



**REAL**

# **FAKE HUSBAND**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JOLIE DAY**

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Warning: This story contains mature themes and language.

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## ABOUT THIS NOVEL



He's my childhood bully.

I didn't plan to see him again, let alone marry him.

But his grandmother had other plans:

She left us a significant inheritance...with strings attached.

We have to get married and live in her small NYC apartment.

For a month.

With just one bed.

When I arrive, he's not the cheeky, pigtail-pulling jerk I hated.  
He's piping hot. Tall. Sinfully tattooed. A stunning villain.

I'm married faster than I can blink.

His stormy kiss spirals me deeper into this grand mistake of  
epic proportions.

His protective heart dissolves all my defenses.

His fiery touch leaves me aching for more.

I know I'm playing with fire—and I don't want to get burned.

**Say "I do," get the check, and get out—that was the plan.**

**I can't possibly be in love with my real fake husband.**

## **NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR (CW/TW)**

There are different kinds of bullies in romance literature these days. This book features several sensitive themes and topics. To keep this romance a light and—hopefully—fun read, Callum Ashford isn't someone who tortured Josie to no end in their childhood, but his actions certainly can't be classified as "normal boy pranks."

Today, because of everything, there's no man Josie hates more.

For content/trigger warning, visit website at: [www.joliedayauthor.com](http://www.joliedayauthor.com)

Enjoy reading!



**JOSIE**

MONDAY NIGHT INSIDE A COZY MOM-AND-POP DINER IN  
QUEENS



**Sometime after 7:00 p.m.**

“Come *closer*, baby doll.” I hear the prick sneer at Kaylin a few tables down.

I’m not planning on a confrontation. But the second I notice that jack-off reach out to touch my bestie, I see red.

He doesn’t even try to hide what he’s doing. When she leans across the table to pick up his plates, he grabs her ass and squeezes. Hard. I watch her jump back in surprise. Wide-eyed, she surveys the diner through her glasses, and she finds my furious gaze the moment I make a beeline for the table.

“What’s the matter, sugar?” the man asks with a wide smirk. It’s apparent he’s already figured her out, aware he’s taken her by surprise and making her flustered.

“S-Sir, you can’t...”

“I’m sorry—what was that?” he huffs. “Can you speak up? Can’t what?”

By now, I’m fuming.

I don’t care what anyone says: The customer is *not* always right.

Approaching the table, I stand by Kaylin’s side, and the words fly out of my mouth without a second thought. “Hey, *prick*. You can’t grope the waitresses. It’s not that kind of diner.”

He gives me the once-over, and I notice his lip curl.

See, I’m not like Kaylin. She’s tall, thin, with a neat brunette side-braid, and big blue eyes—that are currently staring at me like a deer caught in the headlights of a moving vehicle. I’m the opposite of her. I’m short, curvy, brown-eyed with wavy blonde hair, hastily thrown up in a messy bun, sporting flyaways, and immune to all the hair masks I slather on.

Kaylin is my bestie, a few years younger than me, and she's a sweet girl. The sweetest you'll ever meet. When we had an opening at the diner, I immediately gave Matilda her resume.

Tonight, she's done a great job of holding her own so far. The man she's serving is an asshole who thinks he's special because he wears a suit and works in an office rather than waiting tables. There are also three half-started beer bottles next to his half-eaten dinner: a club sandwich with fries. Kaylin has taken every stupid demand (as in, the beer was too cold or too foamy) and backhanded compliment (as in, she is looking "surprisingly good" tonight, "despite her glasses") he's thrown at her with a smile he thinks is seductive, and seemingly polite words. With every complaint, with every comment, he's tested his limits with Kaylin and now acts like his groping is a godsend.

But enough is enough.

"Out. *Now*," I add in a calm, yet firm and even tone.

"Just what are you accusing me of?" he sneers.

"Don't play dumb. I saw you touch her." I've been on my feet for hours after working a double yesterday. No matter how much I love my job, anyone in my position would be exhausted. This man has already tested what little patience I have left.

"I did no such thing." He has the nerve to appear aghast. "She just leaned over, and my hand just happened to be there."

Wow, he must think I'm an idiot. "Your hand just happened to be level with her backside and making a grabbing motion?"

"Is it a *crime* to have my hand resting at my side?"

"No, but it's a crime to touch someone without their consent."

By now, I've put Kaylin behind me, and I'm glaring daggers at this man. He really chose the wrong night to come in here acting like a lech. Matilda's already gone, which means she's left me in charge. I'm the most senior employee and the

diner's supervisor. Which gives me the authority to handle things how I see fit.

The man leans back, full-on glaring at me. I think it's meant to be an intimidation tactic, but little does he know how much it's *not* working.

*Please give me attitude*, I think. I'll snap somebody's ass.

"You know, I don't like the way you're speaking to me, and I demand to speak to your supervisor," he says, having the audacity to wave me off. "Fetch him for me."

Oh, yes, the old "supervisor" trick.

I can't wait to see his face.

"You see, sir," I say, resting my hands on the table to lean in close, "I *am* the supervisor. I'm going to have to ask you to vacate the premises."

Maybe if I use big words, it'll come across condescending enough for him to get the message. Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. If he's gonna be a jerk, two can play that game.

"*You're* the supervisor? Yeah, I'm sure you are. Hey, hey, girl." He snaps his fingers at Kaylin before pointing at me. "Is she really your supervisor?"

Kaylin manages a weak nod in response to his question. The guy scoffs in disbelief.

I've had enough of this dude. If he's going to act like he can do whatever the hell he wants, then I'll prove to him who's in charge of the situation. I backhand one of his half-finished beer bottles, and it falls over, the lukewarm liquid spilling across his lap.

His body jolts backward.

"Oops," I say in a sugary-sweet tone.

The man's face immediately turns bright red, and he's attracting the attention of the other customers. He clearly got more than he bargained for when he decided being an inappropriate douche-nozzle was a smart thing to do.

“You did that on purpose!” he accuses.

“My hand *just happened* to slip. Is that a crime?” I repeat his phrasing and arch a brow, backhanding the remaining half-finished beer bottles, and more liquid spills across his lap.

“Oops,” I say again, but not as nice this time.

His face grows even redder.

“*Out*,” I say, pointing to the door to really drive home the message.

From behind me, Kaylin whispers, “He hasn’t paid yet.”

As I turn around to take the slip from her, he scoffs and climbs out of his booth. Noting the giant beer stain on his lap is incredibly satisfying. It’s hard for a guy to intimidate me in general. Add the fact that it looks like he wet his pants, and whatever tough guy routine he’s pulling falls flat.

Straightening his coat and tie, he looks me dead in the eye and says, “I’m not paying.”

I am so ready to shove my knee into his balls—*with gusto*—but lucky for him, one of my regulars steps in. Martin is an NYPD officer with thirty years of experience under his belt. Towering at over six feet one, he’s a muscular handsome black man (with the softest heart). Very intimidating. Very perfect. When Martin stands behind me and Kaylin, I can see Mr. Suit shrink back, including his wet balls (probably shriveled down to peanuts).

“Is there a problem here, Josie?” Officer Martin asks sternly, his deep baritone sending a hush across the dining room.

I waste no time. “This man groped Kaylin and is now refusing to pay his bill.”

Martin’s eyes narrow. “Do you want to press charges, Kaylin, sweetheart?”

Mr. Suit pales, and Kaylin’s eyes go wide. “No, no, please, I don’t want any trouble,” she insists.

I want to push her to go through with it, but I know it's not my decision. It's hers. If she wants to move past all this, I won't force it. "It's your lucky day," I say to the rude customer. "Now, I'm going to tell you one last time to leave."

Mr. Suit huffs, but between my glare and Officer Martin's imposing presence, he's been beaten, and he knows it. "I'll go. But it's not because you told me to. It's because I would rather be caught dead than step foot in this place again."

He turns, and I clear my throat. "Um, excuse me. Aren't you forgetting something?"

I place his receipt on the table and slide it over, giving him my best customer service smile. Without even looking at it, he pulls out his wallet, grabs a couple of twenties, and throws them down before he spins on his heel and strolls across the room. He's trying to be casual, but the tension in his shoulders is evident, even when he ducks out the door.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I pick up the money. "You all right, hon?" I ask Kaylin.

She nods, clearly still shaken. Poor thing. I pull her into a hug.

"Kaylin, are you sure you don't want to press charges?" Martin asks.

"No, no, I just want to forget this ever happened. Thanks, Officer Martin."

He smiles and pats her arm before returning to his steak and potatoes. I take a second to pop behind the counter and grab a big slice of apple pie from the dessert display. Officer Martin's eyes light up when I slide it in front of him and I return his smile.

I wrap my arm around Kaylin's shoulder and lead her toward the back, aware she needs a few minutes to collect herself. Along the way, I motion to the two other waitresses to take our tables, and they swoop in without complaint.

In the kitchen, it's hot and busy. Just like every other night. Deacon, our head chef, is singing loud and off-key. He's an older man in his late sixties with gray hair pulled into a low

ponytail. When he notices me leading a trembling Kaylin into the back office, I motion for him to fix her something to eat. He salutes me and does as I ask.

Matilda's office is cramped. I don't even think it's technically an office. I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be a storage closet that has a desk, two chairs, and a filing cabinet shoved into it. I sit her down and kneel in front of my friend.

"I want you to just relax here and take all the time you need."

"But the tables," she protests.

"Don't worry about it." I wave her off. "Daphne and the other girls can handle them. I'm sorry that guy was such a creep."

Kaylin sighs, putting her face in her hands. "I can't believe some people."

I say nothing. I've been waitressing a long time, and sadly, nothing surprises me anymore. But Kaylin's a good-natured girl. I've tried to talk to her many times about being "less sweet," but first, I know it's just not in her character, and second, advice is the last thing she needs to hear right now.

"Thank you for coming over and taking care of it," she adds.

"Of course. You're my bestie. You know I'd kick *anybody* in the nuts for you."

I'm thirty-three, and I've been waitressing my entire adult life. I've got a pretty thick skin when it comes to customer service. There's nothing someone can throw at me that I can't handle.

"I know." Kaylin chuckles.

The door opens just enough for Deacon to push a plate through. Perfectly poised in the center is a steaming chocolate lava cake—Kaylin's most cherished sweet dish—with a large scoop of vanilla ice cream melting on top. I take it from him.

"Here, have a yummy treat," I say, handing her the plate. "Take a few deep breaths, and then head on out when you're



done. Okay?”

She nods and offers to share with me, but I decline. She can eat and eat and is always skinny. *I* on the other hand—*oh, well.*

Before she takes a bite, she asks, “Don’t you have that meeting to get to?”

Ugh, the meeting. It’s not a typical “meeting,” but I have no idea how else to explain where I’m going or what I’m going to do once I get there.

“Yeah, but I have a few minutes.”

“I don’t want you to be late because of me.”

A quick glance at my phone tells me I can stay a little longer. I’ll have to grab an Uber instead of using the subway, but that’s doable. Also, more practical with the bags and all anyway.

“Don’t worry about it.” I take the seat across from her, leaning my elbow against Matilda’s messy desk. “To be frank, I’m not in any rush to get there.”

“I can only imagine,” Kaylin says, “I’ve never been named in someone’s will before.”

Neither have I.

My heart aches for Mrs. Blanche Ashford. Or, to her close friends, Blanche. We used to call her “the Baroness” because she was always dressed to the nines, and in the evenings, would sit in her favorite booth with a glass of merlot. She was not royalty, but she looked every inch a royal in her ruffled dresses with a hint of nude lipstick and thick flicks of deep kohl eyeliner. Even though it’s been a few weeks, sometimes when I have the dinner shift, I still can’t help but expect to see her come through the door in a bouncy step. Her gray hair would be twirled in an intricate low chignon knot, underneath an extravagant “fascinator”—a small feathery hat she wore on the right-hand side, immediately above the eyebrow.

I have to stop thinking about her, otherwise I’ll cry again. “She was a special lady,” I say. “I miss her a lot.”

“I do too.” Kaylin puts her plate on the desk, adjusts her glasses, and pulls me into a hug. “Go to your meeting. I’ll be fine. Promise.”

I’m glad she’s okay, but damn, I was hoping to hold off as long as possible.

Truth is, I don’t want to go to Mrs. Blanchie’s apartment.

It’s not just the sadness of the meeting and reading of her will that’s getting to me.

It’s knowing that I’m going to have to see *him* again.

Mrs. Blanchie had no living children, and her husband passed away many years ago. Her only surviving family is her grandson. *Him* I know very well. I’m not worried. Annoyed and ready to get it over with, but *not* worried. Hell, I just kicked some guy out of the diner. I sure as hell won’t have problems handling a bully from my childhood.

I was five—bright-eyed and bushy-tailed on my first day of kindergarten. My mom put my frizzy hair in braids, and I was wearing a brand-new red dress with white dots. Money was tight. Yet she always made sure I had new clothes on special occasions, such as the first day of school.

I was being good and doing everything I could not to get dirty. I even said no to painting, my absolute favorite activity, because I didn’t think the smock was big enough.

From the corner of my eye, I saw *him* sneer. The next thing I knew, he pulled one of my pigtails, and when I turned to face him, there was blue paint all over my red dress. I cried so much they had to call my mom to pick me up.

And he was still sneering.

I haven’t seen him since high school. Luckily.

But can you believe the jerk wasn’t even at the funeral?

**CAL**

*M*y gran's apartment is pitch dark when I arrive.

I never remember her home being dark, even when I was a kid and we lived on the other side of Queens. She always kept the light on in the kitchen. I place my bags and helmet by the door, and the first thing I do is turn on the light above the stove.

The soft glow brings immediate comfort. Even though I know she's dead, I can feel her presence. Not because I believe in ghosts, but because good memories well up in my head.

Now that I can see, I let my gaze wander through the rest of the apartment. It's cozy. Beautifully quiet as always. Several vases and a collection of figurines, knick-knacks, and other decorative objects add a touch of her personality. The flowery dark-purple wallpaper holds a frame of my favorite photo of Gran, with her small body in the middle, between me and my childhood buddy, Theo. When the pic was taken, we were already much taller than her, and I recall we had to crouch down. Our heads are touching, and we're all smiling from ear to ear.

Everything is exactly how I remember it.

With one major difference.

The scent.

Taking a deep breath, I run my hands through my hair and lean against the counter. Her home smells like it used to. Clean and tidy. Flowery, like rose candles and soap. Only the

familiar scent of freshly baked swirled butter cookies is missing. Gran used to make them in an old-fashioned piping she inherited from her mom—who inherited it from hers—and I can still taste the crumbly, light texture melting in my mouth. They were the absolute best.

When I got the call about Gran, it was like a punch to the gut. She was the one who raised me after both my parents died. Even before then, she was the only person who understood me. She had infinite patience with me, I can see that looking back. Gran hadn't been happy when I'd moved to San Francisco after high school, but she'd supported me anyway. Shortly after I left, she moved out of the apartment where she raised me, saying it was too big. She needed something a little smaller, somewhere that wasn't filled with old memories.

Now I'm back, and she isn't here.

I'm still pissed I couldn't make it to the funeral in time. I was on the road, wrapping a few things up, and didn't get the call until a few days after her death. Between that and several flight delays and cancellations, by the time I made it to New York, it was too late.

My eyes sting, and I shrug it off. I refuse to think about that right now. *You need to be on your guard for the nightmare you're about to walk into*, I tell myself.

It's easy not to dwell on the grief, because “the little surprise” in her will has been consuming my thoughts ever since I found out.

What in the name of all things holy were you thinking, Gran, huh?

I know Gran always wanted me to settle down and get married, but I still don't understand why she was hell-bent on Josephine being the one. Josephine Graham. Little well-behaved “good as gold” Josie with her frizzy hair, long pigtails that begged to be pulled, scatterbrain and nosiness—Nosy Josie. That was her nickname. One I'm still secretly proud of, even all these years later.

I still can't fathom why she's going along with this. The grandmother of an old childhood classmate (one you obviously hate with every fiber of your being) dies and tells you that you'll gain an inheritance if you stay married to him for a month and you say *yes*?

She must be really bored—or really desperate.

Yeah, I'm banking on the desperate part. People will do anything for money.

Gran wanted us together, but I never thought she would go *this* far. But I'll settle my beef with her in the afterlife. You hear, Gran? Right now, I not only have to prepare to get married, but it has to be to the most annoying, chaotic, and nosy person on the planet.

After I hang my biker jacket on one of the hooks near the entrance and adjust my tie, I head into the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, I realize I'm starving, until I remember there's nothing here. Shit. It's late, but New York City never sleeps. I'm sure someone is still open for delivery.

Before I can get out my phone, I hear keys rattling in the door.

I head to the living room to find out who the hell would dare let themselves into my gran's—*my* apartment—wait, unless *she* has a key.

The door opens, and I stop in my tracks.

I stare at a beautiful woman.

It's not *her*.

She's wearing black pants and a polo shirt, which is clearly a uniform. Her shirt is the brightest pink. Like, almost blindingly bright. But as far as one can say of this color, it suits her. Her clothes hug her curvy frame. A few strands of her blonde hair have escaped the messy bun atop her head, and my fingers itch to reach out and tuck them behind her ear.

After dropping her bags next to mine in a heaping mess—irritatingly so—she shifts to face me, chocolate-brown eyes narrowed in what seems to be distrust.

“Callum.” Her voice is tight.

Josie? *This* is Josie?

There’s *no* fucking way this woman is the same goody two-shoes who rolled her eyes every time I spoke. My gaze lands on the name tag on her uniform.

“Josephine,” I say, using her full name just as she used mine. “It’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough.”

And there it is. The attitude I’m so familiar with. Yeah, it’s her. Her looks may have changed, but *she* hasn’t changed a bit.

“I didn’t know you had a key,” I say.

She twirls the keys around her finger. For other women, this would be an expression of nervousness. With Josephine, the gesture clearly has something provocative about it. “I used to help Mrs. Blanchie from time to time. She made a copy for me.”

“So, you just let yourself in?” I arch an eyebrow in question. “You realize it’s *my* place now, right?”

She glares. “Well, I didn’t think you would be here... considering you didn’t show up for the service.”

Fucking low blow. “She was my grandmother. If I could’ve been there, I would’ve. Not that I need to explain myself to anyone.” *Especially you*. I know I don’t have to say it out loud.

Clearly, neither of us are thrilled about the arrangement, and even less so about having to spend any modicum of time together. Before she has a chance to respond to my quip, there’s a knock on the door.

I push past her to answer it, glancing at my watch. It’s 8:30 p.m. He’s punctual to the minute.

Vance, the family lawyer from Sanford & Partners law firm, is standing in the hall with a bright smile and a folder clutched in his hands. When he called to ask me to meet him and Josie here, he sounded just as young as ever. Now, seeing

him in person, he's definitely aged. His black hair is now gray, and his face is lined with wrinkles.

But his warm smile is still the same. "Hello, Mr. Ashford," he says in a thick Italian accent, "*buonasera.*"

"Hey, Vance. Come on in." I step aside and let him enter.

"I would say it's great to see you again, son, but given the circumstances..."

"It's all right. Vance, this is Josephine Graham. Josephine, our lawyer Vance Lombardi."

"We've already met," Josie says in that matter-of-fact tone of hers. "At the funeral."

*Yeah. Right.* I don't owe her an explanation, I remind myself.

Josephine gives Vance a polite smile. "Hello, Mr. Lombardi."

"Please, call me Vance. It's good to see you again," he says, extending his hand. She shakes it as he leads us both to the kitchen table. "This shouldn't take very long. Everything's already been drawn up, as per your grandmother's wishes. All I need are your signatures."

The three of us sit, with Josie and I facing each other, though it's evident she's trying to avoid eye contact.

"Let's go over everything," I suggest. "Just so we can make sure we're all on the same page."

"Of course." Vance opens the folder and shuffles a few papers around. "In her will, Mrs. Blanche Ashford named you both as the inheritors of the sum of her estate, which includes this apartment, her storage locker in Queens, and a total of approximately 1.5 million dollars—"

"I'm sorry, *how much?*" Josie asks, her eyes wide.

There it is. Initially, Vance spoke of a "hefty amount." I'm also surprised, but have a much better poker face. I knew Gran was well-off. She always told me not to make a fuss when I took care of her bills and hired a maid to clean for her. But I

never realized the extent of her finances. That being said, \$750,000 won't change my life. Then again, I'm not here for the money. I'm here because I can't say no to Gran's last wish. It's what she wanted, and I would never forgive myself for ignoring it.

Judging by the look on Josephine's face and the fact that she's willing to go through with this arrangement, she needs the money way more than I do.

"One-point-five million dollars," Vance repeats. "As you know, I was instructed not to disclose the amount until both parties were present."

"Go on, Vance," I order.

"I know I spoke to you both separately, but it's crucial that we're all on the same page and there are no misunderstandings. The sum is to be split equally between Callum Ashford and Josephine Graham upon the completion of one month of marriage. The marriage must be conducted by Mr. Vance Lombardi of Sanford & Partners. Both parties must remain married and living together in Mrs. Blanche Ashford's Twenty-third Street apartment for the entire thirty days. Neither party is allowed to renovate or change the furniture due to the value of the apartment. Only after the month is complete will both parties receive their half of the inheritance and the keys to the storage locker."

"Wait," Josie interrupts, drumming her fingers on the table. "We're not allowed to renovate or change the furniture? We can't even move furniture around or buy new things?"

"That was Mrs. Ashford's wish, yes." Vance gives a nod. "I trust you will respect her wishes."

"Of course. No problem, but it's rather...odd."

Crazy is the word she's looking for. This whole thing is batshit crazy. Although, when I think about it a bit, the furniture and renovation thing is weird, but not surprising. Dear old Gran was an eccentric and loved her antiques.

"Seems clear enough," I say, finally looking at Josephine.



She's staring at me, and her mind seems to be racing a million miles a second. She nods.

Vance draws out a single sheet of paper from a manila folder, and a pen from the front pocket of his suit jacket. He clicks it and holds it out. "Everything is taken care of. I just need you two to sign on the bottom line, and you'll officially be married."

I take the pen first, scribbling my signature with practiced ease before pushing the page toward Josephine. I hold out the pen for her.

Her eyes meet mine, and she seems to ponder.

What? Has she changed her mind? If she's still the Nosy Josie I know, then she's weighed the pros and cons a hundred times over. Why is she hesitating now?

When she reaches for it, our fingers brush. It's only for a second—just the tiniest touch. But it's enough for me to feel a spark—*of something*—but not the good kind. My nerves come alive, and my focus narrows in on nothing but her. Did she feel it too? If she did, she doesn't show it. Annoying as ever. This month is going to be a nightmare, just like I thought it would be.

She snatches the pen from me and signs her name.

Done. She drops it and pushes the paper back to Vance.

"By the power vested in me by the state of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife," he says, gathering the paperwork. "Congratulations."

"What happens if either one of us doesn't go through with it?" she asks. "You know, moves out before the month is over?"

"Ah, right. Should either party violate Mrs. Blanche Ashford's last wish, the money goes to"—he flips through his papers—"Mr. Chad Turtlekaw."

"Who the hell is that?" I ask, slightly irritated.

"Mr. Turtlekaw runs a small YouTube channel about endangered algae and desires to create a heartfelt animated

film about them, which requires him to own a custom eighty-two-foot cruising yacht, as well as a film production studio,” Vance explains matter-of-factly.

What the...? I raise my eyebrow, dumbfounded. I’ve never even heard of this guy.

“Evidently,” Vance continues without batting an eyelash, “your late grandmother was a huge fan of his work, and if you or Ms. Graham renege on the arrangement, there are explicit instructions to give the money—the full amount—to Mr. Turtlemau.”

That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. A heartfelt *animated* film about algae? Okay, I’m all for saving the environment and shit, but how the fuck do you save the environment on a huge-ass luxury yacht? Eighty-two-foot! That’s not a yacht, that’s a fucking palace.

But honestly, it doesn’t surprise me. I told you she was eccentric.

Vance doesn’t stick around after that. He’s gone about two minutes later—not before wishing us good luck and expressing his sincere hope to see us here again on the last day of this month, with the annulment papers ready—leaving me and Josephine behind to process what just happened.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Ashford,” I can’t resist teasing her. “Should we kiss now and seal the deal?”

“Hell will freeze over before I kiss you.” A hand goes up to her hair as if to make sure I’m not pulling her pigtails. Then she rolls her eyes and grabs her bags. “And there’s no way I’m taking your last name.”

“Good. After this month is over, we can just move on and pretend like it never happened.” I grab my bags as well.

“Fine by me.” She shrugs indignantly.

“Fine.”

We step toward the hallway, and there’s a moment of awkward shuffling. We each try to go first. She ends up pushing past me, accidentally grazing my chest slightly,

muttering under her breath, and I let her go because I'm a goddamn gentleman. Also, I get to see her swaying hips while she walks.

A second later, she stops abruptly. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"What's the problem?"

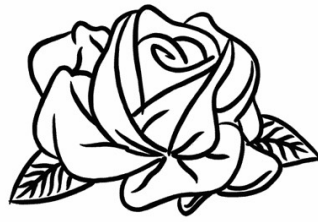
Slowly, she turns to look at me. "There's only one bedroom."

Sure enough, there are two doors at the end of the hall, and one leads to the bedroom. The other is the bathroom. Ahh, I forgot about that. I look over her head into the room and see the neatly made queen-sized bed with a stitched rose floral comforter and an ornate mahogany headboard. Recalling Gran's instructions about not changing or moving furniture, I can't help but chuckle with amusement.

"Well, shit," I say, smirking at Josephine. "I guess we're sharing a bed, Mrs. Ashford."

**JOSIE**

THIRTY DAYS LEFT



The universe hates me.

It has to. What other explanation is there for this whole thing? It's crazy enough that I need to be married to *and* live with Callum Ashford for a month to gain an inheritance I didn't even know was coming, but there's only one small bed!

And that damn smirk on his face?

The tattoos definitely weren't there the last time I saw him. Now they're everywhere, as far as I can tell. His arms are covered, and I can see ink creeping up his neck from beneath his tight black T-shirt. Has he always been that muscular? I believe I would remember if his arms were like *that* in high school.

Doesn't matter. I don't care how attractive he is.

He's still a jerk.

It was Mrs. Rudolph's senior year art class—I'd been looking forward to it all year. Because we were about to graduate, Mrs. R had started giving us the freedom to work on whatever projects we wanted. I'd been dying to get my hands on some charcoal, since I'd been getting better at drawing people—and art class was the perfect place to practice.

Mrs. R wasn't there yet, so I plopped my bag down on my desk and sat next to my best friend, Gwendolyn. She was already hard at work, scribbling on a piece of red paper.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

Gwendolyn didn't look up. “A note.”

Oh, boy. I knew what that meant. Seemed like it was time for Gwendolyn's new crush. I'd lost count of the number of secret crushes she'd had throughout high school. Pretty sure she'd had a crush on every guy in our grade (which was kinda funny).

Curiosity got the best of me, and I asked, “Who's it for this time?”

“Cal Ashford.”

My eyes practically bulged out of my head. “Ugh, seriously? Him?”

“He's gorgeous,” she gushed with that smitten expression on her face. “And he's smart and funny—”

“He's annoying.”

“Don't say that! He is *not*.”

With a heavy sigh, I let her continue writing her little love note and directed my attention back to prepping for class.

Our class was basically divided into three groups.

Group one: the popular crowd (the rich and the beautiful).

Group two: the okay crowd (kinda cool and kinda pretty).

Group three: the uncool crowd (losers, full-on geeks, and creative cretins-slash-dopes).

I was in group three, the uncool crowd. But only because, at the beginning of the year, Mrs. R had sat me next to the “uncoolest” girl in the whole school—Gwendolyn. Nobody wanted to sit next to her in the first row, and I'd been late that day. All because I'd forgotten my sketchbook. Sure, I wasn't the coolest girl, either—far from it—and I certainly wasn't rich or beautiful enough to be in group one, but I hated having to sit next to this super nerd with glasses who always raised her hand like it was an Olympic sport. I wanted to at least belong to group two.

But over the next days and weeks, I discovered that deep down, Gwendolyn was...funny. Sure, she was mostly quiet, shy even (except when it came to writing anonymous love notes to boys), and an overachiever in the worst and best sense, but we shared a similar sense of humor.

Once she opened up to me, I had more fun with her than ever before, during *and* after class. Talk about a life lesson. Soon, I realized Gwendolyn was more my people than the popular and okay crowd, and I happily accepted my new position without any regret or remorse.

It was through Gwendolyn's secret creative writing book club that I met Kaylin. She was part of the uncool crowd back then too, even though she went to a different school. She and I became besties once Gwendolyn moved to another state. Anyway, what all the cool and popular kids didn't understand was that it was extremely beneficial having "nerds" as your besties and being a fully integrated part of them. When something was due, I was like, "Hurry!" I couldn't even tell you how many times Gwendolyn had saved my ass when I'd forgotten to do my homework or needed, let's say, "inspiration" during a test.

I was a bit of a messy kid. I would sometimes forget things.

But this time, I *had* brought my red sketchbook—I was sure—wanting to transfer a couple of small sketches into larger drawings. As I dug through my backpack, trying to find the book, I heard a smartass voice.

"What? Can't find your shit? Did Miss Goody-Goody forget to clean out her backpack?" Callum asked, taking the seat next to mine.

Why the hell did he have to sit there? Couldn't he sit somewhere else? I scanned the room, hoping for another desk to move to, only to find every seat filled. Great. Perfect. Exactly what I wanted to deal with today.

"Mind your business, Callum," I snapped.

"You got it, Nosy Josie."

Oh, my God, I *hated* that name with a fiery passion. He knew it because I'd already told him to knock it off over a dozen times and to stop calling me that. First of all, I was *not* nosy. I just had a high eagerness to learn. Second, he only called me that because it rhymed with my name. Third, it wasn't even original. Fourth, he was an asshat, who likely had the IQ of a gnat. I opened my mouth to snap at him again, but then Mrs. R strolled in and immediately headed to the whiteboard.

"All right, I have guidelines for what we're going to focus on today," she said, her voice firm and straightforward. "If you'll direct your attention to the board..."

Mrs. R was strict, and when she spoke, she expected everyone else to be quiet and listen. I just shot Callum a glare and continued to go through my bag, half-listening to what the teacher was saying.

Begrudgingly, I had to admit to myself that the bag was kind of a mess. I found the sketchbook wedged between my math textbook and science binder, stuck to an open chocolate wrapper. Sketchbook acquired, I put the bag down and gave the teacher my full attention. I barely had time to notice what she was writing on the board when I felt Gwendolyn tug on my arm. She knew I hated being bothered during art, just like she hated being bothered during creative writing. Not to mention there was Mrs. R's whole "no talking" rule.

I shrugged her off and didn't take my eyes off the board.

"Psst, Josie," Gwendolyn whispered. "Can you give this to Cal?"

"No," I muttered under my breath. "Shh, I'm trying to pay attention."

"But he's right next to you," she insisted. "Just slide it over."

If it were anyone else, I'd ignore them. But Gwendolyn was my best friend. I glanced over to find her giving me the most wide-eyed, pleading stare. Against my better judgment, I snatched the note from her, only to hear Mrs. R clear her throat



loudly. I looked up to find the teacher standing in front of my desk, giving me that stern expression she always wore when she was unamused.

“Ms. Graham, you know there is no note passing in class.”

“It’s not my—”

“No excuses. Give it here!”

Sheepishly, I handed it over, and she snatched it away, making a show of crossing to her desk and putting the note in her top drawer. Thankfully, she didn’t open it and read it aloud—she sometimes did. That would have been *so* embarrassing for poor Gwendolyn. Without another word, Mrs. R went back to the board. I glared at Gwendolyn, only to realize all the color had drained from her face.

“We have to get it back,” she hissed.

“No! Just forget it. Write another one.”

“But that one was *perfect*. To the point. It even rhymes.”

“Quiet, you’re going to get me in trouble,” I whispered, training my gaze back to the whiteboard.

Mrs. R spun around, and we immediately went silent. Whenever Callum was somehow involved—even indirectly, like now, through Gwenny’s love letter—I got in trouble. From the moment he’d first pulled my pigtails, I’d had to do double duty to make up for my alleged transgressions (which were in fact entirely his fault). “You all have your assignments. You may get started. Let me know if you have questions.”

With a heavy sigh of disappointment, I set my sketchbook aside and got up to grab the supplies she’d outlined on the board. Gwendolyn caught my hand. “I’ll distract her. You get the note back.”

“Gwenny, seriously, just let it go. I’m not going to get in trouble just to get a stupid love note.”

“Please, Josie, I beg you! What if she throws it away? Or *worse*. What if she reads it out loud?”

She had a point. That old bat could definitely read it aloud at the end of class if there was time, just like she sometimes had in the past. Crap. I was torn between staying tough and helping out my girl. Was I really going to do this for my friend? I looked at her, and she had tears in her eyes. I knew then I couldn't tell her no.

"Fine," I hissed in a soft tone. "You talk to her and make sure she's busy. I'll go swipe the note."

"Thank you, Josie! Thank you, thank you, thank you." Gwendolyn gave me a quick hug before pulling away and raising her hand. "Mrs. Rudolph? I'm not sure I understand the directions."

Mrs. R adjusted her glasses and strode to Gwendolyn's desk to talk to her.

Once she was distracted, I slipped out of my seat and walked to the paper supply, which was right next to her desk. I kept glancing over my shoulder to make sure she wasn't looking. A few times, she lifted her head to take a quick glance around, and I had to pretend like I was rifling through paper. Gwendolyn drew her focus once more—*thank God*—and I knew I had to hurry before I lost my nerve.

Seizing the opportunity, I quietly stepped behind her desk and slowly opened the drawer.

The next thing I knew, I heard a book hit the floor. Loudly.

It was Callum. He was grinning, no—laughing! He'd dropped my sketchbook on purpose to distract Mrs. R from Gwendolyn and bring attention to me.

*Oh no! Please, no! Not again!*

All I could hope was that Mrs. R wouldn't notice me. I stood frozen. The only sound I heard was the whooshing in my ears.

Mrs. R half-turned to pick up the book, looked up, and our eyes met from across the room. My stomach dropped when I realized how pissed off she was. My face grew hot with embarrassment and shame, knowing there would be no talking my way out of this one.

Mrs. R stomped up front, tearing the note from my hand and opening it. *Oh, my God.*

“No! *Mrs. R,*” I tried.

She ignored me and read it aloud:

*Dear Cal,*

*You heavenly creature.*

*You're not only the cutest boy in school but under the big blue sky.*

*Can I be your butterfly?*

*With love from the one who adores you the most,*

*Your forever-forever girl from the loneliest coast.*

The class laughed.

Hysterically.

Several even pointed fingers at me.

My cheeks heated in embarrassment, and they must have been the same color as my red shirt. Okay, Gwendolyn hadn't put her name on the note (she never did), so that meant everybody thought it was *my* love note to Callum. I wanted to protest, scream: *no, I didn't write the damn note!* No way could I allow Callum Ashford to think I was confessing my never-ending love to him—but then I caught Gwendolyn's pleading eyes.

I couldn't rat her out.

So, I remained quiet.

Just behind her, I noticed Callum's stupid laughing face.

The same stupid face I'm now married to.

Of course, *he's* the reason why I got into trouble for the first time in my life. Ugh, just thinking about the incident makes my cheeks grow hot again and annoys me like it did back then. I try not to think about it.

“Ready to go to sleep, Mrs. Ashford?”

“Stop calling me that,” I snapped, turning around and entering the bedroom. I drop my bags onto the end of the bed and start unpacking.

Callum has the nerve to chuckle at me before he does the same thing. I can't even look at him. My head starts racing with thoughts: Why me? Why *him*? Mrs. Blanchie had always talked him up whenever she and I spent time together. I remember many times when she tried to set me up with him over the years. I never understood why she was so convinced we'd be a good match. We can't stand each other, and right now, he's the last person on Earth I want anywhere near me.

It doesn't help that when I turn toward the dresser, he's already there, and I bump right into him. Instinctively, he reaches out to grab my arms and steady me. If it weren't for the stack of clothes I'm holding, my breasts would be pressed right against his chest.

“Easy there, Josie,” he says, a cocky grin playing on his lips.

I shrug out of his grasp, ignoring the fact I can still feel the heat of his palms on my arms. “I know it's difficult for you, but try to pay attention.”

“Still as charming as ever.”

“Back at you.”

The drawers have already been emptied, so I pick one and shove my clothes into it. I almost bump into him—again—as he pivots toward the closet. It turns into this weird dance of us constantly getting into each other's way while we try to unpack. This room definitely isn't the largest. It's clearly

meant for one person, not two. It doesn't help that I'm also not used to sharing a space with someone, and he's obviously having the same issue navigating around another person.

Eventually, we finish without knocking each other over. By now, I'm exhausted. I've been on my feet for over twelve hours, and I have to do it again tomorrow. All I want to do is take a hot shower and crawl into bed.

"I'm starving," Callum says. "I'm going to order some food. You want anything?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"I said I'm *fine*." It comes out harsher than I mean it to. I'm so wound up by this whole arrangement. The fact that he's not, is making me angrier. How can he be so calm about all this? How can he act like this is normal?

"I was just asking. You don't need to bite my head off."

I'm looking for my pajamas, only to realize I forgot my comfy T-shirt and flannel pants. Where is my brain? All I have is a nightie and—oh, *thank God*—my white robe. I pull them out of my drawer and shift to face him.

"How can you be so chill about all of this?" I ask. "Doesn't it bother you? Us having to be married and living together?"

"You didn't *have* to do anything," he says. "You could've easily walked away. But you didn't. You came here, signed the papers, and agreed to the terms. If it bothers you so much, why did you go through with it?"

I don't want to tell him I need the money. I don't want to tell him how much my life will change with \$750,000. But it's more than that. Being a waitress is a great job I enjoy immensely, and it's paying the bills. However, I don't want to do it all my life. With this inheritance, I'll be able to finally breathe and not have to work every second of my life like I've been doing since I was sixteen.

But I don't tell Callum any of this because it's none of his business.

Instead, I take a deep breath to calm myself. "No, I'm not hungry. Thanks for asking," I say, completely ignoring his new question just to make a point, and pushing past him. "I just want to shower and go to sleep."

I will not argue. Not now. Maybe later, though. We'll see if the shower calms me down enough.

Callum lets me go without a word, but I can feel him watching me the whole time. It's not until I reach the bathroom and lock the door (I double-check that it's locked) that I sigh with relief. It's going to be a *loooong* month. But I can do this. I can handle this. I'm not just saying it to convince myself. I can handle anything—even Callum Ashford.

This is the first time I've truly paid attention to Mrs. Blanchie's bathroom—other than to use the facilities—and it's twice the size of my old bathroom, with gorgeous fixtures in pristine condition. There's a frickin' clawfoot tub.

Forget the shower. I'm taking a bath.

I turn on the water and strip, tossing my clothes onto the floor. Scanning the space, I don't see any towels. But there are two doors on the other side of the bathroom, so I check each one.

To my delight, the first one leads to a small laundry room. I need to take a second to admire the washer and dryer because all I've been using are the beat-up ones in the basement of my building.

The water is wonderfully hot when I slip into the tub. I lean back and let out a content sigh.

I close my eyes, trying to relax. It's not easy. Because as soon as I do, Callum's face pops into my head. Those eyes, those lips in that infuriating smirk.

My blood boils.

I know, I know. My beef with him is from years ago, and I should let it go. I probably would if he hadn't immediately

started pushing my buttons. It's like he wants me to be annoyed with him.

*Knock. Knock.*

A sharp knock on the door startles me out of my relaxation. Good grief, what does he want? Thank God the door's locked.

"What?" I call out.

"Food's here, you want some?"

"No." Why is he asking, *again*? Annoying. I told him I wasn't hungry.

"Okay, I'll put the rest in the fridge, in case you change your mind."

The relaxing vibe is instantly gone. Oh well, it was nice while it lasted. By now the water is cold anyway. I haul myself out of the tub, too exhausted to think about anything anymore. My need for sleep overpowers everything else.

I dry myself with the fluffy towel and slip on my nightie. It's sleeveless and short, at least a few inches above my knees. I put on my white robe and tie it around me. Holding my toothbrush in my hand, I go through my toiletry bag. Darn, I think I forgot my toothpaste. I borrow Callum's—it's neatly placed next to the sink. Once I'm done brushing my teeth, I run my towel over my hair and toss it with my clothes before leaving the bathroom, using my fingers to comb through the knots. Even though I'm exhausted, I wonder if I should take a few minutes to sketch. It's been a few days and my hands are itching to grab some charcoal.

That idea goes out the window when I go into the bedroom. The bed looks so inviting, and all I want is to crawl under the covers and pass out. Intending to do just that, I pull back the comforter. I reach down to untie my robe.

"Do you want to be the big spoon or the little spoon?" he rumbles.

I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound of his voice. I never even heard Callum behind me. "Jesus! Don't sneak up

on me like that,” I snap, pressing a hand over my racing heart.

“I don’t remember you being so jumpy.”

I have a sharp reply right on the tip of my tongue, but it leaves my brain instantly when he takes off his shirt.

Gulp.

My mind is a blank slate.

All I can think of is how *ripped* he is.

One hundred ninety pounds’ pure muscle.

But more than that, his collection of tattoos has its own beauty, and I can’t help staring. Some of them are straightforward. A flaming skull covers his right shoulder, the flames traveling down to wrap around his forearm. On his left pec, a detailed human heart (anatomically correct) dripping with blood is right over his actual heart. On his left forearm, a motorcycle takes up the entire area. Yet there are more abstract pieces, mostly tribal patterns and symbols, from what I can see.

From an artist’s standpoint, the work is stunning. I’ve never seen tattoos so detailed and beautiful. From a woman’s standpoint, goddamn, he’s smoking hot. I catch myself and look away. Thank God he doesn’t notice.

He crosses to the other side of the bed, and it’s only then that I find my voice again. “What are you doing?”

“Yeah, it’s still early, but I’m beat. I know it’s our wedding night, but sorry, honey. Not tonight.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I say. “Why are you climbing into bed?”

He pauses in place. “Are you serious right now?”

“We are *not* sleeping together.”

“I know, I told you I’m tired.”

“Stop trying to be cute. I’m not sharing a bed with you.”

“Fine. There’s a perfectly good couch in the living room,” he says, undoing the button of his jeans, and I have to force



myself not to watch the movement. “I’ve been on two connecting flights and haven’t slept in nearly twenty-four hours.”

Quickly, I climb into bed before he can. “Perfect. *You* can sleep there.”

He gives me an incredulous look. “Seriously, Josie?”

“Do I sound serious?” I ask, arching a brow.

Callum grumbles and grabs one of the pillows. “You’re always serious. Little serious Nosy Josie with that sourpuss look on her face.”

Hearing my old nickname brings my anger back full force. “Enjoy the couch and get the lights on your way out.” I purposefully lie in the middle of the bed and, yes, I still have my robe on. “Good night.”

“Oh, fuck it,” he rumbles. “Fine. I’ll sleep on the couch. I’m not going to argue with you right now,” he adds, a tightness to his voice I know means he’s annoyed. “But don’t get used to it. This isn’t over.”

On his way out of the room, he shuts the lights off and slams the door behind him.

Part of me feels bad. A very tiny part, mind you. I don’t mean to be difficult, but, come on. We don’t see each other for years and he really thinks we’re going to share a bed? There’s nothing in the terms of this agreement that says we have to sleep together.

**T**he bed is so soft, and by the time I take off my robe and pull the covers up, I’m already closing my eyes. It never takes me long to fall asleep, especially after such a grueling workday. Goodness, is this a memory foam mattress? It feels absolutely perfect.

I’m in that wonderful moment between sleeping and awake when I hear the door open and feel Callum’s hand on my shoulder. The light’s still off, yet I can see his silhouette in the dark.

“Huh...wh—?” I mumble.

“Move over.”

“Uh, *no*.”

“Josephine, the couch is too damn small for me. Just move over so I can lie down.”

I roll over and put the pillow over my head. “We went over this,” I argue, the pillow muffling my voice. “I’m not sleeping with you.”

“*You* sleep on the couch then. You’ll fit.”

I’m so fucking tired, and I’m a thousand percent done with dealing with him. Pulling the pillow off, I sit up. “Fine. Whatever.”

I roll out of bed, grabbing my robe and pillow, and closing the door behind me. In the living room, there’s a thick blanket laid out on the cream-colored couch already, and I collapse onto it. And barely even bounce. The couch cushions are *hard*. Like, hardly ever been sat on before kind of hard. The pillows are thin. It’s annoying, but I’ve slept on worse. Bundling myself up in the blanket, I settle down and close my eyes.

But the blissful sleep I was slipping into before doesn’t come. I miss the memory foam. I miss the down comforter. The longer I lie there, the more I realize how bad this couch is. I’ve slept on my fair share of couches and floors. This is how I know there is no way I’ll be able to make it through the night. This couch is in a whole category of its own. It’s horrible. It takes nearly thirty minutes of tossing and turning before I concede.

Callum is right.

I lie there with a huff, thinking about my options, of which there’s only one. Would it be so bad to share a bed?

I’m so tired by this point, I don’t even care. Grumbling, I get up and shuffle back to the bedroom. Quietly, I turn the knob and peek in. It’s dark, but I can see that Callum isn’t taking up the whole bed as I had. He’s lying facing away from the doorway so I’m not sure if he’s still awake. The comforter

is draped over his hips, and all I can see is the smooth expanse of his tattooed back.

Quietly, I tiptoe to the bed and slowly climb in. Now that I'm close, I realize the tattoo is a gorgeous pair of black wings on his shoulder blades.

I'm just settling down when I hear, "Couldn't stay away, could you?"

"That couch sucks."

"Told you."

"*You* stay on your side, buddy. I mean it. Don't test me. Especially if you want to keep all your appendages and extremities."

"You're a dirty girl thinking about my appendages."

"You're so gross."

"You're the one talking about my body parts. Get your mind out of the gutter. Hadn't even crossed my mind to move closer." There is sleepiness to his voice.

I turn my back to him. "Smartass."

Ahhh, the memory foam and comforter once more. Excellent. Carefully, I slip out of my robe and snuggle under the covers. Surrounded by comfort once more, I close my eyes, and this time, sleep comes swiftly.

## CAL



*I*t's only a few short hours later that I wake up.  
It's dark.

According to the clock on the bedside table, it's the middle of the night. Fuck, really? I haven't had nearly enough sleep to make a dent in my tiredness. Annoyed, I try to shake the sleep away and figure out why I'm awake so early. There's pressure *on* my chest, and when I glance down, I'm greeted by a beautiful sight.

Josephine is fast asleep, tucked into my side. Half of her is slung across my body, her head on my chest, her hand on my pecs, our legs tangling together. I *am* on my side, but so is she.

All I can think about are her protests from earlier.

*Stay on your side*, she said. *Don't test me*, she said. Oh, this is too good.

I'm not just talking about the irony of her words. It feels good to have her weight on top of mine. One of my arms is already around her waist as if I pulled her close in my sleep.

I want to tease her about it. God, do I want to wake her up and give her such shit. But there are two things wrong with that. For one, I'm not entirely blameless in this scenario. Two, it feels too damn good.

Her body fits perfectly with mine. Her tits are pressed against me. Bet they would fit beautifully in my hands. The heat of her body that called to me earlier is louder now.

Jesus, it's intoxicating, and I'm not the only one who thinks so.

The blanket is lost at the bottom of the bed, giving me a full view of her body. Suddenly, she stirs, and I freeze. Her leg moves up, and the nightie slips, showing off a smooth thigh that grazes my dick. Fuck. That is one beautiful leg and one fucking snug nightie. Can't even see her panty lines.

Wait. Is she wearing panties?

I want to reach down and check, but I don't want to wake her.

Also, that would be inappropriate, right? We're married, but not *that* married. Guess I'll just have to remain still.

At least try to.

Oh, goddamn it.

I lift my head to check.

There's enough moonlight reflecting off of her to reveal two round and bare ass cheeks. *Fuck*. She's pantyless. More blood rushes into my cock as I lay my head back down into the soft pillow. My movement causes her to stir some more. With all the stirring she's doing, chances are high she'll accidentally slide down my dick at some point during the night. Maybe I should just wait for luck to strike.

No. I shouldn't.

Out of the question.

I can feel the heat of her body calling to me. I want to answer, but then I remember that she's the most annoying woman on the planet.

I'm hard as a rock, and I have to shift a little to angle my hips away from her because, you know, gentleman and all that. Will she notice if I start rubbing one out? Because that sounds like a damn good idea. My dick jumps at the thought of catching a beat, and my horniness goes into overdrive. I barely move before she's curling tighter, and the next thing I feel is her pussy heat right *there*, against the cloth of my boxer briefs and my iron-hard cock. Her pussy lips practically hug my shaft

as I force myself to hold back a groan. My brain glitches when she begins to move her hips, rubbing herself against my length in her sleep.

*Fucking don't move, don't disturb her, let her do her thing.*

“Ahh...” A quiet whisper-moan escapes her lips when she comes.

I'm forced to remain where I am, motionless, feeling her slowing jerks, listening to her drift back into a calm sleep, snuggling close, mumbling under her breath before growing still.

Shit. That was hot AF.

Now she's clinging to me in the cutest way imaginable. Her wild hair is in my face and smells of vanilla. Magnificent. Gently, I reach up to smooth it down.

Okay, no jacking off tonight.

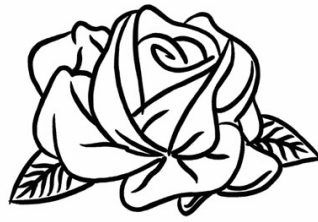
I deny myself the thought of how her pulsing pussy would've felt around my cock. Lying motionless and feeling content with her body molded against mine, her arms and leg nestled around me—that's all I do.

I wrap my arms around her. Ah, it feels good. It feels natural and comfortable to have her close. So, I leave her there, let her stay because the thought of pushing her away now is physically impossible.

It's been a while since I've been in this position. Sure, I've had my fair share of flings, but they don't—usually—end with us asleep and cuddling. I haven't had time for that sort of thing in years. I'm compelled to take full advantage while I can. I tighten my arms around her.

You know, might as well.

**JOSIE**



I don't need an alarm to know when it's time to get up. My body is quite familiar with my daily routine, and I always wake up a good hour before I have to get to work. I come to consciousness to the soothing feelings of warmth and safety.

Dear Lord, this bed is *heavenly*.

I even had a naughty dream. I think I orgasmed—the memory makes me giggle. The first thing I'm going to do when I get that money is buy a new bed. A bed *just* like this one, with *the* best mattress and all. Super cozy. *Memory foam*. I forgot what it was like to sleep without being in a dent. Or having a spring poking me in the back.

Though something is poking me in the thigh.

Something *big*.

It's about now when I realize I'm definitely not lying on the mattress. It smells masculine. Musky and cedary. There's an even rise and fall below my head, arm, and body. It's so nice and comforting. A steady calm beat thumps against my ear.

Wait. A calm beat?

I open my eyes, and the first thing I see is the tattooed expanse of Callum's naked chest. My leg is flung across his hips, and my arms are practically around him in a hug.

Which means what's poking me is *not* a spring.



I want to scoot away quickly, but I'm also acutely aware that could wake him up. That is out of the question, mostly because I don't want him to know I was cuddling him.

I'd better not have orgasmed!

As carefully as possible, I slide my leg off him. I unwrap my arm from around his torso.

*Please don't wake up, please don't wake up, please don't wake up.*

"Good morning, sweet thing."

Dammit.

Callum's sleepy smile does little to soften how absolutely *mortified* I am that I was cuddling him. "Ready to confess your never-ending love?" he rumbles.

"I'm sorry," I say, instantly shifting to the other side of the bed. In fact, I scooch over to my half so quickly I just about bounce off the mattress.

I'm busy sliding back the stupid strap of my nightie. *No boob slip. No boob slip.*

Even as I'm struggling to find my balance and ignoring the hand he's instinctively extending to help me, I'm not busy enough to miss the bulge. The blanket is bunched up at the bottom of the bed, meaning I can see all of Callum. His boxer briefs do very little to hide his very obvious erection. Now that's some impressive morning wood if I ever saw it. I realize what I'm looking at and immediately avert my eyes.

"*Sorry*," I say again.

Callum laughs. Dammit, I hate how sexy it sounds with his raspy voice.

"I'm not," he says, clearly in no rush to move or cover himself. "You wanna rethink us consummating our marriage?"

"No! Of course not!"

"You sure? You *were* cozied up to me thirty seconds ago. The whole night, if I'm not mistaken."

“I can’t be held responsible for what I do in my sleep.”

“I just find it funny how much you protested, and yet, here we are.”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Come on, Josie. Admit it, it felt good.”

It did feel good. He did feel good. Too good. Also, he smells really good. Like man, and bare skin.

I peek back at him. My face has *got* to be beet red—I know it is. I feel the heat in my cheeks. “It was just an accidental cuddle,” I say, jaw clenched. “Means nothing.”

“Uh-huh. Sure it doesn’t.”

He stretches again and places his hands behind his head, giving me a full view of his tattooed body. Dear God, the pecs on that man. He’s built, but it’s not excessive. His muscles look and feel like they come from hard work, not endless hours at the gym.

Just past him, I can see the alarm clock on the nightstand. “I don’t have time for this. I have to get ready for work.” It’s the perfect excuse I need to get out of bed.

“It’s not even six.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when you work in the restaurant business.”

I grab a pair of clean black pants and my second pink uniform shirt, making a mental note to throw my work clothes into the wash before I leave or when I get back.

“I know how restaurants work. I was a busser way back in the day,” Callum says, sitting up. “I was talking about the fact that you worked last night and now you have to go back in less than twelve hours later.”

“The owner asked me to cover a shift.” I gather a few more items on my way to the bathroom.

“The owner should do it. I’d never ask one of my employees to work back-to-back shifts like that.”

That makes me pause. “You have employees?”

I’m well aware that I know little about Callum’s life. The few times Mrs. Blanchie tried to talk him up to me, she mentioned he was well-off, but never went into details about what he did. I didn’t ask. I had no interest in him or his employment endeavors. Now, my curiosity is piqued.

“Yeah, I own several Ashford Motors in San Francisco and the bay area, and I’m opening a new location here in the city.”

“A car dealership? You sell cars?”

“Motorcycles, actually.” Callum stands up, arranges his shorts (or what is inside his shorts), and stretches one more time. “Buy, sell, and fix.”

Without hesitation, he drops to the floor and starts doing push-ups. I have the mental image of him riding shirtless on a shiny motorcycle, his tan, tattooed chest glistening from sweat. I shake away the mental image.

“I guess I never thought of you as the responsible CEO type,” I admit.

He grins at me as he works out. “So, you’ve thought of me, huh?”

“Ugh.” I roll my eyes and leave, ignoring his smirk. Can’t have a regular conversation with this guy without him turning it around and being a cocky jerk.

I hurry to get ready, not wanting to be late. My morning routine is screwed up already from being in a new place, and I’m not sure how long it’s going to take me to get to the subway from here. I can’t afford to spend any more cash on an Uber until I get paid again.

After getting dressed and freshening up, I scour the bathroom floor, looking for my clothes from the night before. My name tag is still on the shirt, and I need it. But the floor is clean, and I have no clue where the clothes went.

When I go back to the bedroom, Callum and his inked body are still doing push-ups. My eyes fall to his hips.

Up, down, up, down.

That sweaty muscled image that came to mind earlier is now right in front of me, and my body responds even as my mind goes blank. Pure heat passes through me. It makes me wonder what he feels like sweaty—and panting—during sex.

I clear my throat.

“Where are my clothes?” I ask.

“On your back.”

“Hilarious. I meant the ones I left in the bathroom.”

Callum finishes exercising and gets to his feet. “I threw them in the wash. Figured they were dirty since you left them on the floor.”

What is he? A stickler for cleanliness? “Well, next time, ask.”

“Well, maybe don’t leave your clothes on the floor.”

Every time I think I can handle being around him, he says something else that reminds me just how much he gets on my damn nerves. “Just don’t touch my stuff.”

I head to the washing machine to retrieve the name tag, and bump into him on the way out.

“By the way, I used your toothpaste,” I say. “Hope that’s fine.”

“Sure. Forgot yours?”

He’s so annoying. “Yes, Callum, I forgot mine. Why do you have to rub it in?”

“You’re tightly wound, you know that, Josephine?” he asks.

“Why are you there every time I turn around?”

“Because I live here.”

“You’re *such* a smartass.”

“You’re not the first person to tell me that.”

“And I’m sure I won’t be the last.”

Callum concedes with a nod. “Probably not. What time do you work? I’ll be ready in a few and can take you.”

“It’s fine, I’ll just take the subway.”

“Seriously, woman, it’s not a big deal. I’m heading out in a few minutes anyway.”

“Work?”

“No. I have a goodbye to make.”

I take a second to realize what he means. My annoyance with him immediately evaporates. *Wow, Josie. Way to forget why you’re in this situation to begin with.* The first thing he’s going to want to do is to visit his grandmother’s grave. That’s what I would do if I’d missed a loved one’s funeral. From his hard expression, I think I can see that the matter has affected him more than I first thought.

Perhaps his grandmother meant more to him than he is letting on?

*He shouldn’t go alone.* “Do you want me to go with you?” I ask, knowing that I need to bury my grudge in the light of the moment—at least for now.

After my mother passed away, I couldn’t handle visiting her grave without Matilda by my side. I could go with him and tell Matilda that I’m going to be a bit late to the diner. She’d understand the reason.

He seems surprised at my offer. “That’s not necessary. I can handle it. Just give me five minutes to shower, and I’ll drive you.”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, just steps into the bathroom and closes the door behind him.

I’m at a loss for words, not expecting his courtesy.

I can handle being in a car with him for a few minutes.

**W**hile he showers, I finish getting ready.

I grab my art bag and sift through the supplies I made sure to pack with me when I left my place. Because I need the money, I'm subletting my apartment to a friend of a friend who's visiting NYC for the month. I also know this will make it difficult for me to capitulate to Callum and flee back to my own four walls. I have a suspicion that the moment will come when even \$750,000 is not enough to bear his presence. My place is a shoebox-sized studio apartment with the living room, bedroom, and kitchen combined into single room, and while I wanted to make sure my guest had enough room for her stuff, I'm now extra glad I brought all my drawing supplies.

Drawing calms me down, and I feel as though I'm going to be doing a *lot* of drawing over the next month.

Before my mom got sick, I used to draw and sketch every single day. Whenever I finished a drawing, she would find a spot on the wall to display it. But then I needed to work to support both of us and drawing went on the back burner.

If I can get through this next month and receive my inheritance, I'll be able to take some classes again. I can draw more regularly and maybe build up my portfolio. A few years ago, I attempted to sell my art on ArtGal, the largest and most popular online platform, representing thousands of artists, however, my work hours were too much to keep up with it.

I hear the shower turn off, and I reach down to grab my messenger bag. When I do, it tips over and my red sketchbook spills out.

*Shit.* I must have left it open.

It falls open to one page.

Boy, am I glad that Callum isn't around so he can't see the sketch of all the nude bodies.

People are my favorite drawing subjects. I love studying the human body and trying to recreate it on the page. I've attended many nude art classes over the years. It was one of my favorite experiences in school, every Thursday from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

The models the school hired fluctuated: sometimes it was a male, sometimes it was a female. I had a favorite one—the “jiggly girl”: a pregnant woman, maybe around twenty-six, and completely uninhibited. You could just tell how much fun she had by her whole attitude. She would come rushing in, tear her clothes off, get in the middle of the hall—the tables were always arranged in a circle—jump up and down to loosen herself up, and her tits would jiggle. She had super-thick thighs, and a “give no fucks” attitude. Once she was all jiggled out, she’d proceed to offer original and not always the easiest of poses. She made it a point to always ask us if we had certain positions we wanted her to do, and she’d also warn us if she couldn’t hold a certain position too long. “Guys, you have about ten seconds to finish up.” That was such a breath of fresh air compared to other models who wouldn’t interact at all. It was wonderful and somehow magical to draw her nude body, eternalizing the various stages and changes of her pregnancy onto paper week by week, drawing the way her belly and breasts grew. At the end of the class, she was the only model who would walk around and take a look at what we’d drawn, and it wasn’t unusual for her to go home with several drawings some of us had gifted her.

I used to think I was pretty good—until that *stupid* article from the douche critic had come out three years ago.

I shove the red book into my bag just as Callum comes down the hall.

I don’t want him to see my drawings.

Callum is dressed in blue jeans and a white T-shirt. It’s a simple outfit. I must have seen it on other guys a dozen times. It’s got to be the tightness of them. They cling to his body damn well, letting me view every thick muscle.

I think about his bare chest, about the heart tattoo, and my fingers twitch.

I want to touch him.

But more than that, I want to *draw* him.

*Not going to happen, Josie.*

You will *not* draw him—he won't go for it. *Put it out of your head.*

He'd just make fun of me for being nosy and wanting to see his naked body. The jerk.



**CAL**

Josie is quiet on the drive.

We take my BMW instead of my Harley because it's raining like crazy out. She's wearing a pair of tight black pants and another pink shirt. Her hair hangs in loose waves around her face, and I'm disappointed when she pulls it up into a bun. When she does that, she reminds me of the old Josephine, the one in school who used to tie her tousled frizzy hair back and raise her hand, ready to give the teacher the right answer.

We pull up outside the diner, and she unbuckles her seatbelt. "I'll be done late. I'll just take the subway back."

"What time? I'll pick you up."

She shakes her head. "I don't want you to go to the trouble."

"It's no trouble."

"Why are you doing this?" she asks, eyes narrowed with clear distrust. "Why are you being so...nice?"

"Do you want me to be mean?"

"It's what I'm used to from you."

"Come on, Josie, that was years ago. I'm not that person anymore."

"Really? Because you've been a total dick since the second I walked through that door."

I lower my voice. “And you’ve been Miss Good Manners?”

She purses her lips. “Fair point,” she concedes. “I guess I don’t know what to think when you’re nice. I want to know what’s going on in your head, Cal.”

I put the car in park.

Cal. She never called me that.

I turn my body in the seat to face her. “I’m trying to make light of the situation, not because I don’t take it seriously, but because there’s no point in making things harder on us than they already are, Josie. I want to respect my grandmother’s wish and make the best of it. That’s what she would’ve wanted.”

I see a shift in her expression.

“Give me your phone,” I say.

Her smile starts to fade. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

With a wary expression, she bends and grabs her phone from her back pocket. She unlocks and hands it to me. I quickly enter my number. “Just text me when you’re done, and I’ll swing by.”

She puts the phone back where it was. I can’t tell if she’ll take advantage of my offer or not. *Probably not*, I think. “Okay. Thanks. It probably won’t be until after seven.”

“Damn, woman, that’s a long time. Seriously, you need to talk to your boss about these shifts.”

“My boss is cool. I don’t mind it.”

“Maybe you should.”

She gives me a strange look, yet for once, doesn’t offer a retort. “I’ll see you later,” she says, and then she’s gone.

**T**he traffic thins the farther away I drive. I notice a flower vendor and pull over to purchase a bouquet. “Don’t you

dare show up on a woman's doorstep empty-handed, Callum," I remember her telling me whenever I went off to hang out with a girl.

She'll probably haunt me if I don't bring her something.

Flowers safely on the front seat, I drive to the place I haven't seen in years.

There are flowers everywhere. Heaps of white and pink roses decorate the area around the tombstone. They're still fresh and in full bloom, swaying in the light rain. Gran always loved to make a splash, and I made sure this was no different. It looks like Gramps's grave has had a little TLC too. While not as ornate, his tombstone still shines as if it were erected yesterday. His also has flowers, but nowhere near as many as Gran's.

"You always loved white roses," I say, kneeling by Gran's gravesite, leaving my bouquet right in the middle.

I glance over at Gramps's grave.

"You finally have your queen back," I say, smiling. "I bet she's talking your ear off, trying to catch you up on everything you've missed."

I can just picture them, sitting in their favorite armchairs with tea, Gran going on and on about what she's been up to since they last spoke. Gramps is probably nodding politely while trying to read his newspaper. The image makes me chuckle.

In the distance, I hear the roar of a motorcycle and glance toward the road. A lone figure rides around the corner, pulling their bike up alongside my car. They dismount and, after looking around, they start to head my way.

"How did you find me?" I ask when they approach.

Theo Hanson, my best buddy since childhood, runs his hand through his black hair and smiles, coming to stand by my side at his buff 220 pounds. "It wasn't that big of a stretch to

figure out where you'd be," he says, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "I didn't want you to be alone right now."

"I can handle it."

"I know you can."

We don't speak for a time. I remain kneeling, my hand resting on the tombstone while Theo keeps his hand on my shoulder. I never wanted to come home when my parents were still alive. Theo and I were always riding bikes or hiking up the mountain or looking at Theo's dad's porn magazines. We were always causing a ruckus around the neighborhood, you know, throwing rocks at cars—never got caught.

I don't want to be sad, don't want to spend time saying my goodbyes through a haze of gray thoughts. I focus on the good memories. One in particular crosses my mind, and I chuckle to myself.

"Do you remember when we snuck out to take your dad's bike *joyriding*?" I ask, glancing up at Theo.

He laughs. "Ha! I totally forgot about that."

I was seventeen and stupid. I mean, most teenagers were, since they were fueled by rebellion and hormones. But being a teen who'd just got their license and had never ridden a motorcycle before, I was a particular brand of dumb.

We snuck out as soon as Gran fell asleep. *Thank God she's so predictable.* Exactly one hour of TV, then a cup of Earl Grey tea (which she swore knocked her out quicker than a bottle of sleeping pills), and straight to bed. Ten minutes after she turned in for the night, we were climbing down the fire escape and booking it to Theo's place.

His dad was out of town on business and his mom was gallivanting around the world with her new boyfriend, doing who knows what. It was times like this when he came to stay with us. Gran, bless her heart, didn't like leaving him home by himself. At that point, he was essentially living with us

nonstop, and Gran had basically adopted him, treating him like her own son.

“Did you see the tits on you-know-who?” he asked on our way over. Both our haircuts were shoulder-length and we sported the unkempt look, because we thought it was way cool.

“Who?”

“Josie.”

“Who?”

“Josephine Graham, bro. She wasn’t wearing a bra today. They’ve got bigger.”

I shrugged. “Haven’t noticed.”

“You don’t think she’s pretty?”

“Pretty? Josephine Graham? *Hell* no.”

“Josie’s friend has a nice pair too. The one with the glasses. Dude, you need to pay attention to those things.”

In the parking garage, Theo yanked the tarp off the bike, and I let out a low whistle.

“Whoa, it’s even better than I remember,” I said, running my hands along the handlebars.

“Yeah, Dad’s been fixing it up,” Theo nodded proudly. “He says when he gets back, he’s going to teach me how to work on it.”

“Gimme the keys.”

Theo tossed them to me.

When the engine roared to life, my heart rate skyrocketed.

Oh, man.

This. Was. Fucking. Amazing.

I shot out of the garage like a bat outta hell. I wish I could say I looked cool, though I was sure I did for a few seconds. But again, young and stupid. I managed to get out of the garage and drive half a mile down the road before I took a turn

too sharply. The next thing I knew, me and the bike were tipping too far to the right, and in my attempt to straighten it, I overcompensated.

For a brief second, I was airborne, and then I hit the ground *hard* and rolled away.

“Cal! Cal!”

Miraculously, I wasn’t hurt. Not seriously, anyway. My pride was a little bit, though. I was lucky my head hadn’t hit the ground, or it could have been way worse.

I sat up. “I’m good.”

Theo caught up to me and breathed a sigh of relief. For half a second. “Shit, the bike!”

He helped me to my feet, and we hurried—well, I limped—toward the motorcycle. It was stuck against a lamppost, tires spinning and engine protesting and sputtering angrily. Theo turned it off, and together, we pulled the bike away from the post and propped it back up. Not only was there a dent where it had hit the streetlamp, there was also a huge scrape across the paint on the side that had skidded against the asphalt.

“Oh, God, oh, no,” Theo muttered.

My heart immediately sank. “It’s okay, dude. We can fix it before he gets back.”

“*How?* I don’t know how to fix it.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

I helped Theo walk the bike back to the parking garage. I realized I was more hurt than I’d initially thought. Every time I put weight on my leg, a sharp pain shot through my knee. I couldn’t focus on that right now. My mind was racing, thinking of how to get us out of this mess. Luckily, his dad wouldn’t be home for a week. We had time.

At least, I thought we did, until we got back and found Gran standing in the open garage (yeah, thanks Earl Grey). She was in her rosé robe, with curlers in her hair, and arms crossed. Not only was I surprised to see her, but the stern

expression on her face told me all I needed to know about what she was feeling.

“Callum Maximilian Ashford,” she scolded. “Care to explain what you think you’re doing?”

The memory is as vivid now as it’s always been. Theo and I got in a shitload of trouble. Gran made me call his dad and tell him what I’d done. Then, as a punishment, I had to help him fix the bike by paying for the damage with my pocket money and extra hours of work around the house and garden. Despite all of that, I don’t regret what I did. It was through that whole situation that I developed a love of motorcycles, and I ended up hanging out with my buddy every free chance I had.

“She was so mad,” I recall, getting to my feet. “And then when she learned I enjoyed fixing bikes, I thought she was going to be angry again, but she was supportive.”

“Ehh...to a point,” Theo reminds me. “I remember her not being *that* supportive when we wanted to ride across the country.”

“She was just worried.” I laugh. “She made me call her at every rest stop.”

Theo chuckles. “Sorry we missed the service, bro. But glad we’re here now.”

I nod and pat him on the back. “You can head on over to the shop. I’ll meet you there.”

Theo inclines his head and doesn’t speak as he leaves. I don’t stick around for too long. I take another minute or two to say my goodbyes, and then I follow.

I’m lighter when I climb back into the car. Now that I’ve said a proper goodbye, I feel better.

Time to move on.

Time to do what I returned home to do.

## JOSIE



“Josephine Graham!” Her voice is harsh, well, as harsh as Kaylin can get. I feel like I’m being scolded by a parent, which is hilarious, given that she’s younger than me and typically the quiet soul of the place.

“What? Why are you talking to me like a mom?”

She puts her hands on her hips to complete the image. “I *cannot* believe you went along with this crazy scheme.”

“Kay, you have no idea what’s on the line. It’s a lot of money.”

“Josie! The only reason to marry someone should be for love!”

Maybe because I know she’s right, her accusation hits me like a punch in the stomach. Yes, Kaylin is a true romantic at heart and an innocent soul, but she’s usually open-minded and the most understanding person I know. Granted, I have never confronted her with being married to my archenemy for a month.

“I get it’s wrong. Trust me, I do,” I say. “But again, it’s just for a month. Also, it’s not like I married a stranger.”

“Who is it?”

“Eh...Callum Ashford, Mrs. Blanchie’s grandson. We went to school together.”

“*The* Callum Ashford?”

“Yup,” I confirm.



“The horrible guy from school?” Kaylin has never met Callum, but I have mentioned him a few times, no specifics, but never in a good perspective, of course.

“Yup, the very same one. So, see, *not* a stranger. I’ve known him my entire life.”

Kaylin lowers her hands from her waist. “I just can’t believe you went through with something so crazy. You *hated* the guy. That’s the exact opposite of love.”

I hear his voice calling my name in the elementary school playground just as I’m inspecting the contents of my lunch box, trying to decide whether to eat the peanut butter jelly sandwich or the cheese one.

Mom used to make me two sandwiches every morning, one topped with cheese, tomatoes, pickles, and thin slices of boiled egg. I always discarded the latter because I didn’t like the wobbly egg whites, but I didn’t have the heart to tell Mom. The other one was made with peanut butter from the organic market and her homemade jelly, and it was the best thing ever. When I looked up, Cal—seven years old and already a schoolyard terror—was standing in front of me.

“Give me your sandwich,” he demanded.

“Are you crazy?” I closed the lunch box and hugged it to my chest, even though I suddenly wasn’t hungry anymore. “Eat your own.”

“Unfortunately for you, I’d rather eat yours.” He was too strong and too quick, and my back was against the wall. Not three seconds later, he had his loot in his hands and was opening the lunch box while I tried with all my might not to cry.

“Pickles...yuck,” he said, tossing the sandwich on the floor.

*Do not cry. Do not cry.* I clenched my fists.

Next, he looked at the peanut butter jelly sandwich, took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. “You know what, Nosy Josie,

here's your breakfast back. That fancy stuff isn't for me." He unfolded the slices of bread, spat on them, and then folded them back together.

It wasn't enough for Callum to throw my cheese sandwich in the dirt and make the other one non-edible. He made me eat the latter too, and he got away with it because he was stronger than me, and because the break supervisor, Mrs. Crigler, was once again busy smoking in the corner by the bike racks.

I only cried once he was gone, and then I spent half an hour rinsing my mouth in the school toilet, making plans for how I was going to pay him back the next time I saw him.

## CAL



“*H*ow much more?”

“About a thousand a piece, but they will ship it for free because of the inconvenience.”

Fucking hell. I’ve calculated the cost of everything down to the last two-by-four. I’ve worked in construction, and I’ve been a contractor before. “Stop bullshitting me. I know this business like the back of my hand, and there’s always a way to find what you’re looking for within your price range. Make sure there’s no further delay. If this job is too much for you, I’ll find someone else who can do it.”

The contractor, William Hunt, is a six-foot-two man in his early fifties. He came highly recommended by some of my colleagues. He tries to sputter a response. “Mr. Ashford, I’m not trying to—”

“I don’t wanna hear it. Just get it done—within budget.”

I leave him there, floundering, while Theo and I head inside.

“You’re nicer than I would’ve been,” Theo says when we’re out of earshot. “I wanted to can his ass the second he told me. Plus, didn’t you tell me you’ve got a new contractor already waiting who you can call in if Hunt can’t deliver? The Holland guy? He seems promising. Sure like to give him a shot.”

“Yeah. But I need to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“You sure?”

I'm not planning to give anybody a second chance to fuck me over, but there's nothing worse than having regrets over a dumb, hasty decision that you can't take back. It'll haunt you, and I have enough ghosts as it is. My gut tells me to let him go, but I know from personal experience that such decisions have a nasty habit of taking revenge.

"I'm giving him one more shot to make it right, and if he can't, he's gone. I bet he thought he could do whatever because we weren't around, but he's got another thing coming."

I have several motorcycle dealerships throughout Cali, and my current project includes expanding into NYC. Theo and I love the East Coast, and it feels good to be back. There's one thing I know for certain though: I don't want to manage the new place. Theo's the right man for the job. He was with me in California, and didn't object to the change of scenery.

"Hell, yeah, when are we leaving?" were his exact words, if I remember correctly.

There's no one else I'd trust to run things.

The motorcycle dealership is five times the size of my first dealership. It's my crowning glory, the dealership I've been dreaming of building since opening the first.

I won't let anything screw my plans up.

The exterior of the dealership is already almost finished. Everything is top tier. Most of the construction is now focused on the inside.

Theo and I do a walk-through, and he shows me around the spaces that are close to being complete. We talk about staffing, and he lets me know that the word is out that we're hiring and that applications are pouring in already.

"Things are looking pretty great," Theo says once we've taken a seat in the parking lot to watch the progress from afar. "I meant to ask, you never told me what your

grandmother left you. Not that I'm being curious or anything, but I know you had to rush back for the reading."

"Oh. That." I never mentioned the details of the will to Theo, and I'm not surprised he's wondering about the specifics.

"Sorry, bro," he adds. "I know that's a sore subject."

"No, it's not that—" I try to find the right words. "My grandmother had some interesting stipulations to her will."

"Well, she was eccentric. She always had the weirdest rules. I remember once when we were eating dinner, she was adamant that we keep the salt and pepper together."

I chuckle. "Yeah, or whenever I was on the phone, she would tell me I was supposed to smile because the person on the other line could tell."

"Never got that."

"Me neither. But, yeah, her testament takes the cake." I grin, shaking my head.

"What do you mean?"

"To get my inheritance, my grandmother wanted me to get and stay married for a month."

Theo slowly turns his head to look at me with wide eyes. "You're shitting me!"

"I wish I was."

"Wait, hang on. Is that even legal? Can she do that?"

"It is, and she did. She lawyered up, and it's all above board."

Theo nods with understanding. "Who's the lucky girl? Wait, I'm assuming she had someone in mind. I doubt she didn't mean you had to marry some random woman for the month."

"Of course not. She had someone specific in mind, all right."

"Who?"

“Josephine Graham.”

Theo immediately knows who I’m talking about. His jaw drops. “The Josie we went to school with? The one your grandmother’s been trying to set you up with for years?”

“The very same.”

“Wow. Diabolical. I mean, I know your grandmother was smart and the sneakiest person I ever met, but this is a whole new level entirely. When are you supposed to go through with it?”

“It’s already done.”

“Dude, hold on. Are you saying you’re married? You actually went through with marrying Josephine Graham?”

“Yeah. Last night.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I would have gotten you guys a gift or something.”

“Chill. It’s not a *real* wedding or marriage. We’re not telling anyone about it. It’s just for the inheritance. After a month, we’ll go back to our own lives.”

Theo doesn’t speak for a moment. When I look at him, I find him shaking his head. “That’s crazy,” he says. “That’s...”

“I know.”

“Why did you even agree? It’s not like you need the money.”

“It’s not about the money. It was Gran’s last wish. I couldn’t be here when she passed away. I can’t ignore what she wanted. It wouldn’t be right. Plus, if I back out, some algae swindler gets all Gran’s stuff. That’s not happening.”

“If it were anyone else you were married to, I’d agree. I know you’ve never backed down from a challenge before, but I remember what you and Josie were like in school. I’m surprised you’re still alive right now.”

“I can handle her. Don’t worry about me.”

He raises his eyebrows. “*Are* you handling her?”

“No handling has happened, nor is it going to happen,” I assure him. “Although I will say that Josie looks different now to what she did back then.”

That piques his interest. “Oh, yeah, different how?”

I think about her in that thin nightie, and it makes my heart rate spike. “Hot enough for me to think about going there.”

“Well, why don’t you?”

“Nah, that’s not what this is about.”

Theo shrugs. “I don’t know, man. I’ve slept with a couple of women I didn’t exactly get along with, and it translated into some really kinky sex.”

The thought of Josie and kinky sex makes my mind wander for several glorious seconds. I picture her lying on my chest on the bed we share. This time, I’d rip that thin nightie off her, taking away that flimsy fabric that separated her hot body from my eager hands. I’d make her moan, make her writhe and beg before I’d give her what she wanted. What she needed. I’d fuck all the hate and resentment she seems to harbor against me right out of her.

*Whoa there. Pump the brakes.*

This is starting to get out of hand.

I’ve got to work off some of this steam. “I need to do something with my hands,” I say. “Come on, let’s go make ourselves useful.”

“Heck yeah.”

For the next few hours, Theo and I join the construction crew. I always loved working with my hands. It’s why the cushy office job drove me nuts. Nothing beats physical labor. I like staying fit and working out—working construction, or working on bikes helps that.

My body is aching when I finally stop. The good kind of ache that comes from solid work. As I down some water, I check my phone and notice that Josie’s texted me, letting me

know that she'll be wrapping up her shift in about an hour, at 7:15 p.m. I shoot her a quick response before slipping my phone back into my pocket.

Theo looks up. "Wanna grab some dinner?"

"Yeah, that sounds great. But first I've got to pick Josie up."

"Aww, how sweet. Going to pick up your wife from work."

"Don't call her that," I say sharply. "I told you we're keeping it on the down-low." It's one thing when I tease Josie about it in private, but Theo calling her my wife when other people are within earshot is not the same.

"Right, sorry. You want to meet us at the bar later?"

"Yeah, but first I want you to keep your eyes on Hunt and see how he wraps things up for the night. Get an update on those parts. I know he was on the phone most of the day, but over the last hour, he's made himself scarce. Text me if there are any problems. Don't get the showroom pieces and Hogs in until the room is painted, and the display glasses have been put in." I'm not eager to have bikes sitting in the dirt in case there's another delay.

Theo rubs his hands together excitedly. "Dude, I can't wait to get my hands on those pretties."

"You're going to have to get in line. Get in touch with Osborn and all that shit. He already left me a message, saying he can't wait to meet to discuss his investment."

"As if you *needed* an investment." Theo scoffs. "You're nearly as rich as he is, and your businesses are booming."

I chuckle. "Yeah, no, I'm nowhere near as wealthy as he is, and you know how stupid fucking corporate politics are."

"I got this."

I slap him on the back and head to my car.



here's enough time to stop by the apartment for a quick shower and change of clothes before jumping back on the road. On the ride to the diner, I think about what Theo said about me and Josie wanting to kill each other, and he's right. We've been at each other's throats since she let herself into the apartment, and if we're going to get through this month, something has to give.

Granted, when we parted this morning, it seemed like there was an understanding, albeit a shaky one. It's probably only a matter of time before we get on each other's nerves again.

It's just the way we operate.

Knowing how stubborn she is, it looks like I'm going to have to be the bigger person. I don't mind extending a truce if it means the next thirty days will be easier to handle. I'm willing to admit that it's going to be hard.

No one gets under my skin as much as Josie does. She always has.

But I've been able to handle her plenty of times in the past. I'll do my thing, she'll do hers, and we'll come away from this without killing each other.

I pull alongside the curb, and Josie is already waiting. She climbs in, and I immediately notice how exhausted she is. Her messy bun from earlier is sagging and loose strands frame her tired face.

She lies back against the seat with a heavy sigh. "I have to admit, it feels so good to sit down."

"Sure does." Glancing to my left, I pull back into traffic after ensuring it's clear. "I helped at the construction site, and I'm ready to sit back and relax."

"How's the work going?"

"Good. How long have you been working at this place?"

"It's the same place I worked at in high school," she says.

"Damn, that's a long time. You must really like it."

"I do."

Hmm. There's something in her curt answer and tone of voice that tells me otherwise. "That doesn't sound promising."

Josie doesn't answer right away. Glancing at her out of the corner of my eye, I note she's staring out the window at the streaking rain. "No, it's a great place to work. Really. I love being a waitress. Matilda, my boss, is cool. I get paid pretty well and have a lot of authority because I've been there for so long." She pauses, almost as if she doesn't want to voice what she's thinking.

"But?" I ask, encouraging her to keep talking.

"But...it's not exactly what I'm passionate about. My heart's not totally in it, you know?"

"Then why are you still there?"

She shrugs. "It's complicated."

"Try me."

"I don't want to talk about it."

I hear the tightness in her voice. "I'm not judging. I worked pretty much every job I could get before I found what I wanted to do."

She shifts to face me. "Oh, like what?"

"Construction mostly. I enjoy working with my hands and building something from nothing. I remember those early days in Cali before Ecclestone, bouncing from couch to couch until I saved up enough money to replace my first bike. It fell apart not long after I reached the Golden Gate Bridge, and I was too broke to get another one right away. Bit by bit, I rebuilt it, buying parts with whatever money didn't go toward food and rent. That first ride after it was finished—I'll never forget."

"It's not that I don't know what I want to do," Josie tells me. "I just don't have the time or money to do it."

"What is it?" She doesn't answer, so I nudge her. "Come on, you can tell me."

"Art," she finally admits. "I love art."

“Get out of town. That’s great. I didn’t know you were that into it. I mean, I knew you were good at art in school, but you were good at everything in school.”

“Anyway, I don’t have time to do much art nowadays,” she says. “But hopefully, one day soon.”

The inheritance. She’s talking about the inheritance.

That’s why she’s going through with this marriage. I feel bad that my earlier judgment of her was so off. “Maybe you can show me some of your stuff later.”

“Absolutely not.”

Hmm. Okay, then.

“Did you eat?” I ask, peering at her from the corner of my eye. She throws me a look that betrays her hatred. Hey now. Isn’t that a way too strong a reaction just because I asked her if she had eaten yet? It must be a woman thing. She must think I’m implying she’s too fat.

“Not since lunch,” she says.

“Perfect. I’m taking you to dinner.”

“I don’t want to go to dinner,” she mutters, letting out a long breath. “I just want to go back to the apartment and lie down.”

“You have to eat,” I insist. “Also, we don’t have groceries.”

Josie makes a noise of annoyance. “Shit, that’s right. Fine. If you stop somewhere along the way, I’ll get a sandwich. I don’t want to go out anywhere.”

“You’re already out.”

“You know what I mean.”

This woman is so goddamn frustrating. Why can’t she just accept my invitation without arguing with me? She’s turning a nice offer into a back and forth. “Geez, Josie, it’s just dinner. I didn’t ask you to suck my cock, dammit. I’m not taking you back home so you can fall asleep hungry.”

At first, there's fire in her eyes—I'm fully expecting her to tell me she'll never suck my cock—but then she sighs softly, settling against the leather seat. "Fine. I'll go to dinner. But wherever we go, it needs to be cheap because I'm trying to save money."

"I invited you. It's my treat."

"I don't need your charity."

"Stop twisting my words," I grumble. "I didn't say you did. Jesus. Has anyone ever given you the rules?"

"The rules? No! What rules?"

"Woman. I'm trying to wave a white flag here."

"You make it sound like we're at war."

"Aren't we? Now, I'm man enough to cop the fact that I haven't been the best at keeping the peace either. But if we're going to survive this marriage, we need to be on the same page. I think this dinner is exactly what we need."

She's suspiciously quiet.

I glance over.

"You're right," she says. "A nice dinner to bury the hatchet sounds good."

## CAL



A few minutes later, I drive up to my favorite biker bar: Mom's Dirty Dogs. Out front, a row of bikes sit gleaming, even in the rainy gray light. I pull into the parking lot off to the side and park. Josie seems apprehensive as I cut the power and slip my keys out of the ignition.

"*This* is the place?" she asks.

"Yeah. Do you have a problem with it?"

"No, it just seems a little..." She trails off, which is funny since I've never known Josie to not say what's on her mind. Then again, she doesn't have to say it for me to know what she's thinking.

"Rough? Why? Because it's called Mom's Dirty Dogs?"

Josie shrugs. "Well, yeah."

"It's nicer on the inside, I promise," I grumble. "Don't worry, I'll protect you from the big bad wolves inside."

She huffs and opens the door. "I can protect myself."

*I've got no doubt whatsoever.* Of course, she's more than capable of handling herself when the need arises. We walk through the door and we're met by a wave of noise. I spot Theo among a group of guys from the construction site, and they all turn to greet me with cheers and waves. That catches the attention of the bartender, who looks up and grins at me.

Thelma, the owner, and "Mom" at Mom's Dirty Dogs, has been working at the bar for as long as I can remember.

Everybody calls her Thelma la Deuce, or Sweet Thelma. She looks exactly like I remember her: burly, wearing a flannel shirt with faded jeans, and long, braided gray hair. She fixes us with a warm smile.

“Eyy! Look who it is,” she says, her voice rough. “It’s been too long, Mr. Cal.”

“Hey, Sweet Thelma, you still here?” I tease as she rushes out to hug me.

“Of course! Where else would I be, sugar? At least now I don’t have to throw you out for having a shitty fake ID.” She laughs and then notices Josie. “And who’s this?”

“This is my good friend, Josie.”

Josie shakes her head. “And by good friend, he means the woman who has to put up with him,” she bites back.

Thelma roars with laughter, taking Josie’s hand in her wrinkly ones. She gives it a gentle squeeze. “Welcome to my place. What can I get you two?”

“Two beers to my favorite booth,” I say.

“You got it. Table is yours.”

I lead Josie through the crowd of people, shaking hands and getting pats on the back along the way. Josie stays close, and I almost lose her in the group until I grab her soft little hand. She doesn’t let go. I lead her toward my favorite booth in the back. It’s the only one that’s empty, and in the middle, is a reserved card.

*This table’s reserved, ya dirty dog!  
Means you do NOT fucking sit down  
here.*

*Sincerely, Mom.  
P.S: Love you, too.*

I move the sign to the side. This table is always reserved, just in case.

“Didn’t you just get back from Cali?” Josie asks, sliding into the seat across from me. “How does everyone here already know you?”

“Some of these guys are working on the dealership,” I explain. “The rest are regulars and have been for years. I’ve been coming here ever since I was seventeen. Whenever I visited the city to see Gran, I would make sure to stop by. Also, I’ve ridden cross-country with some of these guys, and they always take their bikes to my shops when they’re on the West Coast.”

Theo approaches our table, and when he sees Josie, his eyes go wide.

“Hey, Josie,” Theo says with a grin. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“Hey, Theo. Looking good.”

“You are too! Cal wasn’t lying.” He drags a seat over so he can sit on the end of the table and plops himself down just as a waitress comes to deliver our beers.

“Two ice-cold beers,” the older woman says with a friendly smile. She’s a spitting image of Thelma, and could be her twin sister, except she’s beanpole-thin and much shorter. She places the bottles in front of Josie and me before addressing Theo. “Do you need a refill, sugar?”

He winks at her. “Sure do, thanks, Beth.” She hustles off to get his drink, and Theo shifts his attention back to Josie. “What have you been up to?”

“Waitressing mostly. What about you?”

“Hanging out with this guy,” he says, nodding in my direction. “Went to the West Coast for a while and now settling back here. When he told me about the whole arrangement between you two, I was surprised.”

She gives me a “I thought we’d keep this to ourselves” look and says, “Join the club. I don’t know how you’ve been

able to be friends with him for so long without wanting to murder him.”

“Hey, I’m right here,” I say, inserting myself back into the conversation.

She glances at me with a playful smirk. “I’m aware.”

Theo laughs. “You know, he’s not so bad once you get on his good side. You should try it sometime.”

“All right, all right, ha-ha, hilarious,” I say. “Enough dunking on me. I’m the one who’s settling the tab, remember?” Theo lifts his hands up in surrender, and Josie smiles innocently before taking a sip of beer. I face Theo. “Did everything go okay when I left the construction site?”

Theo nods, waving his hand nonchalantly. “Oh, yeah, piece of cake. We’re back on track. No problems. I think your threat lit a fire under Hunt’s ass.”

“Good.”

“You shouldn’t have to in order to get shit done, but that’s how the game works.”

“Everything go okay today?” Josie asks, concern lacing her tone.

For a sec, I find it odd that she’s asking about my work. When I catch her eyes staring into mine, however, I realize she’s not talking about the building. She’s asking about my trip to the cemetery.

“Yes,” I assure her, giving her a curt nod. I appreciate that, despite our differences, she still has concern for me.

She studies me for a moment. I get the sense she thinks I’m hiding my true feelings or holding back some shit, yet her nosy nature is kept in check, and she lets it go. Theo, sensing the dip in conversation, picks things back up on a more positive note.

“What about you, Josie?” he asks. “You said you’re waitressing, but did you ever do anything with your art?”



“How do you know she’s an artist?” I ask, before taking a long swig of beer.

Josie jumps in before Theo can answer. “We used to have study hall together junior year, and since I finished my homework quickly, I would use the time to sketch,” she explains.

One of the construction guys calls to Theo and he waves to him. “Well, I’ll leave you two to your drinks. Great seeing you, Josie.”

He moves off to join another conversation while I remember an incident in art class when she was caught stealing a note from the teacher’s desk.

“What’s so funny?” she asks.

“I didn’t think you had it in you.”

She gives me a look with a slight tilt of her head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’ve never seen you break a rule before. Well, except for that time in art class when you got caught getting into Mrs. R’s desk. Rebellion looks good on you.”

“*Hey*. It was a white lie to a teacher. I would hardly call that rebellious. And speaking of that art class incident, I never did get back at you for ratting me out.”

I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, when you knocked over my sketchbook and then laughed so hard that Mrs. R caught me.” She hastily adds, “Not that I think about it a lot or anything.”

I start to chuckle once I’m able to recall the incident. “Josie, I didn’t rat you out,” I tell her. “You left your sketchbook on the edge of the desk and *the teacher* knocked it over, not me.”

Her eyes go wide, and her mouth falls open. “Are you *serious*? All these years I thought it was you. Then why were you laughing?”

“I wasn’t laughing at you. I was laughing at your friend. She couldn’t think of a question to ask the teacher to keep her distracted.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah. She didn’t say anything. That’s the point. The teacher asked her what she wanted, and she just made this weird high-pitched noise. It was hilarious.”

I’m still grinning, and eventually, Josie joins in. Funny that she spent all this time thinking I told on her for something as insignificant as stealing a note back from a teacher.

“Wait, can you imitate the high-pitched noise my friend made?”

“Yeeek!” She laughs, and I do it again, higher and louder this time. “Yeeek!”

She laughs even harder and tries it too. “Yiek.”

“Nah, that was pathetic. Try again, woman. You have to go all in. You have to hold the vowel longer. Try again.”

We laugh and continue yeeking until some dirty dogs look our way. There are tears in our eyes, and she grabs a napkin to wipe her face.

God, I don’t think I’ve ever heard her laugh before. It’s soft and musical, instantly tugging at my heart. I want to make her laugh again. Somehow, she’s even more stunning than she was before.

“I cannot believe she made that sound,” Josie says, trying to catch her breath. “I somehow blanked all that out. She was the one who wanted me to get her note back so badly.”

“*Her* note?” I ask. “Are you sure it was *her* note?”

Josie nods immediately, picking up her beer. “Yes, positive. *She* wrote you the love note. I was supposed to pass it along before it got taken away.”

“Oh, is that so?” I arch an eyebrow, hooking my finger around the neck of my beer bottle.

“Yeah. I tried to talk her out of it. She always did have questionable taste.”

“I *am* a catch, thank you very much.” I wink, taking a swig of my drink.

She smiles. “Yeah, sure you are.”

“So, you *do* want to be my butterfly?”

“Cal!” Josie’s eyes grow wide, her cheeks tinting an adorable shade of pink. “The note was *not* from me.”

I pause and chuckle. “I know, relax. I was sitting right there next to you guys, remember? I heard the whole interaction.”

“Then why did you give me shit about it all the time?”

“Because you didn’t know that I knew.”

“Oh, my gosh, I can’t believe it! *Smartass.*”

She smacks my arm. There’s no bite to her words, and the conversation seems light. If we keep this going, the rest of the month will be fine.

“But, I’m sorry I didn’t see more of *that* Josie in school,” I rumble. “I never saw you do anything other than follow the rules.”

“Watched me that closely, did you?” She gives me a questioning look.

“I didn’t have to. I could hear you from a mile away.”

“What do you mean?”

“You almost killed me that day after school. Remember?”

Her lips twitch. “No, I only threw that stone because you kept teasing me.”

“Which caused me to fall out of the tree.”

“And then you played dead. I almost had a heart attack.”

“You looked pretty alive to me with all your screaming.”

She laughs, this time a deep, full belly laugh that catches the attention of some of the dogs around us.

It makes me grin.

I really do like making her laugh.

Josie shakes her head in disbelief. “I got called into the principal’s office! Because of *you*.”

“Well, *I* did too.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” she concedes. She holds out her beer in a toast. “Here’s to leaving preconceived notions behind and starting afresh.”

I tap my beer to hers. “I’ll drink to that.”

The rest of the meal goes surprisingly well. Josie and I reminisce about our school days, swapping stories and catching each other up on classmates we’ve kept in touch with. You would swear we’re old childhood friends who’ve always been in each other’s lives.

I don’t remember ever getting along with her this well.

The rain finally stops on the drive home. I roll down the windows, crank the music, and we enjoy the drive. I even catch Josie singing along to the radio.

Once we get home, I collapse onto the sofa. Which, in hindsight, is a bad idea because I forgot how uncomfortable it is. I consider moving to the armchair on the other side of the room, but I’m a big guy and the couch lets me at least spread out some. My body, feeling the effects of a long day of physical labor, groans in protest. I’m able to find a relatively okay seating position and relax. Tomorrow is going to be another busy one. I’ve got meetings with motorcycle collectors, and I want Theo and me to go through the job applicants and start scheduling interviews.

Josie sits down next to me, kicking out of her shoes and pulling her legs up. She, too, has to shift around a bit. When she finally settles, she’s practically buried into my side. Warm,

soft skin presses against me. Why is she suddenly cozying up to me? She only had two beers—she can't be *that* tipsy.

“Thanks for dinner,” she says with a smile. “I actually had a good time.”

She leans even closer—seriously, something's up—and the scent of her vanilla shampoo hits my nostrils. “Good, I'm glad. It was nice seeing you loosen up a little.”

She peers up at me. “You make it sound like I'm uptight or something.”

I don't even dignify that with a response. I just give her a look.

She laughs and shoves me playfully. “Do you think I'm pretty?” she suddenly asks out of the blue.

“No, I don't think you're pretty.”

“Oh.”

“I think you're beautiful.”

Josie's eyes light up. Her hand on my arm awakens my dick, and I'm contemplating going for it—and by going for it, I mean throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her into the bedroom, laying her down onto the cozy, comfortable queen-sized bed, and showing her exactly how beautiful I think she is.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

Goddammit.

“Who the hell is that?” I grumble, ready to get up. “I wasn't expecting any visitors.”

“Oh, that's for me,” she says cheerfully.

She jumps up and answers the door, and I hear her speaking with someone and signing for a delivery. Frowning, I follow her down the hall, and she turns to me with two large plastic bags.

“What's all this?” I ask.

“I had some store credit saved from the bedding store,” she says, carrying the bags into the living room. “I got some pillows, cushions, and sheets for that old couch. I swear I just sat on a spring a second ago.”

Ah. That’s why she was leaning in close. So much for throwing her over my shoulder and making her see fucking stars. Glad I didn’t make a move. That would have been one for the books.

“You didn’t have to go through all this trouble just to sleep on the couch,” I tell her. “If you really wanted all this, I could’ve gotten it for you.”

She quirks a brow. “Who says this is for me?”

“We’ve been over this, Josie. I can barely fit.”

She tosses the bags onto the floor and holds her fist out over her palm. “Best two out of three for the bed,” she challenges.

Okay, she’s not tipsy, but the beer and food have definitely put her in a good enough mood to not be so tense. I can’t help but laugh. “Do you seriously want to do rock, paper, scissors?”

“Yup.” She’s clearly amused.

“I’m not playing you for the couch.” I lean against the wall, crossing my arms.

“Scared?” she challenges again, tilting her head to the side with a cute little smirk.

*Game on. This should be fun.*

Snorting, I copy her stance. “Fine, I’ll do it. But don’t complain to me when you lose.” It’s not possible she’s going to win. Rock, paper, scissors, yeah, it’s my superpower. I’m good at this game, always have been, starting at school. For whatever reason, I can predict the next move—in other words: I never lose.

There’s a playful fire in her eyes that I enjoy. We count to three, and I throw down scissors while she does paper.

“One point for me.” I grin.

Josie waves me off. “Beginner’s luck.”

“Sure.”

We do it again, and this time, she throws rock while I throw scissors. It’s her turn to grin. “One for me.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“Oh, hush.”

I know what’s going to happen right before it does. Josie throws down rock, thinking I’d do scissors again. But I do paper instead. Covering her hand with mine, I declare, “I win.”

“Son of a bitch!”

“Guess you’re on the couch.”

“Fair is fair.” With a yawn, she stretches, and I watch the way her body moves—her tits, those damn pebbly nipples—thinking of our closeness on the couch a moment earlier. “Well, glad I got this stuff then.”

“It’s up to you,” I offer. “I think we did pretty good sharing last night.”

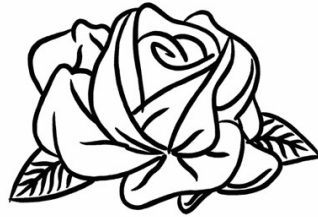
She rolls her eyes and pulls the cushions out of the bag. “I’m good.”

I toss a wave over my shoulder, trying not to chuckle. “Enjoy the couch.”





## JOSIE



I can't believe I had dinner with Callum Ashford.

When Cal asked me earlier if I had already eaten, everything came up again. He has obviously long forgotten the whole "lunch box thing," or dismissed it as a silly boy prank. Not me.

Yet, I went out with him and enjoyed it. It's been a long time since I've been out for fun.

Even when we return to the apartment, I'm still feeling relaxed. He looks so good with his hair pulled away from his face, shaved in the back, with a short man-bun on top, and his bright-green eyes smiling at me. More importantly, the man who went to the trouble of picking me up from work and then made me socialize is...personable. More than that, this man is not the troublemaker I remember. I enjoyed the verbal duel with him. I enjoyed his *company*.

I don't know why I sit on the couch with him, but before I know it, I'm cuddling up to him.

And asking stupid questions.

He thinks I'm *beautiful*?

It doesn't matter, because I have never seen eyes like his. Usually, people have hazel eyes or blue-green. His are like moss or the green of a lush forest. I want to draw them, to spend time finding the right color from my collection of pastels. It feels great to splurge a little with a rent-free month and the tips I'm making, and not having to worry all the time

because of the inheritance. Being this close, I'm struck by how handsome he is. Being this close makes me want to do something stupid as my mind replays images of that body.

Like, kiss him on those full lips.

Luckily, the doorbell rings, and I am *so* glad that it does, because it interrupts any thoughts of us being anything other than roommates.

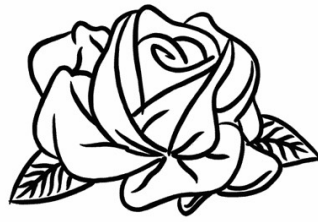
Because that's all we are: roommates who can't kiss, ever.

Then of course, my roommate won rock, paper, scissors—and I won the couch. Speaking of... Mrs. Blanche's cream-colored couch with its gold embroidery and golden feet is going to be in my nightmares forever.



**JOSIE**

TWENTY-FIVE DAYS LEFT



*L*iving with him is *the worst*.

It's only been a couple of days since Callum and I established a ceasefire. Which means all the annoyance I'm feeling is for the present version of him. I can't stand being roommates with the man, and honestly, he's driving me *nuts*.

I tell myself that I've buried the hatchet from the past—at least a reasonable part of it, but there's a thousand new reasons why he's driving me insane.

For one, he's an absolute neat freak. If I put something down, nine out of ten times he'll move it. After years of living on my own, I'm used to finding things exactly where I leave them. Here, who the hell knows? I can't even set a plate on the counter without him telling me to put it in the dishwasher or rinse it off. I'll take a shower and step out of the bathroom to get something, and when I return, my clothes have already been thrown in the washing machine.

I'm not untidy, but my place doesn't have to be as clean as a hound's tooth all the time. I work on my feet all day, and the last thing I care about is coming home to clean. I just want to shuck off my bra, prop my feet up, and lose myself in a few hours of TV or sketching. And if that bra happens to fall on the floor, then so be it. I'll get it eventually.

Second, every time I walk through the door, I trip over his stupid biker or work boots. Seriously. Every. Single. Time. And his feet are way bigger than mine, so it's not like I stumble slightly. They full-on trip me to the point where I have

to grab the wall to stop myself from falling. I'm assuming he steps out of them as soon as he comes home—since he's usually home before me—and just goes on his merry way. For such a neat freak, I don't get how he can leave his boots right there in front of the door.

“They don't go there,” I snap at him when I trip over them for the fifth or sixth time. “It takes literally two seconds to move them to the right of the entryway.”

“I got distracted.”

“By what?!”

“You really want to get into this?”

“You bet your ass I *do*.”

“Fine, we'll do this,” he snaps back. “Speaking of not doing something right, stop pressing the toothpaste in the middle,” he says. “Who does that? Press it from the back.”

“What does it matter?” I huff in annoyance. “As long as toothpaste is coming out, it should be fine.”

He shakes his head. “It's not. And put it back in the right spot.”

“Oh, my God! You're such a control freak! First, you complain that I don't press the toothpaste correctly, and now you say I don't put it in the right spot? I'm sorry I used it. There, happy?”

“Geez, woman, I didn't ask you to get down on your knees and swallow, dammit, just to stop pressing the fucking toothpaste in the middle and then put it back in the right spot. Why is it so hard? You asked me not to touch your stuff, so don't put the toothpaste with *your* stuff. I can't find it if it's buried between your makeup.”

“Well, you stop rearranging the pillows on the couch!” I fling my hands out in frustration.

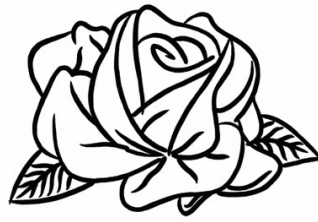
“Well, then don't pile them up all in one spot.”



**JOSIE**



## TWENTY-ONE DAYS LEFT



A pattern is emerging in our coexistence: We don't relent. Usually, the arguments go in circles before one of us grows too tired of arguing and storms away—mostly me. I usually rush out to take a hot bath to calm myself, and when I come out of the bathroom, he's gone. I wonder where he gets all the energy after the hours at the dealership. From our few conversations that don't revolve around tubes of toothpaste or his biker boots, I gather that he goes out to the bar to see a game, connect with old friends, or just ride around with Theo.

He's at the dealership site every single day. If he's not helping with the construction, he's working on other tasks that are required when building a business. Once, he took a day trip to Cali to settle business on the West Coast.

Nowhere in the will does it state that we must be together twenty-four-seven. I don't think I've ever seen someone as on the go as he is. But I have to give him credit: Whatever he's doing seems to be working. As far as I can tell, he has tons of friends among his peers, the new building is coming along great, and his other dealerships are running smoothly.

It certainly makes a difference whether you set up your own business, like Callum, or work for someone else. I have to breathe regularly and remind myself not to be bitchy. If what he says is true—and he's not a liar, never has been—then he's worked hard to turn his passion into his profession.

So, what is it that...excites me, even dazzles me about him? Why can't I just shrug my shoulders and say, "Hey,

we're both doing our thing and this 'forced union' will be history soon"?

Since I'm exclusively sleeping on the couch, I almost always wake up when he arrives home late. He tries to be quiet, but the building is old. The front door and floorboards creak with the slightest pressure. Most of the time I pretend to sleep. Thank God we only have three more weeks of this—otherwise, I think we might kill each other.

Okay, I'm exaggerating. We won't *kill* each other.

Maybe torture one another a little bit.



## CAL



*I*t's past midnight when I unlock the door and slip into the dark apartment.

I remove my boots, instantly sidetracked.

Moonlight was invented to shine through the blinds and illuminate Josie's beauty. Quietly, I sneak past the couch she's sleeping on. More light reflects on her frame, and when my eyes find her face, I stop in my tracks. She looks deceptively like an angel, innocent and calm. Her facial features reflect a peacefulness I've never seen on her before.

She's breathtakingly beautiful.

Her loose hair hugs her face, and the waves kiss her shoulders. All of the day's events leave my body as I take in the unfamiliar sight, watching her breathe soothingly, entranced by the rise and fall of her chest, admiring her gorgeousness.

As if aware of my presence, she suddenly stirs, and her head and shoulders turn in my direction. For a moment I expect her to open her eyes, but she only gasps in her sleep.

Without a second thought, I reach for the blanket to cover her body.

For one last time, my eyes roam over the sleeping angel and the image she presents to me.

I bend down and brush a soft kiss onto her forehead.

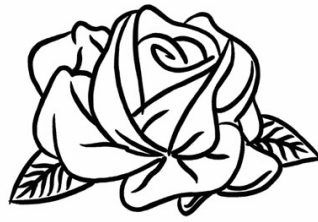
"Good night, sweet thing." It's barely a whisper.

Calm sleep is her only answer.



**JOSIE**

TWENTY DAYS LEFT



Callum isn't the only thing that's been on my mind twenty-four-seven.

When I arrive at work, Matilda is already there to greet me. A tall, thin woman in her late sixties, she has extremely long gray hair that she always keeps tied back in a tight braid. Her blue eyes are kind, and there's always a cheerful smile on her face. This morning is no different.

"Hey there, superstar," she says when I walk in. "I ran into Officer Martin the other day. He said there was some kind of incident?"

I love Matilda, but she can be behind the ball on things. Not to mention extremely scatterbrained—just like me. I had told her about the incident with the jerky groping customer the day after it happened. I had a feeling she wouldn't remember when all I got was an "Uh-huh. Yup, okay," while she kept sifting through the papers on her desk.

"He's referring to the event I told you about," I remind her, and she blinks at me a couple of times. "You know, the one with Kaylin? And the gross guy who I told you I put on the blacklist?"

She gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh, my gosh, you're so right, sweetie! I'm sorry, I don't know where my brain was. Yes, yes, of course you did. The creepy butt-grab, right? Okay. Did you write down his—?"

"Yes, I wrote down what he looks like and updated the blacklist on the podium."



“Great, is Kaylin—?”

“Kaylin’s fine. No, she doesn’t want to press charges. The other waitresses witnessed the incident, and they also know to keep an eye out for him. Not that I think he’ll be coming back here anytime soon. Regardless, everything is handled. No need to worry.”

“Great. You’re the best,” Matilda says, pulling me into a bone-crushing hug. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“You’d be hopelessly lost,” I tease.

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Anyway, what are you doing here? I thought you were going on a day trip upstate.”

“I was on my way, but then I realized that I never signed off on payroll,” she says, taking her seat at the cluttered desk. “Here, why don’t you pull up a chair and see how I do it. That way if I forget again, you can jump in and handle it.”

Lately, Matilda has been taking more and more time off, which is giving me more responsibility. I know she wants me to take over from her, and it’s likely her way of testing the waters.

To be honest, I don’t know.

I love my job. I love what we do. Taking over would mean I’d have more say in my schedule, which would help a lot. But... there are too many factors to consider.

I’d only consider leaving if my art takes off and demands more of my time, many years from now. Sure, \$750,000 is a lot of money, but it won’t last me the rest of my life. If I fail as an artist and Matilda finds someone else to take over the diner, I’ll be left with nothing but a college degree, several years of waitressing experience, and a dream gone haywire.

I tell myself that I’m being cautious. To a degree, I am. I don’t know how the rest of this month will go, and though I have every bit of confidence I can stick it out, and Cal can too, I don’t want to put the cart before the horse.

If for some reason the inheritance doesn't go through, I won't be completely left in the cold.

All I know is, I have a real shot at something that could change my life, if I act wisely. For me, acting wisely means planning everything in advance and building in one or two safety nets.

It's totally not because I'm terrified of hurting Matilda's feelings.

When my mother died, Matilda always made time for me, no matter how busy it was.

**B**y now the other staff members are in and getting their tasks done as well. For the next few hours, I lose myself in the breakfast rush, welcoming the distraction. I've still got Cal on the brain, and now he's competing with Matilda and how I think I might feel when she inevitably asks me to step in for her.

"You okay?" Kaylin asks once the breakfast rush ends and we're prepping for lunch. "You've been pretty quiet all morning. And you look tired."

"I'm exhausted, but I'm fine," I assure her. "The couch I've been sleeping on is the most uncomfortable thing in the world."

Even with the cushions and blankets on the couch, it's still not the most comfortable. If Cal doesn't wake me when he comes home, I find myself waking up at least once or twice a night, trying to get comfortable. I'm not going to complain. He's issued several invitations to his bed (nice try, buddy), and I made him play more rounds of rock, paper, scissors, but no such luck. He tried to let me win at one point (which was kinda cute), but still no luck. It's pathetic. The couch has my name written all over it. Cal suggested I at least use his bed when he isn't there (that was also kinda sweet), but I didn't take him up on that.

Go big or go home. I wanted to win the bed fair and square, and not by giving him any reason to say I didn't play

fair.

It's a small price to pay for a much larger payout.

Kaylin reaches out to squeeze my hand. "Honestly, I don't know whether to keep scolding you or whether to applaud you for being strong enough to pull off this absurd scenario. I wouldn't have the guts to do it."

"Oh, don't talk about yourself like that. You're plenty strong, Kaylin."



## JOSIE



Being the supervisor, I'm the last one to leave. I complete my end-of-shift chores and make sure we're prepped for the morning before I lock up "The Diner." That's it, that's what it's called: The Diner. I once asked Matilda why she called it that and her answer was simple, but super clever: She wanted people to always think of her place each time someone said, "The Diner."

One subway ride later, I'm back at the apartment. I find myself wondering if my new place should be closer to work, so I don't have to spend so much on commuting. Maybe I should connect with a real estate agent and determine what's out there.

Or maybe I should wait. It's still a bit premature for that.

Lost in thought, I walk through the door, only to trip over Cal's boots—again. *Goddammit. Every single time. This is ridiculous*, I think, kicking them to the side. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was doing this on purpose.

I'm taking off my coat and muttering swear words under my breath while I step out of my shoes, placing them so they're not in front of the damn door.

Cal emerges from the kitchen a moment later, looking good in his light-blue T-shirt and jeans. "I thought I heard your mumbling," he says. "I grabbed dinner on the way home."

"Oh." It's kinda cute he thinks about me. He *does* have a good side, I have to admit. "You headed out again?"

“No, not tonight. Come on.”

“Great, I’m starving.”

He takes the seat across from me, and we both fill our plates in silence. I’m more than happy to take a little bit of everything. Avocado roll here, some white rice there, ooooh sweet potato tempura! And oshinko rolls! Dear God, living with this man is going to make me put on ten pounds.

Mentally, I’ve forgiven him for the boots this time, only because I’m very excited about our dinner. This is also the first time since we went to the bar that we’re sharing a meal. It would be nice if Cal wasn’t so sullen. He hasn’t said anything since we started eating and I can tell that something is bothering him. His brow is furrowed and he’s not making small talk.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“You’re not the only one who had a long day. It’s the contractor I hired. I had to fire him. I’ve been keeping an eye on him since I got back into town, and today it became apparent that he was trying to bleed me for more money. He was buying more expensive parts so the job would cost more, and he’s getting a hefty commission from his company.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I had a feeling this was going to happen, so I already had another contractor lined up. But he’s got to wrap up the job he’s working on, which means I’ll have to step in until he’s free. Not exactly what I wanted to do, but these guys need someone to keep them on track. If I don’t, we’ll fall even more behind schedule, and I can’t let that happen. We have deliveries lined up, and some bikes are already being shipped. Thankfully, I shouldn’t have to cover for more than a couple of days.”

It’s at that moment that I’m struck with what a monumental task he’s undertaken. Yes, he’s done it before. He has businesses on the West Coast. But I imagine this is different. From what I understand, he purchased the other

dealerships. This one, though, he's building from the ground up.

Damn. Honestly, that's kind of hot.

"I've never asked you what you're going to do with your inheritance," I say, digging into my food. "Are you going to keep this place?"

Cal shakes his head, picking up a pair of chopsticks. "No, I won't. Vance told me the landlord is selling the building within the next year or two. If there's room in Gran's storage locker, I'll put all of this," he motions around the room, "in there until I have a chance to get these antiques appraised, and then buy a larger place with a private garage. What about you?"

"I want to find a new place too," I say. "My apartment is so small. I barely have room for myself. I want a nice, big open loft with plenty of space. Large windows that look over the city as I sit in front of an equally large canvas with my hands covered in charcoal."

"Are you ever going to show me your work?" Cal asks.

Just the thought of showing him anything I've drawn makes my heart race. "Nope."

I'm not going to tell him about that stupid article or how it shot my confidence to hell. I'm also not going to tell him that my sketchbook is mostly nude bodies, including drawings of my ex. People are weird about nude drawings.

Especially men.

My ex-boyfriend, Chase, wasn't supportive of my art. He wouldn't be mean or discourage me from drawing per se, but he wasn't particularly interested, nor did he go out of his way to encourage me to keep it up.

"Draw my dick bigger," he always used to say. Such a man. Such a douche.

Just to get a rise out of him, I sometimes drew his dick smaller. You know, for example on days after he forgot Valentine's Day, or it slipped his mind that I'd wanted a

chocolate ice cream cone too (and no, I was *not* on another diet, *jerk*), or he overlooked the fact that I had a clit, and rolled over after sex.

Then, when he peeked at my drawing and protested, I'd tell him that that was the already-enhanced version. He would get *so* mad. Especially when I'd draw his nuts smaller too.

Kicking his ass out was the smartest thing I ever did. I still have the drawings of him, only because they're some of my best work.

"Why not?" Cal asks.

"I just don't want to," I tell him, although there is a third, much more important reason.

I'll never forget when Mom gave me my first sketchbook. I would take it to school every day to draw whenever I had a spare minute. I should have known that I was never safe from Callum Ashford, but he managed to add to my humiliation.

"Let me see!" This time he didn't even wait before snatching the sketchbook from me. "Ooooooh, Nosy Josie is an artist!"

He opened the book and ripped out a page. He might as well have ripped my heart out.

"What's *that*?" He dropped the sketchbook in the dirt. He seemed happy to do that with everything I owned. Then he faced the sheet of paper and pretended to look at it intently. "Hey, guys," he called over his shoulder. Immediately, his stupid friends gathered around him. "Look at this fugly drawing!"

I jumped towards him. Callum reached out and held up the drawing of my mom. Even though Callum and I were the same age, he was already a head taller than me, and it gave him pleasure to make me jump. All I could do was stare at him with all my hate, which not only didn't bother him but seemed to encourage him.

"Fugly, fugly," he sang, and his friends took up the chant.



I was soon surrounded by idiots who were laughing at me and kicking the sketchbook around like a soccer ball. Callum fished a lighter out of his pocket and burned the torn-out drawing before my eyes. How he'd got hold of a lighter remained a mystery to me.

I didn't cry this time. I never wanted to cry over Callum Ashford again.

When Cal burned my drawing back then, at least he didn't take away the joy of drawing, unlike a certain art critic did years later.

Cal pulls me out of my memories. "Eventually you're going to have to share your art if you want to sell it."

*Oh really? And then what? Will I be watching my art burst into flames again?* But I don't say that. Instead, I nod. "You're right. And when I'm ready for that, I will."

The conversation falls off after that. We both dig into our food and are too busy eating to keep talking. I finish everything on my plate, and all I can think about is the clawfoot tub that's calling my name. In one of the bathroom drawers, I found bath bombs in a little bowl, ready for me to use.

I get up from the table and take my plate to the dishwasher, putting it away. Once that's done, I barely make it two steps down the hall before Cal calls after me again.

"Dammit, *Josie*."

"*What?*" I call back. "I put the dishes in the dishwasher like you asked. What the hell is your problem this time?"

I spin around on my heel, and my bra is dangling from his finger.

With a huff, I walk back and snatch it from him. "Ugh, can you give it a rest for one second?"

"I knew you'd forget."

“Life is too short to bother,” I argue. “I have more important things to think about than making sure everything is in its place.”

“It’s not about putting things in their place. It’s about treating your stuff and your home with care. Also, a tidy environment promotes a clear mind.”

Okay, I have to admit that I often lack a “clear mind.” But the thing about treating your home with care is wrong. “I’m an artist,” I protest, starting to talk myself into a rage. At the same time, the thought of the devastating review crosses my mind, and I feel like an imposter. *Me, an artist?* “At work, I’m the neatest person you can imagine. You’re saying because I don’t clean up after myself right away here, in my private space, that means I don’t care? That’s a little extreme.”

“It’s not extreme,” he rumbles. “It’s a fact.”

“Oh, my God, You’re such a weirdo! I can’t believe I considered kissing you.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize I meant to say them in my head.

Definitely not out loud.

Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

The expression on his face only annoys me further. He breaks out into a wide grin and crosses his arms, leaning against the wall.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” he teases. “You want to run that by me again?”

Briefly, I think about backtracking or running away to the bathroom and locking the door. It isn’t against the terms of the deal for me to live out of the bathroom for the rest of the month, right? I can make that work.

There’s air. There’s water. There’s—

“I’m all ears,” he presses.

“I may have had a brief, *brief* thought about kissing you, but trust me, it was a momentary lapse of judgment. Don’t

read anything into it. It definitely won't happen."

He looks so damn smug.

Annoyance creeps up in me as I stare in his handsome *smug* face.

My gaze lands on his lips.

"I don't blame you," he says with a shrug. "I'm a catch. I'm an attractive man." He waits until our eyes meet, and his voice grows darker. "You're a magnificent woman. We're only human."

Hold up. Wait a minute.

Did he just say that I'm magnificent?

First, he said I was beautiful. Now, I'm magnificent. Where are all these compliments coming from all of a sudden?

Wait. Does that mean he *finds* me magnificent or just *thinks* I'm magnificent—because there's a difference.

I clear my throat, and ask, "Have you had those thoughts about me?"

He's not even a little embarrassed when he nods. "I woke up in the middle of the night with a woman lying on me in a thin nightie," he rumbles. "Of course I thought about it."

Oh, boy. "Well, stop thinking about it because it's not going to happen."

To my surprise, he pushes off the wall and takes a step forward.

The hallway isn't big, so there's nowhere for me to go. At least, that's what I tell myself when I don't immediately back up. In reality, the heat from his body prevents me from stepping away. He smells like musk and his cedar aftershave.

It's an intoxicating combination that just screams "man."

It's been so long since I've been with a guy. It's been so long since I've shared closeness and intimacy with a beautiful, strong man. That's gotta be why I want to run my hands under that shirt and feel his sculpted abs.

“Look me in the eye,” he says, leaning in, his lips almost brushing my ear, “and tell me you don’t feel any kind of attraction to me.”

I hate that I have to swallow past a lump in my throat. I hate that my nipples instantly grow hard at his proximity and words alone. Is he reading my mind?

No, of course not, that’s dumb. He can’t read minds.

*Quick, Josie.*

*Lie. Lie through your teeth!*

“I don’t feel *any* attraction to you.” Dammit, why do I sound breathless? Why is my voice shaking? Shit, even *I* don’t believe me.

Cal smirks. “Liar.”

“I’m *not* a liar.”

His arms land against the wall on either side of my head as he braces himself over me, caging me in. He stares at me with his bright-green eyes. It’s the first time I notice a scar—a small scar over his eyebrow. But then he leans in closer, and my gaze meets his again. His eyes pierce my soul. His presence is so bewildering, and it feels as if he’s a hundred feet tall and as though I’m going to fall into the depth of his gaze. “Really? Because I’m pretty sure you are,” he rumbles. His lips graze the shell of my ear, and little electrodes start exploding everywhere. “The lady doth protest too much, I think.”

I want to push him away, but I’m physically incapable of it. His nearness is intoxicating. Stirring. Thrilling. “Oh...screw you.” What a lame attempt at protest. “For someone...who calls me...a know-it-all, you sure do think you’re right...all the time.” I can hardly think.

His cheek brushes against mine. Even though he shaved this morning, there’s already stubble growing back. It’s so tantalizing, and he knows exactly what he’s doing. When he speaks, his lips are only a few inches away from mine. “If you’re not attracted to me at all, then kiss me.”

It takes a second for the words to sink in.

“Are you insane?” I exclaim. I *try* to exclaim. My voice is all hoarse.

There’s no way I’m going to kiss him.

Nope. Not going to happen. I don’t care how inviting his lips look. Or how damp my panties are.

“Don’t be dramatic,” he murmurs softly. “If you’re not attracted to me, then you should have no problem kissing me.”

His lips in three words. Luscious. Soft. *Kissable*.

“It’s not about having a problem...it’s about the fact that I flat-out don’t want to kiss you.”

*Liar, liar, pants on fire*, my brain teases.

“Let’s make a little bet then,” Cal suggests, pushing off the wall and out of my space.

I breathe out. Thank God. I turn my brain back on. Bet? A bet? That’s what he said?

Oh, good.

I mean: oh, God.

I do *not* like where this is going. “I’m not making a bet with you.”

“Relax. Don’t be a spoilsport. Learn to be impulsive, Josie.”

“Screw you, I know how to be impulsive.” Okay, I don’t. Never have, never will. The irony is not lost on me.

He grins. The jerk. “Then what’s the harm in a little friendly bet between husband and wife? Unless you’re scared that I’m going to find out you really *are* attracted to me.”

Seriously. I may be his wife on paper, but *only* on paper. He only uses those terms when he wants to get under my skin. I hate that it works every time. Still, he knows me well enough by now to know that I won’t back down from an outright challenge.

“Fine, what kind of bet do you have in mind?” I ask.

He smirks. “If you leave your bra lying around again, you have to kiss me.”

He came up with that bet *way* too fast. Something’s up... But then again, I was the one who started the whole kissing topic. He barely even paused before giving the details. He wants me to fail to prove his stupid point. How can I up the stakes so I’m not the only one losing in this scenario? I consider his terms, staring at him through narrowed eyes.

“This seems one-sided,” I point out. “What do *I* get out of this?”

“Considering how often you leave the thing lying around, you’ll get a kiss out of it.”

“That’s hardly a prize.”

He clutches his chest with a mocking expression. “Ouch, my wounded pride.”

I take another second to ponder his offer before I come up with a good counteroffer. “How about this? If I leave my bra, I have to kiss you. But if you leave your damn boots in front of the door, then you have to sleep on the couch.”

Still smirking, Cal asks, “For how long?”

“The rest of our time together.”

He rubs his chin as he thinks it over. I find myself wondering how his stubble would feel gliding across my skin while he moves down my body.

“Interesting,” he says. “I feel like a simple kiss is worth less than a few weeks on that stupid couch.”

“Then you’ll have no problem moving your boots. Besides, it’s easy for you to say that when you haven’t slept on the couch.”

“Fair point. But in that case, I demand a *real* kiss. Not a simple one. Not a peck. A *kiss*. With tongue. Lots of tongue. Full make-out session.” He holds out his hand. “Shake on it.”

Sure, why not?

He’s not gonna win.

What else do I have to lose?

At the very least, he'll stop leaving his stupid boots in the way. I shake his hand, and without warning, he pulls me in close.

“Game on, Josie.”

My heart speeds up, and I slip my hand out of his. “Let the best man—or woman—win.”

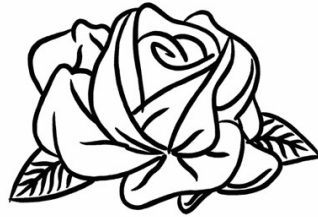
I pivot on my heel and head to the bathroom, knowing my bath is going to be on the cooler side tonight—but deep down, I know better. Who am I kidding?

I'm screwed.





## JOSIE



I'm about to tuck myself in on my couch when I realize I've forgotten to get my clean uniform out of the bedroom. I usually try to get it before I go to bed so I don't have to wake Cal up in the morning when I'm getting ready.

Well, hell.

Hopefully, he's asleep already and I can sneak in, grab what I need, and get out.

Easing myself off the couch, I quietly make my way down the hall.

Under the door, I can see that the light is still on, and I knock softly.

"Cal, you awake?"

I hear nothing, and when I test the doorknob, it isn't locked. I knock again, a little louder this time.

Nothing.

Certain that he's asleep, I quietly poke my head in.

Okay, I admit, now I'm being nosy. But only a little bit.

The room is bathed in soft light, and Cal is out cold in the middle of the bed. I notice how neat and tidy he keeps his side table, really the whole room. There's only what appears to be a thick, shiny business-oriented motorcycle magazine next to the clock, *Revved Up* or something. His phone lies next to his hand as though he passed out without meaning to. He's shirtless, with the comforter wrapped around his waist, his

muscled legs sticking out the bottom. He's facing away from the door, but even without looking at his face, I know he's fast asleep by the soft rise and fall of his tattooed chest. His image is one of utter relaxation and comfort.

Inspiration strikes hard and fast.

I have to sketch him. This will be the sweetest revenge ever. Tit for tat. Callum Ashford captured for eternity by the woman whose drawing he burned as a child. Yes!

Quickly, I tiptoe back to the living room, dodging the squeaky parts of the floor like some deranged creativity-driven ninja. I dump my bag out onto the floor and grab my sketchbook and a pencil.

When I get back to the door, he hasn't moved.

Perfect.

He looks great exactly how he is. I push the door open a little more, pausing when it lets out a quiet squeak. I freeze, and Cal shifts a little before settling back down, still asleep. I don't trust myself to breathe a sigh of relief.

I slip into the room all the way and begin to sketch him. My hand moves across the page on its own, starting with the basic outline of his sleeping form and then getting more specific. He's gorgeous.

I've studied the human body, and I've never seen one as perfect as his.

Hell, this isn't even the artist talking. This is Josephine talking. In this low light, he's the most stunning vision of masculinity I've ever seen in my entire life. One word: chiseled. All I can hope is that my drawing can do it justice. Creativity takes the wheel, my hand moving quickly across the page almost on its own.

I don't remember the last time I've been this struck by inspiration. It's been a while, for sure. It's like my hand has a mind of its own.

I'm putting the finishing touches on the shadows around his body when he shifts again. I don't stop drawing, too far

along not to finish what I'm doing. However, when I glance up from the page, the new visual is enough for me to come crashing back to reality.

Instantly, I freeze, my hand gripping the book tight enough to turn my knuckles white.

The bed cover has slid down a teensy bit further, now revealing his "V." Sweet Jesus. There's a vein trailing down right at the edge.

I'll be mortified if he wakes up and catches me drawing him.

His face turns my way, and I let out a sigh of relief to see he's still sleeping.

Thank you, Universe.

I am *entirely* unprepared for him to roll onto his side, letting the comforter slide all the way down. Because that's *exactly* what he does and *exactly* what happens.

My pencil snaps, my grip even tighter than it was a second ago.

Oh. My. God.

He's not partially naked. He's fully naked.

My brain short-circuits and all thoughts fly out of my mind.

That's...yup, that's his dick. I'm staring directly at his dick.

I should look away.

*Seriously, Josie, look away.*

*Do not be nosy!*

I turn my back on him, clutching my red sketchbook to my chest. The drawing isn't done yet. I can't leave it unfinished, but I also can't just stay here staring at him naked.

No.

I can't do something crazy, like finish the drawing.

Right?

**T**hankfully, I'm able to make it back to the living room without Cal waking up. That would've been one for the books. Shoving all my art supplies back into the bag, *silently*, I shut off the light and bundle myself up in my pile of blankets.

"It's fine. It's just a naked man. You've seen a naked man before. And a dick. Stop acting like it's a big deal."

Big.

Oh, God, I'm so screwed.

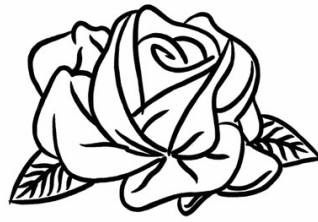
And *not* in a fun way. Unfortunately, telling myself to sleep doesn't work.

I don't get much rest that night, and for once, it has nothing to do with the couch. Every time I close my damn eyes, I see naked Cal.



**JOSIE**

NINETEEN DAYS LEFT



“*J*osie?”

I’m in the middle of wiping down the shelves where we store the coffee mugs and cups when Matilda comes through the door.

“Why are you here so early?” she asks.

“No reason,” I say breezily.

Matilda raises her eyebrows, looking at all the cups on the counter, and me, attacking the shelf like it offended my ancestors. “Anything you want to talk about, sweetie?”

I sigh heavily and let the rag fall onto the shelf in front of me. “I’m sorry I’ve been out of sorts lately. It’s...things are such a mess right now.”

Matilda comes around the counter and pulls me into a hug. “Aww, sweetie, it’s all right. As much as I appreciate your sudden interest in extreme cleanliness, maybe you should take a seat. Come on, put the glasses back, and I’ll make us some coffee.”

I return the hug, instantly at ease.

Matilda always has that effect on me. I do as she says, putting the mugs and cups back onto the shelf and throwing the dirty rag into the back. Meanwhile, Matilda pulls out the specialty coffee, which is usually only used on Sunday. But she knows how much I love French Vanilla and brews a fresh pot for us to share.

Once it's ready, she pours a cup for each of us and takes a seat next to me. "All right, Josie, lay it on me. I know we haven't talked about it, but you've been going through a tough time lately. I can tell. You know you can talk to me about anything."

I pour a hearty amount of sugar into my cup. "I know I can. It's something personal that I've been trying to keep to myself for a few reasons. It's not because I don't trust you, it's just because it's so ridiculous."

She chuckles. "Well, now you *have* to tell me."

"You ready for a good laugh?"

"Always."

I already told Kaylin, might as well tell Matilda. She won't tell a soul. I spend the next five minutes giving her the briefest of rundowns about what's been going on. Unlike Kaylin, she doesn't react when I tell her I got married. When all is said and done, she stares at me for a moment before bursting into laughter.

"Great, thank you, thanks for that," I say.

Matilda lays her hand on my arm. "I'm sorry, sweetie," she says between giggles. "I don't mean to laugh at your expense, but you're right, this *did* make for a good laugh. Being forced to marry your childhood bully for a major inheritance and then seeing his impressive willy would do that to you. Honestly, I'd be more concerned if you didn't find the humor in all of this."

Now we're both laughing. I love Matilda, bless her heart, and it's just so her to say willy instead of dick. It's the whole situation, really, that makes me crack up: me here, talking to my 68-year-old boss about the memorable reproductive organ of my one-month-husband. She's right: the whole situation is too funny, if you think about it. My sides start to hurt, and I have to take a few deep breaths to calm myself. "If you had told me last month that I'd be sitting here complaining about being married and attracted to Callum Ashford, I would've told you to stop pulling my leg." I pick up my coffee and take



a big sip. The warmth spreads down my throat and into my stomach, instantly putting me at ease.

“Hey, I’m not here to judge,” Matilda says, her eyes all wrinkled up in amusement. She lifts her hands in surrender. “I’ve been married three times, and none of them came with hundreds of thousands of dollars. It would’ve been worth it if they had.”

I snort, well aware of Matilda’s relationships with men.

Matilda laughs, this time softer as she puts her arm around me. “All joking aside, good for you. If someone irritated me that much, I’d have gone crazy already. Is he that gorgeous?”

I think about last night and my cheeks grow warm. “Drop dead gorgeous.” I take another big sip of coffee. “There’s *no way* I can let him win this bet.”

“You’ve got this, Josie,” Matilda says, rubbing my back. “Show him who’s boss! Just because he’s a pretty face doesn’t mean you should go easy on him.”

I lift my mug in a mock toast. “Hell no.”

She clinks her mug against mine.

I miss mornings like this with Matilda. It reminds me of the old days when I first started.

As glad as I am that she’s been taking time for herself and considering retiring—she deserves it—I’m going to miss seeing her every day. We take time to finish our coffees, and I’m feeling much better after.

Matilda heads into the office to get some things done, and I get ready to start my actual shift.

**D**espite how busy the day turns out to be, Cal’s naked body keeps randomly popping into my head. I don’t remember ever drawing that fast in my life. It’s not only the subject that was good. The drawing itself came out great. I’m my worst critic, and even though it was a quick spur-of-the-moment sketch, I couldn’t find fault with it when I was done.

I hear the ding of the bell in the kitchen and Deacon calls, “Order up!” dragging me out of my musings.

*Focus on the bet.* That’s the most important thing right now. You have to make sure he doesn’t win.

The Diner is packed with its usual breakfast crew, and the kitchen is alive with activity. It’s the perfect day for training, which was why I scheduled the newbies for their first day. Matilda has left the whole process up to me, and I’ve run with it. It’s making our service a little slower, but I’m able to pick up the slack.

That’s until a customer complains for the third time in a row about our hollandaise (which Deacon makes fresh every morning). When I ask why she’s ordered a dish she doesn’t like for the third time in a row, she doesn’t answer me. Alfred, one of our regulars, is having a bad day and doesn’t find our service fast enough, even though Daphne took his breakfast to his table within eight minutes—freshly made, mind you.

I feel punchy.

I love our regulars. They are some of the nicest people I’ve had the fortune of getting to know. Lately, though, it’s somewhat harder to handle the mean ones. I used to let it slide off my back. Now, I dwell, and it takes longer to get back into happy-mode.

I’m thankful that Kaylin senses my inner turmoil and manages to calm down the difficult customers.



## JOSIE



Lunch prep begins.

“We haven’t been this busy in a long time,” Kaylin says.

“The weather is getting nicer. That always makes people want to get out more.” On autopilot, I empty the coffee makers and go about cleaning them before I start fresh pots.

“We need to try to go out together more often,” she says. “We haven’t been out together in ages.”

Going to a nice dinner with Kaylin sounds great.

“I meant to tell you,” she says, wiping down the counter. “I have a friend who I think you would hit it off with. Bryce Armbruster.”

Putting my hands on my hips, I turn to look at my friend. “Kaylin, are you trying to set me up with someone?” I ask in surprise. It’s so out of character for her, especially after our discussion about marriage and the fact that I’m essentially off the market until the marriage is annulled.

“No, no, nothing like that,” she says. “He’s a friend of my neighbor from high school who just opened an art gallery here in NYC, and he’s always looking for new artists.” I open my mouth to protest but she hurriedly keeps talking. “Now before you say no, he’s a really nice guy with a brilliant eye for talent, and I think you should at least consider taking a meeting with him.”

“Kaylin, that’s very sweet, but I don’t have the space to work on something as intense as an art showcase.”

If Cal thinks I’m messy now, he’s never seen me trying to put a show together. The last time I did, I could barely walk with all the canvases spread throughout the place. Pretty sure I got to the bedroom by jumping on and over the couch.

If I attempted to do the same thing now, I think Cal would have a heart attack.

Again, the visual of a large open loft comes to mind, and I get excited that it’s almost within reach.

“Maybe after I settle into my new place, I’ll consider it.”

“If anyone can do it, you can,” Kaylin urges.

“You know I haven’t done a show in years.”

Three years, to be exact.

Ever since my first and only art show, which ended with a scathing article in *Art Dream Monthly* by top art critic Professor Osgood Ramstraat. I still remember what it felt like reading “uninspired,” “affront,” and my favorite, “no truth.” With each word, my heart sank through the floor. I was crying by the end of it, so upset and humiliated.

The worst part? Chase didn’t disagree with him. When he saw me crying and read the article, he shrugged and said, “He makes a few good points.”

I was so distressed and stunned that it took me a second to process exactly what he had just said. I tossed him out on his ass the next day, and he had the nerve to be surprised. Unfortunately, the damage was done. My confidence was and *still* is shot. For months, I couldn’t pick up a pencil without those words playing on a loop in my mind. Eventually, I got back into it, telling myself that I couldn’t give up because of one lousy article—written by the expert of all art experts—and that tastes differ. Bad publicity is better than no publicity. Some days I tell myself I will become the best artist in the world and then rub the article in Mr. So-called “Expert’s” face.

“But you’re *so* good,” she insists. “Your show was amazing.”

“I’m glad you thought so.”

“Come on, Josie, it was one bad review. Don’t let one jerk keep you from following your dream.”

“It wasn’t just a bad review, Kaylin. It was a scathing review from one of the top art critics in the city. Professor Ramstraat was one of the headmen to define “what makes artwork good.” Today, at almost seventy-five, and of Dutch origin, he’s considered to be *the* mover and shaker among New York’s art critics, and has become popular among art lovers for his honest and amusing reviews. That’s what one article said. Amusing reviews, *my ass*. “I know you’re just trying to be encouraging, and I appreciate it. But it still hurts, you know? Even now, while living with Cal, I can’t bring myself to sketch when he’s around because I’m nervous he’s going to see what I’m working on.” And burn it.

Kaylin gives me a sympathetic look. “Can you at least think about calling Bryce Armbruster? Please? For me?”

I groan in frustration. “Fine. I’ll think about it.”

Kaylin drops the doe-eyed expression in a millisecond and claps. “Yay! And when you’re ready and done thinking about it for the hundred and twenty-fifth time, I’ll give you his card. Or do you want it now? Okay, you don’t. But I’ve got it right here waiting for you, just in case.”

“You’re lucky I love you, Kaylin.”

She grins in satisfaction. “I will pout as much as possible if it means you’re at least open to the idea of another art show. You’re always telling me to stand up for myself. I hope you’ll do the same.”

“Touché, Kaylin. Touché.”

The front door opens, and Kaylin looks past me to see who’s arrived. She softly gasps, “Holy moly, check out the hotties.”

She rarely says anything like that aloud at work. Immediately, I'm amused, needing to see who she's talking about. When I turn around, I'm surprised to find Cal and Theo standing at the podium, waiting to be seated. Daphne approaches and greets them warmly before she shows them to a booth.

"What's he doing here?" I mutter under my breath. I can't deny the spark of happiness igniting in my stomach because Cal's here. Of course, I can't let him know how happy I am to see him. He's cocky enough as it is.

"He who?" Kaylin asks.

I motion to Cal. "That's Cal and his best friend, Theo."

Kaylin stares at me with wide eyes. "*That's Cal? That's your husband?*" she hisses.

"Yeah." I nod, playing it cool.

"Josie!"

"What?"

"Josie!"

"*What?* Stop saying my name."

"He's perfect!"

"I told you he was handsome."

"I know, but he isn't handsome. He's *perfection*."

"Believe me, when he opens his mouth, he is not."

"I know he annoys you, but he doesn't look like a bad guy. He looks...hot, no question about it, but he also has kind eyes."

*Kind eyes? Is she serious?*

She pauses and looks at me sternly. "That doesn't mean I approve of this scheme."

"Oh, no, no. He's not a bad guy at all, Kaylin," I clarify. "He just annoys the crap out of me, and his eyes haunt me in my dreams. I don't know what it is, but most of the time, we just can't seem to get along."

“What about his friend?”

“Theo? Oh, he’s cool. Great guy.”

She perks up again. She looks over at him, and I notice her taking in the tattoos, leather jacket, and motorcycle helmet tucked under his arm.

“I think my water broke, *and I ain’t even pregnant*,” she jokes.

Huh. I know Kaylin likes the inked bad-boy type, but I never saw her going for any of them in real life, yet here she is, practically drooling. Theo and Kaylin. Wouldn’t that be so sweet? But in all honesty, the odds of that happening are as impossible as Cal and me.

Daphne sits them in my section, *of course*. As in, of course I would be the one to serve them. I’m in no rush to greet them. I know, I know. We’re not at war anymore. We’re on good terms now. But his nakedness threw me off.

I finish cleaning the other pots and get more coffee going while putting the freshly washed mugs on the shelf.

“Josie, they’re in your section,” Kaylin says, patting me on the arm to get my attention.

“I’m aware.”

“Are you going to serve them? Or can I—?”

Ha. Great idea. Why didn’t I think of that? “Knock yourself out,” I tell her.

“Yes,” Kaylin exclaims in a hushed whisper. She adjusts her already-flawless hairdo, takes off her glasses, grabs one of the fresh pots of coffee, and heads over. I watch her go in anticipation.

“Good day, gentlemen,” she chirps, slightly nervous. “Can I start you off with some coffee?”

“Yes, please and thank you,” Theo says with a lilt to his voice, eyeing Kaylin in appreciation. I can tell by the redness of her cheeks that she notices. Her smile says she doesn’t



mind. She shyly doesn't meet his gaze when she leans forward to fill his mug.

Cal declines the coffee with a gentle shake of his head. His eyes slide past her to meet mine, and he gives me a smirk and a wave. Waving back, I figure I should at least greet them now that we've made eye contact.

"Hello, gentlemen," I say, coming to stand by Kaylin. Playfully—kinda—I say to Cal, "Any particular reason you have chosen to annoy me at work?"

Cal throws up his hands. "I literally haven't said a word to you yet."

"I know, and I appreciate it."

"You see what I'm dealing with," he says to Theo and Kaylin. "I don't even have to say anything, and she gets annoyed."

"Congratulations, Cal," I say. "You finally understand me."

"Don't worry, they're always like this," Theo says to Kaylin.

"I gathered as much." She giggles. "Do you guys need a moment with the menus?"

"I'll take a beer and a burger," Cal says and winks at me. "Medium, with the works on top."

"And I'll take the breakfast special," Theo says, nodding toward the chalkboard on the wall. "Thank God you guys serve breakfast all day."

"Good choice," Kaylin says. "It's the *best* meal."

"Oh, absolutely," Theo rumbles.

I raise my eyebrow, watching them. Honestly? They're kind of cute. When I glance back at Cal, he also seems to have noticed the spark between them, and we share a smile. My annoyance doesn't go away, but that shared smile takes the edge off.

"Seriously, though, what are you doing here?" I ask him.

“We were passing through,” he says, “and figured I’d stop by and see where you work.”

I gesture to the bright-pink walls which match my T-shirt. “Well, what do you think?”

“It’s a nice place. Cozy. Have you taken your break yet?”

“No.”

“Join us.”

It’s a sweet offer. “Thanks, but I don’t have a break yet.”

“I don’t mind if you want to,” Kaylin says earnestly. “The lunch rush hasn’t started yet, and the other girls are here to cover when it does.”

“See?” Cal moves over and pats the spot next to him. “Come on.”

My stomach growls and suddenly lunch sounds like a wonderful idea. Aside from the coffee I shared with Matilda, I haven’t had anything else.

“Can you tell Deacon I want my usual?” I ask. “And let Matilda know I’m taking my break.”

“I’m on it, honey.” Kaylin gives me a cheeky grin as she turns her back on them on her way to the kitchen.

I sit next to Cal, noticing Theo watching Kaylin while she walks away. He is *definitely* not her parents’ type, but then again, her parents’ type hasn’t exactly been working out for her.

“Everything okay at the dealership?” I ask.

“We haven’t gone yet. Getting a bit of a late start,” Cal says. “By the way, when I woke up this morning, you were gone. Why did you leave so early?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Figured I’d make myself useful and get some work done.”

Cal shifts his gaze to Theo. “Theo, tell Josie she works too much. I’d do it, but she never listens to me.”

“No way, dude. I’m not getting in the middle of whatever this is,” Theo says, gesturing between us.

“Let’s stop talking about me,” I say, not in the mood to have my life choices aired out in my place of work. “Tell me about the dealership. Is everything going okay with the new contractor?”

“Oh, a thousand times better than the last asshole,” Theo says.

Cal nods in agreement, resting his arm on the back of the booth. It’s not quite around my shoulders, yet I can feel the heat of him. “We’ve made up some time and it’ll be good to open by the end of the month. Everything is back on track.”

“That’s awesome!” I’m genuinely happy for him.

“Speaking of the dealership,” Theo says, sitting straighter and wrapping his hands around his coffee mug. “Now that I have both of you here, as well as witnesses, I have to tell you something.”

Uh-oh. I don’t like his tone or the fact that he wants to talk to both of us. What does the dealership have to do with me? Cal also appears confused, his brow furrowed as he stares at his best friend.

“What did you do?” he immediately asks.

“And what does it have to do with me?” I add.

Theo takes a sip of coffee before he speaks. “Well, I ran into Mr. Osborn,” he says carefully.

“Who’s Mr. Osborn?” I ask.

“Main investor,” Cal clarifies.

“We got to talking about the shop and his investment. One thing led to another, and...I may or may not have accidentally referred to Josie as your wife.”

There’s silence.

We both stare at Theo.

Cal shakes his head in disbelief. My heart sinks and my temper flares. “You did *what?*” I exclaim. Suddenly remembering where I am, I wince and look around. “Oh, my God.”

Daphne and one of the new girls are taking orders at another table, and they briefly glance my way. I give them an apologetic smile. It takes all my willpower not to send Theo a swift kick to the shins. There was a reason Cal and I both agreed to keep this under wraps. Nobody was supposed to know! Since we’re going to get divorced in nineteen days anyway, it just makes things cleaner when fewer people know what’s happening. As far as I’m aware, Theo, Kaylin...and, okay, now Matilda too (okay, guilty!), are the only ones who know what the arrangement is. I know I sound like a Holy Willie, but my girls are my besties. They wouldn’t tell anyone. They’d take the secret to their graves. But this Osborn guy, he clearly isn’t inside Cal’s close circle of friends, or Theo wouldn’t seem so remorseful.

Cal, on the other hand, appears oddly undisturbed.

“How did that even come up?” Cal asks.

“It just sort of happened,” Theo explains. “We were talking about your grandmother, and they were offering their condolences. He mentioned his wife was thinking about trying to set you up with someone. I know how much you hate that shit and, given your current situation, I happened to mention Josie and that you’re no longer single, and then the next thing I knew the word ‘wife’ came flying out of my mouth.”

“Yeah, well, my foot is about to fly into your balls,” I threaten.

Theo immediately closes his legs and twists his lower half away from me. “Please don’t. Be careful with the goods. I still need them.”

“It’s fine, not a big deal,” Cal finally says with a shrug. “If they ask about it later, we’ll just say it didn’t work out.”

His nonchalant reply stings. I don’t know the Osborns and, if fortune smiles on me, I never will. Still, I don’t like it when

someone else thinks I don't have endurance. Because I do! Also, think of Cal what you want, but anyone who's met him knows he's not the type of man who gives up easily, whether in business or his personal life.

"Yeah, about that," Theo lowers his voice, his gaze on Cal. "Osborn mentioned that his wife sure would love to meet your new wife."

"What?" I shriek. "*No!*"

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I changed the subject."

"See? No problem," Cal says to me and shifts back to face Theo. "If it ever comes up again, just tell him my wife is out of town."

"Okey-dokey." Theo nods. "I can do that."

"How can you be so chill about this?" I ask incredulously.

"It already happened. What do you want me to do? Go back in time and stop him?"

"Don't be a smartass." The number of times I have said that phrase in the last few days makes me think I should make a recording of it, so I can hit play whenever Cal opens his mouth.

"You *know* I can't help that."

He's probably right. What's done is done. As worried as I am, I know Theo didn't do it on purpose. I can't be mad at him, and it does no one any good to pout about it. I shake my head and lean against the booth. "Please be careful, Theo. We don't need everyone and their mother knowing our business."

"I swear, it won't happen again," he promises.

"Josie, it'll be fine," Cal insists, flinging his arm around my shoulders. "Relax. Don't worry about it."

I sigh heavily and shake my head, pushing his arm off.

The kitchen door opens, and instead of Kaylin emerging, Matilda does, looking around wildly. Kaylin follows a second

later, trying to distract her. I know exactly why Matilda hurried out of the back. Someone—not Kaylin—probably told her I was taking lunch with friends, and she put two and two together.

“Hey there, gentlemen,” Matilda says, approaching our table (despite Kaylin’s almost desperate attempts to sidetrack her), all curious, making no effort whatsoever to hide the fact that she’s just out here to check out both men. “I heard that Josie was dining with a few friends. Any friends of Josie’s are friends of mine. I’m Matilda, by the way, and this is my place.”

“Oh, so you’re ‘the cool boss’ my Josie can’t stop talking about,” Cal says, extending his hand toward her. “I’m Cal.”

*My Josie? Did he just call me his Josie? Why does that make my stomach flip-flop? Why do I like the sound of that? Oh, boy. Let’s unpack that later.*

“Oh, so *you’re* Cal,” Matilda says, eyebrows taking a hike up her forehead and hiding *inside* her hairline. She takes his hand and shakes it before she looks over at Kaylin. “Their lunch is on the house, Kaylin. Make sure you update their slip.”

“Thanks, Matilda, but that’s not necessary,” I tell her.

“Nonsense,” Matilda says, patting my arm. “And don’t you go rushing through your lunch. Take all the time you need.” She gives me the sweetest smile. “Cool boss, huh?”

I can’t help but melt a little.

“Perfect,” Cal says, putting his arm around me again, causing all the butterflies to have a dance party in my stomach. “See, even Matilda knows you need a break to loosen up.”

As she walks away, she mouths, “Oh, my *Lord*,” and fans herself.

I only sigh and shake my head. It’s bad enough Kaylin is drooling over these two, now Matilda is too.

Traitors. Traitors, the both of them.



## CAL



*W*e walk into a wave of noise.

The main garage is almost complete, and the guys are in the process of installing larger pieces of equipment. Power tools can be heard, and below the sound, an old radio plays heavy metal.

Immediately, I spot the new contractor, Charlie Holland, a lively Irishman with disheveled dirty-blond hair and a braided beard—maybe somewhere in his thirties or early forties—giving orders to some of the men.

“Once ye feckin’ get back, I want ye going ninety. It’s stopped rainin’ so just get on with it. The riggings have all been installed, and once the lads are clear of the area, I want ye to stress test each one with the dummy bikes that came in last night,” he says, and the men nod. “I trust where they come from, but they still need to be tested—let’s make sure they were installed properly. After ye do that, the shelvin’ should be finished, and ye can start stockin’ each station with the tools laid out in the back. Everythin’ is labeled, so make sure they feckin’ stay that way.”

When he spots me and Theo, he gives us a nod of acknowledgment and glances at his watch before calling over the noise, “All right, lads. Union lunchtime! Ye’ve got an hour.”

“Hey, man,” I greet him, holding my hand out for him to shake, which he accepts.



“Ah, chief, how’s it goin’?” Charlie is in his usual look: torn blue jeans, and I’m unsure if he’s being modern or wears his jeans until they fall apart—I’m guessing the latter. His armless shirt reveals a sleeve of a naked pin-up-girl with huge tits, blowing a kiss from his upper arm with one eye squeezed shut into a wink. Below that is a big heart with three letters: MOM. Either Charlie has a twisted sense of humor, or he found himself under the ink gun sometime late at night after a heavy night of partying.

“Lost myself a bit of a bet there.” He answers my silent question, likely used to getting odd looks. “Are ya happy enough with things?” He lifts his hand, gesturing around him.

There’s the state-of-the-art showroom where we can display the classics and more expensive bikes, our workshop space (“the garage”) where customers can get their bikes fixed, customized, and detailed, plus a couple of modern office spaces in the back for Theo, sales staff, and other administration employees.

“Things are looking great,” I say, pleased with how organized Charlie is and how systematically he handles his crew. There is not a single array of clutter anywhere, or the mess I usually face during construction periods with sharp deadlines, and I’m pleased. “I didn’t expect to have all the rigging in today.”

“Yeah, fella called me this mornin’ at 5:30, sayin’ they had a cancellation and could move us up the list. Met him first thing, and we got everythin’ unloaded before the lads got here. What d’ye think?”

I scan the workspace with a grin. “It looks like an actual garage.”

“Feekin’ imagine that.”

Chuckling, I slap him on the back. “Thanks for looking out.” Knowing that we have an opening date and are going to make it takes a massive load off. “Have you run into any issues with distributors?”

“Don’t be worryin’ about that. It’s grand. Sure, you won’t get anyone any better round these parts,” Charlie boasts, pointing a thumb at himself and grinning. “I went through all your notes, and we’re good. That last fella was feckin’ useless. Wouldn’t know his arse from his elbow, just runnin’ up the bill with all sorts of shite. There’s plenty left in the budget for us to finish things up properly.”

In the construction field, it’s normal that contractors pick each other to pieces. Everybody wants the job. Not everything you hear is true. I don’t hold it against Charlie that he’s running down a peer. At least we’re within budget.

“Good job,” I tell him.

“You’re grand.” Charlie jerks his head to the back. “The admin offices are all done. The furniture is due in tomorrow, so long as ya approve. Will we give it a look?”

“Sounds good. Let’s check them out.”

We follow Charlie toward the back of “the garage” where the administration offices have been finished. The space is well lit with natural light coming from large windows and modern lighting fixtures. This is better than I could’ve hoped for. We’ve already hired the administration staff, and with their offices complete, it means they can start at least two weeks earlier than expected. It’ll be good to have a central space where business operations can begin while the rest of the building is being finished.

After the brief tour, Charlie heads off to take his break. “Go on so. I’ll talk to ya later.”

**T**heo and I crouch down on the floor of the room that’ll soon be his office.

“So, I have a question,” Theo says, leaning back on his hands and taking my attention away from my thoughts. “About this girl. What do you know about Josie’s friend?”

His question comes out of nowhere and catches me off guard. “Which friend?”

“You know, the brunette she works with. Side-braid. I think her name was Kaylin.”

“Ah, yeah, not much. I know they’re close, but that’s about it. It’s not like Josie and I share every detail about our lives.”

“Do you know if she’s seeing anyone?”

I remember the lunch we just had and how Theo had shamelessly looked her over. I smirk. “You weren’t even remotely subtle about checking her out.”

“How could I be? Did you see those big blue eyes? My God. Not to mention she was fucking smoking.” He makes a noise in the back of his throat and shakes his head. “She reminds me of Jessica Lilly Dawson, remember her?”

“The bookworm with glasses?” I ask, my brows furrowing.

“So what? She was hot. And *not* into me.”

“You certainly have a type.”

“Well, so do you.”

He’s not wrong there. We smirk at each other.

“You should ask her out,” I tell him. “This Kaylin chick.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I asked if you knew whether or not she was seeing anyone.”

“No idea. I don’t think she is. Next time we go, you should ask for her number.”

“I thought about it, but I didn’t want to do it while she’s working. Also, not sure if she’s into me. Not all chicks like tattoos, piercings, and shit. Don’t want her to think I’m some kind of creep who’s stalking her or something.”

I snort in amusement, assessing the huge-ass mountain of a man. He’s an ugly-ass motherfucker—his words, not mine—about three inches taller than me (I’m six foot one), with a bushy beard, and his black hair ends in a short wavy ponytail, like he doesn’t give two fucks. “Don’t tell me you’re *scared* of a small waitress?”

His lips twitch. “Me? *Never*.”

“I can ask Josie to give her your number.”

His eyes light up. “Fuck *yeah*. Thanks, man.”

“No problem,” I say, bumping his fist.

“How about you?” he asks, changing the subject. “Getting laid any time soon? I bet this whole marriage thing is really cutting into your dating life.”

“Yeah, you could say that. Can’t exactly bring a chick home and be like, ‘Oh, just ignore the woman sleeping on the couch. She’s technically my wife, but it’s cool.’”

He laughs. “All right, all right, fair point. I just think the whole thing is fucking hilarious. Especially the whole bet situation you’ve got going on. I take it that’s still on the table.”

Oh, yeah, I told him about that this morning while we were getting ready for our drive. He knows the details of what happens when I win. And I’m going to win. There’s no doubt in my mind.

“So far so good,” I say. “I’ve never seen her clean up after herself before.”

“Imagine, all it took was the idea of kissing you. Man, she really can’t stand you.”

“Gee, thanks, dude.”

“Come on, you had to know she would freak out,” Theo says. “This is Josie we’re talking about. The two of you can’t be in the same room without arguing.”

“We didn’t argue at lunch,” I point out.

“You bickered.”

“But we didn’t argue.”

“Bickering is arguing.”

“Bickering is intense talking,” I counter.

“It’s not like you did anything to prevent it.”

“You act like that’s all on me.”

“Never said it was,” he replies, crossing his arms. “But now that I’ve seen you two together a couple of times, I’m brought right back to high school. Cal, bro, it’s always been that way between you and Josie. I’ve never known two people who get on each other’s nerves like you two do. It’s actually kind of impressive.”

“At least I got her down from hating me to extremely disliking me. Progress.”

“I think you two just need to fuck and get it out of your systems.”

This isn’t the first time Theo’s expressed this sentiment, and I know it won’t be the last. “Hey, man, I’m all for it,” I say, shrugging. “She sure could use a good dose of the good ol’ D. Actually, it would do us both a world of good. But Josie is stubborn. There’s no way she’s going to admit she’s attracted to me without being helped along the way. Hence the bet. Let’s start with a kiss and go from there.”

“You think she’s attracted to you?” he asks, arching his eyebrows.

“Of course she is. I can sense it.”

“But she doesn’t know it yet?”

“Oh, she knows. But she doesn’t want *me* to know.”

“Women and their games.” Theo shakes his head with a chuckle.

Now that everything is back on track, I don’t feel the need to hang around the construction site and oversee it all. Charlie clearly has things in order, and it’s no skin off my back. With that weight lifted off my shoulders, I’m free to focus on other things.

As everything is finishing up for the day, I reach out to Mr. Osborn. The phone to his office rings twice before a soft female voice answers, “Osborn Car Repair and Detail, Mr. Osborn’s office.”

“Callum Ashford calling for Mr. Osborn.”

“Hello, Mr. Ashford, please hold for one moment.”

She puts on that god-awful hold music, and I stand there, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting even longer.

Before I signed the papers for this dealership, I reached out to Osborn to introduce myself and let him know what business I was bringing to the city. I did my homework beforehand and knew if anyone was going to invest, it would be him.

Born and raised in NYC, Andrew Harold Osborn owned the two biggest car dealerships in the city and had started to buy out the smaller dealerships shortly after opening his second location.

I knew since I focused on motorcycles, my business offered something different, yet similar enough to pique his interest. It only took one phone call to get him to invest a cool heavy amount without breaking a sweat. Not sure how much Mrs. Osborn has a say in his company, but she and Osborn are on zoning and construction boards in the city, which makes his support even more important.

That being said, aside from our initial meeting, I haven't done much by way of communication since I got back. I knew if I planned to stay on Osborn's good side, I'd need to do some damn schmoozing sooner or later.

Fucking politics.

It was inescapable to refresh the connection in person.

Eventually, the soft voice returns to the line, and in a chipper tone says, “Thank you for holding, Mr. Ashford. Mr. Osborn is available to speak with you. I'll transfer you now.”

“Thanks.”

He probably kept me on hold as a power move to determine if I have the patience to wait for him. I know that trick from my corporate days. It was a tactic highly encouraged at Ecclestone. Osborn has done it several times during our various correspondences. I don't care for mind

games, but I'm willing to go along with it if that's how Osborn wants to play this.

His assistant transfers my call.

It rings exactly three times before it's answered.





## CAL



“*M*r. Ashford,” Andrew Osborn says in his raspy, booming voice. “I was wondering when I’d be hearing from you.”

“Hello, Mr. Osborn,” I greet him. “Thank you for taking the time to speak to me. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Straight to the point. Tell me—to what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

“I wanted to let you know that my dealership is in the final stages of completion and I would like to extend a dinner invitation to you and your wife. That way we can sit down face to face and discuss a couple of ideas I have.”

“Wonderful! I heard through the grapevine you fired William Hunt. I was surprised to hear that, considering how late in the project you are. It’s my understanding that he does good work.”

“He does, but I decided to bring in a new contractor who better suits my needs.”

Osborn tsked, understanding that I wasn’t going to dog the man. “Such a shame and good to know. Now, back to your lovely invitation. We’d very much like to accept.”

“Great. Two days from now, let’s say seven o’clock. I’ll send you the details.”

“Perfect. Charlotte and I will be there. I cannot wait to meet your new bride. We’ll see you then, Ashford.”

I don't even get a chance to tell him Josie won't be there before he hangs up.

Shit.

Josie is *not* going to like this.

Oh, well. She can deal. It's one dinner.

I get home sometime in the early afternoon. In a rare instance, Josie is home before me. I'm not expecting this, considering how many hours she's been working. I'm guessing Matilda sent her home since she came in early. I notice her stuff when I walk through the door, putting my boots to the side. I'm not sleeping on that damn couch.

When I enter the living room, there are two things I notice right away.

One, her bra is sitting on the arm of the couch.

And two, her sketchbook is lying next to it.

I hear the sound of the bathtub filling, and I realize that in her rush to take her evening soak, she forgot her bra. Either that, or she didn't expect me home anytime soon. Or she left it there on purpose.

Either way, I see a kiss in my very near future.

*Can't fucking wait.*

I will preface this next sentence by saying that I am not snooping. I'm simply tidying up the living room after her, again—except for the bra, of course, because: evidence—when I realize the sketchbook is partially open. The page I see makes me stop in my tracks.

Grabbing the book, I open it all the way to find an *incredibly* detailed drawing of me. Specifically, my naked body.

Like, fully naked.

Dick and all.

On the paper, I'm lying in bed, so she must have drawn it at some point during the night. Oh, this is too fucking good! Is this why she didn't want to show me her work? Goody-goody Nosy Josie isn't as prudish as I thought she was. But she's way, *way* nosier than I expected.

She has a lot of talent.

The drawing looks exactly like me, and the shading is on point. My face, my shoulders, my abs, my dick, and nuts.

Perfect. Fucking. Perfect. Fucking detailed too. Veins and all.

I flip through the pages, looking at the rest of her work. The way she draws the human body is stunning. She doesn't embellish (I can tell)—she doesn't try to make it perfect. She catches all the subtle curves and nuances of the human form.

I continue to scan through the pages. Most of what I see are bits and pieces of a person from when, I assume, she didn't have a model in front of her. Or did she? Someone's arm, someone's torso, a pair of eyes. Wait, are those my eyes? Hard to tell. There seems to be a subtle scar over the eyebrow, which mirrors the one I got when I was a dumb teenager. Not from the night of my first joy ride, but later that week when I'd been forced to help fix the bike and wasn't watching what I was doing.

I get to the start of the sketchbook, finding full nudes of some dude, which pretty much makes me lose interest. I will say he's got nothing on me, and the sneering expression on his face tells me right away that he wears turtlenecks and jumps in the pool holding his nose.

“What are you *doing*?”

I spin around as Josie stands there in her robe, her wet hair slicked back from her face. Her eyes are as wide as saucers.

“Anything you'd like to tell me?” I ask calmly, opening to the naked drawing of me and showing her.

“Oh, my God. Cal! *No*,” she shrieks. “Wait! Please!”

She tries to take the book from me, but I hold it out of her grasp. She jumps to no avail. I'm taller and easily stretch out of her reach.

“Cal!”

I make sure to keep it open to the sketch, growling, “I gotta say, you’ve got a lot of talent. Of course, it helps when your subject is as devilishly handsome as I am.”

She stops trying to grab the book. “Okay, look,” she says, still panicked, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment. “I know this seems creepy. But please, *please* know I didn’t mean to walk in on you. I was going to get my uniform, I knocked on the door, twice I might add, and you did *not* answer!”

“So you walked in, saw I was naked, and couldn’t resist drawing me?”

Her face twists.

It’s evident that she’s trying to figure out how to talk her way out of this.

She just groans and buries her face in her hands. I’m not sure if she can’t come up with an excuse or if she’s given up trying. “Yeah, pretty much. To be honest, I wanted to get even with you for burning that drawing of mine when we were kids, but then...things got out of hand.”

“That’ll teach you.” I’m not angry in the least. I’m flattered. I really am. I’ve never been drawn before, and this girl has a shitload of talent. The sketch is dead on, and she even took the time to include my tattoos.

“Hey, I’m not ashamed of my body,” I tell her. “Clearly, you can see that I’ve got it going on.”

Her cheeks are flaming red, and she groans in annoyance. “Oh, please stop talking. I’m having several déjà vus and can’t even be mad at you. Seriously. I’ll do anything if you do not tease me about this.” She’s drumming her fingers on her thigh.

*Anything?*

That’s what she said?

The way she said it strikes a nerve.

Hold on.

It sounds like she's pleading, almost begging me not to make fun of her. I know it's in our nature to give each other shit, but the past is the past, and there's no use revisiting days gone by, let alone waking dead and buried ghosts. I'd never tease her about something she obviously has a passion for. I can tell she's uncomfortable, and I feel like an asshole. That wasn't my point. I struck a nerve I didn't even know existed. I've never seen Josie like this. She is a fighter, defiant and rebellious as fuck, the most confrontational woman I've ever met, always ready to raise hell.

I must have hit where it hurts.

She let her guard down.

And she let me see.

“Look, I'm teasing about you sneaking around drawing me—not about the drawing itself. The drawing is great. You did an awesome job.”

Her eyes meet mine. “Thanks,” she mutters.

“In fact, it's more than awesome, Josie.” I pause for a beat. “Hey, hey, everything all right there?”

Her cheeks are still red, but it's starting to fade. “It's been a long time since I've drawn anyone. So, when I felt inspired, I really wanted to follow through. I'm sorry...I should have asked you first.”

“You don't need to apologize,” I assure her. “I'm not mad.”

Finally, the tension leaves her body, and her shoulders sag in relief.

That is, until I flip to the beginning of the book and hold up the drawings of the other dude. “Who's the tool-bag?”

“That's my ex.” She makes a face, her assertiveness back. “And I love how you can tell he's a tool-bag just by the drawing. Because he is.”

“Hey, you’re really good. The look on his face says it all. I take it things didn’t end well with him.”

She takes the book from me and closes it before she tosses it onto the couch. “No, it didn’t,” she admits. “He was a jerk. Never really cared or encouraged me. He was furious when I had to work late, and insisted I stopped working at The Diner. Major red flag. *Next*. Oh, and he used to get jealous if I went to a drawing class and drew other guys. That’s when he offered to pose for me. He was fine if a woman was posing, but God forbid I drew a male model.”

I’m floored when I hear this. “Wow. It’s an art class for crying out loud. It’s not like you’re sneaking into someone’s room and drawing them while they sleep.”

She shakes her head, her lips tugging upward. “Ha-ha, very funny.”

I grin. “You’re never going to live this down.”

“I’m aware.” She smacks my arm playfully. “Anyway, yes, he was the most insecure guy I’ve ever met. I ended things after my first art show.”

“Let me guess—he didn’t attend?”

“Worse. He *did* attend, and when I got a really bad review, he agreed with it.”

“He agreed? What the hell?” What a poor excuse for a man.

“Yeah. My drawings just aren’t worth a second look, he said. And I have to accept that.”

“You don’t have to accept shit. Look, I don’t know much about art, but I know talent when I see it. You have real talent, Josie. I mean it.”

Something beautiful flickers in the depths of her eyes. She smiles softly, and it’s the prettiest damn smile I’ve ever seen. “Thanks, Cal,” she says.

For a few seconds we just stand there, and I get lost in her beauty, in a captivating soul she’s taken great care to hide from me.

Something inside my chest pulls.

“Now that that’s settled,” I say, collecting myself, “we have something else that needs to be addressed.”

The smile leaves her face as quickly as it appeared. “What are you talking about?” She frowns.

Smirking, I gesture to her bra just behind me. “I believe you owe me a kiss.”

Her eyes go wide, and she points at me. “No, that *doesn't* count.”

“What do you mean that doesn’t count?”

“I *just* took it off a few minutes ago.”

“And?” I hold up her bra, dangling it from my index finger.

“And I…”

“*And* you’re trying to come up with excuses, so you don’t lose this bet.” I laugh, flicking the bra at her.

She catches it in a huff.

“Pucker up, wifey,” I tell her.

It’s the only warning she gets.

Before she can move, I slide my arm around her waist and tug her forward in a dominant pull. Her body collides with mine. The bra drops from her hand instantly. My arm reaches around her back, drawing her closer, feeling her tits under that white robe pressing deliciously against my chest. I slide the other hand into her wet hair and pull her into a kiss.

Her breathing stutters.

If I thought her body felt good against mine before, this is a whole new level of heat. I meet warm, soft lips. The most tender I’ve ever felt. Her mouth is pliable against mine, even when her body is stiff as a board. Seriously, what’s up with that? She’s not moving, and her body is filled with tension—but she’s not pushing me away.

“Josie, you can do better than that,” I murmur softly against her lips, cradling her head, my mouth back on hers, and I deepen the kiss. My tongue darts into her mouth and swipes along hers.

She doesn’t move her tongue. At all.

It’s like she’s going out of her way to not enjoy this.

I whisper-growl deeply, “Come on, Josie,” my voice hoarse and barely there. My top teeth roll her bottom lip teasingly while my hands cradle her face. My thumbs lightly trace over her cheekbones.

I can feel her trembling beneath my touch.

“Kiss me back, baby,” I breathe, my lips teasing hers.

It’s then that she moves. Her hands slide up my arms to grasp my biceps, and she leans into the kiss, fully parting her lips for me.

*Yes.* That’s more like it. “That’s my good girl,” I rumble, my voice nearly a growl.

Suddenly, she loops one arm around my neck and plunges her tongue into my mouth. The switch takes me by surprise in the best way. I almost stumble back.

Ahh, this feels nice. Holy fucking shit.

My body is on fire, and my dick presses against my jeans like the persistent bastard he is.

After ten minutes of shameless kissing—ten minutes that are over way too fast—and a lifetime of me doing my fucking very best to not open her robe and unleash hell on her naked body, she draws away with a gasp, her big brown eyes dark like chocolate.

Her hands come up to rest against my chest.

I take them in mine, holding her close to keep her from running away.

A clever retort is on my tongue, all ready to go—or is it a fucking plea to keep on going?—but before I can say anything,



her tender lips find mine and she kisses me again, and every thought I ever had goes out the window.

Except the one that begs me to untie her damn robe.

I want to rip it right off, push my hands underneath the fabric and grab the supple flesh I've only had glimpses of.



## JOSIE



Okay, so agreeing to the kiss deal wasn't the best idea.

And neither was forgetting my bra.

And kissing him back.

*But damn*, is he a good kisser.

Part of me isn't surprised. Someone with that many quick comebacks and smartass answers has to be good with his mouth. I'm just *not* expecting one kiss with him to buckle my knees and send a shot of arousal straight between my legs. God, I try so hard not to like it. I really do. I remain still and squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for it to be over. I thought it was going to be over quickly, but he doesn't let up. He keeps going, keeps trying to coax a response out of me.

And it's not long before I give in.

I just can't *not* give in.

Kissing him the second time is not planned. It just happens.

I blame my hormones and general unresolved horniness. Combine that with the fact that I haven't been kissed senseless in a long time, and of course I'm going to go for seconds.

Until I catch myself and pull away.

We're both panting. His hands are around my ass and his full lips are glistening invitingly.

Oh, *no*.

Oh, my God.

Quickly, I break all contact and clear my throat. There's too much silence. I should say something. Something funny and witty. Like what? Shit! I'm an artist, *not* a comedian.

I open my mouth and say the first thing that comes out. "All right, you've made your point. I'll pick up my bra."

Internally, I wince. Well done. Not awkward in the slightest.

"Glad you see things my way," Cal says with that infuriating smirk of his. But oh, crap, he sounds breathless and it's super sexy.

His green eyes are dark, like the color of moss, and he's looking at me like he wants to throw me onto the couch. I'm like two seconds away from letting him. I need to do something.

I start to pick up my stuff, leaving him standing there staring at me.

"So how was work?" I ask.

*Smooth, Josie. So super smooth,* I tell myself.

Cal takes a step back (thank God, because I can still feel the heat of his body, and it's so much worse when he's standing close). "Great change of subject," he teases.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Laughing, he takes a seat on the armchair. He runs a hand through his already-mussed hair. God, I want to do that. I want to see if his hair is as soft as it looks, maybe tug on it a bit to see if I can elicit a noise out of him.

Why didn't I do that during our kiss?

Wow, it's really hot in here.

"Work was fine," he finally answers. When I bend over to pick up my sketchbook off the floor, he adds, "By the way, you're still in your robe, and it's not fully closed. Not that I mind the view."

Oh, shit. I glance down and remember that I've had this entire conversation in my robe, and sure enough, the sash has come slightly undone, and my boobs are almost hanging out. I immediately stand up straight, dropping everything I'm holding.

"Dammit, Cal," I exclaim, retying it. "Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"I'm a man, Josie. If a gorgeous woman wants to sit, kiss, or lounge around in her robe, I'm not going to stop her."

My face grows hot hearing Cal refer to me as a "gorgeous woman." I clutch my robe tighter. "You didn't think to at least warn me that my tits were practically falling out?"

"Why the fuck would I do that?"

I shake my head, trying to will the redness from my cheeks. "I'll go put some clothes on."

The look Cal is giving me can only be described as hunger. He doesn't say it, but I know he'd rather I take the robe *off*. I've never had someone so blatantly undress me with their eyes as he's doing right now. It only makes the memory of his lips even more intoxicating.

I hurry to the bedroom to put some clothes on, trying to put the feeling out of my mind.

Which is way more difficult than it has any right to be.

It was just a kiss.

Technically there were two kisses.

It was just two completely hot and unforgettable kisses.

**S**itting back against the couch, I pick up my abandoned sketchbook. Hey, at least he isn't mad about the drawing.

He said so many sweet things about my drawings.

Really, really sweet things.

It still seems like I'm walking on clouds with this unexpected boost in my confidence (from *him*, of all people!),

and that's a feeling I haven't had in quite a long while.

"But before you start drawing," he says, "we need to talk."

Oh, shit. That's never a good phrase. "What's up?" I ask, trying to keep my voice composed and normal.

"I have an important dinner coming up in two days with a couple of investors," Cal says, watching me intently. "I wanted to give you a heads-up, because it's going to be here."

A sense of relief drifts over me. All right, this I can handle. "Oh, okay. I'll make sure to clear out that night, and rest assured, you don't have to worry about them finding my bra lying around."

"That won't be necessary."

It takes a second for his words to register. "Oh..." He's not telling me about the dinner to make sure I'm *out* of the apartment. "You want me to be there?" At first, I'm surprised by his response and a little touched.

"You sort of have to be."

Then it dawns on me. "Is this about the investors that Theo told we were *married*?"

He nods. "Mr. and Mrs. Osborn. They're expecting you to be here."

"Dammit, Theo," I say, resting my head against the back of the couch, staring at the ceiling for a moment.

"I know," he says. His forehead is all frowny, and he looks at me like I'm about to shred him and his idea into a million little pieces.

I feel something strange building up in my chest.

We have to pretend we're real.

That our marriage is real.

That our love is real.

"You can tell Theo I'm going to rip his balls out and then bury him alive!" I put my sketchbook aside and stand up. Feeling like a thousand ants are crawling all over my skin at

the same time makes it impossible for me to keep calm. “*He* should play the hostess in my place. Ha! You can tell him I’ll be happy to help him prepare for the good wifey role!”

Cal snorts.

At the same time, a picture of Theo sitting next to him, politely making conversation with the investor’s wife, flashes through my mind. The tattooed hulk of man holding a tiny teacup from Mrs. Blanchie’s dresser in his big fingers, asking if he can refill Mrs. Osborn’s cup.

“I’m sure Gran still has a frilly apron somewhere you can put on him,” he says. “I’ll personally help you tie the ribbons just above his ass into a pretty little bow.”

We look at each other. The corners of my mouth twitch. Cal makes a sound that’s somewhere between a snicker and a stifled laugh.

“All right, I’ll be there,” I say and enjoy the moment of surprised confusion in his eyes. That’s an answer he clearly wasn’t expecting. “But you can tell Theo that he’s going to be paying for this for a long, *long* time. We have to make sure we use the good dishes. He could polish the silverware.” With that, all the restlessness evaporates, and I sit down again. On the couch.

When Callum remains silent, I gaze over at him.

He cocks his head at me in curiosity. “Josie, are you all right?”

“Yep.”

“Was that a burst of *impulse*?”

“Nah.” I shrug it off. “Just want to help.”

“Sure looked like a shiver of compulsion to me. And how do you know about the good dishes?”

I set the sketchbook off to the side. Looking around the room, my eyes land on the china cabinet, and I let the memories wash over me. “I helped Mrs. Blanchie get ready for dinner parties so many times, and she always had me get those dishes out of the cabinet. I asked her why she didn’t just keep

them in the kitchen and why she packed them away *all* the time.”

“Because they’re for guests,” Cal says with a smirk, doing a pretty good imitation of his grandmother’s voice. “Not for everyday use.”

I laugh, having heard that phrase many times. “Yeah, that’s what she always said. So before the dinner parties, we’d have to take them out and handwash them. Then after, handwash again—very carefully—and put them back.”

I remember it so clearly. Just the two of us, standing in the kitchen, side by side, talking about everything and nothing. Once I suggested we use the dishwasher, and she *balked* at the idea. I never suggested it again. She’d wash, and I would carefully dry. I never knew my own grandmother, but Mrs. Blanchie filled that role effortlessly.

“What else did you do with Gran?” Cal asks.

“A bunch of different things, especially when her arthritis started to get worse. She was always so insistent about doing her own cleaning, even though there was a cleaning lady that came over a couple of times a week.”

“I remember. I hired her. Gran would have things spotless when she arrived, so more often than not, she had nothing to do.”

“Huh, sounds like someone else I know,” I tease.

Cal grins. “Hey, I had to learn it from somewhere.”

“We girls at The Diner called her ‘the Baroness’—have I told you that?”

“The Baroness? Ha. I like that. I can see why. Gran was a perfect lady who always kept her countenance. Did she know about her pet name?”

“She did. She thought we were being silly. She said”—I mimic Mrs. Blanchie’s cute elderly voice—“Girls, I’m no baroness, there’s not a single drop of blue blood running in my old veins. Only merlot.” Cal grins and so do I. “Then she’d order another glass and leave a huge tip each time.”



“Did you know she was wealthy?”

“No, I really had no idea. You?”

“She kept it from us,” he admits. “She wanted to surprise us. Probably had this planned a long time.”

“Anyway, on days when she was having a hard time, I would take care of a few things for her. Like shopping. Or carrying a plant pot from the living room to the bedroom. Then she always insisted we have lunch. God, her food was terrible.”

Cal bursts into laughter, pressing his hand over his heart. “She was the sweetest, but she wasn’t much of a cook. Except for her butter cookies, they were good.”

Phantom scent memories of her butter cookies waft through my nose.

“Oh, my God, they were! They were the best! We’d have them in the evening with Earl Grey tea. So yummy. But lunch was the absolute worst. I’m just glad she let me cook for the dinner parties because I could not subject her friends to her food. I still don’t know what she put in those tea sandwiches she made when we had our lunches. I always had to eat at least half to be polite, and I don’t think my stomach ever recovered. I started offering to make lunch just so I wouldn’t have to eat them anymore.”

“Bet that went over well.”

“Surprisingly, yes. She thought I was just being sweet, and she loved what I would serve for lunch, and her girlfriends raved about my cooking at those dinner parties.”

“She didn’t know you were trying to avoid food poisoning for all of you.”

Cal and I both laugh, and it feels good. Feels good sitting here sharing memories of a woman who made such an impact on both our lives. I bet she’d like this: seeing us sitting in her living room, actually getting along.

“You grew up with her,” I continue, tucking my legs underneath me to get comfortable. “Was it hard for you too,

being raised without both parents?”

He looks at me in a funny way I can't read, and for a moment, I think I've overstepped—that I'm too curious, too *nosy*, so I add, “My father passed away when I was a toddler, and I was raised by a single mother. That was hard, especially when she became so sick.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. No, all I remember are fights and broken dishes and shit scattered everywhere. They fought all the fucking time. I hated being at home. It reeked of cigarettes, alcohol, and other shit. What I remember vividly, to this day, is my father hitting my chest, my shoulders, and his favorite spot, my back, with a belt, and my mother doing her best to look away, especially when he came visiting my bedroom at night, his motherfucking belt ready in his hand, not even bothering to lock the door. The *coldness* in his eyes. The *hate* in his eyes. God, I loathed the motherfucker, I wanted to murder him. And I would have. One late evening, they overdosed. Gran took me in.”

He pauses when he notices the sad expression on my face.

All kinds of thoughts run through my head.

I had no idea. That's horrible. I want to cry.

Is that why he was such a rebellious, angry kid? Is that why he hardly ever drinks and prefers his home neat and spotless? Is that why he likes being outside so much? No wonder he threw my sandwiches—made with obvious love by my mother—in the dirt and spat on them. Or that he never appreciated how much I loved drawing, and that he didn't understand he'd burned more than just a sheet of paper.

The wings on his back suddenly make sense.

I offer him a few heartfelt words, but it's like he's not even listening. Instead, he shakes his head. “Don't read too much into it, don't Sigmund Freud me. What's done is done,” he continues. “I'm not scarred. It's hard to miss anything that you never had. Gran's home was cozy. She loved Theo. I didn't miss a thing.”

He doesn't say more, and I don't press, instead trying to steer the topic to a happier one. "How did you survive her cooking?"

He shrugs. "Mostly I ate at Theo's house—a simple bagel with cheese or something he and I bought at the corner store," Cal says. "At Gran's house, we lived off her cookies. Theo loved them just as much as I did. We ate them by the bucketful. Later, when we were a bit older, we were always on the go, so he and I would end up eating out."

"That sounds about right."

"I like to stay busy. Speaking of which, I'm headed out."

"Didn't you just get home?" I ask.

"And?"

On the go again. "Where are you going? Work again?"

"Theo and I are meeting up with some guys to talk shop. A couple of them have expressed interest in working for me once the dealership is up and running, so I want to get a little more on them. We've already hired quite a bit of staff, but it can't hurt to have some backup in case someone doesn't work out."

"Wow, that's awesome that they'd be willing to just leave their current jobs at the drop of a hat."

Cal gets to his feet. "Some people know what they want and just go for it." He winks at me.

"I'm perfectly fine right where I am. I already told you, I have plans."

"Plans that still include working at the diner."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, of course not. I just think you're afraid to lose your safety net."

"Without a safety net, people hit the ground. I don't need that, thanks." A lump forms in my throat.

Cal towers over me, and I look up. "But what's the point of life if you don't take a few risks?" he asks. "Especially when

you've got so much going for you.”

For the slightest moment, I think he's going to bend down and kiss me again. Think or want him to? Shit, I'm not sure which. But he doesn't give me a chance to figure it out, because he's stepping away and heading for the door.

“Be home late. Don't wait up.”

My head is spinning too much to come up with a clever response. Not to mention my heart.

I hear the front door close and fall over, burying my face into my pillow and letting out a muffled scream.



## CAL



I'm not entirely looking forward to the dinner with the Osborns. Not because I have anything to prove to them. Mostly because I want to get it over with and focus on more important things. Although I have to say, I am impressed with Josie.

First, she left me open-mouthed by not putting up a real fight and agreeing to go through with the "we're married" charade. Well, it's not really a charade, because we *are* married.

Second, earlier today, she sent me a list of a menu she'd put together. It took me by surprise. She even did a bit of research and found out on some website that Osborn, and more so his wife, are health conscious, and she took that into account.

"You know you don't have to cook. I asked you to join me because they extended the invitation to you. I wasn't expecting you to play the housewife role," I tell her. "It's easy enough for me to have someone cater."

"A caterer is so impersonal," Josie says, looking around the kitchen. "Why order when we have such a nice kitchen? I can cook a fancy-schmancy dinner myself, and it'll be tasty and homey. Trust me, they'll love it. I love to cook. I usually don't have the energy to do much of it."

That, I can believe. She works so damn hard that if I don't order food, she'll throw together a sandwich and call it a meal.

I scroll through the grocery list she texted, eyebrows raised. “There’s a lot of food on here that seems amazing. And complicated. You know how to make all this?”

“You don’t spend half your life working around chefs without learning a few things. I trained for a little while in the kitchen, but I much prefer waitressing than being stuck in the back.”

“So, what exactly are you planning to make?”

“Well...”

I love the way her eyes light up as she goes into detail about what she wants to prepare. I learn that she plans to make roast asparagus, stuffed mushroom caps, faux prime rib in fresh herb sauce, roasted potatoes, a chef’s salad, and several other smaller dishes sprinkled throughout the meal. All of it sounds amazing, and I know it’ll be a big hit with the Osborns.

“Amazing,” I tell her. “I’m sure it’s going to be great. What about dessert?”

She sighs. “That’s a little more complicated,” she says. “I can cook, but baking is another story. I mean, I can make boxed cake, but that’s about it.”

An idea takes hold. “Then leave the dessert up to me.”

“You can bake?”

“Nope. Not at all. But we’re in New York City, and there are a bunch of amazing bakeries on our street. I’ll get something good.”

“Hmm, I think this could work. Surprise me!”

I take the opportunity to inquire her about her friend. Yes, Theo put us in this damned position, but I made a promise to him.

“Is your brunette friend from the diner single?” I ask.

“Why?” She makes big eyes at me, and I explain that Theo has a little crush on her.

My question seems to lift her spirits. She’s genuinely happy to play matchmaker. When I put Theo’s digits into her

phone, she says, “I’m not surprised. I had a feeling he was into her. She seemed into him too. I’ll pass it along as soon as I see Kaylin again. She has family visiting her and her parents, so she’s working less this week and next.”

Before I leave, I notice one major difference. There’s absolutely nothing lying around her space anymore. I gotta say, if I had known that kissing Josie would get her to pick up after herself, I would have done it sooner.



The groceries are delivered that evening, and Josie goes into full chef mode. It’s impressive. To watch her move around the kitchen is mesmerizing. When I offer my help, she shoos me out. She bounces between dishes, making sauces and prepping food ahead of time. Her hair is thrown into that messy bun, curls falling loose and framing her face. She’s wearing jeans and a light apricot shirt with Gran’s apron over it. She looks like she belongs here, and I would read more into that if it weren’t for the giant mess she leaves in her wake.

*So much for major difference.* I cut her some slack—after all, she’s helping me out here.

I’ve never known someone who could look so good while making the biggest fucking mess I’ve ever seen. I have to walk away, because it makes my eye twitch. Literally.



The following morning, I’m surprised to find her sitting on the couch, enjoying a cup of coffee and idly sketching in her book. The apartment looks neat enough. Ever since I found her sketch of me, she’s stopped hiding her drawings when I walk into the room. I’m glad that she’s more comfortable sketching while I’m around. It sucks that she felt like she needed to hide her artistic talent.

I lean over her shoulder, breathing in her vanilla scent. It’s mixed with the coffee she’s drinking, creating an intoxicating



pull. “What are you working on?”

“Cleaning up some lines on some old sketches,” she says, bent over the book with that intense level of concentration on her face I notice she gets when she’s drawing. “Don’t hover. I can’t focus when you’re hovering.”

“Are you saying I’m a distraction?” I ask, letting my breath whisper across her neck. I catch the way her body twitches, and goosebumps rise along her arms.

She scoots away and glares. “Don’t you have somewhere to run off to?”

“And don’t you have work?”

“Believe it or not, I have the day off,” she says with a smile. “The two new waitresses caught on quicker than we thought and are running tables themselves. Matilda gave me today and tomorrow off.”

“Good for you. Since we started living together, I’ve never seen you have two days off in a row. What are you going to do with your well-deserved free time?”

“Well, all the food is seasoned and prepped. I figured I’d straighten up around here and make sure everything is all set for tonight.”

“Thanks, Josie, but everything looks good already. Is there anything I can do so you can take the rest of the day for yourself?”

“But you said this dinner was important. I don’t want to drop the ball.”

“Josie, you’re not dropping the ball. It’s not even yours to drop.” I move around the couch and sit beside her. “Look, you have nothing to worry about. They already invested. This is just a chance for us to meet face to face, and for me to tell them the status of their investment. They’ve already put up the money. There isn’t anything on the line, except for a few new ideas I have that aren’t really important. I’m pretty sure Mr. Osborn will be quite pleased, no matter the outcome of the evening. Don’t stress, he won’t back out if he doesn’t like your

faux prime rib. Besides, I'm the one who needs to be the charming host. Which we both know I can handle."

There's a smile on her lips. "You're right. Of course you're right. I don't know why I'm letting this get to me." She shrugs, closing her sketchbook and setting it on the coffee table. "Okay, anxiety is put away now. Goodbye." She leans back against the couch, picking up her coffee mug and holding it between her hands.

We discuss several topics that may come up during the dinner. It's not like we're strangers, but we agree on some important cornerstones to make our romantic relationship believable. The official reason—in case somebody asks—as to why we don't wear rings is because for us, the commitment itself is important, not the ring that's attached to it. That's BS, for sure. I very much believe in wearing a wedding band as a symbol. Not for a real-fake marriage, of course. However, I don't expect any of this to come up. Mr. Osborn is a "strictly business guy," and we have plenty of things to discuss that isn't our private life.

"I'm really excited about the food tonight."

"I'm excited too. I'm sure it's going to be delicious." I check my watch. "All right, gotta go. Text me if you need anything. I should be home by five."

**W**ith Charlie working his ass off and a stellar crew, we've quickly jumped ahead of schedule. Shipments of bikes have been arriving every day. Theo and I have been going through each one, making sure the bikes showcased on the lot are in top condition. The showroom is finished and ready with the best of the best. The administration crew is already hard at work, and over the next few days, we'll have a full sales staff. Theo handles the majority of the work, doing an excellent job in that manager role I knew he was born for.

"Hi, chief! How's things?" Charlie greets me with a cheeky grin, his hair giving the word "disheveled" a whole new meaning, and he shows me around. The large vehicles and construction equipment have been cleared out. With only a

little left to do, a small skeleton crew remains to finish the final touches.

The day is filled with meetings and training. While Theo is handling the dealership side of things at the moment, I'm filling in to finish the repair shop as well as the specialized store element for custom bikes and tailor-made parts. I'll be glad when the dealership officially opens, and I can go back to focusing on my bikes and finding a new place to settle in. I need to get a realtor looking for a new place. With the way NYC realty is, not to mention the terms of the will, it's going to take a while.

At the end of the day, Theo swings by.

He holds up his phone, showing a black CB750. "I stumbled upon this vintage gem hidden in a collector's barn. After giving it a bit of TLC, cleaning the carbs out and adding fresh gas, the engine roared to life. It's a Honda," he brags, in reference to the brand's legendary reliability.

"It's a beauty." I nod. "Once we have a firm opening date set for next month, get another invite out to Jake Whitlock from *Revved Up*."

"It's hard to get to him directly."

"Do whatever it takes." A feature article in Jake's magazine has ten times the impact of all the other BS outsider's journals, which are often filled with nonsense by media and non-riders.

"Will do. Speaking of beauty. Any word from Kaylin yet?" he asks.

"I just gave your number to Josie, be patient."

"Yeah, I get it." He nods. "She can't text me right away, otherwise I'll think she's desperate. No worries. She seems like a good girl, a shy girl even, and I have to tread carefully. But you know what they say about shy girls. Hope her dad doesn't have a heart attack the day I pick her up on my Ducati. Oh, well. Anyway. It's cute that she's putting so much thought into it. Bet she's not sure what to text me. Lies awake all night, wondering about me, analyzing every word, ha-ha."

“Well, that, and Josie hasn’t even passed on your number to her yet. She told me Kaylin is busy with family.”

“Oh. Got it. Thanks, bro.”

“Hang on.” I stop him as he turns to leave. “I’ve got another message for you. From Josie.”

He groans, knowing full well it won’t be a gentle message of universal forgiveness.

I grin to myself, but can’t quite hide my pitying look. I know what it’s like to be under Josie’s scrutiny. “If I were you, I’d watch my balls because next time you see her, you might find yourself six feet under, without them.”

Is he really getting pale? No, he’s not. “I guess my only hope is to win Kaylin over quickly so I can persuade her to put in a good word for me.”



## CAL



When I open the door to my place, my senses are assaulted with the most mouth-watering aromas. I put down the heavy things in my hand, but I don't even bother taking off my boots this time. Instead, I immediately head for the kitchen. Josie is wearing a sleeveless little black dress that hangs tantalizingly an inch above her knees. It would look perfect on my bedroom floor (or, better, folded on my side table or one of the chairs). On her feet are strappy black heels, and her hair is pinned up in an elegant swirl.

“Dear God,” I growl.

At the sound of my voice, she faces me with a smile. “Wait until you taste it.”

My body grows warm. I suddenly have a mental image of lifting her onto that kitchen island and pushing her dress up over those grabbable hips. “We jumping right to that? I'm game.”

She snorts in amusement. “I meant the food, perv. Take your boots off, I swept already, and I'm not doing it again.”

On the island—that's the current focal point of my fantasies—the hors d'oeuvres are laid out on Gran's silver serving platters, neat as a pin and looking delicious. “Oh, yeah, the food looks good too.” The asparagus smells of garlic, and the mushroom caps are filled with parmesan and herbs. But what grabs my attention the most isn't the smell of the deliciousness in the oven.

“I used less oil. For a healthier alternative.”

“I never use oil unless there’s something that spit can’t conquer,” I say, lost in thought. All I can focus on is the punch-to-the-balls stunning woman in front of me. I eye her up and down. “You clean up well, Josie.”

She does a cute little spin and poses. “I know, right?”

“Why don’t you do me a favor? Close your eyes,” I tell her. “Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

“All right...” She does.

I leave and return within seconds. “Open them.” I hand her the gift I got for her at the art store on the way home. “A little thank you.”

Her eyes widen excitedly as she takes the gift. “An easel! A wooden one. It’s the big adjustable one, the one I always wanted!” she says excitedly and hugs me. “Thank you! How did you know I wanted this one?”

“Lucky guess.” Honestly, the salesperson recommended it as their best, so that’s the one I picked.

“Working at a vertical angle helps with precision and my drawing technique,” she explains. “It also reduces the mess.”

“Sounds perfect to me,” I say. Next, I hand her the two boxes I bought from Gino’s Bakery on the corner. “Homemade butter cookies, courtesy of Gino himself.”

“Oooh, a man after my own heart. How did you know butter cookies are my favorite?” she teases.

“Lucky guess.”

We grin as she opens one of the boxes.

Visually, they are nothing like Gran’s. They aren’t swirly, and they don’t hold the same elegant color. Gran’s cookies carried only the tiniest hint of gold, as if she had removed them from the oven just before the heat could distort the color. But at least these are the same size, and they’re homemade.

I place one cookie between my lips, but instead of biting through, I lean forward, challenging Josie to take a bite.

“Screw off.” She laughs, giving me a playful push. “We’re not kissing again, *nice try*.” She reaches into the box, smells the cookie, then plops it into her mouth. We both bite down at the same time.

“These are good,” she says, chewing, “but something’s missing. A secret ingredient. I wish Mrs. Blanchie had left me the recipe. I asked her a million times. But she patted my hand and told me”—Josie mimics Gran’s voice again—“my apologies, darling. It’s a secret family recipe by my great-great-grandmother, and I don’t want to be haunted by her ghost for divulging our secrets. Sorry. Family only.”

“Yep, that’s Gran.” Good old Blanchie.

“She didn’t give you the recipe?”

“Josie, I’m a man. She wouldn’t have offered her cookie recipe to me.” Gran was old-fashioned. In her generation, men didn’t belong in a kitchen. It would never have crossed her mind to ask me, just like it wouldn’t have ever crossed my mind to ask her. “She took it to her grave I’m afraid.”

“Oh, okay. Well, too bad.”

Josie takes care of the boxes while I head to the bedroom to clean up and change. I walk past the dining room table which has all of Gran’s fine dishes washed and laid out. Josie has even put down a tablecloth and has cloth napkins folded on top of each plate. Damn, this is way too much. I have to make it up to her for going all out.

I’m not nervous about the dinner, not even antsy. Sure, investors have it in their heads that they get a say in what happens with the business because their money is involved. On a certain level, that’s true, of course. I know how shrewd Osborn can be. But my ideas and plans are solid, and I’m more than capable and ready to present them accordingly. I don’t foresee any problems tonight.

Actually, after observing Josie in that black dress, I’m more interested in what’s going to happen *after* the dinner



party. When I said I was a patient man, that was about seventy percent true. Patience goes out the window when the object of my fantasies wears a tiny dress that I can easily rip off her curvy body.

With that thought in mind, my shower is quick—and on the cold side. I change into black jeans and a white shirt, gray tie, my sleeves rolled up. I don't mind dressing for the occasion, but I'm going to be as comfortable as possible in my own home.

I return to the kitchen just as Josie is pulling the ribs out of the oven. They look mouth-watering. And this time, I *am* talking about the food.

“Jesus, Josie.” I move to stand by her side. “You could get a top-paying chef job in any one of the five-star restaurants in the city.”

“Oh, stop.” She lifts her head, giving me a radiant smile.

“I'm serious. You're *one of a kind*.”

Her cheeks are red, and I know it's not from the heat of the oven. This time, it travels down her neck and across her bare shoulders before it disappears beneath the tightness of that fucking dress.

“Thanks. With my food and your appeal, we have this dinner in the bag.”

“Damn right we do.”

As we stand in the kitchen, there's a palpable shift of energy passing through the air between us. Her body is so close, I smell that damn vanilla scent drifting off her in waves. It's intoxicating and reminds me of when we kissed, and her body was wrapped around mine. But it's not just the physical closeness. Something about her saying “we” gets under my skin. Not in a bad way. I like it.

The doorbell rings, and the moment is broken.

Josie smiles, patting my shoulder. “You should get that.”

“Showtime.”

Andrew Osborn is a tall, thin man, with sharp features and a mop of gray hair that's slicked back from his face. His suit is Armani. It's evident, even without noting the label. His black shoes are polished and spotless. His wife is equally as thin, with maroon hair that's cut into a short bob.

"Callum, it's great to see you," Mr. Osborn says in his booming voice, holding his hand out for me to shake as he crosses the threshold. "I can't wait to talk business. It's been quite a while since we've seen you."

"Welcome. Yes, I've been wrapping things up in San Francisco, but I'm happy to be back home. Charlotte, thank you for coming, you look lovely."

Charlotte Osborn giggles and swats at my arm playfully. "Oh, Mr. Ashford, such a charmer. We brought you a little something."

She hands me a bottle of wine, and a quick glance at the label reveals it's an old-world wine from France, a classic that matured in a traditional family cellar stemming from a long history of winemaking.

"Please, come in." Josie emerges from the dining room, and I slip my arm around her waist. "I'd like to introduce you both to my wife, Josie." I sense her excitement at my words. I add, "Josie, meet Mr. and Mrs. Osborn."

With a bright smile, Josie steps forward and extends her hand. "Welcome to our home," she greets them. "I hope you brought your appetites."

"Josie, it is *so* wonderful to meet you. Please, call me Charlotte," Mrs. Osborn says, pulling her into a hug and giving air kisses on either cheek. Josie's eyes widen, but she accepts the sudden contact with a friendly smile.

Mr. Osborn takes her hand and gives it a hearty shake. "I must admit, I was surprised to hear that Callum was married," he says when Josie returns to my side. "I thought this one was going to be a bachelor for the rest of his life."

“That’s what I thought at first too,” Josie says, playfully pinching my cheek. “Right, *darling*?”

“Right.”

“But what woman could resist this face?” She’s really laying it on thick.

Oh, game on, Josie. “And what man could resist this one?” I ask and take her hand in mine lovingly. I lean in and peck her lips—a longer and softer chaste kiss.

She flushes and barely manages to hold back a squeak. Her cheeks immediately redden, and she shoots me an almost scathing glare. Mr. Osborn and Charlotte appear amused by our childish display.

“How *sweet*. You *should* kiss and *often*,” Charlotte chirps. “Trust me, there will come a point in time when you stop. You might think you never will, but trust me, you will. Enjoy it while it lasts. Isn’t that so, Andrew?”

“Ah, yes, young love,” Mr. Osborn says, taking his wife’s hand. “Do you remember when we were newlyweds?”

“Seems like a lifetime ago,” she says with a hint of irony, flashing her ring: a golden wedding band with a huge diamond. “Let me see your ring, Josie.” She takes Josie’s hands that have exactly zero rings.

“Well, we—” Josie starts.

“What, no ring?”

“Oh, how *avant-garde*,” Mr. Osborn says. “There’s no real reason to wear a ring in this time and age. Some might even say it’s an antiquated custom.”

Charlotte shakes her head. “It’s bad luck to not wear a wedding ring.”

“The dining room is just through here,” I tell them, motioning for them to come farther into the apartment, nipping any ring discussions in the bud. “Why don’t I open this wine, and we can enjoy it together.”

“An excellent idea,” Mr. Osborn agrees.

Once they are comfortable in the dining room with their aperitifs, Josie and I duck into the kitchen. Josie makes for the kitchen island and grabs one of the platters. I rummage through the drawer in search of the wine opener.

“The whole ring thing was so awkward. And I can’t believe you kissed me in front of them,” she mutters under her breath.

“You started it. You pinch my cheeks, I kiss you.”

“It’s not fair.”

“All is fair in marriage and war.”

“That’s not how the saying goes—it’s ‘All is fair in *love* and war.’ Not marriage and war. It’s also such a cliché line and only used to lame justification for misbehavior used to gain advantage in situations exactly like these.”

“Well, it worked perfectly for me. Now hurry up, smarty pants.”

Her cheeks are still red, but she smirks, carrying two trays into the dining room.

I find the corkscrew and follow close behind.

“Oh, how delightful,” Charlotte says when we enter and Josie sets the trays down in the middle of the table. “But—” Charlotte’s smile falters, and she cranes her neck, trying to see past us into the kitchen. “Oh, I’m so sorry, is there something wrong with your girl?”

Josie frowns. “Girl?”

“You know, your serving girl. The one who made all the food. Is she not feeling well? You two should not be doing this yourself.”

Oh, geez. Here we go. Josie tries to keep her composure, but by the severe arch of her eyebrow, it’s perfectly clear she has a few choice words going through her head. I prevent her from saying what I’m sure is going to be a smartass reply (which, let’s be honest, Charlotte deserves).

“Actually, Josie did make everything herself,” I say with pride, setting about opening the wine. “We don’t have any servants. It’s just me and Josie. We prefer it that way.”

“Oh.” Charlotte sounds disappointed.

“Well, you young ones don’t know what it feels like to have a good staff at your beck and call,” Mr. Osborn says. “I would *never* let my wife lift a finger if she didn’t want to.”

“Thank you, dearest,” Charlotte says.

It’s so hard for me to contain my laugh. First off, it’s a stupid asinine way to look at things. Seriously, what year are we in? Osborn is talking like it’s the 1950s. Second, as if I could even *begin* to tell *my wife* what she can and can’t do. It took a fucking bet to get her to stop leaving her bra lying around.

“I love cooking,” Josie sweeps in coolly. “When Cal told me we were hosting a dinner, I was more than happy to put the time in to help my husband.”

There’s a bite to her words, a second meaning that only I seem to catch. Charlotte gives her an “Aren’t you precious?” look, not realizing that Josie’s words can also be viewed as a thinly veiled insult.

“It looks delicious,” Charlotte says. “Our girl never makes anything this extravagant. Dear, we should hire a new one, don’t you think? Or maybe an in-house cook?”

“Let’s first talk to her, dear. Let’s not jump the gun. I’m sure she’ll be able to make you happy.”

“How’s business, Mr. Osborn?” I ask, steering the conversation to a work-related topic.

“Thriving as always,” Mr. Osborn says with a grateful expression. That’s all it takes for him to go off, rambling about his current businesses and how well they’re doing.

Once the wine is tasted and poured, I sit next to Josie, reaching under the table and squeezing her hand. She squeezes back, and I’m reassured she’s okay. I take a bite of one of the stuffed mushrooms, and my mouth explodes with a multitude

of flavors. Not wanting to interrupt Mr. Osborn, I nudge Josie, and when she glances at me, I give her an approving nod and a wink. She beams.

Damn. Seriously, she could absolutely be a successful chef if she wanted to be.

Charlotte takes careful, dainty bites of her food. She throws in the occasional comment regarding her husband's work, but for the most part, Mrs. Osborn remains silent. She doesn't seem interested in trying to engage Josie in conversation anymore, which I'm sure suits Josie just fine.

"Tell me about the dealership," Mr. Osborn suggests, picking up his wineglass. "Are you on schedule?"

"Yes, we are. Bikes have already been delivered, our staff is nearly full, and we have an opening date."

"Excellent. That's good to hear. I shall visit soon and take a look myself."

Now Charlotte decides to cut in, her eyes trained on Josie. "These hors d'oeuvres are *delicious*," she exclaims. "Everything is very tasty—I didn't expect that."

"Very tasty. You must have spent all day in that kitchen." Mr. Osborn says.

"Thank you, Mr. Osborn, I was able to prep them after work yesterday," Josie says with a smile.

"Oh, what do you do for work?" Charlotte asks, meeting Josie's gaze.

"I'm a waitress at The Diner."

Immediately, the energy in the room shifts, and I know exactly why. *Fucking pinch me, this is not happening.*

Charlotte's smile doesn't fade, but I notice there isn't much sincerity behind her eyes. "Oh," she says. "I see." She returns to her food without another word in response, completely ignoring Josie—except this time, it seems purposeful.

Mr. Osborn eyes Josie, sipping his wine stiffly, and chooses that moment to continue our conversation. "Anyway.

It's great that you're on schedule. Construction can be such a hassle," he remarks. "You know, when I was your age, I was opening my twentieth business..."

I have to admit, I tune him out.

Strange energy has taken hold around the table. While she was smiling and open before, suddenly Charlotte seems completely disinterested in everything that isn't her plate or her wine. I glance at Josie, and it's clear she feels the change as well. Her cheeks are red, and she rises to her feet.

"I'll get the main course," she says, trying to sound positive.

I need to talk to her privately. "I'll help."

"No, no, I got it, babe," she confirms, her hand on my shoulder to prevent me from standing.

Mr. Osborn is still talking to me, seemingly unaware that I'm hardly paying attention. From the bits and pieces I catch, he's talking about having issues with his construction crew. Charlotte joins in, and they end up having their own conversation about the woes of finding good help. My gaze tracks Josie as she disappears back into the kitchen.

"When I was a young man," Mr. Osborn continues, "I remember when I was overseeing the construction of my first dealership. By then I had already managed several and knew how things were run and what was to be expected. There was a contractor, such a rude man, always using foul language and not in the least concerned about his physical appearance, who was always arguing with me, telling me that what I wanted couldn't be done. Well, I've never been one to take no for an answer—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Osborn. Just one moment," I say, getting to my feet. "I'm going to help my wife."

"She said she's got it handled," Charlotte pipes in. "I'm sure she's used to serving. Just take a seat. You work so hard, you deserve it."

Oh, *hell* no. Too fucking far.

“My wife works hard as well,” I say patiently. “The least I can do is help her carry a tray. Excuse me.”

Not being able to stand another moment in this room, I slip out to find Josie in the kitchen. She’s standing at the counter in front of the food, unmoving. Quietly, I approach her side, placing a comforting hand on her lower back and feeling her body trembling.

“Everything all right?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” Josie says, brushing me off. “I just needed a moment. They’re…”

“I know.”

She looks around as if she’s just realized I left our guests alone. “I told you I got it. You didn’t have to follow me.”

“I also needed a moment.”

We share an eye roll and a smirk before I grab the faux prime rib, and she grabs the potatoes and salad.

“You want me to toss the salad?” I joke.

She grins. “It’s tossed.”

“All right. Ready for war, baby?” I growl. All smiles once more, we head back to our guests. I step through the doorway first and notice Mr. Osborn and Charlotte with their heads bent, talking to each other in hushed voices.

Once they notice us, however, they pull away and smile a bit too brightly.

“Oh, how *lovely*,” Charlotte coos when I place the platter in the middle of the table. “Prime rib is my absolute favorite. This all looks wonderful. Tell me, Josie, how did you learn to cook?”

“I’ve been at The Diner for many years and have trained in the position,” she explains when we sit back down. “I just prefer waitressing.”

Charlotte’s penciled-in eyebrows shoot up. “Wow, that’s surprising.”



“Why’s that?”

There’s a certain tightness in Josie’s tone that I recognize. She’s using her, “I’m being as polite as I can possibly be right now” voice. Charlotte better watch what she says next.

“I just don’t see why anyone would want to stick with waitressing,” she says off-handedly as I serve her a slice of faux meat. “You know, if you work hard enough, I’m sure you’ll be able to move up the ladder.”

That’s presumptuous of her. Who says that? Why does she automatically think Josie doesn’t work hard? I’m almost surprised she’s not physically turning up her nose, but she seems to have a better poker face than her husband.

I glance at Josie, and her jaw is clenched. I serve her food, leaning in close to whisper to her, “Easy, babe.”

She takes a slow breath, forcing another smile. “Diners don’t really have ladders,” she says. “More like, step stools.”

I laugh and, to my surprise, Mr. Osborn chuckles. “You have a clever wife, Callum,” he says, holding his plate out for his food. “A step stool. That’s a good one.”

The tension around the table lightens, and even Charlotte gives a small chuckle. I take a bite of my food and can’t help but moan. It’s amazing. Josie is a good cook. The prime rib melts in my mouth and the roasted potatoes are the perfect complement.

“Spectacular, Josie,” Mr. Osborn says. “This is the best prime rib I’ve ever had.”

“It is delicious,” Charlotte says. “I wouldn’t go with best, but definitely high on the list.”

What the hell is wrong with this woman? She can’t help but take jabs at Josie every time she opens her mouth.

“It’s my favorite recipe,” Josie attempts. “But it’s not real prime rib. It’s made of veggies only. You know, as a healthier alternative?”

“Oh,” Charlotte says.

“Oh?” Mr. Osborn frowns. “Well, well. That’s not real meat? Not what I expected. Or what I’m used to.”

“Definitely *not* what we are used to.” Charlotte shakes her head, nibbling off her fork, and swallowing cautiously. “But we are always open to...*experiments*. Isn’t that so, Andrew?”

The smile is frozen on Josie’s face. She does her best to not clench her jaw. Under the table, I can feel her foot bouncing, and I reach out to place my hand on her knee to stop it. She has beautiful knees. I feel her hand cover mine, squeezing hard. She doesn’t need to speak for me to understand the gesture.

She’s nearing the end of her patience.

And I am too.

“There’s an upscale restaurant not too far from the dealership that I’ve invested in,” Mr. Osborn says. “They owe me a favor. If you’d like, Josie, I can put in a good word for you.”

She lowers her fork. “A good word? What for?”

“I thought if there’s no room for advancement where you currently work, I’d be more than happy to assist you in finding something more...suitable.”

Flames are practically sprouting from Josie’s eyes. Seriously, if looks could kill, the Osborns would be burnt to a crisp by now.

“Thank you, Mr. Osborn, but I’m very happy where I am.” Gone is the forced politeness, and honestly, I’m done with it myself. I invited this couple into our home, and all they’ve done is throw thinly veiled insults at my wife.

“I don’t see how you can be,” Charlotte says. “A diner is hardly a five-star restaurant.”

This time I open my mouth. I’m fucking done with this. “I’m sorry, do you have a problem with my wife’s profession?” I ask in a calm, steady tone.

All three heads swivel to face me. Josie’s hand finds mine under the table.

Charlotte's eyes widen at my question. "Excuse me?"

"I always like to address matters openly, so there's no room for misunderstanding. That's how I do business, and that's how I live my life. Having said that, allow me to speak frankly." Both look at me with big eyes, so I continue. "When Josie first mentioned what she did for a living," I say, leaning back against my chair, regarding them, "you turned your nose up at it, and now you're insulting where she works."

"Oh!" Charlotte says, pale cheeks suddenly flushed with embarrassment. "I meant nothing by that, dear."

Mr. Osborn reaches over and places his hand on her boney one. "What my wife and I are trying to say is, if you ever wanted something a little more..."

"More what?" Josie asks, taking a delicate bite of potatoes, likely to keep from snapping at the couple. But the expression on her face gives her away, at least to me.

They don't seem to know how to talk their way out of this. I have a feeling that they don't normally interact with people who don't hang on their every word. Knowing what I know about NYC politics, I'm sure they're used to people asking for their opinion and desperate for their approval. Josie and I don't fall into that category.

"Stable," Mr. Osborn finishes. "Something a little more stable."

"How is a five-star restaurant more stable than a diner that's been around for thirty years?" Josie asks, tilting her head.

There's no immediate answer. "Let's change the subject," Charlotte declares, picking up her wineglass. "Aside from working, what else do you do, Josie?"

Josie and I share a glance at the abrupt and desperate change of subject. I think it's hilarious that she thinks she can insult Josie multiple times, and we'll jump back into a conversation like it didn't happen.

It's becoming increasingly obvious the Osborns are not people I wish to be associated with privately or professionally.

“I think my wife has a valid question,” I reiterate, not letting Charlotte get away with it. “I’m incredibly curious as to what your answer is.”

The tension that had started to dissipate is back with a vengeance, thicker than ever.

Josie is clearly trying to hold back a grin, not meeting my eye. Our hands are still clasped tightly under the table, her thumb brushing over my knuckle. She gives Charlotte the politest “I’m waiting” look I’ve ever seen. The older woman shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

It takes her a few long awkward moments to gather her thoughts. “I don’t imagine a diner gets very many elite patrons,” she says, setting her wine on the table and picking up her fork again. Her back is stiff and she’s avoiding eye contact.

“And?” I ask, arching an eyebrow in question.

“My wife wants the subject changed,” Mr. Osborn speaks up. “She’s already explained herself. Let’s move on.”

No, no. They’re not getting away that easy.

“And *my* wife works extremely hard and has been with the same employer her entire adult life. She’s dependable and has autonomy and authority where she works, which is more than most people our age have. She also enjoys it. Yet because she’s working at a diner and not some well-known fancy, expensive restaurant, her accomplishments have been criticized. Which I do not appreciate.”

I keep my tone cool, leaning back in my seat. I lift our joined hands, so they rest on the table, showing the Osborns we are a united front. Charlotte doesn’t respond and starts eating again as if I haven’t said anything.

Now Mr. Osborn is glaring at me. “Son, you really want to discuss this?”

“I didn’t hear a proper explanation,” I continue. “What does it matter what kind of patrons Josie serves? I’m confused. I don’t see how it’s relevant.”

“Well, I imagine so, given your circumstances,” Mr. Osborn says in an icy tone.

Hold up. What did he just say to me?

I sit straighter, fixating the older man with a deep frown. “My circumstances? And what circumstances are those exactly?”

“You weren’t born into the same world we were born into,” Mr. Osborn says matter-of-factly. “Let’s face it. We simply have different views.”

“Yes. True. That still doesn’t answer my question.”

Where once his demeanor was relaxed and almost uninterested, now it’s tense and cold. Just like his wife. Fuck NYC politics. I was fully intending to play nice, but if this is how these dickheads are going to act, I’ll do what I need to without their help.

“It all boils down to breeding and family,” Mr. Osborn says. “My wife and I were both raised in the city with families who have been connected with the business side of the city stretching back many years. We know the people who make the city run. We *are* the people who make the city run. In this business, it’s all about who you know. Knowing the right people gets you where you want to go.”

I’ve never heard someone speak so much without really saying anything. It’s the same bullshit you hear over and over among the “so-called” elite. “Right,” I say slowly. “Correct me if I’m wrong, what you’re trying to say is that because we’re new money, we’re not as good as you two, who come from old money?”

Silence.

Charlotte carefully sets her fork on her clean plate and places her napkin on the table. “Andrew, dear, I think I’m ready to go home,” she says, looking at her husband and ignoring me and Josie completely.

“I think that’d be best,” Josie says, a bite to her tone.

Charlotte's gaze snaps to hers, any trace of politeness long gone. Josie meets her eyes without backing down. Her jaw is clenched so tight I'm afraid she's biting through her tongue. I take it the only reason she hasn't completely gone off on these two is because of what this dinner is supposed to mean to me. I appreciate it, but now, the point is moot.

Mr. Osborn considers his wife before his gaze slides back to meet mine. "Well," he says, "I am sorry to say that we cannot stay to finish the meal. Thank you for having us, but we must leave."

"As my wife said, I think that would be best."

They don't need much more convincing to leave. They stand up and I follow to personally show them the door. Charlotte hurries out before her husband, and Mr. Osborn lingers just enough to wish me luck with a firm handshake.

"I look forward to seeing the dealership," he says in short, clipped tones.

Nodding, I say, "I think our partnership ends here, Mr. Osborn."

Mr. Osborn's eyes flare. He steps into the hall, his eyes never leaving mine. "Don't forget, Ashford," he says, his voice with a threatening undertone, "I invested in your dealership. I'm allowed to see what my investment is going toward."

"Don't worry. Your money will be returned to you first thing tomorrow."

He opens his mouth to respond, and I don't give him a chance to speak. I slam the door in his face, locking it with a resounding *click*.

If he lawyers up, I'm fucked.



## CAL



In one fluid motion, I remove my tie and drape it over the coat hanger in the front room, then unbutton my shirt, leaving the top couple of buttons open. From behind me, I hear a huff, and turn to find Josie standing there, arms across her chest. “What a bunch of conceited jerks,” she hisses, stomping back to the dining room.

The clinking of plates echoes as she starts to clean up. “Forget about them,” I say, joining her. “This dinner reminded me why I hate fucking business politics.”

We carry the plates into the kitchen, placing them on the counter by the sink. Josie pauses cleaning to pour herself another glass of wine, this one a lot bigger than her first.

“Want one too?”

“Sure.”

She pours me a glass, then grabs hers and takes a huge gulp. First, we stare at each other in silence. When we put our glasses down, we both start grinning. She pulls out the box of cookies.

“Want one?”

“Sure.”

I repeat the whole “putting a cookie halfway into my mouth and leaning over” tactic, expecting a rejection and a smile. Josie doesn’t disappoint. She swats my arm away, but her expression carries amusement. After several cookies are down, her shoulders droop.



“I’m sorry, Cal. I really am.” She looks at me with those pretty eyes.

“Don’t be.”

“You know, I like my job. I don’t understand why people with money question that. They think everyone wants or needs to be at the top.” She turns and puts the empty cookie box away. “Yet they’d be the first ones complaining if they wanted to go out and there were no waitresses or chefs.”

I grab her hand and spin her around to face me. “Fuck them. Their opinion doesn’t matter. You’re fucking fantastic.”

“Oh, I know I am.” She nods once and downs half the wine in her glass in one swig.

There’s my Josie.

Maybe it’s the emotional charge between us or the way her body looks in that little black dress. Or it could be her seemingly unshakable confidence. Whichever it is, I need to kiss her. So, I don’t stop myself. Slipping my arm around her waist, I pull her forward and press my lips to hers.

Josie lets out a muffled squeak of surprise, and I take full advantage of her open mouth.

She tastes like cookies and wine, sweet, fruity, and robust, intoxicating as ever. The moment she feels my tongue, she throws her arms around my neck and presses that delicious body against mine. I push her back against the kitchen island, just like I’ve wanted to since I saw her earlier this evening. My tongue glides along hers, and it draws a whimper out of her.

That’s all I need.

I yank the knot from her hair, loosening it so I can bury my fingers in the soft locks. Without warning, I hook her leg around the back of my knees, pressing my hips into hers. My dick is hard, and I know she can feel it. Good. I want her to feel it. I want her to know exactly what she’s doing to me.

Judging by the way she writhes against me, the feeling is mutual. But she breaks the kiss, staring up at me with those gorgeous eyes of hers.

“Cal...?” she whispers.

“Don’t think, baby girl. Don’t think.”

“This is *so* wrong. We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Uh-huh. Just do it,” I say, and I kiss her deeper, grabbing whatever I can reach. Slipping my hand under the hem of that dress, she moans when my fingers skim over the silky smoothness of her thighs.

“Sit up here, sweet thing.” I tug, and she moves with me, hopping up onto the island and wrapping her legs around me. A shiver of excitement runs down my spine, and I lose myself in her mouth and curves.

She pulls at my shirt and breaks the kiss to undo the rest of the buttons.

“This needs to go,” she breathes.

“Yeah, good thinking.”

She pushes it off my shoulders, and I let it fall to the floor. Josie’s eyes are dark with desire. Her hands run up my chest, nails dragging just light enough to make my body erupt into goosebumps. I hungrily dive in for more kisses, wrapping my arms around her hips.

“Ah, you’re so perfect,” I rumble. “Everything about you is fucking perfect.”

The seconds tick by while we grapple with each other. I yank down the straps of her dress and she wiggles her arms free, letting the fabric fall, revealing a black bra that’s leaving *everything* to the imagination. Her still-covered breasts fit so perfectly in my hands, giving an appreciative squeeze that drags another moan out of her—anything to make sure she keeps making those noises.

Her legs slide up to curl around my waist, and one of her hands buries into my hair, tugging excitedly while she drags me into a kiss. But kissing isn’t enough. I need more of her. I need to touch and taste everything. I trail my mouth down her cheek to her neck, nipping and biting as I go. The smooth expanse of creamy skin begs to be marked.

Her dress is bunched around her waist, and I take the opportunity to tug on her panties. They're lacy and black, matching her bra and dress perfectly. Pulling back, I slide them down her legs, letting them fall.

“My fingers, or my mouth? How do you want to come?”

Her eyes grow wide. Without even blinking, she says, “Mouth!”

I drop to my knees and nudge her legs apart. “Finally.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispers.

Her lips are slick and parted. Her chest is heaving, full tits moving with each ragged breath. She's nervous and eager at the same time. The sight of her pretty pink pussy—wet, slick, and ready for me, tells me she's been craving this moment just like I have.

“Say please,” I say in *that* voice.

“*Please.*”

The second I bury my face between her thighs, she inhales sharply and moans my name in a soft murmur.

Her pussy is as soft as velvet. I've barely touched her, and she's perfectly wet.

To finally be able to taste her gets me going like never before. Everything about Josie overwhelms me, always has. This is a whole new level entirely. She tastes sweet, like strawberries and cream, the perfect after-dinner dessert. I've died and gone to heaven, if heaven is my kitchen with my tongue on Josie's clit, and her delicious moans irresistible to my ears, her little jerks inciting me.

“Oh...oh, my God,” she moans, “this feels amazing...”

*Oh, I know, sweet thing.*

“Cal...nobody has ever...ohh.”

I stop for a second, pulling my head back, not sure if I heard her correctly. “What? No man has ever eaten your pussy?”

“No...” She shakes her head.

I love that I’m the first, but Jesus, was that loser ex of hers good for anything?

“Relax. Lose yourself, don’t think,” I rumble, lowering myself between her legs again, continuing my assault on her wet little bud. The way her body continues to jerk and wiggle conjures up all sorts of naughty images. I can’t wait to feel her underneath me while I make her mine, rough and hard.

“I’m going to ruin you for all others,” I promise her. I feel the tension building, her arousal dripping down her thighs, her moaning, her whimpering as I continue. She loves my touch, *wants* my touch, and I’m giving her just that. Within seconds, her body begins to tremble, and I can taste she’s on the brink, the urgency of her movements and moans increasing.

“I’m so close...”

The second she says that, I stop. “Not yet, babe. I will let you come, just hold on a little longer.”

“No, no...” Josie gasps in protest, her hips rocking desperately against my mouth. She wants to come, she’s desperate to feel the sweet, sweet release that I’ll give her. Eventually. But first, I’ll edge her to the brink of madness.

“Please don’t stop, *please...*” She’s breathless and needy—right where I want her.

“*I* make the rules. You’ll only come when *I* allow it.”

She grips the edge of the counter when my mouth returns to her drenched folds. I tease her clit until her breathing increases, and this time, her orgasm builds back up within seconds, her moans loud and uncontrolled—and just when she’s about to tumble over the edge, I halt again, smirking against her thighs.

“No...no. Cal, please don’t do this to me...” The more she gasps and moans and protests, the more I’m loving the teasing, the more my hard dick presses against my pants. “I need to come...please...”

Her ass moves, her hips roll.

“I know,” I rumble. “You’re lucky if I let you come, you little tease. I love it when you beg. Try not to flood the place thinking about how my cock will be inside you later.”

“*Cal.*” She can barely think, barely protest (that’s new), she’s so close to coming.

I start licking her again, until she spreads her thighs wider, until she’s the closest she can be to the edge. “It feels so good...”

Watching her, I’m hard as fuck. I need my cock deep inside her. And soon. She pulls and pushes at my hair, and I’ve never wanted to see a woman come like this.

I know this time I’ll let her climax.

My tongue continues teasing her, my lips tugging her clit, my teeth nibbling.

“Oh...yes...yes...don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

I don’t.

“Come for me, baby. I want to hear my name when you come,” I demand, aware that I’ve tortured her enough, and suck her clit into my mouth. Her thighs tighten, and her body locks up as she convulses against my face.

“Oh, my God...*Cal.*”

Feeling her come unraveled makes me groan, and when she slumps back with a loud moan, involuntarily, I release her, satisfied, watching as her orgasm takes complete control of her. It’s a beautiful sight, her mouth slightly open, her body shivering intensely.

“I love it when you come for me,” I growl and kiss her clit. “That’s a fucking good girl.”

Not giving her time to breathe, I yank my belt free. Next, I unbutton my pants and lower my zipper. Fuck, that’s going to feel so good. It’s not until I grab her waist and pull her forward that she finally says something, placing her hand on my chest.

“Wait. *Cal.* It was incredible, but,” she gasps, still breathless, “just, wait a second.”

“I’m not waiting, baby.” I press my mouth against hers, and she melts beneath me.

A second later, she breaks free. “We shouldn’t sleep with each other.”

“Josie. I don’t want to sleep with you, I want to fuck you. Hard. Thoroughly. All night.”

“Oh, my God.”

My mind is focused on one thing, and one thing alone: claiming Josie. To get her naked. To see her tits (finally). To feel her around my aching cock. To make her mine. To feel her walls milking every fucking last drop from me. I lean back, my hand around the back of her head and my lips brushing her skin.

But she halfheartedly pulls back to stop me again. “We shouldn’t do that either.”

*Fuck.* “What?” I frown, my dick weeping. “Why the hell not?”

“Sex complicates things.”

“Things are already complicated.” What she says makes no sense. “Sorry, sweet thing, you need a better reason.”

I go back to kissing her neck, my hands on her tits, loving the way she moans when I do.

She drapes her arms around me, her nails digging into my back, holding onto me with all her might. It urges me on. With a grunt, I rub myself between her thighs. They open up to me, welcoming me. The heat and slickness are fucking overpowering. Her hands fall to my hips, stopping me from pushing forward, from rocking rhythmically against her.

“Reason-s,” she mutters, breathless. “So many reasons why we shouldn’t.”

“Such as?” I manage to ask.

“We fight all the time,” she breathes out.

“We’re passionate. Sex is exactly what we need to blow off steam.”

“We...barely know each other,” she tries, her voice hoarse.

“We’ve known each other our whole lives.”

“I don’t even like you. I *hate* you.”

Okay, this one’s bullshit for sure. “You don’t hate me. We both know you left the bra lying around on purpose.”

She hesitates. “I did *no*—”

I don’t let her answer. She squeaks when I press my mouth to hers, my fingers rubbing her drenched little clit, loving that she’s ready for more. When I tug on her hair, tilting her head back, she presses into me. I can feel her pussy clench each time I tug. The more I kiss her neck and my hands roam her body, the more her resolve slips, the wetter she gets. Each protest comes out weaker and weaker. I’m giving her plenty of opportunities to stop me if she wants, but she’s not taking it. Her hands are touching me, clinging to my arms, all over me.

Just when I reach the clasp of her bra, however, she lets out a shaking breath and sighs.

This time when she pushes me away, there is reluctance in her gaze. “I’m on birth control, but I forgot to take it today. And yesterday. I think.”

That does make me pause. “I don’t have condoms.” *Goddammit*. I’m always packing, but with the move and everything else, buying condoms hasn’t exactly been on the top of my list.

Disappointment is written all over Josie’s face when she pushes me back to put more distance between us, trying to catch her breath. “All right, well, that settles it.”

“That doesn’t settle anything,” I rasp, not giving up. “We can still make out.”

I may not be able to fuck her, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still have fun.

“Yeah...” she says. “But if we do, I know myself. I know I’ll want more, and we can’t.”

“Fine. I’ll go grab some and be back in ten minutes, tops,” I growl, already yanking up my jeans. “You stay here. You wait here. Don’t you go anywhere.”

“Wait, no. I’m already overthinking it now.”

*Think*, I tell myself.

Think.

Luckily, I know *exactly* what to say. “Let’s risk it. I’ll pull out. I’m clean, if that’s your concern,” I say, my last line muffled by her hand.

“Well, yeah, so am I, but—”

“Then we’re good. It’s just one time, Josie. Come on, don’t be a goody-goody tonight.”

Josie’s eyes narrow.

I instantly know I fucked up.

“Hang on now,” I say, knowing exactly how to salvage all this. “It’s just sex.”

“Get off me,” she snaps, pushing me back to break all contact.

I stumble, grabbing my jeans to stop myself from tripping over them. Josie hops off the counter.

Fuck. Dumb move.

I yank my pants back up. “Shit, sorry, Josie, I didn’t mean —”

She adjusts her dress, hiding those magnificent curves. “I don’t even *want* to know what you meant.” She picks up her underwear and starts to storm away.

“Wait, hold on.” I grab her arm to stop her. Not hard, just enough for her to turn around to face me. “I didn’t mean it that way. I only meant that sex between *us* doesn’t need to mean more than just two friends having fun. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Her eyes widen.



Josie slips her hand out of my grasp. “*Friends?* Who says we’re friends? We were never *friends*, and newsflash, we will never *be* friends, *Callum*.”

“Did you ever stop to think that you take things way too seriously, *Josephine?*”

Her lips purse. “Newsflash: I’m a woman. So maybe I do. But one of us has to.” She turns on her heel, and this time, I let her walk away.

Over her shoulder, she says, “Enjoy the couch tonight.”

Watching her disappear down the hall, I lean against the island, cursing in my head.

The last thing I hear is the bedroom door closing.

And the distinct *click* of the lock.



**JOSIE**

SIXTEEN DAYS LEFT



The next morning, I find myself lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. I've been awake for hours. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I even fully went to sleep.

It's supposed to be my day off, but Matilda texted me late last night, asking if I could cover half a shift until one of the new girls came in. All too eager to get out of this apartment, I readily agreed.

With that in mind, I force myself out of bed to get ready for work, praying that Cal is still asleep and will stay asleep until I leave. Standing under the spray of the shower, I enjoy the hot water that's often missing at my apartment.

Once I'm dressed, I tiptoe into the living room.

Oh, my God, I'm acting like a damn teenager trying to sneak out of her parents' house.

Despite the internal chastising, I slowly peek around the corner.

The living room is empty, but more importantly, for some reason, I'm disappointed. Cal is nowhere in sight. He's rarely awake before I am. He must have left early to avoid me like I'm trying to avoid him. Oh, well. With a sigh of relief, I walk into the kitchen, only to find him standing there, nursing a cup of coffee.

*Shit.*

He looks as tired as I feel.

Poor guy, I bet he didn't close an eye on that couch.

A pang of guilt hits me for making him sleep on the couch.

Despite his rough night, he still looks good. His sun-kissed hair is messy, and even though it's from sleep, I wish it was because I was running my hands through it like I had last night. He's wonderfully shirtless, wearing only a pair of dark-blue boxer briefs. Of course, they leave zero to the imagination, showing off his deep "V".

"Good morning," he says, staring at me with those intense eyes. "Where are you off to so early?"

I don't trust myself to look at him again. "Morning," I mumble. I grab my keys from the counter and turn to leave. "Working a half-day. I'll be home later."

"But it's your day *off*."

"Matilda asked if I could cover a few hours."

I feel a gentle hand on my wrist, stopping me. When I risk a look back, the intensity in his gaze isn't lessened by the softness there. "Hey, I don't want to fight with you. Forget about work, we need to talk about *this*. About us."

"Not now we don't. I'm going to be late."

He's still holding my hand, and I have yet to pull away. To be honest, I love the contact. The soft way his thumb strokes my skin sends shivers racing down my spine. The heat from last night is still there, brimming beneath the surface.

"Fine," Cal says, staring me down. "We'll talk later then. I'm not letting you *get off* that easy."

When I get to The Diner, a sense of relief and calm washes over me. I know that whatever happens in my life, The Diner is always there waiting for me. I know who I am here, what I do here. It's like an old friend, greeting me with a warm hug.

Kaylin arrives about twenty minutes later. Before anyone else gets here, I give her a quick rundown of the evening's

events.

“Josie! I can’t believe you and your *husband* hooked up.” Kaylin squeals softly.

“That’s the only thing you’re taking from my story? We didn’t hook up. We *almost* hooked up. We half-hooked up.”

“Well, still. You went from ‘I’m not touching you’ to ‘OMG touch me and kiss my clit’ in a very short period of time,” Kaylin says in awe.

“Hey, I’m a woman! I have *needs*.”

I swirl my spoon around my coffee mug, inhaling the wonderful scent of caffeine. I close my eyes, soaking up the atmosphere while I wrap both hands around the mug, letting the heat warm them.

When I open my eyes, Kaylin is giving me a soft smile.

“I’m too cautious, Kaylin, too serious,” I say. “I think that’s really what this boils down to. Everything was happening so fast and so spontaneously. I got scared. Really scared.”

I pick up the sugar and pour a liberal amount into my coffee.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Kaylin says. “Trust me, I get scared like all. The. Time. Everyone gets scared sometimes. Even someone as tough as you.” She nudges me with her elbow playfully.

“Sex complicates things,” I say.

“Boy, does it ever.”

Kaylin is religious, but has had sex. A few times. When I first met her in Gwendolyn’s secret creative writing book club, she had been torn between saving herself for marriage and her own urges. In the end, several months later, she decided to make her own decisions and concluded that she didn’t want to wait. Being her best friends, Gwendolyn and I supported her completely.

“He’s not your bully anymore,” Kaylin says. “Right? When I was young, Mom told me that bullies bully others because they feel bad about themselves. They try to get some sort of attention and power because they are helpless in their own sad lives. Of course, that’s not an excuse, but she said that eighty percent of our brains are developed by the time we’re five years old, and early childhood experiences shape us more than anything else. It’s tragic, really.”

Kaylin’s words remind me of what Cal told me when he briefly talked about his time growing up. The few things he mentioned were devastating, to say the least. He didn’t have a nice childhood. He had a horrible and sad youth.

“Okay, to be perfectly honest,” I say, “he was the bully who bullied the bullies. That’s why all the girls were so madly in love with him. I get that. That alone would have been so brave and admirable—but I was the one girl he pushed around and tried to intimidate in mean and yucky ways.”

“But you stood up to him, didn’t you? I can’t picture anybody bullying you, ever. Nobody has more backbone than you.”

Is that why we tangled with one another as kids?

He bullied me *because* he was unhappy, and I was the one kid who stood up to him?

Something in me deflates.

Maybe he didn’t hate me. At least, not that much. Maybe I pushed his buttons like he did mine.

When she looks me in the eye and says, “Amen,” I know she knows exactly where I’m coming from. It’s what she says next that throws me for a loop. “You should do it.”

My eyes go wide. “Kaylin?”

Always the caring friend, I realize I shouldn’t be too surprised by her response. However, this is the first time she’s ever told me to just up and sleep with someone.

Her cheeks turn pink. “If you’re attracted to this guy, I say go for it. He’s your husband. Also, he has really kind eyes.”

Shit, she's got me there. "*Technically* yes. I mean, he is my husband. And yes, sometimes he's...friendly. Even protective. Of me." Okay, he's annoying with his constant bickering about me working too much—it's not like he works any less. But he was considerate enough to gift me an adjustable easel. In the fourteen days of our marriage, he has thought about me and my needs a thousand times more than my ex did in all the months of our relationship combined.

Kaylin nods happily at my confession of Cal having a good side too. "You're allowed to have sex with your husband. Actually, it's pretty much encouraged."

I chuckle and take a big sip of coffee. Mmm, nothing beats coffee from a diner. I don't care what any of those fancy coffee shops tell you.

Kaylin sits next to me. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer with the first thing that comes to mind. Don't think, just speak. Are you attracted to him?"

I don't have to think. "Yes."

"Do you know if he's attracted to you?"

Again, I don't have to think. "He's made it abundantly clear that he is."

"Do you want him to spank your butt and call you princess?" The moment she says it, Kaylin throws a hand over her mouth. I can't help but laugh. Quickly, she says, "Sorry, that's a line I read in a blog once back during our secret book club time. Somehow, it caught my attention. It just slipped out."

*Well, well, well.* Still waters run deep.

I'm always thrilled when sweet, innocent Kaylin comes out of her shell, especially now that it's happening more and more often.

I don't have to think. "Ah, girl, you have no idea, and the answer is: *of course.*"

Kaylin titters. "There's your answer."



I take a deep breath. “Oh! I almost forgot, Kaylin. I have something for you.” I pull out my phone and shoot her a quick text. “There. Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

“I would never say that.” Kaylin laughs, checking her phone. “What did you just send me?”

“Theo’s number.”

Her cheeks turn bright red. “Theo’s number?”

“Yup.”

“As in the gorgeous guy who hangs out with your hubby?”

I nod. “Yup, that’s the one. Apparently, he’s got a little crush on you. Cal told him he’d pass his number along.”

“No way.” Kaylin’s cheeks somehow grow even redder. “Oh, my gosh,” she says, staring at her phone with wide eyes. “Oh, my *gosh*.”

It’s so cute to watch her go from disbelieving to excited.

“A little crush on me? Are you sure that’s what he said?”

“Very sure. That’s what my hubby”—*dammit*—“I mean Cal, said he said.”



## JOSIE



I'm back at the apartment. A nervous thrill races up my spine. Geez, I'm nervous about seeing him. I'm nervous about *talking* to him.

I'm not expecting Cal to be here.

It's around noon, and he's almost always out having lunch with the guys or handling things at the dealership. I toe out of my sneakers and place them neatly next to his boots (which are not in the way).

But wait, if his boots are here, that means he is, too.

Quickly, I peek around the apartment. He's not in the kitchen or living room.

"Cal?" I call out.

No answer.

Remembering how exhausted he looked earlier and that he spent the night on that couch, I figure he's probably taking a nap to catch up on sleep. I put my bag in the living room and look around for my laptop. Since I'm home early and no talk is happening—thank you, heaven—I want to take the time to go through my old ArtGal site and start cleaning it up for a relaunch.

My laptop is probably in the bedroom, where I had tucked it away before the dinner the night before. Crap. I walk quietly toward the room. I'm assuming he's sleeping, and I don't want to wake him.

I'm just being considerate, okay?

It's not until I'm right outside the door that I hear rustling. The door itself isn't closed all the way. Inside, it sounds like the bed sheets are moving, and I can hear labored breathing.

Okay, now I'm nosy. Perfectly nosy.

Is he changing the sheets? They aren't even dirty! His cleaning mania sure knows no bounds.

Without a second thought, I put my hand on the door and push it open.

I'm greeted by the hottest sight in the world. A sea of tattoos.

He is *not* changing sheets.

Cal is lying in the middle of the bed, fully naked with the blanket pooled around his waist. His firm hand is wrapped around his cock, and he's stroking himself roughly, his chest heaving as he pants.

My brain short-circuits.

Holy shit.

Holy *shit*.

My mouth goes dry, my mind goes blank, and an ache unlike anything I've ever felt settles between my legs. I thought I was turned on before. But this... This is the hottest thing I've ever seen in my life.

*You should back away*, says the goody-goody on my shoulder.

*No, you should join him*, says the naughty seductress on the other.

*No, back away! No, join him!* The two halves of my brain are arguing, and they need to shut the fuck up. I can't think straight.

I'm too stunned and can't look away, so I don't do either. But what happens next sends me into a mental tailspin.

“Oh, yeah, Josie,” he groans as he’s stroking his thick cock, the veins in his neck tightening.

At first, I think he knows I’m here.

Fear has me standing still as a freaking statue.

It’s only when I tear my gaze from his dick and look at his face that I find his eyes are still closed. He hasn’t noticed me yet. Which means—holy shit—he’s thinking about me.

He’s touching himself and thinking about me.

“Fuck, *Josie*,” he moans loudly, throwing his head back, and I watch as he comes, jets and jets of come erupting over his hand and stomach, his cock pulsating. He’s still panting my name throughout his climax.

So. Fucking. Hot.

My brain finally catches up.

I back away, pulling the door closed behind me.

Quieter than I’ve ever been in my life, I quickly move down the hall, turning the corner and leaning against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

Oh, shit.

*Oh, shit.*

I can’t believe I just saw that. What do I do? Do I tell him, “Honey, I’m *ho-ome*.” Do I pretend like I didn’t see anything? You know, all cool. “Cal? You in?”

I don’t think I could if I tried.

I need to go.

I need to be somewhere other than here.

As quick as I dare, I silently rush back to the living room, grab my bag, and leave, closing the front door *silently* behind me.

Out in the hall, my mind is spinning. I mean, I knew Cal wanted me last night. I guess I assumed once the impulsiveness was gone, things would go back to normal. Our

talk this morning smashed that to pieces, and what I just witnessed only cemented things.

I take a deep breath, the spark of an idea taking hold.

I need to go for it. I said I was going to go for it. Hell, I *want* to go for it. But I don't want it to be a spur-of-the-moment thing. Also, it would be too awkward. It might ruin the moment if I just burst in there with him naked and all his come still hot and splattered on his stomach. I want to do things right. I want to blow his mind.

I need something sexy. And condoms.

Determined, I exit the building and hop on the subway.

**T** here's a lingerie shop not far from here.

"Can I help you find something?" the saleswoman asks, approaching me with a graceful purple lipstick and a smile.

"Yes, yes, you can. I need something that's going to make his eyes pop out of their sockets."

She laughs, motioning to the store around us. "You've come to the right place. Tell me a little something about him."

"Tall, buff, tattooed, rides motorcycles, who I'm super attracted to—even though he drives me crazy."

Her smile morphs into a wide grin. "I see. Something to drive *him* crazy for a change?"

"Yes. See, you get me."

"I have just the thing."

I leave about an hour later, my new lingerie carefully wrapped in tissue paper and tucked into an elegant burgundy bag.

**A**s I stroll down the drug store aisles, I'm distracted by their collection of magazines. Right in front is the newest issue of *Art Dream Monthly*. The cover mentions a certain critic,

and I buy the magazine without hesitation, though I might end up burning it and throwing the ashes in the Hudson River.

I flip through it to the review section. Yup, Mr. Douchey Art Critic is still writing reviews. This time he rips apart an amateur art show in Manhattan. Okay, some of the exhibits do look like a jumbled hot mess—it seems that due to a charity event, submissions weren't filtered as strictly as usual—but that's no reason for him to lump them together and not even leave one good word.

I hate that I still keep up with him, and I hate that it still bothers me. What I hate the most is that more often than not, he isn't completely wrong. Yet how can someone so blatantly snobbish and dickish still be given a platform?

What good does ripping new artists to shreds do? Ignoring someone's talent and favoring years of practice doesn't make any sense. If I ever meet this guy in person, I'll *so* give him a piece of my mind.

Closing the magazine, I shove it into my bag, wondering what Cal would say if I ever decided to tell him about my disastrous fifteen minutes of fame fail.

**W**hen I arrive back at the apartment, however, Cal's boots are gone.

Dammit.

Oh, wait. That's even *better*. I can prep now.

The bedroom is as neat as ever. If I hadn't seen him touching himself not an hour before, I would have never known he'd been in here. Needing to make sure I have enough time to get things ready, I text Cal, trying to be casual.

I decide not to tell him I'm already home. It'll be a bigger treat for him to find me half-naked and waiting if he thinks I'm not here.

ME:

Hey, stuck at work. When are you going to be home?

CAL:

Why? You checking up on me, wifey?

ME:

I thought you wanted to talk.

CAL:

Be home in about an hour.

An hour. This is good. I can work with this. Impulsive enough to be excited, but not too impulsive that I have time to overthink. I'm done overthinking. It hasn't done me any favors.

I raid the linen closet to find fresh bed sheets, grinning at how I thought he'd changed the bed already. He hasn't. He's clearly slacking. Next time, I should leave him a note to please change the sheets after jerking off, ha-ha.

After, I turn down the comforter and make it nice and neat. There are a couple of candles sprinkled throughout the apartment, and I gather all of them to place around the bedroom.

Satisfied the room looks perfect, I go through my bag and pull out the lingerie I bought. The saleswoman presented several pieces to me, but as soon as I found this one, I knew I had to have it. The top is a blood-red corset with black accents. Ribbons hang from the sides and a small black bow rests between my breasts as if they're a present. Which, let's be honest, they pretty much are. The corset pushes my boobs up and makes them look amazing. I can't wait to see Cal's face. The bottom portion of the little number is only a matching red thong with a little black bow (can't wait to see Cal's face for that one either).



Simple but effective, which is what I love about it.

In the mirror above the dresser, I put on “fuck me” red lipstick (you know, subtle), which I picked up to match what I’m wearing.

Just as I’m running a brush through my hair and adding product to get the frizz out, I hear the front door open.

He’s here. *Oh, my God. Oh, my God.*

Excitement bubbles in my stomach, and I scurry onto the bed, adjusting my boobs for the full non-plus-ultra boob experience.

From the living room, Cal calls out, “Josie? You in?”

“Juuuhu. I’m in *he-ere*,” I call seductively.

Suddenly, I hear Theo’s voice, and my heart drops. “Hey, Josie! The guys are heading out to eat—but we’re gonna have a few drinks here. Want to join us?”

*Shitshitshitshit.*

See, this is why I don’t do *anything* impulsive!

Multiple footsteps start coming my way, and I scramble off the bed, racing for the *wide-open* bedroom door.



**CAL**



## A few hours earlier

I'm meeting with "the garage crew" for the first time since all positions have been filled.

A couple of them are already waiting when Theo and I walk in. Most are mechanics with years of experience. It takes Theo and me a little while to show the new guys around the place, but once we're done, Theo offers to take the guys out for dinner. It's something we've done with my other businesses as a way to get to know each other.

"I have a date," I tell Theo with a grin. "But why don't you and the guys stop by the apartment for a quick drink before you go out?"

"I'm game. Are you sure Josie isn't going to mind? Given you have a date and everything?"

"Nah, she won't mind. She's not home yet."

We all grab our bikes and roll out, heading toward my place. In the back of my mind, I know Josie wants to talk, but I'm assuming she's still tied up at work. Which is why, when I walk in and find her shoes by the door, I'm surprised.

"Josie? You in?" I call as the guys file in behind me.

"Juuuhu. I'm in *he-ere!*"

Huh. Odd.

There's something different about her voice. Her calling me from the bedroom is also strange. Juuuhu? That's not Josie. I hope she's not getting sick or anything. Ignoring the guys, I walk down the hall toward the bedroom.

Is she all right? Why is she in the room? Is she not feeling good?

*Jesus.*

*Fucking.*

*Christ.*

The second I step through the doorway, I'm greeted with a fucking spectacular sight. Josie is lying on my bed, done up in some of the hottest lingerie I've ever seen. For fuck's sake, she's wearing a corset? Is that what it is? My mind is blank.

And then I remember the guys are here.

"Cal, Josie?" Theo calls, following me. "Everything okay?"

Josie's eyes suddenly widen when she realizes I'm not alone.

"Josie," I say. "What—?"

Theo is right behind me, and when she realizes it's him, she swears, bolts out of the bed, her mind-blowing tits bouncing, and slams the door in my face. It all happens so fast, it takes a second for me to catch up. My mind is stuck on the image of her waiting for me in bed, in barely-there clothing with candles around her.

Shifting to face Theo, I'm met with a confused expression. I get the feeling he didn't see anything. Good.

"Is Josie okay?" he asks, concern lacing his tone.

"You guys need to go."

"Why? What happened?"

"Just go."

He knows by my tone of voice that I'm not in the mood to argue.

Also, he's a man. *He ain't dumb.*

"K." Turning around, he heads back into the living room, and I hear him say, "Hey, guys, we need to bounce. Now."

There's confusion, but Theo ushers them out the door. It pains me to step away from the bedroom door, but I do so I can lock up after them.

All I can think about is getting my hands and mouth *on* Josie—and my tongue and dick *in* Josie.

Alone at last, I waste no time banging on the bedroom door. “Josie, let me in.”

“*No*,” she shouts from the other side.

Shit. I was afraid of this. That look of horror on her face is burned into my memory. Fuck, fuck.

Gotta smooth this over.

I know *exactly* how.

So, I say, “You got all sexed up and aren’t even going to let me ravish you? Now that’s just *fucking* selfish.”

“Go *away*, Cal.”

“Come on, the guys are gone. Pretty sure nobody saw anything.”

“I’m never going to be able to look Theo in the eye again. I’m so *freaking* embarrassed.”

“Babe, chill—you have nothing to be embarrassed about.” She really doesn’t. I did get a good look at her, and all I know is, what I saw would drive any man fucking crazy. “Nobody saw nothing.” I try the doorknob again, but it doesn’t budge. “Josie, unlock the door.”

“Of course I have a reason to be embarrassed! I tried to do something slightly impulsive, and it blew up in my face. I can’t *believe* Theo saw me in lingerie.”

Chuckling, I lean against the doorframe with one hand, using the other to push my hair from my face. “Babe, he didn’t see anything. All he saw was my back. I was in his way. I’m the only one who saw what you’re working with. I gotta say, I have a smoking-hot wifey.” My dick is still semi-hard from the view she gave me.

She doesn’t answer right away. “I’m not in the mood to be teased right now.”

“I’m not teasing you,” I rumble deeply. “Seriously, who cares about those guys? This isn’t about them. It’s about us. Right now, I want you to open this door and give me a better look at that sexy little number you’re wearing.”

There's silence.

I wait impatiently.

“Open, baby. I'm not gonna repeat myself,” I growl. “Or do you wanna get a spanking?”

I'm just about to bust down the door when I hear the *click* of the lock.





## CAL



The door opens slowly, and I'm once again greeted by the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen.

Josie is wearing a red lingerie corset with matching thong, and my dick stands at attention immediately, roaring against the fly of my jeans. I push the door open and stroll through. Josie takes a step back, but I stop her with my arm around her waist.

“Oh, no, sweet thing, you're not going anywhere. Let me take a look at you.”

Fuck, she looks hot. Where the hell has she been hiding this body? I mean, I already got a few sneak peeks here and there, and was pretty sure she had great tits, but not like *this*. Ten out of ten. I run my hands up the corset, tracing my thumbs across the peaks of her mounded curves. Josie inhales sharply. She grabs my wrists, her eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“Maybe next time, shoot me a text if you're going to wait in my bed,” I tease.

A hint of a smile tugs at her lips. “Maybe next time *you* shoot me a text if you're bringing people over.”

“You were the one who said you weren't home.”

“I was trying to surprise you. You know, without overthinking.”

“Well, color me fucking surprised. I will never bring anyone over ever if this is how you're going to greet me from

now on.”

I yank her into a kiss, then flip her around.

“And now for the spanking you so richly deserve.”

“Oh, my God. No, Cal, I don’t! No! No *spanking*.”

I sit down. “On my lap. Head down. Ass up,” I order calmly.

“Wait. Why, because I didn’t open the door? I *opened* it.”

I shoot her a look that says, “Don’t make me repeat myself,” and with my eyes, gesture to my lap. I’m thrilled (and fucking astonished) when she complies. With hardly any hesitation, she positions herself across my legs, and situates her ass just high enough, giving me perfect access.

It’s fucking superb.

She wants this. I fucking can’t believe she doesn’t protest.

“Ready?” I rumble.

“No! I’m scared now.”

“Oh, you should be.” I smirk, rubbing my palms together to warm them.

All right. Here we go.

“You look exquisite on my lap. Hold still.”

She does hold still. Unbelievable. The hot number and that thong she’s wearing gives me a delicious view of her bare ass cheeks. I take full advantage.

*Smack.*

Josie moans and jerks on my lap. “*Ouch*. Are you not going to call me princess?”

Huh. Kinky. I grin. *That’s* what she wants to be called while I spank her? Sure. Good idea.

“Take that thong off, princess. I want your ass bare.”

“Oh, my God.”

She peels the thong down, and I help get it off her, impatiently tossing it to the side.

I grab her ass and caress it, squeezing, spank it a couple more times (equally sharp), giving her the delicious pain and pleasure she enjoys. I call her princess, and Josie gasps and moans. Her ass is already turning into a pink blush. I spank her a few more times after that, enjoying how she's whimpering under my touch, before brushing my hand down her ass cheeks.

I reach between her folds, brushing over her slit, finding her dripping wet. Whoa. That's what I'm talking about. She's loving this. *I'm* loving this.

“Oh, I'm going to have so much fun with you, princess.”

“Cal...”

I spank her pussy and call her my queen, because why not, and—to my delight—she starts dripping down her thighs.

The desire that has been building for days is at its boiling point, and Josie wiggles and moans under my hand as soon as my fingers brush along her pussy to her clit.

“Will you behave from now on?”

“Yeah...oh,” she yelps as I rub her where she needs it the most.

“Are you sure?”

“No fair...yeah...I will...”

Sounds perfect to me.

When I release her and flip her onto her back, she kisses me eagerly, grabbing me by the front of my shirt. I let her. We're just getting started. Scooping her into my arms, I walk toward the bed. Her hands are on my chest, all over me really, and she can't stop kissing me. Whoa. No woman has ever kissed me like that. She kisses me like she hasn't kissed in years, like her life depends on us kissing, and my kisses are her only salvation. Fuck, she's into me, and I'm here for it. She's kissing me into oblivion, and I almost lose control from sensation overload.

“Hey now,” I growl between her fevered kisses. “Should have known you’d like it rough.”

My knees hit the edge, and I lay her down onto the bed. All the while, her hands can’t stop grabbing at my body.

Jesus Christ. I’m going to fuck her senseless.

I relish how much she wants me, and soon enough, my hands are all over her body, mapping the tight corset and knowing that very soon, there won’t be any fabric in the way so I can touch that smooth skin of hers. She works the buttons of my shirt, hastily undoing each one as our mouths wrestle for dominance. She’s determined to keep the lead, while I’m determined to make her putty in my hands.

Spoiler alert: I’m winning (naturally).

Stradling her hips, I break away only so I can get rid of my shirt. I’m becoming addicted to those fucking kisses, the beautiful amount of suction, her tongue, soft and demanding, needing to have her lips moving against mine. Before diving in for more, I take a second to just admire the fucking gorgeous beauty that’s sprawled underneath me.

Her lips are red and inviting. Her chest moves up and down as she pants, those alluring eyes clouded with passion. She reaches up, and I think she’s going to go for the button of my jeans. Hell, yeah. But instead, she runs her hands up my stomach to my chest, tracing my tattoos with her fingertips. The light caress sends a shudder blazing down my spine, and my body erupts in goosebumps. It’s like she’s mapping me, trying to memorize everything she’s seeing.

“You like what you see?” I rumble.

“Please, hurry,” she murmurs.

“Hush, baby, you have no control in the bedroom, sorry. I’m going to take every precious second.” The urge to fuck her immediately isn’t winning the war inside me. “I want to savor this,” I growl. “I want to savor you. I want to take my time, to kiss you until you can’t breathe, to unwrap you from this lingerie like you’re the best present I could’ve ever asked for.”

“Oh, I hate you,” she whisper-moans.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Please do it already...”

She’s impatient, and I couldn’t care less. Slowly, I slide my hand up the corset, between her tits, up her neck, and around to the back of her head before leaning down to claim her lips again. Her nails drag up my back when she puts her arms around me, making me grind down to relieve some of the pressure in my jeans.

“Now explain why you very obviously want the man you hate to fuck you.”

She gasps, “Ehhh...no...I mean...” and starts kissing me again.

With patience, I take my time undoing the laces of her corset, all the while not letting our kisses break. The way her lips and tongue dance with mine will be the death of me, meeting each of my movements with her own. I’m as eager as she is, tasting and touching while I rid her of the annoying barrier of fabric that separates us.

The corset falls open, and that’s when I break the kiss to look down.

*Finally.* It feels like I’ve waited an eternity for this.

She is mesmerizing.

“Fuck, baby.” To finally have her completely naked beneath me is everything I wanted it to be. Full, round breasts with goddamn perky nipples I wanted to devour, marvelous hips, flawless creamy skin. No, she is beyond mesmerizing. My hands touch her soft skin. “You’re fucking perfect.” I shake my head. “I’m determined to have you naked from now on.”

Josie moans softly, her hands immediately sliding into my hair.

With a grunt of arousal, I bend my head to take one of her pink nipples between my lips.

“Oh...,” she moans, wanting me to do it again.

It reminds me of last night when she was on the counter, holding onto me for dear life. I absolutely need a repeat before I go insane. But I'm still not rushing it this time.

I slip my hand between her legs, my taste buds already anticipating her strawberry sweetness. "You still owe me an explanation as to why you want the man you hate to play with your little cunt and make you come."

"Hhh..." She jerks when my fingers find her heat and gasps.

"Because you *do* hate me, don't you?"

"I...do," she whispers.

"Tempt me. Lie to me and act like you don't want me to play with your wet little cunt."

She breathes, a smirk playing at her lips.

"Oh, bad girl. Bad, bad girl," I growl dangerously. With ease and determination, I move down her body, loving the way my mouth glides effortlessly across her velvety skin. I'm kissing her stomach. Kissing her softly beneath her belly button, and nudging her thighs apart, I continue kissing her soft pussy lips.

When my mouth finally gets to the spot she wants me to touch the most, it's like I've come home.

"You drive me crazy with your perfect little clit."

I flick my tongue across it.

"Yes... right there..." Her head tips back. "Do that again..."

Josie is sounding more and more desperate, and it's driving me insane. "Oh...so good." She's lost in pleasure, her thighs tight around my head and my name on her lips. It's never sounded sweeter. I lose myself in her. Her touch. Her taste. Her sound. Every little thing makes me crazy. My dick is stuck between my jeans and the mattress, begging for more.

But I tell him to calm the fuck down. We'll get there.

Her breathing changes. She's close.

I slide two fingers inside her and hiss my approval at how wet she is. And warm. And tight. “You’re such a goddamn liar.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Come around the fingers of the man you claim to hate,” I growl.

“Oh, my God...oh, my...*ohhh*.” Her pussy begins to pulsate around my fingers. I feel her sex quaking, trembling and spasming uncontrollably, and then her back arches. Josie’s body rocks with pleasure, and she locks around me before collapsing in a satisfied heap.

Smiling at her, I watch the quick rise and fall of her chest, the corset crumpled underneath her and forgotten. “Atta girl.” I lick her clean and place a kiss on her clit. As I pepper kisses on my way back up, she squirms and throws the lingerie off to the side before she grabs for me.

Our lips barely connect before she’s pushing and rolling me onto my back while she perches herself on my waist. I allow it, because staring up at her is the hottest fucking image I could’ve ever asked for. Her blonde hair is loose and wild, her pupils blown wide with desire, while those perfect tits beg for my touch.

“What are you doing to me, woman?” I tease as I slide my hands up her torso to cup her breasts.

She sucks in a deep breath, her lips twitching into a smile. “I’m going to wipe that smirk off your face.”

“I would *love* to see you try.”

“Smug jerk.”

She kisses me, her hands falling to my jeans. I feel a tug as she yanks on the button and pulls the zipper down. Yes. Perfect. I lift my hips to give her space to pull them off, and she doesn’t disappoint. It’s her turn to kiss a trail down my body, her mouth tracing the tattoos on my chest as she rids me of my pants. I kick them down the rest of the way.

Palming my rock-hard dick, I give myself a couple of strokes, then grab for her.

My hands need to feel her skin again.

Why didn't I, idiot, think about buying condoms?

I can feel her heat and lift my hips to grind against it. Her response is instant. Eyes fluttering closed, Josie moans, her forehead falling to mine. I knock her hands away and lock my arm around her waist. I cup her face, kissing the breath out of her. We grind together slowly, falling into a steady rhythm. I know I could enter her with a quick snap of my hips.

With one arm around her waist, I grab her thigh with my free hand, using the leverage to put her on her back again.

My fingers circle her wrists, and I pin her arms down on either side of her head, her face inches from mine.

Her fingers push between mine as I hover above her. "Cal..." she breathes between kisses.

"Yes?" I murmur against her mouth.

"I want to feel you inside of me. Now...please."

My breath catches in my throat.

"I did take my birth control today, but I also bought condoms. We are good." She points to her purse by the bed and fishes out a packet of condoms.

I rip open the packaging. "You want this cock, do you?" I roll the condom on. Next time she will put it on me, but now I'm in a hurry. I can't wait anymore. There's a time and place for going slow, and we're well beyond that.

There's a smile on her gorgeous, flushed face. "Yes, Cal. I do."

*All right.*

Fingers digging into her thigh, I position myself, my cock nudging at her entrance.

"Look at me while I fuck you," I growl, and our eyes lock. "Ready to become mine, princess?"



“Yes.” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

My heart clenches in anticipation of what’s about to happen.

Slowly, I push inside her, one agonizing inch at a time, smooth, smooth thrusts, my eyes never leaving hers. I’m big for her, and I take my time filling her.

“Relax, you can take it,” I grumble, and she nods subtly. “You’re gonna take every inch I give you.”

Even through the condom, she feels soft, hot and slick. Maybe it’s better that way, because entering her bare would slay me, would be my death. The breath leaves her lungs, and she throws her head back in a silent moan. Slowly, I feel her opening up, taking all of me. It’s so. Fucking. Good.

“That’s my good girl.”

My lips find her neck, and I begin fucking her with slow, measured thrusts. It’s everything I wanted it to be, and unlike anything I ever imagined.

“Is that deep enough for you?” I ask, and she nods against my cheek. Her body fits perfectly underneath mine, like she was fucking made for me. Only me.

“I love this already,” she whimpers.

“You’re mine—there’s no going back,” I growl, driving deeper, making her gasp. “*Only* mine.”

“Mmm...Cal...”

“From now on, you’ll only *ever* be mine. That’s clear?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “Yes.” Her hands grab at my back as she tightens her arms around me in a vise grip. It’s evident by the way she moves, the way she responds to me, that no part of her wants to let me go.

Why? Why didn’t I ever know how good it would be between us? I mean, I suspected. I had an inkling. But nothing could prepare me for this. No matter how fast, or how deep I go, it’s never enough. Between kisses, she moans my name

until I angle my hips in just the right way, and her speech disappears.

After that, all she can do is kiss me.

I never want it to end.

A few moments later, her body shudders and rocks, and her pussy squeezes my cock in the tightest embrace. I can barely move—her walls clench and pulse, squeezing my dick for all it's worth. This is paradise, I'm sure. I tilt my head back to observe the expression on her face. It's fucking beautiful. *She's* fucking beautiful—devastatingly gorgeous. I kiss the moan from her, gripping her thigh for leverage. I keep going, keep pumping in and out of her. Her long legs tighten around my waist, her heels digging into my lower back, urging me to keep going.

“Yes...ohh...like that,” she pants in my ear. The unmistakable press of her teeth on my earlobe pushes me over the edge.

“Fuck... fuck...*fuck!*”

The next thing I know, my balls tighten, and I'm coming harder than I ever have in my fucking life. My mouth crashes against hers, tongue slipping past her lips for another taste. Our bodies lock together until the pleasure recedes, and I'm left breathless.

“You're mine now.”

I wait until her breathing slows, then I roll onto my side, bringing her with me so I can keep kissing her. Josie's hand caresses my arm until her fingers intertwine with mine. My eyes take in the absolutely stunning vision of her, post-sex. Her hair is a cute frizzy mess, her lips and skin are glistening red from my stubble, and her eyes are soft as she stares back at me with a smile.

“Wow,” she says softly. “That was fantastic. It was... indescribable.”

“Told you so.”

She chuckles. “Told me what?”

I cup her face with my free hand, my palm fisting her hair tenderly. “You don’t hate me. There’s not a single fiber in your body that hates me. Not anymore. You’re attracted to me. You can’t get enough of me.”

Josie rolls her eyes, sliding her hand into my hair when she pulls me into another kiss. “Oh, hush, Callum.”



## JOSIE



*M*y body is buzzing, aftershocks of pleasure still coursing through my veins. I want to say something more clever and sassy to Cal than “hush” after his little quip, but I’m too satisfied. As far as I’m concerned, he’s more than earned the right to be smug. Holy shit. Normally, I’m unable to have more than one orgasm, if even that. But not this time. My body still hasn’t recovered—it’s trembling, and after a few more kisses, I reach for the blanket, but I’m too shaky to grab it.

Cal grabs the bedspread for me, bringing it up to cover us both. “I love how passionate and impulsive you are, baby,” he rumbles, pushing my hair from my face.

“Yeah, but we both know, typically I am *not* impulsive.”

“I beg to differ. You accepted the kiss deal, on *impulse*. You drew me naked, on *impulse*. You greeted me in lingerie, on *impulse*.”

“You don’t think I took my time to think about all that? I did. Brand-new lingerie, by the way.”

“You saying you picked out that little number just for me? I’m beyond flattered.”

“I was trying for ‘making you speechless.’ But I should have realized it would take more than lingerie to get you to keep your mouth shut.”

“How can I be quiet when you greeted me looking like *that*? And you can deny it all you want, but there was still

some impulsiveness about it. Especially considering the fact that last night, you wanted nothing to do with me.”

“Keep talking, and this will be the first *and* last time we have sex.”

“Liar.”

When he’s right, he’s right. I absolutely *will* have sex with him again. How can I not? I’ve never experienced such visceral and carnal lovemaking in my life. The second we crashed into bed, every other thought flew out of my head. All I could focus on was him and what he was doing to my body.

Even now, a fervent desire to have him again is building hard and fast within me.

“Yeah, well...*maybe*.”

I kiss him. I can’t seem to get enough of his mouth—everywhere. He chuckles, but kisses me back, his firm hand cupping my cheek with gentleness. I believe that’s what surprises me the most. For such a strong, take-charge personality, the way he touches me, it’s as though he’s trying to take care of me.

Like he wants to memorize every inch of my body with his hands and mouth. I’m absolutely going to let him. After all, that’s exactly what I want to do to him. He slides his arm around my waist and pulls me flush against his chest. Even though we just finished, he’s hard again, if what’s poking me in the stomach is any indication. I slip my hand under the blanket, needing to feel the weight of him against my palm.

Oh. My. God.

*Yes.*

The man is sex personified, and I’m all about it. I palm his dick and start stroking, and it grows larger beneath my touch.

Cal grunts, grabs both my hands, and rolls me on my back, kissing me deeper while spreading my legs with his knees. He has me slide a condom onto him, and we rock together like this for some time, his bulge against my center (so hot), but I

couldn't tell you how long. It's like everything in my head that isn't Cal exits stage left.

All I can do is focus on our bodies and how to make him moan.

Because a guy moaning—no, Cal moaning—has got to be the hottest sound I've ever heard. I've been with guys who are silent in bed, which isn't a bad thing, but sometimes you want to *hear* how good you're making him feel. Cal isn't shy about letting me know that he likes what I'm doing.

"I love hearing you," I whisper, lightly digging my nails into his skin to drag a grunt out of him. "It's hot...your voice is so manly and deep and...sexy."

"Oh, yeah?" he growls.

"Yeah."

"Do you know what else is hot?" he whispers against my lips before descending to my neck.

"What?"

"How your whole body shakes when I do this."

He finds the sensitive spot on my neck and gently sucks, sending powerful shudders of desire racing down my spine.

"That so?" I ask, already breathless. "Hmm. No idea what you're talking about."

He chuckles again, nuzzling my throat. "Oh, really?" His palm curls around my neck, and I gasp. He does it again, and I moan, "Oh, *that* spot." My body is screaming for more, and I'm all too happy to listen. No holding back. No overthinking.

"Cal...again," I moan as my legs almost automatically part wider for him, and I feel his thick dick at my opening, with the wonderful promise of being filled.

"Again?" With his palm around my throat, Cal lets out a satisfied growl, and the sound makes my freaking toes curl. "I've been waiting for you to say that for a long fucking time."

When he slides into me, it's just as breathtaking as it was the first time.

The way my body stretches around him makes it seem like we were meant to fit together. “Fuck...fuck,” he hisses through clenched teeth, his hair hanging over my head.

The moment my gaze meets his, he starts to move, and I’m lost in the pleasure and sensations of everything Cal. “Oh... dear God, you really know what you’re doing.” I don’t know why I’m surprised. His confidence has to come from somewhere. Clearly, it’s well-earned.

Even as he’s thrusting in and out of me, I can’t get enough of his kisses. I can’t help it. My mouth is always moving, always going for his lips. He’s nudging me closer, caging me in with his arms, his tongue is in me, his dick is in me, and I couldn’t be any more aroused. His kisses leave me breathless, wanting more.

Everything he does makes me want more.

Cal suddenly pulls back, and my body shivers with the loss of his warmth. Still buried inside me, he sits back on his knees, hair falling into his piercing eyes when he gazes down at me. With that all-too-familiar smirk, he studies my face. Those fantastic hands of his grab my hips, moving me along with his thrusts, the new angle making me see stars. One hand moves to my sex, and his thumb brushes against my clit.

I moan, reaching up to grip the pillow beneath my head.

Cal’s smirk widens, that cocky smile that used to annoy me, adding fuel to the raging fire low in my belly. Damn jerk. Stupid, handsome, very-good-at-sex jerk.

The pillow isn’t solid enough to hold onto.

“Hold on to the headboard,” he commands, sensing my dilemma and causing my heart to pound rapidly.

I reach above to grip the headboard while tossing my head back, needing something to grab onto, to ground me. Cal groans, one of his hands sliding up my stomach, between my breasts, a movement he performed earlier but still hot a second time. He grips my chin, his palm against my throat and forces my head back down so our eyes meet.



“Look at me,” he orders breathlessly. “Look at me when I fuck you.”

At his words, my insides flutter, and I do as he says. I find myself *wanting* to listen, wanting to please him, and obey whatever he says. Our eyes lock, and that smirk shifts into something else. His top teeth dig into his bottom lip every time he thrusts inside me, and I clench around him.

“Jesus, Josie.”

To make a man like Cal pant and moan, to feel the tremors through his body and know that I’m the reason he’s like this, fills me with sheer joy. I lose track of how long we’re together like this. It’s like now that we’ve finally had each other, we can’t get enough. I know I can’t, and my heart races, knowing I’m not alone.

In an explosion of passion, we both come.

Cal has learned my body quickly. He knows where to touch me and how to draw an immense reaction out of me. It’s like he gets off by getting me off, and boy, does he *ever* get me off. I don’t bother keeping count.

By the time I’m spent, and my body is aching for rest, the sun has set, and in the darkness of night, the stars gleam through the bedroom window. The bedroom is bathed in shadow, giving everything a dreamlike quality. Makes sense. I must be in a dream if I’m feeling this good.

Cal rolls over to face me. “Fuck, we both needed that.”

I curl against his side, draping myself across his chest. His arms automatically come up to hold me close. “I think I’ve lost the use of my legs,” I admit, kissing his heart tattoo.

“That means I’ve done my job right.”

**W**e take a quick shower together and return to bed. I can’t help but giggle breathlessly at the switch that’s happened. I went from never wanting him to touch me to not being able to get enough of him. All in a very short period of time.

I'm struck by how beautiful he is. The glow from the city lights cuts through the shadows just enough for me to see his handsome face. His green eyes are soft and gazing at me with indescribable emotion—it's almost too much to stand.

"You're a sweet angel." He shifts to grab the blanket again, and when it's draped over both of us, we get comfortable. He's warm and inviting, and I can't bring myself to break contact. Not that he wants me to, if his grip is any indication.

He's holding me close, as if he's afraid I'm going somewhere.

There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

My eyes start to droop, and I yawn, realizing how exhausted I am. At least it's the good kind of exhaustion this time. The kind that comes from doing naughty things with a super-hot man. I glance at the alarm clock, startled to see how late it is.

"Whoa. I should get some sleep. Definitely lost track of time."

"Yeah, I have that effect on women."

"Geez, why do you have to ruin the moment by talking?"

"Same reason you have to ruin the moment by overthinking. It's just what we do."

His voice is light, and I know he's teasing me. Instead of being annoyed, it only makes me laugh. I slide off him and lay my head on the pillow next to his. Cal scoots closer, draping his arm around my waist and tucking me under his chin, against his chest.

"You're right though. We should get some sleep," he says through a yawn. "If you're good, maybe I'll give you a little something-something before you go to work tomorrow."

I would roll my eyes if it didn't sound like the best idea in the world. "Sounds good to me. Also, I guess you don't have to sleep on the couch tonight."

"Good. Because I wasn't planning to. Nor are you sleeping on there again. You're staying right here with me. That way I

can have quick access.”

“Quick access to what?”

“Take an educated guess,” he says.

“Only if I get quick access too.”

“To what?”

“Take an educated guess.”

“Deal. As much as I respect all the antiques around here, the first thing I’m going to do once the month is up, is sell that fucking couch.”

I crane my neck to look at him. “Are you going to sell everything?”

“For the most part. I’ll keep a few family heirlooms, such as the photograph of her, Theo and me, and the rolling pin, with which she threatened to beat him and me up, but never followed through on the warning. The rest will be sold once the apartment goes. My new place is going to be a hell of a lot bigger than this one.”

The reminder that our time in this apartment isn’t long for this world is not lost on me. It’s funny. When this whole thing started, I couldn’t wait for the month to be over. But now that we’re getting closer, the thought upsets me a bit.

Deep down, I’ll be a little sad to see the place go.

I tuck myself back under his chin and snuggle in. “Does this mean I don’t have to pick up my bra anymore?”

“Only if I don’t have to move my shoes.”

“Nah, you still need to move them.”

“Then you still need to pick up your bra.”

“Okay, *fine*.”

He laughs sleepily, burying his face in my hair. “Goodnight, sweet thing.”

“Night, Cal.”

He falls asleep almost immediately.

I listen to the sound of his breath evening out, feeling the soft rise and fall of his chest against my cheek. But I don't sleep. Not right away, at least. A million things race through my mind. I replay every kiss, every gasp, every thrust of his hips.

More importantly, I think about how he made me feel.

Like I was the most gorgeous woman in the world.

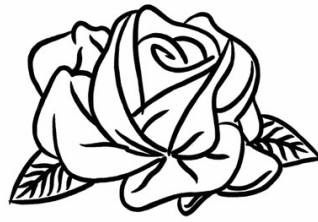
Like he only has eyes for me.

Like I was the happiest girl alive.



**JOSIE**

FIFTEEN DAYS LEFT



I'm humming to myself as I open The Diner. Cal revs the engine of his bike, and when I turn to look, he waves before riding off. How cute. Kaylin walks up just then, watching the exchange with wide eyes.

"How was your family visit?" I ask her.

"Oh, well, the usual. Did you ride on a motorcycle this morning, Josie?" she asks.

"I sure did," I tell her, grinning as I unlock the front door.

"That's so cool! Did you wear a helmet? Because, safety first."

"I did," I chirp.

"And *you're* in a good mood. Does it by chance have anything to do with that husband of yours who just dropped you off?"

I don't even care that she used the H-word. "Yes, yes, it does." I open the door, and we step inside.

"Honey," Kaylin says, eyes wide with excitement. "Did something happen last night?"

"So many things happened. But you'll just have to wait until girls' night to find out just what those things were," I tell her. "*Tonight.*"

"Oh, you tease!"

“Seriously, Kaylin. It was wonderful. The only reason I’m not telling you right now is that everyone else is due in any second, and I want to give you a play-by-play.”

She does an excited little jig. “Yes! Okay, I’ll be patient then. This is going to be the best girls’ night ever.”

A few hours later, I hear a customer groan in a thick, tipsy voice, “Come closer, doll.” I look up and see Kaylin a few tables down. It seems like déjà vu, only this time, the dude is clearly drunk. The second I notice the jack-off reach out to touch her ass, my vision goes red, and I rush toward them.

My mouth drops open.

To my surprise, Kaylin isn’t flustered or shy.

“I’m not serving you,” I hear her say. She’s holding her own, and when the douche-canoë says something douche-y back, she speaks up even louder. “I don’t care, and I’m not repeating myself. If you’re not gone in ten seconds, I’m going to press charges. Out, now!” She’s pointing to the door to really drive home the message.

The drunk prick is out of the door before I can blink.

“Hey there, wow,” I tell her when I pull her into a hug. “Good job, hon.” I couldn’t be prouder. I hardly ever get emotional, but now, I almost want to cry. “Get the girl a chocolate lava cake,” I call out to Deacon. “Wait, make that two. Extra ice cream on top. And two French Vanillas.”

“You’re the best.” Kaylin beams.

“No, *you’re* the best,” I say, pressing a big kiss to her forehead.

“I was *so* nervous. I’m shaking all over.” Kaylin shows me her shaky hands.

“But the prick deserved it. Doesn’t it feel good?”

“Oh, yes, it sure does.”

We sit and eat and enjoy the deliciousness of the rich chocolate and melted ice cream Deacon provided, and we



can't stop smiling at each other.

“Have you texted Theo yet?” I question, knowing if I don't ask, I'll forget, and Cal will likely bug me about it later.

She shakes her head.

“You haven't? Why, hon?”

She sighs. “I can't reach out first. I've never been the one to call first. What do I do? What do I say?”

Laughing, I place my hands on her shoulders. “It's all right, sweets. If it's freaking you out, we'll draft a text together tonight, sound good?”

Kaylin nods, exhaling with relief. “What would I do without you, Josie?”

“You never have to find out, hon. BFFs, remember?”



## JOSIE



*M*y good mood lasts throughout my entire shift. Even a couple more annoying customers can't rain on my parade. By the time four o'clock rolls around, I'm ready for food and much-needed best friend time.

Kaylin and I clock out together.

"You hungry?" I ask her.

"I'm always hungry," she says with a smile. "You know me."

On the way back to the apartment, we stop to grab a pizza and some wine—the dinner of champions.

When we arrive at Mrs. Blanchie's apartment, Kaylin surveys the place with a sad smile. "It's been ages since I've been here," she says as we make ourselves comfortable in the living room. "It looks exactly the same as when the Baroness lived here."

"Yeah, she was pretty adamant that we couldn't change anything," I tell her, opening the pizza box, and she grabs the first steaming slice of cheese. "I think it's because she wanted to force us to share a bed."

"Speaking of which," Kaylin says as I pour two glasses of wine, handing her one before taking my own. "All right, now that we're alone, spill all the details. Don't skimp!"

No need to tell me twice.

The longer I talk, the wider her eyes grow.

God, it feels good to talk about it.

To get it all out.

“Josie, honey.” Kaylin’s voice sounds low and soft once I finish my detailed retelling. “That’s...wow.”

“I know.”

“I mean, you make it sound so passionate.”

“It was, Kaylin. It really was. I...” Pausing, I take a second to gather my thoughts. “After all this time, I can’t believe that I’m drawn to Callum Ashford, of all people!”

People say there’s a fine line between love and hate.

And as much as Cal frustrates me, there’s so much about him that doesn’t. So much that proves what an amazing man he is. Hearing him talk about his relationship with his gran, the way his voice softens, or how his eyes light up when recalling something funny she did, like the time she chased him and Theo with her rolling pin because they accidentally parked their bikes on her newly planted roses. Or his relationship with Theo. Two best friends who have stuck with each other no matter what. Last but not least, the way he stands up for people like he did for me during the Osborn dinner. We were a team. United. That feeling was incredible and one I’ll cherish forever.

Oh, geez, I do like him.

But that’s the worst thing that could happen to me.

“I can’t stop thinking about last night, and how Cal was with me,” *and in me*. “So intense. Fiery. Hot. He was passionate, and more than generous. Nothing he did was half-hearted. It made me finally realize that he *does* care for me.”

At least on some level.

No man can look at a woman the way he looks at me if they don’t care about her.

“Well, from what you told me, you’ve had a rough start, but it looks like he’s redeemed himself. If you ask me, it was fate. A heavenly intervention.” She puts a hand on her heart

and sighs. “It’s so romantic. It’s amazing how incomprehensible and unfathomable some paths are, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t expect to develop feelings for him,” I admit, taking a sip of wine. “But...here we *are*.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

Great question. “I have *no* idea.”

We’re almost halfway through the month, and my last day in his apartment is two weeks on Sunday.

As far as my understanding goes, Cal is going to live here until he finds something more “bacheloresque” for himself. I’ll move back into my place until I find something bigger.

Kaylin gives me a sympathetic look and rubs my shoulder comfortingly. “I think you need to tell him. You’ll feel much better when you get it off your chest.”

“It’s easier to just keep it to myself. We’re going our separate ways at the end of the month, and we lead two very different lives. I can’t even properly articulate how I’m feeling. How on earth am I going to explain it to him when I can’t even fully explain it to myself? Trust me, he shouldn’t know.”

I clink my glass against hers.

We spend the next two hours eating, drinking, and talking. It’s been so long since we’ve hung out like this outside of work, it reminds me why I love her, and I’m glad she’s my best friend.

“I have some news,” Kaylin says at one point.

“Do tell.”

“Matilda pulled me aside the other day and asked if I thought I was ready to take on more responsibility.”

I gasp in excitement. “Kaylin, that’s wonderful.”

Kaylin works hard. I know she’s been wanting to take on more of a leadership role. I’m wondering if Matilda chose this moment to ask her because she plans to ask me to take over. If that’s the case, we’re going to need another supervisor, and

Kaylin is the obvious choice. She's smart, dependable, great with customers, and overall, a fantastic employee. Today I experienced firsthand that she's gained a ton of confidence around crappy customers—something Matilda has surely noticed too.

“Nothing is set in stone yet,” Kaylin says. “But I'm still excited.”

“You should be! No one deserves a promotion more than you.”

“Well, except you.”

I wave off her comment. “Enough about me. We're talking about *you* and how awesome you are. I'm glad Matilda sees it.”

“Okay, enough of that. What do I text Theo?” she asks.

“Oh, right. Text him: Hi Theo, this is Kaylin, we met at The Diner. Thank you for your number. *Smiley face emoji.*”

“That's it?”

“Yeah.”

“No question like ‘How are you?’ or ‘Will you take me on your bike with you’ or—”

“Do you want to spank my ass and call me princess?” I interrupt her.

We laugh.

“Can you imagine?” she asks, her face beaming with mischief.

“Oh, he'd be all over it, I'm sure. I mean, what man wouldn't be?” I grin inwardly at the naughty memory Cal and I shared. It couldn't be any more different from the ones we have from our time at school together.

“Yeah! See, I don't want him to think I'm boring. That could *work.*”

“Yeah...well, no, I was kidding. It's enough that you're friendly. Let him do the work. Let him work for that pussy.”

“Oh. Good thinking. But are you sure about the smiley face? He’s a cool guy. Won’t he think it’s childish? Too cute?”

“Trust me, the tougher the dudes, the more they like smiley faces. It makes them think that they did something we like. It strengthens their ego.”

“Okay, good. Perfect. When should I text him? In a day or two, right? Or should I wait a bit longer? A week? I don’t want him to think I’m desperate.”

“Hon, at this point, he’ll probably think you’re not interested.”

“Hello, ladies,” Cal arrives home. He’s wearing loose jeans with holes in the knees. His dark-blue T-shirt hugs his chest, revealing his muscles through the fabric. “Hope I’m not intruding on girls’ night,” he says charmingly, entering the kitchen just as we do. “Don’t stop on my account.”

“I was just leaving,” Kaylin says, handing me her empty wineglass, so I can put it in the sink with mine. “But before I do, Josie honey, let me give you the number of that art gallery owner I mentioned.”

“Give me that damn card. Now promise you will leave me alone?”

“Maybe.” She smirks, rifles through her purse, and hands me the business card. “It was just one douchebag’s opinion. You *have* to show him your new work. It’s spectacular.”

Chuckling, I take it and hug her. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

The card is plain. The off-white structure represents a canvas, with small lettering right in the center in Charleston green. Just his name, Bryce Armbruster, and a mobile number. It’s neat—and menacing.

“Thank you. I’ll seriously consider it this time. Now get out of here. It’s late, and I want to go to bed.”

“Awesome! You won’t regret it, promise.”

After I walk her to the door and lock up behind her, I turn to find Cal leaning against the doorframe of the kitchen, watching me.

“What was all that about?” he asks.

“Kaylin has a neighbor who’s got a friend who owns a gallery and is looking to showcase local artists,” I explain. “She’s been begging me to reach out to him, but I don’t think I’m ready to do something that big again.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I assume it has to do with the douchebag you two were talking about?”

“Yup. Osgood Ramstraat, the top art critic for *Art Dream Monthly*.”

Cal frowns. “Last name sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Yeah. He’s a big deal in the NYC art scene. When I had my first—and only—show a few years ago, he ripped it to shreds. It was a massacre.”

“What did he write?”

I mimic a deep seventy-five-year-old pompous highbrow male voice: “‘Ms. Josephine Graham’s uninspired work of art—if it can even be called art,’ yes, that’s what he wrote, ‘is lacking in all essential and all irrelevant elements. Her approach is an affront to the human body specifically, and the art world in general. No context, no innovation, and worse, no truth. More power to her...for picking the pinnacle of historical art—the human nude portrait—and mocking it—that’s what Graham is truly terrific at.’”

His eyes bulge so much they look like billiard balls. “Dick.”

“Right?”

“*Dick*.”

Obviously, Cal must have forgotten that he wasn’t particularly nice about my artwork at school either. Ironically,



his words are the most comforting I can imagine. “That’s what I’ve been saying. It’s unforgivable.”

“Okay, let’s be calm. What’s done is done. Fuck him. Who cares what some stuck-up art idiot had to say?” He pauses for a beat. “Your girlfriend’s right: Your work’s amazing, especially your new stuff. I’m not just saying that because you’ve massively improved your taste in subject.”

I can’t help smiling as he talks about himself. Pushing past him and returning to the kitchen, I finish cleaning up. I haven’t gotten a chance to immortalize him on paper since the secret drawing night, only in smaller sketches drawn from memory.

“If you decide to exhibit again, would the idiot be there?”

“Of course he would be, yes. He’s everywhere.”

Cal rolls his eyes exaggeratedly, making me want to hug him. “How long ago was his review?”

“A few years. Three.”

“Oh, you definitely have to call the gallery,” Cal insists. “You’re raw, real talent. I told you that, everybody can see it, and every time I catch a glimpse of what you’re working on, it blows me away.”

I consider his words and what Kaylin told me before she left. In the back of my mind, I feel myself giving in a bit. It *would* be nice to get back into the local art scene. I’ve been away from it for so long.

*Of course* I’m mad at myself for placing so much value on someone else’s opinion that it crushed my confidence. Made me think that art wasn’t my calling, even though it’s my favorite thing in the world.

“I wouldn’t even know what to say.”

“You say, ‘Hi, I’m Josie, and I’m exactly what your gallery needs.’ It’s not that hard.”

“For you, maybe. It is for me.”

“Babe. You gotta take risks.” He grabs a sponge and cleans the counter with me. “You said it yourself: You’re going to

jump back into art. This is the perfect time.”

“I’m just not confident that I have enough strong work prepared yet to succeed,” I explain, placing the business card carefully in my sketchbook. “I can’t go in unless I am one hundred percent confident I’m showing the best I’ve got. You only get so many chances in life.”

The next thing I know, strong arms slide around my waist.

“Listen up, I’ve got something to tell you,” he says. “It’s *important.*”

I freeze.



## CAL



“Are you listening?” I brush a strand of blonde hair from her face.

“I am,” she says stiffly, probably expecting the worst.

“I’m not a preacher, and I hate preaching, and I feel it’s a fucking joke when I, of all people, give fucking advice, because I barely know what I’m doing myself half the time.”

I notice the corners of her lips curve upward a little. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“Good. Because you need to get something into your head.” I softly tap her forehead twice. “There’s no shame in hitting the ground. There’s no disgrace in being wounded, lying there at rock bottom. There’s no humiliation in fucking up. *Everybody* fails. *Everybody* fucks up. Look at me. I hired the wrong contractor. I gave him a second chance, never should have. I involved the wrong investor. There are a million things I regret, things I wish I could take back, but the only thing I can do is to move on, make fucking better decisio—”

“Yeah, but nobody’s laughing at you,” she interrupts, her voice loud.

I stay collected. “What do you mean? *Everybody*’s laughing at me. The construction world’s laughing at me, so is the investment world, and let’s not forget about all the damn motorcycle dealerships. People talk. They’re having the time of their lives over this. The only difference is, I don’t give two shits. Fuck them. This is my dream. Yep, you heard that right, I’m chasing a crazy stupid dream too. Just like you. What I’m

saying is, everybody falls. Everybody has nasty voices in their heads. Everybody deals with fucking demons trying to fuck up their lives. It's how you rise from the ashes when everything around you burns.”

A shiver.

Her eyes lock with mine.

I see a radiant shimmer.

Then a soft breath, and she whisper-says, “That’s the best thing you’ve ever said to me.”

She goes on her tippy toes and kisses my lips, more tenderly than ever before, holds her lips on mine for several seconds, releases and gazes back up into my eyes, beautiful and full of warmth. I see the angel smiling back at me.

My heart thunders at the sight.

“Are you sure that’s the best?” I growl. “I mean, I’ve said some pretty good shit since we’ve—”

I lose my train of thought when she reaches down, stroking my cock over my jeans, then starts unbuckling my belt. Hey there. Uhhh. “Fuck, baby.”

She strokes me eagerly, over and over—*damn*, and I’m so fucking hard—then places her hands over mine and leans back into the touch, grinding herself against my lap.

“Can you tell what I’m thinking right now?” she whispers.

Running my lips down her neck, I growl, “I have *no* fucking idea. Show me.”



**CAL**

## TEN DAYS LEFT



*T*en days left? Since when did I fucking start counting? We're two thirds of the way in. The last twenty days have rushed by like booze hogs on steroids. On a good note, the preps for the grand opening of Ashford Motors next month are coming along nicely, and I can't wait.

Theo's office has been done for some time, and he's been working out of it for the last week or so. While he handles the day-to-day, I organize and reorganize the rare bikes in the showcase room. The rest—four Gixxers (Suzuki GSX-R sport bikes) a GS (BMW GS dual-sport model) and several Classics from one of the collectors I met the other day—will arrive within the week.

We're ready for a soft opening in a few days. Nothing major. Mostly fellow bikers and close friends with connections who we know will get the word out. Our official grand opening will be complete with food, music and gifts.

I'm absolutely in my element. Between my contacts in the city and the great construction crew, we have plenty of new clients waiting for us to open. Not only that, but my dealerships on the West Coast have also brought in record sales for the month. Osborn didn't lawyer up, after all. His wife urged him to, according to word on the street. Vance informed me that a certain clause in the contract he set up after consulting Sanford himself (his infamous boss and strategist at the law firm), prohibited Osborn from pressing charges if a party involved decided to retract within a given time frame



due to an insurmountable viewpoint, and if the full amount was refunded by that date. In a nutshell: We were in the clear.

Everything is exactly how I want it. Yet, I can't help but be bothered. Just a little. I know exactly why. The last week with Josie was fun. Now I can't help the nagging feeling in the back of my mind.

Because at the end of next fucking week, the month with Josie will be over.

"Hey," I say, entering Theo's office. "I'm hungry. Let's grab some lunch."

A ride is exactly what I need. We grab our bikes and ride through the city. But even when doing my favorite thing in the world, I'm still not entirely focused. After riding for about half an hour, Theo and I stop at a local street vendor to grab pizza slices. We eat them while sitting on our bikes.

"So, not long until the end of the month," Theo says. He wipes some tomato sauce off his beard. "Divorce time is right around the corner."

I've been dreading thinking and talking about it for days.

"I gotta say, Theo, I'm gonna miss it."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Say that again?"

"I'm going to miss being married to Josie." *Damn*, it feels good to say it out loud. "This month has been fucking amazing, and I don't know what to do when it's over."

"Just tell her you don't want the divorce," he says.

"It's not that simple. She's already talking about finding a new place. She's ready to move on. Besides, things are going well now, but I'm sure it's only a matter of time before we're at each other's throats again."

"I don't believe that."

He's right. Deep down, I don't believe it either. The words sounded hollow even when I said them. We've come so far since our wedding day. Granted, we still annoy each other, but it's changed. It's evolved. Not to mention we have fun too.

“Maybe not,” I say. “But there are other factors to consider. She’s made it pretty clear that once this month is over, we’re going to go our separate ways.”

“Did you ask her? Maybe she’s having second thoughts like you are.”

“She talks about finding a bigger place all the time. She hasn’t changed her mind. Have you ever known Josie to change her mind?”

We share a look and shake our heads. “No, not really,” Theo agrees, chewing. “But there’s a first time for everything. You won’t know until you talk to her about it.”

“If I can,” I say. “She’s hardly ever at home.”

“I’m sure you’ll find the time.”

“She has back-to-back doubles the next few days to train the new staff.”

Theo lowers his pizza slice, staring at me with wide eyes. “Oh. My. God.”

It makes me stop eating and I frown at him. “What? What’s that about? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I never thought I’d see the day where Callum Ashford is *scared* to talk to a woman.”

“Oh, *fuck* you. I’m not scared. The fucking situation is just complicated as shit.”

“You can say that again.” Theo chuckles while taking a huge bite of his pizza. After he chews it down, he says, “Want me to talk to her for you?”

We grin.

“Get out of my ass.”

He’s not completely wrong. If I’m being honest with myself, a part of me is apprehensive to broach the subject. Things feel like they are falling into place, and I hate the thought of it coming to an end.

We fall into silence, chewing, and finishing our lunch.

Once he's done, Theo hops back onto his bike to head back to the dealership.

“Keep the rubber side down.”

“No cement surfing.”

I decide to swing by The Diner before going home. Maybe I'll be lucky, and Josie will be about done with her shift, so I can drive her home. When I arrive, Daphne, one of the waitresses, tells me that she's already left. That's good news.

Let's see if I can dig a little deeper—subtly, so as not to scare her away and ruin everything—and find out where she stands.



## CAL



To my delight, Josie is home already, lounging on the couch as she sketches. She's wearing earbuds, so she doesn't hear me right away. I take a moment to study her. She's wearing a longer blue flowery skirt and a large fuzzy sweater. Nothing really sexy about the clothes on their own, and yet she looks more beautiful than ever. All she's doing is casually drawing, lose strands of hair in her concentrating face.

She must feel me watching her because she suddenly looks up and jumps. "Goddammit, Cal! You scared me half to death," she snaps and removes her earbuds. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Half an hour." I cross the room to her, enjoying her facial expression. "I'm kidding. I just got back. I thought you were working a double today?"

"Didn't need to," Josie says. "One of the new girls was able to take over the shift. I think Matilda feels bad for all the shifts I've been covering."

"Good, she should."

"Says the man who's busy from morning to night with his opening."

"Yes, that's right," I admit. "But as soon as the shop is up and running, I'll take time off."

Josie moves her legs so I can sit next to her. We've been much more comfortable with each other since we started

having sex.

She leans into my touch with a soft smile. “I keep thinking about what Kaylin suggested. I know I don’t have the time, but I also need to get back into doing more than just sketching. I need to stretch my art muscles again.”

“I’ve got just the thing.”

I get to my feet immediately, and with one swoop from behind my neck, pull my shirt off. I toss it onto the couch.

Josie’s eyebrows shoot up. “I said stretch my *art* muscles. Sex doesn’t exactly do that.”

“I know what you said.” I unbutton my jeans and pull them down over my dick before I place a hand on the back of my head and strike a masculine pose. “Draw me.”

Josie snorts, but there’s a spark in her eyes I can’t overlook. Maybe because of my nakedness, maybe because of my offer.

“What, just like this?” she asks, motioning to me standing there with my jeans and boxers around my ankles.

“Sure.”

“I don’t know,” she says, though her lips are twitching like she’s trying not to smile. “I’ve drawn people I’ve been involved with before—and it doesn’t end well.”

“I’m not your asshole ex. First, you know I support your art and want you to succeed. Second, I have a bigger dick, and bigger balls. Clearly. Third, what better way to get attention than by showcasing this extraordinary example of masculinity?” I gesture to myself, hoicking a thumb at all my *delicious* manhood, and raise and lower my eyebrows.

“Fucking delicious, right?” I tease.

Josie studies me for a second, unable to stop herself from grinning. The next thing she says has me happy along with her.

“Get to the bedroom,” she says in a low voice. “Take off all your clothes. I’ll get my stuff.”

She doesn’t need to tell me twice.

I step out of my clothes, hop out of my socks, foregoing picking them up in favor of getting to the bedroom (fuck me). Before lying on the bed, I do several quick push-ups—you know blood flow and all—then stretch out on the mattress as if it's nothing, waiting. I nudge my dick into a better position. And re-nudge it to an even better one. When Josie comes in, she's carrying the wooden easel I gifted her and a big blank canvas, plus charcoal sticks and pencils, a kneaded eraser (a soft, moldable, gum-like eraser, as she recently explained to me), and a stumping tool (they are used to blend, smear or smudge). It makes me happy that she's using the easel, and has even started treating herself to more art supplies.

The girl means business.

So do I. *Stay down, boy.*

She tries to find a spot to set up, and I hear her mumbling to herself as the easel bumps into various pieces of furniture. "This place is so goddamn small," she grumbles when she finally finds a spot. "But at least it's bigger than my own place." The easel is in the smallest space between the bed and dresser. She gets a stool, sits down, and sets herself up, before taking a deep breath and finally looking my way.

I'm lying on my back with my arm resting under my head. One leg is bent, and the other is straightened out. Even just lying here and thinking about her sketching me has me half-hard. It's very obvious, and I notice Josie eyeing me with appreciation.

"Hot," she says.

"I know, right." I laugh. "Glad you finally noticed."

"Stay still." She begins to draw.

I love the focus she has when she's doing artwork. Her eyes narrow, and she bites her bottom lip while her hand moves wildly across the canvas. She's using charcoal, she's telling me, and within seconds, the tips of her fingers are black. I relax, letting her work. Her eyes swivel between me and the canvas. At one point, she removes her sweater and continues only in a white tank top. It's so tight. No bra. I can

see the outline of her tits, plus I can see her pebbly nipples through the thin fabric.

I start to touch myself.

Josie doesn't notice at first. She's focused mostly on the canvas. But then her eyes slide over, and her hand pauses for a second. I observe the way her chest rapidly starts to rise and fall, and her pupils dilate.

"I'm sorry, am I not staying still enough?" I tease, keeping my tone calm and neutral, still stroking.

There's a beat of silence until Josie smirks. "Do what you want." She's trying to sound aloof but failing miserably. "I'm done with the outline anyway."

"Great."

I keep my eyes on her. Her hand pauses, and her focus is entirely on me.

"How's the drawing looking?" I ask.

"I don't know. Can't focus on it anymore." She stands up.

"But you can finish it without me?"

"Yeah, sure, the shape from my reference is done, I can refine it later..."

"Focus," I order, getting up. "Finish the drawing. How long will it take?"

She sits back down and looks at the canvas. "Well, the 'bare bones' of my sketch are done. About ten to fifteen minutes for the rest," she says. "But, seriously, I can finish later."

"No. Do it now. I want to watch you while you're working on it."

The stool is a little low, but it'll do. In one scoop I lift her up, slide onto the stool under her and put her back on my lap, both of us facing the canvas. Her legs are on the left and right side of mine, and she feels amazing against my body.



She squeaks when I adjust her hips until her ass sits perfectly against my straining dick.

“I will not be able to draw like this, Cal.”

“Concentrate on your drawing, not on me.”

She shrugs her shoulder. “Okay, I will try, *but...*”

“No buts. Hand back on the canvas,” I order. “We know you’ll enjoy it.”

“Okay.” I hear a small chuckle, and she picks her charcoal stick with her already-black fingers, placing it sideways on the canvas. Because of the charcoal’s thin consistency, it gets everywhere—her hands, wrists, arms, cheek—but she’s a pro, there are no unwanted smudges on her paper. The frame displays a beautiful scale with gradations from black to gray to white. Josie’s hand moves quickly to contour her composition, creating a variety of different lines, using the edge of her charcoal for harder lines, then smudging it with her fingers to shade it, and removing small sections for highlights.

Watching her draw, my face close to hers, my stubbly cheek on her ear is increasing my desire. With wicked intention, I run my hands up her side beneath her white tank top to her tits, and she shudders.

“You like this, baby?” I murmur, hearing her gasp as I pluck and twist her nipples. “Does that make your pussy wet?” My lips are all over her neck, kissing and biting.

“Very much, but it’s hard to concentrate,” she rasps breathlessly, now concentrating on adding shadow lines on the shoulder area of my replica.

I widen my legs, spreading hers. She only fights it a little, and I spread them so far, it causes her skirt to fully ride up, allowing me a perfect view of her naked legs. When I run my hands down her waist, over her legs, and under her skirt, she moves her hips.

She wants my touch.

The fabric of her thong is wet, and I feel her dampness against my thighs. My hand reaches into her thong, and her ass

writhes against my cock. Softly, I brush my finger across her clit. Just once. A feather-light touch, but it's enough to cause her to jerk against my finger, with restless need for more friction—friction I don't give her.

“Cal,” she pleads in protest, then points at her canvas, “I messed this up.” She picks up her kneaded eraser to remove a bigger section, and sets it back down. Next, she creates a highlight on my shoulders and arms and settles back into refining the overall tone of the drawing. Subtlety and layering seem to be key, with great attention to the edges. The edges appear to create a sense of realism and depth. Elements in the foreground have harder edges than those more in the distance. Not gonna lie. It's fascinating to watch her breathe life into the male figure on the canvas, who is looking more and more like me.

“Let's get rid of these.” I yank on her thong, and it rips easily.

“Hey,” she exclaims, her words raspy. It's hardly a protest at all. “I liked those.”

“Then next time you come to our bedroom, don't wear any.”

She knows better than to protest again. Because here she is, fully aroused and perfectly bare for me. It is in her breathing, in her gasps. Feeling more of her wetness against my thighs has my cock hard as steel.

My fingers slide down to her pussy, glide over her folds, keeping away from her center, depriving her of what she really wants, sensing her body shudder with each stroke.

She moves her hips in protest, struggling to keep her hand on the canvas, ceasing to draw. “I...can't...concentrate.”

“Keep going. Don't stop.” She returns to the canvas, now smudging and blending some of the lines into lighter, finer areas. Her moves are jerkier than before, but she has enough experience to not let that stop her.

Her skill turns me on, not a question.

Grabbing her hips, I lift her up to position her over my dick.

“Cal,” she bites out. “What...are you doing?”

“Let me be inside you while you continue,” I growl, smiling.

“Really?” she breathes, turning her face to mine. “I won’t be able to keep my hand steady...”

“I’m not fucking you. I want you to work on your masterpiece with my cock inside of you,” I say, grabbing her face and forcing it back to the paper.

I want to reach for a condom, but at this point, I can hardly think straight. She’s on the pill. We’ll be fine. Holding her hips, I slide her down my length slowly, her wet pussy more than eager to take me in.

She moans as she glides down my cock.

Feeling her bare makes me black out a little. Nothing’s between us, she feels like silk—soft, hot, slick silk. Downright perfect.

When I glance down, I can’t hold back a groan. My cock is fully inside her, basically spearing her. Josie places the charcoal back onto the canvas.

I’ve stopped moving, allowing her to regain her composure and pace. She’s capturing the rougher texture of the fabric beneath me and the smoothness of my naked hips. Next, her hand is refining my abs, adding more and more gradual layers with her skillful hand, resulting in matte, deep blacks, and a fascinating contrast between light and dark values. For the most part, I hold still, watching her, giving her time to concentrate.

Now and then I move a little, push my dick in a little, flex it, pulling gasps and protests from her lips. My hands are back on her tits, and each time I squeeze her nipples, her pussy squeezes my cock, and gushes juices down my thighs. It’s beautiful. It takes everything not to start slamming into her, fuck her senseless.

My eyes shift back and forth between the canvas and her. “You look quite exquisite with my cock inside of you. But don’t move. Concentrate.”

She nods.

I let my left hand slide down her stomach, down between her folds. She’s warm, drenched, swollen. Josie’s breath sharpens at my touch. Her sweet cunt feels like satin, her pussy is so soft, but it has the opposite effect on me. My thumb glides across her clit in slow, lazy circles, giving enough pressure to cause her body bliss. Her little button is sensitive and enlarged, and incredibly receptive to my touch.

“Oh, my God...so good.” Her body jerks, and she drops the charcoal stick. “Cal...”

I withdraw my hand mid-circle and deliver a sharp, precise slap on her clit. Her hips buck and a startled cry sneaks past her lips. “I said don’t stop. If I catch you disobeying one more time, I won’t let you come.”

“So...*unfair*,” she croaks from the loss of pleasure and picks up a charcoal pencil, wiping away a mistake with her finger, before placing the tip of her pencil back on the paper. She’s now drawing my dick, quickly capturing the sharpest-looking detail, lifting lighter areas of midtones to smooth transitions.

I resume my tease between her folds, keeping my movements slow, drawing her closer to an orgasm.

By this point, I’m so hard inside of her I can’t think. Watching her detail my dick on paper while I’m stiff, buried deep inside of her, her pussy dripping with need, is one of the most erotic moments I’ve ever experienced.

I let my finger linger on her clit, now and then resuming my teasing, bringing her to the edge, feeling her pussy clench around me each time I brush across her swollen bud. She’s fucking drenched. I want her orgasm to build at a slow speed. At a painful speed. When I pinch her sensitive clit, her back arches and a sexy moan is released from her parted lips. I know it’s taking everything in her not to start moving her hips,

not to start riding me. But it doesn't stop the delicious long moans coming from her lips. Her eyes are glued to the canvas.

“Cal...it's...*torture*,” she whispers in a raspy tone.

She's on the edge, trying her best not to move, not to come all over my cock. “Please, Cal...please...I need to come...I need you,” she begs.

“Hush. I'm going to edge you to the brink until you're done.”

She breathes out in protest, her desperate pussy aching, but she continues her work on the canvas, now adding more detail to my legs.

“Finish the drawing, and I promise we'll fuck. Long and hard. Then I'll let you come.”

She clenches that sweet pussy around my cock, answering me.

Three minutes later, Josie drops the pencil. “Done.”

On the canvas, I look at a perfect replica of myself. Fuck me. What a talent. “Jesus Christ, Josie.”

“The shadow...right?” She breathes heavily, pride in her words.

I nod. “That too. The detail. Everything, really.”

I turn her on my wet lap so she's facing me, my cock still deeply immersed in her.

Softly, I kiss her lips. “And now for your reward.”

“Thank goodness. I need the reward.” Josie grins when I release her. She reaches for the hem of her tank top to yank it off. “Oh, shit,” she says, her hem patchy from her black fingers.

“Don't touch anything,” I warn, my palms curling around her hem.

“Let me run to the bathroom to wash my hands.”

“No. Later. Let me take it off for you.” I yank her tank over her shoulder and toss it somewhere behind us. “You're so

*filthy.*”

Josie is straddling my waist, smiling and holding her dirty little hands away.

I slide my hand up her back and pull her down into a kiss. Her mouth is as hungry as mine. Her tongue juts past my lips, and a muffled moan escapes her.

“Be a good dirty girl and ride me until you come,” I order.

“That’s my reward?” She smiles, my teasing not lost on her.

“That’s your reward.”

Without hesitation, she raises her hips. I’ve never been this sensitive in my damn life. When she slides onto me, she takes her time. But I’ve got no patience for that right now. Grabbing her hips, the skirt still pooling around them, I yank her down while thrusting upward, burying myself in her with one swift movement. Josie gasps, her hands wanting to dig into my chest, but she remembers she can’t, and instead, flexes her fingers.

“That’s a good fucking girl. Yeah, take it. Take every inch.”

“Cal...ohhh...” She rocks her hips while I’m buried inside her, and it’s un-fucking-believable.

God, I fucking love her body. Watching her move above me, her hands not allowed to touch, is the most erotic thing I’ve ever experienced. She looks deliciously dirty. The way her teeth dig into her bottom lip, the way her tits bounce while she moves, the way her wet clit glistens, and the way my fingers look digging into her skin.

Good. I want her to see the marks and think of me. To see them and know she’s mine.

“Cal,” she gasps.

I thrust roughly. “Again. Say my name again.”

“Cal. Callum.”

Everything becomes a blur of writhing flesh and moaning. It's fucking amazing every single time we're together. Nothing compares to this. No matter how much I drive myself into her, it's never enough.

I want more. I want all of her. I need all of her.

"*Babe*, Josie," I grumble, fucking her name with my growl. "I need you to come."

When her body is trembling, I brush my thumb over her clit, thrusting into her while my mouth captures hers. She comes a few seconds later, shuddering while she's calling my name. I leave kisses all over her face and don't last much longer. Losing myself in her body, I grip her hair tighter, exploding inside her, shooting jets—and jets—and jets—of come inside her, filling her.

My mind is blissfully blank, all worries and troubles aside, now that I'm with Josie again.

"**T**hat was *so* hot. I loved it."

"Jesus, woman," I gasp a few moments later, still breathless. "I can't get enough of you."

Giggling, she attempts a hug, but remembers that her hands are still dirty, so I scoop her up and carry her to the bathroom, where we clean up and she washes the charcoal off her hands and everywhere else it left a mark.

Once we're nice and clean, I carry her to the bed to stretch out next to her. My body is humming, and I've never been more content in my life. Josie drapes herself across my chest. "If you're going to model for me, we should limit sexy times because otherwise I'm never going to finish any of my work."

"Or it can be the little treat that inspires you to finish."

"Well, you do inspire me to *finish*."

I playfully gasp. "Oh, my God, did Josie just make a dirty joke?"

"Maybe she's not the goody-goody girl you think she is."

“That’s what I’m coming to realize.”

“Maybe she’s a naughty-naughty girl.”

“That’s perfectly fine with me.”

She rolls off me and sits up.

But before she can go anywhere, I wrap my arms around her waist and yank her back. “Nope, you’re not leaving yet.”

“Cal, I’ve gotta keep this inspiration going.”

“I know, but you’re always on the go. Take ten minutes to relax.”

“I’m always on the go? All I’m doing is working. *You’re* the one always running out the door to hang with Theo or the guys.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere tonight. Neither are you. We both have the time to relax.”

“You just want me to relax so you can grope me some more.”

“And your point is?” She laughs at my response, and I say, “I’ll make you a deal. You rest for a bit, and *I’ll* draw *you*.”

She looks at me with wide eyes. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, this I have to see. Let me at least get my sketchbook.”

I sit up and gently toss her onto the pillows. “I’ll get it.”

It takes me a few seconds to collect her book from the living room where she had abandoned it earlier. When I return, she’s stretched out in the middle of the bed, on her stomach, and I take a second to admire all her naked glory.

“Pencil’s over there by the bed,” she tells me.

“Jesus, woman.” I give her a slap on that delicious round ass because: man. Josie squeaks and wiggles it delightfully in response. She pushes her ass up higher, and I smack it again, of course, because: same reason.



“Okay, get comfortable,” I tell her, grabbing the pencil and sitting on the edge of the bed. There, I flip the red book open to a blank page. She has been busy. There are hardly any blank pages left.

Josie props her chin on her hand as she lies on her stomach, her legs kicked up in the air and crossed at the ankles. Sexy. Very sexy.

Well, let’s see.

This should be doable.

I’ve been watching her enough to basically be an expert.

I start to sketch her, my eyes darting between her and the page as I fill it with lines. Ha. I’m not half bad at this. Another line here, and one there, very good. More and more of her beauty is uncovered in my drawing. Playing hooky from art class wasn’t a detrimental mistake after all. Sure, it’s tough, and it takes most of my concentration, but not enough that I don’t admire how fucking sexy she looks. God, she’s flawless. Just like the girl on my paper.

“Okay, ten minutes are up,” Josie says not too long after. I should have known she was keeping an eye on the clock.

“All right, you ready to see this masterpiece?” I ask.

“Absolutely.”

I turn the page around.

And Josie bursts into laughter.

Yeah, okay, the drawing is questionable. Barely a step above a stick figure. This shit is harder than it looks. Still, I’m incredibly proud of it, and seeing Josie amused makes me grin.

“I know, we should do a joint art show,” I say with exaggerated pride. “I don’t like to throw the term ‘genius’ around, but come on. Just look at this.”

Josie is still cracking up, and now tears are streaming down her cheeks. Her face is bright red, and she’s on her back, her hand pressed to her stomach. “Oh, my God,” she blurts through peals of laughter. “I...can’t...breathe.”

“It’s not an exact interpretation. I took some liberties,” I continue, loving what the ongoing joke is doing. I’m determined to keep it rolling as long as I can. I’ve never seen her this carefree and happy. I keep talking and talking, explaining my profound thinking process behind my artistic triumph, my opus—the defining masterpiece of my career.

Once in a while, she looks at the drawing only to burst out in laughter again. “Cal...I can’t stop. It’s so funny it hurts.”

Eventually, I crack and join in, laughing along with her and tossing the sketchbook off to the side. “All right, fuck motorcycle dealership, new career, and I’m going all in. Mr. Art Douche won’t know what hit him,” I say, lying next to her.

Once I squeeze her against my chest, I caress her soft cheeks. “At least you know whatever you draw will never be as fucking bad as that,” I rumble softly.

“Fair point,” she says, still giggling.

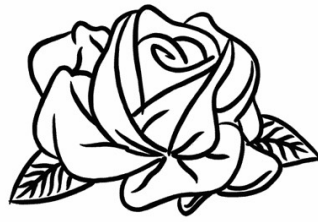
This is paradise. A beautiful naked woman in my bed, happy and carefree and looking at me like I’m everything she ever wanted.

Like I’m the fucking king of the world.



**JOSIE**

## NINE DAYS LEFT



I'm humming to myself as I head back to work. The image of Cal's "utterly exquisite drawing" creeps into my mind now and then, and I start giggling all over again. I've never seen something so peculiar and hysterical in my life. It was like Cal started the drawing with a stick figure and just added on body parts. Hilarious. He's still a mystery to me. How can the boy who made fun of my picture and set it on fire back then have no trouble making fun of his own drawing style?

We had such a great time yesterday.

We spent the night in that room with Cal doing various poses while I filled canvas after canvas. By the time we went to bed, I had several new drawings. They're mostly done too. I just need to go in and work on some finer details.

Cal is *the best* model. I'm not kidding.

True, he's striking and an Adonis of a man. But he's also patient. He doesn't complain, doesn't make a face, or give me attitude when I ask him to move slightly, or when he had to stay perfectly still. When my ex would pose, he was always bitching about it, to the point where I felt so rushed and eventually stopped asking him to do it.

Cal is the exact opposite. Some poses were his idea, and while I drew, we chatted about everything and nothing. My heart hurts knowing that our time together is limited. There are only a couple of days—nine, to be exact—left in the month before we get divorced and return to our separate lives.

I'm so lost in thought when walking into The Diner that I don't even notice Matilda is here already. Her office door opens as I head to the back to clock in.

She pokes her head out. "Josie! I'm so glad you're here. Come into my office. I want to talk to you."

A sinking feeling settles in my stomach, and I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Sure thing." I enter her office and close the door behind me.

Matilda gives me that sweet smile of hers and motions to the other chair. "Please, sit. Just give me a second to finish something..."

I sit, my hands tightly clasped together. She doesn't talk to me right away, too busy going through the mountain of paperwork on her desk. The result is me stewing in anxious silence, waiting for her to speak up. When she's done with whatever it is she was doing, she turns to give me her full attention.

"I take it you know why I want to talk to you," she starts brightly.

"I have an idea."

Her smile widens. "Josie, it's no secret that I want you to take over for me. Over the last month, I've purposefully been taking time off to see how things run in my absence. You've done such an amazing job. I'm ready to finally ask you, officially—will you take over the diner for me when I retire?"

Matilda has already told me that when I take over the diner, she will retain ownership of the property until I can afford to buy her out, and at that point in time, I'll only be running the business. She's offered me a more-than-fair price for the property when I'm ready (Matilda is so, so sweet!). With the inheritance—and given the economy stays the course—I should be able to afford the sum she's asking for in a few years, and without the inheritance, in about two decades. One of her conditions, however, is that I can't resell the place before she dies and must be the one actively managing it.

She's going to consult with a real estate lawyer to draw up the paperwork and discuss payment options to find the best possible solution. As of now, and based on our research, a lease to buy agreement seems to be the best way to go. It's a binding, legal document that reveals ownership, and an accountant will keep track of payments until the remainder of the loan is paid off. It's perfect.

Still, the answer comes to me without even needing to think about it. I want to turn it down. I want to tell her no, that as much as I appreciate her and her offer, it's not what I want.

I open my mouth—and nothing comes out.

I can't speak. I look into her wide, hopeful eyes, and the protest dies in my throat.

Will it really be so bad? I mean, The Diner has a full staff and will run fine. Being the manager and owner will give me all the flexibility I need, and I'll still be able to work on my art on the side. Besides, it's going to take a while for all that to take off. And what happens if my art never takes off? The Diner is my safety net. I can do both for a while if I need to.

I also don't want to disappoint Matilda for no reason.

"Okay," I agree, before I can talk myself out of it.

Matilda beams, standing from her seat and pulling me into a tight hug. "Oh, *Josie*. Thank you! I'm *so* happy. This takes such a weight off my shoulders, sweetie. I'm not going to be leaving immediately. There's a lot I still need to take care of logistically before I sign everything over to you. We'll need to hire another waitress which shouldn't be too difficult..."

I lose track of what she's saying after that.

She's so happy, beaming with the brightest smile I've ever seen. I want to be happy for her. Part of me is. It really is. She deserves to retire and spend the rest of her life doing what she wants. She's earned it after the blood, sweat, and tears she's poured into this place, making it as successful and beautiful as it is. But my stomach still has a sinking feeling, a feeling I don't think is going to go away anytime soon.

I have to ignore it—I have to push forward with my decision. This is the right thing to do. It’s something I knew was coming and had been putting off deciding until now. It’s going to be fine. Everything will be fine.

“Any questions?” Matilda asks.

I realize I missed half of what she said. “Not right now. I’m sorry, I’m just taking it all in. You’ve given me a lot to process.”

Matilda smiles, stroking my shoulder. “I understand. It *is* a lot. Again, I’m not leaving right away, so there’s plenty of time to learn everything.” She looks at her watch. “Oh, breakfast is going to start soon. You should head out and get prep going.”

I nod, getting to my feet. “Sure thing.”

Matilda stands again as well and gives me another hug, which I return. “You’re the best, Josie. I hope you know that.”

Kaylin is in the dining room, and has already started the morning routine. When she notices me, she knits her brow. “Josie, are you okay? You look a little pale.”

“Matilda just talked to me,” I tell her.

“And?”

“And...she did exactly what we thought she was going to do.”

Her eyes widen. “She asked you to take over?”

I nod.

“What did you say?”

“I told her I’d do it.”

Instead of congratulating me, Kaylin steps closer and says in a low voice, “And you are not happy about that.”

“It’s a huge opportunity. Besides, it’s not like we didn’t know this was coming.”



Kaylin's expression softens. "If this is really what you want, you know I'll support you."

Of course it's not what I want. Not deep down. I know that now more than ever. But how can I disappoint Matilda? After everything she's done for me? She's been counting on me to take over for years. This was always the plan. I can't do that to her.

"I'll be fine, Kaylin," I assure her. "It's going to be good. Besides, this means you and I can finally implement some of those changes we've been wanting to make for a while. Like the schedule overlapping and stuff."

Kaylin's smile doesn't quite reach her eyes, and I know she can sense I'm putting on a brave face. "That'd be awesome," she says. "You're going to be *so* great."

I give her a quick hug. "Come on, let's get to work. We open soon."

When the breakfast rush starts, I'm grateful to throw myself into my work. It keeps my mind focused on something other than the momentous changes quickly approaching. It also reminds me how much I love this job and the people I encounter. The more of the day that passes by, the more I warm to the idea of taking over.

I've always wanted to move the tables around for better flow. Oh, my God, and I can paint over this—let's face it—hideous pink color and get cuter uniforms for the waitresses. All this might have been cute in the past, but I believe we can do so much better. In between rushes, Matilda has me sit with her while she goes over some of the finer details of restaurant management.

**B**y the time I get home, my head is spinning.

Cal isn't home when I get there. It's crazy how, without realizing it, I've started thinking of the apartment as my home. I haven't thought about my old place in weeks, aside from the occasional text from my friend who's subletting the apartment in my absence. I take some time to unwind, but

can't seem to turn off my brain. Not even my sketchbook provides relief. I start to draw, but get so distracted that I end up staring off into space.

When Cal arrives home, that's how he finds me: sitting on the couch, pencil loose between my fingers, as I stare out the window.

"Hello, Earth to Josie," he says, his fingers softly brushing my head.

I blink, returning to myself. "Oh, hey. I didn't hear you come in."

"Clearly." He collapses next to me on the sofa, throwing his arm around my shoulders. "What's up? You look like you have a lot on your mind."

"You can say that again."

"Come on, talk to me. What are husbands for?"

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, busying myself with closing my sketchbook and putting my supplies away. "Matilda pulled me aside this morning to talk to me."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's fine. She wanted to officially ask me to take over The Diner when she retires."

Cal rubs my shoulder soothingly. "How did she take it when you turned her down?"

I bite my lip and look away from him. "I didn't."

His hand stops moving. "What do you mean you didn't?"

"I didn't turn her down. I said I'd do it."

When I look up at Cal, he's frowning. "Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

"I mean, it *is* a good financial opportunity, but there are better financial opportunities out there—especially if you factor in the inheritance. Why did you agree to take over running a diner when you have other plans, when you have no interest in it?" It's apparent by his tone of voice that he's upset.

“That’s not entirely true. I mean, I have *some* interest in it. Besides, it’s not like her request blindsided me. I knew it was going to happen.”

“Yeah, and I thought once you got your inheritance you were going to focus on your art.”

“I still am.”

“How the hell are you going to be able to do that when you have a whole other business to run? Do you know how much time goes into running a business?”

“Why are you getting all bent out of shape about this?” I ask, growing frustrated. “It’s my life and my decision.”

Cal snorts and gets to his feet. “Yeah, sure it is.”

I don’t like his tone of voice or what he mumbles under his breath. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that once again, Goody-Goody Josie is doing what she’s told, instead of deciding for herself.”

I hate when he calls me that.

Who the hell does he think he is?

Just because we’re sleeping together doesn’t mean that he gets to judge me or the choices I make. “Screw you, Cal,” I snap, getting to my feet. “You have no idea what kind of situation I’m in. I couldn’t just turn her down.”

“Of course you could. It’s easy. All you had to say was, ‘I’m not interested.’ Simple as that.”

“Nothing is *ever* that simple.”

“It is if you’re not scared to take a risk!”

“This has nothing to do with taking risks,” I snap. My anger mounts the longer we argue. I can’t help it. I’ve been taking care of myself and making my own decisions my entire adult life. I don’t answer to anyone, especially not *him*. Him, of all people! He doesn’t get a say in what I do. He doesn’t get to make comments on my choices.

“Then what’s stopping you, Josie?” he presses. “What’s scaring you about moving on from that place?”

“Matilda was there for me when no one else was! She’s been like a mother to me these last few years. How can I look her in the eye and tell her that all the time and energy she put into helping me, teaching me, was for nothing? Besides, it’s not like I was going to quit the diner once the inheritance came through. There’s no harm in staying on longer. As the manager and owner, I’ll be able to set my own schedule, do things my way—”

“We both know that you will work harder than anyone else. Don’t kid yourself. But that’s not the point, Josie,” Cal interrupts. “The point is that you’re an artist. You’re meant to be drawing and creating. Don’t use the diner as an excuse not to follow your dreams.”

“That’s not what’s happening here,” I nearly shout.

“Bullshit! That’s *exactly* what’s happening.”

“No, it’s *not*. What’s happening here is someone is depending on me, and I’m not going to let them down. I can’t let them down. Not that *you* would know anything about that.”

There’s a pause.

Cal’s eyes flare. “Excuse me?”

My body is shaking with rage, and I have to clench my hands into fists to stop the trembling. I’ve never been this angry in my life. “You don’t know me! You don’t get to judge me,” I snap. “You only have yourself to worry about! You have no idea what it means to have someone depend on you so much that you can’t even entertain the thought of disappointing them. You do whatever you want, when you want. You always have! So don’t you *dare* stand there, trying to tell me how to live my life when you’ve *never* been in my shoes.”

“That’s unfair and not true, and you know it. But we’re not talking about *me*,” Cal snaps back. “We’re talking about *you*. This is not me judging you. We’re talking about how you never stand up for yourself.”

“I never stand up for myself? Are you kidding me?”

“Josie, for fuck’s sake, you have a chance here to make your dreams come true, and you’re throwing it away.”

“I’m not throwing *anything* away. I’m still going to do my art. And sell it.”

“When? Because Kaylin has given you this amazing opportunity to do just that, and you keep coming up with excuses.”

“They’re not excuses!”

“Of course they are.”

He doesn’t get it. He’s not listening. Why did I ever think something could happen between us? There’s a reason Cal and I have always butted heads. He just doesn’t get it, and he’s not even trying to.

“I’m done here,” I say, making a move toward the hallway. I need to get out of this room before I do or say something I regret. “I’m not having this argument with you. I don’t have to answer to you or explain myself. God, I can’t wait for this month to be over!”

“You don’t mean that.”

It’s the tone of his voice that makes me stop and turn back around.

Cal’s expression is no longer angry. His features have softened, and his eyes are so goddamn piercing that I can’t look away.

“Tell me you don’t mean that,” he demands.

His words do little to sway my anger. Stepping up to him, I poke him in the chest with my finger. “Stop trying to tell me what I do and don’t mean or want,” I say. “This is my life, Cal. My decision. If you care for me at all, then you’ll respect that.”

He reaches out and closes his hand around mine. “It’s because I care for you that I’m telling you to change your

mind,” he says. “Josie, don’t think about what others want or expect from you. What does *your* heart desire most?”

I stare at him, my body charged for an entirely different reason now that his hand is touching mine. “A lot of things.”

“No.” Cal shakes his head. “Sorry, baby girl, not good enough. Why don’t you think about it some more?”

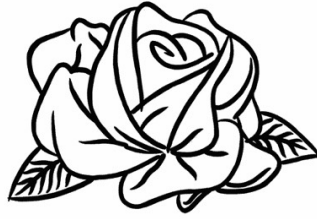
With that, he leaves the room.



**JOSIE**



ONE WEEK LEFT



*H*ow did everything become so messy? Before this whole inheritance thing, I knew what each day held.

I had consistency and some level of security.

Now, everything has changed.

Cal's made me question my life, my desires, and it's turned me upside down.

*What does your heart desire most?*

I never gave him an answer, and he didn't push.

Huh. It's funny that I didn't have that answer until he asked the question. I want to throw my arms around his neck.

But I can't.

I know I shouldn't.

Wanting to kiss Cal so badly scares me more than anything.

In just under three weeks, he—the man I've hated almost all my life—has become the linchpin of my world. Everything stands and falls with him. With his smile. His touch. Being close to him like this is unlike anything I have ever experienced.

I don't want to think about what happens next. Believing in a happy ending would be madness. It would be so dumb.

How can I really trust his heart? How will I know that he won't dash mine into a million little pieces once I open it up to

him? We can't even have civilized discussions instead of shouting (guilty), bickering (guilty), and death stares (guilty).

What does my heart desire most?

Doing what feels right when it comes to Matilda.

Expressing myself through my art. Drawing and creating, no matter what the result is, putting my whole heart into it.

Knowing that Cal won't ever drop me. That he encourages me. Drives me. *Gets* me. That he'll hold me in his arms and protect me. That I can argue with him and never have to worry about losing him after a disagreement. That I can for once in my life experience feeling perfectly safe.

Feeling understood.

This. *This* is what my heart wants.

And so, for my sake, for my sanity, this is where it has to end.

I start sleeping on the couch again.

As much as I love sharing a bed with Cal, love waking up in his arms, our time together is almost over, and I need to put space between us. It'll be easier if I break things off now. If I don't, I won't be able to when the time comes. Doing it is just going to get harder, the longer it goes on.

"Why are you sleeping out there?" Cal asks the first night.

"I think it's best this way."

"Josie, don't." He shakes his head in protest. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to be this way."

"Yes, I do."

He studies me with an unreadable expression and drops the subject.

A strange tension settles between us. It's not hostile or angry. I almost wish it was, because then I would know how to respond to it. What settles between us is uncertainty. We don't know where we stand with each other. Does he know he has

turned my world upside down? That I'm terrified of what will happen to me if I bite the bullet and follow my heart?

One thing is for sure: I will never be the person he wants me to be. I'm not spontaneous. I just can't live for the day, or jump headfirst into the abyss without a safety net.

I don't know where I stand with him.

No, that's not entirely true. I don't know where I *want* to stand. I'm a mess of confusion and conflicting emotions.

Our time together is ending. Do I want it to end? It'd be crazy to stay married. Do I want to remain married, or just stay with Cal? Does he want to stay with me?

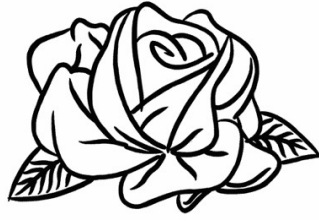
I haven't seen much of Cal over the last few days, and I imagine he's also taking the opportunity to distance himself. He's busy preparing for his grand opening.

It's hard to fall asleep the first night back on that couch. Questions race through my mind over and over until I fall into an uneasy sleep. But after that, it gets easier. It makes me believe that putting space between us is the best option. Exhaustion from work over the next few days also helps me pass out quickly.



**JOSIE**

THREE DAYS LEFT



## Friday

Matilda is in full training mode. I spend most of my day bouncing between her office and the dining room. I never fully realized how much was involved in managing The Diner. There's a lot more to organize behind the scenes (that is: behind the office door) than I ever imagined. If one of my colleagues got sick or had to take care of a sick child, Matilda would ask me, and I'd fill in. Now I have to organize replacements, make sure that food deliveries arrive as scheduled and are sorted as quickly as possible, that the cleaning crew does a good job, that the cash register is correct at the end of the day, and if it's not, determine why. From serviettes to frying fat and fresh eggs, nothing should be missing, which is why I check the stocks and reorder. I have to ensure food quality and safety, maintain cleanliness, and track reports to monitor the diner's operating costs. I need to see to compliance with regulations, and of course, plan and keep an eye on marketing and promotion. The list goes on and on and on. I've done many of these things many times, but never all in one day. It's super exhausting, and I'm whirling around like a dervish, knowing I'll go to bed tired and content tonight.

I suppose it would be different if my heart was fully in it. But as hard as I try to get excited about it, it's quickly becoming apparent that I'm not.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Matilda says one day. "But I also know you can do this. I have every bit of faith you'll do just fine, sweetie. You're my superstar."

"I'll be okay," I assure her. "It's a big adjustment. I'm sure after some time I'll get used to it, no problem."

"Absolutely. Which is why I want you to take over the managerial duties starting Monday."

My heart rate spikes. "Monday? Do you mean, *this* Monday? I thought you weren't going anywhere for weeks."

Matilda gives me a bright smile and a nod. “That’s right. This coming Monday. It’s the perfect day. Monday’s the first day of the month. I haven’t forgotten—your obligations as Cal’s wife will be done on Sunday evening. You’ll be back in your old apartment and regular life. See, I’ve thought of everything. I even set up an appointment with a lawyer with the plan to hopefully sign the papers next Friday. How exciting is that? You’ve got a whole week to get the hang of things, and I’ll be here every day to help out and answer any questions you’ve got. Wait, it gets better. Instead of you shadowing me over the next few weeks, I’m going to shadow *you*. Let you get a feel for it before I officially step down. How does that sound?”

It sounds terrifying. Not because I can’t do it, but because the whole thing about taking over the diner is getting serious. I should be happy. After all, this is what I’ve been working towards. This was the agreement between Matilda and me. The Diner has always been an integral part of my future, even after I found out about the inheritance.

“Great. Whatever you think is best.”

Matilda’s smile widens, and she reaches out to pat my hand. “I’m so happy that you agreed to take over. Knowing the old girl is in good hands makes me feel better about retiring.”

At that, I smile back and squeeze her hand. “You’ve done so much for me over the years, Matilda. You’ve been like a mother to me.” I need to tell her this, to get it out, because it’s true. In her eyes, I see she needed to hear my words as well. “I can’t even begin to repay you for your kindness and support. I hope this is a start.” When her warm eyes meet mine, I feel terrible. I need to believe I’m making the right decision. Because I am.



When I arrive home that night, I take a moment to catch my breath. Cal isn’t home.



Kicking out of my shoes, I decide to take advantage of the sudden burst of energy I have and start to pack my things. There's so much more stuff than I had when I arrived on my first day, and what I do have has made its way around the apartment.

Especially my art supplies.

Luckily, Cal hasn't given me a hard time about it. I toss my phone to the side and scramble around the room to collect my sketchbook and canvases. Looking at all the many drawings in my hands makes my heart ache. I flip through the pages of my book. *They are so good.* Surprisingly, there are many good ones.

I flip, and flip, and flip, feeling happier as I go.

A card falls out.

I pick it up, and see it's the art gallery business card.

I stare at it, flipping it around in my fingers. For once, I can't find a single excuse for not calling Bryce Armbruster.

What it boils down to: I hate being stagnant.

And, Cal's right—I have to take a risk.

I have to shoot my shot.

After not even one minute of collecting and organizing my things and mulling things over in my brain, I've made a decision that even flusters me.

I'm going to call the art gallery guy.

You know, give the good old impulse another shot.

Right now.

Because honestly, screw off, Professor Osgood Ramstraat. Screw. You. Screw you, and your mean, stupid article, and for being such a jackass on the biggest day of my life. I'm going to prove you and the whole art world wrong. For years, your criticism was my mantra—I'm not good enough.

It's over. Revenge is a dish best served cold, so they say. My revenge burns like a thousand fires—and it is a need to

prove Ramstraat wrong.

I can draw.

I am an artist.

Now, if you'll excuse me, Mr. *Chumphead*, I have an important phone call to make.

The art world is waiting.

Gosh, I miss the girl I was before the review.

Talking to Kaylin's friend Bryce won't hurt—at all. I take out my phone and dial his number with trembling fingers.

"Hi, this is Josephine," I say. "I got your number from my friend Kaylin, who's a friend of a friend."

"Hey, Josephine. Bryce Armbruster speaking. You're not Josephine Graham by any chance?"

"The one and only," I reply jokingly, wondering for a moment if he knows my name from the Ramstraat magazine article three years ago. Surely, he must know.

Armbruster chuckles. He has a smooth, calming voice, and even though my heart is going a mile a minute, I'm instantly put at ease. "Josephine? May I call you Josephine?" he asks, but doesn't wait for my answer. "Meet with me next week. No obligations. No expectations. We'll just talk about art, and you can show me your newest portfolio."

"Sure, let's meet," I agree before I lose my nerve. "When would be good for you?"

"Well, I'm deep in this month's show, so the only time I have available is Friday. Friday the fifth. Does that work?"

Friday. Why does it have to be Friday? Life is crazy. That's the day I'm supposed to sign the papers and officially take over from Matilda.

"What time?" I ask. The meeting with the lawyer isn't until late afternoon.

"Around 9:00 a.m.? Here in my office...or you know what? There's a cute little café right across the street that

makes a mean cup of coffee.”

“Great. I’ll be there.”

“Wonderful! Can’t wait to meet.”

I end the call before I can change my mind.

Dammit. Why did I do that?

But this is such a huge opportunity, deep down I know I can’t let it pass me by. Also, the meeting won’t take any longer than an hour or two. Tops.

I find myself more excited than anything else. Stirred, intoxicated, almost feverish. I sink onto the couch, twirling my phone nervously between my fingers.

It’ll be fine. This is a good thing.

My stomach rolls, and a wave of nausea washes over me. Oh, God, here comes the anxiety. I close my eyes and take a deep breath in through my nose before exhaling through my mouth. The nausea doesn’t subside for some time.

It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be fine.

Oh, crap, I need to update my portfolio. I need to take out the drawings of my ex and put in the newer ones of Cal. They’re some of my best work, and the more I think about showing my stuff to Mr. Armbruster, the more enlivened I get.

I can’t wait to tell Cal about my meeting.

I won’t bring my sketchbook and the canvases to the café of course, that’d be too much to carry. My portfolio is digitized in a folder on the cloud. I’ll need to take photos and add them to my online folder. But which ones to add? I’ve done so many over the last month that there’s a wide range to choose from.

Cal finds me in the living room about an hour later, surrounded by artwork. I must look like a madwoman with my hair in a messy bun and my work clothes still on. Charcoal covers my hands and arms from handling my drawings.

Actually, I might have smudges on my face too. Not entirely sure.

“Hey,” he says on his way to the bedroom. When he sees the mess of artwork and the look on my face, he halts. “What’s going on? You okay?”

I look up from my sketchbook. “I’m fine.”

“Josie, you have crazy eyes.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah, and charcoal across your forehead. And on your cheek. What’s going on?”

“I called Mr. Armbruster a little while ago.”

He pauses.

“The art gallery guy.”

His lips curve up slightly. “And...?”

I take a deep breath and get to my feet. “I agreed to meet with him. Next Friday, 9 o’clock. In a café across from his gallery.”

Cal’s face breaks into a grin. “That’s awesome, Josie! I’m glad I didn’t have to call him myself.”

“Call him yourself? I would have been *so* pissed if you’d decided to butt in!”

“I wouldn’t have butted in.”

“Wait. Pushed me? Smoothed the bumpy road for me? Made sure I didn’t cave?” I can feel my temper boiling up.

“No. Helped *him* out. I would have made sure he didn’t let the opportunity to meet New York’s finest up-and-coming artist fly by.”

“Oh.” Not what I expected. My shoulders drop. My temper dissipates in a heartbeat. That was actually so sweet. “Well, good.”

“Good.” He gathers me into his arms and spins me around.

I shout in surprise. “Oh, God, put me down! You’re going to make me sick!”

My stomach rolls again, and I have to hold my breath until he puts me down. I must look awful because Cal’s smile fades. “Hey, hey, you okay? You look pale.” He uses his hand to rub the charcoal from my face.

“No, I’m not okay,” I admit. “I’m freaking out and a complete mess. The meeting is on Friday…”

“You got this, babe.”

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

“But Friday is also the date I’m supposed to officially take over from Matilda.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll just tell Matilda that I’ll be in late.” She’ll understand. I don’t need to tell her more than that.

Cal grins again. “Great. I’m so glad you’re going through with the meeting. Go kick ass.”

Just when I have the funniest retort of my life ready, the nausea returns. “I’m going to throw up.”

“Well, don’t do that.”

“Gee, thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Cal chuckles and sits on the couch, pulling me down with him. “Relax. Take a deep breath. Is the meeting why you made our living room a mini gallery of your stuff?”

I nod, looking around. “First, it was because I started packing, but after the phone call, I realized that I need to update my portfolio. I’m trying to decide which new works to add.”

“Okay, why don’t you work on that, and I’ll order us some food.”

“I’m not hungry.” Anxiety and exhaustion have taken away my appetite.

“Babe, you need to eat something,” he says, concern lacing his voice. “You’ve barely eaten over the last few days. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

*He called me “babe” again. Twice.* A (foolish) part of me feels madly excited, even though I know I shouldn’t. But I’m glad we’ve left our fight in the past. “I’ve been too exhausted.”

“Not eating isn’t going to help. I’ll order something light.”

For the first time in days, he pulls me into a hug and presses a soft kiss to my forehead. My body seems to breathe a sigh of relief. I didn’t realize how much I craved his touch until I went days without it. There’s still a bit of tension, but it’s not as thick as before. Maybe we can be friends, after all. That’s better than nothing. I don’t want to lose him completely.

“Or you can just get the cheesiest, greasiest pizza you can find,” I suggest.

Cal laughs. “Deal. That actually sounds really good.” He studies me for a second, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Are we okay?”

I can’t help but close my eyes and savor the touch, no matter how brief. “We’re okay,” I assure him, smiling. “For now. Maybe not in twenty minutes if you don’t order that pizza.”

Cal kisses my forehead. “Yes, wifey.”



**CAL**



TWO DAYS LEFT



## Saturday

The soft opening was bumpier than expected, but still fairly positive, given the size of the shop. We tested our systems and procedures, and a select group of fellow bikers gave feedback. It was a good opportunity to showcase the facility and models to close prominent friends. We have a couple of days to nail any necessary adjustments before opening to the general public next Saturday. The last bikes should arrive by then, as well.

“Hey, are we going for drinks tonight?” Theo asks after everybody has left. It’s late.

“No, I’m beat.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“Can’t,” I tell him. “It’s my and Josie’s last day. Technically. Vance, the lawyer, is going to be there at 8:30 p.m.”

“Man, I’m sorry. I know how much you care about her.”

“I’m not giving up without a fight. I’m going to make her dinner and tell her I want her to stay with me. Before Vance arrives.”

Theo quirks an eyebrow. “Dude, that’s a fucking great idea. You cooking?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

He chuckles. “Kaylin thinks Josie doesn’t want to leave either.”

It’s my turn to raise my eyebrows. “You two talking?”

“We’ve been texting almost every day. I like her. She writes cute texts. With smiley faces and shit. Her first message cracked me up.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“She told me thank you for my number, and that she’s single.”

“What did you say?”

He finds the message and reads it aloud: “It’s okay that you don’t have a man. Let me be the man to take you out on a date.”

“She liked it? Despite the overuse of the word ‘man?’”

“Hell yeah. I told her I’m game for anything. She’s been super busy with work, but we’re going on our first date next week. Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Well. She said *maybe*.”

I clap Theo on the back. “I’m happy for you, man.”

“Nah, you better wish me luck. She’s still living with her parents. She’s told me stories of her dad. Looks like he’s gonna shoot me the second I show up on his porch. Should I get a haircut? Trim my beard? Cover up some of these tats somehow? You know?”

“*Loser*.”

He sighs. “With a capital L.”

“Sounds like you need a bulletproof vest, not a haircut.”

His eyes grow huge. “Anyway. Back to Josie, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled when you ask her to stay.”

“Let’s hope so. I mean, if she’s going to be looking for a new place anyway, it doesn’t make sense for her to go to her old apartment only to move again later. We should just stay together and find a bigger place for both of us.”

Theo studies me for a second. “You’ve thought this through a lot, haven’t you?”

“Ever since she started sleeping on the couch again. I hate the distance between us, hate that this stupid timeline from the will is keeping her from seeing what’s right in front of her.”

“I hope for your sake she says yes. You’re my bro, and I like Josie. But if she breaks your heart, I’m gonna have to have words with her.”

“You better wear that bulletproof vest.”

“Right.” He grimaces. “I’d probably wear two.”

We grin.

I appreciate Theo’s words. He’s my brother, and I know he’s got my back, just like I have his. “I’ve got this, bro. Not to worry.”

He inclines his head, reaching for his phone. “Let me help you out, *loser*. I’ve got a good realtor on hand. An English girl. Jane Deets. She’s a bit bitchy, probably doesn’t get laid enough, but she’s *the* best of the best. Give her a call.”

That’s perfect.

Yes.

That’s it. That’s *exactly* what I need.

I’ve been meaning to hire a real estate agent to find a larger apartment for me, but haven’t had the time yet. An apartment for both of us will be a nice surprise. I bump Theo’s fist.

Before I head home, I dial Jane’s number. It’s past 11:00 p.m. and I only get her voicemail. I give her a few notes on what I’m looking for, and ask her to call me back tomorrow. I tell her it’s urgent.

When I get home, Josie is still awake. She’s waited up for me. I can’t help but stare at her. She looks at home here, like she belongs.

She *does* belong—with *me*. We share a glass of wine, and she asks me about my day. I ask her about hers. There’s still that lingering tension.

Mid-sip, Josie pauses, eyes meeting mine. “Is everything all right?”

I smile. “You’re gorgeous.”

She smiles back and empties her glass.

Just when I’m about to say, “Josie, I want you to stay with me,” she stands and reaches for our empty glasses to take them to the dishwasher. I grab her hand instead and pull her into a sweet, soft embrace. I want to kiss her, but I don’t want to overwhelm her. Our mouths are touching, but we don’t kiss, we just breathe each other in.

Josie pulls away and says goodnight.

“Wait, one more thing,” I say.

She looks tired. In the better light, I see that her eyes are bloodshot, and there are dark circles underneath, leading me to believe she didn’t get much—if any—sleep the night before. “Long day. Can we talk tomorrow?”

I want to kiss her like the starving, obsessed, mad man I am for her. I’m determined to make her see that we’re meant to stay together. I have to show and tell her how much she has changed my world.

“Sure, first thing, all right?” I say. “Sleep well.”

Not telling her about my plans and our apartment right now is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done in my life. But I pull myself together, because I can see that Josie isn’t receptive.

If my plan works out tomorrow, she’s going to stay.



**CAL**

LAST DAY





## Sunday

The next morning brings rain and a sinking feeling in my stomach. Before I even get up, I know Josie isn't here. I roll over and glance at the time. It's barely seven, which means she must have gotten up and dressed super early, knowing I wouldn't be awake.

With determination, I get out of bed and pull on the first set of clothes I can find. Blue jeans and a soft blue hoodie.

Sunday is the busiest day of the week for Josie, but hopefully she won't be gone all day. I have all kinds of plans for the evening. First, I'm going to order a nice dinner with her favorite dessert. Then, when she's happily eating, I'll tell her that she belongs with me. Hopefully, I can surprise her with a new, big apartment. If she's on the fence, I'll use my voice to be persuasive. Then I'll use other means. I'm ready and willing to "convince" her all night if I have to. Or, until Vance shows up, that is.

It's crazy that I miss her already. She's not even officially gone yet, and my heart feels like it's going to fucking crack.

On the bathroom mirror, I find a sticky note:

*Good morning Cal,  
Two of the girls got sick, and I'm  
filling in.  
My shift ends at 7:30 p.m.  
Sorry! I'll be home before we're  
expecting the lawyer.  
Josie*

*Goddammit.* She literally ran away this morning. I don't care if she's a manager now and has a lot of shit to do. There's too much to talk about, and there's no way we'll be able to hash it all out before Vance gets here tonight, not while Josie is hiding out at work.

As I march through the apartment, heading for the door, I pause long enough to find Josie's things gathered in a *neat* pile in the living room.

A *neat* pile?

What the fuck?

It adds fuel to the already-raging fire. She's already packed, and she made sure to put everything in an *orderly* stack. Since when is this woman orderly? I glance at the couch—even the fucking pillows are neatly arranged. What the actual fuck? And why did she pack? If she thinks she can brush me off and move on like that, she has another thing coming.

No.

I'm not letting her go.

We're good together. She knows it as well as I do.

I'm keeping her.

*Fuck this.*

What the hell is she still so fucking scared of?

I get on my bike and haul ass to The Diner. It doesn't open until eight. I can catch her before she starts her shift. But midway, I slam on my breaks and take the exit to the shop. I'm not going to push any more than I already have. I'm done reminding her over and over again of who she is—an artist dammit—and that her place is in my arms.

The rain is a cold drizzle, but I don't feel it. I'm too fueled by adrenaline to realize I'm not even wearing a coat.

My shirt is almost soaked through when I pull up in front of the dealership. I get in before everyone else. We're keeping an all-star team ready to handle the weekend rush. It's a blessing that states like New York don't enforce Blue Laws.

I move my bike into "the garage" and over to a smaller workstation in the corner I've had set up for my use, at least for the time being. There are shelves everywhere, for quick access to the tools I need. My hands are steady while my mind races, thinking of Josie and our appointment with Vance this evening. A couple staff members greet me, however, when they notice the look on my face, they quickly go the other way.

"How the hell are you?" Theo asks as soon as he gets in.

"Just *peachy*."

"Uh-oh, what happened?"

My voice is short and clipped. "She packed."

"Bullshit."

"Seriously, Theo, she fucking packed." I try to stay calm. "But she's not going to leave."

He grins and claps me on the back. "Fucking-A. I'm glad you two worked it out. But if it's all cool, why the brooding?"

I brush his hand off and give him a dark look.

"Ohhh, I get it," Theo says, realization dawning. "Josie's not officially staying, is she?"

With a heavy exhale, I grab a rag to clean my hands. "We're going to talk about it after she gets off work. I texted her that I'll pick her up at 7.30."

"What about your romantic dinner plans?"

"Scratch that. Not happening."

"What's the problem? She's not attracted to you?"

I glare at him. "She *is* attracted to me, for fuck's sake. Stop pestering me about the same shit."

"What the fuck is the fucking problem then?"

The million-dollar question. “The fucking problem is that she’s pushing me away, that’s the fucking problem. She’s too scared to acknowledge that our relationship means much more now than when this whole thing started.”

“Dude, I’m your best friend and you know I’m on your side, but, bro, if she wants to leave, there’s nothing you can do to stop her. She’s headstrong as fuck.”

“I know. That’s the thing. I also know for a fact she *doesn’t* want to leave. I know she feels what I do. She’s just too scared.”

“Oh, in that case, it’s easy, bro.”

“Huh?”

“Remind her that there’s nothing to be scared of.”

With those last words, he pats me on the shoulder and leaves me to my brooding. How? How can I convince her that she doesn’t need to be scared? That she can take the plunge, and I’ll be there to catch her?

Isn’t that what I’ve been fucking doing all along?

Slowly but surely, I’ve reached my wit’s end.

My cell rings.

“Yes. Hello?” I bark, annoyed as fuck.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Ashford, my name is Jane Deets.” A chipper female voice in a heavy British accent comes through the speaker. “I’m the realtor you called yesterday to help you find another apartment. I’m *more* than happy to assist you.”

I breathe out, calming myself. Jane Deets?

“Hello, Mr. Ashford? Are you there?” the pleasant voice asks before I have a chance to respond.

“Right, Jane.” I would’ve never guessed it was her. She doesn’t sound bitchy like Theo had warned me she was. She sounds delighted. “Hey, good to hear from you.”

“Absolutely! I was wondering if you had time today to see some potential candidates. I have found a few rather smart places matching your criteria, and I think you’re going to *love* them.”

I ponder her request, and the wheels in my head start to turn.

An idea pops into my head. At the same time, it’s incredibly stupid, something Josie will have my ass for. I can already see her angry eyes shooting daggers at me for deciding over her head without consulting with her.

Well, too bad.

If my words aren’t enough for Josie, then I have to let actions speak for themselves. She won’t like me presenting her with a fait accompli, but I also don’t like her running away from herself and her potential.

“Actually, Jane,” I say after a few moments of consideration, “I’ve got a few other things I’d like the new place to include.”

There’s a shift. “I see.” I hear the sudden annoyance in Jane’s voice. “We do already have a rather *extensive* list of non-negotiable features you were adamant about, if you don’t mind me saying. Have any of these changed, Mr. Ashford?”

There is the bitchiness Theo talked about earlier. “No, they haven’t,” I respond calmly. “I just have more that I’m looking for.”

She sighs. “More? Such as?”

“Big windows and a large, open room. Something that would work as an art studio.” If sharing an apartment with a studio doesn’t relieve Josie’s anxiety, then what will?

Bingo. That’s it. That’s what might convince her to stay.

It’s more perfect than perfect.

A pause. “Hmm. Okay, I think we can work with that,” Jane says after a few moments. “Actually, hang on. I think I have the loveliest place for you. And I don’t say that lightly, you know. It is *the* loveliest place. If you can afford it, that is.”

“Well, we’ll see about that. Text me the address. I’ll meet you there in one hour.”

“One hour? Gosh. I do have other clients and appointments, you know. I’m a very, very busy woman, Mr. Ashford. You’re not the only client who requires my services. I’ll make an exception this time though. Just this once, mind you. Don’t let this become a habit. You hear? And don’t be late, *Mr. Ashford*. OK, ta-ta for now!”

*Jesus Christ.*

Jane is younger than I expected her to be, an elegant woman in her thirties and—despite her questionable attitude—a damn good realtor. The apartments she shows me check most of my boxes. Unfortunately, she doesn’t show me anything that wows me. I’m starting to think my list of expectations is too specific for what’s on the market.

“I’m terribly disappointed we couldn’t find something that you like—miffed, to say the least.” Jane sighs after we leave the last place on her list and tightens her already perfectly tight topknot. “Oh, well, let’s not get our knickers in a twist just yet. Did you want me to keep looking? Or have you changed your mind, Mr. Ashford?” She adjusts her glasses. “I’m *more* than happy to keep looking.”

I’m unsure if she means what she says or if she’s giving me attitude. “I have a thought, actually,” I say, unperturbed by how high she raises her eyebrows at the mention of me having a thought. “Are there any apartments under construction or others that require renovations on sale? I know it’ll take longer, but I’m not opposed to working with a team to design and build a place. In fact, given what I have in mind is non-negotiable, it’ll be a better way to go.”

Jane’s eyes light up. “Hmm. That’s a marvelous idea if you ask me. But are you sure this time? I’m a busy woman, you know. But all right, if that’s the direction you want to go, I’d be *more* than happy to see what’s on the market.”

“Good. Let’s do it.”

“I’ll give you a bell as soon as something pops up. Ta-ta!”

Jane and I part ways with her promising to get back to me as soon as possible.

Feeling a little better about the apartment situation, I drive to The Diner to pick Josie up after her shift. At least it’s stopped raining. She’s already waiting at the curb when I pull up.

“Did you have a good shift?” I ask politely as I hand her the helmet.

“It was fine. Thanks for picking me up.”

She puts the helmet on, and doesn’t say anything else. Shit. There’s that tension in the air that comes around when two people are purposefully not speaking. When there’s too much left unsaid.

Our talk might be trickier than I thought.

She’s built up a wall I can’t seem to breach.

Once we get home, I want to tell her about my plans, tell her where I stand, and I want her to tell me why she’s running away from me so I can understand. I know I can fix the problem. If she refuses again, that’s it. If Josie evades me again, she’ll be the one who has to come to me.

This is my last attempt to convince her that we belong together.

I kick down.

The first thing I do when we get home is head to the kitchen to grab a bottle of wine. I have a feeling we’re going to need it. I pour two glasses and carry them into the dining room, where Josie has taken a seat at the table.

After a big sip of wine, she lowers her glass and finally meets my gaze. “If we’re going to talk about this, I don’t want to fight.”

“Who says that I do?”

“Years of knowing you and knowing how you like to push my buttons.”

“You’re right,” I admit. “But can’t you see that I’ve changed? I’m not twelve years old, Josie. You’re the one who’s still living in the past and can’t grow up.” I can see that my comment has hit her and it hurts me, but Josie has to face her problem, has to face us. “In all seriousness though, I don’t want to fight either.”

“Then what *do* you want?”

“I want you to stay with me.” It’s all I want and all I can put on the table.

She takes a shuddering breath. It’s the only thing that gives some kind of hint as to what she’s feeling. “Cal...”

“Just hear me out. You know I care about you, and I know you care about me. We’re good together. We don’t have to end our relationship because the month is up. We can give this a go, for real.”

“Just like that?” Josie asks. “You want us to stay married so we can start dating?”

“A strange way to put it but, yes, that’s exactly what I want.”

For the first time since she got on my bike, she cracks a small smile. “Everything about this is strange. I’m pretty sure dating is supposed to come *before* marriage.”

“That’s how that kiddie rhyme goes, isn’t it? First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Josie with a baby carriage.”

She gives a sweet chuckle. “So they say.” Taking a deep breath, she slowly sips her wine. “Cal, you make all of this sound so easy.”

“It is easy.”

“No, it’s not. I’ve thought about this for days and days now.”



I raise one brow.

“Yes. We are two very different people. We lead two separate lives. We both want different things. This was all temporary. You have your dealership and your businesses. I’m starting this new job at The Diner and trying to get my artwork out there... It’s just a lot to handle right now. I’m not somebody who reacts on impulse without a second thought to the consequences. I’d rather wait things out, take my time. Yeah, in theory staying together sounds great, but what is that actually going to look like?”

“Anything we want it to!”

Josie sighs. “I can’t make a permanent decision based off a temporary emotion. Please try to respect my decision. There are feelings between us, yes, feelings I was not anticipating or ready for. But if you’re not willing to even attempt to see things from my point of view, what kind of relationship could that be? Honestly, it’s better if we just stay friends.”

Is she joking? “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Eh...it’s better than nothing, no?”

“No. It’s worse than nothing. Get a grip, woman. Anyway, I’m asking you to follow your heart, not your head,” I explain, keeping my voice calm. “Okay, yeah, sure, we don’t know where this is going. But that’s okay. We don’t need to have every little detail planned out. What’s the fun in that? Life is about seizing the day because tomorrow isn’t set in stone. You have feelings for me, so choose me. Choose us.”

After a moment’s pause during which she stares at me in disbelief, I add, “You changed my world, Josie. For the better. I can change yours—if you just let me.”

“Please, Cal. Let’s not make this any worse.”

“I’ve hired a realtor to look for a big new apartment for us.”

For a moment, she’s speechless.

First, I take it as a good sign. But then she slumps back in a way that makes me glad I didn’t present her with signed

papers and keys to our big new apartment.

“You *what? Unbelievable.* See? That proves my point exactly. You want to change my life by making decisions, on important things, without asking me. You want to mold me into something that fits your fucking world, not the other way around. We’re just too different—”

“No. You’re scared and taking the easy way out.”

“You think this is easy?” she asks, shaking her head. Her voice reflects her frustration. There’s disappointment in her words. “Do you honestly think that ending this is easy for me?”

“Certainly seems that way. It seems like you’re going to throw away what we have to play it safe.” I lean back in my seat.

“Who’s playing it safe? I have a huge opportunity that I’ve worked half my life for. How is taking over a restaurant and being responsible for all those people working there playing it safe?”

“Because you’re staying where you feel at ease and in control. Josie, you have to branch out, especially if you want to be happy.”

“But I *was* happy with my life,” she insists. “Hell, I *still* am.”

“You were content. Not happy.”

“I have Matilda and Kaylin, and everyone else at The Diner. They’re my family—like Theo and everyone at your dealership is yours. They make my heart smile, and what I do or don’t do is going to affect them in the long run. Matilda was there for me when my mom became sick, and she helped me time and time again when I was in a jam, especially in the last three years. I can’t just blow that off because I feel like it. This isn’t just a business decision, it’s a personal one. Why can’t you see that?”

I want to shout. I want to shake her. I don’t know how to make her understand what I’m saying, what I envision for our future. We’re talking in circles, and it’s getting us nowhere.

Then I remember that this is Josie. My Josephine. The most strong-willed, unyielding, stubborn woman on the planet. If I push, she pushes harder. Not much has ever been able to change her mind once her heart is set on something. She's a feisty little thing, so goddamn bull-headed—and that's exactly why my pull to her is so fucking huge.

Maybe she's right. Maybe not. In any case, we won't get any further.

I fucking hate it.

I hate that I can see her point, that I understand where she's coming from, not because of some stupid childish need to be right, but because it means I'd have to accept that as much as I care about her, as much as I love her, if she doesn't want to stay, isn't ready or willing to see where this relationship can go, then there's nothing I can do about it.

I've gotten to a point where *she* needs to take the next step.

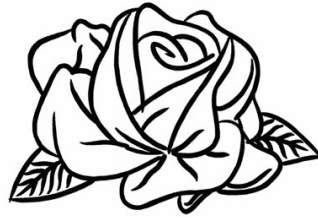
A heavy atmosphere settles around us, and we fall silent, staring at each other. She's waiting for my response, waiting to hear what I have to say.

And for once, I can't find the words.

The silence is broken by a heavy knock at the door.



## JOSIE



*K*nock. Knock.

Without a word, Cal gets to his feet and answers. I hear him exchange greetings with the person as their footsteps head in my direction.

Vance enters the dining room after Cal, giving me a warm smile and extending his hand. “*Buonasera!* Good evening, Ms. Graham. It’s a pleasure to see you again,” I don’t correct him. Technically, I’m not Ms. Graham, but to him, of course, this is still all a temporary thing.

“Hello,” I say, my voice stiff in an attempt to steel my emotions. “It’s great to see you too.”

He takes a seat while Cal remains standing, his hands resting on the back of the chair he just vacated. While Vance makes himself comfortable and starts to pull paperwork out of his briefcase, Cal’s eyes are laser-focused on me. I ignore him, unable and unwilling to look him in the eye, mostly because I don’t know what I’m going to see reflected back.

“I take it you had a pleasant enough month,” Vance says in a cheerful voice. “I’ve spoken with you both on several occasions to verify the arrangement was still being honored.”

I nod, recalling that Vance called us on Mrs. Blanchie’s landline at least twice. “That’s correct,” I say, not waiting for Cal to respond. “We’ve both lived in the apartment for the entirety of the month.”

“Fantastic.” Vance pulls a pen from his pocket, clicking it as he does. “I have drawn up paperwork that states as much, explaining that you both legally swear that you followed the terms of the will and therefore are entitled to your inheritances. If you would just sign here...”

Taking the pen, I scan the document before signing my name on the dotted line. Finished, I slide it over to Cal and hold the pen out for him. He doesn't move, barely even blinks before procuring it from my hand, his fingers lingering on mine a second too long. He signs without looking, pushing the paper over to Vance once he's done.

“Excellent,” Vance says, gathering the document. He carefully places it back in his briefcase before pulling out two thicker packets. He hands one to each of us. “Here is the breakdown of your inheritances and the amount each of you are entitled to. If you agree with the numbers, all you have to do is sign the bottom, and I will be able to release the funds to your bank accounts.”

My hands are shaking when I take this particular packet. I knew I was getting a large sum of money, but seeing it all in writing makes it real, solidifies that my life is going to change forever. As if it hasn't already.

I sign where indicated and hand it back without hesitation. Cal does the same.

“Wonderful.” Vance is a little less cheerful this time. I catch him swiveling his gaze between me and Cal, likely feeling the strange energy in the room and wondering what the hell he's stepped into. “And now for our final piece of business. As announced during my first visit, I took the liberty of drawing up annulment papers. We can have this all squared away and handled tonight, so you both can go your separate ways.”

“Divorce papers,” Cal says suddenly.

Vance frowns. “I'm sorry?”

Cal finally looks at Vance. He's still standing, still hunched over the dining room chair. But now he straightens up, his face

a smooth mask of indifference. “We’re going to need divorce papers,” he explains. “Considering the circumstances, and what I know about divorce versus annulment, this was a legitimate marriage we both entered into with personal *and* legal consent, and it was later consummated. Legally, it would be more honest to go with a divorce.”

A look of understanding passes across Vance’s face, and needless to say, I’m embarrassed.

Why is Cal doing this? Does he want to drag the whole thing out because he thinks I’ll suddenly change my mind? Typical man. Typical Cal. Annulment or divorce makes no difference to me.

Vance lowers the new paperwork back into the briefcase. “I see,” he says slowly. “Well, that shouldn’t be a problem. I will prepare the paperwork for you.”

I wouldn’t have been surprised if Vance had miraculously whipped out the divorce papers from his briefcase.

“Is there anything we need to do while we wait?” I ask to drive away the silence. “Anything you need from us?”

“No, no, I have all the information and can draft divorce papers with what I know. Besides, you don’t have any property or joint assets, and the wording in Mrs. Ashford’s will is quite clear and specific about who is entitled to what. You have nothing to worry about, Ms. Graham. I’ll get this all squared away as soon as I am able.”

He closes the briefcase with a snap and stands.

“In the meantime, with the terms of the will satisfied, and your inheritances squared away, you no longer have to live together.”

And just like that, it’s done.

Cal shows Vance to the door.

While he does, I take the time to go into the living room and gather my things. I’m sad. But “sad” doesn’t seem like a large enough word to describe my feelings.

Everything feels odd, and weird, and right, and wrong, at the same time.

This is always how it was meant to end.

We knew that going in.

Cal and Vance speak of his grandmother's storage room, and Vance offers to bring spare keys the next day, but I'm too focused on what I'm doing to give it much thought. Instead, I request an Uber. I know Cal would drive me to my place if I asked, but I think it's better this way.

The door opens and closes, and then I hear Cal's footsteps coming my way. He stands in the doorway, watching me gather my things.

"So that's it then," he says. "You're leaving?"

"Yes, I am."

His expression is unreadable, his body language stiff. "You don't have to go right this second."

"I think it's best if I do."

More silence.

With a heavy sigh, I cross the room with my various bags, trying to stay strong and determined, even while looking like a damn pack mule. "I think a little space is a good idea," I say when he doesn't speak. "We both have a lot going on and this, whatever it is, is just too much. I'm sorry."

Cal finally moves. Slowly, he reaches out, tucking a loose strand of my hair behind my ear, his hand caressing my cheek. "If this is really what you want."

"It is."

He nods, slipping his hand behind my neck and pulling me into one final, mind-numbing kiss. My bags drop from my hands. My knees buckle, and he holds me firmly. I indulge, fall into it because I desperately want it. One final kiss goodbye before we return to our lives.

It's over quickly.



It's me who pulls away, because I can feel the beginning of tears stinging my eyes and nose, and I don't want to cry. I don't want him to see me cry.

"Take care of yourself, Cal," I say, my voice choked with emotion.

After I reach for my bags and the easel, I move to push past him, and he stops me, his hand on my arm. I look up at him. With emotion-filled eyes, Cal stares at me one more time, and for once, has nothing to say.

What else can be said?

We've said it all, we've told each other where we stand. This is the result. I only nod with understanding, leaning in to press my forehead to his briefly before I break all contact.

And walk out the door.

**M**y old apartment is a sight for sore eyes. As much as I loved Mrs. Blanchie's place, part of me missed this. The friend of my friend had left the day before, and the apartment is spotless, probably the cleanest it's ever been, if I'm honest.

With a deep sigh, I collapse face-first onto my couch. My heart is heavy as I sink onto the cushions. Oh, my God, this is not perfect, but way, way better than that lumpy old thing I've slept on, and I almost feel bad that a part of me is humming in satisfaction.

It's quiet and comfortable.

My stomach grumbles, and I remember that I barely ate anything today while running around.

I look toward the door where I kicked off my shoes, almost as if I miss seeing Cal's boots next to them. Even though he was always out and about, I knew he'd always return home. Home. Shit, Mrs. Blanchie's place did become my home when I wasn't paying attention.

My stomach churns, and I'm suddenly no longer hungry. I decide to call it a night and go to bed. The second I lie down on my mattress, I know I'm not going to be able to fall asleep.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm grabbing the pillows and blankets I bought for Mrs. Blanche's place and making myself a little bed on the couch.

It takes a long time for me to fall asleep.



**CAL**



## Monday

Everything is cold and empty without Josie.

That morning when I wake up alone, I feel lonely for the first time in my life. It's different, and I don't like it. My chest aches. My stomach feels like lead. My insides tear me apart. This woman is slaying me alive. One month sharing a space with Josie, and now that she's gone, it's like she took a piece of me with her.

Instant fucking regret.

That's what I experienced the moment she walked out the door.

For what I said. For what I didn't say. For letting her go.

I get up and spend the early-morning hours exercising, trying to work out my thoughts. It doesn't help.

In a ridiculous attempt to make me feel less like shit, to make me feel like she's still here, I throw the pillows into a messy pile like she always did because it helped her to get more comfortable when she was drawing. After that, I rush into the bathroom, squeeze the fucking toothpaste in the middle, really anywhere, until it looks like a wild animal chewed on it, and I do the same with my tube of hair gel. For good measure. I feel better immediately.

After that, I return to the living room and toss the couch blankets around. A vase falls down in the process and shatters.

I stare at it. Motionless.

The stench of a burning cigarette fills my nostrils. I close my eyes to fend off the memory, but to no avail. I see myself opening the door—carefully and quietly, because when Dad was home, the slightest noise could take him from zero to a hundred.

The sound of the belt buckle hitting soft flesh is unmistakable.

Weakness is not an option.

I open my eyes.

It's pathetic.

My blood freezes when I look around and realize how right Josie was. My past. My childhood. Why I clashed all the time with the one girl who was courageous enough to stand up to me, why I did what I did, using her as my outlet, why I never even felt bad about it.

Why I kept pushing her. To this day.

Years ago, I beat my demons back into submission. But that's not an excuse. It will never be an excuse. No wonder she carries apprehension, maybe even resentment toward me.

I used to push her back then, and I'm still pushing her now—relentlessly.

*Fuck.* No wonder she got out as soon as she could.

*Knock. Knock.*

It's 8:42 a.m. Who's that? It's her. My heart lurches. "Coming, baby!" I reach the door within a second.

It's not her. It's Vance.

He stands there, mouth open, staring at me, at my messy hair, the squished toothpaste in one hand, a jumbled couch blanket in the other. His eyes fall to the mess behind me.

"*Buongiorno*, Mr. Ashford," he finally says, his poker face back. "Is everything all right?"

"Just having fun, what's up?"

He hands me the divorce papers. And a set of keys for Gran's storage room.

As soon as he's gone, I rip the papers apart and toss them into the trash can. Nobody's getting a divorce on my watch.

I want to tell her to come home, tell her I need her.

I don't just want to be inside her body.

I belong in her heart.

But given my realization just now and how we left things last night, with Josie saying she needed space, I need to tread carefully. I need to give her the time and space she asked for. Luckily, there's enough to occupy my mind with the opening, scheduled for this Saturday.

But a text just to remind her that I'm still here for her, and flowers to celebrate her success with Armbruster (which I don't doubt for a second) won't hurt.

I will not rush her. I'll just tell her I'll be there, arms wide open, if she needs me.





**JOSIE**



## Friday

I wake up to the sun searing my eyeballs through my tiny window. Lying on the couch, I stare at the cracked ceiling and listen to the cars going by outside. My neighbor is playing music so loudly I can hear the low bass through the wall.

No more quiet apartment.

No Cal. No smell of him. No strong arms wrapped around my waist. I knew it was going to be a tough adjustment, a challenging first few days, I just didn't realize how much I'd miss him. I've hardly slept all week.

*It's for the best*, I tell myself. It's the same mantra I've been trying to hammer into my mind ever since I moved out. You need to work through all the new changes before throwing another variable into the mix.

I heave myself up into a sitting position, looking around. I try a smile. While everything still feels weird, there is the sense of calm serenity that comes with being in your own space. It's familiar, warm, safe—all the things you want your home to be. That being said, there is excitement at the realization that I can get something bigger, a better place to suit my growing needs.

I have to think positively. I can't dwell on the "maybes" and "what-ifs." Cal and I may not be together right now, and yes, it hurts, but it will get better.

Besides, it's not like he's completely out of my life.

Right?

I grab my phone from the coffee table to check my messages. None are from Cal.

He sent me a "I miss you" voice message on Monday sometime close to midnight and a "Thinking about you" text midday on Wednesday. I was both excited and sad when I saw

the messages. I didn't respond, even though I really, *really* wanted to. I don't want to give him false hope.

My heart drops when I note the time. Holy shit! My meeting with Mr. Armbruster! It's almost a quarter to nine. *I'm late!*

Bolting from the couch, I sprint around my room trying to find something to wear. The clothes in my closet had been packed away to make room for my tenant's stuff, and I still haven't bothered to unpack all of them. I start throwing clothes left and right, trying to find the right thing to wear.

Finally, I throw on my pretty blue flowery skirt that Kaylin gave me for my birthday and a white short-sleeved blouse. A pair of sandals complete the look, and I grab my bag while running out the door. I return to quickly grab my laptop off my bed, *duh*. Luckily, I had it loaded and ready to go before I fell asleep last night (mostly because I was still obsessively tweaking files).

Storming to the subway a street down, I feel both excited and anxious.



**I**nside the café, it's busy, and when I walk in, my nerves kick up. It's 9:22 a.m. *Damn*. It hits me that I have no idea what this guy looks like. It turns out I don't need to, because I notice a smartly dressed man around my age sitting at a table in the corner. He's doing something on his phone but looks up when I enter.

His face breaks into a smile and he waves me over. "Josie?"

Here goes nothing.

I return his smile and approach with my hand outstretched. "Mr. Armbruster? It's nice to meet you. I'm sorry for being late."

He motions for me to join him, and I do. "No worries, I just arrived myself. Can I get you anything?" he asks, sitting

up and adjusting his suit jacket. “On me.”

My stomach is a wreck. “No thank you, I’m good. I do want to start by saying thank you for asking me to meet with you. To tell you the truth, it’s been some time since I’ve done an art show.”

“I’m aware,” he says, inclining his head. “After Kaylin mentioned your name, I did a little digging.”

My heart sinks. “Oh?”

“Nothing crazy, just searched for samples of your work and your ArtGal. I wanted to know what experience you have. You did an art show about three years ago, correct? Was that your one and only?”

“Yes, yes, it was.”

“I was impressed that it was covered in *Art Dream Monthly*, considering it was your first show. First-time artists aren’t usually featured. Although, well...that review from Professor Ramstraat was a...let’s say, interesting read.”

My hope deflates. I try not to appear defeated when he mentions *that* man. No. I’m not going to let him ruin this for me. *Chin up, Josie. You got this.* “Well, as you said, it was my first show. I believe I’ve grown from there. I’ve always had an eagerness to learn all about art and drawing, and I’ve been drawn to the study of human anatomy. It has always fascinated me, now more than ever. Being able to capture the human body fills my heart with joy, and my soul too.”

Mr. Armbruster nods, then puts his hand up, and I feel like I’ve talked too much. “Please, I don’t come into this with any preconceived notions. But I will be frank with you.”

“I’d prefer if you were.”

“Good. I was on the fence at first. I believe Kaylin’s a sweet girl, but I’m not a fan of people trying to use me as connections for their friends. I gave her the benefit of the doubt because I knew it was coming from the heart. To tell you the truth, the few pieces she showed me didn’t speak to me. It wasn’t until I started looking into you a little more that I thought about taking this meeting.”

“I’m glad you did,” I tell him, my determination building. I reach into my bag and pull out my laptop. “I’ve added many new pieces to my portfolio that I think you’ll appreciate.”

He doesn’t take the device from me at first. “Before we continue, I want it to be absolutely clear that I cannot guarantee anything without careful consideration.”

His voice has a sternness to it that takes me a little off guard. It occurs to me that someone in his position must get a ton of unsolicited requests to meet with him. It makes me even more determined to prove myself.

“Of course. I’m not naïve, Mr. Armbruster. I’m ready to prove to you that I have what it takes to do another show. But if either of us believes this wouldn’t be a good idea, a good fit, then there will be no hard feelings.”

His smile returns, and he nods in acknowledgment. “Fair enough.”

I flip my laptop open and hand it to Mr. Armbruster. He asks a few questions as he goes, but mostly we sit in silence as he flips through the drawings one by one. My hands are clasped tightly on my lap. I try to read his facial expressions, but he has a damn good poker face, and I get nothing. All I can do is sit there and wait.

Oh, boy, this nausea is bad.

My stomach is *not* happy.

After several long moments of silence, I realize my stomach is not easing up. “Will you excuse me for one moment?” I say in my nicest voice. “I need to visit the restroom.”

“By all means.”

Trying to walk calmly, even though my stomach is rebelling, I have to weave through the throngs of people. The restrooms are in the back, and I make my way through the café. Thank God there’s not a line. I hurry in, lock the door behind me, and instantly empty the contents of my stomach into the sink. Granted, since I haven’t eaten anything this

morning, there isn't much but bile and spit. I dry heave for another few moments until the feeling slowly subsides.

God, this whole thing is stressful. I've never been stressed to the point of sickness.

I take a few deep breaths, rinse my mouth, and splash cold water on my face. Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I hear Cal's voice.

*You got this, babe.*

"I got this," I say, drying my face with a scratchy paper towel.

He was so sure. Doubtless. Completely unwavering, not even for a second. And fearless. He makes me believe in myself and my dreams. This impossible, pushy, forceful man makes me believe I can achieve anything. Be anybody. Be the best version I can be.

"I got this."

Armbruster is deeply engrossed in the laptop when I return to the table. "Sorry about that," I apologize, all smiles. "Well, what do you think?"

He moves his chair closer to mine, allowing me to share the laptop with him, and flips to the first drawing I made of Cal. He looks up at me. "Some of these are good...quite good, actually. Newer work?"

"Yes," I tell him, feeling my heart burst in excitement and a huge weight dropping off.

"This model you like, I can tell. You have a fantastic eye, and the way you captured his body speaks to me. The attention to detail is remarkable."

I incline my head. "What can I say? He's a muse."

"Apparently." Armbruster flips through a few more drawings. There are many of Cal, and seeing his relaxed visage and all the hours and hours he spent posing for me, trying to help in all ways he could, makes my heart ache. My chest tightens. When Mr. Armbruster looks at me again, his eyes are shining. "This is exactly the kind of work I'm looking

for: raw, candid, unfiltered. You have talent, Josie. Sure, there's still some work to be done, but I think a show is exactly what you need to get your name out there. I know a lot of people who would pay a ridiculous amount of money to buy these or have their portraits done."

Did he really just say that? Deep inside, I jump and release a warrior scream. I want to shout and hug somebody. Not somebody. Cal. "I'm happy to hear that."

Armbruster taps at one of the drawings. "You have a style and a preference, and that's good. It gives your work a voice, a cohesiveness without being repetitive."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear you say all that," I tell him, trying not to let my emotions overrun me. With confidence, I say, "When can we get started?"

Armbruster chuckles, moving his chair back to where it was before. "Oh, we start as soon as possible. We have a long road ahead of us. Art shows are normally booked out months and years in advance. But, as luck has it, we had a cancellation. So, I have an opening in a couple of months." He takes out his calendar, starts scrolling, and gives me the exact date. "Are you up for it? Take it or leave it."

"Let me be frank now, Mr. Armbruster. The problem is, currently, I don't really have the physical space to work on something as intense as an art showcase. I might not have for several weeks. Maybe months."

He waves a hand in dismissal. "Not a problem. Many of my younger talents face the same issue. There's a larger empty space in the back of the gallery you can use to work on your art. If you don't mind the street noise—there's a jazz coffee shop that plays loud music during the evening and night—and sharing the place with other artists, you're welcome to use it until then. So, what's your answer?"

I beam at him. "I'll take it!"

The next hour goes by in a blur, I can hardly wrap my head around it. Mr. Armbruster was standoffish at the start, but now he's open, excited, even animated. I almost can't get him to

shut up, but I'm not complaining. There's a lot to discuss, and a lot of details to work out, but it's a start.

A start to something incredible.

I feel like a gazillion bucks.

We part with a handshake and a promise to continue planning next week.

**W**ith an extra pep in my step, I'm grinning like crazy when I step outside. It's later than expected and I have to head to the diner.

A sleek black town car is waiting. The driver steps out, tipping his hat. "Mrs. Ashford," he greets me, opening the back door. "My name is Dennis. Your husband sent me. I'm his driver. I assisted his grandmother, Mrs. Blanche Ashford in the last few years of her life."

"Oh, that's right, Dennis. I remember you. Hi!"

I'm surprised when he pulls out the biggest bouquet of poppies I've ever seen.

"What—?"

"Mr. Ashford asked me to present these to you when your meeting was over," the driver explains. "Judging by your smile, I take it that it went well."

I'm transfixed by the flowers. Cal got me flowers. Not roses, which are nice, but somehow too impersonal, too conventional. But bright-red poppies with the most delicate petals in a color that reminds me of his heart tattoo.

He didn't know how the meeting was going to go, but he believes in me enough to assume I'd get the show.

I take the bouquet with watery eyes. How beautiful it is!

Burying my face in the soft petals, I inhale their sweet scent.

I get a little dizzy.



“Whoa! All right, all right, have a seat.” Dennis opens the back door and helps me sit. “Are you all right, Mrs. Ashford?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Sorry.”

Feverishly, I try to collect my thoughts. Did I make a mistake by leaving Cal? He held me, encouraged me, admitted that I changed his world. Of all people, he’s the one who cared the most. Besides telling me he loves me, he’s said everything a woman wants to hear from the man she loves.

But will that be enough? Above all, will it be enough for a lifetime? When the rush of first infatuation wears off, Cal will start pushing me around again, making decisions for me and trying to force his carefree way of life on me. Unless he at least tries to see the world through my eyes, our marriage, our love, is doomed.

“Can I drop you off somewhere? I’m happy to take you wherever you need to go.”

“Yes, thank you, I’d like that.”

How can I ever make the right decision when my head is spinning like mad? All I know is that, no matter how much everything in me wants to jump into his open arms, I cannot allow my treacherous heart to make a foolhardy decision that will make us both miserable.

What it all boils down to, is that neither of us are ready. I’m not ready.

It’s hell having second thoughts. It’s hell being in love.

Tears roll down my cheeks, and I quickly wipe them away. Although I vowed never to cry over Callum Ashford again, he’s done it again. He doesn’t even have to be here in person. It’s enough that he pays attention and thinks of me.

I have to believe I’m making the right decision, or I will lose my mind.

Dennis takes a seat in the front. “Where to?”

“To The Diner, please.”



**CAL**



## Friday

I spend a few hours at the dealership, getting everything ready for the big day tomorrow. Normally, when I open a new place, the last few days are hectic while we get everything up and running. I like to be onsite to smooth any bumps in the road or manage anything unexpected. But Theo has everything handled. He knows what he's doing, and there's honestly not much left for me to do.

No text from her.

I call Dennis. He confirms that he delivered the bouquet and dropped her off at The Diner, and that concluded his service.

Once it reaches noon, I decide to call it a day, and leave.

“Hey, bro, you coming to Mom's this evening?” Theo asks on my way out. “A bunch of us are getting together for a few beers.”

“Maybe,” I grumble.

I won't. A hundred percent I won't. I'm in a fucking bad mood. With Josie gone and the apartment empty, I'm in hell, and in no state to celebrate with the boys.

“Maybe?” Theo asks. “What kind of answer is that? Come out with us. It'll take your mind off everything. Let's toast to tomorrow's opening.”

“It's bad luck,” I tell him, clapping him on the back. Bad luck is the last thing I need. “I'll see you later. Have fun.”

I head to my car, glancing at my watch. Finally, I have the time, nerve, and mental capacity to make the long drive to Gran's storage unit. I take my BMW in case it rains. She had the storage unit for a long time. Gran could never throw anything away. Vance had urged me to visit—not that he needed to, I wanted to see what was in there. If there's space, I'll store the valuable stuff from her apartment there until I

have a chance to go through everything. If there's not, I'll see if I can get rid of anything.

The unit is bigger than I thought it would be. I open it, immediately coughing as the door kicks up dust. The first thing I notice is the furniture. It's not antique stuff that matches what's in her apartment. This is old, but in a different way. With a heavy but smiling heart, I recognize the stuff from our old place, the place where she raised me. All the furniture that used to be in my room: my old bed, dresser, desk, everything—it's all here. There are boxes of photos and toys from when I was a kid, and I take the time to go through them all.

I hadn't realized she'd kept *everything*. In one box I find my baby pictures, which I haven't seen in years. There's not a single photo of my parents, and I'm glad. *Love you, Gran.* Hey, look at that, I was a cute kid. One day, maybe I'll be a dad too. I'll do a fucking hell of a job. Not now, of course. Maybe in several years. Now is not the time. I picture a baby with Josie's deep chocolate-brown eyes and have to put the picture back before I punch myself in the face.

Picking my way through the rest of the items and boxes, way in the back I see something that makes me pause. The elegant wooden frame of a brand-new king-sized bed is propped against the back wall, its mattress still wrapped in protective plastic with a rose envelope with my name taped to it.

I take the envelope off and open it. There's a folded piece of paper inside.

*My Callum,  
Consider this bed a wedding present.  
Love you,  
Gran*

I start to laugh. I can't help it.

"You sneaky, sneaky woman," I say, staring at the ceiling of the storage unit.

I bet she's looking down at me with that smug smile on her face. There's a smaller red envelope with Josie's name handwritten across the front. Shaking my head, I tuck the envelope into my pocket.

She knew. She absolutely knew that if Josie and I were forced to spend time together, we would fall for each other. Man, she played the long game. She played it well. Gran always did have the patience of a saint. I leave the unit, my mind made up.

Back in my car, I call Josie. I want to tell her what I found. She loved Gran and will be happy to know. It goes straight to voicemail.

My first thought is to show up at her place, but I have no idea where that is. It wouldn't be difficult to find out her home address from Vance, but I'd prefer not to become a grade-A stalker. Josie would have my dick on the chopping block if I just left Gran's note in her mailbox, let alone barged into her apartment unannounced.

Driving to The Diner doesn't seem like the better alternative at this point. So, I call.

"Oh hi, Cal!" Josie's friend Kaylin answers. "How can I help you?" she asks after a short exchange in which she enquires about Theo and I tell her he's fine.

"I need to talk to Josie."

"She isn't here."

My heart drops, and concern starts to seep in. "What do you mean she's not there?"

"She and Matilda left for the lawyer's office to sign papers. They won't be back in today, I'm afraid. Is everything okay?" she asks, sensing my agitation.

"Yes. Thanks, Kaylin."

Well, shit.

With no other options, I drive home. When I get to the garage, I dial her number one last time. I know I won't change her mind, but I have to get something off my chest. Something I didn't realize when we saw each other last, and that I've been mulling over all week. I step out of the car and wait for her recorded greeting to finish.

Knowing that my scheming grandmother saw Josie and me as husband and wife gives me the resolve—and strength—to say what I need to say.

I need to get it out, now.

“Hey, Josie, it's me,” I say, making my way to the elevator. “I've been trying to reach you. Called the diner to let you know I have a note from Gran. I found it in her storage room, with your name on it. But the main reason I'm calling is because I know I fucked up. I don't like how we left things last Sunday. There's so much we have to say.”

I pause. *Focus, idiot.*

“Okay, so much *I* have to say. The thing is, this is all new for me. I love you, Josie. I fucking love you. Madly. Irrevocably.”

I pause again. I shouldn't be telling her this over the fucking phone, but I need to get it out.

“You're my woman, babe,” I continue. “You get me. You always have. You were right about why we butted heads when we were younger. I was a dumb kid with fucked-up parents, and you saw me better than I saw myself. I'm sorry I gave you so much shit about living in the past. I had no right to do so. I will spend my time making up for the harm I did to you. I promise. I don't deserve a chance, but please listen.” I sigh. “Baby, I don't want this to be over between us. I don't want a fucking divorce, and I don't want to fucking stop seeing each other. I get it. I really do. I get that you need to live your own life...”

The entire time I'm talking, I'm riding the elevator upstairs. When I get to my front door, the words are flowing faster than I can process them. I fumble with the keys, trying to get them in the lock, talking on the phone, "...and that your heart is in The Diner. Okay, fuck it, I'm not going to pretend that I agree with it, but I love you, and I promise to let you make your own decisions—and support you no matter what, please know that. No matter what. I will never stop loving you..."

*Stop talking. You fucked this up.*

*Stop creeping her out.*

The flowers were too much.

This is too much.

I hang up.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

Of course she's not going to be texting or answering my calls. Why would she? She's made her decision. She has her own life to live. We're not together anymore.

Well, I guess we were never really "together."

I unlock the door. For one month, I entered the apartment, looking forward to seeing Josie. Now I enter emptiness.





**CAL**

GRAND OPENING



## Saturday

Amid the blinding flashes of photographers, I cut the ribbon halfway and hand the scissors to Theo to do the honors. I couldn't have done it without him. He grins, grabs the scissors and squeezes. The ribbon floats apart.

"Bad to the Bone" starts playing and everybody cheers.

Theo hollers, bringing me into a man hug. "You did it, bro."

"*We* did it. We," I correct him.

The grand opening of Ashford Motors is here. Sweet Jesus. I can't believe it. It's so damn nice. Charlie's words ring in my head as we shake hands: "There ya have it. A feckin' motorcycle enthusiast's kingdom on 22,740 square feet of state-of-the-art showroom and workshop space for repairs and all sorts of custom shite, now officially one of *the* largest dealerships in the New York City area. Feckin' cheers to that, boss."

We've been working on this dream for months, and now it's a reality.

Theo and I are on hand to greet guests and give tours of the facility with "Riding with the King," "Runnin' Down a Dream," and our anthem, "Born to be Wild" booming out the speakers around us. Pizza trucks from our favorite go-to place are present, and free gifts are handed out: black custom hats and keychains with our shop's logo, free motorcycle inspections, and—my favorite—free test rides on selected bikes.

Guests enter the showroom, and they are greeted with gleaming chrome and polished finishes. Theo and the rest of our team did one hell of a job. Ducks, Hawgs, and Kawis (Ducatis, Harley Davidsons, Kawasakis) and other brands as far as the eye can see, in a wide range of models, from classic and vintage to sport and touring. Each motorcycle is displayed as a work of art, undoubtably capturing the hearts of all who

lay eyes on them. We also have a cozy lounge area where our customers can sit and relax while they browse our collection of leathers (protective gear, jackets and pants), or just hang out and chat with fellow bikers.

The opening is a huge success, with hundreds of visitors pouring in.

When a grinning Theo informs me that he's spotted Jake Whitlock from *Revved Up*, I offer him my fist, and he bumps it. I can't help but feel a sense of accomplishment, even pride. I've put my heart and soul into this dealership, and seeing the excitement and admiration on the faces of the visitors today is a fulfilling experience that makes me excited about my plans to expand.

But one thing is missing. No. Not one thing. One person.

She won't come.

"Absolutely, wow, thanks, man! We're thrilled to finally open our doors here in New York City," I hear Theo say to Jake. "We've put our heart and soul into making this space a true celebration of motorcycles, and we couldn't be happier with how it's turned out."

"What made you take the leap and open this big-ass bike shop, Cal? I'm curious!" Jake asks me.

"I've always loved bikes," I say. "I love the sense of community among riders. We're family. When I found the perfect location in the city, I knew it was the right time. Our goal is to be more than just a place to buy a bike." I point to my left. "Our showroom is about creating an immersive experience. We want to be a destination for riders, a place where they can come and fall in love with the beauty of motorcy—"

A blonde woman walks in and takes my breath away. Dressed in a sleek brown leather jacket and a flowy white dress, she immediately catches my attention as she floats through the showroom.

I excuse myself mid-sentence and start walking toward her.

*Is she an angel?*

*Is this paradise?*

Her smile widens when she sees me. “Hey, husband.”

*Have I died and gone to heaven?*

“Hey, wifey.”

“I dressed for the occasion.” She points to her jacket and boots and twirls around.

I’m still trying to gather my senses. “You perfect angel.”

Josie’s eyes dance. “I have a gift for you. Two gifts, to be precise.”

She hands me a bottle of wine with a huge silver-black ribbon around it. It’s a merlot, a 2019 Chateau Marzy. “This is from Matilda and Kaylin,” she declares. “It’s Blanchie’s favorite wine. That’s the one she used to drink when she visited our diner.”

“That’s the blood running through her veins?”

We both laugh. She nods. “The very same.”

“I love it. Thank you.”

Next, she hands me a thick, half-rolled-up paper. “This is from me.”

When I carefully unroll it, I see it’s a sketch of the shop—a view from the street, with the main building in the foreground. There’s our large sign and today’s welcome banner above the entrance and some balloons. The lot is full of shining motorcycles and people, showing the excitement with a lively and dynamic feel. It’s so cool. She must have sat outside for over an hour to finish it.

“Careful, don’t get charcoal all over you,” she warns. “I thought it might be something for your office space. A little memory, you know.”

“It’s a wonderful gift. Thank you, Josie. It means a lot.”

With my thumb, I wipe a cute smudge of charcoal off her chin, quickly grab her hand, and pull her into one of the

offices. After I place the gifts on the desk, I close the door behind us.

Without warning, I pull her into a kiss.

I kiss her like a starving man. Our kiss is fierce, hungry, and passionate, filled with all the emotions we want to say.

It's like the world explodes into color again.

My body breathes a sigh of relief, and I slide my arms around her waist, crushing her against my chest so she can't get away.

"Josie," I mumble against her lips. "Babe. I was worried I wouldn't see you again."

"Cal, there's so much I want to say, to tell you. You were right all along. I didn't sign the contract for The Diner."

"What? You didn't? When I called the diner, Kaylin told me that you and your boss had left to sign the papers. You didn't sign them?"

"No. I couldn't. I told the lawyer I needed some time to think it over. Poor Matilda. I'm dreading telling her my final decision, but I'll take the plunge and draw as you suggested. I'm sorry for last Sunday, for the last few days, I was so blind and scar—"

"That doesn't matter anymore. What matters is you're here now. Now tell me what I think this means."

She draws back from our embrace only far enough to look me in the eye. "The only thing I know for sure that my heart wants is—*you*. To draw and be with you. Somehow, both you and my desire to create have merged into a single fire within me. Inseparable. Being without you is just as unimaginable as not being able to draw anymore. I love you, Cal. I love you so much. I choose you. I choose us."

Relief washes over me.

Jesus Fucking Christ.

"Josie, you don't have to choose. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I'm sorry for our past. I'm sorry for being such a fool.

I'm sorry I gave you shit for not standing up for yourself, for playing it safe. Loving you is easy for me, falling for you happened so naturally and effortlessly, I hoped you felt the same way. I didn't want to let you go."

"I know, I know that," she says, fiddling with the collar of my shirt. "You don't need to be sorry. I know how much you were hurting, and it kills me. I understand why you did all that, I do. We're both stubborn people, Cal, and we butt heads—it's still going to happen. And I *do* feel the same way. I do, I have... God, there's so much we need to work out, so many things..." She trails off.

"You have to promise me one thing," I whisper in a hoarse voice. "You'll never again be scared. Together we can do anything. *Anything.*"

"Anything." She nods and gives me the sweetest smile. "I promise."

I have her up against the wall in no time. Next thing I know, I'm unbuckling my belt.

In one swift stroke, I push into her.

Josie gasps.

I don't move right away.

"And I love it when you do *that*," she says.

"I know, baby."

I stay there, buried deep inside her tight heat, holding her, pulling the toughest girl with the softest heart close to me, savoring her nearness, my eyes reaching hers, and absorbing all the warmth she has in them. Our gazes lock, and I start moving slowly.

God, I fit inside her so perfectly.

She knows that she's mine. I'm meant for her, and she is meant for me.

I take her slowly. Deeply. With measured thrusts.

"Hold me tighter," I rumble, rocking in and out of her.



“Okay,” she breathes. Her legs wrap more firmly around my waist, and she clings to me, crushing me against her chest. More of that vanilla scent hits my nose.

“Just like that.” The room is filled with the sounds of moans, sighs, and skin-on-skin contact. We move together like one. Fuck, we are one person. Two halves of the same soul, finally connected at last.

“Cal?” she moans.

“Yeah, baby?” I look up, still thrusting, not losing my pace.

I meet her eyes, but she doesn’t say anything. She just looks at me.

I can’t let her go.

When that thought goes through my head, I pick up the pace.

“*Ohmygod.*” She’s quickly lost her composure, I’m about ready to burst. But not yet. Not until I feel her body squeeze me one more time. I slide my hand between our bodies, searching until I find what she needs to push her over the edge.

“Cal...” Josie calls my name, waves of pleasure making her mouth form a beautiful “O.”

The grand opening is in full swing, and I’m here next door fucking the girl I love, feeling her come in my arms. Life can’t get any better than this.

I kiss her, slamming myself into her body, not letting go. Her wet heat is squeezing eagerly all around me, hard, over and over, caressing my dick in raw waves of pleasure. I come inside of her with a deep final thrust, jets of come funneling into her body. Her hands cradle my face as she returns my kisses with panting ones of her own.

We can’t stop ourselves. We can’t get enough of each other.

My pleasure ebbs, but I stay where I am, holding her close. I’m not ready to pull out yet, not ready to break apart.

Our heart rates slow, and we keep kissing. I only stop when my arms are on fire. Carefully, I put her down on her feet. She's wobbly. Drawing back to suck in a deep breath, I look down at Josie.

She has closed her eyes.

“Oh, oh...” she says, opening them. All the blood has drained from her face. She sways a little.

“Josie?” I hold her tighter.

Her wide eyes stare into mine, and she purses her lips. I can sense something's off.

Her eyes grow huge.

Sweat forms on her forehead.

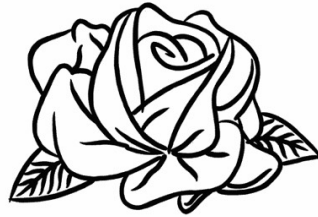
“Josie, are you okay?” I ask, smoothing her hair back softly. “Hey, hey. Babe, what's wrong?”

I reach up and wipe away a strand of loose hair.

She takes in a shuddering breath. “I'm going to puke.”



## JOSIE



I squeeze Cal's hands, so I can turn and puke right there on the ground.

My mind is spinning. What the hell? I'm not anxious or nervous anymore. My stomach shouldn't still be upset. It can't be food poisoning, since the Chinese food Matilda and I ate after meeting with the lawyer yesterday was hours ago. I never get sick. I can count on one hand the number of times I've puked in my adult life. Everything has worked out great. There's no reason for me to still be like this.

Unless...it's not nerves.

I do some quick math in my head and my eyes go wide when I realize what's actually going on.

Oh. Oh, no.

"Babe?" He reaches into his pocket to grab a handkerchief. Handing it to me, he gives me a concerned look as I clean myself.

"I think I'm pregnant," I tell Cal.

Cal blinks.

Then blinks again.

And a third time.

Uh-oh. I think he's broken. I think I broke him.

Taking a step back but keeping my arms around him, I look at him with concern. "Cal, are you okay?"

It takes him a second to respond. “I’m sorry, I think I had a mini-stroke there. For a minute, I thought you said you were pregnant.”

“I think I am.”

He takes a shaky breath. “Just now? You got pregnant right now?”

I can’t help but laugh. “No, it happened earlier.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

I nod. Then shake my head. “Not a hundred percent, but I wasn’t feeling well this morning. Actually, looking back, I haven’t been feeling well for days. Please take me to the drug store.”

“Let’s go, babe.”



## **H**ours later

One trip to the gynecologist confirms the test. It’s very early on, but the results are the same. I’m pregnant with Cal’s child. Our child.

“I attest to the validity of your results. Congratulations, you two,” the friendly doctor says and smiles at us. Luckily enough, Dr. Dillan Maxwell is one of Cal’s biker buddies who agreed to see us as soon as Cal called him up.

The moment Dr. Maxwell leaves the room, Cal gathers me into his arms and spins me around. “Oh, my fucking God! Josie, I’m happy!”

My heart is elated, but my stomach is pissed. “Please don’t spin me. I’ve been throwing up all day.”

“Oh, sorry, babe.” Cal hastily puts me down. Grabbing my hands, he starts to pepper them with kisses. “This is amazing. Holy shit. I’m going to be a dad!”

I smile.

“You forget, Josie, that I knew the second you walked into Gran’s apartment you were attracted to this.” He gestures to himself. “Also, I know what a headstrong person you are. If you didn’t want to be here with me, you wouldn’t be. Fuck, okay. All right. I need to call Jane Deets, the realtor, and tell her to speed up the process. She’s not going to like it, but fuck it. If I’m going to build us the perfect place, we need to get started right now. Shit, we’re going to need so much more room—”

“Wait, realtor?”

“Yeah. Remember I’ve been looking for a big new place? I asked Jane to find something that we can make our own. With lots of space for an art studio.”

I’m speechless. Utterly speechless.

His eyes grow big, and a shadow of concern clouds them.

He pauses.

It’s clear he’s wondering if he’s gone too far, *again*, if I’ll be mad or not, *again*—but in this case, how could I be? I can’t help but laugh a little inwardly when I see his worried “uh-oh, I fucked up” face. Cal has the funniest “uh-oh I fucked up” face in the whole world. This situation is different. Not in itself, but...I have changed. Love, Cal’s love, has changed me. He did it for me—so I could have an art studio. If I want it. I don’t have to agree, but it’s there for the taking. My heart melts into a puddle of goo. It’s such a sweet and kind gesture and shows how much he loves me. “You were thinking of finding a new place *with* a studio for me?”

His features relax instantly at the sound of my gentle voice. “Of course, I was. A big one.” He gives me that smug smile that used to make me want to smack him but now makes me want to kiss him. “I knew you’d come around.”

I hit him playfully on the shoulder. “Smug jerk.”

“But I’m *your* smug jerk.”

“Oh, my God, you *are*.”

Laughing, he pulls me into another kiss.



Cal and I spend the night together at our place, talking about the baby and plans for the future. There is still a lot we need to figure out and focus on, but for now, things are good. Things are solid. He tells me about what he found in his gran's storage unit, and I have to laugh. That woman was crafty, that's for sure. At least the new place will have a wonderful new bed.

Then, he hands me a small red envelope, the word "Josie" on it. When I pull out the note, I recognize Mrs. Blanchie's neat handwriting, scrawled with her little wrinkly hands. I tear up when I read it.

*My Josie,  
You were always family.  
I always knew one day, you would  
be officially too.  
Love you,  
Blanchie (The Merlot-Baroness)*

Guess what is on the back of the note? Her secret butter cookies recipe!



I'm not even a little nervous when I head to work the next morning. Kaylin is stocking the counter when I arrive. She notices me and immediately drops what she's doing to hug me. "Josie! How did it go? Have you guys made up?"

I smile and hug her back. “It went fine, Kaylin. Better than fine.” I wink at her and her eyes light up. “He loved the wine and says thank you. It’s been a crazy twenty-four hours. We’ll talk later, okay? Where’s Matilda?”

“She’s in the back.”

I squeeze her hands before seeking out my boss. I find her in her office, which is surprisingly organized. “Whoa, what happened here?” I ask, looking around.

“Kaylin stepped in to take care of some things yesterday when you called out,” Matilda says with a smile. “I’m glad to see you, sweetie.”

It’s now or never.

“Matilda, we need to talk,” I say, closing her office door behind me.

“Uh-oh,” she says. “Of course, you know you can talk to me about anything.”

I sit down across from her, looking into her kind eyes. I think about the first time we sat like this when I was a nervous teenager trying to make ends meet. We’ve come a long way, and I’ll forever be grateful for the chance she took on an unexperienced younger me.

“I can’t take over for you. I’m sorry.”

Her smile doesn’t fade. “I know, honey.”

Surprised, my mouth falls open slightly. “You know?”

She nods, reaching over to take my hand. “I didn’t want to see it, but once we started training, I suspected you weren’t as enthusiastic about the idea as I was. When the lawyer asked you to sign the papers yesterday, you asked for time to think it over. I wasn’t born yesterday. It’s okay, Josie. I’m not offended in any way. I know you wanted to spare my feelings. But, quite frankly, I’m sorry you couldn’t tell me sooner.”

“I didn’t realize it sooner,” I admit. “I mean, I’ve known it in my heart for a while, but you know I love you and I love this place. But other things are happening, good things. I need to follow my heart. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”



Matilda stands, pulling me with her into a large hug. “Oh, sweetheart, you could never disappoint me. You’re very special to me, and I’m proud to see the strong independent woman you’ve grown into. If your heart lies elsewhere, I’m not going to stand in your way.”

“But what about you? What about The Diner?”

Matilda pulls back. “Don’t worry about this old girl. She’ll be just fine.”

“You or the diner?”

“You brat.”

We laugh and hug again. Eventually, Matilda asks, “All right, I need to know, does this have anything to do with your hot tattooed buff *husband*?” She puts air quotes around the last word.

“Just regular husband now. No air quotes. Full-on, committed husband.”

She smiles. “I’m so happy for you, Josie. I really am.”

I take a deep breath, and it’s like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. “You know,” I say. “Kaylin is a really hard worker. She took care of most of the training herself and loves this place as much as we do. If you’re looking for a replacement...”

“Don’t say a word. I’ve had my eye on her for a while,” Matilda admits. “You know, in case you wised up and said something. I’ve been testing the both of you.”

Happy for Kaylin, I grin. “Can we tell her together?”

“Absolutely.”

**A**n hour later, I leave The Diner for the last time (as an employee and almost-owner). Dennis is waiting for me by the car, and he opens the back door when I approach. “All right, Mrs. Ashford? There are crackers and water back there if you need them.”

I laugh. “Thanks, Dennis. The morning sickness isn’t so bad today.”

“Glad to hear it.”

At my request, he drives me to the dealership. Time to surprise Cal! This is my second time here at Ashford Motors. I hadn’t thought to stop by and see it for myself until the grand opening—I’m such a bad, bad wifey. I’ll have to remind him to *not* spank me for it later. I’ve got to say, it’s an even more impressive sight than it was the last time. Several salesmen are out in the parking lot, showing off the rows of shiny bikes to potential customers.

On the way here, I noticed several billboards advertising Armbruster’s gallery. There’s a billboard across the street too. It is visually striking, in bold red and yellow, with strong lines, showcasing the innovative style of the featured artist. I wonder if Cal has anything to do with it being directly opposite his dealership. God, I love that man.

Dennis lets me out near the entrance, bidding me goodbye before he drives away.

I take the time to walk through the place, where all of Cal’s hard work has come to fruition. When I rushed through here to surprise him on the day of the opening, I was too nervous to take any of it in. He and Theo have managed to turn the place into a stunning dealership. Granted, I don’t have much knowledge about selling cars and bikes. However, aesthetically, it’s sleek and modern, using lighting, display cases, and other elements to create a sense of drama and excitement. The logo is illuminated, creating a bright, inviting presence. The walls are decorated with huge creative display glasses that showcase photographs of bikers enjoying the freedom of the open road.

In the shop, I recognize some of the guys from the night I went to Mom’s Dirty Dogs bar with Cal, and they wave to me. I smile and wave back. I ask where I can find *my man* (love it!), and they’re kind enough to steer me in the right direction.

Cal and Theo are at a workbench tucked away from the main workspace.

“Hey, you,” Cal says with a big smile as I approach. “This is a wonderful surprise, babe. What are you doing here?”

“Thought we could do lunch.”

I reach out to hug him, but he hugs my middle instead, saying, “Hi, baby.”

Huffing, I look at Theo over Cal’s head. “Thing is smaller than a pea, and he’s more focused on her than me.”

Theo chuckles. “If you think he’s annoying now, just wait. He’s been talking baby names all morning.”

Cal stands up straight. “Did you just call the baby ‘her?’” he teases, giving me a tender peck on the lips.

“It just slipped out,” I say. “It’s way too soon to tell, but I’ve got this feeling.”

“I’ll love them either way. How did it go with Matilda?”

“It went well. She suspected I was going to turn her down.”

“And how do you feel now that you have?”

I take a deep breath. “Excited. Nervous as hell, but ready to move forward. Free.”

“That’s my girl.” Cal grins and kisses me.

Theo makes a noise of disgust. “Ugh, I know you’re technically my boss, but this is a workplace, Ashford. Take it outside.”

“You’re right, I am your boss, and I can make out with my wife wherever I want,” he teases. “Get back to work.” He kisses my nose. “I have something to show you.”

He whips out his phone and flips through several photos showing a spacious and luxurious penthouse with breathtaking views of the city.

“My realtor, Jane, called me this morning. I’ve hired her to my team, and she’s found the perfect place for us. Nice area. The art gallery isn’t too far. It’ll keep you and the baby close,

and we can make it exactly how we want. Here's the best part." He flips to the next photo. "Check this out."

My eyes widen, and I almost start to cry. I look at a photo of a dream art studio with high ceilings and large windows in a U-shape, letting in an abundance of natural light.

"Really?" I ask and face him. "Isn't that going to be expensive?"

Cal shrugs. "I recently came into some money."

I snort. "Oh, really? You don't say?"

"Yeah, my gran wanted me to marry some goody-goody with legs for days. If I did it for a month, I got an inheritance. Crazy-ass idea, I know, right? Well, I got lucky, but I think my wife got lucky as well. And a good chunk of change too."

"She sounds clever."

"Oh, she is."

I kiss him deeply, my heart swelling. I swear it's grown two sizes in two days. "I love it. Let's do it."

"I meet with Jane tomorrow. Now, I believe I need to feed my pregnant wife because she barely touched her breakfast."

"Yes, please. I know a little diner around the corner."

Cal takes my hand and leads me to a side parking lot where his bike is waiting. I motion to the billboard across the street. "Just think," I say as Cal climbs onto his bike, "next month, your dick is going to be on that, and in the gallery for all the world to see."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Mr. Armbruster and I picked several of the new drawings depicting you to display. Including the first one I drew of you. And some of the later ones." I wink at him.

He laughs.

I laugh too.

While putting my helmet on, and still grinning, I climb onto the bike with him. I wrap my arms around his waist

tightly, a thrill of excitement rushing through me.

“Ready to go, Mrs. Ashford?” I hear him say, muffled.

“Step on it, Mr. Ashford.”

The motorcycle roars to life, and we speed off.

# **EPILOGUE: JOSIE**

## Many months later

“Oh, dammit,” I swear as I turn around, only to knock something off the counter. It falls to the floor, meaning I can’t see what it is. Not with *this* pregnant belly. I told Cal that once something hits the floor, it’s dead to me.

“You all right out there?”

“Yeah, just throwing things around the room as usual.”

Cal emerges from the bedroom. He looks hot in a pair of dark-blue form-fitting jeans and a black button-up. The sleeves are pushed past his elbows, and he’s left the top buttons undone so you get just a peek at his tattoos. I’m too busy admiring his hotness at first to realize he’s picking up a fluffy duck (an early baby gift from Kaylin) that has fallen down.

Cal pulls me into a hug from behind, his hands coming around to rub my belly. “You’re going to do great. I can’t wait to see it all put together.”

Everything is happening all at once. I love every second of it.

Excitement takes hold, and I squeeze Cal’s hands. “I still can’t believe I have an art show!”

“I told you, you’re talented and amazing.”

“What did you say? I’m not sure I heard you.”

Cal chuckles and turns me toward the bedroom again. “Yes, you’re a star. Now get dressed. Dennis will be here in a few minutes.”

For the art show opening, I slip on a dark-blue maternity dress that is super adorable. I’m due in eleven days, but even though the timing couldn’t be more inapt, I didn’t want to miss the exhibition for the world. Part of me knows it was stupid to still say yes to the show after I found out about the pregnancy, and knowing the timing would fall together like that, especially given we were moving as well. But this was an important milestone for me. It could have been worse. Luckily,

the date didn't fall after the delivery—that would have been even more stressful.

Somehow, I'm happy to have my baby here with me in my belly. Yes, of course I've been having nightmares of giving birth *right there* in front of the art critic—that would make for another unforgettable article, I'm sure.

One day though, I'd be able to tell my child that she was right there with me that day.

Cal has already laid out my slip-on shoes (so sweet of him)—this way I don't have to attempt to do it myself. Seriously, I can't wait to be able to see my feet again.

Cal watches me from the doorway, a smile on his face. "I love you. I'm proud of you. I'm so fucking proud of you."

We drive to the art show, holding hands in the back seat. I'm starting to feel more nervous than excited, and not even a smoothie from my favorite place is enough to calm me down. Cal's hand draws lazy circles on the back of mine, helping me stay focused.

"Relax. You have nothing to worry about," he tells me. "Don't be nervous."

"So, are *you* nervous too?" I ask him.

"No." He arches an eyebrow. "What do I have to be nervous about?"

"People are going to see a ton of naked drawings of you. I mean a ton. Like, half the pieces being showcased are you."

"Then they'll all be jealous of Mrs. Josie Ashford's trophy husband."

I laugh, leaning over to give him a kiss. "You're the best trophy husband a girl could ask for."

"I know."

We pull up outside the art gallery, and my heart does a little flip-flop. There are a lot of people around. And I mean, a lot. Fancy dressed people are filing into a building that has two



large blown-up pieces of my artwork hanging on either side of the door, with my name in big letters.

“Showtime,” Cal says with a grin.

My jaw wants to drop on the floor, and it takes everything in me to act calm and cool.

Dennis pulls up to the curb and gets out to open the door for us. Cal steps out first and extends his hand to me. I graciously accept.

Everything after that is a whirlwind.

We’re swept inside where Mr. Armbruster is waiting with flowers and open arms. Immediately, he starts to introduce me to people, and I smile and shake hands, trying to remember their names but knowing there’s absolutely no way to keep them all straight in my head. Especially with pregnancy brain.

Thank God Cal is here.

“And, Josie, this is someone I’ve been dying to introduce you to,” Armbruster says, leading us over to an older man. He’s about as tall as Cal, with salt-and-pepper hair slicked back from his face and glasses over his brown eyes. He’s wearing a sharply tailored suit with rings on almost every finger. “This is Mr. Pedro Piersanti,” Armbruster introduces. “He’s the new art critic for *Art Dream Monthly*.”

“Oh, it’s nice to meet you,” I say, my heart skipping a beat. “The *new* art critic of *Art Dream Monthly*?”

“Yes, yes, sadly, Osgood retired recently,” Pedro says with an impatient wave. Then he leans into me, and in a low voice, he says, “It was about time too, if you ask me.” He stands tall again, and continues in his loud voice, “I’m happy to meet you, Josephine. I like your work.”

His eyes land on Cal and go wide.

“My goodness...and is this your model?” he asks, sidling up to Cal, eyeing him up and down. “How do you do? Pedro Piersanti. Nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Callum Ashford,” Cal says as he extends his hand. “Model, stimulus, muse—and husband to this talented

woman.”

“Oh. Well, color me jealous,” Pedro says, shaking Cal’s hand, not letting go. “Josephine, you have smashing taste. *Smashing*. May I steal your husband away for a few minutes? Come, Mr. Ashford. Show me which one of these is your personal favorite.”

Giggling to myself, I watch Cal get swept away by Pedro.

Mr. Armbruster shakes his head. “Sorry, Pedro can be a bit much, but he means well and will give you an honest review.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have to deal with Professor Ramstraat anymore,” I say. “I was dreading the thought of him being here.”

“Josie, you have nothing to worry about. Just relax and enjoy yourself.”

That’s what Cal said to me, and I feel silly for having stressed myself out way too much beforehand.

Mr. Armbruster wanders off to mingle, and I take a moment to breathe everything in. I can’t believe it’s really happening. I’m standing in an art gallery, surrounded by my own work. I stare at the portraits, smiling at each piece as I take them in. Pedro and Cal are standing in the center of the room in front of the one I did of Cal sleeping all those months ago. I giggle again at Pedro’s playful staring and flirting, and Cal taking it all in his stride.

Just as my shoulders relax, I see him only a few feet away: a white-haired man with a black hat pulled low over his forehead contemplating my art, his cane tapping against the polished wooden floor with each slow step. He’s wearing a black coat—and a stern expression. My body stiffens. I recognize him immediately. Professor Ramstraat. A recent article featured his photo front and center, portraying him as the “The Art Judge,” emphasizing the critic’s power to render a quick verdict on each work he encounters, and talking about how a positive review from him can make a career, while a negative one can destroy it. I even showed the article to Cal, just to get his hilarious, over-the-top eye-roll reaction.

Being retired apparently doesn't stop Professor Ramstraat from making an appearance at the shows.

His critical eye darts from one canvas to another through thick glasses that sit on the tip of his nose. He shows no sign of softening, and his expression remains unyielding. I watch him get closer, feeling the weight of his intense scrutiny.

“So you decided to reveal your true potential?” he asks, his voice thick and raspy. His wrinkled face turns to me.

He remembers me. Hot and cold shivers prickle over me. I open my mouth—and nothing comes out.

I'm too stunned to speak.

“Not many people have it in them to come back,” he proclaims. He points to the middle of the room with his cane, to Cal's sleeping drawing, and to two newer ones, then he lowers it again. “I believe this is just the beginning of what you're capable of, and we haven't even scratched the surface of your talent yet. With some refinement in your technique and consequent practice, you have the rare potential to create truly remarkable art. Keep pushing yourself.”

With that, he tips his hat and walks away. Just when he's about to leave the gallery, he pauses and looks back at the drawing in the center of the room. Then he's gone.

My jaw drops. Something big in me deflates. This was not what I imagined our encounter to be like. In all my scenarios, I was bold and witty, and he was on his knees begging my forgiveness—forgiveness I never granted him.

What happened today is better. So much better.

I see Cal's thumbs up from the back of the room, and I give him a happy nod. His facial expression says, “told you so—didn't I tell you so?” and he bites back a cheeky smile.

I love him so much.

“Josie!”

I turn around and see Kaylin and Theo coming my way. They're holding hands. “Hey, you two! Long time no see!” They look cute. They look like they're very much in love.

“This is *so* exciting,” Kaylin says, giving me a big hug. “I’m so proud of you.”

“You sure have come a long way since those study halls in high school,” Theo says.

“Thanks. I’m so glad you two are here. Come on, let me save Cal, and show you all what I’ve been working on...”

“Remind me—how did you get her to go out with you?” Cal asks Theo as soon as he’s joined our little group.

“You tell him, princess,” Theo says to Kaylin, a wide grin on his face.

Kaylin smiles. “Well, he showed up at my porch one night, and then Dad stormed out, shotgun in hand, and the next thing I know, he’s fixing Dad’s old truck and changing tires.”

“*Boom.*” Theo shrugs. “That’s how you do it.”

“That’s how you do it.” She beams at him, and he leans down for a tender kiss. It’s sweet, and it seems like they’re taking their time and not rushing things. Looks like not *everyone* gets married the moment they meet again.

“Did you wear a bulletproof vest?” Cal asks.

“You bet your ass I did. And I’ll wear it when we announce we’re moving in together in a month.”

I give Kaylin a big hug at the fantastic news—as best I can with my big belly.

“Better make that two vests,” Cal says.

“Okay, I’ll borrow your spare one.” The men grin at each other.

I spend the rest of the night with my husband, my best friend and his best friend. The four of us are inseparable, and it makes the night even more special that I spend it with the people I love. Even Matilda makes an appearance.

Everything is perfect.

By the time we get to our new apartment, I’m ready to strip off this dress and crawl into a nice warm bed. Cal had the king-

sized bed removed from storage to place in our spacious new bedroom, and what can I say, it's the best thing ever. I was definitely *not* sad to see that terrible couch go. (Mrs. Blanche had obviously left it there on purpose, LOL.)

My husband opens the suite door for me. "Just a second," he says, before lifting me into his arms.

"Cal!" I squeak in surprise, holding onto him for dear life. "You shouldn't lift a pregnant woman."

"Look, I never got to carry you over the threshold. I'm entitled to do it at least once. Today is a special day."

Laughing, we enter the suite, and he nudges the door closed behind us. I'm already kicking off my shoes when Cal puts me back on my feet.

"Wait," he says, "before we do anything else, I have a surprise for you."

He moves to his overnight bag, which is already sitting in the corner of the room. After rustling for a moment, he returns holding a stack of papers.

"What's this?" I ask.

"It was months ago, but remember when I told Vance to draw up divorce papers? I've been hanging on to them for a while. I remembered you saying that I tend to decide things for you and so, I want to give you a chance to decide on your own."

"Ooo-kay?" Where is he going with this?

He gets down on one knee. "Josie, will you consider *not* divorcing me?"

He's grinning, and I know all of this is meant as a joke. He obviously knows that I have no intention of breaking things off. I laugh and take the papers.

"Yes, I will stay married to you." It takes me a second to realize the packet is thick. "Wow, divorce papers are hefty nowadays." I start to flip through them, but immediately stop.

These aren't divorce papers. There's nothing even on these papers. The middle of the stack has been hollowed out. Two rings sit innocently in the space. A golden band, and a ring with the biggest damn diamond I have ever seen in my life.

I look down at Cal, and he's still grinning.

"Gotcha."

Tears start streaming down my face. "Cal..."

He takes the rings and tosses the papers aside. First, he slips the diamond on, then the wedding band. "I figured it was about time to make it official."

"But what about...?"

Wordlessly, he pulls a matching band out of his jeans pocket. "Do you want to do the honors?"

With shaking hands, I slide the band onto his left ring finger while he gets to his feet. I'm overcome with emotion.

How could I have gotten so lucky with this incredible man?

He's everything I could ever have asked for in a partner. He loves me, wants me to succeed, and is proud of everything I do.

"I love you," I tell him. "So much. Always. Forever."

A mischievous expression appears on his face. "Did you just confess your never-ending love to me?"

"I did...*smartass*."

"Love you too, *Nosy Josie*."

I giggle. "Always and forever?"

"Always and forever."

Cal gathers me in his arms, and we kiss and kiss and kiss.

And then my water breaks.

## EPILOGUE AFTER THE EPILOGUE: CAL

I help Josie into the elevator, careful not to jostle the carrier with our sleeping daughter in it. Charlie and I worked overtime to make sure the apartment was ready before the baby was born. But you can't always have what you want. Not complaining. A lot of late nights went into making our forever home. There are still a few rooms that need to be finished, but for the most part, all the important rooms are ready.

We ride up to our floor, which now has a beautiful entryway that separates the elevator from our apartment. I open the front door and step aside to let them in. "Home sweet home, babe."

Josie and I walk into the living room, and we're greeted by our close friends and family. A magenta banner is strung up and reads: "Welcome Home, Blanche!" Theo and Charlie are there, along with Kaylin and Matilda. Josie was adamant that she didn't want too many people around when we brought little Blanche home for the first time.

But I knew she'd appreciate having our family there to greet our newest member.

She's beaming when she looks up at me. "Did you organize this?"

"Nope, not me. This was all Kaylin's idea."

"That's right," Kaylin says as she approaches us. "You think I wasn't going to be here to greet my goddaughter when she came home? Let me see! Let me see!"

Josie pushes back the hood of the carrier to show off our beautiful little girl. She's fast asleep, her soft curly light-brown hair sticking out from under the little rosy hat the hospital gave her. Her eyes are closed, but they're gray and have already started to lighten, which probably means she's going to have my green eyes.

A perfect little combination of me and Josie.

Kaylin and Matilda coo over the baby.

"Oh, how precious!"

"Look at that little face!"

Theo puts his arm around my shoulders. "She's beautiful, bro. Can't believe she's yours." His eyes say, "She's pretty, you're—eh, not so much."

We smirk at each other.

Charlie reaches out to shake my hand, smiling from cheek to cheek. "Congratulations, chief. Love babies. Can't wait to have a few of me own." Charlie's voice is shaky from the emotion, his eyes wet. His usually disheveled hair is smoothed to one side. It looks like he's trimmed his beard a little and put on a fresh shirt. Quickly, he wipes his tears away. "Right. As soon as ye want me to finish those last rooms, I'm ready."

"Seriously, Charlie. You've been a lifesaver over the last few months. I appreciate you getting our home ready for our little family."

"Ah, sure...you know me, ready any time, ya know that. Family man, meself. Well, not right now, but one day—hopefully."

"Are you in a relationship or are you single, Charlie?" He wears several silver rings, but none of them look like a typical wedding or engagement ring. Not that I think he would wear a typical ring of that sort.

"It's just me right now."

I think for a moment. "Well, I know a single girl. Her name is Jane. She's my realtor. English girl."



Charlie perks up. “A realtor, ya say? Sounds pretty perfect with her being in my line of work. What’s she like?”

“She’s very pretty, but to be fair, she can be, let’s say—difficult.”

“I’m well used to difficult. I nearly prefer it! Can you put us in touch?”

I forward him Jane’s website.

“Thanks, and no worries, chief.” He winks. “This Irishman knows how to tame her.”

Josie sits on our new couch, while Kaylin and Matilda crowd around her. I’m about to join them when Kaylin whips out a newspaper. “Tada!” It has an article about the art show, and I see Josie hold her breath. Quickly, we flip through the pages, and there it is.

The headline in bold black Times shines at us:

*Young Artist Wows the Art World*

*as NYC’s Toughest Art Critic Gives Rare Stamp of Approval*

It’s followed by a glorious review. The article goes on and on, marveling at Josephine Ashford’s exquisitely skillful linework and her fresh view as well as unmatched capture of the human body.

There are several drawings, starring my dick front and center. It could be worse, I guess. Anything to see the girl of my dreams smile.

The article ends with a quote by Professor Ramstraat: “The artist’s latest work is a bold departure from their previous style. The composition is inventive, with a dynamic interplay of light and shadow that draws the eye and commands attention. Confident and expressive charcoal strokes reveal a newfound mastery of the medium. The art show was a true achievement, a testament to the artist’s dedication to their craft and willingness to take risks, push the boundaries, and create an unrelenting energy that is hard to ignore.”

Fuck, I’m happy.

I couldn't be prouder of her, and I squeeze her into my arms. "You did it, baby. You fucking did it."

Josie doesn't say a word, awestruck.

Just when I lean down to kiss the happy tears from her speechless face, my gaze fall to a name that sounds familiar:

*Chad Turtleman Arrested*

*for Embezzling Money from Elderly Wealthy Widow*

Josie and I exchange a glance that says, "It's a good thing Gran knew what she was doing when she set up our real-fake marriage."

I lean down and kiss her cheeks.

*Knock. Knock.*

Curious as to who it could be, I answer, only to be surprised by Vance. "Hey, Vance. I wasn't expecting you today."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude," he says, his Italian accent as thick as always. "I know it's a very big day, but there was something I needed to hand deliver to you personally today."

He holds out a cream-colored envelope, and I take it with a frown. "What's this?"

"It's one more thing that was in your grandmother's will. A clause, so to speak, should a specific set of events take place."

Well, now I'm intrigued. "Thanks. Do you want to come in?"

Vance gives me a gracious smile. "Perhaps I will, just to see the little lady."

I step aside to let him in.

After closing the door, I examine the letter in my hands. My name is scrawled across the front in Gran's neat handwriting. Curious, I slide the letter out of the envelope. When I unfold it, it takes me a second to read the contents.

I instantly burst into laughter.

Josie looks at me from the couch with a smile. “What’s so funny?” she asks, cradling Blanchie to her chest while our friends get a good look at her.

I’m laughing too hard to speak.

Instead, I hand her the letter so she can read it for herself.

It’s just one line written in the center of the page.

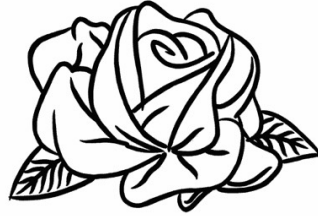
*Congratulations on the baby. Hope  
she’s named after me.*

The End

If you enjoyed *Real Fake Husband*, you will LOVE “[Crushing on my Billionaire Best Friend](#),” a friends-to-lovers forced proximity romantic comedy, but with a twist! She’s moving into his swanky penthouse, all while harboring a mega-secret crush for him... It’s the first book in my steamy *Kiss a Billionaire* Series. All books in the series are standalones.

I’ve included a sneak peek on the following pages, so sit back, relax, and enjoy a little taste of what’s to come.

## THE SECRET COOKIE RECIPE



Do you know where Jolie’s grandmother got the “ancient family recipe” for her famous butter cookies?

She said it’s been in Jolie’s family for generations, but Jolie has always had a sneaky suspicion that she just found it on the back of a flour bag and made it her own...shh, don’t tell her Jolie said that!

Jolie’s grandma was notoriously secretive about her butter cookies recipe, but after much persuasion (and a few glasses of red wine), she finally gave in and handed down her treasured method. Turns out she actually found it in a cookbook that she borrowed from the library thirty years ago and never returned. Well, the secret is out now! When Jolie’s grandpa found out about the overdue recipe book, he said, “I always knew your grandma was a bit of a cookie monster and her love for cookies was criminal, but I never thought she’d go rogue and keep a library book for so long!” He probably thought the librarian was going to charge her a fortune in “dough” for that overdue book, because he grabbed it and ran to the library faster than Grandma’s cookies disappear at Christmas.

*Psst.* Do you want to find out the secret ingredient (Grandma’s own spin on the recipe) that makes the cookies buttery, crumbly, and simply melt-in-your-mouth delicious? Jolie is excited to share the recipe with you—just be sure to keep it a secret!

Visit Jolie’s website for her grandma’s secret cookie recipe (in the October blog entry), and other “delicious surprises” at

[www.joliedayauthor.com](http://www.joliedayauthor.com).

Jolie promises that no ghosts will haunt her readers for reaping the tasty benefits of family secrets. Probably not, anyway, but keep your eyes and ears peeled just in case.

But that's not all!

Check out some of Josephine's fabulous creations on Jolie Day's website (or Jolie Day's Instagram). You'll find a variety of Josie's artwork, including charming renditions of the apartment and the diner—no artistic blushes necessary!

# **CRUSHING ON MY BILLIONAIRE BEST FRIEND EXCERPT**



**She's my best friend.**

**Of course, I'd never think about touching Laney.**

**Not today.**

**Not tomorrow.**

**Not ever.**

**Then she moves into my penthouse.**

I just moved in with my billionaire best friend (and secret crush),

Oliver Humphries.

He's the all-star. The jock. The golden boy—  
and I'm no match.

I'm the nerdy, frizzy-haired, not-so-skinny friend.

The moment I met him at fourteen, I was in L-O-V-E.

I'm under no illusion I stand a chance.

Living with him?

Not a problem.

In fact, it's a brilliant idea. I'm good at hiding my feelings.

Until I play "Truth or Dare" with him.

Oh, good grief!

Did I just tell him I want him to be my first?

## **S**neak Peek:

I'd come a long way since my frizzy-haired, baggy-clothed, four-eyed high school days. I'd also learned how to master the art of makeup and waxing my eyebrows.

Not that it made any difference to Oliver.

My hand was shaking as I lifted the phone back to my ear and held my breath through the ringtone. If Oliver didn't pick up, I was screwed.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

*Why the hell isn't he picking up?*

Ring. Ring.

*Pick up. Pick up.*

Rin—

“Yeah?” He finally huffed, sounding out of breath. “This is...pretty bad timing...”

*Oh, thank you, Jesus.*

I closed my eyes and said a brief silent prayer of gratitude before yelling everything out in a burst of speed even I didn't know I was capable of. He was my only lifeline, and I felt the urgent need to get everything out all at once.

“Oliver? Don't hang up! You're not going to believe this... but something crazy happened. My apartment. There's this cute little white fluffy dog, Princess Bubbles, on my floor, and apparently, she knocked over this big candle and sent it crashing into these rayon curtains...Oh, do you have rayon curtains by the way? Because they're apparently super flammable. Like combustible-level flammable. And—”

“Laney?” Oliver cut me off. He seemed like he'd been so focused on placing who I was that he hadn't heard a word I'd said. There was a tension in his voice that made it sound like he was straining. Was he working out or something?

“Yes. It’s Laney.” I didn’t hide the impatience in my tone. “Didn’t you look at the caller ID? Anyway, *listen carefully* because this is really important.”

“Ohh...okay?” There was a strange grunting noise in between his words.

I groaned and rolled my eyes, pressing my palm flat to the part of my head that hurt the most. Everything in my skull was pounding in one way or another. Leave it to a man to barely listen to you even when you specifically say, “listen carefully.”

“My apartment. It’s gone. There was a fire, and...well, everything I own is gone, aside from what I’m wearing right now and whatever random odds and ends are in my purse. Which might be a lot, actually.” I shook my head, trying to focus on what was most important. “Anyway, can I come over? I need a place to crash. Just for tonight.”

“*Oh, my God,*” he panted away from the phone. He must have been just as shocked as I was.

“I know! It’s crazy, right? I’m just so glad I wasn’t home when it happened.”

“What? Laney? Sorry... Can I call you back?”

“Huh? Haven’t you been listening to me at all? Oliver! Okay, again. *Can. I. Please. Stay. At. Your. Place. Tonight. Please?*” I repeated slowly, making a point to emphasize each word more carefully this time. Whatever part of space his head was floating in at that moment was obviously a place where the workout gods only had ears for weights and “give me more.” Men and their tools—or weightlifting in this scenario.

He let out an even louder grunt, and for the first time, I realized I didn’t think I wanted to know what he was doing. “My place? Oh, yeah. *Oh, fuck...yeah.* You know you’re always welcome...any...time, Laney.”

“Oh. Uh...okay. Great. I didn’t expect you to be so... enthusiastic about it? Thank you, Oliver. You’re a lifesaver. I’m leaving the lab now, so I’ll be there in about twenty minutes or so. See you soon.”

“Yup. See you later, La—”



The call dropped before he even finished saying my name.

Okay, so...Oliver was obviously drunk, and *not* working out. Whatever. Not the ideal thing to be around right now. But that was okay. *Beggars can't be choosers*. And on second thought...maybe it was *exactly* what I needed to be around right now. *Maybe I need to be drunk*.

I certainly wouldn't be able to concentrate on work tonight.

Quickly, I slipped out of my white lab coat before rushing over to the hooks near the exit, where my enormous bag and jacket were hanging.

I flashed my badge across all the security keycard access panels that opened the ridiculous number of doors between me and the main lobby. Before I stepped foot outside, though, I made a mad dash to the ladies' room to check my hair and makeup. I'd been working all day, so what had been a cute up-do was now a mess. I took it down and shook out my long, brown hair, finger-combing it *and* my curls as best I could. It didn't look half bad (kind of like that sexy, wind-blown look). I dug through my bag and found my cherry-stained lip gloss. Perfect! Swiping it across my lips, and then blotting with a tissue, I smiled in the mirror.

I was missing something. Yes! I needed a fresh application of kohl and mascara to make my green eyes pop. Posing in the mirror and analyzing my reflection one final time, I pushed up the girls for good measure (because *Oliver!*) and straightened my slacks.

I was ready.

Once I was safely settled into the warm (slightly smelly), comfort of the backseat of a taxi, I gave Oliver's address to the driver and set myself to the task of dumping my bag's contents out onto the backseat, taking inventory of what I owned.

The taxi stopped, and when I glanced up, I saw his "richy-rich" apartment building towering above me. I grabbed my lip

gloss for one more swipe. Hell, what could it hurt?

I paid the cabbie, opened the door, and stepped out—steeling my nerve... I was about to see Oliver.

## Oliver

Nadine yanked me to the bed. “I want you. Now.”

Who was I to say no to a beautiful woman? I had no problem with returning the favor from the couch later.

“As you wish.” I smirked, and after rolling a condom on, I positioned myself at her slick entrance. But just as I was about to inch into her, a loud knock sounded at my front door.

*Knock. Knock.*

I let out a frustrated growl. “Ahhh, fuck.”

Nadine was starting to look impatient as she stared back at me with eyes full of lust and need.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

I decided the knock could wait. I was busy. But the moment I went back to concentrate on what we were doing, the knock got even louder.

Loud enough to cause concern.

*Knock! Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“Dammit!” I rumbled, finally climbing off the bed.

I grabbed a towel and quickly wrapped it around my waist before flinging the door open. “What is it?”

Laney was standing there, a shocked and confused expression on her face.

“Laney? What are you doing here?”

Her brows wrinkled as she looked me up and down.

I suddenly felt exposed in nothing but the white towel around my waist, barely masking the obvious tent I was pitching underneath it. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to notice that *not-so-small* detail and just pushed past me into the apartment.

“What do you mean what am I doing here?” she asked.  
“Did you hit your head? We just talked on the phone like  
twenty-five minutes ago. You told me I could stay here.”

*End of the excerpt.*

“Crushing on My Billionaire Best Friend” is available on  
Amazon.

## ALSO BY JOLIE DAY



### ***Faking It in NYC Series***

A steamy hot pretend-relationship series. Grumpy, moody, and licking-lips hot CEOs meet the sassy, sunshiny goddess. Do you love the fake relationship trope? Yes? Then you'll love this romance series. *All novels can be read as single books.*

#### One Bossy Date

From fake date to fake fiancée to fake pregnancy. All in one night. Who's the guy?  
My grumpy boss.

(Anders Windham)

#### Real Fake Husband

He's my childhood bully. I didn't plan to see him again, let alone marry him. But his grandmother had other plans: She left us a significant inheritance...with strings attached. We have to get married and live in her small NYC apartment. For a month. With just one bed.

(Callum Ashford)



### ***Kiss a Billionaire Series***

In this steamy-hot series, alpha billionaires working in the same company will catch your eye and drive you wild. Just some good old fashioned romance, comedy goodness, and sexy fun. *All novels can be read as single books.*

#### Crushing on my Billionaire Best Friend

She's my best friend. Of course, I'd never think about touching Laney. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever. Then she moves into my penthouse.

(Oliver Humphries)

#### Faking It with the Billionaire Next Door

He's my next-door neighbor. My mortal enemy. Cocky. Infuriatingly hot. The biggest jerk I've ever met. Imagine my jaw drop when he asks me to be his fake fiancée. Imagine his jaw drop when I agree.

(Miles Humphries)

#### Charming My Broody Billionaire Boss

He's the devil himself: Damon Copeland (he practically carries a pitchfork). He's the top dog at my father's company and my brother's best friend. Oh, and someone

I *accidentally* slept with.

(Damon Copeland)

Assistant to the Billionaire CEO

I was madly in love with my brother's best friend.

Until he broke my heart. Now he's my new boss: Ace Windsor. Tall. Difficult. Insanely gorgeous. And insanely strict. Never run in the hallway. Never loiter. Never be late. Luckily, I'm Miss Punctuality. Until I'm running late.

(Ace Windsor)



***Oh Billionaires! Series***

The plots are set in New York City—the Big Apple (I hope you're ready for a juicy bite). If you love a man in a business suit during the day and biker gear by night, this series is for you. *All novels can be read as single books.*

SOLD: Highest Bidder

I bought her at an auction. My best friend's sister.

Billionaire Baby DADDY

OMG...I'm pregnant with a billionaire's baby!

Billionaire CEO: Fake Girlfriend

He's my worst enemy. He's about to acquire my family business. But, he's got a solution for me: My company in exchange for an *arrangement*. He needs a fake girlfriend, and I fit the bill. Fine, I'll pose as his girlfriend. Problem is—What if I don't want to stop pretending?

BOSS: The Wolf

You ever wake up completely naked next to your boss? Alpha AF Joel Embry isn't exactly Prince Charming. In fact, they call him The Wolf. A sharp suit by day—a tight T-shirt and jeans roaring the streets by night. Get in line for the hottest night of your life.

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I hate him—the man who'd taken my v-card. Now, I'm supposed to work with him—*for* him. What's worse, he doesn't even recognize me! What if he finds out that I have a son...his son?

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