



Surprise
BABY FOR MY
BEST FRIEND'S DAD

SIA WILEY

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BY

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Amelia

Chapter 1

Jax

I GRIPPED THE COUNTER, cursing under my breath. My pants grew tight as I took in the vision before me - chestnut hair flowing down her back, sun-kissed skin barely contained by that sinfully small white bathing suit.

She was dressed more conservatively than the other women milling around the pool, but her curves made that bathing suit look almost obscene.

And there I stood, trapped in a moment of primal lust as that beautiful brunette vixen bounced to the music blaring outside and blood surged to places it had no right to go. The thumping beat of the music echoing the rapid rhythm of my heart.

I stood behind my kitchen island trying to hide the tent forming in my pants and felt a surge of guilt at the fact that I was lusting after a woman that was probably my daughter Lauren's age. I'd never been a guy who chased after young women, but something about this woman made me feel... carnal.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. The only word I could think of to describe me at the moment was transfixed.

Every little twist and turn of her ass made me grow harder, and lust, as I hadn't felt in a decade, flooded me. The scent of coconut sunscreen and sweat wove through the air, gripping my senses like a vice. The primitive part of my brain snarled, urging me to claim, to possess.

All thoughts had left me. I was functioning on my base instincts alone, and the one screaming loudest at me in that moment was the will to claim. To take her. To make her mine.

In a swift move, she twirled around drinking from her can of diet cola and I glimpsed generous breasts that filled out that bathing suit. My eyes continued their way upward to her face as she gulped her cola and I stopped cold.

Amelia.

“Oh! Hi, Mr. Dawson,” she said with a giggle, surprise lighting her eyes.

I cleared my throat, scrambling to switch gears. “Hello, Amelia. It's been a while. How have you been?”

“Fine, thanks. Keeping busy?” she asked as she lifted her can back to what I had just noticed for the first time were a very full pair of lips.

“Yeah, you could say that. I'm always pretty busy.” I smiled back at her.

“I bet,” she said before taking another sip of her drink and then lowering it down to her waist. “So, I hear you're a

billionaire now? That must be nice.” She twirled her hair around a delicate finger.

My heart raced at the thought of this beautiful young woman taking an interest in me and I felt the sudden urge to touch her. I cleared my throat again as I tried to find something casual to say.

“Yeah, it has its perks...like having an endless supply of diet cola on hand, for instance.”

She giggled at my stupid comment, and I wanted to run my thumb over her bottom lip, just to see how it would feel.

Fuck. I couldn't be thinking about her like that. I had to get out of here before I did something I might regret.

Like, act on my instincts that were screaming louder by the minute.

“Well, I'll leave you to it. It's good to see you again.”

“You too.” She smiled warmly.

I hung around just long enough for her to turn back around before I hurried back down the hall to my office with a glass of water and a slice of pizza. And my erection.

Mother fuck. When did little Amelia turn into a full-grown woman?

She had become my daughter's best friend in high school. Lauren never really took her studies seriously so I decided to put her in private school, hoping they could motivate her to do

better. She never really did until Amelia started coming around. Her influence did wonders for Lauren's academics.

The last time I saw Amelia had been when the girls graduated high school.

Then they both took a couple of years off to get jobs and figure out what they wanted to do with their lives before they decided to go to college.

It was hard to believe the skinny and awkward girl with braces and pimples had grown into the woman with the long shiny brown hair filling out that bathing suit so nicely.

As I sat down at my desk, taking a bite of my pizza, I couldn't help my mind from going back to the goddess in the kitchen.

How embarrassing would it be if she had noticed the effect she had on me?

The phone rang, shaking me from my thoughts.

The name *Zeke* flashed across the screen.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Are you almost done going over the plans?"

"I'm about half-way through. I'll be done by the end of the day."

Ezekiel, or Zeke as he was better known, was my best friend since we were kids and my current business partner along with two younger guys, Griffin and Gabriel.

We were working on expanding our most recent acquisition and had plans to turn it into the largest and most luxurious casino resort on the Las Vegas Strip.

The Crown Resort & Casino was my pride and joy. It was the culmination of a dream that had started almost twenty years ago. Looking back, who would have thought that that first dive bar that two clueless kids had opened would turn into the empire we now ruled?

“I don’t want to rush you, but the bank is going to want to see the plans if we’re going to get the financing in time,” he reminded me.

“I *said* I’ll have it done today, didn’t I?” I said, irritation spiking.

“Okay, relax. What crawled up your ass?”

“Nothing. I just don’t need your reminders. I said I’m working on it.”

There was a brief pause before he went on. “You know, I think you could use a stiff drink. Or maybe you need to get laid.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You’re all wound up. You’ve been obsessing over this casino since we decided to expand. You’ve been a real dick lately.”

“Fuck off,” I replied. It was the best retort I could come up with.

“See what I mean? Why don’t we go out and have some drinks? Find you a nice redhead.”

“I don’t need a redhead. What I need is to finish going over these plans.”

“Okay, fine. I’m going to head down to the country club in a bit to hit some tennis balls, then the bar after if you want to stop by.”

“Nah, I’m good. I just want to finish these plans and call it a day.”

“Your loss. Let me know if you change your mind.”

“Will do. Now fuck off and let me finish going over these plans,” I joked.

“Dick.”

I tossed my phone on the desk, rubbed at the tension in my forehead, and looked over at the slice of half-eaten pizza. I hated to admit it, but he was right.

This wasn’t supposed to be my life, though.

I was supposed to still be happily married to the woman I loved and we should be enjoying life together even more now that our daughter was all grown up. I was supposed to come home every day to loving arms and an understanding ear. To her smile. To her laughter. To her light.

I was supposed to be happy. To be living. I was supposed to be... not this.

This empty shell.

And she was supposed to be here. With me. Alive.

It had been ten years since I lost my wife, and I hadn't had a break from work the entire time.

But I had loved Rachel so much and her loss had crushed me. Work was how I coped with the fact that I'd never have that again.

Zeke was still a happy bachelor and couldn't relate.

When we were younger, the two of us had quite the ride, but our lives took parallel journeys when I got married and he didn't. I had a family to take care of, and after Rachel died, being a single dad wasn't exactly a walk in the park. But I did my best.

The sounds of voices out back and splashing in the pool brought a little warmth to my chest. The loud thumping music made a smile spread across my face and I couldn't help it. Since Lauren moved out into her own place, the house had grown so quiet. But now, the house was alive again, even if just for a little while, and that gave me an extra sense of peace.

Lauren was an adult now, and she had her own life to live. I couldn't blame her, but watching her grow wings and fly from the nest broke my heart.

I was happy that she made it a point to come by every summer to use the pool at least, and it did my heart good to hear the sounds of life back in the house again.

The slap of wet feet coming down the hall sounded just before my daughter appeared in the doorway to my office,

wrapped in a towel and out of breath.

“Hey Dad, can you show me how to turn on the hot tub again?”

“It’s easy. You just turn the timer back to however long you want it to run.”

“I did that. It’s still not working,” she said impatiently as her wet, golden hair dripped on the hardwood floor.

“Did you make sure nothing got sucked up in the jets?”

“Yes. I did all the normal stuff. It’s still not working.”

“Alright, I’ll be out in a minute.”

She didn’t leave. Instead, she made her way further inside my office. “There’s a lot more pizza left if you want some. You’re looking a little thin. You want me to grab you another slice?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll grab some on my way back from the pool.”

“Why don’t you take a break and come out for a swim?” she suggested.

My mind went to my visit to the kitchen a while ago, and a lump formed in my throat. The thought of standing in swim trunks in front of Amelia in that bathing suit was too much to bear.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got too much to do.”

“Dad,” she said in a concerned tone as she leaned against the side of my desk. “I worry about you. All you do is work. You

should take some time for yourself every once in a while.”

I cringed as droplets of water fell on the desk dangerously close to the casino plans I had been working on.

“My work is my playtime I’m fine. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I know you miss Mom, but it’s been ten years. She would want you to be happy. I don’t think it would be the end of the world if you started dating again.”

“I *am* happy, and I *have* dated.”

“I mean seriously. You’re a great catch! I’m sure tons of women would love to go out with you.”

Finding women to date wasn’t the problem. I had no shortage of prospects. But every time I went out on a date, all I thought about was Rachel. It felt like I was cheating on her.

“I know. I just don’t have time for that now. But I will, eventually.”

She made an uneasy smile and placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, Lo! I got it working!” shouted a male voice from down the hall.

“Coming!” she shouted back as she turned to rush back outside.

My biggest dream in life was to see my daughter happy. Being able to witness her finding someone who meant as much to her as her mother did to me.

We had been the closest to soulmates I could ever imagine, and I thought she'd grow old by my side. Fate had different ideas.

Now I found myself mourning not only my wife but a life I'd never have again because everyone knew you only really get one true chance at love. At finding your person.

And I'd found and lost mine already.

I would never have that again, and it was a devastating reality to face every morning. Knowing that you had had your one shot at true love only for it to be ripped away from you in the cruelest of ways.

I wanted the life I'd never have for my daughter. I wanted her to live the dream life that I once thought I'd have myself.

I knew Zeke meant well when he mentioned me getting laid, and yes, I did have needs. I was a hot-blooded male after all, but the truth was I wasn't the kind of guy that wanted woman after woman.

Being married and starting a family was the best time of my life. It was a sad realization when I came to terms with the fact that it was all over for me.

Even if deep down, part of me really hoped I could find someone to share a life with again.

I knew it was a pipe dream. I knew I'd never love as deeply again. I knew that ship had sailed because love like I had with Rachel was a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

But God, I wanted it so bad.

Stop that, Jax! I had to get out of my head.

Focus.

Maybe I should take a piss, the walk there and back will help me get back on track, I hoped.

I got out of my office and headed down the hall to the bathroom.

The door was cracked, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

Amelia was standing inside almost completely naked, wearing nothing but a pair of light pink cotton panties with little red hearts all over them.

My heart hammered against my ribs like a caged animal. Every fiber of my being screamed to look away, but I was paralyzed. Man and beast fighting for control at the sight of Amelia standing there, bare breasts exposed.

My breath caught in my throat and I gripped the door frame as I watched her.

Her wet hair had been slicked back off her face, revealing her delicate features and big brown eyes that seemed to be searching for her clothing.

The light coming from outside glittered on her damp skin providing a beautiful contrast between her golden-tanned limbs and her creamy white breasts.

My eyes brazenly trailed her body, pausing over every single curve and valley. She had a body to die for and it was one hell of a view.

I caught a quick glimpse of her perfectly pink nipples and watched them harden in front of me. I felt an ache between my legs before she quickly stood up and threw a shirt over her head. Her perfectly firm tits bounced as she covered herself up.

A moment much longer than I care to admit had passed before I even noticed I was staring at her and then my senses returned to me, snapping me out of my lust-filled haze.

Jax, you are one sick fucker.

I tore myself away from the door frame. Just as I was turning away, she looked up and my heart raced. I was afraid she'd caught me watching her, but I rushed off so quickly, I hoped she thought someone just passed by.

Back in my office, I sank into my chair.

I was a walking disaster.

Zeke and Lauren were right; maybe I needed to get out there, start dating again. Anything to scrub the image of a naked Amelia from my mind.

My thoughts were fixated on her and how my body reacted to my daughter's twenty-year-old best friend. I felt an overwhelming sense of shame for watching her get dressed as I considered that maybe it would be best to go meet Zeke for drinks after all.

It was obvious to me now, that as busy as I was, I needed to carve out some time to start dating again. Even if I knew damn well there was really no point.

For the first time since Lauren moved out, I was actually glad. At least I wouldn't have to see Amelia very often anymore.

Chapter 2

Amelia

Two Years Later

“HI, I WAS TOLD to be here at ten o’clock for an interview?” I greeted the receptionist, hoping to make a good impression from the start.

“Name, please?” The receptionist didn’t bother to look up at me. She looked bored out of her mind, poor woman.

“Amelia Scott.”

“Please take a seat and someone will be over shortly.” With her pen, she pointed at a row of chairs against the opposite wall.

“Thank you.”

“Mhm,” was all she said, waving her hand at me dismissively, her eyes already back in the gossip magazine in front of her.

Looking around at the room as I sat, I was amazed at how basic the space was. The Crown Resort & Casino oozed

luxury, but the HR department couldn't have been more plain. The beige walls and cheap fold-out chairs clashed with the opulence I always associated with the casino.

I rattled a pen between my teeth and tried like hell to keep from fidgeting in my gray suit. I checked my watch maybe fifty times in the span of about fifteen minutes as I tried to quell the acidic swirl threatening to rise in my stomach.

I'd only graduated from college a month ago and I was looking for my first "real" job. I really wanted to find something in marketing, but my lack of experience was a roadblock, and the urgency to secure my own place was mounting.

I couldn't understand how my life had taken such a tragic turn.

Why?

I mean, I should have known. Should have been expecting something to happen. I mean, this was me, right?

But this?

This was too much.

And now, on top of the crushing hurt, I was being forced to find a new home. But for that, I needed money, a job. A job I thought I'd have time to find. Time to wait for the best opportunity. Time to find something that would have the best chances of furthering my career.

But no such luck. So, I had to take anything that came my way, whatever I could get, because I wouldn't be able to stay

in that house much longer.

I needed a roof, and fast. Which meant I needed a job faster.

The Crown wasn't exactly my first choice, but I hadn't had any luck anywhere else and they were hiring for several positions, so I decided to apply for them all.

The benefits were great at least.

All but one.

Lauren's dad owned the casino. The thought of encountering her or her dad sent mixed emotions through me.

When the interview call came, I felt both ecstatic and terrified at the same time.

It wasn't the ideal situation, but it was a prospect, and I was grateful for that much.

"Amelia Scott?" An impeccably dressed brunette woman emerged from the back office and walked toward me. She was wearing a black blouse with puffy sleeves that I recognized from a discount clothing store. I bought the exact same one for three dollars, but she was so well put together that she made it look expensive. My heart raced as I realized that this was it.

"I'm Kristy Jameson, the HR manager." She gave me a firm handshake as she introduced herself. "Right this way to my office." She gestured for me to follow her.

I stood nervously and followed the woman back to her office. I tried to put my game face on and focus on the here and now, pushing aside all the hurtful things that had happened

the last couple of weeks to the back of my mind. This was my one shot at starting over.

“Thank you, Ms. Jameson. It was a real pleasure.”

I rose from my chair, my heart still racing. The interview had been intense, but a success, at least as far as I thought, and I couldn't wait to find out if I had been selected for any of the positions I had applied for.

“When can I expect to hear from you?”

“How about right now?” she asked, extending her hand.

I automatically took it, confused and fearful I'd somehow screwed everything up. Surprised and uncertain, I shook her hand. Had I messed up so badly that she was dismissing me already?

“Congratulations, Ms. Scott. You are now the new assistant for one of our executives.”

What? This wasn't one of the positions I had applied for. I didn't even know there was an opening for that. “Oh... Thank you?”

She laughed, a genuine sound that lightened the tension. “I know, I'm sorry for the surprise. It's a last-minute opening and you'll be perfect for it. Is that something that could interest you? Please say yes so I don't get fired.” She put her hands together in a prayer gesture, and her mock pleading made me smile.

I was still feeling like everything was happening to someone else. Who comes to an interview for about ten jobs and gets

hired on the spot for the eleventh job they didn't even apply for?

“Sure, why not? Everything about today has been a surprise, so I might as well embrace it, right?”

Her smile widened. “You're absolutely right. Wait here for a moment and I'll bring in your paperwork. Ready to start now?”

I laughed. “It's not like I have any other plans, so let's do this.”

She smiled. “Be right back,” she said as she rushed out of the room.

What the hell just happened?

After I filled out an obnoxious amount of paperwork, Ms. Jameson led me to the elevator and pushed the button to the top floor.

My stomach was twisting and turning all over again. Meeting my new boss, I hoped I wouldn't cross paths with Lauren's dad. My wishful thinking danced with nervous anticipation.

“Okay, Ms. Scott, right this way and we'll get you started. As I was saying, this is a last-minute opening. We normally require all our new hires to attend a three-hour orientation, but his last assistant quit unexpectedly, so I know he has a lot of work piling up and needs someone right away. We can reschedule orientation later. I hope you're ready to hit the ground running,” she said as we strode down a long, spacious

hall that led to a large open area filled with neatly placed cubicles.

Lining the open area were doors leading to offices. Ms. Jameson led me around the open area, straight to a corner office. A very large, very important-looking office overlooking the Vegas strip.

I followed her numbly to the door. We walked through a small, empty office that led to a much larger one. She knocked, and from the other side came a gruff, "Come in."

Oh shit.

My heart plummeted at the familiar voice but I pasted a professional expression on my face anyway as she ushered me into the office. The back of a high swivel chair came into view. When the chair swung around, I was met with a pair of shocking blue eyes, and my heart fell to my stomach.

Lauren's dad froze for a moment when our eyes met. When he stood up, his imposing presence made me hesitate. The man who used to be friendly now looked at me with an unreadable expression.

I was used to seeing him in t-shirts and jeans, but he looked quite striking and intimidating in his bespoke suit. The dark fabric made his eyes appear even more blue and all the air left me.

All of Lauren's friends had a little crush on him, myself included, but he was Lauren's *dad* and it was harmless enough. We never told her, of course, but I remember how

intimidated I was when he towered over me with those broad shoulders, biceps as big as my legs, dirty blonde hair, and a body that would put Thor to shame. Seeing him looming in front of me, all-powerful in that big fancy office, made me weak in the knees.

“Mr. Dawson, this is your new executive assistant, Amelia Scott. Amelia, this is Jax Dawson, your new boss,” Kristy introduced us.

His mouth was tight as he studied me for a moment, and my anxiety surged. Had Lauren said something negative about me? Worries of dismissal swirled, but then he extended his hand.

“Ms. Scott,” he said, his voice commanding yet formal. His eyes held an intensity that left me breathless.

Hesitantly, I shook his hand, trying not to turn away from his intense stare. His big, strong hand enveloped mine and the warmth of his palm against mine sent tingles up my arm. I tried to ignore the sparks, but my trembling hand probably gave me away.

Up close, his masculine features were even more striking—strong jawline, straight nose, thick, blond eyebrows. His dirty blond hair was precisely trimmed, not too long but not too short either, just enough to run my hands through.

I forced myself to take slow, even breaths, despite the adrenaline rush I felt being this close to him. I willed my racing heart to slow down before he could hear it hammering inside my chest.

Kristy looked at us both oddly for a moment before clapping her hands together. “Well, I’ll let you two get acquainted. And of course, if either of you needs anything, you know where to find me,” she said, quickly making an exit. She shut the door behind her, leaving the two of us completely alone.

As soon as we were alone, Jax’s demeanor changed. What little warmth he had managed to show before was replaced by an air of formality that left me uneasy.

“I-I, um, I didn’t realize I would be working for you,” I stammered, struggling to compose myself. My heart was thumping so loud I almost couldn’t hear anything else.

A thick eyebrow rose. “You did know this was my casino...” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes, of course. But I applied for several positions here and this wasn’t one of them,” I explained, my nerves showing. “Besides, never in a million years did I think that as a new employee, I would be working directly for the CEO,” I clarified.

“Do you have a problem working for me, Ms. Scott?” he asked in a cold tone.

Swallowing my anxiety, I replied, “No, no problem, Sir. I’m just surprised.”

He scrutinized me, and a tense silence stretched between us.

His lips pressed together, and I could see his clear displeasure at my presence. I didn’t understand what his issue

was with me but I did know that I didn't want to be someplace where I wasn't wanted.

“Um, if it makes you uncomfortable to have me as your assistant, I can—”

“Why would it make me uncomfortable, Amelia?” he asked abruptly.

I bit my lip.

I expected my first day at a new job to be tough, but I didn't expect this level of intensity. “I uh, I don't know. I mean, you've known me since I had braces, so I don't know if this is weird for you or not.”

There was a slight flare to his nostrils and I wanted to slither away and just go apply at the nearest fast-food joint. Maybe if I worked double shifts, I would be able to get a place of my own by Christmas.

His expression remained inscrutable. “Of course not. You're qualified for the job. As long as you do what I ask, we shouldn't have any problems. But I hope you understand that being my assistant is a very demanding job. Are you up for it?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” I said, “I can't wait to get my career started and I'm excited to get to do that here,” I said, trotting out a line that I'd used during my interview. It sounded a lot better than *I'm freaked out about having to deal with Lauren's dad, and I'm even more freaked out by the fact that a man that had*

always been warm to me is now looking at me like I just shit on his desk...'

A forced smile appeared on his face. “Good, then let’s get started.”



“And this is your office. It will be your job to intercept anyone before they even get to my door. Of course, if you have any issues, don’t hesitate to use that security button.” He pointed to a button on the wall next to the desk. “I want you to get to know the security team. I run a casino after all, and sometimes unsavory people want to get to me. In that case, let security do their job and make sure you stay safe.”

I must have looked alarmed because his expression softened somewhat as he hedged, “I seriously doubt it will ever come to that, Amelia, but it’s nice to be prepared just in case.”

“Oh, no problem. I understand.”

“Your first set of tasks is on your desk. I expect those to be completed before you leave.”

I nodded. I was starting to feel a bit like a bobblehead. “Of course, Mr. Dawson.”

He returned to his office without further words. I was left to face the long list of duties on my desk. Despite my trepidation, I was determined to be the best assistant Jax Dawson ever had. Because I had to keep this job no matter what. I’d go through hell and back to make this work.

I settled in at my desk. *My desk*, I thought with an internal squeal.

As nerve-wracking as the morning, and quite frankly, the last few weeks had been, there was something very gratifying about having my own desk, and technically, my own office.

It wasn't a marketing gig, my dream job, but it could lead the way.

I really loved the creativity involved with marketing, and I *lived* for coming up with marketing strategies and seeing how my work paid off for my clients.

I had the opportunity to intern for a digital marketing agency in college and it was an amazing experience. The company relocated to Texas and offered me a job there, but I didn't want to leave my boyfriend Rob at the time.

After growing up in foster homes, I always wanted a family of my own. So badly, in fact, that I was willing to make big sacrifices to will it into existence.

Now everything had changed. My life was upside down and I was totally lost.

So, I'd take this opportunity and thank the heavens for it and do my damn best to show Mr. Dawson that hiring me was the best decision he could have made.

And when you thought of it, I would be working under the CEO at least and would learn a lot, I was sure. I made it this far and that was something to be proud of despite all of my

recent troubles. Maybe this meant my luck was starting to change.

I really hoped it did, because I needed it.

I let myself soak in the moment for a second more and then it was time to start my new job, focusing on the list of duties on my desk—which was a full sheet of paper... front and back. Yikes.

I wanted a fulfilling career, right? This was a good start, and it started now, with this list. This endless list. This impossible-to-complete list.

What have I gotten myself into?

Taking a deep breath, I dove in. I hadn't gone through all the hardships in my life just to be felled by a big old' list, though I was beginning to see why Mr. Dawson had needed a new assistant.

I'd always admired him and never forgot the way he looked in a fitted t-shirt, and I really wanted to impress him. But remembering the cold way he'd surveyed me, however, gave me the strength and determination to prove that I was more than capable of handling this job.

And I needed to because this was my chance of getting out of that house.

In what felt like a blink of an eye, it was lunchtime already and I felt my stomach grumble. I gathered my purse and headed downstairs to the employee dining hall for a bite to eat.

I walked through what felt like miles of hallways, twists and turns, trying to find the place. Amid the maze-like corridors, a familiar voice called my name.

“Lee? Lee. Amelia.”

I turned around to see where the voice was coming from and recognized my old friend Emma.

“It *is* you! You work here?” she said with bright brown eyes and a big smile. Her hair was platinum blonde and shorter than I remembered, and she was dressed in a slinky cocktail waitress uniform. The Crown was so big I felt lost, but I could finally feel my spirits lifting.

“Hey! Yeah, I just started. How long have you worked here?” I asked as we gave each other a quick hug.

“About six months. It’s not exactly my dream job, but the tips are amazing.”

“That’s great!”

“So, what about you? Where are *you* working?”

“I’m working for Jax Dawson, actually. As his executive assistant. Today is my first day.”

“Shut up! Jealous! I’m so jealous. He’s so hot it’s stupid. How did you land that job?”

Emma and I caught up as we navigated the buffet line. We were friends in junior high school before I moved to another school, just when we were starting to get close.

She was just finishing up telling me about a bartender down in the casino she had gone on a date with when I looked down at my watch.

“Shit, I’ve gotta get back to work. I’m so sorry to cut this short.”

“No worries. I need to get back to work too. It was really great bumping into you! We should grab drinks after work one of these days.”

“For sure! Let me get your number.”

We exchanged numbers and I hurried back up to the office.

I had just sat down when Mr. Dawson’s stern tone greeted me. “Amelia, where have you been? The phone has been ringing off the hook and you didn’t switch your phone off.”

“I’m sorry, was I supposed to?”

Damnit. I already fucked up.

“Of course. If you don’t switch your phone off, it rings ten times before rolling over to voicemail. It’s been ringing non-stop for the last half-hour.” His brows were heavy and his jaws clenched.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dawson. I didn’t know. It won’t happen again.”

“Please make sure it doesn’t. I have a lot to do and the constant ringing is very distracting.”

“Like I said, it won’t happen again,” I said firmly as I met his gaze. I tried to be strong, but I was doing my best and was

starting to feel like I was walking on eggshells. Tears were threatening to form in the back of my eyes but I refused to break down on the first day.

After a long pause, he let out a sigh and rubbed a hand over his jaw. “I’m sorry. You’re new here and you wouldn’t have known that. I shouldn’t have been so harsh.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Dawson, I just want to do the best job I can for you.” And I did. I really wanted to impress him, and I was really hoping he would be kinder to me like he used to be.

“You’re doing fine, Amelia. I’ve just been without an assistant for a while and I’ve got a lot going on,” he said with remorse in his eyes. “Please, just let me know before you go to lunch next time and have Katherine, our receptionist, show you how to park the phone before you head out.”

“I will,” I said confidently.

He gave me a stiff smile before he went back into his office, leaving a trail of his spicy cologne lingering behind him. I inhaled a big whiff and held my breath to savor the scent before I realized I was being silly.

I worked my way through a few items on the list, wondering what made Mr. Dawson turn into such a grump. Was he always like this at work? Could it be he was a grump here at the office but not at home? A lot of people turned into someone else entirely when they were at work, and he was in charge of an entire casino and resort, so it wouldn’t do for anyone to think he had a soft touch... or maybe it was just me.

By the end of the day, I was exhausted but determined. I'd faced challenges before, and this was just another hurdle. As I gathered my things and headed out, the weight of my responsibilities sank in.

With each step, I grew more resolute. Whatever lay ahead, I was prepared to give it my all. My journey was only beginning, and the lessons I would learn working under Jax Dawson might just propel me toward the career I'd always dreamed of.

Chapter 3

Jax

AS SOON AS I saw Amelia Scott walk into my office, I knew I was screwed.

Two years ago, when I'd first seen her in that bathing suit, I brushed off my unsettling thoughts as the whims of a lonely, red-blooded man.

I took comfort in the fact that she was rarely around the house anymore. After Lauren moved out, there was no reason for Amelia to be lingering around.

Over time, I managed to attribute my feelings to misplaced grief and longing. She had merely been in the wrong place at the wrong time and my mind had clung to her presence.

But seeing her in my office stirred something within me. When her soft hand touched mine when I shook it, it sent jolts to my groin.

What the fuck?

The day was already testing my limits. Two weeks without an assistant had led to mounting tasks, and I was in no mood

to train a newcomer.

When I saw it was her the HR department hired, I had briefly considered telling her to forget about it and go find someplace else to work.

But for all my faults, I did pride myself on trying to be fair and it wasn't fair to this bright, young woman that she got canned on her first day because I couldn't control my dick.

But the way I still responded to her scared me.

So, I did what I did best in situations where I feared my emotions, or my urges in this case. I closed up.

She didn't need to know the way she affected me. She was my daughter's best friend for God's sake, and now my employee. Whatever this was that I felt around her, I had to bury it deep inside, hoping my body would eventually catch on that she wasn't an option.

A part of me not so secretly hoped that she would fail miserably at the job. I could then let her down gently, give her a good reference, then get her tight little ass out of here.

But as it turned out, Ms. Amelia Scott was a star student and she picked up tasks with remarkable speed.

I had an impossibly long list of things for her to do on that first day. Initially, I'd planned on telling the new hire that they had two or three days to get everything done. Some self-preservation instinct in me forced me to tell her that she needed to get everything done before she left for the day.

I'd wrestled with that impulse for most of the day. I was about to tell her that she could call it quits when I heard a soft knock on my door.

"Come in," I commanded.

Amelia peeked in. "Mr. Dawson? Sorry to interrupt but I just wanted to let you know that I completed the task list. Is there anything else you need from me before I leave for the day?"

Taken aback, I replied, "Uh, no, thank you, Amelia. Have a good night."

She gave me a faint smile that did way more to me than any smile should.

"You too. See you in the morning." With a graceful exit, she closed the door behind her.

I emerged from my office once I was certain she'd left. The calamitous mess her desk had been this morning when she arrived was now immaculately organized with everything labeled so it was easy for me to find. Her desk calendar had neatly penciled in dates and appointments that coordinated with the revised digital one she'd emailed me just a couple of hours before. And there was a stack of messages she'd intercepted for me that were even color-coded by order of urgency.

Awkward visions I'd had of her aside, I could have wept at the efficiency of her work. In fact, she was exactly the kind of executive assistant I'd been longing for, even if it came with complications.

Over the coming days, Amelia continued to prove her efficiency as an assistant... and I proved my ability to be an absolute dick. Even some of the other employees looked at me oddly as I snapped at her.

I definitely wasn't as warm at work as I was at home as a rule, but having Amelia around made me surly and frustrated. My coldness became a shield and was the only way I knew how to hide what I really thought about her, which troubled me deeply.

My strategy seemed to be working, however, and she seemed completely oblivious to it, thankfully. Though, if I was being honest, there was a part of me that got off on the idea that she might have had a clue.

Late one night, exhausted and struggling to focus, I heard a knock on my door. "Come in."

Amelia walked in, holding two cups of coffee. "Hi, Mr. Dawson. I thought you might like some coffee."

I looked out the window and noticed how dark it was outside. I was so focused on what I was doing I hadn't realized how late it was. I was ignoring the grumbling in my stomach and was starting to think that maybe the reports could wait. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

"What time is it?"

"It's eight-thirty." She placed the coffee on my desk and took a seat across from me. I watched her full breasts bounce as she sat. She crossed her gorgeous legs and I almost lost it.

“What made you think I’d want coffee at eight-thirty p.m.? I’ll be up all night for God’s sake.” I waved the cup away.

Despite my rude comment, she pasted on a sweet smile that made her dimples appear. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure how much longer you planned on staying and was just trying to help. I’ll take it away.”

Damnit, why couldn’t she take a hint and stop being so goddamn pleasant?

It wasn’t like I was normally attracted to younger women. Even though she was Lauren’s age, they didn’t seem like the same age, maturity-wise. Lauren had to go through the pain of losing her mother, but aside from that tragedy, she’d never wanted for anything.

I remember Lauren telling me that Amelia had been adopted as a teenager and that she’d spent most of her life in foster homes. Amelia never had anything handed to her and it showed in her work ethic.

I respected that.

She leaned forward and dug into her work. “I’ve read through all the marketing reports and highlighted everything I thought could use improvement. And I already delivered the budget to Mr. Moran. I also went over the security reports and highlighted any incidents I thought might need your attention...”

As she went on, I couldn’t stop thinking about how I ever managed without her.

Her hair was pulled back in an imperfect ponytail and she looked a bit disheveled. Her eyes were heavy and I knew after coming in at seven a.m. she must have been tired, but she was still more than happy to stay late and carry on working, which was more than I could say for any other assistant I'd ever had.

We worked a lot of late nights, especially with all the work that had piled up after my former assistant left. It was a tall task to be my right-hand man, or woman in this case, but she never complained. She always stayed until everything was done, and her work never seemed to suffer regardless of how tired I'm sure she had to be.

"Mr. Dawson?" she said as she was shuffling through some papers at my desk one evening.

"Yeah?"

"How did Mr. Motta and Mr. Galanis come to be co-owners of the casino?"

I was a little surprised by her question. We'd spent quite a few late nights working together but we never made much conversation. I tried to avoid it, in fact, even though I was curious about her.

"Oh, well, Zeke and I needed some extra capital to fund the expansion. Griff and Gabe were best friends and we met them at a golf tournament. We got to talking to them and kind of became friends. When we couldn't get the financing we needed from the bank in time, Zeke and I offered them a percentage of ownership if they would invest. So, they did."

Her sharp eyes narrowed in thought for a moment.

“If you and Mr. Moran are billionaires, why did you need more capital?” She looked at me with those inquisitive brown eyes and my breath hitched. Her presence was captivating.

“Well, we’re only billionaires on paper. A lot of our money is tied up in other things and we weren’t able to liquidate enough in time.”

“Oh. I see.” She continued to organize the stack of papers in front of her before she asked another question.

“And how were Griffin and Gabriel able to come up with so much money? They seem really young to have that much cash lying around.”

“Tell me about it. Too young. They’re tech wizards. They created some start-up businesses on their own that took off. They were bought out and started a venture capitalist firm with their earnings.”

Amelia’s eyes sparkled with curiosity. “That’s impressive. I wish I could do something like that someday.”

We were interrupted by a knock on the door and Amelia got up to answer, wafting her warm vanilla perfume in my direction as she stood up, and it made my head swirl.

A waiter pushed a food cart into the room and Amelia paid him a tip before he left the office.

“What’s this?” I wasn’t expecting food.

“I figured you might be hungry so I ordered room service from Pietro’s downstairs.”

“What made you think I was hungry?”

“You always pull your necktie loose when you’re hungry.” She smirked at me with heavy and what looked like very flirtatious eyes.

Is she flirting with me?

“I do?” I didn’t realize she had been observing me so closely.

“Yep. And don’t worry, I know you’re trying to cut carbs, so I had them replace the pasta with Zucchini noodles.” She walked over with two plates and set mine on my desk in front of me before sitting down to eat herself.

I was actually starving and this meal couldn’t have been more welcome, but it wasn’t the only thing I wanted to devour.

Amelia was wearing a short royal blue dress with high heels, and her legs made my mouth water. So much so that I couldn’t leave my desk without revealing my erection. Her skirts seemed to grow shorter every day.

Every time she came within ten feet of me, my body reacted and it was driving me crazy. I was beginning to resent how immaculate she was with her work because she wasn’t giving me any excuses to fire her, and at this rate, I needed to.

But I was also enjoying spending time with her. A little too much.

“So, what about you? How did you end up here at the Crown?” I asked her. My better judgment told me to avoid making conversation with her but my instincts said otherwise. I couldn’t help myself. Being stuck with three cocky billionaires all day, every day, had grown tiresome. Her presence was a breath of fresh air.

“Well, I really wanted a marketing job, but I really needed something right away and wasn’t having much luck. There were no job openings here in marketing, so I just applied for everything and hoped I would land something,” she said as she continued organizing her stack of papers into piles. “Human Resources said they needed an executive assistant right away, so here I am.”

“And you like marketing? Or was it just something to go to college for.”

“I really love it, actually. I’ve kind of become a whiz at Photoshop, putting together campaigns, and I really love being creative. Consumer psychology fascinates me.”

She slurped up some pasta and splattered some marinara sauce onto her cleavage. I would have given anything to lick it off her. I needed to get a grip.

“The only thing I ever read in my spare time are marketing books. I’ve been dying to get my hands on a copy of *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Murray Adams, but it’s really hard to find.” She paused and then her cheeks went pink. “Kind of nerdy, I guess.”

“Not at all.”

We sat smiling at each other in silence for a moment before I realized that I was staring at her.

“You know, Amelia, I think you’ve done enough for tonight. Why don’t you finish your dinner and you can head home.”

“Are you sure? We haven’t gone over the press releases yet.”

“It’s fine. We can do it tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? I’m actually having a nice time.”

A nice time with me? Or a nice time working?

“You are?” I tried to conceal the excitement from my voice.

“Yeah. It’s easier to work without all the distractions when everyone is here. And…” She hesitated.

“And what?” I persisted.

“And I’m enjoying having some company. You’re much more pleasant after everyone has gone home.”

Some company? Or my company?

It excited me to hear her say those words but terrified me at the same time. I needed to get away from this woman before I did something foolish.

“Is Lauren not home much these days?”

“We’ve both just been so busy. And we’ve been on opposite schedules so we keep missing each other.”

This answer surprised me. Lauren worked office hours at a law firm. It didn’t make sense that they would have opposite schedules, but I decided not to press the issue.

“I see. Well, I’m going to head out of here myself. I’m exhausted and we’ve got a busy day tomorrow.”

Her gaze met mine, unyielding. “Oh. Well, if you’re leaving anyway, there’s no point in me staying...Thanks, Mr. Dawson.”

“For what?”

“For hiring me,” she said with a warm smile that made my chest tingle.

“It was my pleasure, Amelia ... And you’ve dripped a little sauce on your, eh...” I tried not to look as I pointed at her breasts.

“Oh! Whoops.” Her cheeks flushed as she dabbed at her breasts with a napkin.

Good lord, I’m screwed.

Chapter 4

Jax

I SHUCKED MY CLOTHES off leaving a trail behind me like breadcrumbs leading to my bathroom sanctuary. If anyone needed a cold shower, it was me.

Amelia Scott's entrance into my office was like a tempest, stirring up feelings I'd fought hard to suppress.

I had gone from a widower that was so busy with work that I didn't really think about sex all that much, to a man who couldn't stop thinking about it. Except, I wasn't just thinking about it, I was thinking about her... and I was thinking about doing some truly filthy things to her.

Her arrival had ignited a fire within me, a fire I was struggling to contain. I had gone from a man who was content with his work and the solitude it offered, to a man consumed by desires I hadn't felt in years.

I never expected to feel quite that way for anyone after Rachel, and I certainly didn't expect to have those urges toward my daughter's best friend of all people.

Two years had passed since that fateful day when I saw her naked in that bathroom, a sight that had burned itself into my memory. I tried to rationalize it as the fleeting urges of a lonely man, but Amelia's presence in my life was a constant reminder that those urges weren't fading anytime soon.

I tried to dismiss the inner turmoil it evoked as the desperate yearnings of a solitary man. After all, what connection could exist between a grown man and his daughter's childhood friend?

I had attributed it to a fleeting moment of weakness. But seeing her walk into my office every day, I couldn't deny the electrifying pull she had on me.

I hopped into the cold water and it was a shock to the senses, momentarily numbing my heated thoughts. I stood in the stream of water until it didn't feel so cold anymore before I turned up the heat. My balls ached from all the pent-up energy and my dick grew hard again just thinking about her.

I pumped some soap into my hand, gripped my cock, and closed my eyes to visions of her, plump and horny, waiting for me in my office. I imagined walking into my office to find her sitting on the edge of my desk in one of those short skirts she sometimes wore, with a naughty smile. I stood still for a moment, taking in the sight of her, the neon lights from the Vegas strip shining and painting her in shades of green, purple, and red. She looked at me with those brown doe eyes, and it didn't take long before I rushed in to take my fill of her.

She wrapped her arms around me as I slipped my tongue past her lips, claiming her mouth with hungry kisses, and pulling at my shirt to get it off as soon as possible. She took off her blouse just before I unhooked her bra with a single snap of my fingers to release her full breasts.

“I want you. I’ve wanted you for so long,” she panted and I stepped back to get another look at her. She took the opportunity to stand up and drop her skirt and panties to the floor.

“Now get back up on that desk and spread your legs for me,” I commanded, and she obliged.

I pushed myself into my hand even faster as I imagined her naked, legs spread wide open for me, her pussy glistening wet.

I approached her with my hard cock bobbing in front of me and dove into that delicious cunt.

I licked her open and flicked her clit with my tongue as I spread her lips open with my thumbs. I fucked her with my tongue real good before I inserted a finger, and then another.

“Oh! Oh my God!” she moaned.

I worked her with my fingers for a couple of minutes before moving my hands around to her tight little ass to press her pussy into my face, feasting her like a starving beast, running my tongue up and down her folds, up and around that swollen clit, teasing it with my tongue before giving it a good suck.

“Oh fuck!” she cried.

I pumped my fist over my engorged length feverishly as water cascaded down, mingling with the sweat on my brow as I ached for my release.

“Now lie back and take this cock,” I ordered, and she followed orders like a good girl.

I placed the tip of my dick against her slit, rubbing it up and down her folds before pushing myself inside her. She was so wet I slid right in.

“Mmmm. That feels good,” she moaned.

I held her waist steady with my hands as I slammed into that tight little pussy and fucked her senseless.

My forearm started to throb from the action and my legs went stiff as I hissed, squirting my cum all over the shower floor as I made my release.

As the water washed away my frustration, I knew I had to find a way to handle this situation.

I couldn't keep tormenting myself with desires that were both forbidden and impractical. Amelia was my daughter's best friend, someone I had known since she was a teenager. I was a man twice her age, her boss, and a mess of emotional baggage.

I stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my waist and running a hand through my damp hair. It was time to get a grip, regain my composure, and deal with the situation rationally.

I was starting to imagine that she was flirting with me. For real. But she couldn't have been. She wouldn't be interested in her friend's *dad*.

Would she?

I needed to figure out what to do before I did something stupid, but my visions of her were so vivid that I found myself having a hard time sleeping at night. Desire and guilt were not a good combination. I could barely meet Amelia's eyes at work, so I avoided looking at her altogether.

All I knew how to do was keep her at a safe distance and be a dick.



One afternoon at work, I sat at my desk, held my palms to my tired eyes, and took a few deep breaths to keep myself awake. I really needed coffee and had skipped lunch to prepare for a meeting. I felt myself nodding off when there was a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

“Hi Mr. Dawson, I brought you some coffee—” she said in a sing-song voice, “and don't worry. It's not eight p.m.” She winked.

“Oh, you really didn't need to do that.”

“Well, you looked a little tired today, so I thought you could use a pick-me-up.”

“Don’t do that. I’m trying to cut back on caffeine. Take it away please,” I said bluntly. She looked a little startled but replied, “No problem. I’ll just drink it myself, I guess.” She made a polite smile.

Damn her.

I had done a decent job keeping my distance from her that week, but that night, we had to work especially late to prepare for a meeting the next day with some real estate developers who had gone belly up halfway through a project. My partners and I were considering putting in an offer on the property to take it off their hands and needed to finish our due diligence. We also needed to go over some press releases and coordinate with the PR team to bring life to a floundering convention coming into town.

We were the last two in the office and the pull I felt toward her was stronger than ever. It didn’t help that she was wearing one of her shortest skirts yet, and her blouse didn’t quite fit properly. It stretched over her full breasts leaving gaps in between the buttons teasing glimpses of a light pink bra underneath. My blood pressure rose every time I looked in her direction.

She sat next to me behind my desk so we could go over the press releases. I was trying to focus, but with every move, the scent of her sweet vanilla perfume wafted to my nose, and those luscious breasts pushed together every time she reached for something on the desk.

I could barely contain my erection.

To make matters worse, she was biting her plump bottom lip as she tried to concentrate on the documents in front of her.

“What kind of promotion are we doing for the event?” she asked.

“I have no idea. I leave stuff like that up to the marketing department and the PR team.”

“Well, you might want to take a closer look at your marketing department. I’ve had a look at our social media accounts and there hasn’t been a post made on anything in about six months. There isn’t even mention of the event on the Website.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. There aren’t even any ads running in the ad library. We’ve sold a little over thirty thousand tickets for the event in the last six months, mostly from the vendors, but we still have another thirty thousand to get rid of in a week.”

“Fuck. Well, what do you suggest?”

“I would put together some social media posts immediately for the short term and run some ads across all social media platforms. And I’m not sure if the marketing department has done anything to maintain an email list to notify potential attendees. I could put some suggestions together real quick if you want.”

“What kind of posts were you thinking?”

She began to write down some concepts with a pencil on a pad of paper.

“The PR team sent us these press releases, but it’s a little late. These should have gone out months ago in my opinion,” she explained.

Amelia’s efficiency and dedication were on full display as we reviewed her suggestions. I tried to focus on the task at hand, but my attention kept drifting to her, to the way her lips moved as she spoke, to the soft curve of her neck, the way her fingers danced across the documents.

The tension in the room was palpable, fueled by an unspoken want that I was struggling to suppress. With each passing moment, I could feel my restraint slipping, my resolve weakening.

She continued to sketch out some concepts, and every time she erased something it sent those beautiful, tempting breasts jiggling. I mean good lord; a man can only take so much.

Finally, after the fifth or sixth time she furiously erased something, sending my lust for her into a tailspin, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Amelia, for God’s sake, give it rest with that- just sketch the damn things out and move on,” I snapped at her. Her eyes widened, and for the briefest of moments, hurt flashed across her face, and I felt like the biggest prick on the face of the planet.

The hurt in her eyes was a mirror to my own guilt, a reminder that I was letting my desires cloud my judgment.

I threw down my pen and ran my hands down my face as I took a deep breath and mentally prepared an apology, but whatever hurt I'd glimpsed in her eyes was quickly replaced by indignation.

Her jaws clenched and her brows furrowed.

“With all due respect, *Sir*,” she spat out the last word. “I am just doing my job, but that doesn't seem to be enough for you. In fact, I have been turning myself inside out to prove I'm good enough for this job since day one, and if anything, it seems like you keep treating me worse. If this is because of Lauren, you should have just said so on the first day so I wouldn't waste my time here.” She delivered her rant so fast it was as if she had it planned in advance. It seemed she had been thinking about this for a long time.

She rose from her chair and began to storm out.

I regretted my outburst instantly, realizing that I had let my urges get the better of me. I wanted to apologize, to explain, but her anger was a justifiable response to my behavior. When she turned to leave, panic seized me.

“Amelia, wait!” I called at the last possible second and stood up to go after her.

She stopped, and slowly, she turned. Her mouth pressed together in a firm, determined line. Her gaze fixed on me, a mix of uncertainty and defiance in her eyes.

“Look, I'm sorry. You have been doing a phenomenal job here and I mean that sincerely. You've only been here for a

few weeks and I already have no idea how I ever did this without you.”

Her confusion was evident, and I struggled to find the right words.

“If you’re so happy with my work, why are you acting like I’m failing? You were always so nice to me before. Is there something I’ve done to make you not like me anymore?”

I felt a lump form in my throat. Her words cut through me, a stark reminder of the turmoil I was causing. I had to make amends, to show her that I valued her contributions. I really did hate that she thought I didn’t like her anymore. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

I liked her a little too much.

My brain scrambled for an explanation. I could hardly tell her I’d been an asshole because I couldn’t stop imagining fucking her brains out.

She looked at me expectantly, her eyebrows raised in question.

“It’s because of Lauren,” I blurted out, a half-truth that I hoped would suffice.

An expression crossed her features that I couldn’t read but it troubled me nonetheless, so I quickly added, “I was worried that others would think I was giving you preferential treatment since you’re my daughter’s best friend. I guess I overdid it a little bit on the business front,” I explained.

Her shoulders relaxed slightly and it was suddenly obvious that she'd been worried about this for a while.

“Oh... I guess I can understand that.” She smiled, but just as suddenly, her smile dropped. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“It’s fine, Amelia, and well deserved, actually. Let me find a way to make it up to you.”

She shook her head, that polite smile back in place. “No, that’s not necessary, really.”

“No,” I insisted. “There must be something I can help you with,” I pressed. She bit her lip, her brow slightly furrowed. “There is, isn’t there?” I asked as I ducked down to see the expression on her face, satisfied that I managed to read her.

She hesitated. “I really hate to ask—”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering,” I said, really needing to do whatever it was she needed.

“Well, I’m moving into my own apartment this weekend. My foster brother Jason said he would help, but some of my stuff is kind of heavy and I’m not sure the two of us will be able to move it all ourselves,” she explained.

“You’re moving out of the house? Lauren didn’t say anything about this to me,” I commented, confused.

There was a faint twist to her lips but she quickly recovered, shrugging her shoulders as she told me, “I just need to strike out on my own. It’s past time.”

That remark struck me as odd for some reason, but I did understand her urge to establish herself. I could especially see why that was important for Amelia. She had never had very much until she got into high school and I always got the impression that handouts in any form or fashion seemed to make her uncomfortable.

I'd bought the house she'd shared with Lauren outright. I suppose some would say that was too much for a parent to do for their adult child, but after losing her mother, it gave me some peace of mind knowing that Lauren was somewhere safe that she would always know was hers while she got her start in the world.

I guessed I shouldn't be too surprised that it would eventually wear on Amelia. She seemed to be very independent and self-sufficient.

Helping her move, however... that would mean a lot of extra time with her. My heart raced at the thought of it. Part of me nearly sang at this idea while the other part of me panicked. My stomach was starting to twist in knots and I began to regret offering to help her.

But it didn't matter. I'd told her I would make it up to her for my shitty attitude and she was worried enough to ask for help, so I would just have to suck it up, help her out, then go home, jerk off, and take a cold shower.

I gave her a tight smile. "Sure," I said through gritted teeth. "Just let me know when and where."

"Okay. And just one more thing."

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“Please call me Lee.”

“Amelia fits you better. It’s more grown-up. But while we’re at it, you can call me Jax.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s not like I haven’t already known you for years. We can be more formal at work, but after hours, it’s just Jax.”

“Okay. If you insist. Jax.”

Her hesitance was evident, but she finally relented, saying my name with a grace that sent shivers down my spine. Hearing my name in her smooth, melodic voice for the first time made my heart race.

However, as much as I wanted to linger in that moment, I knew I had to find a way to navigate these uncharted waters. Helping her move was a dangerous proposition, but I couldn’t let her down.

As much as I had been thinking about her, I trusted myself not to act on anything. Not only was she my daughter’s best friend, she was my employee and half my age.

And she would also have to be interested and willing, which I was sure she was not.

It would just be a day helping her move. I could handle that.

Chapter 5

Amelia

STARING AT MY CLOSET, I shuffled through clothes like a scatterbrained teenager prepping for a first date.

Mr. Dawson's impending visit had me teetering between excitement and anxiety, an emotional seesaw that made picking an outfit feel like a monumental decision. Casual yet cute – that was the look I was going for.

He would be here soon to help me move and I wanted to look cute. I don't know why. We were just going to move some furniture and boxes, but I felt the need to impress him without looking like I was trying too hard.

I'd spent quite a bit of time at his home back in high school, but he wasn't around much. He had occupied my daydreams more than I cared to admit and left an indelible impression.

Mr. Dawson was a gorgeous man. Taller than most men, and the most crystal-clear blue eyes I'd ever seen. But more than just his physical looks, he just had a *presence* about him. I hadn't been able to see it exactly when I was a teenager but I

knew enough now to recognize an element of power and intensity in him.

He was still just as gorgeous as ever, except now he had a bit of scruff framing his jaw and a little silver in his dirty blonde hair... He was also my new boss and the father of the woman who'd just upended my life. But none of that mattered now.

He was a puzzle of complexities, but I was determined to crack the code.

I curled my hair before I put it up in a ponytail and I applied a little more makeup than usual before I perused my closet. Almost everything was packed up in boxes and it took me longer than usual to find what I wanted.

First, I tried on some cute, short athletic shorts with an off-shoulder crop top and a pair of sandals.

You're moving furniture, Amelia. Don't be stupid.

Then I put on a T-shirt, baggy jeans, and some chucks.

You don't want to look like you're twelve either.

I finally settled on some leggings, comfortable sneakers, and a crop top. My reflection in the mirror stared back at me with a mix of eagerness and self-consciousness. I chuckled at my own vanity. Who was I trying to impress, the furniture?

I had been fantasizing about him the last few nights and couldn't help but crush on him. He was confident, handsome, and an actual billionaire. Not to mention he smelled amazing. Like amber musk and a dash of cedar. It was utterly masculine and smelling him made me feel warm and safe. And horny.

I felt my cheeks heat at the thought and feelings of shame rose to the surface.

He always doted over Lauren and I envied that, but I felt like I could always count on him too. He was the only man that ever made me feel that way. I didn't know him well back then, but he always made sure I made it home safely.

When he told me how pleased he was with my work, it surprised me when I felt a gush of wetness in my panties. Maybe it was some unresolved daddy issues or a deep-seeded psychological reaction to Lauren doing what she did. Or maybe this was my way of getting back at her for stealing Rob ... By fantasizing what it would be like to have sex with her father.

I never thought I would be the type to be into a man in a suit, but there was something about the way that he filled it out that made my belly flip. He had wide shoulders that made the fabric strain across his back, and for some reason that small little detail made my fingers itch to clutch at those shoulders.

And his hands were big and strong but well-trimmed and manicured. I wondered how they would feel on my body and I fantasized about him picking me up with those strong arms and having his way with me on his desk.

I would never act on those feelings, of course, but I found myself wearing shorter skirts and lower-cut tops to work just to see what he'd do. It was fun to pretend that it affected him.

He acted like a miserable grump most days, and I thought maybe it would be harder for him to be grumpy to me if I wore

shorter skirts and smiled at him a little more, but it seemed to just make him worse. I don't know what I was thinking honestly. He would never.

It was a huge relief when he told me his attitude had been due to concern about nepotism complaints. I'd been terrified that I was two shakes away from getting fired. I never imagined that I would be working directly under Lauren's father in the first place, but I couldn't think of a more mortifying event to piggyback off of catching my boyfriend and best friend screwing than getting fired by a guy that had known me since before my pimples cleared up.

Not only was I not fired but my hot boss was coming over to help me move.

I didn't know quite what possessed me to ask him for help but it all came out of my mouth before I could stop myself. I didn't think he'd actually say yes but I knew I was going to need more help than my foster brother Jason could offer.

Asking the man who'd been the center of my erotic dreams for the last few weeks was making me nervous and I felt jittery as hell.

I'd tossed and turned all night knowing he was coming over and at that point, I realized that I hadn't thought about Rob all that much. It was almost as if he never existed. I had been so devastated just a few weeks ago, and now he hardly crossed my mind.

I heard Lauren come down the stairs and my chest grew tense.

“Hey.” She grabbed her designer handbag off the bar stool at the kitchen counter. Her long blonde hair brushed the top of her denim shorts. Other than the blonde hair, she didn’t look much like Jax. She was the spitting image of her mother from what I could tell from looking at photographs of her. Even her brown eyes.

For a second, it made me wonder if I looked like either of my birth parents. I had spent some time with my birth mother when I was young, but I barely remembered her.

“Hey,” I answered back.

“I’m going out for the day and probably won’t come home tonight, so I’ll be out of your way.” She dug through her bag until she found her car keys.

“Great.” I stood on the other side of the counter with folded arms, staring at her as she tried to avoid making eye contact.

She hurried past me, down the hall to the garage door.

She and I largely avoided one another ever since the “incident,” though I did give her a heads-up that I would be at the house to move all my things out that weekend. She said she would make herself scarce and left it at that.

I overheard her talking to Rob on the phone later, and the two agreed that she would just stay with him for the weekend, and for the first time since I caught them together, that was fine by me.

It was evident that Lauren hadn’t told her dad that I was moving out, or that she had a new boyfriend. I didn’t bother to

mention that he would be here helping me move. As hurt as I was by her, I didn't want to get in between her and her dad.

I was still questioning the wisdom of asking for Mr. Dawson's help, but it was too late now. And I was taking a little too much time to get ready before he came over.

I was hoping Jason would be the first to show up so he could act as a buffer, even if a tiny part of me wished Mr. Dawson would get here first so I could try to grab his attention without feeling stupid. But as I glanced out the window, it became apparent that I wasn't going to get much choice in the matter. In true Jason form, he was running late, and in true Mr. Dawson form, he was right on time.

I watched with a combination of excitement and worry as his sleek black sports car pulled into the driveway. I stood off to the side of the window so he couldn't see me and watched him as he got out of his car.

Damn.

He looked good as he eased out of the car. Gone was his sharp business suit and in its place was a gray T-shirt that molded to the mounds of his chiseled chest.

My eyes trailed down to his black gym shorts. I never thought I would be turned on by a man's calves, but his were impressive.

"Shit, shit, shit," I muttered to myself as he came up the front walkway.

Why was I feeling panicky?

The doorbell rang and I sucked in a deep breath, readjusting my ponytail a final time before opening the door.

“Good morning, Mr. Dawson,” I greeted with a practiced smile, my heart doing a little tap dance in my chest.

His lips quirked up in a half-smile, and his gaze swept over me with a hunger I hadn’t expected. “Mornin’, Lee. You can call me Jax outside of work hours, remember?” His voice was huskier than usual, and I felt goosebumps erupt all over my skin.

I nodded, cheeks flushing a delightful shade of pink. “Of course, Jax.”

A mischievous glint danced in his eyes as he added, “I noticed Lauren’s car isn’t here...”

I suppressed a grin, meeting his gaze. “Yeah, she’s spending the weekend at her boyfriend’s place.”

His brow furrowed ever so slightly, a telltale sign of his curiosity. “New boyfriend, huh? She never mentioned.”

“She’s pretty tight-lipped about these things,” I said nonchalantly, though I wondered if Lauren’s secret-keeping had contributed to our current mess.

“Yeah, they haven’t been dating that long, though,” I added as I moved into the kitchen, hoping he would drop the subject, but no such luck.

“Is that why you’re moving out? You don’t like this new guy?” he asked.

I shook my head, “I like the guy just fine,” I said telling myself it wasn’t a lie. I had liked Rob, I thought I loved him, even. “It’s just time for me to be on my own,” I explained.

He looked at me suspiciously. “Okay, as long as she’s safe with this guy, I’ll leave it alone for now.”

It must have been nice for Lauren to have a father who cared enough to worry about who she dated and if she was being treated properly. I never had that privilege.

I tamped down the spike of envy I had over that one and pushed forward, changing the subject. “Jason should be here any minute, he has a tendency to run late.”

“Okay. Well, where are the keys to your truck? I can back it up in the driveway in the meantime,” he said, taking charge as usual... yet another aspect that turned me on about him.

I reached for the entryway table and handed him the keys. Our fingers brushed and the touch was electric, igniting a warmth that spread from the point of contact. Then I caught him staring at my chest.

Without being able to stop myself, I pushed my breasts forward a bit and I saw him swallow hard at the motion.

He was onto me, no doubt, and it was an exhilarating realization. His attention was a secret thrill, a secret that I was only beginning to indulge in. It was a sensation I’d never experienced before – the desire to be seen, to be wanted, by a man any woman would kill for.

He cleared his throat. “Right. I’ll get right on that,” he said, his voice more strained than before, ripping his gaze away from me and making a beeline toward the door.

I couldn’t help the satisfied smile that overtook my mouth. There was no mistaking the way he’d just checked me out, it had been blatant.

I did my best to tamp down the heat that was swirling restlessly low in my belly. It was one thing to be crushing on my boss, but to think he might actually feel the same way? That was enough to send me to bed with my favorite vibrator for a week.

My thoughts were veering into dangerous territory.

He came back, interrupting my wayward thoughts. Quickly, I scooped up the box nearest to me in an effort to look like I hadn’t just been standing there imagining what he looked like beneath those shorts, but I’d forgotten just how heavy I’d packed that box and it must have shown on my face because he hurried over and easily lifted the box from me.

“Here, let me get that.”

I swallowed nervously, made all the more nervous by the way he just stood there with the heavy box in his hands staring at my mouth. I was suddenly grateful that I had spent so much time on my appearance that morning.

We were interrupted by the chirping of my text message notification. I looked down at my phone screen.

“Damn,” I muttered.

“What’s wrong?” he questioned.

“It’s Jason. He said he just got called into work and that he won’t be able to help today.” I sighed in frustration.

“Oh. Well, that’s alright. You and I are two perfectly capable adults, we can get this licked in no time,” he said, hefting the box up and heading back out toward the truck.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I said to myself when I knew he was out of earshot, completely tantalized by everything he just said in that innocuous statement.

Alone with Jax away from work...the anticipation of what lay ahead electrified my senses.

Chapter 6

Amelia

WE WORKED MOSTLY IN silence at first save for the delicious grunts he made when he lifted something particularly heavy. Sweaty dudes were not something that normally turned me on, but the way the rivulets of sweat ran down his neck and into his shirt just made my tongue want to follow the same trail.

Adding insult to injury, the man smelled amazing when he sweat. I mean, c'mon. Who could actually say that? But he had this wonderful spicy scent that seemed to intensify as he worked. It made me want to taste him everywhere.

It was a hot summer day in Vegas, I couldn't help but sweat too and I hoped to God I wasn't grossing him out, but he continued to give me long, stern looks. They were akin to the long, serious looks he'd been giving me in the office, yet his presence had transformed from intimidating to captivating, a shift that had taken me by surprise.

I'd thought those looks had to do with him not being impressed with my work performance, but now that he'd

disabused me of that notion, I wondered if those looks meant something else entirely.

Not to mention that there was one point, where I'd been bending over to pick something up and when I rose, I could have sworn I'd seen him yanking down the bottom of his shirt to cover an erection. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but there was something happening down there.

In the past, I had harbored adolescent fantasies about him, fantasies that I'd brushed off as fleeting fancies. But now, working side by side with him, those dormant thoughts had reawakened with a vengeance. With every glance at his scruff-covered jaw and the strands of silver threading through his hair, my heart raced and my cheeks heated.

“So, I had a talk with the Director of Marketing and asked why there hadn't been a social media post in six months. Or why the Gemini convention wasn't on the Website.”

“Really? What did he have to say for himself?”

“*She*...Didn't have much to say at all. So, I fired her.”

“You *fired* her?”

“Well, I can't exactly pay six figures a year to someone who isn't doing their job, can I?”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Well, I'd like for you to come up with a marketing plan if you wouldn't mind. I've got the next in charge handling things for now, but maybe you two could work together?”

“Yeah, I’d love to.” My mouth pulled into a huge smile and I felt my cheeks beam with excitement.

“Great.” He smiled at me, but not like the usual stiff smiles he gave me at work. I could see his bright white teeth this time and dimples appeared in his cheeks. They were so sexy I wanted to brush my lips over them.

I ate, slept, and breathed marketing for four grueling years and I was dying to put my skills to action and see how I did in the real world. He was finally going to give me a shot and I was giddy with excitement.

“Hey Lee, would you mind if I grabbed a drink of water? I left my water bottle in the car.”

“Sure. Right this way.” I gestured for him to follow me.

He followed me into the kitchen as I grabbed two glasses from the cabinet and poured us some water.

His gaze lingered on me as if taking in every detail, and I averted my eyes, my cheeks flushing as I realized how closely he was studying me. It wasn’t just his commanding presence that affected me; it was the chemistry between us, like, *real* chemistry like I’d never felt before. An undeniable force that tugged at my senses.

“So, what are your long-term plans? Your goals?” He broke his gaze to take a big gulp.

“Well, I’d really love to settle down and have a family one day. Maybe two or three kids. And a Porsche Boxter maybe. A white one.” I giggled.

I looked over at him and he was staring at me with something unidentifiable in his penetrating sapphire gaze.

I swallowed hard, mortification making my face burn.

“Aaaand you meant my long-term *career* goals, not personal stuff. I am so stupid,” I laughed humorlessly.

“Not at all. You’re not stupid,” he insisted. “Besides, I don’t mind hearing about your personal goals. Ever since Lauren moved out, my life has been all business all the time, so it’s nice to hear about something different for a change.”

I smiled at him politely. “That’s nice of you to say, but you don’t have to pretend that you’re interested in my family plans.”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to face me to make sure I was looking at him. “Why would you say that? I *am* interested in you, Lee.” Our eyes met and he was looking at me so intensely.

My throat went desert dry but I managed to eek out, “You are?”

“Yeah,” he said more softly. “Anyone who can whip my office into shape and keep my daughter on the straight and narrow the way you have has earned my respect and admiration.”

I ducked my head smiling, needing to break our profound gaze into one another’s eyes. If he kept looking at me like that, I was liable to do something truly embarrassing that was sure to make a cat in heat sound subtle.

He took the hint and went back to what he was doing.

We had successfully packed up as much as we could into the back of my small pickup truck and drove it to my new apartment.

Speaking of cats, as we walked toward the stairs up to my new place, what appeared to be an adolescent gray kitty approached us from the bushes.

“Oh, she’s so cute!” I dropped my box and squatted down to extend a hand toward him.

I’d never had a pet my whole life and always wanted a dog or a cat to love. Or maybe I just wanted one to love me. Real love wasn’t something I’d ever really had.

My action startled her and she retreated back to the bushes she came from.

“Aw, she looks skinny and has a lot of mats in her fur. I think she might be a stray,” I said.

“Well, don’t even think about feeding him, he’ll never leave.”

“What makes you think it’s a *he*? And maybe I want to keep her.” I stood back up and he was standing so close my breasts brushed against his chest.

“Don’t even think about it. I’m deathly allergic to cats.”

“Well, why would it matter? Are you planning on coming here often?” I said, my hands on my hips as I looked up at his towering frame.

He paused without breaking eye contact. “Cat hair gets everywhere. And you do work for me, Ms. Scott. You might show up to the office wearing more than a tight skirt.” He smirked.

I fought back a smile as I let out an inner squeal at his revelation that he’d noticed my tight skirts.

After three trips back and forth, we were in the process of getting the last of the furniture up the stairs and into my new place.

I hadn’t expected him to be so thorough, though I don’t know why that would have surprised me, but he even placed the boxes into the appropriate spots by label. I’d expected to just sort out everything myself with Jason’s help, but Jax was going above and beyond the call for help.

“Sooo,” he began casually enough. “Is it safe to assume that you’ll want to be married before you start having those kids you were talking about?”

I glanced at him. “Yeah, it’s just finding the right guy that’s the tricky part.” I chuckled.

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were with that one guy, what’s his name?”

“Rob,” I said flatly.

“Yeah, him. What happened to him?” he asked.

I sighed. “Let’s just say that I found out that he is most definitely *not* the right kind of guy for me.”

He shrugged with a smirk, “I could have told you that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I only met him that one time when you all came over to use the pool. Nice enough guy, I suppose, but not right for someone like you,” he explained.

I stopped what I was doing, paying full attention now. “And what would be right for ‘someone like me’?”

He looked at me appraisingly, the corner of his mouth lifting. “You need someone more... mature.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Mature as in attitude? Or somebody older?” I ventured nervously.

“Well,” he started slowly. “I was meaning attitude, I guess, but does age make a difference?”

I shrugged. “As long as everyone is legal, then I say it’s just a number.”

There was that look again.

I used to think it meant he was mad at me but now had me feeling a completely different way.

He sucked in a deep breath, then looked thoughtful. “Tell you what. We’re almost done here and I don’t know about you, but I am starving. How about I order us some pizza?”

“Pizza? I thought you were cutting back on carbs.”

“Today is my ‘cheat’ day.” He reached for his phone to make an order.

“Oh, I couldn’t have you do that. At least let me pay—,” I started, but he was having none of it.

“No, no. Think of it as a really lame apartment-warming gift,” he said, getting out his phone. I laughed.

I started sorting through my boxes as Jax made the order, all the while sneaking glances at him. There was something about his voice, that take-charge attitude, that even when he was doing something as pedestrian as ordering pizza, I still felt an excited tingle at the sound of it.

He’s just ordering pizza. Calm down.

Jax moved the rest of the boxes into the rooms where they belonged while we waited for our food. He left shortly after to go pick up the order. While he was out, I couldn’t help myself from going to the bathroom and checking my hair and make-up. When I emerged, Jax was in the kitchen, pizza boxes in hand.

I had just slapped a couple of slices on some paper plates as we stood in my tiny kitchen and ate.

“So, what made you decide that now was the time to move out?” he asked.

I really didn’t want to get into the nitty-gritty details of what happened between Lauren, Rob, and myself, so I shrugged. “I just felt it was time to get out on my own, and I thought Lauren and her boyfriend might appreciate the place to themselves—nothing worse than feeling like a third wheel.”

His brow furrowed. “I guess I’m going to have to ask Lauren about this new guy she’s seeing, it sounds like it’s getting serious.”

I offered a labored smile, then stuffed some more pizza in my mouth to save me from having to comment further.

He looked thoughtful again, then offered slowly, “I know it can feel weird when you’re just getting out of a relationship and your best friend is getting into a serious one.”

You don’t know the half of it.

He continued, “But don’t worry. You’re young, you’re intelligent, and you’re beautiful. You’ll find someone who appreciates you and more.”

My pulse began to race at the way he was complimenting me. It wasn’t something I was used to. I ducked my head, blushing.

His gaze intensified, locking onto mine as if he could sense the vulnerability behind my words.

“Lee,” he said softly, his low voice a caress that wrapped around my name. “C’mon, you don’t have to do that. Surely, you must know how beautiful you are...”

I swallowed hard, my mouth going suddenly dry. “Um, I don’t know about that. I mean, I guess I never really thought about it.”

He moved his knuckles to tip my chin up so that I was looking him in the eye. “Amelia, look at me,” he said in his deep husky voice.

A tender silence hung between us, and before I could respond, his hand reached out. His thumb traced a path along my cheekbone, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. My breath caught, and I looked up at him, lost in the depths of his gaze.

“Any man would be lucky to have someone as special as you. Not to mention that you are a beautiful, sexy woman,” he said, his eyes dropping to my mouth.

My heart raced, my cheeks flushing at the sincerity in his voice. His compliment was unexpected, and I swallowed past the lump in my throat, a mix of gratitude and uncertainty swelling within me. I felt a warmth spread through my body, down to my core.

“You think I’m sexy?” I whispered.

A slow, sexy grin stretched across his full mouth and he laughed huskily. “Yeah, I, I... uh, probably shouldn’t be telling you this, considering who you are to my daughter, and the fact that you are my employee, but...” he hesitated.

“But what?” I pressed.

He licked his lips and damnit if I didn’t almost come right there on the spot.

“A couple of summers ago, you were at my house at a pool party with Lauren. I didn’t know it was you at first, you had your back turned to me, but I was immediately... affected,” he confessed.

“Affected?” I asked.

He huffed a laugh. “Shit, you’re going to make me say it, aren’t you? I was turned on by what I saw.”

I could feel my eyes widen. “Oh.” I blinked.

“I just wrote it off as a passing attraction, but since you’ve been working at the casino, I’ve discovered that it might not be so passing,” he admitted.

I stared at him surprised. This man that I’d had a crush on for years was telling me he thought I was sexy... This man, who was my boss and ex-best friend’s father.

Was I going to let those two last things bother me, though?

“Amelia?” he asked, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything—”

“No,” I interrupted. “No. I’m glad you did because...” Nerves threatened to close up my throat.

“Because?” he drew out, his eyebrows raised.

“Because it’s nice to know I’m not the only one having those feelings.” I held my breath, working up my nerve to get out the rest. “Because I’ve had a crush on you for years.”

I took in his serious face and the way his jaw clenched at my admission. Was he angry about what I’d just told him?

“Amelia,” he said in a ragged voice. “Do you mean that? Because I can’t handle you teasing me. Not with the way I’ve been dreaming about you.”

My core erupted in tingles. “Yes,” I whispered, “I’ve always had a crush on you, but I didn’t think anything would ever

come of it because I was Lauren's friend. But since I started working for you, it's gotten out of control. I keep thinking what it would be like if you touched me."

I cannot believe I just said that out loud.

His eyes darkened several shades and planted on my mouth. "Amelia," he said in a rough voice. "What else have you thought about?"

"Lots of things."

"Like what? Tell me what you think about, Lee." His voice was low as he stepped closer to me.

I felt embarrassed at first, but seeing how he was looking at me gave me a burst of confidence and the words just flowed from my lips.

"I think about you fucking me on your desk."

"Don't you fucking tease me, Amelia," he said with a gruff voice. He inched even closer to me and raised a hand to grip my jaw, staring down into my eyes. He squeezed my face tighter in his strong hand. "I've jerked off for three weeks straight thinking about you."

Wetness flooded my panties and his hand made my skin feel like it was on fire. He leaned into me and I could feel his erection pressed up against my body.

"You feel that, Lee?" He pressed his erection into me harder and my breath hitched. "You did that."

I stared back into his lust-filled eyes and ached for him in that moment.

“You don’t need these young pencil dick assholes. You want a man, don’t you, Lee?” he said in a husky grumble, his breathing heavy.

I nodded urgently in agreement.

“I want to kiss you, but I have to warn you now, if we start I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop.”

God, I hoped he meant what he said.

I bit my lip. “You promise?” I teased as I looked into his eyes, not knowing where this side of myself was coming from.

The words had barely left my lips before he leaned forward and took my mouth.

His kiss was aggressive and I loved it. There was no gentle pecking, he was all in.

My tongue met his, stroke for stroke, and I couldn’t get enough of how hungry he was for me.

I moaned into his mouth and he pulled me against him so that I could feel all of him. I gasped at the feeling of his hardness against me.

He broke the kiss long enough to ask in a pant, “You sure you want this?”

Feeling bold, I gripped my hands over his thick neck as I asked, “Why don’t you see for yourself just how bad I want this?”

Chapter 7

Jax

“**G** ODDAMN, YOU’RE GOING TO kill me before we even get started,” I said.

She responded with a smile, a silent invitation that unleashed the storm within me.

The tension between us crackled like electricity.

We were crossing boundaries we knew we shouldn’t, but the raw intensity of our attraction drowned out any semblance of reason.

I knew this was wrong, but all my sane thoughts left me the moment she said she felt the same way. I had been repressing how I felt for far too long and my base instincts became unleashed.

Seizing the moment, I kissed her fiercely, my fingers tracing the contours of her body and I let out a deep groan as my hand slipped beneath the hem of her shirt and I pressed against her with a primal urgency.

She reached behind herself and unhooked her bra to give me easier access and I groaned my appreciation. My hand palmed her breast, and she arched her back to push her breast more firmly into my hand. I ran a thumb over her erect nipple and the wanton moan that left her lips sent a rush to my cock.

My mouth moved to her long neck, sucking the delicate flesh.

“The things I’ve thought about doing to you,” I said with a ragged pant, blood rushing throughout my body with excitement.

She pulled back long enough to give me a challenging look.

“Show me,” she whispered.

I nearly growled as I threw her shirt across the room. She dug her fingers into my shoulders as I attacked her breasts with my mouth. When I sucked her hard nipple into my mouth, she let out a long moan that went straight to my groin.

“You like that, Amelia?”

“Yes. I want more, Jax. I want to feel you,” she begged breathlessly.

I gave a low, throaty chuckle, “Oh my, Amelia, you’ve asked for it.”

She was leaning against the kitchen counter when I rose above her, cupping the back of her head in my hand, leading her to a standing position.

“Now show me that sweet pussy you’ve been hiding under those skirts.”

She hooked her thumbs into the waistline of her leggings and peeled them down along with her panties.

I hauled her up onto the countertop to help her kick them off. She spread her legs to show me a glistening wet pussy, covered with a dusting of natural hair.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” I murmured against her lips, my fingers inching lower, teasing her arousal. She whimpered, her hips arching toward me, urging me on.

I felt her breasts before skimming my hands down her ribs and over her waist until they came to rest at her hips. I gave her a long, slow kiss that I felt all the way down to my toes and dropped to my knees before her.

I knelt between her parted legs, consumed by the sight of her, glistening and exposed. Her breath hitched as my gaze roamed over her, taking in every detail. The room seemed to shrink as the intensity between us grew.

I gave her a cocky grin before pushing her knees apart. Her legs were shivering and I placed my hands on her inner thighs to steady them.

Her hands gripped the edge of the tile counter top as I leaned forward, her eyes trained on mine as I gave a tentative lick over her swollen folds. Once my tongue ran over her clit, she gasped.

“Mmm,” I moaned as I devoured her, rumbling against her flesh. I never imagined that just her sounds alone could bring me to orgasm, but I was certain that just a few more moans would send me over the edge.

I glanced at her hands and her knuckles were white from gripping the edge of the counter as I fucked her with my tongue. When I slipped a finger inside of her, her head lolled back and she let out an anguished moan. I inserted another finger and her inner walls tightened around my fingers as I hooked them gently to stroke her most sensitive spot.

“Oh my God!” she cried out.

My voice rumbled. “Come on, baby, come all over my face,” I ordered just before sucking on her clit. I couldn’t believe I was speaking to her this way, but I had lost all control of myself and it seemed to turn her on.

She came all over my tongue in an explosion of wetness as a string of profanity left her beautiful mouth, and I licked her pussy clean as her body convulsed.

I stood up and pressed my length against her, moving close to her ear.

“You ready to take all of me?”

“Yes, Jax. Give me more.” she panted.

The voice that came out of her was not one that I recognized. It was needy and seductive. Bossy and breathy. Somehow, this woman had just unlocked all these urges I’d been stuffing

down over time and I could still hardly believe this was actually happening.

If someone would have told me a couple of days ago that I would be alone with Amelia, her legs spread before me begging me to fuck her, I would have said they were batshit nuts. But God, did it feel right.

I looked at her sharply, “Be careful what you wish for.”

My erection was raging and I was nervous about what I would do to her. I had wanted her so badly for so long that I was libel to break her in half.

I lifted her off the counter and hauled her toward the bedroom. Her eyes were dark and full of want.

The bed was put together at that point and the mattress was still bare, but I didn’t care. “Get on the bed and spread those legs for me.”

She bit her bottom lip in anticipation as she did what I told her to do. I noticed her fidgeting with her hands as I dropped my shorts.

“Oh my God, you’re huge,” she gasped, her eyes wide.

“That’s what you do to me, Amelia. You want something to do with those hands?” I asked as I stroked my length. “Touch yourself. Show me what feels good.”

She bit her lip at the command, struggling to keep her legs apart. She was acting shy and it turned me on even more.

“That’s it, baby. Spread your legs and touch yourself.”

She moved her hand down her stomach tentatively, all the way down to her pussy sending my heart racing as her fingers sought their destination. She touched herself, and my breath caught at the sight of her fingers tracing her delicate folds.

My eyes followed every lazy swirl of her fingers and when she finally found her target, a growl escaped me that had her begging,

“Jax... please.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ll fuck you real good in no time,” I said with labored breath.

She stared at my cock as she touched herself. Her pussy was glistening with wetness in the dim lights. I gripped my cock tighter and slowed my pace. I was going to come in two seconds at this rate and I needed a moment to slow down.

I just watched and took her in. She made more vigorous motions over her clit, over and over before slipping her middle finger inside her slick cunt, then another. Her full breasts shook with the action as she thrust her fingers in and out. She pushed them in as deep as they would go and she palmed her clit in circular motions.

“Fuck, that’s hot.”

She threw her head back and moaned as she fingered herself.

“You want me to fuck you, Lee? Tell me you want me to fuck you. Beg for it,” I said with labored breath. I wasn’t sure anything was going to keep me from fucking this woman’s brains out, but I had to be sure she wanted this.

“Yes, Jax. I want it. Fuck me. Please,” she begged.

I hissed as I stroked my dick, veins bulging from my arm and my whole body was tense with anticipation. I stalked closer to the bed and climbed up to her, leaning on one arm and letting my other hand wander down her smooth body. I held her gaze as our lips met again, fierce and unyielding.

“Do you have any idea how badly I’ve been wanting you?”

She shook her head and looked at me with those bourbon-colored eyes.

I shifted down, sucking her nipple into my mouth and her back arched off the mattress for closer contact.

The way she tasted, smelled, her smooth flesh, those big brown eyes, and the sounds she made—all of it was overwhelming and intoxicating.

“Show me what you’d do to me,” she whispered.

Something akin to a hushed roar emitted from my throat and then my mouth was right next to her ear. “Whatever you want, Amelia, I will give it to you. Just do what I say and I will make sure you get exactly what you want,” I promised darkly.

I settled more firmly between her legs, pushing them even further apart. The tip of my length was pressed against her slit, and her thighs quivered. I stayed there for an impossibly long time as she squirmed. I looked down at her, breathing hard as my cock throbbed. I wanted to hear her needy voice beg a little more.

“Say it again, Amelia. Tell me you want it...”

“Please, Jax,” she panted. “Fuck me hard...” Then she added, “Please, Mr. Dawson.”

“Fuck!” I growled.

I didn’t expect to hear that. But the utterance of those words undid something in me. The last of my restraint seemed to snap like a twig. I pressed myself forward and filled her up all at once. Nothing slow or timid, just all of me stretching her wide, and her pussy was so tight. She screamed out at the force, but I was so eager I couldn’t help myself.

I leaned over her, her eyes on mine.

“You tell me if it gets to be too much, Amelia, you hear me?” I asked sharply.

“Yes, Mr. Dawson,” she said breathlessly, moaning almost immediately as I surged forward, thrusting deep. “Oh my God!” she cried as she tilted her hips upward as if wanting more.

“Yes,” she moaned. “I’ve wanted this. I’ve wanted you.”

Hearing her say those words sent jolts through my body, straight to my dick and I almost went over. I slowed my pace just to savor the feeling of her soft inner walls enveloping me. I wanted to feel every inch of her for as long as possible. After a few thrusts, I found my resolve and grasped her hips, pumping into her with a vigor that, at first, I wasn’t sure she could handle, but damnit, she tried like hell. She cried out at my pace.

“Fuck, your pussy is so tight... That’s it. Squeeze my cock,” I grumbled as I ground my hips into her and her walls squeezed that much tighter around me.

Her hips were pinned against the mattress as I completely took over. She never took her eyes off mine as we fucked and the feeling was intense. Her hands reached for me, grasping my shoulders as her pussy began to clench even tighter.

“Jax,” she cried, “I’m gonna come.”

“That’s it, sweetheart,” I breathed in her ear. “Come all over my dick like a good girl.”

She screamed as a burst of wetness erupted inside her. She cried out my name as her spasms milked my cock.

My thrusts became wild and unhinged. The sounds of our bodies slapping together echoed throughout the mostly empty room. I shifted her across the bare mattress for deeper access and felt my imminent release building in my spine. She squeezed her pussy tighter around me and I stilled above her, my eyes boring into hers as I pumped once, twice more before flooding her depths with my cum.

I collapsed on top of her and we lay there for a while, catching our breath. It felt good to feel her naked flesh pressed against mine.

As the last spasms of my orgasm faded away, I became more cognizant of my surroundings. I was on a bare mattress in an otherwise empty bedroom resting in between the legs of my

much younger employee. And I realized I had just come inside her.

“I hope you’re on the pill.” I panted.

“An IUD,” she replied to my relief.

I felt an odd combination of immense satisfaction and complete horror.

What the fuck did I just do?

Chapter 8

Amelia

I JUST HAD SEX with my boss. My best friend's father.

A thread of panic rose through me and yet I couldn't get over how good it felt to have his six-foot-four frame on top of me. While so much of this felt wrong because of the circumstances, everything about the way he touched me, the way he looked at me, and how I felt around him felt completely right.

The riotous clamor in my head was silenced by Jax pulling back and looking down at me, his expression severe. I saw something cross his face, regret maybe? Was he already regretting what we had just done? Was I?

He sat up and scrubbed a hand over his face.

"That was fucking amazing," he said, his words casting a rush of warmth through me. But his next words shattered the fleeting sense of euphoria. "But that can never happen again."

It felt like my throat was closing up. I struggled to find the proper words to say, A confusing mix of emotions swirled

inside me. I didn't know whether I should be sad, relieved, or pissed.

This was uncharted territory, and I didn't suppose it was something that a person got used to. Not knowing what else to do, I just nodded and managed to add in a strangled voice, "Of course."

Because of course, he was right. I knew this. There was no way this could ever work out.

I didn't expect anything to come from this and I was pretty sure he didn't either. It was just a culmination of several weeks of pent-up frustration and sexual tension. It was just sex.

Now that we had gotten it out of our systems, maybe I could move past this silly crush.

He got up from the bed and started putting his clothes back on. As he dressed, his movements carried a sense of finality.

"I want you to understand this will have no effect on your job whatsoever. Nothing changes when we're at work. This was just a moment that got the better of us, that's all. There's no need to let it ruin anything else for us."

Ouch.

He continued. "It goes without saying that Lauren shouldn't know about this." His chest still heaved as he was catching his breath.

I got up from the bed to retrieve my clothes. My fingers trembled as I fumbled to put them back on. I managed to mask my emotions with a cool exterior.

“You don’t have to worry about me. Nothing happened.”

We stood there for a long moment, just looking at one another and feeling the weight of everything that had just happened. Everything we had just done.

Finally, he nodded solemnly, and I let him off the hook. “It’s getting late, you should go.”

His somber gaze met mine, and for a moment, it seemed like he was about to say something more, something that lingered just beneath the surface of his intense gaze. But he didn’t. Instead, he nodded and turned to leave, leaving behind an awkward silence that reverberated through the room long after he was gone. He gave me one last long look... and I watched him walk out of my room.

I followed not far behind him to lock the door.

“See you on Monday,” he said before leaving.

I closed the door and didn’t bother to watch him walk away.

After I went to the bathroom to clean myself up, I threw some sheets on my bed and lay down to sleep, but I couldn’t at first. I kept reliving the sensations of the last hour until at some point I drifted off to sleep.



The morning light filtered through my window, casting a soft glow over my small bedroom. But the weight of the events from the previous night still hung heavy over me, casting a shadow that was impossible to escape.

I didn't sleep well. Restless images of the night before played over and over in my head. He was the last thing I remember thinking about before I fell asleep, and the first thing I thought about when I woke up.

It was amazing. It was everything I thought it would be and more.

I had never been that open and forward with a man in my life and couldn't believe the things that were coming out of my mouth. But it felt so easy at the time. He took me over and I was helpless to do anything else but give in.

When he told me he thought I was sexy, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It sent a gush of wetness to my core just thinking about those words coming from his deep husky voice.

With a sigh, I finally got myself up from my rumpled sheets and decided to channel my thoughts into something productive.

My mind wandered to the conversation we'd had about the company's marketing, and a spark of determination ignited within me. Instead of unpacking, I decided to first work on my plan and brainstorm some ideas before they left my head.

I had been observing the company's marketing efforts since my first day, and it was killing me not to make some suggestions. When I finally mucked up the courage to bring it up to Jax the night before, I didn't expect him to be so receptive.

He had been so cold, and he was just starting to lighten up, so I decided I didn't want to miss the opportunity to catch him while he was warm. I wasn't a seasoned professional just yet and never expected him to take me seriously, but he surprised me.

It was over a hundred degrees outside and my apartment was roasting. I got up to turn up the air conditioner and rifle through some boxes searching for something to write with. I grabbed a glass of ice water, a pencil, and pad of paper before I set up a makeshift desk out of a large box on the floor.

I started to jot down some ideas but every time the ideas started flowing, my mind wandered back to Jax. His incredible body, his strength, his assertiveness, and how he looked at me. His eyes were like molten lava, burning through me with a feverish intensity. How I trembled every time he touched me.

My heart raced and my cheeks flushed at the thought. I held my glass of ice water to my cheek and felt the shock from the contrasting cold. I didn't know if I was embarrassed or excited. Or terrified.

If Lauren ever found out, I didn't want to think about what that would mean. We weren't exactly on speaking terms, but that didn't mean I wanted to hurt her to settle the score. And I certainly didn't want to cause problems for Jax.

The truth was, I missed her. She had been my chosen family, and no matter what she did to me, I couldn't get between her and her dad. Jax would never put me above her in a million

years, as it should be, and I wasn't one to try to make two wrongs a right.

But the sting I felt when he said it was just a moment that got the better of us remained, and it made me feel a sense of shame.

I knew it was just sex, but part of me wanted to believe he thought more of me than that. But how could he?

Hearing that I was just a good fuck out loud was jarring.

He didn't exactly say that, but that's what he meant.

The hours passed in a blur as I lost myself in my work, determined to channel my thoughts into something productive. I needed to prove to myself that I was more than the impulsive decisions of a single night.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, I realized I hadn't eaten all day. Between working on my ideas, unpacking, and my distraction by the events from the night before, I flat-out forgot to eat. My stomach growled in protest, a reminder that I needed sustenance to keep going. I closed my notebook, a sense of accomplishment mingling with the lingering uncertainty that I couldn't shake.

I hadn't packed a single scrap of food and the leftover pizza from the night before had hardened like a rock. I threw on some clothes, grabbed my purse, and headed out to get a bite to eat.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, the little gray kitty came out to say hello.

“Awwww, hello, little girl.” I crouched down and held a hand out. She came over and rubbed her head under my hand and let me stroke her. She was skinny with mats in her fur and a chunk of her ear had been torn off.

“Are you hungry? You’re hungry, aren’t you? Do you have a mama?” I scratched her chin and she pressed her head down into my wriggling fingers.

She was so friendly it was hard to believe she didn’t belong to someone, but she wasn’t wearing a collar and she was so rough-looking and skinny I couldn’t imagine she would look like that with an owner to care for her.

I decided to buy a few cans of cat food while I was out to at least get her a proper meal. When I returned, she was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. I picked her up and carried her to the front porch and placed an open can of cat food on the ground. She went for it immediately and devoured it.

“Poor thing, you were starving. Let me get you some water.”

I went in and returned to the porch with a bowl of water. She didn’t drink any, but I decided to sit with her for a little while.

My mind was still clouded with thoughts of Jax. I replayed the sensations of his touch, the sound of his voice, and his cold words just before he left. But as the evening settled around me, I at least had this little cat to keep me company.

The journey ahead was uncertain, fraught with obstacles and the potential for heartache. But I was no stranger to challenges, and I was determined to face whatever lay ahead,

even if it meant navigating the uncharted territory of my feelings for Jax Dawson.

Chapter 9

Jax

WHAT THE FUCK HAVE I done?

The events of the last few hours played over and over in my head on a loop. All I could hear were Amelia's cries for more, followed by her cold voice telling me flatly that I should go.

"Of course, I should go," I'd thought at the time. It made perfect sense. But that didn't stop the fact that everything inside me wanted to do the exact opposite.

Every voice inside my head that had been warning me away from Amelia for the last couple of years was now shouting simultaneously at me. I had gone too far.

Every song on the radio became a haunting melody, each lyric mocking my lack of self-control. My thoughts swirled in a vortex of guilt and longing.

The events with Amelia replayed like a broken record, reminding me of my betrayal to both my principles and my daughter.

When she told me how she felt about me, she didn't realize that she had opened up the floodgates.

How was I to know that she felt that way?

I suppose it was a damn good thing I didn't know. If I had had that information earlier, lord only knows what I would have done. Though, I seriously doubted it could have been any worse than what I had just done anyway.

To make matters worse, I couldn't shake the feeling that I should be feeling much shittier about this. I knew what I did was wrong, but all I could think about was going back there and doing it again—the absolute last thing I should have been thinking about doing.

At that point, I thought about Rachel. She didn't cross my mind the entire time I was at Amelia's and this crushed me. I had been so consumed with her memory that I had forgotten what it felt like to live a day without that ache in my heart. But for those hours at Amelia's, it was as if she'd never existed, and that made me feel like shit.

I turned up the volume on my radio as I drove home, hoping the noise would distract me, but all it really did was act as a soundtrack to my memory loop of what Amelia and I had just done.

There was no help for it, the way she felt pinned beneath me, her breathy little moans—I was wise enough to know objectively that there was no way I was going to be able to get those delicious sights and sounds out of my head. No, I was going to have to do everything in my power to distract myself.

It was Saturday evening and I wouldn't see her till Monday morning. I had a day to sort my shit out and get over this little infatuation.

“One day,” I said over and over to myself as a mantra, then laughed humorlessly as I stopped at a stoplight. “Great, now she's got me talking to myself.”

When I got inside my house, I struggled not to pull up my phone and call her and tell her I made a mistake. However, I wasn't entirely sure what mistake I would be admitting to. Having amazing sex with her? Or walking out of her door and leaving her behind?

I didn't like the way we left things even though the pragmatic side of me told me that it was absolutely necessary.

Zeke and I decided long ago that we wouldn't get involved with employees. It never ended well and only complicated things. But the fact was, I wasn't interested in her beyond sex. I couldn't be. I felt shame about it, like I had never felt before.

She did things to me that I couldn't explain, but she was half my age. She was young and had her life ahead of her. She wasn't someone I would have ever considered having an actual relationship with, and I was sure she never considered me either. But I went through with it anyway.

As guilty as I felt about Rachel, this didn't change the fact that I couldn't stop thinking about what Amelia and I had done and how good it had felt.

I couldn't sleep.

As the hours dragged on, I tossed and turned in bed, wrestling with my thoughts until the sun came up.

The morning sunlight beaming through the cracks of my window curtains was unwelcome, a reminder of the new day and the weight of my actions. I had betrayed Rachel's memory, I had compromised my relationship with Lauren, and I crossed lines that should never have been crossed.

When I arrived at the office Monday morning, I waited for her usual morning knock where she would come in with coffee just the way I liked it and ask me if there was anything of importance that she needed to address first before she carried on with her day—but it never came.

I got up once to use my private bathroom, and when I came back out, my coffee was waiting for me at my desk.

She didn't want to see me.

Who could blame her? The last thing I wanted was for her to feel uncomfortable at work.

I had made it clear that nothing happened between us. How else was she supposed to interpret that?

As I sipped the coffee, my thoughts churned. I pictured Rachel's smiling face, her wisdom and compassion, and a pang of grief lanced through me. She had been my true love, her loss leaving a wound that still ached, even after all these years. The comfort of her presence was something I feared I'd never find again.

Had pursuing pleasure with Amelia betrayed the sanctity of Rachel's memory? Or was I being unfair to the living by remaining loyal to the dead? The questions clawed at me, eroding my peace of mind.

Perhaps if Rachel were still here, she would want me to move on, to embrace new happiness. But the lingering guilt over her loss held me back from fully engaging with life once more. I was locked in limbo between the past and present, unable to fully reconcile my feelings.

Sipping the coffee Amelia brought, I longed to speak with her candidly, to understand if she had similar regrets. But the gulf between our positions made such intimacy impossible. All I could do was uphold professional boundaries, no matter how my conflicted heart protested.

When a knock sounded on my office door a few minutes later, my stomach turned into a lump. "Come in," I answer curtly.

My shoulders slumped when Zeke popped his head in the door. The disappointment I felt must have been obvious.

He smiled at me with that shit-eating grin of his. "Nice to see you too, Buttercup."

I glared at him. He gave me a cajoling look.

"Dude, get the fuck out of here."

His smile only widened. "There's the Jax I know. What's up your butt already?"

"Nothing," I answered emphatically.

Zeke hovered close to my desk, but as usual, he didn't immediately take a seat. Some said his restless energy was a part of his charm, but this morning, I was finding it downright annoying.

He paced, casually acting as if he was examining the spines of the books on my shelves.

“You're a little grumpier than usual, today, so let me see if I can figure this out because God knows you could make it easy on me and just tell me what crawled up your ass...”

He rubbed at his jaw with one hand and looked at me suspiciously.

“Let's see... You didn't answer your phone all weekend, missed our round of golf, extra grumpy, looking like shit...”

I glared at him again.

“Gee, thank you. Friends like you really do make everything better, Zeke,” I said sarcastically.

“Thank you,” he answered smugly. “I just meant you look like you haven't slept in a while. Tell me something, what did you have for breakfast this morning?” he asked.

I looked at him oddly. “I didn't get a chance to have breakfast this morning, so far it's just been coffee.”

“Just what I suspected. By the way, that's a terrible habit—that's how you give yourself the runs,” he pointed out.

I was mentally trying to go over the checklist of why this guy was my best friend because, right now, I really just wanted

to punch him in the face.

“Okay,” Zeke drew out as he finally plopped down in one of the seats across from my desk. “So, what did you do this weekend? It must have been pretty important for you to skip out on our golf game.”

I didn’t meet his eyes. Instead, I kept them carefully trained on my computer screen as if the thing I was looking at was something extremely important, when in reality, I had no idea what I was looking at.

“Not really,” I said, hoping I sounded casual. “Worked out, cleaned up the house, just got caught up on some shit I needed to do around the house.”

“Uh-huh, and how many fingers am I holding up?” he asked.

I felt my brow furrow. “What the hell is this even about?” I huffed.

“Just answer the question,” Zeke pressed.

I sighed, annoyed. “Three,” I ground out. “To answer your question, the jackass sitting in front of me is holding up three fingers.”

Zeke raised his brows. “You don’t have to be so snappy, I’m just covering the bases.”

“Oh, yeah? And what have you figured out from all those ridiculous questions?”

Zeke looked at me triumphantly, snapping his fingers together and pointing at me, “You’ve been with a woman.”

“How the hell did you get that from all those stupid questions?” I asked indignantly.

He shook his head, smiling. “You’re right, those were stupid questions, I was just yanking your chain. Nope, I knew you’ve been with somebody the second I walked through that door.”

“And that makes you automatically assume that I have been with someone?” I shook my head. “Your logic confuses me.”

He was quiet for a moment, and I could tell that he was measuring his words carefully. I knew he was about to say something heavy because Zeke was not one to measure his words with me.

“You’ve been missing all our squash games, and you’d been trying to book a tee time at Juniper Canyon for months. Last time you were this flaky was when you started seeing Jennifer Brewer.”

My shoulders grew tense. I hadn’t dated much in the last ten years, although I had plenty of opportunities, but the last real attempt was with Jennifer. She was an attorney out of LA who was helping us acquire a hotel chain in southern California. She was an attractive woman and smart as hell, but things didn’t work out. It didn’t help that she lived in LA, but I couldn’t get past my guilt. Like I was cheating on Rachel. If she lived in Vegas, maybe I could have gotten past it and made things work. Now I’d never know.

“Look man, I’ve known you for a long time. I know what you look like when you’re feeling guilty.” He blew out a long breath before his next words. “I know that you haven’t dated

much since Rachel, and I also know that the times you have ate you alive with guilt.”

“We really don’t need to discuss this any further…” I started.

“Yeah, well, maybe we should. You’re like a brother to me. It’s been ten years. Maybe it’s time you finally moved on. Rachel would want that.”

He leaned forward, folding his hands, resting his elbows on his knees.

“And maybe you don’t need somebody else to make you happy, fine. But don’t beat yourself up just for doing something human.” Zeke was looking at me earnestly, and I both appreciated and hated him for what he’d just said.

I really wanted to unburden myself and tell him everything, and I seriously considered it. He was my best friend after all, maybe he wouldn’t judge me as harshly as I was judging myself. But I just couldn’t bring myself to do it, so instead, I simply muttered, “It’s a little bit more complicated than just feeling guilty about being with somebody that’s not Rachel.”

Zeke looked at me, oddly. “Okay, well, my interest is definitely piqued now. So, what’s up?”

I opened my mouth to give him another evasive answer when there was a soft knock at my door.

“Come in,” I shouted.

Amelia popped her head in and I felt like somebody kicked me in the chest. She looked tired, but still beautiful, and it took

everything inside of me not to kick Zeke out of the office, slam the door behind him, and take her across my desk.

“Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Dawson, Mr. Moran, but the financials from the Boulevard property were just dropped off and you said you needed them as soon as possible.” She glided toward my desk wearing a slim pantsuit.

I offered her an artificial smile. “Right. Thank you. I’ll take those.”

She walked the last few steps to my desk and slapped the files onto it, then moved away quickly, accidentally backing into Zeke’s chair.

She would’ve been out the door if it hadn’t been for Zeke, looking strangely between the two of us.

“Good morning, Amelia. How was your weekend?” he called out to her.

“It was fine.” She looked at him with a sheepish expression.

Zeke raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? What did you get up to?”

The previous urge to punch him in the face resurfaced, and I thought of doing just that.

In that moment, Amelia was calm under pressure, another trait I admired about her. “Just moved into my new place. That’s all, really.”

“A new place? You’re not living with Lauren anymore?” he asked.

“No. I decided it was time to get my own place.” She made a quick, polite smile.

Zeke nodded approvingly. “Well, good for you. There’s a certain amount of freedom in being able to have the whole place to yourself.” As he said those words, I saw something flash across his face. He quickly covered it and smiled politely at Amelia.

She looked at both of us a little oddly and said, “Well, if there’s nothing else…” and then quietly left the office, shutting the door behind her.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Zeke was on his feet. The expression on his face was almost comical. “You slept with your daughter’s best friend?”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “Would you keep your voice down, for God’s sake?” I hissed at him.

Zeke began pacing in front of my desk. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

I looked at him, and everything he wanted to know must have been in my expression because he put his hands to his mouth.

“Holy shit.”

“Look, you’re not going to say anything, right?” I asked.

Zeke looked at me like I was insane. “Of course not. I don’t want to have any part of you imploding your relationship with your daughter. With that said, however…”

“Oh God,” I groaned.

He continued, “I’m just a little confused. You have been living like a monk for a long time now. And when you finally decide to go for it, you do it with your assistant, of all people? Not to mention, she’s Lauren’s best friend.”

I looked at him and answered truthfully. “You think I haven’t thought of that? Do you think it hasn’t been weighing on my conscience ever since it happened?”

Zeke looked thoughtful. “I mean, it’s not like she’s not legal...”

I looked at him strangely, wondering where he was going with this.

“...and Lauren is a grown-up now, she would want you to be happy...” He trailed off.

“What the hell are you getting at?” I asked, annoyed.

“Well, you know I never shit where I eat, and we agreed it was best not to date employees—”

“We’re not dating,” I cut him off.

“Whatever...” he continued. “But in this case, if she’s what does it for you, I don’t object.”

“Since when did I need your approval?”

“I’m just saying. I think it would be good for you to get some regular action. If she’s okay with it, why not keep seeing her?”

“Because she’s my employee, half my age, my daughter’s best friend, and I’m not interested. I fucked up, and that’s

that.”

Telling him I wasn't interested was mostly true, but it felt like a lie.

I didn't need him to see the storm going on in my head. I wasn't interested, not in an actual relationship anyway, but I was more attracted to her than I had ever been attracted to anyone, probably ever.

I had absolutely loved having sex with Amelia, but there was no possibility for anything more with her and I was wracked with guilt over it.

She may be a grown adult, but it was still wrong, and I knew better.

I had to admit there was more with Amelia, but there couldn't be, so I was going to have to be a grown-up and get over it.

“But what if she wanted to?”

“That's ridiculous. I'm not going to go after somebody who would jeopardize my relationship with my daughter and possibly lose the best assistant I've ever had. That's insane.”

He just stared at me with doubt in his eyes.

I shook my head at him. “It doesn't matter. Nothing can come of this. And you need to keep your fucking mouth shut.” I pointed a finger at him in warning.

He put his hands up in mock surrender. “Hey, I don't know nothin'.”

“Good.”

Zeke looked at me through narrowed eyes before opening his mouth like he was going to say something, but he seemed to think better of it.

His words had hit me harder than I expected. I had been stuck in a cycle of guilt and nostalgia, afraid to embrace any form of happiness. Could he be right and it was time to break free from that self-imposed prison?

“Well, I guess I’ll leave you to it. I’d like to look at the Boulevard property financials when you’re done.”

With that, he got up from his chair and left my office.



I spent the rest of the morning trying to focus on my work and fighting the urge to go talk to Amelia. I wanted to know how she was feeling, what she was thinking, but I knew that neither one of us could afford for me to show that much interest. So, I stayed in my office, and she paged my phone to let me know about various calls coming through. I replied curtly to all of them.

It was around noon when I heard a familiar voice. I arose from my desk and started to open the door, but stopped when I saw the interaction happening before me.

Something was off, something was really off.

Lauren was standing in front of Amelia’s desk and the air was tense.

For her part, Amelia's face seemed to be made out of stone. She looked almost angry and determined to keep her eyes away from Lauren.

"Kind of weird seeing you behind this desk," Lauren said to Amelia.

"Yeah, well, lucky for you, it's the only place you have to see me anymore," Amelia replied.

I saw a brief flash of hurt cross Lauren's face and then watched as her expression hardened.

"Lee, I..." she was about to say something but hesitated. "I'll just see you around, then."

She turned and I ducked back behind the door, rushing back to my desk, feeling like a fool and a sneak.

There was a soft tap on the door, and Lauren popped into her head.

"Hey Dad," she said, shooting a lingering glance back behind her, toward Amelia. "Are you too busy to have lunch with your favorite child?"

I smiled at my baby girl. "Never. Where would you like to go today?" I said, closing up the folders I was working on.

She eyed the work on my desk. "If you need to get some work done, I can order delivery and we can eat in your office like we used to," she offered.

"No, no, that's alright. I could really use some time outside the office," I told her.

She looked at me oddly. “Oh, the words I never thought I’d hear you say.”

I sucked in a deep breath, hoping to God that my thoughts weren’t playing out on my face.

“Yeah, well, things change, you know?”

She smiled and nodded her head, but there was sadness in her eyes. “They sure do.”

I made a mental note to follow up on the tension between Lauren and Amelia at lunch, but here was not the place.

For one thing, I didn’t want to risk Amelia overhearing anything. For another, I really did need to get out of that office and away from the tempting vixen in the next room.

I knew that today would be tough, but even with everything I had imagined, I had sorely underestimated how difficult it would be.

I felt terrible about the thought that I had disrespected Amelia. She was clear what she wanted the other night, but that didn’t make it okay. I was much older than her, and her boss, and I should have been adult enough to not make such a dumb mistake.

But it sure didn’t feel like a mistake at the time.

When Lauren and I left my office, Amelia wasn’t behind her desk. It probably wasn’t a big deal, she wasn’t chained to her desk, but I couldn’t help but notice the look of disappointment on Lauren’s face as we walked by.

She didn't say anything as we went to lunch, and I considered asking her about the tension I felt there, but something told me to back off. It was probably nothing. Friends had little spats all the time. They were probably just having an argument and it was best I stayed out of it.

I enjoyed my lunch with my daughter and welcomed the distraction, trying to quell the guilt I felt for hiding something so big from her. But I knew damn well it would do no good for her to know.

"So, how's Amelia working out as your assistant?" Lauren finally broke the silence.

The bite of steak I'd just swallowed went down sideways.

"Great. She's a great assistant, actually," I answered, taking a swig of my sparkling water, hoping that she would change the subject.

"That's good," she said, looking down at her plate thoughtfully.

"Something on your mind, kiddo?" I asked, hoping she would volunteer more information.

She opened her mouth to say something but stopped herself.

"No. Just work stuff, no worries." She smiled.

I chewed my food as I contemplated asking her a few things I'd been curious about. I decided to ease into my questioning.

"So, what are your plans? Do you plan on staying at this new job for a while?"

Lauren never really had a plan and seemed to fly by the seat of her pants. She went to school for Business but got a job at a law firm as a legal assistant after graduation.

“I’m thinking I might apply to law school. My boss thinks I have a great mind for law and I’m really enjoying it so far.”

I almost choked on my food.

“Really? That’s great! I think you’d be great at it, actually. Do you want me to talk to Richard Meadows about getting you in?”

Richard Meadows was another casino owner in Vegas. He had been an attorney before getting into the Casino business and he was the founder of the law school at the university. We’d got to know each other quite well over the years.

“No. I think I can get in on my own merits, Dad,” she snapped at me.

“That’s not what I meant. Of course, you can. I was just offering to help.”

I took another gulp of water before I asked what I *really* wanted to know.

“I heard you have a new boyfriend?”

“Who told you that? Amelia?”

“Doesn’t matter.” I paused as I looked over at her. “So, do you?”

“Well, I’ve been seeing someone, but it’s not that serious.”

I felt a knot in my stomach.

“So, what’s his name? What does he do?”

“Daaaaad.” She rolled her eyes as she turned her head to look at me. “I don’t want to talk about it. He’s just a guy I’ve been seeing. If it gets serious, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Okay, fine. I’d better be.” I winked at her.

Of course, I wanted to see my daughter happy, but the thought of her being old enough to date made my stomach turn. Being a parent was the happiest and the saddest thing at the same time. She was in diapers one minute, and dating the next.

I just hoped she’d settle for a nice guy who loved her as much as I’d loved her mother.



I returned to the office to find Amelia back at her desk.

“Mr. Dawson? Don’t forget you have a meeting at one-thirty. Do you like me to send them right in or wait outside until you call them in?” she asked, looking down at her desk.

“Have them wait until I call them in,” I told her,

She nodded and kept her gaze on the work in front of her.

She seemed to be avoiding eye contact, and it made me worry.

“Hey, Amelia...” I sat down on the edge of her desk.

She looked up at me with those big brown eyes, and my throat went dry.

“I wanted to apologize to you about the other night. I got carried away and didn’t mean to make things uncomfortable for you here at the office. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” She shook her head and continued, “You don’t have anything to apologize for, really.”

“I think I do.”

“No, you really don’t.” She turned toward me in her chair and looked me in the eye. “I’m a grown woman and I make my own choices. I knew nothing could ever work out with you and I never expected it to. It’s fine.”

What she was saying made perfect sense, but it still felt like a punch to the gut. She was right and it was time to put this little infatuation to rest.

“Okay, then. I’m glad to hear it.” She gave me a polite smile and went back to work.

I felt a wave of relief that Amelia seemed to be fine, but there was a big part of me that still ached to relive the other night.

Chapter 10

Jax

I HAD ALMOST FORGOTTEN about the meeting scheduled for this afternoon until Amelia reminded me. It was with potential investors who promised they could help the casino and resort make quite a bit more money, so I thought it might be worth my time to at least hear them out.

Not long after I settled behind my desk, Amelia paged my office phone. “Mr. Dawson? Your one-thirty is here.”

“Send them in.”

I rose from my chair as two men walked through my door. One was quite large and could’ve easily moonlighted as a linebacker. The other was a much smaller man, but his eyes fixed on me in a way that made the back of my neck prickle. They reeked of cigarette smoke and very strong cologne and it was beginning to induce a headache.

I shook both their hands.

“Hello, Mr. Dawson. I’m Sergei Ivanov and this is Igor Orlov. We appreciate you making time to see us today,” the

smaller man said as he introduced himself and his associate. The tattoos on their arms and necks and thick Russian accents gave them away immediately. I knew exactly who they were.

Bad news.

The Smirnova crime family had been giving us trouble since we opened and we couldn't seem to get rid of them. Most of the casinos on the Strip were either owned or under the influence of the Italian Mafia. The Russians were new to Vegas and dying to get their hands on our place. We were one of the few privately-owned casinos not spoken for by any organized crime faction and we wanted to keep it that way.

Vladimir Smirnova, the head of the Russian mob, decided to send over two new goons it seemed, but I decided to play along for the time being.

"Gentlemen, I understand that you have some investment opportunities you wanted to share with me," I humored them.

"Yes, this is true," Sergey answered. "I have to tell you..." he said, crossing his ankle over his knee. "You are very hard man to get a hold of."

"Well, as I am sure you can understand, things are quite busy around here." I swiveled in my chair.

He gave me a knowing smile. "This is good. This means business is good, yes?"

"I can't complain. Though, I'm curious to hear what you all have to say."

“Yes, I’m sure you are. It’s good that business is good, Mr. Dawson. May I call you Jax?”

“I don’t know you well enough,” I said, already getting suspicious by the way he was speaking to me.

“Have it your way, Mr. Dawson.” His jaws clenched. “What my associates can do is make your business go from good to fantastic,” he said, his mouth spreading into a wide grin. There was something about that grin that set me even more on edge.

“And how is that?”

“It’s very simple really. We have very valuable product that we could distribute here. We’re willing to offer you a generous cut in exchange for a percentage ownership.”

“Are you here on behalf of Vladimir Smirnova?”

“Would you like us to be?”

“Not really, no.”

He scratched his chin in an agitated manner. “That is shame. Mr. Smirnova will be disappointed to hear this. He is not one to take no for answer.”

“Look, Mr...Ivanov?”

He nodded.

“I’ve made it pretty clear to Mr. Smirnova in the past that we’re not interested in any more partners, or expanding in that way at present. And we’re not interested in conducting illegal activity in our place.”

“Who said anything about illegal activity?” He threw his palms up as he leaned forward.

“Let’s not play games, Mr. Ivanov. I know exactly who your boss is and what he’s involved in, and we want no part in it here.”

“I think you’re being fast to judge. Maybe you take some time to think about our generous offer before making decisions you may not live to regret?” Both men leaned forward, their eyes boring into me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“Is that a threat?” I asked as I leaned toward them.

How dare this fucker threaten me? Vegas was *our* town. I’d be damned if I was going to let some new arrivals waltz into my place and bully me, mafia or not.

“Of course not, Mr. Dawson. Life is short. Why not take advantage of an opportunity that could be win-win?”

“You can tell Mr. Smirnova that I appreciate his offer, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to respectfully decline ... Now, is there anything else I can do for you?” I looked him straight in the eye, unblinking.

“You would be wise to give Mr. Smirnova’s offer more time for consideration.”

“No, thank you.”

“Have it your way, Mr. Dawson. But Mr. Smirnova isn’t one to give up so easy.”

“Neither am I. So, I guess we’re done here. Good day, gentlemen.”

And with that, the men got up and made their way out.

I held my breath as they walked out the door. As soon as the door shut, I started dialing my business partner Gabe’s number. Gabe had just managed the installation of the most state-of-the-art surveillance equipment in the world.

“Hey Jax, what’s up?”

“Can you round up the guys for a meeting in my office immediately?”

“Sure thing. Everything okay?”

“A couple of men just left my office. They’re Smirnova’s guys. I think they just threatened me.”

“Fuck. Alright. I’m on it.”

“Thanks, Gabe.”

I felt a lump of ice forming in my throat.

Vladimir Smirnova had gained a foothold in Las Vegas. When people thought of the Mafia, they typically thought of New York City, but many didn’t realize that it was still alive and thriving in Las Vegas. The Italians had been here for decades but were low-key. They wanted the streets safe and business booming. But the Russians, they were new and much more openly hostile.

What better place for them to be than with all of the casinos and vulnerable tourists? My partners and I realized when we

got into the casino business that eventually we would have to deal with one of the crime families. So far, we had managed to evade them, remaining one of the last casinos in the city that didn't have a mob presence.

Part of me had suspected it would be just a matter of time, and I was starting to believe our time may be running out judging by how persistent Smirnova had been. But I would be damned if I wasn't going to fight.

This Smirnova guy could bark and send his minions to try to intimidate us, but there was no way I was opening up my casino to organized crime and getting involved with the mess that brought with it.

I already had enough money. No amount of money would be worth dealing with that mess.

Gabe, Griff, and Zeke filed into my office, shutting the door behind them. Each man took a seat, their eyes scanning mine for answers.

“Smirnova's goons just walked out of here. They're pushing for a partnership, probably a smokescreen for whatever shady shit they're into,” I began, feeling the weight of their attentiveness.

Zeke adjusted his tie, his face a fortress of calm. “Not surprised, but threatening you openly is a bold move.”

“I'm not sure it was a threat,” Griff chimed in, “so much as a guarantee of future inconvenience.”

“Sounds like a threat in a tuxedo to me,” Gabe retorted, his fingers drumming on the armrest. “What’s the plan, Jax?”

I leaned back, locking my fingers behind my head. “Well, we can’t let them get their foot in the door. Once they’re in, there’s no getting them out. So, we have two options: go to the police or handle it ourselves.”

Zeke chuckled. “The cops are likely paid off. You really think they’re going to interfere in mob business?”

“Are we not billionaires?” Gabe quipped. “I’m pretty sure the four of us could out-bribe the mafia six ways from Sunday.”

“You can bribe with things other than money, Gabriel. Things that involve life and death for instance?” Zeke shot back with a severe expression.

“We dig up enough dirt on Smirnova and his crew to make it too risky for them to operate here,” I interrupted.

Zeke smirked. “Blackmail the blackmailers. I like it.”

Griff raised an eyebrow. “And how do we go about doing that? I assume we don’t just walk into their headquarters and ask politely for incriminating evidence.”

Gabe grinned. “I got it. I still have contacts who owe me favors. Shady guys. We can gather information discreetly.”

“Alright, so it’s settled. We get dirt on them, make it crystal clear that pursuing us is a bad idea,” I finalized, my voice carrying the echo of finality.

“Remember, gentlemen, we’re not just protecting our business. We’re protecting everyone who walks through those doors—employees, guests. Our families.”

“Agreed,” Zeke chimed in. Gabe and Griff nodded in a chorus of determination.

I stood up. “Then let’s get to work. Time’s not on our side.”

As they filed out, Zeke lingered, his eyes meeting mine. “We’ve been through a lot, Jax, but the Russian mob is not to be trifled with. Be ready for anything.”

“I am,” I said, clenching my fists. “Smirnova is a visitor in *our* town. I’m not going to let him push us around.”

Zeke left, and I remained standing, leaning on my desk. The room felt colder like the promise of conflict had dropped the temperature a few degrees. My thoughts circled back to Amelia, her proximity to danger a chilling realization.

“Fuck,” I muttered to myself, my fingers gripping the edge of the desk till my knuckles whitened.

I was grateful that Smirnova’s henchmen hadn’t been here when Lauren was here earlier, but I was also horrified at the knowledge that they had passed by Amelia and even spoke to her. These were not the sort of men that I wanted around either of them.

I strode into Amelia’s office.

“Those men bother you at all when they were in here?” I asked her.

She looked at me a little strangely. “No, they were actually pretty friendly.”

“Right. Could you please page the head of security and tell him I need to meet with him immediately?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” she said, watching me closely, and I tried not to let her words or the way she was watching me get to me, but it was already making all the blood rush from my head down to my groin.

How the hell could I have gone from sitting with a couple of mob enforcers to fighting off an erection for my assistant?

There was something seriously fucked up in my head.

“Mr. Dawson? Is there something I should know about those guys?” she asked.

“No, not right now, anyway. I will let you know if something changes,” I assured her.

We looked at each other for a moment, and I thought she was going to say more, but after a lingering gaze, she tore her eyes away and returned to the work on her desk.

I went back into my office and shut the door behind me, wondering where it all went wrong.

A month ago, I had been overworked and lonely, yes, but I had a routine and things were calm. Now I felt like I was losing my mind.

There was an ache in my cock because of the assistant just outside my door. There was a continuous acidic worry over

what would happen if my daughter found out about what we had done. And now there was the added concern of the Russian mafia trying to move in on my business that I had worked tirelessly for, for all these years.

Once I knew the door was locked behind me, I paced around my office, battling the frustration. It was roiling up inside me. I finally plopped down in my desk chair and slammed my laptop shut because I knew trying to focus was pointless. Somewhere along the way, everything started unraveling, and it had a lot to do with the irresistible young woman in the adjoining room.

I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. All I could do was think about my daughter's best friend, and it was eating me up inside.

Chapter 11

Amelia

“WHAT’S THIS?” JAX ASKED as he looked over an email I had just sent him.

“It’s just a couple of ideas I came up with for marketing. So far anyway.” I bit my bottom lip and flicked my pen between my fingers, trying to read his reaction.

“You’ve kept me so busy the last few weeks I haven’t had a chance to meet the VP of Marketing. What’s her name again?”

“Darcy Miller. I’ll send her an email and set something up,” he said without taking his eyes off the screen. His brows were heavy as he perused my email.

“Five social media posts per account per day? Who is going to do this? What kind of posts?” he asked.

“Well, I was hoping I could work with Ms. Miller to come up with some ideas for content, but we could utilize AI to automate everything for us.”

“AI?”

“Yes. Artificial Intelligence.”

“I know what AI is. I’m just not sure how this would work for social media?”

“There are AI programs out there that you can teach. You teach it what kind of content you want, and we can integrate it with our social media accounts. We can schedule it to post at certain times per day and it will do it all for us.”

“It can do that?”

“Yeah. It’s really new, but I was reading about it in an article recently.”

“How much is this going to cost?”

“Well, it would take some time to come up with a handful of ideas to get it started, but I found a service that can do it for seventy-nine dollars per month.”

“That’s it?” His brows shot up.

“That’s it.”

“Well, fuck. I’ll make sure to get you in touch with Ms. Miller and you two can put something together.”

“Great! I can’t wait.”

My lips pulled into a beaming smile. I was so excited I could burst. Jax glanced over at me and I could see the corner of his mouth turn up into a crooked grin. I couldn’t help that every time he looked at me it sent my heart racing.

I got up to head back to my office when he called my name.

“Amelia?”

“Yes?”

“Great job.” The look of approval on his face made my belly flip.

“Thanks, Mr. Dawson.”

I let out a huge sigh of relief. I wasn't sure what he would think about my ideas, but it was the first time he volunteered a compliment and it made my heart fly. It had already been a little over a month since we had sex and I was afraid that things would be awkward at work. I was mortified that first day back, but as time went on, things were starting to feel a little more normal. Better than normal, actually.

He wasn't going out of his way to be a dick like he had been before, but it almost made it harder to forget the night we had.

I still couldn't stop thinking about it. His muscular body hovering over me and his hot tongue between my legs. I closed my eyes and shook off the thought. I knew it couldn't happen again, but how could I forget about the best night of my life with one of the sexiest men in the world?

I never in a billion years thought he would go for me, but when he confessed his attraction, it sent a flood to my panties. I found myself saying things I never thought I'd say to anyone, and it just came out of me so easily. It was the sexiest I had ever felt and it terrified me. I knew how things would end if I clung to the idea of him and me, but he felt so right that night it was scary.

We did our best to keep things professional, but I'd caught him staring at me a few times. And then there was that time after hours when I took my jacket off in his office and had a camisole on underneath. I could see an erection under his pants and he sat back down behind his desk immediately.

I didn't help matters by doing my best to garner his attention, both professionally and physically, but it gave me a weird, twisted sense of power.

I finally decided to pull out my phone and google him, just to see what I'd find.

Self-Made Billionaire Jax Dawson Attends the Kentucky Derby with Country Singer Simone Wallace.

Billionaire Jax Dawson Attends a Charity Ball with his Girlfriend, Attorney Jennifer Brewer.

Las Vegas's Most Eligible Bachelor Jax Dawson Moonlights with Mystery Blonde at Le Maison du Fleurs.

I scrolled through the images of him with these women and my heart sank. I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment and shame.

Embarrassment for thinking I could compare to any of these women. Shame for sleeping with my boss and ex-best friend's father.

I didn't know why seeing him with these other women bothered me so much. He was drop-dead gorgeous and was practically made of money. Of course, women would fawn all over him. I knew that he and I could never have anything real,

but I spent almost all of my waking time with him the past six weeks and I was growing addicted to his company.

Lauren always talked about how worried she was about her dad. How lonely he was, and how he didn't date much. But he didn't look like he had trouble finding dates from what I could see. And these weren't just dates. These were bona fide babes. It made it all the more incomprehensible that he was even the slightest bit interested in *me*. At least he was the other night. I guess that was all it was to him. One night.

Of course, he's not interested in me. Get over it.

My stomach grumbled just as Emma walked into my office.

"Well, look at you in your fancy office," she said as she looked around the room with her hands in her pockets. "It suits you."

My office was hardly fancy. It was a box with a big desk, a chair, and a small sofa. I brought in some plants to add a little color and purify the air, but other than that, it was pretty basic.

Emma was in her skimpy cocktail uniform, pantyhose, and heels underneath her oversized hoodie. She smelled like fresh cigarette smoke from the casino mixed with overly-sweet perfume. The scent overpowered me at first and I felt a wave of nausea.

"Hey! Thanks. You think so?"

"Totally. I always knew you'd rise to the top."

"I wouldn't say that," I rolled my eyes at her. "I'm just an assistant."

“An assistant to the CEO. That’s huge! It’ll open doors for you, I know it.”

“I hope so. What are you doing here?”

“I was about to head off to lunch and thought I’d come up and see if you wanted to come with?”

“Yeah, actually. I’m starving. I just need to finish up a couple of things.”

“Sure. I’ll wait.” She took a seat on the cream loveseat across from my desk and watched me as I finished up.

“So, I’m going out with Derek again. That bartender I went out with the other night. His friend Chris is single and he’s pretty cute. Do you want to come out with us on a double date?” Her eyes were wide and she had a cheesy smile on her face. “Please say yes.” She put her palms together in a mock plead.

I didn’t know why, but the thought of dating again gave me anxiety. Rob and I had just broken up and I was trying to get over an infatuation with my hot boss.

“I don’t know. I don’t have much time to date these days. When were you thinking?”

“Probably Saturday. His friend Chris has extra tickets to the Aces baseball game. He invited us and said he had an extra ticket and to bring a friend. It’ll be fun! You should go.”

My gut told me that I didn’t want to go, but I needed to get Jax out of my head. I was young and single, and single people went out on dates. What could it hurt?

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Yes! So, are you almost done? I’m starving.”

“Why don’t you head down and I’ll catch up with you. I just have to confirm a few appointments for Mr. Dawson.”

“Oooh. Mr. Dawson. He’s so hot, I don’t know how you get anything done around here.”

“Shhh! He’s Lauren’s dad! And my boss,” I whispered. His door was open and she was so loud he almost certainly heard her.

“That doesn’t make him less hot,” she whispered back.

“I’ll meet you downstairs.” I shoo-ed her off on her way.



When I returned from lunch, Jax called me into his office and I set my purse down and immediately went in.

“Yes, Mr. Dawson?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but did I hear that you are going to the Aces game on Saturday?”

He *did* year us.

“Oh. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“My partners and I will be at the game. The hotel is a big sponsor and we have a suite reserved at the ballpark,” he said as he leaned on his elbows resting on his large wood desk.

“You and your friends can watch the game from the suite if

you want.” He looked so cool as he made his suggestion, never breaking eye contact. It was as if we’d never had sex at all.

Before I could think about it, I noticed my shoulders had slumped, and it surprised me when my heart broke just a little. Surely, he heard that I was invited on a double date, and now he was asking me to bring that date to his ballpark suite. I wasn’t quite ready to let go of the fantasy, but I supposed it would have been the first step in getting over it.

I swallowed. It was clear to me now that what happened between us meant nothing to him and I shouldn’t have been surprised. I guess I wasn’t, but it still stung a little. There’s nothing like feeling like you’re just another notch on some guy’s bedpost.

If he wants me to move on and forget about it, then that’s what I’ll do.

“Well, if you don’t mind. That would be great.”

“Okay, then. Email me everyone’s names and I’ll add you all to the VIP list.”

“Sure.” I smiled politely. “No problem. Thanks.”

I guess.

After returning to my desk, I pulled out my phone to text Emma.

Okay. I’ll go with you guys to the baseball game on Saturday.

Emma: Yesssss! It’ll be so much fun!

Chapter 12

Jax

ME AND MY BIG mouth.

I sipped a gin and tonic as Zeke and I stood in the comfort of air conditioning in our ballpark suite overlooking the baseball diamond.

It was six pm and it still felt like an oven outside. Being outside in the summer in Vegas was like sitting in an air fryer. Even ten minutes outside took a good hour in ice-cold air conditioning to finally cool off.

The sun hadn't set yet and the crowd was just filing into the stadium.

I felt Zeke's large hand slap my back.

"So, what's up? Why are you so tense?" he greeted me.

"What makes you think I'm tense?"

"You look like you're waiting for a hitman to jump out of the stands and shoot you."

Truth be told, I had invited Amelia and her date and was having regrets.

I thought it would be a good idea to see her move on after our night together. Maybe it would put me in my place and finally put this not-so-little obsession to rest.

I thought I had done a pretty good job moving past it, but as time drew on, my stomach turned into knots just thinking about seeing her with another guy.

But Zeke didn't need to know anything about that.

“Well, now that you mention it, I am a little on edge ever since my meeting the other day with those two ‘investors’.” I made air quotes with my free hand before taking another sip of my drink.

“Fucking mafia rats. They're a pain in the ass for sure.”

I wiped beads of sweat off my forehead with the back of my wrist and looked over at Zeke in his black suit. “It's boiling outside. How the fuck do you walk around in the summer with a suit on?” I changed the subject.

“You walk around in a suit every day.”

“Yeah, at work. It's Saturday. And we're at a baseball game.”

“Yeah, what's next?” our other partner Griffin chimed in as he walked over and patted Zeke on the shoulder, “You going to start wearing suits on the golf course now too?” he said with a smirk.

“It may be Saturday, and we may be at a baseball game, but we’ve got some important associates coming tonight, and we’re big sponsors for the team. Someone needs to make an impression and represent the company,” Zeke said, looking affronted.

“Now who looks tense?” I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow.

I looked over at Griff and Gabe. They were in shorts, t-shirts, and baseball caps. Zeke had a point. I looked down at their feet and noticed flip-flops and thought they could have done a little better job of not looking like bums.

I’d noticed that these younger guys weren’t as concerned about keeping up appearances. Fair play to them. I hated wearing suits.

“What associates are coming?” I asked him.

“The attorneys for the San Diego Seals. The team hasn’t been doing well and the owners are looking to sell. I thought we could pick them up and bring them to Vegas.”

“No shit? Why didn’t you say anything earlier?” Griff asked.

The Seals were a major league team. The Vegas Aces were only the minor leagues, but attending the games proved to be a popular event for the locals. If we could acquire the Seals and bring them to Vegas it would be huge for the city, and for us.

“I didn’t know for sure they would be coming until ten minutes ago. I dressed accordingly just in case.” Zeke replied as he flicked lint off his lapel.

Zeke was ever the professional. I'd known him most of my life and he was more relaxed around me, and more recently, our other two partners, but to everyone else, he was intensely serious and a stone-cold businessman. I don't think anyone other than the three of us had ever heard him crack a joke.

As more and more people filled the stadium, I grew anxious for Amelia's arrival. She sent me her guests' names and I added them to the VIP list but I wasn't sure they would actually show up.

I didn't have to wonder for long because I heard distinctly feminine voices make their way into the suite.

Amelia walked in wearing a pale-yellow sun dress and smelling like sweet vanilla. She was utterly lovely and my pulse picked up a notch. Her legs were toned and tanned and the afternoon sun shone through the glass making her look like a golden goddess. I felt blood rush to the surface of my skin and my mouth began to water.

The guy she was with looked like a tool and I knew I'd made a mistake inviting them here. He was covered in tattoos and had a punchable face.

"Hi, Mr. Dawson. Mr. Moran." She nodded at Zeke and he smiled politely back at her. "Thanks for inviting us."

"It was our pleasure, Amelia. Who are your friends?" I asked.

"This is my friend Emma. I've known her since junior high and she's a cocktail waitress on the casino floor at the Crown."

Emma smiled and shook my hand and thanked us for the invitation.

“This is Derek. He bartends down in the casino as well, and this is Chris. He’s a bartender at Club Boomerang at the Coronado Hotel,” Amelia concluded the introductions.

“Mr. Dawson, it’s great to meet you. I’d love to get some tips on investing if you have a few minutes. I do some day trading myself but would love to pick your brain.” Chris, Amelia’s date I presumed, was pushy and invaded my personal space.

“Maybe another time, Chris. But feel free to grab a drink and some food and make yourselves comfortable.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Dawson. Thanks.”

They proceeded to the bar to get drinks and food and made their way to some bar tables near the window. That tattooed prick put his arm over Amelia’s shoulder and I could see him pushing his face into her hair. I felt heat rising up my neck and had to look away.

She wasn’t mine to claim and I knew I had to let the idea of her and I go, but seeing that prick with his dirty hands on her made my skin crawl.

“I need to get some fresh air. I’m going to head out to the seats,” I told Zeke as I topped up my glass with ice and made my way outside.

I saw Griff and Gabe sitting in the first row down below and decided to sit in the back to collect myself. I didn’t want to be near anyone just then.

Good Lord was it hot. The sun had just gone down and it was still easily one hundred and ten degrees out. After several minutes, I felt my shirt stick to my skin, damp with sweat. I was about to head back inside to rejoin the air conditioning when the golden goddess herself made her way down the aisle toward me.

“Mind if I sit down?”

“Not at all. Have a seat.”

She placed her cup in the cup holder and sat down next to me. She commented about how hot it was and asked a few questions about the game before we sat in awkward silence. I finally decided to break the silence and ask her a few questions of my own.

“So, how is your date going?”

“Fine so far. He seems nice.”

“You think so?” I questioned her with a raised brow. She was still young and naïve. She hadn’t yet learned how filthy men could be.

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’m pretty sure just wants to fuck you,” I said. I didn’t mean for it to come out so blunt, but after our night together I took the liberty.

“How do you figure?”

“Because you’re a beautiful young woman. He’s a young guy. That’s all they want.”

“But older guys don’t?”

“Any man would love to fuck you, Lee. Just be careful with that one, that’s all I’m sayin’.” I stared at the field while the players made their way to their positions on the baseball diamond.

She hesitated before making her next statement. “Is that all *you* wanted from me?”

“Of course, I did. No man with a pulse wouldn’t.” I knew what I’d just said would sting. I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings, but being upfront was the least I could do for her. I didn’t want to lead her on and was probably inappropriate to even broach the subject with her. But I was curious about her date and let my curiosity get the best of me despite my better judgment.

“So, what if he does? Is that so terrible?”

Her comment surprised me. She didn’t seem like the type to just jump in anyone’s bed, but maybe she was? I mean, she did with me, not that there’s anything wrong with that. It just didn’t seem like...her. It was none of my business anyway, but I was loathe to think about anyone else laying a hand on her.

“No, I guess not. If that’s what you’re looking for.”

“So, how are all these couples getting together if all men want is sex?” she argued.

“Well, you’ve got to make men work for it. If they’re willing to put in the work, maybe it’s worth it. But I’m pretty sure that guy isn’t willing to put in the work.”

She turned toward me and the scent of her fruity shampoo snaked its way to my nose and it was refreshing in the sweltering heat.

The smell brought me back to the night we were together. My face buried in her hair, listening to her groans as I pumped my cock into her. The tremble of her thighs as she came.

“How would I know if he’s willing to put in the work?” She placed her hand on my bare forearm. It was cold from her drink and it felt good in the heat. I looked down at her hand and she moved it instantly. I wished she hadn’t.

“If he’s interested in more, he won’t ask you to go over to his place after the game. If he asks you to join him at his place, then you’ll have your answer.”

We were interrupted when her friends came outside and sat down next to us. Chris, her date, leaned over Amelia’s lap to speak to me.

“So, Mr. Dawson, I’m really interested in getting a VIP host job at Club Nirvana at the Crown. Do you think I could put you down as a reference?”

“I don’t think so, Chris. I don’t know you well enough.” I smirked at him. I was used to people asking me for favors, but I usually knew them a little longer than five minutes. The nerve of this guy.

Amelia began to stand up. “I’m going to go refill my drink. Anyone else?”

“I’ll take another beer. Thanks, babe,” Chris said to her. She nodded. His hand trailed her back as she stood up and it took everything in me not to swat it off her.

As she made her way down the aisle, Chris moved over to her seat to have my ear.

“What do you think of the ass on that?” He jerked his chin in Amelia’s direction and my blood started to boil. This prick wasn’t worth Amelia or the dirt on her shoes.

“Amelia is my employee, and I’ve known her for years. I’ll have to ask that you don’t speak about her that way.”

“Whoa. Really, man?”

“Really. Now if you don’t mind, I’m roasting out here and am going to go back inside.” I got up and made my way back to the suite.

The blast of ice-cold air against my sweaty skin as the door opened sent goosebumps all over my body.

It looked like Amelia hadn’t made it to the bar just yet. She was sat at a table with Darcy Miller, our VP of Marketing. I approached them at the highboy tables at the back of the room and took a seat on a bar stool to see what they were talking about.

“Hello, Mr. Dawson. Amelia and I were just discussing a time to meet to go over some ideas on a new campaign. I hope you don’t mind if I pull her away for a few hours next week.”

“Not at all. As long as she has some time to spare, it’s fine by me.”

“Great! Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to make myself a plate. I’m starving,” Darcy excused herself.

Amelia and I were sat alone again and she scooted her stool closer to mine and leaned toward me. “So...When *you’re* interested in a woman, really interested, what do you do?” She attempted to continue our conversation from outside to my surprise.

“It doesn’t matter what I’d do.”

“Humor me.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Just curious. I want to know what to look for. Maybe you could teach me? We’re friends, right?” She put her hand on my forearm again and my skin hummed at her touch.

Friends.

“Yeah, I guess you could call us friends now.”

“So, between friends, what would you do?” She poked me in the shoulder and looked up at me with playful eyes. I didn’t know if she thought I’d notice, but she tugged the front of her dress down to reveal more cleavage.

Fucking tease.

She was flirting with me. I may not have been very active in the dating scene but I knew what flirting looked like. And I knew what Amelia was normally like and she was definitely being more flirtatious than usual.

I promised myself I wouldn't take things any further with her a second time, but she was making it really hard not to. Maybe she was up for another round after all? Her attention excited me, and I wanted to prolong my time with her even though I knew I shouldn't. If she was willing to play, I was game. It would get her away from the douchebag outside at the very least, and at the moment, that's all I wanted. Everyone was focused on the game and we were in the back of the suite away from prying eyes.

I leaned close to her ear and spoke in a low voice.

"I would start slow," I put my hand on her thigh and gave it a squeeze, "and shower her with attention." I trailed up her neck to her earlobe with the tip of my nose. Goosebumps erupted all over her skin. "And I would never push my way into her bed. I would wait as long as it took for her to invite me. Until she practically begged for it."

I could see her chest heaving with her breath at my words before she squeezed my forearm, sending a rush of blood to my cock.

What the fuck am I doing?

I pulled away and sat upright.

"But that's just me." I clinked what was left of the ice at the bottom of my glass. "You'd better get back to your date." I nodded toward the door outside just before I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Hey, Dad."

I whirled around in my seat to see Lauren and her new boyfriend and was afraid I had been caught. My heart skipped for a split second. I had invited them at the last minute but she said she couldn't make it and I didn't expect her to actually show up. I was stunned to see that she brought the same guy that Amelia had brought with her to my house that day two years earlier.

“Hey, Honey. You made it.”

“Yeah, I didn't think I was going to but I really needed a break from work. Dad, this is my boyfriend, Rob. Rob, this is my dad, Jax Dawson.”

“Hi Mr. Dawson, it's nice to meet you.”

I shook his hand. He was wearing a baseball cap and kept his head down after briefly looking up at me. He had already met me before and surely knew that.

I looked over at Amelia and her cheeks were red. Her head was turned away and she was pretending to watch the baseball game outside.

I wondered what had happened between the two of them. Now I knew. Lauren ended up with Amelia's boyfriend. My sweet daughter stole her boyfriend.

“Hey, Amelia. How are you?” Lauren sheepishly approached her.

“Fine. Never better, actually. I'd better get back to my date.” She stood up, refilled her drinks, and headed back outside to rejoin her friends.

Lauren sat down while Rob got their drinks.

“Isn’t that Amelia’s boyfriend?” I whispered.

“It was. But it’s not what you think.”

“Oh good. Because it looks like you stole your best friend’s boyfriend.”

Her eyes avoided mine like negatively charged magnets. She took a deep breath after a long pause.

“I would never have gone out with Rob if I didn’t think things were real.”

“What are you saying?”

She was still looking away, hiding from my eyes before she mucked up the courage to just come out with it.

“Rob is moving in with me.”

My heart dropped to my stomach.

“Lauren...Do you really think this is a good idea? You’re planning on moving in with a guy that you know cheated on someone else?”

“Dad, I don’t want to talk about it. I’m a grown woman and it’s not up to you.”

My insides felt like lead. I felt a sense of impending doom knowing she was letting this creep move in.

I wanted to see my daughter happy more than anything. She was my world. The most precious thing in my life. And it ripped my heart out to think that she could be making a huge mistake that would likely end in heartbreak.

“Of course, you’re an adult and can make your own decisions, but couldn’t you just wait a little while before deciding to let him move in?”

“It’s too late for that. He’s moving his stuff in tomorrow and the lease at his place is up at the end of next week. I wish you could just be supportive.”

Supportive? How could I support something I *knew* was likely to be a huge mistake?

“Well, you’re going to do what you’re going to do. I can’t stop you. But that doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

“Here you go, Lo. You ready to go sit down?” Rob came back, handing her a drink.

“Yes, please,” she said defiantly as she got up and headed off toward the door leading outside.

I went over to the window and looked down at Amelia sitting with her friends. I watched her chestnut hair shine under the stadium lights as she sat in her seat. Even in my worried state, I couldn’t help but admire her beauty. With a resigned sigh, I turned and headed to the bar for another drink.

I invited her here with her date because I hoped it would be good practice seeing her with another guy. I wanted to get myself used to the idea.

Instead, I couldn’t get the idea of fucking my assistant a second time out of my head.

Chapter 13

Amelia

I WAS MISERABLE AND just wanted to go home.

It was the bottom of the seventh inning and Emma and Derek were off in their own little world. They couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other.

The heat paired with alcohol was making me nauseous. Or maybe it was the grease-soaked popcorn.

Every time Chris touched me, it gave me shivers, in a bad way. After being with Jax, he just didn't compare.

Seeing Lauren and Rob show up together was an unpleasant surprise and just made things even more awkward.

I wanted to be anywhere but here.

They were sat a few rows down from us and I could see them holding hands. The fact that it didn't really bother me was a surprise.

I'd tried so hard to forget about what happened with Jax and me but I couldn't keep myself from staring at him whenever

he was in my line of sight. We had gotten friendlier over the past few weeks, but I craved his attention and couldn't help but flirt a little, just to see what he'd do. He never took the bait until tonight.

He said what happened the other night couldn't happen again, but tonight was the first time outside of that night that he actually flirted back, and my heart soared to the moon. Not to mention that his rough voice sent a torrent to my panties and I was afraid there would be a wet spot on the back of my dress.

"Hey, Lee." Emma's voice shook me from my thoughts. "Derek and I are going to take off. Would it be okay if you got a ride home from Chris?" She waited a moment before addressing Chris. "You don't mind taking her home. Do you, Chris?"

What makes you think I want to leave with Chris?

"Sure, not at all," he replied with a crooked grin and I was hit with a wave of dread. He was kinda cute and all, but I just wasn't interested. He kept talking about video games, partying, and he bragged constantly about how big and important he was at the Boomerang Club.

"Great! I'll talk to you later, Lee." She gave me a quick hug goodbye and they made their way through the stands to leave.

We sat through the remainder of the inning in uncomfortable silence.

“It’s awfully hot out here still. How about we beat the traffic out and head back to my place?” Chris suggested as he put his arm over my shoulders. I recoiled at his touch.

“Actually, I’m pretty tired. I think I’d rather just go home.”

Not only did I not want to go back to his place, but I felt like I was actually going to throw up. The popcorn in my stomach was churning.

“Aw, come on! I’ve got a case of beer and some weed back at my place. It’d be a good time.”

“It sounds great, but I’m not feeling so good and just want to go home.”

I was only twenty-two, but I hadn’t done the weed and partying thing since I was fifteen, and even then, it had never really been my thing.

“Seriously?” He threw his hands up. “C’mon. I thought this was a date. The least you could do is come back to my place and hang out.”

“The *least* I could do? I’m sorry, but do you think I owe you something?”

“Well, yeah. I could have been out with any number of girls, but I came here with you. The least you could do is come back with me and have a good time.”

“Excuse me? I believe we’re sitting in the suite of my employer, and you’ve enjoyed free food and—”

“Hey Buddy,” a gruff voice from behind cut us off. “Why don’t you shut your mouth and get the hell out of here.”

“Why don’t you mind your fucking business, bro...” Chris responded as he turned around. He stopped mid-sentence when he saw who was talking to him.

“This is my suite and *she* is my guest. You’re no longer welcome here. Now get the fuck out before I have security throw you out,” Jax demanded, and my stomach fluttered like a thousand butterflies.

“Whatever, man.” Chris was at least smart enough to stop mouthing off. He got up and left, and I felt pounds lighter from the stress release. Until it hit me that I didn’t have a ride home.

Jax was sitting by himself one row behind us while Zeke remained in the suite entertaining the attorneys.

He walked down the aisle and climbed over the seat to sit beside me and I noticed his khaki pants stretched over his thighs as he sat down. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his biceps looked like they were going to explode out of them. He leaned back in his seat and brought his hand to his chin making his forearm look even more magnificent, and I resisted the urge to run my fingertips over the cords trailing over them.

“I hate to say I told you so. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I’ve been through worse.” I smiled at him.

“These young guys need to learn some manners.” His jaws clenched.

“Yeah. Maybe you could start an online course.”

“I’m hardly an expert.” He looked over at me with his hypnotic blue eyes and I melted into a puddle on the floor.

“Don’t be so modest. You’re better than most.”

He chuckled and turned his attention back to the game. I heard a loud crack when the batter made contact with the ball hitting a home run. The crowd cheered as *Don’t Stop Me Now* by Queen blared over the loudspeakers.

“So, why didn’t you tell me about Lauren?” he asked after the music had died down.

“I didn’t want to drag you into our drama. And I didn’t want to get in between you two.”

“I see.” He nodded slowly. “Well, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I can hardly blame them. In hindsight, he and I weren’t really compatible. If they’re happy, I’m happy for them.”

“That’s a mature way to look at things.”

“To be honest, I haven’t really thought much about them since I started working for you.”

“And why is that?”

Because I can’t get you out of my head.

I played with the tassel on my handbag and contemplated telling him the real reason why, but then I looked down a few

rows at Lauren and Rob. Flirting with Jax here wasn't appropriate now that they were here. Flirting with him at all wasn't appropriate.

"I guess being so busy with work has helped me take my mind off things." It was partially true.

"Work has that effect," he replied, and I thought I saw disappointment in his expression. I probably imagined it. Wishful thinking.

"Yeah...Well, I'm pretty tired and the heat is making me nauseous. I think I'm going to book an Uber and head home."

"Nonsense. I'll give you a ride home."

"I couldn't ask you to do that. You've got the lawyers for the Seals to entertain."

"Zeke can handle them. It'd be my way of making it up to you for inviting Lauren and making things awkward for you. I'm roasting out here anyway."

I knew I should have said no, but I had forty-five dollars in my bank account until I got paid again and I needed it to stretch until the end of the following week. I couldn't exactly afford to pay for an Uber.

"If it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all, I'd be happy to. Let me go tell the guys I'm leaving."

I waited patiently as Jax said his goodbyes to Griff, Gabe, and Lauren. I thought it was best to wait so as to not draw

attention to the fact that we were leaving together. I figured nobody would suspect anything but I was self-conscious all the same.

He's just giving me a ride home.

I weaved the chain of my purse strap around my fingers as I waited to leave. I was going to be alone in the car with him and my heart was thumping furiously in my chest.

“C’mon, let’s go.” He gestured for me to follow him.

We made our way through the suite when I heard Zeke shout at us, “Wait, where’re you two off to?” Zeke asked as he hurried over.

“I’ve got to give Amelia a ride home. Her friends left her here.”

A sinister grin appeared on Zeke’s face and his eyes shifted over to me.

Did Jax tell him about us?

“Are you coming back?”

“Probably not. The game’s almost over, so I’m just going to drop Amelia off and go home.”

“Okay, but would you mind saying a word to the Seal Attorneys first? It’ll only take a minute. Sorry to keep him from you, Ms. Scott.” He placed a hand on his chest in apology.

“It’s fine.” I smiled awkwardly.

“Yeah. Sorry, Amelia. Just give me a minute.” He walked over to say his goodbyes to the lawyers and I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment. Mr. Moran was acting strange when he questioned me the other day, but I couldn’t imagine Jax telling anyone about us. I didn’t peg him as the type to kiss and tell.

I hadn’t told anyone about us and had hoped he would have done the same. Although I *was* dying to tell someone.

My teeth clenched as I waited and my whole body grew tense.

“Alright, let’s go.” He put his hand on my back and led me out the door.

He opened the door to his luxury sedan for me and the chivalrous gesture almost broke my resolve. But I was pissed at the thought that he told Zeke about us and needed to know if my anger was warranted.

He tried to make small talk the first half of the car ride and I couldn’t even tell you what he said. I was too busy thinking about how to broach the subject before I finally blurted out, “Did you tell Mr. Moran about us?”

I heard the leather squeak under his hands as he gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. He took a deep breath and huffed it all out before answering me.

“Not exactly. He kind of figured it out.”

“Figured it out?” My voice sounded like a squeal even to my own ears.

“I’ve known the guy most of my life. He knows me. I didn’t mean for him to find out. I’m sorry.”

“Jax! I feel guilty enough as it is. Now I have to feel embarrassed at work?”

“I said I was sorry, Amelia,” he said sternly. “But he won’t say anything to anyone. Zeke is a vault when it comes to stuff like this. And you have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“He’d better be.” I watched the lights pass by out the window and neither of us spoke for a few minutes. My eyes traced the contours of the Vegas skyline, which was ever-changing.

We got to a red light, and it was so quiet I could hear his breathing.

“Why do you feel guilty?” he asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Why do you think?”

“We’re grown adults, Amelia. What happened, happened. There’s nothing to be ashamed of and no reason to spend a second regretting anything. Life’s too short.”

I was looking out the window but I could feel his eyes on me and it sent a shiver through my body.

“I know I don’t,” he said in a low voice, almost to himself.

All this time, I assumed he had regretted everything. Regretted me.

“You don’t?”

“Of course not. It was amazing. I...” he stopped.

“You what?”

“I haven’t stopped thinking about it, actually.”

My pulse sped up hearing his words, and I wanted to tell him I hadn’t stopped thinking about it either. About him. But I couldn’t. There was only one way any of this could end, and that was in heartbreak. I couldn’t allow myself to go there. I had had enough heartbreak to last a lifetime.

It was excruciatingly silent the remaining ride home. He was expecting me to respond to his last comment, but I didn’t know what to say.

He parked outside my apartment building and shut the car off before turning toward me, and his eyes looked so blue they were almost glowing in the dim light.

“So...Do *you* have regrets?” his gruff voice sliced through the silence.

All I wanted to do was stay with him as long as possible. To feel his weight on top of me again. To smell his spicy scent and feel enveloped in his strong arms. He said that what happened between us couldn’t happen again, but he was making it really hard for it not to.

I didn’t help matters with all the flirting I had done earlier, but I couldn’t help myself. He was the sexiest man I had ever been with and he drew me to him whether he meant to or not. I knew I shouldn’t, but I wanted to relive the other night more than I had ever wanted anything in my entire life.

Yet, there were a million reasons why I couldn't. He was hot as hell, a billionaire, powerful, intimidating, my boss, twenty years older than me, still loved his deceased wife, and he was my ex-best friend's dad.

He could have anyone. I was just a foster kid that no one wanted. He couldn't possibly want more with me, and I kept finding myself wishing that I could be his. And not just for a night. But it could never be.

I sat thinking of what to say for what felt like forever.

"Amelia?" he urged for an answer.

"What difference does it make? It's not like this could ever work out, and I'm not really up for being your pleasure toy."

"What?" he sounded surprised. "It's not like that."

"Not like what?"

"I like you, Lee."

"Why are you telling me this?" I finally turned to face him. "We both agreed this couldn't happen again."

"I don't know. Maybe I want more."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I like you. A lot." He grabbed my hand and my heart felt like a stampede of horses.

"What do you want from me, Jax?"

"I don't know."

I knew this was wrong, and I wanted him in that moment so badly. But I knew how this would end and I wasn't prepared to risk it all.

"This can't happen." I pulled my hand away. "I've finally gotten on my feet and I don't want any trouble right now."

He let out a sigh. "Yeah. You're probably right."

"Goodnight, Jax. Thanks for the ride home."

"Don't mention it."

I got out of the car and headed for my apartment. I didn't hear his car pull away and didn't turn around to see if he was watching me, but I could feel his eyes.

He made it clear he still wanted me.

I wanted him too. I just had to figure out a way to make it through this job without giving in.

Chapter 14

Amelia

I SIGHED AS I entered my apartment, the little gray cat twining around my ankles. I'd let her inside the last few nights and she was making herself at home. Though she was a stray, her affection was a balm to my turbulent emotions. I picked her up and cuddled her close, her purrs soothing me.

“At least someone wants me around,” I murmured into her fur. She nuzzled my cheek in response.

My thoughts drifted to Jax, our charged encounters replaying in my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about him, but I knew nothing could come of it. He was Lauren's father, my boss. It was too complicated.

Yet, being near him set my body aflame, in a way I'd never experienced before. When he looked at me, spoke to me in that rough, gravelly voice, I felt a hunger awaken inside, threatening to consume me.

I thought back to that night, the way he commanded me with authority. His muscular body pinning me down, rough hands

exploring every curve. I'd never been so utterly possessed by a man. He owned me that night. And I wanted him to own me again.

And his kiss...God, the way his tongue dominated my mouth, staking his claim. I grew wet just thinking about it.

But it was over. We both agreed. I had to stand by it, no matter how badly I wanted more.

I set the cat down and shuffled to my bedroom. My stomach was still queasy from all the greasy popcorn.

Just after I threw on some pajamas and washed the makeup off my face, I was startled by a knock at the door. I peered through the peephole to see Emma on my doorstep, mascara smudged beneath her eyes. My heart jumped for fear that something terrible had happened. I swung the door open.

“Emma! What happened?”

She burst into tears. “It’s Derek. I just left him at the bar and took an Uber over here.”

I quickly guided her to the sofa and fetched a box of tissues. As she dabbed at her eyes, the story came pouring out between hiccupping sobs.

Emma blew her nose loudly. “He’s such a douchebag, I should have known.”

“What did he do?”

“I caught him flirting with another girl and he gave her his number!”

My eyes widened. “He did what?”

“Ugh, it was awful,” Emma groaned. “After we left the game, we went to the Double Deuce across the street for a few drinks. I got up to use the bathroom. When I came back...”

She swallowed hard, fresh tears welling up. “There he was at the bar, chatting up some trashy blonde in a mini skirt. I couldn’t believe it!”

I gasped, hand flying to my mouth. “No!”

“I watched him take that girl’s phone and put his number in. Right in front of me!”

“How do you know he was giving her his number?”

“Because I heard him say, ‘Here’s my number. Call me.’”

“Oh my gosh, what an asshole!” I cried.

Emma nodded, sniffing. “I was so pissed. I told him not to bother giving me a ride home, stormed out of there, grabbed an Uber, and came straight here.”

She blew her nose again, mascara smudging the tissue. “I’m so stupid. I should’ve known he’d pull something like this eventually.”

I shook my head, rubbing her back comfortingly. “You’re not stupid, Em. Derek is, for hurting you like that.”

She gave me a watery smile. “Thanks, Lee. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, squeezing her hand supportively.

She gave a derisive snort, wiping at her runny mascara. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Derek always has roving eyes. He flirts with anything in a skirt.” She looked at me curiously. “Speaking of men, how’d it go with Chris? I didn’t really expect you to be home already.”

“Oh, well, not great. He ended up being a jerk, so Jax gave me a ride home.”

“Figures. Birds of a feather.” She rolled her eyes. “Jax, huh? You’re on a first-name basis now?”

“Sort of.”

She groaned, “For Jax Dawson, I’d almost be willing to put up with some bullshit if I could end up with that.”

I bit my lip, hesitating. I was dying to confess my secret liaison with Jax, the need was bubbling urgently inside me. Emma was the only real friend I had now, someone I knew I could trust, and I desperately needed to talk about it with someone.

“Can you keep a secret?” I asked in a hushed tone.

Emma’s eyes lit up. She leaned in eagerly. “Of course!”

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I confessed everything. The immediate, magnetic attraction I felt toward Jax from the start. The growing sexual tension between us that finally erupted in a night of raw, primal fucking. His stern declaration afterward that it could never happen again. The constant, aching desire I still felt for more.

Emma's eyes grew wider with each explicit detail. "Oh my God! You and Jax Dawson? As in, gorgeous billionaire mogul Jax Dawson?"

"Shhh!" I glanced nervously at the front door, praying no neighbors overheard.

"How was it?" she whispered enthusiastically.

I felt my cheeks flush crimson. My voice dropped low. "Amazing. Mind-blowing. I've never felt anything like it."

Emma fanned herself dramatically. "Geez, girl. I don't know how you can keep your hands off him. Just seeing that man in a suit gets me excited."

"It's not that simple," I said with a grimace. "He's not just my boss, he's also Lauren's dad, and she and I aren't exactly on speaking terms. It's...complicated."

At the mention of Lauren's name, Emma's expression hardened. "You're not friends with Lauren anymore? I thought you guys were inseparable."

Emma knew who Lauren was, every kid in Vegas did, but they were never close.

I winced at the memory of catching Lauren and Rob together, the sharp sting of their betrayal. Lauren had a reputation for being down to earth considering who her father was, and she was well-liked by most.

"She kind of screwed me over," I admitted softly.

Emma's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? What did she do?"

I decided to confess the full story that I'd kept to myself until now.

I took a deep breath, "One night, I was at dinner with my adoptive parents, Anna and David. But Anna started feeling sick, so we left early."

Emma listened raptly as I continued.

"When I got home, I saw Rob's car in the driveway. I figured he was waiting in my room for me to come home."

Taking a deep breath, I went on. "I didn't see Rob in my room. But I heard noises...moans...coming from down the hall."

Emma wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Get out!"

"Her bedroom door was open just a little. So, I looked in." My voice dropped to a pained whisper. "And there they were. Naked. All over each other."

Emma jumped up, pacing in fury. "That backstabbing bitch! If I ever see her again, I'll claw her eyes out!"

I just shook my head sadly. The pain of that betrayal still cut deep.

Emma crouched before me, grasping my hands. "I'm so sorry she did that to you. But don't let her ruin your chance with Jax. She doesn't deserve your loyalty."

I nodded weakly, wishing it could be so simple.

I gave a limp shrug, the wound still too raw. “I thought she was my friend. My family, even. I guess I was wrong.”

Emma grabbed my hands, her expression earnest. “Amelia, listen to me. Don’t let what that backstabbing bitch did stop you from finding happiness with Jax. You deserve it after everything you’ve been through.”

I offered a weak, unconvinced smile. “I wish. There’s no way. He would never do anything to hurt Lauren. And neither would I.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t owe her shit!”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right. Maybe I don’t owe her anything, but I owe him. He gave me a job and has been more supportive of me than anyone ever has. I showed him some marketing ideas and he’s been really encouraging. I couldn’t do anything to make him jeopardize his relationship with his daughter. He would never.”

We talked late into the night, rehashing my turbulent history with Lauren and debating the merits of taking a chance on something real with Jax. I knew Emma meant well, but it wasn’t a path I could let myself consider. Not when the obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Exhausted, Emma finally headed home around midnight. I shuffled off to bed soon after, my thoughts still consumed by Jax. Somehow, I had to find the strength to move past this ill-advised infatuation. I needed to be professional and prove I was more than a fleeting object of desire. But my foolish heart

had its own plans, rebellious and hungry for more of what I'd experienced in his arms.

I tossed and turned all night, bleary-eyed when morning came. The week ahead already felt impossibly long.

That Monday, I felt hollow and unsettled as I readied for work, obsessing about my confused feelings for Jax. I needed to focus wholly on my job and prove to him and myself that I was more than a passing fancy.

Willing my heart to cooperate, I tamped down my unruly emotions and finished getting ready.

But when I went to start my truck, dread coursed through me. The engine sputtered weakly before the ignition failed completely.

"Damnit. Not now!" I cursed to myself.

My ancient truck had been on its last leg for a while now. But I couldn't afford repairs, let alone another car. With a defeated sigh, I pulled out my phone and called Emma.

"Hey Em, sorry to bug you so early, but my truck won't start. Any chance you could give me a ride to work?"

"Of course!" Emma replied. "I don't start until nine, but I can probably get us both there by eight or eight-thirty."

Relief swelled within me. "You're a lifesaver. Thank you so much."

After securing a ride, I quickly texted Jax:

"Running late this morning. So sorry. Will be there ASAP."

I stared anxiously at my phone, willing him to reply right away. I knew Mondays were especially hectic with weekend issues to address. The last thing he probably wanted to deal with was my tardiness. But the text remained unanswered as the minutes ticked by.

Right on time, Emma arrived to shuttle me to work. I did my best to tamp down my anxieties during the drive, dreading Jax's reaction to my late arrival.

All too soon, Emma pulled up to the vast employee parking lot. "Text me if you need a ride home," she said supportively, giving my hand a comforting squeeze. I thanked her again and rushed inside.

My heels click-clacked across the polished concrete floors of the corridor from the employee entrance to the elevator. When I finally reached the executive offices, I paused outside Jax's door to collect myself, smoothing my hair and clothes, then entered as confidently as I could manage.

Jax sat at his large desk, impeccably dressed as always in one of his tailored suits. He glanced up, his piercing blue eyes unreadable.

"Morning, Mr. Dawson. I'm so sorry I'm late—"

Jax held up a hand, cutting off my breathless apology. "It's fine, Amelia. I got your text." Though his words were reassuring, his tone was clipped and cool.

I lingered with uncertainty. I wanted to explain that my tardiness was out of my control, but he didn't seem interested

in hearing my explanation.

“Was there anything urgent this weekend I should be aware of?” I asked.

“No. I forwarded you the priority emails,” Jax replied matter-of-factly. He was already returning his attention to his computer screen, the conversation clearly over.

I slipped quietly from his office, cheeks burning. So much for dazzling him with my initiative and focus. Some mornings it was like he could barely stand to look at me. Like a bothersome obligation he was forced to tolerate.

Once the door closed behind me, I leaned against it and huffed out a breath. I had to stop caring what he thought. Had to stop wishing for more. It would only end in heartbreak otherwise.

With a deep, shaky breath, I gathered my composure and headed to my own desk. I may not have had Jax’s affection, but at least I still had this job. For now, that would have to be enough.

Chapter 15

Jax

IT WAS A NEW day.

I had been pining over my assistant for long enough and almost made another huge mistake. I was grateful to Amelia for not allowing me to indulge in my sick fantasies. She was right, and I knew better.

I finally decided to get over it and move the fuck on, and I felt good about my decision.

It didn't help matters that we had a busy day and she showed up an hour and a half late, but I decided to give her a break. She was the best assistant I'd ever had, and I didn't want to lose her by being an asshole. Again.

She entered my office with a stack of paperwork that needed my signatures.

"Hey, I'm sorry, again, about Lauren. If I knew what happened with you two, I wouldn't have invited you both."

"It's fine. You didn't know."

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m disappointed in her.”

“It does make me feel a little better, actually.” She smiled at me from across my desk.

That smile. Even though she was smiling, she had an innocence and a sadness behind those eyes. It made my chest tingle and made me want to hold her and promise her that she would never be sad again. She didn’t have a real family, or anyone she could really count on and I was sorry about that. She deserved so much more.

Just when I finished signing the last piece of paper, I heard a light knock on the door before it opened and Zeke poked his head in.

“Sorry to interrupt. Do you have a minute?”

“I’m all yours. We’ve just finished up.”

Amelia got up to walk out and Zeke followed her with his eyes before turning back to me with a smug grin.

“Soooo, you’re in a chipper mood. I take it you and Amelia had a nice time after you left the ball game?” He sauntered in and made himself comfortable in the seat Amelia had just left.

“If you consider dropping her off and going home to bed a nice time, then yes, we had a nice time.”

“Really?” He narrowed his eyes at me in disbelief.

“Really.”

Zeke seemed to be examining me with his eyes before he shook his head. “If you say so. It’s just as well. Jennifer

Brewer sent me an email saying she was in town next month and wanted to meet with us about another deal that has come up that we may be interested in.”

“Why didn’t she contact me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she felt awkward reaching out after your breakup?”

“Hm.” I glazed over what he had just said, hoping he would let it go.

“She asked how you were.”

“Okay. So, what did you tell her?”

“I told her that you were still single and could use a little company.”

I stopped what I was doing, turned toward him, and gave him my full attention. “Zeke. You’re getting dangerously close to sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“C’mon, what’s wrong with Jennifer? She’s smart, beautiful, independent, successful, and you two got along okay.”

“Then why don’t *you* date her?”

“I don’t do sloppy seconds, man.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Why do you care anyway?”

“Purely selfish reasons, really.” He smoothed a hand over his blue tie. “She’s got other people she’s presenting this deal to apparently. It sounds particularly interesting and it would be nice to have a leg-up on the competition.”

“The truth comes out. So, what is it?”

“She’s representing some guys that own a tech company specializing in artificial intelligence. They were looking for investors but couldn’t get enough capital together for what they wanted to do. They decided to just sell it and be done with it. With Griff and Gabe’s knowledge and experience with tech companies, I thought it could be a good fit for us.”

“Amelia was just talking about using AI for marketing.”

“Amelia?”

“Yeah. She has a marketing degree and is going to be working with the marketing department to come up with some ideas. She mentioned that we could use AI to create some campaigns for us. “

“Interesting.” Zeke nodded before cocking a mischievous brow. He knew Amelia and I had hooked up, but that didn’t mean that it was going to happen again. He was trying to goad me and I wasn’t going to fall for it.

“So, you’re lining up the San Diego Seals, acquisition of the Boulevard casino, and now you want a tech company? What do you think, we’re made of money?”

“Well, yes, actually. When you’re like us, opportunities present themselves. But these are the best ones that have come through, in my opinion.”

“I’ll think about it.” I looked over at his still smug face. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to start things up with Jen again.” I shot him a stern look.

“She won’t be here for a few weeks. You’ve got time to change your mind.” He smirked at me.

“Don’t you have work to do?”

He chuckled as he got up to leave. “Fine. I’ll go tell Gabe and Griff and see what they think.”



After Amelia returned from lunch, she came into my office to go over some weekly reports from the other departments.

She looked amazing and smelled even better. I was proud of myself for fighting my attraction to her and making it through the morning without getting a hard-on.

I was about to take a bite of my sandwich when she mentioned something curious.

“I need to tell you something. When you were meeting with Mr. Moran, Mr. Motta, and Mr. Galanis earlier, two Russian men came up here looking for you.”

“Oh?” I looked up at her from my sandwich. “What did they want?”

I was already seething at the fact that those two goons made it all the way up to my office and security hadn’t notified me.

“Was it the same two guys that were here before?” I asked her.

“No. These were two different men. I think you’d better have your car checked out.” Her eyes were big and her lips pursed.

She looked serious and her expression startled me.

“Why?”

“They said something about putting a GPS tracking device on your car. Is everything okay?”

“They told you that?”

“No, not exactly. They were speaking Russian, but I understood what they said.”

“You speak Russian?” I was shocked. I had no idea.

“Yeah. It’s not perfect, but I lived with a foster family when I was a kid for a couple of years and they left me with a Russian nanny every day. I learned quite a bit. And my adoptive mom is Russian, so she helped me get back whatever I had lost over the years. I’ve learned how to speak it pretty well.”

Mother fuck.

What was it going to take to get rid of these guys?

And how was she able to surprise me every day? I was not easily surprised, but she never ceased to amaze me.

“Okay, thanks for letting me know.”

I picked up the phone to call my head of security.

“Hi Freddie, It’s Mr. Dawson. Two men came up to my office earlier, sometime between eleven a.m. and noon. Could you get me surveillance footage of everywhere they went on the property while they were here? In particular, could you look to see if they tampered with my car? ... Thank you.” I hung up the phone.

“Amelia, you impress me more and more every day.” And this was a fact. She came from so little but had wisdom beyond her years. She and Lauren were the same age, but it blew my mind how mature she was.

“Who are those men? Should we be worried?”

“Nobody. Don’t worry about it. They’re just a couple of pests who will be dealt with.” I wasn’t quite sure how just yet, but I wasn’t going to allow these vermin to push me around.

I sat with Amelia in my office and was dying to ask her more about herself. I hated to intrude, but was genuinely curious about her. I wanted to know more about her and couldn’t resist the urge.

“So how long were you in foster homes?”

She looked at me curiously, then swallowed hard before she began. “My whole life up until I was fourteen.”

“Wow. I’m sorry. That must have been hard for you.” My heart ached for her. Giving up a child was unfathomable to me. I would do anything for Lauren. Every child deserved parents that would do anything for them. It was a cold, cruel world and even worse without dedicated parents who were there for you no matter what. It’s a tragedy that there were people in this world who grew up without parents that they could depend on.

“It’s okay. It was. But I ended up in a good place in the end.” There was that smile again. I could tell that she was

uncomfortable talking about her past and felt a little embarrassed for intruding.

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad.” I cleared my throat before the next sentence left my lips. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For intruding. I didn’t mean to pry, but I find you fascinating.”

“Really? I haven’t done anything. It’s just my life.” She shrugged.

“You’ve done a lot for yourself, Amelia. It’s very impressive. I’m proud of you.”

She tried to resist when the corners of her mouth pulled into a smile and she pressed her lips together to stop herself. Her cheeks went pink and she looked down at her feet. She looked like an angel.

Her modesty was endearing and in sharp contrast to the women I usually met in Vegas. They oozed faux confidence and always seemed to fish for compliments. Not Amelia. She was modest, but sassy and assertive in the most understated way. She was plain, simple, but beautiful.

She fools you with her cool demeanor but doesn’t hesitate to put someone in their place when needed. People underestimate her and she takes advantage of it, whether intentionally or not. Good for her.

“Thanks, Mr. Dawson. No one has ever said that to me before.”

“What?”

“That they were proud of me.”

“You’re joking.”

Hearing her confession broke my heart a little. A remarkable woman was sitting before me and no one in her life had ever told her that they were proud of her. How cruel the world could be.

“I wish I were. Thank you.” She smiled at me and her eyes glossed over with tears. She quickly wiped one away the second it overflowed onto her cheek.

“Don’t mention it. You deserve great praise, Amelia.” I looked at her and her eyes sparkled behind a sheet of tears welling up in her eyes.

We sat in silence for a moment before we heard a feminine voice come from Amelia’s office.

“Amelia?”

“In here! Come in.” Amelia called out to her. It was her friend Emma.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt. I’m about to go to lunch and wanted to see if you wanted to come?”

“Sorry, I can’t. I’ve got to catch up on everything I missed this morning.”

“Oh, that’s okay. If I don’t see you until later, I wanted to let you know that it’s slow in the casino today so I might finish

my shift early. Did you want me to wait for you to take you home?”

Amelia’s cheeks went pink and she glanced in my direction sheepishly, as if to see if I’d heard what Emma said. Since I was sitting right there, I obviously had.

“Uh, no, you don’t have to do that. I’ll find another way home.”

“No, it’s no trouble. I’ll just wait for you at the bar downstairs. Come get me when you’re done.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, of course! I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Thanks!”

It was now clear that Amelia was late today because she was having car trouble. I saw the state of her truck the day I helped her move and was shocked that it still ran. Barely.

“Amelia, is everything okay?” I asked her.

She took a deep breath and huffed. “Yeah, fine. Just a little car trouble.”

“Is it fixable?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t taken it in yet.”

“Okay, well, let me know if you need help with anything. You can always take one of the company cars until it’s fixed if you want.”

“No, I’ll take care of it. It’s fine.”

“Yeah, but instead of depending on Emma to give you a ride every day until it’s fixed, just take the company car. I insist. It’ll give me peace of mind to know my assistant will be here on time every day.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll have security bring up a key and take you down to the car later.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “That would be great, actually. When do I have to give the car back?”

“You can use it as long as you need to. It’s just been sitting collecting dust, so it’s all yours for as long as you need.”

“Thanks, Mr. Dawson. That would be a huge relief.”

“No problem.” I winked at her.

She closed the door behind her when she left my office and I immediately picked up the phone to call the Porsche dealership. It was all bullshit. We didn’t have a company car, but I couldn’t let her stress herself out worrying about how she would get back and forth to work. I needed to get a white Porsche Boxter to the property stat.

She mentioned that she liked them the day I helped her move and just my luck, the local dealership didn’t have any on the lot, but they managed to find me one in Los Angeles.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dawson, but our truck won’t be here until tomorrow. We won’t be able to get the car to you until Wednesday at the earliest,” the salesperson at the dealership said with little remorse.

“Look, I’m paying cash for this car and I need it here in five hours. I’m sending a truck over right now and I need that car here in five hours or I will lose my shit. Do you understand?”

There was a brief pause before the man answered me. “Of course. I’ll be here waiting for your driver.”

“Thank you.”

I arranged for a truck to pick up the car to deliver it to the hotel. Now I needed to register the damn thing and get plates on it before Amelia saw it or she would know I was full of shit.

I could tell Amelia was ashamed of her past and wasn’t one to accept charity. I knew she would never let me outright buy her a car, so I had to tell her it was a company car just so she would accept the damn thing.

I had the receptionist arrange to register the car by phone and pick up the plates. There was a benefit to being Jax Dawson. Everyone in town knew who I was and my name got me some special favors when I needed them.

“Jax, you are a fucking moron,” I muttered to myself when I realized I had a million things to do that I had pushed aside so I could spend the afternoon secretly buying a car for my irresistible assistant.

I wasn’t lying when I said it would give me peace of mind to make sure she would be to work on time, but I wanted to buy it for her. One Porsche Boxter was nothing to me, but it could be the world to her. I wanted to be someone that she could

depend on, and I bristled with excitement at the thought of seeing the look on her face when she saw it.

I was also sweating bullets worrying if it would be here in time.

My afternoon was shot, now I had to spend more time coming up with a backup explanation for why the car wasn't here in case it didn't get here in time.

My phone went off, tearing me from my thoughts. It was my head of security and I had to answer.

“Freddie, what'd you find out?”

“We went through the footage and those two men did indeed tamper with your car. We went into the parking lot and inspected it and it looks like they installed a GPS tracking device to the underside of your car. Would you like us to remove it?”

“Yes, please. And call the police and file a report. Let me know if they need me to give a statement.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

“Thanks, Freddie.” I hung up.

My fists balled up and I slammed one down on the desk. I was livid. Those fucking bastards fucked with my car.

This mafia bullshit was grating on my last nerve. We needed to get dirt on those guys and get them off our backs immediately.

But I didn't have time to think about all that just yet. I had a Porsche to arrange.

I had decided to move past my attraction to Amelia and keep things professional as recently as this morning, yet there I was, buying her an expensive sports car. What the fuck was I doing?

I thought about what Zeke had said before. Maybe as long as Amelia was okay with pursuing something casual, it might be okay to indulge?

But of course, it wouldn't. She deserved the world, and I couldn't give her that. All I could give her was a shitty car.

I sat back down in my leather chair, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. The cursor blinked on an empty email body as if daring me to spill what I couldn't even articulate to myself. I wanted to ask her to meet me, to talk, to sort out this tangled mess of emotions that had me caught in its snare. But my hand retreated from the keyboard, like a moth second-guessing its fatal attraction to the flame.

The weight of the day, of my choices, bore down on me. The Porsche, the secret charity, the unsaid words hanging thick in the air between us like fog. Not to mention the cold-blooded killers trying to track my whereabouts. It was a crossroads, and there I was, paralyzed.

My phone buzzed, snapping me out of my reverie once again. An email. From her. A weekly update or something equally mundane. But seeing her name pop up on the screen

sent a jolt through me, like a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart.

I clicked on the email, my eyes barely scanning the professional lines of text. It was all business, yet even her typed words seemed to have a pulse, a hidden layer of life beneath the formality. And in that moment, I realized I was reading between the lines, searching for a clue, a hint of how she felt.

I hit the reply button. My fingers typed, then erased, typed again, and then finally retreated. What was I doing? I was her boss. She was my assistant. I had resolved to keep it that way, hadn't I?

I sighed, a deep, soul-wrenching sigh that seemed to echo in the hollows of my empty office. I was Jax Dawson, the man who had it all together, except for this one frayed knot in the fabric of my calculated life.

My cursor hovered over the 'Send' button, but I couldn't do it. Instead, I moved my mouse and clicked 'Discard.' The email vanished, and with it, a chance to open a door I wasn't ready to walk through.

The office was quiet, the only sound was the hum of the copy machine out in the main office, but in my head, it was deafening. Because as I sat there, staring at the blank screen, the unsent email, the discarded opportunity, I knew.

I was at a cliff's edge, teetering, caught in the gravitational pull of something—someone—undeniable. And though I had

just stepped back from the edge, the abyss was still there, waiting. Always waiting.

I leaned back in my chair, my hands covering my face. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter 16

Amelia

THE CURSOR ON MY computer screen blinked—a metronome of time slipping away. Reports, spreadsheets, and looming deadlines stretched across the dual monitors, each demanding a slice of my attention. But my mind, traitor that it was, kept drifting to Jax. A vivid mental image of him flashed before me—those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see right through me, and that jawline, chiseled like a Greek god’s.

A soft thud on my desk jarred me from my musings. A small, wrapped package lay near my keyboard. No note, no ribbon, just an unassuming brown paper. My eyes darted around the room, finally catching Jax’s gaze from his office. He offered a subtle nod before diving back into a call.

My hands trembled as I unwrapped the paper. It was a book—‘Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion.’ I’d mentioned wanting to read it ages ago.

He remembered.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth and my heart was doing summersaults.

His offer to loan me the company car was a lifesaver. I was seriously worried about how I was going to manage getting to and from work every day. The last thing I wanted to do was impose on Emma. I barely had furniture at my place and was nowhere near being in a position to fix my tattered junk heap of a truck. Jax really came through.

How had I come to rely on him so much? It was jarring, this newfound dependence. But then again, Jax was different—steadfast in a way no one had ever been for me. I caught myself smiling at the thought, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. Was it unhealthy, this quick reliance? Or was it filling a void, a cavernous emptiness that had always been a part of me?

As I stood at the copy machine scanning some documents I needed to upload to the company hard drive, Sarah from Accounting sidled up to me, her eyes twinkling with a mix of curiosity and mischief. “So, you and Mr. Dawson, huh? You two seem to be getting along really well.”

I felt my cheeks flush. “Yeah, we work well together.”

Sarah grinned. “If you say so. But the walls here are thin, my dear. People talk.”

“What do you mean?”

“He isn’t exactly the easiest person to work for, but he seems quite taken with you.”

This comment baffled me. “He’s on my case constantly. If this is what it looks like when he’s taken with someone, I don’t want to know what he’s like with someone he’s not happy with.”

She shrugged, “I admit, he was quite tough with you at first. But he seems to have softened up.”

“I guess he just appreciates hard work. Speaking of, I’d better get back to it.” I forced a laugh, brushing her off as I headed back to my desk. But her words lodged themselves in my mind, growing roots and sprouting doubts. Was I fooling myself by thinking Jax and I could keep things purely professional?

I had just sat down at my desk, mulling over what Sarah had said when a looming figure came toward me.

“Amelia,” Freddie, the head of security, knocked and poked his head through the doorway. “Got a minute?”

I snapped my eyes back to the screen, pulling up a spreadsheet to look busy. “Sure, come on in.”

Freddie walked in, his bulky frame filling the doorway, a set of keys jingling in his hand. “Here are the keys to the company car.”

Right on cue, Jax walked in, filling the room with his presence. He snatched the keys from Freddie to hand them to me. “Thought you’d like to see it before you drive off.”

A knot tightened in my chest, a strange blend of emotions. Gratitude, surprise, and something else I couldn’t quite place.

“You’re spoiling me.”

He shrugged, a casual lift of his shoulders. “It’s just a car. And it’s just temporary, right?”

I accepted the keys, my fingers brushing against his. The brief contact sent a tiny shockwave through me as if my skin was more sensitive, more aware. “Thank you. Both of you.”

Freddie left, and for a moment, it was just Jax and me, the tension palpable but unspoken. “Ready to check it out?” he gestured toward the door.

“Yes!”

The elevator ride down to the parking garage was a mix of awkward silence and lingering glances. The air felt thick, charged. When the doors slid open, Jax led the way, his steps purposeful, cutting through the labyrinth of cars.

And then I saw it—a white Porsche Boxster, gleaming under the fluorescent lights like a jewel on velvet. My dream car. The air caught in my throat.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Jax smiled, the corner of his mouth twitching just so. “Coincidence.”

“You expect me to believe that? After I told you I wanted one?”

His eyes met mine, a depth there that I couldn’t fathom. “Sometimes the universe aligns.”

I let out a laugh, disbelief mixed with a joy I hadn't felt in years, probably ever. I got into the car, the leather seat hugging my body like a second skin. My hands gripped the steering wheel, a thrill racing through me. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Believe it," Jax said, his voice low, tinged with a warmth that sent shivers down my spine.

I smoothed my hand over the buttery soft leather. "What's her name?" I asked.

He huffed out a laugh. "Name? You name your cars?"

"Yeah. It gives them personality."

"What's your truck's name?" He leaned on the window frame.

"Rusty."

"Ha!" he laughed. "No, this one doesn't have a name. Why don't you name her for me?"

"Hmmm. What to name you—" I pondered as I looked over the curves of the dashboard until the first name came to mind. "Eliza."

"Eliza?" He parroted back to me with an inquisitive expression.

"Yes. From Pygmalion. By George Bernard Shaw."

"My Fair Lady?"

I was surprised he was familiar at first, until I remembered that it was one of my and Lauren's favorite movies. "Yes.

Eliza was smart, sassy, and spirited, and she came from nothing. She was underestimated. After Professor Higgins cleaned her up, she gained some confidence and she was unstoppable.”

“Hm.” He pondered what I had said for a moment before we locked eyes. They were boring through me and my heart fluttered like an unsteady butterfly caught in a gust of unexpected wind.

“Oh shit. Emma’s waiting for me,” I suddenly remembered, my eyes darting to the clock on the dashboard.

Jax pushed himself off the car, his silhouette framed by the harsh lighting. “Go. I’ve got work to wrap up.”

I nodded, stuffing the keys into my pocket. “I’ll be back for you later, Eliza.”

I weaved through a crowd of people wandering around the casino, making my way to the main bar. The casino was a sensory overload—colors and sounds melded into a cacophony of excitement and despair. Slot machines chimed their siren songs, tables buzzed with the thrill of risk. I found Emma at the main bar, her eyes lighting up when she saw me, her posture straightening.

“There you are!”

“Hey, I’m sorry for making you wait, but I don’t need a ride anymore.”

Emma’s eyebrows shot up, curiosity painting her features. “Oh? How are you getting home?”

I ordered myself a dirty martini, extra dirty, then let it all out. “Jax is loaning me a company car. A white Porsche Boxter, to be exact.”

Her eyes widened even more if that was possible. “Your dream car? Seriously?”

I nodded, a wistful smile tugging at my lips until I gave in and let out the cheesiest grin imaginable. “I mentioned it to him the night we... well—”

“Fucked. Yes, I know.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, you know. But he swears it’s a coincidence.”

Emma shook her head, visibly impressed. “Wow. That man is full of surprises.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “He is. But it’s only temporary, so it’s not a big deal.”

She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “And what about you two? Anything... new?”

I looked down at my martini, the olive swirling in a dance of its own. My thoughts drifted back to Jax, to the way he looked at me, the way he made me feel...Wanted. Cherished even. But then, my past clawed its way back into my consciousness—my birth parents abandoning me, my ex-boyfriend Rob cheating on me with my best friend. Each memory was a sharp blade, slicing through the soft veil of comfort Jax had woven around me.

“Amelia? You okay?”

I snapped back to reality, meeting Emma's concerned gaze.
"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just... complicated."

"Girl, when is love ever simple?"

"Who said anything about love?"

"How can you *not* be in love with him? He's gorgeous, a billionaire, and he bought you a car. Hell, *I'm* in love with him." She downed her chardonnay.

I chuckled, the sound tinged with a bitterness I couldn't quite shake off.

"He didn't *buy* me a car. It was already here. He's been busy all day. There's no way he went down to the dealership, bought a Porsche, registered it, and parked it in the parking garage since this morning."

"I suppose. That's one hell of a coincidence, though, if you ask me."

"Anyway, so what about you? How's the dating life?"

Her lips curled into a sarcastic smile. "Non-existent, unless you count the charming men who leave me their numbers along with their tip. And the pickup lines..." she rolled her eyes, hard.

"What's the best pickup line you've heard all day?"

She put a finger to her lip in contemplation. "Hmmm. Probably the guy at the roulette table. He said, 'Hey Miss, I need you to help me pick some lucky numbers. Why don't you put your phone number on this napkin for me?'"

“Oh geez. No!”

We both laughed, the sound of our laughter drowning in the noisy bar. A fleeting moment of levity, but beneath it all, my thoughts churned, a turbulent sea of hope and fear. I wondered if he had bought the car with me in mind. I had twenty-seven dollars and forty-six cents to my name and there was no way I was going to get myself something drivable in the foreseeable future. Jax really came through by loaning me this car.

But could I really trust Jax? Could he be the exception? Or would he become just another name on my ever-growing list of disappointments?

“Come on. I wanna go play a few hands of blackjack.” She gestured at me to follow as she placed a tip under her empty wine glass and collected her purse. She had already changed out of her uniform and was wearing street clothes.

“Oh, no, I can’t.”

“Come on! Why not?”

“Girl, I’ve got less than thirty dollars to my name until Friday. I can’t.”

“Here, take these. I don’t want to play by myself.” She shoved four casino chips into my hand.

“This is a hundred dollars. I’m not going to take your tips.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got plenty. See?” She opened her purse to show me her haul. It was full of them.

“I told you the tips were good here.”

“How much did you make tonight?”

“Five hundred and seventy-five dollars. But it was a slow day. Now come play a few hands with me. It would be rude to make me play by myself. If you win, you can give them all back.”

“Fine,” I capitulated. “I wouldn’t want to be rude.”

We picked a table without any other players. Its green, velvety surface empty except for us. That was until a boisterous group of guys sauntered over, drinks sloshing in their hands and their egos inflated like parade balloons. They took their seats, reeking of cologne and alcohol, their eyes darting between Emma and me like we were prizes to be won.

Emma seemed to bask in the attention, her laughter a little too loud, her smiles a bit too wide. It was as if she was performing, playing a part she knew too well. But the guy to my left was pushy, his eyes narrowing as he leaned in too close for comfort. “So, you ladies play often?”

“First time for everything,” Emma winked, her voice tinged with flirtation.

I lost the first three hands and was down to my last chip.

The cards were dealt and I had two aces. My fingers itched to split them, the most logical move, but I was out of chips and didn’t have anything to split them with.

“You should split that.” the guy taunted, a smirk stretching across his face as he puffed on a cigarette and blew the smoke in my direction. I waved the toxic fumes away as best I could.

“I know how to play,” I snapped, hitting instead. A ten of hearts. Another hit. Bust.

His laughter was grating, like nails on a chalkboard. “Should’ve listened to me.” He stood up and wrapped his arm around the back of my neck and pressed his body against me.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. I was about to unleash a torrent of words when I saw him—Jax, standing across the casino pit. His eyes were dark, intense, like a storm cloud ready to burst. A shiver ran down my spine. Was he... jealous?

Before I could contemplate further, Jax signaled to security. With a commanding stride, he crossed the floor, stopping right next to our table. “Gentlemen, I think you’ve overstayed your welcome.”

The guy to my left sneered, a defiant tilt to his chin. “Who are you to—”

“I own this place,” Jax cut him off, his voice ice cold. “Now, leave or I’ll have security throw you out.” He nodded at the two obnoxiously large men next to him.

“Hey! We’ve spent a lot of money in this place. Is this how you treat paying customers?”

“No. This is how we treat drunk assholes that harass young ladies.” He turned to his security guards, “These guys are eighty sixed. Now get ‘em outta here.”

Security swooped in, escorting the guys out like they were yesterday’s trash. Jax didn’t say a word, didn’t even look at

me. He just stormed off, leaving me in a whirlwind of emotions—elation, confusion, and a stirring of something deeper, more primal.

“What was that about?” Emma asked, her eyes narrowed, her lips pursed. “Jealous much?”

I shook my head, disoriented. “I need to go.”

I left Emma at the table, my steps quickening as I navigated through the maze of the casino. When I finally reached the office, it was deserted. The rows of cubicles were a ghost town, empty chairs spinning in the draft.

I burst into Jax’s office, my heart pounding, my chest tight. “What was that about?” I demanded, my voice tinged with a blend of accusation and curiosity. “Those guys were jerks, but you can’t treat customers like that. If you threw out every drunken gambler that walked in here, you wouldn’t have any customers.”

He stood up, his eyes locking onto mine. And then he was upon me, his lips crashing against mine in a kiss that was all-consuming, fervent, leaving no room for questions or doubts.

And in that moment, the walls I’d built around myself crumbled, leaving me exposed, raw. But for the first time, it felt okay. Because if there was one person I could be vulnerable with, it was Jax.

And yet, his show of jealousy stirred a complex whirlpool of emotions I couldn’t quite decipher—flattery, fear, and an undeniable realization that something between us had

irrevocably shifted. I wondered if this would be our undoing or the beginning of something terrifyingly beautiful.

Jax's hands were everywhere, trailing fire across my fevered skin as he laid me back across the expansive walnut desk. His possessive kisses seared a path down my neck while his fingers made quick work of my skirt.

Cool air kissed my overheated flesh as the garment slipped away, baring me to his ravenous gaze. The raw hunger in those azure eyes sent a fresh wave of arousal through my core. After weeks of restraint, we were finally giving in to this overpowering need.

He tore open my blouse and his powerful hands cupped my breasts, thumbs strumming my taut nipples in a way that had me arching off the desk with breathy moans. I dug my fingers into his broad shoulders, urging him onward.

He removed my bra in a split second, and his kisses continued lower, tracing the sensitive underside of my breasts, nipping at my ribcage, before finally reaching the lace edge of my panties. My heart jumped as he licked me through them, teasing me with the promise of more. He slowly peeled them down my legs, exposing my slick folds to the chill air.

I propped myself on my elbows, watching with bated breath as he settled between my splayed thighs. Our eyes locked and an unspoken promise passed between us. After this night, there would be no going back from what we'd started. A thrill of exhilaration chased away any lingering doubts.

The first velvet stroke of his tongue stole my breath. I let my head fall back, awash in sensation as he lapped and suckled my swollen pussy. My fingers tangled almost painfully in his hair as he added his fingers, pumping them in time with each languid lick.

My hips rocked urgently against his mouth, chasing the crest I could feel building. I was lost in this maelstrom of ecstasy, my moans echoing off the office walls.

When his fingers crooked inside me, finding that sweet spot, my climax crashed over me. An inferno ignited across my core, stealing all coherent thought. Jax's name fell from my lips like a fervent prayer as I came undone beneath his touch.

As I drifted back down to earth from my heavenly climax, Jax's heated gaze seared into me. Our joining was far from over as he kicked off his pants and threw off his shirt.

Chapter 17

Jax

SEEING THAT SWEATY ASSHOLE put his hands on Amelia was the final straw.

I couldn't take it. I shouldn't have thrown those guys out. That was stupid. I had lost all control.

But seeing Amelia come undone beneath me only amplified the raging lust for her coursing through my veins. My cock strained against the confines of my pants, aching to be buried inside her tight, wet pussy.

I tore off the remainder of my clothes in hurried motions. Amelia's eyes widened at the sight of my length jutting out, rigid and throbbing with need.

"You want this cock?" I growled, giving myself a few rough strokes as I watched her squirm atop my desk.

"Yes," she whimpered, "Give it to me, Jax."

Hearing her beg for me drove me insane. With feral urgency, I grabbed her hips and pulled her to the edge of the desk, her glistening pussy on display. She was mine for the taking.

I crouched down and gave her soaking wet cunt a final taste before I lined myself up and drove into her with one powerful thrust, her slick walls clenching around me. She cried out, the sound was music to my ears. Gripping her hips so tight I was sure it would leave bruises, I pounded into her relentlessly.

“Fuck, you feel good, baby,” I grunted through clenched teeth. I moved a hand between her legs, rubbing her clit, slick with her juices, in time with each punishing snap of my hips, and she let out long breathy moans that sent a rush to my engorged cock.

She clawed at the desktop, moaning wantonly as I claimed her body for my pleasure. She pushed her hips up to meet my savage rhythm, taking everything I gave her like a good girl.

The primal sounds of our fucking echoed off the office walls. I was an animal unleashed, focused only on my carnal need to possess this woman completely.

“Harder, Jax. Fuck me harder,” Amelia begged breathlessly. I complied, hammering into her with bruising force. I could feel her inner walls beginning to flutter around my pistoning cock. She was close again.

“That’s it. Come all over me, baby.” I rasped. My balls tightened, that familiar pressure building.

Amelia’s answer was a long wail as her orgasm crashed over her. The feel of her spasming cunt set off my own climax. I pulled out and released hot spurts of cum all over her flat stomach.

I draped myself over her, our hearts thundering in tandem as we caught our breath, and I had no intention of letting her go.

Amelia lay beneath me, our hearts hammering in unison as we caught our breath. The musky scent of sex permeated the air, mingling with her sweet vanilla perfume. I nuzzled into the soft skin of her neck, inhaling deeply before propping myself up to look at her.

Her rich, brunette hair fanned out across my desk, honey brown eyes regarding me with a vulnerable sort of wonder like I was a puzzle she was trying to solve. I traced the curve of her cheek with my thumb, something protective and primal swelling in my chest. She was mine now. I had marked her, claimed her body in a way that left no doubt.

As the haze of lust began to clear, the weight of what we'd done pressed down on me. I withdrew from her body with a quiet grunt, reality intruding on our stolen moment of indulgence. Silently, we gathered our discarded clothing, the whisper of fabric punctuating the thick silence.

Once dressed, I took her hand and led her to the leather couch along the far wall of my office. She curled into my side, head nestled on my shoulder. I wrapped an arm around her, savoring her warmth.

“That was...” Her voice trailed off.

“Intense,” I finished for her.

She nodded against my chest. “What happens now?”

I threaded my fingers through her hair, buying time to gather my turbulent thoughts. “I don’t know,” I admitted.

She raised her head to meet my gaze, vulnerable uncertainty swirling in those doe eyes. “Do you regret it?”

“Fuck, no.” I cupped her face in my hands, holding her gaze intently. “I want you, Amelia. Only you.”

The admission tumbled out before I could stop it, but I meant every word. She had awakened something within me, an all-consuming need that defied reason.

“I want you too, Jax.” Her voice was a strained whisper, as if she could hardly believe the words herself. “But what about everything else? Your business, Lauren...”

I stroked her hair, weighing how to answer. She was right to consider the fallout. If word got out, it could destroy my reputation, my relationship with my daughter. But despite the risks, I couldn’t make myself walk away. Not now, after knowing the heaven of her body and her rare, quiet spirit.

“All that matters right now is you and me. We’ll figure the rest out,” I assured her.

She bit her lip, a crease forming between her delicate brows. “Maybe this is just physical attraction? It would be safer if we kept things strictly professional.”

My fingertips grazed the soft skin of her inner arm, raising goosebumps in their wake. “Is that what you want?” I asked seriously.

Amelia closed her eyes, conflicting emotions playing across her features. When she opened them again, they shone with conviction.

“No. Being with you feels right in a way I can’t explain. I want to see where this goes, no matter the consequences.”

I cupped her face again, catching her in a searing kiss that stole our breath away. When we finally broke for air, foreheads pressed together, the path forward seemed clear. Caution be damned, we would seize this unexpected chance at happiness, wherever it led us.

Lord knew I never thought I’d ever experience anything this powerful again. I had to take the chance.

“Then that’s what we’ll do, honey. But we’ll need to be discreet.” I twirled a lock of her hair around my finger. “I suggest we keep this between us until we figure things out.”

Amelia nodded, snuggling against my chest once more. “It’s probably for the best. For now, at least.”

I smiled down at her, a sense of peace settling over me despite the uncertainty ahead. With Amelia by my side, I felt like I could weather any storm.

We sat entwined in contented silence as I considered how to move forward. A thrill ran through me at the thought of stolen moments with her, secret trysts far from prying eyes. The risk only heightened the allure.

“When can I see you again?” The neediness in my own voice surprised me.

“Soon, I hope,” she murmured against my shirt.

I tipped her chin up, capturing her lips in a slow, sensual kiss that left us both breathless.

“I better let you get home. It’s late,” I said reluctantly, tightening my arms around her slender frame.

She sighed, nuzzling my jaw. “I wish I could stay.”

“Soon, sweetheart.” I brushed a tender kiss over her forehead as we untangled ourselves and rose from the couch on shaky legs.

Walking her to the door was sheer torture, my hands itching to pull her back into my arms. I settled for a parting caress of her cheek.

“Drive safe. And text me when you’re home.”

“I will.” Her cheeks dimpled with a soft smile.

As she disappeared down the dim hallway, I sank back against the doorframe, marveling at the extraordinary woman who had turned my world upside down. A sense of hopeful anticipation bubbled up inside me. The future was unclear, but one thing was certain—my heart belonged to Amelia now. Come what may, I wasn’t letting her go.

I waited anxiously for her text, thoughts racing, body still thrumming from our illicit encounter. When my phone finally chimed, I snatched it up eagerly.

Home safe :) Can’t wait to see you again. Sleep well, Jax.

I smiled to myself, picturing her snuggled in bed, soft and warm. My reply was brief but sincere.

Sweet dreams, honey. Tomorrow can't come soon enough.

I fell into my own bed that night with her name on my lips, the lingering scent of her perfume still clinging to my skin. Tomorrow really couldn't come soon enough. A whole new chapter was unfolding, and I was ready to turn the page.



I arrived at the office the next morning feeling lighter than I had in years. The memory of Amelia's soft skin and labored moans filled me with renewed vigor. For the first time in forever, I felt content. Whole.

I felt a pang of guilt when I thought about Rachel. How would she feel if she knew what I was doing? I couldn't think about that now. I had spent enough time mourning her loss and I had to move on with my life. There was no better person to move on with than Amelia.

I had just settled in at my desk when a knock sounded at the door. "Come in," I called, unable to keep the smile from my voice.

She entered, radiant as the dawn in a fitted navy dress that hugged every curve. "Good morning, Mr. Dawson." Her smile beamed.

“Please, call me Jax.” I stood and rounded the desk, unable to resist pulling her into my arms. She melted against me with a delighted sigh.

“Jax,” she amended in a throaty purr, igniting my desire all over again. “I thought I was to call you Mr. Dawson at work?” I tilted her chin up, catching her in a heated kiss that left us both breathless.

“You can call me whatever you want. I missed you,” I murmured against her lips before forcing myself to pull back. As much as I wanted to throw her down on my desk for a repeat performance, we had work to do.

Clearing my throat, I smoothed my rumpled shirt and tie. “So, how’s Eliza handling?”

Amelia’s eyes lit up at the mention of her new car. “Like a dream. I still can’t believe it.”

“She’s all yours for as long as you need it,” I assured her.

We shared a smile brimming with promise before getting down to business. Throughout the morning, we exchanged clandestine looks and heated touches behind closed doors, giddy as school kids.

Around lunchtime, I called her into my office and shut the door. As soon as she was in my arms, conversation ceased, mouths and hands too busy reacquainting themselves with newly familiar territory. We spent a blissful half hour necking on the leather couch like a couple of teenagers.

“God, the things you do to me,” I rasped against the sensitive spot below her ear that never failed to make her shudder.

She clutched me close, breath coming in panting gasps as my hands roamed her body. “I don’t ever want this to end.”

“Oh honey, it won’t,” I kissed her hard, staking my claim. “You’re mine now.”

By the time we came up for air, faces flushed and clothes askew, the path forward seemed clear. Caution be damned, we were all in.

“So, are we really doing this?” Amelia asked shyly as she straightened her dress. “Giving this a real shot?”

I brushed an errant strand of hair from her face, my heart swelling at the vulnerability in her expression. “Absolutely. I meant what I said last night. I want you, Amelia Scott, and I intend to keep you for as long as you’ll have me.”

Joy sparked in her twinkling eyes. “Then I’m all yours.”

“So, how about a date? You want to go out to dinner later?”

“You mean, in public?”

“Of course. We should keep things low-key around the office, of course. But if we’re going to try to have a relationship, we’re going to have to go out in public eventually. You’re not a dirty secret to keep hidden away.”

“Yeah, but you’re Jax Dawson. People will recognize you. It’s sure to get back to Lauren.”

“If Lauren finds out, she finds out. I’m not going to go out of my way to let her know, but if she happens to find out, we’ll deal with it. Regardless, I’m not going to hide you away. And you’re driving.”

We exchanged giddy smiles, basking in this newfound closeness. I knew the path ahead held risks, but Amelia was worth braving the storm. I would move heaven and earth to make her happy.

A knock at the door had us flying apart. I cleared my throat, calling, “Come in.”

Zeke strolled in, his sharp eyes scanning the room. They lingered on Amelia, her kiss-swollen lips and mussed hair telling.

“Morning, Amelia. You’re looking rather...cheery today.”

“It’s a beautiful day, Mr. Moran,” she replied breezily. “How’s your golf game these days?” I had to admire her poise even as I fought back a proud smile. My girl had nerve.

After exchanging pleasantries, she slipped out, leaving Zeke smirking at me knowingly. “Well, well, well. I’d say it’s serious.”

I held his gaze unflinchingly. “It’s new.”

Clapping my shoulder, he gave it a congratulatory squeeze. “I’m happy for you, brother. But what about Lauren? Have you thought about how she’ll react when she finds out you’re banging her former best friend?”

I raked a hand through my hair, exhaling heavily. “Honestly, I’m taking it one day at a time. Lauren doesn’t need to know yet. When the time comes, I’ll handle it, but for now, Amelia and I are figuring things out. Enjoying the moment.”

Zeke studied me for a moment before nodding. “Your secret is safe with me. Just tread carefully.” He headed for the seat across my desk and I joined him.

“So, where we at with digging up dirt on Smirnova?”

“Well, we’re nowhere yet. Gabe is trying to find contacts that have an in with him somewhere. He thinks he might be able to hack Smirnova’s system if he can get access. Don’t you have contacts at the sheriff’s department?”

“Yeah, but a lot of those guys belong to the mob. It’s hard to know who can be trusted. We’re going to pursue this route for now until we have no choice but to consider other options.”

“Understood.” Zeke stood up and made his way to the door, pausing to add sincerely, “I’m glad to see a smile back on your mug for a change.”

I smiled, buoyed by his support. “Thanks, Zeke.”

My thoughts lingered on Amelia as I finished up the last of my work, anticipation thrumming through me. I had promised to take her to dinner and was already imagining her sensual lips closing around the rim of a wine glass, dark eyes smoldering at me across the table. Just the thought had me restless to have her all to myself again.

At six o'clock sharp, I made my way to her office. "Ready to go?"

"Almost. There's something I wanted to go over real quick in your office." She stood up.

"Can it wait? I can't wait to get you all to myself." I grabbed her ass with both hands and gave it a squeeze.

"No, this can't wait."

"Sure. Come on back."

I sat in my chair and turned to see Amelia rounding the desk, dropping to her knees. Nimble fingers making quick work of my belt and pants. My cock sprang free, rigid and aching for her touch.

"There's something I've been wanting to do since my first day," she purred, grasping my length in her soft hand. My head fell back with a groan as she pumped me slowly, her tongue flicking out to lap at the sensitive tip.

She placed my hard cock in her warm, wet mouth, and when her plump lips finally closed in around me, I thought I might pass out from sheer pleasure. I fisted my hands in her hair, guiding her head as she took me deeper, tongue swirling skillfully.

"Fuck," I grunted through clenched teeth, resisting the urge to fuck that sweet mouth. She moaned around my length, the vibration sending shockwaves through me. She sucked me hard and fast, cheeks hollowing with effort.

The obscene sounds of her slurping and gagging on my cock echoed off the office walls. I was helpless, reduced to a mess of primal need under her expert ministrations.

“That’s it, baby, suck me,” I rasped.

Amelia responded with a breathy whimper, redoubling her efforts. The pressure building in my balls was unstoppable. With a guttural groan, I came hard down her throat in hot, spurting jets. She swallowed every drop like a champ.

I hauled her up for a messy kiss, the taste of myself mingling with the sweetness of her tongue.

“Fuck, I love this mouth,” I panted.

Amelia gave me a coy smile, dabbing at the corner of her swollen lips. “Just wanted to give you a little preview for later.”

I growled low in my throat, swatting her pert ass. “Tease. Now let’s go before I bend you over this desk and fuck you right here.”

She laughed throatily, smoothing down her dress. “Yes, sir.”

Grabbing her purse, she beamed up at me. “So, where are you taking me?”

“It’s a surprise. But I think you’ll like it.”

We rode the elevator down to the parking garage and I fought the urge to grab her hand. At the sight of Eliza, Amelia broke into a delighted grin. “There she is. You wanna drive?” She tossed me the keys.

“She’s all yours tonight.” I tossed the keys right back.

She caught them with one hand. “Well, if you insist.” She beamed.

I chuckled at her enthusiasm, the joy on her face warming my heart. I’d have bought her a hundred cars just to see her smile like that.

She drove flawlessly, caressing the wheel with obvious delight. Seeing her so happy flooded me with tenderness and vindication—I had made the right choice pursuing this, consequences be damned.

We put the top down to feel the fresh air and drove along the Vegas Strip, neon lights painting Amelia’s skin in vibrant hues. She was a vision, joy emanating from her in warm waves. I never wanted this night to end.

I directed her to a cozy Italian restaurant just off the Strip. She pulled into a parking space and shut the car off. I got out of the car and noticed that she hadn’t moved. Her hands still gripping the steering wheel.

“What are you waiting for?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know, Jax. I’m not sure I’m ready for this.” My heart fell to my balls. Was she having second thoughts already?

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think we should be out in public. Yet, anyway. I’m not ready for Lauren to find out about us and I feel like going out so openly in public is sure to get back to her.”

“That is true, but if we’re going to pursue a relationship, Lauren will have to find out sooner or later.”

“I know. But I would rather she find out on our terms. Not through a headline in a newspaper.”

I leaned on the passenger door frame. Thinking.

“Can’t we just enjoy this for a while? I just feel like if we go in there, we’re inviting trouble.”

I didn’t want Amelia to feel like I was hiding her, but she had a fair point. Lauren wouldn’t take this well and she’d be humiliated if I didn’t tell her first. I had to balance the needs of both of these women and was doing a poor job already.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right,” I lamented.

“How about we just go home and I’ll cook something up for us?”

“That’d be great.” Better than great actually. I was dying to have her all to myself for the night.

“So, your place or mine?” she asked.

“It’s probably best if we go to your place. I don’t want to risk Lauren dropping in and seeing anything she shouldn’t.”

“Right. Of course.”

Back at her place, she whipped up a quick meal as I sipped a glass of wine and watched her move around the kitchen. My pulse quickening at every glance in my direction.

Over wine and grilled salmon, conversation flowed easily. I felt comfortable enough making a confession.

“From the moment I saw you that day at my house, I was hooked,” I told her earnestly. “I know the odds are against us, but I have to see where this goes. You’re worth the risk.”

Amelia ducked her head, cheeks pinking prettily at my heartfelt words.

“Part of me is terrified,” she admitted. “My past has left some scars. But when I’m with you, I feel strong enough to face anything.”

I raised my glass in a toast. “To us.”

She clinked her glass to mine, eyes sparkling. “To us.”

I leaned over and kissed her deeply. She pressed against me, hands fisting my shirt like she was drowning and I was her only anchor.

When we finally broke for air, I thought it was as good a time as any to broach a delicate subject.

“Amelia, there’s something I wanted to discuss.”

She tensed slightly. “What is it?”

I gripped her hands reassuringly. “It’s about Lauren. I hate to see you two estranged. I know how close you two were.”

Sadness flickered through her eyes. “I miss her sometimes. But too much has happened. I don’t think we can go back.”

“Maybe not to how things were, but do you think you could move past it? I think a conversation could really help.” Seeing her reluctance, I pressed gently, “Just consider it?”

After a long moment, she sighed. “Alright, I’ll think about it. But she would have to reach out first.”

I smiled approvingly. “Fair enough.” I drew her close again, lips finding the sensitive spot below her ear. “Now, where were we?”

Amelia shuddered deliciously against me, nails raking my nape.

Groaning, I nipped her earlobe. “I need to feel you and I can’t wait another second.”

Her breath hitched at those little words, uttered so casually. Eyes shining, she whispered, “Take me to bed, Jax.”

No further convincing needed, I swept her into my arms and carried her back to her bedroom.

After another round of blissful sex, she fell asleep in my arms, and for the first time in a long time, I felt complete. I couldn’t imagine that there was anything that could tear me away from this woman.

Chapter 18

Amelia

I SAT AT MY desk, idly tapping my pen as I stared blankly at the computer screen. My thoughts kept drifting back to Jax.

It had been just over a month since that fateful night in his office when we finally surrendered to the electric tension between us. Since then, we'd settled into an easy rhythm, stealing secret moments behind closed doors. He still thrilled me beyond measure, both in and out of the bedroom. I couldn't get enough of him.

By all accounts, things were going perfectly between us. Too perfect. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for my happiness to be snatched away as it always had been before.

Emma joked that I was a professional pessimist, quick to seek out the dark lining in every silver cloud. But experience had taught me that people always disappointed in the end. Part of me wanted to bask in this newfound joy with Jax, but a larger part remained wary, braced for the heartache I felt sure would come.

I still struggled with the fact that Jax was my boss, Lauren's dad, and twenty years my senior, but I enjoyed the little bubble we had created. I finally felt truly wanted. But I knew deep down that I was not secure.

A stampede of drama was waiting to trample in. Until these monumental issues were addressed, it was only a matter of time until our little bubble would burst.

When Lauren waltzed into my office, I was afraid that the Universe was sending a harbinger of what was to come. She had every right to be there, of course, but somehow it felt intrusive.

"Hey," she offered softly.

My voice came out clipped, still guarded. "He's not here." I assumed she was there to see her dad.

An awkward beat of silence passed before Lauren ventured further into the room.

"Actually, I'm here to see you."

I looked at her with narrowed eyes and studied her pensively. I wondered if Jax put her up to this. Our once easy camaraderie now felt strained, the gulf between us yawning wide in the wake of her betrayal.

But the truth was, I wasn't sure I was even mad at her anymore. I was still hurt by the betrayal by someone I trusted, but after the last couple of months, I was convinced she'd actually done me a huge favor.

The last few months with Jax made me question if I ever really loved Rob at all. I thought I had, but now, it just seemed like child's play. He never made my heart race like Jax did.

Part of me wanted to stay mad at her. I guess it made me feel better about what I was doing with her father. I knew it didn't excuse my behavior, but it made me feel a little less awful at least.

So, I maintained an air of subtle hostility.

“Why is that?”

“I'd like us to talk. But not here. I was hoping we could go grab lunch, maybe talk things through? I owe you an explanation.” I looked at her hopeful eyes and I missed my friend.

My first instinct was to decline, self-preservation urging me to maintain my distance. But despite everything, I couldn't ignore the earnest longing in Lauren's voice. Perhaps she regretted what had happened between us as much as I did. And considering what was going on between her father and me, nobody was innocent here.

“Okay,” I conceded softly. “I'm free for an hour.”

Lauren's face lit up. “Great! I'll drive. Cactus Blossom sound okay?”

I allowed a small, wistful smile as the name left her lips—The Cactus Blossom Café. We used to cut class and sneak off there to sip lattes, stuff our faces with the best pastries in town,

and dream about the future. And there was a barista that worked there that Lauren had a crush on.

“I can’t believe that place is still open,” I marveled.

“Right? Hopefully, the pastries are just as good as I remember. And the baristas.”

We shared a fleeting, nostalgic laugh before the weight of unspoken hurts settled over us once more. But for a moment, it felt just like old times.

The café was downtown, which was a fair distance from the Crown, too far to walk, but it was nice to get off the strip for a little while.

We sat in silence as we passed a large construction site where they were building a new casino. The skyline of the Vegas Strip was constantly changing. There were hardly any hotels left on the strip that were older than twenty-five or thirty years. Rows of palm trees lining the long stretch of road had turned into old, dilapidated buildings lined with the cheesiest of cheesy gift shops.

“So, how’s work? I was surprised when my dad said you were working for him.” Lauren decided to break the silence.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?” I said curtly.

She gripped the steering wheel and didn’t reply. She and I both knew why working for her dad would be awkward, but she wasn’t ready to talk about it just yet, I guessed.

We had just passed the courthouse and I was starting to feel nostalgic.

Tourists swelled the Vegas strip and the glitz it had to offer, but downtown was “Old Vegas.” The Crown was the largest and most grand casino resort on the strip, but Old Vegas made me feel like I was in a time capsule from nineteen fifty-five.

I loved seeing the old neon signs, the smell of musty cigarette smoke, the tacky paisley carpets, and the businesses that still operated in that area did their best to make sure that their esthetic never changed.

Lauren pulled into the small outdoor parking lot not far from the café. A black sedan behind us swiftly pulled into the stall next to us. Something about the way it whipped into the parking lot set me on edge, but I brushed it off.

We got out of the car and proceeded to walk through the parking lot toward the café.

A loud deep voice called out after us, “Lauren!”

Lauren turned to see who was calling for her. A large man stepped out of the sedan and was quickly walking toward us. Lauren and I instinctively stepped closer together.

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?” she asked the man.

The man didn’t say anything, which made his next move all the more eerie. He was well dressed in slacks, a button-down, and a Jaxr that looked one size too small. He looked like someone out of an action movie. Casually, he opened his Jaxr and flashed a gun that was tucked into his waistband.

Holding Lauren’s eyes, he said in a firm tone and a thick accent, “Lauren Dawson, I’m afraid you’re going to have to

come with me.” Before anything else could be said, the man reached for her. I could see the fear in her eyes. It was a quick glance at one another as we turned to run, but the man was clearly anticipating this and he lunged up behind us in a split second and grabbed her by the elbow, squeezing the joint painfully until she cried out.

All of my old foster kid survival instincts came rushing back. I looked wildly around the parking lot looking for a weapon of some sort until I spotted a large rock holding open the door to the parking attendant booth.

I bolted and grabbed the heavy thing.

Lauren was fighting like hell against the man.

“Get your hands off me!” she screamed, and I was proud of the volume she hit as she struggled.

I had to wait for just the right moment so that I wouldn’t hit Lauren, but finally, the man lifted his head just enough and I was able to smash the rock hard against his skull. He collapsed like the heap of garbage that he was.

A couple of people rushed over from across the street, asking us if we were okay. One person said he had already called the police, and they were on their way.

Lauren and I looked at each other, startled, and then she collapsed into my arms.

“Oh, my God, thank you!” she said in a shaky voice. “You totally just saved my life!” We made our way back to her car,

and I drove us across the street to watch and wait until the police arrived, which luckily wasn't that long.

When the cop car pulled up to the sidewalk, the officers went straight to the man on the ground and inspected him. They found the gun in his waistbelt and searched for his wallet in his back pocket. One of the officers was taking notes.

We got out of Lauren's car and walked straight over.

"Excuse me, officer, I'm Lauren Dawson. This is my friend, Amelia Scott. She's the one who hit the man on the head."

"Okay, Ms. Dawson, can you tell us what led your friend to hit this man?"

Lauren explained what had happened, her words coming out a mile a minute. She was still in shock

"And do you know this man?"

"No. I've never seen him before." She was still trembling.

"And you?" he directed the question at me.

"No. I've never seen him before either," I answered.

"Any idea what he wanted?"

We both shook our heads.

"Can you point to his car?"

We proceeded to answer all of their questions and filled out a statement of what had happened as the paramedics lifted the man into the back of an ambulance. They also collected statements from the other witnesses who had been paying attention enough to see some of what happened.

After we gave our statements, we got out of there like we were on fire just trying our best to put the whole ordeal behind us. When we got back to the casino, Lauren pulled up to the main entrance and we just sat. The car was shut off for a few long minutes as we tried to collect ourselves. A flurry of loud tourists passed by holding three-foot-high plastic cups filled with half-drunk alcoholic slushies, laughing without a care in the world.

Lauren broke down in tears and sobbed for a little while, burying her face in her arms resting on the steering wheel. “Oh, my God, we could have been killed if it weren’t for you.”

I just sat still, staring into the space in front of me, still in shock. I’d seen some rough stuff in foster care, but this was the first time I had ever witnessed an attempted kidnapping. At gunpoint.

Lauren looked at me finally and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so, but we need to figure out what the hell that was about and I think I know who we need to ask first.”

Chapter 19

Jax

THE TICKING OF MY grandmother's antique clock on my desk echoed through my office, a metronome counting down the minutes since Amelia's disappearance. Worry gnawed at my gut like a rabid dog.

Where was she?

I checked my phone for the hundredth time, clenching it so tightly the case creaked under the pressure. Still nothing. Just empty silence from her end, more deafening than any noise.

Zeke, Gabe, Griff, and I were all in my office for a meeting, and I was trying desperately to focus on what they were saying, but I was distracted.

Amelia's lunch break ended half an hour ago and she was still nowhere to be seen.

I had texted her furtively just to make sure she was okay, but all I got was radio silence.

I waffled in my head over whether I had done something to make her mad and she was just giving me the silent treatment

or if something was seriously wrong. It wasn't like her to be late without letting me know.

Gabe and Griff were in the middle of arguing over something stupid when Zeke sidled up to me and said in a quiet voice, "Hey, are you okay? You're distracted as hell."

I looked up at him and decided this wasn't something that I could try to sweep under the rug. I was also grateful that he knew about my situation because he would understand my concern all the better.

"Amelia was supposed to be back over thirty minutes ago. She's not answering her texts. She's not picking up. I'm a little concerned," I admitted under my breath, raking a hand through my hair.

Alarm flashed across Zeke's face. He understood well the dangers lurking in this town, especially for someone connected to me, and especially after all the mafia bullshit.

Apparently, Gabe had overheard.

"Hey, are you talking about your assistant?" he asked, honing in on the conversation. "I wouldn't worry, I saw her leaving with Lauren a while ago," he said casually, then went back to his argument with Griff.

At the mention of Lauren's name, dread flooded my veins like ice water. Amelia out to lunch with my daughter, the one person who could destroy everything if she learned of our affair. The possibilities swirled darkly in my mind, each one more troubling than the last.

Zeke and I looked at each other alarmed. I felt the blood drain from my face and my heart increased its pace. I felt a whole other kind of fear racing through me.

I knew I had suggested that the two of them work things out, but I was kinda hoping to be present when it happened just so I would know how it all went down.

The thought of them going out and having an extra-long lunch made me nervous.

I was starting to fear that I was going to have to prepare myself for my daughter thinking I was the scourge of the earth for sleeping with her best friend.

I didn't have to guess for long.

Without knocking, Lauren and Amelia burst into my office. They both looked disheveled with wide eyes. I immediately rose from my chair.

“Dad, we have a serious problem,” Lauren said, still out of breath. It was over a hundred degrees outside and they were both still warm, the heat radiating from their bodies. Beads of sweat ran down their pale faces. They were brimming with molten anxiety.

I looked between the two of them, scared out of my mind, “What the hell happened?”

Lauren opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out, and to my dismay, big fat tears started rolling down her cheeks.

“We were just attacked in a parking lot downtown. On Fremont and Las Vegas Boulevard,” Amelia said in shaky, but mostly calm voice.

“What??? Who attacked you?” I hoped to God it was just some drunk on the street and nothing more serious.

“We don’t know. We had just pulled into the parking lot and he parked next to us. He got out of the car and called Lauren’s name and told her she needed to go with him. He flashed a gun at us. We tried to run but he grabbed her, so I hit him over the head with a rock and knocked him out,” Amelia explained.

“You hit him with a rock?” Zeke asked, his eyebrows shot up. “Did you call the police?”

“Yes. We filed a police report. And they got statements from some witnesses,” Amelia answered him.

“Don’t worry, Lauren. I won’t let anyone hurt a hair on your head, do you hear me?” I assured her.

As I held her close to me, she cried into my shoulder. I held her and let her cry it out as I looked at Amelia behind her, looking shaken.

I mouthed out the words “Thank you” to her but she just shook her head and tore her gaze away, biting her bottom lip.

Griff stood up and paced the room. “Don’t worry, girls. We’ve got the best security in town and nobody is coming into this building without us knowing about it, okay?”

The next few moments were intense as the guys surrounded both Amelia and Lauren with comforting words and more

questions. Over their heads, however, my eyes met Zeke's and he asked the question that was burning on my mind but stuck in my throat for some reason.

“What did this man sound like? Was there any notable accent or anything like that?” he asked them.

“Oh,” Lauren was still crying, but she managed to speak through her tears. “Yeah, actually. He sounded maybe Eastern European? Something like that, maybe—”

“He was Russian. The accent was Russian,” Amelia said, cutting her off, meeting my eyes meaningfully.

My partners and I all looked at each other knowingly. The anger and dread that merged together rose up in my throat like bile. It was something that I had never experienced before.

It was one thing for them to fuck with me. But now they were fucking with my daughter and my lady.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Lauren, I want you to stay here in the Casino for a little while where I can see you at all times. Amelia, you are not to leave this office.”

As a testament to how scared the two were, neither one argued with me.

Amelia gently took Lauren's arm. “Come on, we might as well sit while they figure out what's next.”

For the second time that day, Amelia saved my ass. The first being when she saved my daughter's life, and the second, when she understood that the guys and I would have to take care of this immediately and we needed the space to do that.

Zeke was already issuing orders before I could even get a word out.

“Gabe, Griff, I need you to talk to security. We are going to need to double up. We’re also going to need to get additional security for the girls. They are not to be by themselves.” Zeke looked over at me sheepishly. “Anything you’d like to add, Jax?”

I shook my head.

Griff was already headed for the door just like he was asked, but Gabe, ever the hothead, was wanting to do a little more than just talk to security.

“Jax, come on. I think it’s time we found these guys and made a statement. That’s the only kind of thing that people like that respond to. We need to let them know that we are not to be fucked with. I know a couple of guys with nothing to lose that could take care of this.”

Griff rolled his eyes. “Gabe, this isn’t Taken, and you’re not Liam Neeson. The smartest thing to do is to talk to security, notify the police, and then work from there.”

“I’m just saying, we can’t let them get away with this, and there’s only one thing guys like this understand. We need to set a precedent,” Gabe insisted.

“And we will,” Zeke said calmly. “But we’re not going to be helping anybody out if we act rashly. So, please go do as I asked and get the girls covered. Jax and I are going to come up

with a game plan that we'll let you in on it when we have all the details ironed out. Got it?"

Gabe looked like he wanted to argue, but then he looked at me and I saw something softer run through his expression. I'm guessing he saw a terrified father because he let it go and reluctantly followed Griff out the door.

I glanced over to the sofa in Amelia's office and saw the girls sat at opposite ends. It didn't look like they had mended their relationship just yet.

Zeke looked at me with understanding eyes as he told me, "Look, I know you want them in your sight, but they probably don't need to hear this."

He was right. I wanted the girls as far removed from this as possible. We waited until our two best security guards arrived and I ordered them to escort Lauren to one of the best suites in the hotel, where she could hopefully relax and wait until further notice, while Amelia stayed in her office. But before Lauren left, I stopped them both.

"I want you two staying with me for the foreseeable future... At least until we can figure this out. That guy that came after you," I said, looking toward Lauren, "he's very dangerous, and I am not certain that they won't try that again."

"Dad, who is the 'they' that you keep talking about? Who's after you? Who is after us?" she asked, still visibly upset.

"I'll fill you in later. But I have to talk to Zeke right now. I'm sorry." I looked between the two of them. "After we're

done here, we'll stop by both of your places and you two are going to need to pack enough to stay for a while. I'm not letting either one of you out of my sight."

Lauren was still shaking, but she nodded her head in understanding. My eyes went to Amelia's. Her eyes were uncertain and I could see a million questions there, but she kept her mouth shut and nodded her head curtly. I watched as my two best security guards escorted Lauren out.

"Lauren, text me as soon as you're locked in that room so I know you're safe and sound."

She nodded.

I closed my office door, and angrily kicked over my desk chair. "Those motherfuckers think they're going to make this personal, I will torch the whole fucking city before I let them touch either one of my girls again," I said through gritted teeth.

Zeke's steady hand on my shoulder grounded me. "We'll make them pay. But let's be smart, yeah?"

I scrubbed a frustrated hand over my face, "I am all for being smart, but screw this business about trying to get them to ease off. That plan is out the window now."

"What do you suggest, then?" Zeke asked cautiously.

"Gabe may not be entirely wrong in his response. We need to let them know that we won't tolerate being fucked with."

Zeke plopped down in the chair across from my desk, his knee bouncing up and down agitated.

“Well, are you saying that we need to learn how to make Molotov cocktails or do you have something a little bit more civilized in mind? Mind you, I sincerely hope for the latter because we would be completely playing into their hands if we went that crazy over it,” he reasoned.

I righted the chair I had kicked over and settled in, grabbing my phone, “We’re going to call them up and let them know that it is not only a no, it is a never on your sorry fucking life, fuck no,” I nearly yelled as I searched for the card that Sergei had given me with his contact information on it. “We need to put everyone on notice, not just these assholes either. We need to get a hold of every hotel owner and CEO along the strip, and let them know that enough is enough.”

Zeke noted. “I agree, I really don’t know of anybody that wants to do business with them. It’s time that we all stand together as a united front. But is that enough?”

I looked at him with determination in my eyes.

“If it’s not enough, then we will make sure that we call in all our favors. I mean, come on, Zeke, this is our town. I’m not going to let these assholes run us out of it and take over. The four of us have spent years building relationships with everyone important in this town. We saved Governor Lindsay’s ass and helped him win his election. He owes us. Besides, once they hear what’s going on, they’re going to want to get involved. Nobody wants to see the Russian mob take over Vegas. I’m talking the DA, the Sheriff’s office, the

mayor... Hell, didn't you even help Sheriff Ortiz out of a financial disaster?"

Zeke nodded. "Indeed, I did. He usually takes my calls. I'll go put in a call and see if he can suggest any options. We should call our attorneys as well and see what our legal options are."

Zeke was halfway to my office door when he turned and looked at me with a concerned expression. "I'm sorry you're having to deal with this, I really am, but we're going to make sure the girls are safe no matter what, alright?"

I nodded, unable to speak because a lump had formed in my throat. As the door clicked shut behind Zeke, the enormity of everything that happened that day hit me at full force, and I struggled with whether I should toss the whole office or go beat the shit out of someone myself.

It wasn't until all the phone calls were made, and all the security plans were put into place that my words came back to me:

"I will torch the whole fucking city before I let any of them touch either one of my girls again..."

If Zeke had noticed my slip, he had been kind enough not to point it out. But now those words boomeranged back to me.

My girl. I had called Amelia my girl, and I surely shouted it loud enough for Lauren to hear. And the simple fact of the matter was, sitting here after such an arduous day with so

much bullshit to deal with, I felt in every fiber of my being that she was, in fact, my girl...

I just hoped that Lauren hadn't heard or thought anything of it.

Once again, a wave of stress and horror washed over me. Not only had I thrown down the gauntlet to the Russian mob, but now I would be having both my daughter and my lover all under one roof for the foreseeable future.

There was no way around it.

That would mean that Amelia and I would have to keep our hands off each other and put on an act, which would be damn near impossible considering she would be close to me at all times.

"Fuck." I rubbed at my temples. I didn't know how we were going to get through all this.

After a long day of high tensions and dealing with the threat of the Russian mob, I was exhausted both mentally and physically. All I wanted was to go home, pour myself a stiff drink, and try to unwind. But there was still much to address before I could rest.

I gathered my things wearily, dreading the conversation I would soon need to have with Amelia and Lauren. We had agreed they would stay with me for their safety, but that inevitably meant risking a revelation of mine and Amelia's secret relationship. I cringed at the thought of facing Lauren's

disappointment, her sense of betrayal. She would see me as a hypocrite, a liar, and an absolute scumbag.

As I rode the elevator down to the lobby, the day replayed in my mind like some violent film. The terror in the girls' eyes, my impotent rage and vows of vengeance. In a single afternoon, everything had fractured. I was exposed, vulnerable. For the first time in years, forces beyond my control threatened all I held dear.

Stepping outside into the glaring sun, I slid on my sunglasses, the tinted lenses cutting the harsh light. My car waited at the curb, sleek and pristine as ever. But I knew better. They had put a tracking device on my car before. For all I knew they could be watching me now. So, I had security check my car again before we left.

The drive to Amelia's apartment was a blur, my hands gripped tight on the wheel. Lauren sat in the front seat while Amelia sat in the back and I hadn't had an opportunity to speak with her alone yet.

What would I say to her? I had no answers, only the uncertainty of whether our affair could remain secret under the circumstances. A storm was coming that could dash our hopes upon the rocks if we weren't cautious.

We pulled up to her apartment building and she got out of the car to run inside. I noticed the little gray cat waiting for her at the top of the stairs. It came running down to greet her.

Amelia wanted to keep her, but refrained from letting her into her apartment because of my cat allergy. I could tell she

was growing attached to it and it made me feel a little guilty for standing in the way of her chance to have a pet.

As she made her way back toward the car with a suitcase in tow, she bent down and picked up the cat, carrying it to the car.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“I’m bringing him with. If I’m staying at your house, no one will be here to feed him.”

Him?

I thought the cat was a she, but I didn’t dare ask her about it in front of Lauren and risk giving our secret away.

“Sorry, Amelia, he can’t come. I’m deathly allergic to cats.”

“I’m not leaving him behind. He comes with me, or I’m not coming.”

I looked at her through the rearview mirror and her expression was stone cold and resolute. I wasn’t about to throw her out and leave her at risk over a fucking cat.

“Fine. Just make sure to keep him in your room.”

“Sure. I just need to stop by a pet store for a litter box. And a crate.”

What have I gotten myself into?

When we got to Lauren’s place, we finally had a minute to talk alone while Lauren ran inside to get her things.

The tension hung in the air like a curtain.

“I’m sorry, Lee. I really am. I know this is going to be hard, but it’s temporary. We’re just going to have to put in the effort to be discreet.”

She gave a grim nod. We both understood the risks now.

Chapter 20

Amelia

THE DRIVE BACK TO Jax's mansion was a suffocating silence, a thick fog that settled over the car like an unwelcome guest. It clung to me, crept into the corners of my thoughts, and stifled the air. Jax's focus was on the road, his jaw tight. Lauren sat beside him, her eyes darting around like a caged bird in the reflection of the side mirror.

Lauren and I never had a chance to really talk before that Russian gorilla attacked us. I wanted to make amends, especially since we'd be stuck with each other for who knew how long. But considering I was in a secret relationship with her father, I had no choice but to keep my distance.

If we got too comfortable with each other, something was bound to slip. I couldn't risk her finding out about Jax and me.

Lauren's eyes wandered out the window before she flipped the visor down to look at her mascara-streaked face. She wiped away the mess before finally settling her eyes on me in the visor mirror.

“I didn’t know you had a cat,” Lauren broke the silence, her voice cautious but curious.

I drew in a breath, letting the fog lift for a moment. “I don’t. Not really. He was a stray.”

Jax’s eyes darted to me in the rear-view mirror. We thought he was a she and I hadn’t yet had a chance to tell him I’d learned otherwise.

“I’ve been feeding him for a while.”

“And?”

“I finally took him to the vet yesterday to see if he was microchipped. I thought he was a girl but found out he’s a boy, and he is in fact microchipped.” I held his wriggly body firmly in my lap to keep him from escaping my grasp. He looked properly freaked out being in a moving car and I didn’t want his claws to scratch the rich leather seats. “They contacted the original owner—an elderly woman named Sue. Apparently, she had to move to an assisted living facility, so she left him with her neighbor. But he didn’t get along with her other cats, so the neighbor... well, she dumped him.”

“That’s so sad. I always wanted a pet, but my dad’s allergic. What’s his name?” Lauren asked, her eyes a little softer now.

“Jean-Clawed Van Kitty. But I call him Clawed for short.”

Jax’s lips twitched, but he said nothing.

“Ha! How’d you come up with that?” Lauren asked.

“Up until yesterday, I’d been calling him Clara. I’d heard him getting into fights outside my window for a while, and he kept turning up with scabs all over his body. He was a fighter. When I found out he was a boy, I named him after a famous martial arts actor.”

The car turned into the gated entrance of the country club and rolled up to Jax’s mansion. An armed guard stood sentinel outside the private gate to his house, his eyes scanning the vehicle before waving us through.

Once inside the house, the tension morphed into something more palpable. A wall, invisible but impenetrable. Jax, Lauren, and I became actors on a stage, each unsure of our lines.

Jax was the first to speak. “Ladies, we need to talk.”

We gathered in the living room, a space that usually exuded a sense of luxury and comfort but now felt like an elegant prison.

The walls were adorned with tasteful, abstract art, each piece a swirl of colors that seemed to clash with our current mood. A grand fireplace sat at one end of the room, its mantle boasting a mix of family photos and small sculptures.

There was a photo of Jax, Rachel, and Lauren with an older couple that I assumed were his parents. They had to be. He was the spitting image of his father from what I could see, and his mother had dark hair with a spattering of gray. They looked like good people and the pride they had for their son emanated from them even through the photo.

Rachel, Lauren's mother, was in every single photo, and there were at least twenty of them. It made me wonder if I'd ever see a picture of Jax and me on this mantle.

When I couldn't imagine seeing a picture of us among the sea of images of Rachel, I felt a lump form in my stomach. How could I possibly compare to what he already had?

I wanted a family someday. He already had that. A long time ago. Would he want to start over and do it all again with me? What would Lauren think about being a big sister at twenty-two? Or having a step-mother that's four months younger than her?

Suddenly, I felt as if a yoke had been placed on my shoulders and I was carrying the weight of the world.

My eyes continued to roam around the room. It had been two years since the last time I'd been in this house and it felt like a lifetime ago. Everything looked the same, but so different at the same time.

The furniture was a collection of high-end pieces, all plush cushions and rich fabrics. A glass coffee table took center stage, its surface gleaming under the soft lighting from the modern chandelier above.

On any other day, the room would have felt inviting, a testament to Jax's success and refined taste. But today, its opulence was a stark backdrop to our grim faces, each item a silent witness to the drama unfolding within its confines.

“That man was a member of the Russian mafia,” Jax said in a low gruff voice. “The Smirnova crime family has been trying to worm their way into our casino. Me and the guys— we’re working on a solution. For now, I don’t want either of you to leave the house.”

Lauren’s eyes flared. “The Mafia? So, that man could have actually killed us.” Her face twisted into a horrified expression.

“He wouldn’t have killed you. That would have been stupid on their part.”

“Ohhh, okay, so he could have severed a finger and sent it to you in a box?”

“We’re all in danger, yes. But we’re going to deal with it,” he said in a stern voice.

“And what about my job?”

“You’ll have to talk to your employers. Work from home,” Jax countered. “If it gets to be too much, I’ll arrange an armored car and security for you too.”

Lauren groaned, “And how long do you think we’re going to be stuck here?”

“I don’t know. We’re working on a few ideas, so hopefully, not long.”

“What does ‘not long’ mean?”

“Lauren, I don’t know,” he snapped, “but I don’t want to risk something like this happening again, so you need to stay put.”

You understand me?”

Lauren let out a long sigh and turned her head to look out the window.

“I’ll be in my office. I need to make some calls.” Jax said as he left the room and I felt his absence like a physical thing—a missing warmth, a vanished light.

All I wanted was to feel the comfort of his strong arms around me. To smell his warm spicy scent and know that everything was going to be okay. But I couldn’t. Not with Lauren there.

Neither Lauren nor I moved for a long while. We just sat in uncomfortable silence, thinking about the gravity of the situation until Lauren shifted in her seat, crossing her legs and fixing her eyes on me.

“Amelia, it’s been a while. How do you like working for my dad?”

My gaze met hers, and for a moment, I saw a flicker of genuine interest. She’d already asked me this question on our ride to the Cactus Blossom, but I humored her need to make conversation.

“Work’s fine. Busy.”

She nodded, pressing her lips together. “And Jean-Clawed Van Kitty? He’s settling in okay?”

I glanced at Clawed, who was watching us from a crate we’d just picked up at the pet store. “He seems fine. Cats are

resilient,” I said, each word another brick in the wall I was building.

“That’s true,” she replied, pausing. “Are you planning on keeping him?”

I almost said that I would if it weren’t for Jax’s allergy, but I caught myself from almost giving us away.

I chuckled, a dry sound. “Well, considering his history, I don’t think he’s keen on ‘ownership’.”

“Fair enough,” she said, standing up. “Cats do value their freedom.”

“Freedom is underrated,” I replied.

After another long pause, Lauren looked up, her eyes meeting mine again. “Amelia, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Lauren. Just tired. It’s been a long day,” I said, each word solidifying the wall between us. “I’m going to go put Clawed in my room and setup the litter box.”

Just as I was about to escape to my room, Jax reappeared, breaking the heavy tension. “How about we order some dinner? Everyone can pick from their favorite places.”

Lauren’s eyes lit up, a spark of normalcy in an otherwise abnormal day. “I could go for sushi.”

“I’m not fussed,” I said. “Whatever you guys decide is fine.”

Jax placed the orders, and soon enough, an assortment of dishes sprawled across the dining table. Lauren eagerly dove

into her tuna sashimi, but I stared at my plate, the food unappealing, each bite a struggle.

“You okay?” Jax asked, his eyes meeting mine.

“I’m not hungry,” I said, pushing my plate away. “Everything tastes... fishy.”

Lauren snorted a laugh, chopsticks pausing mid-air. “It’s fish!”

“No, I mean it tastes off. Metallic, almost,” I elaborated.

“That’s what pregnant women say. You’re not pregnant, are you?”

My heart plummeted. Time froze. I realized my period was late. Very late. I glanced at Jax, and he was already staring back at me, his expression lined with a nervous realization that mirrored my own.

I scoffed, forcing a laugh. “Of course not. You have to have sex to get pregnant.” I stood up, hoping she believed my fib. “I’m exhausted, you guys. And my stomach is queasy. I think I’m just going to go to bed.”

“Oh shit, really? Do you want some Pepto or something?” Lauren offered.

“No, thanks. I’ll feel better after I’ve slept. Night, guys. And thanks for dinner, Mr. Dawson.”

“Don’t mention it. I hope you feel better.” He looked at me with concern in his eyes.

I retreated to my room, closing the door softly behind me. Alone, the walls seemed to close in, the room suddenly too small, too confining. My thoughts raced, a torrent of what-ifs and how-coulds swirling into a storm I couldn't contain.

I'd had an IUD in for months. I couldn't possibly be pregnant.

I dug frantically for my phone in my purse and googled 'IUDs effects on menstruation' as fast as my thumbs would tap. As I read the results a wave of relief washed over me. According to Dr. Google, it was not uncommon to miss periods while wearing an IUD.

Thank God.

A couple of hours had passed before I heard Jax walk down the hallway. I wanted him to come to me, but instead, I heard him knock on Lauren's door. She let him in and I could hear muffled voices through the thin walls but I couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

He knocked on my door shortly after.

"Come in," I managed to squeak out.

He appeared in the doorway of my room, his eyes a complex maze I no longer knew how to navigate. "Can we talk?" his voice a hushed whisper.

He was careful to not be overheard as he shut the door behind him and sat down beside me on the bed. His warm cologne wafted toward me, and I immediately felt safe.

“About what?” I asked, my voice colder than I’d ever heard it. As much as I wanted him, I had to stay guarded.

“Us. This. Everything,” he said, his voice tinged with a desperation that matched my own. “I know this situation isn’t ideal, but your safety and Lauren’s is of utmost importance to me. I need to keep you both close.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I understand.”

He turned toward me and grabbed my hand. I craved his touch. I was still shaken from earlier and felt like I was on pins and needles. The situation with Lauren just exacerbated it.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Not really. I’m still queasy. But I’ll feel better after I get some sleep.”

He sat quietly and looked at me expectantly, questioning me with his eyes without actually asking.

“My period is late, but I’m not pregnant. I can’t be. I’ve got an IUD in and it’s common to miss periods.”

“Are you sure? Do you want me to pick up a test or something?”

“No, it’s fine. I fought off a large Russian gorilla today in one-hundred-and-fifteen-degree heat. I’m exhausted. And I’m scared.” I sat up in my bed.

He squeezed my hand. “I won’t let anything happen to you. We’re going to get through this.”

“How? How can we untangle this mess without destroying everyone around us?” I questioned. “I don’t even know how to act. I feel like I’m performing in some sick play.”

“I know. I feel the same way. But this is only temporary. Me and the guys are calling in favors with some important people and will have this all figured out in no time. I promise.”

I promise.

I’d heard those words before. Those empty promises always went unfulfilled.

“How could you possibly promise something like that? This is the Russian mafia. Those guys are crazy. They have no qualms about leaving bodies in a hole in the desert.”

“Shhhh, keep your voice down,” he reminded me. “Because I’m Jax Dawson. I didn’t get to where I am by being a pushover. The four of us are powerful men and we’ll figure it out.” He squeezed my hand.

I wanted so badly to believe him. But the thought of living with the two of them under the same roof for the foreseeable future was unbearable.

“We can’t keep this up forever without telling her. If this is going to work, she’s going to have to know at some point.”

“I know that. But for now, I think we should probably cool it for a little while.”

“Ya think?”

“We’ll figure something out.” He looked at me meaningfully.
“I don’t want to lose you.”

He leaned in, lips inching toward mine. I turned my cheek, letting him catch nothing but air and disappointment.
“Goodnight, Mr. Dawson,” I pulled my hand away.

He paused, his eyes locking onto mine for a fraction of a second. An expression like he’d just been slapped in the face. In that moment, he was no longer Jax, my lover. He was Mr. Dawson, my friend Lauren’s dad. He had to be, for now.

He sighed before he stood up. He walked toward the door and paused to give me one last fleeting glance, then he left, and the room felt like a cavern of emptiness swallowing me whole.

I was left alone with Clawed and my thoughts. He purred, blissfully unaware of the human complexities surrounding him. But as his soft vibrations filled the room, my own walls crumbled, and I cried.

Tears flowed, salty rivers ran over my cheeks, until there was nothing left but raw, aching silence. My thoughts swirled like leaves in an autumn wind, unpredictable and untamed.

And there, in the quiet of my room, I understood the harsh truth—my life had become a fragile house of cards, each card a lie, a secret, a betrayal. And like any house of cards, it was destined to fall. It was not a question of ‘if,’ but ‘when.’



That night was pure torture.

I stayed awake late, waiting, hoping rather, that he would sneak into my room and lay with me. I thought about tiptoeing over to his bedroom once or twice before I thought better of it. It felt like things were over between us and we didn't even get to talk about it.

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks— Jax and I could never work. No matter how badly I wanted it to. Lauren would never accept us and he would never choose me over her. I had to make a choice, to be the architect of my own destiny or the victim of circumstances.

He was Lauren's father and somewhere deep down I knew we would have to end things eventually, no matter how bad I wanted things to work out. I just didn't think it would have to be so soon. She was staying in the same house and there was no way we could risk getting caught.

As I lay there, staring into the darkness, the room felt like a canvas painted in shades of uncertainty, each stroke a choice, each hue a consequence.

As Clawed settled beside me, his purrs a soft lullaby in the deafening silence, my thoughts drifted to the one question that now held the key to my future—what would my next stroke on this canvas be?

Chapter 21

Amelia

THE NEXT MORNING, I stood in Jax's kitchen trying to prepare a pot of coffee.

Lauren walked in and noticed I was struggling to find where everything was.

"The filters are over here," she said quietly as she walked past me to the cabinet near the sink.

I didn't say anything as I watched her take over the coffee-making. I sat down on a stool at the kitchen island.

Lauren flipped the coffee pot on and turned around to face me, leaning on the counter top. I did my best to avoid eye contact.

"Lee, I want to thank you. For saving my life yesterday. If you hadn't been there, I'd probably be in a barrel at the bottom of Lake Mead right now."

The imagery of her in a barrel at the bottom of the lake terrified me. I must have been in a state of shock after the events of the previous day because the realization finally hit

me how close we came to being seriously hurt, or dead. Tears started to well up in my eyes and I took a deep breath as I blinked them back.

“It’s fine,” I said with a huff of breath. “You would have done the same for me, I’m sure.” I looked up at her.

“You know I would have...Lee, I—”

“Morning, ladies. How’d you sleep?” Jax interrupted as he walked in the kitchen. He was already dressed and ready to head out for the day.

“I thought you didn’t want us out of your sight. Now you’re going to work and leaving us here alone all day?” Lauren said defiantly.

“No, not alone. I’ve got two armed guards outside and I’ve let security at the gate know what’s going on. No-one is getting in here alive.” He walked over to her and kissed her on the forehead and I wanted so badly for him to come kiss me too, but I knew he couldn’t.

Lauren was about to say something before Jax walked in and interrupted, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear what she had to say.

Maybe I just wasn’t ready to hear her be apologetic when I knew what I was doing with her father behind her back. The guilt played a relentless drumbeat on my nerves.

“I’ll leave you two to it. I’ve got to get to the office to meet the guys to go over things one last time,” he said as he poured himself a coffee in a to-go cup.

“Are you not staying for breakfast, Mr. Dawson?” I said as he secured a lid to his cup.

“No, I’d like to see the guys first thing before they get on with their day. But I’ll see you two later.” He pulled out his phone and started punching the keypad. “I’m going to text you both the phone numbers for the guards outside. If I’m not here, call one of them if you need anything.” He walked toward the hall to the garage.

“I’ll try to be home early. Call me if you need anything. And don’t step foot outside this house. Understand?” he shouted from down the hall as he left.

And just like that, he rushed out of the house as if he were avoiding something. I couldn’t blame him. I wouldn’t want to be here with the two of us either.

I got up and poured myself a cup of coffee, and before Lauren had a chance to say anything else, I headed back to my room, and closed the door.

The room was larger than my whole apartment. I had an on-suite bathroom all to myself, a plush sofa with a coffee table, and a small reading desk in the corner. I walked over to the French doors and looked at the perfect view of the ever-changing Vegas skyline. I was hit with a wave of nausea and gripped the floor to ceiling ivory curtains to steady myself.

That damned fish.

I sat down and attempted to get some work done, but it was impossible to focus. I stared at my laptop screen in front of

me, but my stomach was still churning from the questionable sushi from the night before.

After a few fruitless hours attempting to work through the discomfort, I finally got up from the little corner desk and headed to the kitchen to find something to settle my stomach.

As soon as I opened the bedroom door, Clawed darted out, nearly tripping me as he wove between my legs.

“Clawed! Get back here!” I called out, gently nudging him back into the room. But he was too quick for me, evading my attempts to corral him back into the room as he pranced triumphantly down the hall ahead of me. That cat clearly had a mind of his own.

When we got to the kitchen, Lauren was sitting at the dining table, eyes glued to her laptop screen as she typed away.

Clawed went straight for her, purring up a storm as he rubbed against her legs.

“Well, hey there, handsome boy!” Lauren cooed, reaching down to stroke his fur. “You sure are friendly.” She smiled over at me before turning her dotting gaze back to Clawed. “He really is so friendly. Hard to believe anyone would turn him out.”

I felt a prickle of irritation as I watched Clawed preen under her lavish attention.

“I always wanted a cat. I begged my dad for years, but he always refused because of his allergies.” Clawed jumped up onto the table and pressed his chin into her fingers as she

scratched it. “He doesn’t seem allergic to *this* cat, though. I wonder if he’d care if I kept him if you decide not to.” She looked up at me.

I tensed, trying to keep my voice steady. First, she steals my boyfriend, now she wants to steal my cat?

“Why would you need his permission? You live on your own, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but he comes by every now and then, and I come here sometimes. I’d have cat hair all over my clothes.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway because I’m keeping him.” If I hadn’t decided before, I’d made a decision then.

I scooped Clawed up and turned to head back down the hall before Lauren could argue. I’d be damned if she was going to take my cat too.

“Hey Amelia, wait.” Lauren turned in her chair and called after me.

I paused, sighing under my breath. So much for making a quick escape.

“What’s up?” I asked over my shoulder, not quite meeting her gaze.

“Can we talk for a minute?” Her voice was gentle but firm.

I hesitated, clutching Clawed tightly to my chest. I really wasn’t in the mood for a heart-to-heart. “I can’t. I should really get back to work. If I don’t finish these reports, your dad...”

“This will only take a minute.” She pushed the chair opposite her away from the table with her foot.

Damn.

The only possible outcomes would be unpleasant. We would either have a huge fight, which would increase the tension between us at the house, or we would make up, which would put my relationship with Jax in a heightened state of jeopardy.

“Amelia?” She waited impatiently for me to take a seat.

My shoulders slumped in resignation and I turned back toward the table. Lauren gave me a faint, hopeful smile as I sat down across from her, keeping my eyes fixed on Clawed in my lap.

“Lee, I’m really sorry how things went down. I never meant to hurt you, you have to believe that.”

I stayed silent, still avoiding her earnest gaze. I wasn’t ready to forgive and forget so easily. I couldn’t afford to risk it.

“But there’s something you need to know.” She took a shaky breath. “Rob and I were seeing each other before you two got together.”

What?

My head jerked up in shock. “You and Rob?”

She nodded, looking pained. “We met about two months before I left for Europe. Do you remember that summer I backpacked Europe with my cousin Sophie?”

I nodded.

“We really hit it off and dated for a couple months. We were crazy about each other. We planned to pick up where we left off when I got back.”

I sat stunned, trying to process this new information. All this time I had thought Lauren was the interloper in my relationship with Rob, but maybe I was the one standing in the way?

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked quietly.

“You were so busy with work and school, and I hadn’t seen you in forever. When I got back, you two seemed firmly in a relationship. If Rob wanted to be with you, what could I say?” She looked down, ashamed. “You were like a sister to me. I didn’t want to get in the way...but I guess Rob and I just never got over that connection we had. I’m so sorry I hurt you by getting involved with him again. We should have handled things differently.”

My head was spinning. As much as I’d been devastated by their betrayal, I was starting to grasp Lauren’s side of the story.

“I really wish you would have said something.”

“What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey Lee, I’m into your boyfriend. Would you mind stepping aside please?’ You’d already been through so much and you two seemed to be happy.”

I stroked Clawed and thought about what to say as I stared at the back of his little head. I could feel Lauren’s eyes on me, expectantly waiting for a response.

“I don’t know. It was a shock walking in on you two...I was devastated,” I said finally. My mind switched to Jax and what it would mean if Lauren and I made up. I hated conflict and wanted to end this drama with Lauren, but I needed to keep my distance too.

I looked up at Lauren and saw the sincerity in her eyes.

“I’ve missed you a lot. Nobody gets me like you do. I don’t really have any other friends I hang out with anymore. I never had a sister except for you and I just want my sister back. Please accept my apology.”

Damn her.

“I’ve missed you too,” I said.

Lauren’s face lit up, her eyes glistening.

“Apology accepted.” I smiled at her.

We embraced tightly, a wave of relief washing over us. I knew repairing our bond wouldn’t be easy after all that had happened. But this talk was a good start. I would just have to be extra careful to make sure mine and Jax’s secret stayed that way.

As we pulled apart, I gave her a tentative smile. “And I’m sorry too. If I knew you and Rob had a thing, I probably would have done things differently too.”

Lauren shook her head, wiping at her eyes. “You have nothing to apologize for. You had every right to be upset. Let’s just move forward from here, okay?”

I nodded, feeling a glimmer of hope cut through the darkness of the last few months. With time and understanding, perhaps Lauren and I could rebuild what we had lost. And maybe she wouldn't freak out as much as we thought when she found out about her dad and me?

For now, I was grateful to have my dear friend back in my life.

“Okay. You can have Rob. But the cat stays with me!”

“Deal.” She giggled.

Chapter 22

Jax

I HELD MY BREATH as I turned the key in the front door, bracing myself for the tension I was sure to find within. The house had been uncomfortably silent when I'd left Lauren and Amelia alone together this morning, the damage from their fractured friendship still raw and exposed.

But as I stepped inside, the sound of laughter drifted down the hall. Heartened, I followed the cheerful sound to the kitchen, where Amelia and Lauren stood side by side, chopping vegetables. Gone was the stony silence of breakfast, replaced by an easy camaraderie as they chatted and worked in tandem preparing dinner.

I cleared my throat, not wanting to startle them. "Something smells amazing in here."

Lauren's face lit up when she saw me. "Hey, Dad! We're making steak kebabs. Hungry?"

"Starving," I replied, marveling at the transformation. This morning they could barely look each other in the eye, and now

they were joking and cooking together like old times. I was happy to see the thaw between them, but a niggling worry needled me—it would be much harder to hide my relationship with Amelia now that she and Lauren were on good terms again.

I met Amelia's eyes, trying to read her thoughts, but she turned away, busying herself with the kebabs. Sighing internally, I grabbed a beer from the fridge and settled at the kitchen island.

“So, how was work?” Lauren asked. “Any updates on the whole...situation?”

I hesitated, not wanting to worry her further. “We're working on it. I talked to Sheriff Ortiz today, but he says they need hard evidence to intervene.”

Lauren's eyes clouded with worry. “So, we're basically trapped here indefinitely?”

“No,” I reached across the granite counter to squeeze her hand. “We're doing everything we can. It's just going to take a little more time.”

She didn't look convinced, but nodded.

We ate dinner together, conversation stilted despite Lauren's animated small talk. My thigh occasionally brushed Amelia's under the table, electric sparks neither of us could acknowledge. As soon as manners allowed, I excused myself. I needed space to think.

Alone in my room, I stared up at the ceiling, thoughts churning. Having Amelia so close yet so untouchable was pure torture. Several times I reached for my phone, fingers itching to text her. But what would I say?

Misery won out over restraint. I tiptoed down the hall and slipped into her room well after midnight, heart hammering. We couldn't go on like this.

"Jax, what are you doing?" Amelia hissed as I shut the door behind me.

"I had to see you." I pulled her into my arms, relishing her warmth.

She resisted my kisses, tension ringing her body.

"Lauren is right down the hall."

"I know, I just..." I dragged a hand through my hair in frustration. "These past days have been hell, Lee. I need you."

Her eyes softened, but she shook her head. "It's too risky here. If she found out..."

Sighing, I sat on the edge of her bed. She was right. With Lauren under the same roof, we were playing with fire.

"This charade is killing me," I admitted wearily. "Now that you and Lauren made up, it'll be even harder to hide this."

Amelia sat beside me, chewing her lip. "I know. But we don't have a choice right now."

I turned to her, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "What if we told her the truth?"

“What? Now?” Amelia blanched. “With everything else going on?”

“Maybe not right this second, but soon. Otherwise, how can we ever be together openly?”

Fear swirled in her eyes, but she nodded slowly. “Just give me a little time to process.”

“Of course.” I pulled her into my arms, breathing in her familiar scent. Our lips met tenderly, each kiss a silent promise of devotion. For now, it would have to be enough.

Leaving her was agony, but I managed to slip away unnoticed...or so I thought. Turning the corner, I collided with a soft, feminine frame. Lauren.

“Oh! Sorry, Sweetpea—” The endearment died on my lips when I saw her narrowed eyes, darting between me and Amelia’s room.

Think fast, Dawson.

“That damn cat got out again,” I improvised quickly. “Just bringing him back to Amelia’s room.”

Lauren’s shoulders relaxed, seeming to buy my story. “Okay. Well, g’night, Dad.”

“Night, Lauren.” I waited until she disappeared into her room before sagging against the wall in relief. That was way too close for comfort.

In the morning, I decided to bring Amelia to the office with me. I needed time alone with her before I lost my mind.

Lauren was annoyed at being left out, but I didn't care. I had to see Amelia.

We piled into the back seat of the armored SUV and the second the dark divider went up, sealing us in shadows, I was on her. Her mouth found mine urgently, our forced distance exploding in a frenzy of need. My hands slid up her thighs, rucking her skirt up to bare her lace-clad hips.

"I've missed you so much, Jax," she gasped between frantic kisses along my jaw.

"I know, baby. I've missed you too." My voice was rough with desire. With fumbling hands, I tugged her panties down just enough for access. The sweet scent of her arousal filled the backseat.

Amelia whimpered impatiently, nails raking my shoulders even through the fabric. "Please, I can't wait any longer."

With a growl, I lifted her effortlessly, pinning her against the door as she wrapped her long, toned legs around my waist. Our mouths met again, tongues tangling as I drove my length into her slick velvet heat. We swallowed each other's cries, the lewd sounds muted by lips and breath mingling as one.

"That feel good, baby?"

"Yeah, so good," she answered with labored breath.

"You like a good fuck, don't you?"

"I love it," she moaned.

"You're my filthy little slut, aren't you?"

“Yes, I’m all yours. You own this pussy,” she said in breathy little moans.

“Fuck!” I almost lost it and went over the edge. But I breathed through it and steadied myself.

I fucked her with wild abandon, all the frustration and longing of our forced separation channeling into each frenzied thrust. The leather seat creaked in protest beneath us. Amelia clawed at my back, urging me deeper, harder, until nothing existed but our joined bodies chasing euphoric oblivion.

“Come with me, baby. I want to feel you come on my cock,” I rasped the command into her ear, punctuating it with a bite to her long neck.

She threw her head back, keening, as her inner walls spasmed and clenched around me. The exquisite sensation tore my own climax from me with bruising force. I spilled inside her with a bitten-off groan, pleasure whiting out my vision.

As our breathing slowed, reality seeped back in—the growl of the engine, the vinyl seat sticking to bare skin. But after days starved of her touch, I was loath to withdraw just yet. I nuzzled into her neck, inhaling the heady scent of our fucking.

Amelia’s fingers stroked my nape lazily, sending little shivers down my spine. I never wanted this stolen moment of bliss to end.

Afterward, holding her in my arms, I whispered, “Last night was too close. We have to be more careful.”

She nodded, snuggling into me as the Las Vegas Strip streamed past the dark tinted windows. For now, stolen moments like this would have to sustain us.

“I don’t know how. And what about after I’m back home at my apartment? Now that Lauren and I are friends again, what if she stops by and you’re there?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. We’re going to have to tell her eventually. But for now, we just need to be careful.”

“Are you sure we can even tell her? If she freaks out and doesn’t approve, what then?”

“Then, I’ll deal with it. I’m an adult and her father. I don’t take my cues from anyone.”

“So, if she says she’ll never speak to you again, you’ll be okay with that?”

I sat quiet for a while. What *would* I do? I liked to think that Lauren wouldn’t cut me out of her life. Forever anyway. But anything was possible.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” I grabbed her hand, lacing our fingers.

“But what if it does?”

“She’ll get over it.” I gave her the most reassuring look I could muster, but she had doubt in her eyes.

The rest of the car ride was dead silent.



At the office, I had just settled in when Amelia buzzed my office.

“Mr. Dawson, Jennifer Brewer is here to see you,” Amelia notified me, her voice clipped.

Jennifer Brewer.

I hadn't been expecting her. Zeke mentioned that she would be in town, but this visit was unannounced.

“Send her in.”

Jennifer Brewer sashayed into my office, all long legs and coy smiles. Her crisp white blouse clung to her curves, the top few buttons strategically undone to reveal a hint of cleavage. She was still as striking as I remembered, with honey-blonde hair falling in soft waves past her shoulders and eyes the color of whisky.

She reminded me of Rachel.

“Jax, it's been too long,” she purred, leaning in for an air-kiss. Her familiar floral perfume wafted over me, cloying and out of place.

I returned the perfunctory peck, then quickly stepped back, keeping a professional distance between us. “Jennifer, nice to see you again. Please have a seat.”

She settled gracefully into one of the leather chairs facing my desk, crossing her legs with slow deliberation. I suppressed an eyeroll at the obvious attempt to recapture my attention. Her coquettish act may have worked in the past, but now it only left me cold.

We discussed her proposed business deal, though my thoughts kept straying to Amelia. Jennifer's transparent flirtation held no appeal compared to her.

After what felt like an infinite length of time, Jennifer finally wrapped up her pitch. As she lingered hopefully, the office door swung open and Zeke strode in.

"Jennifer, always a pleasure," he said smoothly, leaning down to kiss her cheek in greeting. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Not at all, we're just finishing up." I stood to usher her out, eager for her departure.

Zeke gave me a knowing look. "Leaving already? Jax, don't be rude. Why don't you take Jennifer out for a proper dinner to continue your...negotiations." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

I gritted my teeth, irritation flaring. Zeke was clearly oblivious to the shift in my feelings toward Amelia and was being obnoxiously pushy with the idea of Jennifer and I rekindling something.

"That's quite alright, Zeke. I wouldn't want to keep Jax from his plans," Jennifer demurred, though her eyes betrayed a glimmer of hope.

"Nonsense, his calendar is wide open tonight." Zeke threw an arm around my shoulders jovially. "You two should go out for drinks at least, eh?"

I shrugged him off brusquely. “Thank you for your input, Zeke, but I can handle my social engagements myself.”

He looked between Jennifer and me and lingered awkwardly.

I added politely, “I’ll walk you out, Jennifer. Excuse us, Zeke.”

I escorted her to the foyer, maintaining a professional distance until she disappeared down the hall. Returning to my office, I rounded angrily on Zeke.

“What the hell was that about? I would appreciate it if you stayed out of my personal affairs from now on.”

Zeke looked taken aback. “Hey man, I’m just looking out for you. No need to bite my head off.”

Sighing, I scrubbed a weary hand down my face. “Look, things are different now. Jennifer belongs in my past. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t invite her back into my present.”

Comprehension dawned on his face. “Wait...is this about Amelia?” At my telling silence, he let out a low whistle. “It’s that serious between you two? I thought you two were just messing around.”

I nodded.

“Hey, I’m happy for you, truly. But I have to ask...have you thought this through? When you told me you were seeing her, I didn’t realize that you were considering anything long term. Amelia’s young enough to be your daughter. Your employees could view this as favoritism. And what about Lauren? Don’t you owe it to her to end things with Amelia?”

My temper flared at his meddling questions. “I don’t owe you an explanation. This is between me and Amelia. I’d appreciate it if you backed the fuck off.”

My sharp words seemed to strike Zeke like a physical blow. He recoiled, blinking in surprise. In all our years of friendship, I had never spoken to him so bluntly before.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep,” he said carefully after a moment. “I just want make sure you’ve really thought this through.”

I raked an agitated hand through my hair. “Believe me, I have. More than you know.” I sank down heavily in my chair. The weight of our concealment and my divided loyalties pressed upon me once more.

Zeke’s expression softened. “Hey, talk to me. What’s really going on here?”

I hesitated, wavering on the edge of confession. Perhaps it would help to share the burden with my closest friend.

“It’s not just a fling, Zeke,” I began quietly. “What Amelia and I have...it goes beyond anything physical.” I met his eyes solemnly. “I haven’t felt this way about anyone since Rachel.”

Zeke’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Clearly, he hadn’t grasped the depth of my feelings until now.

“Wow. So, it really is serious, then,” he murmured.

I nodded. “She’s not like anyone I’ve ever met. But the circumstances are complicated, as you’re clearly aware.”

Zeke blew out a long breath, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Complicated is an understatement. So, what are you going to do?”

Rubbing my jaw, I admitted, “I don’t have all the answers yet. I know there are risks. But when I’m with Amelia, none of that seems to matter.” A faint, bewildered smile crossed my lips.

Zeke studied me for a long moment. Then, slowly, an understanding smile crept onto his face. He leaned back in his chair.

“Hey, we’ve been friends a long time. I know that look. You’ve got it bad, my friend.” His smile faltered briefly. “I just hope you know what you’re getting into.”

“So do I,” I admitted ruefully. “But I can’t just walk away from this.”

I could only pray my divided heart wouldn’t bring everything crashing down around us all.

Zeke nodded. “Well, you clearly don’t need my approval. But you’ve got my support.” His expression turned serious. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

I returned his steady gaze. “I appreciate that. So, what’s the word on the Smirnova front. Any updates?” I changed the subject.

“Pffft. That’s another story. Gabe knows someone that has information about some bad blood between the Italian Mafia and the Smirnovas. He thinks we might be able to use the

situation to our advantage but we still need to wait and see. Have you heard from them?”

“No. Not a peep.”

“Well, hopefully Gabe’s contact comes through with something we can use.”

“I hope so. I don’t know how long I can manage living under the same roof with Lauren and Amelia.”

“That is a problem for sure. I don’t envy you.” Zeke shook his head and chuckled.

He stood up to leave. On his way out, he said, “I don’t mean to bring up Jennifer again but we really should all go meet with her again and discuss the RoboGenius deal with her. I’d like Gabe and Griff present as well.”

“Sure, but let’s just arrange a formal meeting here at the office during business hours, shall we?”

“Sure thing.” He closed the door behind him.

I had just sat back down when Amelia walked in, slamming a stack of papers on my desk. Her jaw tight, eyes snapping with anger.

I blinked in surprise. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine,” she bit out tersely, folding her arms across her chest.

“Lee, talk to me.” I approached her carefully, like one would a skittish colt.

She stepped back, avoiding my touch. “I just...I don’t know if I can do this, Jax. Sneaking around, waiting for everything to implode.” Her voice cracked.

“What happened? What changed since this morning?”

“Nothing,” she snapped.

“Amelia? Clearly, there was something. Tell me what’s bothering you.” I dipped my head to see her eyes.

“I’ve been disappointed before, Jax. A lot. I don’t think I could handle another big disappointment. Seeing Jennifer Brewer walk in, it just...I don’t know.” She looked down at the floor.

“What does Jennifer Brewer have to do with anything?”

“Nothing. It just made me think that maybe we weren’t the best match. And with all the other obstacles in our way, I just don’t see a way through without a lot of heartbreak. For someone.”

My heart constricted at her pain. I understood her doubts, her fear. I drew her into my arms, heedless of who might see.

“Zeke seems keen on the idea of you and Jennifer starting something up.”

“Zeke’s an idiot. Don’t pay any attention to him.” I tipped her chin up. “Hey, listen to me. I know this is hard. But I’m willing to fight for this, for us. Please don’t give up on me yet.”

She searched my face, hesitant. “What about Lauren? If she finds out...”

I cupped her cheek, holding her gaze. “I don’t have all the answers. But I’m willing to fight for this. We’ll find a way, I promise you.”

Even as I said the words, a voice in the back of my mind told me that if forced to choose, my loyalty would have to remain with Lauren. She was my child, flesh of my flesh. It was the main objective of any parent to stand by their child no matter what.

As my promise came out of my mouth, the realization gutted me. Amelia deserved someone who could give his whole heart. What if mine was already too scarred and divided to ever be made whole?

For now, I clung to fragile hope, praying my fractured heart could learn to love again without betrayal. Amelia was a light piercing my darkness. I couldn’t lose her now.

Chapter 23

Amelia

SITTING AT MY DESK, I worked on my tasks for the day without thinking about what I was doing. I was going through the motions, but my thoughts whirled in a maelstrom, each one snagging onto memories of the last twenty-four hours like debris caught in a storm drain.

When Jennifer Brewer sauntered into Jax's office, her coy smile and artful cleavage that I could never hope to match, my shoulders went tense. She was much more beautiful in person than the pictures I had seen of her and Jax together on the internet.

She was everything I was not—beautiful, accomplished, sophisticated, and a lawyer to boot. Next to her, I was just a moon-faced girl playing dress-up. It made me wonder what could a man like Jax possibly see in me?

Suddenly, I was overcome by all the doubts and insecurities her presence stirred up inside me.

I probably shouldn't have made such an outburst in Jax's office earlier, but I'd had so much pent-up frustration about our situation that I couldn't contain it any longer.

His promises and reassurances made my heart flutter, but I couldn't shake the doubt in the back of my mind that I couldn't count on him to stick by me if it really came down to it.

A soft knock at my office door jarred me from my brooding. I hastily composed my features.

"Come in."

The door swung open and Emma breezed in, concern creasing her forehead. "Hey girl, you okay? I stopped by to see if you wanted to go to lunch yesterday but they said you weren't here. Everything okay?"

I managed a wan smile. "Yeah. Something came up and I had to call in to work."

Emma tilted her head skeptically. "Is everything alright? You seem...I don't know, off."

My nonchalant façade crumbled. Emma could see right through me.

I motioned for her to shut the door, my voice dropping to a whisper. "Actually, things have been kind of a mess lately."

Emma's eyes widened as I unloaded the whole sordid tale—the Russian mob attacking us, being forced to stay with Jax and Lauren, the unbearable tension of maintaining my secret relationship under the same roof with my lover's daughter.

“It’s like I’m trapped in this pressure cooker of secrets and lies, just waiting for everything to explode,” I confessed miserably.

Emma whistled under her breath. “Damn, that’s heavy. No wonder you look so stressed. But at least you and Lauren are on better terms now, right?”

I grimaced. “I guess. But it just makes hiding things with Jax that much harder.”

“So, I take it you haven’t told her yet? About you and her dad?” Emma asked.

I shook my head vehemently. “No way. Can you imagine how she’d react if she found out I was screwing her dad behind her back? She’d never speak to me again. Or him.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely a tricky situation,” Emma agreed. “But Jax is standing by you through all this chaos. That’s a good sign, isn’t it?”

I chewed my lip uncertainly. “I want to believe he really cares about me, but...” My voice cracked, tears prickling behind my eyes.

Emma slid her chair closer, gripping my hand supportively. “But what, hon?”

I took a shaky breath. “Everyone leaves eventually. My mom, all those foster families, and Rob...no one ever sticks around when things get hard.” I swiped angrily at a tear that escaped down my cheek. “I’m just waiting for Jax to decide I’m not worth the hassle.”

“Oh sweetie.” Emma enveloped me in a fierce hug. “Jax is not like all those people from your past. Anyone can see how crazy he is about you. He’s not going anywhere.”

I felt a little reassured from Emma’s encouragement, drawing strength from her steadfast loyalty. If only I could borrow some of her optimism.

“I hope you’re right,” I whispered.

Emma gave me an extra squeeze before letting go. “I know I’m right. That man is head over heels, trust me. It’s gonna work out.”

I managed a watery smile, buoyed by her faith despite my lingering doubts. With Emma’s support, perhaps I could weather this storm after all.

“Thanks, Em. I really needed to hear that.”

“Anytime. Now let’s go grab some lunch, I’m starving,” she said briskly, linking her arm through mine.

I faltered at the mention of food. My stomach was still queasy and I was starting to worry. I felt like barfing at the thought of food, but I was starving at the same time.

I had been queasy since the other night after the sushi, but I should have felt better by now. When I thought about it, I realized that I hadn’t felt right since the baseball game. I was also exhausted and needed food to keep up some energy. Coffee alone wasn’t cutting it.

Together we made our way down to the bustling employee dining hall, the familiar smells of greasy food instantly turning

my stomach. Chicken soup was the only thing that didn't make me want to throw up and I started to worry that this might be something more serious.

As we ate and chatted about lighter topics, I almost felt like a normal girl again, my troubles left behind outside the cafeteria doors.

But the reprieve was short-lived. Too soon we were dumping our trays, reality creeping back in with each step toward the exit. I braced myself for the return to secrecy and scrutiny upstairs.

At the end of the day, Jax waited solemnly by the SUV, his sharp eyes softening when they met mine. Though we exchanged pleasantries on the ride back to his place, tension hummed beneath our polite facades. Jax reached for my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. I tried to take comfort in the gesture, but my smile felt strained. His promises rang hollow while our future remained so uncertain.

“Can we stop at the pharmacy on the way home? I need to pick up some mascara,” I asked.

“Sure, no problem.”

We stopped off at the pharmacy and Jax decided to wait for me in the car and answer some emails, to my relief. I wanted to pick up a pregnancy test. I was almost certain I wasn't pregnant but had to be sure.

Arriving home, I tensed when I saw Lauren's car in the driveway. Our temporary peace felt as delicate as a rope bridge

swaying in the wind over a spanning a chasm. One wrong move could send me plummeting into the abyss below.

But, Lauren greeted me with a cheerful smile, showing no suspicion toward my continued presence in her father's home. "Hey Amelia! I was getting bored around here, so I let Clawed out to keep me company for a little while. I hope that's okay."

Clawed meowed and came to greet me. It gave me a warm fuzzy feeling to see him so happy to see me at the end of the day. It made me understand why people grew so attached to their pets. I was so attached to him already.

"Dad, I'm getting stir crazy in here and I haven't seen Rob in days." She glanced awkwardly in my direction. "Do you think I could get out of the house for a little while? Just for a few hours at least?"

"I don't know, Lauren. It's not safe out there just yet."

"Can't one of the guards take me? If it's safe enough for you and Lee to leave for work, it should be safe enough for me to leave the house for a few hours."

My belly flipped at the thought of having the house alone to ourselves and I hoped Jax would agree.

He contemplated her request before replying casually, "Fine. One of the guards will escort you to your place for a few hours. But no side trips, understand?"

Lauren rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Yes, sir. I'll be on my best behavior, scout's honor."

"And I want you back here by ten."

“Geez. You’re making me feel like I’m fifteen again.”

“Lauren, I’m serious.”

“Alright. Ten. Got it.”

“And I mean ten PM. Tonight.”

“Of course!” She made a beeline to the front door.

A tidal wave of relief washed over me. She would be back, but at least Jax and I would get a reprieve for a few hours.

I stood awkwardly to the side as Jax issued instructions to the hulking, somber-faced guard who would be accompanying Lauren. Part of me envied her for the chance to escape the confines of the house, even briefly. But a larger part was simply relieved to have Jax to myself again without the strain of secrecy.

With Lauren safely seen off, Jax and I retreated to the living room. He crouched down to the fireplace to light it.

“What are you doing? It’s over a hundred degrees outside.”

“I know, but I don’t use this thing enough. I find it soothing.”

We made ourselves comfortable on the plush living room sofa, settling close. The air hummed between us, words unsaid hovering like mist. I felt his strong arms around me as I nestled into his chest, his warm spicy scent invading my senses, shrouding me in a veil of warmth and protection.

I felt safe. But this safety felt temporary. I knew a ticking time bomb was going to go off, eventually.

“It’s nice to have the house to ourselves. We’ve never spent time here just the two of us,” he mused.

“Such a shame. I love this house.”

He brushed a tendril of hair away from my face as he kissed my forehead and I wanted things to stay like this forever.

Jax looked down at me, his eyes searching my face, reading my uncertainty. “Talk to me, Lee. Something’s bothering you. What is it?” he implored softly.

I looked down, fingers worrying the hem of my shirt. “Nothing specifically. I guess the stress of everything is just wearing on me. I feel exhausted.”

“I know how you feel. I feel the same way. But we’ll get past it. I’m not going anywhere,” he assured me.

“I really want to believe that.”

“Have I ever done anything to make you doubt me?”

“No, not yet. But I know where this is headed. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Where do you think this is headed?”

I tried to blink back the tears welling up in my eyes, but they ended up spilling onto my cheeks instead. Once the tears started, I couldn’t stop them. They flowed like a river.

“Jax, I don’t know if I can do this. I’ve been disappointed so many times before I don’t think I could take anymore,” I sobbed.

My body and my mind felt worn down and exhausted. I wasn't one to cry normally, but lately I felt so emotional. Like a crazy woman.

“Lee, why don't you believe in me?”

“Because everyone always leaves.”

“Who disappointed you so badly?”

“Just everyone. Everyone I've ever known. They say your parents are the only people in this world that a person should be able to count on. And mine left me.”

I couldn't contain the tears. I tried to breathe through them but it just made it worse.

“My birth mother, Heather. She was a single mother and couldn't take care of me by herself, so she turned me into the foster system. I went to a decent home apparently. I don't remember it. But she came back two years later to come get me only to give me up again. I guess she couldn't handle it like she thought she could.” I took a few deep breaths to collect myself and managed to stop crying for the time being.

Jax just sat quiet, listening to me intently.

“The family I was with before was assigned another kid, so they put me in a different home. I went through two more homes after that for different reasons. One couple gave me back because they were getting divorced and neither wanted to keep me by themselves. I got taken out of another couple's home by Child Protective Services because they were found to be abusing drugs and alcohol and neglecting me.” I sniffed.

“So, I went to another home that was actually okay. Those foster parents worked a lot and left me with a nanny most of the time, but it was safe, and they had good jobs. Made good money. Took care of me okay. Then my birth mother came back for me again...”

I tried to remember my birth mother but everything was so fuzzy. She had brown shoulder-length hair and that was about all I could remember about her.

“She had gotten married and thought she could finally take care of me since she had the support of a husband. But her husband was...not a nice man. He hung out with some shady people. He didn't want to have anything to do with raising someone else's kid.”

I sniffed back some lingering tears.

“He never hit me or anything, but he was verbally abusive. When he wanted to move to the Midwest, he considered me ‘excess baggage’ to be disposed of, so she gave me back to the foster system...She chose her asshole husband over her own child.” I swiped at a stray tear, anger and grief swirling.

The pain of being left again at that horrible place burned a hole through me.

I had never told my whole story to anyone, but I had buried it deep down for so long, and I was so exhausted from all the worrying it all just flowed out of me, like a dam that had just burst.

“I went through a couple more homes after that. Some good. Some not so good, until I ended up with Anna and David. Heather finally relinquished all parental rights to me and they formally adopted me when I was fourteen.”

Jax held me so tight I felt like a baby in a swaddle being comforted to sleep.

“Lee, I am so sorry you had to go through that. I couldn’t even imagine a child going through even a fraction of what you went through. But I’m not like any of those people.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. You are a caring father that has dedicated his life to his only daughter. You have to know that Lauren will never accept us as a couple.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. This is how things happen for me. Nobody ever chooses me.” My voice was a wounded whisper, and I closed my eyes to try to stop the tears. “I can’t expect you to choose me over her if she won’t accept us.”

I had been having these thoughts for a while, but saying them out loud made it so much more real.

Jax sat up and turned to me. He grabbed my shoulders with both hands and dipped his head down to my level.

“Amelia, that’s not going to happen. Sure, Lauren will be upset at first. But she will get over it. Even if it takes her ten years, I’m not going anywhere, do you hear me?”

I looked into his eyes and they were dark and intense. His brows were heavy and his jaws clenched. I knew he meant

what he was saying, but I still wasn't sure he would follow through when he actually saw Lauren's reaction.

I searched his face, wavering. "Do you promise?"

He pressed a tender kiss to my forehead. "I promise you, here and now, I'm not going anywhere. You just need to have a little faith in me." He gathered me against his broad chest, his steady heartbeat soothing.

The sincerity in his eyes had pierced my defenses. I nodded slowly against his chest, the knot inside me loosening by a fraction. Perhaps this time could be different. With Jax, I wanted to believe the impossible—that someone found me worth weathering the storm for.

Jax's large hand cradled my face, guiding my lips to his. The kiss was achingly sweet, sealing his vow.

My fingers trailed down his chest, finding the buttons of his shirt. Our kisses deepened, shedding the tentativeness of before. I needed to feel him, to erase all doubts with the proof of his need for only me.

In moments, our clothes lay scattered, our bare skin pressed flush. Jax's hands roved my flesh reverently, worshiping every curve and valley. We moved down to the floor and he laid me back on the plush rug before the hearth, the fire's golden glow dancing across our entwined bodies.

We moved together slowly, savoring every sigh and gasp. No longer furtive sex stolen between moments of deception, but a

consummation of fragile hopes, a covenant written in sighs and parted lips.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered in my ear and my body erupted in shivers.

I clutched the planes of his back, urging him deeper, and in his eyes I glimpsed something that stole my breath—not just lust, but adoration. Love even. The revelation at once exhilarated and terrified me.

I pulled him down into a deep kiss, pouring all my tangled emotions into the wordless communion of our lips and questing tongues. He drank me in, hands roaming feverishly and thrusting deep until with a broken groan, he found his release. I followed him over that sweet precipice, crying out his name.

Afterwards, nestled against his chest as our heartbeats slowed to sync, I knew. I loved this man. But I swallowed back the words, sealing them inside my heart. It was too soon and I wasn’t ready to be that much more vulnerable.

For now, I would cling to cautious hope, praying each new dawn strengthened the bonds between us. Jax’s promise rang in my ears, a lifeline in the stormy seas ahead. With him beside me, perhaps we could weather anything, even my battered heart.

Jax and I relaxed on the rug a little while longer before I was hit with a wave of nausea, and I remembered the pregnancy test waiting for me in my purse.

Jax and I had never really talked about kids. I had mentioned wanting kids someday, the day he helped me move, but I'd never asked him if he wanted more. I probably should have, but we hadn't been seeing each other that long. I didn't want to scare him away. But if I were pregnant, it was something I wanted to know.

“So, do you ever want more kids?” I asked as I swirled my fingers over the tufts of hair on his chest.

He took his time to respond. His hesitation made me nervous.

“I don't know. I'm a little old to do all that again.”

My heart sank.

We had just made love, probably for the first time ever, and we never really bothered to talk about an actual future together or what that would look like.

I sat up and looked down at him. “If I wanted kids someday, would you be okay with that?”

“Lee...” he hesitated. I could see his eyes shift about, looking at the vaulted ceiling for answers. “I don't know. Kids monopolize all your time. I don't know that I have the time or the energy to take care of a baby again.”

I did my best to contain a sneer. “So, if I wanted a baby, is this a deal breaker for you?”

“Lee ... There's more to life than just kids.”

I stared at the fire. The flames mirroring the fury I felt forming in my chest.

This was a mistake.

I knew that somehow, some way, he would disappoint me. I just didn't think it would be five minutes after I realized that I loved him.

I never thought about having kids any time soon, but I assumed I would have them eventually. Someday. Hearing that he didn't want more made me realize how important it was to me. I never really imagined a future without them.

I didn't know how to respond to the bomb he just dropped on me.

I excused myself to use the bathroom and took my purse upstairs with me to my room. I decided to first get ready for bed and took a few minutes to wash my makeup off and change into some pajamas.

After a cursory read of the instructions on the box, I peed on the stick and set it down on the floor in front of me. They say the minutes ticking away while waiting for the results of a pregnancy test were the longest minutes of your life. I was pretty sure I wasn't pregnant, but those minutes were indeed the longest of my life.

As I waited, I heard a soft knock on the door. "Lee? Is everything okay? You've been in here a while."

"Yeah, fine. I'm just cleaning out the litter box," I fibbed.

When I came out from the bathroom, Jax was waiting for me on the bed.

“Everything alright?”

I sighed. “Yeah. I just never really thought about a future without kids before. I always assumed it would happen. Someday.” I sat down on the bed beside him.

“Kids are great, but your life is no longer your own once you have them. We can have a perfectly charmed life without them.”

I thought about what he was saying. Disappointment coursing through my aching heart. I loved this man. But I wanted a family someday. And I wanted to be with someone that was thrilled at the prospect of starting a family with me. What was more important to me?

A family was the thing that I never had and always wanted. To have family dinners at a large table, seats filled with children of my own. Seeing my little ones’ faces light up on Christmas morning when they saw what Santa Clause had brought them. Taking pictures of them in a school play. And being there for them in a way my own parents never were for me. I wanted it all. One day.

I just realized that I loved this man only minutes before, and already my dream of having a family shattered before me in an instant.

I loved this man and wanted to be with him, but I wanted a family too.

Maybe not having children could be okay?

“Yeah. I guess.”

He pulled me toward him and kissed my forehead.

“Lauren will be home soon and I’m exhausted. I think I’m just going to go to bed,” I mumbled.

He smiled at me. “Alright. I’m going to stay up and do a little work in my office before I go to bed.”

“Okay. Night.”

“Night.” He leaned in to kiss me goodnight and I didn’t kiss him back. I was too busy questioning whether I could continue this relationship any longer. No matter how bad I wanted him to be the one. I needed time to think.

“Lee?” he looked at me questioningly.

I gave him a contrived smile, hoping it would satisfy him enough to leave. I just wanted to be left alone.

He gave me one last peck and left my room.

I glanced over at the bathroom door. My heart thumping as I got up to read the results on that dreaded pregnancy test. Each step I took toward the bathroom made my heart pound a little harder. I flicked on the light and picked up the box on the table to make sure I understood how to read the results, and with a deep breath, I closed my eyes and picked up the stick.

When I opened my eyes, my heart fell to the floor when I saw two pink lines.

Chapter 24

Jax

I FUCKED UP.

The irony of it all twisted my gut as I stared at the pile of reports on my desk. Leather-bound chairs, high-tech gadgets, a view of the Vegas strip from my office window—none of it mattered. The room smelled of cold coffee and lingering cologne, a scent that had become all too familiar over the years.

I looked out at the glimmering skyline. A world bustling with life, and here I was, trapped in a glass cage. The reflection off the windows of the glistening buildings mocked me, shining like the distant stars—cold, far, unreachable. I let out a deep sigh, fogging the windowpane with a cloud of regret.

I looked over at the hefty stack of reports on my desk and dreaded looking at them.

I had a busy day, like always, but Amelia said she wasn't feeling well and decided to stay home, leaving me to fend for

myself.

I reached for my phone and sent her a text.

Hey. Feeling any better? I could really use your help today.

My thumbs hovered over the tiny keys, each tap a drumbeat of hesitation.

A pause. Then, **Not really. Still pretty sick.**

Sick, or avoiding me? The words of our conversation last week echoed in my head. The subject of kids had opened up an abyss between us, and we were both teetering on the edge. She wanted them; I didn't. Simple as that. Or was it?

I grabbed the top report from the stack, a rundown of the Gemini Convention's ticket sales. I skimmed the numbers and then did a double-take. Fifty thousand tickets sold in a week. Amelia's ideas had blasted our target out of the water. She oversold the event by twenty thousand tickets. And she did this even before meeting our head of marketing.

She had a talent for marketing, this was clear. She was a damn comet, ready to Jax across the sky. I felt a pang of guilt for keeping her all to myself when she could be building a crushing career doing what she loved to do.

A knock on my door pulled me back to Earth. "Come in."

The door swung open and Zeke sauntered in. Griff followed close behind, shutting the door behind him as they took their seats. They were in mid-conversation.

“... He punched the bouncer in the face, so we had to throw them out,” Griff said.

“I’d be real surprised if that guy doesn’t file a law suit against us,” Zeke added.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Some guy that claims to be a billion-dollar hedge fund manager racked up a two hundred-thousand-dollar tab at Club Nirvana last night. The GM got nervous, so when he asked the guy to verify his identity with a driver’s license, the guy threw a fit. He punched one of the bouncers in the face and security had to escort him and his party out of the club. A scuffle ensued and the guy got injured,” Griff answered.

“Good Lord. So, was he legit?” I asked. I really didn’t need another issue to add to the mountain I already had.

We were just settling in to start our meeting when the door burst open again, interrupting our conversation.

Gabe stormed in, a whirlwind of frenetic energy, his hands clapped so loud it was like a gunshot. “Boys, do I have news for you!”

“Jesus, Gabe. Ever heard of knocking?” Griff chided.

He grinned, unabashed. “No time for formalities. You’re gonna want to hear this.”

“Well, spit it out,” Zeke growled, irritation lacing his words.

“The Smirnovas. I’ve got ‘em,” Gabe declared, his eyes aJax.

“Explain,” I demanded, my heart rate spiking.

Gabe leaned against my desk, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Apparently, the Smirnovas have been hijacking truckloads of goods over the last couple of months.”

I leaned forward, skepticism narrowing my eyes. “And?”

Gabe smirked. “The goods belong to the De Luca crime family. Don De Luca is fuming, but he doesn’t know who’s behind it. Yet.”

“And you’re sure about this?” Griff questioned him.

“As sure as I’m standing here,” he replied, conviction radiating from him. “My contact is a guy I’ve known since I was five. He’s been working as paid muscle for some shady people. He’s done work for the De Lucas, and the Smirnovas unknowingly hired him to help them pull off the hijacking jobs. He only found out the goods belonged to the De Lucas after he overheard Vincent De Luca complaining about the missing trucks.”

“So, your contact is willing to go to the police with this information and risk going to jail himself?” Zeke asked.

“Yeah, that would be a hard ‘no’.” Gabe rounded his head in Zeke’s direction.

“So, how does this help us?” Zeke snapped, his patience wearing thin.

Gabe held his hands up in defense. “Look, the De Lucas could get the Smirnovas off our backs when they find out it was them. And rumor has it, Don De Luca is hurting for

money since he lost out on months-worth of goods. We tip him off about the Smirnovas, maybe give him a loan, we earn his favor.”

“Why doesn’t your contact just tell the De Lucas what he knows?” I asked him.

“Because he helped the Smirnovas steal the trucks. He’s afraid the De Lucas will bury him in a hole in the desert when they find out. But they might not if we back him.”

I exchanged glances with Zeke. To say getting involved with another organized crime family was risky was a gross understatement. But the potential upside was undeniable.

“Last resort,” I said firmly, locking eyes with each of them. “We explore every other legal option and consider this as a last resort.”

“Jax, we don’t really have any other options without more proof. These guys don’t care about the law. They don’t care about anything but their own necks, and Don De Luca will have them when he finds out,” Gabe urged.

“I have to agree,” Griff added. “The Smirnovas don’t give a shit about anything. The Italians would love a good excuse to get rid of them. They can do the dirty work for us. The De Lucas have their own business. They don’t need our casino.”

I thought about this for a few moments before giving my answer.

“I’m going to have to say no. If we loan Anthony De Luca money, we’ll have to deal with collecting and who the fuck

knows if he'll ever pay us back. And I don't want him to get into the habit of coming to us asking for money. We don't need to get in any deeper with organized crime than we already are. We need to come up with something else. Something legal.”

“Agreed,” Zeke said, his face set in a grim expression.

Gabe and Griff nodded reluctantly and we broke the meeting.

My chair rolled back into the credenza as I got up to make my way downstairs. I had to walk the casino, check in with the pit bosses, make sure the empire was running smoothly. Zeke offered to join me, concern creasing his forehead.

The elevator doors opened to the ringing sounds of slot machines. I was pleased to see the casino dense with customers. A group of young guys in flip flops, swimming trunks and inner tubes around their waists walked past The Velvet Table, our most expensive gourmet restaurant on the property, cocktails in their hands. The sports book roared with cheer from onlookers watching the soccer game on the big screen. Things in the casino seemed to be in order. I wished I could have said the same thing about my personal life.

“Everything alright?” Zeke asked as we navigated through the labyrinth of slot machines and card tables.

I shook my head. “Things have been tense at the house. Amelia's been distant. And Lauren's dating Amelia's ex, so to say things are awkward would be an understatement.”

Zeke's eyebrows shot up. "Lauren's dating Amelia's ex? You never mentioned that before."

I shrugged. "I'm not one for gossip, especially when Lauren is concerned. It's just making things more awkward at the house. Lauren wants to spend time with her boyfriend but feels uncomfortable bringing him to the house with Amelia there. And then of course, there's the fact that Amelia and I have been having a secret relationship. It's just a fucking mess."

"And you think Amelia's being distant because she's jealous of Lauren? You're worried she wants her ex back?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I think it's because of our talk about kids. She wants children someday and asked if I wanted more. But I'm too old and too busy. I can't go through all that again."

Zeke sighed, his eyes searching mine. "That's kind of a big deal. I hate to say it, but maybe it's time to let Amelia go, Jax. You two should be with someone who wants the same things."

I clenched my fists. "I can't, Zeke. Not yet."

At that moment, my phone was exploding. I had four texts from the security guards back at the house. As I looked at the screen, my phone rang in my hand. It was Lauren.

"Dad, Amelia's gone."

"What? Where?" I felt my stomach drop.

"She packed up and went back to her apartment. Said she couldn't live like this anymore. I don't blame her, honestly."

I ended the call, my hand trembling as I put the phone back in my pocket. “Zeke, I’ve got to go.”

It was the middle of the day and my armored car wasn’t on hand, so I decided to forego the additional security and took a taxi to Amelia’s straight from the hotel. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my thighs and did my best to calm my nerves as I looked out the window on the ride to her place.

I’d called her several times with no answer.

She had been avoiding me the past week and I knew exactly why. She was cold. Distant. And she made every excuse possible to keep me at a distance. A more serious talk was long overdue.

I had instructed one of the security guards to keep an eye on her apartment earlier and he gave me a nod as I walked past his car.

I knocked on the door. She didn’t answer. I knew she was inside, so I pounded.

“Amelia. I know you’re in there. We need to talk,” I shouted through the door.

I finally heard movement from inside and the deadbolt turned. I was relieved she was willing to finally talk to me.

She opened the door, slowly, but she wouldn’t look me in the eye.

She was in shorts and a t-shirt and her hair was piled into a messy bun on the top of her head. She looked disheveled but beautiful.

“Can I come in?”

She stepped aside and left the door open as she walked back inside without saying a word. She had no furniture in her apartment, so I followed her to her bedroom. She plopped down on the bed and cradled a pillow on her lap.

“Why did you pack up and leave? You know it’s not safe yet.”

“I’m your assistant, Jax. A nobody. I doubt the Russian mafia have any interest in me. And I can’t live like this anymore.”

“We all knew this would be hard, but it’s temporary,” I reiterated.

“Not temporary enough,” she sighed.

“What’s bothering you? Does this have anything to do with our conversation the other night. About having kids?”

She looked down at her fingers, twirling a stray thread on the pillowcase. “That’s part of it.” She still wouldn’t make eye contact. “I think we made a mistake. I don’t think I can be in this relationship anymore.”

It felt like an army just hit me in the gut with a battering ram.

“How can you say that?”

“We have the universe against us, Jax. You’re twenty years older than me, my boss, my best friend’s father, and I want a family. You don’t.”

“So, not having kids is a deal breaker for you?”

“Apparently, it is.” She looked up at me. An air of finality in her eyes.

I swallowed, hard. I wanted this woman so intensely. But what she wanted was life-changing and not something to take lightly.

“Lee, I know you want kids, but I don’t think you understand the extent to how much of your life they consume. Our lives wouldn’t be our own anymore. I’m at a point in my life where I want to enjoy life. Just the two of us. Is that not enough?”

“I thought maybe it could be, until the decision was made for me. It made me realize how important having a family was to me. It’s something I’ve never had. Anything less is a waste of time for me. And for you.”

“Lee, I...Lauren and I can be your family—”

“If she even accepts the two of us together,” she snapped. “And I highly doubt that. In fact, I know she won’t.” Her voice was shaky. “I think deep down you know it too.” A tear escaped her eye and she quickly wiped it away. Her chin quivered and I could tell she was holding back more tears.

“And it wouldn’t be the same. I want to be a mother someday.” She took a deep breath and let it all out to calm herself.

Having a family was an amazing thing. I had already done all that, so I knew. But that was a lifetime ago. I was in a different place.

But I couldn't deprive her of that no matter how badly I wanted her. Could I? I could tell her what she wanted to hear and keep her satisfied for now, but if and when the time came to start trying, and I pulled away, it wouldn't end well.

And she had a point about Lauren. Lauren would have a difficult time accepting us as a couple, if at all.

I knew where she was going with this, but I needed to hear her say it. "So, what are you saying? That this is over?"

"It *is* over."

I knew losing Amelia would hurt, but she was ripping my heart out. It was over before we really got going. Her words were a stab to the gut, every syllable a twist of the knife. She was shutting me out, retreating somewhere I couldn't follow. I didn't know what to say, so I reverted to my old standby. I decided to be an absolute dick.

"Well, then," I cleared my throat. "I guess there's no point in hanging around. You seem to have made up your mind." I stood up. "So, can I expect to see you at work tomorrow?"

She let out a sarcastic chuckle and rolled her eyes. "Yeah."

"Alright, then. I'll see you at the office. Night, Ms. Scott."

"Goodnight, Mr. Dawson."

After I let myself out, I made sure to instruct the security guard not to let her out of his sight. The mafia threat was still alive and well. She may have just ended our relationship, but I still wanted her safe.

Amelia's apartment door closed behind me, the metallic thud echoing my own sense of finality.

I'd lost her. Truly lost her. My hand clenched into a fist, gripping the empty air like it could somehow bring her back.

I headed back home, my thoughts a torrential downpour of what-ifs and regrets. The house felt like a mausoleum, every room echoing with the absence of her.

"Hey Dad," Lauren greeted me, her voice laced with sweetness which told me that she wanted something.

"Not now, Lauren," I snapped, my patience threadbare.

I went straight to my study, my sanctuary. Fingers trembling, I poured a generous measure of Macallan Sherry Oak 18 Years Old into a crystal glass. The amber liquid caught the light, but its usual warmth eluded me. I took a sip, the liquid fire doing little to thaw the icy void Amelia had left in her wake.

Should I fight for her? Convince her that a life without kids could still be meaningful? Or was that the epitome of selfishness, clinging to her like a life raft without regard for what she wanted, what she needed?

Maybe it wouldn't be so terrible to be open to the idea of more kids? I was only forty-two. People still had kids at forty-two.

Lauren's voice floated from the hallway. "Dad, is it okay if Carlos took me to go meet Rob at my house?"

"Fine," I muttered, hardly looking up. Threats were still out there, but Lauren couldn't be caged forever. As long as she

was with the security guard, I felt confident that she would be safe.

I wandered aimlessly to Amelia's empty room. Her scent clung to the air—vanilla and something uniquely her, a fragrance that had seeped into the very walls. My chest tightened.

On autopilot, I found myself in her bathroom. It still smelled of her shampoo. I inhaled a big whiff and noticed she had cleaned it almost spotless except for a smattering of cat litter on the floor. I grabbed a tissue and bent to wipe it away. As I tossed the tissue into the trash, I noticed it was overflowing. I bent down to empty the can and my sunglasses slipped from my shirt pocket, plummeting into the bin.

“Damn it,” I muttered, plunging my hand into the trash can to retrieve them. My fingers brushed against something that didn't belong. My heart drummed in my ears as I pulled out a small, white stick and saw what it was.

A pregnancy test.

It was positive.

The room spun. My knees nearly buckled under the weight of the revelation. She was pregnant. Amelia was pregnant, and she had walked away without saying a word about it.

Every argument about not wanting kids, every cautionary warning I'd given her—they all shattered, meaningless. A child, *our* child, changed the stakes. And she kept it from me. Was she planning on facing this alone?

I pulled out my phone to call her, but I didn't know what she'd say. As I locked the screen, my eyes fell back onto the positive pregnancy test clutched in my other hand. A whirlwind of emotions engulfed me, none of which I could name. One thing was clear, though.

This changed everything.

Chapter 25

Amelia

MY EYES STUNG, EACH blink felt like sandpaper. The rearview mirror's harsh light seared into my tired eyes, reflecting a face I barely recognized—puffy and red. I'd cried myself into a stupor last night, a cocktail of hormones, love, and utter disappointment swirling inside me.

“You alright, Miss Amelia?” Max, Jax's hired security guard, peered at me through the rearview mirror. His eyes were filled with concern, but I could only muster a weak smile.

I was scared to go back to my apartment again, but at this point, I was more afraid of going back to Jax's house again under those circumstances and was willing to take my chances with the Russians.

I couldn't imagine that they would have any interest in me, but was glad to have Max there if I needed him.

“Long night,” I mumbled, clutching my purse like a lifeline.

Max nodded, focusing back on the road. “We're almost there.”

The Crown Hotel and Casino loomed ahead, a glittering monolith against the Las Vegas skyline. My stomach churned, nausea building up like a volcanic eruption.

You can do this, Amelia. You have to.

We pulled up to the entrance, and as soon as the car stopped, I forced myself out. “Thanks, Max,” I said, my voice barely

above a whisper.

“Take care, Miss Amelia,” he replied, “I’ll be back to pick you up at six,” he said before driving off as I took shaky steps toward the building.

The moment I walked in, the familiar scent of the Crown’s lobby—coconut air freshener mixed with a faint trace of cigarette smoke—hit me, and I felt another wave of nausea. I sat at an empty slot machine for a few minutes until the nausea passed.

My heels clicked on the marble floor up in the executive offices, each step echoing the dread pounding in my veins.

“Amelia, in my office. Now.” Jax’s voice boomed from behind his closed door the second I stepped into my office. I froze, my hand still clutching the doorknob.

Here we go.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside. Jax was standing behind his desk, his eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

“Close the door,” he ordered.

I did as he said and sat down, my hands trembling in my lap.

“We need to talk.”

I looked up, catching the concern in his eyes. “About?”

“Us. This baby. Everything.” He rounded the desk, coming to stand in front of me. “I can’t—won’t—let you walk away.”

My heart clenched. “How do you know about that?”

“Never mind that. The fact is, I know, and you kept it from me. I’m not going to let you go that easily.”

“You don’t get to decide—”

“I’m the father, Amelia. And I want to be a part of our child’s life.”

“I never said you couldn’t be. But what I won’t do is force you into a life you don’t want.”

Jax’s face hardened. “Who says I don’t want it?”

“You did! You made it abundantly clear that you didn’t want another family,” I shot back, my voice tinged with bitterness.

“That was before I knew about the pregnancy. Before I had time to think.”

“And what? You’ve suddenly seen the light?”

He sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“Lee, there are a few things you need to understand.”

He sat down in the chair beside me.

“Rachel, Lauren’s mother, was sick—ovarian cancer. She hid it from me. I didn’t even know she was sick until two weeks before she died.”

My eyes widened. “Why didn’t she tell you?”

“Because she knew I was stressed, expanding the business. She didn’t want to add to my worries. I was so busy growing the business she didn’t want to be a distraction to me. She thought she could handle it on her own while I was buried in work.”

“And you feel guilty.”

He nodded, his eyes clouded with regret.

“Every damn day. I took her for granted. I thought I would have time to spend with her after we got the business where we wanted it. But time ran out and I didn’t even have a chance to blink.”

I looked at the lines on his face. Laced with regret and I felt for him.

“I fucked up, Lee. And I didn’t want to make the same mistake with you.”

My heart pounded against my ribcage.

“So, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I want us to be a family. I want to be there for our child. For you.”

A myriad of emotions warred within me. “I don’t know Jax. I don’t want to force you into a family. If I didn’t happen to get pregnant, we would be over.”

“Well, obviously, this changes things. But I want to be with you. I’ve always wanted to be with you, that hasn’t changed. Having another baby wasn’t in my plans, but now that it’s here, I don’t want to be anywhere else but by your side.”

“I’ve been let down before. Too many times to count. This baby will never be what Lauren is to you.”

“Stop assuming the worst of me, will you? Who do you think I am? Of course this baby will be just as important to

me.”

I bit my lip, my heart dancing a dangerous tango. “We still have to tell Lauren and she’s not going to take it well.”

Jax pulled me into his arms, his lips finding mine in a fervent kiss. It was as if a dam had burst, unleashing months of pent-up emotions. I melted into him, my fears momentarily quelled by the strength of his embrace.

“We should tell Lauren, and soon,” he said, pulling away.

My stomach knotted. “Are you sure she’ll be okay with this?”

“We won’t know until we try.”

I sighed, my joy tinged with apprehension. “Okay.”

Jax glanced at his watch. “On another note, I have a meeting with Vladimir Smirnova soon. I’m going to record the conversation, and I want you to listen for anything incriminating in Russian.”

“Vladimir Smirnova? The Russian mobster?” I blinked, my eyes widening. “Does Mr. Moran or the others know?”

“No, and I want to keep it that way. I made a last-minute decision and I want to get it over with before the guys have a chance to change my mind. After Smirnova arrives, go for a long lunch. Come back and listen to the recording. This is a long shot, and I don’t know if it will work, but I have to try. We need to resolve this already and the guys haven’t been much help figuring out a way to get rid of them. I would have rather done things differently, more legal and all, but we don’t

have any other options right now and I want to nip this bullshit in the bud.”

“Alright,” I agreed, the weight of his words settling over me.

“How do you say ‘go fuck yourself’ in Russian?”

“Idi na khuy.”

He chuckled, “What?”

We both laughed.

A few hours later, I was scanning some documents at the copier when the elevator doors slid open with a soft chime and Vladimir Smirnova stepped out, flanked by two hulking associates. Smirnova was a tall, imposing figure, his salt-and-pepper hair slicked back, giving him a predatory look. His eyes were cold and calculating, like a snake assessing its prey. He wore a tailored black suit that probably cost more than my monthly rent, and a red silk tie that screamed power.

His associates were no less intimidating. The one on the right was bald, his head gleaming under the harsh office lights, a maze of tattoos snaking up his neck. He wore a black leather jacket that did little to conceal the bulge of a concealed weapon. The other was younger, with shaggy brown hair and a perpetual smirk that made my skin crawl. He was dressed more casually, in dark jeans and a gray t-shirt, but the air of danger around him was palpable.

I beat them to my office.

Their presence was like a dark cloud, filling the room with a tension that was almost tangible. I felt the hairs on the back of

my neck stand on end as I forced myself to speak. “Mr. Dawson, Mr. Smirnova is here to see you.”

“Thank you, darling,” Smirnova sneered, his eyes lingering on me a second too long. I shuddered, glad to be leaving the room.

Jax came out to receive them and I made my way to the casino and found Emma loading up her tray with cocktails at the bar well.

“Hey you! What are you doing down here?” she said with wide eyes.

“Just seein’ if you wanted to go to lunch?”

“Yeah, sure. Just let me close out these tabs and finish up.”

I waited at the bar. The smoke from the customer next to me was making my stomach churn. I got up to move further away, but it didn’t seem to help. I got up to find Emma at the blackjack pit.

“Hey, I can’t handle the smoke at the bar. You wanna meet me at Pietro’s?”

“You don’t want to go to the dining hall?”

“No, not today. I’m craving some good pasta.”

“Sure. I’ll meet you there.”

I felt like I might barf and made my way to the bathroom. This baby was doing a number on my stomach and I was starting to worry that it would come out malnourished. I

always thought pregnant women had voracious appetites, but so far, I had a hard time eating anything at all.

I hovered over the toilet for ten minutes and couldn't get anything to come up. Just a few minutes away from the smokey casino seemed to help settle my stomach.

I walked into the dimly lit restaurant, soft murmurs of diners talking and clattering plates echoed throughout the room. Emma was already there, scrolling through her phone at a small table. As she looked up and caught my eye, her face lit up.

“Hey, Amelia, over here!” she called out, waving.

I made my way over, pulling out the chair across from her. “Hey, Lady.”

“So, what's going on? You look like you've seen a ghost,” she said, her eyes narrowing with concern.

I sighed, gripping the edge of the table. “Where do I even start?”

“Just spill it, Amelia. You're among friends here.”

I took a deep breath and let it all out. “I broke up with Jax.”

Her eyes widened. “What? Why?”

I looked down at the menu, the words caught in my throat. “He...he said he didn't want kids... And I'm pregnant.”

“Oh, my God, Amelia. He said that after you told him you were pregnant?”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, I broke up with him first. He found out about the baby later.”

“Are you okay? What are you going to do?” Her eyebrows furrowed.

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice tinged with desperation. “I love him, but I couldn’t imagine bringing a child into this world knowing its father doesn’t want it.”

She reached across the table, squeezing my hand. “Listen, Amelia. Love is messy and complicated. But a child—that’s forever. You need to think long and hard about what’s best for you and this baby.”

“I know. But Jax...he wants to try again. He found out about the baby and wants to be a part of our lives.”

“Wow. That’s...that’s huge, Amelia. But what about Lauren? How’s she going to take it?”

“We’re telling her soon,” I said, my stomach turning at the thought.

“Whatever you decide, Amelia, just know I’m here for you, okay?”

“Thanks, Emma. You are a gift.”

I was glad to have somebody to talk to about all this. And I was even more glad to have a whole meal that didn’t make me want to throw up. The gnocchi alfredo hit the spot.

I returned to the office, half an hour later than usual, just to be sure the Russians were gone. They were.

Jax called me into his office. “Listen to this,” he said, pressing a button on his phone. The room filled with the crackling sound of a recorded conversation.

“Mr. Smirnova, thank you for coming,” Jax’s booming voice echoed through the speaker.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Dawson,” Smirnova replied, his voice dripping with insincerity.

“I’ll get straight to the point. I know you’ve been hijacking trucks from the De Luca family. Don De Luca won’t be pleased if he ever found out who took his goods.”

Smirnova laughed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. You have no proof.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Jax countered.

The room went silent, then erupted in a flurry of Russian words. My ears perked up as I listened closely.

“What did they say?” Jax asked as he paused the recording.

I answered. “One man said, ‘How could he know this?’ and another man said, ‘Shut up, you idiot.’”

“This is great,” he said before continuing the recording.

I heard Jax’s voice fill the room once again. “If you come near my casino again, or so much as look at my daughter again, you’re finished in this town. Do we have an understanding?”

Russian filled the room again and Jax paused the recording, looking at me expectantly.

“One man said, ‘He’s bluffing,’ and the other said, ‘We can’t afford to risk it. We don’t need any trouble from the Italians right now’.”

He continued with the recording and Smirnova’s voice began again in his thick Russian accent. “Mr. Dawson, we don’t want any trouble. I don’t know what you think we did, but I’m a very busy man and don’t have time for such nonsense. Of course, I would like to do business with you, but you can be sure if you stay out of our way, we stay out of your way,” Smirnova conceded.

“Do I have your word?” Jax asked.

“Of course. You have my word,” he answered in his raspy voice.

I looked up at Jax, my eyes wide. “You did it. You actually did it.”

He nodded. “Thanks to you, Amelia. That could have easily blown up in my face if they didn’t say anything in Russian,” he said, his voice tinged with relief. Our eyes met, and the world seemed to disappear as he rounded the desk and pulled me into another searing kiss.

He stalked over to his office door, turning the deadbolt.

“What are you doing? It’s office hours. The employees...” I whispered. My heart pounding with excitement.

“Fuck ‘em,” he barked as he threw off his tie.

My body was alive with electricity, and I felt all the nerve endings in my body humming with anticipation.

He pinned me to the door. His hands cupped my face as his tongue explored mine. His grip on me tightened as he ran his hands over my hips and down to the hem of my dress.

I gasped at the sensation as I felt his fingertips trace along the inside of my thigh, sending shivers up my spine. He moved his hand higher, teasing and tantalizing me until he found what he was looking for. He tugged my panties aside and his fingers slipped inside me without warning, taking me by surprise and eliciting a deep moan from within me.

He pulled away slightly and looked into my eyes with an intensity that nearly took my breath away. With one hand still buried between my legs, he used his other hand to unbutton his shirt. One button at a time until it was open completely, revealing his toned chest and abs.

I ran my hands over his bare chest, tracing the lines of his muscles with my fingers. He removed his hand, kicked off his shoes, and removed his pants while I worked his shirt off, letting it fall to the ground.

His body was sculpted with all the right curves and angles, hard in all the right places and soft in all the places that mattered most. His hands moved back to the hem of my dress, pulling it up with haste, inch by inch, until it was high above my head, leaving me in nothing but my undergarments.

He stood back and admired me for a moment before he leaned in and kissed me again. A slow, languid kiss, the kind that makes you forget everything else.

I could feel the heat growing between my legs as my body began to ache for him. I reached behind me and unhooked my bra, letting it drop to the floor, baring my breasts. He stared at them hungrily, like he was seeing them for the first time. The look of lust in his eye was enough to make me shudder as he pulled me to him.

My body pressed against his as his lips found my nipples. With all the hormones, they were especially sensitive. He teased them with his tongue, kissing them and sucking them until they hardened. I ran my hands through his hair as he left a hot trail of kisses down my body.

“We shouldn’t be doing this here,” I said, my voice shaking.

“I know,” he said. “But I want you so bad, and I don’t give a shit anymore.”

I didn’t protest any further. I couldn’t. My body had betrayed me. I wanted him just as bad. We could let everything else fall by the wayside.

He picked me up and carried me to the sofa at the other end of his office. The fire that burned between us was enough to torch a whole city, and I could feel my heart beating faster with each step he took.

Once we were on the sofa, he lay me down and climbed on top of me. He pinned me down as he looked into my eyes, our faces just inches apart. His arms were strong and muscular against mine, and I felt completely safe in his grip. His every breath was like pure oxygen to me, and I felt myself melting into him as he claimed my lips for his own again.

His kisses became more urgent now as his hand found its way between my legs once more, fingers expertly caressing me until I felt pleasure radiating from within. My breaths grew shallow as he brought me closer to the edge, and I clung to him tightly with every sensation that coursed through my body.

“Please,” I said, breathless. I knew I couldn’t resist him any longer. “Fuck me, Jax.”

He stood and quickly removed his boxer shorts, freeing his engorged length.

Before I could say anything, he climbed on top of me and thrust inside of me without warning. I gasped as his length filled me completely, and the intensity of his thrusts made me lose control of myself.

I clawed at his back as he drove inside me, again and again. The sound of his hips slapping against mine echoed through the room, and I gripped him even tighter. He pulled my legs up and held them taut against his chest. I could feel him driving deeper and deeper inside of me with each motion as my toes curled and my breath caught in my throat.

My body felt like it was on fire. My skin hummed with pleasure, and a dizzying warmth filled me as his hips thrust against mine. He let go of my legs and they fell to either side of him as he moved his hand between us, his fingers working me expertly. I moaned at the feeling of his fingertips thrumming at my clit. His hand continued to work me as he

thrust again and again, sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body.

He slammed into me harder than he probably ever had and it felt so good.

I moaned his name as he took me to new heights of ecstasy. I felt myself coming undone as he thrust deep inside me.

The sound of his name on my lips sent him over the edge, and he came with a loud moan, shuddering as he came deep inside me. I could feel his hot seed spilling into me as our bodies shook with pleasure.

We collapsed into a heap on the sofa for a moment, breathing heavily. Then he turned and pulled me into his arms. We just laid there, his hands caressing my skin softly. I listened to his deep, rhythmic breathing and felt him nuzzling my neck with his face.

Every muscle in my body was relaxed and completely at ease for the first time in what felt like forever. I closed my eyes and let his arms wrap around me as I embraced the feeling.

We were back on track, our future spread out before us like a blank canvas. Yet, as I left his office, the weight of our impending confrontation with Lauren hung over me like a dark cloud. I felt it—something was about to shatter, and I couldn't shake the gnawing dread that clawed at my soul.

Chapter 26

Jax

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER of a quiet moment.

I sat back in my office chair and looked at Amelia just past my office door. The ambient glow of the computer screen casting a soft halo around her as she wrapped up her work for the day. With the office now empty, the silence felt comforting, not isolating. And for the first time in weeks, I could breathe.

“Almost done?” I leaned back further, the leather chair creaking under me.

She glanced up, a smile spreading across her face. “Just a few more emails.”

I got up, feeling the pull of my tailored suit around my shoulders. “Take your time. I’m in no rush.”

“Because you’re the boss?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Because I’m with you,” I corrected her, walking over to the floor-to-ceiling window. My eyes fixed on the glittering

skyline of Las Vegas. Below us, the Strip unfurled like a tapestry of neon and light, a glowing river cutting through the dark expanse of the desert. Casinos shaped like modern-day pyramids and fairytale castles reached toward the heavens, their spires and towers drenched in vibrant hues of red, blue, and gold.

And higher still, the sky was a canvas of darkness, punctuated by the winking of distant stars, as if even the universe couldn't resist joining the spectacle below.

I heard Amelia's footsteps behind me.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" I finally broke the silence, feeling the weight of her gaze shift from the horizon back to me. "All this life, all this beauty, built in the middle of nowhere."

"It is," she replied, her voice tinged with wonder.

I mulled over the recent developments. I'd managed to resolve the issue with the Russians—no small feat—and for the first time in ages, the constant, gnawing tension started to ease.

"So, what did Mr. Moran and the others think when you told them about Smirnova?"

"They were kind of surprised I took care of it myself. They were irritated that I didn't tell them about it, but they'll get over it."

"I just hope it's finally over."

"I think we're good, Amelia. With the Russians, I mean," I said, not taking my eyes off the skyline. "But I still want to

keep you and Lauren close, just to make sure we're in the clear.”

I looked at her in the window, her reflection blending with mine in the glass.

“I trust you. But what's next?” she asked.

I turned around, my hands finding her waist. “How about we go shopping for baby gear this weekend? Or maybe next weekend? And I'd like to go with you to your first doctor's appointment.”

Her eyes lit up, and I could almost feel the walls she'd built around herself start to crumble. “I'd love that.”

Watching Amelia's eyes light up, I felt a warmth in my chest, as if my heart had found a sun to orbit.

Here was this remarkable woman—brilliant, resilient, a diamond formed under life's harshest pressures—and yet, she'd never really had anything she could call her own. Now, standing beside her, sharing this stolen moment in time, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of purpose. I wanted to give her not just the world, but galaxies, all the untamed beauty and boundless possibilities that life could offer. Because a woman like Amelia didn't deserve just a chapter or a scene; she deserved an epic saga written in the ink of unwavering love and devotion.

As Amelia's head found its natural resting place on my shoulder, a rush of clarity flooded through me, as startling and illuminating as a bolt of lightning ripping through a night sky.

The word ‘love’—a term I’d used sparingly since Rachel had left this world—suddenly found its rightful heir.

I loved her.

The realization surged through me, vibrant and potent, disarming every defense I’d painstakingly erected around my heart over the last decade.

My hand instinctively gravitated toward her belly, the tender sanctuary of our unborn child. A medley of emotions unleashed within me: awe, exhilaration, a happiness so profound it seemed capable of birthing new stars.

I was on the precipice of fatherhood again, and Amelia was the woman who’d made it possible, who’d breathed color and light into my black and white world.

For a fleeting second, my thoughts drifted to Rachel. I’d been shackled by the notion that loving someone as deeply as I’d loved her would be a betrayal. But now, staring into the galaxies reflected in Amelia’s eyes, I understood.

The guilt that had anchored me to a past life began to dissolve, washed away by the unspoken yet palpable love that filled the room. Rachel would have wanted me to live, to love, and be loved again.

My lips parted, tempted to declare my love right then and there, but something held me back. This wasn’t the moment. Amelia deserved a canvas as grand as the feelings that overwhelmed me, a setting worthy of the seismic shift that had just occurred in the landscape of my soul.

“Amelia,” I began, my voice tinged with an emotion I couldn’t yet name out loud. “The future looks incredibly bright, doesn’t it?”

Her eyes met mine, shimmering like the lights below, and in that sacred exchange, I sensed that she too felt the pull of something extraordinary, a gravitational force neither of us could escape.

The drive home was quiet but comfortable, Amelia’s head resting on my shoulder. As we pulled into the driveway, the front door flew open and Lauren burst out, practically sprinting toward us.

“God, I thought you guys would never get here! I’m going stir crazy!” Lauren exclaimed.

I chuckled. “Well, you’ll be glad to know we might be in the clear with our Russian friends.”

Lauren let out a sigh of relief that seemed to come from her very soul. “Oh, thank God.”

“But,” I added, “I still want you both to stay close for a bit longer. That means that you two can start going out more, as long as you take security with you.”

“Deal!” She bounced on the balls of her feet, ecstatic. “Actually, about that...” Lauren hesitated, “Rob and I are planning a mini-vacation to Hawaii. We leave tomorrow morning.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You made plans to go to Hawaii? Without consulting me?”

“We thought it’d be safer if I got out of Vegas for a while, and we just decided this a few hours ago,” she rushed to explain. “I was going to tell you as soon as I saw you.”

I forced a smile, hiding the cocktail of surprise and irritation swirling inside me. A little relief too if I can admit it. “Alright, have fun. Just be safe.”

Rob arrived at the house early the next morning. He seemed uncomfortable to be in the same room with both Amelia and Lauren, understandably. He didn’t say but two words the whole time.

Max, one of our security guards, loaded their luggage into the SUV while Lauren hugged us goodbye, her cheerfulness a stark contrast to Rob’s stoic silence.

As the SUV pulled away, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “Finally.”

Amelia chuckled. “Feeling relieved?”

I grabbed her by the hand, pulling her close. “You have no idea.”

I gave her a long, deep kiss.

“We’d better get ready for work. I need to hop in the shower. How ‘bout you join me?” I suggested as I grabbed her tight little ass.

“Sure, but we don’t have time to fool around. We need to get going.”

“C’mon, I’ll be quick!”

“Jax, no!” she swatted my hands away.

The warmth of the water cascaded over us, mingling with the steam that filled the large, glass-enclosed shower. I leaned in, my lips finding the curve of her neck, my hands starting to explore.

“We don’t have time, Jax,” she said, though her voice quivered.

I let out a reluctant sigh, shutting off the water. “Alright, let’s get going.”

She reached for my tie after we got dressed, her fingers deftly knotting it around my collar. I caught her hand, pressing it to my lips. “I’m glad we have some more time to ourselves, finally.”

She smiled, her eyes meeting mine. “Me too.”



After a week of uninterrupted bliss, we found ourselves sitting across from each other at my glass dining table, plates filled with salmon and sauteed spinach.

“How are things going with Darcy Miller in Marketing?” I ventured, swirling my wine.

Amelia hesitated. “To be honest, you’ve been keeping me so busy I haven’t had much time to work with her.”

I sensed there was more. “And?”

She took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking that I’d really like to switch over to marketing full time.”

The words hit me like a freight train, derailing the track of thoughts I’d carefully laid out for our future. I’d come to depend on her so much that I really couldn’t imagine finding a replacement that could compare.

But then I looked at her—really looked at her—and saw the flicker of ambition in her eyes, the raw talent that drew me to her.

“I’m not sure how I’ll manage without you. But if that’s what you want, I’ll support you,” I said, forcing a smile. “You’re brilliant at what you do, Lee.”

“Thanks. I’m relieved to hear you say that. You’re kind of a pain in the ass to work for,” she joked.

I responded with a scowl.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. I’ve been wanting to start a non-profit foundation in Rachel’s name. A charity to fund research for ovarian cancer. I hadn’t had time to look further into it, but I’ve got my attorneys putting something together now. I’d like you to help me with marketing it. Come up with brand standards and all that.”

“Oh my gosh, I would love to Jax.” She beamed from ear to ear.

As much as I needed her to myself, I also needed her to pursue what she loved. And she was damn good at it. I knew my foundation would be in good hands.

“Thank you so much for the opportunity. I won’t let you down I promise.”

“I know you won’t.” And that much was true.

Since the first minute, she had gone above and beyond in her work, and I would make sure to let her know how much I appreciated her efforts for as long as she kept being my assistant. I knew it wouldn’t be long until I had to let her go, but for now I could breathe knowing that I was being taken care of.

Oh, I also made an appointment with the doctor. It’s next Friday at two” she said.

I marked the date and time in my calendar, already planning to clear my schedule for it. We clinked our glasses together, a toast to new beginnings and the daunting unknown.

Yet, as the night wore on, a nagging feeling settled in my gut. Things were going too perfect. I was still waiting for the universe to shatter this almost-perfect world I’d dared to imagine. And as much as I wanted to revel in the happiness that filled the room, a part of me stood on guard, bracing for impact.

Just when you think all is right with the world, that’s usually when the world decides to prove you wrong.

Chapter 27

Amelia

“SO, YOU AND JAX are doing some baby shopping this weekend? Sounds like a dream day for a mom-to-be,” Emma said, eyes twinkling as she sipped her iced tea.

I looked up from my salad, a smile tugging at my lips. “Yeah, he’s been incredibly supportive. We’re planning to get a crib, stroller, you name it. There’s so much stuff to get it’s overwhelming.”

“Aww, I’m so happy for you!” Emma gushed. “Have you guys talked about moving in together yet?”

I hesitated, poking at an olive. “Not yet, but I’m sure it’ll come up soon, especially once I start showing more. My only worry is telling Lauren...”

Emma grimaced sympathetically. “Yeah, that’s not going to be pretty. But you can’t avoid it forever. She’s going to find out one way or another.”

I sighed. “I know. We just need to rip the band-aid off. I’ll be showing soon and after that, there’ll be no hiding it.”

Emma reached across the table and squeezed my hand reassuringly. “It’ll be okay. Lauren will be upset, but she’ll come around eventually. You shouldn’t let her stop you from being with Jax and starting your new family together.”

I offered her a small, hopeful smile. “I hope so. This baby is a blessing and I need to focus on that. I always wanted to have a family. I just didn’t expect to start so soon!”

“And with a billionaire! And a *hot* billionaire at that.” She took a bite of her chicken sandwich.

I rolled my eyes at her.

Emma leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “So, spill, girl. What’s he like in bed?”

“Emma!”

“Oh come on! I need to know.”

I bit my lip, struggling to contain my grin. “Our physical connection is pretty mind-blowing. He’s so attentive and generous. He really knows how to make a woman feel... special.”

“Does he have a big dick?”

I choked on my sparkling water. “Emma, you almost just killed me!”

“Well?” she looked at me expectantly.

I looked at her with a serious expression.

“It’s massive.” I hid my face with my napkin. I couldn’t believe I was telling her this.

“Oh my God, I knew it,” Emma said with a knowing smile. “That man oozes sex appeal. I’m so jealous.” She fanned herself dramatically. “Whew, you’re getting me all hot and bothered just thinking about it! No wonder you have that glow. Pregnancy looks good on you.”

I laughed, placing a protective hand over my still flat stomach. “Thanks. I still can’t believe it sometimes. Jax is going to make such a wonderful father.”

Emma’s expression softened. “You are so lucky. He really cares about you, I can tell.”

“I know,” I said, feeling a rush of emotion. “He’s been so supportive since he found out about the baby. I think this is it for me, Em. The real deal.”

“I’m so happy for you, Lee. You deserve it,” Emma said softly. “Now, enough baby talk. Tell me more about Jax in the bedroom! Don’t leave out any juicy details...”

I laughed and tossed my napkin at her. “Emma! You’re terrible.” But as we dissolved into giggles, I felt a comforting warmth spread through me. It was so nice to have a friend again.

I had acquaintances, but Lauren was my only real friend that I had ever been really close to. Emma was doing a great job filling her shoes.

“Seriously, though. I’m so jealous. I need to find myself a hot billionaire. How about setting me up with Griff? Or Gabe?”

“Oh no. They’re players, Em. Trust me, you don’t want any part of that.”

Her eyes darted around the restaurant, then settled back on me. “What about Mr. Moran?”

“Zeke? You into older men now?”

She shrugged. “Not really, but for him, I’d make an exception. He’s totally hot.”

“As far as I know, he’s a confirmed bachelor. But I’ll keep my ears open for you.”



Four days later, my nerves gnawed at me like a famished rat. Lauren was back, and D-Day loomed. Jax had booked us a table at The Ember Steakhouse, a luxurious gem tucked away in a hotel a few doors down from the Crown. He thought it best that we go somewhere public where she was less likely to cause a scene and didn’t want to confront her at the Crown.

After work, Jax maneuvered his car through the evening traffic. His cologne, a rich blend of cedar and spices, filled the car.

“So, I ordered a really beautiful Silver Cross Balmoral stroller from England. It should arrive any day. Might be here now. You’re going to love it,” he mentioned casually.

“Oh wow! Aren’t those like five thousand dollars?”

“Yes, but they’re beautiful. It could be an heirloom that we hand down for generations.” He grabbed my hand and gave it

a squeeze.

“It’s a waste really. We’ll only use it for a couple of months before he outgrows it.”

“He? How do you know it won’t be a she?”

“I don’t know. I just feel it. I keep having dreams about peacocks. I looked it up in a dream dictionary and it said that it means I’m going to have a strong boy.”

Jax’s mouth pulled into a smile.

“So, how would you feel about moving in with me?”

A thrill zipped through me, as if I’d touched a live wire. Everything was moving so fast. We had only been seeing each other a couple of months, but under the circumstances, it made sense.

“Really? I’d love that.” I was squealing inside.

In that moment, I marveled at my life. Me, Amelia, the abandoned kid that no one wanted, sitting next to a man who felt like home. Yet, the old fears whispered, conjuring memories of past heartbreaks. Would he ask me to move in with him if I weren’t pregnant? Did it matter?

“We’re here,” Jax announced, snapping me out of my reverie.

As we entered The Ember Steakhouse, the scent of seared meat and the clinking of wine glasses filled the air. We took our seats, menus in hand, every tick of my watch tightening the knot in my stomach.

Lauren sauntered in shortly after, all smiles. “Hey, you two! Sorry I’m late. Rob’s running behind.”

Jax and I exchanged a glance.

“Oh, I didn’t realize Rob would be coming,” Jax said.

“Well yeah. He’s my boyfriend, isn’t he?” She made a furtive glance in Amelia’s direction. “Sorry, Amelia.”

“No need to be sorry. It’s water under the bridge. So, how was Hawaii?” I ventured, stalling for time.

“Amazing! We surfed, we snorkeled—we even took a helicopter tour of the volcanos!” She picked up her menu and started skimming the pages. “I hope they still do the roasted artichoke here.”

Jax cleared his throat. “Uh, Lauren, there’s something we need to tell you.”

“What? The Russians try to kidnap someone again?” she joked.

“No, this is about me.”

She looked up from her menu, oblivious. “Oh?”

“Yeah. So, I’ve started dating again.”

She looked up from her menu and her eyes widened. “Really? And?”

“And I’ve been seeing someone in particular. And it’s getting pretty serious.”

She threw down her menu giving him her full attention. “Oh my gosh, who?”

Jax hesitated. “Well, actually, Amelia.”

Laughter burst from her lips. She was sure he was joking. Then, Jax reached over and grabbed my hand.

Catching our serious expressions, her face crumpled. “Oh, my God, you’re serious.”

“Yes. We are,” Jax confirmed, looking over at me adoringly.

Lauren rubbed her temples before she erupted. “Wait... You’re dating her? Amelia? My friend Amelia? My twenty-two-year-old friend Amelia?” She was aghast.

“Lauren, now calm down. I know this is a bit of a shock.”

“Shock??? She’s twenty years younger than you! What could you possibly have in common with a twenty-two-year-old?” she screamed.

“Lauren, calm down and listen to me—” Jax said in a firm tone, almost shouting.

She turned to face me. “You did this to get back at me, didn’t you? I got Rob, so you went after my dad?”

“Of course not! Nobody went after anybody. We didn’t plan this. It just happened,” I tried to explain but I felt my chest constricting and tension radiated throughout my body. I looked around and the whole restaurant was staring at us. So much for going somewhere she was less likely to make a scene.

“That’s not fair, Lauren,” Jax protested.

She ignored our comments, turning back to Jax. “What would Mom think?”

“Lauren, don’t bring your mother into this. I’m a grown man and I don’t take cues from my child.”

“She’d be rolling in her grave if she knew you were perving out over twenty-two-year-old girls!”

“Lauren, Stop it! You’re causing a scene,” he said through gritted teeth.

“*I’m* causing a scene??? You’re galivanting around town with a girl half your age! You’re humiliating me!”

Just then, Rob walked in, staring at the table before him, dumbfounded.

“No! No fucking way. This is absurd.” Lauren spat, standing up. “I won’t have it. Dad, if you don’t put an end to this farce, I’ll never speak to you again! And don’t bother coming to my wedding!”

Jax looked shell-shocked. “You’re getting married?”

“Next weekend. At the drive-through chapel. We were going to tell you tonight, but I swear, if you don’t stop seeing her, you had better not be there.”

I looked at Jax and waited for him to say something. To defend us. To refuse. But he was speechless.

She stormed out, Rob trailing her. Jax and I were left, staring at each other, grappling with the magnitude of what had just happened.

I knew this would happen. Maybe not to this extent, but I knew. And I knew that if given an ultimatum, he would choose

Lauren. The walls were closing in and the room started spinning.

Jax stood up to follow her. Just then, a sharp pain stabbed my lower abdomen. “Jax,” I gasped, clutching my belly. “Something’s wrong.”

His eyes widened, concern cutting through his shock. “We need to get you to a hospital. Now.”

He helped me up and out of the restaurant. As I stumbled through to the main entrance, I felt a warm, wet feeling running down my inner thigh. I was horrified when I looked down and saw a trail of blood running down my leg.

“Oh, my God!” I screamed through the pain.

In the car, my world unraveled. Jax called the nearest hospital to let them know we were coming. The pain intensified; each cramp a cruel reminder of what I might lose. And with Lauren’s ultimatum hanging over us, the man I loved was being torn away from me.

We were greeted at the hospital by a man with a wheelchair and as soon as I sat down, I screamed from a pain so intense it knocked the wind out of me. I struggled to breathe and the last thing I remember seeing before blacking out were the hospital lights, like blurred stars in a sky I could no longer reach.

Top of Form



Sterile lights seared through my eyelids, pulling me out of darkness. The incessant beeps and hums of machines buzzed in my ears like a swarm of mechanical bees. My fingers twitched, encountering not soft sheets but a tangle of plastic tubes.

I looked around the room for Jax, but he wasn't there.

I sat up with a jerk, only to have my body rebel with a sickening lurch. My hand clamped over my mouth. I swallowed hard, fighting back bile.

I placed my hand over my belly and mourned the loss I had no doubt I had suffered. My eyes stung, hot tears escaping despite my best efforts. I never even had the chance to feel it kick. To know if it was a boy or a girl.

The tears gushed out of me like a dam that had breached.

Lauren's rant from the restaurant replayed in my mind. Seeing the look on Jax's face when Lauren threatened to cut him out of her life was the look I was afraid of.

He had the look of a conflicted man that had no choice but to choose his daughter.

He was always going to choose Lauren. Deep down I always knew this. I fooled myself into believing that maybe he would be just as devoted to our baby as he was to her. But he couldn't.

And how could he? She was his flesh and blood, a full-blown person. And I was just... Amelia, the foster kid no one wanted. And our baby was the size of a pea and completely

abstract to him. A creature he never knew. A complete stranger.

The door swung open, snapping me out of my self-pity and a nurse walked in, her face a mask of professional concern. “How are we feeling?”

“Um...I don’t know. I just woke up. Is there a man outside waiting for me?” I rasped, my voice hoarse from crying.

“Yes, but I’m sorry, only family members can visit right now. Don’t worry, the doctor will be in shortly to update you.”

“Family,” I said under my breath. A harsh reminder of what I never had.

I did my best to wipe the tears away with my tube ridden hand.

The door opened again, and a man in blue hospital scrubs and a white coat strode in.

“Hello, Ms. Scott. I’m Dr. Sullivan. How are you feeling?”

“Queasy,” I admitted, my hands unconsciously drifting to my belly.

“You had an intrauterine device that was misplaced causing all the cramping and bleeding. We were able to remove it without any issues, and you and your baby are just fine.”

The room spun.

“Baby? The baby is okay? Are you sure?” I expected a death sentence, not a reprieve.

“Would you like to see for yourself?” Dr. Sullivan offered, wheeling an ultrasound machine to my bedside.

Dr. Sullivan squeezed a dollop of cold gel onto my belly, the chill making me flinch. He moved the ultrasound wand in small circles, the machine humming softly next to me. I braced myself, my gaze fixed on the screen, my heart pounding in sync with the seconds ticking away.

Then it came, cutting through the anticipation like a warm ray of sunlight—the rapid whoosh-whoosh of a heartbeat. It filled the room, drowning out every other sound, every doubt, every fear. That heartbeat, strong and unwavering, spoke a language deeper than any words could convey. It was the sound of life, of survival—our baby’s tiny, miraculous heartbeat. It took my breath away.

As I looked at the screen, at the small flicker representing the heart, pumping away in a secure little cocoon of its own, I forgot to breathe. My eyes grew hot, a tear breaking free and trickling down my cheek, warm against my skin. In that instant, everything else fell away. The room, the hospital, the unspoken questions—they all blurred into the background, outshined by this simple, extraordinary moment.

As I looked more closely at the screen, I was surprised how big and well developed it was. Much bigger and more human-like than the tiny bean I was expecting.

“It’s so big. How many weeks am I?” The words tumbled out before I could stop them.

Dr. Sullivan raised an eyebrow. “Hasn’t your doctor told you?”

“I haven’t been yet. I only just found out I’m pregnant. I have an appointment next week,” I stammered.

“I’d say you’re about fifteen weeks along.”

“Fifteen weeks,” I mumbled to myself. I did the math in my scrambled head and the realization hit me. I got pregnant the first time Jax and I’d had sex.

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“It’s too early to tell with an ultrasound, but your doctor will be able to run bloodwork and determine the sex of the baby. Now, just lie down and get some rest. You can leave in the morning. Do you have any family we should contact to let them know you’re here?” Dr. Sullivan asked.

I shook my head. “No. No family.” Another harsh reminder.

“There’s a man in the lobby claiming to be the father. Shall we let him in?”

I knew Jax was outside, worried sick. But I didn’t have the strength to face him.

“No,” I whispered, my gut twisting.

“Alright, then. Michelle here will take good care of you.”

The nurse lingered to take my vitals after the doctor left, her eyes shining. “I hate to be nosy, but the man waiting for you in the lobby. Is that Jax Dawson?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Girl, you are so lucky.”

“Oh, no, we’re not together. He’s just my boss,” I lied, though my voice faltered. “He’s not really the father. He probably just said that so you’d let him back to check on me.”

She sighed wistfully. “Oh, I see. Still, though. I wouldn’t mind looking at that at work every day. He’s way hotter in person!” She made a cheesy grin.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is he single? Do you think he’d be into short blonde nurses?” The excitement twinkling behind her eyes made my nostrils flair and I took a deep breath.

“I really don’t know. I’m sorry, but I’m exhausted—”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’ll stop.” She giggled. “It’s just not every day that we get a hunky billionaire in here. Just thought I’d ask.”

After she left, I lay in the hospital bed, a battleground of emotions. Jax had waited hours in the lobby for me, but I now knew that I couldn’t trust him with my heart. The thought of another heartbreak made me physically ill.

Amelia, you’ve had enough.

Maybe it was time to stop pretending, to stop setting myself up for disappointment. Why cling to a beautiful lie when the truth was so damn ugly?

Even if he were to stay with me, he would grow resentful. I would be the reason his daughter cut him out of her life.

I wanted to be a mother like I never had. I didn't want this baby to ever feel the pain and abandonment that I'd felt growing up. I would cherish this baby and make it my number one priority, like Lauren was to Jax. I wasn't about to let this child grow up around a father that kept them in the shadow of his 'favorite' child. Like a shameful mistake unworthy of a father's absolute love and devotion.

As my eyes grew heavy, I made my decision. Tomorrow, everything would change. I'd walk away. It was the only way to protect my already beaten heart—and now, another, much smaller one.

Chapter 28

Jax

THE HOSPITAL LOBBY SMELLED like antiseptic and stale coffee. A concoction designed to sterilize souls. I drummed my fingers on the armrest, each tap a countdown to an uncertain fate. Amelia. Our baby. Two lives I never realized I wanted so desperately until now.

I pushed off the chair and strode to the front desk, where a nurse in blue scrubs hunched over paperwork.

“Excuse me,” I said, my voice cracking like dry earth. “I need an update on Amelia Scott.”

She glanced up, eyes shielded by professionalism. “I’m sorry, sir. We can’t disclose medical information to non-family members.”

“Non-family?” I clenched my fists. “This is the mother of my child here. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Her eyebrows arched, a silent reprimand. “I’ll have her nurse speak with you.”

Moments later, footsteps padded on the tile behind me. “Mr. Dawson?”

I turned. A petite blonde nurse extended her hand. “I’m Michelle, Amelia’s nurse.”

“Is she okay? The baby—”

Michelle cut me off. “Amelia’s resting. We’re keeping her overnight. You can check back in the morning.”

“I’ll wait.”

Michelle tilted her head. “There’s really no point. She’s safe here and will be out in the morning and can tell you all about her condition. Go home. Get some rest.”

Rest? As if sleep would come. But then Michelle shifted gears, her voice taking on a lighter note. “So, Amelia says she works for you. Are you this attentive to all your employees?”

I frowned. “She’s a very important employee.”

“And owning a casino. What’s that like?”

Her words floated around me like soap bubbles, transparent and irrelevant. My mind screamed Amelia’s name, but then I saw it—the flirtation in Michelle’s eyes. I had seen it many times before, but now was not the time.

“On second thought, I think you’re right. I think I’m going to head out and check back in the morning,” I said, my words tinged with a cold edge. “Could you please leave a message for Amelia to call me? As soon as she can.”

“Of course. I’ll relay the message.”

The drive home was a blur. Streetlights smeared past, their glow a poor imitation of daylight. Of hope. I clutched the steering wheel, imagining a future void of baby laughter, of Amelia's touch. A barren landscape.

Lauren. I reached for my phone and dialed her number. Voicemail. Again. I dialed once more. Voicemail.

“Fuck!” My phone soared across the car, a plastic missile of despair.

I walked into my house and Lauren wasn't there. Her room had been cleared out.

I made my way into my study, uncorked a bottle of scotch and lifted it to my lips. No glass stood between me and the amber liquid; it was a direct line of fire from bottle to soul. As it burned a path down my throat, searing away the taste of helplessness, I felt the weight of the past crash into the present.

Amelia.

I'd never let myself say it to her, but she'd done something I thought impossible—she'd made me contemplate love again. After Rachel, love was a room in my heart I'd sealed off, a place too painful to revisit.

But Amelia had slipped in, bypassing barriers I didn't even know were crumbling.

I'd never said those three words to her. And now, it seemed, I never would.

I set the bottle on the coffee table, my hands trembling. How had everything spiraled so fast? One moment I was navigating

life's ups and downs, and the next, I found myself tumbling into an abyss of regret and what-ifs.

Then there was Lauren. The one person I thought I could count on, no matter what. My love for her was as natural as breathing, but now, resentment twisted inside me like a noxious weed. Her outburst, her ultimatum—it was like a slap in the face.

She'd presented me with an impossible choice: her or Amelia. I was supposed to be the cornerstone of her life, the one constant she could rely on. Would she really keep me from her wedding, slice me out of one of her life's biggest moments, just because she disapproved of my choices?

I raked my fingers through my hair, a sense of helplessness swallowing me whole. I couldn't see a way out, a path that led to a future where I could hold onto both Amelia and Lauren. My only hope was to reason with Lauren, to break through whatever wall had sprung up between us. But she wouldn't answer her phone. She'd shut me out, and the silence was deafening.

I picked up the bottle of scotch again, staring at the liquid that promised numbness. But even as I took another swig, I knew it was a temporary escape, a momentary lapse into oblivion. When I resurfaced, the problems would still be there, larger and more insurmountable than before.

Suddenly, the weight of it all was too much. My hand shook, and the bottle slipped, crashing to the floor. Glass shards and spilled scotch—a mess that mirrored my life. I sank onto the

couch, my face buried in my hands. Lost in love, lost in family, just lost.

I collapsed onto my bed but found no rest. The sheets twisted around me, shackles made of cotton and regret.

Morning light invaded my room. Saturday. I threw on the first shirt and pants within reach. Getting to the hospital was the only thing on my mind.

When I got there, Amelia was gone.

Panic clawed its way up my throat as my car roared to a stop in front of Amelia's apartment building. I was out before the engine fully died, my feet pounding the pavement as I raced up the stairs, two steps at a time, my chest tightening with each step I cleared.

I stood there, my knuckles still tingling from pounding on her door. No answer. I pulled out my phone and called her. Voicemail. Again.

I slumped against the wall outside her apartment, my head falling back as I stared at the ceiling. It was like looking into a void, a blank slate that refused to fill with answers. My hope felt like dry soil, crumbling and scattering in the wind.

In that moment, my thoughts were a whirlwind, but at the eye of the storm was Amelia. I needed her to understand that I wasn't ready to give up on us, not without a fight. I wanted to tell her I loved her, three simple words I'd guarded like a state secret. I'd envisioned saying them in a moment of joy, not desperation, but life had other plans.

If only I could get her to see that we needed time—time for Lauren to come around, time for us to figure things out. I wasn't naïve; I knew our situation was a tinderbox, ready to ignite at the smallest spark. But I also believed in us, in what we'd built in our stolen moments and whispered promises.

Could I convince her to be patient, to withstand the storm until clearer skies appeared? The optimism felt like a lifeline, thin and fraying, but still something to cling to.

I glanced at my watch; an hour had passed. An agonizing, endless hour that had stretched on like a bad dream. I pushed myself off the wall, my body heavy with regret and uncertainty. As I walked away, my newly cracked phone buzzed with a new text, but it wasn't from Amelia. I shoved it back into my pocket, my hope a fragile thing, teetering on the edge.

I sent her another text: **Please, just tell me if the baby is okay.**

After five painstakingly long minutes, finally, a reply: **There is no baby.**

I sank to my knees, my legs no longer able to support the weight of my shattered world. Devastation wasn't a strong enough word for this abyss that had opened up beneath me. It was as if I'd been hollowed out, leaving nothing but a shell of the man I once was.

The baby—*our* baby—was gone. And with that loss, a universe of possibilities had been snuffed out, extinguished like a candle in a cruel wind. I'd come to cherish the idea of

being a father again, of hearing the laughter of a child fill the empty corners of my home, of watching Amelia's eyes light up as she held our baby in her arms. It was something she'd always wanted. I was able to give it to her.

And now it was gone.

It was a future I'd hardly dared to envision, but once I had, it became a dream I clung to. A dream now reduced to ashes.

I'd been here before, in a similar abyss.

When Rachel passed away, I thought I'd lost everything. But this was different. Back then, I was grieving for a life lived, for years spent in love and companionship. This time, I was mourning a life that had barely begun, that hadn't been given the chance to unfurl its wings and soar.

My phone was still in my hand, its weight an anchor pulling me down further into despair. I called her again. No answer. Amelia's silence was a gaping chasm, widening the rift between what was and what could have been. I couldn't reach her, couldn't bridge the distance to share this grief that was too immense for one person to bear alone. I didn't want to think about how she was feeling.

Tears threatened to spill, but I managed to blink them back. I was a man who dealt in certainties, in odds and percentages, but no amount of calculated risk could've prepared me for this. I'd gambled with fate, and fate had dealt me the cruelest hand.

I pushed myself off the step, each movement an effort, each breath a labor. But even as I stood, I knew that a part of me

would remain there, broken and kneeling, haunted by a life that would never be.

When I arrived home, I pulled into the driveway, the tires whispering against the smooth concrete as if trying not to disturb the heavy air. As I stepped out of the car, my eyes caught something sitting at the front door—a large box, wrapped in plain brown packaging. Curiosity nudged at the edges of my gloom.

I approached the box cautiously, my steps heavy with the weight of the morning's events. I bent down, gripped the edges, and dragged it over the threshold, the cardboard scraping against the hard wood floors. It filled the entry way, a monolith out of place in my now disjointed world.

I pulled out my pocket knife and sliced through the tape that sealed the box closed.

As the flaps fell open, my heart plummeted, crashing through layers of raw emotion and settling in a place darker than before.

It was the Silver Cross Balmoral baby stroller.

Royal navy fabric, chrome-spoked wheels, and a polished chrome frame—it was the Rolls Royce of baby strollers.

I'd bought it on a whim one evening, letting myself get swept away in the intoxicating allure of a future with Amelia and our baby.

I'd imagined us pushing this stroller through the park, laughing as our child gurgled and cooed, basking in the simple

joys of a family life I never thought I'd have again.

Now, it sat there, not as a promise but as a monument to a future that would never be. A life that had been snuffed out before it even had the chance to begin. I reached out, my fingers trembling as they brushed the fabric. It felt unreal, as if I was touching a ghost.

Each detail—the intricately stitched fabric, the gleaming wheels, the lovingly crafted handle—was a stab of agony, a stark reminder of what could have been. And in that moment, my vision blurred as tears welled up. I bit them back and instead smashed my fist into the heavy wood door.

“Fuck!”

I dropped to my knees, the knife falling from my hand and clattering to the floor. I was a man undone. The stroller stood before me, a beautiful artifact of a shattered dream, and I was powerless to look away.

Finally, I rose, my body moving on autopilot. I closed the flaps, sealing the stroller—and all the hopes and dreams it represented—back in its box. But as I pushed it into the corner, I knew there was no box big enough to contain my grief.

Come Monday morning, my reflection in the mirror was a ghost. A specter devoid of purpose. As the door to Amelia's office creaked open, I stepped into a space that felt like a void. It was empty. As if she had never been there at all.

Amelia's office had been an extension of her—a warm cocoon of efficiency and charm. The once-busy corkboard that hung on the wall had been stripped of its memos, pictures, and inspirational quotes. The desk that used to be a battleground of neatly stacked papers, Post-it notes, and an ever-present cup of coffee was now glaringly empty. The bookshelf that held an array of business books, mixed in with some unexpected choices like 'Pride and Prejudice,' stood bare. Even the potted plant by the window, which she jokingly named 'Fred,' was gone.

I felt as if I'd walked into a black and white photograph, all the color, all the life, drained away. The absence of these small, everyday items screamed a painful truth: She was erasing herself from this place. And from my life.

A knot tightened in my gut as I moved through the vacant space, each step echoing in the emptiness, each sound a reverberation of my internal turmoil. I pushed through to my office, letting the metal door slam shut behind me with a finality that shook me to my core.

My office was a stark contrast—everything in its place, but none of it mattered. I looked out through the tall windows. The morning light spilled over the distant mountains, casting the world outside in a soft, golden hue. But the beauty of the dawn felt like a mockery.

Sitting at my desk, the chime of an incoming email snapped me back to reality. My eyes darted to the screen: "New Email: Amelia Scott."

My heart lodged itself in my throat. With a reluctant click, I opened the message. She'd given her notice. The words on the screen crystallized the ache in my heart, adding a layer of incontrovertible finality to the haunting emptiness of her office.

For a long moment, I sat there, staring at the words as if they might rearrange themselves into a happier message. But they didn't. And I knew then that the void she'd left was not just in her office, but in the very fabric of my life.

My world had capsized, and I was drowning.

As the morning wore on, it became more and more clear that Amelia and I were over. There was no saving us. But I could still salvage my relationship with Lauren.

I sent her a text: **Amelia and I are over.**

She finally responded. **I'm sorry, Dad, but it's for the best.**

Best? A laugh, bitter and hollow, escaped me.

Zeke walked in, his face lined with concern. I told him everything. He offered words, but they were just shapes in the air, meaningless and formless.

Lauren appeared at lunch time and offered a consolation meal, so I took her up on her offer.

We went downstairs and sat at a corner booth at Café Serenade, the eatery's faux-Victorian decor contrasting sharply with the cold, modern lines of my feelings. The irony of the café's name wasn't lost on me.

“You look awful,” she said.

“You think so?”

Lauren picked up her menu but set it down again, her eyes meeting mine. “Dad, I know this is hard for you, but it’s for the best. There are just too many obstacles with you and Amelia.”

I looked at her, really looked at her. This was my daughter, my flesh and blood, sitting across from me and passing judgment.

“Obstacles? Like what?”

“Come on, Dad,” she sighed, rolling her eyes as if the answer were obvious. “The age difference, for one. And let’s not forget you were her boss. And she was my friend. It’s just... wrong. On so many levels. It’s just too complicated.”

Her words stung, each one a needle pricking at my already frayed patience. “So what? Love is complicated. Life is complicated.”

Lauren shook her head, a small, sad smile forming on her lips. “Sometimes, love isn’t enough.”

Her words hung in the air, a noose tightening around my hopes.

I felt cornered, as if my back were against the wall and the room was closing in.

“Is that what you believe?” I asked, my voice quieter than I intended.

“Right now? Yes,” she replied, her eyes searching mine, looking for some sign of surrender, of capitulation.

She took a deep breath, changing gears. “So, will you come dress shopping with me?”

I shook my head, incredulous. “A drive-through wedding? For my only child?”

“We don’t want a big fuss.”

“I’m not happy about this. You’re my only child. I wanted better for you.”

Lauren hesitated, her eyes darting away from mine. It was as if she’d struck a match only to realize she was standing next to a powder keg.

“I’ll think about it,” she finally said, her voice tinged with an uncertainty that I’d rarely heard from her.

The words felt like a small victory, but one that tasted like ash. My daughter was reconsidering her rush to the altar, yet the chasm between us remained, a yawning gap that seemed to widen with every passing second.

“Think about it?” I murmured, my voice laced with a bitterness I couldn’t conceal.

She looked up, her eyes meeting mine, and in that moment, I saw a flicker of the little girl she once was—a child torn between wanting her way and needing her father’s approval.

“I’ll think about it, Dad,” she said softly. “I promise.”

Back in my office, my stomach churned, a cauldron of chaos. I wanted to have hope that Amelia and I were salvageable, but as time wore on, that glimmer of hope began to fade.

The seconds turned into minutes, the minutes into hours. Each tick of the clock was a reminder of the unyielding passage of time, of opportunities missed and doors closed. Despite the whirl of activity in the casino below and the hum of the city beyond my window, a deafening silence settled over me.

I found myself drawn to the large windows overlooking the Strip, now awash in the full light of day. People down there were going on with their lives, oblivious to my world falling apart.

I put my hands on the glass, feeling its cool surface against my skin, and looked at my own reflection. There I was—a man unmoored, drifting in a sea of regret and lost chances.

For a brief moment, I closed my eyes, letting myself imagine a different reality. One where Amelia was still here, where our child had a future, where Lauren understood. But when I opened them again, the harsh light of reality pierced through, and I was back in my office, alone.

I sank into my chair, its familiar contours offering no comfort. My phone lay on the desk, silent and accusing.

No calls from Amelia. No messages. Nothing but a void where once there was laughter, love, and plans for a future that now would never be.

And so, I found myself pondering a life without Amelia, a life that just a week ago, would have seemed like a return to normalcy but now felt like a barren wasteland. It was a life I couldn't bear to face, yet one that I was being thrust into, ready or not.

And the emptiness of it all was a black hole, pulling me in, consuming everything I once held dear.

Chapter 29

Amelia

I'D LEFT THE HOSPITAL before the sun came up. The streets were still dark, just a hint of dawn's glow etching the horizon. An Uber pulled up to the main entrance, its headlights piercing the night.

As I slid into the backseat, the driver asked, "Where to?"

"6229 Spring Street, please."

I sunk into the seat, watching the city lights stream by in a blur. Emma's apartment couldn't come soon enough. I needed refuge, a safe harbor from the storm raging inside me.

By the time I arrived at Emma's building, faint rays of sunlight were creeping over the rooftops. I stood outside her door, suddenly unsure if I should disturb her this early. But I had nowhere else to go. I couldn't go back to my place, Jax would find me there. I knocked softly at first, then more insistently.

The door swung open, revealing Emma in pink pajamas, her hair mussed from sleep. Relief flooded through me at the sight

of her familiar face.

“Amelia? What are you doing here so early?” Her voice was gravelly but laced with concern.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s early. I just...I didn’t know where else to go.” My words came out shaky, on the verge of tears.

Emma’s face softened. “Oh honey, come in. Let me make you some tea.”

I stepped inside the cozy warmth of her apartment. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon enveloped me, remnants of the candle she had been burning the night before. For a moment, I allowed myself to exhale.

Emma busied herself in the kitchen, filling the teapot with water and setting it on the stove. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked gently.

I sank into her plush sofa, its softness soothing my tense muscles. “Jax and I...it’s over between us. For good this time.” Saying the words out loud brought a fresh wave of sadness. I blinked back tears, determined not to cry anymore over him.

Moments later, the teapot whistled, and Emma appeared with two mugs of steaming chamomile tea. She handed me one and sat down beside me. “So, what happened?”

I relayed the depressing details as she looked on with a concerned look on her face.

“I’m so sorry. I know how much you love him.”

I stared down at the tea, watching the steam coil and dance. “I did. I do. But he’ll never choose me over Lauren, and I can’t live like that.”

Emma nodded, her eyes brimming with empathy. “You deserve so much more than that.”

We sat in silence for a moment, sipping our tea. The floral aroma filled my senses, calming my roiling emotions.

“Thank you for this. For everything.” I managed a small smile. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, honestly.”

“Don’t mention it.” Emma squeezed my hand. “You can stay here as long as you need. *Mi casa es su casa.*”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Of course! What are friends for?”

A wave of gratitude washed over me. With Emma by my side, perhaps I could get through this heartbreak after all.

“I’ve gotta go back at some point and get Clawed.” He had enough food out to last a couple of days, but the litter box would need a clean. I was afraid what he’d do to my place if it overflowed.

“Why not just get him now?” she asked.

“I can’t go back there now. Jax still has a security guard posted at my place for who knows how long. I just need to figure out how to get around him without him telling Jax.”

“Do you want me to go?” she offered. A wave of relief washed over me.

“Would you?”

“Of course. He can’t follow *me* around.”

“That would be great!” Then it occurred to me. “You work for him, Emma. He just has to go to HR to find out where you live.”

“Oh, well, I guess there’s that.”

“But I shouldn’t be here long. Maybe go in a couple of days when I figure out what I’m going to do?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Emma lent me some comfortable clothes and her softest blanket. As I made myself comfortable on her couch, I knew I’d made the right choice coming here. I couldn’t go back to my apartment. Jax would find me there and make me change my mind and I couldn’t face him.

A moment of silence had passed before Emma finally spoke up. “Are you sure you want to end things with him?” Her eyes were a mix of concern and disbelief, as if she were peering into a puzzle she couldn’t solve.

“I have no choice. Lauren will never accept me, and Jax will never choose me over her. I’m making it easier for him. And me,” I replied, the words leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Did he actually say that? That he chooses Lauren?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. But I know that he will. Or has. He has no choice. That’s the kind of father he is. He will be loyal to her no matter what.”

Emma looked at me with furrowed brows. “Have you told him the baby’s okay?” her voice dropped an octave.

“No. I told him the baby didn’t make it.” It pained me to make this confession.

“Amelia! You can’t keep this from him.”

“I have to, Emma. If he knows the baby is okay, he won’t leave me alone. It would just complicate things. It’s easier this way.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s right. If someone were having my baby, I’d want to know about it.”

I knew what she was saying was right, but I didn’t think I could handle any more heartbreak. I had thought about it all night, going back and forth. This was a clean break, and I needed to move on with my life.

I never wanted to have to depend on anyone ever again, especially another Dawson. Staying here with Emma made me feel bad enough as it was, and I was loathe to ask my adoptive parents for help. But it was the only option for the time being.

“But you’re having an actual billionaire’s baby! You’d be set for life!”

“Money isn’t everything, Emma. I won’t let my child be a shameful secret. I don’t want him or her to know that their older sister hates their guts. And Jax would hate me eventually for being the reason Lauren cut him out of her life.”

She nodded, her eyes filled with a newfound understanding.

As we finished our tea, she asked, “So, what’s next? What are you going to do?”

I cupped the warm mug in my hands, contemplating. “I think I need a fresh start. Somewhere totally new.” Voicing the thought crystallized it. I needed to get away, far from all the memories here.

“Like where?”

“I don’t know...maybe Reno? I could stay with my adoptive parents for a bit while I figure things out.”

Emma nodded slowly. “That could be good for you. Distance and all that.”

“Will you come visit me?” I asked. As exciting as a fresh start sounded, the thought of leaving Emma behind made me sad.

She squeezed my hand. “Of course! As often as I can. We’ll stay in touch every day.”

Reassured, I smiled. “Then I think Reno is my next step.”

I needed distance. From Jax, from the life we’d shared, from all the memories that haunted me. If I saw him again, I knew those striking blue eyes would convince me to stay. His husky voice would soothe away all the hurt until I melted into his arms once more.

I couldn’t let that happen. As much as I loved him, this relationship was doomed from the start. Lauren would always remain number one in his life.

I needed a clean break, to sever the tie completely before I lost myself again. A new city, new people, new possibilities - it was time. Time to find out who I was without him. Time to build a future that was wholly my own.



The day I left, Emma hugged me tightly at the curb of the airport drop-off. “Call me when you land, okay? Clawed will be safe with me until I hear from you.”

I promised I would. “Just promise to give him back.”

“Now that I can’t do. He’s so damn sweet!”

“Don’t make me fight you.” I joked. We hugged once more before I headed inside.

I was sad to be leaving Clawed behind, but I wasn’t sure how Anna and David would feel about having a cat around the house. Emma saved my ass again by offering to keep him until I sent for him. His presence had become so comforting over the last few weeks I wasn’t sure how I would manage without him.

As the plane lifted into the clouds, I pressed my hand to the window. The city shrank beneath me as we ascended, the cars and buildings blurring into a patchwork of gray and white. I watched until it disappeared from view, swallowed by the clouds.

Below that blanket of white, my old life drifted into the distance. Quietly, I bid it goodbye. Above the clouds, endless

sky stretched before me. The promise of a new beginning.

As I settled into my seat, I placed a hand on my belly. Beneath my fingers, I felt the tiniest flutter. My breath caught in my throat. Could it be...?

There it was again — a gentle rumble against my palm, almost like little bubbles. My baby, saying hello for the very first time.

Tears sprung to my eyes even as a smile spread across my face. My heart surged with joy and love. “Hi baby,” I whispered. “It’s your mama.”

Those tiny kicks were the most beautiful sensation in the world. Proof of the new life growing inside me. My child, my family.

As I sat there, reveling in that magical first flutter, a wave of sadness washed over me. My baby would have to grow up without a father. The dream I’d clung to of Jax embracing fatherhood was just that — a dream.

But a father who wasn’t devoted heart and soul was no father at all. Better for my child to have just me than parents trapped in resentment and regret.

I placed both hands on my belly, holding my baby close. “It’s just you and me now, little one. We’re going to be okay. I promise.”

Saying the words aloud strengthened my resolve. We didn’t need anyone else. I would give this baby all the love in the world. And the adventures ahead would be ours for the taking.



The aroma of roasted chicken and garlic filled the air, a homey scent that should've comforted me. Yet, as I sat at Anna and David's dinner table in their Reno home, the scent seemed to accentuate the distance between us—like a perfume that didn't quite belong on my skin. The forks clinked against the plates, and the laughter and conversation felt like subtitles to a foreign film: understandable, but somehow not my language.

“Anna mentioned they're hiring an event planner at the hotel,” David said, his voice cutting through the fog of my thoughts.

“Yeah? I'll consider it,” I replied, gripping my fork a little too tightly. The nausea of morning sickness was a stealthy tide, rising in the pit of my stomach. How much longer could I keep this secret? How much longer could I maintain this façade?

I would have loved to tell them about the baby, but my fear of disappointing them won in the end.

Anna chimed in, her voice soft, almost as if she sensed my discomfort. “It could be a good opportunity, Amelia. Steady income and all.”

“Yeah,” David added. “It's a sensible option, especially if you're planning to stick around for a while.”

Their eyes met mine, and the question hung in the air, unspoken yet palpable: How long do you plan to stay?

The weight of that unasked question squeezed my chest. “Hopefully, not long,” I managed to say. “I just need a bit of time to get back on my feet.”

“Any plans?” Anna inquired, her eyes meeting mine.

“I was actually thinking of starting my own marketing agency,” I blurted out. I knew they would think it was a bad idea. Starting a new business would mean I would be with them a lot longer than they’d probably like.

They meant well, but as hard as they tried to make me feel like family, it made me realize that some things just can’t be forced. I knew they cared about me, but not like their own kids. It was just different.

Anna and David exchanged a quick glance before Anna spoke. “You’re brilliant, Amelia. You’d excel at it.”

“But maybe,” David added, pausing to choose his words carefully, “something more practical for now might be best. Get grounded first, you know?”

Practical. Grounded. Words that felt like anchors when all I wanted was to sail far away from everything that was tying me down. They were being nice, polite even, but the undercurrent of their words seemed to say, “Don’t overstay your welcome.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I said, mustering a smile that didn’t reach my eyes.

As I looked down at my plate, I realized I’d lost my appetite, not just for the food, but for this life of polite conversations and veiled expectations. This wasn’t home; it was a pit stop on

a road to an uncertain destination. And that uncertainty, that gnawing void, made each morsel of chicken, each garlic-infused bite, harder to swallow.

They were nice people, Anna and David. But every mannered smile and well-intentioned piece of advice only etched it deeper into my bones: I was a stranger here. An outsider in their world, just as I had been in everyone else's, except Jax. He felt like home.

The dinner continued, but I was already miles away, charting the unknown terrains of my future, a future where the word "home" didn't yet have a place. And for the first time, that emptiness felt heavier than any secret I was carrying.

The interview at the hotel was a breeze, thanks to Anna. She was the Director of Conventions and Events and had put in a good word for me.

Stepping into my new office felt like entering a different universe—a downsized version of reality where everything was compressed into tight, beige confines. Gone were the sweeping views of the city skyline that I'd grown accustomed to, replaced by sterile, off-white dividers that penned me into a cubicle. My chair was ergonomic but impersonal, a utilitarian piece that squeaked its protest with every shift of my weight.

As I glanced around at my new colleagues—faces I didn't know but would come to recognize—I felt a pang of something unidentifiable. Was it regret? Nostalgia? Or was it a seed of resilience, sprouting through the cracks of this humbling new soil?

This cubicle, as restrictive and uninspiring as it was, marked the first square of a new game board. A different kind of challenge, a different measure of success. My reality had been reshaped, boxed into a cubicle, but it didn't mean my dreams had to be. I was still the same woman who could whip up an ad with a flick of my wrist, who could turn a phrase until it shone like a gemstone. That woman was still in me, cubicle or no cubicle.

This may not have been a marketing job, but at least I was still able to use my creativity.

As I finally pressed my fingers to the keyboard, initiating the first clack in a string of many, a quiet but steadfast resolve settled over me. This was my life now, a life in a box. But boxes could be filled, and they could also be transcended. The walls around me weren't limitations; they were merely new boundaries waiting to be pushed.

As I settled in, thoughts of Jax swarmed my mind. How his touch ignited sparks, how his words once made me feel like the only woman in the world. And how deeply he'd let me down.

My phone buzzed, snapping me back. "Hello, this is Amelia."

"Hi Amelia, I'm Cheryl from Elevate Women. We're a non-profit organization supporting women in business. We're interested in hosting an event at your facility."

"Sure! When do you plan on holding your event?"

“The first weekend of November.”

“And how many attendees?”

“About a thousand.”

“I see. The only space we have available for that weekend holds ten thousand. It’s a little big for what you’re planning.”

“Oh, well we’d love to have that many attendees, but it was a last-minute decision and I’m not confident we’ll be able to attract that many people. We had a tough time getting all the board members together to approve it.”

My mind raced.

I knew I could help this woman market her event to gain more attendees. This was my chance. “What are you doing to market the event?”

“Well, we have a large email list and were planning on emailing our subscribers about it in a newsletter.”

“Is that it?”

“Well, what else did you have in mind?” Her voice laced with curiosity.

I pitched some ideas, and Cheryl was sold.

“So, how do I implement all this?”

I’d been wanting to start my own marketing agency and this was my shot. I had a baby to plan for and needed my own place. I could do all this in my sleep in the evenings and keep working at the hotel to save up some money. It was now or never. I decided to go for it and worry about the details later.

“Actually, I have a marketing agency on the side and am just getting started. Marketing is kind of my specialty. I could handle it for you.”

“Oh, that would be fabulous! That’s what Elevate Women is all about. Supporting women in business! So, what do you need from me?”

I asked her more questions about herself and her organization and told her I would come up with a presentation for her to review in a couple of days. She was thrilled, and hearing the excitement in her voice was music to my ears.

I hung up, a smile creeping onto my face for the first time in weeks. I could do this. Build a life for me and my child. On my terms. No billionaires needed.

As I looked around my cubicle, a bare space and blank walls, a newfound sense of optimism flooded me. I didn’t need a billionaire’s love to thrive. All I needed was the tenacity to seize the life I deserved, and the courage to walk away from one that was never truly mine.

And for the first time, I was sure of one thing: I could do it alone. Even if “alone” included the tiny heartbeat that fluttered within me. A secret I’d soon have to reveal, but for now, it was mine. And it filled me with a strength I didn’t know I had.

Chapter 30

Jax

I STARED BLANKLY AT the computer screen, the words and numbers blurring together. Even the strong coffee sitting untouched by my elbow did nothing to shake the fog from my brain.

It had been three days since I'd last seen Amelia, but not a moment passed she wasn't on my mind. Her absence left a constant, gnawing ache in my chest.

I forced myself to reread the same sentence for the tenth time, trying in vain to focus. But it was no use. With a defeated sigh, I shoved back from my desk and went to stand by the window to ponder what the hell I was even doing here.

My cell phone rang, jolting me from my brooding. I glanced at the name on the screen - it was Max, the guard I had watching Amelia's building. My pulse quickened.

"Any sign of her?" I answered urgently.

"No, but I thought you'd want to know, a blonde woman came by Ms. Amelia's apartment early this morning."

I gripped the phone tighter. “A blonde woman? Did you get a good look at her?”

“Average height and build. Short blonde hair just above her shoulders. She entered the apartment with a key and came out with the cat and a suitcase.”

My pulse quickened. It had to be Emma, Amelia’s friend. The one person who likely knew her location.

“Did you stop her? Or speak to her?”

“Yeah. She wouldn’t tell me anything. All she said was ‘Amelia is fine. Now fuck off’.”

“So, did you follow her?”

“No. My orders were to stand guard at Ms. Amelia’s apartment, so that’s what I did.”

Cripes. Sometimes these guys were useless.

“Alright. Thanks for letting me know. You can go ahead and leave. If Amelia isn’t there, there’s no point in hanging around.”

I stood up immediately to head downstairs. I had to find Emma and get her to talk. She was the link I needed to reach Amelia.

Adrenaline flooded my veins, propelling me into action. I would uncover the truth from Emma, whatever it took.

The blinking lights and cacophony of the casino assaulted my senses. I made a beeline for the main bar and scanned the

casino floor for the little blonde until I found her approaching the well at the bar beside me.

“Where is she?” I asked.

Emma’s head jerked up, eyes wide. “Mr. Dawson! What are you—”

“I know you collected Amelia’s things this morning. I’d appreciate it if you told me where she is.”

Emma hesitated. I could see the gears turning behind her startled gaze.

“Please,” I implored, softening my voice. “I’m worried sick about her.”

“She wouldn’t want me telling you anything,” Emma said quietly.

I raked a hand through my hair in frustration. “You know she’s in a fragile state right now after losing the baby. I need to make sure she’s alright.”

At the mention of a baby, Emma’s expression flickered. I leaned in closer. “If you care about her at all, you’ll tell me where she is.”

Emma shook her head slowly. “I’m sorry, Mr. Dawson. I promised her I wouldn’t say anything.”

I slammed my fist on the bar, making her jump, and realized that I needed to regain my composure. “I’m sorry. I’m very upset and need to know where she is.”

Her eyes flashed with anger at first, then she was cold. “I’m sorry, Mr. Dawson. You lost any right to that information when you broke her heart.”

I recoiled at her words. She was right, of course. I’d squandered any claim to Amelia through my own stupidity. I should have done more to reassure her. And I shouldn’t have let Lauren take control of the situation.

But I couldn’t let it end like this.

“Please,” I implored, softening my voice. “I know I’ve made mistakes, terrible mistakes. I need to make this right. Give me one last chance.”

Emma’s stare remained resolute. “I’m sorry, I wish I could tell you, but it’s not up to me. Amelia doesn’t want to be found. But she’s fine.”

I searched her face for any glimmer of sympathy, but found none. She would not relent.

I turned and left without another word, shame and defeat weighing heavily on my shoulders. I had ruined the last real shot at happiness I’d ever had. And now I was paying the price.

The weeks crawled by in a depressive haze. In the sober light of day, I poured myself into work, signing papers and barking orders on autopilot. But come evening, I found myself stumbling back to an empty house that had become a museum of broken dreams.

Every once in a while, I caved and went to talk to Emma, begging her to tell me where Amelia was. Begging her to help me reach her again.

She never did.

So, life went on. It had to.

Months passed by and I was finally settling into my new life. Or old life rather. I was back to where I started, back into my old routine, even if now my chest ached twice as much.

I'd lost my second chance at love, my second chance at a family.

I was back to being all about work.

I was just about to start reviewing our occupancy reports when Paul, my new and sub-par assistant buzzed my phone to let me know that Lauren was here.

Lauren would always be the light of my life, no matter how dark things got. I was glad she and I had made amends at least.

I wasn't happy about her ultimatum. It still stung that she had been so selfish as to not care about anyone but herself.

But even that was my fault. I'd been the one to make her think she was above everyone else when it came to me. That I'd always take her side.

The choice had been taken from me, but if it hadn't, for the first time ever, Lauren would have had a reality check. Because given the chance, I would have fought tooth and nail for my happiness.

For the chance to grow old with Amelia by my side.

Lauren opened the door and entered my office.

“Hey Kiddo. You here to grab some lunch?”

“Actually, I came to see if you wanted to come dress shopping with me today? For the wedding.”

“Of course,” I said, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Just let me finish up.”

As she smiled and bounced up, I felt the smallest spark of light pierce the gloom. If I couldn't have Amelia here, helping Lauren prepare for her big day gave me purpose again. She needed me, and I would be there.

We spent the afternoon being fawned over at the city's most exclusive bridal boutique. Lauren must have tried on twenty dresses, each more resplendent than the last. But none felt quite right to her.

I didn't mind the endless parade of satin and lace. Seeing her twirl and grin lifted my spirits more than I could express.

For those sunny hours, it was just me and my baby girl again.

“Okay, last one,” Lauren declared, disappearing behind the curtain once more.

I settled into the plush sofa, smiling to myself. Father of the bride - who would've thought? Just yesterday I was blowing raspberries on her round baby belly. Where had the years gone?

After a minute, the curtain whisked back. I looked up and my breath caught in my throat.

Lauren stood before me in a stunning ivory gown, the bead-encrusted bodice glittering like stars. The skirt fell to the floor in gossamer layers, making her seem ethereal, almost floating. Like an angel.

Tears blurred my vision and I did my best to blink them away. This radiant young woman was my child, my pride and joy. No matter what storms life threw at me, I'd helped create this remarkable human being.

“Wow,” I breathed. “You look...beautiful.”

Lauren's eyes misted over as she turned to admire herself in the mirror. “You really think so?”

I stood and moved beside her. “I don't just think so. I know so.”

She beamed, unique as a snowflake. Then her smile faltered. “I wish Mom could have been here.”

My heart ached, both for her and for myself. “Me too, baby girl. She would have loved to be here for you.”

Lauren dabbed at her eyes, trying not to smear her makeup. Then she turned and hugged me fiercely. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, sweet pea. Always.”

We held each other tightly. She would always be the most precious gift life had given me. And I would move heaven and earth to make her happy.

I sat back down on the sofa as Lauren admired what she saw in the reflection.

As I sat among these wedding dresses, I couldn't help but think about Amelia again and what could have been.

Looking at my daughter, my mind drifted, and soon it was not Lauren there anymore. I was imagining Amelia in a dress, just like this, just for me.

I could easily picture her coming down the aisle and us exchanging vows for the world to see.

She was mine. I loved her.

I loved her.

Oh God.

I thought love only came by once in a lifetime, but I'd been lucky to find it twice.

Only to lose it twice, because now she was gone.

I'd never had any intention of letting her go. I was always going to fight for her, but she didn't give me the chance.

And her absence in my life left a hole in my chest that nothing was able to fill.

Lauren had given me an ultimatum, yes, but I had been willing to put in the work to make her understand that I was not giving up on my happiness. If it took everything in me.

Lauren putting me in a position where I had to choose was bullshit. I would have never done the same to her and could

easily have done so. I wasn't exactly a big fan of Rob. After all, he had cheated on Amelia with my daughter, the prick.

Besides, no one should have to choose between one type of love and the other.

So, I wasn't going to let Amelia go. I couldn't!

I needed her more than I let myself believe.

I had to find a way to get her back.

So, why had I sat back and accepted my fate for so long?

Amelia leaving had made the decision for me. Her telling me she lost the baby took the wind out of my sails and I was adrift for a while.

I knew she had left me it to save me from having to hurt either her or my daughter. And I guess part of me was grateful.

But mostly, I was hurt. Devastated.

Damn it. The choice should have been mine from the start!

And when she left, I thought maybe she was done with me. Maybe being with her was wrong. I'd had my chance. I had my daughter to look after.

For a while, I thought I was doing the right thing. I wanted to respect their wishes. But it was too hard. Too painful. Too depressing.

I was a mess. Going through life just to have something to do. Working myself to exhaustion to try and forget only to be assaulted by memories as soon as I even looked away for a second.

This was no life. I wanted to be the man I was with Amelia.

So, I was done.

I'd never let someone else dictate any element of my life, ever. Why was I letting her choose for me?

At that moment, I decided I was going to find Amelia. Come hell or high water, I was going to find her and make her mine again. My only regret was waiting so long to make my move. Making her doubt her place in my life.

God, I missed her so much.

Just then, Lauren looked over at me in the reflection in the mirror and her smile turned into a frown. She turned around and approached me on the sofa before smoothing the billowy fabric behind herself so she could sit down.

“You know, I’ve been thinking a lot lately. About you and... Amelia.”

I tensed. We hadn’t spoken her name in months. “What about me and Amelia?”

She hesitated. “I know I wasn’t very...supportive. But seeing how hard this has been for you, I think maybe I made a mistake.” She bit her lip.

“It was wrong of you to do what you did. You know that, right?”

“I know. It’s just that I thought you would get over it quickly. But it’s been months and you haven’t been the same. I

haven't seen you this way since Mom..." She stopped herself momentarily. "Well, you know."

She looked down and traced the shape of lace on her lap with her finger.

"I know. But honey, Amelia was never just a whim or a fling. She made me want to do things again, she made me enjoy life again. She gave me a second chance at something I thought I'd never have again. Love. And I can't give up on that. In fact, I won't."

She looked deep in my eyes, tears pooling in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Dad. I had no idea. I was just so... I don't even know." Her eyes moved to her hands and she took a deep breath.

"If Amelia really makes you happy, then I think you should be with her."

I stopped short, stunned. "Really? Are you sure?"

Lauren smiled up at me. "Yeah. Amelia is a good person. I might not understand it, but if you want to be with her, I won't stand in your way."

Joy surged within me, so sudden it made me dizzy. "You really mean that?"

"Really. I want you to be happy, Dad."

I swept her up in another crushing hug. "Thank you, baby girl. You don't know how much this means."

She laughed. "Okay, okay! Don't get all mushy on me now."

We walked back to the car, my step lighter than it had been in ages. Hope bloomed anew in my heart. I would find Amelia and bring her home, no matter what it took.

Bursting into my office, I made a beeline for my computer, fingers flying across the keyboard. I scoured the internet, determined to uncover any trace of Amelia.

“Whoa there, somebody’s on a mission!”

I glanced up to see Zeke sauntering in, two cups of coffee in hand. He offered me one as he settled into the chair across from me. “Looks like someone got their spark back. What’s got you all fired up?”

I grabbed the coffee gratefully. “I’m trying to track Amelia down.”

“No kidding!” Zeke broke into a wide grin. “Well, it’s about damn time. What brought this about?”

“I guess I had a wakeup call of sorts.”

He frowned. “What about Lauren?”

“Lauren gave me her blessing, but even if she hadn’t, I realized I don’t really have a life without Amelia. I was back to my old self. An empty guy who just goes with the flow and isn’t living. I want to live, and for that, I need Amelia.”

“Good for you! Any idea why made Lauren change her tune?”

I shook my head. “No idea. But it’s like a huge weight has been lifted.”

“Maybe a talk with her Uncle Zeke made a difference,” Zeke said with a wink. “I always knew our girl would come around.”

Something clicked into place. “It was you? You talked to Lauren?”

“Maybe I helped nudge her in the right direction. But she loves you, man. She just wants you to be happy.”

I clapped him on the shoulder, overcome with gratitude. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, brother. Thank you.”

“Anytime.” He stood and moved toward the door. “Now go get your girl! I can’t look at your sour mug around here anymore.”

I turned back to my computer, resolve renewed. I would scour every corner of the Earth if I had to. Nothing would stop me from finding her.

Hours later, I was no closer to a lead. Frustrated, I pushed away from my desk and headed downstairs. One person here still held the key - Emma. This time, I had to make her understand how desperately I needed that information.

I found Emma in the poker room and pulled her aside. “Emma. Please,” I implored. “I know I have no right to ask anything of you. I need to find Amelia and make this right between us.”

Emma crossed her arms, unmoved. “I think she made her feelings pretty clear.”

“Let me talk to her, face to face. If she tells me herself it’s over, I’ll accept that. But please, give me the chance.”

Emma chewed her lip, clearly conflicted. I pressed on. “I love her, Emma. I know I’ve made mistakes, but I need her with me. And Lauren has given us her blessing. There’s nothing in our way anymore. Don’t I at least deserve the opportunity to fight for her?”

I could see her resolve melting away.

“Please, Emma.”

Finally, she sighed. “Alright. She’s in Reno. Staying with her parents. She got a job working at the Nero Hotel. In conventions and special events.”

A fierce joy surged through me. “Reno! Thank you, Emma. Thank you. I’m giving you a raise!”

I pulled her into an impulsive hug. She stood stiffly for a moment before patting my back awkwardly. But her eyes held the barest hint of warmth. “Don’t make me regret this.”

I stepped back, cheeks flushed. “You won’t, I promise. I’m getting her back.”

Emma just shook her head with a wry smile as I hurried off. I had a destination now - Reno. And a mission: to pour my heart out to Amelia, on my knees if need be, and convince her to give me another chance.

I would board my jet first thing in the morning. Tomorrow I would see her sweet face again and try to make things right

between us. But tonight, I needed to head to Tiffany's and get her a ring. The biggest, brightest ring they had.

One more chance was all I needed. This time, I wouldn't let her go.



The Nero Hotel and Casino in Reno stood among the pine trees and a slew of hotels. As I walked through the revolving glass doors, the scent of money and possibility filled the air. But I wasn't there for blackjack or a roll of the dice. I carried a different kind of gamble: two dozen long-stem roses in one hand and a small blue Tiffany's box containing a five-carat diamond ring in the other.

"Excuse me," I stopped an employee passing by, his nametag reading *Bill*. "I'm looking to speak with someone in conventions and special events. Could you point me in the right direction?"

"That department would be in the corporate offices. Fourth floor."

"Thanks," I replied, my pulse quickening. The elevator ride seemed to stretch for an eternity, each ding of the passing floors amplifying my anticipation. I stepped out onto the plush carpeting of the fourth floor and navigated through the maze of cubicles and glass doors until I found the corporate suite. My heart sank when I walked in and didn't see her.

Another employee walked by. A woman in her thirties with a stern expression.

“Excuse me, Miss. I’m looking for Amelia Scott. Can you point me in the right direction?”

“Amelia? She’s probably at the convention hall. There’s a big convention going on today.”

Disappointment gnawed at me, but I didn’t let it show. “Thanks,” I said, forcing a smile.

The descent to the convention center was a plummeting roller coaster of emotions. When the elevator doors parted, I surged into the bustling activity of the convention hall. The clamor of voices and flashing event signs became a blur as I pushed through the crowds. Room after room, I scanned faces and peered into corners, but Amelia was nowhere to be found.

Then, at the end of a long corridor, I found it—the last convention room. I stepped inside, and my eyes immediately found her. Her back was to me, but I’d recognize that silhouette anywhere—the delicate bend of her waist, the way she stood with such purpose. My arms, burdened with roses and ring, dropped to my sides, limp.

My heart stopped when she turned to the side, revealing a swollen belly under her professional attire.

She was pregnant. *Still* pregnant.

Reality splintered as I pieced together the weight of that moment.

After all the grief, the future I thought I had lost was standing here in front of me, ready for the taking. It knocked the wind out of me.

I felt a brief pang of hurt that she had lied. She kept this secret from me and this was no small thing. But I didn't want to waste another second dwelling on the past when I could be moving forward with my life. With *our* life, as a family.

Amelia turned, her eyes meeting mine. Time froze. The crowd around us became a faded backdrop to our locked gaze. A sea of emotions swirled in her eyes—surprise, vulnerability, a glimmer of hope?

I took a step forward, then another, until I stood just a few feet away from her. She hung her head down, looking at her belly and placed her hands on it. She bit her lip and I could see her brows furrow even with her head down.

“Jax, I...I'm so sor—” she shook her head.

“Amelia,” I cut her off, my voice tinged with the desperation I could no longer contain. “I'm not gonna lie and say I'm not hurt, but I understand you were protecting yourself.” She looked up at me with tears coating her tormented eyes. “I know I've been a colossal idiot. I stayed silent when I should have spoken up. But I can't keep silent anymore, baby. I've been a mess without you.”

Her eyes glistened, but she said nothing, waiting.

“Every day without you feels like a year in purgatory.” I took another step closer. “You made me do what I thought wasn't possible. You made me love again. I love you, Amelia. So fucking much it hurts. And I don't ever want to be without you ever again.”

I dropped to one knee, the roses laid gently at her feet, and opened the Tiffany box to reveal the sparkling diamond. “Amelia Scott, will you marry me?”

For a heartbeat, the room held its breath. Then Amelia’s eyes overflowed with tears, her lips trembling as she whispered, “What about Lauren?”

“Lauren has given us her blessing. She came around in the end. But whether she did or didn’t, it wouldn’t have changed anything. I love you, Amelia. And I want us to be a family.”

“Are you sure?” she asked softly.

“I have never been more sure about anything in my entire life.”

A tear escaped her eyes and her mouth pulled back into a beaming smile. “Yes, Jax. Yes.”

The room erupted in applause, but all I heard was the symphony of her acceptance, drowning out everything else. I rose to my feet, slipped the ring onto her finger, and pulled her into a kiss that sealed our forever.

As we broke away, I leaned my forehead against hers. “I can’t wait to meet our little miracle,” I whispered, my hand gently caressing her belly.

She smiled, tears of joy still glistening in her eyes. “I can’t wait for you to meet him.”

“Him?”

“Yes. We’re having a boy.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. A boy.

My mind raced, conjuring up images of a miniature version of myself, with Amelia's eyes and my stubborn chin. Football games in the backyard, teaching him to ride a bike. Little girls were wonderful and I would have been thrilled either way, but the weight of it all crashed into me. It was a wonderful, overwhelming sensation.

I cupped Amelia's face.

"A son," I murmured, my voice thick with emotion. "Our son."

Amelia nodded, her eyes glistening.

I rested my hand on her belly again, feeling the warmth beneath her dress. The world seemed to fade away until it was just the three of us. I leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "I promise, Amelia, I'll be the best father I can be. For him, for us."

She smiled, intertwining her fingers with mine. "I know you will, Jax."

We stood there, lost in the promise of a future filled with love, laughter, and a little boy who would change our lives forever.

Chapter 31

Amelia

THE BANQUET HALL BUZZED—A cacophony of laughter and clinking glasses. But all I heard was the steady thump of my heart.

Jax's arms, solid and reassuring, held me as if I were the only real thing in a world that had been spinning out of control. I stood in his arms, trembling with excitement.

“You okay?” His voice was a warm rumble against my ear.

Tears spilled over, but they were tears of joy, each one a liquid diamond. “More than okay. I'm... I can't even find the words.”

His eyes locked onto mine, their intensity stealing my breath away. “How about we escape this place for a bit? Grab some lunch?”

My eyes darted to Melanie, my manager, for approval. She stood at the edge of the crowd not far from us. Her eyes were glossy and she was fanning them to keep the tears from falling.

“Go!” she urged, shooing us away with a teary grin.

Hand in hand, we maneuvered through the labyrinth of congratulations and well-wishes until the clamor of the banquet hall faded behind us.

“I could murder a pizza right now,” I said, the words surprising me a little. “There’s a really great pizza place in the casino.”

Jax chuckled. “We’ve come full circle. Pizza it is.”

It occurred to me that the first meal we ever ate together was pizza, at my apartment in Vegas the night I moved in.

The aroma of melting cheese and baking crust enveloped us as we stepped into the cozy pizza joint. It felt like an alternate universe—casual and homey, far removed from the opulence of the Crown Resort. We settled into a booth, and Jax leaned across the table, eyes intent on mine.

I looked at him and I couldn’t believe he was really here.

He was a study in contrasts—the rugged edge of his jaw, the fine lines that framed his eyes whenever he smiled, the way his tailored suit somehow seemed at odds with the untamed muscular physique underneath.

My gaze lingered on his lips, remembering the taste of them, the firm yet gentle way they’d pressed against mine.

And those eyes, those rich blue eyes, locked onto mine, and I felt as if he could see into every hidden crevice of my soul. It was disarming and exhilarating all at once.

He was so incredibly handsome, but it was more than that. It was the way he looked at me, like I was the axis on which his world spun. A wave of something intense and primal rushed through me, leaving my heart pounding in its wake.

I had to remind myself to breathe.

“So, what have you been up to?” he asked, picking up a menu but not really looking at it.

I took a deep breath. “Well, I started my own marketing agency. I’ve already got three clients.” My fingers nervously twirled the shiny ring on my finger. “A couple more, and I’ll have enough to quit my job and run the agency full time.”

His eyes lit up. “That’s incredible, Amelia. I’m so proud of you. You’re going to crush it. What’s it called?”

“Fair Lady Marketing.”

Jax’s smile spread from ear to ear. “Ah, the Eliza Doolittle transformation.”

I laughed. “Exactly.”

His expression turned tender. “And how are you feeling? With the pregnancy, I mean.”

“I have another ultrasound later today. You can come if you want.”

His response was instant and intense. “Fuck yes! Of course!”

The waitress took our orders, and when she walked away, a silence stretched between us—a comfortable one, but tinged with the weight of things unsaid.

“Jax, I’m so sorry. I should’ve told you the truth about the baby,” I blurted out, unable to hold it in any longer.

Jax reached across the table, covering my hand with his. “It killed me when you told me, but what was even worse was not being able to be there for you. I was hurting so much, but all I could think about was how much more you should be hurting.”

“I never meant to hurt you, Jax. Just the opposite. I tried to give you a clean break. Give you your relationship with your daughter. But I should have never done it at the expense of your relationship with our son. I’m really, truly sorry.”

God, I had hurt this man so much. The man I loved had suffered for months because of me. Because I thought I knew better. What a waste of time. I’d been so stupid.

“Amelia, you don’t have to apologize. I get it, I really do. I’m just grateful the baby is still here, and healthy.”

I bit my lip. “Does Lauren know?”

His eyes met mine squarely. “I didn’t even know, so no, she doesn’t know.”

My stomach tightened at the mention of Lauren. “And when she finds out? About being a big sister?”

Jax’s thumb traced soothing circles on my hand. “This is my life. *You* are my life. If she has a problem with it, then she’ll just have to get over it, okay? Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere, do you hear me?”

The words were a balm, but uncertainty still flickered in the recesses of my mind. “What changed her mind about us?”

He sighed. “She saw how miserable I was without you. She said maybe she’d been too harsh and gave me her blessing.”

“That’s... that’s good,” I murmured, relief mingling with a still-fresh sense of disbelief.

His eyes sparkled with unspoken plans. “Lauren and Rob are pushing back their wedding date. Six months from now, they’ll have a proper wedding.”

“In July? In Vegas?”

“No, the ceremony will be in Malibu. We’ve got a small hotel there, but it’s more charming and intimate. They don’t want a big fuss.” He took a swig of water. “So, will you come with me?”

My eyes flicked away for a moment, then back to his. “Let’s see how she reacts to the baby news first.”

Jax chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Our pizzas arrived then, hot and inviting. Yet, as delicious as they were, the meal felt like an interlude, a short break in a day that had already changed my life forever.

“So, I’d like to take you back to Vegas with me. Can I send for your belongings at your parents’ house?” he asked, as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“I can’t go back to Vegas now. I need to put in my two-weeks’ notice first,” I said. “But yes, eventually.”

He leaned back, satisfied. “Well, I’ve booked a suite at the hotel. Care to stay with me?”

My heart did a somersault. “Yes!”

The rest of the day at work was a surreal blur. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was floating, untethered from a reality I no longer recognized. I closed out emails, placed food orders for another trade show, but my thoughts were a tangled mess of awe and wonder.

Jax was here. I was engaged to the love of my life. It was as if happiness had burst through my chest, expanding until I thought I might explode.

I thought about the moment I finally told Anna and David that I was pregnant. I wasn't hardly eating anything from the morning sickness and Anna was starting to worry. I was barely able to button my pants and realized that I needed to finally tell them.

They were shocked of course. They asked questions, too many questions, and I just gave vague answers. I didn't know how to tell them that I had been sleeping with my much older boss, so I told them it was with a guy I had been dating back in Vegas, and things didn't work out.

They feigned happiness, but I could sense their disapproval, hovering over our heads like a dark cloud.

I had felt like a stranger in their home, like an unwelcome guest, and I was just starting to look for my own place when Jax showed up. And now, he had reentered my life, like a ray of sunshine piercing through the gloom.

The afternoon waned as Jax and I made our way to the doctor's office. It was freezing cold outside, a stark contrast to the Vegas heat the last time I'd seen him.

The waiting room was filled with the muted colors of anxious anticipation—mothers-to-be, some alone, some with partners, flipping through magazines and stealing glances at the clock.

When they finally called us in, my heart pounded with a mix of excitement and regret. I was overjoyed that Jax was here with me to see our baby on the screen, but also sad that he had already missed so much of my pregnancy. This was time that he could never get back and lying to him was my biggest regret. I thought I was making things easier for him, for both of us, but it was no excuse.

He really let me off the hook even though I'm not sure I deserve it.

I learned my lesson.

All I could do now was enjoy the here and now, with him, at last.

We sat together in the dim room, staring at the monitor as the technician squirted cold gel on my belly.

And then, there it was. A fuzzy image took shape on the screen, but to me, it was clear as day.

Our baby. Our future.

I looked over at Jax, his eyes wide and shining. He squeezed my hand, and the world fell away. It was just us—our little,

growing family—and the overwhelming reality of our love.

“I can’t wait to meet you, buddy,” he whispered, as if he could speak directly to the tiny life inside me.

The moment was so charged, so full of promise, that it left me speechless. All I could do was nod, my eyes mirroring the emotion in his.

Our next stop was Anna and David’s house. It was a modest suburban house that had been my home but never quite felt like it. As Jax pulled into the driveway, I felt a sudden apprehension clutch at me.

“I’m excited to finally meet your parents.”

“They’re just my adoptive parents,” I reminded him, trying to temper his expectations.

He looked at me with an earnest expression that made me weak in the knees. “I’m excited to meet them, Amelia. Adoptive or not, they’re important to you. And I’d like you to meet my parents when we get back to Vegas too, if that’s okay with you.”

I felt like I was dreaming. This couldn’t possibly be real. I’d kept the baby from him and he was acting like I hadn’t told him a horrific lie that most people would never recover from. And now this.

The guilt I felt for what I had done was eating at me, but I did my best to push forward and not let it affect this wonderful day.

Finally, after a drive up a long, icy road, we arrived. I'd left the house earlier that day to go to work like any other day. Stepping back into the house felt like walking into another lifetime. Anna and David looked up from their evening news, their faces registering shock, then awe, as they took in Jax Dawson—billionaire, Las Vegas celebrity, and now, my fiancé.

“Anna, David. I'd like you to meet Jax Dawson.”

“Mr. Dawson, It's so nice to meet you. What brings you here?”

“Well, Mr. and Mrs....” He looked over at me and I realized he didn't know their last names.

“Barnes,” I interjected.

“Mr. and Mrs. Barnes,” he continued, “I came here to propose to Amelia. I *have* proposed, actually.”

“We're engaged,” I announced, the words tinged with a defiance I hadn't intended.

“*This* is the man you were dating in Vegas? The father of your baby?” Anna questioned.

I had learned long ago that Russians were quite blunt and didn't have much of a filter. At least Anna didn't.

“It is,” I confirmed.

Anna's hand flew to her mouth, her light Russian accent breaking through as she spoke. “Oh, Amelia, this is such good news. We've been so worried.”

David extended a hand to Jax, who shook it firmly. “Well, then, I guess congratulations are in order.”

“Thanks, Mr. Barnes, I appreciate that.”

The evening unfolded like a scene from a dream. Jax charmed them, speaking of his love for me and his excitement about our future.

I could see that Anna and David were impressed, genuinely so, and for the first time, I felt their approval.

I wished I had received their approval for something that I had accomplished, but I was grateful for this small win.

As we said our goodbyes, Anna pulled me aside. “You’ve made a good choice, Amelia. We’re so happy for you.”

Her words, so simple yet filled with meaning, filled me with a warmth I had never felt from her. David patted Jax on the back as we stepped out into the night, where a light snow was beginning to fall.

The drive back to the hotel was quiet, the silence filled with the electricity of the day’s events. Snowflakes danced in the air, catching the glow of the streetlights, as if the world was joining in our celebration.

When we arrived at the hotel, Jax pulled the rental car up to valet and turned to me, his eyes searching mine. “Today has been...incredible.”

“It’s the first day of the rest of our lives,” I said, the words tinged with wonder and a little bit of awe.

We made our way to the hotel suite, a luxurious space that suddenly felt like the most intimate place in the world. As the door closed behind us, Jax pulled me into his arms, his eyes locking onto mine as if he could see straight into my soul.

“I love you, Amelia,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Before I could respond, his lips met mine, and the world fell away. It was a kiss that spoke of promises and dreams, of a future that was ours for the taking.

And as I melted into his embrace, I felt it—the overwhelming, radiant joy that flooded my being, leaving no room for doubt or fear.

When our lips finally parted, I was able to tell him what I had first felt long ago.

“I love you too.”

He pulled me into his strong embrace. Our lips met tenderly at first, a whisper-soft brushing that sent a shiver down my spine. Then the kiss deepened, tongues tangling, mouths exploring with a rising hunger. I ran my hands over the firm planes of his chest, reacquainting myself with every contour.

His fingers trailed down my neck, along my collarbone, igniting a burn deep in my core.

I leaned into his touch, aching for more.

His hands continued downward, caressing the sensitive skin of my breast, thumb grazing over the taut peak. I gasped at the spike of sensations.

Our gazes locked, filled with unspoken longing.

He trailed kisses down my neck, nipping at the tender flesh as my pulse quickened.

I fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, hands shaking with need. I slipped it over his shoulders, revealing the muscular frame I had missed so much. I splayed my fingers across his chest, feeling the heat of his skin.

He peeled off my dress agonizingly slow, hands skimming every inch of newly exposed skin. The cool air puckered my skin, contrasting deliciously with the building fire within me.

Soon, we were intertwined atop the butter-soft sheets, bare flesh against bare flesh. The warmth of his body enveloped me like a cocoon. As I laid on my side, he caressed my swollen belly with reverence, then continued his sensuous path lower. I arched into him helplessly, dizzy with want.

His fingertips found my slick folds, teasing and tantalizing me with gentle strokes. I trembled as his fingers explored me, sending wave after wave of pleasure through my body. With a gentle nudge, he pried open my legs wider before pressing his thumb to the bundle of nerves at the apex. Intense pleasure shot through me like a jolt of electricity, and I cried out in delight.

He leaned forward and kissed me deeply, drawing on my lower lip before exploring further down with his tongue. His hands cupped my hips as his lips worked their magic, sending tremors cascading through every inch of me until I was panting and breathless with need.

I could feel him trembling with desire against my body as he pulled away slightly to gaze into my eyes. He shifted himself gently between my legs from behind, mindful of my growing bump and pressed the head of his length against me. With one slow thrust, he penetrated deep inside me—filling me up completely in the most exquisite way imaginable—and a pleasure so intense it was almost pain shot through me.

We moved in exquisite rhythm.

With every breath, with every thrust, we became one.

Pleasure coiled within me, tighter and tighter, until finally, I let it go—surrendering to an explosion of bliss that pressed me up against the edge of the bed. My muscles tightened around him as he gripped my breast, groaning out in relief as he followed me into ecstasy.

Words failed to describe the feeling of Jax inside me, of his flesh pressed against mine. The sensation was so powerful it bordered on the spiritual. I felt elation, joy, love, peace, all swirling within me in an all-encompassing feeling of warmth and belonging.

I rolled over and saw him gazing at me with a solemn expression.

“I’ve been in pieces without you, Amelia. Now I finally feel I’ve been put back together.”

My heart swelled with love for him. I could have stayed in this moment forever, never tiring of its perfection.

As the last waves of pleasure subsided, we sank into the bed, our limbs intertwined, hearts thudding in sync.

After a lifetime of emptiness, and searching to fill a void that had always been present within me, I had never felt so loved and so complete.

I nuzzled into the hollow of Jax's shoulder as he pressed a kiss to my temple. No words were needed in those peaceful moments - just the comfort of each other's arms.

As we laid in the plush bed, catching our breath, he caressed my arm softly before his voice broke.

"I have a confession to make."

"What's that?"

"I bought that Porsche Boxter for you the day I gave it to you."

"Oh, my God!" I slapped his chest. "Why didn't you just say so?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't have accepted it."

"I probably wouldn't have." I laughed.

Another moment of silence passed.

"I have a confession to make too," I said.

He looked at me inquisitively. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah...That day at your house three years ago, when we were over to use the pool...I knew you were watching me get dressed in the bathroom."

His head jerked down toward me. “You did?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know. I guess I liked it.” I looked up at him to see his reaction.

His eyes went wide. “Wow.”

“You should have stayed. I was about to give you a really good show.” I giggled.

“How about you show me what I missed?” he growled as he turned toward me, pulling me close and giving me a soft bite on my neck. He ran his hand down my round belly. Just then, the baby kicked.

“Holy shit, this kid can kick! Maybe he’ll be a soccer player someday,” he mused.

“You have no idea.”

This was it. This was us. I drank in the wonder in Jax’s crystal blue eyes as he felt our baby kicking for the first time, responding to his voice, and I realized that I finally had the family that I’d always envisioned.

And as the snow continued to fall outside, blanketing the world in a soft, silent promise, I knew that we were just beginning to write our own story, one that would be filled with love, laughter, and endless possibility.

Epilogue

Amelia

I STARED AT MY reflection in the opulent mirror of the bridal suite at Jax's Malibu retreat, The Crestview Hotel. The shimmering fabric of my wedding gown hugged my curves like a second skin, the intricate lacework creating a pattern that looked like it was painted on me.

"So, what do we think?" I asked my bridesmaids, Lauren and Emma. Emma's eyes met mine in the mirror.

"Wow. You look amazing," she said, her eyes glazed over.

"You really think so?"

"Yes, you look perfect." She clutched her hands over her heart.

"I'm so jealous you're going to honeymoon in the Maldives. Have you got any more single billionaires laying around?"

Laughter bubbled up around the room, but it froze on my lips as I caught sight of Lauren, clutching her belly, her face pale.

“You okay?” I shifted my gaze from the mirror to her.

“Yeah,” she exhaled, her hand fluttering to her stomach.
“Just morning sickness. Got any tips?”

Lauren and Rob were married seven months earlier at this very hotel and were already expecting their first baby.

I was happy for them. Jax got to know Rob a little better and had warmed up to him. He wasn't a bad guy really. I couldn't blame Rob for being nervous around Jax at first given the circumstances of his and Lauren's relationship.

Rob was taking over his family's sheet metal company, which supplied sheet metal to just about every construction company in Vegas, so he was doing quite well for himself. That was a relief to Jax, I was sure.

“I was so sick when I was pregnant with Landon. The only thing that helped was sniffing lemons,” I said, my eyes flicking to a bowl of fresh fruit on the counter. “It worked wonders. There are some lemons over there, go try it.”

“I'm willing to try anything at this point.”

As if summoned by the mention of his name, Landon crawled over in my direction, his cherubic face glowing.
“Mama, mama, mama.”

My heart swelled, exploding with a love so fierce it felt almost painful. I scooped him up, his fine, blonde hair tickling my nose. “Hey, you.”

Landon was a rambunctious little baby, and he was the spitting image of Jax. I now understood what Jax meant by

babies consuming all of your time. He wasn't even a year old yet and already, I couldn't take my eyes off him for a second. He got into everything and was already taking his first steps. I was terrified what he would do once he started walking around.

“Speaking of billionaires,” Emma nudged Lauren, her eyes twinkling. “What’s the status on Griffin, Gabriel, and Zeke?”

Lauren’s lips twitched. “I believe Griffin may finally be taken, Gabriel’s into strippers last I heard, and Zeke? He’s a perpetual bachelor with no interest in settling down any time soon. But I’m not sure. My dad doesn’t really tell me much about their private lives.”

“Damn.” Emma sighed. “I think I can charm one of them into changing their minds.”

“Emma, I think you just might be right,” I assured her. We all had a good laugh.

Lauren and I had mended our relationship, but it wasn't like it was before. Too much had happened. But Emma and I had become very close and I'd asked her to be my maid of honor. I was so grateful when she said yes.

Just then, the door swung open, and my adoptive mom, Anna, waltzed in, trailing the wedding planner like a shadow. “The guests are all seated and It’s time to get started,” the planner announced, clipboard in hand.

My heart started pounding against my ribcage and I suddenly felt like I might faint.

“You okay, Lee?” Lauren asked me.

“Yeah, fine. I just can’t believe I’m about to get married. Is this really happening?”

“It is. But it’s going to be wonderful,” she assured me.

Anna took Landon from me, her eyes misty. “See you out there, darling. You look beautiful!”

I didn’t have my real father around to walk me down the aisle, I didn’t even know who he was, but David stepped up to the plate, and I was glad to have him there. He and Anna never completely felt like family, but they did their best for me and I appreciated them just the same.

The world blurred at the edges, like a dreamy vignette, as I took each step down the aisle. My heart pounded a rhythm only I could hear—until I saw him.

Jax stood there, a figure carved from a fantasy, impossible and real all at once.

His dirty blond hair was meticulously combed, framing a face that could make Thor envious, setting off those striking blue eyes that had captured me from the first time we met. They were the kind of eyes that told stories without words, promising adventures and quiet moments all at once.

But as my eyes locked onto Jax’s, clarity hit me like a bolt of lightning.

I was actually marrying this man. The man of my dreams.

The disbelief ricocheted through me, mingled with an elation so profound I thought I'd burst.

I told myself I wouldn't, but as I approached the altar, I burst into tears the moment I saw Jax's face. He was almost red trying to hold back tears as he watched me walk down the aisle, and I never thought anyone would look at me the way he was looking at me then.

We exchanged vows and he placed the ring on my finger with steady hands, and it felt like we were moving in slow motion.

After we said our 'I do's, and as his lips descended on mine, I drowned in a happiness so complete it was almost terrifying. What could I have possibly done to deserve such happiness?

After the reception, Jax's strong arms hefted me up as if I were as light as a feather, and he carried me across the threshold of our suite. "Welcome to the honeymoon phase," he grinned, setting me down gently on the bed.

"As much as I'm looking forward to honeymooning in the Maldives," I began, my voice tinged with speck of regret, "I can't wait to get home and get back to work."

Fair Lady Marketing had just picked up another huge client and I was anxious to dive into the Starlight Productions campaign.

Starlight was a huge motion picture company that had quite a few blockbusters over the years. I had over thirty clients under my belt, but this was the biggest by far.

Jax's eyes sparkled. "Well, I'm thinking you're gonna need more office space."

He was developing a new high-rise office building and reserved the top floor for Fair Lady Marketing. Construction was almost done and I was excited to move into my new office space.

I stared at him, incredulous. "Two floors?"

He nodded. "Well, I'm going to need you to put together a marketing package for the Las Vegas Seals. We're going to be finalizing the deal as soon as we get back to Vegas. And let's not forget the Rachel Dawson Foundation. At this rate, you're going to hit the Fortune 500 before the building's even done."

"I just can't believe it. I can't believe this is my life."

"Believe it, baby. You've done well for yourself and it's well deserved. You're amazing at what you do." He loosened his tie and began unbuttoning his vest. "How are you getting on with the RoboGenius product?"

"Honestly? I want to rebrand the whole thing. I'm not crazy about the name RoboGenius. I should ask the AI bot to come up with some ideas for a better name for itself. But Griff and Gabe put a team together to help implement some of my requests. I think it could be a real powerhouse in the digital marketing industry."

Jax and his partners had acquired the AI tech company in the end and had massive plans to expand its applications. I had

already used it quite a bit to generate content for some clients, but it could have definitely used a little improvement.

“Oh, and we have a meeting with the President about it,” Jax added.

“The president of what?”

“Of the United States. He thinks it could be useful in military applications and wants to discuss a government contract.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s huge!”

“No shit.” He kicked off his shoes and joined me on the bed. “Zeke has had a permanent smile on his face since we got the call and hasn’t let me live down the fact that I was apprehensive about the acquisition.

I had grown quite fond of Zeke. He was intimidating at first, but the more time I spent with these four billionaires, the more I learned that they were just like anyone else, except with fancier cars.

A soft sigh escaped my lips. “I miss Landon already.”

Jax’s face softened. “I do too, but my parents are spoiling him rotten as we speak. He’ll be just fine.”

Jax’s parents, Ed and Linda, were the nicest people imaginable. They were so warm and accepting of me from the start.

I was nervous about how they would react to Jax bringing home a woman half his age, but if they had a problem with it,

they did a great job of hiding it. They adored Landon and showered him with love and attention. They were the grandparents I always wished I'd had.

Jax loosened his tie and moved toward a gleaming bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket, popping it open with a flourish. "To us," he said, offering me a glass.

"Oh, no thanks," I declined.

"What? Don't leave me hangin', Mrs. Dawson. It's our wedding night and we need to make a toast."

"I can't." I shook my head, my heart pounding in my chest.

His brow furrowed. "Why not?"

Rising, I rifled through my purse, finally pulling out a small rectangle. I handed it to him, my breath caught in my throat.

Jax stared at the ultrasound picture, his eyes widening. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes," I whispered. I wasn't sure how he was going to take the news.

His lips pulled into a wide smile as he got a closer look at the image in his hand and my heart melted. "Wait...Is this...?"

"Twins," I confirmed.

For a moment, he looked shell-shocked. Then his eyes met mine, ablaze with a joy so raw it sent shivers down my spine.

"Twins," he whispered, the word imbued with a wonder that echoed in the very depths of my soul.

And as he pulled me into his arms, I realized that for the first time in my life, I was hurtling toward a future that didn't terrify me. Because whatever came our way, I knew that I'd finally found my soulmate, and we could handle anything life threw at us. My dream of sitting at a dinner table, seats filled with little ones, had finally become a reality.

The End

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Fake Fiancé Next Door

Waking up with amnesia in a hospital, engaged to a billionaire, sounds like a bad Hallmark movie. Sadly, this is now my life.

Cocky doesn't begin to describe Griffin Sterling. But I could think of a few other choice words.

After cursing him out for making me believe we were engaged, I begin to notice the biceps begging to be let out of that \$900 tailored shirt.

And those stormy grey eyes that that melt my soul from a mile away.

But there's no time for that nonsense.

I have a case to fight in court.

Unfortunately, my fiancé is the person I'm fighting against.

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Fake Fiancé Next Door

Chapter 1

(Sneak Peek)

“You can’t say that about him, Juliet! He’s the defendant in a case you’re representing!”

“But he *is* gorgeous. I’ve had a secret crush on him for years, that doesn’t mean I’m going to act on it. Sheesh. A girl can have an opinion, can’t she?”

Brooke, my paralegal, was almost affronted that I found the defendant attractive. And I could relate. After all, it was against the rules of professional conduct to even *speak* to the opposing party to a law suit one was representing without their attorney present. But what happened in my mind was a different story. This was a place where *anything* could happen. And sometimes, it did.

“Not the point! Okay, whatever. You need to get to sleep. The hearing starts early and it’s already late as it is.”

“Fine. Fine. Going to bed now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, but don’t spend too much time fantasizing about him tonight. You need to wreck him in court tomorrow.”

“I always do.”

It was half past midnight already, and I was lying in my bed, staring at the ceiling. I couldn’t sleep, anxious about the

hearing later that morning. I had already won hundreds of cases but still had jitters the night before a trial no matter how prepared I was.

But it was more than just the court case. I had that handled. My personal life, on the other hand, not so much.

After my parents' divorce years ago, I took sides with my dad. My mom and sister Leah had cut me out of their lives since, because they never forgave me for it.

They hadn't been easy to live with. They had always been manipulative, and I didn't appreciate the way either of them had treated my dad. He was a sweet guy, and although he didn't have much money, just enough to make a decent living, my mom squeezed whatever money she could out of him. Everything was about her. He worked himself to the bone for us, but she didn't care. It was never enough.

She had always been emotionally abusive and completely unsupportive of anything any of us did that didn't line up with whatever benefitted her the most. And she was cold. She didn't have a maternal bone in her body.

I knew all this, but through the first few years, I tried several times to re-connect with them. Make amends. But they wouldn't have anything to do with me. So, I'd accepted that they didn't want me and moved on.

Being a lawyer had not been in my plans. I'd always dreamed of being an artist. Unlike my mom, my dad fully supported me, and together, we made what was to us a good

life. We were living paycheck to paycheck, but we were happy. Until we weren't.

My dad got sick and needed help.

I figured, with all the bills stacking up, the best chance for us would be for me to go to school for something that would pay me a lot more money than being an artist ever would. As I was finding out as I went, they weren't called "starving artists" for nothing.

Considering my options, I realized I hated the sight of blood and never cared much for math, so being a doctor or accountant was out. That left me with the one option I was trying to escape from the beginning, but lawyering it was! It was a tragic irony to end up doing what my mom wanted me to do in the first place, but I guess that's life.

And I just so happened to be very good at it, which was always odd to me to be so good at something I hated.

I was one of the most prominent attorneys in New York for civil cases like this, and the high-profile nature of this case was sure to bring more recognition to the firm, which was a win for us, but I was finding it harder and harder to go to work every day. It was sucking the life out of me and couldn't have been further away from what I *really* wanted to do.

Of course, being as good as I was had its advantages too. It paid well. So I was able to help Dad pay the bills, which delighted me, but had a very disconcerting side effect. Both my mother and my sister had come crawling back and

magically reappeared in my life after I finished law school and started making good money.

Problem was, after they'd both turned their backs on me, I wasn't feeling particularly charitable. Not to them. Years later, and they were still attempting to worm their way back into my life here and there.

My phone went off with a text, pulling me away from my mind.

We've got him. I just got the email confirming the source of the sex tape leak. It came straight from Griffin's personal email address. We've got proof now.

It was a great way to end my night. I wasn't entirely confident about our case without this piece of the puzzle, but once we had it, I slept a little better at least. As much as I didn't want to believe that a man I had admired from afar could do such terrible things, wrong was wrong.

I was a damn good lawyer, and I was going to crush him.

I started going over my arguments in my head over and over until I had them committed to memory, word for word. As I rehearsed the hearing in my head, I kept going back to visions of the defendant's stormy gray eyes, staring at me with such utter disdain it made me more uncomfortable than usual.

It was normal for defendants to dislike me. After all, I was attacking them in court, I usually won and I wouldn't like me either if I were them, but it never really bothered me until now.

Of course, I noticed Griffin Sterling was insanely attractive as soon as I laid eyes on him. He was tall, with wavy, dark hair, broad shoulders, muscular build, and blue-gray eyes as tempestuous as the sea. He had a reputation for being a man of high integrity and had made billions across various ventures, but he was best known for being a media mogul, and a bit of a ladies' man. He'd founded the Stellar Network, a cable TV network focused on positive and uplifting programming.

When I'd first heard about him, long before the trial, I developed a bit of a crush on him, I must admit. He was always raising money for charitable causes and seemed to pride himself on his reputation as a man of high integrity. The fact that he was drop-dead gorgeous didn't hurt either. He was often photographed with different gorgeous women from time to time and seemed to be the city's most eligible bachelor.

My client, the Plaintiff Jenna Lancaster, was his ex-girlfriend. I knew I would never have a shot with him without risking my license to practice law, but it was still fun to fantasize about him.

I was a little surprised when Ms. Lancaster first brought this case to me. Griffin Sterling's reputation was pristine, and it just didn't seem like something he would do. Not that I knew him personally. I guessed it didn't seem like something the person I imagined him to be would do.

When I learned what a petty jerk he really was, my high opinion of him deflated a bit. After learning about what he did, I couldn't let him get away with it.

Apparently, men in high places had egos to match and felt they could get away with murder.

Then again, maybe not.

My client was a bit over the top. She was suing for four million in damages, had a compelling case, and I couldn't pass it up. But the more I worked with her, the more I started to wonder if she had been making the whole thing up. Things weren't exactly lining up, and it wouldn't have surprised me. She claimed to have receipts and tons of evidence, but the email she just texted about was the first actual evidence she had produced of anything.

I remembered the first thing my pre-trial litigation professor told us on the first day of school back in law school. *Never forget, your client is your enemy.* He was referring to the fact that it wasn't unusual, fairly common even, for clients to withhold information, or present alternative "facts" to paint themselves in a better light only to learn in the middle of a trial that they had lied.

Maybe this new evidence was the smoking gun we needed, maybe not.

Either way, Griffin had been my dream man for years, and I wasn't about to let a little detail like him being the opposing party on my trial interfere with my habit of fantasizing about him.

As I laid in the darkness of my bedroom, I imagined myself sitting at my desk in my office before Mr. Sterling barged in, banging the door against the wall.

“Mr. Sterling, you shouldn’t be here. I could lose my license to practice.”

I stuck my hand under the blanket and made my way down to my intimate parts for a little stress release.

“You think I give a shit about your license after your attempts to fuck-up my life?” He stalked confidently toward me, sucking all my air as he invaded my personal space. He was so close I could lick his lips without leaning in. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but there’s no way in hell you’re going to win this battle. Your client forgot to tell you she’s unhinged and doesn’t have a shred of proof to back up her claims. I think it’s time you were punished.” He paused to wait for my response and I just stared back, fluttering my eyelashes with a coy smile.

“Take off your clothes,” he demanded.

I started to undress as he watched me.

I massaged my private parts through my panties and felt the wetness coming through.

With my busy schedule, it had been a while since I had been with a man, and I wasn’t afraid to help myself when I felt the urge, which seemed more often ever since Griffin Sterling became a more regular occurrence in my thoughts.

I undressed slowly as he watched with hunger in his eyes before he finally rushed in for a deep kiss, ripping whatever clothes I had left off me. I tore the front of his shirt open, aching for him to take me. He turned me around and bent me

over the desk before whispering in my ear, "I've been wanting to do this ever since I saw you. You're going to really enjoy this, Ms. West."

"Oh yes. Yes, I am."

My panties were soaked through as I massaged my clit to life.

He found my pussy and licked me open, massaging my ass with his big strong hands before giving me a little spank. He pleased me with his tongue, and I lived for it.

I reached into my nightstand for my vibrator and added it to the mix.

He stood upright and entered me slowly, grabbing my flesh, pulling me into him.

Oh my God. So deep.

He pushed into me for a few hard, slow thrusts before quickening his pace. Faster. Harder.

"How does that feel? That feel good?"

So good. So, so good.

He turned me around to lay me down on my desk and began to ravish me with his soft tongue once again. I was dripping wet as he re-entered me to finish what he'd started. In and out he thrust, shaking every cell of my body, leaving them humming for more.

I came with an intensity I hadn't felt in a long time.

I let the pleasure of my climax lull me into a deep sleep, as I was starting to regret ever taking on this case.

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