxton. The warmth emanating from his large body. Each breath he takes. Suddenly, the bed feels even smaller. There's no sleep for me tonight, not after this conversation and knowing Daxton is right beside me with no shirt on.

An hour passes. Maybe two, still with no sleep. The earlier slickness between my thighs has only intensified. Not once has my groin stopped aching. I roll over to face Daxton, watching the back of his shoulders rise and fall in a steady rhythm. Does he feel the tension between us as much as I do? My guess is no. He hasn't moved in a long time, so he must be sleeping. But curiosity gets the best of me.

"Daxton?" I whisper.

"Yes?" The deep word is thrilling, his voice not even the slightest bit tarnished by sleep.

"Just checking if you're asleep."

"Clearly not."

There are professional grounds I *know* I should maintain with Daxton. He's paying me and I shouldn't get involved with him, physically or emotionally. But it's too late for the latter. And I can't recall ever wanting a man's touch more than I want Daxton's right now. I don't know where I find this surge of reckless confidence, but everything in me succumbs to the tension that's been building between us for weeks and I reach out, stroking a finger over the silhouette of Daxton's lat muscle. His breathing ceases.

"Jordan, that's a dangerous move."

"Maybe I want to be dangerous. I can't sleep because of you."

He rolls toward me, his movements so quick I have no time to comprehend how we arrive in this new position. Daxton hovers above me on his hands and his hips have slid between my legs. I gasp, feeling how hard he is through the fabric of our clothes, his cock pressed to my wetness. My legs

wrap around his waist and he thrusts against my clit, drawing a moan from me.

“Fuck,” he hisses, the sound filled with both pain and pleasure. “There’s a difference between us, Jordan. You want me because you’re sexually frustrated. For you, this moment is sparked by spontaneity. As for me, I want all of you. Your body. Your mind. I want you fucking obsessed with me the way I am so unbelievably obsessed with you. The day will come when I do fuck you, Jordan. I promise you that. When that day arrives, I won’t be able to *stop* fucking you. But I can’t cross that line with you yet.”

“Why?” I beg.

“It will... complicate things.”

I open my mouth to clarify Daxton’s meaning, but he thrusts again, eliciting a blissful cry from me as I arch my back.

He smirks, glancing at the door then back down at me. “You want people to hear you?” His dick grinds into me again. Another flare of heat builds in my groin, growing an orgasm and making me ache for more. From the smug look on Daxton’s face, I can tell he’s enjoying this, teasing me with what I want.

“I might already be obsessed with you.” My hips lift up, searching for the friction of Daxton’s erection.

He grants my desire and thrusts along my panties again, only this time, I feel his muscles tremble above me and his breath shudders. The darkness in his eyes as he looks at me is fueled by all the things he wants to do to me. Things I want too.

“Please,” I beg.

“Please what?”

“Touch me. Kiss me. *Anything*, because this is torture.”

“Good. I want this to be torture for you. I want you to need me as much as I need you.”

My hips lift again, needing to feel his hardness. He meets them with another thrust.

“That’s it, Jordan. Get yourself off on my dick. You have no idea how much I love watching you. I could watch you forever. I thought the sight of you dancing on that aerial hoop for me was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. But this moment wins by far, having you breathless beneath me and desperate for my cock.”

Another moan leaves my lips when I hear how much Daxton desires me. The rasp of his voice itself brings me closer to the edge. I’ve never been with a man who speaks during sex, let alone talks the way Daxton is right now.

“Don’t stop talking like that,” another plea leaves my lips.

“Like what?”

“The dirty talk.”

“Jordan, if you think this is dirty talk...” A groan vibrates through his body as he thrusts. “My mind is in the *fucking* gutter with all the things I plan on doing to you.”

His words send my pussy tighter, my movements growing more frenzied with an approaching orgasm. I’m out of my mind, wildly grinding against him and gripping onto the bedsheets. My body undulates in uncontrolled motions as I get closer to release.

Before letting the orgasm consume me, I gaze up at Daxton’s face, needing to know what he’s thinking. All I see is that obsession he spoke of earlier, and when we make eye contact, my inner muscles tighten beyond belief until I reach the mind-blowing edge. My delicate muscles spasm around nothing, just the fantasy of Daxton’s cock inside me. Even with the emptiness, I’ve never felt anything this intense in my life.

My moans are uncontrollable as my orgasm rolls on, growing stronger and stronger. The heat of Daxton’s eyes remains on me the whole time and I love it. He continues to thrust, working my orgasm. My God, I wish he was inside me. I wish he was coming in me, bare, with no barrier between us.

When I finally come back down to earth, my breathing is labored and I'm exhausted. Daxton holds himself above me with a slight glisten of sweat to his skin and a gaze that devours me. His cock is still hard between my legs. Desperate to know what he looks and sounds like when coming, I reach down to feel him, but he grabs my wrist before I have the chance to wrap my hand around him.

"Tonight isn't about me," he says.

"You have good self-restraint."

He laughs, the sound laced with a hint of something bitter that I don't understand. "Trust me, I have *terrible* self-restraint. I shouldn't have done any of this with you, but I couldn't resist seeing you like that."

A frown finds me. "You're saying you regret—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence. And get rid of that frown. I don't regret anything. Doesn't change that it shouldn't have happened."

He's right. I knew we shouldn't have crossed this line when money is involved. But that's a problem for another day. Nothing has felt more right than the emotional connection we've formed and expressing that bond physically.

He raises the knuckles of my right hand to his lips and presses soft kisses to my skin. It's such a simple yet intimate gesture that I'm certain would make me blush if I weren't flushed already.

Daxton returns to his side of the bed and pulls me flush against his body, the two of us face to face. He hitches my leg over his waist, his cock still hard and throbbing against my groin, then twirls a finger through my hair and places a kiss on my forehead. "Sleep, kitten."

Somehow, I follow Daxton's command and relax in the warmth of his arms. As I drift off to sleep, one thing lingers on my mind. Daxton was right. The orgasm he gave me was better than any orgasm I've received from a book, and we haven't even had sex yet.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Daxton

For the entire drive back to the city, Jordan rests her head on my chest in the back seat of the car, cocooned beneath my arm. Nothing ruins this moment, not even the incoming call from my brother. I ignore him and enjoy my time with Jordan. The two of us don't speak a word but there's a new closeness between us, an intimacy ever since waking in each other's arms.

An intimacy based on a lie.

That realization pulls me back from bliss.

I don't have time for dishonest people.

I cut them out of my life.

I don't know what I was thinking, bringing Jordan to Josh's party and grinding up against her in bed. I *wasn't* thinking, at least not with my head. The only thing redeemable about the situation is that I didn't sleep with her. I need to keep my dick in my pants.

Don't have sex with Jordan.

Don't kiss her.

I tell myself it's a good thing I'm heading back to LA for the week. Even so, I can't bring myself to release Jordan from my arms. I can't stop smiling at everything she says and treating her like she's my girl.

Our car arrives at The Hawk Grand Hotel and the driver opens the backseat door. Holding Jordan's hand, I help her onto the pavement.

While the driver retrieves our belongings from the trunk, I pull Jordan aside and stroke my hands through her hair. "Staying at The Hamptons last night has made my schedule tight today. I have to say goodbye to you here and head straight to my flight."

"Oh, okay." Jordan's smile drops and she looks down.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's fine. I just... thought I still had a few hours with you. I had a good time with you this weekend and don't want you to leave."

God, I love the sound of those words. "Yeah?"

"Will you... call me again every night?"

"Of course. I'll see you next Friday." By then, I *need* to figure out a way to tell Jordan the truth without losing her.

I desperately want to kiss Jordan goodbye. Instead, I go for the next best thing and lift her hand to my lips, then head back to the car.

"Daxton?"

I turn to face Jordan, intrigued by the nervous smile she wears.

"Before you go, um, Mina wanted me to ask you something. Look, she's pretty protective of me. She doesn't like this escorting deal between us." Jordan cringes at those words, and I know it has to be because of the closeness we've formed. I don't like the sound of them either and make a mental note to end this business arrangement the two of us have... once I figure out how to make her my honest girlfriend.

"So, anyway," Jordan continues, speaking faster this time. She enters a full-on ramble, and I must admit it's kind of cute. "Mina said she wants to meet you so she can scope you out and hopefully feel at ease about me being with you. So, ah..."

she asked me to invite you to a party she's hosting. It's this Wednesday night. I told her it was pointless for me to ask you to attend the party because you won't be in town. But she insisted I ask. Well, this is me asking you. I know it's stupid, so forget it—"

"Sure, I'll be there."

Her lips part on a surprised, "What?"

Fuck, what am I doing saying yes to the invitation? Spending more time with Jordan will only make it harder to tell her the truth. But seeing her so nervous... I don't have it in me to turn her down. "I have a few meetings but I'll rearrange my schedule to be at the party."

"Seriously?"

I grin. "Seriously. What kind of party is it? Cocktail? A dinner party?"

"This is the part that's kind of embarrassing. It's a murder mystery party."

My grin broadens. "Why is that embarrassing?"

"Because you don't seem like the kind of guy who would be seen at a murder mystery party."

"For your information, *Knives Out* is my favorite movie. I've always wanted to attend a murder mystery party. Who do I need to dress up as?"

"Ah... Mina said the party has a supernatural theme and we need to put a lot of effort into our costumes. You're Dracula and I'm Dracula's wife."

A smirk glides over my lips at those details. "My wife. And we're vampires. This Mina girl has taste. *Octodick* and now this. I have a feeling I'm going to like her a lot."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jordan

“It’s eight o’clock. How much longer will Daxton be?” Mina asks me, walking around her living room and serving drinks to everyone, dressed as a zombie nurse.

“I don’t know. His flight was late and he’s stuck in traffic. I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

“I hope so because these murder mystery games take hours to play. We’ll be up till three a.m. at this rate. We’ve put too much effort into this party for it to go to waste.”

“The party won’t go to waste,” I tell her.

Mina wasn’t kidding when she said they were going all out on this party. I spent the day here with Mina and Zac, helping them transform their apartment into a haunted castle. The living room is lit only by the flickering of candles and there are cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. I’ve already stepped on Mr. Fluffy three times because Mina bought a fog machine that covers the floor in five inches of fog, making it impossible to see the little guy.

I’m still convinced this party will be embarrassing, but as I look around the living room at everyone chatting on the couches, I can’t deny all the costumes are incredible. Zac sits next to me with both arms spread over the couch backrest, his costume matching Mina as a zombie doctor. Across from us, Verena is perched on her husband Adrian’s lap, the pair of them dressed as Egyptian mummies. *Sexy couture Egyptian*

mummies. Then there's Darius and his boyfriend Victor on a third couch, fiddling with the eerie music that's playing, dressed as wizards.

A text from Daxton arrives on my phone, letting me know he's here. "Ah! The doorman let Daxton in and he's on his way up. I'm nervous."

"Why?" Mina asks.

Adrian smirks while twirling Verena's hair with one finger. "Mina, please. Because she likes him, obviously."

Mina huffs at me. "I thought you said there was nothing going on between you two and that your relationship is professional."

I shrug, having omitted details about the constant text messaging and phone calls between me and Daxton, along with the orgasm he gave me. "I guess I haven't had a chance to fill you in, but um... yeah, I like him now. We've been getting along really well."

"You told me you would be smart with this guy. He's paying you—"

"Can you just... stop talking. I know all of this, babe."

Before she can argue, there's a knock on the door. Mina makes a beeline for the door but I rush past her to open it, wanting to get to Daxton before she does.

And holy shit. He's dressed as a handsome Dracula in a tuxedo and black cape. His brown hair is smoothed back, emphasizing the strong lines of his cheekbones and jaw.

Daxton grins at me, and I realize I'm smiling at him too. The two of us are standing in the doorway, taking in the sight of each other as if it's been far longer than three days since we were last together.

"Hey, kitten." Daxton's gaze finally breaks from mine, examining the corset dress I'm wearing as Dracula's wife, and he wolf whistles. "Very beautiful. I missed you." The greeting hug that follows sends a flutter through my stomach. Daxton lifts me off my feet and squeezes me tight.

“I missed you too. Hey, guess what,” I bust out as soon as I’m back on my feet, having been excited to share this news with Daxton all day. “You know my TikTok video that did well? It’s up to three hundred thousand views.”

“Incredible.”

Mina shouts out to me from in the living room. “Babe, what? You didn’t tell me. That’s amazing.”

“I was going to tell you,” I call to her, then turn back to Daxton. “Come and meet my friends.” I lead him by the hand into the living room where everyone stands for his arrival. “Hey, everyone. This is Daxton, my um…”

“Boyfriend?” Darius offers.

I send him a glare and he grins back at me.

Zac takes the lead, holding out his hand for Daxton to shake. “Hey, it’s nice to officially meet you. I’m Zac.”

“Likewise,” Daxton tells him.

Mina introduces herself next, keeping her distance but offering a welcoming smile. “Hi, I’m Mina.”

“Honestly, you need no introduction. Jordan doesn’t stop talking about you.” He passes Zac a bottle of wine. “My way of saying thanks for the invite.”

Zac reads the label, his eyebrows rising. “1989. Fancy.”

“What can I say? I grew up on a vineyard.”

When the introduction with Mina and Zac wraps up, I gesture to everyone else. “This is Verena and her husband, Adrian. And Darius and his boyfriend, Victor.”

They all shake hands and share a few words, then Mina says to everyone, “Not to be a bitch and interrupt the conversations, but we need to get this murder mystery started. Follow me to the dining room.”

Daxton takes my hand and we follow everyone out of the living room. Ahead of us, I see Verena enter the dining room first. She yelps at something and jumps back into Adrian’s arms, laughing in hysterics a moment later.

“Jesus, Mina,” Adrian laughs. “I didn’t realize how over the top you were going with this party.”

I have no clue what could be so startling. I helped decorate the dining room and all that’s in there is a circular seance table that we’ll be dining on with an assortment of crystal balls, tarot cards, and other divination tools as a centerpiece.

Daxton and I file into the living room next, and then I see it, the guy lying on the table pretending to be dead with a fake knife sticking out of his heart.

“Babe,” I laugh. “You hired an actor?”

The doorbell rings, followed by aggressive banging.

“Correction,” Mina says. “I hired multiple actors. Let me check who’s at the door.” She winks at us then heads for the front door, reappearing with a police officer.

He’s a thick, burly man and shouts at all of us. “Sit down, you motherfuckers. There’s been a murder here and no one is leaving this apartment until the culprit is found.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Daxton

“The victim’s penis was found behind the refrigerator.”

Everyone cracks up laughing as Verena reads the clue. With a few glasses of wine in everyone—except me and Jordan, because if she’s not drinking, neither am I—and with the erotic humor of this game, none of us have stopped laughing for the last two hours.

“Not only that,” Verena continues. “The penis was found with two puncture marks and drained of all blood.”

“Vampires!” Darius shouts, pointing across the seance table to where Jordan and I sit.

Jordan leans into me, giggling. “I’m so sorry, I had no idea this party would be so strange.”

“Are you kidding me?” My left hand rests on her thigh and I give a gentle squeeze. “This is hilarious. I’m having so much fun.”

Mina stands from the table, adjusting the blood-splattered belt of her zombie nurse costume. “Okay, let’s take a ten-minute break while I make us some refreshments. Daxton, will you help me in the kitchen?”

“Real subtle,” Jordan mutters.

“I’d love to help.” I place my napkin on the table.

Jordan cringes, giving me an apologetic smile. “Sorry in advance if she says anything harsh.”

“Everything will be fine.” I follow Mina to the kitchen, leaving behind the hum of group chatter.

Like the rest of this apartment, the kitchen is nice, with marble bench tops, gourmet appliances, and an island counter. Mina places a set of crystal glasses on a tray and grabs cocktail ingredients from the fridge.

Before mixing any drinks, she folds her arms and faces me. “All right, motherfucker.” Her words are stern, impersonating the police officer, but she can’t hold character and laughs. “What are your intentions with Jordan?”

I lean back against the counter and tuck my hands into my pockets. “Ah, the classic best friend interrogating the guy. Jordan is special. I like her a lot.”

“Okay, but why? She told me about that first date you two had. You said Jordan isn’t your type. What changed between you two?”

I rub the back of my neck in contemplation, deciding to speak as much of the truth as I can. “We talked. That’s as simple as it is. Things just clicked and I realized how much I like her. She is *exactly* my type. We talk all the time—when I’m in New York, when I’m out of town. I got to know her and I love what I see.”

“And has she explained who Steel is?”

Shit. I should have known this topic would come up. “Yeah.”

“But has she told you she’s in love with him and how upset she’s been by his absence?”

I sigh, the fun of this party being wiped away at the reminder that I’m in over my head with Jordan. “Yes.”

“And what do you think of all that? You’re pursuing a girl who is in love with another man.”

“I’m hoping she likes reality better than fantasy.”

“But you’re *paying* for her. That’s not healthy if you both like each other—”

“I know.” I cringe while speaking the words. “Jordan and I haven’t had a chance to discuss the money situation yet. Things between us have happened kind of fast. But I plan to take her on a real date sometime soon. I want to call Jordan my girlfriend and know that none of it is fake or based on money. Things are just... complicated between us at the moment.”

“Well, sort them out, because damn... Jordan is happy tonight. I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen her this happy around a guy.”

Seriously?

Hearing Jordan’s closest friend admit such a thing brings a smile to my lips and spreads warmth through my chest.

Mina points to the dining room with her thumb. “Okay, come on, let’s get back to the party.”

I nod at the empty drink glasses in front of her. “What about the refreshments?”

She grins. “You know as well as everyone else at the party that this visit to the kitchen was never about refreshments.”

Chapter Thirty

Jordan

I can't stop fidgeting and sending nervous glances toward the kitchen the entire time Daxton and Mina are gone. The group has dispersed from the dining table with the men chatting in Zac's office, leaving me and Verena to our own conversation on the living room couch.

"What's taking Mina so long?"

"Calm down," Verena tells me. "They haven't even been gone for five minutes."

"Okay, but what do you think is happening in there? What could they possibly be talking about?"

"You, obviously."

Footsteps approach and my gaze darts back to the kitchen, finding Daxton and Mina's return.

"Hey. Everything all good?" I ask them.

"Of course," Daxton says, fog swirling around the hem of his cape as he walks my way.

"It looks like the men are in the office." Mina speaks with the least bit of subtlety again. "It's right through that door, Daxton."

"Hint taken." He veers left, winking at me. "I'll see you soon."

I send a sharp look at Mina as she sits with me and Verena, squishing me in the middle. “What did you say to him?”

“It was a nice chat. Nothing bad.”

“So, are you convinced Daxton is a good guy?”

“I thought he would be a jerk but he’s not. I like him.” She leans into me and lowers her voice. “Babe, I think Daxton is into you. Like, *really* into you.”

“I agree,” Verena adds. “I’ve been watching him since he arrived and his eyes are always on you. He’s always close to you and finding some way to touch you.”

“Very true,” Mina says. “My only concern is the money thing. You said it yourself—money and friends don’t mix. Well, neither do money and romantic relationships.”

I nod. “Yeah, we have some things to discuss.”

“How do *you* feel about *him*?” Verena asks.

The question brings back memories of my night with Daxton in The Hamptons. I haven’t been able to *stop* thinking about that night and how hot it was.

I want you fucking obsessed with me the way I am so unbelievably obsessed with you.

The memory of Daxton’s deep voice speaking those words above me travels straight to my clit.

“To put it simply... I’m obsessed.” Both girls squeal at my confession, urging me to continue. I hit them both across the arm, laughing. “Will you two shut up. He’s going to hear you.”

“Sorry,” Mina whispers. “I’m just excited for you, babe. We need to know everything.”

Everything? She’ll hear all the details with time. She always does. But right now, my night at The Hamptons remains a secret I’m not ready to share. So, I settle for something more tame.

“Other than Steel, Daxton is the first guy I’ve been interested in since... I honestly can’t remember. It’s been

years. Things started off rocky between us, but Daxton made up for it in so many ways. I feel like I can trust him. You know how important trust is for me. And you know what, Daxton makes me forget about Steel. Whenever something exciting happens to me, Steel isn't the first person I want to tell anymore. It's Daxton."

"Clearly. He even gets priority over me," Mina teases, speaking across me to Verena. "She spends the whole day with me preparing for this party, and yet Daxton is the first one she tells about her viral TikTok."

I laugh her comment off. "The TikTok thing isn't massive news. Three hundred thousand views is amazing for my standards, but in the big picture it's not viral."

"Have you kissed him?" Verena whispers.

I shake my head, feeling a little deflated at the answer.

"Babe, make that shit happen," Mina says.

"Believe me, I want to. I *will* kiss him. But also..." My lips press together in contemplation. "I know I just said Steel has moved to the back of my mind. He hasn't spoken to me in a while but we *do* have history. I just keep thinking... am I really meant to forget about him?"

"Yes," Mina says. "That's *exactly* what you're meant to do. Look, you know I was president of the Steel and Jordan fan club, but he *has* been a massive cockhead by leading you on, asking to meet you, then ghosting you the moment you agreed."

Verena laughs. "Who even says cockhead?"

"I do." Mina proudly tosses her pink hair over one shoulder. "And that's beside the point. Jordan, go for Daxton. He's right in front of you and likes you a lot. Sort out the money issues then make a move on him and text me when you two finally kiss and hook up."

"Like how you told me when you and Zac hooked up? Because as I recall, you kept that a secret for a while."

She flips me the bird and grins.

Chapter Thirty-One

Daxton

Jordan and I step into the penthouse well past midnight, the two of us laughing over the murder mystery.

“I still can’t believe the victim died from a cursed dildo and that Adrian was the murderer,” Jordan says, flicking on a lamp by the front door as she steps out of her heels.

“So ridiculous. How did Mina even find that murder mystery story?”

“No idea. Okay, I need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.” Jordan hurries off, disappearing into the dark.

This night with Jordan and meeting her friends has been amazing. I want to stay up and keep talking to her, have a movie night where we snuggle up in the home theater with a bowl of popcorn and laugh over the movie’s storyline. But I don’t trust myself to keep things innocent between us, not after how we got carried away in *The Hamptons*. If I sit next to Jordan in the dark movie theater, I won’t be able to keep my hands to myself.

I should be heading straight to bed. I have an early flight to catch and loads of work I need to be alert for. Better yet, I should be contemplating a way to tell Jordan I’m Steel without her hating me for omitting the truth for so long.

I’ll wait for Jordan’s return and say goodnight.

Once removing my Dracula cape and tuxedo jacket, I drape them over the couch and stand against the backrest. Silence settles over me. The living room is dim, lit only by that one lamp Jordan turned on and the glow from surrounding buildings. Making myself comfortable, I unbutton the cufflinks on my white dress shirt and roll the sleeves to my elbows, then close my eyes and listen to the distant hum of traffic.

“Hey.” Jordan’s voice, though gentle, makes me jolt. I glance in her direction, finding her silhouette far across the living room. “Do you... want to watch a movie or something?”

The question may be innocent but I can hear the true meaning in her intimate tone. My eyes adjust to the dim lighting and I find a smile on Jordan’s lips. My God, she’s beautiful. I want to indulge in whatever she’s hinting at. But I’ve set myself rules.

Don’t have sex with Jordan.

Don’t kiss Jordan.

“I should go to bed.” It takes all my effort to turn her down. I step away from the couch and stand tall. “I’m tired and have an early flight.”

Her hands slide behind her back like an innocent schoolgirl and she makes the tiniest giggle. “Can’t you just... sleep on the plane?”

I groan quietly at her persistence. The fucking irony. I have been trying to pursue Jordan for months, before we even knew each other in person. Never did I think I would find myself in this situation, where Jordan is coming on to me, yet *I’m* the one who has to turn her away. Somehow, it’s happened twice in the space of five days.

I clear my throat. “I need to work on the plane.”

Jordan smiles, biting the corner of her bottom lip like she’s contemplating something. The next thing I know, she takes a slow step forward, then another, walking to me like a graceful cat prowling the streets at midnight. I don’t think she has any

clue how seductive she is or whether she's even trying to be seductive. Her very presence is hypnotic, the way she licks her lips and how with each step she never breaks eye contact. A look lies within her eyes that says she wants to be fucked. Her hips sway as she approaches, making me want to grab them tight and crush them to me.

Jordan stops right in front of me, so close that her breasts almost graze my chest with each rise and fall of her breath. She gazes up at me with half-lidded eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to watch a movie with me?" Her breathy whisper makes it near impossible for me to say no.

"Jordan... We can't..." I can't even form a coherent sentence just from looking at her.

"Maybe you'd like to do something else? I've been practicing a new dance routine. Would you like to see it?"

"Another time."

Jordan's hand rises to her chest, her fingers gently stroking the curve of her cleavage. "Are you sure about that? The night I danced for you in the gym, you had this look in your eyes like you wanted to take me back to your bed. Kind of like how you're looking at me now. I've never felt more desired than I did that night."

A growl forms deep in my throat. I feel her flirtation in the tip of my dick. When I don't give in and respond, Jordan moves closer, her hot breath sending shivers through me as she whispers in my ear. "I fingered myself that night to the thought of you."

Her words turn me completely still. My breath catches and I'm hot everywhere. The image forming in my head of Jordan touching herself is the last fucking thing I need right now. I've pushed her to an orgasm before. But the thought of Jordan doing that to herself—not only touching herself but touching herself over *me*—unleashes something feral.

She makes a move to step back, but I clutch her wrist, my eyes dark upon her and my voice a stern warning. "Jordan, don't taunt me like that. If you're making this up—"

“I’m not making anything up. It was right after I showed you my dance routine. I returned to my room, ready for bed, but spotted you by the pool and liked what I saw. I kept visualizing you jerking off in the shower and wondered what had turned you on. I wondered if you were jerking off to the thought of *me* and I realized I liked that idea too much. So, I touched myself while watching you out by the pool and made myself come.”

My hand remains tight around her wrist. Jordan makes no attempt to free herself. Of course she doesn’t. This is what she wants, my hands on her. Where did all this sexual confidence come from? A few days ago, she was embarrassed over me reading a sex scene to her. Perhaps this is the effect we have over each other. She makes me want to do the dirtiest things to her that I’ve never felt the urge to do to other women.

When I make no further advancement, Jordan smirks. “You looked into my bedroom window while I was touching myself. The possibility of you seeing me is what made me come. I think you’ve given me a kink for being watched. Being watched by *you*, that is. You wanted me obsessed with you? You got your wish, Daxton.”

Jordan attempts to retrieve her wrist from my grasp, but my grip tightens. My voice turns into a guttural command I don’t recognize. “Show me.”

She gasps and her cheeks flush pink. “What?”

“Show me how you touched yourself.”

Her chest rises faster. I don’t know what’s gotten into me but I can’t stop. No fucking or kissing. Technically, no rules are being broken.

She won’t do it, I tell myself. Jordan may have developed a kink for being watched. She may be coming on to me right now. But having the confidence to act out the kink is an entirely different situation. If she hasn’t seen a man jerk off before me, chances are she’s never touched herself in front of a man and is too embarrassed to share such a raw display. Maybe this is exactly what I want—to call her bluff and send her straight to her bedroom.

This time when Jordan draws back from me, I let go of her wrist. My eyes follow her movements, unsure of what's to come next. She holds my gaze with her own, her breath heavy and her cheeks pink. Jordan stands idle for so long that I'm convinced she's about to fold and retreat to her bedroom, but then she lies on the couch and slowly pulls one side of her dress up her thigh. Her hand disappears beneath the fabric.

My cock presses painfully against my zipper, begging for release. I need to walk away right now. I can't let this thing between us go any further until I've revealed my identity.

But then Jordan moans. Her neck arches; all the while, she's never taken her eyes off me. My mind tells me to leave, yet I'm welded to the floor.

My voice is more gravelly than before as I send out my next command; I don't even recognize myself. "I said *show* me. Lift your dress all the way."

She does, revealing her hand buried beneath a black thong.

"Take the thong off too."

My cock aches so fucking bad when the thin straps slide down her legs and I see her wet pussy. I can't look away from how perfect it is.

"You were right, Jordan. I *was* thinking about you in the shower that night. I've jerked off so many times while thinking about you."

She whimpers at my confession and returns her fingers between her legs, rubbing small circles over her clit.

Temptation gets the best of me and I *have* to get closer to Jordan, even if I can't touch her. I won't touch her.

I won't.

I step up to the couch and lean over Jordan, resting my hands on the arm and back rest. She gazes up at me with those half-lidded eyes again, full of desire. I never could have imagined this side of Jordan existed. Of all the things we spoke about on Secret Santa, intimate details about sex were never shared. I always thought she would be vanilla. A sweet

girl in the bedroom. Even when I learned who Jordan is, I never expected this from her. She's elegant in her day-to-day life, yet a little slut for me behind closed doors and I love it.

"You only touch your clit?" I ask, needing a full picture of how Jordan likes to get herself off.

"No," she moans, arching her back. Her free hand moves up to her chest and she rubs her breast through the fabric of her dress. What I would give to have her completely naked right now. "I wanted to know how you fuck. So, I rode my hand and pretended you were inside me."

I watch as one finger disappears inside Jordan's entrance. Her body arches higher off the couch, her back bowing. I am in absolute pain watching Jordan like this and not able to have her. She slips another finger inside. I can't tear my eyes away, watching her pussy grip her fingers as they move faster.

My hand twitches, desperately wanting to take over. "Jordan, you don't know what you do to me."

"Please, Daxton. Let me feel you inside of me."

"When you beg like that..." I dig my nails into the couch, holding back from taking her. "Add another finger."

"I can't. It's too tight."

Fuck.

Her words only aggravate me more, making my cock throb with the need to feel how tight she is.

No matter how much my brain tells me to stop this moment, I need to see her come. *I* want to be the one who makes her come, but that will only complicate everything more. So, I give her some excuse as to why I won't touch her tonight.

"I don't share my women with anyone, even if it's only emotionally."

She understands my words perfectly and shakes her head. "Steel is the last person I'm thinking about."

“He’s still in your heart. But just because I won’t touch you doesn’t mean this needs to stop. Be a good girl for me and make yourself come.”

She plunges faster. Her head tips back and she closes her eyes with pleasure.

“Eyes on me, kitten. You look at me when you’re coming.”

Her green eyes land back on me and her lips part with a moan. “Daxton,” she cries as her hips lift off the couch. Fuck, she’s coming already. My dick aches at the sound of my name on her lips. She moans my name again, the pitch higher as she fucks her fingers. And then she collapses back on the couch and goes limp with the aftermath of her orgasm. Her breasts rise with ragged breaths. Her skin is flushed and the slightest layer of sweat sits on her forehead, glimmering in the moonlight.

Perfection.

Yet I’m in my own personal hell right now. I have never wanted Jordan more than I do in this moment, to slide into her and know what her pussy feels like fresh after an orgasm.

I need to get the fuck out of here before I do something I’ll regret. But there’s no winning because any action I take—to leave or stay—will hurt Jordan. I’ve fucked up so badly with this girl and keep making the situation worse. I’m tangled in a web of lies and don’t know how I got here when all I’ve ever wanted is to be honest with Jordan.

Distancing myself and gaining clarity is the best I can do by her right now. So I rise to my feet and back away.

Jordan frowns as I weave my arms through my jacket. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. To the bar downstairs or for a walk somewhere to clear my mind. Jordan, baby, you have no idea how much I want to stay, which is exactly why I need to leave.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jordan

Fucking asshole.

He left me. How could he have just *left* me after such an intimate moment? I can still hear the door slamming from not even a minute ago when he raced out.

I return to my bedroom and pace back and forth, trying to figure out what Daxton is playing at. None of this makes sense. He's made it clear as day that he wants me. Yet he won't lay a hand on me. Is it really because of Steel?

Maybe the exchange of money between us is his concern. Goddammit. I *knew* money was an issue, and yet I continued sweeping our business arrangement to the back of my mind because I was so caught up in my attraction for Daxton. I should have taken Mina's advice and ended the escorting before letting things escalate this far tonight. But it doesn't feel like I'm Daxton's escort anymore. It hasn't felt like that for a while, and I know he feels the same way.

The Steel issue returns to my mind and I drop to my bed, sighing.

I wouldn't like it if Daxton had another girl on the side. In fact, I would *hate* it. He said his last girlfriend cheated on him. It *does* make sense that he wouldn't want to be involved with a new woman who has feelings for someone else. Daxton is the one I want, yet a part of me is still clinging to Steel. And for what? He's not coming back. Mina told me to forget about

Steel, that I have a much better option in front of me, and she's right.

Taking care of what needs to be done, I open the Secret Santa app and type a message to Steel that has my thumbs shaking with nerves but comes from the truth of my heart.

JORDAN HART

Whatever went wrong between us, I need to move on from the heartache your disappearance has caused me. The truth is, I've met someone else. He's the one I think about when I fall asleep. He's the one I miss when he's not around. It's not you anymore. It's taken me a long time to come to this realization, but I'm glad you stopped talking to me because you've pushed me right into his arms. This is goodbye, Steel. I won't contact you again. I'm deleting my Secret Santa account as soon as I send this message.

I reread the message, my pulse pounding in my ears as I hit send. Then I follow my word and deactivate my account and delete Secret Santa.

I stare at the blank spot on my phone where the app used to be.

Steel is gone.

One hundred percent gone. Yet I'm still breathing and everything is all right. It's more than all right. A weight is lifted off my shoulders that I didn't realize I was carrying. I send Daxton a message.

JORDAN

I deleted my Secret Santa account. Steel is gone for good. He's not the one I want anymore. I also want you to stop paying me. I like you too much and don't want to be your escort anymore.

And then I wait... for a reply that never comes.

I try to sleep but there's no relaxing my mind. I look at my phone, finding it's three a.m. and that Daxton still hasn't returned home. He hasn't even replied to my message.

Frustrated, I rip the sheets off my body and change into my bikini, deciding to blow off some steam with a swim. I'm so pissed off at Daxton that the thought enters my mind to pack my bags and spend the rest of the night at Mina's, but then he gets away without answering to me. He's leaving New York in the morning and who knows when I'll have a decent conversation with him again if he's avoiding me.

Mostly, I'm annoyed at myself for lowering my guard around Daxton and starting to trust him. By now, I should have learned that almost every person I care about ends up hurting me.

I head out to the pool, the water glowing a neon blue on the otherwise dark rooftop. After dropping my towel to the ground, I dive into the water, the refreshing coolness of it enveloping my body. Lap after lap I swim, trying to clear my head, but it's no use. My mind keeps going back to Daxton and the unanswered text message.

At the sound of a door closing, my swimming comes to a sharp stop. I stand in the shallow end with the water at my waist, catching my breath as my eyes whip to the inside of the penthouse. It's dark in there, all but for that one lamp I left on in the living room when returning from Mina's party. Regardless, I see him instantly, standing on the other side of the glass door. The two of us are frozen in place, staring at each other. He left to get sex off his mind, but from the pained way he's watching me, I can tell he found no success. Despite not wanting to be affected by Daxton's gaze, warmth rushes between my legs. My nipples tighten beneath my wet bikini top.

After what seems like a lifetime, Daxton opens the door and steps out to the pool area. The blue glow of the water illuminates his face as he stands by the pool ledge. Yet he doesn't say a damn word. Screw him.

I wring my hair and climb out of the water, walking straight past Daxton for my bedroom.

“Jordan.” He gently grabs my wrist, speaking my name in a low voice. No other words are said. Daxton’s shoulders are rigid and he doesn’t even turn to look at me.

“Don’t touch me. Where do you get off leaving me on the couch like that? I messaged you ages ago and you never replied.”

He releases my wrist and remains silent. I wait for an explanation. When the seconds tick by and he gives me nothing, I continue walking to my bedroom.

Before I get far, Daxton’s hand slips into mine. “Jordan, please don’t go—”

“I *said* don’t touch me.” I spin back to face Daxton, shoving him away.

His balance wavers and he steps backward, losing his footing on the edge of the pool. The next thing I know, his arm is around my waist and I’m flung forward with him, both of us stumbling into the water with a loud splash.

At some point during all the chaos, Daxton lets go of me beneath the water. I find the surface, spitting out water and gasping for air. Beside me, Daxton is drenched in his suit, the fabric clinging to every muscle in his body. He wipes a hand over his face and pushes his hair back. Not waiting around to play into more of Daxton’s crap, I swim for the stairs.

“Jordan, stop.”

“Fuck you.”

A splash comes from behind me. I glance over my shoulder and find Daxton has gained on me. That same tortured look sits in his eyes. His hands close around my waist, spinning me around and drawing me to his chest.

“Jordan,” he pants my name, catching his breath. Unlike a moment ago, I don’t free myself from Daxton’s grasp. My gaze drops to his lips, watching the ragged way he breathes and wondering what he possibly has to say that could justify

his behavior. “I am so fucking... *obsessed* with you. You don’t know what you do to me.”

I’m convinced Daxton has no idea what it feels like to be obsessed. To be so consumed with someone the way I am with him. Because if he were, there’s no way he would have left me on that couch. There’s no way he wouldn’t have kissed me by now. My God, I want so badly to know what Daxton’s kisses feel like. I’m going insane with my desire to sleep with him.

Taking what I want, I push forward, crushing my lips to Daxton’s. He answers my kiss with an animalistic groan, his lips moving just as desperately against mine. Everything happens so fast, like my kiss has unleashed a floodgate within Daxton and he’s finally indulging in what he wants. His hands are in my hair. They’re cupping my face then sliding down my body, digging into my hips. Before I know it, my arms are around Daxton’s neck and I’m clinging to him with so much fucking need. His lips have me moaning his name, begging for more.

“Baby, I’m so sorry. Please don’t hate me.” Daxton draws my legs around his waist, gripping my ass tight as he pulls me against him. A moan slips past my lips at the feeling of his erection between my legs. “Tell me how to fix this and I’ll do it. I’ll do anything for you. If only you knew how much power you have over me.”

“You left me.” My breath turns uneven as Daxton’s lips trail down my neck and his hands roam over my body, playing with the bikini strings of my top. His hot touch burns my skin in the most delicious way and I can’t fathom the thought of him letting me go. “I deleted Steel from my phone.” The words are a struggle to speak; my body has craved the feeling of Daxton’s kisses and I can barely think straight. Each concern comes out of my mouth as a staggered sentence. “I don’t understand what the issue still is. You have to know I don’t want your money. Stop paying me to be your escort. I just want you.”

“I’m sorry. I was trying to do the right thing when I left.” Daxton kisses a path along my collar bone. “But I can’t stay away from you even if I try. I won’t leave again. Ever. I

promise. You're not an escort to me. It started off that way, but now you're so much more. I've only been keeping up pretenses because I didn't want you to leave. You have no idea how much I... like you. Adore you. Those words don't do justice for how I feel about you, Jordan."

Daxton's mouth returns to mine and I lose all resolve when his tongue sweeps past my lips. His kisses hold such urgency and passion that I've never felt from another man before. I don't want him to leave. I never want to stop feeling this desired by Daxton.

Returning the kiss, I pull him closer. He unties the back of my bikini and rips the fabric off my body, rasping at the sight of my naked breasts. A thought rushes over me that anyone in the surrounding buildings can see me exposed like this, but the rooftop is dark and I'm too caught up in the moment to truly care.

Wasting no time, Daxton brings my nipple into his mouth. I gasp, clinging to him as the bliss of white heat bursts through my body. His tongue switches to my other nipple while he works at the string on my bikini bottoms, then he slides the fabric off my legs, getting me completely naked, and pushes me against the pool ledge.

Daxton grabs the nape of my neck and draws my lips back to his, his mouth desperate, his breath hot and intoxicating. There's nothing delicate about the way he handles me. His kisses are possessive and send sparks down to my clit, making me moan against his lips.

Water splashes around us but I barely notice, too consumed by the heat between us. Without breaking the kiss, Daxton removes his jacket. I assist by unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it down off his shoulders. Next, he's unbuckling his belt. As soon as his pants are off, he grabs my legs and pulls them back around his waist. His bare cock presses between my thighs. I reposition myself, aligning my entrance with the head.

"Not here, Jordan. I can't make love to you the way I want to in the pool."

Make love. All the air vanishes from my lungs. No man has ever spoken those words to me before and it only makes me cling to Daxton tighter. Before I can reply, his hands move down my back, cupping my ass as he effortlessly hoists us out of the water. Instead of walking to the door, Daxton carries me to a nearby daybed.

“Here?” I gasp, glancing at the surrounding buildings.

“You like being watched.”

I like being watched by *Daxton*. But now that I’m in this moment, the risk, the unknown, that a stranger in a nearby building could see us having sex is the hottest, most erotic thing I’ve ever heard.

Daxton lays me down, his eyes on my body as he releases me and stands tall. Unlike the glimpse I got of Daxton jerking off in the shower, this time I get a proper view of his body. Standing in front of me, completely naked, he is perfection. A wall of muscles and ink and power.

My gaze travels lower. Knowing where my attention is, Daxton grabs the base of his shaft and gives one pump, groaning at the movement. I lick my lips and meet his eyes, shuddering at how he watches me with such need and impatience. My body aches, desperate to feel his thick length inside me.

“I need to get a condom. Don’t move.”

“No.” I push up onto my elbows. “I don’t want to wait.”

“I’ll be back in one second.”

“It’s not just that. I don’t want to use one. I don’t want any barriers.”

His eyebrows draw together, and even in the dark, I can see how tense his face is. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

“Because you don’t realize how tempting you’re being right now. I’ve never had sex without a condom before.”

“You don’t need to worry. I’m on the pill.”

His gaze turns possessive and full of jealousy. “Have you had sex without a condom before?”

“You would be my first.”

Daxton lets out a groan of frustration. “Everything you say is the complete opposite of what I need to be hearing.” He claws a hand through his hair and looks out at the city in contemplation.

The wait has my groin throbbing with pain, so I touch my clit, attempting to ease the ache. The tiniest sigh escapes my lips, turning Daxton’s attention back to me.

His gaze lowers to my hand. “Fuck.”

That’s all it takes for him to lose control. Daxton climbs onto the daybed, hovering over me. My legs curl around his waist, feeling the tip of his length meet my entrance. Instead of thrusting into me, Daxton grabs my hips and pulls me onto his cock in one sharp movement, burying himself to the hilt. I cry out as my body stretches to fit him. Never have I felt so full. Never have I heard anything as amazing as the guttural sounds leaving Daxton’s lips. His breath trembles as he pulls out in one prolonged motion, then thrusts back into me, his face in pain.

“Fuck, Jordan.” Daxton stills, his head falling to my shoulder while he takes a slow breath. “You are creating a monster in me. I don’t think I can ever use a condom again.”

A perfect monster. I never want to feel the barrier of a condom between us.

Composing himself, Daxton rises above me again, his jaw tight as he thrusts. I moan and arch into him, the back of my head digging into the mattress. Daxton’s lips find mine; his kiss is soft and his arms tremble as his hips find a slow rhythm. I gaze up at him, a lump forming in my throat when I find his eyes boring into me with none of the darkness from a moment ago, but tenderness. He said he was going to make love to me, and that’s exactly what this is. My core tightens at the knowledge, sending a wave of pleasure through me.

“You and me, Jordan, we’re meant to be.”

“We are,” I murmur, fastening my legs around Daxton and pulling him into me as deeply possible.

He hisses through clenched teeth. “So fucking deep, baby. Is that how you like it?”

I nod, unable to speak through the pleasure. With one hand supporting himself as he continues deep and slow thrusts, Daxton watches his other hand explore my body as it memorizes the curve of my thigh and ass. His hand glides over my ribcage, my breast, and he keeps working his dick into me as he brings my nipple into his mouth. I cling to Daxton’s shoulders as his tongue sends another burst of sparks through me.

“Believe me when I say I am fucking in love with your body, Jordan. I think about having sex with you all day, every day. Fuck.” He stops mid thrust, his face tense as if straining to hold back from coming. “You are so fucking tight.”

Daxton takes another deep breath, then continues thrusting, this time watching his cock slide in and out of me. I love the way he watches us and wonder whether anyone else is witnessing this moment, seeing Daxton bring me to the brink of an orgasm. The thought only excites me, sending a thrill through me and making my inner muscles clench tighter around Daxton.

He pulls out suddenly, his chest heaving. “You feel too good. I don’t want this to be over yet,” he says, then fills the emptiness between my legs with his fingers, rubbing my clit in small circles and intensifying the ache.

“Don’t make me come like this,” I plead. “I want you in me. I need you to come inside me.”

“Fuck,” he growls, focusing his skilled fingers on the upper wall of my entrance. My body writhes beneath him. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me, massaging my g-spot. Torturing me as I resist an orgasm. “The thought of coming inside you... It drives me insane. You’ll get my dick again in a moment. As soon as I feel your little pussy tighten around my cock, I’m going to let go inside you.”

My hands scrunch into my hair as I lie back, breathless. I bite my lip to muffle my moan, but I can't hold back how good Daxton makes me feel. He continues stroking that sweet spot in me, watching me in awe. I clutch at the mattress, about to lose control.

“So fucking beautiful, kitten.”

Just when I think I'll collapse, Daxton pulls his fingers out and thrusts his dick deep inside me, making me gasp his name as I hit my peak.

“That's it, Jordan. Come for me.” He grunts, thrusting through my orgasm and finding his own release, so loud as he spills into me. “Fuck.”

My climax grows stronger, knowing Daxton's cum is inside me and that I'm the only girl he's ever come inside of. The two of us are panting against each other's lips. We're sharing breath. Together we're one.

Gradually, Daxton's thrusts slow in speed. When our movements stop, he remains buried within me as we kiss endlessly beneath the stars. I don't know how much time passes. Time doesn't exist. There's nothing in the world except me and Daxton. And I realize... I don't just *like* this guy. I am falling *hard* for him.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Daxton

Earlier, when I returned to the penthouse after leaving Jordan on the couch, I had every intention of being honest with her. I would come clean about being Steel. I knew I would lose her, but it was the right thing to do.

Then I saw her close to naked in that tiny bikini. We fell in the pool together and before I knew it, she was kissing me. Jordan was moaning at my touch and letting me undress her, begging me to have sex with her without a condom. All my self-control snapped, and I had to have her. I *needed* to make her mine.

Out of all my fuck ups, this is by far the worst. There's no doubt I'm going to hell.

But I won't regret it. At least not tonight. She's mine for this one night, then I'll deal with the repercussions in the morning.

I watch my fingertips trace the curve of Jordan's hip as she lies naked on the daybed with me. She's a perfect silhouette in the dark night, with only the blue pool light glowing across her skin. A thin gleam of moisture covers her body, though I can't tell if it's water from the pool or sweat from the orgasm I just gave her. Now that I've had her body, I'm not sure how I'll be able to return to the mundane tasks of life. Sex with Jordan is like a drug and I already need more.

A thought enters my mind, that right now as Jordan lies peacefully beside me, my cum is inside her. I'm the *only* man who's ever come inside her. My cock grows instantly hard again. She makes me so fucking possessive of her.

"Jordan," I whisper, stroking my fingers through her dark hair. "Let me run you a warm shower and take care of you."

"As long as you're joining me, that sounds perfect."

I lift her off the daybed. Her legs find their way around my waist and I kiss her again, carrying her straight for my bathroom. Keeping Jordan tight in my arms, I turn on the hot water in the shower. As steam fills the room, I shut the shower door behind us and gently lower Jordan's feet to the ground, guiding her beneath the rainfall showerhead. My dick aches as I watch the water trickle down her body. Needing a distraction, I pump liquid soap and lather it in my hands, then massage it onto Jordan's shoulders.

Her eyelids tip shut. "Your hands feel so nice."

Slowly, I work my way down her arms. I can't stop looking at her breasts, desperate to take her peaked nipples in my mouth. A sigh travels from her lips when my hands glide over her breasts. Heading farther south, I kneel in front of Jordan, kissing her thighs as I work the soap into her legs.

My hands pause and I take a moment to admire her beauty, the hot water cascading down the curves of her body. My gaze catches between Jordan's legs at my cum leaking out of her. Fuck. I brought Jordan into the bathroom to clean her up, but there's no way I can wash my cum off her.

"You stopped," she murmurs.

I clear my throat and rise to my feet. "I was enjoying the sight."

She looks up at me and laughs. "You're staring."

"Your body is perfection, that's why."

I glide my fingers over the colorful tattoos on her arm. The ink is a mixture of beautiful burlesque women, love hearts, and sugar skulls.

“I love your tattoos. Everything about you is a turn on,” I say. She smiles at my words, dropping her head at my praise. I lift her chin and bring her lips back to mine. “I need to know what you’re thinking.”

Jordan places a hand on my chest, gently pushing a small gap between us. “I hope this isn’t a mood killer but... you told me your ex cheated on you. I’m trying to figure out how she could have done that. I think you might be my perfect guy, Daxton, in every sense.”

Not a mood killer at all. Nothing can ruin how connected I feel to Jordan in this moment. I continue massaging her shoulders, unsure how to respond with words. If only she knew the truth, that I’m far from perfect. But I’m not going to dwell on that tonight.

“What happened between you and your ex?” Jordan asks. “If your sex life was anything like the way we had sex by the pool, I don’t understand how she had a wandering eye.”

“Sex wasn’t like that with her. Nowhere near as... intense as what you and I just shared. It hasn’t been like this with anyone but you, Jordan. I thought my ex and I had a deep connection—emotionally and physically—but now that I’ve experienced both with you, I know it wasn’t right with her.” My massaging pauses on Jordan’s shoulders and I slide my hands down her arms, taking her fingers in mine. “Just because this escorting arrangement between us is coming to an end doesn’t mean you need to find somewhere else to live. Stay here. Please. I don’t want you to leave.”

She nods then lifts up onto her toes and kisses me, her breasts pressing into my chest. I could get lost in her kisses so easily, but I know where that will lead us.

“Let me finish washing you.” I turn Jordan around, her back facing me.

My hands trail down her spine and I can’t resist brushing my lips against the nape of her neck. She moans as I do so and leans back into me, her ass pressing against my hard cock.

“Jordan,” I warn.

She spins back to me and slides her hand between my legs, finding what she's looking for. I let out a low groan as Jordan strokes me. Ripples of pleasure spread through me with each slow pump of her hand, then she hooks one leg around my waist, pressing her pussy against my cock.

"Trust me, kitten, I want nothing more than to have you again." I can already feel the pre-cum leaking from me as I grunt heavily against her lips. "But I took you hard by the pool and you need to recover."

"I don't need to recover." Jordan's hips push forward. Her pussy is so wet that she slides effortlessly onto my shaft, making the two of us gasp at the depth. She's so tight that I can't resist. I grab Jordan's hips and thrust over and over until her legs buckle.

Chuckling at the effect I have on her body, I wrap her thighs around me and turn the shower off. "Hold on."

"Where are we going?" she asks as I carry her out of the bathroom.

"To my bed." We enter my room, dripping wet all over the carpet, but I don't care. I sit on the edge of the mattress and guide her back to my dick. "Ride me, baby."

She does as I say, sinking onto me with a breathy sigh. Her hand trails down to her clit, but I pull it away.

"You don't come until I let you. Do you hear me?"

She nods, her eyebrows drawn together like my command is torment.

"Good girl. Let me see you enjoy yourself on my cock."

Jordan bounces up and down, her breath labored and her body shuddering each time she lowers onto me. I guide her hips with my hands, helping her move faster. The sight of Jordan fucking me is enough to make me come this second, but I restrain myself, needing more of her.

"I don't think I can hold off," she pants right as her pussy clenches around my cock, drawing a hiss from me. "I need to come."

I hold her hips still, with my dick pressed tight to her back wall. “Don’t you dare come, baby. Not until I tell you.”

Her face pinches as I tease her, pressing her hips firmer onto my cock. She’s stretched so tight over me that I know she’ll be sore in the morning.

“Oh, God. You’re so deep.” Jordan’s body shakes as she tries to control herself. Her pussy grips every inch of my cock, driving me wild. She’s struggling not to come and I’m right there with her.

Deciding I’ve toyed with Jordan’s self-control enough, I move her hips up and down, the two of us panting as my dick juts up into her. She moans louder with every thrust, fighting against her orgasm. I want to fuck her all night long, but I can’t hold off any longer.

“You’ve worked hard, Jordan. Now I want to watch you come.”

My thumb finds her clit, and within an instant, she’s coming on my dick. Her orgasm chokes my cock, triggering my own release. The bedroom is loud with our gasps as I fill her with my cum until her pussy sucks me dry.

She collapses onto me, her body limp and exhausted from her performance. We’ll need another shower, that’s for sure.

“And here I was...” she pants mid-sentence, “...thinking sex by the pool was incredible.”

Laughing, I fall back on the bed, bringing Jordan with me. I hold her close, never wanting to let go. She’s so beautiful, sated and relaxed. And she’s all mine, for tonight at least...

Chapter Thirty-Four

Daxton

My phone vibrates on the side table, drawing me from sleep. Once opening my eyes, I'm met with the warm sight of Jordan asleep in my arms, right where she belongs. Heated flashbacks of last night enter my mind—taking her by the pool, and later when she rode me in bed. I want to do it all again. I *never* want to stop fucking Jordan.

Careful not to disturb her, I stretch an arm out for my phone, finding a No Caller ID calling me. I'm about to decline the number, not wanting to ruin this long-awaited moment with Jordan, but it could be an important business matter.

Keeping quiet, I slide from bed, leaving Jordan peaceful between the sheets, and pull on a pair of long pants before heading out of my bedroom.

“Daxton Hawk speaking,” I say, holding the phone to my ear.

The line crackles and a voice speaks that I haven't heard in three years. “Oh, Daxton, honey, I'm so glad you answered. I've missed you so much.”

My mother.

My chest prickles with anger. Betrayal. I keep my voice low, so as not to wake up Jordan. “Look, if you're calling about the wedding, I won't be attending.”

“That’s not why I’m calling. Although, the wedding *is* something I want to discuss. Brad and Felicity are getting married this weekend at the vineyard and it would mean so much to everyone if you were there. We haven’t seen you in years—”

I take this conversation outside to the pool area to ensure Jordan doesn’t overhear. “Do not ask me to attend the wedding of my brother and my ex.”

“Daxton...” Her voice wobbles like she’s about to cry. “This might be the last chance we all have together. I didn’t want to tell you this over the phone but... I have cancer. The doctors haven’t given me long.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Jordan

I stir from sleep as soon as the bedroom door clicks shut. The muffled sound of Daxton's voice travels through the door, of him speaking on the phone to someone, so I give him privacy and roll over in bed.

For the first time since early last night, my viral video returns to mind. Curious over its performance, I open TikTok to check the video's view count.

My eyes pop open wide the second I see my profile. Holy shit. Eight hundred thousand views overnight. I sit up, holding the bedsheets to my naked body as I stare at the screen in shock. There must be a glitch because how does my dance video have so much traction? My phone is vibrating nonstop with notifications. I can barely keep up with the comments pouring in. I scan through the comments section, finding an overwhelming amount of praise from everyone telling me how amazing my routine on the aerial hoop is. I'm even tagged in multiple videos with the repetitive commentary of people saying, "Isn't that the girl Daxton Hawk is dating?" It's not exactly the title I want to be known for. But whatever, I'll take the label if it means word of my routine spreads.

My heart stops when I see a comment on my video from Dark Artist. She's one of my favorite burlesque dancers, the one who made me fall in love with burlesque when I was a teenager. *An incredible routine. I just watched all your videos*

and want to help spread the word of how talented you are. I'm sharing this video on all my social media platforms.

My chest feels like it's about to explode. I'm shaking with excitement. No wonder my video has grown even more viral if Dark Artist is backing me. This is a freaking dream come true.

I lay in bed for the next five minutes, spread eagle and staring up at the ceiling in awe. When it finally sinks in that Dark Artist commented on my video, I work up the courage to reply. I also reply to a bunch of other comments but there are so many that I'll have to respond to more later.

A few minutes later, I poke my head out of the bedroom to locate Daxton and tell him the news. He catches my attention, out by the pool in the middle of a phone call. The excited part of me contemplates running out to him and shouting about my success, but from the stern look on his face and the way he paces back and forth, I behave myself and give him privacy. He's clearly in the middle of an important conversation, probably work related, so I head for the shower instead.

I lather my hair in shampoo and wash my body, the whole time singing a random Taylor Swift song at the top of my lungs. Jesus Christ, I've turned into Mina, walking around on cloud nine, happy, and with a man I'm crazy about. Give me this level of happiness all the time, please and thank you.

Once I'm dressed for the day and am busy fixing my hair in the bathroom mirror, an incoming call arrives from Mina.

"Hey, what's up?" I answer.

"Babe, we have *so* much to discuss." Mina speaks at super speed. Ordinarily, I would assume this means she's excited about something but there's an unusual hint of tension in her voice that has me wary. "I don't even know where to start. We should probably talk about the easy stuff first."

"There's hard stuff? Great." I sigh, leaning against the bathroom counter. "Okay, I'm listening."

"That burlesque dancer you're obsessed with—Dark Artist, the one you made me follow on Instagram—I saw she shared your video. Everyone is going crazy over your dance

routine and I can see why. You look sexy as fuck. I'm not sure why I didn't think to share your video too. Zac and I are going to repost it on all of our social media accounts to boost your views. I'm also going to ask Verena and Darius to repost too."

"Oh my God, seriously?" I don't know the exact follow count each of them have, but it's definitely in the tens of millions. I can't even fathom that many people seeing a video of me. "That would be amazing. Thank you."

"It's no problem at all. Okay, next thing. How did last night go with Daxton? Please tell me you have good news."

I laugh, because of course she is calling about that. "We had sex."

My right ear becomes temporarily deaf as Mina screams into it. "Yes, babe! How was it?"

I switch the phone to my other ear, grinning at myself in the mirror. "The sex was amazing."

"Oh, come on. I need more than that."

"I'll tell you all the details in person. It's more exciting that way."

"You get your ass over to my place straight away. Unless... Are you with Daxton right now?"

"Yeah. But he's busy with a phone call."

"Oh, all right," she sighs.

"I'll visit you the first chance I get. Promise."

"Wait, does this mean the escorting is over?"

"Yeah. I'm going to stay here, though. In the penthouse. Things are good between us."

"Thank God. Babe, I'm *so* happy for you. Hey, um..." Mina's bubbly voice takes a turn into something troubled. "There's one more reason I'm calling. I'm guessing you haven't seen Ryan's latest YouTube video if you're this happy."

Shit. "No. What's wrong?"

“I think it’s best if you look at it yourself.”

I put Mina on speaker phone and open the YouTube app, finding my brother’s channel. My stomach drops when I read the video’s title. *Marrying the Girl of my Dreams in the Himalayas*.

“Are you kidding me?” I shout. “Ryan got married?”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Daxton

Heavy metal music blasts from the gym when I finish the call with my mom. So, I know where to find Jordan.

I enter the gym and there she is in a sports bra and short pants that hug her ass, sprinting on the treadmill. She doesn't glance my way, not even when I step right up to her. Jordan keeps running at an impossibly fast pace with what could easily be mistaken as a look of determination if I didn't know her so well. She's frustrated about something.

"Impressive speed."

Jordan hits the emergency stop button and climbs off the treadmill, wiping her face with a towel. "I need to be alone right now."

She walks past me for the door, but I grab her hand and pull her back to face me. "Jordan, what's wrong?"

She closes her eyes as if to calm herself. But when she presses her palms to her face, I realize she's holding back tears. "I woke up to eight hundred thousand new views on my TikTok—"

"That's incredible—"

"But then I found out Ryan got married." Jordan's voice crumbles when she says that last word. I pull her to my chest, wrapping her in my arms. "My brother got married and I had

to find out through a viral YouTube video he posted of the ceremony.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“I would have loved to have attended the ceremony or to have known he was engaged.” Her words muffle against my shirt. She remains strong, not breaking into tears, but pain is heavy in her voice.

“What can I do to make the Ryan situation better?”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

“Maybe not about Ryan himself, but I can try and do something to make you smile. Cook your favorite breakfast—eggs with way too much chutney and chili flakes? Have that long-awaited running competition? After what I just saw on that treadmill, you would annihilate me.”

She wipes her eyes and laughs, finishing the sound off with a sigh. “Thank you, but I’ll be okay. I’m just having a moment. How are you? I saw you out by the pool. Your phone call looked kind of tense.”

My chest tightens with unease over my mother’s condition. I sit on a nearby gym bench and lower Jordan to my lap. “I was speaking to my mother on the phone. She... has cancer. The doctors say she doesn’t have long.”

Jordan’s face pales. Her body stills for a long beat before her arms slink around my neck. “That’s terrible. Why did you let me complain about this stupid thing with Ryan’s marriage?”

“The Ryan thing isn’t stupid. You’re hurting and your feelings are valid.” I hug Jordan, stroking her hair. “My mom has asked that I return home this weekend. I’ve already arranged a flight. It leaves in a few hours. I’m so sorry I’m leaving you like this after last night. I was hoping we would have more time to be together and talk about us.”

I *do* want to talk about us. About Steel. But that’s a delicate conversation which needs time and can’t be rushed. I certainly can’t drop the information on Jordan then leave town.

“Don’t apologize. I understand.” She draws back from the hug to meet my eyes. “I know you don’t speak to your mom, but the news must still be upsetting. How are you doing?”

“I don’t think the severity of her situation has fully sunk in for me yet. It’s a lot to wrap my head around. We were extremely close before everything fell apart. I’ve been angry at her for three years but... it doesn’t mean I love her any less.” I close my eyes and pinch the space between them. “She told me my brother is getting married on her vineyard this Saturday. I hadn’t planned to attend, but I’ll do it for her. I’m just so... tense about seeing my family. *All* of my family. Everyone will be there. I don’t know how I’m meant to get through this weekend.”

Jordan lowers my hand from my face and speaks softly. “I’ll come with you. We’ll get through the weekend together.”

I shake my head. “Kitten, I want you to come with me so badly. I hate the thought of leaving you. But I can’t take you with me. The issues between me and my family are on a whole other level of complicated. It will be a difficult time and you don’t deserve to be placed in the middle of that. I won’t do that to you.”

Jordan weaves her fingers with mine and gives a little squeeze. When I look into her eyes, there’s so much tenderness gazing back at me that it makes my throat clench. “I don’t mind being placed in an awkward situation if it means I’m supporting you,” she says. “In fact, I *want* you to lean on me for support. You don’t always have to be strong. You can be vulnerable around me, Daxton. If I had to deal with my parents, I would need all the support in the world.”

If the circumstances were different, I would bring Jordan home with me this weekend. But it’s too risky. Someone could mention details about my past. She could piece together that I’m Steel. I can’t have her find out the truth under those circumstances. *I* need to be the one to tell her, not that I have any clue how to tell Jordan now that I’ve slept with her.

Even if my identity weren’t an issue, I can’t bring Jordan to the wedding. It would place her in an unfair position,

unaware the bride is my ex-fiancée. If a guest mentioned my past with Felicity, she would be completely blindsided.

Fuck. Why must everything be so complicated?

“Jordan, you are... perfect. So supportive. Everything you say is the right thing. I just... can’t take you home with me. I’m... protective of you. You’re the most important person in this world to me.”

She nods, speaking quietly. “Uh... okay?” I can hear it in her voice that she’s hurt, which is the last thing I want to make her feel. “Daxton... I don’t know what happened to cause such a rift between you and your family. I hope one day you’ll trust me enough to tell me. But I’ll drop the topic.”

“Jordan, please don’t be upset.”

“I’m fine,” she lies, her smile wavering. “Can I help you pack?”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Daxton

It's midday when the car service I took from Malibu pulls up in front of my childhood home in Napa Valley. My muscles ache, stiff with the anticipation of this family reunion. So many streams of anxiety are running through my head, like my mother's illness and the awkward interactions that are bound to occur between myself, Brad, and Felicity. I can't stop dwelling on the way every guest at this wedding will be thinking about the elephant in the room—that Felicity and I used to be engaged. The silent judgment is something I don't want to deal with.

Everything feels wrong between me and Jordan too. I landed in LA late yesterday afternoon and spent the night at my home in Malibu before traveling here. Jordan and I spoke on the phone like we do every night when we're not together, but our dynamic was off. I could hear the distance in Jordan's voice. She was like that all throughout yesterday morning too, not herself while helping me pack for my flight. I know it's because she asked me to be open with her about my family issues, and that she feels a disconnect because I couldn't.

I gaze out the backseat window, taking in my surroundings. Although I haven't stepped foot on the vineyard in over three years, everything is exactly as I remember. Beautiful and timeless.

Vines cover the stone walls of the house, scaling up to the terracotta roof. Farther down the property, I spot the vineyard restaurant my parents opened when I was a kid, a popular destination for weddings and no doubt where Brad and Felicity will be celebrating their nuptials this weekend. Scattered along the perimeter of the vineyard are small, rustic cottages that offer accommodation to vacationers.

Grapevines stretch out as far as the eye can see, perfectly aligned in neat rows. Memories flood my mind, of me and Brad running through the rows of vines, playing hide and seek in the barrel room, and helping my parents during the grape harvest. I can hear the sound of my mother's laughter as we cooked homemade pizza together in the wood fired oven, as if it was just yesterday.

I see her smile disappear when my father entered the kitchen. How I came home that one night and found him beating her.

My eyes clench shut, pushing away the memory.

Hearing the front door of the house open, I glance in its direction and see my mother rushing toward my car. From her agile movements and plump face, there's no signs she's a sick woman, which offers me some relief. After a steadying breath, I open the car door and step onto the limestone footpath.

Before I have a chance to speak, Mom pulls me into a tight hug. She smells just like I remember: the grassy scent of grapevines and oak barrels used for aging wine. Mom is small in my arms but her embrace is fierce. Her brown hair has turned white since we last saw each other. It sits in a low bun and she's dressed in her favorite color of red wine.

She draws back, holding my shoulders as she examines my face. A few more wrinkles have aged her, but she looks good, like her vibrant old self. "My goodness, Daxton, you're even more handsome than the last time I saw you. It's so good to see you. Too much time has passed. We've all missed you so much."

I clear my throat. "It's ah... good to see you too, Mom. You're looking well."

Only now that the initial greeting is over do I notice one of my young cousins, Charlie, is with us. He would be about ten now, and is standing patiently with oven mitts, a tray of cookies, and a mop of brown hair on his head.

Mom places a hand on Charlie's upper back, gently encouraging him to step forward. "We spent the morning baking your favorite cookies as a welcome home treat."

Charlie looks up at me with wide eyes and a shy smile. I have plenty of memories of this kid. Of all the kids in our extended family, which is a lot since Mom is one of four children and my dad had five siblings. Growing up at family functions, I was the fun older cousin, chasing them through the vines. Now, Ally is the only kid in my life, and I do miss them.

I crouch down to be at Charlie's level. "Hey, kid. Long time no see."

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. I don't blame him. He always was a quiet one, and I'm basically a stranger to him now.

"It's okay, Charlie," Mom says. "Tell Daxton what we spoke about."

Finally, he perks up a little and grins. "If anyone treats Aunt Shirley like she's sick this weekend, she'll bitch-slap them."

I laugh at the kid's answer.

Mom rests an arm on Charlie's shoulder. "No, not that part, dear."

"Oh. I'm really happy you've come home and I hope you'll play with me again. Cookie?" Charlie holds the cookie tray toward me.

"Thanks, buddy," I say, taking one. "These look amazing. And of course I'll play with you." I take a bite of the cookie and it's delicious, exactly like the ones Mom baked when I was a child. I ruffle Charlie's hair and stand up. "Mom, can we be serious for a moment. How are you?"

She waves her hand, dismissing the topic. “I have my good and bad days, but I’m doing fine. And Charlie was right—if any of you act like I’m sick, I *will* bitch-slap you.”

I let Mom off the hook for the time being, but we *will* be discussing her health at some point this weekend.

“I suppose Amabella hasn’t arrived yet?” When I mentioned I’d be attending the wedding after all, Amabella, being the amazing cousin she is, said she would be here too. I offered her a ride on my jet, but she said Josh would be attending as her date and that they’d fly together on his plane, giving them the freedom to turn this trip into an extended vacation touring wine country. I guess things are going well between the two.

“I believe Amabella will be arriving in a few hours,” Mom says. “Well, come inside. I’m sure you’re starving. Brad and Felicity are on the vineyard somewhere, setting up for the wedding. There’s more family hanging around the place. They’re all dying to see you.”

That sounds like a nightmare. “Actually, I’m a little tired from traveling. I could use some time to rest and freshen up before all the chaos begins.”

“There won’t be any chaos,” Mom says. I hope she’s right, but I don’t believe it. “Okay. Let me show you to your cottage.”

With the fast-approaching launch of The Hawk Grand Hotel LA, this visit to the vineyard has come at a terrible time for business. Despite the falling out with my mother, she *is* important to me, so I’m making this weekend work. But that means squeezing in pockets of work during every chance I get.

After Mom settles me in my cottage, I spend the afternoon answering emails on my laptop, using the worst internet connection known to mankind. The cottage is luxurious but tiny, with only a studio living space, kitchenette, and bathroom. There’s no desk, so I have to work on the bed.

Throughout the afternoon, I hear other wedding guests arrive at their accommodation in nearby cottages. At around four p.m., Amabella's laugh draws my attention from work. Mom must have told her which cottage I'm staying in.

I close my laptop and head out the door to greet Amabella. The second I step outside, my feet come to a halt. My body freezes and panic sets in *hard*.

Jordan is here.

Fuck.

How the hell is Jordan here?

She's walking along a path with luggage and a small group of people.

"Hey, there's Uncle Dax." A familiar voice. I blink several times to clear my mind, realizing it's Ally. She's with Jordan. Amabella, Josh, and his teenage son, Dan, are too.

Jordan sees me and smiles. Her *real* smile, not the sad one I received all yesterday morning. She lets go of her suitcase and runs up to me, eagerly wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Please don't be mad with me," she says against my ear. "I hated the way things were left between us. Talking to you on the phone last night felt weird and I didn't like it one bit. You said attending the weekend will be awkward for me, but I decided none of that matters. This is what you do when you care about someone. You support them through tough times. And Daxton, I care about you so damn much. You have no idea." She releases her arms and peers up at me with her beautiful green eyes. "Plus, you told me to buy all these expensive dresses and I haven't had an opportunity to wear them yet. That should be illegal."

I smile at Jordan, masking how nervous I am about her being here. "I'm not mad, baby. I didn't like how things felt between us either. You're right, about everything."

"Uncle Dax, I can't believe you've been hiding Jordan from me all this time. She's so nice," Ally says, approaching up the path with her luggage.

Beside her, Amabella sends me a panicked apology with her eyes, then turns to Josh. “Hey, do you mind taking Ally and Dan to our cottage? I need to speak with Daxton for a moment.”

Josh nods and continues along the path with Ally and his son.

“Ally is the one you play the piano with?” Jordan asks me, nuzzling herself beneath my arm. “She told me all about it on the plane. She even said she’s going to give me piano lessons.”

Amabella joins us. “That sounds like something Ally would say.”

“You know, she’s totally crushing on Dan. I watched them interact all throughout the flight. She’s convinced she’s going to give him piano lessons too. He seemed keen.”

“Oh, gosh no.” Amabella laughs with a dismissive wave. “There’s no crush. Ally is just so glad to have a friend in him. I’m relieved too. They get along great.”

“If you say so. Hey, I need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

“Of course.” I kiss Jordan’s cheek and watch as she heads inside my cottage. As soon as the door closes behind her and she’s out of earshot, my eyes turn sharp upon Amabella. “What the hell were you thinking, letting Jordan board Josh’s plane?”

“I tried to stop her,” she whisper-yells, matching my tone. “We bumped into each other in the hotel lobby and when Jordan found out Josh was flying us to the wedding on his jet, she insisted she come too.”

“So then you make up an excuse to stop her from getting on the plane. I haven’t had a chance to fill you in on the details, but my relationship with Jordan is significantly more serious than the last time you and I properly spoke. I know I shouldn’t have let it get this far, but we’re together now. The consequences of her finding out the truth in the wrong way have tripled.”

“Dax, I tried every excuse in the book to stop her from boarding Josh’s plane. Nothing worked. I sent you a ton of messages. I guess you haven’t received any of them because of the bad service out here.”

I scrunch a hand through my hair. “This is a disaster. She’s going to find out everything and in the worst way. Someone will mention something about me and Felicity or use my legal name.”

“No, they won’t. No one has called you Steel since you were eighteen. And no one is going to mention your past with Felicity. It would be inappropriate at her wedding.”

Maybe Amabella is right, but I can’t take that chance. The only thing working in my favor is that Jordan never learned Felicity’s name, or anyone else’s names in my family, when we spoke on Secret Santa. “I was planning on telling Jordan the truth soon, I just hadn’t found a way yet and then I heard Mom is sick. Everything has been so chaotic.”

Amabella grabs my shoulders and calms her voice. “Stop panicking. Everything will be okay. Look, you know I don’t like this secret, but I’ll help you keep it because I like Jordan and don’t want to see her be blindsided during her stay here, especially when she’s out of her comfort zone. We need to make sure one of us is constantly by Jordan’s side. That way, we can protect her from having any conversations with people that might lead in a dangerous direction.”

“Fine.” Not an amazing plan, but I don’t have much to work with. “Has Jordan interacted with anyone yet?”

“No. She came straight from the car to your cottage. Go inside and get settled with her. I’ll see you at the rehearsal dinner in a few hours. We’ve got this.”

I groan and head back through the door with Jordan’s suitcase, knowing we absolutely have *not* got this.

Jordan steps out of the bathroom, smiling at me. God, she’s so damn beautiful, inside and out. I can’t fathom losing her. It’s not a possibility.

“I missed you so much, baby.” I pull her into my arms, to the place she belongs, and hold her tight, burying my face in her neck and savoring her sweet scent.

Her lips find mine and she kisses me deeply. I can't think clearly with her breath hot against my skin, especially when her hips press to my groin. All I know is I need this girl and can't bear the thought of losing her. I need to make love to her right now.

Grabbing her ass, I pull her tighter to me. She gives an excited gasp and slips her hands down to unbuckle my belt, all while I guide her backward to the bed. With her beneath me, I glide her panties down her smooth legs, then slide inside her, slow and deep. Through every thrust, she clings to me, moaning against my lips. Her body moves with mine, shuddering as our breathing grows heavy and our skin damp with sweat. When she begs me to come inside her, I lose all control and give her what she wants. Jordan's orgasm pulses around me as I spill into her, the two of us connected as one.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Jordan

Evening arrives and I'm finishing up the final touches of my hair and makeup in our bathroom mirror, preparing for the rehearsal dinner we're running late for. Ariana Grande is playing on my phone and although I'm in a rush, I can't help but dance. Being at this vineyard is a challenge for Daxton, but I'm bringing the energy for both of us, determined to make this weekend easier for him. On top of all that, my TikTok is now at eight million views thanks to Mina and her crew reposting my video. At least, it was at eight million a couple of hours ago when I last checked. The cell signal isn't great here, which is probably a good thing, otherwise I'd be obsessively checking my view count every minute.

I finish applying my red lipstick and check my phone signal again, holding it up in the air and waving it around, hoping to find a hot spot. One bar appears, and a moment later, my phone buzzes with a bunch of notifications. Totally obsessed, I check TikTok first.

Fifteen million views.

Countless comments.

Again, I'm staring at the screen in disbelief because fifteen million? How is this even possible?

A text arrives from Mina. I open it, finding a viral TikTok from some random girl attached. *"I know some of you are sad about the speculations that Daxton Hawk is dating this*

Delphine Fox chick because he was rumored to be the next Bachelor, but I love them together. I hope she's Daxton's girlfriend. No, I hope she is secretly his wife because damn, they would make one fine couple."

I laugh and close the app, about to lock my phone, but see a new email pop up in my inbox. As soon as I open the email, my jaw drops.

From: The Feather Tease Burlesque Lounge.

To: Delphine Fox.

Hi Delphine,

My name is Sofia Adams and I own The Feather Tease Burlesque Lounge in Manhattan. I'm emailing you because I saw Dark Artist shared a dance routine of yours on her social media. As you may know, Dark Artist, as with many famous burlesque dancers, started their career at The Feather Tease. I would like to extend an offer for you to dance with us. Let me know if you're interested. I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Sofia Adams

My heart races as I read the email. My vision blurs with tears of excitement. What the heck is happening?

"Daxton!"

He rushes into the bathroom, alarmed until noticing my smile.

"I got an email from The Feather Tease. They want me to dance for them." I jump on him and he laughs, stumbling backward into the bedroom.

"Amazing." He grabs the backs of my thighs, holding them securely around his waist. "I'm so proud of you."

“I honestly can’t believe it. I’m dreaming, aren’t I? I’m going to wake up and be back in my shitty apartment, having never met you and with a pile of dance rejections.”

“That’s not going to happen. Enjoy this moment. You’ve worked so hard for it. Have you emailed them back yet?”

“No. I literally just got the email. Plus, we’re running late for the rehearsal dinner.”

“The dinner can wait. Email them now.”

My feet land back on the ground and I grab my phone while Daxton takes a seat on the bed, watching me and waiting patiently. My thumbs type a response to Sofia Adams, telling her I would love the opportunity to dance at The Feather Tease. Once pressing the send button, I take a deep breath to calm my nerves, ready to carry on with the night.

“Okay, how do I look?” I spin around, giving Daxton a view of my outfit.

I’m wearing red heels and one of Verena’s designs—a short, tight black dress with full sleeves that hug my arms. The dress is backless, showing the right amount of skin to be both sexy and elegant.

Daxton stalks up to me, pulling my hips to him. “You look like I want to skip this rehearsal dinner and have you naked beneath me again.”

When I feel how hard he is and how quickly I turned him on, it dawns on me that he’s being serious about skipping the dinner. I peck Daxton on the lips and step back from him. “If you’re using sex as a tactic to avoid seeing your family, it won’t work.”

“Was worth a try.”

“Come on, the dinner won’t be bad. I’ll be with you the whole time, which means everyone will be polite and not stir up drama.” Whatever the drama is. I push away the sadness that comes with Daxton not sharing the issue. He won’t tell me, and despite wanting him to open up about it, I know he’s dealing with a lot right now. I fluff up my curls and take

Daxton's hand in mine. "Let's go. Hey, by the way, is it true you were offered the role of The Bachelor?"

Daxton's nose puckers. "My PA mentioned something about it to me in passing months ago. Obviously I had no interest in accepting the role. How come?"

I place my phone in front of him and play the video Mina sent me. By the end of it, Daxton rolls his eyes and laughs. "I try to stay out of what the public says about me, but I'll admit, the wife part is hot."

"Oh, really?" I laugh along with him as we walk out the front door of our cottage. I won't get ahead of myself, but it's a turn on thinking that one day Daxton and I might end up together.

"Yes, really." He kisses my cheek and locks the door.

We walk hand in hand through the vineyard, the moon casting a soft glow on the many rows of vines. Although the circumstances of this weekend are not ideal, I can't deny I'm enjoying myself. The plane ride was nice, getting to know Amabella and her daughter a little better. This is my first time on a vineyard, and despite not being a drinker, I can appreciate the beauty and culture of this land. The air is constantly filled with the sweet aroma of grapes. There's a stillness to this place, away from the madness of the city. But most of all, I'm happy to be with Daxton.

As we near the restaurant, it seems the rehearsal dinner is well under way. There's a jazz band playing, the scent of delicious food wafts through the air, and I can hear the voices of many people socializing. Fairy lights are strung across the trees, making the restaurant look magical.

Daxton comes to a stop, pinching the bridge of his nose. His entire body is tense.

"Hey, you all right?"

He swears under his breath, then stands tall, composing himself. "No. Let's just get this night over with. In and out as quick as possible."

Daxton brings my hand to his lips and continues forward. The music and voices grow louder as we step inside the restaurant. Waiters are weaving among the crowd, serving champagne to all the mingling guests. As with the rest of the vineyard, the restaurant follows a rustic theme with stone walls and wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling. Oak barrels line the perimeter. All the tables are draped in white tablecloths and have floral centerpieces. The dim lighting creates a cozy and intimate atmosphere.

“Oh, fantastic, you’re here,” a lady calls out. I spot her to Daxton’s right, navigating her way through the guests to him. From her age and the facial resemblance to Daxton, my guess is this is his mother. “How are you feeling? Well rested, I hope —”

Her eyes switch to me as she arrives in front of us. Confusion washes over the lady. Her gaze travels down to Daxton holding my hand and back up, then finally she gives a delighted smile. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize Daxton was bringing a date.”

Daxton’s hand slips around my waist and he draws me closer to him. “Mom, I’d like you to meet someone. This is my girlfriend, Jordan.”

My eyes flash to Daxton and a smile twitches on my lips from hearing the label. Of course, I’ve heard him refer to me that way before, but this time, it’s not fake. I *love* that nothing between us is fake anymore.

Daxton’s mom pulls me right out of his grasp and into a hug. “It is *so* lovely to meet you, darling. You can call me Shirley.”

I laugh, caught a little off guard by how welcoming she is. “It’s nice to meet you too. I hope it’s okay that I’m here.”

“Are you kidding me? Knowing that Daxton has a girlfriend makes me so incredibly happy. You’re like a daughter to me now. Your presence is more than welcome. I can’t tell you how lovely it is to meet someone special to Daxton.” Shirley releases me from the hug and Daxton

instantly has his hand around my waist again. “Can I offer you two a wine?”

“Jordan doesn’t drink. We’ll order something non-alcoholic at the bar.”

“No problem,” she says. “Dinner will be served soon. I’ll let you two mingle.”

The second Shirley disappears into the crowd, I feel Daxton’s hand relax at my side.

I lean into him, resting my hands on the lapels of his suit jacket. “That went well.” In fact, a lot better than I expected, considering the rough dynamic Daxton described between him and his mom. I don’t know exactly what I had expected—no one will outright cause drama at a sophisticated wedding event—but I certainly hadn’t been expecting such a warm welcome.

“Dax, is that you?” a female voice calls.

Daxton’s muscles stiffen at the voice. I guess this is going to be a recurring pattern throughout the night.

We both look to the voice, finding a young woman approaching through the crowd with a guy who looks like Daxton, except less handsome, not as muscular, and is dressed more casually than Daxton in his suit. The man wears cream-colored pants and a white linen shirt. Brad, I suppose, the groom. And that must be Felicity with him. She’s beautiful with long blond hair and tanned skin. There are nervous smiles on both their faces as they join us.

“Hi, Brad. Felicity.” Daxton greets them with a stiff nod.

“We didn’t know you were coming to the wedding,” Brad says.

“Mom convinced me. I assumed she would have told you. I should have RSVP’d.”

Felicity’s lips twitch. “Shirley probably wanted to surprise us. We’re so happy you’re here.” Her attention shifts to me. “And you’ve brought a... girlfriend, hopefully?”

“Yes, this is Jordan.”

“Hi.” I smile at the pair. “It’s nice to meet you both. Congratulations.”

The bride and groom share an optimistic look with each other, almost seeming relieved. “Thank you,” Felicity says. “It’s nice to see Daxton happy. Well, ah...” Silence stretches over the four of us. Before I have a chance to break the tension, Felicity speaks up. “We better move on and keep greeting people.”

Once they walk off, I gaze up at Daxton. “A slightly more awkward encounter. They seem nice, though.”

“Yeah.” He laughs, but there’s something sharp in the sound. “Come on, let’s get that drink.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Daxton

The rehearsal dinner is draining with all the small talk and pleasantries involved. Lots of extended family members greet me. I can't count how many times an aunt or uncle speaks a variation of the phrase, "Everyone has missed you. We're glad to see you've mended your relationship with Brad and your mother." To which, I force a smile and deflect the conversation, not wanting Jordan to hear any elaboration on my past.

Jordan and I dine at a table with Amabella, Josh, Ally, and Dan. Champagne toasts follow, and when they conclude, a dance floor opens up. As guests start mingling again, Jordan excuses herself for the bathroom. Amabella, keeping true to her word, accompanies Jordan where I can't. Ally and Dan have disappeared somewhere. Josh heads for the bar and I'm suddenly alone at the table.

I search for Ally, not wanting to be stuck in a conversation about finance or something equally as boring with one of my uncles, but find her dancing with Dan in front of the jazz band. His hands are around her waist. Even though their stance is innocent with a gap between their bodies, I watch them for a moment, questioning if there's any merit to what Jordan said about Ally having a crush on him. Ally won't stop smiling at Dan, that's for sure.

Josh's kid must be a year or two older than Ally. He's attractive and has the build of an athlete. Dark hair. Looks like one of the popular kids in school. I'm left wondering what on earth he's doing here of all places, at a random wedding in the middle of nowhere. It's not like this is a family vacation, not when Josh has a handful of kids and none of the others are here.

Perhaps Amabella knows her daughter well and there's no crush on Ally's behalf. Or perhaps...

I laugh to myself. No, there's certainly a crush involved. A crush from both sides.

I won't interfere. It would only embarrass Ally, and she deserves to have a friend or whatever Dan is.

Needing to occupy myself, I make my way through the guests and take a seat at the bar, ordering something non-alcoholic.

"Hey, Dax."

My shoulders tense at the voice behind me. A conversation about finance isn't looking so bad after all.

Brad sits beside me. "Thanks again for coming to the wedding. It means a lot."

"I came because Mom is sick."

"Yeah, I figured. I'm still glad you're here." He places a wine glass on the bar, twisting the stem between his two fingers and watching the glass twirl with a furrowed brow.

I'm honestly surprised I can stand to look at his face. The last time I saw Brad, I couldn't be in the same room with him without wanting to punch him in the jaw. Now... the pain is still here, but it's changed. There's no possessive alpha male in me, furious that he stole my fiancée. *None* of this is about Felicity anymore. It's about losing a brother. My best friend. The one person who had gone through my fucked-up childhood with me.

"Listen, Dax, I know you don't want to hear this, but I need to say it. I've made some big mistakes in my life. You

and I were close. As close as brothers can be. Every day I wish I'd handled things differently between us. Things with Felicity happened so quickly and I didn't know how to tell you the truth without hurting you."

The same old story. I've heard this excuse a hundred times. Only this time... Brad's words sit differently.

He sounds so desperate and regretful.

He sounds...

Fuck. Brad sounds just like *me*, caught in a situation he didn't know how to get out of without hurting someone he cares about. Scared of the inevitable, that he would lose his brother. I would give *anything* in the world for Jordan to forgive me when I tell her who I am.

I glance out among the sea of guests, searching for Jordan. She catches my attention in the distance, exiting the ladies' room with Amabella. Mom pulls them both aside and starts playing with Jordan's black curls, admiring her hair. I watch as the three women have an animated conversation, with Jordan laughing as she demonstrates how to create curls, twisting her hair around her finger as if it were a hot roller. My God, there is nothing I want more than for this secret between me and Jordan to be resolved.

"She's beautiful." Brad's voice draws me back to the moment. He's followed my gaze and is watching Jordan. "I'm happy for you, man. I've kept an eye on you two tonight and I can see how much you like each other. You deserve to be happy."

When I don't reply, Brad stands from the barstool to leave. My attention remains on Jordan, still talking with my mother and Amabella, and I realize it's because of her that I can let go of this anger I have toward my brother.

"Wait," I say before Brad walks too far from the bar. I turn around on my barstool to face him. "There's something I have to say."

"Go ahead. Whatever it is, I can take it."

“It’s not like that.” I smooth a hand through my hair and rub the back of my neck, trying to find the right words. “When I first received your wedding invitation a couple of weeks back, I wanted to punch a hole in the wall. Not because I still have feelings for Felicity—I moved on from her a long time ago. But because of you. It’s your actions that hurt the most. But for the first time in years... Brad, I understand your apology. I *accept* your apology. Tomorrow at the wedding, you and Felicity will have my congratulations.”

My brother stares at me with a look of disbelief. A smile tugs at his lips and disappears with uncertainty. “You... mean that?”

“Yes, I do.”

He nods, the smile returning to his face for good this time.

Chapter Forty

Jordan

The night is closing in on ten p.m., yet with all the alcohol passed around and the jazz band still roaring, the rehearsal dinner shows no sign of slowing down. I'm laughing with Amabella and Shirley by the wine barrels when a hand slips around my waist. Glancing over my shoulder, a smile finds my lips when I see Daxton behind me.

"What did I miss?" he asks with a warmth in his eyes that I haven't truly seen since before our arrival at the vineyard.

"Your mom and Amabella were telling me about you as a kid."

All the color drops from Daxton's face and his gaze shoots to Amabella.

"Relax." She sends him some silent message with her eyes. "Nothing bad was said. We were talking about the time you and I tried to surprise Aunt Shirley with breakfast in bed and the kitchen caught on fire."

"Hey, you all right?" I ask Daxton, resting my back against his chest as I peer up at him. "They only mentioned it when I told them you cooked me breakfast."

"Yeah, just tired. I'm ready to call it a night," he says.

Shirley continues speaking, dismissing Daxton's exit cue. "The gesture of making me breakfast in bed was sweet, really."

I barely know the woman, and yet can tell from the animation in her voice and hand gestures what a charismatic person she is. The fond nature in which she shares her memories makes it clear how much she adores Daxton, which only adds to my confusion about the family drama. Every single family member I've met tonight has been lovely.

"It was the thought that counts," Shirley says. "The two of them had never cooked a thing in their lives, yet for some reason, they thought it a good idea to use the stove. Well, you can imagine the fright I got when the fire alarm went off. Luckily, I was able to contain the fire quickly. That was the day I set out to teach them to cook. We cooked everything from soufflés to beef stroganoff. I hope my son has been spoiling you with his delicious cooking and not hiring personal chefs."

I gaze up at Daxton and giggle, finding the story so precious.

"Don't start, kitten." He smirks down at me, then offers a smile less smug to his mother and Amabella. "If you ladies are done embarrassing me, I'd like to steal Jordan away."

"Of course," Shirley says. "You two enjoy the rest of your night."

Daxton weaves our fingers and leads me through a crowd of guests, out of the restaurant and into the dark night.

"Are you sure we should leave?" I ask. "I don't want anyone to think we're being rude."

"No one will notice. Plus, I have more important things to do with you." He squeezes my ass.

I yelp, startled by the playful nature of his actions. "What's got you in such a good mood all of a sudden?"

"Besides how incredible you look in this dress?" he whispers in my ear, coaxing another laugh from me. "I was watching you from across the restaurant while I spoke to my brother. You were laughing and it made me realize that nothing truly matters except for you. *You* make me happy. I'm letting go of all the shit that went down with my family."

My feet come to a stop and I stare at Daxton in amazement. “That’s... fantastic.”

I desperately want to ask what the family issues were about, but not at the risk of ruining this newfound attitude toward his family, especially when time with his mother is limited. I came here to support Daxton, not make this weekend about myself.

Regardless of my good intentions, sadness tinges my mood, like our last morning in New York City together when Daxton didn’t confide in me about his family.

“You okay?”

“I’m happy for you.” I push away the questions about his family and continue walking.

As we arrive at a crossroads, I veer right for the path to our cottage, surprised when Daxton steers us in the opposite direction.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Showing you something. A place where I used to hang out when I was a kid.”

The moon is full and bright, illuminating the way as Daxton guides me downhill along a rocky path. Each step of the way, he holds my hand securely, assuring I don’t stumble over the uneven ground. We walk for a few minutes, passing rows of grapevines, until arriving at a pergola.

“I used to come here as a kid when I needed to get away from everything.” Daxton flicks a switch and the pergola suddenly twinkles with fairy lights. Vines wrap around each post, trailing up to the slatted roof. Crickets chirp and far in the distance I can hear the jazz band playing. Daxton lifts me up, sitting me on a picnic table beneath the vines. “I would lay here for hours, staring at the stars.”

I tilt my head to the sky. “It’s beautiful here.”

“I’m glad you like it.” He takes my hand in his, kissing my knuckles. When I look back at him, the same playful expression from earlier sits on his face. “I always thought one

day I would bring my girlfriend here and make out with her under the stars.”

“Oh, did you, now?” I hook a finger into Daxton’s belt and draw him closer. “That was your mastermind plan for bringing me here. Wasn’t it?”

“Maybe. Or maybe I want to do something else.” His hands slide up my thighs, causing me to shiver in anticipation.

“Teenage Daxton thought about making out with his girlfriend here. Did you ever imagine you’d fuck her here?”

“Sure. But that’s not what this is. I want to make love to you,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin as he trails kisses along my neck.

My breath hitches. Tingles spread through me, pooling deep in my belly. My body wants this, yet the next moment, tears prick my eyes and an overwhelming sense of sadness consumes me. I try to ignore the feeling and get lost in the sensation of Daxton’s lips on my skin, but I can’t shake the lump in my throat. My muscles stiffen and Daxton must notice because he leans back, his gaze turning troubled as soon as he sees tears swimming in my eyes.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” he whispers, brushing a thumb over my cheek.

“I don’t know.” It’s the truth. I’ve never felt like this over a guy before—so utterly consumed with him, heart and soul, yet... *sad*. “I’m... scared.”

“Of what?”

“I can’t explain it properly. There’s just... this feeling inside me, like I’m going to lose you.”

He sighs, bringing my head to his chest and hugging me.

After taking a steadying breath, a sense of clarity over these feelings finds me. “I’ve been waiting for you to show me what’s in here.” My hand presses softly to Daxton’s heart as a tear escapes down my cheek. “I want to know you. All of you. There’s tension between you and your family and it’s clear you can’t be open with me about it. Maybe I’m being unfair to

you. Maybe I'm only acting this way because my parents messed me up so fucking much, but I have to wonder..." I release myself from the hug to meet Daxton's eyes. "What happens the next time we face a similar situation? Are there other things I don't know about you that you won't share?"

Daxton blows out a tired breath of air and places both hands either side of me on the table, his head hanging between his shoulders.

I weave my fingers through his hair and kiss his head, hating this divide between us. "I'm sorry for mentioning it."

"Don't be sorry, Jordan. I understand," he says from down at my chest. "You're not being unreasonable. You want to know the man you're with. I want to tell you everything. I *will* tell you everything, but we need to discuss this properly back in New York."

"Why does the location of this conversation matter?"

Daxton stands tall, leaving an emptiness within me when he steps back, breaking contact with my body. "Because I'm not proud of what I have to tell you. You won't like hearing the truth and I can guarantee you'll want space from me. Space you deserve but won't find while confined at this wedding with me."

A flash of outlandish scenarios enters my mind of what Daxton could feel so ashamed of. What he thinks would drive me away from him. But what it comes down to is I know Daxton is a good person and his past actions would have been explainable. And if not justifiable, I'm sure he would have learned from his mistakes.

"Whatever happened, Daxton... You have to know nothing will change the way I feel about you."

He wipes a stray tear from my cheek. "We'll see about that."

Chapter Forty-One

Daxton

I know Jordan's smile, and the one she's wearing right now as we wait for the wedding ceremony to begin—the smile she wore all last night after our conversation at the pergola—is the fakest smile I've ever seen.

All guests stand as Felicity arrives at the aisle. I may not be the biggest supporter of Brad and Felicity, but there's no denying the ceremony is beautiful, rustic in theme and held beneath an arbor in the heart of the vineyard on a sunny morning. My mother reads out a poem she's written. The vows are touching. I follow through on my word to Brad—when the celebrant pronounces him and Felicity a married couple, I stand and clap for their happiness and offer my congratulations. The reception is just as nice, held at the restaurant. My younger cousins want to be chased around the venue and I do so to keep up pretenses. But all I can think about throughout the day is that Jordan is slipping through my fingers.

As mid-afternoon arrives, all guests stand face to face in a long line, forming an arch with our arms for Brad and Felicity to run through as we farewell them for their honeymoon. While they climb into a car and everyone waves them goodbye, I draw Jordan back to our seats in the restaurant, wanting to talk to her, but have no words. Everything between us is just... stale.

The wedding band resumes playing and guests return to the dance floor, the party continuing.

Mom pulls up a chair next at the table with us, an aura of contentment surrounding her. “What a beautiful wedding. You don’t know what it means to me to see both my sons so happy.” The statement ridicules me, deepening the guilt in my chest. “I’m so thankful everything has worked out all right in the end.”

The end...

A reminder that my mother’s time is limited and I still don’t know anything about her condition or the treatment she’s receiving. She’s made it clear she doesn’t want to talk about her health, but I need some kind of closure. I can’t sit back and twiddle my thumbs, pretending she’s not dying.

“Mom...”

She looks at me, her eyebrows raised in an unimpressed manner, foreseeing what I want to discuss.

“Hey, Dax!” Amabella’s voice comes from behind me. I turn, finding her and Josh arriving by our side. “A few of us are taking a tour of the vineyard. Do you and Jordan want to join us?”

Mom claps her hands, eager to get rid of me and my looming questions. “That sounds like a fantastic idea. Off you go. I’ll enjoy a glass of wine while listening to the music.”

Jordan glances between my mother and me. “I’ll come along. Daxton, you should keep your mom company.” She rises from the chair but I grab her waist, pulling her onto my lap before she can get far.

“Jordan...” I whisper, hating the disconnect between us. “I’m sorry about... everything.”

She smiles softly at me, and I’m put at ease when I see in her eyes that this smile is genuine. “We’re okay. There are more important issues right now, like your mom. You haven’t spent any alone time with her this weekend. Take this opportunity. I’ll be back soon.”

Fuck, I love her. She's so selfless and caring and *way* too good for me.

I watch Jordan follow Amabella and Josh out of the restaurant. As much as I don't want to be apart from Jordan, a long-awaited discussion is needed with my mother, so I cut to the chase.

"What are the doctors doing to help you?"

She rolls her eyes and sends me a humorous warning glance. "Have you forgotten your cousin Charlie's warning? He wasn't joking. I'll bitch-slap you if you treat me like a sick person—"

"Mom, this isn't funny. I'm being serious. What is your treatment plan?"

She rests an elbow on the table and sighs, giving in to me. "Daxton, there is no treatment plan."

Frustrated by her answer, I lean forward, pressing her for more information. "Why not? Is money an issue? I have plenty of it to secure any treatment you need."

She takes my hands in hers, her voice at peace. "Money won't fix what's wrong with me."

"But you at least have to try—"

"And what? Live out my remaining months sick from chemo? I want to enjoy what time I have left."

I groan, not liking her answer at all. But I do understand.

"It's also my wish that my family doesn't see me when I'm sick."

"Mom, no. You can't go through this alone. I'll be here for you."

"No, you most certainly will not be. I want you to remember me like this. Lively and happy. Not when I'm at my worst. And while we're on the topic, I don't want any tears at my funeral. No one is to dress in black. No mention of your father. There'll be hip hop music with tons of swear words in

it. People will be smiling over memories of me. My life is a celebration.”

We laugh together, my vision blurring with tears. This is the tough woman I know. The woman who disappeared for a while when my father was at his worst, but at her core she has always been strong-willed and set in her ways.

The tears come heavier when it sinks in that my mom is really going to leave this world, and I’ve wasted the last three years being angry at her. I pull her into my arms and hug her as tight as I can.

The two of us remain like this for I don’t know how long. A few songs finish before Mom wipes her thumb across the corner of my eyes to dry them. “These are the last tears you will cry for me. Promise me.”

With reluctance, I nod. As for leaving Mom alone in the end, I can’t promise her that. But we don’t need to argue that topic right now.

“I’m so sorry about how our family fell apart. I know what Brad and Felicity did was heartbreaking, and I never wanted to make you feel like I don’t support you—”

“Mom, I don’t want to talk about this. It seems so petty compared to everything else happening. I’m not about to embrace my relationship with Brad and Felicity, but I’ve accepted them as a couple. Some day in the future, we’ll be okay. You and I are okay too.”

She smiles and there’s so much warmth within it. “Daxton, I’m so relieved to hear you say that.” Mom fans her glassy eyes and laughs. “Now, onto more important topics before I cry. How serious are you about this girl of yours?”

The first response to enter my mind is that I’m in love with Jordan, but the answer feels sour when I think about the current state of our relationship. I sigh, running a tense hand through my hair. “I love her. Jordan is it for me. But... things are complicated.”

“I don’t know if you’re afraid to be vulnerable with Jordan because of what happened with Felicity, but you need to let all

of those issues go. Don't let your past ruin your future. Life is too short to be hung up on the bullshit.”

I stare at an empty wine glass on the table, tracing the rim with my finger. “It's not the past that's the issue. I... There's information about myself that I haven't shared with Jordan. I never found the right moment to tell her or how to tell her. Now... I'm too deep into our relationship to reveal the truth and still keep her. I have so much fear within me because I can't fathom my life without Jordan.”

Mom gently places her hand over mine on the wine glass, ceasing my movement. When I look up, there's a gentle smile on her face and her voice is like a warm hug. “The right moment to tell Jordan the truth is now. Whatever this secret is, Jordan may have difficulty hearing it, but I can see that she loves you. She might need time to process the information, you might lose her for a little while, but she'll come back to you.”

I gulp down the lump in my throat. “She won't come back to me, Mom. I have lied and betrayed her trust.”

“Then your relationship was never meant to be. If you love something, set it free. If it returns to you, it will be yours forever.”

I take a shaky breath, knowing deep within me that Mom is right. The way things are between me and Jordan right now... I've already lost her. Fear has made me grasp onto something precious, scared it will vanish. But in turn, I've smothered it until barely anything is left.

Waiting to tell Jordan the truth in New York will make things easier for her, but I can't keep delaying the inevitable, especially not when she's already so hurt. If I'm being honest with myself, the location excuse is a valid concern but doesn't outweigh the need for the truth.

I kiss Mom on the cheek and stand up. “Where are you going?” she asks.

“To find Jordan and do the right thing.”

“I'm proud of you, Daxton. And I love you.”

Hearing those words from my mother gives me strength, and for the first time in years, it gives me closure to say it back to her. "I love you too, Mom."

Chapter Forty-Two

Jordan

After an hour of touring the vineyard and not once being able to get Daxton off my mind, I decide to return to the restaurant and be with him. To hold his hand. To see his face and hear his voice. To tell him that we need to fix our issues because we're too good together to let everything fall apart like this. I don't let Amabella know I'm leaving the tour because honestly, I think I might cry, and I don't want to embarrass myself in front of her and Josh. They're busy talking to a few other guests, so it's easy enough to slip away without being noticed.

Within a few minutes of walking through the vineyard and getting my emotions in check, I arrive back at the restaurant in search for Daxton. The venue is still crowded with guests on the dance floor and many more scattered around the tables, chatting with each other, but I can't find Daxton anywhere. Shirley remains at the same table I left her at, so I take a seat beside her, hoping Daxton isn't far off.

"Your vineyard is so beautiful," I tell her.

"Thank you, darling. Daxton was looking for you. Did he speak with you?"

"No. Do you know where he is?"

"This place is so big. He could be anywhere."

I take out my phone to call him, finding zero bars of reception. “No signal.” I’ve had no cell signal for almost an entire day and I’m going out of my mind unable to use the internet.

“Oh well. Best stay here. I’m sure he’ll be back soon enough.” She tops up her wine glass then holds the bottle out, showing me its label. “This is a special bottle. It was gifted to me on the day Brad was born. I kept the bottle all these years, saving it for the day Brad got married. I have a bottle from Daxton’s birth too, but I don’t know if I’ll be around long enough to open it.”

Well, that’s depressing.

“Would you like a glass? Oh, shivers. I’m sorry. I forgot Daxton mentioned you don’t drink. All the more for me, then.” She brings the glass to her lips and smiles at me. It’s the smile of a loving mother and the way they look at their child. A smile I can’t remember ever receiving from my parents. “I need to thank you for making my son so happy. You’ve healed him and I will be forever grateful.”

“Healed? What do you mean?”

“From Brad and Felicity. The only way he was able to attend the wedding was because you’ve helped him move on.”

Right. He’s healed from the way Brad betrayed him, which is still a mystery to me. I sigh, feeling a sting of sadness return. “Daxton doesn’t talk about Brad and Felicity a lot,” I tell Shirley.

“I don’t blame him. Daxton loved Felicity dearly. It was hard for him, discovering his fiancée and brother were involved.”

Um... *what?*

Daxton was... engaged to... *Felicity?*

Heat creeps up my neck, prickling my skin. My mind struggles to comprehend the information. Did I even hear Shirley right? Yes, she said Daxton and Felicity were engaged. But... what the hell?

A sense of possessiveness washes over me. My chest hurts. No, it *burns*, hearing that Daxton had such a serious relationship with another woman and I knew nothing about it. It's belittling and... embarrassing.

All the puzzle pieces suddenly click into place and I realize *this* is what Daxton couldn't tell me about his family, and why he said this weekend isn't the right time to discuss the topic. But *why* he felt he couldn't tell me? I have no idea. I could have handled this information just fine, hearing it from *him*.

Does he... *still* love Felicity?

Every muscle in my body tenses and I feel sick in my stomach.

“And then, of course, I never made things easy for Daxton by supporting Brad and Felicity's relationship,” Shirley says. My attention switches to her, and from the peaceful look on her face as she sips her wine and watches guests dance, I realize she's oblivious to the impact her words have on me. “I know what you must be thinking, how could I support Brad and Felicity? Well, I didn't at first. I was there for Daxton when the betrayal happened. I wasn't proud of my other son. But once Brad proposed to Felicity, I realized their relationship wasn't just a fling. They were serious about each other and I had to accept it. Daxton wasn't pleased about my stance, and that's when I lost him. But you've brought him back to me. Finally, I have my precious Steel back.”

My eyebrows draw together. I blink several times in confusion, trying to process that last bit of her story.

Steel.

Did Shirley just refer to Daxton as... Steel?

My breath feels like it's trapped in my throat. My skin itches and I'm hot. Too hot.

Daxton is... Steel?

It takes me a long moment to connect all the dots, but when I do, everything makes perfect sense. The whole reason Steel joined Secret Santa was because his fiancée cheated on

him with his brother and Steel wanted a stranger to talk to about it. *That's* why Daxton never told me about Felicity, not because he couldn't be honest about his family, but because he knew I would realize he is Steel.

My God. What the actual fuck. This can't be happening. My heart is hammering and I feel like I'm about to pass out. The wedding band suddenly sounds too loud. There are too many people around me and I can't breathe. What does Daxton get out of all of this by lying to me? He's been lying *all* this time. Making me fall in love with him. Tricking me. And for what?

“Darling, are you all right? You look very pale.”

I fake a smile, just like all the other ones I've been faking today. “Ah... yeah. I think I ate something that doesn't agree with me. I'm feeling a little queasy. I'm going to get some fresh air and go for a walk.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Daxton

An hour and a half later, when the sun is setting and I've had no luck finding Jordan, I return to the restaurant. Amabella catches my attention, standing alone at a far wall with panic all over her face as she scans the room. Shit. I don't even need to ask her what's wrong. She's lost track of Jordan.

"Amabella." Her eyes whip to the sound of my voice and she rushes in my direction.

"Dax, I'm so sorry. Jordan was with me one moment and then... I'm sorry."

I rub a hand over my jaw, swearing. "It's okay. None of this is your fault. I just need to find Jordan. When did you last see her?"

"I don't know. Half an hour ago. Possibly longer. Have you checked your room? Maybe she's resting."

I did search our cottage, but that could have been before Jordan went there. "Thanks. I've got to go."

I exit the restaurant and pace through the vineyard back to the cottage. With each step, my pulse races at the thought of what will take place when I find Jordan. Nothing good, that's for sure. I just hope Mom is right, that Jordan will somehow forgive me, even though I know I don't deserve it.

As I get closer to the cottage, my nerves grow a million times worse when I see Jordan through a window. Forcing

myself forward, I enter the front door, finding her doing something by the closet, but what, I can't tell since her back is to me. I long to hold Jordan one last time before the truth comes out and changes everything. I want one more kiss. One more smile. But I can't allow any more distractions.

"Jordan." My voice is so lifeless I don't even recognize it. "There's something I have to tell you."

She jolts when hearing my voice but doesn't turn to face me. Instead, she grabs a bundle of clothes from the closet and carries them across to the bed where she drops them inside her empty suitcase.

The next thing I know, she darts into the bathroom, re-emerging with her toiletries and tosses them into the suitcase too.

"Jordan, are you all right?" I step behind her, placing gentle hands on her shoulders.

She shoves my hands off her and closes the suitcase. "Don't *fucking* touch me."

From the aggression in her voice, I instantly know she's discovered the truth. I'm not sure how she found out but that's beside the point. I fucked up, and my fists are shaking with the weight of the truth surfacing like this.

She zips up the suitcase and lowers it to the floor, then raises the handle and wheels her luggage to the front door.

"You're leaving? Jordan, look at me." I grab her hand and turn her to face me, which earns me a harsh shove in the chest.

"I told you to get your fucking hands off me, Daxton. Or should I call you Steel? That's your real name, isn't it?"

"Jordan... I can explain."

"How can you possibly justify deceiving me? What the fuck are you playing at?"

"Baby, please believe me—"

"Don't call me that!"

I step back from Jordan. Her voice is vicious, like nothing I've ever heard. All I know is I have to explain everything, and I have to do it fast before she disappears. "I'm sorry. My legal name is Steel West but I haven't used that name since I was eighteen. I didn't know who you were when we first met at Club Noir. I didn't realize until you were living with me. The fire in your apartment made me question whether you were Jordan. When you told me your real name I panicked because you as Delphine hated me—"

"Do you know how humiliated I was when your mom referred to you as Steel? When she told me you were engaged to Felicity?"

"I can only imagine, and I hate that you had to find out that way." My words barely feel adequate. "I was coming to tell you the truth right now. My mom convinced me that there's no good time and the truth needs to come out. I've wanted to tell you for so long but I couldn't find the right way."

"How about just saying the damn words when you first found out? Or when you realized I was starting to develop feelings for you. Better yet, how about telling me the truth before you *fucked* me?"

"I know. I screwed up. I never meant to hurt you. I just..."

"Just what?" Her voice shakes with anger.

"I was so afraid of losing you." The excuse sounds weak. I'm drowning in a sea of regret and shame. "Please believe me when I say none of this was calculated."

"How can I believe *anything* you say? Everything between us is a lie. You know how difficult it is for me to trust people. But I opened up to you. I thought I was safe with you and that for once in my life I'd found something real. I took a risk with my heart and flew across the country because I was so stupidly in love and wanted to support you this weekend. Fuck, what is it with me and always believing in the wrong people?"

"That's not true. I fucked up. I fucked up real bad, Jordan, and I'm so sorry. But what we have is real."

“It’s not real. *Nothing* is real between us.” She opens the door, and as she wheels her luggage out of the cottage, it feels like the room is closing in on me. The air is thick and I can’t breathe.

“No, Jordan, please.” I chase after her as she paces toward the road. “We need to discuss this. Give me time to explain this all to you properly.”

“You don’t deserve any more of my time. My ride to the airport is waiting for me.”

Ahead of us, there’s a private car service waiting for her in the driveway. As soon as Jordan arrives at the car, she passes her luggage to the driver and opens the passenger door.

Before she sits inside, I spin her to me, my hands trembling as I cup her jaw. “Jordan, please. This is real—you and me. Don’t leave. You’re the one for me. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I love you.”

Her eyes grow watery as she looks up at me, and a stray tear falls down her cheek. “Yeah,” she whispers. “I thought I loved you too.”

She slips out of my hands and into the car, saying one last thing to me. “Goodbye, Daxton. You won’t see me ever again.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Daxton

The New York penthouse is quiet without Jordan.

Everything is lifeless.

Painful.

I hate being here without her.

Despite Jordan only living here a few short weeks, everything about this place reminds me of her and what I've lost—the gym where her aerial equipment still hangs and where I never got the chance to race her on the treadmill like she joked about; our night in the movie theater; the couch that she touched herself on; the pool where I first kissed her and made love to her.

The money she earned while living here has been deposited back into my bank account. All of her clothes remain in the closet and I know she won't be returning for them. She's cut all ties.

I am in *agony* in this penthouse. But I won't leave. This place is ours. The Hawk Grand Hotel LA is days away from opening and it's crucial that I be there over the next few weeks. But business will have to suffer because I can't leave New York. I *need* to be close to Jordan, even if she is ignoring every one of my texts and phone calls. I *need* to find a way to fix this.

I lean back on my bed and call Jordan. As with every other time I've called her in the last forty-eight hours since she left the vineyard, the line just rings. So, I open our messaging history, finding the countless texts I've sent her, all of them unanswered too.

DAXTON

Please just tell me where you are so I know you're safe.

I'm so sorry, Jordan. I will never stop being sorry.

We were real. I love you.

Please let me explain what happened.

I send another text now.

I am so miserable without you. I will do anything you ask, just please let me fix this.

My pulse speeds up when a new message arrives, dropping again when I realize it's not from Jordan.

NO CALLER ID

This is Mina. Jordan is staying with me. She says you need to stop contacting her.

At least I know where Jordan is now. As much as it pains me to stop contacting Jordan, I'll respect her wishes for the time being. I don't like it, but perhaps time and space is our only way forward. Jordan needs to be surrounded by supportive people right now, and while Mina and Zac are her close friends, I don't know that they're enough. She needs family. So, I get online and type in the name *Ryan Hart*, and begin my search for Jordan's brother.

Three days later, I'm standing sleep deprived and dosed up on coffee in the lobby of Mina's apartment building, waiting for her to meet me. When the elevator doors open and she walks out alone, my heart sinks a little. I knew Jordan wouldn't be with Mina, but some foolish part of me hoped I would see her.

"Mina, thanks for meeting with me."

As soon as she sees me, her face turns hard and she storms in my direction. "What the hell were you thinking, Daxton? Should I even call you Daxton?"

"Yes. I don't go by Steel and haven't for a long time."

"Well, whatever. You have seriously pissed me off. I was rooting for you! I was your biggest advocate. I spent months encouraging Jordan to meet Steel. Then when I could see she was falling in love with Daxton—" She stops mid-sentence, cringing. "This is doing my head in, referring to you in third person. Look, what are you doing here? I told you on the phone, Jordan doesn't want to see you."

"I know. I won't try and convince you to bring her down here. Will you just give her this?" I pull an envelope out of my suit jacket and hold it out to Mina.

She stares at it like it's a piece of trash. "What is that?"

"A letter I wrote to Jordan. It contains the truth. All I can hope is that it gives Jordan closure about what happened between us. Please, just... give it to her. That's all I'm asking."

She sighs and takes the envelope from my hand. "Sure."

"One last thing. I tracked down Ryan and explained everything that happened between me and Jordan. He's coming to be with her."

She gasps. "You... what? How did you reach him?"

"Three days of no sleep, persistence, and a lot of money. But that's not what's important. I haven't organized any of this as a way to win Jordan back. I just want her to be surrounded by people who love her. I know how much she misses him."

Mina nods, a little startled, and returns to the elevator.

Chapter Forty-Five

Jordan

I've lost track of the days. I'm asleep more than I'm not. When I'm awake, my eyes are swollen with tears. Mina and Zac are letting me crash at their place until I can find my feet again, which seems to be a pattern for me. My life is constantly spiraling out of control and I keep hitting rock bottom.

Ironically, my career prospects have never looked better. My viral TikTok keeps growing with every passing day and has surpassed thirty million views, landing me another job offer at an amazing burlesque club in the city called The Black Flamingo. I force myself to set up a meeting with them and to also organize my meeting with The Feather Tease, both happening over the next week. Ordinarily, I would be ecstatic about these career opportunities, but with the heartbreak, the sunshine is dampened. Along with being angry at Daxton for all the lies, now I'm angry at him for taking this moment away from me too, a moment that should be filled with excitement.

My phone is flooded with missed calls and texts from Daxton. To make matters worse, I punish myself and listen to all of his voicemails—of him apologizing endlessly and telling me how much he loves me. I read all his texts. I dream about him and that we're happy, that there was never any deceit. And when I wake up, I'm crying, because I remember everything between us is based on a lie.

A knock on the door wakes me. I wipe my eyes, feeling like a zombie from how much I've been sleeping. Mina pops her head through the door and smiles upon seeing me awake.

"Hey, babe." She takes a seat on the end of my bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. What time is it?"

"Six p.m."

Hearing that I've slept the entire day makes me feel worse. I prop myself up against the headboard and brush my fingers through my hair.

"I've got someone here to see you."

I shoot a glare at her. "If it's Daxton, Mina, I swear I will kill you."

"It's not. I think you'll enjoy this visit." She glances back at the door and calls out, "Hey, get in here."

My eyes widen in disbelief when my brother steps into view. His blond dreadlocks are tied in a bun and there's thick stubble on his jaw. Ryan's shirt is fully unbuttoned and his torso is on display, like he's just finished surfing at the beach. The sight of him is like coming home and makes me burst into tears all over again.

"Hey, baby sis." He sits on the bed with me and Mina and wraps me in his arms. I collapse into his embrace, hugging him tight.

"Ryan, what are you doing here?"

He shares a look with Mina, the two of them communicating something silently.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing. Daxton contacted me. He told me everything. I came immediately."

I don't know whether to feel pleased or annoyed by this information. On one hand, I'm obviously happy to see Ryan. On the other... "If Daxton thinks calling you is going to make me forgive him—"

“He doesn’t,” Mina interrupts. “I spoke to Daxton and he made it clear contacting Ryan was purely about you having the support of your brother.”

My teeth grind together. Probably another lie from Daxton. Ignoring the topic, my focus returns to Ryan. “It’s so nice to see you. I’ve missed you a lot.”

Mina stands from my bed. “I should give you two a chance to catch up. I’ll be in the living room.”

“You don’t have to leave,” I tell her. She’s not intruding on anything, not when she’s basically family to me as well as Ryan. He’s known her since we were young. They’re good friends. On occasion, they’ve been more than friends.

“You two deserve a sibling moment. Before I go...” She places an envelope on my nightstand. “Don’t hate me. This is a letter from Daxton. He gave it to me a few days ago. I should have given it to you sooner, but I wanted to wait till you were feeling a little more stable. Do with it what you want. I’m not forcing you to read it.”

“Take it away.”

“Babe...”

“Throw it in the trash. I don’t want to read it.”

She nods and steps out of the room, taking the envelope with her.

“You should read the letter,” Ryan says.

“Don’t start.”

“I’m not saying you have to forgive the guy, just that you should read the letter.”

I rub both of my eyes and sigh. “You and I have other things to talk about. Like how you got married.”

Ryan holds my hand, speaking softly. “Mina told me I may not have chosen the best way to break the news to everyone. She said you were a little upset finding out the way you did. Of course, it was dumb of me. I wasn’t thinking. You know how I am, doing things that feel right in the moment.”

“Yeah, I do know. It’s okay. Really. I’m happy that you’re happy. I was just caught a little off guard when I saw the vlog. You and Hannah only met a few months ago. I had no idea you were so serious about her.”

He shrugs, smiling. “Time doesn’t matter. You don’t need to be with someone for a long time to know they’re the one. When you know, you know. Hannah is like no girl I’ve ever been with and I didn’t want to wait to marry her.”

Mina and Zac said the same thing to me when they got engaged. Before flying out to Napa Valley to be with Daxton, I was starting to think the same about him...

My throat clenches with a new wave of tears trying to make an appearance. I swallow, fighting the waterworks.

Ryan sighs, continuing his explanation. “Then my manager was hounding me about how I hadn’t posted a vlog in a while, so I handed over footage of me and Hannah eloping. It was a dick move. I’m sorry. I didn’t know how much you were struggling, not just with my absence but everything. Unemployment. The fire. Escorting. Shit, Jordan, I would have come here sooner if I’d known.”

“It was escorting with no sex,” I clarify. “And I’m not your problem to fix, but I won’t deny missing you.”

“I know.” He pulls me back into a hug. “But I’m going to do better by you.”

Ryan and I talk for another hour in my bedroom, discussing everything we’ve missed out on in each other’s life. After freshening up with a shower, I meet him and Mina in the living room. They sit on opposite couches, with three mugs of tea on the coffee table between them, and Mr. Fluffy curled up on Mina’s lap.

“No Zac?”

“He’s at the gym with Adrian and Darius,” Mina tells me. I’m somewhat relieved by her answer. One less person to

witness how miserable I am right now.

“So...” I drop to the couch with Ryan, crossing my legs beneath me. “I’m back to being a broke bitch.”

“There’s the Jordan I know,” Mina jokes. “Okay, but seriously, what are you talking about? You were living in Daxton’s penthouse for, like, a month or something, which means you have forty thousand dollars.”

“I gave back every last cent.”

“What? Are you crazy? You earned that money. It’s yours.”

I shrug. “The money was a reminder of the lie. It felt dirty.”

“Babe, who cares how it feels. Daxton lied to you. You don’t owe him shit.”

“I know. I just... couldn’t keep the money.” I reach for one of the mugs and bring it to my lips, cringing as soon as cold, sour liquid touches my tongue. “What on earth did I just drink?”

Ryan grins. “My famous kombucha.”

Famous is no overstatement. Along with Ryan’s popular YouTube channel, people are obsessed with his kombucha brew. He’s raking in the cash.

I look at the mug in front of Mina and raise a confused eyebrow at her. “You’re drinking this stuff? I thought you had some phobia of Ryan’s kombucha.”

She laughs. “Hey, he insisted on pouring all of us a cup. I never said I would drink mine.”

Ryan chugs down his entire drink within five seconds. “You should both be drinking a glass of this a day. Especially you, Jordan, with you barely getting out of bed at the moment. It will do you wonders.”

Classic Ryan, believing kombucha fixes everything. I sip on the kombucha to appease him, the taste not so bad now that

I'm not expecting tea. "I should have asked sooner. Is Hannah here?"

"She's flying in separately. Had a few things to wrap up before boarding the plane. Mina and Zac are letting me crash here for a few days. When Hannah arrives, we'll find an apartment to rent."

"You don't have to move here for me—"

"I know I don't have to. I *want* to," Ryan says. "Hannah and I will stay for a couple of months before traveling again. It will be nice to spend time with you. You can even live with us if you like."

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass. Your apartment will probably be a nudist zone."

Mina snorts, twirling a finger around Mr. Fluffy's ear. "Ryan, I better not find you walking around naked in this apartment."

He winks at her. "Don't worry. I'll keep it in my pants."

A moment later, a message alert beeps on Ryan's phone. He pulls the device out of his pocket, pursing his lips when seeing the screen.

"Uh-oh," Mina says. "I know that look. What's wrong?"

Ryan glances up at her. "What? Oh, no, nothing is wrong. Ah, what were we talking about?" He slides the phone back into his pocket and smiles at us.

"That wasn't suspicious at all. You sure everything is good?" I ask.

"There is something, but I don't want to bother you."

"Well, now I am bothered. Just tell me what it is."

"I... ah... It was a text from Mom."

I raise my eyebrows, not expecting that answer at all. "I heard from her a few weeks back. She said her and Dad are in rehab. I didn't reply."

“Yeah, they are. I received a few messages from them when my phone came into range. I called them—”

“You *what?*” Not that I’m frustrated at him calling them. Not at all. I’m just surprised. It’s a shock that Ryan would open up the doorway with my parents when he was hurt as badly by them as I was.

“We spoke for a while and had a good conversation.” He grabs a cushion and props it behind his back. “I didn’t want to mention any of this to you yet. It’s an extra stress you don’t need.”

“I can handle it. What happened?”

“I’m not about to run off and paint my nails with them, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Ryan helps himself to Mina’s mug of kombucha. “But I can see they’re trying to change. I spoke with a doctor at the facility too because I wanted trusted information. They said Mom and Dad checked themselves into rehab and are responding well to the treatment. This is the longest they’ve ever been sober. Mom and Dad told me they want to mend their relationship with us. They also understand it won’t be a quick fix.”

“How do you feel about that?”

He chews on his bottom lip. “I’m not sure yet. Mending our relationship certainly won’t be easy. But if they continue to seek help and there is long-term improvement... maybe one day I’ll have a relationship with them.”

I nod, contemplating Ryan’s words. I don’t know if I can ever forgive or learn to trust our parents again. But he’s right, if there are big changes made in my parents’ behavior, then maybe one day.

Silence lingers in the living room with the heavy weight of our conversation. Mina takes the lead, steering the topic in a different direction. “So... Babe, what are you going to do for money?”

“I told you, I’ve got a few meetings set up with some burlesque clubs.”

“That’s great, but you won’t see an income from them for at least a few weeks, if not longer. What if these jobs don’t even come through? Don’t tell me you’re going to escort again.”

“Obviously not. I’ll go back to waitressing.” My eyes water at the mention of escorting and all the memories it brings back of Daxton. My head sinks onto the couch backrest and I stare up at the ceiling, trying not to cry.

Ryan pats my leg. “You always have me to fall back on for money.”

“I’m not upset over money. Just... thoughts of Daxton. Everything triggers thoughts of him. I still can’t wrap my head around all that happened. I feel so stupid, like I should have known Daxton and Steel were the same person.”

“How were you supposed to know?” Mina asks.

I wipe away a tear. “There were little things. Daxton and Steel both lived in LA and traveled to New York at the same time. They were both businessmen who worked in property.”

“Those things could have easily been a coincidence.”

“There’s more. A whole list. Daxton and I started getting close the moment Steel stopped talking to me. Sometimes Daxton acted surprised when learning new things about me, like he should have already known them. At the wedding... I should have known when the celebrant spoke Brad’s last name that something was wrong.”

“West is a common last name,” Mina says. “Those examples don’t mean anything. You fell in love and none of this is your fault.”

“Another time, Daxton told me he wouldn’t pursue anything with me because I still had feelings for Steel. I am so stupid.”

Ryan passes me a box of tissues. “Maybe Daxton was trying to do the right thing by you. It sounds like he loved you and was just caught in a mess. You don’t honestly think he set out to deceive you, do you?”

“Ryan,” Mina scolds, swiping her pointer finger across her throat, signaling for him to shut up. “You’re not helping right now.”

I dab my eyes with the tissues. “No, it’s okay. I’ve been reflecting a lot over these last few days. Ryan might have a point. I don’t think Daxton’s plan all along was to deceive me. It still doesn’t excuse him not revealing the truth once he knew who *I* was. The thing that upsets me the most is…” My voice breaks with the thickness of new tears. “I still love Daxton. I don’t think I’ll ever stop loving him. But the trust is broken and I don’t know if I can forgive him.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Jordan

By some miracle, I manage to pull myself together for a few hours and act happy while meeting with the club owners of The Black Flamingo. They offer me a part-time contract where I'll be one of the main acts, starting in two weeks. I accept the offer, secretly keeping my options open with my upcoming meeting at The Feather Tease. A part-time income isn't enough to keep me afloat in this city, and while The Black Flamingo is a well-established burlesque club, it doesn't hold the same prestige as The Feather Tease, nor is it known for creating famous dancers.

Regardless, The Black Flamingo is an amazing opportunity. A stepping stone to great opportunities. I should be smiling, but as I walk back to Mina and Zac's apartment, I can't help but feel exhausted. Everything is surreal. After the events of the last couple of weeks, I can't seem to make myself excited about anything. The worst part is, when I stepped out of The Black Flamingo fresh with a job, Daxton was the first person I wanted to share my success with. I miss him and I hate that I do.

"Hey, how did the meeting go?" Ryan asks as soon as I return to the apartment. He's standing in the kitchen with Zac, and by the look of the brown liquid in front of them, he's teaching Zac a thing or two about brewing kombucha.

I shrug. "I got the job."

“That’s great,” Zac says. “Congratulations.”

Ryan cheers. “Yeah, amazing. Well done.”

I smile on cue, my gaze dropping to the ground. “Um... I’m going to lie down.”

“You okay?” Zac asks.

From the corner of my eyes, I see Ryan step forward to follow me, but hesitates, reading my need for privacy. “We’re here if you want to talk, sis.”

Thankfully, Mina is out with Verena and Adrian today. I don’t think I can handle her positive attitude right now.

I draw all the curtains shut in my room and collapse into bed. Unable to stop myself, I replay Daxton’s voicemails.

“I know I fucked up and I’m so sorry, but it was real between us, Jordan. You know it was.”

My bottom lip trembles as I think back to my time with Daxton. All the late-night phone conversations we had. The laughter. That day in The Hamptons where we trusted each other with difficult moments from our pasts. The way he held me in the shower that first night we slept together; he had this look in his eyes that made me feel so safe and secure in what we shared.

It was real between us, Jordan. You know it was.

I stop hiding behind anger and sadness for a moment and accept the truth. The level of intimacy we shared can’t be faked. I know what Daxton and I had together was real, but that doesn’t change that he was lying. He lied to me when he knew how damaged I am from all my parents’ lies.

“I’ll give you all the space you need from me. But I’m not giving up on us. We belong together—”

The voice message cuts short when an incoming call appears on my screen. It’s from a no caller ID, and I answer in case one of my job offers is trying to contact me.

“Hello?”

“Delphine, it’s lovely to speak with you again,” a deep yet friendly voice greets me. “This is Tom Sanders calling.”

My brain takes a long moment to compute that Tom could sound so welcoming.

“I’ll get to the point,” he says at my prolonged silence. “I’ve heard you and Daxton broke up, which I assume means there’s no harm in asking you to dinner.”

“I’m not escorting anymore. Goodbye—”

“Wait. You misunderstood me. I wasn’t asking to hire you.”

My face screws up into a ball of confusion. “You want to go on a real date? I’m not interested.”

He laughs, the sound light and warm. “I’m not making myself clear. Word spreads around Manhattan fast and I hear you’re the latest talk of the town. Everyone wants you dancing at their club. Rightfully so. You know I’ve always thought you are exquisite. I’d like you to reconsider my offer. Dance at my club.”

“I have no interest in stripping.”

That same friendly laugh comes from Tom’s end of the phone. “I know. I’m referring to a different club. This is a new business venture of mine and I believe the dancing will be more in line with your tastes. It’s cabaret. Patrons dine as they are entertained by the show on stage. I want you to be a lead act. The club opens within two months but I’m more than willing to pay you in advance if it means securing you. This wouldn’t be a freelance role. You’d have the security of a full-time income. Delphine, you really are magnificent and I want you on my stage.”

I sit up in bed, even more startled than when I answered the phone. “Wow. Um... I’m a little caught off guard. This is...” Amazing. Better than what The Black Flamingo offered me today.

But wariness sinks in. I’ve never liked Tom. Daxton made it clear Tom isn’t a good man. Along with those issues, Tom’s offer seems too good to be true. I’ve dealt with so much

disappointment in this industry. Chances are this opportunity will be a dead end too.

But... a job is a job and if this one works out it could be life changing. There's no harm in hearing what Tom has to say. As for not liking the guy, once the club is up and running, I'm sure Tom will be occupied with his next business venture and the two of us will rarely cross paths. Daxton wouldn't approve of me working for Tom. But I'm not with Daxton anymore so his approval doesn't matter. If Tom has a good offer, I won't let Daxton's personal issues with him stand in my way.

"You said you'd like to have dinner?"

"Yes," Tom says. "To discuss this in more detail. I'm having dinner and drinks with my business partners tomorrow night. I'd like you to attend with me so I can introduce you to them and show them my vision of you on our stage."

And there's the catch. Tom still needs to convince his business partners that I'm the right lead dancer for this club.

"Sure," I answer, nervous now that I'll have to put on a happy face for Tom and his partners. "What restaurant will we be dining at?"

"The restaurant at The Hawk Grand Hotel. Eight o'clock."

My stomach twists into knots. "I can't go there. I can't chance running into Daxton. Things between us didn't end well."

"I see. Delphine, I hope you appreciate the difficult position this places me in. One of the gentlemen we'll be dining with organized this dinner reservation and I'm not at liberty to change it."

"I... Uh..." My thoughts become cluttered and I can't get a single word out of my mouth. My mind is riddled with panic over seeing Daxton.

"You do know that your fear of bumping into Daxton is irrational? He returned to LA for the opening of his new hotel. He'll be there for a few weeks."

Oh... Of course. I've been so deep within my own misery that not once did I stop to think life has carried on for Daxton and he's busy with work. "I... didn't know that. I don't talk to him anymore."

"I understand your concerns. Breakups can be messy. But don't let what happened between you two stop you from an amazing opportunity."

I sigh. "You're right. I'll meet you at the Hawk Grand tomorrow night."

Chapter Forty-Seven

Daxton

“You are *literally* on your phone every waking minute of the day,” Amabella says, stirring a pot of spaghetti on her stove. Ally was chatting with us a moment ago but ran to her bedroom when receiving an incoming call from Dan.

I send the current email I’m drafting and lock my phone, then lean back against Amabella’s kitchen counter. “Sorry. Work stuff with the LA hotel opening.”

Diving into work and trying to uphold the LA Hawk Grand Hotel launch is the only thing keeping me sane. When I’m not tending to work emails or phone calls, I have my phone glued to me with the hopes Jordan will call.

“How’s the opening coming along?”

“The launch would be smoother if I were in LA but that’s not an option.”

Amabella turns the hot plate off and drains her spaghetti. “Again, I’m really sorry I let Jordan out of my sight at the vineyard. I feel terrible.”

I know she does. She hasn’t stopped apologizing.

“Amabella, how many times do I have to tell you, none of this is your fault. I should have listened to you from the very start and told Jordan the truth.”

“I still feel bad. Has there been any communication from Jordan yet, even a text?”

“None. It’s been ten days since I left the letter with Mina.”

“Is it possible Mina didn’t give Jordan the letter?”

I dig my hands into my suit pockets and sigh. “Yes. Mina has no reason to do me any favors. I’m going out of my mind here. It’s taking so much self-restraint to leave Jordan alone and hope she forgives me. The last thing she said to me was I’ll never see her again. It’s killing me inside to even think her words might be true.”

“They’re not true. Jordan just needs time to work through everything.”

A message alert buzzes on my phone. I pull the phone from my pocket, desperate to see Jordan’s name. Instead, it’s Tom fucking Sanders, and he leaves the most cryptic message.

TOM SANDERS

You stole the Quinn deal from me. Let’s see how you like it when I steal something from you.

For fuck’s sake. He’s delusional. I dial Tom’s number, not having the patience to play his games. He doesn’t answer. A moment later, I receive a photo message from him that makes me murderous.

The image is a selfie of him dining at a restaurant with Jordan. Her eyes aren’t on the camera. She’s looking down at her phone in her lap, unaware Tom is taking her picture. Tom is winking at the camera and his tongue is poking into his cheek, signaling the “blow job” sign.

“The fucking bastard!” I growl, my free hand clenching into a fist.

“What happened?”

I pass Amabella my phone and she gasps upon reading Tom’s messages. “My God, Daxton, you have to stop him.”

“How? Neither Tom or Jordan will answer my calls. I don’t know how to find them.”

Another message alert goes off.

“That’s him again.” Amabella passes the phone back to me.

TOM SANDERS

How’s the grand opening in LA? Wish I could be there but I’m too busy picking up the pieces of your girlfriend’s broken heart. I’m enjoying wining and dining her in your restaurant. I can’t wait to take her upstairs and fuck her again in one of your rooms. She couldn’t keep her hands off me last night. Such a tight pussy. An even tighter ass.

I’m seeing red. Before I have a chance to break any of the furniture in my rage, I storm out the door.

“Dax, where are you going?” Amabella calls, following me into the corridor.

I press the elevator button. “He’s downstairs. I’m going to fuck him up.”

“What? No! You’re angry. This could turn bad quickly.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“Daxton—”

The elevator opens and I step inside. “Amabella, please stay out of this. Go back inside to Ally.” The doors slide shut and she’s out of sight.

Six levels feels like the longest elevator ride in history. The whole journey, I’m stewing in jealousy and anger. I don’t know what to believe about the claims in Tom’s last message. A large part of me is convinced he’s lying about having slept with Jordan just to mess with me. But I also don’t know how Jordan is acting right now. She deposited all the money I paid her back into my account. What if she agreed to escort him because she’s desperate for money and this time she sleeps

with him? I can't allow Jordan to be placed in that position, with Sanders of all people.

The elevator opens and I rush into the restaurant, scanning the venue for Tom. Jordan catches my attention first, seated at a table in the middle of the restaurant with him. I stalk through the crowd of dining guests, past the pianist playing gentle music, and punch Tom side-on in the head before he sees the blow coming. Everyone around us gasps as he's knocked off his chair to the ground.

"Daxton!" Jordan shouts, standing from the table. "What are you doing?"

I'm too angry to reply and instead turn my attention to Tom lying on the ground. "I told you to stay the fuck away from my girlfriend. Don't use her because you're trying to destroy me. And don't you dare speak about her the way you did in those messages."

Jordan eyes me suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

Tom sits up, growling at me. "You stole the Quinn deal from me."

"I never stole shit from you."

Jordan scoffs and grabs her handbag off the table, then says to Tom, "I knew your job offer was too good to be true. Your business partners aren't meeting us for dinner, are they?"

He laughs, rubbing his bruised cheek but doesn't answer her. Tom rises to his feet with all his focus on me. "The Quinn deal was mine and you know it—"

Jordan cuts him off. "Are you opening a cabaret club or was that a lie—"

"Daxton, shut your bitch up or I will. How dumb can she get?"

My fist smashes into Tom's jaw and he falls to the ground again.

From my peripheral, I see Jordan head for the restaurant exit right as security arrives to inspect the scene. Glaring down

at Tom, I contemplate whether to kick him in the ribs, until I realize he's crying. Fucking pathetic.

"Next time you talk about my girl like that, I'll kill you." I turn to the two security guards beside me. "Escort this man out of here and make sure he never steps foot in this hotel again."

"Yes, sir," they say in unison as I follow Jordan.

Noticing me trailing her, she walks faster, so I jog to catch up to her.

"Leave me alone, Daxton."

"Not until you talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about," she says as I walk beside her, attempting to keep her pace.

"Have you read my letter?"

"No." Jordan presses the elevator button and turns away from me while waiting for the doors to open. "I told Mina to throw it in the trash."

Fuck. I seriously hope that's a lie. I can't deal with another ten days of not hearing from her, or longer. The elevator doors open and Jordan steps inside. I act fast, joining her and hit the penthouse button.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Jordan

The elevator doors shut, confining me with Daxton. The floor beneath me rocks slightly and we begin our ascent. With a groan, I turn my back to Daxton because the only way I can cope right now is to not see his face. There's so much pain and longing in his eyes. I see love in them too, and if I meet his gaze, I know I'll crumble and give in to him.

"You are intolerable, Daxton. I am *not* entering your penthouse."

"Please talk to me. You left the vineyard so quickly and haven't spoken to me since."

"I'm so angry at you, I don't know *what* to say."

"Tell me all of those angry thoughts."

His warm hand caresses my waist. I shove him away, shouting the loudest I ever have in my life. "I am humiliated!"

"Yes, scream at me. Hit me. I deserve it. Do whatever you need to do, just don't shut me out."

The elevator doors open at the penthouse level but my feet stay planted in their spot.

"Please, come inside with me. Let's talk."

"You're crazy if you think I'm going anywhere with you." I scowl at Daxton, my chest rising up and down with anger.

breaths. Right as the doors slide shut, Daxton sticks his hand out to keep them open.

“Do I really have to say this again? I’m not entering your penthouse.”

“Yeah, you are.” Before I have a chance to back away, Daxton grabs my waist and throws me over his shoulder, carrying me to his front door.

My skin buzzes with a treacherous excitement at the intimate way he handles me, like I’m still his girl regardless that we’ve broken up. A few minutes ago in the restaurant, Daxton called me his girlfriend, and despite my external frustration, I can’t deny the thrill that ran through me.

“Put me down this second!” I yell, kicking and banging my fists against his back.

He steps inside the penthouse and closes the door behind us, lowering me to the ground.

The living room is dark, lit by only the surrounding buildings, but there’s enough light to see Daxton clearly. As soon as I gain my bearings, my palms slam against his chest. “What is *wrong* with you? Don’t you ever do that to me again.”

“I’m sorry. We just... need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.” I shove Daxton’s chest again, so hard that this time he’s knocked off balance and takes a few steps backward, entering deeper into the living room.

His lips twitch and he has the nerve to smirk at me. That fucking smirk that I am obsessed with. A moment later, his gaze drops to my lips and I feel the heat of it in my clit. He likes this—whatever is happening between us right now—and *that* realization only deepens the pulse in my groin.

I step forward, shoving him again. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“How am I looking at you?”

“You *know* how. I’m *not* going to kiss you.”

“Trust me, kitten, it’s not kissing I’m thinking about.”

My skin warms at the thought of having sex with Daxton.

With *Steel*.

For the first time since the truth was revealed, I’m able to look past the anger for a moment and see Steel. All the emotional attachment I formed with him on Secret Santa comes flooding back, and flutters travel from my stomach, heading south.

“I want Steel. I like him better than Daxton.” I don’t know why I say it—to get a rise out of him? He doesn’t bite, so I taunt with another shove, and this time, Daxton falls backward, right onto the couch.

He grabs my waist and pulls me on top of him, bringing my thighs to either side of his. My dress bunches high up my legs and I gasp at my compromised position as another rush of flutters consumes me. I tell myself this visceral reaction is caused by shock and not arousal, but I’m one hundred percent lying to myself. I could climb off Daxton right this second. He isn’t restraining me.

And yet I’m not moving.

His hips push up, the hard bulge in his pants grinding against me. The tiniest moan takes me by surprise, leaving my mouth. And then another moan when Daxton’s lips press to my neck. His hot breath sends ripples along my skin and I’m suddenly clutching his shoulders.

“You’re angry with me,” he whispers, his lips continuing along my neck, creating sparks of heat that travel to my clit. Goddamn the effect this man has on me. I don’t want to enjoy any of this, but I do. The feeling of his lips on me is electrifying and I can’t bear the thought of him stopping. “You have every right to be angry. But stay and let me fix this.”

Before I know what I’m doing, my hips work against his cock, seeking release.

“That’s it, baby.” He rocks in time with me.

No, this isn't right. I push Daxton's shoulders away from me, pinning him to the couch backrest. "You can't fix this with sex," I say, holding back a sigh of pleasure as I grind against him again.

"I know." The look in his eyes is earnest. "I will never stop trying to make it up to you. I'll do whatever it takes to earn back your trust, Jordan."

My hips continue grinding on Daxton's lap, my pace growing faster. My breath shallow.

"You like this?" he murmurs.

"No, I just need release."

"I don't believe you."

I can already feel the heat of an orgasm building deep within me, but I stop grinding to prove a point. Without the friction, my inner muscles grow achingly tight, begging me to continue chasing the orgasm. I groan with frustration. I've already learned that no orgasm I give myself will ever be as intense as what Daxton can give me.

Taking what I need, I slide backward on Daxton's lap, my hands racing to unbuckle his belt and unzip his fly.

"That's it, Jordan," Daxton purrs, watching me.

The space between my thighs throbs at the anticipation of feeling him inside me. Not wanting to climb off Daxton and create distance between us for even one second, I move my panties to the side. He has other ideas and wraps a fist around the fabric, ripping them from my body. With impatience, I position the head of his erection at my wet entrance and sink fast and hard onto him.

"Fuck," he hisses.

Our loud and untamed moans sound out in unison as we cling to each other. I'm stretched so tightly over his cock that it hurts, but I need to feel him deeper. Harder. I need all of Daxton right now. Bracing myself, I rise and slam my hips back down, my head tilting back as I cry out his name.

“Look how well you take my dick. Such a good girl, kitten,” Daxton growls as I pick up the pace.

My inner walls tremble at the sound of him calling me *kitten*, sending me dangerously close to orgasming. I’ve missed the name. I’ve missed everything about him.

“Ride my cock. Make your pussy feel good.”

I do exactly as he says. Even through the darkness of the living room, I can see his eyes and how he watches me with so much need. He pulls the neckline of my dress down, releasing my breasts and bringing a nipple into his mouth while rubbing the other one with his hand. A high-pitched sigh escapes me, but I’m too lost in the skill of his tongue to care.

“We’re so good together, Jordan.”

We are.

Fuck. No. He *won’t* win. I push Daxton back by the shoulders again as I continued to ride him. “This isn’t about you. I told you, I just need to come.”

“You’re right. I should put on a condom.”

I glare at him and bounce faster.

“That’s what I thought. You want my cum.”

“I hate you.”

“I know you do, baby. Just don’t stop fucking me. Stay and punish me. Take your anger out on my cock.”

His words send another wave of sparks from my core all throughout my body. I still can’t wrap my head around how Daxton and Steel are the same person. Not so long ago I was fantasizing about what it would be like to meet Steel and kiss him. To have *sex* with him. None of those fantasies match this moment. I never could have envisioned anything this intense. Each time I’ve had sex with Daxton it’s been incredible, but this right now is on a whole new level. It’s more passionate than anything I’ve ever experienced. Raw and primal.

Breathless, I speak my thoughts aloud. “I thought about this—what sex would be like with Steel. I touched myself over

him so many times.” Another flurry of pleasure spreads through me, knowing I’m living out that fantasy right now, having sex with Steel. “You’re him.”

“Admit it,” he rasps. “There’s a deep part of you that’s turned on by me being Steel.”

I won’t say the words out loud, but he’s right. Instead, I give in to desire and kiss him, our lips fast against each other’s as I work myself up and down on his dick. Sweat forms over my skin as we share breath.

“I know you still love him,” Daxton says against my lips. “You still love me. We can have that connection again, both of them—the one from Secret Santa and what we’ve formed in person.”

I moan at the temptation and kiss Daxton harder, knotting my fingers through his hair. His thumb finds my clit and that is the end of me. Unable to stop myself, my orgasm consumes me, spreading through my body with white heat.

“Yes, that’s it. You’re so beautiful, Jordan. I love you,” Daxton groans, letting go at the same time. His cock thrusts up with several sharp jabs. I gasp his name, spasming tighter around his length as his cum pumps into me and he confesses his love.

When Daxton finally stops, my whole body tingles blissfully as my orgasm slowly fades away. I rest my forehead on his as we grow still, all but for our ragged breathing. In this moment, there’s only me and him, the way he worships me and how perfectly our bodies fit together.

And then he speaks, drawing me back to reality. “Jordan, baby…” He strokes my cheek, gazing into my eyes. “Please, read my letter.”

Daxton’s voice is so genuine. So pleading and full of pain that it hurts me. And that’s where the problem lies. I can’t be feeling this for him. I don’t want to leave this penthouse. I still love him even though I don’t want to.

I lean back and adjust the top of my dress, returning myself to modesty. “I already told you, Mina threw your letter

in the trash. I need to leave now.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Jordan

“You had sex with Daxton?” Mina repeats, her fork pausing halfway to her mouth. “I ask how your meeting with Tom Sanders went last night and your response is *I had sex with Daxton?*”

I shrug, the two of us having dinner with Ryan at the dining table. Thank God Zac is at the gym again with Adrian and Darius because I don’t know if I could handle another person’s questions. “It just kind of happened.”

Mina places the fork on her plate and leans forward, fascinated. “Babe, I’m going to need details. Explicit details.”

“Um... Maybe later when my brother isn’t listening.”

Ryan cuts into his chicken. “I really don’t care. But before you two get into Jordan’s boy drama, tell me first about this Tom Sanders job offer—”

“It was complete bullshit. There was no job.” With Mina and Zac off at rehearsals all day and Ryan meeting with investors in his kombucha company, now is the first chance I’ve had to discuss the details with anyone. “Tom was using me to seek revenge on Daxton. But I’m not hung up on it because you know that meeting I had with The Feather Tease Lounge today?”

“Oh my God, yes!” Mina squeals. “How did that go?”

“Really well. They want me to dance full-time for them as a lead act. I’m accepting the offer.”

They both cheer at the news and jump up from their chairs, running around the table to smother me in hugs.

“You deserve this,” Mina says. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks,” I laugh, buried beneath their arms. “Let’s hope this works out.”

“Are you kidding me? Of course it will,” Ryan says as they return to their seats. “That’s exciting.”

I push vegetables around on my plate with my fork. “Yeah... The Feather Tease is what dreams are made of for a burlesque dancer.”

“You don’t sound excited,” Mina says.

“I am. It’s just that... I don’t want to get too excited and then be heartbroken if the job falls through. It’s happened many times before.”

“Stop. You need to have faith, babe. This time is going to be different. A positive mind attracts positive energy. Don’t let past failures and the crap that’s happened with Daxton ruin your time to shine.”

“You’re right. I’m trying.”

Ryan pours himself a glass of kombucha. “Agreed. The Feather Tease will be your lucky break.”

“I really hope so. Um... something else happened today that’s worth mentioning. I texted Mom and Dad.”

Ryan and Mina drop their cutlery with a startled gasp. “You did?” my brother asks.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said—how you think they’re getting real help this time. I want to believe it but I’m not going to until I see the results. Anyway, I sent them a message saying I heard you spoke to them, and I hope they’re doing well. I know it’s not much but... it’s all I can offer right now. They said they were glad to hear from me.”

“You did good,” Ryan says.

“Super good,” Mina adds. “It’s more than they deserve. So, back to the sex with Daxton topic. What’s happening between you two?”

“I don’t know.” I mindlessly push food around on my plate. “The sex last night was a mistake. A spur of the moment thing which I need to wipe from my mind. At one point today, I caught myself feeling glad that Daxton and Steel are the same person because I’ve been through so much with both of them. I was trying to rationalize how taking Daxton back will mean having Steel too. There’s some twisted part of me which *likes* that Daxton is Steel. I can’t be feeling like that.”

“Why not?” Ryan asks. “You clearly love the guy and he is *crazy* about you. Maybe he deserves a second chance.”

“Babe, listen,” Mina says. “You’re allowed to feel confused over Daxton. You’re allowed to want him back. You’re allowed to even take him back. There are no rules here.”

“I know. It’s just...” I groan and hang my head in my hands, resting my elbows on the dining table. “It’s too soon. I’m still upset with him.”

“Jordan wants to make him grovel,” Ryan says right before shooting back his last mouthful of kombucha.

“I do not.” My words muffle against my hands.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with groveling. Daxton deserves to grovel.”

Mina sighs. “Was it at least good sex?”

I peek through my fingers at her. “The best I’ve ever had. It was like I was having sex with Daxton and Steel at the same time. There were so many emotions involved.”

She watches me for a good few seconds and I can’t tell whether she’s silently judging or pitying me. A moment later, Mina wipes her lips with a napkin and stands from the table. “That’s it, we’re going out tonight to find you a new man.”

“No way.” I drop my hands, planting myself firmly in the chair. “I’ve had enough of men. I can’t deal with any more of

their emotional crap.”

“Who said anything about getting emotional? Have fun with a few guys. Flirt a little. Sleep around. Ryan, are you coming with us?”

“I’ll sit this one out,” he says. “Have a girls’ night.”

A voice in my head warns me off Mina’s idea, telling me Daxton is the only guy I want to flirt with. I can’t even fathom the idea of sleeping with another man. Daxton told me I’m the one for him, and I know there’s no other guy I’ll ever love as much.

But that’s what scares me. My heart wants to forgive him. Being in his arms again last night, having him look at me like I’m his entire world... it was a warm place I never wanted to leave. But... his lies still hurt and I can’t get past the mistrust. What if he hurts me again? My head tells me to not cave in and that I can’t take him back after what he did to me. I’ve made the mistake of forgiveness too many times before.

“You know what?” I stand from my chair. “I’ve changed my mind. I think we *should* go out tonight. It will be a good distraction.”

An hour later, I’m standing in front of the floor-length mirror in Mina and Zac’s bedroom, looking at myself all done up and nothing like my usual appearance. Mina straightened my hair instead of the curls I always wear. She made me change into a pink dress of hers, pink heels, and has applied pink lipstick. It’s giving Barbie vibes and is not at all in my comfort zone, but whatever. Tonight is about having fun.

Mina holds up her phone in front of us. “Pose for a selfie.”

“I’ll pass on the selfie.”

“Sorry, babe, not an option.” She jabs my ribs.

Mina gets a squeal out of me as I swat her hands away. In which time, the camera flashes.

“Perfect.” She shows me the photo. And wow, what a sight. I genuinely look like I’m having fun. “Okay, I’m going to take a quick shower and get dressed.”

Mina leaves me alone in her bedroom. I’m about to head out to the living room to see what Ryan’s up to but take a seat at Mina’s dressing table first, deciding I need the finishing touch of my favorite perfume.

Dozens of tiny perfume bottles, eyeshadow pallets, and skincare containers sit on Mina’s dressing table, making it difficult to find her Coco Mademoiselle. After a minute of scanning her collection and still not finding it, I open the first drawer, my breath catching in my throat when I find Daxton’s letter.

A back-and-forth battle takes place in my mind, contemplating whether to read it. A flashback of last night hits me, of Daxton’s pleading gaze. Without hesitating another second, I tear open the seal, finding his handwriting.

Jordan,

Have you ever found yourself mixed up in a lie you never wanted to be a part of? That’s what happened with you.

When I discovered who you were, I panicked and kept the truth to myself because I knew you hated the real me, Daxton. You were resistant to meeting Steel out of fear that we would ruin the intimacy we shared online. I was convinced if you knew who I was, it would be the end of us. I’d never see or hear from you again. I’d lose yet another meaningful relationship. You were the one good thing in my life and I let the fear of losing you overpower me.

My plan was to mend your impression of me to a point where I could share my identity without scaring you off. I cut all Secret Santa communication because I knew I couldn’t keep talking to you as Steel. We grew closer in the real world, and then I discovered how badly your parents had hurt you with lies. I knew then that my omission of the truth would be my downfall. I was selfish and kept trying to find the right way to

be honest with you while also getting to keep you. Instead, I became more tangled in a web of lies and didn't know how to get myself out of it.

In hindsight, I should have been honest from the start. I have so many regrets. So many things I would have done differently if I could go back.

I should have told you I was Steel as soon as I discovered who you were and trusted that even though you hated me as Daxton, we would have found a way forward.

I should never have let our relationship move beyond friendship while you didn't know who I was.

I should never have made love to you while you didn't know the truth, despite those being the best moments of my life.

Jordan, you have no idea how much I regret hurting you. I've never loved anyone as much as I love you. I thought I knew what heartbreak was when Felicity cheated on me but that doesn't even compare to this. The feeling of Brad and Felicity's betrayal was still fresh not so long ago and it kills me to know that I've inflicted a similar pain on you.

I understand all too well that you need time to process everything that has happened but please don't make this the end of us. I will do anything it takes to earn back your trust.

My mom gave me the courage to finally be honest with you. She said if you love something, you set it free. If it returns, it will be yours forever. If it doesn't, it was never meant to be.

I know you and I are meant to be. How else do you explain us falling in love with each other online, unknowingly meeting that night at Club Noir, and being instantly drawn to each other?

I fucked up, Jordan. I fucked up so bad. I really hope you return to me because you're it for me. You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Daxton.

Tears are trickling down my cheeks by the end of Daxton's letter. I don't know what the tears resemble. Every emotion inside me is muddled and I can't think straight. But my heart thumps fast and the urge to feel Daxton's arms around me is overwhelming. I can feel it within myself that this letter contains the truth. I'm still mad about the lie but the full force of my anger is fading.

"Dammit, babe, you've ruined your makeup."

I look up from the letter, finding Mina in the doorway. Her attention shifts to the paper in my hands and she gasps.

"You read it. What did it say?"

I hold out the letter to her. "Read it yourself."

Mina sits on her bed, taking a minute to read the letter. I join her, crossing my legs on the mattress.

"What do you think?" I ask.

She rubs a hand over her jaw and returns the letter to me once she's finished reading. "Don't hate me for saying this but I kind of understand where Daxton is coming from."

I nod, wiping my eyes. "I feel the same way. I... I love him. But I can't take him back. Right? I mean, what would that say about me? I'm a pushover. What if he lies about something else?"

Mina takes my hand, smiling gently at me. "Now you're just making up excuses not to be with Daxton. You're pushing him away because if you shut yourself off from him, he can't hurt you again. I'm not judging you; you've been hurt bad in your past. But, Jordan, Daxton is not like your parents. He won't make the same mistake twice. He may make other mistakes that hurt you, but you know what? That's okay. Daxton isn't perfect. No one is. That's what being in a relationship is like. People have flaws. They hurt each other without meaning to."

I bite my bottom lip, letting Mina's words sink in.

"If you do take him back, you need to do it with confidence and full forgiveness. *He* needs to have trust in *you*,

Jordan, that you do forgive him and together you can work through any future challenges. That you won't always doubt him because of this one mistake.”

I dab the tears from my eyes, hearing sense in all that she says. “You're right. Mina... I really do want to let go of all the pain. Everything is just... still so fresh. My emotions are out of control and I'm still hurting.”

“I understand. The letter makes it clear he isn't going anywhere. If you need time, he'll wait. But Jordan... Daxton seems like a good guy who just messed up and acted out of fear because he was so in love with you. It's actually kind of romantic when I think of it like that.” She laughs to herself, then sighs. “Daxton cares about you a lot and... after reading his letter, I really do think he wants to do right by you.”

My head hangs with fresh tears streaming down my face. I love him. I love him so damn much it hurts.

Mina is right. Daxton *is* a good man even if I've had trouble admitting so in the past few days.

My eyes water as I reread Daxton's letter. When I reach the bottom of the page, the closing sentences draw a sob from me. *I really hope you return to me because you're it for me. You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.*

It reminds me of what Ryan said about his feelings for Hannah. *When you know, you know.* Despite all the pain Daxton's lie has caused me, I *know* in this moment.

Daxton is the one for me.

I can let go of the pain.

“So... what do you want to do about tonight?” Mina asks, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Are we still going out? I don't mind if you'd rather stay home or if you want to see Daxton.”

Of course I want to see Daxton. But I'm too emotional to face him right now. Tomorrow, once I've calmed down, I'll go to him. “Let's go out. I want to dance and have fun. We'll treat it as a celebration for my new job. But no guys, okay?”

“Sure. No guys at all.” She grabs her phone and starts typing away with her thumbs. The corner of her lip twitches upward.

“What’s the smile for?” I ask. “You sexting Zac or something?”

“What? Oh, um... yeah.”

“At least wait till I’m out of the room.”

Chapter Fifty

Daxton

I spot Jordan on the dance floor of Electric Dreams. She's with Mina, the two of them laughing as they take turns spinning each other around. Jordan isn't dressed anything like her normal self, wearing all pink. I like this style on her. I like any style she wears. I can't stop thinking about last night, how good it felt to have her back in my arms and how perfect she looked riding me. Fuck. Thinking about it again has me readjusting my pants.

I place my drink on the high table and pull out my phone, rechecking Mina's Instagram post that Amabella sent me. The one I'm sure was designed for me, which might as well say *look, Jordan is having fun without you. You mean nothing to her.*

There's a photo of Jordan and Mina laughing as they get dressed for the night, with the caption: **Ladies night out on the town. Trying to find a new man for my girl. All eligible bachelors hit us up at Electric Dreams.**

With Mina's celebrity status and follower count, this club is swarming with men. Yet Jordan isn't paying attention to a single one of them.

When I look back up from my phone, the two girls are making their way through strobe lights to the bar. They order drinks and find a table to stand at, then chat for a minute before a guy from the table beside them leaves his friends to

talk to them. Jordan, specifically. He's looking at her like he wants to fuck her, and it makes my blood boil, until Jordan offers him a polite smile and shakes her head. He returns to the table next to them without another word. And that tells me all I need to know—she's not here for a quick hookup.

Mina's eyes latch onto me and she clutches Jordan's arm, nodding in my direction. Jordan looks at me and I hold her gaze, remembering the intimacy we shared last night. She gets the message, seeing the graphic thoughts behind my eyes, and blushes before turning away.

I unlock my phone and send her a message.

DAXTON

If you're trying to make me jealous, kitten, it's working.

JORDAN

How did you know I would be here?

Mina's Instagram. I had to come and check out my competition.

Jordan says something to Mina then checks her phone again. The next second, Jordan hits Mina's arm and shouts. The music is loud, but I can still hear her say, "I can't believe you posted that!"

Mina wards Jordan off, laughing. "I'm sorry. Actually, I'm not. You need a push in the right direction and I knew Daxton would come here if he saw my post."

A new guy steps up to the ladies. Tall, dark, and muscles visible through his shirt. He grins at Jordan, standing closer to her than normal while introducing himself. I clench my jaw while watching the interaction, commanding myself not to interfere.

Jordan's eyes flick to me mid-conversation. The tiniest smile tugs at her lips, disappearing so fast that I question whether I imagined it.

DAXTON

Who's the guy you're talking to?

JORDAN

I don't know. Don't care. I just like the way you look at me when you're jealous.

Is that what this is—you enjoy making me suffer? I'm okay with that. I deserve to suffer. I will do all the groveling it takes to get you back. Tell me what else you like.

I liked last night.

I know you did.

Have you read my letter yet?

Jordan reads my texts then returns her phone to her purse. She says something to Mina and leaves without another word to the guy, walking through a crowd of people gathered around the bar. I abandon my post and follow her, curious as to where she's going. Jordan turns a corner then enters an unmarked door. I hesitate, questioning whether she's entered the Ladies' room. But then I spot the door to the left labeled *Ladies' Restroom*. So, what room has Jordan walked into?

I follow her inside, met with what looks to be a small sitting room. Like the rest of the nightclub, the lights are dim. Plush velvet couches line the room and potted ferns sit in the corners. The heavy beats of the music are softer in here, better for easy conversation.

“Jordan?” I glance around, finding her leaning against the wall behind me.

Her gaze drops to my lips and lingers, but it's not tenderness that I see within her eyes. Instead, heat and passion, just like when we connected last night in the penthouse. From this one look, I can tell she hasn't been able to stop thinking about last night either. She can deny it all she wants, but last

night wasn't *just* sex for either of us. I felt it in the way she kissed me, how she looked into my eyes and clung to me. So many deep emotions were involved.

“Baby—”

“Don't talk,” she murmurs, the breathy, sensual tone of her voice traveling straight to my dick. “You're right—I do want more groveling, but not with your words.”

A rasp escapes my throat at her implication. She's not shutting me out anymore. This is progress. In fact... I think she likes this, having power over me. Seeing me beg.

Fuck, that's hot. I'll happily give her what she needs. I'll beg. I'll worship her. Whatever it takes.

My eyes roam down her body and back up, lingering on the way her breasts swell with each shallow breath she takes. Even with the mood lighting, I can see her cheeks blushing.

A chair stands nearby us. I grab it and wedge the back beneath the door handle, securing our privacy. Jordan watches me with hooded eyes as I stalk toward her. Slowly, I lower to my knees and place my hands on the bare skin of her thighs as I gaze up at her. She feels so warm under my palms. Holding her is pure heaven.

Her breathing grows louder as I press my lips to the inside of her thighs. Sliding my hands higher, I slip them beneath the seam of her panties. She shudders as I gently pull them down her legs, then she whimpers as I kiss in between, gliding my tongue over her clit.

“Daxton,” she moans softly, bunching her hands through my hair.

Hearing Jordan say my name sends heat to my dick. I continue kissing Jordan's sweet spot until her legs grow weak from pleasure. She struggles to remain standing, so I rise to my feet and wrap an arm around her waist, supporting her body as my fingers create slow circles on her clit.

Jordan gasps at the hardness of my dick pressing through my pants, digging into her side. Her hand grips me through the fabric, making me grunt at the unexpected contact.

“Feel how hard I am for you, baby?”

My finger pushes inside her tight opening. She sighs with pleasure, clinging to my shoulders, so I add another finger, stretching her open. Jordan cries out, so loud that I’m sure anyone walking past this room will hear, even with the club’s loud music. Her legs grow weaker, buckling beneath her until I’m supporting her whole body weight.

She grabs my wrist suddenly, causing me to stop pleasuring her. Jordan peers up at me with a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead and a glazed look in her eyes like she’s close to coming. “I don’t want to come like this. You know how I want it.” She presses her lips to mine, kissing me with an open mouth. My body quivers at the feeling of Jordan wanting me. I kiss her back with as much force, only stopping when she whispers the sweetest words I’ve ever heard. “Make love to me, Daxton. Please.”

I search her eyes, longing to find forgiveness in them and something to tell me she’s back. But I can’t be sure what I see within her other than love. I just hope love is enough for Jordan to forgive me.

I press her back against the wall, freeing up my hands. She gazes up into my eyes the entire time I unzip my fly. I’m so lost for words. There was a part of me that was scared she would never look at me this way again, like she loves me.

Wasting no time, I grab the backs of Jordan’s thighs and lift her off the ground, wrapping her legs around me. She leans against the wall as we work together lining me up with her entrance, then I thrust into her, burying my dick to the hilt.

I groan as she sighs my name against my lips. Her muscles hold me inside her. This is where I belong. Her body was made for me and it takes every ounce of concentration not to release myself inside her already.

I attempt another thrust, but Jordan’s legs are wrapped so tight around me, holding my dick deep in her. Instead, I carry Jordan to a nearby couch and sit down, gazing up at her on top of me.

“Do you still hate me?”

She rises and gently sinks back down on me with a moan.
“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Another moan and this time her eyes flutter shut as she lowers onto me.

“If this is what hate looks like, you can hate me all you want.”

She kisses me, her lips so tender against mine as she slowly works up and down on my dick. Our arms are tangled together as we cling to each other. Her gaze caresses me. There’s nothing hateful about this moment. With each rise and fall of her hips, her muscles grow tighter around my length. Her tiny cries become more desperate. She’s about to come, but I can’t let go of this moment yet.

Right before she climaxes, I hold her hips still, denying her the friction she needs.

“Be angry with me all you want. I deserve it,” I whisper. “Baby, I’m *so* sorry for how badly I fucked up. But please take me back. Be mine and only mine from here on out because you own every piece of my heart. I’m nothing without you.”

She nods desperately like she can’t give me the answer fast enough. “Yes. Fuck, Daxton, yes. I’m yours. Only yours. I need you.”

My chest swells with pure bliss hearing those words. I release my grip on Jordan’s hips and she returns to riding me in slow bounces while kissing my lips. The next moment, she’s gasping my name and I feel the contractions of her orgasm.

“Yes, Jordan, come on me,” I grit out, thrusting up and joining her climax. Waves of ecstasy spread through me as I release into her.

Jordan collapses onto me and I hold her tight, panting as I recover from such an intense high. I stroke her hair and brush my fingertips along her damp skin. Her heartbeat races away

against my chest. We remain like this, locked in each other's arms until our breathing synchronizes into a calm rhythm.

Now that the heat of the moment is over, I question how much of Jordan's talk was said only to appease me so she could reach an orgasm. The sex is over, and as much as I want to believe she was serious about being with me from here forward, I don't expect her to hold true to her word.

"Jordan," I mutter the plea along her skin, kissing all down her neck and shoulders. "I love you so much. I will never stop being sorry. You have to believe me."

Jordan leans back, meeting my gaze. To my surprise, she nods, her voice gentle. "I know. I read your letter and believe everything you wrote. I forgive you. And I love you too, Daxton."

A smile twitches my lips. I cup her jaw in my palms, searching her eyes for the truth and barely believing it when I see it. My lips crush to hers and I kiss her deep and hard, never having been so relieved and filled with joy in my life. When I pull back, she smiles softly at me.

I brush my thumb along the bottom lip of her smile. "I thought I'd never see you smile at me again. Please, let me take you home. Back to the penthouse. *Our* penthouse."

She nods. "Let me tell Mina."

Chapter Fifty-One

Jordan

Daxton opens the car door for me and offers his hand when we arrive at The Hawk Grand Hotel. From the moment we freshened up after reconnecting in the sitting room of Electric Dreams, Daxton hasn't left my side. His hands are constantly on me. He won't let me out of his arms and I love it. Though, I do sense uncertainty in the way he looks at me, like he fears our reunion is too good to be true and is still at risk of losing me.

Our fingers weave together as we enter the lobby. As we wait for the elevator to arrive, I spot Amabella in the distance. She smiles at us and nods in approval. I smile back, snuggling into Daxton's arms.

The elevator doors open with a soft *ding* and we travel up to the penthouse in silence, the whole time with my head resting against Daxton's chest and his hands buried in my hair as he places soft kisses on my forehead.

Once we're inside, Daxton lifts me onto the kitchen counter and nuzzles his hips between my legs. I glance at our surroundings, my chest filling with a sense of ease as though I'm finally home. Despite only having lived here for a month, I grew attached to everything about this place.

"Update me, baby." Daxton kisses my lips. "Tell me everything I've missed in your life."

“My brother came back. Thank you for finding him. It’s been so nice having Ryan around.”

“Anything for you.” He smiles. “And what happened with The Feather Tease?”

“I met with them today. They offered me a dancing position. Full-time pay. I took the offer.”

“That’s incredible, Jordan. I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah. It’s... really good.”

Daxton twirls a finger through my hair, his eyes studying me. “Why don’t you sound more excited?”

“I am excited. Everything has just been a lot to deal with lately.”

“Jordan...” There it is again—the concern in Daxton’s voice, that I’m about to vanish into thin air. “I’m so sorry—”

I press my fingers to his lips. “You don’t need to keep apologizing. I forgive you.” Mina’s advice returns to me, about reassuring Daxton that he can trust me too. “I mean it. You don’t need to walk on eggshells around me, scared I’ll run off. Mina said something to me that really stuck—that people are flawed and are allowed to make mistakes in relationships. You’re allowed to make mistakes going forward. I’m not going to hold a grudge or use the Steel secret against you every time an issue arises between us. We have a clean slate.”

Daxton’s eyes soften at my words, filled with relief.

“There’s something I want to ask about... Steel.”

“Anything.”

I place my hands on the lapels of his jacket, mindlessly playing with the fabric. “I know you were desperate to meet me in real life when we spoke on Secret Santa. In all that time, did you really never pursue other women?”

Daxton holds my gaze, his voice and eyes serious. “Not once. It’s been you, only you for years. What we had on Secret Santa was my life support after Felicity and I ended. And then, one day I forgot about her and you were the girl on my mind.

I've been in love with you for so long, Jordan. Even before we met."

I nod, smiling softly as Daxton's words sink in. "You were right, by the way, about what you said last night. I didn't want to admit it at the time, but I am glad you're Steel. To now realize all the qualities I loved about Steel are also in you... It only strengthens what we have and makes me love you more."

Daxton holds me closer, kissing my forehead. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you speak those words."

"Also..." My cheeks grow a little heated. "I had a thought earlier in the evening after reading your letter. You were right about something else—what you wrote about the universe wanting us to meet. I wouldn't commit to meeting Steel, so the universe pushed us together that night at Club Noir. What were the chances of you randomly entering the club where I work and singling me out from every other woman there?"

Daxton's thumb brushes against my cheek. "Move back in here with me. This is where you belong. I've missed you so much."

"I want to but... You're away on business a lot."

"Jordan, I'm meant to be working in LA right now. But there's no way I can be in a different city from you. Not now. Not ever. I've made arrangements that will relieve me from traveling. My place is in New York with you. Wherever you are. So, please, baby, move back in here with me."

"I don't understand. You *have* to travel for business."

"I'm the boss. I can do whatever I like." He laughs softly, drawing my arms around his neck. "Do you remember my mother's phrase I wrote in my letter? *If you love something, set it free. If it returns to you...*" Daxton's jaw stiffens and he swallows hard, suddenly growing nervous. "Jordan, this isn't really about living arrangements. You are *it* for me. There'll never be anyone else. Please, tell me you've returned to me. Returned for good."

I smile and place a gentle kiss on his lips. "Yes, Daxton. I'm yours forever."

Chapter Fifty-Two

2 Years Later

Jordan

It's late afternoon when I finish my stretching routine. I strip out of my workout wear, completely naked, and dive off the ledge of the yacht. The cool water is refreshing against my sweaty skin. After rising to the surface, I inhale a lungful of salty sea air, feeling the sun's warmth on me. In the distance, the Italian coastline shimmers, with small boats bobbing in the gentle waves. I float on my back and gaze at the sky, the tranquility of this moment rare to find in my hectic everyday life.

This is the first proper vacation Daxton and I have taken together. Our work schedules have been crazy, with him opening new hotels and me dancing. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, enjoying the calm sea. My career has felt like a whirlwind these past two years. Once I took the job at The Feather Tease Lounge, more opportunities snowballed, landing me shows in Vegas, features in music videos, guest judge positions on dance shows, and I'm now a regular on Verena's reality show.

Then there was the hardship of Daxton's mother passing away. He handled it surprisingly well, following her wishes that her life be celebrated. But her death did take its toll on him. At least it brought him a little closer to his brother. It even brought me closer to my parents. Ryan and I still have a long way to go with Mom and Dad, but we're talking to them more frequently and they've been sober for two years now.

This vacation has been a long time coming. A private yacht. Daxton and me alone for a whole month, sailing the Mediterranean. It's absolute perfection and I still can't believe this is my life. When we do return to New York, there'll be so many exciting things waiting for us. We'll get to hear all about Mina and Zac's elopement. They sent me photos of it a week ago and the ceremony looked so romantic, just the two of them on a beach in Bora Bora like they wanted. Then there's the baby. Adrian got Verena pregnant nine months ago and she's due any day now. Next month, we'll be attending Darius and Victor's engagement party.

I dip beneath the water again and swim a few laps around the yacht before climbing back on board.

That's when I see him.

Daxton is standing at the edge of the deck, dressed in black track pants and no shirt. His eyes roam over me, taking in every inch of my naked body.

I wring out my hair, smirking. "What are you looking at?"

"You have to ruin all my plans, don't you?"

"What plans?"

"I was planning on surprising you with a romantic dinner on the beach, but now that I have this view, all I can think about is how badly I want you."

"I'm not understanding the problem. Why can't you have both?"

Daxton walks toward me slowly, narrowing the distance between us until our bodies almost touch. He reaches out and takes my hand, pulling my naked, wet body against his. The heat of his torso spreads into me and I feel his hardness against my stomach.

"Because..." His voice is low and rough. "Now all I want is to take you right here, right now, and for the rest of the night."

"A romantic evening on the beach does sound nice, but I like this idea more." I push up on my toes to kiss him, but he

presses a soft finger over my lips.

“You’re a bad influence on me.” He steps back, grabbing my silk robe strewn over a nearby table.

“You’re seriously dressing me right now?” I ask as Daxton returns to my side and threads my arms through the robe, tying it at my waist.

“Yes, kitten. Trust me, you’ll want to be dressed for this.” He chuckles, sweeping me into his arms and carrying me to a large sun lounger.

“What are you talking about? Dressed for what?”

Daxton lays me down and climbs on top of me, then digs into his pocket, retrieving a small leather box.

“What’s this?” I ask as he holds it in front of me. He remains quiet with a broadening grin. Realization kicks in and I gasp, clapping a hand to my mouth. “Oh my God, Daxton.”

He opens the box, revealing the most stunning black diamond ring. “Marry me, Jordan. I’m so crazy in love with you. Let me spend every day of the rest of our lives making you happy.”

I reach up and kiss him as tears form in my eyes.

He laughs against my lips. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes, Daxton. Of course I’ll marry you.”

His arms wrap around my waist and he hugs me tight, kissing me back. “You have no idea how happy it makes me that you’ll be my wife.”

Hearing Daxton refer to me as his wife makes my heart rush faster. After everything we’ve been through and the strength we’ve formed, I know he’ll be an amazing husband. He slides the ring on my finger and kisses my hand.

“The diamond is *so* beautiful and unique.”

“Just like you,” he says. “I knew you’d love it.”

We kiss again, deeper this time, our bodies entwined on the lounger. Before getting too carried away, I lean back from the

kiss, catching my breath. “For the record, I’m glad you made me wear a robe for this occasion. Imagine me having to tell our future kids and grandkids that you proposed to me while I was naked.”

“Fuck,” he growls. “You’re turning me on with the thought of getting you pregnant.”

I laugh, placing another kiss on his lips. “You know, I don’t mind tweaking *some* of tonight’s events when we retell our proposal story. That romantic dinner you planned sounds nice—we can tell everyone you took me to shore—but I’d rather stay here where it’s just the two of us.”

He gazes into my eyes and smiles. “Jordan, baby, I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

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Fake Dating Daxton Hawk

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But then the most incredible thing happened for a small author like me. I received two amazing messages from my readers, telling me how much they loved my books and that they were excited for the next book in the series.

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About the Author

Skyla Summers is an Australian author who lives with her husband and daughter in the sunny state of Queensland. Like many others, she fell in love with reading as a teen girl when discovering the likes of Edward Cullen and was convinced that book boyfriends were better than the real deal. When she was in her early 20s, she began her career as a music teacher in a small country town where she felt isolated from society, and it was here where she found her passion for writing. Before long, writing became her whole world, and she realized her true joy in life came from storytelling and making characters fall in love. Skyla loves hearing from her readers. If you enjoy her work, you can message her at www.skylasummers.com or find her on social media at the links below.

