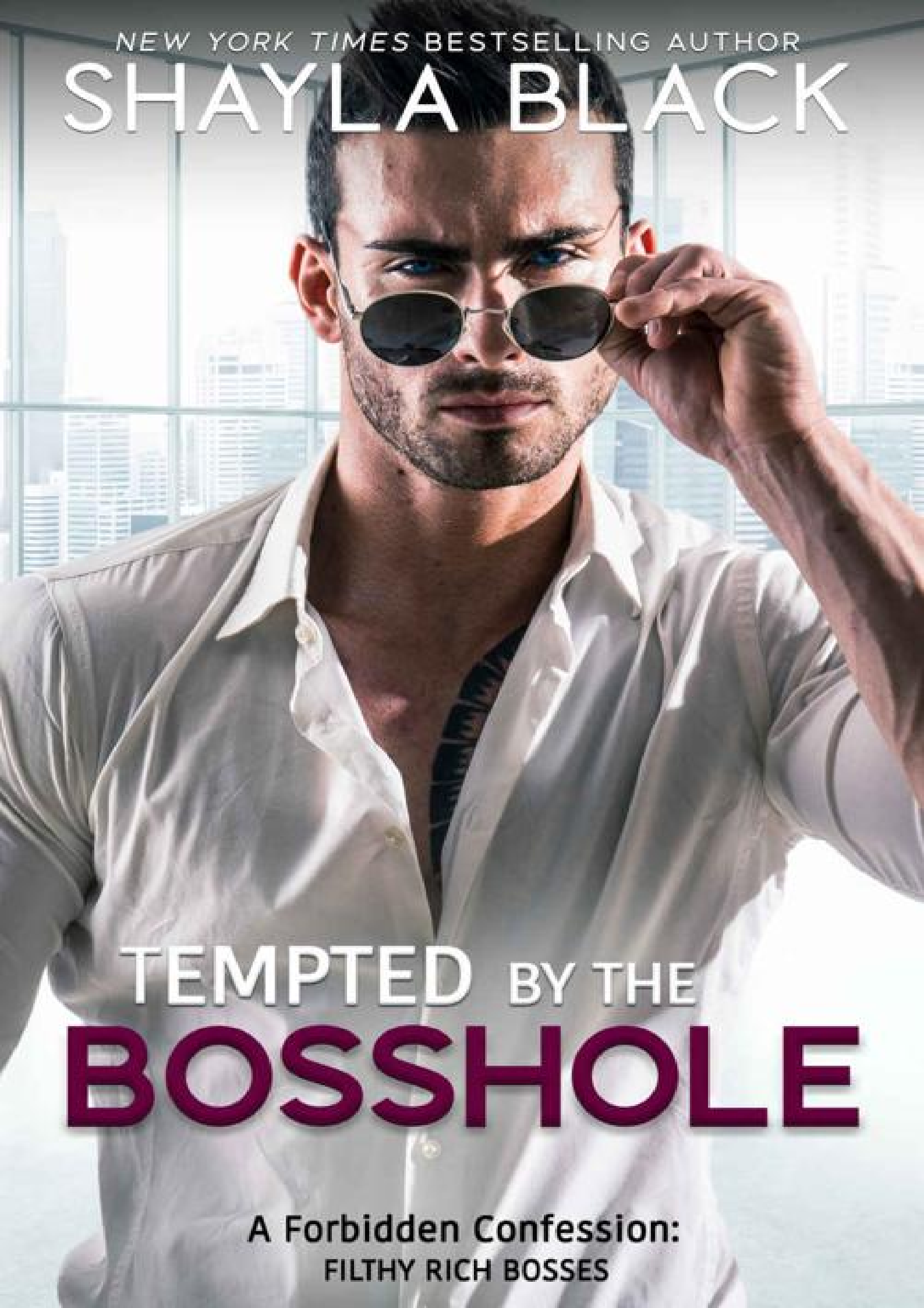


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHAYLA BLACK



TEMPTED BY THE
BOSSHOLE

A Forbidden Confession:
FILTHY RICH BOSSES

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FILTHY RICH BOSSES



SHAYLA BLACK
ADDICTIVE. SUSPENSEFUL. SPICY.

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TEMPTED BY THE BOSSHOLE

A Forbidden Confession: Filthy Rich Bosses

Written by Shayla Black

This book is an original publication by Shayla Black.

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ABOUT TEMPTED BY THE BOSSHOLE

My best friend's daughter is off-limits—until I seduce her for revenge.

When my business partner skips town, he takes everything.

Except his daughter.

Burning for retribution, I hire pretty, desperate Isabella to work under me.

Little does she know, that's where she'll spend all her nights and weekends, too.

Until I've stolen her future and her will.

Until I've wed and bred her.

When my former pal returns, he'll find that all he valued is mine—and I play for keeps.

CHAPTER ONE

December 1

Boston

Nathan

“Okay, spill,” my older brother demands, lounging on my living room sofa and tossing back a swallow of beer. “You’re up to no good.”

I stare into my whiskey glass, repressing a grin. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re way too quiet not to be plotting something.”

He’s not wrong. “Guess.”

“Well, you tolerated Douglas Shay stealing the money from your joint venture years ago only because he paid you back—”

“After I threatened the living shit out of him.”

Steve nods. “So the asshole knows you won’t take the fact he stole your wife lying down.”

I snort. There’s no way I’d let that son of a bitch steal from me twice.

“He didn’t.” Julia and I were already on the verge of divorce. “After I ended things, he moved in with her.”

“Semantics. They were already fucking.”

“By then, I didn’t care who she spread her legs for. We were done.” In fact, my heart purged Julia as soon as I realized

she lied to me for a decade.

“Then what’s your beef with Shay?”

“Besides the fact he’s a backstabbing asshole? Julia got half of everything in the divorce. Now she plans to marry that bastard, so he’ll get back all the money he once stole from me—with interest.”

Steve winces. “That would piss me off, too.”

“You’ll never have to worry about that, bro. You’ve got the best wife in Laurel.”

“I do,” Steve says smugly.

He deserves happiness—and his amazing wife. My sister-in-law is kind, generous, funny, smart... They have a great marriage and a passel of kids, the last of whom just left for college. Besides love, he’s also been blessed with money, success, and security. Steve is living the dream.

“I want the same for you, Nate. It’s been months since Julia and Doug announced their engagement, and you’ve let this go way longer than I expected.”

“Eleven months, seven days, and two hours. Who says I’ve let it go?”

“So you *are* up to no good.” Steve grins. “Tell me your plan.”

“Did I mention that Doug has a daughter?”

He raises a brow. “How old is she?”

“Fresh out of college. And looking for a job. Or she was until I hired her.”

His jaw drops. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, I did. She starts Monday.”

“Holy shit. Seriously? She must know there’s bad blood between you and Doug.”

“I don’t think so. During her phone interview, she said she hadn’t spoken to her father in a while.”

“What did you hire her to do?”

I grin. “She’ll be my personal assistant, at my beck and call, working directly *under me*.”

He nearly chokes on his beer. “Dude, you’re forty. And she’s...what, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three.” I shrug. “Why does it matter? She’s an adult, and I’m not dead.”

“How will you get her into bed, unless... You already have dirt on her, don’t you?”

I merely smile. My brother knows me too well to think I have qualms about blackmailing Isabella Shay.

“You son of a bitch.” He laughs. “I almost feel sorry for her. But if she’s anything like her father...”

“Probably *everything* like her father.” Though I’ve barely talked to Isabella since she was a gangly thirteen.

“So...what’s your end game? What do you want from this girl besides raunchy sex?”

“Fucking her will merely be a fringe benefit. Let’s just say that by the time Julia and Doug return from their honeymoon after New Year’s, everything he left behind will belong to me.” Including his daughter.

And she *will* give me the one thing my ex-wife refused to...

December 16

Isabella

“You look hot.” Jen eyes me suggestively. “If you weren’t my best friend—”

“But I am, and you’re strictly dickly.” I smooth my hands down the figure-hugging red velvet dress, wishing I wasn’t too broke to buy my own. Thank god we wear the same size. “It’s not too much?”

“Only half your tits are hanging out, and I can’t see vag, so it’s super classy.”

“Jen...” I huff.

“I’m kidding!”

“No, it’s too much.” I pull another dress from her closet. “The black one would be better.”

She yanks it free and shoves it back on the rack. “God, no. I wear this to funerals. And my exes’ weddings. You’re going to a Christmas party! Wear the red. It looks amazing on you, especially because you have the man-magnet trifecta: great tits, a tiny waist, and fantastic legs. You’re smart and nice, too. I’d hate you if I didn’t love you so much.”

“If I’m such a man magnet, how come you’re the one always having orgasmic sex with super-hot guys?” I’m definitely not.

“Because I’m looking for a human vibrator, not a husband.” She scowls. “Eric doesn’t deserve you. He never puts you first, even in the orgasm department.”

Jen hates my boyfriend...but she’s not wrong. Eric and I have been together since our junior year in high school. I fell hard and fast, convinced he was “the one.” But lately, he’s seemed distant. When he looks at me, I’d swear he’s looking *through* me. We’d planned to get engaged after my graduation. But weeks have passed since I received my degree, and Eric hasn’t popped the question. I’m wondering if he even wants us anymore. I don’t know what to do.

But tonight is about a party. Nothing that happens at the Force Financial holiday bash will decide my future.

I stare at myself in the mirror. “Are you sure about this dress? It’s awfully short.”

“It’s festive,” she corrects.

“This one-shoulder neckline exposes so much of me that I can’t wear a bra.”

“You’re fine. Your girls are perky. And hey, maybe you’ll finally attract someone who can get you off.”

“I still have a boyfriend.”

“This dress could help you change that.”

“It’s my *office* Christmas party!”

She shrugs. “Bonus. Whoever you hook up with can’t ghost you.”

“Jen!”

“Fine.” She sighs. “Tell me again why dipshit couldn’t go with you.”

Eric doesn’t do “office” things, even parties. As a trust-fund kid, he only has to pick out his next fancy car and play X-Box. He has no real responsibility. But he’s otherwise decent...most of the time. “Don’t start. Please.”

“I swear I saw him at Murphy’s last weekend with your neighbor.”

Mariah? Not possible. “He was in Florida with his buddies. He even sent me a group picture from Universal Studios.”

She glares skeptically. “If you say so.”

Eric isn’t perfect. I know he needs to mature some. But I wouldn’t cheat on him. Besides, if we split up now, I don’t have anywhere to live. Until I get my first paycheck, I won’t have the money for a place of my own.

“Can we focus? I’m not trying to attract a new boyfriend at this party, especially since I’ve only worked for Force Financial for two weeks. I want to send the right message. I’m professional. I’m dependable.” I wince. “I should wear the black dress.”

Jen blocks the closet door before I can reach for it. “You shouldn’t. It says boring. It says you’ve given up on yourself. It says you’ve only ever had missionary-style sex, none of which is true, right?”

I blush. Jen would be horrified if I was honest. “Of course.”

“What about your mysterious boss?”

“I’m not trying to hook up with him, either. He’s married.” Or at least he was when I met him a decade ago.

“I meant are you finally meeting Nathan Price tonight?”

“Technically, we already met.”

Jen rolls her eyes. “When you were a kid doesn’t count.”

“Why not?” After graduation, I figured it couldn’t hurt to apply for a job at the swanky financial firm he works for. I don’t remember him much, except that, at thirteen, I thought he was hot. And way nicer than his standoffish wife.

“Why aren’t he and your dad business partners anymore?”

“I don’t know.” Most of my dad’s life, especially his current whereabouts, are a mystery. “But I doubt Mr. Price will be at the party tonight. The big business emergency in Hawaii, whatever it was, got resolved. Still, if you could spend an extra weekend in paradise and avoid the Boston winter—along with the office Christmas party—wouldn’t you?”

“So he’s out until Monday. Got it.” She bumps my shoulder. “That means you can relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I hardly know anyone, so I doubt I’ll stay long.” Really, I should cut the evening short and spend some time with Eric. Since graduation, I’ve been busy finding a job so I can start paying off my student loans. I’ve barely spent time with him. Maybe that’s the cause of the rift I sense between us.

“Does the party have an open bar?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Live a little, girl!” She lifts my arms wide and gives me a once-over. “You look great. The fuck-me shoes totally make the outfit.”

They’ll last fifteen minutes. I keep a pair of black flats at my desk. They’ll be perfect for blending in. “Thanks.”

“Here.” She shoves a little gold purse in my grasp. “Have a good time. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Call me tomorrow. I love you.”

I’ll probably be home by ten. “I love you, too.”

After a hug from Jen and a meow from her cat, Dude, I'm out the door and in my car.

The truth is, I don't love this time of year. A decade ago, Dad left Mom and me just before the holidays. Five years later, when I was barely eighteen, Mom died. I spent that Christmas alone sobbing in the funeral home. Those were the darkest days of my life. I went to college because she wanted me to. Dad and I still have a strained relationship, but he helped financially—until last year when he basically disappeared. I've looked everywhere for him, even broke into his last known address. Nothing.

Who gets ghosted by their own father?

After I start the car, I glance in the rearview mirror. This dress would look more elegant—and less boobalicious—if I had something to distract from my cleavage. The clock tells me I have ten spare minutes to run home and grab my mother's pendant. Yes, it's a fourteen-carat-gold security blanket, but it would make me feel better.

A few minutes later, I dash through snow flurries from the parking lot to the front door of our apartment overlooking the water. Despite the fact Jen would frown at me throwing a coat over her slutastic dress, since I'm here I'll grab one of those, too.

When I open the door, light from inside floods the elegant stoop. Instead of an empty pizza box and a loud video game, I'm greeted by a sexy R-and-B tune drifting from the back of our apartment.

I tiptoe down the hall, toward the bedroom with a frown. The song ends. In the silence before another begins, I hear the shower running.

He finally decided to get clean after two days of BO...

My first clue that something's wrong is the bra strewn across the threshold of our bedroom. Since all my lingerie is practical, I know the red-lace underwire number isn't mine. Neither is the accompanying thong next to our bed.

Eric is cheating on me. The realization hits me like an anvil.

I go cold all over. The bottom falls out of my stomach.

God, is this really happening?

Our mussed bed and the discarded condom wrapper on my nightstand tell me it is.

Holy cow. Holy. Cow.

He *is* cheating on me. That bastard!

“Oh, fuck, yeah, babe...” Eric moans.

Babe. That’s what he calls me, too.

Why does that make the betrayal somehow worse?

“That’s it. Use that tongue to get my cock nice and clean so I can get it all dirty in your pussy again.”

“You’re sure we’ll have time?” a woman asks.

“Yeah. Izzy will be at this boring-as-fuck party until at least ten.”

She laughs. “Do you think she has any idea?”

“Nah. I’ve got her fooled. I even photoshopped myself into a pic all the guys took last weekend in Orlando. She’s too gullible to figure it out.”

No, I’m too trusting. I knew something was off.

God, I feel as if Eric slapped me. I’m humiliated. Embarrassed. Furious.

And I’m done.

I stomp over to the shower curtain and yank it wide, stepping back to avoid the spray, and take in the sight of my boyfriend standing with his back to the water and our neighbor on her knees with his softening dick in her mouth. “No need for her to rush out. I won’t be coming home tonight. Or ever. It’s over, Eric.”

He pushes back from the brunette with mascara running down her face and darts out of the shower after me.

I step over the skank's underwear and sprint down the hall, only to find Eric chasing me as he wraps a towel around his naked ass. "C'mon, babe. Wait. We should... Fuck, I don't know. Talk about this."

"Talk?" I toss over my shoulder without slowing down. "What is there to say? You'd rather sleep with Marcella—"

"Mariah," he corrects.

I know. "I don't care."

Out the front door, I rush down the stairs and head for my car.

He follows. "Fuck, would you just come back inside? It's freezing." He shivers, ignoring the side-eye from a guy walking his dog. "You can't just leave."

"I can. I am. I'll get my things later."

And the fact I'm not devastated should tell me something. Right now, I'm too mad to figure it out.

"If you get in that car and drive away, don't expect to come back."

"I wasn't planning on it. You and Marina deserve each other."

"Mariah."

"I still don't care." I turn to face him. He's stomping his foot like an agitated kid who isn't getting his way. "Someday, I hope she cheats on you so you can see exactly how this feels."

"Ah, come on. What she and I did...it didn't mean anything."

"If you think that, then you and I didn't mean anything, either. Jen was right—"

"That bitch fills your head with stupid ideas."

"Well, she told me I could do better, and I should have listened sooner. Know what else she told me? To go out tonight, have fun, and let some hot stranger blow my doors off

since you never have. This time, I plan to take her advice. The next back I dig my nails into won't be yours. Buh-bye."

It isn't until I get in my car that I realize I forgot both my coat and my mother's pendent, but I can't go back now... In fact, other than to pack up, I can't come back ever.

Where the hell will I sleep tonight? I can't crash at that McMansion my dad listed as his address. Even if I had a key and wouldn't have to break in again, he's clearly shacking up with a woman. Maybe it's her house. Maybe she doesn't even know about me.

And maybe Dad stopped giving a shit about you.

I reach for my cell to call Jen. Then I remember she has an extra-spicy Tinder hookup tonight. Damn it. Fine. I'll figure out where to sleep. There are plenty of hotels near the office. What's one more charge on my overtaxed credit card? Tomorrow, I'll find a long-term solution.

Tonight, I intend to take advantage of Force Financial's open bar, meet some single men, and find one who will make me damn glad I'm a woman.

CHAPTER TWO

The party is in full swing by the time I arrive. During my drive, I realize two things: First, other than the luxurious apartment Eric can afford, living with him wasn't all I hoped it would be. Second, I'm furious that he lied to me. I'm incensed that he played me and embarrassed me. I'm mad at myself for wasting so much time on him. But I'm not as upset to lose him as I feared I would be.

Honestly, if he wants Mariah—who had sex with his older brother in our bathroom during our last Fourth of July barbecue—he can have her.

I'm afraid of how suddenly my life is unraveling, but I'm leaving—and I'm not looking back. In fact, tonight I'll celebrate being single. Maybe I'll even take Jen's approach and stop looking for a guy to put a ring on my finger. Instead, I'll grab the first one who can get me off. But I absolutely refuse to sit in an impersonal hotel room and feel sorry for myself. Eric isn't worth wasting another moment.

At the door, the fifty-something receptionist, dressed as Mrs. Claus, hands me a scrap of paper and half a pencil. "Vote for the department responsible for your favorite decorations. You'll find snacks at every station. The bar is in the back, catered food in the break room. Tables and chairs are in Mr. Force's office. Happy holidays!"

"Thanks," I murmur, wandering through the double doors.

Even the dimmed lights can't hide the fact that it looks as if Santa's elves threw up everywhere. Besides all the tinsel

hanging from the ceiling and the wrapping paper affixed to the walls, rows of cubicles have been decked out in holiday themes. A giant gingerbread house, illuminated by strings of Christmas lights, reaches the ceiling and encompasses the six desks belonging to the Overseas Markets group. It's definitely the most creative cluster—way better than PR's Winter Wonderland display on the other side of the floor. Classic Holiday, where the Large Cap dudes all sit, looks phoned in, proving they're as stodgy and old-school as the sector they represent.

Turning, I search for the bar, fully intending to people-watch and drink. Instead, I feel someone's stare fix on me. A man's. He's watching me. Taking me in. Sizing me up.

His attention isn't subtle. Nor is the hot blast of his lust. It's so thick it's almost palpable.

Acutely aware of his gaze, I scan the party. But he's invisible, everywhere and nowhere. Around me, people in cocktail dresses and suits drink expensive booze and eat five-star hors d'oeuvres. They chat and laugh like they don't have a care in the world.

Suddenly, I feel like a predator has scented me and marked me as his prey. That should scare me.

It doesn't.

I've never felt this alive. My heart thumps. My skin burns. My nipples peak. My pussy clenches.

Who is he? Where is he? How long before he makes his move?

Biting my lip nervously, I wend through the crowd, scanning faces and checking out guys I pass. A man wearing a schlumpy navy-blue suit and a gold band on his left hand talks to a very pregnant Mrs. Force, who is my boss's boss. She spares me a smile as I walk by and head for another dude a few feet away with a faint tan line on his ring finger. Separated? Divorced? Either way, he's clearly too busy sucking up to Mr. Force—the company's hunky, old-money CEO—to be flirting with me. Deeper into the room, a thirty-

something guy wearing an ugly Christmas suit flirts with the smiling bartender. Clearly, he's gay, so he's not the man staring at me. I still can't tell who is, but I sense him prowling my way—and closing in.

“What would you like, gorgeous?” asks the mixologist with killer dimples.

Since he's still making eye contact with ugly-Christmas-suit guy, he's only complimenting me for a tip.

“White wine.”

The bartender winks and gives me a generous pour as I drop a few bucks in his overflowing cup.

Glass in hand, I search the room again, this time more slowly, probing. Is my watcher one of the IT nerds discussing code and video games? Highly unlikely. Or one of the bigwig hedge-fund managers, all with more money than ethics and a date way out of their league? I doubt it. Maybe one of the buttoned-up suits from Regulatory and Governance? As I pass, I make eye contact with each of them. But no.

None of these guys revs my heart or make me hyperaware that I'm a woman with needs Eric didn't fulfill. This man... I haven't seen him, but he makes me giddy. Excitement tightens my throat. The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

Time to draw him out and get face-to-face with him. After all, Jen swears that the best way to get over one man is to get under another.

My innate caution screams that strangers can be dangerous and stalkers are bad. My body doesn't care. It's humming with a throat-gripping sexual awareness I've never felt. Besides, he's someone at my office Christmas party. How dangerous can he be?

Pretending to take in all the decorations, I circle the room. With each step and every breath, I feel his possessive stare.

A thrill shivers through me as I jot down my choices for the department decor prize, then drop the slip of paper in the box. I get a second glass of liquid courage and decide to lure my stranger closer...

Vino in hand, I stroll down a darkened hallway toward my absent boss's office. My stalker, if he wants me, will have to follow me where he can't hide or blend in with the crowd.

My heart shifts into overdrive as I open the door to Nathan Price's domain, lit only by the moon and the city lights. When I glance down the hall, a shadowy figure of a tall man with wide shoulders and a fit form follows, his stride decisive. Confident. Determined.

He's coming. For me.

Oh. My. God.

I swallow and shut the door in a fit of second-guessing panic. Allowing myself to be cornered isn't smart. We're far enough from the music and chatter that no one would hear me scream. He could cover my mouth, tear off my clothes. He could do anything he wanted, and I couldn't stop him.

I should return to the crowd.

But I don't.

Moments later, a quiet click fills the silent office. The gleaming knob turns. My heart hammers. I can't breathe.

He steps inside. Shadow falls across his strong face as his stare fastens on me. I can't see his features in the dark, only the outline of his muscled form under his suit coat and the glint of lust in his eyes.

"Keep the door open." My voice shakes.

Purposefully, he shuts and locks it. "I make the rules, baby girl."

The authority in his voice melts my knees. My heart lurches and thuds. "Why were you watching me?"

"You're beautiful."

I'm not used to compliments, especially growled ones. My breath catches. "It's the dress. I borrowed it from a friend and—"

"No. It's you." He saunters closer, like a man in control of his situation, of his life.

Of what happens next between us.

“Why did you follow me here?”

“Why did you lead me here?”

I can't not answer him, especially when he watches me like he's absorbing every detail. “I felt you.”

His teeth flash white in the dark. “Same. The second you walked in the door.”

Lust grips my throat. I should ask his name and what department he works in. Something. Words escape me.

“Whose office is this?” he asks.

“My boss's.”

“Will he mind?”

“I don't know. I'm new.”

“But you know your boss, right?”

“Actually, we've barely talked. I haven't seen him since I was a kid, and I don't remember him much.”

He laughs. “Well, don't forget it's always easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. First and last warning. Say no now, or I'm going to fuck you until you scream.”

His words short-circuit my brain. Men really talk that way? It's not just a fantasy authors write into one-handed reads? Or maybe that's how he rolls. His demeanor tells me he's older. His blunt confidence reinforces that.

If he's any indication, I've been swimming in the kiddie end of the dating pool, wasting my time with a boy.

He's a *man*.

“Anything to say? Is ‘no’ coming out of that pretty mouth?” His fingertips skate up my arm, but he doesn't grab me or drag me closer. I can back away. I can escape.

I don't want to. I shake my head.

It doesn't matter that I don't know this man. He makes me feel more alive than I ever have. This must be what people

mean when they talk about chemistry. Desire pings between us, electrifying the air. I breathe hard. My knees wobble.

“What are you saying, baby girl?”

“Yes. Please,” I breathe.

“Oh, you’re polite. I like it. You’ll need that later.” His smile widens as he cups my nape and steps against me, all but eclipsing me. The heat of his body radiates through his suit and blast-furnaces away the winter chill seeping through the windows. “I’m going to enjoy every minute of this...”

When his knuckles graze my cheek and his hot breath warms my lips, I dissolve. My eyes slide shut. My body sizzles. Before our mouths even meet, I suspect this man won’t merely adjust my definition of sex. He’ll redefine it forever.

Then he plasters his body against mine. He’s not subtle as he urges me back until I make contact with the wall. When I gasp, he flashes me a shark’s smile as he plants his palm above my head and presses against me. Every part of my body buzzes when he lifts my chin with his free hand and his mouth swoops down to hover over mine.

“Say it again,” he demands. “Tell me you want this.”

“Please.”

My trembling whimper barely brushes his lips before he seizes my mouth and delves inside as if he owns me.

His clean, warm taste, flavored by a hint of scotch, intoxicates my senses. I shudder. I can’t get my hands on him fast enough. I can’t slant my head and take him deep enough.

The stranger pins me to the wall with his hard body and devours me with an exacting, methodical kiss. He’s an expert at dismantling my defenses and awakening me.

I moan and grab his impossibly wide shoulders as his hands wander. While he learns my shape in the dark, my head spins, buzzing with how wrong yet perfect his manhandling feels. Kissing Eric was never like this. I don’t care about trivial things, like breathing. All I want from this man is more.

He grinds his impressive cock between my legs and swipes his thumb across my taut nipple. Another shiver spreads through my body. A groan slips free. I don't care who he is or where we are. I want him.

Tearing my lips free, I shove his tie aside and reach for the buttons of his shirt.

He grips my wrists. "Not here."

I whimper. "But—"

"Shh. I still intend to make you scream, but I've decided to take you somewhere I can take my time with you."

Yes. Every part of me throbs in excitement. For him.

Still, I hate looking desperate. "What if I've changed my mind?"

"You haven't." He drags his thumb across my nipple again, his touch slow and subversive. "Have you?"

"No," I pant. "God no."

"Good girl."

Those words shouldn't excite me. But they do, especially when he slants his mouth over mine again. I lose myself in my mysterious stranger, inhaling the seductive scents of amber, sandalwood, and man. It's not artificial, like cologne. It's him.

I can't stop touching him.

The feeling seems mutual when he slides his rough palms down to cup my ass and pulls me closer. I throw my arms around his neck and press myself against him.

God, I've never swooned from a kiss. I spent six years with Eric, and I've never felt so desperate to be touched.

This stranger is going to ruin me, and I don't want to stop it.

Abruptly, he pulls free and searches my face. "Anyone you need to say goodbye to?"

"No. You?"

"Already done. Where's your coat?"

“I didn’t bring one.” The displeasure tightening his face leaves me feeling chastened. “I forgot.”

“Wear mine.” He drapes his around my shoulders, then takes my hand. “We’ll leave down the back stairs.”

The stranger doesn’t give me time to think before he leads me from the party and to an unmarked door. My whole body throbs, single-mindedly focused on pulling off my clothes and begging this man to do his worst.

In the surprisingly dark stairwell, he wraps a steadying arm around me so I don’t fall in my too-high heels. “I’ll bring you back to your car in the morning.”

I’d rather have a way home if I need it. But...where is home now? “Okay.”

Finally, we reach the brightly lit parking lot. I turn and glance up at the stranger.

My jaw drops.

I suspected he would be hot, but this man... I bite my lip to hold in a moan.

He’s a god with a strong face, black eyes, and dark hair salty at the temples. Time and life have worn a frown line between his brows that makes him look deliciously stern. His five o’clock shadow frames a slash of a mouth and dusts a jaw so cut, he’ll probably slice me open. And the way he feels under his dress shirt? He obviously works out a lot.

He’s not just a man; he’s *all* man.

A wave of heat rolls up my body and settles impatiently between my legs.

He raises a dark brow at me. “Any objections?”

“No.”

He gives me a lascivious once over. “Good. You’re stunning, baby girl. I can’t wait to make you come.”

My stomach dips as he guides me onto the passenger’s seat of a luxury sedan he probably paid six figures for. Then he

settles his big body in beside me, commanding the vehicle as he pulls out of the lot and steers me through the night.

“What if...we work together?” It’s a question I should have asked sooner. “I’ve only been at Force Financial for two weeks and—”

“Have you seen me in the last two weeks?”

“No.”

“At this point, if we worked together, would it really matter to you?”

The way I feel right now? “No.”

“Is there any way you don’t let me fuck you tonight?”

I hate to be too obvious, but after Eric, I don’t want to waste time playing silly games. “No.”

“Then we don’t need to talk until after I give you orgasms.”

CHAPTER THREE

Nathan

At the first stoplight, I glance at my prey, now clutching her little gold purse and staring out the windshield.

Isabella Shay is beautiful—and nervous as fuck. She should be. She’s a walking wet dream I’m going to enjoy defiling.

When Doug was my business partner, I barely saw the girl. She was thirteen, all gawky elbows and a smile full of braces. But now? She has my full attention. Hell, she had my cock throbbing the second I spied her walking into the party. Fucking her both physically and figuratively will be a distinct thrill. And by the time she understands my intentions...it will be far too late.

She’ll be mine.

Should I feel guilty about making the daughter pay for her father’s sins? Probably.

I don’t.

“Do you have anyone at home waiting for you?” I already know she has a live-in boyfriend, and that Eric Meadows is a douchebag.

Is that why she’s so eager to cheat on him? Or is that common practice for her? Not that it matters. From now on, I’ll be the only man in her bed. Even if I’m fucking her over, I’ll treat her better than that asshole.

“No.” She looks down to her lap. “I broke up with my boyfriend just before the party.”

Interesting development. “What did you fight about?”

“I found him in our shower, getting a blow job from our neighbor.” She pastes on a bitter smile. “That’s why I forgot my coat.”

She has zero reason to lie. They’ve been together since high school, and it’s the holidays. She must be devastated...

I’ll give her lots of orgasms for her emotional boo-boo.

“What a bastard.”

Her lips flit up in a ghost of a smile. “See, you figured that out right away. It took me years.”

“I’ve lived a little longer.”

“How old are you? Not that I care, but—”

“Forty.” A few years younger than her dad. “Does that bother you?”

She sends me a wide-eyed shake of her head, the pale tendrils that escaped her updo brushing her shoulders. “Are you married? Have children?”

Interesting... So she has boundaries and morals? Surprising since Douglas doesn’t. “Divorced, no children.”

She frowns. “You don’t want them?”

“I do someday. You?”

“Yeah. I love kids. How long have you been divorced?”

“Do you care as long as I am?”

She bites her lip. “Am I your rebound girl?”

“Not even close. But it’s ironic you ask since I’m clearly your rebound guy.”

She frowns. “But you’re not my revenge fuck, just to be clear.”

Oh, but baby girl, you’re mine... “Then what am I?”

“A fresh start. I’m doing this because I can,” she murmurs. “Because I’m single. And because...you make me feel something I’ve never felt.”

“What’s that?”

“Arousal.” She gives me a self-deprecating laugh. “That probably sounds crazy. At first, I assumed this excitement is the thrill of repaying my ex for his shitty behavior. Or the anticipation of trying something new.”

“New?” She can’t possibly be a virgin.

As we pass under a streetlamp, a blush pinkens her cheeks. “I’ve never had a one-night stand.”

My grip on the wheel loosens. “I’m happy to be your first.”

And her last. She just doesn’t know that yet.

“Anyway, I realized none of my assumptions were true as soon as you touched me. This arousal is what my ex should have been making me feel all along.”

Eric Meadows must be a dud in the sack, and I’ll be more than happy to show Isabella the difference. “Yes.”

I drop my hand to her exposed thigh. Her body goes taut. Her breath shudders. She glances longingly at me beneath thick lashes.

Breaking her will be easy.

We don’t speak for the rest of our ride. The sexual tension between us makes the air almost too thick to breathe, but the protector in me is furious. Isabella doesn’t know my name. She didn’t even ask. She hasn’t told anyone where she’s going or who she’ll be spending the night with. I could be a fucking ax murderer. And since I doubt two glasses of white wine seriously impaired her judgment, she’s clearly impulsive. Reckless. She needs a caretaker. She needs a goddamn daddy.

Whether she knows it or not, she just got one...

Once I park my Mercedes in my garage, I turn to her. “Last chance. You sure?”

I'm giving her a potential out so she doesn't cry rape, but that's not why I asked. Nope, some stupid, marshmallowy part of me doesn't want to hurt this girl. Life has already dealt her a blow tonight. And so far she seems...decent. Not jaded. Not backstabbing. Nothing like Doug.

But none of that matters. My former pal needs to pay. Isabella is my currency of choice.

"Very," she assures softly.

With a nod, I close the garage door behind us and help her from the car, then usher her inside my darkened house. As I lead her through the living room, her heels make a quiet click on my hardwoods, counting down the moments to my vengeance.

Jesus, she smells amazing. Exotic. A hint of rose shrouded by something spicier. It's half the reason I locked lips with her at the office and almost lost my head. Hell, I can still taste her sweetness. I want more of her lush mouth. But that scent of hers teases my nose and fucks with my logic. It's tempting me to forget the long walk to my bedroom, push her against the nearest wall, and lose myself inside her.

Instead, I grapple for patience and lead her to my bedroom door, dragging in more of the nose-tease that clings to her and makes me hard as hell. All I can think about is burying my face in her neck and filling my head while I stuff her pussy with every stiff inch of my cock.

The pull I feel to Isabella is strong. What is it about her?

At the bedroom door, I reach for the knob.

She stops me with a touch. "Are *you* sure?"

Her concern surprises me. I might be fucking her, but I'll heap unforgettable pleasure on her all night. It's the least I can give her before I drop the hammer and shit gets real. "I'm more sure about this than I've been about anything in a long time."

She smiles shyly and drops her gaze.

Fuck, those signals she's giving me... Douglas Shay's daughter has a submissive streak—something my ex-wife didn't have an iota of. I already wanted Isabella. She's gorgeous. But now? Nothing will stop me from taking her.

I shove open my bedroom door and urge her into the dark, broken only by the moon beaming through the window. Beside the bed, she faces me with a shiver.

Before I can stop myself, my hands are on her, one curling around her nape. The other grips her hip possessively. “What are you thinking?”

“I'm nervous. I don't know what you want or expect. Usually, I sucked my ex for a minute. Then I'd lie back while he grabbed a condom and—” She winces. “You're scowling. That's too much information, isn't it? Sorry.”

“You're fine.” But I'm annoyed. Not only is her ex a cheating douchebag, but he's apparently selfish, too. Unless... “Do you not like foreplay?”

The flush on her cheeks deepens. “I do, but I know men don't, so...”

So she was willing to do without it because the asshole she used to fuck was too impatient to make her feel good? “Maybe he didn't, but I love it—especially making a woman come. Did he get you off?”

Isabella squirms. “I think he did. Sometimes.”

But she isn't sure? “If you only ‘think’ he did, baby girl, he didn't. Whatever you believed or expected about sex, forget it. I'm here, I'm in charge, and tonight will be different.”

“Okay.” Her voice shakes.

“Good. Now take off your dress. Everything underneath?” I grin. “I want to strip that off myself.”

Isabella

OMG, is this for real?

I swallow and stare at the stranger. He's awfully confident in his abilities, but why shouldn't he be? He's hot, and his kiss says he knows what he's doing. Everything about him is sexy, even his bossiness.

Still...he wants me to strip down to my underwear and stand nearly naked in front of him? I was already shaking with nerves. His touch rattles me even more. God, I hope he doesn't think I suck in bed.

"Baby girl, do I need to repeat myself?"

The command, coupled with the hint of threat in his deep-timbred voice, should terrify me. Instead, my pussy clenches. I press my thighs together to relieve the building ache, but it's hopeless. My panties are drenched.

The way he looks at me, I swear he knows it.

"No," I breathe.

"Then why are you still wearing your dress?"

"I-I have a zipper."

"Turn."

I don't even stop to think; I just comply, bowing my head. The stranger doesn't immediately pull the tab. Instead, he caresses my exposed shoulders, his touch a whisper over my goose-pimpled skin. Involuntarily, I shiver.

"So responsive," he murmurs in my ear.

Am I? Not according to Eric.

I swallow. "Do you like responsive?"

"I expect it. If you hold back your reactions, I'll withhold orgasms. Are we clear?"

That answer should annoy me. Who is he to tell me when I can and can't come? Instead, I'm turned on. "Yes, Sir."

“Hmm, there’s my polite girl again,” he says in smug delight. “We’re going to get along well.”

He begins lowering my zipper. The quiet hiss in the otherwise silent room makes me achingly aware that I’m about to get naked for a stranger whose name I don’t even know.

The red velvet sheath gapes open. Slowly, he pushes the lone spaghetti strap of the asymmetrical dress off my shoulder. He doesn’t have to ask me to lift my arm free; I yield to his unspoken wish.

Moments later, the garment sags, clinging to my hips. He pushes it down my thighs, leaving me in nothing but too-tall stilettos and the Christmas thong Jen insisted I need.

“Hmm.” He caresses my ass. “Step out.”

I do, leaving the safety of my dress puddled on the floor. As I turn to face him, he flips on the bedside lamp. A golden glow illuminates the manly bedroom of grays and wood tones. He turns his dark eyes on me, his stare lingering on my mouth and breasts before stopping between my legs.

He smiles. “That’s subtle.”

I glance down at the black thong Jen gave me. The front is emblazoned with mistletoe bound by a bright red bow. My bestie teased that, if I wore these underwear, maybe I’d finally find a guy who would kiss my pussy. “A friend gave me these as a joke.”

“A guy friend?” He almost sounds...jealous.

I shake my head. “My bestie, Jen.”

“Remind me to thank her later for the suggestion.”

Is he intimating that he’s planning to put his mouth *there*? I gulp.

His smile widens. “Look at you blush.”

Resisting the urge to fidget under his hot gaze, I watch him tear off his coat and tie while he kicks off his shoes. “Anything you don’t like in bed? Anything you won’t do?”

“Um...not that I know of.”

“No hard limits?” He saunters closer, grinning like I’ve just given him the best gift of the Christmas season. “This is going to be fun. But if you don’t like or aren’t ready for something, tell me. We’ll stop and discuss, okay?”

Eric never cared whether I liked something. If I complained, he inevitably slammed out of the bedroom and berated me for criticizing him. I don’t want drama tonight. “I’m sure everything will be great.”

“You should expect that, baby girl. I want to flip every one of your switches. I assure you I’m a big boy, and my ego isn’t too fragile to hear if you want me to rub it differently or lick it better.”

Does he really mean that? “Okay.”

“Come here.”

Trembling, I walk into his open arms with my heart pounding, nearly wobbling in the ridiculous heels Jen insisted I wear. He catches me before I fall and gathers me against his warm body, my nipples rubbing against the slight abrasion of his dress shirt.

“That’s a good girl.” He nuzzles my neck and inhales me with a groan. “Let’s get your shoes off.”

“You don’t like them?”

“Oh, they’re sexy as fuck, like you are.” He kneels and rips off the red shoes, then throws them across the bedroom. “But I don’t want you falling. Besides, it’s not your footwear I’ll be looking at once I have you naked, legs spread, in the middle of my bed. And it’s not your shoes you’ll care about once I have my mouth on you.”

Goose bumps erupt. God, the way he talks... Like everything else about him, it arouses me. But under his dirty words, he nearly brings me to tears. Maybe it’s stupid, but for the first time ever, a man is putting my pleasure before his. This stranger is making me feel important, like he wants me for me.

Eric never did.

When his hot palms skim my body, my thoughts scatter. Ditto in double when he lifts me against his chest bridal style, as if I weigh next to nothing.

I cling to his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Seducing you.” He sets me on the edge of his ruthlessly made bed. His comforter is so taut, I’d swear I could bounce quarters off it. Neatness that exacting doesn’t come merely from being fastidious. Was he in the military? Given his short, sharp haircut and that predatory vibe he gives off, it fits.

He hovers over me and presses forward, urging me back to the mattress. He follows, his eyes glittering with promise. That stare robs me of breath. My heart thuds against my ribs just before he grinds his lips against mine in a kiss that demands my surrender. I can’t help it; I moan against him and melt. I don’t know much about this man except we work for the same investment firm, he’s divorced, and he kisses like he’s intent on extracting every pleasure possible from my body.

When he nudges my lips apart, I open to him eagerly. He steals inside my mouth like midnight, quietly, inexorably, leaving me with an undeniable desire for more.

Our breaths sync up. I throw my arms around him. He cups my nape, tilts my head, and opens me up to his most demanding kiss yet. I’m not aware of arching up to him, but he seizes on my unconscious plea and cups my breast in his hot palm. Slowly, he slides his thumb across my aching nipple in teasing back-and-forth sweeps. I whimper and clutch him tighter. My hips move restlessly in search of relief.

“Need something, baby girl?”

“More,” I breathe against his mouth.

“You’ll get it. By sunrise, you’ll be—what do you twenty-somethings say?—walking side to side.”

He can’t be serious. That’s not really a thing, is it?

As those questions zip through my head, he breathes on my neck, wringing a shiver from me, before his lips skim down my body. He captures one of my nipples, worshipping the sensitive tip and ratcheting up my desire. He never

hesitates or second guesses. It's as if he knows my body. I wasted six years on Eric, who never quite figured out where to touch me. Miraculously, this stranger already knows where to find my erogenous zones.

We haven't even had sex yet, and I'm already worried one night with him won't be enough.

He scrapes his brutally short nails across my other nipple. Then, as he sucks the first deep again, he pinches the other. Tingles detonate, shooting sensation straight to my clit.

“Oh, my god. Yes...”

“You wet for me?”

He's too observant not to have noticed the dark spot on my mistletoe thong.

“Yes.”

He releases my nipple and slides his hand down my abdomen, his fingers slow-dancing with the waistband of my panties. “Do you want me to touch you?”

“Please.”

A little smile almost softens the hard angles of his face. “I'll always reward honesty and politeness. Spread your legs.”

Wider? I don't ask why, just obey. The elastic of my thong surrenders to his whims as easily as I do, giving way to his delicious invasion.

Unerringly, he finds my clit. At his first touch, I gasp and jackknife at the torrent of tingles.

He pushes me back to the bed with one hand. “You're soaked. Perfect.”

Tracing lazy circles over my aching bundle of nerves, he props himself up on one elbow and watches me, drinking in my every reaction. His stare is unnerving. It's intimate. But I can't look away. I lose track of time, not to mention the number of moans and whimpers he wrings from me. My desire climbs with his every swipe over my slick, puffy flesh.

Blood rushes between my legs and pumps from my pounding heart, resounding between my ears. Something big is happening, and when this tension explodes it will blow away my definition of orgasm.

Before it seizes me, he pulls his hand free with a grin.

“No! Why did you stop?”

“Deprivation will make your release even sweeter.”

Obviously, he has no way of knowing I’ve been deprived most of my life.

“Besides, it’s the holidays,” he quips. “You can’t expect me to ignore the mistletoe.”

Is he really going to—

The question is still ripping through my thoughts when he kneels between my feet and drags me down the mattress until my ass perches at the edge. I watch, gaping, as he clamps his big hands around my ankles and positions my bare feet on the footboard. Then he shoves my knees wide and surges between with a wolfish grin.

My heart stops. Oh, shit. He’s serious.

The stranger drags his thumb up the front of my soaked thong, wrenching another gasp from me. “I have a feeling you’re going to be one of the sweetest things I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

“Y-you don’t have to...”

“I do. Mistletoe. ’Tis the season and all that.” He cocks his head. “Unless you don’t like someone worshipping your pussy?”

His dark stare demands an answer, and I feel compelled to reply. “Um, I don’t know. I’ve never...”

He raises a sharp brow. “Ever?”

“My ex said going down on me was disgusting.”

The man who’s about to become my only other lover sends me an acidic smile. “You were right to dump his ass. His loss

is my gain. Yours, too.”

Those words ping around my brain as he lowers his head and covers the gusset of my panties with his mouth. Through my soaked thong, he bites my flesh softly, his teeth catching the edge of my clit through the cotton. His tongue follows, taking a long swipe up the covered pad of my pussy.

Even with the underwear between us, he makes my body detonate with a flurry of tingles. “Oh!”

He backs away with a growl.

“What’s the matter?” Does he think I’m disgusting, too?

The stranger doesn’t reply, just leaps up, grabs my thong by the waist and yanks it down my legs. Once it’s off, he shoves the cotton scrap in the pocket of his slacks with another sly grin. “I’m not supposed to kiss the mistletoe, but what’s beneath it. Let’s try this again.”

He leans over me, opens his mouth, and drags his tongue through my slit. When he lingers over my most sensitive spot, I slap my palms to the mattress to brace against the pleasure. “Oh, my god!”

With his lips wrapped around my clit, he chuckles. The vibrations, coupled with his touch, melt all hints of my resistance. My body stops obeying me to chase the incredible sensations. My back arches. My hips lift as I twist to get closer. Sweat breaks out across my forehead. My heart jolts and pounds as he methodically unravels me with his tongue. As if that’s not enough, he shoves a pair of blunt fingers inside me and thrusts them into me, slow and hard. As tingles build and I moan, he shifts his digits, curling them up and hitting a mysterious spot that has me gasping and begging.

“That’s it.” He slides his tongue between my slick folds, lingering on my clit with a hum of delight. “That’s my girl. You’re this close to coming for me.”

It’s not a question. He knows. He understands my body better than I do.

“Yes...”

Jen always said I should indulge in self-love more, both to make up for Eric's lack of prowess and to understand my body. But life in college dorms and living with my ex, who rarely left his apartment, never gave me privacy. If touching myself felt half as good as this stranger driving me to soaring heights, then I've definitely been missing out. Eric never made me feel like this. Hell, he never even tried.

Why? If he was supposed to love me, didn't he want me to feel good? This man whose name I don't even know has treated me with more care than the douchebag I wasted six years with.

"So close," he breathes on my needy flesh.

"Yes!"

"Hmm." He swipes his tongue across my clit again, then backs away with a kiss to each of my inner thighs before he stands.

He's stopping? "But—"

"You want to come." He skims his thumb across my pussy again, giving me enough sensation to stay on the edge, but not enough to topple over. "You will. But I want you to do it on my cock."

With his gaze fused to mine, he twists the buttons of his dress shirt free, revealing inch after inch of bronzed, hard-bodied man, before he flings the pristine white garment across the room.

Holy shit, he's a god.

His suit hid big traps, bulging shoulders, hard pecs, biceps as big as my thighs, and ridged abs that I would swear were photoshopped if I couldn't reach out and touch them.

Belatedly, I realize I'm gaping.

He merely smiles. Like everything else about him, his oozing confidence is sexy. I've never felt compelled to run my tongue up and down a man—until now.

"I promise you'll come on my tongue later." He reaches for the button of his slacks.

I prop myself on my elbows. “I’ve never had an orgasm during penetration.”

He lifts a dark brow. “For me, you will. Buckle up, baby girl. It’s about to get rough. You ready?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Nathan

“Please,” she pants.

Isabella really is an eager little thing. And if I’m being honest, she’s nothing like I expected. She’s beautiful, a little naive...and sweeter than I imagined. Based on the last two weeks she’s been in the office, she’s also hardworking and smart. She seems pretty much perfect, at least on the surface.

And from now on, she’s *mine*.

Since her ex apparently didn’t get her off, I’ll lavish pleasure on Isabella Shay for the rest of her life. Regardless of what else I do to her, I’ll worship her body every chance I get. In fact, I love the idea of being the first—and only—man to give her ecstasy. Maybe I should have let her come on my tongue, but my inner caveman insists I give Isabella her first real orgasm while I’m buried deep inside her. I want her to associate my cock with screaming bliss and to beg for it every fucking day.

I won’t stop until she does.

My pants fall to my ankles. I step out of them and peel off my boxer briefs, loving the way her eyes flare wide. “You on the pill?”

“Sorry. I can’t take it.”

Excellent.

Grinning, I grab a foil square from my nightstand, ignoring the impatient throbbing of my cock. In the silence, she

watches with wide eyes as I roll down the condom.

“Get in the middle of the bed and spread your legs.”

Isabella doesn't balk or play coy. She merely complies, biting her lip nervously as she meets my stare.

God, she's fucking perfect to look at.

At the foot of the bed, I plant my knee between her legs and crawl up the mattress, my mouth working its way up her body again. The high arches of her delicate feet are graceful. The skin of her fleshy thighs is so goddamn soft. I appreciate that she's not a size-two twig. This girl has lush hips and a juicy ass, not to mention an overflowing handful of tits with sweet pink nipples. That exotic scent of hers fills my head once more, making me half drunk. She's going to be a joy to fuck. And later, when she's filled out even more...

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I skim my lips up her inner thigh and settle over her pussy. With a groan, I drag my tongue up her puffy furrow once more. Jesus, she's addicting. She's wetter than ever and so goddamn swollen I'll have to fight my way inside her. I look forward to the struggle.

Seriously, if I could have dreamed my perfect woman, she'd be a lot like Isabella Shay.

But I need to be careful. I'm the predator; she's my prey. I can't let her unravel nearly a year of painstaking planning.

Her uncontrolled whimpers and whispered pleas tell me when I've driven her to the brink of orgasm again. With a last reluctant lick of her tangy-tart cunt, I lift my head and kiss my way up her torso, lingering at her pretty nipples. When I'm not so determined to claim her, I'll spend hours working these peaks over. She's responsive, so I suspect she'll come simply from me sucking them.

I can't wait.

I let one of those hard tips pop from my lips before I cover her body, settle my hips between her thighs, and align my crest

at her slick opening. I'm almost embarrassed that I'm shuddering with excitement. "Ready?"

She blinks and bites her lip. "I've only ever done this with my ex. If I'm not good at it—"

"You are." She's the enemy...but she looks so worried that she's going to ruin the sex between us, it fucking hurts me. I'm pissed on her behalf. Not only did the asshole she lived with deprive her of pleasure, he cheated and made her feel bad about herself. I'm no saint, but I'll never do that.

"You don't know me," she argues.

"Baby girl, you're a goddess, and I'm going to make you feel so good. All you have to do is let me."

"You really think so?"

Smart or not, I give her a reassuring smile. "I know so."

"Then hurry." For the first time, she smiles. The expression transforms her from gorgeous to so beautiful, my fucking heart stops.

Shit. Isabella is supposed to fall to her knees and eat out of my hand, not the other way around. I need to literally get in and get out. Fuck her until she's loopy and happy and disinclined to ask questions. I can't get sidetracked by her sweetness or her curves.

"You want me to rush?"

"No." The way she looks at me, like I'm the answer to all her prayers, threatens to blunt my need for vengeance. "You've been so good for my bruised heart. I can't wait for the rest of you to fill me up and make me feel even better."

"Then hold on."

With a grip of her hips and a reminder to keep my head screwed on straight, I push forward, submerging my crest inside her. She's silken soft and snug as hell. In fact, she's clamped so tight, I can't press in any farther. Presumably her ex took her V-card. Did he have a dick at all?

Beneath me, she gasps and tightens. Cursing, I tell myself to dial back the aggression.

When I do, she shakes her head and lifts her hips to me. “Please...”

“Relax, baby girl. Let out a breath.”

She blinks up at me. Her uncertain stare rips at my heart. But she sends me a shaky nod and releases a shuddering breath, loosening beneath me.

I ease free and run my cock along her slit, coating every hard inch in her wetness, before I thrust inside her once more. Then I do it again. And again, each time working more inside her tight cunt.

After sweating and straining and a blinding surge of need, I’m finally buried inside Douglas Shay’s little princess, all the way to the hilt.

She wriggles—a silent demand for more. Being one step closer to achieving my revenge is going to make fucking her even sweeter, and I can’t wait to unload inside her. But Isabella has to come first—always. That’s nonnegotiable.

Time to reduce her to a trembling, screaming mess.

I bury my face in her neck, rub her hard clit with my thumb, and ease into her tight depths again. A groan tears from her throat. Sensation jets through my veins and rattles my spine.

Fucking her is like fucking heaven.

“Take my cock,” I pant against her skin. “Every fucking inch is for you.”

“Please.” She writhes, throwing her arms around my neck and filtering her fingers through my hair.

“I love hearing you beg.”

“More,” she whines. “Whatever you’re doing to me, do more.”

“I’ll never stop,” I blurt as I push in with a molasses stroke.

She whimpers as I slowly retreat, then inhales sharply as I shove inside her again. She clings as she wraps her thighs around me, undulating to match my rhythm as I fuck her with one unhurried, bed-jarring stroke after another.

Jesus, I could lose myself inside her addicting, sugary-sweet depths. What is it about her?

I have a healthy sex life. Active, even. Of course Isabella is pretty, but I've fucked lots of gorgeous women since my divorce. Somehow, she's different. I barely know her, but I'm determined to make her forget Eric Meadows and any other man who's ever crossed her mind.

I slant my lips over hers again, simultaneously filling her with my tongue and my cock. She bucks, enveloping every inch of me. My eyes threaten to roll into the back of my head. Shit, I've been inside this woman for less than two minutes and she's scalding my blood. I'm already hanging by a thread.

Staring into her blue eyes, I fuck her again in protracted strokes, submerging deeper with every thrust and losing myself in her broken pleas. I can't stop. Our connection feels more than physical, and it's fucking wild. I *feel* her wonder, her desperation, her excitement...

I ramp up my thrusts.

Sweat films my back and beads at my temples. I tighten my grip on her hips and yank her closer, teeth bared, angling to stroke her G-spot with each thrust.

Her cries get louder. Her head falls back. Her breaths quicken. Every move she makes is sensual. Her every reaction feels perfect. I shove into her. My headboard bangs against the wall. But she softens to envelop every inch I give her.

I caress her; I can't fucking keep my hands off her. She arches to my touch. Our gazes fuse. She looks entranced—but I'm the one mesmerized.

Her blond hair begins to slip free from her updo and scatter across my dark sheets in a pale cloud. Fuck, I can't stop looking at her and imagining her here, under me, tomorrow night and beyond...

Isabella is making it damn hard for me to keep my head screwed on. Her climax needs to happen fast. My own is brewing and raging, roiling under my skin for release.

Gritting my teeth, I fuck my way deep into her again, cursing the condom, and swirl my thumb over her hard clit. She's closer than ever. My less-than-subtle caress has her gripping me tighter, nails digging into my shoulders, and crying out for more.

“Kiss me.”

Jesus, she's throwing oil on this fire blazing between us—and I have zero interest in stopping it.

I shove a hand in her hair, destroying the last of her elegant twist, and shove her lips apart with my own. As I sweep my tongue into her honeyed mouth, I plow into her luscious body, abrading her most sensitive spots.

Instantly, she gasps and melts in my arms.

“You like that?”

She digs her fingers into my shoulders. “More. Please...”

“If I do, you'll come.”

She nods frantically. “I can't stop it.”

Thank fuck. “I don't want you to. Come now.”

“But I don't want this to end.”

“End?” Hell, I plan to fuck her for the rest of her life. “I'm nowhere near done with you. Come for me.”

Roughly, I fill her again and again, gratified when a rosy flush rises up her chest and reddens her cheeks. It doubles when she clamps down on my cock with a cry.

“That's it. Yeah. Baby girl...”

“Oh. Oh... *Ooooooh!*” Her screams fill my bedroom.

With my fist in her hair, I tug her lips under mine and swallow her next long, high-pitched wail as she pulses around me, gripping and squeezing until my restraint runs out. I give in to my inescapable need not merely to orgasm. I strain

against my biological urge to mark her, claim her, and make her understand who she belongs to.

I let go of every shred of self-control and climax. A strangled groan rips from my throat as sensations mow me down—epic and violent. The blindsiding pleasure threatens to unhinge me. I shudder. My controlled strokes become savage bangs inside her as dark ecstasy smothers my rational thought. Fuck, she's barely more than a girl, and she's on the brink of unraveling me.

My orgasm lasts half an eternity. It flattens me until I'm dizzy and I see black spots. My whole body pings like it's electric. Fuck, I've never felt a release like this. And it's not because I haven't gotten laid in a while. I have. I tapped a friend with benefits after I returned from Hawaii so I'd be in stone-cold control tonight.

But I failed. I'm totally unprepared for the way Isabella makes me feel.

An embarrassingly long time later, my breathing and heart rate recover. The verdict is out on my sanity. I should feel mellow and sated. I should want to keep Isabella close so she'll be available when my itch needs scratching again. Instead, I still feel torqued up—and more determined than ever to put my stamp on her so she never wants to leave my bed.

What the fuck is this woman doing to me?

“Oh, my god.” She blinks up, tears leaking from the corners of her big eyes. “That was...”

“Insanely fucking good,” I admit.

“I didn't even know something like that was possible. You probably hear a lot that you're amazing, but...wow.”

Does she think this is normal for me? “What we just did? I've never felt anything like that, either. You're magic.”

“Me?” She shakes her head. “You must—”

“I love sex, one hundred percent. But what we just did was...beyond.”

A blinding smile breaks across her face. “Really? I’ve always thought I was terrible in bed. My ex—”

“Forget him. He’s in your past. Keep him there.”

“You’re right. I won’t let him define me anymore. Maybe I didn’t flip his switch or whatever, but—”

“He’s an idiot who told you it was your fault that he didn’t arouse you.”

“According to him, it takes me too long to get ‘warmed up.’”

I scoff. Yeah, I’m using this girl to get revenge, but she’s been mistreated by an asshole unworthy of her.

Unable to stop myself, I brush my fingers across her so-soft cheek and remain buried as deep inside her as I can. “His impatience was his problem. You’re perfect.”

She sends me a grateful smile. “I’m sharing some of the most embarrassing things about my life with a man I barely know. How is it not awkward?”

“We have chemistry, baby girl. There’s nothing you can’t tell me.”

She laughs. “Intimacy is something I usually shy away from. But I’m starting to think you’re right about our chemistry—even if you still make me nervous.”

Does she sense on some level that I’m her foe? Tonight, I’ll give her all the compliments and climaxes she can handle. I’ll drown her in pleasure, give her orgasms, coax her trust, and enjoy the hell out of her.

Tomorrow? I’ll drop the hammer, and shit will get real—fast.

CHAPTER FIVE

Isabella

The night is everything. For hours, the stranger lavishes me with attention. He feeds me. He holds me. In the shower, he cleans me from head to toe...only to dirty me up again in his bed twice more. The pleasure he heaps on me is insane. And the things that man can do with his tongue? Holy cow.

If I had known this man existed sooner, I would have ditched Eric. He was a waste of my time. But my stranger makes me feel boneless and crazy happy. Hours fly by in a dreamlike idyll where the laws of time and space and hookups being meaningless don't apply. He keeps me under him and screaming in ecstasy. Already, he has me hoping for a future beyond tonight.

I think I'm falling in love.

That sounds crazy. I still don't even know this man's name. We agreed to wait until morning to discuss anything practical. Tonight is for us.

Finally, around four a.m. I fall asleep in his arms, curled up in sheets that smell like our passion. I nuzzle against him, already looking forward to waking up in his embrace.

But when I wake, the sun stabs my eyes and the bed is empty. I wince against the harsh light and find him dressed, sitting in a chair I didn't notice last night. His elbows are balanced on his knees as he leans forward, dissecting me with a dark, dispassionate gaze.

Trying to ignore my skitter of unease, I clutch the sheet to my naked body and sit up. “Morning. Sorry I slept so late.”

He shrugs. “I expected that.”

Maybe, but I can’t tell if he minds. “Have you been up long?”

“A few hours. Why don’t you get dressed? I set some clothes on the bathroom counter for you, along with a fresh toothbrush and a new comb. I’ll head downstairs and make you some coffee. How do you like it?”

So he’s not throwing me out right away. “One sugar and a splash of creamer.”

“Hazelnut okay?”

Despite the unexpected tension between us, I attempt a smile. “My favorite.”

He doesn’t smile back. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

As he turns to leave, I remember what he took from me last night, besides sanity. “My underwear, where are they?”

“You don’t need them anymore.”

Then he’s gone. I sputter at the empty space where he stood moments ago. What does that mean? Of course I need underwear...unless he’s hoping I stay the rest of the weekend. If that’s the case, he’s right. I don’t need them—at least until I leave.

Once I do, I’m not returning to Eric. So I still don’t have anywhere to call home. I have to solve that problem...

Wincing, I slide out of bed, every muscle in my body deliciously sore—especially my inner thighs. My girl parts feel tender and swollen and well used. But oh, the discomfort is worth the agonizing pleasure my stranger gave me.

Now I know exactly what I’ve been missing.

I’m probably way more attached to this hookup than I should be, but even if we only last another day or two, he’s shown me what to look for in a lover. I’ll never give Eric Meadows a scrap of my attention or affection again.

After a quick rinse in his shower, I use the toothbrush and comb he thoughtfully laid out, then slip on the sweatpants and soft, long-sleeved T-shirt. Damn it, I don't have a bra, either. Sighing, I hop into his thick socks and meander downstairs.

His house, like his bedroom, is fastidiously neat. It's also comfortable and functional, filled with grays and blues and the occasional pops of color that catch my eye. There isn't a feminine touch in sight.

That makes me happier than it should.

I follow the smell of coffee and find the kitchen. The man I spent the night with leans over his coffeemaker.

He looks every bit as mouthwateringly fit as he is. Under the morning sun, his hair seems more salt than pepper. But the undeniable tension coming off him makes me pause. Instead of shivering in anticipation of his touch, I'm worried he's looking for a nice way to show me the door.

"English muffin? Toast? Eggs?" he asks without facing me.

How did he even know I was here? "I don't usually eat breakfast."

That makes him turn with a disapproving stare. "When you're with me, you do. Choose or I'll choose for you."

Last night, he was bossy in the bedroom. Outside of it? That's not okay. "Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

"English muffin it is." He reaches into his pantry.

I cross the room to him and grab his arm. "Seriously, don't go to any trouble. I rarely eat before noon."

"You do now." He sends me an unblinking stare. "I take care of what's mine."

"Yours?" He can't mean that the way it sounds.

"Yes." He leans in, his stare daring me to refute him. "Mine."

I rear back. I wanted to spend more time with this guy. Heck, I was hoping to spend the rest of the weekend in his

bed, under him, absorbing all the pleasure he gives me. But I just left one controlling jerk. The last thing I need is another.

“Listen, I should—”

“Go? No. You’re not moving until you’ve eaten and we’ve talked.” He settles the toaster onto the counter and shoves the two halves of the muffin into the slots.

What the hell is going on? “I don’t think so.”

He hands me my coffee as if I didn’t just balk. “Sit. I’ll bring your food. Butter? Jelly? Something else?”

“I don’t want breakfast.”

“Okay. Peanut butter, then. You need protein.”

Last night, he treated me like a goddess. This morning, I feel like a caged pet. He cares about what I’m eating, but not about how I feel? No wonder he’s divorced.

“I appreciate that you want to feed me. I’m sure you mean well and that you don’t intend to come off as bossy—”

“I am bossy. I’m not trying to hide that at all.” The muffin pops up, and he dumps it on a plate, then swaths it in peanut butter and heads toward me. “I suggest you get used to it.”

“I don’t have to ‘get used’ to anything where you’re concerned. We hooked up, and now it’s over.”

He takes me by the arm and jostles me to the breakfast table, kicking out the chair and planting me in front of my food before he leans over me with a scowl. “You’re wrong, Isabella.”

I gasp. “How do you know—”

“Your name?” His smile does nothing to set me at ease. “Here’s how this is going to go: you’ll do whatever I say because, first, you work for me.”

“Oh, my god. Are you”—my heart lurches—“Nathan Price?”

“Got it on the first guess. Good. I knew you were smart.”

Shit. I just slept with my new boss. How did I not remember this man? Granted, I haven't seen Nathan Price in a decade, so my memory of him is more than fuzzy...but we talked over the phone during my interview. Why didn't I at least recognize his voice?

The gray matter between my ears wasn't doing the thinking last night. Lust was, damn it.

"You tricked me!"

"I gave you what you wanted when you prowled into the company Christmas party wearing a skintight dress and fuck-me heels."

"Prowled? You're wrong. I—"

"Don't lie and tell me you went to the party without a single thought of finding someone to fuck."

A hot flush steals up my face. "I was angry."

"You deserve to be. Your ex is a complete douche. But that doesn't change what's going to happen, because not only do you answer to me during the day...you're going to answer to me every night, too."

Foreboding makes me freeze. "What?"

"We're getting married."

I shake my head, praying he's not as serious as he looks. "You're insane!"

"Maybe, but you're going to sleep naked in my bed every night and take my cock."

"No. I'm not—"

"You are. I have pictures of you breaking into a house I own a few weeks back. Want to see them?"

The only place I've ever broken into in my life is the place I thought my dad lived in. How is it Nathan Price's pad if my father lives there? "I didn't take anything. I only was searching for—"

“I don’t care why you were trespassing and illegally entering my property. The fact is, you did. Did I mention that I’m personal friends with the police chief, the DA, and most of the judges around here?”

As threats go, it’s hardly a veiled one. I feel incredibly betrayed. “What do you want?”

“Revenge. Your father stole a small fortune from me. Then he slept with my wife. You’re my repayment.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Eat.”

I’m not actually hungry, but choking down breakfast gives me a few minutes to get my head together.

My thoughts spin. Is my dad’s relationship with the ex-Mrs. Price the reason I haven’t seen or heard from him in so long? Dad was always self-absorbed. I counted on him for money and not much else. Even after I buried Mom, he could barely be bothered with me. But is he really a thief, too? Did he actually take both Nathan Price’s money and his wife?

I swallow the last of the English muffin and wash it down with coffee that’s way better than anything I’ve had at Eric’s place or the office. Before I can blink, my new boss lifts the plate from in front of me and loads it in the dishwasher. Briefly, I think of running out the door, but I’m in Nathan’s clothes, I have no shoes, it’s cold as hell out there...and I still have nowhere to run to. Even if I Ubered to Jen’s place, it’s the size of a cracker box. I can’t stay there long.

“More coffee?” His deep voice startles me.

I gasp. How did he sneak up so silently? “No. What do you want from me?”

“A wife.” He sits again. “You’ll be moving here this morning. Like I said, you’ll work for me by day—”

“And fuck you every night?” I hurl the words at him like an accusation.

He’s unfazed by my anger. “Yes. You’ll serve at my pleasure...whatever I decide that is.”

That threat should not make any part of my body clench with desire. God, I have horrible taste in men, and I need to have my head examined. “For how long?”

“Until I’ve had my pound of flesh.”

“If I refuse?” But I already know the answer. He’ll make sure I end up in jail.

Nathan slants me a chiding stare. “Don’t test me. You think I’m ruthless now? You’ve seen nothing yet, baby girl.”

“Are you shitting me?” Jen screeches in my ear. “He’s blackmailing you for revenge?”

Nathan Price isn’t just blackmailing me for revenge. He’s fucking me for it. He intends to marry me for it. “What am I going to do?”

“Have you found your dad?”

“No. He changed his number, moved out of his apartment, switched jobs, shut down his social media accounts... Short of hiring a private investigator, which I don’t have the money for, I don’t know what else to try.”

“And you really broke into your boss’s house?”

“I didn’t know it was his. Dad’s last employer told me that address was where they mailed his final paycheck. When I went there, no one was home. Since I thought my dad was renting the place, it never crossed my mind that anyone else would consider me sneaking in through an unlocked window breaking and entering.”

“If it’s your boss’s place, why would your dad be living there?”

“I’m guessing he’s shacked up with Mr. Price’s ex-wife. Apparently, they’re a ‘thing.’”

Jen laughs. “Mr. Price, really? Izzy, you spent all night fucking the guy, and he’s determined to marry you. But you

won't call him by his first name?"

"Focus," I hiss into the phone, acutely aware that Nathan won't stay in the shower all morning. "I don't know what the hell to do."

"You've already established that you don't have many options. And honestly, if he rocked your world that much and he's hot...why not go with the flow?"

"Marry him and let him use me in whatever way he wants so he can backstab my dad at my expense? Capitulating is *not* like you. What happened to equality? To not having my life controlled by an asshole with a Y chromosome?"

"Normally, I'd vote for that. Totally. But not going to jail trumps that. Besides, you know what Mae West said: 'Men are like linoleum floors. Lay them right and you can walk all over them for years.'"

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"No. Fuck him good a few times, and I'll bet you can have him eating out of your hand. And if he's half as good as you say he is, you'll have a way higher orgasm quotient than you did with Eric."

"Eating out of my hand? I don't have your experience. I only kind of know what I'm doing in bed." And last night, Nathan put out all the effort. I simply had to lie back and feel good.

It's not lost on me that, when I first woke up, I was trying to figure out how to spend more time in bed with him. But that was before I knew he was my boss and before he was coercing me into putting out until death do us part.

"Told you, you should have taken that blow job class with me. But you chose your dislike of cucumbers over learning a valuable skill."

"Are you listening to me at all? This man hates me."

"No. He doesn't *know* you. It's your dad he despises. And honestly, anyone who hates him can't be all bad."

“Good people don’t force someone to have sex with them.”

“They don’t. But tell me, are you really going to be able to resist Nathan Price when he drops his clothes, puts his head between your legs, and makes you scream down the ceiling?”

Jen’s words make me blush, both because the visual that accompanies her words is arousing...and because she’s not wrong. “Okay, he’s hot. Having sex with him is hardly a chore. But that doesn’t mean I want to marry him. And what am I if I let this man do whatever he wants to me in bed?”

“A woman without an orgasm deficit?”

“Do you think of anything besides sex?” I huff.

“You’ve known me long enough to answer that question.”

She’s right. Unless it’s new clothes or celebrity gossip, she doesn’t think a lot about much else. Well, except her friends. She is unfailingly loyal. She’s also, despite her seemingly shallow interests, deeply practical. Jen has a huge heart.

Maybe she has a point about my situation. What are my more appealing options? I could quit my job, but then what? I’d be poorer, and I’d still have to put out for a man who’s using me. My first student loan payments are coming due soon, and I need a place to live...

“I’m scared.”

“Do you think he’d hurt you physically? Like beat you?”

As underhanded as his threats are, my gut tells me he’s a protector. “No.”

But emotionally? Sexually? Nathan Price has the power to destroy me.

“You’re braver and stronger than you think. Seriously, blow his mind—and any other part of him you can—in bed. He’ll soften—except his cock. And all the while, you’ll have a cushy place to live. I’d call that a win-win. Roll with it, girl. See what happens.”

“You’re crazy.” But even if that’s true, I don’t have a choice.

Looks like I’ll be at the mercy of my hot, ruthless bastard of a boss for the foreseeable future...

CHAPTER SIX

An hour after my panicked call to Jen, Mr. Price—Nathan—got a text from Mr. Force, our CEO. By nightfall, he was on a plane to Tokyo. Not without seducing me again first, of course.

I tried holding out. I tried clinging to my anger. I tried resisting him.

I failed miserably.

During our night together, he learned my body well. He knew precisely where to touch me and how. He whispered the words I craved and looked at me as if I mattered. And stupidly, I fell for it.

Then, suitcase in hand, he was gone.

Since then, I've had four days to scrounge work clothes from Jen's closet and to think.

My number one takeaway? I can't be a coward. If he's crazy enough to force me to marry him, I'll show him I'm crazy enough to make his life hell. His grudge is with Dad, and I'm not paying for my father's mistakes with my body or my future. And if Nathan insists on making me miserable, I'll take him down with me.

Will you? Really?

I hate my inner voice...but I fear it has the better grasp of reality. I melted for Nathan the first time he kissed me. Each time he puts his hands on me, my will to withstand him

evaporates. I lose my clothes, spread my legs, and beg him to take me in every filthy-dirty way he wants.

At least the sex will be good in our marriage.

Totally not the point.

I snort and dive back into an email reply to Kate Hennessey-Hunt, keeping up with the work pouring in while Nathan is gone. But I'd rather be busy than fixating on when he'll be back—and what he'll expect.

Suddenly, I hear a familiar growl behind me. “My office, Ms. Shay. Now.”

With a startled yelp, I whirl and spot Nathan wearing an impeccable charcoal suit and tearing a path down the hall.

Why does my bosshole have to look so damn good? Why does my traitorous pussy clench with need at the sight of him?

“I’m waiting.” He unlocks his door and holds it wide impatiently.

I’m afraid to ask what he wants.

On wobbly knees, I rise and hustle toward him, ducking under his arm as I enter his private domain. Memories of his touch assail me.

God, he smells good, like amber, sandalwood, and man. That scent reminds me of the orgasms he heaped on me last weekend until I begged him to stop.

He ignored me and kept making me come.

In the middle of the room, I face him and tell myself to focus on business. He shuts and locks the door. As he shrugs out of his suit coat, he crosses the room and brushes past me—detonating tingles through my body—before he hangs the garment on the back of his chair. Then he snares my gaze. His face is impassive, but his eyes... They’re burning. With anger? Desire? Vengeance?

“Come here.”

I raise my chin and force myself across the floor, keeping his desk between us. “Welcome back, Mr. Price. What do you

need?”

“Your pussy. Lose that prissy little blouse, along with whatever’s underneath it, lean over my desk, and lift your pretty ass in the air.” He flings off his tie and flicks open the buttons of his crisp, white dress shirt. “Grip the far edge. And no matter what, don’t make a sound.”

Has he lost his mind? “You want to—”

“Fuck you? Yes. It’s been *days*,” he groans as if our separation has been torture while reaching for the hem of my skirt. “I hope for your sake you didn’t wear panties.”

I did. He hasn’t been here for days, and I didn’t think the text he sent on Monday morning forbidding me to wear anything under my skirts was serious. “I-I...”

“Can’t follow directions? We’ll work on that. Bend. Over. The desk.”

Panic sets in. Everyone will know what we’re doing. “I won’t screw my professional reputation so you can get laid.”

He raises a brow. Why the hell does he have to look so hot and male with his shirt open to his ridged abs and his hard, lickable chest exposed.

Damn it, I’m a responsible adult. My libido should behave like a grown-up, too.

“The longer you stall, the longer people will have to guess what we’re doing behind this door. Tick-tock, Ms. Shay. If you’re quiet when I make you come, no one will be the wiser.”

I could keep refusing and call his bluff. But merely being close to him has made me uncomfortably aware of his nearness, of his mastery of my body, of my ache for his touch...

“You’re a bastard.” I unbutton my blouse.

“One who will give you never-ending orgasms. How terrible,” he draws. “You’ve got ten seconds to lay yourself across my desk.”

I don’t ask *or what*. He’s already spelled that out.

My fingers tremble as I remove my lacy shirt. My bra follows. My nipples draw tight, and I'm incredibly aware of his stare on my breasts. With the windows open to the city, I feel exposed. I should be too self-conscious and ashamed to be excited.

Unfortunately, I'm drenched.

Swallowing hard, I stand behind his desk and kick off one high heel.

"Leave them on."

"Why? Because you're a sexist pig who thinks sex while I'm wearing my heels is hot?"

"Because you're a little thing. You'll need the extra height while I fuck you."

His blunt words send shards of pleasure through me. Gulping, I slide my foot back in my shoe. He plants his palm between my shoulder blades and pushes me down. I hiss when my hot cheek and sensitive nipples make contact with the cold surface. Then he shoves my skirt to my waist with one hand. With the other, he slips his fingers inside my panties and finds my clit.

I gasp. "Nathan..."

He leans over me, breathing against my neck. "That's right. There's my wet girl. Oh, I've missed this pussy..."

I want to resist the pleasure he's giving me. But it's damn near impossible to fight something my body hasn't stopped craving since the first time he put his hands on me.

In seconds, pressure and need coil under his digits. I bite my lip to hold in a whimper.

Out the windows, I swear the whole city of Boston is watching him undo me with his methodical, unerring touch. I close my eyes, but without the skyline to focus on, I only feel Nathan more.

"Please..."

"Begging to come already?"

“No,” I pant.

“I don’t believe you. Your clit is swollen and hard.”

“It’s still sore from your abuse last weekend.” That’s not true, but maybe that will make him stop.

Do you really want him to?

“You aren’t accustomed to frequent orgasms. I’ll change that.” He peels my panties down my legs and taps on my ankles, one at a time. “Step out.”

Obediently, I do. He pockets my underwear. He intends to keep this pair, too? Like a trophy?

Anxiety ties me in knots. I’m afraid of getting caught yet afraid of displeasing him. Everything about him and this situation stirs and agitates me.

I turn to him. “Give those back.”

“I told you, when you’re with me, you don’t wear these. I know you read my text. I want you available for my cock at all times. I’m going to fuck you often and well. I’ll remind you this pussy is mine every chance I get.”

“You’re a bastard.” One whose sole goal is revenge; I need to remember that, not how incredible his touch feels.

“At least I’m not a cheating douchebag.”

He has a point, but... “No, you’re a bossy, possessive caveman.”

“I don’t deny that.”

“Give me back my underwear.”

He tsks. “We need to work on your listening skills. Not only do you no longer wear them, you don’t own them.”

To prove his point, he tosses my scrap of white cotton in his wastebasket and pours the remnants from last week’s coffee on top. They’re ruined.

Seeing red, I turn to face him. “Nath—”

He covers my mouth with his palm. “Shh. You don’t want the rest of the office to come running. I’m not sharing these

perfect tits with anyone.”

Then he swoops down and laves my nipples, his quiet groan vibrating through my body.

One touch and I surrender. Why? Where’s my self-respect and my will? Apparently, they’re between my legs, begging like the rest of me. It’s barely after eleven a.m., and Nathan is melting me into a puddle. Unless I go shopping on my lunch hour, I’ll be commando for the rest of the day.

After one final nip of his teeth on each tender tip, he turns me back to the desk and urges me flat. The hiss of his zipper fills the room otherwise occupied by distant office noises and the sounds of my shallow breaths.

“Spread your legs.” He nudges them apart with his foot.

The tearing of a wrapper fills my ears next. My heart thrashes hard when the thick head of his cock nudges my entrance while his massive hand pins my wrists to his desk. “By the way, five minutes ago, I announced our engagement. The whole office knows.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

He doesn’t answer, merely plants his lips on my shoulder, grips my hip, and thrusts deep inside me in one ruthless stroke.

Tingles explode. I’m furious with this man. He’s manipulating me. He’s shoving me into a corner. He intends to use me to get back at my father. I should hate him.

But hate isn’t what has me biting my lip to hold in a cry. I wrap my fingers around the edge of the desk and hold on for dear life while Nathan withdraws, exhaling hot breaths against my neck. Before I can assimilate the pleasure, he drives inside me again with another spine-melting thrust.

“Fuck, you feel good, baby girl. The whole time I was in Tokyo, I wanted to be inside you. You’ve ruined jacking off for me. I tried, but I couldn’t masturbate your perfect pussy out of my system. I just stayed hard, fantasizing about you.”

I bite my lip even harder, refusing to admit that I craved him while he was gone. Everything in his house reminds me of

him. Not only is it full of his belongings, but every nook and cranny has his vibe. After my first night alone in his bedroom and my unsuccessful attempt to self-pleasure away my desire, I changed the sheets. But even removing his scent didn't put a dent in my ache.

How did he rewire me to need him in a single night?

Nathan grips my hips, forcing me onto my toes with his next slow, deliberate thrust. A whimper slips free. My nails scratch the underside of his desk.

"I hate you."

He laughs. "No. You hate that you want me. You hate that I can make you melt and beg and come. But you don't hate me."

Damn it, he's right. And I also hate that he has so much more experience. Jen's advice rings in my ears, but how am I supposed to lay Nathan right when he has me so pinned, I can't even move? All I can do is feel his impaling cock stretching me while his wandering fingers manipulate my clit every bit as masterfully as he's manipulated me into marrying him.

"Did you come without me? Did you put your trembling fingers in your sweet little cunt and think of me?" He slides inside me again, ramping up my ache even more. "I think you did. How did that feel? Unsatisfactory, I'll bet."

Damn him for being right. "None of your business."

"Wrong. Everything about you is my business from now on, especially when you come."

I have every intention of absolving him of that notion, but he rails me with his hard cock again while he rubs my clit with a pair of devoted fingers and his lips drift up my neck. My stinging reply dies in my throat, and the only sound that comes out is a high-pitched whine of need.

"Oh, my little bride likes it when I pet that pretty pussy and fuck her." He nips at my ear. "Deny it all you want, but your body tells me the truth. You're about to come."

As much as I want to refute him, I can't. Instead, I try to breathe through the growing tingles converging where he's plowing me with firm, deep strokes.

"Say it. Tell me you're mine. That your pussy is mine. That your every orgasm is mine."

Biting my lip, I shake my head mulishly.

Nathan concentrates those devilish fingers of his on my clit, swirling his magical touch over it until my eyes roll into the back of my head and my knees threaten to buckle. He's taking advantage of the fact I've never had good sex and using my body against me. I want to be mad, but I'm too close to climax to feel anything but burning need.

"Say it. Or I stop." He freezes, then—no thrusting, no rubbing. Just his hot breaths on my neck.

Instantly, my body tightens and objects. Before I'm even aware of it, a mewl of protest slips free.

He covers my mouth with his hot palm. "Hurts, doesn't it? Your body is primed, baby girl. You're right there. Just another touch or two and you'll fall into ecstasy. And I'm dying to give it to you and watch you claw my desk as you shudder under me. All I want in return is a few simple words. Say them. 'I'm yours. My pussy is yours. My orgasms are yours.'"

I writhe under Nathan, desperate for the last bit of friction my body needs to combust. He yanks his hand from my pussy and withdraws his cock. I'm still reeling when he smacks my vulnerable backside in a pair of harsh spansks.

As I gasp and try to process the pain quickly morphing into pleasure, he surges inside me again, renewing the sharp, overwhelming ache I can't fight.

"Say the words, or you don't get to come." He wraps his fist in my hair and pulls my head back until his lips whisper against my ear. "I'll leave you aching all afternoon."

The raspy, relentless growl in my ear tells me he's serious. Giving in feels like ceding parts of myself I'll never get back. But when he propels deep inside me again, holding out isn't an option anymore.

“I’m yours,” I gasp out.

“Yes.” He fucks me harder. “And?”

I close my eyes against both the knee-buckling bliss and humiliation. “My pussy is yours.”

“A lesson I will teach you again and again. Tell me what else is mine.” He prods my weeping clit with his fingers.

“My orgasms are yours,” I gasp out.

“That’s right. And I *will* hold onto what’s mine, Isabella. Do you hear me?”

In some vague corner of my brain, a scathing protest forms. My need for orgasm is a wet blanket on my objections. “Yes.”

“Good girl. Want to come?”

Why is Nathan asking? The bastard knows the answer.

“Yes,” I pant.

“Hmm, you’re perfect, baby girl. Do it. Come.” He slams inside me again. “Come all over my cock.”

Then he unleashes the passion he’s been restraining and overwhelms me with sensation. His lips glide across my skin while he tugs on my hair. I’m shocked by how much his caveman insistence and my stinging scalp arouse me. All the while, he swirls insistent fingers over my needy clit while he drives into me over and over.

“Nathan...” I cry just under my breath.

He shows no mercy. “That’s it. Take my cock, baby girl... Give me your pleasure.”

I grip his desk tighter, feeling my grasp on reality slip. Tingles spread. Need pools, mercilessly drowning me in desire that’s a breath from exploding.

“Oh, fuck, baby. Fuck,” he growls. “Now.”

Denying that voice—and him—is impossible.

The climax he’s withheld for so long gathers and converges before it detonates inside me in an orgasm unlike

anything I've ever imagined. I buck and bite my lip to hold in my cries, but it's useless. My body is no longer my own. It belongs to Nathan, especially as he ramps me up, squeezing every ounce of pleasure from me. His strokes get impossibly rougher. He gets impossibly harder. Then, holy cow, his teeth latch onto my shoulder. He pulls harder on my hair. The pain drives my ecstasy to new heights before culminating with a final spasm of my body and his rough groan in my ear.

My body is still shuddering when he unwinds his hand from my tresses and pulls his fingers off my clit. I can't form words. I can only lie across his desk, trying to catch my breath.

What the hell has this man done to me? When he touches me, my body isn't my own. He's coercing me to the altar for all the wrong reasons, and we've had sex a mere handful of times. But none of that matters. My pussy has decided that Nathan Price is its master and owner. No matter how the rest of me revolts and resists, he manages to unravel me every time he touches me.

Swallowing the tight lump of defeat in my throat, I peel my torso off his desk. Beside me, he plops the used condom in the trash, and I hear the zip of his fly and the clink of his belt buckle. Then he wraps his arms around me and pulls me back against his chest possessively. I tense, despising the way I both simultaneously hate and love his embrace. Worse, he's left me so emotionally raw, like he scrubbed my psyche with steel wool. Even if I don't want his touch, I *need* it.

Suddenly, he turns me in his arms and takes my hand. Before I can blink, he slides a blinding diamond on the ring finger of my left hand. Holy cow, it's giant. At least a few carats of oval sparkle on a thick band encrusted with more diamonds. There's nothing subtle about this ring. It's a statement of possession. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it.

"It's beautiful," I murmur before I can stop myself.

"It reminded me of you." He tips my chin up and takes my mouth in a deep kiss that seems to penetrate to my soul.

When he pulls away, I cling, craving more—until I remind myself he’s forcing me to be his wife. “But it’s unnecessary. You’ve had your revenge. I work for you. I live with you. I have sex with you... What else do you want?”

“Everything. I’m just getting started. Pack a suitcase. Tonight, we leave for Vegas. Tomorrow, we’re getting married.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

My heart pounds two hours later when I sneak out of the office and slide my key into Eric's apartment door.

Thankfully, my ex won't be home since his father usually commands his sons have lunch with him every Thursday at noon. This should be the perfect time to gather the last of my clothes and possessions, including my mother's pendant.

I tiptoe down the hall and pull my suitcase from the closet, then lift my clothes—hangers and all—and toss them inside. Toiletries follow. God, I've missed my skincare... Then I turn and snatch my body wash, shampoo, and conditioner from the shower before tossing them all into my bag. I retrieve my birth certificate and passport from my nightstand, then turn to fetch my jewelry from the dresser.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Gasping, I slap my hand to my chest and whirl to the sound of Eric's angry voice. He stands in the doorway with a glower.

"Y-you're here?"

"Thought you'd sneak in?" he sneers. "You fucking leave without even talking to me. I try calling and texting you, but you *blocked* me. Now you show up and...what?"

I'm confused. "I didn't block you."

"Don't bullshit me." He bangs his fist against the nearby wall, then focuses his narrow-eyed glare at my hand. "What the fuck is on your finger?"

I glance down. My engagement rock winks at me. My stomach plummets to my toes. “Jewelry.”

“It looks like an engagement ring.”

What should I do? I’m torn between spinning a lie and admitting the truth when he takes my arms. His fingers dig into me brutally as he shoves me against the wall.

“Eric—”

“Give me the fucking truth, Izzy. You had your panties in a twist because I fucked Mariah, but if you’re marrying someone else, you’ve clearly been fucking around behind my back.”

“I haven’t,” I hurl back. “I met him Friday night after I left you.”

“You’re telling me you met some guy and got engaged in less than a week? Bullshit.” He drags me closer, then recoils. “Ugh, you smell like sex, and he left a hickey on your neck. What is he, fourteen?”

That’s it. I’ve had it with his condescending BS. Since it’s definitely over, I’m not holding back anymore.

When I was Eric’s girlfriend, I was too afraid to rock the boat. In retrospect, I should have realized that by sacrificing my feelings and putting off difficult conversations so he wouldn’t leave me, I was only making myself unhappy. I’m mad as hell at Nathan for boxing me into a corner, and I still can’t believe that in roughly twenty-four hours I’ll be Mrs. Price, but I can at least thank him for opening my eyes about a few things.

“He’s forty. And he’s way more man than you’ll ever be. He doesn’t sit around all day, then demand I take care of him when I come home from work. *He* takes care of *me*. And he cares about my feelings.” Okay, all that’s a stretch, but Eric doesn’t need to know that. “He’s also so damn good in bed that I lose my mind every time he touches me. I finally know what an orgasm is, no thanks to you.”

“That’s a fucking lie! I got you off.”

“Never. Not once in six years did you ever manage to make me feel good. Worse, you not only never really tried, you never *cared*. Everything in your life is about you. Your wants, your impulses, your wishes. I’ve grown since high school, but you haven’t. I want a future with a husband and children and a home. You didn’t propose when you said you would. Every time I mentioned children you either sneered or shuddered. And despite having more money than you can spend, you stay in this impersonal apartment out of...what? Laziness? Apathy? Tell me.”

“I’m just not in a hurry for that adult shit. But I guess you and your biological clock got impatient and glommed onto Grandpa. Congratulations for letting a geezer put a ring on your finger, not to mention his cock in your pussy. You hoping he’s got enough sperm left in his shriveled testicles to knock you up?”

“Shut up.”

But Eric has a point. I want kids...but with Nathan? Everything is happening too fast. I always pictured myself having Eric’s babies. I thought about my future with him during my final year of college, about making the perfect family I never had. Now I realize my anger at him the night I discovered him with Mariah wasn’t merely about his cheating, but about the loss of the future I’d envisioned for so long. And when I think about what might have been if I’d never walked in on Eric getting blown by our neighbor, I realize I dodged a bullet.

“This is bullshit. Take off that ring, unpack your suitcase, and stop being a whiny bitch.”

“If being honest makes me a ‘whiny bitch,’ I plead guilty. You were lousy as a boyfriend and worse as a lover. I made excuses for you for too long, and it’s over. We’re done.” I wrench free and reach for my jewelry.

Eric snags an arm around my waist, pulls me from the dresser, and slams me against the wall again. Then he grips my arms in a brutal grip sure to leave bruises and shakes me.

“We’re *not* done. When you gave me your V-card, you promised me forever.”

“Eric, you’ve been sticking your dick in another woman. *You* broke the promise, not me.”

He grips me even tighter. “A little extra pussy on the side doesn’t mean I don’t want you anymore.”

“That’s exactly what it means, and I won’t put up with it.” I try to wriggle free from his grasp. “You’re hurting me.”

“Maybe you deserve it for hurting me.”

I don’t, and I refuse to take another ounce of crap from him. “Or maybe you’re just full of shit.”

Without hesitation, I knee him in the balls, delighting when he doubles over. While he clutches his testicles and falls to his knees, I race to my suitcase, zip it up, and dash toward the front door.

“Goddamn it, Izzy. Get the fuck back here,” he shouts through the strain.

“No. Don’t call me anymore.”

“If you leave here, I’ll trash the rest of your shit. I’ll dump whatever else you came for in the landfill!”

My heart seizes up. My mom’s pendant is the last thing of hers I really have. I cherish it. I’ll sob if I lose it. But Eric is coming down the hall, and I already know if he reaches me, our fight will get uglier. He gets out of control when he loses his temper, like a toddler who can’t manage his emotions.

“I don’t care,” I bluff. Eric is too self-absorbed to realize he still has the one item I want most. “I got everything I need. I’m out, and I’m not coming back. Have a miserable life. You deserve it.”

He lumbers and sputters his way down the hall, then shouts as he wrenches open the front door while I toss my suitcase in my compact and drive off to the sight of him waving his fist in my rearview mirror.

I doubt I've seen the last of him, but he's not my biggest concern. Nathan and our pending nuptials are. I've escaped one horrible situation, but my ex is merely a big, self-absorbed bully. Nathan is far more dangerous. What's going to happen once I'm forced to say "I do" and I become Nathan's wife?

CHAPTER EIGHT

After a bumpy, packed flight, Nathan and I reach our hotel in Vegas just after midnight. He offers to order room service for dinner. I'm too tired and too shell-shocked. I beg off for a shower in our luxurious suite. When I climb out, wearing my thickest winter plaid as armor, Nathan is gone.

His absence is a relief. At least that's what I tell myself.

It's a lie. Even if I don't like anything about him except the way he makes my body feel, I'm in a city I've never been to. He intends on changing my life forever tomorrow. And I feel so alone.

When I wake the following morning, he's missing again. I know he returned in the middle of the night. He laid behind me, his arm wrapped around me, his lips skating up my neck as he got me off with his hand, swallowed my cries of pleasure with a demanding kiss, then told me to go back to sleep.

What's happening? I don't understand.

Suddenly, a knock sounds at my door. I leap up to answer it. Maybe Nathan forgot his key?

When I yank back the heavy slab, it's not my groom. Instead, a room service attendant stands in a starched uniform with a plastic smile. "Your breakfast. Where would you like it?"

Nathan must have ordered it, but where did he go?

“Over there.” I point absently to the window—then nearly gasp at our amazing, unimpeded view of the Strip that I was too tired and too angry to notice last night.

“Hey, girl!”

I whirl to find my bestie dashing into my hotel room, sizing up the view, then checking out the help, who’s attractive in a buttoned-up way, before grabbing me in a big hug. “Jen! W-what are you doing here? How did you know I was here?”

“Surprise! Maid of honor to your rescue. Your fiancé called me yesterday, since you didn’t.” She sends me a pointed glare. “We talked, and he flew me here. Despite the rocky start you two had, I think you’ve got a keeper.”

“Clearly, he bamboozled you. Did you forget the part where he’s forcing me to marry him?”

The room service attendant sends us a sideways glance, then hands me a scrap of paper and a pen. “Sign, please.”

I do, giving the guy an obscene tip since it’s coming from Nathan’s pocket, then jot down Jen’s phone number for good measure. As I hand the slip back, I gesture to my bestie. “She’s single, and she’s here all weekend.”

He looks her up and down with a hot flare in his eyes.

When she flashes him a kittenish smile, I groan. I should have known she’d be thrilled I gave a hot stranger her digits.

“Thanks.” He winks at Jen, then shuts the door behind him.

My bestie giggles. “Nice try. You should see your face.”

“Ugh, what’s wrong with me? I can’t even yank your chain right.”

“You’re too nice. But that’s okay; I balance you out.” She wags her dark brows. “So tell me about the wedding?”

“I don’t know anything. He informed me yesterday that the wedding is today. That’s all I know. What did he tell you?”

“He asked me a few questions, then told me to be here by ten this morning. So here I am.”

I grab my phone. “What time is it?”

My screen says 9:48. Holy cow, I slept that long? “Do you know where Nathan is?”

“You don’t?”

“Since he sent the food up, he must be downstairs. I’m starving,” I lie and pounce on the room service tray to avoid more questions I can’t answer.

“You never eat breakfast. Here.” She extracts a bottle of Coke Zero from her purse. “He told me to take care of you this morning.”

I shove the domed lid back over the pancakes and lunge for the bottle of carbonated heaven. “Thank you. Want something? He ordered enough food for an army.”

She shakes her head. “You okay? I mean, with everything today?”

“I’m afraid.” And I’m confused as hell.

“I know you think he’s marrying you for revenge, but I know men. There’s more between you two than his scheme.”

I scoff. “He’s got you fooled.”

“Honey, I’m no one’s fool. You know that.”

Normally, I do. But when it comes to manipulation and coercion, my groom-to-be is in a class all his own.

Before I can respond, another knock sounds on the door. Jen stomps over and pulls it wide, revealing a smartly dressed bald man carrying a chunky black case standing between two model-thin women in matching dresses whose hair sits piled on their heads. Bringing up the rear is a tall blonde with a long rolling rack draped in black plastic.

I frown. “Can I help you?”

“Isabella Shay?” the man asks in some Eastern European accent.

“Yes.”

“Excellent. I am Franz, your stylist. These are my assistants, Mita and Gita. Luna will be your bridal consultant. We are here to help.” He turns to the women. “Come. Come.”

As soon as I step back to admit them, they march into the suite collectively and begin unzipping cases and opening their bags.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“We are here to make you beautiful for your big day. Luna?”

The exotic blonde, who’s at least ten inches taller and twenty pounds thinner than me, bows her head. “Congratulations, Isabella. We will choose your wedding dress.” She rips the black plastic from the rolling rack and tosses away the protective cover. “Do you see one you would like to try on first?”

I gape. Fifty designer wedding dresses all hang in their elegant, sparkly glory. “Nathan sent you?”

“Mr. Price?” The man speaks. “Yes, of course. Now choose. We must have you ready by four.”

“I only need an hour.” From shower to shoes, I’m usually out the door in sixty minutes or less. “Makeup isn’t really my thing, and my hair is hopeless, so I quit fighting it.”

The entourage laughs.

“Today, you leave that to us. It will take longer, but you will look like a queen. Now...a dress. Pick.”

Reeling, I scan the rack. Apparently, Nathan doesn’t care that he’s making a mockery of marriage. I always envisioned speaking solemn vows to my groom with happy tears in my eyes and a heart full of joy. That’s not happening. Yeah, I could give him the figurative middle finger and wear the ugliest dress I can find. But I won’t stoop to his level. If we’re going to be legally bound, I’m going to treat this ceremony with the sanctity marriage deserves.

Blinking and overwhelmed, I turn to Jen. One truth hits me hard. “I always envisioned Mom being with me when I...”

As if she knows I'm going to bawl, my bestie hugs me. "I know, honey. I miss your mama, too. But I'm here for you. Pick the dress that makes you feel most beautiful. She'd love it, no matter what, because she loved you."

"I don't think I can. I'm not ready. Everything is happening so fast."

She squeezes my hand. "Maybe that's why Nathan sent me here early."

I don't want to give him props, but I'm truly grateful that I'm not getting ready for my wedding alone.

A handful of dresses and forty minutes later, I'm frustrated. Gowns that look absolutely stunning on the rack only accentuate the fact I have hips, boobs, and a five-foot-nothing stature.

"You could wear any of these and look spectacular. I look like a sausage," I cry as I stare in the full-length mirror.

My bestie may have a tough shell, but she has a marshmallow heart. "You're picking dresses that are trendy instead of ones that work with your figure."

"No dress is made to work with my figure. Wedding dresses don't come in a forty-two pudgy."

"You are *not* pudgy. You are blessed with curves, and I'd give anything to have a chest that doesn't look like a twelve-year-old boy. There's a dress here for you."

"If I may?" asks Luna who, until now, has been silent.

She probably knows more about wedding dresses than Jen and I put together ever will. "Please. Whatever it is, I'm willing to try."

"You have chosen three mermaids and a trumpet. Perhaps a different silhouette? Maybe"—she withdraws a dress from the rack draped in heavy plastic—"something like this."

Out of the bag comes a dress from fairy tales. A white, lacy confection that makes me gasp the instant I set eyes on it.

“This will be perfect for your shape and accentuate your best features while concealing what you wish to minimize.”

Jen nods. “It’s gorgeous.”

Five minutes later, Luna laces up the corset back, then circles me, seeming to make mental notes before she stops in front of me with a smile.

“Does it look okay on me?”

“I do not wish to influence you. See for yourself.”

As she shuttles me in front of the full-length mirror, Jen covers my eyes. Once Luna releases me, my bestie lifts her hands with a grin.

I blink at my image. Tulle shaped like roses create thick straps over my shoulders that give way to lacy sleeves. The sweetheart neckline with a crisscrossed bodice harnesses my breasts and reveals a respectable amount of cleavage. The simple bodice ends at my waist, which the stylist enhanced with a sparkling sash encrusted with crystals and pearls. It calls attention to my small waist, while the flare of the dress hides the wider thrust of my hips and falls gracefully until the scalloped lace brushes the cool marble floor.

Everyone smiles as I gawk.

Holy cow, that beauty with the perfect body is me? Tears spring to my eyes. “I love it.”

Jen hands me a tissue, then dabs at her own eyes. “You’re going to be a beautiful bride, honey.”

This is crazy. I barely know my groom, and I’m being forced into this, but... “I actually feel like a beautiful bride.”

“Is this the one?” Luna asks.

I nod before she even finishes the question. “Yes.”

“Good,” Jen says. “If you said anything else, I was going to override you and have your head examined.”

After more laughter, Luna pins fabric along the bodice and at my waist, then removes the dress and disappears into

another corner of the suite. Mita and Gita approach next. I can't tell them apart.

Franz nods. "Let us talk about colors..."

What is there to say? "Okay."

"They weren't talking to you, honey," Jen whispers. "Let them do their thing. If Luna was any indication, these people know what they're doing."

The next four hours pass in a blur. After Franz washes and deep conditions my hair, Mita—I think—attacks my face, starting with a sheet mask and tweezers for my brows. Gita gives me a first-rate mani and pedi. Somewhere in the middle, Jen brings me a sandwich and wanders the suite.

Finally, the trio who have poked, primped, and prodded me step away.

"Your dress is ready." Luna stands from behind her portable sewing machine. "I also took the liberty of choosing a veil for you."

Normally, that would annoy me, but this woman grasps what will look good on me. "Thank you."

"Of course. I'll help you into your dress when you're ready."

Before I can answer, I hear the snick of the key in the lock. Nathan?

Instead, a soft knock proceeds an unfamiliar woman entering. She's older, maybe in her midforties. She wears her wispy blond hair in a face-framing style and a beige beaded dress that accentuates her lanky figure.

"Am I interrupting"—she glances around the room until she lays eyes on me and smiles—"Isabella? It's nice to meet you. I'm Laurel, your new sister-in-law. I'm married to Nate's brother, Steve."

As she takes my hand, she radiates kindness. I like her right away. "Nice to meet you."

“Likewise.” She searches the room, spots Jen, and introduces herself.

“Hi.” My bestie is usually a tough cookie to win over, but she seems almost instantly comfortable with Laurel, too.

“Ready for your big day?” the woman asks me.

“I’m trying.”

“Preparing for a wedding is a lot of work. It’s been more than a few years, but I remember being a bride.” She squeezes my hand. “Nate tells me your mom passed away?”

The mere mention of Mom today has my eyes stinging with tears. “Five years ago.”

“I’m so sorry. I would never presume to replace her, but I have four adult children, so I have a lot of experience being a mom. If you need anything, even a hug...”

“Thank you.” I try not to let my tears fall, but it’s hopeless.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Laurel grabs a tissue and gently dabs my face. “Of course you miss her. But she’s always with you, so just know she’s bringing you a bit of heaven as you get married.”

That’s a lovely sentiment. Even if it’s wishful thinking, it makes me feel better. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Do you have something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue?”

“No.” I didn’t think of any of that.

“That’s okay. Just like Nate thought you might need your best friend and some motherly guidance, he also thought you might not have had time for these traditions.” She reaches into her bag and withdraws a baggie. “Something old. It’s a pressed flower I wore in my shoe at my wedding. My grandmother swore it would bring me good luck. She was right.”

“That’s incredibly thoughtful. I’ll give it back as soon as the ceremony is over. I’m sure I can figure out the rest—”

“No need. I came prepared. Something new.” She hands me a little velvet box. “These are from Nate. A wedding gift.”

A gift? I take the box with numb fingers. “I didn’t get him anything.”

I was rushed. I was angry. I was confused about my feelings.

I still am.

Laurel shakes her head. “He doesn’t want anything except you.”

The gracious woman clearly thinks a lot of her brother-in-law, so I don’t point out that he’s only marrying me for revenge.

“Open it,” she prompts.

This wedding shouldn’t matter, but the gravity of the day is inescapable. My fingers shake as I lift the lid of the little blue box. When I see the diamond and pearl earrings inside, arranged like a branch with glittering leaves and gleaming blooms, I gasp. “They’re beautiful.”

“He wanted you to have something that made you feel like a bride.”

Why? If all he wants is a job at my father, why does he care how I feel?

Beside me, Jen leans in and whispers in my ear. “See? A keeper. Would Eric have ever given you something like that?”

Never. In fact, he forgot my last birthday.

“I’m not presuming to tell you what to do, Isabella, but I’m sure Nate would be delighted and honored if you’d wear his gift today,” Laurel says.

The group of stylists creep closer for a peek, then collectively nod their approval.

“After we put on your dress,” the bridal consultant insists. “We should not risk snagging the lace or tulle.”

“Of course.” I set the earrings aside, feeling mushier inside than I should.

“Something borrowed.” Laurel withdraws another velvet box, this one longer, and lifts the lid. “Do you have a necklace you’ll be wearing?”

“No,” I choke out.

Jen gapes. “You weren’t able to get your mom’s pendant from Eric’s apartment?”

“No. We fought and...” I bit my lip and try not to cry. “He threatened to throw out the rest of my things.”

“That rat bastard. I’m going to kick him in the balls the next time I see him.”

“I already did.”

“Seriously? Go you!”

When she holds up her hand, I high-five her. “It felt good.”

“I’m so sorry you don’t have your mom’s pendant. I realize what I’ve brought isn’t the same, but I’d be honored if you’d wear my grandmother’s pearls.”

“Oh, I couldn’t borrow something so valuable. I appreciate the thought, but—”

“But nothing. All the women in my family wear these on their wedding day. And as of today, you’re family.”

Her kindness wrenches me. I haven’t had family in such a long time, and it’s something I desperately want. “I don’t know what to say except thank you.”

“You don’t have to say anything at all.” Laurel smiles as she slips the strand of pearls around my neck, then hands me an oblong box wrapped in luxurious silver-gray wrapping. “Now something blue. Steve picked this out, so no telling what’s inside.”

I tear into the paper and reveal a delicate lace garter woven with pale blue ribbon. “You both are so thoughtful. Now I have everything except Nathan.” We haven’t spoken a word since last night, and we should talk. “I’d like to see him.”

“Before the wedding? No. It’s bad luck, dear. You’ll have the rest of your lives,” she assures. “When I saw him slip out

of your room this morning to get a cup of coffee, I told him in no uncertain terms that he wasn't allowed back in. No laying eyes on you until you're walking down the aisle."

Luna slips me into my dress. Jen helps with my new earrings. Franz fits a pearl and crystal comb above my intricate updo of braids and curls. The two waifs in the matching dresses slide me into my shoes and brush on lipstick in a soft, blushing pink. Then, collectively, they all step away.

Finally, I get a look at myself, and I'm speechless. "Oh, my god."

Every inch of me looks beautiful and bridal, which is precisely how I feel.

"Damn, girl." Jen smiles affectionately. "Gorgeous. Your mom would be so proud."

Coming from my bestie, that's a major compliment. "Thanks. And thanks for being here."

"Of course. I wouldn't miss a free trip to Vegas." She winks. "Or my best friend tying the knot."

"Wow." Laurel sniffs. "I swear, the minute Nate looks at you, if he hasn't already, he's going to fall in love forever."

CHAPTER NINE

Nathan

“**A**re you sure about this?” Steve leans in as we stand at the altar, waiting for Doug’s daughter to walk down the aisle to me.

“Marrying Isabella?”

“Yes, especially without a prenup. You lost your ass in your divorce from Julia.”

“This time, there will be no divorce.”

“You can’t know that.”

“She wants stability and security. I’ll give her those things.”

“You gave those to Julia and—”

“She didn’t want them.” My ex-wife wanted to make partner at her law firm and take another man’s cock. She didn’t have a sentimental or maternal bone in her body.

Isabella seems like Julia’s opposite.

“When your divorce was final, you swore you were never getting married again.”

I tug at my bow tie. “Things change. People change.”

“Sure, but don’t you think marrying this girl you barely know is taking your revenge too far? I was all for it when I thought you planned to take her to bed once or twice. You’d get what you needed to let go of the past, and she’d get a

valuable life lesson about trusting the wrong people. Everyone would go on, and that would be the end. But marriage?”

How do I explain that I’m dangerously close to falling for Isabella Shay? Of course she’s gorgeous, but it’s not her looks. Her other intangibles attract me more. She’s smart. She’s kind. She’s eager in bed, responsive as hell, and she looks at me like I’m a god every time I make her come. And she’s so real. The way she clings to me when I fuck her... It’s not just the pleasure. She yearns for something, and based on her history—her parents divorcing, her mom dying, her father skipping out—she wants everything I crave. Family. Future. Forever.

Yes, I drew Isabella into my web for payback. And I’m still getting an epically satisfying revenge...but I’m shocked by how important this girl has already become.

After tonight, after she’s your wife and we’ve started our lives together, how will you feel about her then?

It’s a terrifying but unavoidable question.

“Just...reserve judgment until you’ve met her.”

My brother sighs. “It’s not her I’m questioning. Laurel texted and said she’s lovely. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“I’ve got everything under control.”

“Do you?”

Scowling, I turn to him. “Do you have her wedding band?”

“Of course. And I had Laurel give her maid of honor yours. But—”

“Thank you.”

“Damn it, Nate. Please think about what I’ve said.”

“I have. She’ll come through those double doors any minute, and I have zero hesitation. She’s going to give me everything I want.”

Steve gapes at me. “Holy shit, are you going to—”

“Yes. Of course.” I turn to him, willing him to understand. “She’s my last chance.”

My brother looks ready to object. Thankfully, the music in the hotel's swanky wedding chapel saves me from hearing it.

I look up and see who I presume is Jen Simpson, a tall brunette with curls swinging around her elbows, big doe eyes, and a pillowy pink mouth that invites a fucking. I'm not interested, but I see the appeal. According to my private investigator, Jen has a colorful love life. More importantly, she's been a devoted friend to Isabella since they were kids. She's hardcore loyal to my bride. That's what matters.

"Maid of honor?" Steve asks.

I nod. "Jen."

"She's unmarried? What is wrong with these Gen Z dudes? If I were young and single, I'd snap her up."

Despite my nerves, I smile. "I'm not sure she wants to be snapped up and tied down."

"Ah. Well, back in my day, I would have made that fun."

I know. Steve and I share a lot of the same proclivities. "What about Laurel?"

"Oh, I'm just expressing surprise at the no-dick dipshits of her generation. I love my wife. I don't want anyone else."

"Good, I'd have to beat your ass," I whisper.

Steve huffs. "You and what army?"

"I don't need an army, bro." I slap him on the back with a laugh.

Jen reaches the altar, and I smile, holding out my hand. "I'm Nate. Nice to officially meet you."

"Nice to meet you." She shuffles her bouquet, and we shake. "If you break my friend's heart, I'll kill you."

Her fierceness makes me smile. "You can stop sharpening your claws. I only want to take care of Isabella."

As she takes her spot on the other side of the altar, I see the wheels turning in her head. "If that's true, then...thanks for

this morning. She needed the help you sent, especially Laurel.”

I have my suspicions about why, but before I can ask, the music swells again, a dramatic trumpeting announcing the bride. I drink in the vision in white that emerges at the end of the aisle.

Isabella literally takes my breath away. “Fuck me...”

“She’s beautiful,” Steve seconds. “Congratulations.”

I know my brother; he still has reservations, but he’ll shelve them and support me. And I love him for that.

But I hate for my bride’s sake that she had no one to walk her down the aisle. That’s Douglas Shay’s fault, not mine.

With every trembling step, Isabella comes closer. She’s visibly nervous. Even her hand shakes when she takes my outstretched one.

With a squeeze, I pull her to my side. “You look stunning.”

She turns to me, seemingly on the verge of tears, then whips her gaze to the officiant, tuning me out.

What did you expect? You’re forcing her to get married...

“Dearly beloved...” the older man drones like someone who performs this ceremony twenty times a day.

I ignore him. I know the drill. I know the gravity of the words we’re about to speak. Does Isabella?

We exchange vows, and I slide her diamond wedding band on her finger. No telling what will happen next, but if she’ll give me a little time and a little trust, I’ll do my best to make her happy. If she doesn’t...we’re in for a long death do us part.

Finally, the officiant prompts me to kiss the bride. I lift her veil. The silver paths of her tears are like a stab to my heart as I cup her face and thumb away her tears. “Kiss me, wife.”

Isabella blinks before her eyes slide shut obediently and she offers me her mouth. I’m not fooled. If we were alone, she’d probably tell me to go to hell. And I would deserve it. But she’s too polite or too embarrassed to make waves in

public, so she sweetly complies, her lips clinging to mine as I claim her for the rest of our lives.

Then the officiant pronounces us mister and missus before we make our way down the aisle again, hand in trembling hand. Camera lights flash. Jen and Steve bring up the rear.

“You really do look beautiful,” I murmur.

My bride turns to me, tears still clinging to her lashes. “I don’t understand. Why?”

Why go to the trouble of marrying her? Of having a lavish wedding? “Because you’re mine. I’ll never let you go. And I want the world to know it.”

The next few minutes pass in a blur. Laurel and her kids meet us in the private reception room I booked at the top of the hotel. This whole shindig cost me an arm and a leg, especially on short notice so close to Christmas, but I want Isabella to look back on our wedding and be glad our ceremony was so real.

We’re seated at the wide, round table in the center of the cozy room. A centerpiece of fresh flowers frames a softly glowing lantern, accentuating the shades of silver and soft blue all around. The pianist begins serenading us. And I realize that, except for Jen, every person at this table is here for me.

My wife is basically alone, like she has been for most of her life.

“She’s overwhelmed,” Laurel whispers beside me.

“Yeah.” And that fucking hurts my heart.

“She misses her mom a lot.”

I can’t replace the woman, but I can be there for Isabella. “She looks beautiful. Your grandmother’s pearls were a nice touch.”

“She really wanted to wear her mother’s pendant. I think it’s one of the few things Isabella has left of the woman.”

“Why didn’t she?”

“She couldn’t get it back from her ex-boyfriend. He threatened to throw it in the trash.”

That fucking bastard. “I’ll handle it.”

Eric Meadows damn well better cough up that pendant if he wants to continue breathing.

Laurel smiles. “I don’t know what’s happening between you two, but she’s really sweet. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look at a woman the way you’re looking at her now.”

I whip my stare to my sister-in-law. Her knowing gaze makes me squirm. Shit, she can tell I have feelings for Isabella...just like she’s guessed I’m resisting.

Dinner is served, and my niece and three nephews keep Jen engaged for most of our small reception. Unless my wife wants to shout across the table, that leaves her with no one to talk to but me.

“Are you okay?” I ask her over Beef Wellington.

“Fine.”

I was married once. I know that “fine” means she absolutely isn’t. “Take my hand. Give me your mouth. Kiss me and smile.”

“For your family, so they believe this lie?”

“For us.” As my niece clinks her spoon against her glass, I paste on a happy expression, but I’m deadly serious. “Our forever starts today.”

Isabella

My stomach is in knots, and I can’t eat what I’m sure is an amazing dinner. But I can damn well drink the champagne. I need the liquid courage.

The minute Nathan and I are alone, I’m going to lay into him and demand answers. But his niece keeps clinking her spoon to her glass and demanding we kiss. Every time my

husband—it feels crazy to call a man I barely know that—claims my lips, I feel a little weaker, a little more fluttery, a little more connected to him.

What is he doing to me? I should be furious he's hijacked my life for his retribution. Instead, some stupid part of me only wants to curl up to him, lay my head on his wide chest, and beg him to make everything better.

I need to have my head examined, and I need to stop letting him manipulate my emotions.

Suddenly, Nathan seizes my mouth again, stealing inside in a kiss ripe with effervescence and hope, before he stands and sends me a glance that, if I didn't know better, I would swear is full of devotion.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice to our wedding. Isabella and I appreciate every one of you dropping everything, especially this close to Christmas, to be with us on this momentous day. As many of you know, I've been skeptical about marriage these past few years, but my bride changed all that. The minute I laid eyes on her, I needed to make her mine. Thank God she agreed.”

His niece and nephews, who probably know nothing about his revenge, all cheer. Jen raises a sharp brow. Steve and Laurel, bless them, smile, but I see their concern.

Why is Nathan toasting us? Why is he going through the charade of a happy marriage? None of this is how I pictured my wedding day. Tears sting my eyes.

“I'm older now than the first time I spoke vows,” Nathan goes on. “Wiser, too. No cracks from you, Steve.” Everyone laughs as my husband takes my hand and helps me to my feet. “But I've learned what marriage needs to thrive. In addition to the vows I already made you, Isabella, I promise to stay by your side and take care of you, no matter what. I'll be there for the good days, the bad days, and all the days in between. I will put you on a pedestal, treat you like the queen you are, and never leave your side. To forever.” He lifts his glass.

Woodenly, I follow suit. Why did he say that stuff that melts my heart? Does he mean any of it?

As the chilled bubbles slide down my throat, Nathan kisses me again. Not only is our embrace full of promise and passion, it's also a warning that our wedding night won't be remotely chaste.

Once we're seated, I lean closer. "What are you doing?"

He takes my hand. "Isabella—"

"It's Izzy, actually."

"You're too beautiful for that. Isabella suits you." He settles his cheek against mine and whispers in my ear. "Our marriage might have started because of hate and retribution, but it doesn't have to be about that. I mean everything I said today. I will take care of you and be there for you—always."

I rear back and meet his solemn stare. He's serious. Is he reading my mind? Is that how he's speaking my language and telling me everything I want to hear?

Do I dare believe him?

No, and I shouldn't feel this marshmallowy for a man who's only using me...but I'm seeing a completely different side of Nathan. Like he's not just a bastard out for his revenge.

What if I tried, too? Made the best of a crappy situation? Would marriage work out for us?

My head spins. I'm not sure what to think.

One thing I am sure I need? More champagne. Based on the way Nathan keeps looking at me, as soon as we're alone, he'll strip me down, ramp me up until I'm breathless, then undo me simply because he can. Now he has the right to do it for the rest of our lives. And if he keeps acting like a groom instead of a foe, how will I resist him?

The rest of the reception passes with more bubbly and angst. Around me, everyone seems happy. Jen squeezes my hand to assure me everything will be okay.

I don't share her optimism.

After Nathan and I share bites of cake, along with a dance, he starts saying our goodbyes. My phone tells me it's barely nine o'clock. I don't know Nathan as a husband, but I know him as a lover. Leaving now means he'll have hours at me, inside me, unraveling me.

Oh, god.

Laurel wraps me in a motherly embrace. "Jen gave me your number. I'll check on you tomorrow. But you should know that if you ever need anything, I'm here for you. If I could give you one piece of advice, it would be to believe that things happen for a reason, and all will turn out for the best."

That's something my mom would have said. Despite Dad abandoning us just after I started high school, she never stopped being unflinchingly optimistic about life.

And speaking of dear old Dad, does he have any idea I'm now his enemy's wife?

"Thank you," I murmur.

My new sister-in-law squeezes my shoulder and smiles before passing me to her husband. Steve hugs me. "Welcome to the family, Izzy. Jen told me that's your preferred nickname."

I nod. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I doubt I'll be family for long. Once Nathan has his revenge—"

"Don't kid yourself. He's never letting you go. He may have sought you out for reasons other than love, but that doesn't mean he wasn't serious when he spoke his vows. Just...be kind. I know that's asking for a lot, given the circumstances. But Julia hurt him. He's angry, and he hasn't recovered."

"Because he's still in love with her?" I don't want to consider why that possibility hurts me so much.

"No. Whatever they once had died years ago. But trust is hard, especially when someone's cheated on you and..."

Against my will, I understand. If Nathan hadn't intervened in my life, if I had gone straight from learning about Eric's

betrayal to an uneventful Christmas party, I might have spent a night or two alone at a cheap motel downtown for my pride, but I would have eventually had to face my ex again. I probably would have gone back to him. But how would I have trusted him? How could we have gone on?

I spent six years merely being Eric's girlfriend. His infidelity was awful enough, but I can't imagine finding out your spouse of nearly a decade was sleeping with someone else.

I don't want to feel anything for Nathan, especially sympathy...but suddenly I do. "I understand."

"Thank you. If you'll meet him halfway, he'll be a great husband."

While I'm still reeling, he passes me to his children. After a quick goodbye to the quartet who's nearly my age, I find Jen beside me and grip her hands. "Help. I'm screwed."

"Not yet, but give your new husband an hour..."

"I'm not kidding," I hiss.

"You're going to be fine. Life threw you a curveball. Instead of ducking like you did for years with Eric, maybe swing this time. Really give him a try. You might be pleasantly surprised. To get you started, I left you a little something in your suite. Call me later."

I cling to my best friend. Once she's gone, I'll be alone with my stranger of a husband. "Where are you going?"

"I'm flying to Chicago in the morning. My parents are expecting me for the holidays."

"I meant tonight."

"Well, the room service waiter called." She glances at her phone. "And I'm late. I'll be back in Boston for New Year's Eve, but I predict by then you won't just be wifed up, you'll be loved up and you won't have time for me."

Where does she get that idea? "You're insane."

“I’m more objective. I think, despite his best efforts, your husband has feelings for you. At least based on the way he’s looking at you.”

I whirl to find Nathan staring at me with intense dark eyes. His expression isn’t merely full of heat that makes me shiver, but a warmth I haven’t seen before. Is Jen right?

She slips away with a kiss to my cheek and a squeeze of my hand. Steve, Laurel, and their kids all leave together full of smiles and joy.

Seeing their closeness, I feel so defeated. I’ll never have that.

“Ready, wife?”

I turn to Nathan. “If I said no, would it make a difference?”

“Not really.”

Now that family is gone and people are no longer watching, is he dropping the tender groom facade? “I figured.”

“Let’s go.”

I down another glass of champagne with one hand and grab the last of the open bottle with the other, trembling when Nathan settles his hot palm at the small of my back and leads me to our suite.

Once inside, he flips on the light in the foyer. I rush for the bathroom, looking for even a temporary escape. I stop short as soon as I reach the bedroom.

The bed is surrounded by battery-operated candles and rose petals. On the pristine white bed, someone has arranged more red petals in the shape of a heart. At its apex, a pair of swans formed from towels kiss. Fluffy white pillows are wrapped in red bows and more fake tea lights give the space a romantic glow. Above the headboard, someone hung a banner that reads **JUST MARRIED!**

Jen did this for us?

“I found this on the table in the front room.” Nathan hands me a delicate ribbon-wrapped box. “Any idea what’s inside?”

“No.” I pluck at the bow and the box springs open to reveal scanty silken lingerie. The card inside reads:

HAPPY WEDDING NIGHT! DON'T DO ANYTHING I WOULDN'T ENJOY...

I HOPE YOU FIND HAPPINESS. YOU DESERVE IT.

LOVE, JEN

“That looks...interesting.”

Mortified, I slam the lid on the box. On the one hand, I can't imagine slipping on something this scandalous for a groom who's only using me. On the other hand, Nathan is always voracious in bed—without me even trying to arouse him. I can only imagine how passionate he would be if I wore something this close to nothing.

“Yeah. Um...I need a shower and—”

“No.” He takes the box and sets it aside, then lifts my chin until I can't look at anything but him. “You need to be told how beautiful you are. Then you need to be undressed, touched until you beg, and fucked until you can't walk right. Let's get you out of this dress.”

My heart clutches with fear. My traitorous body clenches with thrill. “Nathan...”

“Wife,” he murmurs before he lowers his head and takes my mouth in a deep, dreamy kiss that has my champagne-addled head swimming.

I grip onto him, clinging even though I shouldn't. But every time he puts his hands on me, I melt. And I crave more.

When he pulls back and nuzzles my neck, I don't even think. I tilt my head to give him better access.

“Hmm.” His lips drift up my throat and across my jaw while he finds and loosens the corset-back of my dress and begins stripping it away, eventually pushing the sleeves down

my arms until the bodice sags around my waist. He turns me to face him and grabs my hands, holding them out wide, then begins examining the skin he's revealed.

Suddenly, he freezes. "What are these marks on your arms?"

Marks? When I glance to see what has him bent out of shape, I gasp, wholly unprepared for the black-and-blue splotches ringing my biceps. They weren't there last night. "Bruises."

I guess when Luna helped me out of my robe and into my dress, she was too polite to mention them. Good thing I chose a dress with long sleeves. Otherwise, everyone would have seen what my ex did to me.

"In the shape of fingers. Who did this to you?" Nathan doesn't merely sound mad; he's deadly furious.

"They're just bruises. They'll fade. It doesn't matter."

"It *does*. No one touches my wife." His eyes narrow. "Did Eric do this to you?"

"Forget it. I don't want more problems." Especially since Nathan looks ready to throw down, and Eric's father is a big-wig attorney who would probably sue the hell out of my husband for touching a hair on his baby boy's head.

"Like hell. Tell me who did this. Now. Don't fucking protect someone who hurt you, baby girl."

He's not going to let this go...

"Fine, it was Eric. But he won't touch me again. I won't let him."

"Let's be clear. *I* won't let him. He'll be hard-pressed to touch his own dick after I break both of his hands."

"You can't do that." I grab the lapels of Nathan's tuxedo jacket.

"Watch me. I told you; I protect what's mine. From this day forward, that's you, wife."

Then he's done talking. He slants his mouth over my own, and his tongue makes love to mine in a slow, thorough kiss that decimates my ability to think.

Next thing I know, my dress is puddled on the floor. Nathan lifts me against his body. Instinctively, I wrap my legs around him so I don't fall as he carries me to the bed, strips away the comforter with a fling of his arm, bounces me onto the mattress, and follows me down, tuxedo and all.

With one hand, he rips away my bra and flings it across the room. With the other, he wraps my underwear in his fist. "What did I say about these?"

Is he serious? "I-I had to wear something under my wedding dress."

"You didn't." He tears the scrap of lace from my hips, ignoring my gasp as he tosses them to the floor. "Fuck, you're mine now. You're...everything."

If I'm tipsy on champagne, he's drunk on lust. It's in his eyes. I shouldn't...but I can't help the shudder of excitement that seizes me. "I'm nothing."

The words slip out. Instantly, his face tightens. "*Never* say that again. Your ex cheated on you and made you feel expendable, right? Interchangeable? No longer important? I've been there. But *he's* the one who's insignificant." He traces the dark bruising on my arms. "He's the one not worthy of touching you ever again."

Nathan means every word of that, and for better or worse, I press his words to my heart. "Stop. You're ruining me."

"From hating on yourself? Good." He captures my breast and thumbs my turgid nipple. "Spread your legs, wife. I've been waiting forever for this day. Time to make you mine for the rest of our lives."

I don't hesitate; I part my thighs under him. "You've been waiting to consummate our marriage?"

"Yes," Nathan groans as he rises just enough to discard his jacket and unzip his fly. Once he's half undressed, he grips my

hips and drives inside me in one powerful thrust. “But not nearly as long as I’ve been waiting to breed you.”

CHAPTER TEN

Nathan

“**B**-breed me?” Isabella sounds shocked, but her pussy clamps down on me as if she’s aroused.

I need to answer her, but holy shit, I’m inside her for the first time with nothing at all between us, and it’s a mind-blowing heaven. Fuck, she’s snug and slick and grips me like she was made for me. Now that she’s my wife, fucking her feels even more sublime. And unlike my ex, I already know Isabella can’t take the pill.

How long before she’s round with my baby? Even the thought of her swelling with my child has me on the edge. I can’t wait to spill inside her again and again.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want kids,” I growl in her ear. “You do. You told me you do the night we met.”

“I do, but—”

“So do I, and I want them with you. This is forever for me. Nothing will ever be more important than you and our family.”

“Nathan...”

I surge deeper inside her with a groan. I could explain that her father is at least part of the reason I don’t have kids and that having my enemy’s daughter give birth to my child will be the sweetest revenge imaginable. But it’s far more than that. I’m falling for Isabella—harder than I should. If we start a family together...maybe she’ll be happy and want to stay?

“Baby girl, you were beautiful today. You’re even more stunning in my bed, taking every inch of my cock.”

“You say these things that make me melt...but we talk about having kids before we have unprotected sex.”

She’s right. I know that, but... “I don’t want to wait another day to start our future. I want you forever.” I brush my lips over hers and pray she’ll understand.

Beneath me, Isabella yields, taking my kiss and returning the pleasure. The more I learn my way around her body, the more responsive she gets. The more I want to give her ecstasy. The more I need her craving me.

Until I can plant a baby in her belly, orgasms and that ring on her finger may be the only reasons she stays. I need to make this good. I need to addict her.

I take her arms and lift them above her head, skimming my palms up until our fingers lock together. Looking deep into her eyes, I pump her with the slow, deep strokes I know she can’t resist. “I want you, Isabella. I want you all the time. I want you naked in my bed every night. I want your smiles, your tears, your cries of pleasure, your pain. I want all of you. And I want you pregnant.”

Her pussy clenches on me again. Her head might balk at the idea of having my baby so quickly, but her body has a different opinion.

“Where are you in your cycle?”

“Nathan...”

“Tell me.” I fill her cunt with a battering, slow-motion stroke that slams the headboard to the wall.

She cries out. “The beginning. I had my period while you were in Tokyo.”

“What was the last day you bled?” I demand as I ease free from her, then drive in again as if I have forever.

“Wednesday,” she gasps.

It takes serious concentration when fucking my wife feels this good, but I persevere. “You’ll be fertile around New Year’s Eve. I’ll get you pregnant then. Tonight is for us.”

I halt any conversation or protest by settling my lips over hers, gripping her hands, and banging my way into her body. The mattress shudders. Her thighs clutch me. Her pussy tightens. She’s close, and I love how she responds.

But I’m not ready to let her come. I want this to be a night she can’t forget.

Gritting my teeth, I withdraw from her silken cunt and flip her onto her hands and knees, then shuttle into her from behind. She whimpers as I fill her. Her little sounds drive me insane, but watching myself fuck her in the mirror above the dresser across the room adds another level of pleasure to this consummation.

“Look at us.” I dig my fingers into her demure bridal updo and tug.

Curls cascade free as she focuses on us with glassy eyes, her rosy lips parted as if they’re just waiting to be fucked. Impossibly, I get harder inside her. Why does this woman turn me inside out every time I touch her?

“Ahhh...”

“Look at me fuck you,” I mutter in her ear as I settle restless fingers over her clit.

“Nathan!”

“That’s it, baby girl. You take my cock so well. Just like. You were. Made for. Me.” I slam into her until she’s clutching the sheets and begging with sweet moans.

After another tug on her hair, I stand her on her knees and take in the view of me filling and rubbing her little pussy. Her eyes slide shut as her head falls back to my chest. And damn, her luscious tits bounce with every thrust.

“You’re a fucking goddess.” I pepper kisses along her shoulder and strum the hard tip of her clit. “I can’t stop fucking you. I can’t wait to get home, toss away all my

condoms, and stay buried inside you while you swell with my babies.”

“Babies?” Her nails dig into my thighs as her breathing turns labored. “Plural?”

After waiting this long, did she think I would settle for just one? “I want a big family.”

“H-how many kids?”

“A few. We’ll see how it goes and how we feel,” I sidestep.

But I’m making up for the decade I wasted on Julia, so as far as I’m concerned, all forms of birth control are off the table for at least the next five years. I’ll do my level fucking best to keep Isabella pregnant. If I have my way, she’ll always have a baby at her breast and her husband deep inside of her, creating the next child together.

Fuck, I used to make fun of Steve for his breeding kink. For half a decade, Laurel was constantly pregnant. Secretly, I was jealous as hell. And now that it’s my turn, I shouldn’t be surprised by how much the idea of knocking up my bride turns me on.

The telltale flush of arousal begins traveling up her body and pinkening her skin. Her breathing gets choppy. Her entire body turns taut. And that pretty little pussy begins to quiver and clasp me.

“You want to come, wife?”

“Yes. Please...”

“Tell me to come inside you.”

“Nathan.” Her rough breath is a protest.

I’m not having it. “You don’t get to orgasm until you invite me to come deep inside that sweet cunt and fill you with my seed. From now on, that’s how it’s going to be. You want ecstasy? You beg me to spill every drop against your unprotected womb.”

That has her panting. Her wild stare in the mirror tells me she's aroused even more by my words. I'm starting to think my little wife has a secret breeding kink of her own.

What a deliciously bent surprise.

I swirl her stone-hard clit under my fingers in focused, unhurried stokes designed to ramp her up, not get her off. "Tell me. Or I'll pull out, come on your stomach, and leave you aching."

"You don't play fair."

"No, I play dirty as hell. Tell me what I want to hear." I mutter thickly, "Tell me and I'll give you what your body needs."

She undulates, trying to get more friction. Trying to steal her orgasm.

"Bad girl." I spank her swollen cunt.

She clamps down on my cock and mewls.

So my sweet wife likes a little torment with her pleasure? God, I'm starting to think she was made for me...

"I told you the rules. Play nicely or suffer." For good measure, I spank her pussy again.

"Come inside me, please. Please! I need you..."

Fuck, yeah. "There's my good girl, begging for my cock."

With her cries ringing in my ears, I tumble her to the mattress again, onto her stomach. With my palm grinding against her swelling clit, I rail my bride mercilessly, delighting in every groan and whimper until she begins bucking under me with a hoarse cry of completion. I slam into her, my body going up in flames as sensation gathers into an unavoidable pinnacle. Then, as if I haven't come in years, I unload, filling her tiny pussy full of my seed. Together, we ride the ecstasy that seems to go on forever.

Finally, we still and lie limply together. Her trembling moan blends with my gruff sigh. I kiss her cheeks, licking up her spilling tears.

“Such a good girl,” I croon in her ear. “Rest.”

She gives me a tired nod. In the mirror, I see her eyes slide closed. Seconds later, she drifts off.

I smile and hold my wife close. For the first time in years, I’m optimistic about the future. Isabella is going to be a perfect wife for me, and we’re going to have amazing kids. This isn’t just revenge anymore. It’s a chance for every one of my dreams to come true.

Under me, she sighs in her sleep. I stay buried deep inside her, nuzzle her fragrant neck, and cuddle her. I can’t remember the last time I felt this content, this connected to another person. I know I’ve never been as determined to make a relationship last as I am now. Losing Isabella would be catastrophic. It would decimate me.

Holy shit. Am I falling in love?

I’m afraid to answer that question. That’s a tomorrow-me problem. Maybe in the light of day, with clothes on and the memory of our pleasure in my rearview mirror, I can put tonight into perspective.

In the meantime, I can’t forget my revenge. *Nothing* can make me forgo that.

Reluctantly, I pull free from my wife’s body, taking a moment to appreciate the sight of my seed spilling from her still-swollen pussy. Fuck, if that doesn’t have me hard again. But I need to take care of business before I indulge again.

Rolling Isabella to her back, I brush errant curls from her red-cheeked face, lift her up the bed, and position her amid the rose petals. Then I drag her discarded wedding dress beside her, grab my phone, and cover her naked body with my own. Finding the right angle for this selfie that hints but doesn’t show my wife’s nudity while still capturing her wedding dress and the big banner in the background proclaiming us just married takes patience, but finally I get the perfect shot with all the elements and a bonus of my five o’clock shadow’s abrasion on her soft neck. Even with her eyes closed, Isabella looks well fucked.

The shot turns out perfect. There's no way Doug can misconstrue this.

Though I don't know my former pal's phone number anymore, I know my ex-wife's. That's the next best thing.

My thumbs fly across my screen as I load the pic into a text and tell her to pass the photo along to her deadbeat of a fiancé with one message:

An eye for an eye, motherfucker.

Then I turn my phone off, set it aside, and swallow a sip of Isabella's champagne before I crawl back into bed, prod her swollen pussy with my cock, and kiss her awake until she delights me with more of her cries before finally begging me to unload inside her again. I comply with a hoarse growl and a smile.

Isabella

I can't wipe the loopy grin off my face when Nathan lifts me from the ruffled bed and settles me into the huge tub for two in our suite. He thoughtfully sprinkled the rose petals from our bed into the steaming bath. As soon as the water closes around me, I sigh.

He hands me another glass of champagne. "Happy, Mrs. Price?"

"Hmm." More than I probably should be. The idea that I could soon be pregnant doesn't horrify me in the least.

God, I sound like I've lost my marbles. I don't know the man I married well, and the idea of having a ruthless stranger's child should terrify me. A baby is a big responsibility. What kind of father will he be? For that matter, am I ready for motherhood at twenty-three? On the other hand, Nathan is handing me everything I've wanted for years on a silver platter. Home. Belonging. Family. Love?

He never mentioned that...

“Need anything else?” he asks.

“A kiss?” I shouldn’t invite him closer or risk falling for him more. I should remember that he’s using me. But after the way he just made love to me? I can’t resist. Despite his manipulation, I’m falling for him, and I don’t know how to stop.

He climbs into the tub beside me and settles into the water before pulling me against his body and covering my lips with his lips in a solemn kiss that sucks me deeper under his spell. “Always. You don’t even have to ask. I’ll always want you. Only you.”

My heart clenches. “You don’t know that.”

“I do. I’m old enough to be sure of who I am and what will make me happy. That’s you, baby girl. You’re everything I could have asked for.”

Does he mean any of the things he says? I don’t know, and I struggle for a reply as I swirl the petals around the warm tub. “I don’t have your experience. I only know what I don’t want: Eric. But this, everything between us, is happening so fast.”

“I know our marriage seems sudden to you. But I’ve been planning this for almost a year.”

His words nearly make me choke. “A year?”

He nods. By the candlelight glow, his expression looks softer, his features almost boyish. “When your father and I started our business together, we were in our twenties, both married with futures to think about. I knew he and your mom were having problems. I had no idea why.”

“There was another woman.”

“My wife.”

“Oh, god.” I should have seen that coming. I should have realized those two weren’t a new item. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t.” He scoffs. “Hell, I didn’t know for longer than I want to admit. I was so busy working, to build a

better future for us... Julia didn't need my income. She made great money as an attorney, but it felt like my responsibility to provide, you know? I was so focused on the future that I didn't see what was happening in front of me. Then, one day, I got a call from the bank that held the business account I shared with your dad. They said checks I'd written were bouncing. That seemed impossible, but after some digging—and trying for two days to reach your father—I realized he'd taken the money and skipped town.”

“That’s when he left Mom and me. He took all our money, too.” I sigh. “My poor mom dropped out of college to help him finish his education. She waitressed and cleaned houses and took whatever work she could find to pay bills. Dad promised she could finish school once he did, but she got pregnant, so...she decided to be a stay-at-home mom instead. After my father left, we had no means of support. Mom couldn't find a good job since she hadn't finished college and hadn't worked in over a dozen years. We struggled and scraped. Years passed. Dad turned up again out of the blue, all apologies, and opened his wallet. He promised to pay for my college to make up for the way he stiffed Mom and me. He kept his word for the first three years. Then...he disappeared again.”

“This time with my wife.”

“Why didn't she leave with him the first time?”

He shrugs. “A lot of reasons, but none of them about me or keeping our marriage intact, I suspect. Mostly, she didn't want to ruin her image at her hoity-toity law firm. Julia was always ambitious, and making partner by the time she was forty was her goal.”

“Is that why you two never had kids?”

He laughs bitterly. “One of the reasons.”

I realize what Nathan isn't saying. “My father was the other.”

He nods. “Since she was fucking another man, the last thing she wanted to do was get pregnant. But she had me

fooled for years. She pretended to monitor her temperature. She bought ovulation kits and kept a journal of her cycle. Every month, she'd lure me into bed over a weekend and swear she was fertile. She acted so disappointed every time she failed to conceive. She even told me she'd sought specialists to find out what was wrong."

"But she didn't?"

"The night before our twelfth anniversary, I found out she was both fucking your dad and taking the pill—and had been all along."

How horrible. Nathan married me for revenge. He's trying to get me pregnant for revenge. I shouldn't have an ounce of sympathy for his situation, but the betrayal he endured literally hurts my heart. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You did nothing wrong." He holds me closer. "You know they're getting married next weekend, right?"

I freeze. "Dad and Julia? You're sure?"

"You didn't know?"

"I haven't seen or spoken to my father in over a year. I broke into your house trying to find him. After he reneged on his promise to pay for my last year of college, I took out student loans. I was trying to find him, to talk to him... I could tell a woman lived there, but I had no idea you owned the house."

"After the divorce, I let Julia stay. I couldn't be where I had so many memories. She rents the place back from me. Doug moved in with her a few months back."

"I'm so sorry. My life hasn't been easy, but yours..."

"It's at least half my fault. I was too myopic, too focused on getting ahead and providing, saving money for what I hoped would support the family we'd eventually have. I didn't ask questions when I should have. I made excuses for her when I shouldn't have. I just...stopped looking."

"Nathan, you did what you were supposed to do. What a good husband would do. You tried to forge a future. You

believed in her, trusted her, loved her.”

“I tried.” He shook his head. “It wasn’t enough.”

“If being with Eric taught me one thing, it’s that one person can’t love enough for both partners.”

He grips my chin and drags my face to his. Determination fills his dark eyes as he positions my body over his and thrusts deep inside me. “Don’t forget that. I meant it when I said I was never letting you go.”

Then he seizes my mouth, grips my ass, and drives himself inside me until I dissolve in his arms. Only then does he come inside me again and makes me forget everything but pleasure.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nathan

It's late when Isabella and I land in Boston. Since I kept her awake most of last night, she's tired, not to mention hungry and adorably cranky. Cradling her close and fighting the urge to shove my hand under her skirt just for the fun of watching her get off, I feed my bride the takeout of her choice, deliver her home, then tuck her into bed. Sleepily, she crawls beneath the covers and drops off in seconds.

I glance at my watch. It's after ten, and it's almost Christmas. I don't give a shit. I intend to give my wife the most priceless holiday gift, something she wants more than anything in this world, all tied in a pretty holiday bow.

But I'm giving myself a gift, too. Fuck, I'm going to enjoy this...

Twenty minutes later, I pull up outside the apartment building I've only driven past. This time, I stop and park, darting up the stairs to the unit my wife used to share with her asshole of an ex. Since the lights are on, I pound on his door.

A man I've only glimpsed at a distance wrenches the door open, then looks me up and down. "Where's my Chinese food?"

Of course the loser is alone tonight. He's average—height, build, and looks. He's obviously dumber than hell since he let Isabella get away.

I barge my way into his unit and slam the door. "I'm not here to deliver anything but a warning. And to take back what

doesn't belong to you."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I'm your ex-girlfriend's husband."

"You..." He recoils when he sees the wedding band on my finger. "Izzy is already married?"

"Yeah. As of last night, she's my wife. So I intend to set a couple of things straight. First, when Isabella came here to collect *her* belongings, you didn't let her take all of them. Are you hanging onto her dresses, shoes, and underwear for your personal use?"

He recoils like I punched him. "Fuck you. I don't wear her clothes. I just wanted to talk things out. I don't know why the hell she was so set on leaving in a tizzy."

"Are you really unclear about why a woman would want to leave a man who can't keep his dick out of other women? So, on top of being unfaithful, you're stupid?"

He scoffs. "That shit with Mariah was just a little stress relief. It didn't mean anything. I tried to tell Izzy—"

"*Isabella* doesn't want your sloppy seconds. She's much happier now, getting all the orgasms she can handle. You know, the ones you didn't give her."

"Get the hell out of my apartment, or I'm calling the police."

"I hope you do. I'll be happy to tell them you've stolen my wife's personal effects, and you assaulted her when she tried to take them back."

"Assaulted her? She fucking kneed me in the balls."

"After you roughed her up and bruised her. I have pictures to prove it." I snapped them while Isabella slept. "And I can probably persuade her to press charges..."

"What the fuck do you want?"

"The rest of her things—all of them. If you threw anything in the trash like you threatened..." I shake my head and tsk. "There won't be a rock small enough for you to hide under."

And if you think I won't beat the shit out of you, you're sadly mistaken. I'm a former marine, a boxing champ, I have a black belt in karate, and I spent most of my time in the service with special forces. Try me. I dare you."

"Jesus, dude. Have her, then. She isn't worth this bullshit. Just take her stuff and get the hell out."

As I expected, Eric Meadows is a typical bully—lots of bark, but when confronted by someone who's bigger than five-foot-two and has a history of combat, my wife's ex has no bite. The douche simply rolled over and showed his vulnerable belly. What a coward.

From the closet, I grab a flowery duffel that can't possibly be this asshole's and pile in the rest of the shoes, socks, lingerie, and personal effects that seemingly belong to my wife. Then I pin him with a glare. "Where is her jewelry?"

"Top left drawer of the dresser. Hurry the fuck up."

"Trust me, I don't want to spend quality time with you, either." I rifle through the contents of the shallow drawer and pull free her earrings, necklaces, bangles, and costume jewelry rings. Finally, I spot a little beige velvet box and pry it open. Yes, it's her mother's pendant. With a smile, I slip it into my pocket. Then I zip up the flowered bag and turn to Meadows. "I'm finished."

"Make sure you got *all* that cunt's stuff. I don't want it here. I don't want her, either."

Not only is he sniveling, he's lying. If Isabella came back tomorrow, he'd welcome her. Then he'd betray her again because he's immature, arrogant, and selfish. But she doesn't have to worry about him anymore.

"You upset her, and you bruised her. Did you feel brave beating up on a female half your size?" I scoff. "If you ever call her a cunt or put your hands on her again, I will nail you to a wall—literally—before I skin you alive and feed you your balls as you're bleeding out. Those aren't big words, and that's not an idle threat. I will hunt you down. I will find you. I will

follow through. And no one will ever find your body.” I grab his shirt and shove him against the wall. “Are we clear?”

Isabella’s ex swallows like he’s trying to shove down a goose egg. Then he nods. “Fine. Take your goddamn hands off me.”

“Say it out loud. Tell me you understand.”

“I get it. Fuck. Just leave me alone.”

“I will as long as you leave *her* alone. If not...you know what to expect.”

“Hi, baby girl,” I croon as I slide into my bed, steeped in night shadows, beside my bride an hour later.

I’m clean after showering Eric Meadows’ stench from my body, I’m naked, and I’m hard as hell. Again. I can’t get enough of Isabella.

But first things first.

I brush my lips over hers once, twice, gratified when her lashes flutter open. “Nathan?”

“Were you expecting someone else?”

“No. Is something wrong?” She reaches through the shadows for the bedside lamp.

I grip her wrist to stay her. “Nothing. I wanted to give you something.”

“What?”

With a devilish grin, I roll on top of her and kiss my way up her neck. “Spread your legs.”

“Now?” But that little whine in her voice isn’t a complaint; she wants me, too.

The fact that she’s wet when I lave one of her stiff nipples and probe her entrance tells me so. She lifts her hips to me,

too, taking me deep in one thrust. When I bottom out, we both groan.

“Are you always this insatiable?”

“When it comes to you,” I murmur in her ear as I fuck her slow and soft.

She melts under me. “Nathan...”

“Baby girl.”

“I swore that all I wanted was a full night’s sleep, until you came to bed. But you’ve rewired my body. Every time you touch me—even look at me—my body pings, and I ache for you.” She tosses her head back and offers me her throat. I take it and nip at her soft skin while I glide deep inside her. “Yes...”

Her confession nearly turns me inside out. Women like Isabella don’t crave sex with a man they don’t have feelings for. Just like I’m more attuned and attached to her as we spend time together. That’s the best wedding gift I could have asked for.

“I have something else you want.” I lave my way up her neck and nip at her lobe.

“What?”

“Not so fast.” I pluck at one of her nipples and slow my strokes to a snail’s pace. “I need something from you first.”

“Tell me,” she breathes.

“Ah, ah, ah. Be a good girl and come for me. Then I’ll tell you.” I settle my thumb on her clit.

“Nathan...”

God, I love unraveling my wife. “Look at me. Give your pleasure to me.”

With a shaky nod, she meets my stare, opening the windows of her soul to me. I watch as I dismantle her, her body revealing its need one blissful reaction at a time. Her breathing turns choppy. Her cheeks glow red and her hips undulate. Then the moans begin. She bites her lip. The gasp

she can't quite keep in follows. When she tries to throw her arms around me, I gather her wrists in one hand and pin them to the mattress. If the wide flare of her eyes and the clamping of her snug pussy are any indication, she really likes that. Finally, she starts begging.

"Please. Please..."

"Please what, baby girl?" I fuck her slow and deep, the way I know she likes it.

"Please let me come."

"What about me?"

She doesn't play games or pretend to misunderstand. "Come inside me."

"Good girl. Who am I?"

"Nathan."

"Who am I to you?"

"Husband."

"Yes. Now say it altogether for me. Beg."

She drags in a shuddering breath. She's so close, and she looks at me as if I'm her world. "Come inside me, husband."

That's all it takes. I turn up the heat, surging against her G-spot while I increase the pressure of my thumb on her swollen clit. She tightens, nearly strangling my cock, and bucks under me. Her fists clench, and her nails dig into her palms as she surrenders, screams out her ecstasy, and takes me with her.

I flood her with my seed in an epic, back-twisting orgasm that has me shouting out my satisfaction and grinds me into a puddly goo of rapture.

As my heart rate slows, I exhale and gather her close, laying a lazy kiss across her lips, feeling decidedly content. "Knowing you're sated, *now* I can sleep."

"This isn't about me. You're sated, too."

"That I am." I kiss her nose and send her a teasing smile back. "Good night."

“You said you had something for me. Is sex what you intended to give me?”

“Not sex. *Hot* sex.”

She giggles. “Very hot sex, yes. But you made it sound like you had something else to give me.”

“Oh, that. As a matter of fact...”

“Yes?”

“There is something I should tell you. I think you’ll like it.”

“What? I know it’s not extra vacation time since the whole company is basically shut down between Christmas and New Year’s.”

“True, but no.”

“Then what? Stop teasing me and tell me.”

She’s adorably impatient, but the smile on her face tells me she’s happy as my wife, in my bed. I’ll do my best to make her content every damn day for the rest of her life. But I’ve told her that. After the way her dad ran out and her ex took her for granted, I don’t expect her to simply believe that I mean what I say. Recovering from abandonment takes trust, and I’ll need time to prove that I’m solid. That’s fine. I can be patient since we’re moving in the right direction.

Why do her feelings matter...unless you love her?

“Since you’ve been so accommodating”—I pressed my half-hard cock inside her—“and such a good girl, I’ll tell you as soon as I take care of you.”

Isabella sighs as I slowly withdraw from her body and leave the bed. I return a minute later with a warm washcloth and a bottle of lavender lotion. She’s splayed out naked and relaxed, her pretty pussy on display. The devil on my shoulder that’s pissed off I haven’t heard from Doug since texting him a picture of his daughter and me in postcoital bliss tells me I should consider posing us for another picture. I don’t. Revenge isn’t what I’m interested in now.

Instead, I clean Isabella up, soothing her well-used pussy with the wet cloth. She sends me a sleepy, pink-cheeked smile. “Thank you. I didn’t have the energy to get up.”

“You don’t have to, baby girl. I’ll always take care of you.” I begin rubbing her feet with the lavender lotion, massaging her insteps and toes. That earns me a groan as she melts into the bed.

A few minutes later, I move up to her calves, her knees, her thighs...and then I see her pussy all pink and swollen inches from my face.

I can’t resist.

“Just relax.” I part her folds with my thumbs and suck her clit into my mouth.

Her eyes flare wide, and her back arches. I worry she’s not ready for more, but she spreads her legs wider and reaches frantically for my head between her legs, digging her nails into my scalp.

For long minutes, I suck, lave, nip, and tease her sensitive nub until I see all the right signs. “Give me your orgasm. Let go, and I’ll make sure you sleep so good.”

“Nathan...yes. Yes.” She writhes and wriggles and lifts herself to my mouth where my greedy tongue just can’t get enough of her taste. “Yes!”

She explodes, and I lap her up, drawing every ounce of pleasure out of her I can before rising to loom over her limp form. She lifts lids heavy with satisfaction and smiles. “You’re spoiling me.”

“I’m trying.” I sit back on her thighs and rub more of the lotion on her neck, shoulders, breasts, and stomach, gratified at her sigh of contentment. “Feel relaxed now?”

“And replete, like I don’t have a care in the world, except that someone has given me so many orgasms my muscles down there feel like limp noodles.”

I laugh. “I suggest you get used to that.”

“OMG, I’d ask if you’re serious, but—”

“I don’t joke about sex.”

She smiles while her eyes close as if sleep is moments from taking her.

“I don’t want you worrying about anything, baby girl. Give your problems to me. I’ll put them on my shoulders.”

Her lids flutter open again, and a little frown appears between her brows. “What did you do earlier tonight that put you in such a good mood?”

“After I dropped you off here, I visited Eric. We had a... chat. You won’t be hearing from him again. Ever. I’d bet on that.”

Her frown deepens as she rises to her elbows. “Did you threaten him?”

“With everything he holds dear.” I leave out the part where he nearly pissed himself. That was for me, for my enjoyment. Isabella only needs to know one other thing. “He will never put his hands on you again. But if he tries, if he reaches out to you—despite the fact I made sure he was blocked in every way he might try to reach you—”

“You did that?”

I nod. “While you slept that first night we were together, following the company Christmas party.”

She blinks sleepily. “How? My phone is locked.”

“I have ways.”

“Of course you do.” She yawns. “Thank you. I’m so much happier without him.”

Those words make everything I’ve done to reach this moment worthwhile. “You’re very welcome, wife.”

“Are you trying to make me fall in love with you?” she slurs out. “If you are, I’m afraid it’s working.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

December 24

Morning comes, and I stretch beside my sleeping bride, press a soft kiss to her forehead, and climb out of bed, her words last night still ringing in my ears.

Are you trying to make me fall in love with you? If you are, I'm afraid it's working.

It's Christmas Eve, and most of Force Financial will be on vacation, but I need to catch up on my gym habit, some last minute shopping, and work that crossed my desk while I was in Tokyo. Then...I don't know. What are Isabella's holiday traditions?

After an hour of pumping iron, I shower and grab a few things at the mall for Steve, Laurel, and the kids. But I meander for a long while, trying to find something that will make my wife's eyes light up. I find nothing special.

Finally, I admit defeat and reach out to the one person I know who can help.

"Nathan?" Jen answers on the third ring, sounding surprised.

"Merry Christmas."

"Back at you. Izzy okay?"

"Isabella is great. She's perfect, actually."

"You've got it bad..."

I don't refute her. For better or worse, she's right. "It's our first holiday together, and I don't know what she enjoys during the season. Does she bake? Shop? Watch Hallmark movies? How can I make this the best Christmas she's ever had?"

"Oh, um..." Jen sighs. "She doesn't really celebrate."

"What?" I'm not the most religious guy, but I always hit a Christmas Eve service, then enjoy a frosty Christmas morning with coffee, a big breakfast, and opening presents before a decadent dinner with my family. But it's a time of peace, closeness, and joy. And Isabella doesn't partake? "Why?"

"You don't know?"

Clearly, I've overlooked a detail. "Sorry."

"Her mom died on Christmas Eve five years ago."

The bottom drops out of my stomach. How did I not remember today was the anniversary? "Fuck."

"I didn't think she'd tell you. Somewhere in her head, she's convinced that she should be over the loss by now. But every Christmas Eve, she holes up, eats crap, and hides until after the holiday."

"What can I do? It doesn't sound like I can buy her anything that will make her happy."

"You can't. My suggestion? Don't let her be by herself. The day her mom died, I was already away with my parents for Christmas. To this day, I regret not being there for her, especially because her dad never showed up. She spent the holiday at the funeral home, sobbing alone."

Jesus, that makes my heart wrench. Fuck work. I can catch up later. My wife needs me. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm only telling you this because I think you care about her. And I think she's falling for you. If you're serious about wanting to keep her—and keep her happy—"

"I am."

"Then just...be with her. Surround her. Care about her. Help her start a new tradition besides crappy store-bought

cookies and *Die Hard*.”

“Hey, *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie.”

“No, it’s not. Silly man,” she teases. “My point is, she doesn’t do any of the things normal people do for Christmas because she never really got the chance. Even her dad abandoned them a decade ago, shortly before the holiday season. They had no money, and she was just a kid. Heck, I don’t think they could even afford presents for years.”

“Jesus...” I hurt for her. Hell, I want to buy her the world. “I’ll do my best to fix it.”

“I don’t expect miracles, but if you really want to keep her—”

“I do.”

“Then try to make this a happy time of year for her. It would go a long way to making her fall for you. I’ll send you something that just might help.”

Seconds later, a photo pops into my text that makes me smile. “This is great. I’m on it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Merry, merry!”

“Merry Christmas. When you get back in town, I owe you the best dinner money can buy.”

She laughs. “I don’t need the calories, but if you have a single friend...”

“He’ll be my age.”

“Good. Izzy has convinced me that I need to expand my dating pool.”

I laugh. “You got it.”

The moment we hang up, I leave the mall, find the perfect little shop to help me make my wife smile, then pick up some groceries and head home. I glance at my watch and swear under my breath. It’s nearly three in the afternoon. I’ve left her alone on one of the hardest days of the year.

Never again.

“Isabella?” I call out as soon as I open the door.

“In here,” she croaks.

I cross the floor and find her in the living room, curled up in a blanket and downing a package of store-bought cookies, with a messy bun, a red nose, and puffy eyes while *Die Hard* explodes from the big screen above the fireplace.

Jen called it.

“Baby girl...” I drop my packages on the coffee table, take the cookies from her cold fingers, and drag her onto my lap. “I’m sorry I’ve been gone today.”

“You have a life.”

She’s not wrong, but her voice is small. The sadness I hear hurts. “I’m back. I won’t leave you.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not. Look at me.” I cup her cheeks until she does.

Instantly, she tears up. “I’m not usually good today. I’ll be okay by midweek.”

And miss Christmas? No. “I’m sorry about your mom.”

The tears start rolling down her face. “How did you—”

“I called Jen.”

“And she told you.” Isabella presses her lips together and brushes the tears from her face. “Traitor.”

“She’s an amazing friend.”

“The best.” My wife starts crying again.

I wrap my arms around her tighter and hold her trembling body close as I press the remote to turn on the fireplace. “Tell me what happened?”

She shakes her head.

“Please.” That’s not a word I use often. “I want to understand, and I can’t until you explain.”

“Why? There’s nothing you can do.”

“Maybe not, but you’re my wife. I told you, I take care of what’s mine.”

She blows out a long breath, like she’s too tired to fight me. “Early that morning, Mom went to the mall to buy my Christmas present. It was a charm for a bracelet we’d been adding to since I was a kid. She wanted to get there when the store opened at five in the morning since they were having a sale, quantities were limited, and money was tight. On her way, a drunk driver veered into her lane on a dark road and hit her head-on. She never stood a chance.”

Oh, fuck. I hold her tighter. “I’m so sorry, baby girl. So, so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Isabella pushes me away. “This isn’t your problem, and I don’t expect you to try and make it better.”

“You’ve spent this day more or less alone for the last five years, right?”

“It’s better that way.”

“Is it? Hiding from everyone hasn’t made you feel better. Maybe it’s time to try something different.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Maybe not, but I think you should.”

“Why are you pushing me?”

“Why are you determined to shove away someone who wants to help?”

She glares at me. I glare back. Then she sighs, and slowly she lets me draw her back into my arms. I lay her head on my shoulder and rub her back. As if my comforting touch dismantles the tough outer shell she hid behind, she falls apart.

It’s not a quick sniffle. She doesn’t cry pretty. These are soul-wrenching, deep-down tears. I hug her close, kiss her temple, hand her tissues, and reassure her while ignoring the sopping wet shoulder of my T-shirt. I promise I’ll hold her as long as she needs.

I mean that.

She pulls back nearly an hour later, looking spent but more at peace.

I brush her hair from her thoroughly red face. “There’s my pretty girl.”

“Oh, gorgeous—but only if you like a runny nose and a splotchy face.”

“You’re in luck. And on you, they’re perfect.”

“You’re such a liar.”

“I’m not.” I kiss her softly. “Let me help you enjoy the rest of the day.”

“It’s the anniversary of my mom’s death. I don’t think it’s possible.”

“It’s not if you don’t try.” I squeeze her tight. “Let’s start by turning this off.”

She lurches for the remote as Alan Rickman begins falling from Nakatomi Tower, but I’m quicker.

As the TV screen goes black, she whirls on me. “You don’t like *Die Hard*?”

“I love it, but not right now. We have other things to do.”

“If you’re thinking more sex, count me out. My girl parts are sore.”

It’s impossible not to grin. “I’ll keep that in mind. Come with me.”

With a tug on her hand, I haul her off the sofa and lead her to the kitchen. It takes some coaxing and some spectacular failures with cookie dough on my part, but she shakes off her malaise, and we bake sugar Christmas trees together. She teaches me to frost and decorate—something my ex-wife would never have been caught dead doing. When we’re done and everything is put away, I make Isabella a stir-fry with her favorite vegetables, sit her on my lap as we eat, and find the schmaltziest holiday romance movie I can find.

She sometimes groans and sometimes laughs. What she’s not doing? Crying or mourning. As far as I’m concerned,

that's a win.

"That would *not* happen." She scoffs at the TV screen.

I can't disagree. "The big-city billionaire marrying the small-town baker without a prenup, and especially without fucking her first, is totally far-fetched. And the acting was horrible, too."

She bites her lip. "True. But I didn't hate it."

"Then I didn't, either."

Isabella frowns. "Why are you being so nice? I don't get it. You sought me out for revenge. You married me as a middle finger to my dad. You even want me to have your payback baby. You didn't sign on for my emotional crap."

"You have this fallacy that me wanting revenge automatically means I'm a villain who won't care about you or how you feel. Why does it have to be one or the other? Why can't I find ways to get revenge and still adore my new wife?"

She scowls. "I guess...I never thought of it that way."

"Try. They're both true. My feelings toward your father don't mean I want to do anything but shower you with the best and give you a good life."

"I don't know whether you're brilliant or insane."

"Think about it and let me know what you decide, okay?" I tap her nose with my finger.

"I guess I should have asked what's up for Christmas before I threw myself a pity party."

"I should have told you my thoughts so we could work it out together. If it's okay, I hoped we could go to Steve and Laurel's tomorrow around noon. We'll have dinner and dessert, watch some football, maybe play a few board games, then come home."

Isabella takes a minute to think that over, then nods. "That sounds nice. If you're sure they won't mind me crashing..."

"You're not crashing; you're family."

She bites her lip, and I know that face. She wants to believe me but doesn't. "How can I help? I don't want Laurel to do all the cooking by herself."

"My niece will help, too, but why don't you call? I'll bet Laurel has everything under control, but she'd appreciate hearing from you."

"Okay."

When my wife starts to leave my lap, I pull her back. "Where are you going?"

She scowls as if it's obvious. "To call Laurel."

"In a minute. I know it's not Christmas morning, but I'd like to give you two things now."

"Nathan, you've already given me so much."

"Cock doesn't count. Wait. Forget I said that. I'll insist later that you need cock for Christmas." I wink.

"Of course you will, but I'm not forgetting."

I can't resist laughing. "Brat. Close your eyes."

Isabella sighs impatiently, but complies. I reach into my pocket and pull out the small beige box, lift the pendant from the case, then sidle next to her. "Sit up."

Again, she does as I ask. She looks beautiful with her messy bun twisted on her head and tendrils falling loose to frame her face. The lights from the Christmas tree and the fireplace beam off her hair, which shines in a seemingly endless array of blond shades.

I slide the pendant around her neck and tighten the clasp. "There."

She opens her eyes and touches the cool gold pressing against her chest, feeling its shape with her fingertips. Then she whips her shocked gaze to me before hopping to her feet and dashing to the mirror in the foyer. I follow, reveling in her stunned gasp.

"Oh, my god! My mother's pendant! How did you get this?" Isabella starts crying again, this time happy tears. "How

did you get it back from Eric?" Her eyes widen. "You must have thoroughly threatened him."

"I did."

"I can't believe he backed down."

"He definitely did." I grin. "I also got the rest of your stuff out of your closet and dresser. It's in your duffel in my trunk."

"Thank you so much!" Isabella launches herself at me. "This pendant is the most priceless gift ever! My grandmother gave it to my mother on her wedding day, and I—"

"You don't need to explain, baby girl. It's important to you, so it's important to me."

She tears up again. Then she does something I don't expect. For the first time, she kisses me, initiating our contact voluntarily. I could lose myself in her mouth, in her body. My cock wants to, but the moment is more important than an orgasm.

"I want you to be happy, Isabella."

More tears fall. "I have no idea what Julia was thinking when she chose my dad over you, and I'm sorry for the pain you had to go through. But you've been so much better to me than Eric ever was. I didn't know men could be this thoughtful..."

"Only for you. Usually, I'm an absolute bastard."

"I don't doubt it." She grins.

"Despite that, I also had something made for you." I rummage through the bags I dumped on the coffee table and pull free a simple white box. "Open it."

"What's this? I didn't get you anything. I didn't even think about Christmas. I just usually—"

"I don't need anything but you, baby girl. Go on."

Cautiously, she opens the box and pulls my gift from the foam wrapper. When she sees the picture of her and her mom, along with the inscription on the plaque, Isabella tears up. "Those we love never go away; they walk beside us every

single day. Unseen, unheard, but always near, still loved, still missed, and very, very dear.' Oh, Nathan... I love it."

When I open my arms, she lunges into them and sobs again on my shoulder. I hold her tight, murmuring soothing words and pressing gentle kisses to her temple.

She lifts her head with a sniffle. "This is amazing. I could say thank you a thousand times and it wouldn't be enough."

"You don't even have to say it once. Your face says it for me."

"Still, I appreciate it, and I want you to know it."

"You're welcome."

"No, I want to thank you in a more...personal way." Isabella drops to her knees between my feet and reaches for my fly.

Instantly, I get hard—a common occurrence when my wife is around. But this is different. The earnest need to please is all over her face, and I can't deny that her submissive instinct revs me straight to the edge of my restraint.

"Please..."

Her whisper is like a siren call. "You don't have to."

"I want to. Let me."

Fuck, I can't say no. I've been dying to feel her mouth around me, and once she's swallowed me down, I'll lay her across our bed, tug off her pajama bottoms, and return the favor until she screams.

I drag my thumb across her lower lip. Then I raise my hands in surrender, and close my eyes while she gives me the merriest Christmas gift I could have asked for.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Christmas morning starts with a peaceful fall of fluffy snow, warm pancakes, and hot sex with my even hotter wife. As much as I love fucking Isabella, now that I've made love to her when she's soft and her heart is open, it's even more sublime. I can't wait until she's fertile. Until she conceives. Until I'm filling her pussy while I'm holding her swelling belly.

I'm surprised I haven't heard from Doug in the last thirty-six hours. He's usually an impulsive hothead, so the image I texted him of Isabella and me on our wedding night should have set him off. But I'm not enraged or anxious like I thought I'd be that the bastard hasn't responded.

Why?

One conclusion bombards my brain: I've become more emotionally invested in keeping Isabella than in having revenge. In fact, I've hardly thought about anything except my new wife in days. Other than taking our picture in bed and sending it to Doug via my ex-wife, I haven't lifted a finger for the payback I spent obsessive months scheming. I've focused all my energy on cementing my bond with Isabella and making her happy.

That realization is both comforting and disturbing.

After we clean the kitchen and dress for the day, we toss together the green bean casserole Laurel asked us to bring and head to my brother's place a few miles away. They welcome us with hugs and a bottle of good red wine. The kids are

spending the afternoon with friends and significant others, but they'll be back for dinner.

After some football and casual conversation, Laurel throws the dishes she prepared in advance in the oven. Steve checks the prime rib on the smoker. The scents of scrumptious food fill the house and combine with the smell of pine from their giant tree while snow falls softly outside. It's the perfect backdrop for Christmas Day.

I take my wife's hand and lower my voice. "You doing okay?"

"Good." She sips her wine and fingers her mother's pendant. "Great, actually. I haven't enjoyed this holiday since I was a child. You made this year totally different."

"Better than Oreos and *Die Hard*?"

"I'll probably deny it tomorrow, but yeah."

"Then let's call cookie baking, stir fry, and sappy holiday movies our new tradition."

She laughs and thanks me, then joins Laurel in the kitchen.

Steve makes his way to the sofa and sits beside me, looking over his shoulder at the women bustling around the stove. "Seems like that's going well."

"Surprisingly, yeah." I fill him in about her mother's death, and my big-hearted brother is full of sympathy.

"I don't blame her for not celebrating the holidays, but I'm glad she has you to help her see Christmas differently."

"Well, I wouldn't say I changed her outlook in a day. That would be giving myself far too much credit, but I'm hoping by next Christmas, that we'll have a new reason to celebrate, one with ten fingers and ten toes..."

His jaw drops. "You're already trying to get her pregnant?"

"You knew I was going to. I started the minute I said 'I do.'"

He claps me on the back. "Fingers crossed it all works out. You'll be a great dad."

“From your lips to God’s ears.”

“You heard from Izzy’s father?”

“No, and it’s weird.” But is it? The asshole has ignored her most of her life. Maybe he really doesn’t give a shit. And the fact that I may not get a rise out of him doesn’t bother me as much as I thought it would.

My brother shrugs. “I hope everything comes together for you two. The more I watch you together, the more I think you’re a good match. You give her balance and stability. You’re solid, and she can count on you—something it doesn’t sound like she’s ever had from a man in her life.”

I nod. “You’re right. What do you think she gives me? And if you say a piece of ass, I’m going to deck you.”

“She does, but she also gives you something real. Nothing you had with Julia was.”

He’s right, and I hate that I didn’t see it until she and Doug stabbed me in the back.

“In fact, I’ve never seen you like this. You’re smitten.”

It shows? I wince. “Yeah, didn’t account for that.”

Steve chuckles. “Karma.”

“Laugh it up. I know I started this to get back at that son of a bitch I was once in business with, but Isabella is...”

“Perfect for you?”

“I’m starting to think so.” Is that why I keep wondering if I’m in love?

Aren’t you?

“At least you’re wising up,” Steve says. “What you need to do is stop giving a shit about Douglas Shay, choose Izzy, and let your happiness be your revenge.”

It sounds so simple, and on some level, I suspect he’s right, but... “That fucker would skate scot-free.”

Steve shrugs. “Would he, though? Really?”

“He took over a million dollars from me.”

“Like you said, he paid you back. Are you mad he was having an affair with Julia?”

“At the time.” But not after she was gone and I realized she’d lied to me for a decade. She and Doug drop-kicked my pride more than they broke my heart. “Not anymore.”

“Then what’s this revenge really about?”

I tap my thumb on my thigh and sift through my thoughts. “Anger.”

“Dig deeper.”

Fuck, I hate it when Steve reads me this way. “Me trying to force karma.”

“That sounds right. But Doug is always going to have a strained relationship with his daughter because he earned that. And Julia will be old and childless someday, and she’ll wish she had chosen family and love over ambition and adultery. They’ll both die with bitter regrets. You need to give up this revenge, search your heart, and decide what’s truly going to make you happy.”

“Steve?” Laurel calls from the kitchen. “Check your meat. I think I’ll be ready in less than thirty.”

“Think about it.” My brother hops up, leaving me with my thoughts.

I fear he’s right. What the hell am I going to do?

My niece and nephews return. Dinner is served, and classic Christmas tunes fill the dining room along with a lot of chatter, laughter, and love. I watch my wife. Isabella isn’t saying much, but her faint smile tells me she’s taking the scene in. She looks surprisingly content.

After dessert and a ruthless game of poker, Laurel begins yawning. She tries to be discreet, but she cooked an incredible meal for eight, so I’ll bet she’s been up since the wee hours. Besides, I want to spend some alone time with Isabella. I lost

myself inside her barely nine hours ago, and I'm already desperate for her again. And I have to figure out how to undo all the damage I've done seeking this revenge so I don't lose her. Maybe I'll take her on a honeymoon...

In the car, I reach for her hand. "Have fun today?"

"Yeah. Even when I was a kid, Christmas wasn't like that. My mom's parents lived in Oregon, where she was from. I have an aunt, but I've only met her once, when she came to Mom's funeral. My grandfather died when I was four. My grandma didn't last too long after that. My dad's parents had all but disowned him years before. Anyway, since I was an only child, it was always just the three of us for the holidays. For as long as I can remember, my parents fought—no matter what day it was. There wasn't much happiness or Christmas cheer."

"We're definitely going to change that and embrace new traditions together—you, me, and our kids. Speaking of—" I stop the car with a scowl when I turn onto my street and see Julia's familiar silver SUV in the driveway and Doug leaning against it, arms crossed like he's pissed as hell.

He also looks like he's aged ten years in the last two, when I last set eyes on him.

Beside me, Isabella gasps. "What is my dad doing here?"

He's come to get in my face. He's come to get payback for my retribution. I wanted this revenge so badly. I spent hours compulsively putting my master plan into place. I wanted to get a rise out of him, and I sent him a picture designed to boil his blood. Now I wish I hadn't. I wish Doug would just go the fuck away.

How will Isabella handle his unexpected visit?

"Shit." It's definitely going to hit the fan.

Heaving a sigh, I pull in the driveway, my heart dropping to my stomach even as rage flashes through me. I haven't been any sort of saint, but this asshole hasn't paid attention to his daughter in a decade. What gives him the fucking right to think he can suddenly waltz back into her life and school me?

Sliding my car past my ex-wife's and slinging it into the garage, I shove my Mercedes in park, cursing under my breath, and kick my door open. "Doug."

He's already coming at me, fists clenched. "You son of a bitch."

I'm damn happy to meet him halfway. "You can say that after what you've done to Isabella? I should punch the fuck out of you."

My wife hustles to my side and grabs my arm before I throw the first punch. "Nathan, don't."

"He's ignored you. He's hurt you."

"She's an adult. I let her live her life," Doug argues, then peers at his daughter. "Why did you *marry* him?"

"Oh, yeah. Thirteen is *so* grown up." I scoff. "You tool. She *needed* a father then, and you skipped out for money. Then you show up a decade later—after not paying for her last year of college, like you promised—and try to play daddy? Fuck you."

Guilt flashes across Doug's face before anger takes over. "Shit happened, and I dealt with it the best I could. Diana and I should never have gotten married. We were too young, and we wanted different things. But I never stopped loving my daughter. I just—"

"You had a fucking odd way of showing it."

"I've been looking for you for a year," Isabella cuts in. She doesn't sound angry or even accusatory. She sounds hurt. "A whole year! You never once reached out to me, just like you didn't when I was a teenager."

I pin her asshole of a father with a glare. "Do you hear that? Do you hear what you did to her? You abandoned her when she was a kid and—"

"Because I had cancer!" He sighs. "A frontal lobe glioblastoma. I...thought I was going to die."

Isabella gasps, hand pressed over her open mouth, obviously stunned and reeling.

I glare at him suspiciously. Is he lying for sympathy?

Doug doesn't flinch or look away.

Oh, shit. Maybe he's telling the truth.

The implications of that... Fuck, it changes everything.

"Once I found out my insurance company wouldn't pay for a treatment the FDA hadn't approved yet, I took the money from our business account and split. I'd found a doctor in Brazil who had a good success rate with curing this kind of aggressive cancer. I had to act fast. And I had to pay in cash. I almost didn't make it."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" my wife demands.

That's my question, too. We were business partners. I thought we were friends.

Doug sighs. "Diana told me a few weeks before I left that she wanted a divorce, so I couldn't ask her to take care of me. If she didn't want me anymore, I didn't want her pity. And you were too young to handle a potentially terminal illness. I thought a clean break would be easier for you to process than slowly watching me die."

In his shoes, would I have made the same decision? I don't know.

"Diana asked you for a divorce because you were sniffing around Julia," I point out.

"I wasn't. We were friends. *Just* friends back then. She knew about the cancer because she came into the office looking for you the day I got the diagnosis. I was at my desk, losing my shit, and I blabbed. She promised she'd keep my secret and helped me hash out a wellness plan. She was my support system over text and email during treatment and while I recovered. It wasn't until I came back stateside years later and long after my divorce was final that something more happened between us. Izzy had just left for college, and I was finally getting back on my feet. I showed up to your house to repay you the money I took, but Julia answered the door. We started talking. There was a spark. Things...happened. I'm sorry."

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this after I grew up?” Isabella demands.

“I didn’t know how to bridge the gap between us. Once I was out of the woods medically, I’d missed holidays and birthdays, crushes, tests, and teenage rites of passage. I didn’t think I had the right to just appear out of nowhere and be Dad again. You seemed to be doing all right and”—he kicks at a rock in the driveway—“I thought I’d just be in the way.”

“Even when Mom died?”

“I should have asked if I was welcome, not assumed I wouldn’t be. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me.”

“What about this last year? You just dropped off the face of the earth again. Never mind you’d promised to pay for my school. I took out student loans—”

“The cancer came back. I had to return to Brazil, and I needed the cash for more treatment.” Doug sends her an imploring stare. “That’s why my hair turned so gray. The last year has been rough.”

Holy shit. I had no idea what Doug endured. Still, he picked himself over his daughter. Yeah, life or death versus money, but Isabella wasn’t a child anymore. If he couldn’t part with his green, at least he could have given her the truth.

“Are you in remission?” she asks softly.

That’s what I love about my wife. Even when she’s been wronged and has every reason to be upset, she still cares about the people around her. Despite the crap people have heaped on her—me included—she has a big heart. It gives me hope she’ll forgive me someday.

“Two brain surgeries and more chemo later, yeah. I’m broken, but I’m alive.”

“I-I don’t even know what to say.” Her voice catches. “You’ve been through so much...”

Doug tears up. “I know you have, too. And I know I’ve largely failed as a father.” Then he shifts his stare to me. “Maybe if I had reasserted myself in your life sooner, you

wouldn't have married this bastard. He's only using you to get to me."

"Dad—"

"I'm serious. He sent me pictures of you two. Did you know that? Of him on top of your naked body in bed, next to your wedding dress. I don't have to guess what he was doing to you in the name of revenge just before he snapped this picture."

Damn it, I've already done my own damage. I don't need him fucking up things with my wife even more. He'll paint my actions in the worst possible way, and how will Isabella feel? How hurt will she be? "Doug—"

"Shut up. You can't defend this. I haven't been a great father, but I'm here for Izzy now." He opens his phone and shoves the image in her face. "He doesn't care about you. Stop being his whore."

I grab the phone from his hand. "You don't get to show up on Christmas night with your righteous indignation and call your daughter names. I fucked up, and I deserve her anger. But you'll have to come through me if you want to say that kind of shit to Isabella and crush her again. I will beat the fuck out of you if you don't treat her with respect."

"You sent my dad pictures of us? In bed?" Isabella sounds shocked. Betrayal pinches her expression. "I knew you married me for revenge but—"

"You knew?" Doug narrow his eyes at me. "Then you must have forced her to marry you. How? Does she owe you money? I'll pay it."

Before I can answer, Isabella sucks in a sharp sob and lurches away from me. "I-I can't believe you sent him a picture of us...and hurt me intentionally."

Her choked voice crushes me. I ignore Doug; I don't owe him a damn thing. But my wife deserves an explanation. "I was always going to tell your father we were married. You must have known that."

“*Tell* him, yes. But a picture of us in *bed*? You took it while I was sleeping, didn’t you?” She shakes her head as if she’s stunned by the depths of my betrayal. “I was vulnerable, and I trusted you. And you trampled on my privacy and chose revenge at my expense.”

I curse under my breath. I didn’t stop to consider that photo would upset Isabella. I never meant to hurt her, much less burn a bridge between us.

What a shitty time to realize I only want her by my side forever.

“I’m sorry, baby girl. That wasn’t my intention.”

“That’s not true. You thought you had me under your thumb, so how you treated me didn’t matter. You almost had me convinced. I believed in you, especially after you rescued Mom’s pendant from Eric and—”

“I love you.” I take Isabella by the shoulders. “I know you have no reason to believe me, and I’m sure it sounds convenient that I’m saying those three words now, but I swear it. I. Love. You.”

“Take your hands off her,” Doug growls.

As far as I’m concerned, no one exists except my wife, and the tears that fill her eyes almost destroy me. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do. I didn’t intend to fall for you—ever. When I hunted you down at the Christmas party, you were nothing but an attractive means to my vengeance. Then you slipped under my skin with your goodness and kindness. You were fun to be with. You were sweet. I could be myself around you. While I was in Tokyo, all I thought about was you. Your smile and your sassiness. The way you looked and smelled and felt. I was consumed by you. I wanted you more than I should; I knew that. Once I had you in my arms again, I didn’t care much about revenge. After we married, I snapped that pic, and I intended that to be the end of it. Because I only wanted you.”

“No, that’s not true.” She cradles her stomach protectively. “You turned me inside out, over and over. You tried to get me

pregnant to get back at Dad and Julia.”

“What the fuck?” Doug cuts in.

I ignore him again and implore Isabella. “I wasn’t trying to get you pregnant to get back at them. I was trying to cement you to me. I knew if you were having my baby, you wouldn’t walk away.”

“Never mind how I felt.” Tears fall down Isabella’s face. “What you did was wrong. And hurtful. I let myself get caught up in the moment, and that’s on me. But I don’t know how to forgive you. Or if I can.”

“Isabella...” I grip her tighter, panic filling me as my world falls apart. “Baby girl, I love you. All I want to do is spend the rest of my life loving you.”

She swipes her tears away with a sniffle. “You have a terrible way of showing it.”

“Let me take you somewhere else.” Doug tries to tug Isabella from me.

Everything inside me stands ready to fight. If he takes my wife now, will she ever speak to me again? Will she ever let me make it right?

“No. You stay here,” I offer. “I’ll leave.”

She frowns. “It’s your house.”

“Do you really want to stay with your dad and my ex-wife?”

Isabella recoils. “No.”

It takes every ounce of my will not to pull her close, coax her to kiss me, and beg her not to let this come between us. But I miscalculated. I fucked up. This is out of my hands until she decides whether she can find it in her heart to give me a second chance.

“Then stay here. Think about us, about what you want for your future, about how I put you on a pedestal and how I made you feel. All of that was real and from my heart.” I dig the keys from my pocket. “I’ll be back.”

“She’ll be gone, asshole!” Doug shouts to my back. “I’m taking her far from you.”

Halfway to my car, I stop and whirl on him. “That’s Isabella’s choice. From this point on, everything should be. I’m sorry you had brain cancer. I’m sorry you struggled with your health. For the record, when we were business partners, I considered you my best friend. I would have told you to take the money and go to Brazil. You didn’t need to steal the funds from me. And you didn’t need to take Julia, either. If you two had been honest and told me you had feelings for each other, I would have let her go. But you both ducked and lied. I get that you handled your life the way you thought you should. But I did the same. I love your daughter.” I turn to my wife. “Listen to me, Isabella. Unless you tell me that you have zero feelings for me and want a divorce, I will never let you go. I’ll love you until you believe me...or I die.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Isabella

As I let my father in the house I've shared with Nathan for the past week and a half, my hands shake.

Dad had cancer. Twice. I've spent years resenting a man who was fighting for his life. I'm ashamed that I assumed he didn't care about anyone else. But he also isn't blameless. He wasn't honest. He never shared his trials with his family.

I don't know how to feel about that.

Dad shucks his jacket. I follow suit and hang both up in the coat closet. I'm stalling, trying to buy time. I don't know what to say.

"Coffee?" I shut the door and face him.

Watching me with an inscrutable stare, he shakes his head. "I don't need caffeine this late in the evening. But more than that, I don't want to waste time. Nate and I haven't been good friends in over a decade, but one thing I know? He never lets anything sit for long. He'll be back sooner rather than later."

I've only known Nathan for a few weeks, but I'm convinced Dad is right. "Let's sit."

When I direct my father to the living room, he plants in a chair and watches me sit on the edge of the sofa. "I'm sorry."

"For what, precisely?" I'm glad Dad knows he screwed up, but I'm not sure he really comprehends that his actions affected my whole life.

“For not being around.” He huffs in frustration. “If I’d never gotten sick, if I’d never been forced to leave the country for months and months at a time—”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but it’s the reason I was never there for you.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

“It is. My cancer kept us apart.”

“I’m stunned and saddened that you endured such a serious health scare by yourself. I can’t imagine how terrifying, difficult, and lonely that was. My heart goes out to you. You forged on bravely, despite what I’m sure were some dark days where it would have been easier to give up.”

“Dark days, hell. Dark weeks. Dark months. Earlier this summer, I wasn’t responding to treatment at all. I thought I was going to die. It was—”

“Horrible in every sense of the word. I’m sure it put you in touch with your mortality far younger than you expected. But let’s be clear. *You* kept us apart.”

“Izzy—”

“You did. You didn’t have to go through any of that without me. You chose to. One phone call. One.” I hold up a finger. “And I would have been your sounding board. I would have cheered you on. I would have cried with you. I would even have come to Brazil to hold your hand. But you chose another man’s wife.”

“I didn’t want you to see me at my worst.”

“I appreciate that you wanted to shield me from your illness and deal with it in your own way.”

“I sense a ‘but’ somewhere.”

“But you shut me out. I was a child, and you never thought about *my* feelings and how *your* choices affected them. You didn’t grasp that I was growing up with not just a father, but a daddy.” I try to stop the emotions from pouring out, but there’s no holding my tears back. “After you left, I was crushed and

confused. I had so many issues. So many questions. What did I do wrong? Was I such a horrible child that I drove you away?”

“Oh, kiddo. No. Of course not. It had nothing—”

“To do with me? As an adult, I understand. As a kid? I couldn’t begin to. Mom tried to explain that you leaving had more to do with her and the divorce, but those felt like kind lies. I was sure I’d been too mouthy, too difficult. I stopped speaking up and stopped fighting back. I stopped advocating for myself—in school, friendships, even work. I never wanted to rock the boat or drive people away.”

“You should never let anyone silence you.”

“No one was around to tell me that. You were gone. Mom was working multiple jobs to keep a roof over our heads. So I got quieter. That clamming up carried into my romantic relationships. I let my one and only boyfriend walk all over me for six years. He took me for granted and hurt my feelings all the time, but I let him because...what if he left me and I was alone again? Even the question made me panic.”

“You’re so sweet, and you grew up so beautiful. You never have to be alone, and you deserve someone who treats you like a queen. Someone who loves you. Never forget that.”

I do. I deserve someone who treats me like—

I shut down the thought. Nathan worshipped me because he wanted to lull me into his trap, not because I meant anything to him.

If that’s true, why did he bother retrieving your pendant after you were married? He had nothing to gain, except your heart...

“You can say that to me after you called me a whore?”

“I didn’t say you *are* one. I just hate that you allowed Nate to”—Dad winces—“use you for his nefarious bullshit. And that was my anger talking. I didn’t mean it.”

“Maybe you see me as deserving, but after you walked out, I felt unworthy. And so alone. It scared me. So I let my ex say

and do horrible things to me. I grinned and bore it because I was afraid he'd abandon me."

"Like I did." Dad heaves a pained sigh. "Oh, my god. I'm so sorry. I tried to spare you the worst..."

"I would rather have held your hand during your illness than spend all this time wondering what horrible thing I'd done that made loving me impossible."

"Nothing, kiddo. Nothing at all." Regret tightens his face. "I really am sorry."

After a decade of carrying an albatross of fear and anger, I finally got the apology I've needed for so long. Yet it feels anticlimactic. Once he spoke the words I needed, I thought I'd be magically healed. I thought it would change something inside me.

I was wrong. I'm still the same Izzy with the same fears and insecurities.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"I haven't done a good job of showing it, but I love you."

He looks at me expectantly, as if he wants me to return the sentiment. I don't have the energy or bravery right now to open my heart. I don't have it in me to forgive and forget. Not my father. Not Nathan. Maybe if I rest and think and pray...

Or maybe...I should confront my fear head-on and tackle life alone while I decide whether to let either of them back into my life.

"That's good to know," I finally say.

More regret crosses his face, but he gives me an artificial smile. "Of course. That's quite a wedding ring you're wearing." He gestures to my left hand. "Did you pick that out?"

"Nathan did."

Dad falls quiet, and the wordless moments stretch on. The silence turns awkward, but I don't have the energy to fill the emptiness. After a grief-ridden Christmas Eve and an anxiety-

filled Christmas night, my husband, whom I was falling for, turned out to value revenge more than me. Then my dad shows up out of the blue and drops a bombshell. I'm overwhelmed. I don't know how to feel, except spent.

"You know, when Nathan and I were business partners, he was my best friend, too. Good guy," Dad says. "Always made the right call. I was sometimes jealous of his innate ability to know the perfect thing to say or do in any situation. He was a really honorable son of a bitch, too. We'd go on business trips, and he's a good looking SOB, right? He'd get hit on a lot. He always stayed true."

"You didn't?"

"I didn't have nearly as many opportunities as Nate, but... your mom and I had problems almost from the start. I'm not proud of the choices I made."

"They were selfish." Maybe I shouldn't say that or be so harsh, but I won't hold back my feelings anymore. When I do, I'm always the one who gets hurt.

"You're right. Julia and I have talked about the fact we're both innately selfish people, and we're working to be better."

"Is that why she never wanted kids and lied to Nathan?"

Dad nods. "She hoped if she kept kicking the can down the road, they would eventually get too old for kids, that he would give up and be happy with the status quo."

"That's selfish and dishonest, too." In fact, I'm horrified. "How can you love someone like that?"

Dad sighs. "She's not that person anymore. Age and life have this way of changing folks. You get older and you start to look back at the choices you made and the things you valued. In hindsight, you see where you fucked up. You learn lessons. You want to right wrongs and be a better human. And sometimes, that all comes too late." He swallows. "After trying to get pregnant for the last six months, Julia and I found out she waited too long. She can't have kids anymore. She's only thirty-eight, but she has to have a hysterectomy right after our honeymoon."

He doesn't have to tell me how much Nathan's ex-wife regrets her decisions. It's all over his face.

"You're forty-four. Did you want more kids?"

"I was on the fence. I went along with the plan because I love her and I wanted her to be happy. But once the doctor gave us the news...it felt like a killing blow. I'm not ashamed to say we went home and cried."

They both made terrible decisions in life, but that doesn't negate the empathy I feel. "I'm sorry."

"I am, too. Now what, kiddo?"

Isn't that the million-dollar question? "I don't know.

"Can we keep talking and working this out?"

Eventually. Right now... "I need to be alone for a while."

"And Nate?"

"That goes for him, too."

Dad frowns. "How do you feel about him?"

"This morning I would have told you I was in love with him. Now I feel bulldozed and numb."

"You need rest. You're welcome to come stay with Julia and me. We—"

"No." The last thing I need now is to be with the two people who fueled Nathan's need for vengeance. "Thank you, but I think some solitude would be best."

My father nods. "If it's any consolation, when Nate drove away, he looked as if he was leaving his heart at your feet. He may have pursued you for revenge, but I don't think payback was top of mind anymore."

"Are you advocating for him?"

"No, but I can admit that you're not seeing him at his best, and I'm at least partially to blame. Maybe now that this revenge business is behind you two, you'll get to talk this out with the real Nathan Price. Then you can decide what's best for you. I'll support you either way."

“I wasted six years on a man who wanted me for reasons other than love. I won’t put up with another. We’ll talk, but if I’m not enough for Nathan, then it’s time to move on.”

Even if I have to do it alone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nathan

Just before sunrise, I let myself in the house, juggling coffee and donuts, and praying like hell that Isabella is still here.

The minute I step inside, I know she's gone. I can't smell her. I can't feel her.

Fuck. I have no idea where she spent the night or if she's coming back. And it's killing me.

Cursing, I set everything on the dining room table, plop into the nearest chair, and wonder where she's gone. Even if she left the city—hell, the country—I'm not giving up on her. On us. She's the woman I want to spend my forever with.

How do I convince her of that?

I pour myself a steaming mug and glance around my house. I bought it cheap after my divorce. Crappy place in a good neighborhood. I fixed it up, and I've loved living here. It's been quiet, peaceful. A modern promise on a fresh start.

Now when I look around all I see is Isabella. I've gotten used to her living with me. To seeing her brush her teeth at my sink, to watching her bop to a silly pop song while she cooks, to cuddling her on the sofa with a blanket and a smile.

My sanctuary feels horribly empty now. Hell, I feel empty.

How did I fuck this up so badly? I should have changed course when I realized I was in love with her.

Suddenly, I hear the clinking of the lock. In the silence, the jingling and rustling sounds magnified. Then the door whooshes open.

My heart lurches as I leap to my feet. Isabella charges in bare-faced, dressed in leggings and a ponytail. She's still wearing her mother's pendant. Her ring finger is bare.

That observation guts me.

Her eyes meet mine. They're red rimmed. I stop breathing. She looks as exhausted as I feel. But she's more beautiful than ever, and I'm worried this is the last time I'll ever be alone with her.

"Morning." It's not the wittiest greeting, but it's neutral. I need to gage her mood before I say more.

Has she decided to divorce me?

"Morning." She stops in the foyer, shuts the door behind her, and stands rooted, staring back.

Slowly, I approach her. I give her plenty of time to back away. I don't want to spook her. "I'm glad to see you. Can we talk?"

Isabella hesitates, swallows, then nods. "That's why I came."

I release a breath I didn't realize I was holding. If I didn't already know the truth, that alone would tell me how critical my new wife has become to my heart and my happiness. But I'm painfully aware. All night, I thought of nothing but her, wondering miserably what I'd do if she couldn't forgive me and walked out of my life for good.

"I was hoping you'd be here. I brought coffee and donuts," I offer.

"I could use some caffeine. Jen doesn't have any at her place, and I didn't sleep."

"I can tell." I lead her to the kitchen and pour her a hot cup, trying to calm my shaking hand. "I didn't, either."

A soft smile lifts the corners of her lips I'm dying to kiss as she takes the cup. "I can tell."

"Did you and Doug talk?"

She nods, then sips her java. "It was...eye-opening. He apologized, said all the things I've waited a decade to hear." She shrugs. "We'll see. One thing he told me? Julia finally decided she wanted kids, and now she can't have them. Dad says she's devastated. They both are."

Once upon a time, I would have fist-bumped karma for repaying my ex-wife and my former friend with such a permanent kick in the teeth. Now I just feel sorry for them. "I figured she'd change her mind someday. She's going to carry that regret forever. And I wish..."

"She'd realized it sooner?"

"That I could spare her the pain. I lived it for the last half of my thirties, the deep ache for a family of my own. I still have a shot. Maybe someday it will happen for me... But Julia—"

"Will be having a hysterectomy in January."

I don't know why, but I hurt for my ex-wife. Hell, maybe my emotions are just raw after worrying all night. My anxiety is magnified by the fact I'm standing two feet from Isabella, but she's keeping me at a metaphorical arm's length, so I might as well be two oceans away. "I hate that for her."

"You mean that." My wife sounds surprised.

"Yeah." I shrug. "Did Julia wrong me? She did. Do I want to see her—or your dad—pay any more for what they've done? I don't give a shit about that now. I just want you."

Isabella's eyes well, and her jaw trembles. "Nathan..."

"Just listen. For two minutes. Please..."

She doesn't answer for an interminable moment. Then she lets out a shuddering breath. I swear she's going to refuse me, and my heart starts cracking apart and aching like a motherfucker.

“I had a whole speech prepared,” she chokes out.

“Of course you did. You’re smart, and you plan ahead. But I want to say a few things before you do anything final. Maybe what I tell you will impact how you feel.”

“There’s almost nothing you can say to change my mind, but I’ll hear you.”

With those words, the bottom falls out of my gut. Inside, I shake like a fucking leaf in a hurricane. Somehow, I hold myself together. “I’m sorry. If you don’t believe anything else I say, please know I truly mean that.”

“Duly noted.”

I blow out a breath, then let everything out. “Before I met you, all I wanted was revenge. I was unhappy. I was angry that I was unhappy. I blamed Julia and your father for stealing the future I saw for myself. So I schemed and plotted—something I’m good at. I studied you—on paper, anyway. I knew your age, your face, your alma mater, your friends. But I didn’t know *you*. You threw me a curveball I never saw coming. Your kindness, your passion, your spirit... I never thought I’d fall for you, much less fall head over heels. You made me see that what I really wanted was a second chance at love and family, and that I needed to let go of revenge and simply love you.”

“Nathan...” She sobs behind her hand. “Don’t—”

“Just let me finish. Everything I did was wrong. I seduced you. I threatened you. I coerced you. Then I married you against your will. I should have dated you, let you get to know me, then took you to bed and to the altar when you were ready and with me every step of the way. But nothing went as planned. You showed me your vulnerable side almost from the start, and it humanized you in a way I hadn’t counted on. As I got to know you...I realized I not only need you in my life, I need to be more like you. Warm. Thoughtful. Forgiving.

“By the time we got married, I suspected I was saying ‘I do’ not because it was part of my plan, but because I couldn’t imagine living another day without you. I tried to force a

family on you for the same reason. I'm truly sorry. I can't turn back time and change what happened, but I can promise you a few things. The evidence I captured of you breaking into my old place? It's yours. Keep it. Destroy it. Whatever you want. I won't have copies or backups, so I'll have nothing to hold over your head."

"Thank you."

"Second, I ask that you give me a chance to earn your love. My heart is yours. I mean that. I don't need revenge. I need you." I swallow hard. "I love you."

Isabella gives me a shaky nod, then sets her coffee aside. "Anything else?"

Am I changing her mind at all? Her face gives zero clues. I want to gift her with a thousand ardent, heartfelt words and arrange them into the most beautiful sonnet or love song—whichever would melt the walls around her heart—and give them to her, wrapped in a pretty pink bow. But I'm not good at any of that. I was built for combat. I understand war. I'm no poet, and I can't sing for shit. I'd probably just scare her away. Instead, I hope that my honesty and the fact I'm a fucking mess without her will sway her to give me another chance.

If she does, I won't waste a second, and I'll take nothing for granted.

If she doesn't...I have no one to blame but myself.

"Unless you have questions, no. What happens next is purely up to you."

She nods. "I appreciate that. I know giving up control is hard for you."

"As fuck."

She smiles faintly before her expression slowly sobers. "I spent all night thinking. Of where I've come from, where I'm going, and where I want to be. I thought hard about my conversation with my dad. I'm at a fork in the road."

Her words squeeze my heart. She could so easily choose the path without me... "Isabella, I—"

“No.” She holds up a hand. “You said what you need to. Now let me finish. I sat up with Jen’s cat in my lap—Dude trapped me in a recliner for hours—and I thought through all my potential futures. Then I asked what would truly make me happy. Finally, I boiled down what upset me so much about that picture you sent. And I realized something. All my life, I’ve tried to be enough for the men around me. I wasn’t enough for my dad, and if he and I are going to resume any kind of relationship, we’ll have to work through that. God knows I wasn’t enough for Eric, and I can never be with someone who will manipulate, lie, and disrespect me again.”

Shit. “Isabella... Baby girl—”

“Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. As hard as it is, I have to shut the fuck up and let her speak. After everything I’ve done, it’s the very least I owe her. “Absolutely. Go on.”

If she refuses me, I’ll find out what she needs and give it to her until she finally says yes again.

“Answer one question for me.”

“Anything.”

“Am I enough for you?”

“Yes. Yes! I love you, exactly as you are. When we’re together, I’m not only a happier man, I’m a better man. Before you, I wouldn’t have felt a shred of compassion for Julia and Doug’s infertility. I wouldn’t have given a shit about anything except making them suffer. You changed me. You’re my everything.”

She sniffles. “After the way our marriage started, I don’t know how to believe that I’ll be enough for you.”

“You are. You always will be.” But I’ve said that. She needs to hear more. “How about I make you this promise? Every day, I’ll do my best to prove how much you mean to me—for the rest of my life. I’ll never stop. Ever. Even when you *know* you’re not only enough, but my whole world.”

Slowly, she nods, tears falling. Fists clenched, I hold my breath, wondering what the hell she's thinking. What she's deciding. My heart thuds. My palms sweat. I want to touch her, demand answers, make her promise she'll give me another shot.

I can't.

"Last night, I realized that I've always held back, been nice, and failed to rock the boat because I believed I wasn't enough. I know better now. I need you to know it, too."

Would my opinion matter if she didn't see a future for us?
"Absolutely. One hundred percent."

"I won't tolerate any more BS. If something upsets me, I'm going to say so. I'm going to insist things change until I don't feel marginalized or shoved in a corner."

"You should. And you should expect the people in your life to listen and compromise."

"I do." She blows out a deep breath as new tears tremble on her lashes. "But I also realized that I can't see my future without you. You make me feel special and adored. Everything you crave is what I want, too—home, marriage, kids. That's what I've been missing. Being your wife, even if the circumstances weren't great, made me feel complete. I was upset when I found out about the picture because I took that to mean I wasn't special to you, that I'd fallen for you when I was nothing but the means to an end."

"No. Baby—"

"I knew not to expect more from my dad because he'd disillusioned me long ago. I wasn't surprised when Eric treated me that way because he'd shown his true colors almost from the start, and I didn't have the will or self-esteem to stop him. But I really thought you were different."

"I am. Give me another chance to prove it, Isabella." I squeeze her hands. "Give me a real chance to make you happy."

"All right."

My heart stops. “Y-yes? That’s it? No more pushback or fighting or...”

“None of that. I came here this morning, speech prepared, to tell you I intended to come home, be your wife, have your children, and live happily ever after because I love you.” Her tears begin flowing. “Believe me, I tried not to choose you. My mind told me to be smarter. But my heart decided for me. Because you showed me what being truly loved felt like—safe and accepted. I just needed to know that you valued me, too. I’ll give you my heart and my respect in return. If you want to share that life with me—”

“Yes. Fuck, yes. A million times, yes.” I sweep her off her feet and into my arms, then kiss her like she owns my heart, because she does. “I’d marry you again if I could.”

“You can...in a way.” From her coat pocket, she pulls her wedding ring, slides it into my palm, and holds out her hand. “Only speak vows to me this time if you mean it.”

Smiling so wide I think my face might crack, I take her hand and settle the diamond band at her finger. “I do. Always and forever. I love you.”

Once the ring winks up from her finger, she blinks at me, smiling through her tears. “I do, too. Always and forever. I love you.”

I pull her closer, finally feeling complete for the first time, maybe ever. “God, I swear last night felt like a thousand years.”

I press my mouth to hers, not caring if I ever come up for air again.

“It felt the same to me,” she whispers finally. “I don’t want to spend one more night without you. Take me to bed.”

My heart skids across my chest and grinds to a breathless halt. “Now?”

“Is there a better time? I’ll be fertile in a few days. I figure we should get in some good practice, be really ready for New Year’s Eve.”

My grin widens. “Other than you, there’s nothing I’d love more. I’ll spend my life showing you that.”

Isabella shucks coat and shirt, then drops them on the hardwoods. She toes out of her tennis shoes and slides down her leggings—no panties—until she’s deliciously naked, her tits round and her lush thighs hiding the secrets I need to know. “Well?”

“Hell, yeah, I’ll get naked with you.”

She watches as I remove every stitch and toss my clothes wherever. Then she approaches me, suddenly solemn. “Good. Because other than you, there’s nothing I love more, husband. Let’s start our forever together right now.”

“As long as you understand that, since I’m now more focused on you than revenge, I’ll be even more voracious for you.”

My beautiful wife smiles. “I was counting on that...”

EPILOGUE

Valentine's Day

The last seven weeks have been the happiest of my life. That's not an exaggeration. Having Isabella in my life every day and in my bed every night has been my best dream come true. As I promised her, not a day goes by that I don't both tell and show my wife that she's not only more than enough for me, she's everything.

And she's blossomed. My sweet Isabella has come out of her shell. She's not afraid to rock the boat—with anyone. Peers and upper management at Force Financial? She not only tells me when I have a bonehead idea, but she told Marcus Hunt, who was recently promoted to COO, that he was wrong about a projection. Nicely, of course, but firmly. She even suggested a new reporting tool to Mr. Force. And he ran with it. She has so many reasons to feel positive about her professional future, and I'm so damn proud of her.

She also stood up to the contractor building our new house. When he tried to tell her that she didn't really want a private balcony off our bedroom, she insisted I didn't need to get involved because she had the situation in hand. That was true...but I still told our contractor in no uncertain terms that what my wife wants, my wife gets. The building process has been smooth sailing since.

Despite the fact I spent hours with Isabella in the office earlier, I can't wait to see her again. Yeah, I'm that schmuck. I work with her all day, I fuck her all evening, and I cuddle her all night—and I still can't get enough of her.

Tonight, I'll take her to a swanky Valentine's Day dinner before we go home, where I'm determined to worship her until dawn—but only after we put one of my gifts to good use.

Stopping my Mercedes in the Force Financial parking lot, I grab the plastic bag with her "gift" and head inside. Since it's nearly six-thirty, most people have left. It's unfortunate that Savannah Force needed Isabella for a last-minute project today of all days.

I'm itching to get my wife alone.

After an interminable ride in the elevator, I emerge onto the executive floor to find the expansive office space empty and dark, except for the light spilling from Chad Force's half-closed door.

Josh Hennessey, one of Chad's right-hand guys, emerges and sighs with relief when he sees me. "Did you come to lend another pair of hands to this fucking emergency?"

"I came to pick up my wife for dinner...but if there's an emergency, I'll roll up my sleeves and—"

"Great. Follow me."

Damn, this isn't the Valentine's Day evening I hoped, but I fall in behind Josh as he darts across the darkened floor. "What are we doing?"

"Brewing a pot of coffee. It's going to be a long night." He flips on the light in the break room. "Believe me, Marcus and I are dealing with a very unhappy wife. Word of advice? Don't piss off a pregnant woman."

"Kate is usually a team player, but I get it. Valentine's Day and all."

He nods, then frowns at the bag in my hand. "What's that?"

Nothing I want to share with a coworker until my wife and I are ready. "Stuff I picked up at the drugstore for Isabella."

"Ah." He nods as he starts the coffee. "Find as many mugs as you can, then round up some cream and sugar, will you? Kate is ordering pizza for everyone and—"

“What’s the emergency? And why didn’t anyone call me?”

“I’ll let Chad fill you in. Everything erupted in Asia shortly after you left the office and...” He sighs. “It’s a shit show.”

Not what I wanted to hear. “Shit.”

“Would you stay and watch the coffee? I need to hit the head.”

“Sure. I’m just going to say hi to Isabella and—”

“Wait. They’re on a call. Negotiating. It’s tense.”

“Chad usually handles those issues.”

“He is, but it’s taking someone with a much sweeter disposition to get the job done.”

That’s definitely not Chad—or his wife, Savannah. She’s ruthlessness in stilettos. Same with Kate Hennessey-Hunt. Marcus is a bull in a china shop. That really only leaves Isabella to sugarcoat the negotiations, whatever they’re about. “Gotcha.”

“They’ll let us know when to come back.”

“So you’ve been relegated to Boy Friday and coffee fetcher, huh?” I grin.

“Fuck you.” He laughs before he dashes out of the break room.

Since it’s all hands on deck, I quickly gather and wash up a dozen coffee cups. Finally, Josh returns and lifts the steaming carafe, along with a few mugs, before gesturing me to gather the rest of the stuff. “Let’s go.”

“What does Chad need my help with?”

“I don’t know. The boss man and his bride run the show...”

And everyone knows it. Lucky for us, they do a great job. They’re both shrewd, honest, and generous. I know the Hennessey-Hunt family has benefited from working closely with the Forces. So have I. Since coming on board, Isabella

has been admitted into the inner circle, and she's thriving, too, professionally and personally.

"Hang on." Josh shoves me back as we approach Chad's door. "Let me see how quiet we have to be."

I hang back while he sticks his head inside. Then he turns back with a grin. This is an emergency, but he's smiling about it? I'm getting suspicious. My birthday was last week. Isabella and I celebrated, but...

"All clear. Looks like they're ready for us." Josh enters the room and sets the coffee on a table near Chad and Savannah.

As I fall in behind him, I stop. The office is covered in streamers and balloons. And why do I see bottles of champagne everywhere?

"Surprise!" everyone shouts.

"Happy birthday!" Isabella all but bounces up to me, full of excitement. "We got you, didn't we?"

Grousing, I set the coffee cups aside and send her a gruff smile. "Yeah, baby girl, you did." I drop my voice and whisper in her ear. "We agreed we weren't making a big deal out of my birthday. I'll punish you for this later."

Her grin widens. Yeah, she's not afraid of me at all. Minx. "I'll look forward to that. For now, everyone is here to celebrate you, except Steve and Laurel."

"It's been a cold as fuck winter. Maybe should have taken the Caribbean cruise with them."

"And miss this?" Isabella shakes her head. "Surprising you was priceless."

Chad shakes my hand and wraps an arm around his wife. They look so fucking happy, and good for them. I used to be jealous, but now...

I drag Isabella to my side and kiss her temple. "Thank you all for thinking of me."

"Oh, this isn't just my doing," she says.

Josh claps me on the back. "Gotcha."

“Bastard. You should have been an actor.”

“Go to Hollywood when I can stay here and yank your chain? Never.”

Marcus crosses the room with Kate. Despite being a big bastard, he moves almost silently and sticks out his hand. “Happy birthday, man. You twenty-nine again?”

I laugh. “The twelfth anniversary of twenty-nine, sure.”

“Josh and Marcus understand,” Kate swears. “They’ve been celebrating the anniversaries of their twenty-ninth birthdays, too.”

“You’ll be doing that soon, too,” Marcus points out.

Kate bats him away with a roll of her eyes, but she smiles when he brings her in for a kiss while Josh swats her ass playfully.

Suddenly, Doug and Julia appear in the doorway. Instinct makes me stiffen, but I have to give my old pal credit. He’s bent over backward to make amends with Isabella. They’ve had some hard conversations. After a lot of tears on both sides, they’ve been healing and rebuilding their father-daughter relationship. Accepting our marriage has taken Doug some time, but he’s come a long way.

Even Julia and I have had some brutally honest talks and realized we were better as friends. As spouses, we wanted different lives, and both of us kept hoping the other would bend, despite the fact we’re stubborn. Since we’ve cleared the air, things are better. Being around these two has gone from something I did my best to avoid to actually pleasant.

“You two came?” I hold out my hand to Doug, then brush a kiss to Julia’s cheek. “Thanks for giving up your Valentine’s Day.”

My ex-wife smiles. “Izzy called and invited us. I’m happy to celebrate you.”

“Besides, we have news,” Doug says. “Julia and I have hired a surrogate to carry a child for us. They took one of my

wife's eggs and my sperm and implanted it...and it took! We should be parents by Halloween.”

“Congratulations!” I tell them. I mean it sincerely. Yeah, I could remain bitter that Julia put off being a mother for a decade and lied to me about it, but I've realized that, despite the pain, this outcome is best for everyone.

Or it will be as soon as Isabella is pregnant.

Our New Year's Eve was an absolute sexfest. I did everything humanly possible to breed my wife. Even if it didn't work, that was still one of the hottest nights of my life, but I'm hopeful. Isabella hasn't had a period all year, hence the home pregnancy test I brought in the plastic bag. Which I left in the break room, damn it. I'll grab it shortly.

“Oh, Dad,” my wife croons. “I'm so happy for you two!”

“Thanks.” He hugs his daughter. “This time, I'm going to do fatherhood right.”

“We're both putting our child first,” Julia swears.

Honestly, I think they mean it. And good for them.

Food arrives, something far more gourmet than pizza. Everything is delicious, the champagne flows, and the gifts I receive are either thoughtful or hysterical. I have an odd, ragtag bunch of colleagues, exes, and friends, but since I have Isabella, too, I feel beyond happy. I'm only missing one thing.

“You're not drinking the champagne,” I murmur to her as we finish dinner. “Something you want to tell me?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “No.”

“Okay. I bought you a pregnancy test for Valentine's Day. Why don't you make me happy and go take it?”

“Not necessary.” Her coy expression splits into a giant grin. “I saw the doctor today.”

Hope ticks up. “And?”

Isabella ignores me and clinks her fork on her glass. “Attention, everyone. I need to say a few words about my husband.”

Everyone falls quiet, except Marcus, who is his usual asshole self. “Speech!”

“Spill the tea!” Savannah seconds.

Uh-oh. “Is this the part where you all roast me?”

The group laughs, and Isabella lifts a glass of water. “Happy birthday to the most amazing man. He changed my life, helped me understand love, and makes me feel like the most important person in his world every day. He believes that I can do anything, picks me up when I falter, and celebrates my every win. There’s no better man to share my life with. Despite the less than normal start to our marriage”—Doug groans, and everyone laughs again—“there’s no man I would rather be with. I choose you every day, and I love you with all my heart. Not to mention my womb. Congratulations! I’m pregnant. We’re having a September baby.”

The gathering erupts in cheers. The sound is a roaring in my head, only eclipsed by the chugging of my heart.

I grab my wife and delve into her dancing blue eyes. “You mean it? You’re sure?”

She nods, biting her lip. “I’m nine weeks pregnant. Doctor confirmed. Are you happy?”

“Oh, baby girl. Happy doesn’t begin to cover how I feel. I’m ecstatic, humbled, and so fucking in love with you. You’re going to be an amazing mom.”

“And you’re going to be the best dad ever. I’m sure of it.”

I press a kiss to her lips and lose myself, knowing that I’m exactly where I should be and I’m with the woman who has finally made me feel totally complete.

Once I take her in hand, the bratty pop princess will fall to her knees...

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I'm Kayla.

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EXCERPT

One of his warm hands leaves my breast and skates down my waist, settling over my hip to bring me closer. I can smell a hint of toothpaste and coffee on his breath.

“Have you let any of those tossers you’ve dated kiss you, Kayla?”

I swallow. What will he do if I tell him the truth? “A few.”

He scowls as if my answer pains him. “Did you like it?”

I wanted to, but... “It was all right. No one has blown my panties off.”

I suspect Oliver could.

His eyes soften. “Kissing can be wonderful. Someday, when you find a man you care about, one who knows what he’s doing, you’ll love it.”

I have a man I very much care about standing right in front of me, and the thought of kissing Oliver makes my body throb in arousal. I sway closer, pressing my aching breasts against his chest. “What about you? I’ll bet you know what you’re doing.”

The second the words leave my mouth, my heart careens out of control.

“I shouldn’t kiss you, Kayla,” Oliver practically groans.

“Please,” I beg. “Just once.” When he stares at my lips, they tingle. Everything in my body flushes hot. Even my skin feels too tight. And the ache between my legs coils relentlessly. “You’ve already touched my breasts.”

“Are you bloody trying to kill me?” His voice sounds rough with need.

That excites me even more.

“Is one kiss asking so much?” I clasp his T-shirt in my fists and tilt my face under his.

He hesitates for a long moment, his eyes searching mine, nostrils flaring, jaw rigid.

“Kayla,” he growls. “Goddamn it...”

Just when I’m sure he’s going to walk away, Oliver grabs me by the nape, holding me immobile. His breathing turns hard and rough. I tremble. He’s wrestling with himself. My

heart revs. What is he thinking? Is there any chance he'll kiss me?

Suddenly, he jerks me against his body and seizes my lips.

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ABOUT SHAYLA BLACK

LET'S GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER!

With over 25 years in publishing, SHAYLA BLACK is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of nearly 100 novels. Known for her ability to craft rich characters and emotionally nuanced stories, she has won awards, sold millions of copies, and been published in a dozen languages. But it's her spicy, steamy romances that have readers breathless for more. After two decades with major New York publishers, she now enjoys the freedom of being independently published.

As an only child, Shayla occupied herself by daydreaming, much to the chagrin of her teachers. In college, she found her love for reading and started pursuing a publishing career. Though she graduated with a degree in Marketing/Advertising and embarked on a stint in corporate America, her heart was with her stories and characters, so she left her pantyhose and power suits behind.

Shayla currently lives in North Texas with her wonderfully supportive husband, her daughter, and two spoiled tabbies. In her "free" time, she enjoys reality TV, gaming, and listening to an eclectic blend of music.

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