



FINDING
FORGIVENESS

J.L. PERRY

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Books by J. L. Perry.

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FINDING FORGIVENESS

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This book is dedicated to my readers.

*Without your support,
I wouldn't be able to continue
doing what I love.*

So, thank you!



Books by J. L. Perry

FINDING LOVE SERIES

Finding Him

Finding Forever

Finding Us

Finding Forgiveness

Finding Love (Coming Soon)

Finding Her (Coming Soon)

BASTARD SERIES

Bastard

Luckiest Bastard

The Thief (Coming Soon)

Cocky Hero World Series

Bossy Bastard

Sexy Bastard

Standalone Books

One Night Only

The Boss

Saviour

Nineteen Letters

Sometimes forgiveness is better than the alternative.

Cassandra Lewis has owned my heart for as long as I can remember. When I was nineteen years old, I told her I loved her for the first time ... she said she loved me back, but two days later, she ghosted me.

For years, I've tried to hate her, tried to move on, but no matter how many women I bed, my thoughts always lead back to her. It doesn't help when she's my little sister's best friend—she's like a constant torture I can't escape.

As soon as I graduated from college, I took a job in another state. I told my family it was all that was available. *That was a lie.* The truth is I was running from the woman who ripped my heart out and stomped on it like it meant nothing.

When my sister crosses the border to move in with me, the woman I can't seem to let go of is back. The push and pull between us is stronger than ever, and it's only a matter of time before we implode.



I've obsessed about Connor Maloney since I was thirteen years old. *Believe me, I'm not alone.* His good looks and charismatic personality made him very desirable. I stood on the sidelines for years as he moved from one girl to the next ... I was almost sixteen when he finally noticed me, and what a glorious day that was.

From the outside looking in, I had it all. Money, looks, talent, great friends, but what I lacked most in life was love. To my parents, I was a burden that stood in the way of their fancy jobs and lifestyles. I had an endless line of credit to placate me in lieu of their presence. Connor was the first person to show me what true love looked like, and consequently, I fell hard and fast.

Lying to my best friend was a heavy weight on my shoulders, but I was addicted to her big brother, and the way he made me feel, so I couldn't let him go. That is until my

mother got involved and forced my hand. The sequence of events that followed my altercation with her still haunts me to this day, but hurting him paled in comparison to the alternative.

All these years later, I can still see the longing in his eyes, but if he knew the truth of my betrayal, he'd hate me. How can I expect him to forgive me for what I did, when I can't even forgive myself?

Chapter 1

Cassie

T *he past ...*

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow, Cass,” Jacinta says, hugging me on their front porch. I’ve spent the weekend with my dream family, the Maloneys, and I always get an ache in my heart when I have to leave and go back to my real home, because I want to be here with these people, forever and always.

It’s a place where I’m wanted, cared for, and loved.

The last two days have been extra special, because my best friend’s big brother, Connor—the love of my life—was home for the weekend from college. I miss not being able to see him every day; it’s been tough, even more so since Jacinta has no idea what we are doing behind her back. That is something I struggle with most.

Jacinta and I met when we were twelve and became besties straight away. That girl breathed life into my miserable existence, and for that, I’ll forever cherish her and the bond we share. She makes my life worth living. That’s why lying to her is so hard. I’ve seen firsthand how girls constantly use her to get close to her brother, and how much it hurts her. Even though I’ve been pining for him from afar for years, I still swore to her I’d never be one of them, yet here I am, carrying on a secret relationship with him, without her knowledge.

In my defence, every girl with a heartbeat wants him, I can’t help but be one of them.

I climb into the passenger seat of Connor's car, trying my best to act cool as his sister watches on from the porch, but inside, I'm absolutely giddy. It's been two weeks since I've been able to touch him, smell him, bask in his love. We still talk and text every day, but it's not the same as having him here in the flesh. He's nineteen—three years older than me—I have just over a year left before I graduate from high school, so it's not like we can be together anytime soon.

My hands wring in my lap as he reverses out the driveway, and the moment we pull out onto the street, he reaches for me, lacing his fingers through mine. I sigh when he pulls our conjoined hands up to his mouth, placing a kiss on my knuckles. "Fuck, I've missed you, Cass."

"I've missed you too, Con," I reply as tears sting the back of my eyes.

Connor has never held a relationship for long, he's had a plenitude of girls in the past, but they've always been short lived. For some reason, things seem different with me. It doesn't stop my inner panic every time I have to say goodbye though. I've lost countless hours of sleep since he's been gone—knowing he's surrounded by women his own age—and silently worrying that he'll lose interest in me, but that's yet to happen. Two nights ago, he even went as far as telling me he loved me. It was the first time ... and of course, I told him I loved him right back because I do.

I loved this man long before he even knew I existed.

His grip on my hand tightens as he turns the corner, heading towards our secret spot ... the place he started bringing me last year when our friendship began to develop into something more.

It's a lookout that sits about halfway between his parents' house and mine. I was fifteen when he got his driver's licence and offered to start driving me home. Prior to that, Jim, his father, used to give me a lift.

Connor and I have always been kind of friends because Jacinta and him are super close, so being alone with him was awkward at first. *Exhilarating but weird.* It was nice to finally

be the sole object of his attention, because that usually went to his sister.

In the beginning, he'd drop me off without many words exchanged between us, but when he started to notice I was often going home to an empty house, the questions began, which in turn led to an interrogation. Although my family dynamic is not something I like to talk about, I found myself gradually opening up to him.

Over time, as our interactions grew, so did our friendship. I became desperate for more from this man but never believed that was possible. Somewhere along the line, things gradually changed. I noticed he started looking at me differently, *staring may be a better word*, and he began to prolong our time together. I've always loved being with Jacinta and her family, but my lift home at the end of the night was what I found myself looking forward to most.

On my birthday, as we sat in his car by the kerb in front of my house, I made a backhanded comment about how I was sweet sixteen and had never been kissed. To both my surprise and elation, he turned his body towards mine, leant forward in his seat, and whispered, "*Let me do something about that then.*"

My heart was hammering in my chest when his fingers threaded into my hair, drawing me closer. The instant our lips connected, I was a goner ... who am I kidding? I'd been dreaming about that very moment for as long as I could remember.

Over the weeks and months that followed, our make-out sessions became longer and hotter, but apart from some light petting, he never progressed any further from there. I was at the age of consent, but no matter how much I pressured him, he was hesitant to relent. He wanted it as much as I did—the ever-present tent in his sweats told me that—but despite it not being his first time, it was mine, and he said with our age difference he didn't feel like it was right. He wanted to wait until I was older. It was sweet of him, but unnecessary. I was all in.

I knew it was only a matter of time before we went all the way, and once that day finally came, there was no looking back. I've never felt so close, so connected, to another human being, but it hurt that I wasn't able to share any of this with my best friend, after all, it's what girls my age do. We gossip about boys and stuff.

The deeper I fell, the guiltier I felt. My betrayal towards Jacinta was profound, but my friendship with her was something I couldn't bear to lose. I was caught between a rock and a hard place, but keeping this secret felt like my only option.

"You're quiet tonight," Connor says as he pulls into a parking space at the lookout and switches off the engine. When my parents aren't there, which is often, we usually go back to my place, but my mother texted me earlier asking when I'd be home, so he brought me here instead.

I have so much to tell him, but I'm scared. I'm not sure how he's going to react to my news, and he has exams coming up—which I know he's stressing about—so I'm thinking it can wait. "It's hard with you gone ... I die a little inside every time I have to say goodbye," I reply, because it may not be the real reason I'm quiet tonight, but it also isn't a lie.

The sweet smile he gives me has me swooning in my seat. This man is seriously good-looking, and I'm so lucky that I get to call him mine.

He reaches across the centre console, wrapping me in his arms. "The holidays are coming up soon, and it will be just like old times, I'll be able to see you every day."

Not in the way I wish.

When Jacinta's around, I have to act like this man isn't the air that I breathe. It's a constant struggle not to reach out and touch him, hold him, mesh our mouths together, or ride the high that only he can give.

"Yeah," I say, dipping my head.

"Cass." He grasps my chin between his forefinger and thumb, gently tilting my face up to meet his. "What's going

on? You're not having second thoughts about us, are you?"

"What? God no! I love you, Connor Maloney ... with everything I have." I lift one shoulder. "I'm tired of hiding though, every time I look Jacinta in the eye I feel like the worst human being in the world."

"Me too. I'm thinking it's time we come clean."

"I can't lose her, Con."

"You won't, she loves you."

"She's not going to be happy about this."

"When she sees how much we love each other she will."

"You think?"

"Yeah, I do. We'll talk to her in the holidays, that way we won't have to hide our true feelings anymore."

"Okay." The thought still makes me sick to my stomach, but we've kept this secret too long.

"Now that we have that out of the way," he says, peppering kisses along my jawline, "let's make the most of this short time we have together before I have to head back to my dorm."

And that's exactly what we do. By the time he drops me off at home two hours later, I feel lightheaded, delirious, and thoroughly satisfied. Is it enough to last until he returns? Not even close; I'll be pining for him again by morning. But for tonight at least, I'll be falling asleep with a smile on my face.

There's a definite spring in my step as I bound along the path that leads to my front door. Although I'm petrified about the news I'm yet to tell Connor, and our impending talk with Jacinta, I can't stop smiling.

I punch the code into the lockbox by the front door that holds the key to get inside, but before I get the chance to retrieve it, the door swings open. "Who was that?" my mother barks.

"What?"

“Don’t play coy with me, young lady, the person who dropped you off?”

“Connor, Jacinta’s brother. He was home from college for the weekend, and offered to give me a lift on his way back to campus.”

My mother roughly grabs hold of my arm and drags me over the threshold. She may not be the most loving parent, and despite the venom she often spews in my direction, she’s never once manhandled me like this before.

“Is it him?”

“Is who him?”

I don’t even see it coming, but when her hand connects with the side of my face, the force almost knocks me off my feet. “Do you have any idea the scandal this will cause if it gets out? It could ruin your father’s career.”

My flattened palm is now resting against my stinging cheek as I try to make sense of what she’s saying. What scandal? Is she referring to the age gap between me and Connor?

“I don’t know what you are talking about, and I can’t believe you just hit me.”

When she pulls out the white plastic stick from her pocket—the one that was hidden in my room—and waves it in my face, my heart sinks to the pit of my stomach.

Shit!

She wasn’t supposed to find that.

Chapter 2

Connor

T *he present ...*

The moment the plane touches down in Melbourne, I'm out of my seat and collecting my carry-on luggage. "You'll need to remain seated while we're still moving, sir," the flight attendant says as she approaches me.

Fuck.

It's the sitting that is doing my head in ... I feel like I'm going out of my mind. I remain standing, staring at the hostess challengingly, but when she arches one of her perfectly sculptured eyebrows and points to my seat, I feel like a kid being scolded.

Begrudgingly, I nod and sit, but my leg starts to bounce the moment I do. I bow my head, clap my hands together and do something I haven't done since I was a small boy ... I silently pray. I beg God for a second chance, for an opportunity to right all my wrongs where she's concerned, but most of all, I pray for *her*. Cassie doesn't deserve to go out like this. She may have broken my heart when we were younger, but she's a good person. She deserves to live, a chance to find happiness, even if that's not with me.

When I'm done, I rest my elbows on my knees, lean forward, and clutch my head in my hands. I feel like the world is crumbling around me. For six long years I've been acting like I hate Cassandra Lewis. I'm ashamed of the way I've treated her at times, and some of the dreadful things I've said. The truth is I still love her—*I never stopped*—but now, I'm

faced with the real possibility that I may never get a chance to apologise. To try and make up for all the awful things I've said and done.

I've never felt so helpless in my life.

Now that we've landed, I know I can turn off the aeroplane mode on my phone. I'm sure there is an update from my parents or my sister, waiting for me, but I'm scared. *Petrified would be a better word.* What if I'm too late?

The last news I got before I boarded was that the doctors had pumped Cassandra's stomach, in an attempt to remove the toxins she'd ingested, and that she was in critical condition in intensive care. Why would she do this?

Jacinta mentioned she'd had a fight with her mum before coming to stay with us, and of course there was the blowout Cassie had with my sister when she busted us in a compromising position, but this? I saw how down she was before she flew back to Melbourne—and I'll admit I was worried about her—but trying to end her life? I didn't see that one coming. It seems so extreme.

They would've worked things out in the end, those two are too close to let this end their friendship, so it makes me wonder if there is more to it. I feel like a cad for coming between them. It's just another thing I can add to the long list of wrongs I've committed where Cassandra is concerned.

Was it that phone call she got? I have no clue who she was talking to, but whoever was on the other end of that line, upset her.

My mind drifts back to that moment—the same day Jacinta found Cassandra and me in bed together. It was a place I swore I'd never go again, but this woman has always been my weakness.

I'd stepped out of the shower and into a cloud of steam, rolling my shoulders and manoeuvring my head from side to side as I did. I was stiff all over from the workout I'd just done. I'd spent the few hours prior at the gym avoiding my arch

nemesis, Cassandra Lewis, who had invaded my apartment once again.

I hated that I got a sick kind of thrill whenever she arrived, because the truth was having her around was torture. It was a constant reminder of the love I'd lost ... of the woman I could never have. All these years later, I still couldn't seem to let her go.

I'd tried, boy had I tried, but none of the other women I'd been with since her could spark even a fraction of the feelings Cassie evoked in me. It had been six years since she ghosted me and broke my heart, and I was still unable to completely move on.

Reaching for a towel, I scrubbed it over my face and through my wet hair. Fuck my life. It was way easier when I first moved to Sydney and didn't have to see her anymore.

As I wrapped the towel low around my waist, I opened the bathroom door and stepped back into my bedroom. I wanted to hide in here for the rest of the afternoon, but I was starved after my workout.

As I walked towards my dresser to grab some clothes, I heard Cassie scream, "I hate you!" She hated who? Me? That was old news. "You ruined my life six years ago ... I'll never forgive you for that. Now you're trying to destroy it completely, why can't you just let me be?"

Her yelling was followed by a loud thud and then a wail ... a blood-curdling scream that sent a shiver running down my spine. It was concerning. So much so I found myself turning and heading down the corridor that led to the room where she stays when she's here.

I wasn't sure who she was talking to, but I knew it wasn't my sister. Those two never fought.

I lightly rapped my knuckle on her bedroom door, but instead of an answer, I heard a loud sob coming from inside. Without thinking, I reached for the doorknob. I don't deal well with emotional females at the best of times, but my unease for her overrode that.

I'd only seen that woman cry twice in the ten years I'd known her. The first was the day I moved away for college, and the other was when Jacinta came to live with me in Sydney. This woman was typically a ball-busting rod of steal.

"Cass," I said when I saw her sitting on the side of her bed. She was slumped over, and her head was buried in her hands. Her slender body convulsed with racking sobs. She was alone, but I spied her phone lying on the floor on the opposite side of the room, so I could only presume whoever she'd been screaming at had been on the other end of that line. "Cass," I repeated a little louder.

That time, she heard me because she raised her face and when she saw me standing just inside the doorway her eyes widened. "Shit," she mumbled, jumping to her feet and vigorously swiping her fingers over her cheeks. If she was trying to hide her tears, she was wasting her time. I'd already seen them.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Me? Yes," she answered with a scoff, flicking her hand.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Then why are you crying?"

"Ugh. I was watching some random stuff on TikTok ... you know those videos ... the ones where the soldiers return home to surprise their families? They get me every time."

My eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you."

"Well, it's a good thing I don't care what you believe then, isn't it, Maloney?"

"Don't be a bitch, Cass, I only came in here to see if you were okay."

"I'm sorry," she said with a sigh before turning her face away. "I'm fine, really."

I stood there unmoving because I could tell by the slump of her shoulders that she was anything but fine. When I noticed

her reach up to swipe her hand under her eyes for a second time, my suspicions were confirmed.

“Cass.” I took a tentative step closer, followed by another.

“Don’t,” she said, raising her arm and holding her flattened palm out to me. “I can’t deal with your kindness right now, Con.” Her voice cracked as she spoke, so I ignored her plea and continued to close the distance.

As soon as she was within reach, I grasped her shoulders and turned her to face me. When I saw the tears cascading down her pretty face, I didn’t hesitate to pull her into my arms. It had been years since I’d held this woman, and I hated how good it felt, especially when she hugged me back and snuggled her face into my chest.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I drew back slightly, cupping her jaw in my hands and tilting her face up. When our eyes met, I sucked in a sharp breath. The Cassie I first fell in love with when we were younger was a stunner, but the grown-up version ... fuck me.

Ignoring the kaleidoscope of feelings only she could evoke, I exhaled. “Who were you on the phone with just now?”

“Nobody.”

My thumbs fanned out to wipe away the tears that continued to fall, and it hurt me to see her like this. “Talk to me, Princess.” It had been years since I’d called her that, and that word only managed to bring on a fresh wave of tears.

“I can’t ... especially with you.”

Her statement stung. Cassandra had always been somewhat of a closed book. Even when we were a couple, she opened up a little about her home life, but I was always left feeling like there was more she wasn’t saying.

“I don’t know what I did to make you hate me so much.”

“I don’t hate you, Connor.” I wanted to scoff at her words, but I managed to rein it in. I wasn’t there to fight. Dumping all

my hurt on her in that moment was the last thing she needed. When I remained silent, she reiterated her words. "I don't ... truly. Do you honestly think that?"

Did she even need to ask that question?

She'd been the only woman I'd ever professed my love to ... she even said those words back, and then she ghosted me. Just thinking about that time had my gut churning. They were some of the darkest days of my life, and the worst part was I still didn't know why.

"How could I not think that? The last time I drove away from you everything seemed fine. I told you I loved you and you said those words back, Cassie. You said those fucking words back! Then the following day you refused to take any of my calls and texts ... I found out a week later from my sister that you were seeing that fucking douche from your school." My hands dropped from her face and I retreated a step because all these years later, it still tore me up inside. "If you didn't want to be with me you should've just said so, instead of stringing me along like you did."

"Con," she whispered, reaching for my hand and squeezing it. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"Yes."

"I guess I should be grateful that I'm getting an apology even if it took you six years," I mumbled, turning my face away because I could no longer look at her.

"The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you."

My eyes narrowed as my gaze snapped back to her. "You didn't just hurt me, Cass, you ripped my heart out of my chest and stomped on it."

"I wasn't lying when I said I loved you."

"Hah!"

"I'm telling the truth."

She spoke her words with conviction, but I still had my doubts. “Then why? Why did you treat me so poorly?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got all the time in the world.”

“I don’t want to get into it now.”

“I’ve waited long enough for an explanation don’t you think? You owe me that at least.”

“Mentally, I’m not up to that conversation.”

“Seriously?” I snapped as I shook my head and turned on my heels ready to storm from her room. I regretted coming in here. I owed this woman nothing, I reminded myself. She didn’t deserve my kindness after the way she’d treated me.

“Connor, wait.” She reached out to stop me from leaving and accidentally grabbed hold of the towel I was wearing. “Don’t go—” Her words were cut off and replaced with a gasp when I took another step forward and the fabric effortlessly slid out of the tuck around my waist. I was left standing there completely naked.

This stopped me in my tracks, and even though I was still incredibly pissed at her, or maybe I was just an asshole, I spun around. It wasn’t like she hadn’t seen me naked before. Although I’ll admit, Connor the boy and Connor the man were worlds apart. There was also a portion of me that wanted her to see what she’d been missing out on.

Nobody could have loved this woman as fiercely as I once had ... and possibly still did.

Her greedy eyes immediately started to track down my body. Over my pecs, across my defined abs, and when her gaze reached the ‘V’ that led to my cock, she paused to stare. The heat in her eyes was palpable.

The instant she began to nibble on her plump bottom lip like she wanted to gobble me up, my dick started to swell. Could this situation between us be any more fucked up?

“Do you like what you see, Princess?” I asked as I unashamedly took a step in her direction. My legs seemed to

have a mind of their own. I had no clue what I was doing, but I never did when it came to her.

Her eyes flickered up to meet mine for a brief second before gravitating straight back to my growing appendage, so I took another step. We were close enough now that I could feel her warm breath as it ghosted across my skin. I should've turned around and ran, only a fool would've stayed given our past, but I guess I was a glutton for punishment. This woman had always been my weakness.

I took another step until our bodies were flush. "You didn't answer my question." Tilting her head back, her wide eyes met mine. Her breathing had now become erratic, and I knew if my fingers were to slip underneath that sexy little dress she was wearing, I'd find her wet and just as turned on as I was. My hand rose and I used my forefinger and thumb to grip her chin. "I'm waiting," I said, arching a brow.

She blinked her pretty caramel-coloured eyes a few times before answering, "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I like what I see."

"Do you miss my cock, Cass?" What was I saying? This was a place I swore I'd never go again, and like a chump, I was clearly setting myself up for rejection because she'd made it clear she didn't want me.

She swallowed thickly. "Yes."

"Show me, Princess ... show me how much you've missed it."

It was a challenge I was in no way expecting her to accept, so I was powerless to stop the growl that permeated in the back of my throat when she dropped to her knees.

My fingers fisted in her long brown hair, tilting her face up towards mine. The sadness that was present in her eyes when I first walked into her room was now replaced with hunger. "Are you sure this is what you want?" I asked.

She nodded once, as her pink tongue darted out, skimming over her bottom lip. The logical side of my brain was already telling me this was a bad idea, but my dick seemed to be in control. I wanted this ... I wanted her. I'd craved this woman for years.

"Open up?" I used my free hand to stroke myself a few times, and the moment she parted her pretty lips, I guided myself into her mouth.

Could I even trust this woman not to bite my cock off? I once thought I knew her, but I was evidently wrong.

Any rational thoughts I had vanished the second she expertly took me into the back of her throat. "Cass," I groaned, tilting my head back.

The memories of the first time she did this were still vivid in my mind, her movements were awkward and clunky back then from her inexperience, but she managed to make me come so hard and so fast in a matter of minutes, because it was her. I'm not sure if she underestimated the depth of love I had for her back then, or if she simply didn't care, but I had every intention of marrying her one day. She was my forever girl, or so I thought. The reality was she inadvertently turned out to be my biggest mistake.

She ruined me for all the others.

I pushed those thoughts from my mind. That ship had well and truly sailed, and I was not stupid enough to think this was any more than a distraction for her. A way to forget whatever was going on with her when I walked into her room. Was I a bastard for taking advantage of that? Probably. But in my defence, I'd been aching to be with her like this again. I was going to take whatever she was prepared to give, and I'd worry about the fallout this would bring later. For now, I was going to stay in the moment and enjoy having her again.

Both of my hands were now cradling the back of her head as I started to slowly pump into her mouth. The expertise she showed as she worked my cock over was something else I was choosing to compartmentalise. I didn't even want to imagine how she gained her newfound skills, and with whom.

“Fuck,” I groaned through gritted teeth. It had been less than a minute and as soon as a tingle ran up the length of my spine and my balls tightened, I reluctantly drew back. When my dick exited her mouth with a pop, Cassandra tilted her head back slightly, and her confused eyes locked with mine.

One of my hands moved around to caress the side of her face. Don’t worry, Princess, I’m not done with you yet. If this was the only time I’d get to be with her again, then I was going to make the most of it.

I slid my hands under her arms and effortlessly pulled her to her feet. Once she was standing, I backed her into the wall and crashed my mouth into hers. I was grateful she didn’t push me away.

It seemed like an eternity had passed since our lips had touched. I groaned into her mouth when her fingers threaded into my hair, dragging me closer. My head was spinning. This was really happening.

My entire body was zinging back to life with the possibilities of what this could mean, but I couldn’t get ahead of myself here. I was only setting myself up for heartache if I did. She didn’t want me in the way I wanted her ... she’d proven it over and over again, so I needed to hold on to that.

My hands travelled down the length of her torso until I reached the hem of her dress. I bunched up the fabric in my closed fists before dragging it up her body. I needed her naked. She pulled out of the kiss long enough for me to tear it over her head, and the moment I did, her lips immediately sought out mine again.

I moved to her bra next, because I needed to feel all of her. Skin to skin. I tossed it to the side as I did her dress, and dropped my face to press open-mouthed kisses along her jawline.

“I need you,” she whimpered.

I knew I’d regret going here after the fact, but I couldn’t seem to deny her. “I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

I palmed one of her spectacular tits in my hand, while my tongue lapped at the other.

“I need more, Con.”

She was always so responsive to my touch; I guess nothing had changed.

I raised her off the ground and she lifted her legs, wrapping them around my waist. My erection was now pressing into her core as I glided it back and forth over her clit. There was only a scrap of lace separating us. As desperate as I was to be inside her, I needed to take my time ... to stretch this out as long as I could. Like a final hurrah. I never got this the last time we were together, because I had no clue the end was coming.

My hand moved along her outer thigh, and she moaned into my mouth when my fingers dipped under the elastic of her underwear. I almost blew my load when I felt how wet she was for me. “Cass,” I groaned when I pushed two fingers deep inside her slick heat.

“Oh, God,” she moaned when I crooked them to stimulate her G-spot. She somehow managed to open her legs wider, sinking further down onto my hand, and in a matter of moments, she fell over the edge. Her entire body shuddered as I continued thrusting my fingers inside her until I milked all the pleasure from her body.

When she went limp in my arms, I turned and took the few steps towards her bed, gently laying her down on the mattress.

Her hooded eyes made contact with mine, and I noticed a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. It was a far cry from the devastation I saw on her face when I first came in here. For that at least, I was glad. What was going to happen now? Was this where she told me to leave?

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I am now, thanks.”

“Do you ... umm, want me to go?”

She pulled herself up onto her elbows, and my eyes were drawn back to her perky tits. They were bigger, fuller ... rounder than I remembered. She was all woman now, and although the word perfection didn't seem to do her justice, it was the best I had in that moment.

"Do you want to go?" she asked.

The logical side of my brain was screaming, Yes! Get the hell out of here, you dumb fuck, before she does more damage to your heart. But being the obvious fool I am, I chose to ignore it.

"No, I want to stay right here, with you," I answered.

If I could have locked myself in this room with her forever, I would've done it in a heartbeat.

I was still standing beside her bed watching her like a voyeur. She captured her bottom lip between her teeth as her eyes tracked down my body. My dick was semi-hard and hanging heavily between my legs, but her intense stare had it turning to granite.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, reaching up to twirl a length of her long brown hair around her finger as she batted her eyelids.

Her antics had me barking out a laugh. She was no longer the sweet and innocent girl I fell in love with all those years ago ... she was a damn temptress, and she knew it.

The smirk I gave her was a cocky one because that was a loaded question. The things I wanted to do to the grown-up version of this woman were endless.

I took a step closer, stopping between her parted legs and bent down. My flattened palms were now resting on the mattress, either side of her body, and my face was mere inches away from hers.

"I'm going to fuck you, and show you what you've been missing."

And that's exactly what I did until my sister walked in on us. Everything went to shit from there, and it's been a

downward spiral ever since.

Chapter 3

Connor

My stomach is in knots by the time the taxi pulls up outside the hospital. I've yet to turn my phone off aeroplane mode because I'm afraid of what I might find if I do. My dad offered to pick me up from the airport, but I blindly made my way outside and jumped in the first available cab. My main goal was to get here as soon as possible.

I pay the driver and retrieve the small carry-on suitcase I brought with me before reluctantly heading inside. Being here brings back unwanted memories. The majority of my childhood was spent being shuffled between this very hospital and my grandmother's house during my mother's illness.

I still remember the last time I was here, when my father and I were forced to walk out these doors the following morning without her. Although she'd finally found peace, after many years of suffering, it did nothing to ease the trauma associated with her passing or fill the void her death left behind in both of our lives.

Sure, I have Grace now—my father's new wife—and I adore her, she's become a mother to me in every sense of the word, but I still get a pang in my heart when I think of all the shitty cards the woman that birthed me was handed. Those final hours of her life were the worst, especially for me. My father had tried his best to shield me from the harsh reality of her deteriorating health for the longest time—understandably so because I was just a kid—but that night was something he

was unable to hide, and those moments still haunt me to this day.

I may have only been five years old, but it's still so vivid in my mind.

My mother had woken up in the middle of the night coughing up blood, and instead of waiting for an ambulance, my dad knew it would be quicker if he took her to the hospital himself. I was left to hold a towel under her chin while my father drove, pleading with her to hang in there the entire time.

I'll never forget the frightened look in her eyes or the desperation in my dad's voice. I was so scared and confused. *Fuck*. I shake my head as I try to push that night from my mind because I can't go there right now. I have no clue what I'm about to face when I get inside, but I need to keep my shit together.

When I enter the foyer, I bypass the reception area, opting to follow the signs that lead towards the intensive care unit. I know I'm being a coward, but it feels like my entire future is hanging in the balance, which is stupid considering Cassandra and I aren't even a couple anymore. We may have hooked up a few days ago, but she gave me no promises of more. I was a means to an end ... a distraction.

I blow out a long breath as I step into the lift that will take me to the floor I need to be on. I'm banking on the fact that she's still up here ... I refuse to even consider the alternative.

My hands are slightly trembling by the time I push the green button on the wall that opens the automatic doors that lead me into the ICU ward, and I feel immediate relief when I spot my dad sitting on a chair by the wall.

"Dad."

"Connor," he says, jumping to his feet. "I thought I was coming to get you from the airport."

"I decided to get a cab. It was quicker. Where's Mum?"

"She's in the room with Cassie."

"How is she?"

He runs his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair, which is a clear sign that he's stressed. "No change, the doctors did all they could, now we just have to wait and see. She's young and healthy so ..." I bow my head and clear my throat when his words die off. "I know, Son," my dad says, placing his hand on my shoulder. "I'm still trying to wrap my head around it too ... she was in a terrible state when we found her ... why would she do this to herself?"

"I don't know. I hope it has nothing to do with her and Jaz's fight." I'm already beating myself up about that.

"Your sister has been calling me every hour for an update, the poor thing is beside herself with worry ... she's flying down in the morning with Mason and Blake, maybe she'll be able to get to the bottom of it."

"Maybe." I glance up briefly at my father before turning my head to look further down the corridor. "Am I allowed to go in and see her?"

"I don't know. Your mum had to lie to the nurses by telling them she's family."

"Are Cassandra's parents here?"

"No," he says, frowning.

"Why the hell not?"

He rolls his eyes. "Her mother is in the hospital somewhere ... she's apparently in the middle of a surgery. We were told she asked the staff not to contact Cassie's father."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Son."

I shake my head in disgust. Hours have passed since their daughter tried to take her own life; I can't believe neither of them has bothered to come and see her. Their parenting has always been questionable, but this ... those two have a lot to answer for.

"I'm going to speak with the nurses."

I head further down the corridor until I reach the nurses' station. "Hi," I say to the woman sitting behind the desk with her head buried in a chart.

She looks up, and a kind smile curves her lips. "Hi, can I help you with something?"

"Yes, I'm here to see Cassandra Lewis."

"Are you family?"

"Yes." I roll my lips as I form the lie in my head. I've always prided myself on my honesty, but there's nothing I won't say or do for a chance to see her. "She's my fiancée."

I feel a hand come to rest on my back, and when I turn, I find my mum standing there. "Connor."

"Mum."

"I saw you through the window." She gestures behind her and when my eyes dart in that direction my legs almost give out from underneath me. There behind the glass lies Cassie, and she's barely recognisable behind all the tubes. *Fuck*. I don't know what I was expecting to see, but it wasn't this.

My mum obviously senses my distress, because her arms instantly slide around my waist. It kills me to see her like this. My throat clogs, and I feel tears sting the back of my eyes as I break away from her embrace and approach the window.

"Look at her, Mum," I say, my voice cracking.

She comes up behind me and rubs her hand over my back. "I know, sweetie. She hasn't regained consciousness yet, but the doctor assures me that her vitals are continuing to improve. That's a really good sign."

"I should've been more insistent with her before she left Sydney. I should've made her stay."

"You can't blame yourself for this ... you weren't to know this was going to happen."

Those words have my stomach lurching because I knew things weren't right with her ... *I fucking knew it*, hence why I tried so hard to get her to stay. It's why I kept checking up on

her after she left ... that and the fact that I'm partly responsible for her fallout with Jacinta. I should've tried harder, or better still, I should've kept my hands to myself.

I even expressed my concern for Cassie to my sister this morning when she came to the apartment, but I left it too late. The damage was already done.

"I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't pull through, Mum."

"You care about her, don't you?"

"I love her. I've loved her for years."

"When you were younger, I had a feeling there was more than just a friendship going on with the two of you."

"You did?" I ask, turning my face to meet hers.

"I was right, wasn't I?"

"Yes." My voice cracks as I bow my head. "She was the one that got away."

"She was young, Connor ... you both were."

"We were," I say, but even back then, I knew she was the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

"Why don't you go and sit with her for a while, and I'll go and check on your dad."

"Why don't you and Dad go home? I have no plans to leave until I know she's going to be okay."

"We might hang around for a while, just in case you need us."

"You don't have to."

"I know, but I want to. I was in the middle of cooking breakfast when Jacinta called this morning, so we haven't eaten today. I'll see if your dad wants to go downstairs to the cafeteria, do you want me to bring you back something to eat, or a coffee?"

"No thanks." I'm too knotted up inside for food.

"Okay, sweetie. We'll be around if you need us."

“Thanks, Mum.”

She wraps her arms around my waist, giving me a quick hug before stepping back. “There is a buzzer beside Cassie’s bed if she wakes. They’re keeping a pretty close eye on her though.”

“Okay.”

My mum stands there and waits as I enter the room. I pause just inside the door and give myself a moment before approaching the bed.

I blow out a long breath as I gaze down at her, and when the lump in my throat grows, I have to turn away. She’s so pale ... so lifeless.

“Cass,” I whisper, reaching for her hand and lifting it towards my face so I can place a soft kiss on her knuckles. She’s so cold. “You have to keep fighting,” I encourage as I choke up. “Jacinta will be arriving tomorrow, so you’re going to have to wake up.” *I need you.*

I tilt my head towards the ceiling when tears cloud my eyes. I give her hand a gentle squeeze as I exhale. All I can do now is wait.



By mid-afternoon, there’s still no change. My parents left the hospital on my insistence; there was no point in them hanging around since Cassandra was only allowed one visitor at a time. Mum brought me a sandwich and a bottle of water before they left, but it’s still sitting untouched on the small table beside the bed.

I feel helpless just sitting here, and with every passing hour, my fury seems to be growing because Cassandra’s parents have yet to come and see her. She’s their daughter. How could they treat her so poorly? Does she mean so little to them? They almost lost her ... they still might, yet they don’t seem to care. No wonder she wanted to give up after her fallout with Jacinta ... my family is all this poor girl has.

I stand when the nurse enters, then move towards the corner, allowing her room. “You don’t need to get up,” she says, but I stay where I am anyway.

I watch on as she does whatever it is she’s doing. “Did the doctor give any indication when she might wake?” I ask.

“No,” she answers as her eyes flick up to meet mine. “She’s been through something pretty traumatic, when she’s ready she will.”

“Will there be any ongoing effects on her body from this?”

“It’s too early to say.” I nod, because I know this is only the first step in a long journey ahead. What if she tries this again? *Fuck*. I can’t let my mind go there. “Her vitals are strong and she’s stable, so that’s a good thing. Rest is the best thing for her right now.”

The nurse moves her attention away from me to focus on Cassandra again, and I get choked up when I see her tenderly brush a strand of dark hair off Cassie’s forehead.

“Is there any news from her parents? I can’t believe they haven’t come yet.”

The nurse’s lips thin, and I gather from her expression she’s not impressed by that fact either. She clears her throat before answering, “No.”

I shake my head. If and when she gets out of this godforsaken place, I’m taking her back to Sydney. There is no way I’m leaving her here with those fuckers.

When I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket, I pull it out and see Jaz’s name on the screen.

Jaz: Any updates? I just got off the phone with Mum, she said Cassie has tubes coming out of her everywhere.

Connor: No change, and yes, she does.

Jaz: Can you FaceTime me so I can see her?

Connor: The nurse is with her right now.

I raise my phone and point it towards the bed as I open the camera app, snapping a quick picture. I know seeing her friend in this condition is going to upset her, but at least she'll be prepared when she arrives tomorrow. If Cassie is awake by then, Jacinta is going to need to remain strong. I guess we're all going to be carrying her over the coming weeks and months.

I attach the image to a text message and send it. I'm not surprised when my phone starts vibrating with a call seconds later.

"I'm just going to step out for a second and take this," I say to the nurse, holding up my phone.

As soon as I leave the room, I accept the call. "Con," I hear my sister sob down the line the moment I place the phone to my ear.

"I know, Jaz," I reply, swallowing thickly. I've never been able to handle seeing my sister upset.

"I wasn't expecting her to look like that ... I should be there. Should I try and get on a flight tonight?"

"Jaz, there's nothing you can do. She still hasn't woken up yet."

"It's been hours, why isn't she waking up, Con?"

"I don't know ... the nurse says she needs her rest to heal. Hopefully, by the time you arrive tomorrow, she'll be awake. It will mean the world to her to have you here."

"What if she doesn't want to see me?"

"We both know that's not going to happen." I wander further down the corridor and take a seat on one of the chairs my father occupied earlier. "I hope she's not disappointed if I'm the first face she sees ... neither of her parents have come to see her yet."

"Ugh. I hate them. They are arseholes. Well, her mum is, the jury is still out on her father. I've seen her with her dad

over the years and he seems to care, he just puts his career first. Her mum's mean though. She's always giving Cassie a hard time."

"I want to bring her back to Sydney when she's well enough ... are you okay with that? I don't want to leave Cassie here with them," I tell her.

"One hundred percent, but I don't know if Cassie will want that."

"Why not?"

"She's worried her parents will cut her off. Her mum is always hanging that over her head."

"She doesn't need money ... I'll look after her."

"She won't want that either."

"I'm not comfortable leaving her here with them, Jaz. It's obvious they don't care about her."

"Yeah, I get that feeling too. I was going to move in with Mason, but I'm sure he'll understand if I stay at your apartment a little longer."

"You don't have to do that. I'll look after her, and you can come visit whenever you like."

The line goes quiet before Jacinta eventually speaks again. "I guess now would be a good time to ask what's going on between you two?"

"Nothing is going on between us. What you saw the other day—"

"Connor, you two were having sex, that isn't nothing," she spits, cutting me off. "And if you try to tell me you tripped and fell in her vagina then I'm going to end this call and get on the next flight, so I can come down there and kick your arse."

I lean back into the chair and exhale a long breath. "Do you remember when I first got my driver's licence?"

"Of course, we used to go cruising around for hours. Why are you bringing that up now?"

“Remember how Dad used to drop Cassie home?”

“Yes.”

“And how when I got my licence, I started doing it.”

“Again, yes.”

“That was when things started between us. Not straight away, but I’d always had a secret crush on her when we were kids. I knew she was your friend, so I never contemplated going there—”

“Until you did,” Jacinta says, cutting me off again.

“It was a slow process, trust me. I fought my feelings every step of the way, but the more I got to know her on a personal level, the greater those feelings became. I’d been giving her a lift home for months before we even kissed.”

“Hmm.”

“I never wanted to hurt you, I hope you know that. Neither of us did. We both felt bad that all this was happening behind your back. We’d talked about telling you.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Things ended between us before we got the chance.”

“You moved on to the next one? The story of your life.”

“No ... no I didn’t. She wasn’t just a quick lay for me, Jaz, she was the first and only girl I ever loved.”

“Then why did you stop seeing her?”

“It wasn’t my doing,” I admit.

“Cassie ended things?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I told her I loved her ... she said she loved me back, then she ghosted me.”

“Something must’ve happened for her to do that.”

“I’ve racked my brain, trust me. To this day I still don’t know what I did or didn’t do ... I meant it when I told her I loved her.” *Fuck*. I scrub my hand over my face. “It crushed me, Jaz.”

“None of it makes sense ... well maybe the part of you hating her for all these years does.”

“I don’t hate her. I’ve tried to, but for some reason, I can’t. I’ll admit I’ve struggled having her around considering everything that happened between us. It’s the reason I took the job in Sydney.”

“You said it was all that was available.”

“I lied.”

“I wish you would’ve talked to me.”

“It just seemed pointless after the fact.”

“Aww, Con. It would’ve been hard for you to see her with other guys then?”

“You think? That first fucker she started seeing after she dumped me, earned himself a black eye.”

“Connor!”

“I know, I know. But at the time I was messed up ... I couldn’t see straight.”

I glance up when the doors to the ward open and my eyes take in the middle-aged female that enters. She’s dressed in dark blue scrubs, and I’m not sure if she’s a doctor or a nurse, but the hard lines I see on her face as she storms past me, tell me someone is about to feel her wrath.

“I probably should get back to Cass,” I say, focusing back on my call.

“Please keep me updated.”

“I will, Jaz, and again I’m sorry for everything that happened.”

“I’m still hurt that you guys kept it from me, but I’ll get over it. It’s the least of our worries right now.”

“Love you, little sis.”

“I love you too, Con.”

I end the call and slide the phone into my pocket, giving myself a moment before standing. I’m grateful that Jacinta and I seem to be okay now; I hated the fact that she wasn’t talking to me. At least something positive has come out of this mess.

My hands are shoved in my pockets as I stroll back down the corridor, and I notice there are two nurses now standing behind the desk, but it’s their large eyes that draw my attention. They’re both looking towards Cassandra’s room. My gaze snaps in that direction, and that’s when I see the lady who just passed me leaning over the bed.

My pace quickens as I push through the door and enter. I come to an abrupt stop when I hear what she’s saying.

“Wake up, you selfish little bitch,” the woman says, roughly grasping Cassandra’s shoulder and giving it a firm shake. “Or maybe it’s better for everyone if you don’t. It would certainly make my life a lot easier. Was this little stunt of yours a ploy to get your way? If it was, it’s not going to work. I’m over your attention-seeking dramatics. I’ve reached my absolute limit with you. You had the audacity to accuse me of ruining your life ... think of where you’d be now if it wasn’t for me. I saved you from making the biggest mistake of your life, and this is how you thank me. I honestly regret the day you were born, you’ve been a thorn in my side for years. I never wanted you ... I would’ve aborted you, but your father wanted a child so desperately. Someone to carry on the family name, what a joke you turned out to be. All you do is bring shame to his good name and this family.”

“Hey,” I snap, taking a step towards the bed. My eyes briefly dart to Cassie and I’m relieved to see her eyes are still closed. She’s been through enough and the last thing she needs is to hear that kind of venom spewed in her direction.

Who in the fuck does this woman think she is?

She straightens and turns to face me. The moment her eyes meet mine, they narrow. “You,” she scoffs. “Get out.”

“I think it’s you who needs to leave. How dare you speak to her like that.”

I’ve never met Cassandra’s mother before, but if her words weren’t enough to tell me who she was, I can see the family resemblance up close. They have the same eyes, full lips, and that perfectly straight nose. Her beauty pales in comparison to her daughter’s though. Her resting bitch face is not a good look on her.

“Do you have any idea who I am?”

My reply is out before I even realise what I’m saying. “I’m no gynaecologist, but I’m guessing you’re a cunt.”

She gasps at my crude assumption, and although I’m not a fan of that word, after what I just witnessed, it’s fitting.

It takes a moment for her to regain her composure, but after pulling back her shoulders, she closes the remaining distance between us. “I know exactly who you are, Connor Maloney and I wouldn’t get too smug if I was you. I’m well aware of your past with my *underaged* daughter.” She raises one of her arms as she speaks, and for a split second, I think she’s going to hit me, but instead, she clicks her fingers in my face. “I could destroy you in an instant.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I counter. I may be three years older than her, but Cassie was over the age of consent before anything happened between us.

“You should be,” she growls before turning and storming from the room.

I watch her leave and make her way straight over to the nurses’ station. I can’t hear what she’s saying from here, but by the way the nurses shrink back, I gather they’re getting a mouthful of her toxicity as well.

Although I don’t know her personally, I’ve always gathered Cassandra’s mother was a piece of work, but never in a million years did I believe she was this bad.

Chapter 4

Connor

I stand at the glass window and gaze into Cassandra's room, and a small smile tugs at my lips as I watch her with my sister. Jacinta's now climbed on the bed beside Cassie. I have no clue what they're talking about, but I'm glad she's here. She's better at this stuff than I am, and Cassie seems so much happier today.

Despite Doctor Amanda Lewis's attempts, she failed to have me ejected from her daughter's room. I'm only standing out here now because the protocol in intensive care is one visitor at a time, so of course, I stepped out the second my sister arrived.

Cass finally woke yesterday evening, and in between the doctor and nurse visits, the numerous tests, pokes, prods, and questions, I eventually got my one-on-one time with her. It was kind of awkward when she first opened her eyes to find me sitting beside her bed ... I was probably the last person she wanted or expected to see.

As much as I wanted to deep dive into what the hell had happened, I managed to keep the conversation light. She's fragile right now and needs our love, support, and understanding, not criticism.

One of the first things she asked me was if her parents had been in to see her. There was no way I was going to tell her what her mother had said in the short time she'd visited. I'm still trying to comprehend it myself. All I said was that she'd called by briefly between surgeries. That news had gained me an eye roll. "*And my dad?*" she'd asked hopefully.

“As far as I know your mother asked the hospital not to contact him.”

“Of course she did,” she said, rolling her eyes for a second time.

She tried to brush it off like it didn't bother her, but I saw straight through it. It broke my damn heart. I desperately wanted to reach out and hug her, but I refrained. From the second she woke, it's been a constant struggle not to react. I wanted to fold her in my arms and weep at the fact she was still here ... still with us. But sadly, that's not who we are anymore.

I offered to reach out to her father on her behalf, but she told me not to bother. I hate that she's constantly overlooked by them, and I'm sure I don't know the half of it. I hope Jacinta and I can convince her to come back to Sydney with us when she's well enough to travel. After seeing her mother in action yesterday, I can't leave her here with them. She needs to be around people who are going to lift her up, not tear her down.

I eventually make my way back down the corridor and take a seat. I feel like a creeper standing at the glass and watching them. They need their time together; they have a lot to work through.

The look of pure elation on Cassandra's face when Jacinta walked in said it all—it was a stark contrast to the reaction I got when she saw me sitting beside the bed.

Cass was so happy to see her and they immediately burst into tears the moment they hugged. It was somewhat of a relief because I was partly responsible for their rift. My sister and Cassie have always been tight, so if anyone can get her through this dark time in her life, it's Jacinta. I wish it could be me, I'd shower that woman with so much love she wouldn't need it from anyone else, but I'm not who she wants.

Blowing out a long breath, I lean forward in my seat and rest my elbows on my knees. I need to remember this isn't about me, or my deep feelings for her. It's about getting Cassie

well again and there's nothing I wouldn't do to see that happen.

I pull out my phone to check the time, just as a message comes through from my mum.

Mum: Hey sweetie, how are things going there?

Connor: Yeah, good. The girls are together. I'm sitting outside in the corridor because they're still only allowing one person in the room.

Mum: Do you want your dad to come get you? You can come back here and have a shower and some lunch. I'm making schnitzels.

Connor: Actually, I might take you up on that offer.

I haven't eaten since yesterday, and I'd love a shower. I know what those girls are like when they get together, so Jacinta won't be coming out of that room anytime soon.

I wish I was the person Cassie relied on, who made her smile ... the one she can't live without, but I'm not.

Mum: Great. Your dad is leaving now. He'll text you when he's downstairs.

Connor: Okay.

I stand, shooting a quick text to my sister before I leave.

Connor: I'm going to head home and have a shower and a feed. Is there anything you or Cass need before I go?

Jaz: No, we're good. But thank you. Cass said to say thank you for being here for her too ... she said you've been very sweet and I can tell it meant a lot to her.

I half-heartedly smile at her reply, but an unwavering sadness washes over me at the same time. I'll always be there

for Cassie if she needs me, but I also have to accept that anything more than that probably isn't in the cards for us. I have to keep moving forward, like I've been doing for the past six years. I've been hung up on the past for way too long.



I'm already waiting by the kerb at the front of the hospital when my dad pulls up. After stowing my suitcase in the boot of his car, I slide into the passenger seat.

"You look tired," is the first thing my father says to me.

I lift one shoulder. It's been a long couple of days and the exhaustion is starting to set in. Even before this whole ordeal, I wasn't sleeping well. My sister wasn't talking to me, and I was worried about Cassandra's mental health, with good reason considering what happened. "I didn't get much sleep last night," I reply. I dozed off a few times, but the chair I was in wasn't very comfortable.

"How's Cass today?"

"Okay, I think. She didn't say much to me, but she perked up heaps when Jaz arrived."

"I bet, those two have always been close." I turn my head and gaze out the passenger side window ... Cass and I were close once too. "Did her parents bother to show their faces?"

I clear my throat as the anger starts to rise within me. "Her mum did." I'm still trying to process everything she said.

"That's something, I guess."

"You think?"

"You sound upset about that."

"She came while Cassie was still out of it. I'd stepped out to take a call from Jaz and when I returned to the room, she was in there ... leaning over the bed screaming at her daughter."

"You're joking?"

"Nope."

I look over at my father and see him shake his head in disgust. I can only imagine his reaction if he knew the things she was saying. “I have no words for that. Poor fucking kid. No wonder she’s so messed up.”

“Thankfully she wasn’t awake to hear it, but yeah.”

“I’m flabbergasted her mother could be so heartless towards her child. There’s something obviously going on with her daughter. She should be trying to help, not make things worse.”

“I want to take Cassie back to Sydney with us when she’s well enough. I’m not leaving her here with them.”

“Does she want that?”

“I haven’t mentioned it to her yet, but Jacinta knows I want that.”

“Your mum and I will help out any way we can. We love that girl like she’s one of our own.”

“I know ... I’m glad she has us. Her parents have a lot to answer for.”

“That they do.”

The rest of the trip is travelled in silence, which I’m grateful for. I’m emotionally tapped out.



I went straight upstairs to my room when we arrived at the house. I needed a moment to decompress, but once I’ve showered and changed, I head back downstairs. It’s been two years since I’ve lived under this roof, but it’s always good to be back home.

When I enter the kitchen, I find Mason sitting at the table with my dad, and his son, Blake, kneeling on a stool beside my mum as she gets lunch prepared.

“Sweetie,” she says when I enter the room. She moves to the sink to wash her hands before heading in my direction. As soon as she’s within reach, she cups my face, and I’m not sure

if it's that gesture, or the sympathetic look she gives me, but I feel like I'm on the verge of tears.

I've never been an emotional man ... I can count on one hand how many times I've cried in my lifetime. The majority of those centred around my mother's death. Maybe the lack of sleep has taken its toll on me.

"I'm okay, Mum," I lie. The crack in my voice is a complete giveaway.

"Why don't you and Mason grab a beer and head out onto the patio ... lunch will be ready soon."

I'm grateful she doesn't push it any further. "Sounds good."

I walk over to where Mason is sitting to shake his hand while my dad grabs two beers out of the fridge. My best friend has that same look of concern on his face that my mum did, but I know him well enough ... that's as far as this will go. We're close, but we don't do feelings and all that emotional baggage bullshit. I know he's here for me if I need him, but he won't force the issue.

When he releases my hand, I turn to face Blake. I make a fist and extend my arm over the breakfast bar for a fist pump. He raises his crumb-covered fingers and bumps his knuckles against mine. "Hey, champ," I say.

"Hey, Uncle Connor. I'm helping Grandma make chicken switzels." I chuckle at his mispronunciation. He's a cute kid.

"They're called schnitzel's, bud," his dad corrects.

Blake just lifts one shoulder and reaches for the next piece of floured chicken, then drops it into the egg mixture.

Mason stands and takes the beers from my dad, passing one to me. We both head for the back sliding doors in silence. Once I'm seated on the outdoor sofa, I crack the top off my beer and take a large gulp. I know alcohol isn't the answer, but I wish this was something stronger. I wouldn't mind getting fucked up so I could numb this queasy feeling I have inside.

We sit in silence for a few minutes, but I can feel my best friend's eyes on me. "So, how's Cass doing?" he eventually asks.

"Okay," I answer with a shrug. "She was quiet when she woke, but she perked up the minute Jacinta got there."

"Did she tell you why she did it?"

"Nah, and I didn't ask. She's fragile right now, and I didn't want to say or do anything that would upset her."

"Are you two a couple again ... you know, after ...?"

I lean into my seat and tilt my head back with a groan. I guess I was wrong about him not prying. "After what? Banging? No, we're not."

"Hmm."

"I heard her screaming at someone on the phone, so I went to her room to check on her ... I found her crying. I consoled her and one thing led to another ... that's about the gist of it."

"Do you think it had anything to do with—"

My eyes narrow. "Her trying to off herself?" I snap. "No."

"That's not what I was going to say," he replies, frowning. "Who was she screaming at on the phone?"

I shrug, but I'm pretty sure it was her mother. She mentioned something about ruining her life during her rant at the hospital ... they're the same words I heard Cassie scream to whomever she was on the phone with. I use the tips of my fingers to rub circles around my temples. I have the worst headache.

Cassie used to confide in me once, but I know nothing about this grown-up version of her.

"Can we just not talk about it ... it's been a shitty couple of days and I'm sure my mum and my sister are going to bombard me with questions the moment they get the chance ... I don't need you breathing down my neck as well."

"I wasn't breathing down your neck, I was trying to be here for you."

“And I appreciate it, but like you’ve told me a million times, we’re not chicks. We don’t do this deep and meaningful bullshit.”

He chuckles before taking a swig of his beer. “Right. I’ve been hanging around with you too long, you’re starting to rub off on me, Maloney.”

“Hah.”

We both remain silent while we finish our beers, and I’m good with that. When Mason holds up his empty bottle and asks if I want another, I nod my head.



By the time I finish beer number three, I’m finally starting to relax. “I’m going to try and talk Cassie into coming back to live with us permanently.”

“Hmm,” Mason hums.

“That’s all you’ve got to say on the matter?”

“Are you going to accuse me of being a chick if I elaborate?”

“No.”

“It just seems weird that you’d want her there. I can’t imagine it would be easy for you to have her around if you’re not together. I’ve seen the longing in your eyes when you look at her.”

“I have my reasons for wanting to bring her back and it has nothing to do with my feelings for her.”

“Okay. If I ask you why, are you going to bite my head off again?”

“No.” I’m still struggling to come to terms with what her mother said. I want to hash it out with someone, but not my sister. I can’t risk her telling Cassandra. “If I tell you something, can you promise to keep it between us?”

Mason sits up straighter in his seat. “It depends, is it going to get me in trouble with my fiancée?”

“Something happened at the hospital and I don’t want to discuss it with Jacinta, because I don’t want Cassandra to find out ... it’s fucking with my head and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“What do you mean something happened?”

“With her mum. I left the room to take a call from Jaz, and when I got back she was in there with Cassie.”

“And?”

“She said some pretty fucked-up things, like it would be better for everyone if Cassie didn’t wake up.”

“She said that to you?”

“No, she was saying it to her daughter. She didn’t know I was there.”

“Wow.”

“I know right? How could a mother be so cold and cruel? Especially considering what happened.”

Mason blows out a puff of air and bows his head, staring down at the wooden deck. That’s when I realise what I’ve just said. Is he thinking about his abusive father? Or the way Blake’s mother treated their son before he came to live with him?

“I’m sorry,” I say.

His gaze moves back to mine. “Why?”

“For what I said.”

“Don’t be. You have nothing to be sorry for. I admire you for wanting to get Cassandra away from a situation like that ... despite how hard it will be for you, you’re willing to put that aside ... for her. It’s very admirable.”

My gut tells me her mother has a lot to do with Cassie’s attempt to end her life. So regardless of how hard it will be for me, I’ll do anything to keep her safe.

Chapter 5

Cassie

“Cassie,” Jacinta utters from beside me. She’s joined me on the bed.

“Yeah, Jazzie.”

“Are we going to talk about what happened?” she asks as her hand reaches for mine.

I’ve been waiting for this. “I don’t even know what to tell you.”

“You tried to end your life, Cass.”

“I can’t say for sure that was my plan. I just wanted the hurting to stop.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“For what?” I ask, turning my head to look at her. I’m surprised to see that tears are now welling in her eyes.

“For ignoring you. I was upset and hurt, but you needed me and I wasn’t there. I went over the messages you sent me ... the ones I didn’t read or respond to.” She slides her free hand into her pocket and pulls out her phone, opening it to our message thread. “This one,” she says, pointing to the screen.

Cassie: Help me if you can I’m feeling down, and I do appreciate you being ’round. Help me get my feet back off the ground, won’t you please, please help me?

I frown. “Your point? I was speaking from my heart.”

“You do realise they’re song lyrics, right?”

I gasp. “How did you know that?”

“My mum’s a huge Johnny Farnham fan. I grew up listening to him.”

I blow out a puff of air. “I heard the song on TikTok. It came up on my *for you* page. Something about those words resonated deep within me. They don’t call him the voice for nothing, Jaz.”

She nudges my shoulder with hers and laughs. “You’re such a weirdo at times, but I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Maybe that’s why we gel so much ... we’re kindred spirits.”

“Hey,” she snaps, and this time, I laugh.

“I’m glad you’re here. I’m not sure I could do life without you ... you make it meaningful.”

“Ah, Cass. I feel so responsible.”

“Jazzie,” I say, rolling onto my side and wrapping my free arm around her waist. “I was completely heartbroken when you stopped talking to me, you’re my ride or die—the light in my darkness, but if I’m being completely honest, I was already spiralling before that happened.”

“Because of Connor?”

“No, my mother.”

“What’s she done now?”

“What hasn’t she done would be a better question.” I push my head further back into the pillow and sigh. I can’t do this right now. “I’m not ready to talk about it.” I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to open that can of worms.

“It’s okay,” she says, reaching up to stroke my hair. “Connor wants you to come back to Sydney with us when you’re well enough to travel.”

“He does?”

Why does that make my silly little heart beat faster? I'll admit I was equally shocked and thrilled when I woke to find him sitting beside my bed, but I played it cool. Over the years, I've mastered the art of acting unaffected by him. He was the last person I expected to find here, but it just speaks volumes about the kind of man he is. I've treated him so poorly, but he was still here for me regardless. I lucked out when I lost him.

"We both want you to come back with us."

"I wish I could, but there's no way my mum would agree to that."

"Fuck your mum. She doesn't deserve your loyalty."

She's got that one right, but it's not my loyalty she's getting, it's my compliance. "Can we talk about something else?" I ask as I feel my emotions bubble to the surface.

"Of course, but when you are strong enough, we're going here again. I can't in good conscience sit around and watch you spiral further. I want to help you, but I can't if I don't know what's going on inside."

This is why I love this woman so much. When tears of gratitude rise to my eyes and begin to cascade down my cheeks, Jacinta reaches up to wipe them away, and that's when I notice the huge rock on her finger. "What the fuck is this?" I snap, grasping hold of her wrist.

"You mean this?" she casually answers, twisting her hand around until it's facing me and wiggling her fingers.

"Yes that," I say, narrowing my eyes.

"It's my engagement ring."

She's engaged?

"When did this happen?"

"The day I found you bouncing on my brother's dick."

"Yikes," I say, grimacing. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"You'll be even sorrier when you receive my therapy bill."

I roll my lips to hide my smile. I can't even articulate what it means to have her here. If something positive can come out of this clusterfuck I find myself in, it's the fact that I haven't lost her too. I couldn't imagine my life without her in it. I'm still trying to get over losing the other Maloney.

"Does this mean we'll be planning a wedding in the future?"

"Probably sooner than you think. Mason's already putting pressure on me to get married."

"I better be your matron of honour, biatch."

"There's no one else I'd want by my side."

My mother has forbidden me from going back to Sydney, but there's no way I'll miss my BFF's wedding.



My body stiffens the moment I hear her voice. "Jacinta," she says, "would you mind giving my daughter and me a moment in private?"

My grip on Jaz's hand tightens as both of our heads swing in her direction. I don't want to be left alone with this woman. The two of us are still lying side by side on my bed and I'm grateful when my best friend doesn't budge. Instead, her gaze moves to me and we're so in sync that no words are needed.

She gives me a look that clearly conveys, "*Do you want me to leave?*"

My silent reply is, "*No.*"

Jacinta then turns her attention back to my mother. "I think I'll stay, Mrs Lewis."

God, I love this girl.

My mother's fake smile instantly turns into a scowl. "It's Doctor Lewis and I prefer it if you left," she barks.

"No," Jacinta retorts.

"What is it with you Maloneys? First I get attitude from that rude and disrespectful brother of yours, now you. No

wonder my daughter is so messed up.”

Connor was rude to her? My stomach churns at the thought of them going head-to-head. What did she say to him?

“What can I do for you, Mother?”

“Are you sure you want to do this with an audience?”

I arch a brow, suddenly feeling a lot braver with my bestie by my side. “Do you?”

She has a lot more to be worried about than I do. I’m not the villain in this scenario.

There’s so much she could say, but I doubt she will. Not in front of Jacinta. I’m not the bad guy here, and my mother knows it. She’s the one who will rot in hell for what she’s done.

That stern bitchy look she’s famous for is now present on her face. Her narrowed eyes move to Jacinta, then back to me. Her face slightly reddens when neither of us reacts.

She raises her hand and points her finger in my direction. “We will be having this conversation one way or another. Actually,” my mother says, pausing to look down at her watch, “now that you’re awake, you no longer need to be here. I’m going to talk to your doctor and get your discharge papers drawn up. I’m taking you home.”

Shit. My heart drops as soon as those words are out of her mouth. I know exactly what she’s doing. She’s controlling the narrative ... it’s what she does. She always gets what she wants and will stoop to any level to see that happen. The last thing I want is to go back to that house with her, but she’ll wreak havoc if I don’t.

When she turns and leaves, my wide eyes move to Jacinta.

“Do you want to go back there?” she asks.

“Of course not, but I don’t have a choice.”

“Yes you do, you’re an adult. She can’t control you.”

Hah. She’s been controlling me all my life. “You don’t understand, Jazzie.”

“Enlighten me then.”

Ugh. I feel like I’m being backed into a corner. “I’m scared of what she’ll do if I don’t do as she says.”

“What’s the worst that can happen? She’ll cut you off? You don’t need to worry about that, Connor and I will look after you until you find your feet.”

I’ve always made a big deal about the allowance my parents gave me, but it was purely a smoke screen. What my best friend doesn’t realise is it runs far deeper than money. “This has nothing to do with them funding my lifestyle.”

“Then what? You look petrified right now.” I fist the bedsheet in my free hand to hide the tremble. “What are you not telling me, Cass?”

I didn’t want to go here, but I know it will come back to bite me on the arse if I don’t. I can tell she isn’t going to let this go. “If I don’t do what she wants, she’s going to go after Connor, Jaz.”

“Connor?”

“Yes.”

“For what ... and why?” she asks, frowning.

I bow my head. “It’s a long story, but trust me when I say she’ll stop at nothing to get her way.”

The room falls silent, but I can feel Jacinta’s eyes on me as she tries to make sense of what I’m saying. “Is your mum the reason you broke up with Connor all those years ago?”

I nod my head because that’s as much as I’m willing to give her right now.



“Good news, Miss Lewis,” the doctor says with what appears to be a forced smile when he enters the room. “On your mother’s insistence, we’re discharging you.”

On your mother’s insistence. Those words are not lost on me.

My eyes dart to Jacinta—who's now sitting on a chair by the far wall—where I find her frowning in the doctor's direction. She's been quiet since my mother paid us a visit, which concerns me, but I'm grateful her questions have now stopped. I don't know if I'll ever be ready to confess the truth, because the outcome of that won't be pretty. Just the thought of it has bile rising to the back of my throat.

“Isn't there some kind of protocol Cassandra needs to go through before being discharged?” Jacinta asks.

“I'm not sure what you mean by protocol,” the doctor answers, moving his attention to her.

“Considering the reasons surrounding her admittance, wouldn't the hospital have a duty of care towards their patient? Has counselling or therapy been discussed? Are you not concerned that the moment she is released she may try this again?”

“I won't,” I say, giving her a confused look.

“I can assure you, Miss ...”

“Maloney. Jacinta Maloney,” she says, rising from her seat and extending her hand to him. “I'm Cassandra's best friend.”

“Her mother has assured me she has all the necessary precautions in place. She's also organising counselling for her daughter.”

“Right, and pigs might fly.”

“Excuse me,” the doctor says, and he's not the only one surprised by her outburst.

“Cassie's mother is the reason she's in here.”

I gasp. “Jacinta.”

“I'm sorry, Cass, but it's the truth and you know it. I don't believe she'll get you the care you need. I'm concerned about what will happen if you leave here with her.”

“I don't need care,” I protest.

“Really?” she asks, frowning.

She's probably right, I'm carrying around a shit load of baggage, but I wouldn't feel comfortable unloading any of that on a stranger.

The doctor just stands there, his gaze moving back and forth between me and Jacinta like he's watching a game of tennis. The awkwardness only intensifies when my mother enters carrying one of my Louis Vuitton overnight bags in her hand.

"Jarryd," she utters, greeting the doctor as she makes her way towards the bed, placing the bag on top.

"Amanda." I can tell by his curt response he's not a fan of my mother. Join the club buddy.

"I brought in a change of clothes for you to wear home." *Home*. Just the thought of going back to that place with this woman makes me feel sick to the stomach.

"She's actually coming to stay with me, *Doctor Lewis*," Jacinta says, emphasising the word doctor.

My wide eyes meet hers, as I silently ask, "*What in the hell are you doing?*"

The expression she gives me in return is hard to read, but I'm gathering it's saying something along the lines of, "*I'm saving you from this crazy bitch.*"

"Hah," my mother retorts. "It's amusing that you think you have a say in *my* daughter's life. I'm her mother, and she's being released under my care. While we are on the subject, Cassandra won't be able to visit you in Sydney anymore, so I suggest you say your goodbyes before you leave because you won't be seeing her any time soon."

I'm pretty sure the desperation on my best friend's face is mirrored in my own, but I already knew I wouldn't be going back to Sydney. I broke my own heart six years ago for the man I love, and even if we're no longer together, I'll always protect him.

"She's twenty-two, and an adult," Jacinta says, in a last-ditch attempt to save me. Bless her sweet little heart; I'll forever be grateful to her for this.

“That may be true, but she isn’t well enough to make decisions for herself anymore.” My mother turns her attention to me, dismissing Jacinta entirely. “Get dressed,” she snaps, shoving the bag she brought with her in my direction. “We’re leaving.”

Chapter 6

Connor

We're just finishing lunch when I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket; I forgot it was still on silent. I slide it out, flip it over, and see my sister's name on the screen.

"Jaz," I say with a lazy smile when I answer. The four beers I had with Mason did their job. I'm finally feeling relaxed.

"Connor," she cries down the line. My body instantly tenses as I sit up straighter in my seat.

"What's wrong? Did something happen to Cassie?"

"She's gone, Con."

"What?" My heart drops into the pit of my stomach as I stand so abruptly my chair topples backwards, landing on the marble floor with a loud thud.

"Her mum had her discharged under her care ... I don't know if I'll ever get to see her again," she sobs.

I take a moment to absorb her words. She's not *gone*, gone, she's just been discharged. Why the fuck didn't my sister lead with that? I think I just lost five years off my life. "Are you still at the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm coming there now. Fuck, I've been drinking."

"I'll drive you," my father offers.

"I'm coming too," Mason chimes in.

“What’s happened?” my mum asks.

“Jaz, we’ll be there soon, hang tight. And don’t worry, we’ll get this sorted.”

Although four beers were not enough to get me drunk, the tipsy feeling I was experiencing earlier is gone, and I’m now super focused as we drive to the hospital. I’m formulating a plan in my head. In my heart, I know Cass isn’t safe under her mother’s care and there are avenues we can take if need be.

We find my sister waiting outside the front of the hospital when we get there. She looks crestfallen, and it has me immediately reaching for my seat belt, but Mason beats me to it. He’s out of the car the moment it comes to a stop and engulfing Jacinta in his arms.

Although they’ve been together for months, I’m still trying to get used to the fact that I’m no longer her protector. Before him, I was the one who she always turned to. I may not have been happy when these two first got together, but I’m good with it now. It was Mason’s prior lack of commitment to women that concerned me, but he’s more than proven himself. He loves her, that is evident, and I couldn’t ask for a better partner for my sister.

I blow out a frustrated breath when I see her wrap her arms around his waist and sob into his chest. It’s only then that I notice the huge motherfucking diamond on her ring finger. “What’s that?” I ask my dad, pointing towards her hand.

“What’s what?”

“That ring on her finger.”

“Jacinta and Mason got engaged. They didn’t tell you?”

“No.” I knew their relationship was the real thing, but marriage? I didn’t see that one coming.

I’m now sporting a frown as Mason cups my sister’s face in his hands and swipes the tears away with his thumb. She nods at whatever he just said, and when he leans in to brush his lips against hers, I’m forced to look away. I’m in no way jealous of them—I simply want what they have. It’s just

unfortunate that the only woman I'd be willing to make that kind of commitment with isn't interested in me in that way.

As soon as they're seated in the vehicle, the first thing I do is ask Jacinta if she's okay—assuring her that we'll get this mess sorted. Only then do I address the huge motherfucking elephant in the room ... or should I say car.

"I just spent the last few hours with you, Bradley," I grumble. "When where you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"That you're going to marry my sister," I snap, turning in my seat and narrowing my eyes at him.

He rolls his in return. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're the one that stated we aren't chicks and don't do deep and meaningful bullshit."

"This is completely different, cocksucker, and you know it."

"Connor!" my dad interjects.

"Sorry, Dad."

"I'm pretty sure your sister came down to tell you about our engagement the day I proposed, but you were too busy screwing—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," Jacinta shrieks, cutting Mason off.

"On that note," my father chimes in, starting the car. "Are we going back to the house?"

My attention moves to my sister. "Have you had any contact with Cassie since she left the hospital?"

"No, I tried to call her, but it went straight to voicemail. Her phone is either off or I've been blocked."

I pull out my phone and call her number. I get the same response. I turn my attention back to my father. "Can you drop me at the police station?"

"Is there a reason for that?" he asks.

“I’m going to request a welfare check on Cassie, and if that fails, I’ll apply for an Intervention Order.”

“Good idea, Son,” my father says.

“What’s that?” Jacinta asks.

“It’s our last defence if Cass refuses to come willingly.”

“You can’t force her to come with us if she doesn’t want to, Con.”

“She doesn’t have a choice. I’m not leaving her there with that woman,” I state.



Despite my sister’s protests, I managed to get her to go back to the house with Mason and Dad. I knew I could be here for hours, and if I’m going to make this happen, I have to tell them everything I heard at the hospital. Jacinta is upset enough; hearing that won’t help. If this doesn’t go as planned, it’s only going to traumatise and make her worry more.

I have zero jurisdiction down here in Victoria, but I’m connected to the police force, so I’m hoping that goes in my favour. My gut tells me Cassandra isn’t safe under her mother’s roof. Would she physically hurt her daughter? I have no clue. Will she hinder her recovery? Absolutely. She may have been released from the hospital under her mother’s care, but she is an adult and cannot be kept in that house against her will.

When I entered the police station, I introduced myself to the officer at the front desk and asked him if I could speak to one of his superiors. If I had any chance of pulling this off, I needed to go straight to the top.

Thankfully, I only have to wait ten minutes before a senior sergeant takes me out back, to one of the interview rooms.

Once I’m seated, I tell him my concerns, starting with the phone call back at my apartment the day I found her crying. I don’t go any further than the phone conversation I overheard. He doesn’t need to know the rest. My point in bringing this up

stems back to what Amanda Lewis had said to Cassandra at the hospital.

During the call I heard Cass scream, *“You ruined my life six years ago ... I’ll never forgive you for that. Now you’re trying to destroy it completely.”*

It coincided with her mother’s words. *“You had the audacity to accuse me of ruining your life.”*

It had to have been her on the other end of that call.

Of course, I told the sergeant all the other vile things Doctor Lewis had said to her daughter, and he agreed that a welfare check was viable.

I’m now seated in the back of a patrol car en route to the Lewis mansion. They tried to discourage me from tagging along, but not only did I need to see Cassie was okay with my own eyes, I feel like she’s more likely to speak up if she has an ally there.

When we pull into the driveway, I’ll admit I’m feeling uneasy. It’s been years since I’ve been here. I avoided driving down this street after Cassie dumped me.

The three of us—the two officers and myself—exit the vehicle. I decide to hang back near the car for now, because I know her mother won’t be impressed when she sees me here. I honestly don’t care what she thinks, but I’m not going to do anything that will make things worse for Cassie.

I nervously rub my hands together when one of the officers knocks on the front door. I’m not sure how this is going to play out, but I pray in our favour. This isn’t my last resort if things go pear-shaped, but I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that.

It takes a few minutes for Cassie’s mother to answer the door. I’m not surprised to see a deceptively over-the-top smile on her face when she does. That immediately turns into a scowl when the officer tells her why they are here.

I shove my hands into my pockets and blow out a long breath; I knew she wouldn’t take this well.

“Thank you for your concern, but my daughter is fine. She’s upstairs resting.” She retreats and proceeds to shut the door.

The officer on the left takes a step forward, extending his arm to stop her. “We will need to sight your daughter before we leave, Mrs Lewis.”

She raises her chin in defiance. I get the feeling this woman is used to getting her way. “It’s Doctor Lewis, and as I just stated, she is resting.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor Lewis, but it’s protocol.”

“My daughter was released from hospital under my care. I am not only a doctor, but I am her mother. This situation is ludicrous and uncalled for. You’re wasting your time by being here. I can assure you she’s being well cared for.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but we will still need to see her.”

“Do you have a warrant?”

“In this instance, a warrant isn’t required. We are here to conduct a welfare check on your daughter, and legally we can ascertain that by any means necessary.”

“Fine,” she snaps, retreating another step. “You can wait here, while I go and get her, and once you’ve seen her, you can kindly get off my property.”

I’m surprised she didn’t come back with something like, “*Do you know who my husband is?*” People like her constantly throw their weight around. I’ve dealt with her type before.

I wonder if Cass’s dad has been notified yet. If he hasn’t, then why? It’s very suspicious. Why is she so hellbent on him not finding out about his daughter?

She returns a few minutes later with Cassie in tow. I stand up straighter, and my heart starts to race the moment I lay eyes on her. It’s funny how even after all these years she still has that kind of effect on me. My eyes drink her in. Her long brown hair is pulled back into a high ponytail. She’s dressed

casually in an oversized hoodie, a pair of tights, and her feet are bare.

It's not the usual immaculate attire I'm used to seeing her wear. It reminds me of the teenage version of Cassandra ... the young, innocent, and impressionable girl I fell hopelessly in love with.

Cassie's mother grabs hold of her arm and yanks her forward. "There, you've seen her, you can leave now," she sneers.

Both officers' gazes snap down to Amanda's grip on her daughter. And as much as I hate seeing her manhandled like this, I know it's going to work in my favour.

One of the officers clears his throat. "I'd like to have a word with your daughter."

"That's not necessary."

The officer ignores her and moves his attention to Cassie. "Miss Lewis, could you step outside for a moment."

Cassandra goes to take a step forward, but her mother still has hold of her arm. "My daughter has been through a traumatic experience; I won't stand for you terrorising her when she's in such a vulnerable state."

I roll my eyes. She's reaching and she knows it.

"We have no intentions of upsetting your daughter, Doctor Lewis, we just need to ask her a few questions."

Her lips thin with displeasure, but she reluctantly lets go.

Cassandra wraps her arms around herself as she exits the house and moves to the side to speak with one of the officers. She looks so fragile, so broken, and it concerns me. I need to get her away from this woman.

She hasn't noticed me standing here yet, and although she nods in response to the questions she's being asked, her eyes keep flicking towards her mother who's watching her every move. It's an intimidation tactic, and I can see it's working.

That knowledge has me removing my hands from my pockets and taking a step forward. When I'm close enough, I say, "Cass." Her eyes widen as soon as she sees me approaching.

"I should've known he was behind this," Amanda grumbles. "I want that man off my property immediately."

"Cass," I say, reaching for her hand and threading my fingers through hers. "Can I have a moment with her?" I ask the officer.

"No," Amanda shrieks. She goes to take a step forward, but the officer standing beside her raises his arm to stop her from advancing further.

I take that as a sign and gently guide Cass a few steps away.

"What are you doing here, Connor?" she whispers. I can hear the quiver in her voice. She's clearly terrified, the poor thing.

Now that I'm up close, I can see her swollen eyes, and I know she's been crying. "I'm here to save you, Princess," I tell her, reaching up to tenderly tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

"Save me from what?"

"Your mother."

"Con."

"Cass, you're not safe here. You know it as well as I do."

"I can't go with you."

"Why?"

Her eyes dart back to her mother. We're talking softly enough that she can't hear what we're saying, but it doesn't stop Cassandra from leaning forward and whispering in my ear. "She'll come after you if I leave."

I draw back and make eye contact with her. "I'm not afraid of your mother."

“You should be. You have no idea what this woman is capable of.”

“I’ve dealt with worse.”

“I can’t put you in danger like that,” she murmurs, bowing her head.

“Cass,” I say, placing my finger under her chin and raising her face back to mine. I bend slightly so I’m at eye level with her, and the sadness I see in those caramel-coloured orbs almost undoes me. “You’ll be safe and cared for with us, you know that right? I’m not asking for anything more from you, so you don’t have to worry about that. I need you safe, and the only way I can do that is to get you away from that woman. Jaz is beside herself with worry. She’s been trying to reach you ever since you left the hospital.”

“My mum took my phone away.”

I figured as much. “I’m pretty sure she’s blocked both of our numbers ... can’t you see, this is just the beginning. She’s trying to control you. Please say you’ll come with me? I’m prepared to take on your mother if need be.”

“You say that now. There is no level she wouldn’t stoop to. She could destroy you, Con.”

“Do you forget I’m a lawyer? That my father is a lawyer. I work for the police department and deal with shady people on the daily. People far worse than your mother.” Tears rise to her eyes, and it tugs at my heart. “Don’t cry. My family loves you.” *I love you.* “We’ll take care of you, Cass. Please say you’ll come with me.”

“She’s not going to let me leave.”

“You’re an adult, she can’t stop you.”

“But I was released from the hospital under her care.”

“It’s not a court-appointed care order, Cass. It means nothing.”

“I’m scared, Con.”

“I know, Princess, but together we’ll get through this. You have a lot of people in your corner. My entire family is behind you, you know that right?”

“I do, and I appreciate you all so much for that.” She pauses for a moment before saying, “Okay.”

“Okay, what? You’ll leave here right now, with me?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding her head once.

Thank fuck. I feel an instant relief. I wrap her in my arms, crushing her petite body against mine as I place a soft kiss on her hair. “Good girl.”

I grasp her hand and lead her back towards the others. Her grip tightens as we approach. “Cassandra has agreed to come with us.”

“Is that what you want?” the officer asks.

“Yes,” she answers without hesitation.

“She is not going anywhere with that man,” Amanda yells.

“Your daughter is an adult, Doctor Lewis, you cannot keep her here against her will.”

“She is under my care.”

The officer ignores her and turns his attention back to Cassie. “Do you need to go back inside and pack your things?”

“She’s not taking anything from this house,” Amanda spits.

“She’s allowed to grab her personal belongings.”

“Her father and I have funded her lifestyle, she owns nothing ... she is *nothing* without us.”

Cass bows her head, which I can only presume is in shame. “You’re wrong,” I say, in Cassie’s defence. “She will shine without you holding her back, you just watch.” And I mean what I say. I know the real Cassandra Lewis, and she’s kick-arse.

Chapter 7

Cassie

My hands are still shaking as I sit in the back of the police car with Connor. We're on our way to his parents' house, and I have mixed feelings about being here. Do I want to be with the Maloneys? *Hell yes*. Will I regret coming here? Probably.

I've always yearned to be part of their family—as Mrs Connor Maloney more specifically—but I've hurt this man way too much over the years for that dream to ever come to fruition. Jaz is like a sister to me, and her parents are the most loving and nurturing people I know. It's the backlash from my mother that terrifies me the most. She won't let this go; I know it. She has way too much to lose if the truth ever gets out.

“How are you holding up?” Connor asks, reaching for my hand and wrapping it in his. He's been so sweet with me over the past couple of days, I don't deserve his kindness after the things I've done.

“I'm okay,” I lie.

His thumb sweeps back and forth across my knuckles as we sit here. That move has tears stinging the back of my eyes. “Everything will work out, Cass, I promise.” As scared as I am about what's to come, I feel safe in this moment with him by my side.

I give him a tight smile before turning my head to gaze out the window. I'm not sure if things will ever be okay. Is it even possible to unpack the amount of baggage I carry around? I can't undo the past. Nothing will right the wrongs that have

been committed against us both, and my heart breaks for him and all the things he doesn't know.

The rest of the drive is travelled in silence, but his hand still clutches mine, and that sweet constant movement of his thumb is somewhat comforting. He doesn't let go until the police car pulls alongside the kerb in front of his parents' house. It's been a while since I've been here, and I've missed this place. It was the closest I had to a real home growing up.

He exits the vehicle, and I slide across the seat to find him waiting there with an extended hand. I give him an unsure smile as I allow him to help me from the car. He thanks the officers before retrieving my suitcase from the boot.

It was awkward having one of the officers stand at my bedroom door watching me pack, especially when it came to grabbing all my undergarments out of the drawer. My mother tried to follow me upstairs, but the other officer ordered her to stay put.

I jammed in as much as I could, but it was only a fraction of my extensive wardrobe. Thankfully, I had enough sense to empty the contents of my jewellery box inside the case. I may need to pawn some of it since I'm moving to Peasantsville. It's a place I never wanted to end up, but I'm now realising that being poor is a small price to pay to be out from underneath that woman's clutches.

We only make it halfway up the driveway before my bestie comes barrelling out of the house. "Cassie," she cries as she sprints towards me. I move away from Connor, heading in her direction, practically falling into her open arms.

Saying goodbye to her at the hospital was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I wasn't sure if I'd get to see her again. When my mother practically tore me from her embrace and marched me down the corridor, I felt like I was being led away to the gallows.

Even if my reprieve turns out to be short lived, I'm so glad to be here with the Maloneys for now.



“Can I get you something to drink?” Grace asks as she places a chicken schnitzel sandwich down in front of me.

“No thank you. I’m good.”

“Okay, sweetie,” she says, smoothing her hand over my hair before leaning down to place a kiss in its wake.

Everyone has been so wonderful since I arrived. Jacinta’s mum cried and hugged me so tight when I walked through the front door. *“I can’t even tell you how happy I am to see you, my precious girl. I’ve been going out of my mind with worry,”* she had said. I know she was the one who found me and initially stayed by my bedside until Connor got there, and I will forever be grateful to her for that. She is the kind of mother I’ve always wished I had.

It is just the three of us women in the kitchen. Connor has moved into the front room with his dad, Mason, and Blake. I’m grateful for the reprieve. Initially, I had the six of them sitting around the table watching me. It was daunting to say the least.

Picking up half of my sandwich, I bring it to my mouth. Food is the last thing I feel like, but Grace went to the trouble of making it for me, so the least I can do is eat it. Or try to. I take a tentative bite before placing the rest back down on the plate. She’s a great cook and she’s added lettuce and mayo, which is my favourite. On any other day, I know this sandwich would taste delicious, but for some reason, I feel like I’m chewing on a piece of cardboard.

I manage to force down the rest of that half, but I can’t stomach anything else at the moment. Grace stands and collects my plate when I push it away. “Why don’t you go upstairs and have a lie down, Cass? You’ve had a big day. I’ll make up one of the spare rooms for you since Mason is bunking in with Jacinta.”

“I’ve already made one up for her,” Connor says, appearing in the doorway of the kitchen. “I’ve put her in the room next to mine.” *Next to him?* “I want her close.”

A grin tugs at my lips as I bow my head, shielding it from the others in the room.

“That’s good,” Grace replies, and when I side-eye Jacinta, I find her smiling adoringly at her brother.

“Come,” Connor offers, appearing beside my chair. “I’ve already taken your things up there.”

I grasp his hand when he extends it to me, and he helps me stand. “Thank you,” I say to him before moving my attention to his mother. “And thanks for the sandwich.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie. I’ll get one of the kids to come up and get you in a few hours, when dinner’s ready.”

“Okay,” I say with a nod.

My heart does a little flutter in my chest when Connor doesn’t let go of my hand and guides me out of the kitchen. His fingers are still wrapped in mine as he leads me up the stairs. When we reach the landing, he navigates us to the right.

“That’s my room there,” he states, pointing to it as we pass. I have to refrain from rolling my eyes. I practically lived here when I was growing up, and was very aware of where his room was. I may not have ever stepped inside it, but I knew which one was his. Especially, when we were seeing each other.

Back then, I used to sleep in Jacinta’s room, beside her, and I can’t even tell you how many times I wanted to sneak down the hallway and slide under his covers. The struggle was real. It felt like a form of torture. As much as I loved my time with his sister, I was totally besotted with her brother. Whenever I was around him, I always ached for his touch, and when I wasn’t I would internally pine for him.

We enter the room beside his. It’s another one I haven’t been in before. We never ventured down this end of the house, it always seemed like Connor’s domain. It’s decorated beautifully, just like the rest of this place. Apart from the dark teal feature wall behind the head of the bed, this room is light and airy. The other three walls are painted a bright white, and there are two large windows down one side, looking out over

the expansive backyard and pool area. The furniture is light oak, and the bedding is white, with a throw rug and cushions that tie in with the teal wall.

“I’ve put fresh sheets on the bed for you.”

“You have?” I ask with wide eyes.

“Don’t look so surprised, I’ve been living on my own for the past two years, I’ve become very self-sufficient,” he replies, chuckling. I watch on as he moves further into the room and lifts my suitcase, laying it down on the wooden bench seat that sits at the foot of the bed. “Would you like some help unpacking?”

“No, but thank you for the offer.”

I cross to where he’s standing and unzip my bag, flipping open the lid. “Did you rob a jewellery store?” he asks, looking down at the chaos before us, and I’m not just talking about the knot of jewellery. All my clothes are balled up and stuffed in. It’s not the usual order I like when packing, but in my defence, I was in a hurry to get out of there.

“It’s my safety net ... I’m sure you heard my mother when we were leaving. She’s probably already cut off my credit card and frozen my bank account. Sadly, this is what my life has resorted to ... pawning my things until I can find my feet.”

I lean forward and start picking through the tangled mass of diamonds and gold ... there are rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and bangles. I left the pearl necklace behind. It was a silent fuck you to my mother. My days of being a showpiece—a politician’s daughter—are over.

I’ve accumulated a lot of jewellery over the years. Not all of it was bought by me. My parents liked to shower me with expensive gifts for birthdays and Christmas, but it was their love I wanted most. Material things mean nothing to me. My mother’s generosity was all show.

“Cass,” he says, reaching up to grasp my shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “You don’t need to sell your things; I’ll take care of you.”

I dip my face and swallow thickly. *This man.* I don't deserve his compassion or kindness. "I couldn't ask you to do that, Con," I say, choking on my words.

"Hey." He turns me to face him and wraps me in his big strong arms. When he rests his chin on top of my head, the tears start to fall. I'm an emotional wreck, and I hate that he's witnessing it. "You are surrounded by people who care about you ... things may seem hopeless right now, but you are so much stronger than you give yourself credit for. Accepting help doesn't make you weak, Cass. It requires strength, and you have that in bucket loads."

He's always had the capability of being able to lift you and make you feel like you're more than you are. I tilt my head back so I can see his handsome face. "I don't deserve you, Connor Maloney."

He reaches up to gently brush away my tears with his thumb. "You deserve the world, Cass. Don't let anyone ever make you feel like you don't."

"Thank you. I may not deserve your kindness, especially because of the way I've treated you in the past, but I want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done for me. I know it's six years too late, but I'm sorry for hurting you." *I'm sorry for so much.*

"People hurt each other, Cass ... it's what we do. Whether it's intentionally, unintentionally or regretfully. It's part of life, but the beauty of the human race is we have the ability to heal and to find forgiveness ... so if it's any consolation, I forgive you." Those words only seem to bring on more tears. Would he forgive me if he knew the truth? I very much doubt it. He leans in and places a chaste kiss on my forehead before letting me go and retreating a step. "You start unpacking your clothes, and I'll tackle these," he says, reaching into my suitcase to scoop up the tangled jewellery.

"You don't have to help me."

"I want to," he says, taking a seat on the side of the bed and getting to work.

A grin plays on my lips. I know we can never get back what we once had ... too much has happened, but I hope that going forward we can at least be friends.

Chapter 8

Connor

Once Cassie has unpacked all of her things and put them away, and I finish untangling her jewellery, I leave her and head to my own room. As much as I wanted to stay, I could tell she was exhausted.

I feel like we have made a lot of progress today, and I'm somewhat lighter for it. I'm still hurt by everything that has happened in the past, but I meant it when I said I forgave her. I've seen how controlling her mother is over the past two days, and my gut tells me there's a chance she had something to do with Cass's decisions back then. I may not agree with the way she went about it; I feel like I deserved more than what she gave me, but if it's going to help her heal, then I need to let it go.

I'm now lying on my back on the bed with my hands resting behind my head. My mind is going a hundred miles an hour as I stare up at the ceiling. It's not going to be easy just being friends, especially considering I want so much more, but it has to be better than the animosity we've shown towards each other over the past six years.

It was draining and only seemed to cause the open wounds I'd been carrying around to fester. For that split second, I'd take pleasure in the cruel comments I'd sling her way, but that satisfaction never lasted long. I was always left feeling like an asshole. That's not the kind of person I am, but a broken heart can make you do unspeakable things.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when my phone starts to ring. When I pull it out of my pocket and glance at the screen, I see

it's an unknown number. I usually ignore those, but given everything that is going on, I decide to answer it.

“Hello.”

“Mr Maloney?” the male voice asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

“This is Bradford Lewis, Cassandra's father.”

I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed. “Mr Lewis,” I say. “What can I do for you?”

“I've just had a very distressing phone call from my wife informing me that you are keeping my daughter against her will.”

Wow. “That's interesting since it was your wife that was holding her prisoner.”

“I don't believe you. Amanda may be a little strict on our daughter occasionally, but Cassandra has always lived a pretty carefree life.”

“If that is so, then why did I have to go with two police officers in tow to get her out from under your wife's clutches?”

“I don't appreciate your implications, young man.”

“And I don't appreciate yours. Did your wife inform you that your daughter has been in the hospital for the past two days?”

“No. Why was she in the hospital?”

“She was actually in intensive care after a failed suicide attempt.”

“You're lying.”

“Am I? Why don't you ask your wife, or better still call the hospital where she works? I believe it was her that informed the staff not to notify you.”

“My wife would never do something like that?”

I scoff at his reply. This guy is delusional, or he's been living with his head buried in the sand for far too long. “I

guess you don't know your wife as well as you think then. Not only did my mother and I have to sit by your daughter's bedside because neither of her parents were there when she needed them most. But the one time your wife did bother to show up, she told Cassandra that it would be better for everyone if she didn't wake up—”

“Now listen here,” he shouts, cutting me off. “My wife loves her daughter; she'd never say such a despicable thing.”

“I'm not finished ... and I was standing right there and heard every hateful word that spewed from her mouth. She told her she regretted the day she was born and would've aborted her if it wasn't for you wanting an heir. That's not motherly love, Mr Lewis. Your wife is a vile human being.”

“Put my daughter on the phone,” he orders.

“I'm afraid I can't do that. Your daughter is resting, but I'll tell her you called. She may not be able to call you back though, since your wife confiscated her phone and cut her off financially.”

“Put Cassandra on the phone this instant, or I'll contact the police.”

“Be my guest. They are well aware of what's going on. Hence why they went to the house to perform a welfare check on her. Your daughter came with us willingly, despite your wife's attempt to keep her there against her will.”

“You haven't heard the last of me,” he barks down the line before ending the call.

And here we go.

Cassandra's mother may be a top-notch surgeon, but the worst thing she can do to me is remove a vital organ and sell it on the black market. Her father, on the other hand, is a powerful politician with friends in high places. He has the means to undo all the good that I've accomplished, and I can only hope for his daughter's sake he doesn't.



I'm feeling like shit by the time I make it downstairs for breakfast. I tossed and turned all night, despite being dead on my feet. I've barely slept in the past five days and I'm running on empty. My call with Cassandra's father is what kept me up. I have no clue what their next move might be, but I think it's time we left Melbourne and headed back to Sydney.

"Morning, Mum," I say placing a kiss on the side of her head.

"Morning, sweetheart."

I nod at my father across the table as I take a seat. "Dad."

"Son," he answers, peering at me over the top of the newspaper he's reading. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Honestly ... like shit. I barely slept."

"You're worried about, Cass?" my mum asks, placing a cup of coffee down in front of me and rubbing her hand down my arm.

"Her dad called me yesterday afternoon."

That news has my father sitting up straighter in his seat and placing the paper down on the table. "He did? What did he want?"

"He was under the impression that we were keeping Cass here against her will."

"That's bullshit," he snaps.

"I know. I informed him of that, but I still hold concerns. I'm not sure what his plans are going forward, so I'm thinking of taking Cassie back to Sydney today. Her father has connections in Melbourne ... she'd be a lot safer away from here."

"I have connections here too, Son. Cassandra isn't a minor, so there's not much they can do."

"I still don't trust them."

Our conversation is cut short when Blake comes barrelling into the kitchen. "Grandma," he shrieks, running over to wrap

his arms around her waist. “Can I have chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast please?”

My mum leans down and kisses the top of his head. “You can have whatever you like, sweetheart.”

I find myself smiling as I watch them. Although Blake has only been in her life for a short time and is not her biological grandson, you can see the love she holds for him. It makes me sad to think I’ll never be able to give her grandkids. It’s not that I don’t want to be a father, because I do, I just can’t see myself settling down.

My sister and her fiancé enter the kitchen a few minutes later, looking all loved up. Mason takes a seat next to me and proceeds to punch me in the arm. “You look like shit,” he says.

“Fuck ...” My words die off when I get a scathing look from my father.

Jacinta kisses Mum and then moves over to wrap her arms around Dad’s neck. “Morning, Daddy,” she says. I use his distraction to flip Mason the bird.

“Is Cass coming down?” I ask.

“Yeah, she’ll be down in a minute,” Jacinta answers. “She’s just getting dressed.”

I had to fight the urge to not check on her throughout the night, or again this morning when I woke. She was so close, yet she seemed so far away. I know it’s going to be a struggle having her living with me full-time, but it’s a small price to pay to keep her safe.

After taking a sip of my coffee, I pull out my phone and start searching for flights. “When do you guys plan on heading home?” I ask, looking between my sister and Mason.

“Not sure,” Jacinta says with a shrug.

“I think Cass and I will leave today if I can get us on a flight.”

“Why so soon?” she asks, frowning.

“I think the sooner I get her away from Melbourne, the better.”

“You’re probably right. Maybe we should leave too,” she says, looking over at her fiancé for confirmation.

“I understand why you have to go, but I wish it wasn’t so soon,” my mother chimes in. “It’s been nice having you all home again.”

Mason reaches for Jacinta, dragging her down onto his lap and nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck. “I’m cool with whatever you want to do, babe.”

Am I an asshole for being envious of their relationship?

I look away just as Cassie enters the room. Our eyes instantly lock and my stomach does a stupid flip-flop. My gaze scans over her face, she looks well rested, and dare I say beautiful. She’s wearing make-up this morning, and her long hair is down and styled in loose waves. She’s dressed to the nines—back to her regular attire. At first glance, you wouldn’t know she’d been to hell and back, but I see through her façade.

The casually dressed Cassandra I saw yesterday is the real her. As stunning as this version is, her hair, flawless make-up, and fancy clothes are simply a shield. A diversion from what’s going on underneath. If you stare long enough, you’ll see it. The sadness in her eyes is unmissable, to me anyway.

She’s haunted. By what? I don’t know. Her mother maybe? But it’s something I’ve noticed many times over the years. Her armour is a distraction. Like smoke and mirrors. I know this woman better than she thinks.

I got to know the real Cassandra when we were younger, the person she is deep down. I’ve watched her transition since then. We may not be together anymore, but I continued to observe from the sidelines. She’s like a trainwreck—as much as I want to, I can’t look away.

“Morning,” I say, smiling up at her.

“Morning.”

“Did you sleep alright?” I ask, rising and pulling out the seat beside me.

“Thank you,” she says as she sits, and it doesn’t go unnoticed that she avoided answering my question.

“Are you hungry?”

“A little,” she answers, lifting one shoulder.

She barely ate any of her dinner last night, which troubled me. I know her whole world has been turned upside down, but she needs to keep up her strength. I’ll protect her with everything I have, but my gut tells me we’re going to have a battle on our hands going forward.



Around midmorning, the doorbell rings and my gut churns. “Are you expecting anyone?” I ask my mum.

“No.”

“A delivery maybe?”

This time she shakes her head instead of answering, and I can see the concern on her face. Our flights have been booked for later today, but I’m on edge. I won’t be able to relax until Cass is on that plane.

I blow out a long breath as I rise from my seat. “I’ll get it,” I say when my father goes to make a move.

I’m not surprised when I open the door and find Cassandra’s father standing there. I only recognise him because his profession has him regularly on the news. “Mr Lewis,” I say. “What can I do for you?”

He holds up one of his hands in front of him. “I’m not here to cause any trouble,” he answers. “I’d just like to see my daughter.” I’m torn. He appears to be genuine, but he’s also a politician, they lie with a straight face for a living. “Please. I confronted my wife, and I realise some of the things you claim are in fact true.”

“Everything I told you was true.”

“I’ve packed up some more of Cassandra’s things.” He turns and signals his driver who is parked by the kerb. I watch as he exits the car and moves to the rear of the vehicle. He retrieves two large and one small Louis Vuitton suitcases from the boot. They match the one she brought here with her yesterday. “I thought she might need them. I meant it when I said I wasn’t here to cause trouble. I love my daughter and I just need to see she’s okay with my own eyes. If being here is what she wants, I’ll support her wholeheartedly. Unlike my wife, I’m aware she’s an adult and old enough to make her own decisions.”

The pleading look he gives me has me caving. This is my first time meeting him, and I can already tell he’s a lot nicer than his wife. “Give me a moment,” I say. I’ll leave this decision up to Cass; if she wants to see him, I won’t stand in her way.

I’m startled when I turn around and find Mason standing a few feet behind me with his tattooed arms crossed over his chest. The thug-like look on his face has me rolling my lips to suppress my chuckle. “Will you go and get Cassie for me?”

He gives Mr Lewis the side-eye before nodding his head once and turning towards the staircase. The girls moved up there to hang out after breakfast.

A few minutes later Mason returns with Cassie in tow. The genuine smile that curves her lips when she sees her father standing there tells me everything I need to know. She’s happy that he’s here. I’m pleased with that, but I hope he doesn’t convince her to leave with him.

“Daddy,” she squeals, bouncing down the last few stairs.

“Pumpkin,” he replies, opening his arms for her. You can clearly see the love shared between these two.

Cassie falls into his embrace, and he hugs her tight. For some reason, their reunion has a lump rising to the back of my throat. I’m happy for her and relieved to know she has at least one decent parent, but I’m still going to blame my emotional reaction on sleep deprivation.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“I flew home as soon as I got the news. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner; I had no idea you were in the hospital.”

“You know how Mum gets sometimes.”

“I do. Her constant need to control the narrative can be a bit much at times. I’m sure in her own way, she thought she was doing the right thing. My job is important to me, but it’s not as important as you are. I hope you know that, baby girl. I know I’ve been absent from your life a lot, but if I knew things were as bad as they were between the two of you, I would’ve checked in on you more often.” He draws back and looks down at her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding.

“And being here is what you want?”

“Yes.”

I release the breath I didn’t realise I was holding when she answers him.

He nods once. “Okay. I packed up some more of your things just in case,” he says, pointing to the suitcases his driver wheeled up to the porch.

“Thank you.”

“I can have the rest brought over at a later date.”

“I’m moving to Sydney,” she tells him. “I’m flying out later today.”

“If that’s what you want, I’ll support you. I just want you to be happy.”

For some reason, Cassie’s eyes dart to me before she focuses back on her father. “I am,” is all she says.

“That’s all I needed to know. Will you keep in contact with me?”

“I will. Mum took my phone, but once I get on my feet, I’ll buy a new one and send you the number.”

“That reminds me,” he says, reaching into the pocket of his suit jacket. He pulls out her phone and hands it to her. “You might need to block your mother’s number until things settle down a bit.”

“I will.”

He then reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulls out an envelope. “Here.”

“What’s that?”

“Just some money to tide you over. Open up a new bank account when you get to Sydney and send me your details and I’ll wire you some more.”

“Actually,” she says, pushing the envelope back towards him. “I’m almost twenty-two and I think it’s about time I start to stand on my own two feet. I’m going to look for a job when I get to Sydney.”

Both her father and I smile at that. I honestly think it will do her the world of good. “Take it, pumpkin, please. I’ll feel better knowing you have money if you need it. What about your car?”

“I’ll buy a new one when I can afford it.”

“That will take some time. You’ll need to be able to get around ... especially if you’re working. I’ll have the car changed into your name and get it shipped to you.”

“But—”

“It’s your car. I bought it for you. If it will make you feel better you can pay for the insurance and registration going forward ... although, I’m more than happy to do it.”

“Mum won’t be happy about that.”

“Leave her to me.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” she says, stepping forward to wrap her arms around his waist again.

“I love you, Cassandra, don’t ever forget that. I’ll always be here for you if you need anything.”

“I love you too,” she says, and that damn lump returns.



It's late by the time we get called to board the plane. Blake is already asleep in his father's arms. I couldn't get the five of us on the same flight until 9 pm. Cass and I could've got an earlier one—which is what the selfish part of me wanted to do—but in the end, I decided it was best if we stuck together.

Standing, I extend the handle of my carry-on luggage and then reach for Cassie's. “I can—”

“I've got it,” I say, cutting her off. I asked her to pack all her valuables in the smallest case. I wasn't comfortable leaving all that jewellery in her check-in luggage.

A shy smile tugs at the corners of her lips before she bows her head. It reminds me of the innocent teenage girl who captured my heart all those years ago. She's done that exact movement numerous times over the past few days ... whenever I've done something nice for her.

I lead her to our seats, which are two rows behind Mason, Jacinta, and Blake's. Did I do this purposely? Maybe. Is it wrong I want her all to myself? I know I'm just setting myself up for more heartache, but I can't seem to stop. This vulnerable side of her is my addiction.

Once I've placed our luggage in the overhead compartment, I take a seat beside her. “How are you feeling?” I ask.

She lifts one shoulder. “A little numb.”

My hand automatically moves to her knee, giving her a light, comforting squeeze. “It's going to be okay, Cass. Sometimes when you're in a dark place it may feel like you've been buried, but actually, you've been planted. It may not happen overnight, Princess, but it's your time to shine.”

She doesn't reply, but when her hand covers mine and she laces our fingers together, I know she understands the meaning behind my words.

Chapter 9

Cassie

It's close to midnight by the time we arrive back at the apartment in Sydney. Between the four of us, we managed to get all of my bags up here in one go. Despite Connor's protests, I help him wheel them inside and down the hallway towards the room I usually stay in when I'm here.

I always hated leaving this place whenever my mother would summon me home, so it's kind of thrilling that this time I get to stay on. I'm uneasy about the road that lies ahead, but there's nothing like a brush with death to give you a new perspective on life.

"Do you want a hand unpacking?" Connor asks as he opens the door to my bedroom.

"I'm too tired to unpack right now. I'm going to shower and fall into bed ... I'll tackle all this in the morning."

"Sounds like a plan," he says over a yawn.

My eyes take him in, and even the dark circles under his eyes do nothing to distract from his handsome face. He has that unique rugged kind of beauty, and if he ever decides he no longer wants to practice law, I have no doubt he'd make a killing on the runway.

His exquisite milk chocolate, come-to-bed eyes—that I swear look straight into my soul at times—are surrounded by long ink-coloured lashes. Even his scent is intoxicating, something I'd happily drown in. Pouty lips and a bright, panty-melting smile that has countless women shamelessly dropping their underwear and throwing their vaginas his way.

His thick, dark hair, cut short on the sides and left a little longer on top, is slightly tussled like he uses his fingers to comb it, but on him, it's perfect. Don't even get me started on his chiselled jawline, which is presently covered in a day's worth of dark stubble. Stubble my fingers are itching to reach out and touch.

I clear my throat, snapping myself out of my haze. "You look like you could do with some sleep too."

"Yeah, I'm fucked."

For some reason those words have my eyes flicking towards the bed. The last time we were in this room together that's exactly what we did.

The bed is still unmade ... just the way we left it. I can see the indent of his head on the pillow where he lay as I unashamedly rode him like an A-grade Pornstar. I wonder if it still smells like him. I'm unsure of the brand of shampoo he uses, but there's some kind of pheromone sorcery going on there.

Jacinta went to stay at Mason's after she found me *bouncing on her brother's dick*—her words not mine—and I left in a hurry, so I never got a chance to tidy up in here before flying back to Melbourne.

I reach for the neckline of my shirt, tugging at it, as memories of us together in that bed flash through my mind. I'm suddenly feeling quite warm. I can't regret what we did, because, for me, it was my final goodbye. I honestly thought I'd never see him again.

My mother had already informed me by that stage that my visits to Sydney were to cease. Technically, she couldn't stop me from coming here, but when she threatened to go after Connor once again, she knew I'd comply. It's her go-to move and how she's managed to control me over the past six years.

I'd like to think that I'm now free of that woman, but I know better. This transition has gone far too smoothly; I feel like it's the calm before the storm.

“I should let you get some sleep,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat.

His eyes move from the bed to me, but a split second later, he looks away. “Right.”

“Good night.”

“Good night. You know where my room is if you need anything.”

What I need is you, Connor Maloney. Boy, do I need him. The problem is I can't have him. Not in the way that I want. The secrets that I keep will forever stand in the way of that.

When he turns to leave, I reach out, grasping hold of his hand. “Con.”

He glances at me over his shoulder. “Yeah, Cass.”

“Thanks for letting me stay here.”

He nods his head. “No problem.”

I drop his hand, and he closes the door on his way out. There is so much left unsaid between us, like there's a giant, unsurmountable wall standing in our way. But the implications that come with climbing that hurdle will only destroy the little we have left.

I move over to the bed and plonk down onto the mattress. The impulse I had a few minutes ago returns with a vengeance, so I reach over and grab the pillow—the one he rested his head on—bringing it to my nose and inhaling deeply.

Yep, I was right.



“Rise and shine, biatch,” I hear before the room is suddenly flooded with light.

I hesitantly lift my head from the pillow, groaning as I do, and spy the culprit through my one squinty eye. Ugh. “What the hell, Jaz.”

Her arms are spread wide, and she's sporting a ridiculous smile for so early in the day. "Welcome to Peasantsville, my friend. Up and at 'em." I flop back down, face-first onto the pillow when she loudly claps her hands together. "Chop, chop."

Have I traded one dictator for another?

"Go away," I grumble into the fabric.

"No can do I'm afraid," she says, grabbing the end of the quilt and tearing it from my body.

"Eww," she screeches. "Where are your clothes?"

"I'm not wearing any," I retort grinning.

"I can see that. What the hell, Cass."

When she throws the quilt back onto the bed, my shoulders bob with laughter. A few days ago—when I was in the depths of despair—I doubted I'd ever laugh again. It makes me think of what Connor said to me on the plane, "*I'm not buried, I've been planted*".

They are words I never knew I wanted to hear, and in some way, it's brought me out of my funk. It's made me see things from a different perspective. I've spent the last six years punishing my mother for the things she did, but it's time to move forward and get my life back. I want to prove to him, *to the world*, that I can in fact shine.

I drag the quilt over my body and roll onto my back. "I was too tired to go through my suitcases after I got out of the shower, so I climbed into bed. Don't you dare tell me that you've never slept naked, Jacinta Maloney, because I won't believe you. Especially, with that big hunk of man meat sleeping beside you." When her face turns bright red, I find myself smiling again. "Exactly," I say, pointing an accusing finger in her direction.

She turns away and heads for the door because she knows I'm right. "Get dressed, we have stuff to do."

"What kind of stuff?" I ask, abruptly sitting up.

“We are going out for breakfast, then we’re calling by the studio to talk to Brooke about a job.”

“Can’t I have a day to wallow?”

“No,” she snaps, looking over her shoulder with narrowed eyes. God, I love this girl.

I wait until she’s left the room before I throw back the covers and rise from the bed. *It’s your time to shine*, I tell myself as I lift one of my suitcases onto the bed and unzip it.

“Let’s see what you have to offer, Peasantsville,” I mumble under my breath.



It’s late when I finally walk through the door. It’s been a long and exhausting day, but I’m still smiling.

“Hey,” Connor says, looking up from the lounge where he’s sitting. “You’re coming home late?”

“I’ve been at work,” I say, which is a sentence I never thought I’d hear myself utter. There’s something very liberating about those words.

“You have?” he asks, standing. “You got a job already?”

“Yes. Brooke hired me.”

“Wow.”

“Jaz and I went to the studio after breakfast and she hired me on the spot. Look,” I say, digging in my bag. I pull out the four crisp fifty-dollar notes and proudly hold them up. To some, it may seem like a lot of money, but considering the extravagant lifestyle I’ve been used to living, it’s like small change, but I couldn’t be prouder of myself. “She paid me in cash because I don’t have a bank account or tax file number yet. I actually got two-fifty, fifty dollars a class, but I had to pay for a cab home.”

“You should’ve called me; I would’ve come and picked you up.”

I flick my hand. “Jaz offered to come and get me as well, but the new and improved, self-sufficient me wanted to do it on my own. Who knows, I may even learn how to catch a bus going forward ... it will be a lot cheaper.”

“I’m not having you catch buses, Cass. Especially at night.”

“Why?” I ask frowning.

“Because it’s not safe.”

It is sweet that he cares, but the new independent me doesn’t like being told she can’t do something. “My dad called me today. I should have my car by the end of the week.”

“Good,” he says, crossing the room. “Until then, I’ll take you wherever you need to go.” He passes by me and opens the drawer of the hall table by the door. “Have you eaten?”

“No.”

He pulls out a stack of pamphlets and hands them to me. “Since it’s a celebratory dinner to commemorate your new job, you can choose what we have to eat.”

I smile. “Anything?”

“Yes ... as long as it isn’t that raw fish crap you eat.”

My smile grows because I knew he’d say that. He hates sushi. “Hmm.” I thumb through the selections in my hand. “How about Five Guys?”

He looks at me accusingly. “Since when do you like burgers?”

To be honest, I’ve never been a fan, but I know Connor loves them, and even if we’re celebrating my job, I want to do something nice for him ... he’s been so good to me the past few days.

“That was the old me,” I say, pushing the pamphlets into his chest. “The new and improved Cassandra Lewis is on a voyage of discovery.” Rounding him, I head towards my bedroom.

“Where are you going?”

“This working girl is going to take a shower.”

“You want me to order?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want?”

“Surprise me, Maloney.”

Chapter 10

Connor

My eyes drink Cassie in as she crosses the main room. I'm trying not to stare, but I can't help it. She's dressed in a pair of black tights and a tight, long-sleeved white T-shirt. Her hair is still wet from her shower, and there's not a stitch of make-up on her beautiful face. She appears so much younger than her actual age when she's in her natural state, and I've got to say, it's my favourite look on her.

"Here," she says, slapping two fifty-dollar bills on the table.

"What's that for?"

"Dinner," she says. "And we need to discuss what my share of the rent will be."

My lips instantly thin in displeasure. "You're not paying for dinner, Cass, it's my treat. And I'm not charging you rent either."

"I'm paying rent, Connor Maloney," she growls, which I find adorable.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Princess, but you're not. My dad bought this place, so I don't pay anything either ... all I cover is the utilities."

She crosses her arms over her chest, making her perky tits rise, and fuck me if it doesn't give me a semi. She lifts her chin defiantly and I know the sass is coming. "Well then, I'm paying half of those and if you try to tell me I can't, I'm going to kick you in the balls."

Her eyes flicker down to my crotch as she speaks, and just like that, my semi deflates and my nuts retreat into my stomach. “That’s a little harsh don’t you think?”

“Con,” she says, coming to take the seat beside me. “How am I ever going to learn to stand on my own two feet if you refuse to let me pay my way?”

Shit, she has a point. “Fine. You can pay half of the utilities, but I’m paying for dinner tonight.”

I push the money she put on the table towards her, and the huge smile that breaks out on her face hits me right in the chest. I have to swallow my groan when she folds the notes in half and stuffs them into her bra. Everything in me wants to dive right in after them.

My eyes flick from her chest to her face and I find her watching me. The world seems to stand still and the air crackles around us as we sit there staring at each other. My body involuntarily starts to lean towards her ... like a magnet being drawn in. But the moment is suddenly broken by a knock on the door.

It’s perfect timing because if this living arrangement is going to work, we can’t go there again. Clearing my throat, I stand. “That must be the food.”

I carry the bags to the table and start unpacking everything I ordered. I know this isn’t the kind of food that Cassie usually eats, so I got a bit of everything. I hope there’s something here she’ll like.

“I’ll grab some plates.”

She jumps up from her seat and heads into the kitchen. She reappears a minute later carrying two plates and two beers.

My eyebrows raise. “Is that other beer for you?”

“Uh huh.”

“Since when do you drink beer?”

She lifts one shoulder. “Don’t judge me, Maloney, I’m embracing the new me, and expanding my palate.”

I shake my head and chuckle. “No one is judging you, Princess. And I kind of like the new adventurous you.”

“Hmm,” she purrs, placing a plate in front of me and taking a seat.

Once all the food is laid out, I sit down beside her. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her struggling to get the bottle top off the beer. “Let me do that for you,” I offer.

“You make it look so easy.”

It’s not rocket science, but I don’t say that out loud. “I’ve had plenty of practice.”

“Thank you,” she says when I pass it back. My eyes remain on her as she brings the bottle to her mouth. She’s used to sweet frou-frou drinks and the occasional wine, so I’m curious to see what her reaction will be to the bitter taste of beer.

As soon as she takes a swig, her face screws up like she just sucked on a lemon. I roll my lips together to hide my amusement. She swallows thickly and when she notices me watching, she hums, “Mmm.” I can’t help but bark out a laugh.

“You hate it, don’t you?”

“It’s not the best thing I’ve ever had in my mouth.”

I’m not sure if that was an innocent comment or a sexual innuendo, but my cock seems to think it was the latter. It still has vivid memories of sliding between those luscious bee-stung lips of hers.

There is so much I could say to that, but it’s dangerous territory, so I reach for one of the wrapped burgers, placing it on her plate. I grab some fries and a hotdog, adding them as well. “I wasn’t sure what you’d like, so I got a bit of everything.”

“Thank you,” she says, scooting her chair closer to the table. Cass stares down at her plate but makes no move to pick anything up.

“Problem?”

“No. I was just thinking the old me would be having an internal meltdown about the calories she was about to consume, but this new improved working version needs her sustenance if she’s going to conquer the world.”

That statement has me grinning. I pick up my beer and hold it in front of her. “I guess that calls for a toast.” She picks up her beer bottle and clinks it against mine. “To conquering the world,” I say.

“To conquering the world.”

“I’m proud of you, Cass.” She bows her head, and that sweet little smile of hers tugs at her lips. When I see a pink hue form on her cheeks, I place my finger under her chin and raise her face to meet mine. “You’ve got this,” I say with confidence, because one day she’ll discover just how fierce and strong she actually is. She may not realise it right now, but she can’t hold back that fire within because her passion burns stronger than her fears. “Onwards and upwards.”

“Onwards and upwards,” she repeats.



Cassie’s been living here for over a week now, and I’ve barely seen her. We’re like ships passing in the night. I do my nine-to-five, and she works until late at the dance studio, so even when my day’s finished, she’s not here. In a way, it makes it easier because keeping my hands off her has become a constant struggle, but I’d be lying if I said I haven’t missed her.

I’m loosening my tie as I exit the lift when it stops on our floor. I’ve been in court all day, so I’m feeling mentally exhausted. I was planning on heading to the gym tonight, but I can’t be bothered going now.

I can hear an annoying alarm sounding from somewhere. It must be coming from another apartment, which is one of the major downfalls in a building like this. When you share adjoining walls, there isn’t much privacy.

Digging into the pocket of my suit trousers, I fish out my keys. As I'm unlocking the door, I realise that the noise is coming from inside.

Turning the key, I hastily push it open. I smell the smoke before I see it. It's billowing through the opening in the kitchen. *What the fuck.*

I drop my briefcase and rush in that direction. "Cass," I call out. I don't even know if she's home, but her safety is the first thing that comes to mind.

"I'm in here," she shouts back.

My long strides morph into a run before my brain has even registered what it's doing.

"Shit," I say when I round the corner and see Cassie holding a flaming frypan in her hand through the smoky haze. She turns towards the sink and reaches for the tap. "Stop," I yell over the incessant noise of the smoke alarm. I quickly close the distance between us and take the pan from her hand. "Water will make it worse."

"Are you nuts? Water puts out fires, you dick ... even I know that much."

She tries to reach for the pan again, so I turn away from her and place it back on the stovetop. We don't have a fire blanket or an extinguisher in the apartment. I'm pretty sure there's one somewhere in the corridor on this floor, but I've never really paid much attention.

"Water is the worst thing you can put on an oil fire, Cass. I need something to smother the flame. Do you know where the lids for the pots and pans are kept?"

It might seem like a stupid question since this is my place, but I don't cook ... ever. My mum was the one who bought all the kitchen stuff and unpacked it. Plates, cups, coffee mugs, and cutlery are my limit.

"No, I don't," she says over a cough.

I frantically start pulling open the drawers and cupboards, but not only has the smoke gotten worse, hindering my sight,

it's stinging my eyes and making them water.

"You need to get out of here, Cass. Leave the apartment. Maybe alert the neighbours on your way out of the building, in case this goes pear-shaped."

"I'm not leaving you, Con ... this is all my fault."

I turn and grasp her shoulders. "Go, please."

"No!"

Fuck this woman is stubborn. Any other time I'd throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of here myself, but I need to deal with this fire before it spreads.

I blow out a long breath which morphs into a cough, there's no time to argue. "Help me find a lid then." Thankfully, between the two of us, we managed to locate them. I grab hold of the largest one and place it on top of the pan to smother the flame. "Open the windows."

My racing heart begins to slow when I realise the crisis has been averted. "I'm sorry," Cass says, placing her forearm over her mouth and coughing again. I reach for her hand and pull her from the kitchen and across the main room. "Where are you taking me?"

"Out."

"Oh, my God, are you kicking me out? It was an accident. I didn't mean to almost burn down your place."

"I'm not kicking you out, I'm removing you from the smoke-filled apartment. And when I've sorted this mess, I'm going to get you checked out for smoke inhalation."

"I don't need to see a doctor, Connor."

"Let me be the judge of that."

So much for my relaxing night.



It's just after 1 am when I drive into the car park underneath our building. We sat in the emergency for five long

hours before a doctor could look over Cassandra. She went back and forth from protesting to apologising the entire time.

“I’m sorry,” she says for the millionth time.

“Stop apologising,” I snap as I put the car into park. I don’t mean to sound so harsh, but I’m tired and pissed off. It’s been a long fucking day, and what she did was reckless. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact you attempted to cook something when you have no idea how?”

“Jaz makes it look so easy.”

“So, you thought you’d give it a go? I hope you learnt your lesson.”

“I did, asshole,” she grumbles, removing her seat belt and swiftly exiting the car.

“Fuck,” I mumble under my breath. By the time I get out of the vehicle, she’s already halfway to the lift. “Cass,” I call out, jogging to catch up. “I’m sorry, okay. I’m just tired and annoyed.”

She stabs at the button on the lift aggressively before folding her arms over her chest and turning her head to the side, ignoring me.

I scrub my hands over my face in frustration.

When we step into the lift, I push the button for our floor before stepping back to lean against the wall.

“I was trying to do something nice for you,” she murmurs.

“What?”

“I’ve seen the look on your face when Jaz was living with you, and you’d come home from work to see she’d cooked your dinner.” She lifts one shoulder. “I had the day off, so I went to the butcher and asked for the biggest piece of steak they had ... I know how much you like meat.”

She’s right; I’m an asshole.

I had wondered what she’d been cooking. But by the time I’d put the fire out, it looked like a chunk of charcoal. “You did all that for me?”

“You’ve been so good to me lately, I just wanted to repay you somehow.” When I hear her voice crack, I feel even shittier.

I’m touched that she would do something so sweet, even if it turned out to be a disaster. I place my hand on her shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. What I want to do is wrap her in my arms, but keeping my distance is the best thing for both of us.

“That was nice of you, Princess. I appreciate the sentiment behind it, but maybe you should’ve asked Jaz for some lessons before trying to conquer it on your own.”

“Maybe. I’ve been kicking Peasantsville’s arse since moving here ... I kind of felt invincible, like I could do anything. I guess I still have a way to go.”

Peasantsville?

I roll my lips to hide my smile. I’m not even going to try and make sense of that statement. She says some really random shit at times, but for me, it just adds to her adorableness.

When we enter the apartment, it still smells like smoke, despite having opened all of the windows before we left.

It’s late, but we both head straight for the kitchen. We visited a drive-through on the way home because neither of us had eaten.

“Why don’t you head to bed,” she says. “It’s late, and I know you have an early start. I’m going to clean up this mess.”

I remove the cufflinks from my dress shirt, shoving them into the pocket of my trousers before rolling up my sleeves. “I’ll help you.”

“But—”

“I’m helping,” I grumble, cutting her off. As tired as I am, I’m not leaving it all up to her, especially now I know why she attempted to cook. I walk over to the sink and turn on the tap to heat the water. “What do you want to do, wash or wipe?” Her gaze moves from the burnt encrusted pan to her perfectly

manicured nails, so I reach for the tea towel and toss it in her direction. “You can wipe.”

It’s not like I haven’t washed dishes before, but for some reason, it feels intimate doing domestic duties with her.

“Thank you,” she says when I pass her the clean glass.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, side-eyeing her.

“A little embarrassed.”

I chuckle. “Don’t be. Just promise next time you want to give me a steak, you’ll DoorDash it.”

“Yeah, my cooking days are done and dusted.”

“I’ve never known you to give up so easy. Have you thought about taking some lessons?”

“By myself ... yeah, nah.”

“Get Jaz to go with you.”

Cassie rolls her eyes. “She cooks like a professional chef; she doesn’t need lessons.” She reaches for the chopping board I hand her as I move on to the burnt pan. I probably should chuck this, but I’ll give it my best crack. “You could come with me.”

“Hah, yeah right,” I scoff.

“Men take cooking lessons all the time, Maloney. We can’t live on takeout for the rest of our lives.”

“If you learn to cook, we won’t have to.”

“Newsflash, it’s not 1950.”

“Your point?” I ask, putting a little more elbow grease behind my scrubbing.

“You’re acting like a chauvinist.”

“Because I don’t want to attend cooking lessons?”

“No, because you’re expecting me to become a Stepford wife. Correct me if I’m wrong, but we’re in the twenty-first century now, mister. Times have changed.” She pokes my

bicep with her pointer finger to emphasise her point. “You’re not the only one who works in this house.”

“I don’t even know what a Stepford wife is,” I reply confused.

She pulls back her shoulders and places her hands on her hips. “It’s a derogatory term for a submissive and docile woman who conforms blindly to the stereotypical role of an old-fashioned subservient wife.”

Wow, that was a mouthful.

“Firstly, we’re not married, Cass, and even if we were, I’d never expect, or ask you to be subservient.”

“Fine, that’s settled then.”

“What’s settled?”

“We will learn how to cook together.” I’m about to protest, but then she leans in and plants a kiss on my cheek. “Thank you for agreeing to do this with me. I’ll get online first thing in the morning and see what classes are available in our area.” When she draws back, she bounces on her feet and claps her hands together. “Oh my God this is going to be so much fun, Con.”

I just stand there and stare at her in disbelief. *What in the fuck just happened?* Her sweet smile screams innocence, despite the fact she knows damn well I was just railroaded.

Chapter II

Cassie

“**W**hy does it smell like smoke in here?” Jacinta asks when she enters our apartment Saturday morning. “Is something burning?”

I glance at Connor in a panic, silently begging him not to throw me under the bus. It’s been two days since my little kitchen mishap and that smell has yet to fade.

He flicks his hand in his sister’s direction from where he’s casually lying on the sofa. “A mishap with one of those stupid scented candles you women like to burn,” he says with a roll of his eyes.

“Stupid? Don’t be hating on our candles,” his sister bites back.

“Yeah, Maloney,” I add with a touch of attitude. When his eyebrows spring up in surprise, or possibly shock, I have to bite my lip to suppress my smile.

“I came down to see if you two have any dinner plans. I’m making lasagne tonight.”

“Hell yeah,” Connor says, leaping to his feet. “I don’t know about Cass, but I’m definitely down for that.”

Her eyes then move to me. “I know you’re not a big fan of carbs, Cass, but I’m making a salad and can grill you a piece of chicken if you like.”

“I’m good with lasagne.”

Her eyes widen. “You are?”

“Yes. The old Cass wasn’t a fan of carbs, but I’m new and improved. I’m a working girl in need of substance, so they’ve become my friend.”

Jacinta does a double take before stepping forward and pulling me in for a hug. “Look at you killing this new life; I’m so proud of you.” She’s the second person to say those words to me, but would she be proud if she knew I nearly burnt down her brother’s apartment?

“Thanks.”

“I’m heading to the shops, can I get you guys anything?” she asks, releasing me.

“We’re good,” we both reply in unison.

Jinx.

“Do you want to come with me?” she asks.

“To a grocery store?” My body shudders at the thought. “Nah, I’m good. I umm ... have stuff to do.”

“Ugh, you’re such a liar.”

“I do.”

“Whatever.” She turns towards the door. “Come up around six, or earlier if you want.”

As soon as she leaves, Connor stalks towards me. “What the hell was that?”

“I do like carbs,” I say, schooling my face. “I ate a burger and fries, didn’t I?”

“You and I both know I’m not talking about carbs, Cass.”

I lift my chin. “Well then, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I fib.

“I lied to my sister to protect you only to have you both gang up on me.”

“I was giving the story credibility. Nobody forced you to lie, Connor.”

“I’ll remember that next time you give me one of those looks.”

“What look?”

“The *please* don’t tell my sister I nearly burnt down our entire apartment block and made us all homeless look.”

“Con,” I say, reaching up to place my flattened palms on either side of his face. “That’s a little overdramatic don’t you think, and technically there was no candle mishap, so you’re getting worked up over nothing.” When he opens his mouth to protest, I squish his cheeks together, halting him. “Our cooking class is in two hours. Why don’t we head out now ... we can get brunch before it starts.”

When I release his face, he blows out an exasperated breath. “Did you just gaslight me?”

“Never,” I answer, giving him what I hope is an innocent smile. He shakes his head as he turns, heading down the corridor towards his room. “Is that a yes?”

“Let me grab my shoes.”



We pull up outside the culinary school where our lessons are being held, and Connor immediately starts whining. “I still can’t believe you roped me into this.”

Roped is a better word than strong-armed, or tricked, I guess. “Stop your bitching, Maloney. We’re going to have a blast. Think of all the gourmet meals we’ll be able to cook ... or the dinner parties we can host.”

When he chuckles, I narrow my eyes. “What?” he asks, holding his hands up defensively. “I think you’re getting a bit ahead of yourself here ... have you forgotten your first attempt at cooking?”

I reach over the centre console and punch him in his big thick thigh. He’s all hard muscle, so it actually hurts my hand a little. “Don’t be an asshole, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Just stating the obvious, Princess.”

“Well don’t, you’re messing with my psyche.”

“My bad,” he says with amusement in his tone as we exit the car simultaneously and meet at the front of the vehicle. “So, this is the place huh?”

“It sure is.”

“And what are we supposed to be cooking today?”

“No clue, but it’s a beginners’ class so I think we’re good.”

I can tell he doesn’t want to be here, but after a moment of stalling, he extends his arm, saying, “Lead the way.”

When we get to the front door, Connor moves around me to open it so I can enter first. He’s always been a gentleman; it’s just one of the many traits I love about him.

We both pause in the foyer, taking it all in. The first thing Connor spots is a fire extinguisher hanging on the far wall. “They knew you were coming,” he whispers.

“Hah, you’re a comedian,” I retort, nudging his shoulder with my own.

I approach the front desk and let the woman know who we are, and why we’re here. I have to swallow down the resentment when she gives Connor an appreciative once-over. I should be used to the way women fawn over him by now, but I’m not. I hate it, I always have, especially when he was mine. I no longer have the right to be jealous—since I’m the one who ended our relationship—but internally, that possessiveness still runs deep.

This is the only local beginners’ class I could find that not only runs on the weekend, but also has vacancies. The others were weekdays or evenings. I work afternoons and nights during the week, plus I’ve just started seeing a therapist some mornings, so my calendar is pretty full from Monday to Friday.

“I love how they’ve decorated the place ... very shabby chic,” I say once we’ve taken a seat on the sofa by the wall.

“If you say so,” Connor replies, lifting one shoulder and pulling out his phone, completely uninterested in the décor, this place, and me. “What time does this thing finish?” he

asks. “I’m supposed to meet up with some of the guys for drinks later.”

That news has my stomach churning. Naturally, I knew this was coming, but it does nothing to stop the panic I feel inside. Our conflicting work schedules mean we haven’t seen each other a lot since I moved here, but to my relief, he’s home every night when I get there. It was only a matter of time before he resumed his old life—moving from one bed to the next.

I’ve done the exact same thing in the past, but that was the old me. I’m no longer going to use others to help me move on from him, because the truth is it never worked anyway. On my therapist’s advice, I’m choosing to deal with those feelings instead of running away from them.

“Did you forget about our dinner at Jaz’s?”

“Shit. Yeah, I did.” He looks down at his phone and starts typing something. “I guess I can catch up with the guys another time.”

The relief that brings just confirms one thing ... I have a lot of work to do on myself moving forward.

We sit in silence for the next ten minutes, before the others start to filter in. The first two to arrive are both guys ... I’m guessing in their late twenties. They’re holding hands when they enter, so they’re obviously a couple. They look really cute together.

A few minutes later, a group of three ladies walk through the door, possibly in their early thirties, they’re a little loud and boisterous, but look like lots of fun.

Connor’s still sitting there scrolling through his phone, completely aloof. A wave of guilt hits me for forcing him to come. “Hey,” I say, nudging his leg. “If you don’t want to be here, you can go.”

He sits up straighter in his chair and looks at me suspiciously. “You’re giving me permission to leave? What’s the catch?”

I lift one shoulder. “There is no catch, you seem like you don’t—”

A loud clap of hands halts me from finishing my sentence. When I glance in the direction it came from, I see a man ... about fortyish, very tall, nicely built, with dark, wavy hair. He’s dressed in a white chef’s jacket and black trousers, and his striking blue eyes are trained on me ... specifically my crossed, bare legs.

“Ladies,” he says as his eyes dart from me to the group that just walked in. The toothy white smile on his handsome face diminishes slightly when he moves to the boys and then Connor. “Gentlemen.” His attention is back on me in an instant, and our eyes are now locked. “I’m Marco,” he croons, holding out his hand. “I’ll be your teacher today.”

“Cassandra,” I reply. “But people call me Cassie.”

“You’ll soon learn that I’m not like most people, so Cassandra it will be ... a pretty name, for a pretty woman.” I hear the other ladies sigh when he pulls my hand towards his face and bends to give it a chaste kiss.

When I hear a deep growl, I glance at Connor over my shoulder and find him glaring in Marco’s direction. “I think I’ll stay,” he grumbles.

Interesting.

Chapter 12

Connor

You'd think Cassie was the only student in the class by the way this douchebag is acting. He's giving us a rundown and he's solely focused on her. It's pissing me off. I get she's a stunner, but his undivided attention towards her is bringing out my inner caveman.

"I'm gathering since you're here for the beginners' class today, cooking isn't one of your strong points, so we're going to start with the basics," he says. "We'll focus on hygiene, cooking methods, recipe reading and correct measurements, knife skills, food prep ... for example, chopping onions, garlic, and vegetables. Learning how to cook things like pasta, rice, searing and braising meat."

I lean towards Cass, "That's something you can definitely benefit from." My comment earns me a playful elbow to the ribs.

"By the end of this eight-week course," he continues, "I'm confident you'll be able to make scrumptious meals at home and be the envy of all your friends."

Eight weeks? Fuck my life.

Cass jumps on the spot and claps her hands in excitement. "Yay."

I roll my eyes. I like her energy, but even I know this guy is reaching. I'm pretty sure she'd burn water if that was a possibility.

“Okay,” the douche says, giving her a blinding smile, which I’d like to punch right off his stupid face. “Let’s get started. In front of you, you’ll find your starter pack. You get to keep these as part of your tuition fee.”

Tuition fees? Why am I only just realising this now? Obviously, this course isn’t free, but I was so focused on not wanting to be a part of it, that I didn’t even consider the cost. “How much is this course going to set me back?” I whisper.

“Nothing,” she replies. “It’s on me for forcing you to come.”

“I’m not letting you pay, Cass.”

“Too late, I already have.”

“Hmm.” I’ll see about that.

She starts unravelling the cord on the black case in front of her, opening it, and spreading it out flat. It contains sharp knives in various sizes, which makes me feel uncomfortable. I’m not sure she should be using them.

Reaching out, Cassie runs her finger along the side of the largest blade. “Be careful,” I say, grabbing her hand and drawing it back.

She looks over at me and smiles, and that seems to be the cue for dickface to approach. He picks up the folded black apron that’s sitting on the workbench in front of her, shaking it out. “Allow me,” he croons, lifting the neck strap over her head.

When he slides his hands under her hair and gently lifts it out of the way, I see red. Blood red, specifically his. Here I was worried about Cass handling sharp knives, but if this dude touches her again, it’s him that’ll be in danger.

He is oblivious to the death stare I’m now giving him as he grasps the ties on the sides and instructs her to turn around. I swear he’s bordering on a sexual harassment suit, and I’ll have no hesitation slapping him with one.

“I’ve got it,” I sneer, snatching the ties from his hands.

He gives me a surprised look, like he's just seen me for the first time. We may not be a couple, but he doesn't know that.

"Right," he says, clearing his throat.

He moves back to the front of the class, where he better stay. I roughly tug on the two ties before fastening them around her tiny waist. When I'm done, I look up and find Cassie staring at me over her shoulder. There is a pink hue on her cheeks. Is she embarrassed about the way I just acted?

"I'm sorry," I grumble.

"Don't be," she replies, giving me a sweet smile.

"We are going to start with the vegetables," the dick says, holding up a carrot. "Grab the vegetable peeler out of your kit." He holds one high in the air. "It looks like this."

That earns him another eye roll. I can't cook to save my life, but even I know what a vegetable peeler looks like.



Although our lesson got off to a rough start, by the time I leave with two containers balancing in my hand—the contents being the beef stir-fries we just made—I'm actually smiling. Who knew that cooking something with your own two hands could be so gratifying?

Thankfully, my little run-in with the douche at the beginning of the class was enough to keep him at bay for the remainder of the lesson. Every time I caught him looking at Cass, he quickly diverted his gaze. *Pussy*.

He even complimented me on what he called my *excellent knife skills*. When he lifted his hand for a high-five, I ignored him. He's lucky I didn't high-five his face.

"Oh my God," Cassie squeals when we push through the front doors and step out onto the sidewalk. "Can you believe we cooked something? We are bona fide chefs now, Con."

"I wouldn't go that far, Cass," I say, chuckling. "We cooked one meal with step-by-step instructions."

“Ugh,” she groans, nudging me. “We’re chefs and nothing you can say will change my mind. Gordon Ramsay better watch out ... I’m coming for him.”

I shake my head in amusement as I use my free hand to dig in my pocket for my car keys. She has the sweetest grin on her face as I open the passenger door so she can seat herself inside. It’s hard to believe we nearly lost her a few weeks ago. She seems to be coming along in leaps and bounds, and I can only hope this continues.



“Five thousand dollars,” I shout the moment Cassandra walks through the front door. “Where did you get that kind of money from?”

I had my assistant look up the cost of our cooking course online today, and to say I was pissed when she told me how much Cassandra had paid would be an understatement.

“Ugh,” she groans, dropping her bag on the dining room table. “Have you been spying on me, Maloney?”

“I wouldn’t call it spying.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“A simple internet search.”

“It’s been a long day, and I don’t appreciate coming home to your bitching.”

“It’s a lot of money to outlay when you’re still trying to find your feet.”

She flicks her hand dismissing me. “I used some of the money my dad gave me in Melbourne. Besides, you get what you pay for in this world, and greatness doesn’t come cheap.”

Her comment has my lips thinning. “There was nothing great about that douchebag ... he was a creep.”

She rolls her eyes as she crosses the room, flopping down on the sofa beside me. “I mean us, Con ... what we cooked was great.”

“It was a basic stir-fry, Cass, not a Michelin star worthy dish.”

She bends over to slip her shoes off. “My feet are killing me,” she groans, swinging her legs up and laying them across my lap. My hands automatically reach for the one closest to me, digging the pad of my thumb into the ball of her foot. “Oh, God,” she moans, flopping back onto one of the throw cushions. “That feels amazing.”

“Stop straying off topic ... I’m cranky with you.”

“I’m sorry, did you say something? I can’t think straight right now.”

I narrow my eyes when a smile tugs at her lips. As soon as I remove my hand from her foot, she drags herself up onto her elbows. “Why did you stop?”

“Are we going to hash this out, or are you going to keep avoiding the matter at hand?”

“Fine,” she says with a sigh. “Put your hands back on me first.”

That request has all the blood in my body rushing straight to my dick.

I reach for one of the cushions—placing it on my lap for obvious reasons—propping her feet on top. “FYI, I put the five thousand dollars back into your account today.”

She gasps. “What? How?”

“I asked Jaz which bank you used to open your new account. When court broke for lunch, I went there and charmed the teller and she gave me your account details ... the rest is history.”

I roll my lips when she releases a cute little growl. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“What, charmed the teller? She was at least fifty, Cass, relax.”

“No, put the money in my account.”

“Too bad, so sad.”

“How old are you, five?”

“Deal with it, Princess.”

“For that, you can do my other foot when you’re done.”

“Fine. Lay back and relax.”

I had every intention of doing both feet, and I’m certainly not going to complain about getting a free pass to touch her. I continue to work my magic, but by the time I move to the other foot, she’s sound asleep. *Poor thing.*

She’s really grasped this whole working gig, and I’m incredibly proud of her, but I also worry that she’s going to burn herself out.

She mentioned she’s been doing a lot of private pole lessons with the strippers—on top of her regular classes—which I honestly don’t mind. As long as she doesn’t pull the same stunt Jacinta did, by filling in for one of them at the strip club, we won’t have an issue. I’m drawing the line at that.

I gently lift her legs so I can slide out from underneath them. Standing, I stare down at her for longer than what you might call appropriate. But this is one time I’m able to get my fill without worrying about being caught, so I’m taking it. I find myself smiling as I lean down and brush back a loose strand of hair from her forehead. She’s so damn beautiful, and I’ll never tire of looking at her.

Bending slightly, I effortlessly lift her into my arms, and when she snuggles into me, something inside my chest cracks. Having her here is both a blessing and a curse, because it’s hard to be friends with someone you’re madly in love with. But I realised something when I saw her lying in that hospital bed: regardless of our circumstances, I want her in my life any way I can have her. Certain people make the world better just by being in it. She’s one of them.

Chapter 13

Cassie

I wake to my phone vibrating on the bedside table. I blindly reach for it, not even bothering to look at who it was. “Hello,” I croak.

“It’s been a month, Cassandra. I thought you would’ve tired of your life of poverty by now, and come running back with your tail between your legs.”

The moment I hear her voice, the panic starts. I bolt upright as I struggle to get air into my lungs and stare down at the screen through squinted eyes ... the call is coming from my father’s number. I blocked her arse, just like he’d told me to, and I don’t answer any calls from numbers I don’t recognise. I should’ve known she’d resort to something like this.

I’ve been dreading the day I’d have to converse with this woman again. Despite how good my new life has been without her in it, there’s been a part deep inside me that’s still struggling. Because in my heart I knew this day would eventually come. My mother has too much to lose by setting me free.

You never fully realise how toxic some people are until you breathe fresher air.

“I’m not living in poverty,” I say with a shaky voice. I hate how she makes me feel. “I have a job now. I’m earning my own money.”

“Hah,” she scoffs. “And how long will that last? You’re useless ... we both know it. It’s only a matter of time before

the rest of the world sees it.” I bow my head as my throat clogs. Some people bring you down just by being them. That is what my mother does to me ... her darkness is always trying to steal my light. “I’m going to book you a flight for later today. You’re coming home, and I don’t want to hear another word about it. Be grateful I’m giving you a second chance, because you certainly don’t deserve one after the shame you’ve brought upon this family.”

“I don’t want to go back to Melbourne, I’m happy here.”

I brace myself for her reply because I know it’s not going to be pleasant. “You ungrateful little bitch. Are you shacking up with that predator again?”

“He’s not a predator.”

“Do you forget what he did to you?”

“He did nothing that I didn’t ask for.”

“You were a stupid, impressionable, underage child and he took advantage of you. Wake up to yourself, Cassandra.”

“I was sixteen, Mother. I wasn’t underage.”

“You can keep telling yourself that, but I know better.”

“You know nothing.”

“It’s your word against mine ... who do you think people will believe? A reckless, irresponsible little girl, or a top surgeon ... the wife of a well-respected politician.”

“You have no proof he did anything wrong because he didn’t.”

“And like I’ve told you in the past, I have my ways. Now you listen here, I will say this once and once only, get your arse back to Melbourne or I’m going to destroy that man, and when I’m finished with him, I’m coming after you. I’m done playing games.”

She ends the call before I get a chance to reply.



Jazzie: Hey, where are you? I'm at your apartment and you're not here. Did you forget we have work today?

Ugh. In my emotional haze, I forgot it was my turn to drive.

Cassie: I'm sorry. Something came up and I had to leave early.

Jazzie: Are you already at the studio?

Cassie: No.

Jazzie: Where are you?

Cassie: Waiting to see my therapist.

Jazzie: Didn't you see her yesterday?

Cassie: Yes, but I needed to see her again.

Jazzie: Why? Is everything okay?

I was afraid she'd ask that.

Cassie: My mother called me this morning.

Jazzie: I thought you blocked her number.

Cassie: I did. She called from my father's phone.

Jazzie: Gah.

Cassie: I know. I wouldn't have answered if I knew it was her.

Jazzie: What did she want?

Cassie: She wants me to go back to Melbourne.

Jazzie: I hope you told her to go fuck a cactus.

Cassie: No, but I'll definitely save that one for next time.

Jazzie: Please don't tell me you're leaving us. This is the best place for you right now.

Cassie: I know, hence why I called this emergency appointment.

Jazzie: Do you want me to call Brooke and tell her you're not coming in?

Cassie: No. I'm still going to work. My therapist is fitting me in between her other clients.

Jazzie: Text me the address of your therapist.

Cassie: Why?

Jazzie: I'll Uber it there so I can drive us to the studio when you're done.

Cassie: Again, why?

Jazzie: Just text it to me, biatch. Please. *Insert a kissy face and praying hands here

Her reply has me smiling for the first time today. I've been a mess since I got off the phone with my mother, and I knew I'd continue to spiral if I didn't talk to someone. I know Jacinta loves me unconditionally and would do anything to help, but I can't confide in my best friend. She has no idea how deep this betrayal runs. And since it also involves her brother, I can't risk telling her the truth. This burden has been weighing me down for years, so I can't, in good conscience, put something so heavy on her petite little shoulders.

I stare down at the phone unsure of how to reply.

Jazzie: I'm waiting!!!

Against my better judgment, I send her the address. It's not like she's going to come into my appointment with me.

Naturally, I've touched base with my therapist on my mother. She's the reason for what some may call my mental breakdown, but I'm yet to dive down the deep rabbit hole with her. *Maybe it's time I do.* My mum is a manipulator and will stop at nothing to get what she wants. Is she bluffing about going after Connor? I'm not sure. It's been a month since I left Melbourne with him, you think if she was serious with her threats, she would've done something by now. It makes me wonder if this is her way of keeping me in line. Up until now, it's always worked.

Without being subjected to her daily dose of toxicity, I'm seeing things a little clearer.

This is why I'm desperate to see my therapist. I need guidance and some clarity. My appointment will determine whether or not I board that flight. I love my new life, and the last thing I want is to go back there, but if Connor is really in danger, I'll be left with no choice.

My hands are twisting in my lap as I sit here and wait. Thankfully, it only takes a few more minutes until Beth, my therapist, enters the waiting room.

"Cassandra," she says with a gentle smile. "Come." My stomach churns as I stand and follow her down the corridor towards her room. I'm not even sure if I can go through with this. She opens the door and stands back, allowing me to enter. Neither of us speaks until we've taken our seats. "How are you?" she asks. "I take it something has happened."

"I got a call from my mother this morning."

"I see. Did you unblock her number?"

"No, she called me from my father's phone."

"Oh. I take it the call didn't go so well?"

"No. She's given me an ultimatum. She's booked me on a flight to return to Melbourne later today."

“Do you want to go back to Melbourne?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think you would, given everything you’ve told me so far. You know you’re an adult now, Cassandra. You don’t have to do this if it’s something you’re not comfortable with. Your mother has no control over your life.”

I blow out a puff of air. “She’s threatening me.”

“With what?”

“Connor.”

“She doesn’t want you here in Sydney with him?”

“No. She hates him.”

“Can I ask why?”

“You know how I told you we used to date?”

“Yes.”

“I was sixteen and he was nineteen.”

“I see. I get that you were young, but so was he. Three years isn’t much of an age gap.”

“There’s more to it. I ... umm, got pregnant.”

“Oh,” she says, jotting something down on the pad in front of her. “And this is the reason why your mother doesn’t like him?”

“Yes. She says he took advantage of an underage, naive girl. She refers to him as a predator.”

“And do you think she is right? Because the age of consent in Australia is sixteen.”

“I know, and no I don’t. He didn’t do anything I didn’t want him to. We loved each other, and it was me who was putting the pressure on him. I wanted to take our relationship to the next level, but he thought I was too young.”

“And the baby?”

I bow my head as tears cloud my eyes. “I’m not ready to talk about that yet.”

“That’s fine, Cassandra. As I’ve told you in the past, we’ll work at your own pace. Can I ask how Connor reacted to the pregnancy?”

“I never told him. He was attending university when I first found out. He had exams coming up, so I had planned to tell him when he was home for the Christmas break, but then something happened.”

“The thing you’re not ready to talk about I gather?”

“Yes,” I say nodding once. I can feel all those emotions I’ve buried so deep rising to the surface. “It was a dark time in my life for many reasons, and I had no choice but to break it off with him.”

“And your mother? What was her reaction to all of this?”

“She was furious, and threatened me.”

“With what?”

“She said if I continued my relationship with him, she’d have him arrested.”

“For what?”

“Having sex with a minor.”

“But you weren’t a minor.”

“I know, but my mother is very calculating. Connor was studying to be a lawyer back then. He was following in his father’s footsteps, and I knew if she got her way, he’d lose everything he’d worked so hard for. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“I’m not sure how she planned on destroying him if you weren’t underage.”

“Believe me, she’d find a way. What Doctor Amanda Lewis wants, she gets.”

“And is this the same threat she’s using to try and get you back to Melbourne now?”

“Yes. This is why I’m so torn. I don’t want to make any trouble for Connor. He doesn’t deserve it. He’s been good to

me since ...”

“Do you want my advice?”

“Please. I’m so confused, I love my life here ... my job, my friends, but I’m also terrified of what she might do if I disobey her.”

“From what you’ve told me, your mother doesn’t sound like she has your best interests at heart. I’ve seen how far you’ve come in the past month. In saying that, I can’t tell you what to do, that’s not what I’m here for, I can only advise you.”

“And your advice would be?”

“Don’t get on that plane.”

Chapter 14

Connor

I'm just about to walk into court when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and see my sister's name on the screen.

Jaz: Just a heads up, Cassie's mum called her this morning. I'm on the way to get her from the therapist. Her mum wants her back in Melbourne.

Her message sends fear coursing through me, which quickly morphs into anger. I left home early this morning, and Cass was still asleep. I hate that I wasn't there to protect her from that woman. Over the past month, we've reignited the close friendship we once shared when we were kids, and I've become accustomed to having her with me. I wish it was more than just that, but I'll take whatever she's prepared to give. A positive relationship with her is far more rewarding than the malicious one we once had. I'll be gutted if she leaves.

If that vile woman has caused Cassie's progress to diminish in any way, she's going to feel the full force of my wrath.

Connor: WTF! She's not going, is she?

Jaz: I hope not.

Connor: I'm about to walk into court, but if you need me, I'll come.

Jaz: Go put a criminal in prison, I've got this. We're heading to the studio when I get her anyway. I just wanted to let you know what's going on. We need to keep an eye on her, Con. I don't want her doing something stupid again.

That thought makes me feel nauseated.

Connor: Keep me updated.

Jaz: Will do. Love you.

Connor: Love you too, little sis.

I blow out a long breath as I slide my phone back into my pocket. I have a huge case on today, one I've been working on for over a month. I need to keep my head in the game, but the only thing I can think of right now is Cassie.



The moment court breaks for the day, I bundle up my paperwork, shove it into my briefcase, and hightail it out of there.

I exit the building in long, purposeful strides, not bothering to talk to anyone on my way out. I'm on a mission as I briskly head back to the police station where my car is parked.

I click the fob on my key and toss my briefcase on the passenger seat, pulling out my phone.

There are no messages or missed calls ... no news is good news I suppose. Jacinta would've reached out if something had happened, surely.

They must be at the studio. I do a quick search for the address on my phone before typing it into my GPS. Only then do I start the car and put it in reverse. As tired as I am, I need to see Cassie with my own eyes; I've been going out of my mind all day. I'm not going to be able to rest until I know she's okay.

It takes me thirty minutes, due to heavy traffic, before I arrive at the studio. When I push through the doors, the first person I see is Brooke. “Connor,” she says, rounding the front desk.

“Hey.”

She hugs me before drawing back. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, are the girls still here?”

“Yes, they’re in the pole studio. Do you want me to take you to them?”

“Please.” She pushes through a large door and I follow closely behind. I’m struck by how big this place is. I’m not sure what I expected, since this is the first time I’ve ever been here, but it certainly wasn’t this. “Nice place.”

“It’s great isn’t it,” she says, glancing at me over her shoulder. “Logan bought me this for my birthday around ten years ago.”

“Wow.”

“I know right. I still can’t believe this is all mine ... I have to pinch myself every day.”

I know they’re loaded, but this was a birthday present? Logan Cavanagh has definitely raised the bar high for all the other husbands. Now, even I feel like I need to up my game.

The most expensive gift I’ve ever bought for a girl was jewellery. Specifically, a six-carat oval diamond ring. A promise ring for Cassie, and I’d planned on giving it to her for Christmas the year she broke it off with me. We were too young to get engaged, but I already knew I wanted to marry her one day. I still have it. I’m not sure why I held on to it for all these years, but it’s sitting in my bedside drawer.

There’s a dance class underway so we hug the far wall, staying out of the way. I notice a couple of the teenage girls do a double take when I pass, so I keep my attention trained forward. Brooke leads me towards the far end of the studio and through a door beside the stage. I’m shocked when it leads us into another large room.

This one has expansive cathedral ceilings, and every inch has been painted a bright white. The large wooden beams that run from one side of the wall to the other—used to secure the metal poles—are stained a light oak to match the polished floorboards.

My eyes immediately zero in on Cassie. She's on one of the poles at the front of the class. Those skimpy little shorts she's wearing, that hug her peachy arse perfectly, have my cock twitching in my pants. She paired them with a black lycra top which looks more like a bra.

I'm so impressed by her obvious strength as she effortlessly holds up the weight of her own body by her arms as she scissors her legs wide and swings around the pole. She's always had a tight, lean body, but you can clearly see her muscle definition when she makes certain moves.

She's so damn sexy, and seeing her like this is something I won't be forgetting in a hurry. I'm pretty sure this sight will haunt my dreams ... just like *she* has for years. I can't tell you how many times I've woken up with a raging boner after dreaming of her. It's like a never-ending torture that I can't escape.

As if seeing her every day and not being able to touch her, kiss her, hold her, isn't torment enough.

My sister is walking the floor and correcting any wrong moves the women make. They are dressed just as scantily as Cassie. Is it a common rule that pole dancers wear limited clothing, or does the excessive amount of skin on show help with their routine somehow?

There are about a dozen students in here, but I'm not paying them any attention. I'm too mesmerized by Cassie. I knew she was a phenomenal dancer, because I've seen her perform countless times when we were younger—when I attended my sister's dance recitals. But observing her work this pole is on a whole other level. It's so hot it has my mind going straight to the gutter.

My sister is the first to notice my presence, but I don't even realise she's standing in front of me until she speaks.

“Con, what are you doing here?”

“You never updated me.”

“I’m sorry, you were in court so I didn’t think you’d get it anyway.”

“I came straight here ... I needed to see she was okay.”

“I’ll take over the class so you can talk with her,” she says. Her gaze moves to Brooke who’s still standing beside me. “Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Brooke answers.

Jacinta makes her way down to the front of the room and when she says something to Cassie, her head snaps in my direction.

Brooke places her hand on my arm. “I’ll leave you guys to it.”

“Thank you.”

When Cassandra approaches, I give her a tentative smile. From the outside, she looks fine, but I won’t be able to stop worrying until I know for sure.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey.” I reach for her hand. “Have you got a second to chat?”

“Sure.”

I turn and lead her towards the door I just came through. The passageway beside the stage will be private enough, and I won’t have to raise my voice to be heard over the music.

“Jaz told me your mum called,” I say once we’re alone. When she bows her head, I place my finger under her chin, bringing her attention back to me. I scan her face as I speak, and now that I’m up close, I can see her eyes are puffy. She’s been crying. “Are you okay?” She nods her head once, but when I see her eyes glistening, I fold her in my arms. “Please tell me you’re not going back to Melbourne?”

She tilts her face back, looking up at me. “I went to see my therapist today; she advised me not to get on the plane.”

“Your therapist sounds extremely wise.” My statement has a small smile tugging at her lips.

“She’s great. She’s helping me, Con.”

“I’m glad.”

“I have to tell you something though; my mother is threatening to go after you again if I don’t do as she demands.”

“Let her. As I told you before, I’m not scared of her, Cass.”

“You should be. You don’t know her like I do.”

“The only thing I’m scared of,” I say, cupping her face and skimming my thumb over her jawline, “is losing you.”

“I’m staying here.”

“Good.”

“I know you have your therapist, but if you ever need anyone to talk to, you know I’m here for you right? Things have been rough for us over the years, but despite that, I care about you.”

“I appreciate that more than you know.”

“You’re my roomie, my cooking buddy ... my *friend*, Cass.”

“I’m glad we’re friends again.”

“I wish we were more.” Those words are out of my mouth before I even realise what I’ve said.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Even after the way I’ve treated you?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“You deserve the world, Princess. Any man would be honoured to call you his.”

“I’m a hot mess. You can have any woman you want.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Please,” she scoffs. “We grew up together remember? Women fall at your feet, they always have.”

“If I could have any woman *I* wanted, Cass, there’s no way we’d be *just* friends.”

Chapter 15

Cassie

I'm all over the place by the time I get home. Connor's words are still swimming around in my head. *I want him too* ... I've always wanted him. But the only way that can happen is if I tell him the truth. He deserves to know ... to hear it from me, but I'm petrified of what will happen if I do. My life will implode, that much I know.

I'm hungry, but I'm too tired to make or order any food. I just want to curl up on my bed and forget everything for a moment. I turned my phone off after my call this morning because I'm chickenshit. I hesitantly switched it back on before I left the studio to find a text message that contained flight details, and two missed calls from my father's number. My mother would be ropable that I didn't get on the flight she booked me, and I'm sick to my stomach with worry because of it. Is she now plotting her next move? Is this safe little haven I've created about to crumble?

Is it wrong that I'm hoping Connor is in bed when I slide the key into the lock? It's not that I don't want to see him, it's more like I can't. I need some time to think this out ... to sleep on my decision.

I'm messed up inside, and I know I have a huge choice to make. I'm at a crossroads. It feels like my mother is forcing my hand. The last thing she'd want is for me to unburden myself of our secret, but if she's going to try and destroy Connor's life, I have to get in first and take her down. It's the only option I have ... my only way out of this mess.

I open the front door and the first thing I hear is the television, so I know Connor is still up. Will he think I'm rude if I just give him a quick hello and head to my room?

When I enter, I don't find him on the sofa. He's standing beside the dining table, and it looks like he's setting it for a meal.

"Hey," he says from across the room.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"Yes, you." He pulls a box of matches out of his pocket and lights the candle that's sitting in the middle of the table. "I've made us dinner."

I place my flattened palm on my chest. "You have?"

"Yes, it's nothing flash, but I thought you might be hungry."

God, this man is the sweetest. "I'm starved." *So much for the quick hello.* I place my bag down, and as I approach the table, he pulls out a chair for me. "Thank you."

We've been experimenting at home with certain dishes we've made in cooking class; it's been hit and miss, but heaps of fun. It's a lot harder without a teacher in the room giving you step-by-step instructions, but I've grown to love our one-on-one time together.

He's changed out of his suit and is casually dressed in sweats and a T-shirt. His dark hair is still wet from his shower, and that witchery shampoo of his is working its magic as his delicious scent invades all my senses. He smells so good I could gobble him up.

Connor reaches for the bottle of white wine that's chilling in a bucket of ice, effortlessly removes the lid, and pours a huge amount into the glass. He obviously thinks I need it, and he'd be right.

"Relax, Princess," he says, passing it to me. "The food is almost ready."

"What are you cooking?" I ask before taking a sip of my wine.

“Lasagne.”

That is not something we’ve learnt in class, but I shouldn’t be surprised. He’s taken to this cooking gig much better than I have. Don’t get me wrong, I’m proud of all the things I’ve made, but he’s killing it.

There is not much this man can’t do; he seems to excel at everything. He was not only the best-looking boy at our school, he was also the smartest. He shone outside of the classroom as well ... in any kind of sport. He’s what you might call an all-rounder.

“You are making lasagne? Are you using your mum’s recipe?”

“No, I found this one online. I even went to the store on my own and bought all the ingredients. Granted, I got the premade lasagne sheets ... I’m not that advanced yet, but it wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. If you like it, we can make it together another time.”

His thoughtfulness has tears stinging the back of my eyes. He’s going to make some lucky woman very happy one day. “Sounds delicious, I can’t wait to taste it.”

He leaves the room and comes back a few minutes later with a beer in one hand and a salad bowl in the other, placing it down in the centre of the table. His chest kind of puffs out when he stands to full height. He’s proud of himself, and so he should be.

I lean forward in my chair, peering inside. All the vegetables are cut uniformly. It has a smile tugging at my lips. My knife skills are still lacking, but it all goes down the same way, right?

“I made the same dressing we did in class last week.”

“Yum,” I say. “It looks good.”

He heads back into the kitchen, and I take a large gulp of wine. Once I place the glass down beside my plate, I take in the table setting. It looks very ... *romantic*. That should please me, but instead, it has my stomach recoiling.

The lasagne smells amazing when he places it down beside the salad. “Ignore that little burnt bit in the corner,” he says, and I grin up at him. “There must be a hot spot in the oven. I’ll know better for next time.”

He cuts me off a piece—from the non-burnt side—and serves it to me. You can clearly see the defining layers and I’m impressed. He places down the spatula and after a quick toss, he uses the salad tongs to scoop some onto my plate. This feels very domesticated yet intimate. Living with him has given me a glimpse of how wonderful our lives would be if we were a couple. I’ve always known he was the best thing to ever happen to me, so this moment only amplifies my loss.

“Thank you,” I say as I pick up my knife and fork. “It looks so good, Con.”

“You’re welcome, and thank you,” he says, beaming. He looks so happy ... so proud. But seeing him like this has bile rising to the back of my throat, because the things I need to tell him are life altering.

He takes his seat opposite me, and I cut off a small piece of lasagne, bringing it to my mouth. “Yum.”

“You like?”

“I do, it’s delicious.”

“I doubt it’s as good as Mum’s or Jaz’s.”

“It’s better.”

To be honest, they pretty much taste the same, but since this is his first time, he wins by default.

“Really?”

“You did good, Maloney.”

He’s still smiling as he digs in. He deserves all the praise. I’m so grateful to be here with him, and I can only hope we’ll have many more moments like this going forward.



“Thanks again for dinner,” I say, placing the last dish away. I offered to clean up since he had cooked, but he wanted to help. We’ve fallen into a routine over the past few weeks, and even the most mundane chores seem rewarding with him by my side.

I hang the tea towel over the handle on the oven to dry and reach up to pull the elastic from my hair. I run my fingers through the long strands as I focus back on Connor. He’s leaning against the counter, legs crossed at the ankle, and arms folded over his muscly chest. I take a beat to appreciate the sight before me. He is a vision, and if things were different, I’d be all over this man like a rash.

By the time my eyes move back to meet his, I find him watching me intently. “I was pretty impressed with your pole skills today ... well what little I saw.”

“I enjoy it, it’s fun.”

“It’s sexy is what it is.” I feel my cheeks flush. He’s the only man on this earth who’s gained that kind of reaction from me. He pushes off the counter and closes the distance between us. “I’m a sucker for this,” he says, reaching up to lightly brush his knuckle across my cheek. “It reminds me of the young and innocent girl I fell hopelessly in love with.”

That girl died right alongside her child.

I turn my face away as I feel my emotions bubble back to the surface. “It’s late,” I say, choking on my words. “I’m going to take a shower and head to bed.”

“Hey.” He brings my face back to his. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No.” The tears I’m struggling to hold at bay make their way to the surface.

“Cass.” I clench my eyes close, and Connor being Connor does the sweetest thing. He leans in and places a soft kiss on each eyelid before folding me in his arms. “I’m sorry you’re going through this,” he says, resting his chin on top of my head.

I wrap my arms around him and hold on tight. I don't ever want to let go, but I'm afraid I won't have a choice. "It's nothing you did or didn't do Con, you've been wonderful. It's just been a shitty day."



I can hear Connor moving around in the kitchen. Turning my head, I look at the clock beside my bed. It's just after six, and I've barely slept. This decision I'm struggling to make feels like a ton of bricks weighing heavily on my chest. I know what I have to do, I'm just petrified to do it.

Connor Maloney deserves better. He needs to know the truth despite what those consequences may bring. He's been kept in the dark too long.

The realisation has me flinging back the covers and rising from the bed. *It's now or never.* I head to the bathroom first, do my business, wash my hands, and brush my teeth. I don't want to kill him with my morning breath.

The butterflies in my stomach take flight as soon as I enter the kitchen and find him leaning against the counter with a coffee in hand. He's dressed in his power suit, ready for work.

"Morning," he says. "You're up early ... trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah."

He extends his arm, handing me the mug he's holding. "You look like you need this more than me."

"Thanks." I take it from him and place it down on the counter. "Con."

"Yeah, Cass."

"There's something I need to tell you."

He stands up straighter, and his concerned eyes scan over my face. "Did something else happen? Did your mother contact you again?"

"I had a few more calls from my father's number, but I didn't answer them in case it was her."

“Good. I’m going to look into getting you a new number.”

I gulp air into my lungs as I prepare myself for the things I’m about to say. “You know how we broke up?”

“Technically we never broke up, you just ghosted me and then started dating that tool from your school.”

I blow out a puff of air. “I never liked that guy, I only pretended to date him.”

“Why did you do that, Cass? To hurt me? As if ghosting me wasn’t enough ... I thought you loved me.”

“I did.”

“Right,” he scoffs. “If you loved me, you never would’ve ___”

I steel myself and blurt out the words before I chicken out. “I was pregnant, Con.”

“What?”

“I fell pregnant.”

“To him?”

“No.”

He gives me a confused look as he runs his hand through his hair. “You were pregnant with *our* child or someone else’s?”

“Ours, I never cheated on you.” The tears bubble to the surface and begin to cascade down my cheeks.

“Let me get this straight, you fell pregnant, and instead of telling me you broke it off?”

He takes a step backwards when I nod my head. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” he roars as his face turns red. “You’re fucking sorry.”

Turning, he storms from the kitchen, and my stomach drops. He has every right to be angry, but he hasn’t even heard the half of it yet. That news was just the tip of the iceberg.

“Connor,” I cry, chasing after him. Ignoring me, he picks up his suitcase and starts storming towards the front door. “Connor please let me explain.”

His back is to me as he pauses at the doorway and raises his hand. “I can’t even look at you right now. For years I beat myself up, wondering what I had done to make you hate me so much ... I guess I finally have my answer.”

“I never hated you, please believe me. I meant it when I said I loved you, but I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Cassandra.”

“It was my mother ... she threatened to destroy you if I told anyone ... I was trying to protect you.”

He blows out an exasperated breath as his shoulders deflate. For a split second, I think I’m getting through to him, but then he grasps the doorknob and walks over the threshold, slamming the door behind him as he leaves.

I fall to my knees, burying my face in my hands and sob like a baby. Just like I did that fateful day—all those years ago—when my world fell apart.

I was jolted awake when my bedroom door flew open so violently, it hit the adjoining wall with a loud thud. “Get up,” my mother shrieked from the doorway.

I rolled onto my stomach and pressed my face into the pillow. After being screamed at for two hours straight last night, I was in no mood for another round that morning.

I was nauseous, tired, and scared. So fucking scared. She wasn’t supposed to find out ... not yet anyway. I hadn’t even told Connor the news. He was supposed to be the first person I told. I may only be sixteen years old and far too young to be a mother, but I already loved this baby and I’d make it work ... somehow, even if Connor decided he wasn’t ready for that type of commitment.

“Go away.”

“I said, get up.” The sheets that were covering my body were roughly torn away as she spoke. “I need you to take

this.”

“Take what?” I asked, lifting my head from where it was buried in my pillow, glancing at her over my shoulder.

“A vitamin for the baby.” She extended her arm where a glass of water sat in her hand. “I may not be happy about this situation, but that’s my grandchild you’re carrying, so its welfare is my first priority.”

As shitty as I felt, a small smile tugged at my lips, because that was the last thing I expected her to say.

Sitting up, I reached for the glass. She opened her other hand to reveal a white, round tablet lying in her palm. I didn’t even think twice, taking it from her and popping it in my mouth. She was a doctor, after all. My mother may be cruel with her words, but apart from the slap I received last night—which I probably deserved—she would never physically harm me.

“Good girl,” she said once I’d swallowed it down. “I want you to take the next few days off school. It’s important you get your rest.”

“Okay,” I replied, feeling perplexed at the sudden change in her demeanour. “I’ll bring you up some dry toast and a glass of apple juice before I leave. Are you feeling nauseous?”

“A little.”

She nodded her head once. “The toast will help. I’ll get some peppermint tea on my way home from work. I used to drink that when I was pregnant with you.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I was dreadfully sick in my first trimester.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hopefully you won’t suffer as much as I did.”

“Hopefully.”

“Have you told anyone about the pregnancy yet?”

“No.”

She arched an eyebrow like she didn't believe me. "Not that boy or his sister?"

"No. Connor has exams on at the moment. I'm going to talk to him when he's home for the holidays."

"Good idea," she said with an approving nod as she turned to leave. "This stays between us for now. I'm not going to mention it to your father either, he has a lot going on at the moment. The news will probably kill him."

I rolled my eyes at her retreating back. Naturally, he's not going to be thrilled that his sixteen-year-old, unmarried daughter is pregnant ... but kill him? I highly doubt it.

My mother paused at the doorway just as I reached over to grab my phone off the bedside table. When she glanced over her shoulder and saw what I was doing, she spun around and stalked back towards the bed.

"What are you doing?" she snapped.

"Messaging Jacinta to let her know I won't be at school. She'll worry if I'm not there."

"Make it quick." Once I pressed send, she held out her hand. "I'll take that."

"Why?"

"Because you need your rest."

"Can I just keep it here with me?"

"Give me the damn phone, Cassandra."

Hesitantly, I handed it over. Just as I did, it dinged. "That will be Jacinta messaging me back."

Ignoring me, she turned back towards the door and left.

Ugh. She is such a bitch at times.

On my mother's insistence, I stayed in bed all day. Only getting up to use the bathroom and go downstairs for food. She'd left a sandwich and some cut-up fruit in the fridge for me, which equally surprised and pleased me. She wasn't usually so thoughtful.

I rubbed my hand over my stomach and smiled, silently hoping that this child would bring us closer together. Finally giving me that mother-daughter bond I'd always yearned for. Just like the one Jacinta had with her mum.

I took the following day off school as well, and virtually rinsed and repeated the day before. I had no idea if Jacinta or Connor had reached out to me because I still didn't have my phone back.

It was late in the afternoon when my mother entered my room again with another glass of water in her hand. "I have another vitamin for you to take," she said.

I sat up and took it from her, completely unaware that this exact moment would turn out to be the biggest mistake I'd ever make. And believe me when I say I'd done some stupid shit in my time.

Within an hour, the pain started ... excruciating pain. Like nothing I had ever experienced before. Those cramps were like period pains on steroids and I immediately knew something was wrong. It felt like someone was continuously slashing my abdomen with a razor blade.

I clutched my stomach and curled my body into a tight ball and groaned. "Mum ... Mum!" I screamed and continued to call her name over and over, but she never came.

I somehow managed to slide out of bed, crawling towards the bathroom on my hands and knees. It's where she found me a few hours later. Curled into the fetal position and soaked in my own blood. "What did you do?" I asked through racking sobs.

Her response was as calculating and cold as her. "I took care of it ... you're welcome by the way."

Chapter 16

Connor

I'm livid and so fucking hurt. *She was pregnant.* With my child no less. I can't believe I'm finding out about it six years down the track. *What a fucking joke.* Did she lose it? The alternative is a place where I refuse to let myself go. She wouldn't, would she?

I thought I knew her, but I'm realising now I never really did. She was an illusion ... a figment of my imagination. I've put her up on a pedestal for far too long, but this news has knocked her straight off. The person I've loved for all these years wouldn't do something so cruel.

I've been driving around in circles for hours. I'm supposed to be in court soon, but I'm too fucked up to care. I bang my hand down on the steering wheel three times. "Fuck," I scream. Of all the scenarios I've imagined over the years, concerning our breakup, this certainly wasn't one of them.

My phone rings in my pocket, but I ignore it. I don't want to talk to anyone. Only when it ends and starts ringing again straight away do I think twice. As mad as I am at Cassie right now, I don't want anything bad to happen to her. She was sobbing when I left, and considering what we went through a month ago, I feel compelled to answer it the second time.

I flick on my indicator and pull over to the side of the road. When I slide my phone out of my jacket pocket and see Jacinta's name on the screen, I feel relieved, but also concerned to hear what my sister has to say. Did Cassie call her after I left?

I close my eyes and silently pray that nothing has happened as I accept the call.

“Con.”

“Hey.”

“Where are you?”

“Driving around in circles.”

“I just left Cassie, she’s a mess.”

“How the fuck do you think I feel? She was pregnant with my kid, Jaz ... and I’m finding out six years later.”

The line goes silent before she says, “I’m so sorry, Con.”

“You have nothing to apologise for ... you didn’t know.” My breath hitches in my throat as soon as I voice that. “You didn’t know right?”

“Of course, I didn’t know.” *Thank fuck for that.* I couldn’t handle a second betrayal today. “I’m devastated for you ... for both of you.”

Wow. *She’s devastated for Cassie?* That might sound selfish, but she caused this mess.

“I’m sorry, Jaz but I can’t do this right now.”

“I understand. I just wanted to check you’re okay.”

“I’m not okay, this ... this news changes everything.”

“Aww, Con. I wish there was something I could say to make things better.”

“There’s nothing you can say that will change what I learnt today.” I swallow thickly, trying to remove the lump that’s now formed in my throat. The anger I was feeling moments ago is slowly fading, and the sadness is settling in. “Did she tell you what happened to the baby?”

“No. She could barely string two words together.”

“Do you think it’s wise to leave her alone?”

“I’m just going to drop Blake at school, then I’m heading straight back to your apartment. I made her promise she

wouldn't do anything stupid while I'm gone. She was more concerned about you, but I told her it may seem hopeless right now, but things will work themselves out in the end."

I scoff, I can't help it. Things will never be the same between us again. I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive her for this.



When court breaks for lunch, I pack up my things and hightail it outside. I don't speak a word to anyone as I do. I'm sure my client and the courthouse staff—who have dealt with me numerous times in the past—have noticed I'm not my usual jovial self today. I've been snappy and short with everyone.

I shouldn't have come, but in the end, it seemed like the more logical idea. Being on my own gave me too much time to think ... to seethe, to wallow. I needed a distraction and short of finding the nearest seedy pub so I could drink myself into oblivion, this seemed like a more responsible choice.

Once I've exited the building, the first thing I do is pull out my phone and turn it on. I usually leave it on silent, but this morning, I needed to remove myself from the situation completely. Yet here I am, the first chance I get, eager to see if there's any news from my sister.

I'm not surprised to see I have two messages waiting for me. I also have a missed call from an unknown number.

I open the messages from Jaz, and an uneasy feeling settles over me as I do. Nothing she can say will make this okay, but I'm more concerned about Cassandra if I'm being honest. I may be distraught by her revelation, but even the angry side of me is invested in her wellbeing.

Jaz: Just letting you know I'm back here with Cass. I won't leave her side, so you don't have to worry. Hope you're doing okay. I love you. Call me if you need to talk. x

I'm relieved to know she's there, but that feeling vanishes the moment I read the next message.

Jaz: She's gone. I tried to stop her, but she said she needed some space ... some time alone. I'm sorry, but I couldn't keep her here against her will, even though I wanted to. She promised me she'd call when she got to wherever it is she's going. She left you a letter, it's on the kitchen table. I have no idea what it says.

I close the thread and call her.

"Con," she says when she answers.

"Have you heard from her yet?"

"No, she left about an hour ago."

"Fuck."

"She's not going to do anything stupid."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do. I would've tied her to a chair if I thought she was."

"I hope you're right, Jaz." I tilt my head back, pinching the bridge of my nose with my free hand. "Did she give you any indication where she might be going?"

"No, but when she was in the bathroom packing her toiletries, I slid my apple tracker off my keys and hid it in the front zipper pocket of her suitcase."

"Jaz!"

"I know it's illegal Mr Law-abiding-citizen, and I'm not going to track her, it was purely a strategic move on my part ... an in-case-of-an-emergency reassurance. I panicked, sue me."

"I get why you did it, but ..."

"I believed her when she said she needed space ... she thought you'd want some too, but I was worried about her leaving on her own."

I look down when I see another call coming through. It's the unknown number again. Against my better judgement, I decide to answer it.

"Jaz, I'll call you back, I have another call coming through."

"Hello," I say when I end her call and accept the other.

"Connor."

"Yes."

"It's Bradford Lewis, Cassandra's father. I'm sorry to bother you again, but I've been trying to reach my daughter for the past few days and she's not answering any of my calls."

"That's probably because your wife called her from your phone, demanding she return to Melbourne."

"She did what?"

"Cassie blocked her number as you advised ... I guess your wife used your phone to get around that obstacle."

"That woman is testing my last patience. I told her to leave Cassandra alone. Can you please tell her that from me?"

"I would, but Cassandra isn't staying with me at the moment."

"Where is she staying?"

"I'm not sure ... things are a little strained between us," I admit, which is the understatement of the century. "She finally told me about the baby this morning."

"What baby?" he asks, and I can tell by the tone in his voice he's perplexed by what I've just said.

"You didn't know?"

"No."

"I guess I'm not the only person who's been kept in the dark."

"My daughter's expecting?"

“No, she’s no longer pregnant. This isn’t a recent development, Mr Lewis. This was years ago ... when we were dating. I don’t know specifics; you will have to talk to your daughter or your wife if you want to know more.”

“My wife knew about this?”

“From the little I do know; she was the reason Cassie kept it a secret.”

“I’ll be getting to the bottom of this,” he says, releasing a long breath. “If you hear from my daughter in the meantime, can you get her to call me?”

“I doubt I will, but if I do, I’ll let her know it’s you that’s been calling, and not your wife.”

“You sound upset.”

“You think? I had a right to know ... and not six years later.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Connor.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.”

When I end the call, I re-enter the courthouse and head straight for the judges’ chambers. I’m going to have to get this trial postponed for another time. I’m no good to anyone while I’m like this.

Chapter 17

Cassie

I have no idea where I'm going, so I just keep driving. I've been on the road for two hours now. I'm not familiar with the suburbs in this state, other than Sydney, but I'm well and truly out of the big smoke. I can only presume I'm heading inland since I haven't driven off a cliff and fallen to my impending death into the murky ocean below.

Why did I flee? I can't say. All I know is I had some kind of epiphany as I shed about fifty-five percent of the sixty percent of water that makes up the human body in tears this morning. It might sound a little cliché—or I'm possibly suffering from a severe case of dehydration—but during that time I realised something ... I was lost. I no longer knew who I was.

That happyish, innocent, carefree girl I once was, was no more. For years, I've just been existing. Going through the motions of life on autopilot—living in the body of a survivor but unable to leave the scene of the crime. The trauma may not be my fault but healing is my responsibility. I'd taken the first step by finally telling Connor the truth ... well part of it. Now it was time for me to work on myself.

Thankfully, my best friend didn't stand in my way. I know it was hard for Jacinta to let me leave, but she has nothing to worry about. I'm not going to harm myself. I'm on a voyage of self-discovery ... well I hope that's what I'm doing. All I know is that I need to be alone, to have some free time to be myself.

I've never had a chance to do that. For years, my every move has been controlled by my mother. Even when she wasn't around, I was weighed down by the poor decisions she made. This secret has been eating away at me from the inside out for years. On the exterior, I may have seemed happy, but internally, I was dying a slow and agonising death.

Although there's still more of this story to tell, I feel lighter now that Connor knows about the baby. Running away and leaving him a letter may seem like the coward's way out, but I can't be there to witness his devastation when the real truth is revealed.

The confusion and heartache I saw on his face before he walked out on me this morning will probably plague me for years to come. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him, but by not telling him, it's exactly what I've done.

Sure, I had my reasons, but even they seem moot now. I was a scared and impressionable sixteen-year-old child. Bullied by her mother to the point of submission. I believed her threats. The conditioned part of me still does.

I thought I was doing the right thing by him, but now I know better. He has every right to be angry; this mess affected him too. And when he finds out what my mother has done, I can only imagine what his reaction will be. I know I've waged a war by finally cleansing my soul of the pure evil that's befouled us both, but that woman deserves everything that is coming her way. She needs to pay for her sins.

I stopped at a place called Katoomba—which is a hip kind of country town in the Blue Mountains—so I could pee and fill up my tank.

As I continue my drive, the small pockets of civilisation seem to be getting further and further apart. I'd hate to run out of petrol in the middle of nowhere and be stranded, only to then be eaten by a wild animal, or worse—chopped into teeny tiny pieces by a deranged axe murderer. My life thus far has been shitty enough without meeting such a tragic and dramatic end.

I place my bottle of water between my legs, using them to grip it so I can remove the lid. I need to stay hydrated because I haven't eaten today. My stomach is too knotted up to think of food right now.

I'm wondering what Connor will do when, and if, he reads my letter. I glance up at the clock and see it's only 2 pm. He wouldn't even be home from work yet.

Has he tried to reach out to me?

I had the foresight to turn my phone off before I left because my main focus of this trip is to heal; I'll deal with the fallout of my decisions when I decide to return.



It's dusk by the time I arrive at a place called Mudgee; I'm in the bum fuck of nowhere, but I have to admit it's the sweetest little town. As I drive down the wide main street, I feel like I'm stepping back in time as I eye all the quaint, historic buildings mixed in with the new.

I'm a contemporary, clean-lines kind of girl, but even I can appreciate the grandeur and workmanship these old buildings showcase. They just don't make them like they used to.

I ease my foot off the pedal and lean forward slightly in my seat. What I'm looking for is a hotel ... somewhere to stay for the night. I feel like I've been driving forever, and I'm physically and emotionally spent. I need a long shower and some food before I hit the road again in the morning.

When a horn sounds behind me, I wave my hand out of the window in an apology before pulling over to the kerb. It's probably safer and a lot more practical if I do a quick Google search for accommodation. I'm surprised by the list that pops up on my screen. I wasn't expecting so many.

The first listing is a place called Cobb & Co. Court Boutique Hotel. *Boutique*, I like the sound of that. When I see the cost of a nightly stay, I gasp. One hundred and ninety-one dollars. Growing up, my family would stay in hotels that cost

ten times that, but then I remember I'm living in Peasantsville now.

Punching the address into my GPS, I take the short journey to Cobb & Co.

It looks pleasant enough from the exterior; I can only hope the interior is the same. The two-story, red-brick building is turn of the century and appears to be well maintained. It has an ornate metal railing along the length of the second-floor balcony. It's very different to what I'm used to, but one night won't kill me. The new me embraces different, and besides, I'll be back on the road tomorrow. The old stuffy Cassandra would've never considered a place like this, but I'm not that woman anymore. I'm no longer my mother's daughter.

I have no clue how far I plan to travel on this journey of self-discovery, but Perth seems a little extreme. I'm hoping this trip gives me the solace I'm so desperately seeking. I've never had the chance to completely mourn my child, because I was too busy trying to pretend it never happened. I've been too focused on protecting my mother, but no more. The hole in my heart will never mend, but if I want some inner peace, I have to try and learn to live with it. The first step is letting go of the resentment and accepting I can't undo the past.



I tilt my head back and gaze up at the blue sky, letting the morning sun's rays kiss my face. I'm sitting on the front balcony of the Cobb & Co. enjoying my first coffee of the day. I didn't sleep the greatest, so I know this will be the first of many, but it had nothing to do with my accommodation and everything to do with my current circumstances.

Has the shit hit the fan back home? I'm too scared to find out. I turned on my phone once I'd checked in last night for as long as it took me to send a message to Jazzie. It simply said, *I'm at my first stop, I'm safe and bunkering down for the night. Love you.* I feel like a total asshole for it, but I need this time for me.

I appreciate my friend's concern, and my heart goes out to Connor and everything he's going through because I've been in his shoes. He's only twenty-four hours into his grief ... I've been carrying mine around for six long years.

I bring the mug to my mouth and lean forward in my seat when I see a young girl moseying down the street on horseback. She has a pink cowboy hat on her head and a backpack on her back. The clippity-clop of the horse's hooves, as it walks, amplifies in the silence. It has a lulling effect.

Is she riding that beast to school? I wish I wasn't on a self-imposed phone ban because I'd love to take a picture, it's not something this city chick sees every day. Not in real life anyway.

When my coffee is finished, I head back inside. My room is quite spacious and surprisingly clean. I'm not sure what I was expecting for one hundred and ninety-one dollars, but it certainly wasn't this. I even have my own bathroom, and despite its gleaming appearance, I still showered in my trusty rubber thongs last night. The last thing I need is some nasty fungal disease attaching itself to my feet.

After I remove my pyjamas and get dressed, I slip into the bathroom to brush my teeth and pull my long hair back into a ponytail. I'm doing the no-frills Cassandra today. No make-up or fancy clothes. There's nobody to impress, and if I'm serious about my recovery, I need to stop hiding behind all the glitz and glamour.

Once I'm ready for the day, I grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and make my way downstairs. I'd planned on getting back on the road first thing this morning, but I've decided I'd like to explore this town a bit more before I leave. I also need to get myself one of those pink cowboy hats. Healing is a slow process. You can't rush these things.



I inhale a large breath, taking the fresh country air into my lungs. It's a vast difference to the city smog I'm used to breathing in. I considered doing a DoorDash or Uber order for

breakfast, but I'm not sure they do that kind of thing in the sticks—it's my first time experiencing rural life—besides, I couldn't explore the town from my hotel room, so I decided to go it on foot.

It's daunting being in a new environment on my own, but I'm proud of myself for getting out there. Despite my best efforts, all I can think of is home as I wander down the main street of Mudgee. More specifically, Connor. What is he up to? How is he feeling this morning? Is he still angry with me? Did he read the letter?

“Good morning,” a lady walking her poodle says.

I grin at her. “Morning.”

Is everyone in this town friendly? I haven't passed a single person that hasn't acknowledged me in some way. A head nod, a smile, a tip of their hat, a greeting. It's nice, and a big change from the fast-paced life in the big city. Everybody seems like they're in a rush there. I'm a stranger here, but I definitely feel welcome. Maybe I should stay an extra night.

It's early so none of the shops I pass are open yet, but I spy a few people entering a café across the street and further down, so I head in that direction. I've already had a coffee, but I won't say no to a second one. I might even grab some food while I'm there. I didn't end up eating dinner last night. By the time I got to my room and showered, the enormity of the day settled over me like a dark cloud. I ended up climbing into bed and crying myself to sleep.

The truth may not have imprisoned me, but the repression of my conscience certainly did.

My eyes are drawn to the bright pink and white signage as I cross the road, and a smile tugs at my lips when I read it. The Dancing Goat. It feels like an omen. Dancing has been my lifeline since I was a little girl. It's also how I met my bestie ... the person who changed my life for the better.

I join the queue and scan the board behind the counter. My stomach growls as I do, confirming I need to eat something. I'm going to have to keep my strength up if I want to continue

travelling around the country. Okay, maybe that's a stretch; I doubt I'll even leave the state, but I have to at least trust my journey, even if I don't understand it yet.

In some ways, I feel like I'm still trapped in that sixteen-year-olds body. Suspended in time because I'm unable to deal with the wreckage of my past. If I look out into the abyss, it's that young girl's terrified face I see staring back at me. I've spent the last six years running, partying, and moving from one guy to the next, to try and escape my reality. I need to stop that destructive lifestyle and finally face my demons head-on. It's the only way I can truly move forward.

When it's my turn, I step up to the counter. "Can I get a latte with a double squirt of hazelnut and one sugar please ... oh, make it skinny, you know to compensate for the extras."

The woman serving me looks to be around sixty, with bright pink highlights in the tips of her greying hair. It's cool; I like it. "Totally understandable," she says, grinning. "Is that all, hun?"

I was eyeing the granola, but that's what the old me would've ordered. My eyes dart back to the menu. "I'll have the hot smoked salmon bagel too, please."

"Is that to eat in, or takeaway?"

"Eat in if possible."

"Of course." She hands me a number and tells me to find a vacant table. "I'll bring your order out when it's ready."

"Thank you."

I decide on one of the al fresco tables. Not only is it a beautiful sunny morning, but I also left my phone back in my room ... on purpose of course. Out here I can at least people watch to help pass the time. If I'm lucky, I might see another horse or a kangaroo. I saw a few of them bounding through a paddock on my way into town.

I'd usually be skimming through social media now, keeping up with the gossip, or watching mindless reels on TikTok that would have me laughing one minute and crying the next—if you've ever fallen down that rabbit hole you'd

understand. But if I'm serious about rediscovering myself, then I need to stay clear of any outside influences.

Maybe I should go off-grid somewhere and reconnect with nature. Who am I kidding? The closest I've ever come to nature is the pristine manicured gardens on my parents' vast estate. Or that time a huntsman spider—that was the size of my hand—decided to climb up the leg of my white linen chinos. My body shudders at the thought. I didn't scream or freak out as you'd expect. No, I fainted gracefully, like a lady.

A few minutes later, the hot-pink-tipped server appears at the side of my table. "Here's your coffee, hun. The food won't be much longer."

"Thank you." She places a paper serviette down on the table beside the mug. It has the dancing goat logo on it. "I love the name of this place," I tell her.

"There's a story behind that."

"There is?"

I'm shocked but not uncomfortable when she takes a seat opposite me. "You see, I have a hobby farm ... goats, chickens, pigs and a donkey named Dingbat. He's not very bright that one, he's constantly getting his head caught in the fence."

"Poor Dingbat. Do your goat's dance?"

"No, not mine," she chuckles.

"I've seen the cute baby ones on TikTok that bounce around in their little onesies." I place my hand on my chest and sigh.

"Onesies?"

"You know the all-in-one outfits they wear."

She barks out a laugh so boisterous her tummy jiggles. "We don't dress our animals in the country, hun." I force out a weak smile, trying to quell my disappointment. Seeing a real-life baby goat in a onesie would've been the highlight of my trip thus far.

“What a shame.”

“Hmm,” she hums rolling her lips. “Would you like to hear the story of how the café was named?” I’m now feeling less enthusiastic about hearing the story, but I nod anyway. “You see, legend has it that Kaldi—he’s an Ethiopian goatherder by the way—was pasturing his herd when he noticed his flock acting more energized than usual. They were jumping and dancing around. When he enquired into their quirky behaviour, he discovered they’d been eating the cherries from the Arabica tree. It’s believed to be the first coffee to be cultivated.”

“Wow. That’s a cool story.”

“I thought so too. You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No. Is it that obvious?”

“The goats in the onesies gave it away.”

I sigh. “I’m a city chick at heart ... born and bred.”

“What brings you to Mudgee?”

“I’m just passing through.”

“Oh, where are you heading?”

I lift one shoulder. “I have no clue. I’m just going to drive until I can’t drive anymore, I guess.”

“That doesn’t sound like a solid plan.”

“It was very last minute,” I say, bowing my head.

She holds out her arm, extending it across the table. “Martha,” she says.

“Cassandra,” I reply, making eye contact with her as my fingers wrap around her hand. “But my friends call me Cassie.”

“Cassie it is then. Okay,” she says, slapping her hand down on the table. “How are you with animals?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t allowed to have pets growing up. I always wanted a puppy though.”

“What a shame, pets can be a great learning tool for kids ... it can teach them the importance of responsibility at a

young age.”

Maybe that’s half my problem. I never had much responsibility growing up ... I just did as I was told. “My parents were always too busy with work.”

Martha’s lips thin. “Do you have siblings?”

“No, just me.”

“All the more reason you should’ve been allowed to have a pet. They can be great companions. When my husband passed, God rest his soul, I don’t know how I would’ve coped if it wasn’t for our animals. They gave me the will to keep going.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, placing my hand on top of hers.

“Thanks, hun.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I like you, Cassie, so here’s what we’re going to do. I only work here until the lunch rush is over ... the girls handle the rest of the day. I have a couple of cabins on my property. We used to let them out to city slickers, just like yourself, but I don’t have time for that nowadays. They’ll be a little dusty ... they’ve been vacant for a few years now, so if you’re not afraid of housework, you’re welcome to stay in one until you can decide where exactly you’re heading. I have clean sheets up at the house. How does that sound?”

“It sounds wonderful, but I couldn’t ask you to take me in.”

“Good thing you’re not asking then. I’m not comfortable with a young and pretty girl like yourself, driving around with no solid plan in place. There’s not much out there past here ... the towns are few and far between. If something happened to you, or your car, you’d be up shit creek without a paddle.”

“I—”

“No pressure,” she says as she stands. “But I get off at one today, so if you decide it’s something you may be interested in, meet me back here. It’s spring, so I have lots of little kids on the farm you might like. Some of them are even bottle-fed.”

“You want me to look after your children?” I mean, I like little kids, but I have zero experience with them.

“No,” she says, laughing again. “Kids as in baby goats.”

My eyes widen. “Oh.”

She taps her hand down on the table. “I’ll go grab your breakfast.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s been nice talking with you, Cassie, and please consider my offer. You can stay as little or as long as you like.”

“I appreciate that.”

I had no plans of taking up her offer, but as the morning passed, the idea started to grow on me. When one o’clock rolled around, I somehow found myself standing outside The Dancing Goat, wearing my new pink cowboy boots on my feet ... the matching hat was lying on the passenger side seat. If I was going to do this, I was going all in.

Farmer Cass has a nice ring to it.

Chapter 18

Connor

It's been a week since Cassie dropped a fucking bombshell on me and fled, and I'd like to say I've started to accept it, but that would be a lie. I'm more fucked up than I was the day I learnt the truth. I haven't been able to bring myself to read the letter she left yet; I'm too hurt, angry, and confused, and I'm honestly not sure if there's anything she can say to make this right. It's still sitting in an envelope in the middle of the table where she left it.

I'm not even in Sydney at the moment. I flew down to Melbourne four days ago because being in that apartment, surrounded by her scent, her things and *that letter*, proved to be too much. I'm not only struggling with the news of the baby, but I'm mourning our relationship too. Whatever progress we'd made in the past month is now wiped clean. Any trust I had in her is gone.

After I spoke with the judge about getting the trial postponed, I headed back to the office and talked with my boss. I didn't go into specifics with either of them. All I said was I found out there was a death in the family. *I'm not lying*. It may have been six years ago, but since I only just found out, it's as fresh as the day it happened as far as I'm concerned.

Jacinta has been keeping a close eye on Cassie via the tracker she stashed in her luggage, but I've stopped asking for updates. The first day my sister got a quick text from her, but she turned her phone back off before the reply came through, because it remained unread. The tracker said she was at a hotel

in Mudgee. The following day her location moved to a large property outside the main town.

At first, we didn't think much of it, but when it didn't move for the two days that followed, I'll admit even I became concerned. Maybe because Jaz was adamant that Cass had been kidnapped, murdered, and buried in a shallow grave on someone's property. She stopped thinking that only when a second text came through of Cassie wearing a pink cowboy hat while feeding a baby goat a bottle.

Any other time that beautiful smile gracing her face would've made my heart beat that little bit faster, but this time it had the opposite effect. She was out there living her best life, while mine felt like it was falling apart. Hence why I hightailed it out of there. This home—where I grew up—has always been my safe place. My parents welcomed me with open arms, even though I told them I wasn't ready to talk about why I was there.

“Hey,” my dad says, coming up beside me and ruffling my hair like he used to when I was a little kid. “Here.” He passes me a beer and takes a seat opposite me.

“Thanks.”

My dad clears his throat before speaking again. “I know you're a grown man, Son, but you've been walking around with a long face ever since you got here. Your mum is worried ... hell, I'm worried about you too. The last time I saw you this down was after you came back from university for the Christmas break. From what your sister has since told us, I'm presuming that was because of Cassandra, and since she's living with you now, I can only surmise she's behind this sudden mood change as well. Did you two have a fight or something?”

“Or something,” I scoff, cracking the top off my beer and taking a long chug.

“What's going on, Con?”

I blow out a long breath, place my beer down and start picking at the label. “Obviously you're aware that Cass and I

had a secret relationship going on back then, but what you don't know is that I loved her, Dad ... I loved her so much."

"Why did you break up then?"

"She told me she loved me back ... and then a few days later she ghosted me. I never knew why, until the other day."

"What did she tell you?"

"That I got her pregnant."

My father's eyes widen slightly as he leans back into his chair. "I see. And she never told you at the time?"

"No. I only just found out."

"And the baby?"

I shrug because I can't give him any more than that. "I don't know."

"You didn't ask her?"

"At the time I was too angry to speak."

"You need to talk to her about this, Son."

"I can't, she's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Mudgee."

"I don't know where that is."

"It's about four hours north-west of Sydney." I only know that because I googled it. "A small country town in the middle of nowhere."

"Does she know anyone who lives there?"

"I don't think so." I shake my head as my anger starts to rise again. "I can't believe she'd do something like this. I never picked her for a coward."

He scrubs his hand over his chin. "I can understand why you're upset, Connor, but it's hard for me to weigh in without knowing all the facts."

I roll my eyes. "That's such a lawyer thing to say."

He chuckles. “You can take the man out of the courtroom, Son, but you can never take the courtroom out of the man.”

“You’re such a cliché, old man.”

“Hey, enough of the old thank you very much.”

I bury my head in my hands and groan. “It took her six years to tell me, Dad. It’s not like she never had the chance to say something before then ... she’s been in our lives the entire time.”

“That part I don’t agree with, you had a right to know, but it doesn’t seem like something Cassie would do intentionally. Despite her upbringing with those poor excuses for parents, she’s a sweet kid with a big heart. It doesn’t make sense. There must be more to it.”

“She left me a letter before she ran away.”

“And what did it say?”

“I didn’t read it.”

“Son,” he says with disappointment in his voice.

“I wasn’t ready. Sue me.”

“I’m a lawyer, I could do that.”

“So am I remember,” I say as my lips slightly turn up at the corners. “I could countersue.”

“On what grounds?”

“I’d think of something.” We both laugh ... I needed that. This inner pity party I’ve been throwing myself is draining.

“Are you not interested in seeing what’s in the letter? You might find the answers you’re seeking.”

“Maybe,” I say, bringing the beer to my mouth.

My dad reaches across the table and places his hand on my arm. “For what it’s worth, Son, I’m sorry about the baby.”

The baby. Those words have a lump rising to the back of my throat. Cassandra is the only woman I’ve ever envisioned myself having kids with, and it stings to think that could’ve been a possibility. I’d be a father now of a child not much

younger than Blake if it had survived. That realisation is a total mind fuck. We were young back then, but in my heart, I know we could've made it work. I would've made sure of it.



Unfortunately, my time at my parents comes to an end far too quickly. I know I have to return to work, but I'm not looking forward to stepping back inside that apartment.

I extend my hand to my father when we arrive at the airport, but he pulls me into a hug instead. "It was good to see you again, and we're here if you need us."

"I know and I appreciate it."

"I love you, Son."

"I love you too, Dad."

I'm not sure why I'm feeling emotional, but I am. It's been nice spending time with them, and having my mum dote on me again. I'm blessed to have the most loving parents, there's nothing they wouldn't do for me or Jacinta. It's a shame Cassandra can't say the same about hers, but that's still no excuse for what she's done.

I move to my mum next and fold her in my arms. "Bye, Mum," I say, placing a kiss on the top of her head.

"I always love having my baby's home," she snuffles into my chest, "I hate it when you or your sister have to leave." She draws back and cups my face in her hands. "If you need us to come to Sydney, just say so. We'll be on the first plane out."

"Thanks, I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie. It may not feel like it now, but it will all work out in the end. Just give it time."

"I hope so," I reply, but I have my reservations. I may be able to accept this in time, but as for me and Cassandra, the damage she's caused is irreversible.

After I move through security, heading towards my gate, my phone rings. As much as I'm trying to ignore everyone in an attempt to distance myself from this mess, I still pull it out.

It's from an unknown number again. Bradford Lewis? Maybe. And for that reason alone, I answer it. As mad and disappointed I am in his daughter, there's still that part inside me that's terrified something bad is going to happen to her.

"Hello."

"Connor."

"Yes, Mr Lewis."

"I'm still trying to get in contact with my daughter. It's been over a week and I'm beside myself with worry. I'm thinking of contacting the police and reporting her as a missing person."

"She's not missing, Mr Lewis."

"Bradford, please. Has she returned to Sydney?"

"No, but she's been in regular contact with my sister." If you could call a vague text here and there regular contact. If it wasn't for that illegal tracker Jaz put in her luggage, I'd probably be freaking out too.

"Okay, well that's something I suppose."

"I'll let my sister know you called. Maybe she can pass on a message."

"That would be great. I'd appreciate it." I'm not even sure if she's heard from Cassie since the goat picture, because I haven't asked, but my sister would've spoken up if she was concerned for her friend's welfare. "I spoke to my wife about the pregnancy."

A wave of panic engulfs me when he says that. Part of me wants to know what he has to say on the matter, and the other part wants to hang up before he speaks another word. "You did?"

"She said she has no knowledge of a pregnancy."

"Oh." That is not the reply I was expecting. From the little Cassandra said, that makes no sense.

"I don't believe her though."

“You don’t?”

“No. I’ve been married to that woman for twenty-six years, so I’d like to think I know my wife. However, given recent developments, I’m not sure if I do. When I mentioned it to her she went off on a tangent, which isn’t unusual for Amanda, but it was her initial look of guilt that made me suspicious. I need to get to the bottom of this, Connor. I feel like I’ve been kept in the dark long enough ... through no fault but my own for being absent over the years, but I love my daughter. I’ve only ever wanted what was best for her.”



I decided to get an Uber back to my apartment, despite Mason’s offer to come and get me. I’m irritable and drained, and I just need some time to myself. My sister will find out soon enough that I’m back. I’m not interested in any updates. I hope Cassie’s safe, but that’s about all. I may be physically done with her, but I wish her no ill intent.

Thankfully, I manage to slip into the building unnoticed, and head straight upstairs, locking the front door behind me ... which is kind of pointless since my sister still has her key.

Bradford’s call is still weighing heavily on my mind. None of this makes sense, and my lawyer brain is desperate to piece it all together, but the wounded part of me is hesitant to know the truth. Cassie’s father is right; there is definitely something off here.

I head straight for my room, purposely ignoring the dining room table, and the letter that’s sitting on top of it, as I pass. I’m presuming Cassie hasn’t returned. When and if she does, she’s going to need to find somewhere else to live. I’d never kick her out on the street, but I can no longer live under the same roof as her. Seeing her will only be a constant reminder.

I drop my bag onto the bed and strip out of my clothes. I need a shower, a bottle of scotch, maybe a pizza, and some mind-numbing TV. Anything that will stop my brain from constantly ticking over.

Once I'm showered and dressed in a pair of sweats, my bare feet pad out to the main room, and I get a shock when I find I have company waiting. "The fuck."

"Welcome back."

"How did you get in here?" I already know the answer to that, but I ask anyway.

He smirks like a motherfucker as he twirls the key around his finger. "Your sister thought you might need some company." My best friend is balancing a pizza box in his other hand, and I spy a bottle of Jack Daniels tucked under the same arm. "The game starts soon."

Did he read my mind?

"How did you know I was here?"

"Your mum called to see if you got home safely. She tried calling you, but said your phone must be off."

It is. I turned it off after my call with Cassandra's father.

"Hmm," I hum.

"I see you're on your period again."

"If you're going to be a dick, you can leave."

"Nah, I'm good," he says, chuckling as he takes a seat on my sofa and places his feet on the coffee table.

"Are you right there?"

"Just peachy, thanks. You wanna grab some glasses?"

I mumble a few profanities under my breath as I turn and stalk into the kitchen, but in truth, I'm glad he's here. I'd never admit that to him though.

Chapter 19

Cassie

“**M**orning, Chris,” I say as I place my pink-booted foot on the bottom rung of the wooden fence to elevate myself higher. Once I’m in position, I lean over and tip the mixture of grain and food scraps from the bucket I’m holding into the trough.

He gives me a quick appreciative snort before tucking straight into his breakfast. Chris is short for Chris P. Bacon and he is one of two, 350-kilo pigs that live here on Martha’s property.

After stepping down off the fence, I place the bucket on the ground next to the other one and glance into the pen next door for Porkchop ... Chris’s girlfriend, and she’s nowhere to be seen.

“Porkchop,” I call out as I move towards the enclosure where she sleeps. “Porkchop.”

Martha recently had to separate the pigs because Porkchop is expecting. I hope I’m around to see the piglets when they’re born, because if they’re anything like the baby goats, I know I’m going to fall head over heels in love with them.

I’ll admit the first time I hand-fed one of the kids I got all emotional. It’s silly, I know, but it brought my past trauma to the surface and reminded me of everything that had been taken from me.

When I reach the gate to her enclosure I get up on the tip of my toes and peer inside her stall. My heart drops as soon as I see her. She’s lying on her side half buried in the fresh hay

we lined her enclosure with yesterday afternoon, and her back is to me.

“Porkchop!” She doesn’t move when I call her name, and I’m already thinking the worst, but that doesn’t stop me from unhooking the latch on the gate and rushing inside. I come to a stop beside her and drop to my knees. My eyes are clouded with unshed tears as I place my hand on her. She’s still warm, but her breathing is laboured.

“Porkchop,” I whisper, and when she gives me a little grunt, the first tear falls. Something is wrong with her, but I’m still new to this farming gig, so I have no clue what’s going on. “I’ll call Martha, she’ll know what to do,” I say, not sure if I’m talking to myself or the pig.

Shit, my phone is still back at my cabin.

Turning, I run from the pen and up towards the house. My hands tremble as I pull the keys out of my pocket and climb into my car. I leave a big cloud of dust in my wake as I speed down the dirt road towards the back of the property.

I leave the car running as I dash inside to grab my phone from the bedroom. A few weeks ago, this device was attached to me like an extra limb, but I can’t say I’ve missed being without it. It’s been freeing.

I’m shaking so much that it takes a few attempts to turn it on, but once I do, I’m heading straight back out the door. As I’m running towards the car, all I can hear is ding after ding as all the messages and calls I’ve been avoiding the past week come through in rapid succession. They are the least of my worries right now.

My hands are still trembling as I pull up my Safari app and type in The Dancing Goat Café. My leg is bouncing up and down as I click on the call icon and wait. “I need to speak to Martha,” I say as soon as the phone is answered. “Something is wrong with Porkchop.”

I have no idea who’s on the other end, but I hear them reply, “Okay,” before Martha comes on the line.

“Cassie?”

“Yes,” I say, my voice cracking as I speak. “Something is wrong with Porkchop, she didn’t come out for her breakfast. I found her lying on her side in the pen.”

“Do you think she’s in labour?”

“You said she wasn’t due for a few weeks.”

“That was just a rough guess.”

“How can I tell?”

“You’ll need to squeeze one of her teats and see if she’s lactating. That’s always a sign the piglets are due.”

The Bluetooth has already connected to my car play, so I drop the phone onto the seat and move the gearstick into drive. “I had to go back to the cabin to get my phone. I’m heading down to the main house now.”

“Take a deep breath, hun, I can tell you’re stressing.”

“You think?”

“You did the right thing by calling me.”

“I’m scared, Martha,” I admit, biting my thumb nail.

“It’s going to be okay; you’re doing great.”

Who is she kidding; *I’m a hot mess.*

I wish I had her confidence. The last thing I need is Porkchop’s demise on my hands. Running back into the stall, I find her just how I left her. Moving around her extremely large body, I squat down in front of her. I was so intimidated by these oversized animals when I first met them, but over the past week, I’ve relaxed. They’re actually quite sweet and have individual personalities.

“I’m back, Porkchop.” She doesn’t lift her head or acknowledge me, but does give me the side-eye. “I’m sorry,” I say as I reach for one of her teats and give it a firm squeeze.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Martha replies.

“I was apologising to Porkchop for groping her teat.”

Martha barks out a boisterous laugh. “There’s never a dull moment with you around, Cassie. You say the most random

things.”

“There’s milk,” I screech. “It’s a teeny tiny drop, but it’s there.”

“Okay. Here is what I need you to do.”

“I can’t deliver her babies, Martha, I’m not a doctor. Technically, my mother is a surgeon so I may have some medical genes floating around in me somewhere, but I’ve never watched her cut someone open.”

She laughs again. “There’ll be no cutting anything open. I need you to go up to the house and get the box in the laundry ... it’s on the bottom shelf. Everything you need is in there.”

“Okay.”

“I’m texting, Hanna, the vet, as we speak, but if she’s at another job, she may not be able to come out straight away.”

I gasp. “I can’t do this on my own, Martha.”

“You can! Porkchop will do most of the work, all you need to do is supervise. I can walk you through it. Besides, you’re a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

I’m not sure why, but her belief in me helps. I grew up with a mother that constantly reminded me I wasn’t good enough.

“What do I need to do?”

“Start by going and getting the box.”

I’m not sure why I leave it behind, but I place my phone down on the straw and sprint up to the house. I’m puffing by the time I return with the large box cradled in my arms.

“I’m back,” I pant into the phone after placing the box down by my feet.

“Grab the heat lamp off the top and go and plug it in on the far wall. It will keep the piglets warm while she’s having the others.”

“Done.”

“The pile of clean towels are for you to wipe over the piglets as they come out. Once you’ve done that, place them under the heat lamp so they don’t get accidentally squished by Porkchop.”

I wince at the thought. “Okay,” I say, pulling out the stack of towels and setting them down beside me.

“Is there any sign yet?”

“Of what?”

“The piglets.”

“Umm ... this is going to sound dumb, but where do I look?”

“At the rear ... underneath her tail.”

“Oh my God, Martha, I see an itty-bitty snout.”

“Great. It’s all happening. I wish I was there.”

“I wish you were too. I’ll try and get some video for you.”

“I’d like that. Keep an eye on the time as the piglets are delivered, she shouldn’t go more than half an hour between each birth.”

“What happens if she does?”

“Hopefully the vet will be there by then.”

I’m both nervous and mesmerised as I watch the entire head of the first piglet appear. “Good girl, Porkchop,” I encourage, gently running my hand over her side. I’m blessed to be here to witness this, but I also know it could go pear-shaped in an instant. I pray that it doesn’t because my nerves are already frazzled. “It’s out ... the first one is out,” I squeal.

“Do you remember what you need to do?”

“Yes. Wipe it over with the towel and put it under the heat lamp so it’s warm and doesn’t get squished.”

“Good girl. I need to get back to work, call me if you have any problems.”



“Jazzie,” I sob as soon as she answers my video call.

“Cassie, what the fuck. Are you okay? What happened to you?”

“I need to show you something.”

“Why do you look like you’ve been attacked by a wild animal?”

“I do?”

“Your face is covered in dirt, and your hair is sticking up all over the place.” I reach up, trying to flatten it out with my hand. “Is that a piece of straw?” she asks.

I pull it out and drop it on the ground. “Don’t worry about how I look, it’s not important.”

She gasps. “Since when is your appearance not important?”

“Since this,” I say, swinging around the camera on my phone.

“What’s that?”

“The baby piglets I just helped Porkchop deliver.” I’m smiling through my tears as I look down at all eight of them. The vet has just left ... she only got here in time for the last two births, but she’s since given both Porkchop and her sweet little babies a clean bill of health. Six girls and two boys. I basically did it all solo and I’ve never been one to toot my own trumpet, but I’m incredibly proud of myself.

“Porkchop?”

“Yes, that’s the mother’s name. The father is Chris P. Bacon.”

“What the hell. Please tell me you didn’t name them that?”

“No, Martha did, but she said I could name the babies.”

“Who’s Martha?”

“She’s from The Dancing Goat.”

“From the where ... Cassie, are you drunk?”

“No!”

“Have you been smoking anything?”

“Of course not, I’m just high on life.” Bringing eight little lives into the world will do that to you.

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I’m making perfect sense,” I snap.

“You ignore all my calls and texts for over a week, then suddenly you ring me out of the blue looking like a dishevelled lunatic, talking about farm animals with obscenely offensive names and dancing goats, excuse me if I sound concerned.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you. I sent you a picture of me feeding Delilah a bottle.”

“So the goats have normal names?”

“Actually, its real name is Goaty McGoatface, but that’s a mouthful, so I call it Delilah for short.”

“In what universe is Delilah short for Goaty McGoatface? It would be Goaty, Goatface, McG ... something along those lines.”

“Lame,” I scoff.

“Whatever. Is she the one who dances?”

“Who?”

“Goaty McGoatface. Or is it Martha?”

“Martha isn’t a goat,” I snap.

“Well, excuse me.”

“And Delilah is a boy.”

“See, just another reason why that name is stupid.”

“Hmm,” I hum sarcastically. “And for your information, there are no dancing goats, it’s just a legend ... there’s no substantial proof that the goats actually ate the cherries from the Arabica tree and started dancing. Kaldi, the Ethiopian

goatherder, was the one who supposedly witnessed it. Is he even credible?"

"Okay, I'm hanging up and dialling triple zero."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're either as high as a kite or you've finally lost the last of your marbles."

"Wow," I say, completely offended. "Maybe it's me who should be hanging up on you."

"No, please don't hang up."

"I rang you to share the greatest achievement of my life, and you've done nothing but rain on my parade. Rude much."

"I'm sorry. Show me the piglets again." I turn my phone around, leaning forward to get a close up. "They're super cute ... did you really birth them?"

"No, Porkchop did, I just helped." I hear her laugh, but I ignore it. "This is," I say, pointing to the firstborn... which is a cute little boy, "Harry Porker." The vet was kind enough to school me on their sex when she was here. I continue down the line of piglets suckling on their mother. "Crackling, Spam, Pork Sausage, Pigtail, Jerky, Short Rib and Christine."

"Christine?"

I roll my eyes. "She's the only one who looks like her daddy, but it's not like I could call her Chris ... that's a boy's name. Duh."

My eyes narrow when I hear her mumble, "But Delilah's okay," under her breath. It's followed by, "Hold on a sec, I need to sit down, you're making me dizzy."

"Wow."

"True story ... I think you just broke my brain."

"Why are you so crabby?"

"Why? I'll tell you why. Firstly, my BFF flees the country."

"I didn't even leave the state," I grumble.

“Can I continue?”

“Go right ahead.”

“My brother is falling apart; I’ve never seen him so ... heartbroken.” I bow my head and rub that familiar ache in my chest. “Blake’s getting bullied at school again, and I think we’re going to have to bring the wedding forward because I skipped a period.”

Now it’s me who needs to sit down. I head towards the far wall and take a seat on one of the hay bales. “You’re PG?”

“I don’t know ... I might be ... I’ve been feeling a little off the past couple of days.”

My heart pangs as I think of my own baby, but despite that, I’m still elated for my friend. She deserves all the happiness. When we were younger, we made a pact that we’d marry best friends or brothers, and have our kids around the same time so they’d grow up to be close like us. Unfortunately, I can’t see that happening in my near future, if ever. Especially since her fiancé’s best friend now hates my guts.

Pushing that thought from my mind, I swallow down the lump in my throat and whisper, “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunty.”

“I don’t know for sure yet.”

“How does Mason feel about it?”

“I haven’t told him. I need to do a test first.”

“You should probably do that. I wish I was there to hold your hand.”

“I do too, come home, Cass.”

“I’m not ready.” *I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready.*

“You can’t stay away forever. We need to pick out our dresses while I can still fit in one. I don’t want to get married in a tent.”

“You won’t.”

“I can’t be walking down the aisle if I’m the size of a whale.”

“Please, you’re too tiny to look like a whale.”

“Have you seen the size of my fiancé? I’m pretty sure my stretchmarks will have stretchmarks from carrying his giant-arse kid in my stomach. I’m going to have to walk around holding up a wide-load sign.”

I roll my lips to muffle my laugh. “You’ll still be beautiful no matter how big you get.”

“Aww, thanks. You’re a good friend, Cass.”

“I’d rather have a friend with two chins than two faces.”

“God, I miss you. You better be back in time for my wedding, biatch, I’ll never forgive you if you’re not. I can’t get married without my matron of honour by my side ... unless ___”

“I’ll be there,” I growl, cutting her off. “If you even think of replacing me, I’ll murder you in your sleep, chop you up into little pieces and feed you to Chris P Bacon, that pig will eat anything.”

“I’m going to talk to Brooke today and see if it’s possible to bring the date forward. If it’s not, we may have to find another location.”

“It’ll all work itself out, Jaz. Now tell me, what’s going on with Blake?”

“He came home from school yesterday with a black eye.”

I gasp. “Oh my God.”

“I kept him home today, and Mason has an appointment with the school principal this afternoon. We’re not sending him back there until we know he’s going to be safe.”

“That’s good. Poor little guy.”

“I know, it breaks my heart. He’s taking it like a trooper, but I hate that for him. He’s been through so much in his short life. I cried myself to sleep last night.”

“Aww, Jazzie. I’m sorry. I wish I could slide my arms through the phone and hug you.”

“I wish that too.”

I blow out a puff of air and steal my shoulders before asking the question I wanted to know the most. “And Connor?”

“He’s a mess, Cass. He’s not taking it well at all.”

“He read the letter?”

“No. Mason went over there last night to try and cheer him up. He said the letter was still sitting on the table unopened.”

A sense of foreboding settles over me as I chew what’s left of my thumb nail. “Jaz, I need you to promise me something.”

“It depends what it is ... it’s not illegal is it?”

“Of course not. I want you to be with Connor when he reads the letter. If he’s falling apart now, I’d hate to see what he’s going to be like when he learns the whole truth.”

Chapter 20

Connor

I'm surprised to find my sister in the apartment when I get home from work. I was only coming back here to change out of my suit. It's been over a week since I've been to the gym, and I think a workout will do me good.

"Hey," I say, placing my briefcase down and crossing the room to where she's sitting. "Is everything okay? You look upset. Has something happened to Cassie?"

"She's fine. I had a long talk with her today. She's staying in a cabin on a farm. She helped a pig give birth to her piglets today ... all by herself."

"Wow," I say, nodding my head once. "It's not something I've ever imagined her doing, but good for her." Although I meant it, those words taste bitter in my mouth.

"How are you doing? How was work?"

"Same, same, and I'm doing okay."

She arches one of her eyebrows, sceptically. "Are you really? Because even Mason is worried about you. He said you were distant last night."

I throw my hands in the air. "What do you want me to say, Jaz? That I'm struggling to come to terms with the fact that the woman I've loved for years has been lying to me? Or that I lost a child I didn't even know existed?"

"If that's how you feel, then yes."

"There's just so many unanswered questions." My eyes dart to that damn letter that's been haunting me. This morning

I even considered throwing it away, but I knew I'd regret it if I did.

"You need to read the letter, Con."

"I don't know if I can."

"Cassie asked me about it today. I think you're going to find your answers in there."

"What if I don't?"

"I'm pretty sure you will."

"Do you know what it says?"

"No, but she asked me to be here with you when you read it. She's worried about how you're going to react when you find out the whole truth."

"What does that even mean?"

"I don't know," she says as she walks over to the dining room table and picks it up. When she extends her arm towards me, I feel like I'm going to puke. "It's time. You won't be able to move forward if you're stuck in limbo."

Begrudgingly, I take it out of her hand and move over to the sofa. Jacinta follows, coming to sit beside me. My hands slightly shake as I tear open the flap. I don't want to do this, but my sister's right. I need answers, and this may be the only way I'll get them.

I intake a large breath and hold it as I remove the letter and unfold it.

Dearest Connor,

First and foremost, I'm sorry. It's been a heavy burden that's been weighing me down for years. I knew the truth was going to hurt you, but that's not why I stayed silent. You

had a right to know, I've always felt that, but I had my reasons for not telling you.

That may seem like an excuse, but believe me, it isn't. I was a kid when all of this happened, Con, we both were, and although I knew right from wrong back then, I believed my mother when she said she'd destroy you. Hence why I broke my own heart to protect you. And I'd do it again and again if need be, that's how much you mean to me. My love for you has no limits.

The last night we were together, I knew I was pregnant. I'd known for a few days. It's not something I could tell you over the phone, or via text, so I'd planned on telling you that weekend—face to face.

But when you drove me home that night, you were stressing about your end of year exams, and it didn't seem right to put such a heavy burden on your shoulders at that time. This news was life changing for both of us. So, against my better judgement, I kept quiet.

Your end of year break was around the corner, so I decided it would be best if I waited. It's one of my biggest regrets, because things may have turned out differently for us

... for our baby, if I'd just told you then and there. I had no foresight to what was awaiting me when I walked through the front door of my house that night, I would've run straight back into the safety of your arms if I had.

That last sentence has me sitting up straighter in my seat. What happened to her when she got home? The next two words I read have a chill running down my spine. *My mother.*

My mother had found the pregnancy test in my room, and although she's always been vicious with her words, it was the first time she'd ever physically struck me. For hours I had to listen to her ranting and raving about what a terrible person I was ... a letdown and an embarrassment to my family.

The next morning, she was different, nicer, caring even. She was lulling me into a false sense of security, and I fell for it. She took my phone away and told me I needed to stay home from school and rest. She gave me a vitamin ... she said it was to help the baby, and again I believed her. The following afternoon she got me to take another one.

I think you can guess by now that the pills weren't vitamins. Within an hour of

taking the second pill, my life as I knew it started to unravel. I laid on the bathroom floor for hours, Con, calling out for help, soaked in my own blood, but she ignored me. By the time she finally came, it was too late. Our baby was gone.

When I asked her what had she done, she told me she'd taken care of it, and that I was welcome. Can you believe a human being could be so cold? I never would've suspected she'd stoop as low as killing her unborn grandchild, but that's exactly what she did.

Two days later she sent me back to school, but I was under strict instructions to have no contact with you. She called you a predator and threatened to have you charged, which you and I both know would've ruined your career before it even started.

I pleaded with her, and told her I was at the age of consent before we had sex, but it didn't matter. She said she had ways of proving otherwise. I couldn't let her do that to you, so I did as she asked, and kept quiet.

I drop the letter to the floor and stand abruptly. I've read enough. I take a few deep breaths as I dig the heels of my palms into my eye sockets. The rage I'm feeling is like nothing I've ever experienced in my life.

A million fucked-up scenarios run through my head, because I *will* avenge my child, but first things first.

My feet are moving before it even registers.

“Where are you going?” Jacinta asks as I stalk towards the front door.

“Mudgee.”



It's close to midnight by the time I arrive at my destination. Jacinta managed to stop me at the door, trying to talk me into making a plan first instead of running off half-cocked. The truth was she was worried about my intentions for going after Cassie, but she had no reason to be.

Once I explained why I needed to see her, she was on board. We lost an hour looking into flights—which would be fifty minutes, as opposed to almost four hours by car—we even tried to book a helicopter, but neither were available until morning. I couldn't wait that long, so I got in my vehicle and hit the road.

Knowing it would be late when I arrived, I had planned on renting a room for the night, but I was too antsy to sleep. So instead, I programmed in the address from Jacinta's tracker and headed straight here. I'm now parked outside the property, and all I can do now is wait for the sun to rise.



I'm jolted from my sleep by a loud banging sound. I'm somehow slumped over the steering wheel, and my sudden movement sounds the horn, which manages to startle me further. I turn to look out the side window and immediately shield my eyes from the blinding light that's shining in from the outside.

“Get out of the car,” the stern voice says. I wind down my window in my sleepy haze, which probably isn't the wisest move since I'm currently parked in the middle of nowhere. It's only then I see the barrel of a gun pointing at my face. “I said

get out of the car.” I hold my hands up in front of me. “Now, or I’ll blow that pretty little head of yours right off those ... big broad shoulders.”

The gruffness of her initial words have now turned somewhat seductive. It leaves me a little perplexed; am I getting robbed, hit on, or both?

I leave one hand in the air, using the other to reach for the door handle as I reluctantly exit the vehicle. “Why are you parked outside my property?” the woman asks.

“You’re property?”

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?”

“Martha?”

“How do you know my name?” she sneers, poking the barrel of the gun into my chest. “Who are you?”

“My name is Connor ... Connor Maloney. I’m looking for Cassandra, I believe she’s staying with you.”

“Hmm,” she hums, running the torch down the length of my body and pausing a fraction too long around the crotch area for my liking. “I’d like to see some ID.”

“Okay.” I lower one of my arms and slip my hand into the back pocket of my trousers to remove my wallet. I flick it open and the torch is lowered in that direction. Only then does she drop the gun and take a step back. My eyes remain fixed on her as she turns and shuffles around the front of the vehicle towards the passenger side. “You can drive me back up to the house, it’s a bit of a hike from here, and I’ve been on my feet all day.” I stand there stunned when she opens the door and lowers herself inside. “Come on, young man, I don’t have all night.”

Against my better judgment, I get back in the car. The interior light is still on, so I use this time to take in the woman sitting beside me. She’s a lot older than I surmised. The tips of her grey hair are dyed hot pink. There are two neat rows of rollers along the top and glasses sitting low on her nose. There’s a fluffy, leopard-print dressing gown wrapped around her short, stubby body, and long, bright-red gumboots on her

feet. The shotgun that was just trained on me is now resting between her slightly parted legs.

“Is that thing loaded?” I ask, pointing towards the gun.

“Pfft,” she huffs. “What do you think?”

“Do you even know how to use it?”

She curls her hand around the barrel and lays it across her lap. “Would you like me to show you? I once shot a moving wild boar right between the eyes from fifty metres away.” I stare at her, and the serious look on her face tells me that’s exactly what happened. “Are we going to sit here all night? I’m not getting any younger,” she grumbles.

“Right.” I shake my head and start the engine. Of course, Cass would gravitate towards a nutcase.

We travel in silence as I follow the dirt driveway up a small incline until a white cottage comes into view. I pull up alongside the house and leave the car running as I wait for her to get out. “Are you coming inside?”

“Is Cassandra in there?”

“No. She’s staying in the cabin further down.” She points out the front windscreen as she speaks. “It’s towards the rear of the property.”

“If I follow the driveway, will it lead me there?”

“In the morning yes ... she’s asleep right now ... she had a big day today and needs her rest.”

“Delivering piglets?”

“She did a mighty fine job too. I’m very proud of her.”

That makes me smile. Cassie needs more supportive people in her life. I understand why she’s hung around now.

“Is it okay if I wait here, or are you going to threaten to blow my head off again?”

“If you don’t come inside, I might just do that.”

“You’d shoot me for not coming inside?”

She taps her forefinger against her temple. “A hunter never reveals their hand.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a poker player.”

“Hmm, you may be right. The question is, are you willing to take the chance?”

“I’d prefer to stay out here if that’s okay with you.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, not since lunch.”

“That’s what I thought.” She opens her door, groaning as she swings her legs out. “Come, I bought some leftovers home from the dancing goat.”

Food from a goat ... that dances no less? This woman is crazier than I thought.



Martha yawns as she rises from her chair and collects my plate. She was right when she said she had leftovers, and they were delicious. I also found out that The Dancing Goat is the name of the café where she works. It’s how she and Cass met.

She happily chatted with me the entire time I ate. About her late husband, her animals, and everything Cassandra has been up to since she arrived.

“How did you know I was parked in the street?” I ask as she rinses the plate I was eating off. The homestead is quite a distance from the road, so I know she wouldn’t have been able to see me from up here. Unless she sits at her window with a pair of binoculars, which doesn’t seem too far-fetched for this woman.

“My husband installed a camera in one of the trees by the front gate. It came in handy when we used to lease out the cabins. It would alert us when our guests arrived.”

“You don’t lease them anymore?”

“That was his domain ... the café’s mine. It’s a shame they’re sitting there unused, but I don’t have the time or the

energy anymore. I'm busy with work and attending to the animals. That woman of yours has been a godsend, having her here has lightened my load. I'll miss not having her around."

"She told you about us?"

"A little. She went on and on about your good looks, but now I can see that girl wasn't exaggerating. Hot damn." The wink she gives me has me squirming a little in my seat. I'm not entirely comfortable being objectified. My looks have worked to my advantage over the years, but it gets old fast. "The first thing that stood out to me when we met, was her sad eyes, I get the feeling she's been through a lot."

"She has." *So much more than I ever imagined.* And as much as my heart breaks for her, I can't help but admire her strength. The resentment I've been carrying around for the past week vanished the moment I read her letter.

Martha wipes her hands on a tea towel, hanging it neatly over one of the cupboard doors before shuffling towards the doorway. "I'm going back to bed. Goodnight."

She's going to leave a strange man in her house while she sleeps? "Ah, Okay. I'll head back to my car then," I say, standing.

She waves her hand dismissing me. "Nonsense, I have a perfectly comfortable lounge you can sleep on. Make yourself at home. You'll find pillows and blankets in the hall cupboard near the front door."

"Thank you again for the food," I say to her retreating back. "And for not shooting me."

Martha throws her head back and cackles. "Don't get ahead of yourself, young man. If you upset my Cassie tomorrow, I might have to carry through with that threat."

What a strange night this has turned out to be.



Despite her invitation, I headed out to the car, turning off her lights as I went and locking the front door behind me. I

didn't feel right staying in her house, I barely knew the woman.

I reach over to the passenger side seat where I dropped my phone and click on the screen to see the time. It's just after three in the morning. Leaning back into my seat, I scrub my hands over my face and groan. Martha said Cass gets up at six to feed the animals before breakfast, but that's hours away. I stare ahead into the darkness, in the direction that I presume her cabin is, and with each passing minute, I become more unsettled.

I'm desperate to see her, and I can't wait that long. I'm not game enough to start the car up though; I'm likely to have Martha shooting out my taillights if I do.

Reaching for the door handle, I slowly open it, trying to be as quiet as I can. I'm not even sure how far Cass's cabin is from here, but even if I can't find it, a walk will do me good. Sitting here is driving me around the bend, and if nothing else, it will help kill some time.

I click the torch icon on my phone, then start down the dirt road. I'm not used to such complete darkness, it's so black out here you can't see your hand in front of your face. Even the full moon and countless number of visible stars do nothing to light my way.

I'm not a person who spooks easily, but the weird and creepy sounds coming from the distance, and poor visibility, have my senses on high alert. I hope I don't come in contact with a wild boar.

I've been walking for about five minutes now, and I still haven't stumbled upon her cabin. I did pass through a cobweb though, which had me karate chopping the air like a ninja. Thankfully, nobody was around to witness that less-than-manly act. I checked myself over with the torch, and I'm pretty sure the spider isn't on me, but my skin still crawls nevertheless.

I continue along the road, shining the torch towards the ground as I go. After a while, I stop and lift my arm illuminating it in the distance, hoping to see her building. I

hear some twigs crack beside me, and my body immediately spins in that direction. I remain as still as a statue, even going as far as holding my breath. I hear another twig snap and rustling of leaves, and I'm now regretting not driving. This place is as creepy as fuck. I'm guessing Martha and her shotgun would've been the safer route.

My feet are killing me, and my usually polished dress shoes are now a dusty brown, along with the cuffs of my trousers. I should've changed into something more comfortable before I left, but I was in too much of a rush to get here.

I glance behind me, but the way back to my car is probably longer than the one ahead, so I decide to keep moving forward. As I take a step, a large kangaroo jumps in front of my path. I drop the phone in my hand on instinct and raise my clenched fists ready to take him out if need be.

He's a huge buck, almost the size of me, and built like a brick shithouse. I've done loads of kickboxing sessions in my time, but I'm not sure if I'm any match for this motherfucker and his razor-sharp claws. It pauses for a moment; when it makes eye contact with me, I cock an eyebrow, daring him to make his move, but he bounds away instead. *Pussy.*

"For fuck's sake," I growl as I bend down to retrieve my phone. Out of all the places my girl could flee, she chose the fucking country. Give me the hustle and bustle of city life any day.

I swear I've walked a kilometre, maybe two, by the time the cabin comes into view. Her red Mercedes-Benz is parked outside, so I know it's the right one. It's a lot smaller than the main house, but quaint. It has a matching bullnose veranda. I shine the light around the vicinity; she's so secluded down here, surrounded by nothing but bushland, and I don't like it one bit.

I move to the base of the stairs that lead to the front porch, and that sickly feeling I had in my stomach on the drive here returns. Will she even want to see me after the way I've acted?

I've been so lost in my own head since I found out about the baby, I never once considered what she had gone through, and now that I know the truth, I feel like a colossal asshole. This poor woman has been to hell and back, with zero support along the way.

As much as my heart breaks for her and everything she's had to endure, I admire the hell out of her, and the resilience she had to keep going, because her situation would've broken many.

She was a kid, betrayed in the worst possible way by a person who should've protected her most. She's suffered in silence for years all because she was trying to protect me and continued to smile through her sadness nevertheless. I fucking love her for that, but I wish she hadn't.

Legally, there is nothing her mother can do to me; I know it, and so does she. We were young and in love, and the only crime that was committed was by her. I imagine it would be easy to manipulate a child when they know no better. She was bluffing and poor Cass is so conditioned by that baby-murdering cunt, she took her threats as gospel.

The real kicker here is that she's a doctor ... someone who has supposedly dedicated her life to saving others. I promise you one thing, by the time I'm through with Amanda Lewis she'll regret the day she was born.

I suck air into my lungs as I take the four steps and cross the landing in three long strides. Raising my hand, I pause. I don't want to scare Cassie by knocking this time of morning, but I've come this far, and I need to see her.

Shaking out my shoulders, I move my head from side to side a few times before raising my hand to tap twice. I wait about a minute before I do it again, this time with a little more force. A few seconds later, the door swings open and a squinty-eyed Cassandra stands before me, and fuck me if my heart doesn't skip a beat. One look at her pretty face and it feels like the organ that's been lying dormant in my chest since she left suddenly kicks back to life.

She looks like a hot mess in that oversized T-shirt that hangs off one shoulder, and her usual immaculate hair is sticking up all over the place, but she's a beautiful mess. *My beautiful mess.*

"Connor," she gasps in surprise.

"I can't believe you just opened the door in the middle of the night without even asking who it was."

"I thought it was Martha."

"I could've been an axe murderer, Cass." Her caramel eyes widen as she bites the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth ... she knows I'm right. I reach up and use the pad of my thumb to drag it free.

I want to kiss her so bad.

"What are you doing here? Am I dreaming?"

She pinches a chunk of skin on her forearm, and when she winces, I smile. "You're not dreaming, Princess," I say. "I'm really here."

"Why? How?"

"I read your letter today."

"You did?" she asks as tears rise to her eyes.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry for everything you went through." My voice cracks as I speak. "I'm so fucking sorry, Cass."

When her sob breaks free, I engulf her in my arms, crushing her body to mine. "I loved our baby, Con ... I loved it so much."

I clench my eyes shut as I struggle to keep my own emotions at bay. "I know, sweetheart," I say, running my hand soothingly over her hair. "I know."

Chapter 21

Cassie

Connor Maloney was the last person I expected to see when I opened the door, but having him here—being in his arms again—is like a dream come true. I thought I'd lost him forever ... that there was no coming back for us this time, but I'm glad I was wrong.

I sob into his chest, for our relationship, *for our child*, for all the things that were taken from us. He doesn't let me go for the longest time, and if I could stay cocooned in his arms like this, for eternity, I would. This is the only place I've ever truly felt safe.

When he finally releases me and draws back, he does something completely unexpected. He tenderly cups my jaw in his hands, swipes the pads of his thumbs over my cheeks to wipe away my tears, and then he leans in and kisses me like his life depends on it. Devouring me like he's starved of oxygen, and I'm the air he needs to survive.

I don't hold back either, I'm all in.

I left Sydney on a quest to find myself, but I'm not naive enough to think it will happen overnight. It's going to be a long and tedious process because I have years' worth of baggage to unpack. I can only hope that now I've purged all of my secrets, I'll continue to move forward with my healing.

I've enjoyed the solitude that this place has brought me, as well as Martha and the animals, but when the chores are finished and night falls, the loneliness sets in. Having Connor here, for however long that may be, is something I'll cherish.

He tugs my body closer, and I whimper into his mouth. Crossing the threshold, he kicks the door closed with his foot, then walks me backwards across the room until we hit a wall. Our mouths part as he slides his hands underneath the T-shirt I'm wearing, palming my butt cheeks with his big strong hands.

"Are you okay with this?" he asks, making sure this is what I want before he takes it any further. He's always been considerate of others—which is only one of his many admirable traits—and I'm glad his suffering, at my hands, hasn't robbed him of that.

"I'm more than okay with this," I answer, reaching for the buttons of his dress shirt. What I want to do is rip his clothes off with my teeth, but thankfully I manage to contain that urge.

"I didn't come here for this," he clarifies. "I just needed to see you."

"I want this," I reiterate, skimming my hand over his thick, dark hair. I have nothing holding me back now. No guilt, no lies ... no secrets. "I want you, Con. I've always wanted you."

My confession has the corners of his lips tugging into a grin. "I've never stopped wanting you, Princess. *Never.*"

I was twelve when we officially met, but I knew who he was prior to that, because we not only attended the same school, but Connor Maloney was the object of every girl's attention. Like he was the sun and the entire female population were the planets that gravitated around him.

"I feel like I've spent my entire life craving you." My hand slides from his hair to caress the side of his face. His light stubble scratches against my skin as I do. "Especially when we were apart."

I can't remember a time I didn't ache for this man, even when he acted like he hated me.

His eyes are locked with mine as his hands rise over my waist and skim upwards along my spine, bringing the T-shirt with him as he goes. I lift my arms in the air so he can tug it

over my head. He glances at the tee before tossing it aside. “Is this my shirt?”

I grimace. “I stole a few out of the washing basket in the laundry before I left.”

He chuckles as he leans forward, nipping at my bottom lip. “I like that you were wearing my clothes, but I prefer you like this,” he admits as his gaze moves down to my bare chest. His hands gravitate in the same direction as the tips of his fingers skim over my ribcage, causing goosebumps to pebble in their wake.

He palms my breasts in his strong hands before tweaking my hardened nipples between his forefingers and thumbs. My lips part as I tilt my head back and moan. I’ve been with other men since we broke up six years ago—which is something I’m not proud of—but none of the others have been able to make my body hum like he does.

You can only find heaven if you back away from hell.

I push his unbuttoned shirt off his shoulders and down his arms as his hands slide into the back of my satin underwear, squeezing my cheeks as he tugs my body closer. Skin to skin. My soft against his hard. He has the most amazing body ... ripped and muscular.

His looks and physique, although faultless in my eyes, are not his most endearing qualities. It’s his beautiful, gentle heart, and how he loves with his entire being. I’ve been in enough relationships in my time to recognise how truly special he is.

His lips move down to my jaw, raining kisses along my skin as he goes. “I need to be inside you, Princess.”

I need that too.

We were interrupted by his sister the last time we were together, and there’s been nobody else since. I was so messed up in that moment, I never really got to appreciate what we were doing, but I won’t take *this* time for granted ... I’ll cherish every second of my time with him, however long it lasts.

He reaches for the buckle on his belt, quickly freeing himself. "I'm going to fuck you hard and fast against this wall, and then I'm going to take you to bed and worship every inch of this luscious body." When he's ready, his hands slide around, grasping the back of my legs, as he effortlessly lifts me off my feet. "Wrap your legs around me, Cass."

I could probably count on two hands how many times we've had sex. When we were younger, time together was always limited, given the fact that our relationship was a secret and he was already away at university by the time things got serious.

Our alone time was spent in his car, at our special spot, or on a few occasions in my room when my parents weren't home. He was always so sweet and gentle with me. Don't get me wrong, he was an attentive and selfless lover, even back then, but this ... *what we're doing now*, is off-the-charts hot. We have a lot of lost time to make up for, and this grown-up version of Connor Maloney is most certainly going to be my undoing.

He slides my underwear to the side and runs the head of his dick back and forth through my arousal. I'm ripe and ready for this man, so when he impales me in one swift motion, the euphoria overrides any pain. He's so big ... so hard and all man. Every delicious inch. I love it ... *I love him*.

"Fuck, Cass," he grates out through gritted teeth as his forehead comes to rest on my shoulder. "You're so tight ... so good. Being buried deep inside you is my favourite place to be."

I lock my ankles together at the base of his spine as I fist a handful of his hair in my hand and tug his head back so I can gain access to his mouth. "Fuck me, Con. Fuck me hard and fast ... give me everything you've got," I plead before I crash my lips into his.

"This will be over before it's even started if you keep talking to me like that."

He draws back to the hilt before propelling back in at lightning speed. He growls into my mouth as he repeats that

movement over and over again. I rock my hips forward, grinding my pelvis against his. The friction heats my skin and pure adrenaline courses through my veins with every thrust, slowly bringing my body and my soul, back to life.

The room is now filled with sounds of our skin slapping together and guttural groans and whimpers. My orgasm is close, I can feel my body climbing to that blissful place with every plunge. Our kiss is just as wild and frenzied as our fucking. This is raw, primal ... animalistic.

Connor abruptly draws back, using the weight of his body and the wall behind me to pin me in place, his hand moves between us. "Come for me, Princess," he commands. "I don't know how much longer I can hold on. You feel too good."

The moment the pad of his thumb swipes over my clit, I go spiralling over the edge.

"Connor," I cry out as my entire body trembles with the intensity.

"That's it, sweetheart, milk my cock." He throws his head back and releases a mighty roar as his hips jerk against me. "Fuck yes!"

My inner walls are still pulsing around him as he stills, leaning in to give me an earth-shattering kiss that's so passionate it has tears stinging the back of my eyes.

When our lips finally part, he gives me one of his signature panty-melting smiles as he takes a step backwards, bringing me with him. "Which room is yours?"

"The first door on the right."

Connor remains inside me as he heads in that direction. After bending forward and laying me down gently on the mattress, he slides out of me and stands to full height, looking down at his dick that's still semi-hard.

"Fuck," he grumbles, frowning when he glances back up. "I didn't use protection."

"I'm on birth control."

Leaning in, he drops his hands onto the mattress, either side of my body, brushing his lips with mine. “I’m still sorry. It was irresponsible of me.” Drawing back slightly his eyes lock with mine. “I was lost in the moment and couldn’t think about anything more than being inside you again.”

I’m expecting him to climb onto the bed beside me, but he straightens before turning to leave the room. I hear the tap running a few seconds later, and when he returns, there’s a washer in his hand. The self-assured smirk he gives me as he crosses the room has me swooning.

“Lie back,” he orders, and so many beautiful memories flash through my mind as he cleans me. No man has ever shown me the kind of devotion he does, and it never wavers. It’s one of a long list of reasons why I’m obsessed with this man.



Connor kept true to his word, and he devoured every inch of me after joining me in bed. As tired as we both are, neither of us has slept. We have so much lost time to make up for.

I lift my head from where it’s resting on his chest and groan when I see the time. “I need to get up and feed the animals.”

I enjoy doing it, despite the ungodly hour, but this morning, not so much. Not when I have the man of my dreams—the love of my life—lying beside me in bed.

“I’ll come help you.”

I lean in and brush my lips with his before rolling over and getting up. “Stay here, it won’t take me long.”

“Don’t go,” he pleads, reaching over to try and grab me.

“I have to, the animals will be hungry.”

“This animal right here is ravenous,” he reaches under the sheet to cup himself.

I roll my eyes and laugh as I bend slightly to grasp the bedding, tearing it away from his body. I nibble on my bottom

lip as my eyes take him in, in all his naked glory.

I release a small whimper when he wraps his fingers around his thick shaft and it starts to grow before my eyes. I can't believe he's ready to go again. I'm sore and tender—muscles I didn't even know I had ache. I need to soak in a long hot bath before I even consider going there again.

Wrapping the sheet around my body I turn, heading towards the bathroom before I change my mind. I don't even make it out of the room before there's a loud knock on the front door.

Connor leaps out of bed and scoops up his discarded trousers. "Stay here," he utters. "I'll see who it is."

He's switched into protective mode, which makes me a little giddy. I follow him out of the room, and when he opens the front door, I see the taillights of Martha's fully restored 1974 Ford F100 heading back down the dirt road and away from the cabin. It belonged to her late husband and was his pride and joy. After he passed, it became hers.

I look down and see a cake box with a clear window on the lid, sitting on the porch by the door. It contains a dozen muffins, and beside it is two large coffees in a takeaway tray. There's a folded note tucked beside one.

I bend, sliding out the piece of paper to read it.

*I thought you two might need an energy boost.
Go back to bed, I've already fed the animals.
If you could check on the piglets later today,
I'd appreciate it. I'll expect you both at the
main house for dinner tonight. 6 sharp.*

Martha

I've enjoyed my time here with Martha; I'm going to miss her when I leave. I clutch the note to my chest as Connor

squats to pick up the box of muffins. “They’re still warm,” he says.

“They’re from The Dancing Goat. Martha has a guy come in every morning; they’re freshly baked.” I slide one of the coffees out of the tray and shove it in his direction. “You’ve got to try this coffee. It was voted the best in Mudgee three years running,” I say proudly, like I have some sort of claim over it. “It’s delicious.”



We end up back in bed, where we feed each other muffins, taste-testing all the different flavours, drinking our coffee, and talking about old times. It’s nice, and something we’ve never had the luxury of doing.

When we were younger it always felt like there was an invisible, ticking clock hanging over our heads. Connor would have to leave way sooner than I liked, so his family wouldn’t become suspicious. As far as they knew, he was only giving me a ride, and I’m not referring to his dick either. And if I was at their house with his sister, we had to act like nothing was going on.

Who knows what the future holds for us ... *if anything*. I’d be a fool to think that things will just magically fall into place after everything that’s happened. Will I ever truly escape the atrocities of my past? *If I can’t heal from what hurt me, I’ll end up bleeding over the ones that didn’t cut me*. I couldn’t do that to Connor, I’ve already put him through enough.

Holding on to someone just for the sake of it can do more damage than letting go, and the truth is, this beautiful man owes me absolutely nothing.

Chapter 22

Connor

I can't stop grinning as I watch her. It's a side of Cassandra Lewis I never thought I'd see. I rest both of my elbows on top of the fence and lean in further so I can observe her every move. She's a vision ... I could look at her all day long and never tire.

She's in her element here, which is great to see, but I'll admit there's a part of me that's scared shitless by that knowledge. What will I do if she wants to stay?

First and foremost, I came here because I needed to see her, with no further plans than that. But after everything that's happened since my arrival, I was kind of hoping I'd get to bundle her in my car and take her back home with me, where she belongs. In this moment though, right here and now, I'm not sure if I can do that to her. It's the first time in forever, that I've seen her truly happy.

"And this little cutie-pie," she says, picking up another piglet, "is Crackling."

I bark out a laugh. "Can I ask who named them?"

"Me. I had to continue with the pork theme ... like their parents."

"Their names are a tad gruesome," I admit.

"They're not," she growls. "They're cute."

She's cute, and I'm loving seeing her all country-like. She's dressed in a pair of dark, body-hugging designer jeans, complete with long, pink boots that have intricate embroidery

stitching down both sides. A white, fitted top—that was pristine before we left the cabin, but is now smeared with streaks of mud—and a cowboy hat, which is the same colour as her boots. Her long brown hair is plaited in a loose braid that’s draped over one shoulder. She definitely looks the part.

She’s as sexy as fuck, and despite the number of times I’ve taken her today, my cock still craves more.

“Cute until one of them ends up on the dinner table at Christmas time,” I say.

She gasps. “Martha would never do that.” She nibbles on the corner of her bottom lip as she gazes down at little Crackling. I can see her mind ticking over from here. When her eyes move back to me, they’re as wide as saucers. “She wouldn’t do that would she, Con?”

I lift one shoulder. “Farmers do that stuff all the time. One day it’s a cow grazing in the paddock, the next it’s a T-bone steak on the barbeque.”

“Stop,” she screeches, placing Crackling down with the greatest of care to suckle with its siblings. Once her hands are free, she hugs her torso, looking a little green. “We have to save them.”

“The cows in the paddock?”

“No, my babies.”

“Technically they belong to Pork Chop.”

“I helped bring them into this world, so they’re partly mine,” she declares, moving her hands to her hips. “If I had known they were going to be, you know,” she lifts one of her arms and slices her pointer finger across her throat, “I would’ve left them inside Pork Chop where they were safe and sound.”

“I’m pretty sure that wasn’t a possibility, Cass.”

“Pfft.” She flicks her hand dismissing me. “Semantics. You need to help me think of a plan.”

“It’s the circle of life, Princess.”

“It’s cruel. You can’t eat pets, it’s against the law.”

“When we’re talking about farm animals, I’m pretty sure that rule doesn’t apply.”

Her lips thin. “Well, it should. We need to appeal the high court.”

I roll my lips. “It doesn’t work like that, and I was only surmising, maybe Martha doesn’t have plans to eat them.” A crooked smile tugs at one side of her mouth as she slides her phone out of her back pocket and powers it up. It starts to ding in succession, with incoming messages. She frowns down at the screen before raising it to her ear. “Who are you calling?”

“Martha,” she mouths as she lowers her arm and proceeds to put the call on speaker so I can hear their conversation. “Martha, hi, it’s me, Cassie.”

“Hey, hun, is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” she says, lifting her free hand to her mouth to nervously chew on her thumb nail. “Thank you for the muffins and coffee this morning.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Umm ... while we’re on the subject of food, what do you plan on eating for Christmas dinner?”

I bite my knuckle to hide my smile.

“Why?”

“I’m just curious.”

“Christmas is months away ... I haven’t even thought that far ahead.”

“You really should ... these things can sneak up on you. I know how busy you are, so you need to prepare.”

“Cassie.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me why you really called?”

The hand in her mouth drops to her side as she blows out a puff of air. “Are you planning on eating Chris P Bacon, Pork

Chop, or God forbid, one of their sweet little babies for Christmas dinner?”

“No,” she screeches. “Those animals are my family, why would you think that?”

Cassandra’s head snaps in my direction and her eyes narrow. “Never mind. Let’s pretend I didn’t call, okay?”

I hear Martha’s boisterous laugh down the line as Cassie quickly ends the call and slides the phone back into her pocket. When I notice the heat rising to her cheeks, I step up onto the bottom rung and throw my leg over the fence, closing the distance between us in three long strides, so I can wrap her in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble as I rest my chin on top of her head. But when my body starts to shake with silent laughter, it earns me a punch to the stomach. Lucky for me I have abs of steal.



After I toured the farm, meeting the rest of the ridiculously named animals—including Dingbat the donkey that we had to rescue twice because his head was caught between the wired fence—we collected the eggs from the coop, freshly laid by McNugget, Sir Clucks-a-Lot, Chick Jagger, Meryl Cheep, and Hen Solo, just to name a few, before heading back to the cabin to get some well-earned sleep.

Despite our history, I got to experience a lot of firsts with Cassie today. Including soaking in a bubble bath together, feeding each other in bed, and having her sleep wrapped in my arms, which may have been my favourite thing. I’ve never considered myself a cuddler ... I don’t do sleepovers, *ever*, but I want it all when it comes to this woman. *I always have*. The whole nine yards. Marriage, babies, and a lifetime with her by my side.

I even leant against the doorjamb at the entrance to the bathroom and watched her apply a dusting of make-up to her face before we left for dinner. It’s something that never interested me in the past, but I’m finding myself wanting to learn all those insignificant parts of her, that make up the

woman she is—even the most mundane of tasks, like her skincare routine. For some reason, I found it fascinating. I love how well she takes care of herself.

We are currently sitting at the dining table at Martha's. She made roast lamb, and I noticed Cass stare down at her plate for far too long before she eventually started eating ... pushing the meat to the side of her plate, and sticking to the vegetables. I'm gathering our conversation about the animals earlier was the reason for that. Bless her sweet heart. I, on the other hand, tucked right in.

Martha must've noticed the same because she suddenly says, "Are we going to talk about the phone call today?"

Cassie's eyes widen for a split second before she schools her face and sits up straighter in her seat. "What phone call?" she questions, trying to act innocent but failing miserably.

I raise my glass to my mouth to hide my amusement as a cheeky grin tugs at the corners of Martha's lips. I can tell she's thoroughly entertained by Cassandra's antics. "Oh, that's right. I forgot I was supposed to pretend you never called. My bad."

After dessert, we helped with the cleanup before heading back to the cabin hand in hand. Tonight, the walk is uneventful, as far as rogue kangaroos and spiders go anyway.

"It's so peaceful here, isn't it?" she mumbles.

"It is, a big change from city life."

"Martha's great too."

"She is," I agree.

We fall silent again, Cass more than likely lost in her own head, and me trying to find the courage to ask her how long she plans on staying here. It's a simple enough question, but my uncertainty about her answer is what's holding me back.

When we arrive at the cabin, Cassie asks, "Do you want the first shower?"

I step forward and cock one of my brows as I slide my arms around her waist. "We could conserve water and shower

together.” If she agrees, it will be another first to add to the list.

“We could definitely do that,” she replies with a grin. I brush my lips with hers before we head into the bedroom to grab our things. As I’m collecting some clean clothes from my suitcase, her phone starts to ring. I eye her across the room and don’t miss the tensing of her body as she stares down at the bedside table where it sits. “It’s my dad’s number.”

“You probably should answer it, he’s been worried about you.”

“You’ve spoken to him?”

“A few times, yes.”

“What if it’s my mother again.”

I drop the clothes I’m holding onto the mattress and round the bed.

Leaning down, I scoop up her phone and answer it. “Hello.”

“Connor, is that you?”

“It is, Mr Lewis.”

“Bradford, please. Is Cassandra there?”

“She is, she’s right beside me.”

My eyes move to her, and I wait until she gives me a nod before I hand over the phone. Her dad seems like a decent guy, but I’d never force her into doing something she wasn’t comfortable with.

“Daddy,” she says, placing it to her ear. Her phone isn’t on speaker this time, so I can only hear her side of the conversation. “Yes, I’m okay. My phone has been off for most of the week, I just needed a break from everything.” After a short pause, she says, “You know about the baby?” That information has all the colour draining from her face as she slowly lowers herself down to sit on the side of the mattress. “Mum told you? ... Oh, Connor did.” Her eyes snap to me. “Did he tell you what she did to the baby?” she whispers as

tears instantly rise to her eyes. I shake my head, letting her know I didn't. We haven't conversed since I read the letter. "She killed it, Daddy," she cries, choking on a sob, and seeing her like this has my own emotions bubbling to the surface. "She gave me tablets she said were vitamins, and I miscarried."

When she breaks down, I take the phone out of her hand and drape my free arm around her shoulders, pulling her body into my side. It's moments like this that I realise that radiant smile of hers hides so much hidden sadness. "Mr ... I mean, Bradford."

"Is what she saying true?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

He falls silent for a moment before saying, "I can't believe Amanda would do something so despicable and heartless ... to her own daughter no less."

"It's all true," I state with conviction because I know the real Cassandra, the person she is deep down, and I believe every word she wrote in that letter. That sweet and vulnerable girl would do anything her parents asked of her because she was so desperate for their love. Her mother took advantage of that in the worst possible way. "I probably should warn you; I won't be letting this slide. I'm coming after her with the full force of the law for what she's done."

Cassie draws back and looks up at me with wide eyes. The shock on her face is evident. This isn't how I planned on broaching the subject with her, but I can't let this go. I will seek retribution for both Cassandra and our child. I won't rest until that evil woman is behind bars where she belongs.

He clears his throat. "You'll have my full co-operation."

"Thank you." I hope Cassie is on board too because I can't let this go.

"I need some time to digest this," he confesses. "Can you please tell my daughter that I love her and I'll be in touch?"

"I will."

“For what it’s worth, Connor, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for the both of you. I knew my wife had control issues, but this ...”

Once the call has ended, I drop the phone on the bed and slide my hands under Cassie’s arms, lifting her to her feet, where I wrap her up tightly. “I hope you can understand why I need to do this, Cass.”

“I hate her for what she’s done, Con, but I’m scared ... *so scared*. That woman terrifies me.”

I draw back and cup her pretty face in my hands. “You’re safe now ... I’ll never let her hurt you again. I promise.”

I’ll move heaven and earth to see that happen.

Chapter 23

Cassie

I've had two more calls from my father today, the first being early this morning. Once the initial shock of my conversation with him last night wore off, the anger set in. He's even gone as far as asking my mother for a divorce and moving himself out of the house. My family has a second residence in Canberra, where he stays when he's doing his parliamentary duties, which is often, but Melbourne is still the place he's always called home.

Both my dad and Connor have been constantly reassuring me that things will be okay, but I'm still sick with worry, to the point it's almost crippling me. My mother's world is crumbling and there is no way she's going to just sit back and let it happen. These two don't know the real side of Amanda Lewis like I do. Her reputation and the perception others have of her mean everything.

"You're shaking," Connor says when he re-enters the bedroom after showering.

"I have a sick feeling inside."

"Princess," he says, coming to sit beside me. When he slides his arm around my waist and leans in to place a soft kiss on my hair, I feel a smidge better. Having him here has been amazing, but he's returning to Sydney today, and I'm not sure how I'm going to cope once he's gone. "I wish you'd reconsider coming with me. I don't like the idea of you being here on your own. Besides, I'll miss you."

I glance over at him and smile. “I’m going to miss you too.” Tears are burning the back of my eyes, but I’m trying hard to keep it together. I’ll let it all out once he’s gone.

“I know physically you’re safe here—if you disregard all the wild animals that lurk around at night—it’s your mental state that concerns me. You need to be around people who care for you, Cass. You have Martha, but she’s at work most days.”

My heart was set on this journey of discovery, and I was determined to see it through to the end, but he’s right. I can always revisit it when the storm settles. I need to be around Connor and Jacinta ... the people that really matter to me.

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“I’ll come back with you.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”



After a tearful goodbye to my sweet baby piglets and their parents—whom I’ve become completely attached to—Delilah, Dingbat, and Martha, I climb into the passenger seat of Connor’s vehicle. He didn’t want me driving home on my own, so we’re leaving the Mercedes here. It’s been moved into one of the big sheds, out of the weather, until I return for it.

Connor has promised he’ll fly back with me so I can pick it up soon. It’s going to suck being without a car, but at least I know I’ll be returning to Mudgee. This farm will always hold a special place in my heart. It came along when I needed it most, and I’ll never forget my time here, or Martha.

Speaking of Martha, she bends down, poking her head through the passenger side window. “Drive carefully.”

“We will,” Connor assures her. “And thank you again for your hospitality ... and for looking after my girl.”

As heartbroken as I feel about leaving here, I bow my face in an attempt to hide the joy those two words bring. *My girl.*

I reach for Martha's hand, wrapping it in mine. "Thank you for everything. I'm going to miss you."

When my eyes well with tears, she straightens and snuffles. "These damn allergies get me every time," she mumbles.

This time, I don't try to hide my smile, because this tough old broad is getting emotional and she's trying to blame it on the pollen. "It's spring ... it's to be expected," I say, taking pity on her. She's been through a lot, but she soldiers on regardless. I admire her for that. It can't be easy working every day and running this place all on her own, especially at her age. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Make sure you do. In the meantime, I'm going to be driving around town with the roof down in your flashy sports car."

"Please do," I say, rummaging around in my handbag for the keys.

She pushes my hand away when I try to pass them to her. "I was kidding."

"Take them, please. Just in case the Effie doesn't start." That's her nickname for the F100. I've had to give her a jumpstart a couple of times, so it's a possibility. Can you believe I even did that? Who am I?

"Okay." She leans back through the window and places a chaste kiss on my cheek. "I'm going to miss having you around, Cassie. You've brightened a little old lady's world. Don't ever lose your sparkle, you hear."

Why couldn't I have been born to the fruit of her loins? Instead, I got the polar opposite ... *Lucifer*. "You've brightened mine too," I say, choking on my words, because it's the truth. My short stay here has done more for me than she'll ever know.



Our four-hour trip home seems to go pretty fast. We talked a little here and there, and went through long bouts of silence,

but it never felt awkward. Connor held my hand the entire way, which was sweet of him.

I'm not sure where we're going from here. Are we even a couple? It would feel weird to straight out ask him that question, so I'll go with the flow until I know otherwise.

Connor pulls into his spot in the underground car park of our building, and after turning off the engine, he looks over at me and smiles. "Are you okay?" he asks, pulling our conjoined hands up to his mouth and placing a soft kiss on my knuckles.

"Yeah." I never planned on staying away indefinitely, but I didn't expect to be back here so soon.

He unbuckles his belt and exits the car before rounding the front of the vehicle to open my door. He extends his hand and I take it. "It's nice to have you back," he says, collecting both our suitcases from the boot.

"It's nice to be back," I reply, but for some reason, the words taste bitter in my mouth.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to be here with him, but I'm wary about thrusting myself back into the real world so soon. I wasn't left with much of a choice, because I couldn't willingly stay in Mudgee considering the shit is about to hit the fan. I'm safer here, and I can't expect Connor to take this all on by himself. That wouldn't be fair. It's something we need to do together. My mother's poor decisions have impacted us both.

Like the gentleman he is, he rolls our suitcases across the smooth, polished concrete towards the lifts. It's quiet down here so the small heels on my cowboy boots echo loudly in the enclosed space with each step I take.

Neither of us speak as we travel up to our floor. I think we're both emotionally drained. Personally, I could do with a long hot shower and a lie down.

I stand back while Connor opens the door and the last thing either of us expects to see is a house full of people. Jim,

Grace, Jacinta, Mason, and Blake ... the whole family is here. In our apartment.

The moment we step over the threshold, we are inundated. Grace is the first to approach me. As soon as she wraps me in her arms, she starts to weep. "My sweet, sweet girl. I'm so sorry."

At first, I'm confused, wondering what's happened, but when Jacinta squishes in between us, and says, "You should've talked to me, Cass. You're like my sister ... I love you; I would've been here for you. I can't believe you suffered for all these years in silence."

And then it hits me. *The letter*. These beautiful, loving people are banding together in solidarity for me and Connor. This is why I love the Maloneys, and the reason I've always yearned to be one of them ... part of this strong bond and unity. All for one and one for all. I didn't know families like this existed until I became friends with Jacinta.

I thought my dysfunctional family was the norm. My mother was always controlling and would not relent until she got her way, even with my dad. I'm sure she's the reason he stayed away as much as he did. I rarely got to see her maternal side. She always made me feel like more of a hindrance than a blessing. There were no family dinners where we'd sit around the dining table and discuss our day, no board game nights, or movie marathons. Deep down I know my father loves me, but he was absent so often, and for such long periods, we never got to form the kind of connection this family shares.

When the girls finally release me, Jim moves in to cocoon me in his big strong arms before placing a soft kiss on the top of my head. "We'll get through this together, Cass ... as a family."

Those words have tears stinging the back of my eyes. *As a family*.



Coming home to a house full of people and having to relive all the horrors of those few days, while Connor and his

father took extensive notes and formalised a game plan—as Jacinta and her mother cooked up a storm for us in the kitchen—may have not been what I wanted, but it turned out to be exactly what I needed.

I had reservations about coming home so soon, but as I sit here at the dining table surrounded by people I love, and who clearly love me back, I realise I don't need to go it alone anymore. I've had many meals with these people over the years but there's something about this one that starts to choke me up inside.

Pushing back my chair, I suddenly stand. "Excuse me," I say, my voice cracking as I speak.

I quickly turn to leave the room, and as I do, I see Connor begin to rise. "I've got this," Jacinta murmurs, suddenly hot on my heels. As I enter the bathroom, she pushes her way in, closing and locking the door behind us. "Cass."

I swipe my hand under my eyes, trying to hide my tears. "I'm okay."

"No, you're not," she says, wrapping her arms around me from behind and resting her cheek on my back.

"They are happy tears, Jaz. I'm just a little overwhelmed. I love your family so much."

"And we love you." I turn to face her and see her own eyes glistening. "I wish you would've told me what was going on back then ... I could've been there."

"I couldn't tell you."

"I would've kept your secret."

"I know you would've, but I couldn't do that to you. I couldn't put something so heavy on your tiny little shoulders."

"Hey," she growls as her eyes narrow. "My shoulders aren't that tiny."

A smile tugs at my lips as I turn her in my arms to face the mirror. "They're itty-bitty, Jaz, we both know it."

"Oh, God," she groans.

“How am I going to carry Mason’s giant-arse baby around inside me for nine months?”

“I’d be more concerned about popping out that giant baby if I was you.”

She sighs. “My vagina’s going to be ruined, isn’t it? What was I thinking getting engaged to—”

“An enormous hunk of man meat,” I say, finishing her sentence for her. “You love him, that’s why. You two are perfect together ... and yes, your poor lady bits are going to get mutilated, but it will be worth it. We can always find a good plastic surgeon to piece you back together.”

“They do vagina reconstructions?”

I lift one shoulder because I have no clue, but I don’t see why they couldn’t. “So, you took the test?”

“Not yet, I bought one though.” She bends, opening the doors below the basin and reaching into the back of the cupboard. “I hid it at your apartment so Mason didn’t find it.”

As soon as she straightens, I snatch the box out of her hand. “We have to do it now.”

“My entire family is sitting out there.”

Ignoring her, I rip the box open and start laying the contents out on the countertop. I hand her the stick. “Pee on this.”

“Right now? In front of you?”

I roll my eyes. “How many times have we shared a bathroom stall when we’ve been out clubbing?”

“We were drunk ... it doesn’t count.”

“Just do it, bitch. I’ll keep my back turned if it makes you feel more comfortable.”

“It would.”

“Although, it may be my last chance to see your vag intact before it resembles mincemeat.”

I giggle when she extends her leg from where she's sitting on the toilet and kicks my calf.

“For that comment, I'm banning you from the hospital when I go into labour.”

“Your loss,” I say unaffected by her threat, because I know that will never happen. “I could've assisted the doctor since I'm an expert on birthing now.”

“You do realise I'll be popping out a giant human and not a piglet, right?”

“Same, same,” I say with a flick of my hand.

“Okay, I'm done. What do we do now?”

“We wait.”

After Jacinta washes her hands, we both take a seat on the edge of the bathtub. I reach for her and she laces our fingers together. The thumb on my free hand is in my mouth as I nervously chew on my nail. I get a flashback of myself doing exactly this six years ago. The one big difference being the way I'm feeling. Back then I was petrified of what a positive test would bring, this time my anxiety is coming from a place of excitement. I'm going to be a kick-arse aunt.

Chapter 24

Connor

My eyes keep flicking towards the hallway where Cass and my sister recently disappeared. They've been gone for ages, and every fibre of my being wants to get up from this table and find out what's going on, but I somehow manage to quell that impulsion. I love the friendship the girls have, but I'm already missing having Cassie all to myself. *Selfish, but true.* I want to be the one she turns to when she's happy or upset.

The battle is lost the moment I hear a loud squeal. I stand so quickly my chair topples over, hitting the floor with a thud. I'm across the room and heading in their direction in a few lengthy strides.

The bathroom door is the only one closed, so I raise my fist and knock. "Is everything okay in there?" I ask.

A few seconds later, I hear the click of the lock. The door opens a fraction and Cassandra pops her head out. The tears in her eyes are evident, but the smile on her face is contradictory. "All is fine, Con. We'll be out in a minute."

"Then why did I hear a scream?"

"Oh, that was nothing."

"Who screamed, Cass, and why?"

"Umm ... a spider. Yes, that's it, we saw a spider and we kind of freaked out. It was big with beady eyes and eight hairy legs ... absolutely hideous." She does a little shiver to try and bring home her point, but she's a shit liar ... always has been.

My eyes narrow. “I don’t believe you.”

“Excuse me,” Cassie retorts, completely offended. “I didn’t realise you were the spider police, Maloney.”

“It’s okay, Cass,” Jacinta says from somewhere inside the bathroom. “You can let him in.”

When Cassie sighs and opens the door the rest of the way, I see my sister quickly hide something behind her back. The girls share a look, and then Cassie dashes towards the basin and starts shoving the contents lining the countertop under her shirt.

When they both turn to face me, they look guilty as sin. “What the fuck is going on?” I grumble.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Cassie says, pulling back her shoulders and raising her chin in the air.

“Nothing is going on,” my sister adds.

“Then what is under your shirt?”

“Rude much,” Cassandra says as her hand skims over her stomach. “I just ate, I’m bloated.”

“You must’ve eaten a box? Because your stomach looks awfully ... rectangular.”

“Hah,” she scoffs, but when she can’t think of a believable comeback, Jacinta steps in.

“I can’t tell you until I’ve spoken with Mason.”

“Mason,” I call out over my shoulder.

A minute later, he appears in the doorway. “You called?”

“Your fiancée has something she wants to tell you.”

“Red?” he asks, confused.

Jacinta’s eyes are everywhere but him as she opens and closes her mouth a few times. “Oh, for God’s sake,” Cassie says. “You knocked her up.”

My sister elbows her friend in the side just as my open palm clips the back of Mason’s head. He gives me the side-eye before taking a step forward. “You’re pregnant?”

Tears rise to Jacinta's eyes as she nods her head, and when he slides his hands under her arms and lifts her off the tiled floor, my gaze darts to Cassie. She's beaming as she watches them celebrate the news, but a few seconds later, she dips her face and I can see the underlying sadness hidden behind her joy. For an instant, my mind went to the same place.

Reaching for her hand, I pull her from the room. I don't speak until I've led her into my bedroom and closed the door behind us.

I back her against the wall and cup her jaw as my eyes scan over her face. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I am. I'm going to be an aunt ... why wouldn't I be thrilled with that news?"

"Cass, you don't have to pretend with me."

"But I am happy."

"And a little sad because it got you thinking of our baby?" She doesn't answer me, but when she bows her head, I know I'm right. "One day I'm going to put another baby inside you, Princess."

Her gaze snaps back to mine. "You are?" she asks with eyes as wide as saucers.

"Yes, if that's okay with you." When she nods her head once, I beam. "We've only just gotten back together, but when the time is right, we'll try again."

Her eyes widen a little further. "We're back together?" Those words have my heart dropping into the pit of my stomach.

"I just thought—"

She must hear the confusion in my voice because she raises her hand and places her finger against my mouth. "I wasn't sure if you wanted that."

"Of course, I want that ... you're all I've ever wanted, Cass."

“So, I’m officially your girlfriend again?” she asks with a little trepidation in her voice.

“Do you want to be my girlfriend?”

“Hell yes,” she squeals, leaping into my arms.

The exhilaration her answer brings has warmth spreading throughout my body. I lean in and cover her lips with mine, kissing her like my life depends on it, because in a way it does. She’s the only woman in this world that can make me feel whole.

I know exactly what it feels like to live without her, and I never want to experience that type of heartache again.



By the time we make it back into the main room, hand in hand, my parents have been given the news that they’re going to be grandparents. We all have huge grins on our faces, but mine is extra big, for obvious reasons.

My mum does a double take when she notices Cassie’s fingers are laced with mine. She releases her hold on Mason and heads straight for us. “Are you two back together?” she asks as her eyes ping-pong between us.

“Yes,” we say in unison.

“I’m so pleased,” she shrieks, throwing her arms in the air before wrapping them around us. “We have a double celebration.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“I hope you two find the happiness you both deserve.”

“We already have,” I reply, tightening my grip on Cassie’s hand.

My mum turns to my dad. “We should take Blake back to our hotel with us tonight so the kids can celebrate their good news.” I throw up a little in my mouth when she says that, because I know exactly what she means by *celebrate*. I think my best friend has already done enough damage. He needs to keep his monk dick in his pants.

Blake's completely on board with their plan, because my parents spoil him rotten when he is with them.

The three women start clearing the table, despite my insistence that they leave it. I've enjoyed having everyone here, but I'm also eager for them to go so I can have some alone time with my girl.

Mason rushes towards my sister when he notices her hands laden down with dirty plates. "I'll take them, Red," he growls.

Jacinta ignores him as she dodges his attempt to remove them from her hands. "I can carry plates."

"You're pregnant."

"Exactly."

"You shouldn't be lifting heavy things," he says, manoeuvring himself in front of her.

"They are plates."

"I don't care, hand them over." I bark out a laugh when he takes them out of her hands, and in return, she stomps down on his foot.

"You've known for one-point-two seconds and you're already acting like a caveman." He schools his face, but I know my friend well; he's thoroughly amused by her outburst. She may be a pocket rocket, but she can get feisty when provoked. She raises her pointed finger towards his face. "You better snap out of this real quick, or we are going to have issues."



I lift my head off the pillow and place my lips against Cassie's bare shoulder. It didn't take much convincing on my end to get her to sleep in my room last night. Today, I plan on moving all of her things across the hall.

From the outside looking in, you'd think we were moving way too fast, but like me, I think she realises we've lost enough time. *Six long years.*

I hear Cassandra's phone ding from her old room, and mine does the same thing a split second later. I roll onto my back and scoop it up off the bedside table. It's a direct message from my sister. I click on the app and see we've been added to a group chat titled *Wedding*.

Jacinta: Morning my beautiful family, just an FYI, with my pregnancy news, I thought I'd let you guys know that the wedding is being brought forward. We have four weeks to organise everything. Dresses, suits, menu, flowers, cake ... the list is endless.

Mason: Why are you sending me messages when you're sitting right beside me?

Jacinta: Stop complaining, you are the one who got me into this mess.

Mason: I believe it takes two to tango, Red.

Connor: Do you two want to take this argument somewhere else, I haven't had breakfast yet.

Jacinta: Morning, Con.

Connor: Morning, Jaz.

Jacinta: How's my BFF this morning?

Connor: She's lying beside me, sound asleep.

Mason: You two are a couple now I take it?

Connor: Hmm. I'm still not talking to you. You sister impregnator!

Mason: Stop acting like a big baby. What exactly did you and Cass get up to last night? People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, my friend. The only difference between you and me is my sperm's obviously superior.

Connor: There is nothing wrong with my swimmers, fucker. And the big difference is, Cass is not your sister, asshole!

Mason: If you ever pull your head out of your arse and marry her, she will be.

Connor: We've been back together for two days, unlike you, I don't rush into things.

Mason: I was with your sister for months before I proposed, cocksucker. And FYI, your sister and I have sex ... a lot, get over it.

Grace: Now, now, boys. It's a little early for this. Please don't fight.

Connor: Sorry, mum.

Mason: Yeah, sorry, Grace.

Brooke: I haven't stopped smiling since you called me this morning, Jaz. I'm so happy for you guys.

Logan: Brooke, I can't believe you knew she was pregnant and you didn't tell me!!! And can I ask why I've been added to this thread?

Brooke: Give me a break, Hotstuff ... you thrive on family gossip.

Logan: I have no idea what you're talking about.

Brooke: Yet you knew from my vague reply above that Jacinta was already pregnant because you've been sitting at your desk glued to your phone and reading the entire thread ... tell me I'm wrong?

Jacinta: Sorry, Logan. I thought since we were getting married at your place you might want to be included in the plans. I can remove you if you like.

Logan: That's okay, Jacinta, you don't need to remove me.

Brooke: Bahahaha. See!!!!

Jim: Good morning, everyone.

Jacinta: Morning, Daddy.

Jacinta: Oh, and good morning to you too, Mumma.

Logan: Good morning, Jim. I got the message you sent last night about the issue Connor has. I'll call you when I'm done with my next meeting okay?

Brooke: Hotstuff, you're still here?

Connor: Dad, did you tell Logan what's going on?

Jim: No specifics yet. I just thought it would be wise to pick his brain. I won't say anything if you're not comfortable, Son.

Connor: No, that's fine. I'd appreciate his input on this. I want to go in with my best foot forward. I want the book thrown at her for what she's done.

Logan: Actually, I have ten minutes up my sleeve. I'll give you a quick call now, Jim.

Brooke: Hmm.

Logan: What?

Brooke: I rest my case!

Logan: I'll deal with you when I get home, wench.

Brooke: Looking forward to it.

Logan: And for your information, I'm not being nosey, just helpful.

Brooke: Uh huh.

Logan: It's true.

Brooke: I don't doubt it, you're a sweetheart like that, but I can also guarantee you're dying to know who she is and what she's done.

Jacinta: Con, can you get Cass to call me when she wakes? I want to look at some dresses this morning.

Connor: Okay.

When Cassie starts to stir beside me, I drop my phone on the bed and roll onto my side so I can run my tongue along the length of her spine. "Morning, Princess."

"Morning," she rasps. Her voice when she wakes is pure sex, and as soon as I hear it, I start to harden.

"Jacinta wants you to call her," I say before I forget. "She wants to go dress shopping this morning."

When Cassie goes to sit up, I wrap my arms around her, keeping her in place. "I need to get my phone, it's in my bedroom."

"Your old room, you mean. This is your bedroom now."

I wrap my hand around her leg, pulling it back and draping it over mine. My fingers skim over her silky-smooth skin until I reach the apex of her thighs. She spreads her legs a little wider and whimpers as soon as I come in contact with her clit.

My fingertips move in slow and lazy circles. I can't believe I'm going to get to wake up to this special kind of sex with Cassie for the rest of my life; the kind that's specifically made for early mornings.

"I—"

"You can call her when we're done. This is our first morning together, we need to commemorate it."

"We woke up together at the cabin."

"This is different. This is in our place, our room, and now that you've agreed to officially be mine, it's ... special."

She raises her arm and reaches back, curling it around my neck. When she twists her head to the side, I lift mine off the pillow and capture her lips.

I work her over with my hand until she's ripe and ready. Only then do I reach for my rock-hard cock and slowly guide it inside her. She moans into my mouth as I do. I'm not proud to admit that I've been with many women, both before and after her, but none of them meant anything to me. They were simply a means to an end. I'm probably going to sound like a chick, but being intimate with the person you love adds so many layers. It's not just sex, it's meaningful. When we are together like this, I feel a closeness to her that I can't even explain.

I draw back to the tip, before rolling my hips and thrusting back in. The feelings that this woman evokes in me are both scary and electrifying. A part of me is petrified I'm going to lose her again, but I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that never happens.

My fingers are still working over her clit as I continue to move inside her, in long languid strokes. I can already feel her inner walls tightening around my dick, so I know she's close. "Come for me, Princess," I whisper in her ear.

"Connor," she breathes, and when I feel the first spasm, I push in as far as I can go and stop moving, wanting to feel it all. I don't withdraw until I've drained every ounce of pleasure from her body. Only then do I roll her onto her stomach,

before dragging her onto her knees. As nice as that lazy morning sex was, I need to fuck her now.

My fingertips dig into her soft flesh as I grasp hold of her hips and thrust back in until I'm balls deep. I clench my eyes closed and throw back my head as I start to pound into her over and over again. "Fuck you feel so good, Cass. So fucking good."

"Don't stop."

If it was at all possible, I'd never stop, but I already feel like I'm on the brink. I thrust into her a few more times, but when my balls tighten, I quickly withdraw and flip her onto her back. I still need to make her come again, so I have to slow down.

I place my lips on her neck and start kissing my way down her body. I'm going to make her come with my mouth while I give my dick a chance to calm the hell down.

Her body withers and her hands are now clutching the bedding as I suck one of her hardened nipples into my mouth, lightly grazing it with my teeth. My hand palms her other breast before I switch places.

I take my time as I continue to move south, exploring every inch of her, reacquainting myself with her spectacular body. Even when we were apart, she always played the starring role in my dreams.

By the time I reach my destination, her hands are fisting my hair. The moment my tongue sweeps over her clit, she bucks against my face. I trace the lips of her bare pussy, teasing her ... tasting her. When she releases a little growl, a grin curves on my lips.

"Con, I need more." There's no way I can deny her of anything, so I move back to her clit, sucking it into my mouth and lightly biting down. My fingers join in the action as I slide two digits deep inside her, crooking them as I do, so I can stimulate her G-spot. My eyes watch her from between her spread legs. "Yes," she screams, thrashing her head from side to side as she pushes it further back into the pillow.

She takes everything I give her like a champ as I gobble her up like a starved man and finger fuck her like it's my sole purpose in life. When she finally falls over the edge, her hands slip from my hair to my shoulders and her nails dig into my flesh. Her orgasm seems to go on forever as her body arches off the mattress and her inner walls contract against my fingers. She's so fucking hot I can't help but grind my cock against the bed. I need back inside her, stat.

My lips and chin glisten with her arousal as I make my way back up her body, settling between her parted legs. I reach for her hands, dragging them above her head and lacing our fingers together.

I rest my head against her shoulder and groan when I thrust my hips forward and enter her in one fluid move. My dick is as hard as steel.

She locks her ankles around my arse, and the next time I bottom out, she holds me there. Sweat breaks out across my skin as a mixture of pleasure and torture washes over me as she restricts my movements. I'm buried to the hilt and as good as it feels, I need to move.

I roll my hips as much as I can in this position, and although my body is screaming for more, when I raise my head to stare down at her, I'm momentarily winded by the intimacy of this moment. Nothing in the world compares to being here with her, like this.

Releasing one of her hands, my fingers move of their own accord, caressing down the side of her face. "I love you, Cass."

Truer words have never been spoken, but my stomach plummets as soon as they are out of my mouth. The last thing I want to do is ruin this moment or scare her away by moving too fast. Technically, we only officially became a couple last night, but my love for her never stopped. Even when we were apart.

Her reply is the last thing I expect to hear. "I love you too, Connor Maloney ... with all my heart."

Chapter 25

Cassie

I'm sitting beside Grace on the lounge in the viewing room of the bridal shop, waiting for Jacinta to come back out in the next gown. She's tried on five so far and they were all beautiful, especially on her, but I could tell by the look on her face that none of them were the one.

As soon as she steps out of the dressing room my breath hitches in my throat. And when my eyes flicker from the dress to her beaming smile, I know this is it. The gown is a lightweight, airy tulle. The netting on the outer layer creates a cloudlike volume to the skirt. The corset bodice is hand pleated, with a keyhole back that's finished with a dainty bow.

She looks like a princess and the sight has tears immediately rising to my eyes. This is a moment we've been talking about since we were little girls. I'm so overcome with emotion as she steps onto the pedestal in the centre of the room that a small sob bubbles in the back of my throat. Grace instantly reaches for my hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. I glance over at her and find tears streaming down her face too.

"This is the one," Jacinta says as her gaze moves from the mirror to us.

"It's perfect," I manage to squeak out.

"You look beautiful, sweetie," Grace whispers, dabbing her eyes. She rises and crosses the short distance to her daughter, where they hug it out in the middle of the room.

I feel blessed to be experiencing this mother-daughter exchange. Unfortunately, I'll never get to share a moment like this with my own, and that saddens me more than I care to admit.

Even though Jacinta and I often fantasised about marrying best friends and bringing our kids up together, deep down I knew she was only going along with it for my benefit. Because back then, marriage was never on the cards for her. Due to the extensive damage she suffered in the first twelve years of her young life—growing up with an abusive father—men were never on her radar.

The significance of this moment is not lost on either of us. Not only is she defying the odds by marrying the man of her dreams, but she's also carrying his baby.

My best friend is living my fantasy. Even though Connor and I expressed our love for each other this morning, I'd be a fool, given everything that we've been through, to bank on a happy ending for us.

I can't guarantee it won't happen, but after sitting down with Connor and his father last night to discuss what happened, the cold hard truth is I have no proof to substantiate my claims, just my word. Common sense tells me that won't stand up in court. As confident and competent as they seemed despite this, it left me feeling like a dark cloud was looming over us, because nothing in life is a certainty. If my mother has anything to say about it, we'll be lucky if we walk out of this as a couple.



I feel high on life by the time we arrive back at our building. The dresses are chosen, including mine and the mother of the bride's. The things that still need doing are extensive, but we went over Jacinta's list during lunch and have decided to divide and conquer. I'm confident between the three of us we'll smash this out of the park.

We exit the lift on my floor, and when I unlock the front door, I'm greeted with a scene that instantly deflates me. I'm

again coming home to a house full of people. Aside from Jim, it's not the same crowd from last night. Logan Cavanagh—Brooke's husband—two other men in suits, and an elderly, casually dressed man, whom I've never seen before, sits alongside my father, going through a stack of papers.

“Daddy,” is the first word out of my mouth.

“Pumpkin,” he says, rising from his chair and crossing the room. When he opens his arms, I immediately fall into them. “I've been so worried about you.”

“I'm okay,” I lie. “What are you doing here?”

“Helping in any way I can.”

I tilt my head back and smile up at him. Although I'm not overly confident there's anything anyone can do, it's comforting to know I have his support and all these people in my corner.

Connor gets up to greet me next, cupping my face in his big hands and brushing his lips against mine. There is a sparkle in his eyes, one that I haven't seen in a very long time. I'd like to think I'm the one who put that there.

“Come,” he says, reaching for my hand and leading me towards the table. “I'll show you what we've been up to since you've been gone.”

He introduces me to everyone I don't know, and I greet the ones I do. The men in the suits are two of Logan's top lawyers, one who specialises in criminal cases, and the other who deals with medical malpractice. The old guy is Mike, Logan's private investigator.

I'm grateful to have all these competent men on my side, but I'm still having doubts.

Connor pulls out the chair beside him. “Sit,” he commands.

As soon as I'm seated, Logan starts talking. “We've been in contact with the police in Melbourne and faxed down the detailed statement you gave Jim last night. They're putting together a task force to investigate. At this time, your mother

has not been arrested because we're still trying to gather all the evidence to build a case. We want this charge to stick. Regardless of the police involvement, we will still be doing our own investigation from this end, we want to cross all our t's and dot all our i's."

My head is spinning as I listen to him, but the word that stands out the most is *we*. It's comforting to know I'm not going through this alone.

"We're not bringing in the hospital where she works, or the medical board at this stage," he continues, "we don't want to do anything that may tip her off until we get all our ducks in a row, but once we do, things will start to happen pretty quickly. We're also making plans to have her audited at some point, to try and find out how she came into possession of the medication she prescribed you, and what it was. Hopefully, there's some kind of paper trail."

My hope continues to dwindle when he says that because it sounds like a lot of what ifs. "Okay," I squeak, sounding like a frightened mouse. Connor's hand moves under the table, coming to rest on my leg.

"She's denying you were even pregnant," my father chimes in.

"She's lying because I was."

"We believe you," Connor says, lightly squeezing my leg.

"After I took a pregnancy test, I went to see a doctor. He did both a blood and urine test and confirmed I was."

All the men around the table sit up straighter in their seats. "With your father's help, we are getting all your medical records from your general practitioner, as well as the paediatrician you were under."

"I didn't go to my regular GP," I state, bowing my head. "He was a friend of my mother's and I was scared he'd tell her. I went to a medical centre a few suburbs over ... the same place I'd gone to get birth control when Connor and I became sexually active." My face heats having to admit that in front of all these strangers, but mainly my father. I was young, I know

—sixteen—but to me, there was nothing dirty, wrong, or sinister about what Connor and I did. We genuinely loved each other, and it was simply our way of expressing that. My eyes hesitantly move to my dad, and I mouth, “Sorry.”

I’m not apologising for my actions, but I am sorry if any of this news hurts him. He’s probably disappointed to hear his teenage daughter was doing all these things behind his back.

“It’s okay, baby girl.” My father leans forward in his chair and reaches across the table to place his hand on mine. “You were young and in love, you have nothing to apologise for.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” I say, choking on my words.

Having my father here means the world to me. I know this can’t be easy. Especially considering his job. Scandals like this can ruin politicians; you see it all the time.

Connor removes his hand from my leg and drapes it around my shoulder, pulling me into his side. When he places a soft kiss on the side of my head, a tear rolls down my cheek.

Logan clears his throat. “I know this isn’t easy for you, Cassandra, and I’m truly sorry for everything you’ve been through, but trust me when I say you have the best legal minds in the country on your side. Your mother will pay dearly for her crimes. I won’t rest until she does.”



“How does the table look?” I ask Connor as he exits the kitchen.

Coming up behind me, he slides his arms around my waist and rests his head on my shoulder. “It looks great ... very professionally done.” He turns his head and places his lips against my cheek. “You did well, Princess, I’m proud of you.”

I spin until I’m facing him and snake my arms around his neck. “Thank you.” I’ve dined at enough fancy restaurants over the years to know how to do a perfect table setting.

The last three weeks, here with him, have been a dream come true. I’m living my best life, but there’s been the odd

occasion where I'm hit with a fear so intense it's debilitating. My therapist thinks they're anxiety attacks, stemming from my mother. But they come from nowhere ... even when I'm not thinking about *her*, or worrying about what she's up to.

I wonder if it's because things are too good ... I'm too happy, and I'm not used to this kind of bliss. Growing up, my mother was always lurking on the sidelines ready to drag me back down to reality whenever life was going too well for me.

"Have you ever considered doing something like this professionally? You have the knack for it."

"No, I like my job at the studio," I answer as my fingers play with the short hair at the nape of his neck. "How's dinner coming along?"

"Good. The chickens are almost ready to come out of the oven and rest. The vegetables should be done by the time everyone arrives."

We've resumed our cooking classes at the culinary school and seem to be improving every week ... well I do. Connor is a natural. Last weekend, we made roast chicken and baked vegetables. It turned out so good we decided to spring a surprise dinner party. Our guests think we're ordering in and discussing the final preparations for the wedding—which is just under two weeks away—but instead, they'll be dining on a beautiful home-cooked meal prepared by us.

Tonight's going to be an adult-only get-together. Grace, Jim, Jacinta, Mason, Brooke, and Logan are all coming. Blake's spending the night at the Cavanagh's residence with their kids. Logan's niece, Lara, is babysitting. Mason and Jacinta recently pulled Blake out of the school he was attending due to the bullying. He's now going to the same one as CJ and Angel.

Connor did most of the cooking for tonight, but I helped him with all the prep. My main job was decorating and making the kick-arse cocktails that I plan to serve on arrival.

"Poor Henry and Henrietta," I say, pouting.

"Who's Henry and Henrietta?"

“The chickens ... the ones in the oven.”

“You named them?”

“It felt like the right thing to do. God rest their sweet little souls.”

When I do the sign of the cross, Connor shakes his head and barks out a laugh. “Fuck I love doing life with you, Cass.”

“Me too, Con. You make me so happy.”

He leans in and covers my mouth with his, kissing me so passionately it makes my toes curl in my heels. When he draws back, he rests his forehead against mine and smiles. “I love you, Miss Lewis, more than you’ll ever know.”

He doesn’t profess his love often. He doesn’t need to. I know how much he loves me; I feel it in every kiss, every touch, every gesture, and it’s something I’ll never take for granted. “I love you too, Mr Maloney.”

Chapter 26

Connor

I lean my shoulder against the entrance to the kitchen and observe my girl—the hostess with the mostest—greet our guests at the door.

She's in her element, I can tell, and fuck if it doesn't make my heart sing seeing her smile like that. She deserves it all, and I'll make sure she gets it. I always thought I couldn't love her any more than I used to ... *I was wrong*. The feelings I have for this woman run so damn deep they scare me sometimes.

Cassie spent hours yesterday looking up the perfect drink recipes for our dinner party and ended up choosing three: Raspberry and Passionfruit Martinis, Cranberry Sours, and Bourbon Cocktails—complete with garnishes—and a mocktail for Jaz since she has a bun in the oven, which she's now perfectly balancing on a large silver tray.

“What's this?” Jacinta asks, taking the drink she's offered. “And why are you dressed up? I thought this was a casual thing.”

“Don't worry, this one has no alcohol. And Connor and I decided to host a dinner party tonight ... we wanted to surprise you all with our awesomeness.”

“Yum,” Jacinta says after taking a sip of her mocktail. “You know you're supposed to serve nice food at a dinner party, right?”

Cassie juts out her chin. “I know, Jacinta.”

“What are we eating then?”

“Connor and I have cooked.”

She throws back her head and laughs. “Yeah right.”

“It’s true,” I say, stepping forward and grabbing a Bourbon Cocktail off the tray.

Mason reaches in and follows my lead, grabbing one too and bringing it to his mouth. “Mmm, what’s in this?” he asks.

“Bourbon, lemon wedges, mint leaves, maple syrup, soda water and crushed ice ... shaken not stirred,” Cassie recites.

“You made this?” he asks. She nods her head proudly. “It’s delicious.”

“Thank you, Mason,” she says, raising her chin a little higher and giving Jaz the side-eye. I bring my glass to my mouth to hide my smile.

“What’s in mine?” my sister asks.

“Pineapple wedges, thinly sliced orange, fresh passionfruit, cranberry juice, ginger beer, fresh mint, pomegranate seeds and ice cubes.”

“Impressive,” she says.

“Cass and I have been attending cooking classes at a culinary school.”

“Since when?”

My eyes move to Cass. “A few months now,” I say.

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing about it?” my sister gripes.

“We don’t have to tell you everything,” Cassie grumbles. “I’m sure you and Mason do lots of things we don’t know about.”

“Like how he just brought me to orgasm with his fingers in the lift on the way down?”

The mouthful of drink I’ve yet to swallow goes spraying across the room. “For fuck’s sake,” I manage to get out in between racking coughs. Mason chuckles as he leans in to tap

my back. “Get your fucking hand off me,” I bellow, slapping his arm away.

“Relax, I used the other one,” he says, like that makes it okay. When I narrow my eyes at him, he shrugs. “This baby has made your sister insatiable.”

“La-la-la-la,” I sing, trying to drown out his words as I spin around and stomp towards the kitchen. I swear these two do shit like this on purpose.



“I think they actually cooked it,” I hear Jacinta say to the rest of our guests sitting at the table. “I saw the dirty dishes in the sink, and Connor was making gravy with the pan juices. It doesn’t appear to be staged.”

I look over at Cassie who’s in here helping me place everything on the serving platters, just in time to see her roll her eyes. “Why is it so hard to believe?”

“Probably because it’s something we’ve never done. Don’t worry, Princess, they’ll be eating their words soon enough ... the proof is in the tasting.”

“Ugh.”

“Jacinta’s pregnant. Is it even safe for her to eat their food?” Mason chimes in.

Do they not realise we can hear every word they’re saying?

A tiny growl permeates in the back of Cass’s throat as she grabs one of the baked potatoes from the platter and runs it across her tongue, licking it. I give her a strange look as she places it back down on top of the others. “That one is Mason’s,” she grumbles.

Chuckling, I proudly lean in and place a kiss on the side of her head. “That’s my girl.”

“For the record, I like being your girl, Maloney.”

Those words have my heart swelling in my chest. All that heartache I went through seems so pointless now. I’d go

through it all again if it led me right here, to this moment, with her.

We pick up a platter each that has a chicken sitting in the middle, surrounded by a plenitude of baked potatoes and roast pumpkin. Cassandra is grinning as she puts hers down at the end of the table where Mason is sitting, and I place mine in front of my parents.

“Wow, it looks delicious. I’m proud of you both.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

We both head back into the kitchen to grab the rest of our meal. We have honeyed carrots and a broccoli and cauliflower cheesy bake.

Jacinta sits forward in her chair, inspecting everything we’ve laid down. “It looks really good.”

Cass rolls her eyes again as I pull out her chair. “The table setting looks beautiful too,” Brooke chimes in.

“Cass did all that, and she made the cocktails from scratch.”

“Good job,” Brooke says, leaning in to nudge her shoulder with Cassie’s. When a pink hue forms on her cheeks, I give her leg a quick squeeze. “We should get you to do the place settings for the upcoming wedding.”

“The company I hired is taking care of that,” Jacinta states.

“O ye of little faith,” Cassandra mumbles under her breath.

“You’re cooking and quoting bible scripture now? Who are you?” Jacinta retorts.

“Your ex-BFF if you insult me one more time tonight.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “These pregnancy hormones are playing havoc with me.”

Mason places his closed fist against his mouth and coughs, so I give him a dirty look. “I hope you washed your hands,” I bite.

My father clears his throat. “Would you like me to carve the chickens?” he asks.

“Please,” I reply. “But I have a few words to say first.”

“Go ahead, Son.”

I reach for Cassie’s hand under the table and lace my fingers through hers. “I’d just like to say a special thanks to Henry and Henrietta.”

“Who’s Henry and Henrietta?” Jacinta asks. Cassie points to the chickens with her free hand and Jaz’s eyes widen. “You knew them personally?”

“No.”

“Are they from Martha’s?”

“Woolworths,” Cassie says.

“Can I finish?” When my sister nods, I continue. “They lived a long and happy life on the farm ... they spent their days frolicking in the sun, pecking for food and scratching around in the dirt. At night they’d snuggle up together, safe and cosy in their coop ... we appreciate the sacrifice they made for us tonight.”

Mason throws his head back and laughs. “How much did you two have to drink before we got here?”

“Rude much,” Cassie mumbles before tightening her grip on my hand. “That was beautiful, Con,” she says, looking over at me and smiling. “Thank you. Henry and Henrietta would’ve appreciated it.”

I’ll be the first to admit what I just said was a dumb, stupid and completely ridiculous thing, but I did it for Cass and her alone. Some may say she’s a little wacky—I prefer unconventional—but her quirks are just one of the many things I love about this woman. It’s what makes her, her.

She’s been weird with meat since our talk about Christmas ham at the farm in Mudgee. So even if I just made a complete fool of myself in front of my family and friends, I don’t care. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to see her smile.



“Have you got a moment?” Logan asks, pulling me aside.

“Sure.”

“We got her.”

“Amanda?”

He places his hand on my shoulder. “Yes. I got a call from Mike on my way here.”

“What did you find?”

“When they audited her doctor’s records, they found two prescriptions she wrote, and it marries up perfectly with the timeline. One was for Mifepristone and the other for Misoprostol.”

“That’s what she used to ...” I can’t even bring myself to finish that sentence.

“A medical or medication abortion can be used in place of surgery if done before nine weeks. From what I’ve been told, a pregnancy needs a high level of the hormone progesterone to continue. Mifepristone blocks the action of progesterone to stop the pregnancy from progressing. Misoprostol softens the cervix and contracts the uterus to expel the foetus.”

“That bitch.”

“I know. I still can’t wrap my head around it. The detectives were en route to the hospital when I got the call. She’ll be arrested and charged before the night’s out.”

The news is bittersweet, but I still manage to extend my arm and shake his hand. “Thank you for everything.”

“You’re like family, Connor. I was happy to help.”

“Can we keep it between us for now? I want to tell Cassie myself.” I can hear her laughing with the girls in the kitchen, and I don’t want to ruin her night. “I’ll wait until everyone has left before I say something.”

“Of course. As you know the trial won’t be for months, maybe longer, but once she’s formally charged, she’ll lose her

job and her license to practice medicine. It's a small consolation for now, but I'll make sure she goes away for a long time for this."

Chapter 27

Cassie

I grab Jacinta's hands and bounce up and down on the spot. "Can you believe you're getting married today? In a matter of minutes, you'll no longer be a Maloney."

"Oh my God ... don't tell me that."

"Why?"

"Becoming a Maloney was one of the best days of my life."

"Ah, crap. Okay, let's start over. You look beautiful, Jazzie ... breathtakingly stunning." Which is true. I thought she looked absolutely perfect the day she tried on her dress, but now it's accompanied with the accessories, hair and make-up ... she's a vision. "Mason's going to get a massive boner when he sees you walking down the aisle."

Jacinta slaps my arm. "Don't say that either. I don't want all my family and friends seeing my soon-to-be husband's erect junk."

Gah. I bite the corner of my bottom lip as I try to think of something more appropriate to say. I'm her matron of honour ... her support system on her big day, and I'm really fucking it up right now.

My train of thought is broken when someone knocks on the door. It's Jim. His eyes move between the both of us and he smiles. "We're ready."

"Coming, Dad," Jacinta says.

I grab both our bouquets and pass one to her. I still haven't said anything monumental, so I go with the first thing that springs to mind. "Break a leg, bestie."

She rolls her eyes, but at least she's smiling when she does. *I'm so lame.* The lamest of lame. The worst matron of honour in the history of matrons of honour. I can only pray this marriage lasts because if it doesn't, I doubt I'll be asked to do this gig again.



Angel, Blake, and CJ are the first to walk down the aisle. A length of white carpet has been laid from the house, leading down to the large floral archway, where Mason and Connor are standing with the marriage celebrant.

The kids look so sweet. Angel in her frilly white dress, and the boys in tiny three-piece suits. She's standing in the middle, sprinkling pink rose petals as she goes, and is flanked on either side by the boys who are both holding white satin pillows with a gold ring tied to each.

The song Mason and Jacinta chose for this moment is "A Thousand Years" by Ellie Goulding, and I'm suddenly feeling very emotional. I'm not sure if it's the song or the fact that I'm staring at the groom's best man as I place one foot in front of the other, wishing with all my might that it was us who were getting married today. Is marriage even on the cards for us? That's a prospect I'm too scared to even think about. Wishing for things can only lead to disappointment.

As I approach the makeshift altar—with the stunning beach as a backdrop—where Mason waits nervously for his bride, my eyes are still glued to Connor. "I love you," he mouths, and if I'm not mistaken, he looks a little emotional as well. Is he thinking the same thing I am?

A girl can dream.

I'm wearing a blush-pink, full-length, chiffon, sleeveless V-neck dress that has a sweeping skirt and a large split up the front that stops just above my knee. Jacinta and I both had our long hair set in large curls this morning, which the hairdresser

then swept back off our faces, coiling the curls and entwining them into a full, loose bun at the nape of our neck.

My make-up is flawless, with dark heavy shadowing which has my caramel-coloured eyes popping, a bronzed glow highlighting my cheekbones, and a toned-down neutral gloss painted on my lips.

I take my place on the opposite side of the boys and turn to watch my best friend walk down the makeshift aisle, arm in arm with her father, to marry the man of her dreams. Her glistening eyes and radiant smile have a lump rising in my throat.

When she's close enough, Mason swoops her into his arms and spins her around. Once she's placed down on her feet, he dips her back and gives her a scorching kiss. It has me swooning on my feet. The love these two share is palpable. I couldn't be happier to know my bestie is going to spend the rest of her life being adored by this man.

The last four weeks have been a whirlwind, to say the least. Pulling a wedding together in a month has been a mammoth task, with a few tears and tantrums along the way, but we got here in the end, and I'm so proud of everything we achieved.

There are only forty people in attendance because Jacinta and Mason wanted to keep it small and intimate. A mixture of family, friends, and work colleagues.

An expansive white marquee was bought in two days ago and erected on the grassed area of the Cavanagh's vast estate.

Jacinta and I spent yesterday here, supervising the setting up of the interior, and I was impressed watching it come together. Complete with a wooden floor, chandeliers, white tulle that was loosely draped along the expanse of the ceiling, and entwined with fairy lights. The table settings matched the colour theme of the wedding ... white and blush pink. A silver, three-foot-high candelabra, decorated with pink and white flowers and crystals, sits on a mirrored base in the centre of each table. The finished product took my breath away.

We slept here last night, because we needed to be up early for hair and make-up, and Brooke made us a scrumptious lobster and champagne breakfast. The boys stayed at a nearby hotel with Jim and Grace.

Once the vows are exchanged and more rose petals are thrown, the bridal party heads down to the beach for photos before we rejoin the guests for canapés and drinks on the lawn.

Connor hands me a glass of champagne before sliding his arms around my waist and pulling my back into his front. Leaning in, he whispers, “As beautiful as you look in this dress, Princess, I can’t wait to peel you out of it when we get home.” His warm breath caressing my skin makes it pebble with goosebumps.

Turning in his arms, I brush my lips along his. “Mmm,” I hum. “Something to look forward to.”

“I missed you last night. I couldn’t sleep without you beside me.”

“Aww,” I say, reaching up to cradle the side of his face. “It was a full-on day here yesterday, I’m pretty sure I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.” When he frowns at my reply, I smile. “If I wasn’t so tired, I would’ve struggled too though.”

“Hmm.”

When the master of ceremonies speaks, I glance at him over my shoulder. “Ladies and gentlemen, before we enter the marquee to be seated, the bride would like to throw her bouquet. Can I have all the unmarried women congregate over by the fountain please?”

“That’s me,” I say, turning back to Connor.

“Good luck,” he replies, placing his lips on mine.

“I don’t need it.”

“Why?”

“Never underestimate a woman on a mission. I’m prepared to take down anyone that gets in my way.”

Connor glances towards the fountain where a few women have gathered. “Even Angel?” he asks. She’s now joined the crowd looking awfully excited.

I shrug. “If she gets in my way, I’m taking her down.”

“Brutal,” he says, grinning.

“That bouquet is mine, Mr Maloney.” Reaching down, I remove my heels and hand them to him. “Hold these.”

“Go get ’em, tiger,” he says, slapping my arse as I walk away.

When Jacinta takes her place with her back to us, Angel moves forward, right in front of me and holds her arms up high. Would people notice if I used the pink sash around her waist to restrain them behind her back?

My eyes quickly scan over the guests, and unfortunately, everyone’s attention is on us. That immediately foils my plan. I swear if this dress had sleeves, I’d be pushing them up my arms right now. She’s a kid, so I can’t exactly bowl her over, but I’ll leapfrog over her head if need be.

I widen my stance when Jaz raises the bouquet above her head, but instead of throwing it, she turns to face us. My eyes narrow as she heads in our direction. I swear to God if she hands those flowers to Angel, it’s going down. She’s not even old enough to get married.

She stops right in front of her, and I clench my hands into fists. I’d never hit my BFF, but I am prepared to snatch those flowers from her if need be. My turmoil is short lived, because Angel suddenly steps to the side and Jacinta hands her bouquet to me.

I frown. Did she doubt my ability to win it fair and square? Despite my annoyance, I take it from her. “I could’ve caught it legitimately.”

“I know,” she says, smiling. She reaches up and for a second, I think she’s going to hug me, but instead, she places her hands on my shoulders and turns me around. I gasp the moment I find Connor behind me and down on one knee.

The prized bouquet in my hand is soon forgotten as I throw my arms in the air and it goes flying across the yard. “Yes!” I scream, diving in his direction and tackling him to the ground.

Connor is now flat on his back and my body is aligned on top of his. He’s smiling up at me as he says, “I haven’t asked you yet.”

“My bad, but the answer’s still going to be yes.”

“What if I was going to ask you something that required a no answer?”

“You were on your knees holding out an engagement ring, Connor. There isn’t a no in that equation.”

“I laid awake all night thinking of the perfect thing to say.”

My eyes narrow. “I thought you laid awake because you missed me.”

“It was a combination of both,” he says, chuckling.

I raise my chin. “Let me hear it then.”

“Can I get up?”

“No, whatever it is you have to say to me, you can say it right here.”

“Okay.” He takes a deep breath. “Cassandra Lewis, I feel like I have loved you my entire life.” He extends his arm and starts feeling around on the grass for the box he dropped when I tackled him.

“Here you go, Uncle Connor,” Blake says, picking it up and handing it to him.

“Thanks, champ.” His attention moves back to me. “Six years ago, I bought you this promise ring ... it was your Christmas present, because even back then I knew I wanted to marry you one day.”

“You did?”

“Yes. And although I never got the chance to give it to you—and it was a constant reminder of everything I had lost—I held on to it, and do you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because true love will always find its way back to you.”

“Oh, Con,” I say as tears fill my eyes. “That was beautiful, and the answer is a big fat yes.”

“I still haven’t asked the question.”

I wince. “Sorry, go ahead.”

“I can’t imagine growing old with anyone but you, nor do I want to. There are many ways to find happiness in this life, Cass, but all I need is you. You deserve the world ... someone who will always have your back, let you grow without borders, and love you without end. Let me be that person for you. Marry me?”

The tears are freely flowing now as I smile down at him. I know I don’t deserve this beautiful man after the way I treated him, but I want him, and for once in my life I’m going to do something selfish ... I’m keeping him.

“Now’s the time to answer,” he utters.

“Oh right,” I say with a small laugh. “Even when we were apart, in my heart you were still mine. You were the dream I went to every time I closed my eyes.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Being your wife would be an honour, Connor Maloney.”

He lifts his head off the ground and places his lips against mine and everyone gathered around us cheers. “That’s still not a yes, but I’ll take it, Princess.”

Chapter 28

Cassie

I hold my hand out in front of me because I can't stop staring at my ring. A part of me feels bad that we highjacked Jacinta and Mason's wedding, but Connor keeps assuring me that they were in on his plan from the very beginning.

The guests are all seated inside the marquee, and the wedding party is outside the entrance waiting to be introduced.

"I take it you like your ring?" Connor asks. "You can't stop looking at it."

"The ring itself is exquisite, but what it signifies means so much more. How could you have afforded such a huge-arse diamond when you were only nineteen?"

"My mum set up a trust fund for me before she died. I got it when I was eighteen."

"Con, that money was supposed to be for your future."

"You *are* my future, Cass."

This guy.

I slide my arms around his waist and rest my cheek on his broad chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart ... the heart that I now know beats solely for me.



I knew this wedding would be amazing, but it turned out to be the best day of my life. My cheeks hurt from smiling so

much. We've laughed, danced, and eaten the most amazing food. I've barely consumed any alcohol, because I don't need it. I'm high on life.

I'm not even nervous when it's time for me to make my speech. I reach for the neatly folded piece of paper that I stashed in my clutch earlier, then stand.

"Good evening, everyone. Jacinta and I first met when we were twelve years old, and I loved her in an instant. She was shy, innocent, and so damn sweet ... she still is to this day. The kindest, and purest person I've ever had the pleasure of knowing ... well when she's not being mouthy, she is."

Everybody laughs, and when I feel Jacinta's foot stomp down on mine under the table, I look down at her and grin.

"She's the coolest, funniest, and most loyalest BFF a girl could ever ask for, and I'm not only blessed, but honoured to be able to share this special day with her. I'd like to think I even played a hand in bringing these two together.

"Almost a year ago, we were out celebrating Jacinta's twenty-first birthday when these two bumped into each other at the bar. I immediately saw the sparks fly. Jacinta's protective shield promptly came up, and her sass came out to play. You see, being her closest friend for all these years, I knew this was her tell-tale sign. Code for I like this guy so I'm going to scare him away with my mouthy mouth."

I look down at her and arch one of my perfectly sculptured brows, driving home my point from earlier.

"When she turned and stormed away, and Mason gobbled her up with his eyes, I knew I had to do something. That's when I decided to hatch my devious plan, because there was something about these two that felt like kismet.

"On first impressions, those rugged good looks, big muscles and inked arms can be a little intimidating for a woman still carrying around her 'V' card."

"Oh my God," Jacinta screeches, punching me in the thigh.

"I'm not lying."

“You didn’t need to say that in front of my parents.”

I roll my eyes and continue.

“These two needed a little push, and I was the perfect person to give it, but I needed to vet Mason first. I wasn’t about to send my BFF home with just anyone. It was my duty as her best friend, and I don’t take those kinds of things lightly. When I found out he was not in fact a career criminal, but had a good job, never murdered anyone, been in prison, kicked a puppy or a kitten, I realised underneath his brutish exterior he was a stand-up guy.”

“I swear on everything that’s holy, if you mention birthday ‘D’, I’m going to kill you,” Jacinta mumbles from beside me.

I throw my hands in the air because my BFF has chosen this very moment to become a bridezilla and ruin my speech. I give her the stink eye before turning back to my audience.

“Since the bride has just informed me that I’m not allowed to mention the birthday ‘D’ or the three mind-blowing ‘O’ she ended up getting that night, I’ll just move things along and adlib the rest.”

Mason throws back his head and cracks up, and Connor places his hand over his ears and gags.

“When we were younger, Jacinta and I made a pact that we were going to marry best friends when we grew up, and after the events of today, I can’t believe that those two starry-eyed little girls are going to get their wish.” My eyes move to my fiancé. “I know I am.”

I hold up my hand and wiggle my fingers, showing off the massive rock I’m now sporting before reaching for the glass of champagne in front of me and raising it in the air.

My attention ping-pongs between Jacinta and Connor.

“Not only will I officially become your sister, Jazzie, but I’ll also finally get something I’ve yearned for since I was a little girl—to be part of a real family, and the best one in the world—a Maloney!”

I may say the last word too loudly, with a lot of emotion, and fist pump the air, but that knowledge has my heart swelling to a point where it's in danger of busting out of my chest and spraying little chunks of my heart all over the guests.

My eyes move back to the piece of paper in my hand.

“Jacinta, you are my best friend, you are my ride or die forever and I love you more than words can ever say. May your troubles be less, your blessings be more, and nothing but happiness come through your door. A toast to laughter, love and a happily ever after.

“To Mason and Jacinta.”

“To Mason and Jacinta,” the guests repeat.

She stands and hugs me a little too tight for my liking. “I’d be sleeping with one eye open tonight if I were you,” she whispers.

“Oh please, I’ve heard all about those nympho pregnancy hormones of yours. You’re going to be too busy riding that big hunk of man meat to worry about me.”



“Princess,” Connor says, reaching for my hand across the centre console. “Why are you still crying?”

I dab the tissue under my eyes. “I’m so emotional right now, Con. It was that stupid farewell circle at the end of the wedding that did me in. Saying goodbye to my best friend like that, ripped my damn heart out. I can tell you one thing, that circle is banned from our wedding.”

“You do realise she’s still your best friend, right?”

I flick my hand at him as I push my head further back into the seat. “You don’t understand, everything is changing, Con, who knows when I’ll get to see her again.”

“You’re going to see her in the morning, Cass,” he says, chuckling as he tightens his grip on my hand. “Have you forgotten we agreed to meet up with them for breakfast before they leave for their honeymoon?”

“Exactly. Right before she gets on a plane and leaves the country being the operative word here.”

“What exactly was the operative word in that sentence?”

I count them out in my head. “The first eleven.”

He barks out a laugh before pulling our conjoined hands to his face. “She’ll be gone two weeks,” he says, placing a kiss on my knuckles.

“She’s a wife now, and in seven months she’s going to be a mum ... she’ll be busy, and have no time for me anymore.”

“Technically, she’s already a mum to Blake, and she still has time for you now.”

“Blake’s all grown up ... he’s practically self-sufficient.”

“He’s six, Cass.”

“Still ... babies take up a lot of time.”

“Do you know what you do if that happens?”

“What?”

“You get in the lift, go up to their floor, and sit with her ... help her, I know she’d appreciate it.”

“I can so do that,” I say, smiling.

“There you go, problem solved.”

I turn in my seat to face him. “There is another layer to my sadness.”

“And what’s that?”

“She’s not a Maloney anymore ... she’s a Bradley now, and that makes me so sad,” I tell him as a few more tears leak from my eyes.

“Irrelevant. The name change means nothing, she’ll always be a Maloney deep down.”

I gasp. “When we get married, I want to be a full Maloney ... like all the way down to my bone marrow.”

He glances at the watch on his wrist. “In roughly ten minutes, when we reach our apartment, I can guarantee you’ll

be full of Maloney ... namely me.”

Despite my despair, that knowledge has me smiling. “I like the sound of that.”



As soon as we step through the front door, Connor is all over me like a rash. He backs me against the wall and crashes his mouth to mine. By the time we finally come up for air, I’m feeling dizzy. He immediately spins me around until I’m facing the wall.

“You’ve been driving me crazy, swishing that sexy arse of yours around all day in this dress.” Reaching for the zipper in the back, he slowly drags it down. “I’ve been trying to imagine what you’ve got on underneath, but I can guarantee the reality is far more alluring than what my brain can conjure up. Fuck,” he groans when he pushes the straps off my shoulders and the gown pools around my feet. I’m left standing here in nothing but my high heels and matching skimpy, pink lace G-string and strapless bra.

His big, strong hands slide around my waist and splay out on the bare skin of my abdomen. He’s suddenly walking us backwards until we reach the sofa. I’m abruptly spun around again and bent over the arm as his hand travels down between my legs.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he growls as he fumbles with the belt on his trousers. “I’m going to fuck you hard and fast, right here, and then I’m going to carry you to our bed, and make love to my fiancée.” *His fiancée.* Boy, do I love the sound of that. Grasping the bun at the nape of my neck, he tugs my head back. That movement is so hot I’m pretty sure I just experienced a mini ‘O’. I like the way he manhandles me. “How does that sound?”

“Like a really good plan,” I whimper.

He chuckles and the metal part of his belt jiggles as he lets it go and drags down his zipper. The sound has my anticipation at fever pitch. I moan the second his hands are back on me. He grasps my underwear, but instead of dragging

them down my legs like I'm expecting, he tears them straight from my body.

"Such a shame," he murmurs. "They were so pretty too."

"I have others just like them," I inform him, because my ruined underwear is the least of my worries right now.

He takes a step forward and uses his knee to part my legs further. I bite my lip to stifle my moan when he slides the head of his dick back and forth through my arousal. "Always so wet for me," he mumbles under his breath. On his next swipe, he pushes the tip inside. "So fucking tight." His fingers clutch my hips so hard the tips dig into my skin.

He leans forward and groans in my ear as he thrusts inside me, all the way to the hilt. "I've been thinking about what you said in the car," he says as he slowly draws back to the tip before propelling back in. My mind is so drunk on him and the way he makes my body feel, his words hardly register. "When you're ready ... this is completely your decision, Cass," he clarifies before continuing, "I want you to stop taking the pill."

He stills his movements when I glance at him over my shoulder. "You do?"

"Yes, but like I said, when *you're* ready. There's no pressure from me. And before you say it's too soon—that we're moving too fast—this has been six years in the making ... *six fucking years*. If I could marry you tomorrow and fill you with all my babies, I would."

I nibble on my bottom lip to hide my smile as I make a mental note to throw my birth control away in the morning because he's right. Six years is a long time. "Okay."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"Right now, yes. Can you get back to fucking me please?"

He grins at me all smug-like, which is a look that's so sexy on him. "Your wish is my command, Princess."

Chapter 29

Connor

I remove the key from the lock on the front door and reach for the knob. Once I've pushed it open, I move to the side to allow Logan to enter first. Cass and I are flying down to Melbourne tomorrow for Amanda Lewis's committal hearing, which is starting at the end of the week. It will determine whether the prosecution has enough evidence for a conviction if we go to trial, which we do.

It's been five months since she was first arrested, and during that time, we've been working tirelessly alongside the prosecution. I want them to throw the book at this woman. She deserves to spend the rest of her days rotting in prison for her crimes, because she gave her daughter a life sentence when she committed that vial act.

I met up with Logan this afternoon, and after expressing my concerns to him, he wanted to touch base with Cassandra before we leave, hence why he's here now. She's nervous about having to get up on the stand and face her mother once again, but she understands it's a necessary evil. It's all part of the process, unfortunately.

He takes a few steps inside the apartment before pausing; I'm not expecting him to stop, so I run straight into his back.

When I hear a loud thud from inside, followed by Cassie's scream, I immediately shove him to the side. That's when I see my poor fiancée crouched down on the floor wearing nothing but an itty-bitty scrap of red satin underwear, matched perfectly with those plump lips of hers, and the sky-high heels

on her feet. There's a spilt bottle of beer lying on the wooden floor beside her.

Even with her body curled up into a ball, and those large, terrified, caramel-coloured doe eyes, she looks like a damn wet dream.

The first thing I do is smile, realising she must've been waiting to greet me when I got home in nothing but that tiny piece of satin. Part of me wants to shove Logan back out the door so I can continue this fantasy.

Last week I came home to find her prepping dinner in the kitchen. Her back was to me, and she was wearing this sexy pleated miniskirt. When I stalked across the room and flipped it up, I found that exact thing underneath. Her round, peachy arse was made to showcase that type of underwear and it gave me an instant boner.

"One day I want to come home and find you wearing nothing but these," I groaned, while palming her cheeks. I guess my sweet girl was granting my wish, she just picked the worst possible time to do it. One of the many things I adore about this woman is the way she loves me. Neither of us takes what we have for granted because we went through hell to get here.

Logan's back is now turned, which I appreciate. "Princess," I say, taking a step in her direction. Only then does the shock of what just happened wear off, because she leaps to her feet and bolts towards our bedroom.

"Do you want me to go?" Logan asks, looking just as embarrassed as Cassie did.

"No, give me a minute though," I answer, crossing the room and heading in her direction, ignoring the spilt puddle of beer as I pass.

By the time I make it to the room, she already has a suitcase on the bed and is throwing things into it. Is it wrong that I take a moment to appreciate her? Because fuck me, she's perfect.

"Cass," I say, approaching her. "What are you doing?"

“Packing.”

“Why?”

She stops, turning to face me, and that’s when I see the tears brimming in her eyes. “I have to leave, Con.”

“You are not going anywhere,” I grumble, sliding my arms around her tiny waist and drawing her closer.

“I don’t have a choice, my life as I knew it is ruined.”

I roll my lips. “It’s not ruined, Princess.”

“It is! I just showed my boss’s husband my tits. I have to quit my job ... I’ll never be able to show my face in public again. The only choice I have is to move away,” she rambles. “I know Martha will take me in. I can spend the rest of my days living in obscurity on the farm.”

We’ve returned to Mudgee three times for a secluded weekend away. That place has grown on me, or maybe it’s just because Cass loves it there. The first time we flew down to collect Cassie’s car—the plane was small, and the turbulence was a nightmare. I wasn’t a fan. It was a quick fifty-minute trip, but it’s not something I’d do again in a hurry.

We’re back to driving, but we leave straight after work on Fridays. It’s late when we get there, but this way we get to spend all of Saturday and most of Sunday at the farm. We are planning an extended stay after Christmas since the courts close down until mid-January. Martha is always happy to see us and has said we’re welcome to come whenever we like.

My hands move to cup Cassie’s face, tilting it back so I can make eye contact. Her cheeks are now as red as her lips, so I lean in and brush her mouth with mine before saying, “You are not leaving.”

“I can’t stay.”

“So what if Logan saw your tits?” To be honest, the caveman inside me isn’t happy about that fact either, but if I make a big deal about it, she’ll only feel worse. “I’m sure he’s seen plenty in his lifetime.”

“Not mine though. He must think I’m a dirty hoe,” she says, choking on her words.

“I can guarantee he doesn’t think you’re a hoe.”

“I was facing the door, Connor, in full view ... leaning against the wall all seductively in only this,” she says, running her hand up and down her body, “My leg was propped up and not only was I licking the neck of the beer bottle, I was tweaking one of my nipples,” she screeches.

Fuck.

The imagery she just described has my cock twitching in my trousers. “Can we do a re-enactment tomorrow afternoon?”

“No,” she yells, punching me in the stomach. “My hoe days are over! Done and dusted.”

I hastily pull her face into my chest, then rest my chin on her head. I’m struggling not to laugh. I feel her pain, I do. It may sound insensitive, but I can’t help but be amused by her antics. I find her dramatics completely adorable.

“Logan is still out there; he came to go over things with you before we fly to Melbourne for the court case.”

She takes a step back and pushes on my chest. “I can’t go out there ... I’ll never be able to look that man in the eye again. My life is over, finished ... kaput.”

“Princess,” I say, reaching for her again. “Your life is not kaput. The girls you teach pole to, flash their tits for a living.”

“To strangers, not their lawyer ... their family friend. He’s probably going to sue me for sexual harassment.”

“He’s not.”

“Well, emotional turmoil at the very least. I probably scarred him for the rest of his life.”

I reach into her suitcase and pull out one of the bras sitting on top. She just stands there as I slide one of her arms into it, followed by the other. When I’m done, I reach around the back of her so I can clasp it.

“He’s not going to sue you and you didn’t scar him.” I place a soft kiss on her forehead before taking a step backwards. “Have you seen your body? I can guarantee nobody would be damaged from seeing you naked, Cass. Get dressed, and come out when you’re done.” Her face is void of any emotion as I retreat a few more steps. I see her eyes flicker in the direction of the window a few times, like she’s planning her escape. “We’re on the seventh floor ... don’t even think about it.”

I don’t turn away from her until I reach the doorway.

When I re-enter the main room, Logan looks just as mortified as my fiancée did. “I’m so sorry,” he says.

“Don’t be. It was just one of those unfortunate things. I didn’t tell her you were coming, she’s horrified, poor thing. She was packing her suitcase ready to flee when I went in there. She says she has to quit her job at the studio because her boss’s husband saw her tits, before leaving town.”

His lips quirk, and so do mine. “Should I go?”

“No. Do you want a beer?”

“Ten minutes ago, I would’ve said no, but I think I need one now.”

I’ll be eternally grateful that I had the beer bottle held up to my mouth—which managed to hide my amusement—when Cass came out of the room a few minutes later. Despite the fact we’re currently experiencing a heatwave here in Sydney, she was wearing one of my hoodies—which drowned her petite frame—jeans tucked into her long boots, a scarf wrapped around her neck numerous times, and a beanie pulled low on her head.

It was a struggle not to lose it, and when Logan coughed behind his fist and quickly diverted his head to the side, I’m pretty sure he was in the same boat as me.



The court case wraps up just after three. We’re going to trial, which I knew would be the outcome. Our evidence is

extensive. Including notes from the doctor Cassandra went to see about getting on birth control and again for the pregnancy. She'd informed him on her initial visit about her first sexual encounter the day prior, which disputed Amanda's accusation that we'd had sex while Cassandra was underage. She had nothing to back her claim. Hearsay or assumptions don't stand up in court.

Cassie is a mess though. She's trying to act unaffected but I can feel her hands shaking in mine as we exit the courthouse. Her mother glared at her the entire time she was on the stand, but my brave girl held her head high and did what needed to be done. I knew she was terrified about getting up there, but she aced it.

We've been staying with my parents since we arrived in Melbourne and will be here for the weekend.

Instead of heading to their place, I lead my fiancée to a bar down the street from the courthouse. She needs a glass of wine and a debrief before we face anyone. My parents mean well, but I know there will be questions when we get there.

"Where are we going?" Cassie asks. "The car is back that way."

"I'm getting you something to drink."

"I have water in my bag."

"Something alcoholic."

"Oh. I could go a glass of wine or twenty."

I chuckle as I bring our conjoined hands to my mouth, placing a soft kiss on her knuckles. I hate that she has to go through this and relive her trauma, but she wants her mother to pay for her wrongdoings just as much as I do. "*I want justice for our baby*" were her exact words.

An hour later, I'm still sitting on my first beer, because I'm driving. Cass is on wine number three and starting to relax. I let her talk, getting it all off her chest, and only speak when required.

“I feel a little stronger after today. It was hard seeing her, and there is so much I want to say to that woman. Things I was too scared to voice back then. Maybe one day I’ll get that chance.” She reaches across the table and laces her fingers with mine. “You give me strength, Con. When I’m with you I feel invincible.”

The corners of my lips tug up, but I have nothing to do with this. *It’s all her.* This woman is a beacon of strength to have survived the things she did. If she wants to accredit that to me, then I’m not going to argue with her. As long as she knows she’s strong, that’s all that matters.



“How are you feeling?” I ask as we pull up outside my parents’ house.

Cassie turns her face towards me from the passenger seat and gives me a lazy smile. “Very chill. Those wines were exactly what I needed,” she says, reaching across the centre console to place her hand on my leg. “Thank you for being you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Princess. I’ll always look after you.”

“I hope you know how much I love you, Connor.”

“I do,” I say with a smile. Not a day goes by that she doesn’t prove it with both her actions and words. Sometimes the most damaged love the hardest.

Once I exit the vehicle, I round the car to her side so I can open her door and help her out.

My hand is clutched in hers as we head down the path towards the house. As we’re climbing the stairs the front door flies open and my heavily pregnant sister waddles out.

“Jazzie!” Cassie shrieks, dropping my hand and opening her arms. “What are you doing here?”

“We flew down this morning. We wanted to be here for you when you got home from court.”

“Thank you.” Once she releases my sister, she steps back. “Are you staying for the weekend?”

“Yes. Have you been drinking? You smell like alcohol.”

“Rude much. I had a couple of wines; I had a shitty day. Sue me.”

“It wasn’t an insult.”

Cass’s hands move to her hips. “You accused me of smelling like a brewery, Jacinta Bradley.”

“I did not. And as I said, I wasn’t trying to insult you. If anything, I’m jealous.”

She rubs her expanding stomach, and Cassie reaches out to do the same. “I can’t believe how big you’ve gotten.”

“Now who’s being rude? You saw me two days ago ... I was the same size then.”

“No, you’re definitely bigger.”

Mason exits the house and joins us. When he drapes his arm around his wife’s shoulder, she looks up at him and pouts. “Why the sad face, babe?”

“Cassandra just called me a whale.”

I shake my head and round them, heading inside. I flick my eyes at Mason as I pass. He’s an idiot if he gets involved. I know from experience; when it comes to these two, he’ll only end up incriminating himself somehow and they’ll both turn on him.



Thankfully, Mason ended up taking my lead and followed me inside. He’s been around those two enough to know the score.

We are currently sitting out on the back deck having a beer with my dad while he cooks the barbeque. Standing, I grab the empty bottles. “You want another?”

“Please,” Mason answers.

“Dad?”

“Thanks, Son.”

I pause at the entrance to the kitchen and observe the three most important women in my life. They’re chatting and laughing as they make sides to go with the meat. As expected, Cass and Jaz are best of friends again, hence why I stay out of their little spits. They never lead anywhere, and if I’m being honest, their fights make no sense ... Jaz never accused Cass of smelling like a brewery and Cass never called her a whale.

Smiling, I lean my shoulder against the archway and watch my girl in action. She’s in her element here. Growing up, she’d sit at the breakfast bar and watch my mum and sister work, but she has *some* skills now, which she is proudly putting to use.

She’s currently making honey and mustard dressing for the salad; I recognise the ingredients as one of the ones we learnt in culinary school.

After giving it a good mix, she lifts the bowl and holds it out in front of Jaz. “Taste this, and tell me what you think?”

My sister dips the tip of her pinkie finger in and brings it to her mouth. “Yum.” The lift that one word gives my girl chokes me up a little inside. That straightening of her posture, that small puff to her chest ... but it’s the way her beautiful face lights up that gets to me most. “Taste this, Mum.”

My mum gives the same reaction. “That’s delicious, Cass. Can I trouble you for the recipe, sweetie?”

The placement of her hand on her chest, and the slight glisten in her eyes as she proudly nods her head forces me to turn my face away. “I’ll write it down for you after dinner,” I hear her say as I make my way to the fridge.

It kills me to know that the slightest bit of praise can mean so much to her. I could strangle her mother for all the damage she has inflicted. Going forward, she’ll be loved, appreciated, and protected by us. I’ll make sure of it.

“Can I get you ladies a drink?” I ask as I pull three beers out of the fridge.

“We’re good, sweetie,” my mum answers.

I walk around the island and palm Cass’s arse as I pass. “Buttercup will be ready soon,” I tell them.

“Who’s Buttercup?” Jacinta asks.

“Buttercup the cow,” I reply, looking over at Cassie and winking.

When she realises where I’m going with this, a beautiful grin lights up her face, hitting me right in the chest. “I think he’s referring to the steaks on the barbeque,” she says.

“Gah,” Jacinta grumbles. “You two are weirdos.”

“Takes one to know one,” I reply like a five-year-old.

I’m looking forward to spending the weekend here with everyone, and I think it will do Cassie the world of good.

Chapter 30

Cassie

After the waiter takes our order and walks away, my attention moves back to Jacinta, where I find her giving me a strange look. “Since when do you drink peppermint tea?” she asks.

“Since forever,” I lie.

“Please, I’ve known you since I was twelve, I’ve never seen you drink *any* kind of tea.”

“I had a chai latte once,” I retort, screwing up my nose, because I wasn’t a fan.

“Hmm.”

We decided to meet up for brunch. I’ve taken the day off because I have an appointment I need to go to after this. Jacinta is officially on maternity leave. She’s been working the front desk at the studio for the past few months, but since she’s almost ready to pop, Mason wanted her at home.

She’s booked in for a caesarean next week since her prediction was correct. There *is* a giant baby growing inside her. She’s so tiny her doctor thought a C-section would be safest for both her and Bub. She had her heart set on a natural birth but opted for their recommendation in the end. I wouldn’t want to be pushing that thing out of my vagina either.

We all have a side bet going on behind Jacinta’s back. I’ve predicted the baby will weigh twelve pounds. Connor said five, Mason seven, and Jim said eight ... *amateurs*. Blake said

a hundred, bless his little heart, and Grace was closest to me, her guess being ten.

I'm sad I won't be there to witness the birth of my niece or nephew, but I want them to be safe, so I understand. Mason will be there by her side.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I watch her squirm in her seat.

"I need to pee again ... I only just went before we left home."

"You've got a giant head resting on your bladder, it's understandable."

"My baby doesn't have a giant head," she growls. "It's in perfect proportion with the rest of its—"

"Giant body," I say, cutting her off. "I rest my case."

"Hmm," she hums again as her eyes slightly narrow.

By the time she waddles to the toilet and returns to the table, our drinks have arrived. She chose a fruit smoothie since she can't have coffee.

It takes her a minute to find the best position once she's seated. Poor thing. Side on, she's almost as wide as she is tall. Well, that may be a slight exaggeration, but you get where I'm coming from.

"Feeling better?" I ask.

"Ugh. I have a constant urge to pee, and then when I go it feels like two drops come out."

I make a face. "Sounds delightful."

"I need this baby out ... the last few weeks have been hell." She leans in and takes a sip of her smoothie. "Mmm. How's your tea?"

"Yummy," I lie. It tastes like hot water that's been stirred with a Christmas candy cane.

When our food arrives, Jacinta's eyes are again on me. "Why did you only order vegemite toast ... and why are you taking such minuscule bites and chewing for ten minutes?"

I give her the stink eye. “I’m not.”

“That is the third lie you’ve told me since we got here. What’s really going on, Cassie?”

“I’m late.”

“Oh my God,” she says with a mouth full of bacon and eggs. The sight makes my queasy stomach recoil. “You think you’re PG?” I lift one shoulder. “Have you taken a test?”

“I have an appointment at the doctor after this.”

“What time?”

I glance down at my phone. “Just over an hour.”

She shovels more food into her mouth before placing down her cutlery and pushing herself up to stand. “There’s a pharmacy a few stores down. Let’s go.”

“I’ll just wait until I see the doctor.”

Despite how shitty I’m feeling, I’m not confident. I’ve been off the pill for months, and every time my period comes, I end up in tears. I’m afraid those pills my mother gave me have broken something inside.

I haven’t even told Connor I’ve gone off my birth control. I could see how desperately he wanted to have a child with me, so I thought I’d surprise him, but as the months passed and my hope diminished, I kept quiet.

Jacinta picks up a piece of toast off her plate and takes a huge-arse bite before pointing it at me. “Listen here, you,” she growls. “I shared my moment with you, and now you need to return the favour.”



We end up back at her apartment and follow the same routine as we did with Jacinta’s test, only this time in opposite places. Once I pee on the stick, we take a seat on the side of the bath. I was nervous last time, but that pales in comparison to how I’m feeling right now. My stomach is churning and I have peppermint-flavoured bile sitting in the back of my throat.

When the timer goes off on her phone, I spring to my feet ... it takes Jazzie a little longer to rise. I stare down at the stick sitting on the countertop, but I'm petrified to pick it up. I don't think I can bear another disappointment.

"Oh, for God's sake," she snaps, swiping it up. When she raises her hands in the air and squeals, "You're preggo, biatch," it takes a moment for those words to sink in.

As soon as they do, I throw my arms around her and cry. We jump up and down a few times, but then Jacinta suddenly stills. I feel it before I see it. "Eww, did you just pee on my foot?"

"No, I think my water broke."

Oh crap.

I kick off my shoes, because gross, and lead her into her bedroom. Once I've managed to lay her down, I spring into action. I'm unusually calm, maybe because this isn't my first rodeo. When I re-enter the room with a stack of clean towels in my hands, she looks over at me confused. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing for the birth. Do you have a heat lamp?"

"A what?"

"A heat lamp to keep the baby warm. The towels are so I can wipe all the gunk off it once it's born."

"First of all, have you lost your ever-loving mind? Secondly, you are not delivering my baby."

"I have experience," I proclaim, rolling my eyes.

"With piglets," she yells. "I'm having a human baby ... and did you forget about its giant head?"

I throw my hands in the air. "Oh, so you're finally admitting it has a giant head?"

"Pass me my phone," she roars.

"Why?"

"So I can call an ambulance and my husband."

“I can do that.”

“You need to pack my bag.”

“You haven’t done that yet?” I screech.

“No! I thought I had another week to prepare. Obviously, this kid has other plans.”

I dash towards their walk-in robe to grab a suitcase. I come out a few minutes later with a cute top and a pair of matching heels. “What about these.”

“That top no longer fits, and I’m going to the hospital to have a baby, if you even think of packing those shoes, I’m going to spear your eyeball with the heel.”

I gasp. “Bitchy much.”

“Just pack me some comfy clothes, tights, tees, a few hoodies. Oh, and in my top drawer, you’ll need to grab my *Yummy Mummy* pyjamas.”

“Yummy Mummy?”

“Mason bought them for me. He had them custom-made because he’s been calling me that since I fell pregnant. He’ll be upset if I don’t wear them.”

“Ooookay then,” I say with sarcasm as I cross the room. And she had the hide to call me and Connor weirdos because he named the cow we were eating.



Thankfully, we all made it to the hospital in time. Well, Grace and Jim didn’t. They are currently on a flight. They weren’t supposed to arrive until the weekend, but since the baby had other plans, they’re now scrambling to get here.

Mason is with Jacinta in the operating theatre, Connor is sitting in a chair with his head buried in his hands, Blake is beside him, swinging his little legs back and forth and playing his Nintendo Switch like he doesn’t have a care in the world, and I’m pacing like a crazy woman. I swear I’ve worn a path in the vinyl floor.

One, because I'm worried about my BFF who is currently having her guts sliced open, and two, I have yet to tell my fiancé about the pregnancy test I took earlier. I feel like we invaded their wedding with our surprise proposal, I don't want to crash the birth of their baby as well.

An eternity passes before Mason enters the small room where we are waiting. We get a start when the door comes flying open. "I have a daughter," he announces with tears brimming in his eyes.

I fling myself into his arms. "Oh my God," I screech. "Congratulations. Do we have a name?"

"Emmy-Lou."

Once I release him, my hand flies to my chest. *Oh, my heart.*

Connor stands and crosses the short space to shake his hand, and Blake abandons his video game to hug his dad's leg. "I have a little sister?"

Mason bends down to ruffle his hair. "Yeah, bud."

"Yes," Blake says, punching the air.

"She's going to need you to look after her. Do you think you can do that for me?"

"Yes!"

"Me two," Connor adds.

"Me three," I say.

This little girl is going to be so loved.



Grace and Jim arrived before we were finally able to see Jazzie and Emmy-Lou, and *wow*, what an incredibly emotional moment that was. I think we all shed a tear or two. Maybe I shed a few more than that, but I'm going to blame my pregnancy hormones for my overly emotional state.

Connor and I do the right thing and let the grandparents and Blake have first cuddles. It's a struggle because I just want

to squish my beautiful niece's fleshy cheeks.

When our turn finally arrives, I step aside and let Connor have first dibs. The way his face lights up as he looks down at her with so much love in his eyes has my ovaries disintegrating in an instant, *poof*. It feels like a bittersweet moment, because I know our first child would have gotten that same adoring reaction if that moment hadn't been robbed from us. It has my heart flip-flopping in my chest.

He's going to be the best daddy, and I'm already counting my blessings that it's him I get to do this with. Our baby is going to be a Maloney from birth, and will be showered with all the love by these amazingly kind and good people.

"Do we have a weight yet?" I ask.

"Eleven pounds, three ounces," Mason answers proudly.

I extend my arm, holding my palm face up. "Pay up, bitches," I say, wiggling my fingers.

"Pay up for what?" Jacinta asks suspiciously.

"We had a side bet on how much your giant baby would weigh." I curl my fingers over into an arch and blow hot air along my nails before rubbing them against my shirt, all smug-like. "Of course, I won," I boast.

When her eyes narrow, I smile.

I take a seat beside my baby daddy and glance down at my chubby, giant niece. She has the sweetest little face, and she is so cute I could gobble her up.

Connor's eyes move from Emmy-Lou to me. "Have you given any more thought to what I asked?"

"Huh?"

He leans in and kisses his niece's forehead before whispering, "Going off the pill."

"Oh, that."

"I don't want to put pressure on you, but we need to have our own little one of these, Princess," Connor says, looking

over at me with so much hope in his eyes I can't hold it in anymore.

My hand caresses my stomach and I grin. "About that."

Chapter 31

Cassie

T *hree years later ...*

The nerves set in when Connor pulls into a parking space and shuts down the engine. I feel like I'm going to throw up.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks.

“Yes.” I need to, so I can truly move on. The last three years have been crazy busy. Not just with our wedding—which we had on the farm in Mudgee—I've also popped out three babies in that time.

Our twins were born seven months after Emmy-Lou, and when I went back for my six-week examination, I found out I was pregnant again. *Oops*. My gynaecologist wasn't impressed, but I simply said to her, “*You've seen my husband, right?*” She couldn't exactly argue with me after that. I've always struggled to keep my hands off him, but seeing him dote on our children is as addictive as crack cocaine.

I lean across the centre console and place my lips on my man, and his hands instantly slide into my hair. “If you keep kissing me like this, I'm liable to knock you up again.”

My mouth curves against his. “I need at least two years of straight, uninterrupted sleep before I can go there again.”

Sleep deprivation is a bitch, but I'm lucky I have the best hands-on husband in the world. I'm not sure I would've made it through if it wasn't for him. Especially when the twins somehow ended up on different schedules. Basically, while

one was asleep, the other was awake. As hard as it was at times, I still revelled in the fact that I'd finally become a mother.

I got my second chance, something I'd been wishing for since I was sixteen years old, but instead of one baby, I was blessed with two.

Grace, who is now affectionately referred to as Mum, was wonderful; she came and stayed with us for an entire month after the birth. Even my dad stepped in to help. In the end, he hired me a part-time nurse, just to help lighten the load a bit. It was a godsend.

I breezed the second birth ... one child seemed like a walk in the park after having the twins.

“Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you? We can take the kids back to my parents.”

“I'm sure.” This is something I need to do on my own. It's been a long time coming.

I exit the car and move to the back door on the passenger side. Dakota, our youngest, is sound asleep in her car seat. There's a pink dummy in her mouth, and I can't help but smile as I look down at her sweet, chubby face as she sucks on it in her sleep. Not a day goes by that I don't appreciate everything I have, but I still mourn for my child who never got the chance to experience life.

I lean down and place a soft kiss on her forehead before looking over at the twins. Our son, Axil, was the firstborn, and his sister, Blossom, came ten minutes later. Everyone was concerned about what we'd name our children, but they needn't have been. Of course, we went with a theme, just not in the way they thought.

Since Connor and Cassandra both start with the letter 'C', our kids were given names in corresponding alphabetical order. 'A', 'B', and 'D'. Will we get an 'E' one day? I can't say, but if it never happens, I'm okay with that too. I'm blessed with what I already have.

“Mummy won’t be long,” I say, reaching further in to stroke both of the twins’ faces. Their little hands are clutched in each other’s, it’s something they’ve done since they were born. It’s the cutest thing. I love the special bond they have. “Daddy has snacks.” I look over at him and find him turned in his seat, grinning as he watches me with his children. “You packed snacks, right?”

“Yes, and a spare bottle for Dakota, water and juice for the twins, nappies, baby wipes, spare dummies, a bib, three extra sets of clothes, the thermometer and liquid Panadol in case any of them get a sudden temperature—”

“Okay, super-dad,” I say, cutting him off. “I get it, you’re Mr Wonderful.”

He chuckles as I stand to full height. “Good luck in there, Princess. I’m out here if you need me.”

I appreciate that, but my babies will never go any further than this car park. That woman lost the right to see any of her grandchildren.

My hands have a slight tremble to them as I walk towards the jail where my mother is being housed for the term of her natural life. She’ll never get the chance to taste freedom again and will die in this cold, concrete prison. That knowledge does not upset me one bit. She still gets to breathe in air every day ... which is more than my poor baby got.



My hands wring in my lap as I wait for her to be led out. It’s been over two years since I’ve seen her. The last time was at her sentencing. She remained stoic and unremorseful throughout it all, and like the cold-hearted woman I know she is, not a single tear was shed when her freedom was taken away from her.

She got longer than any of us predicted, but I think her lack of remorse and her complete disregard of any wrongdoing was her downfall. She spent her entire time on the stand throwing mud at the wall, but nothing stuck because it was all fabricated lies. A pathetic attempt to save her own arse.

“You abused your position of power in the worst possible way. You were in a profession dedicated to saving lives, but you are not God. You don’t get the right to pick and choose what lives you save, and the ones you take away. You committed a despicable act, against your own daughter, no less.” That was just a small part of the judge’s three-page speech before her sentencing.

I’m pulled back to the present when the door on the far side of the room opens, and I have to do a double take when my mother is led out in shackles by the guard. The awful green colour of her prison attire doesn’t do anything for her. She looks nothing like the polished put-together woman I remember. Her once-long Brunette hair is now cut short and almost completely grey. That would be a hard pill for Amanda Lewis to swallow. She had a standing weekly appointment with her hairdresser when I was growing up. Her appearance was everything to her.

Her face is void of emotion when she arrives at the table. She doesn’t even acknowledge me once she’s taken a seat. I wasn’t expecting her to if I’m being honest. Her once-flawless complexion is looking weathered and pasty. Her caramel eyes look lifeless.

She stares at me coldly across the table before finally speaking. “What are you doing here? Have you come to gloat?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want, Cassandra?” she queries, raising her nose in the air like a snob.

My left hand moves up to rub along the length of my throat which is suddenly feeling constricted. I shouldn’t have come here.

Her eyes move down to my hand and zero in on the engagement ring and wedding band on my finger. The faintest smile tugs at her lips. “You finally managed to snag yourself a rich husband, I see. Does he know you’re damaged goods?”

Her comment stings. “Actually, I married Connor.”

“Figures. Nobody else would want you?”

If a place like this can't give her any humility, there's no hope. “I was never interested in anyone else but him. You tried your best to keep us apart, but true love won out in the end.”

She laughs at that. “You stupid, delusional girl. There is no such thing as true love.”

“Not for narcissistic people like you there isn't.”

“I loved your father.”

“You loved his career, his stature in the community ... his money.”

She smirks because she knows I'm right. “You are smarter than I ever gave you credit for.”

“If I was smart, I never would've trusted you when you told me those pills were vitamins.”

“I was waiting for this,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I did you a favour, get over it.”

“You killed my child ... your own grandchild.”

“You were sixteen years old,” she yells, banging her hand down on the table. “It would've ruined your life and our family's reputation.”

And there it is.

It was never about me; it was more about her precious image.

My mind automatically goes to the sweet cherub faces of my babies who are waiting outside in the car with their daddy. Yes, I was young, but that child was a gift. “It was never your decision to make.”

“You were far too stupid to make it on your own, so I did it for you ... and this is the thanks I get,” she sneers, waving her hand around the room. “Ungrateful bitch.”

I'm giving up time with the people I love, who love me back, for this ... waste of air.

“Although you left scars on me that will probably never heal, in a way you did me a favour. I’m now free of your toxicity, and so is Daddy. He’s happy ... happier than I’ve ever seen him. His fiancée is the sweetest ... she’s beautiful on the inside and out, and she loves him very much.”

That knowledge has her sitting up straighter in her seat. “Your father is engaged?”

I refuse to even answer that question. She can stew on that news when she gets back to her cell. “Enjoy the rest of your life rotting in this hellhole, Amanda!”

This is the last time she’ll ever see me.

Abruptly standing, I give her my back. Tears sting my eyes as I walk towards the exit with my head held high. I’m free ... *I’m finally free.*



Two and a half years later ...

Connor and I are playing tag team as we get the kids ready to go outside and feed the animals. I’m in charge of the winter coats, gloves, and scarves, while he puts little cowboy boots on their tiny feet.

I zip up Dakota’s coat and place a soft kiss on her cute little nose just as someone knocks on the front door.

When I open it, I find Mason standing on the other side. Emmy-Lou is riding on his back, sweet little Mia, the newest addition to our growing family, is strapped to his chest in a baby harness, and Blake is beside him. “Where’s Jaz?”

“She was up half the night with Mia, so she’s sleeping in. She’ll join us later.”

They stayed in one of Martha’s other cabins the week of our wedding and fell in love with this place as well. We try to come here at least once a month now. The kids love the animals.

“Emmy-Lou,” Blossom squeals when she joins my side.

Emmy-Lou's face lights up as she wiggles on her father's back until he helps her down. The girls instantly embrace. You'd swear they hadn't seen each other in weeks instead of hours. They're the best of friends. Jaz and I sometimes get emotional when we watch them together. They're like tiny versions of us.

"Is Blake here?" Axil asks, rounding the girls and stepping out onto the front porch. Blake is twelve now and such a great kid. Axil is obsessed with him, and he doesn't seem to mind having a five-year-old following him everywhere. "Hey, Blake."

"Hey," Blake replies, and Mason and I smile at each other when they fist pump.

"Is your bike here?"

"Yeah." Blake points over his shoulder to the quadbike he got for Christmas. He would never be able to own something like that in the city. There's nowhere for him to ride it, but on the farm, he's got acres to explore, and he does. We are still living in the same apartment building, with no plans of moving anytime soon. The kids get the best of both worlds between here and there.

Axil turns to me and his praying hands are already clasped together in front of him. "Can I please go on the back of it, Mummy," he begs. "Please, please, please."

"It's up to Blake. He may not want to double you around."

Blake lifts one shoulder. "I don't mind."

"Yes," Axil shouts, jumping up in the air.

"Go back inside and get your dad to put your helmet on, and those protective pads I bought you."

"Ah, not the pads ... only babies wear pads."

"Pads or no bike ... take your pick."

He blows out a frustrated breath before stomping inside. "Okay, Mummy."

Connor and I have talked about getting him one of his own, but I still feel like he's a little young. *Maybe next year.* Jacinta teases me by calling me a bubble wrap mum, but I know what it feels like to lose a child, so I can't help but be overprotective of the three I still have. They are my life.



I'm busy feeding my not-so-small surrogate babies—the piglets—which are just as big as their parents now, when I hear Blossom yell, “Grandma.”

Her and Emmy-Lou are sitting on the ground taking turns feeding the newly born kid, Scapegoat. I love that our children get to grow up experiencing country life.

Martha is beaming as she hobbles towards them. The kids adore her. She never had children of her own, and I know she gets a kick out of being called that. Apart from Grace, she's the closest thing I have to a loving mother. She often takes all the kids—Jacinta's included—for sleepovers in the main house, so the four of us parents can have a night out. They have so much fun with her, and she spoils them rotten.

“Mummy, look at me,” Dakota's cute voice calls out.

I turn my head and glance out into the paddock as Connor leads her past. She's sitting on the back of the miniature horse Martha bought the kids last year. She's a white mare with a beautiful sweet nature. Her name is Brittany Spurs.

One of Dakota's chubby little hands lets go of the rein to wave at me, and my heart drops into the pit of my stomach. “You need to hold on with both hands, Bubba,” I say, the fear evident in my voice. Since the twins struggled to pronounce her name when she was born, Bubba stuck.

Connor's lips quirk as he moves to the side of the horse, placing his hand on the small of our daughter's back. “Relax, Princess, I've got her.” He knows how anxious I get sometimes, especially when one of the kids is doing something that might hurt them, but he never makes fun of me for it. He just steps in and assures me they're okay, doing whatever he

can to de-escalate any anxiety I'm experiencing in that moment.

Last year when we took them to the Easter Show and they desperately wanted to go on the rides, Connor simply said, "*Why don't you and Jaz go for a walk and check out the pavilion ... you can leave the kids with us.*"

It was his gentle way of saying, let the kids be kids, I'll look after them, and if you're not here to see it, you won't stress. I'd never want to put my insecurities onto their tiny shoulders, so I always follow his lead. No questions asked. He is like the calm to my storm, doing what is best for us all.



The kids are finally asleep, and this time is ours. We spent the evening outside, roasting hotdogs and marshmallows over the open fire, while the kids ran around and played. They seem to sleep much better when we're here ... maybe because our days are so jam-packed. Fingers crossed it stays this way throughout the night or, at the very least, the next hour or so. It's not unusual to have one, or all three, of the kids crammed into bed with us.

I adore snuggling with my babies, but love my one-on-one moments with my husband too.

It's our last night in Mudgee; we're heading back home first thing in the morning.

Connor spent the last ten minutes working me over with his hand before he rose from the bed. I hear the familiar click of the lock as my sexy-arse husband creeps back towards me, ripping his T-shirt over his head as he goes. My eyes follow his every move.

After slipping out of his boxer briefs, he kneels on the side of the mattress, giving me one of those cocky smiles that hold so much promise—it's a look that would surely melt my panties off if I was wearing any.

He moves into the middle of the bed, hovering over me. I am so hot for this man I'm already throbbing in anticipation.

Settling between my parted legs, he covers my body with his. I find inner comfort when his heavy weight has me pinned to the mattress. I open my mouth to speak, but he places his finger against my lips, stopping me.

“Shh,” he whispers. He removes his finger and immediately replaces it with his mouth. I whimper as soon as he rolls his hips forward and enters me, burying himself right to the hilt in one hard thrust. Every nerve ending in my body instantly pings to life. I’ll never get enough of this man or the way he makes me feel. He’s not just my lover, my partner, or the father of my children ... *he’s my lifeline*. The air that I breathe.

Gone are the days of countless hours of foreplay or fucking each other senseless all night long. Now, we try and manage to steal a few moments like this whenever we can.

He draws all the way to the tip before plummeting back in, and we both moan in unison. His lips move to the side of my neck, trailing hot wet kisses down to my shoulder. I wrap my legs around his waist, hooking them at the ankles, as my flattened palms skim over the hard muscles on his back.

“Fuck, Cass,” he groans into my ear as he starts to pick up the pace. “I can’t get enough of you ... I want to climb inside this pussy of yours and never leave.”

If I didn’t have three tiny people relying on me for survival, I’d be totally down with that.

“Fuck me, Con. Give me everything you’ve got.”

He doesn’t disappoint, but when the sheer force behind his movements has the bedhead hitting the wall with a dull and steady *thud, thud, thud*, he stills to rest his head on my shoulder and grumbles, “Shit.”

“What are we going to do?”

“That noise will wake the kids.”

“We could move the bed away from the wall,” I say.

He lifts his head and grins. “You’re not just a pretty face.”

Rolling off me, he leaps off the bed. I follow suit. We move down the end, grab a bedpost each and slowly drag it across the floor and into the middle of the room.

“You think that’s enough?” I ask, looking over at him.

“Bring that sexy arse of yours over here, Mrs Maloney,” he orders, crooking his finger. My feet start moving towards him before my brain even registers. Like a moth drawn to a flame. When I’m within reaching distance, his hands grasp my hips and he tugs me closer. The kiss he gives me is so passionate, so hot, it curls my toes. “Don’t move.”

He heads towards the dresser and opens the top drawer. When he pulls out a pair of my underwear and holds them up, I’m confused.

He stalks back towards me, and when he stops, he says, “Open up.”

“Open what?”

He drags down my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. “Your mouth. If you want me to give you everything I’ve got, Princess, I’m going to have to gag you. I don’t want you waking up the kids when you scream.”

I grin and do what he asks.

He balls up the fabric and pushes it past my lips. I love it when he goes all caveman on me.

“Bend over,” he commands before bringing his hand down to slap it against my butt cheek. When he enters me again, he doesn’t hold back. It’s so hot that the moment he touches my clit I come, but he doesn’t relent. My fingers grasp the footrest so hard my knuckles turn white.

I widen my stance and push my hips back into him, greedily taking everything he gives. My nostrils flare as I struggle to get enough air into my lungs, but I don’t want him to stop ... *I never want him to stop.*

His body leans over mine as he fists my hair in his hand and tugs my head back so he can kiss my neck. “You are my

sweetest addiction, Cassandra Maloney,” he groans against my skin. “I love you so fucking much.”

I love him too. *Truly, madly ... deeply.*

True love is like a ghost. It’s something everyone talks about but few people actually see. I’m one of the lucky ones because not only do I see it, I feel it every day of my life.

Finding Love

Love isn't finding someone to live with, it's finding someone you can't live without.

I've lived a charmed life. My father is rich, powerful, and the CEO of the biggest law firm in the country. I'm the apple of his eye, *his baby girl*. When I was young, I loved the attention he showered me with. I went with him everywhere, I was his little sidekick, but I'm a grown woman now, and his overprotectiveness has become somewhat smothering. So much so, I made the decision halfway through college to move to another state to finish my law degree. It was time for me to live a little ... to breathe. My studies were always my main priority, until I met *him*.

Chase Daniels is not only a heartbreaker ... he's a soul stealer. I knew it from the very beginning, but I still wanted him anyway. We came from two different worlds. I grew up with a silver spoon in my mouth; him ... not so much. On paper we'd never work, but in reality, we were a force to be reckoned with. Something about him drew me in; he's sexy, forbidden, and the more I got to know him, the harder I fell. The only problem was, he wanted to be my friend, nothing more.



I grew up on the other side of the tracks ... raised by a mother who was neglectful, manipulative, and always put her endless bevy of men before her son. I was on a one-way trip to nowhere, but that all changed when my stepdad came into my

life. He gave me the love and attention I'd always craved. Pops may be rough around the edges, he's a bikie and not what you'd call a law-abiding citizen, but to me, he's a hero. He encouraged me to be more, to rise above my circumstances ... to make something of my life. I wanted that too, especially once I met *her*.

Angel Cavanagh is everything I never knew I needed. Breathtakingly beautiful, refined, smart, and so damn sweet. Pure and innocent—my polar opposite. I was addicted from the first glance. I was drawn to her, like a moth to a flame, and even though I knew she was way too good for a man like me, I couldn't stay away.

Angel

I'm standing at the sink and staring out the kitchen window, watching my dad pace back and forth like a caged animal across the expansive deck. Every so often, he'll pause to clutch his head or stare blankly out at the ocean at the rear of our property.

Logan Cavanagh is usually relaxed and carefree when he's at home with his family, but not today. Today he looks like he's climbing out of his skin ... like the world as he knows it is crumbling around his feet. *To him, maybe it is.* For me, not so much.

In a few hours, our family and friends are arriving for a double celebration ... my father's fifty-fifth birthday and my big move interstate. I'm gathering the latter is the source of his current distress. He's known this was coming for a while now—although he's refused to talk about it since our initial conversation—but the disappointment I saw in his eyes that day still haunts me.

I love my dad, *so much*, and I know those feelings are reciprocated; we've always been close. The special bond we share runs deep. A girl couldn't ask for a more loving, supportive, and protective parent, but those admiring qualities—for me anyway—come with their own set of problems ... the smothering.

There's no malice behind his actions, and when I was a little girl, I adored the attention he showered me with, but I'm a grown-arse woman now, and sometimes that overprotectiveness makes me feel like I can't breathe.

Literally. Hence why I transferred from the University of Sydney to Melbourne, smack bang in the middle of my course.

The last thing I want to do is hurt my dad because he is the best, but it's time to spread my wings, whether he's on board with that decision or not.

“Angel,” my mum shrieks.

I glance at her over my shoulder and find her frowning. “Sorry, did you say something?”

“I’ve been talking to you for the past few minutes.”

“I was watching Daddy out the window.”

“What’s he doing?” she asks, rounding the kitchen island, where she’s been busy prepping the food for our celebration, to join me. “Oh dear.”

“Will he be okay, Mum? I’ve never seen him like this.”

“He will,” she answers, rubbing her hand up and down my back. “It will take some adjustments, but in time he’ll get used to the idea of you no longer living here.”

“You understand why I’m doing this, right?”

“I do, sweetie. Your dad can be a bit much sometimes, but his heart is in the right place. He cares deeply about the people he loves, and the two of you have always been especially close.”

“I know.”

“Why don’t you go out there and talk to him? It might make you both feel better.”

I blow out a puff of nervous air, and my stomach churns as I pass through the sliding glass doors and step out onto the back deck. My dad is so lost in his head that he doesn’t even notice me approaching.

“Hey, Daddy,” I say when I’m close enough for him to hear.

He stops moving and turns in the direction of my voice. “Oh, hey.” There’s no beaming smile illuminating his

handsome face, like the ones I usually get, and that knowledge makes my heart pang. I knew my leaving wouldn't be easy for him, but I never expected this.

"Have you got a moment to talk?"

"About what?" he asks, anxiously running his hand through his thick dark hair.

"About me leaving." As soon as I say that, he abruptly turns and moves towards the edge of the deck in long purposeful strides, descending the stairs. "Daddy!" I'm hot on his heels as he disappears around the side of the house. "Daddy, please."

The pleading tone in my voice has him coming to a sudden halt. "I've got to get these tables and chairs set up," he says, still giving me his back. "Our guests will be here soon."

"I'll help."

"I'm good ... I think your mum needs you in the kitchen."

"She sent me out here," I reply with a crack in my voice. Over the past few weeks, he's been pulling further and further away, and it's tearing me up inside.

He swings around to face me, and when he sees the tears glistening in my eyes, he sighs. "I can't do this right now, Angel."

"When then? I'm leaving tomorrow."

He turns his face away and stares off into the distance. "Don't remind me."

"I'm sorry that this is so hard for you, but I'm not a little girl anymore. It was inevitable I'd move out one day."

"I know," he says as his troubled green eyes move back to me. "I just ... I don't understand why you feel the need to move so far away. There's nothing wrong with the university here. I attended there, and so did your grandfather. You seemed to enjoy your first two years. What's changed?"

Nothing has changed, that's the problem.

I take a step closer and reach for his hand. “Please don’t take this personally, but I’m an adult now ... I’m about to turn twenty, and it’s time, Daddy.”

“Time for what?”

To get a life.

“To stand on my own two feet.”

“I don’t see why you need to move nine hundred kilometres away for some independence. You already have that here. I think your mother and I are pretty lenient on you and your brother.”

“On CJ you are, me not so much. He’s even allowed to have girls stay over.”

My dad converted one of the rooms on the bottom level of our house into a music studio for my brother. CJ is in a band and gets his musical talent from our mum. He sings, plays the guitar, piano, and drums.

His bandmates are here regularly for practice, and they’re always accompanied by random groupies. I’ve seen my brother disappear upstairs to his room with different ones from time to time.

Mum has an issue with this; my dad, not so much. “*He’s a typical teenage boy, let him live. He’s responsible, and uses protection,*” I heard him tell her.

Deep down, my little brother is a good kid, but he’s also a little wild and reckless. I’ve never done anything but follow the rules, yet I feel like I’m governed by an iron fist at times.

“You’ve had girls stay over too,” my dad says. “I don’t see the issue here.”

“Girls, yes ... *my friends*, but I can’t even bring a guy through the front door without you going all daddy-bear on him and scaring him away.”

“You’re being melodramatic. I’m not that bad.”

“Am I? What did you say to the last guy I went on a date with? “*Remember, whatever you do to my daughter, I’ll do the*

same to you.” Does that sound familiar? Or the time you told my prom date that I was your princess and not his conquest.”

“I let that kid ... what was his name again?” He clicks his fingers a few times as he tries to think of it. “Benny? Bobby? The one with the thick, black-rimmed glasses?”

“Benjamin?”

“That’s it. I let him come inside. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I was very cordial to him.”

“Dad, I was twelve, and he was here to do a school assignment, not date me.”

“I was still nice to him though.”

“You sat at the table with us, glaring at him the entire time. The poor kid was on the verge of a panic attack. He couldn’t even look me in the eye after that.”

“Pfft,” he says as his lips quirk. “He sounds like a—”

I cut him off before he finishes his sentence. “This is part of the problem ... you think it’s a big joke. This is my life you’re ruining.”

He rears his head back like I just slapped him. “You think I’m ruining your life?”

“No ...” I blow out a puff of air. “Sometimes.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, baby girl. It’s just ...” He shoves his hands into his pocket and bows his head. “I’ll do better.”

“You’d honestly be okay with me having a boyfriend and bringing him back to the house?”

“When you’re old enough, of course I would.”

“I’m almost twenty,” I shout.

“*Almost* being the operative word here.”

I throw my arms up in the air. “I’ve been a legal adult for two years.”

His face starts to turn red, and I can tell he’s on the verge of losing his temper. “Let me get this straight, you’re leaving

your family and moving to the other side of the country because you want to be free to meet boys?”

“Firstly, I’m moving one state over, not the other side of the country. And no! I’m moving away to finish my degree. I just need some room to breathe while I do it.”

My confession must sting, because he spins around so sharply, that I feel a woosh of air hit my face. He starts stalking toward the outbuilding that houses the tables and chairs, and I just stand there watching him go.



My farewell and my dad’s birthday turned out to be a major bust ... for the two of us anyway. I at least pretended to have a good time, but my father wore the longest and saddest face for the entire duration. You’d swear he was at a wake, not a celebration.

The guilt I feel about leaving is weighing heavily on my heart, but I know I’m doing the right thing for me. Especially since my brother and his best friend, Blake—Mason and Jacinta’s oldest—swiped a bottle of my father’s best scotch from the bar and snuck down to the beach to drink it. They’re seventeen ... not even at the legal drinking age.

The pair of them were so drunk by the time they stumbled back up to the house, yet my dad never said a word. My uncles, Mason and Connor, thought it was the funniest thing they’d ever seen; Mum and Aunt Jacinta, not so much. My dad would’ve flipped his lid if I’d done something so irresponsible and reckless. Such double standards. It only cemented my decision to leave.

The gloom and doom continued at breakfast this morning; my stomach was tied so tightly in knots, that I could barely eat.

We’re now in the car en route to the airport. My mum is flying down with me to help me get settled. My dad is quiet in the driver’s seat, and my brother, who’s sitting beside me in the back, is looking awfully green ... serves him right.

I lean in his direction, “You smell like a brewery,” I whisper. “And your skin is almost the same colour as your eyes.”

He gives my side a playful elbow, and I smile for the first time today. “And here I thought I was going to miss you.”

“You’ll miss me.”

“Like a hole in the head.”

“Hah!”

He blows out a long breath, resting his head back into the seat, and when he reaches for my hand and wraps it tightly in his, I know he’s struggling with me leaving as well. I feel selfish; I hate hurting the people I love, but I’m also a ticking time bomb—an accumulated bundle of frustration and hurt—and if I don’t do this, I know I’ll eventually implode.

I’ve always been the good girl, doing what she’s told ... never making waves, but with that kind of life comes resentment. Over the past few years, it’s grown to the point I’m ready to burst at the seams. I’m not only doing this for me, I’m doing it for them too. I’ll end up lashing out and saying or doing something hurtful or stupid if I don’t. Things I can never take back or undo.



Once our luggage is checked in, we make our way towards the security area that leads to the departure gates. My mum is walking ahead of us, hand in hand with my dad. I can’t hear what she’s saying to him, but occasionally he’ll nod. Is she prepping him for our goodbye?

When we get to the point where they can go no further, we all stop. I hug my brother first. “I’m going to miss you,” I say. “So much.”

The entire second floor of our expansive home has always been ours. The bottom level is the main living area, and the third floor is our parents.

If CJ had a bad dream when he was little, or there was a big storm about, he'd come into my room in the middle of the night and climb into bed beside me. That kind of thing doesn't happen now that we're grown—he seems to be my protector these days, despite our age gap—but once upon a time, that job was mine.

“I'm going to miss you too, big sis. More than you know.”

“What are you going to do next time there's a thunderstorm?”

“Very funny,” he says. “It's been years since I snuck into your room.”

I release a small sigh. “I miss those days,” I whisper. I know I'm doing the best thing for me, but in this moment, the doubts are starting to set in. In a way, I'm saying goodbye to the only life I've ever known, and it's way harder than I thought it would be. I squeeze him extra tight as I feel my emotions bubble to the surface. “I love you, Christopher James.”

“I love you too, Angel-cakes,” he whispers. “Be safe down there. I'll come visit as soon as I can.”

“Please do.”

When I let him go, I turn towards my father, who's now standing with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed.

I take a tentative step in his direction. I know he's upset about me leaving, even more so since I told him the reasons why. But if he refuses to give me a proper goodbye, I don't know what I'll do. I love him, he's always been my favourite person, so this standoff between us is tearing me apart.

“Bye, Daddy.”

His hands slide out of his pockets at the same time he raises his head, and when I see the tears glistening in his eyes, my heart squeezes in my chest. His big strong arms engulf me before I have a chance to speak, crushing my body to his. “Be safe, baby girl,” he pleads. “Please be safe.”

“I will,” I cry over a small sob.

He holds me to him for the longest time, and I just stand there, listening to the steady beat of his heart. That sound and the familiar scent of his cologne have always been a comfort. When he finally releases me, he cups my face in his hands. “Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine.”

“I’m going to miss you so much, Daddy.”

“I’m going to miss everything about you. The house won’t seem the same without you in it. Who am I going to talk law with now? Your brother certainly isn’t interested.”

“Hey,” CJ gripes.

“We can still talk on the phone, or FaceTime. You know I’m going to need to pick your brains when my next assignment rolls around.”

“I’d like that,” he says, leaning in to place a lingering kiss on my forehead. When he draws back, his emerald-green eyes meet mine. “I trust you, I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like I didn’t.”

“I know you do,” I reply as a smile curves my lips. As my mother said, his overprotectiveness comes from a good place.

“I love you, baby girl, never forget that.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

He moves to his wife next and folds her in his arms. “I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

When he covers her mouth with his, my brother and I instinctively look away. I adore how deeply my parents love each other—and I can only hope to one day find a man that worships me as much as my father does my mother—but their public displays of affection can get a bit much at times.

I turn to glance at my dad before we disappear out of sight and blow a kiss in his direction. He catches it, like he always does, and slips it into his pocket for later. It’s our special thing and something we’ve done since I was a little girl. He blows one back and I do the same, placing my clutched fist over my

heart before storing his kiss away for later. The smile he gives me in return has tears stinging the back of my eyes.

“I love you,” I mouth.

The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt or offend him like I did yesterday, but I meant what I said, his coddling is holding me back. I’m craving space—a chance to live a little—it’s the sole purpose of my move. Nothing more, nothing less. My main focus is, and will always be, getting my law degree, not picking up guys.

How was I to know that on my first day at my new college, a womanising bad boy, by the name of Chase Daniels, would casually walk into my life and turn my entire world upside down?

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