



The **DEAL** *with the*
PLAYBOY

J. M. STONEBACK

The DEAL *with*
PLAYBOY *the*



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Trigger Warning:

This book contains abused of a parents(Not on scene),
attempted rape (Not by Jasper or Poppy).

This book is dedicated to my husband, thank you for being my backbone and supporting me and loving me no matter what.

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Chapter ONE

Poppy

The bartender sits my beverage on the wooden bar. Sighing, I place my lips on the rim of the crystal glass, taking slow sips of the cool Long Island Iced Tea as New York's nightly breeze tickles my bangs across my forehead.

When I scan the rooftop, the dim light casts a soft glow, creating a romantic aura, and the smell of exquisite food fills my nostrils. People dressed in elegant clothing and expensive jewelry litter the tables, and their chatter overshadows the classical music humming in the air.

Nervousness swallows me whole like a tidal wave as I tap my foot against the concrete floor.

Any minute now, my date, Mason, should be walking through the wooden doors. We matched on a sugar baby website, and I know it's not the best idea to meet men on the internet, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I've never been the type to meet men on dating sites, but I had no choice. He needs to play as my fake fiancé, so I can get into good graces with my

mother and in turn have access to my inheritance. Not any guy will do, he has to be the perfect match on paper and Mason is the perfect candidate.

Well educated. Check.

Net worth over a million dollars. Check.

Clean background. Check.

All he has to do is pass my interview and sign my contract and we'll get the ball rolling.

When I clutch my purse, I fish for my compact mirror, open it, then I stare at myself in the mirror.

My makeup is light and natural, with red lipstick painting my lips, making my light brown complexion pop. I try not to overdo it, and I don't want to look desperate either.

I tuck the mirror back into my purse and rest my elbow on the bar as my gaze drifts back to the entrance. My anxiety explodes in my chest and the tea is trying to make its way back up my throat.

The bartender, dressed in a crisp shirt and pants, smiles. "Do you need anything else, beautiful?"

My eyes drift back to the entrance and a guy with brown hair and soft eyes scans the bar, and he glances at me. He makes his way toward me.

Mason is cute.

He strolls right next to me, embraces a short woman near where I'm sitting, and my smile deflates before I glance at the bartender, plastering a fake smile across my face.

A knife so I can cut all the anxiety out of my chest.

"No, thank you."

He turns his attention to the next customer.

What if Mason is not who he says he is? What if he's crazy? I should have asked him to FaceTime me. Clearly, I didn't think this through. I FaceTime every guy before the official meeting, but he told me he couldn't do it for personal reasons.

My phone hums in my purse, so I grab it, then I swipe left, and a message from Mason pops up on the screen, and I read it.

Mason: Something came up, another time.

I tuck my cracked phone into my purse.

Disappointment sprouts in my chest like a weed.

This is the fifth date I've been stood up on, and he was my last hope. Time is ticking, and my bills are getting taller than the Empire State. My poor savings is getting smaller by the week. I have enough money to cover my next rent, but I don't know how I'm going to cover the rest of my bills.

When my mother blacklisted me, she cut off my credit cards and disowned me as her child; it left a gigantic hole in my chest. The more time I spent away from my family, the bigger the hole in my chest gets. She disowned me because I didn't want to marry her *precious* Link.

My mother is quite the parent.

Link was a piece of work. He treated me like shit, even cheated on me. My stepfather was banking on using Link's connection with a winery company so it could help him make millions of dollars.

I work at a shitty bar, with men who can't keep their grabby hands off me and proposition me to do dirty things to them for extra cash. If I didn't have a moral compass, I'd probably consider it. What am I going to do if this doesn't work out?

I need my mother's approval. I'm desperate for it. Being the outcast of my family is so lonely that sometimes, I cry. My mother hasn't ever gone this long without speaking to me. Six months is too long to be without your family. I wasted too much time on Mason, and I can't keep going on blind dates in hopes someone would actually stick to their word. Coming here was a waste of time, and I wasted my money on a twenty-dollar drink. Maybe my sister, Sophia, can ask her husband if he has suitable any friends, but I don't want to involve them in my bullshit. Plus, I never liked Tate, so I don't need to ask him for a favor. From what Sophia told me about him, he would want something in return. I'll match with someone else online and if I can't find someone, then I might have to go back to Link. The thought alone scares me. Getting sucked back into Link's orbit and being told I'll never find better than him doesn't sit right with me.

Sighing, I stand up, slap a crisp twenty-dollar bill on the wooden bar, then I down the rest of my drink because I am not going to waste it. That would be blasphemy.

As I approach the door, my heart nearly gives out at *who* walks through the archway.

Jasper Barrett.

Multibillionaire and CEO of Risqué lingerie.

The most beautiful man alive. Not my words, but *People* magazine's.

The guy who left his imprint on me when he fucked my brains out last year. We hooked up one time and I couldn't get him off my mind, no matter how hard I tried, so I took the coward's way out and went back to my ex. One of the biggest mistakes of my life.

The way he strolls to the bar, reeking of dominance, and the heads of both women and men turn in his direction as his powerful presence sucks in the air like a vacuum cleaner.

When his beautiful chocolate eyes meet mine, I suck in a breath as my pulse jumps through my skin like a jackrabbit. He makes a beeline for me, and my feet are glued to the floor. I should get away from him as soon as possible.

Once he stops in front of me, he tucks a strand of my chestnut brown hair behind my ear. Normally, I wear my corkscrew hair, but because of the humid weather, it was best for me to relax my hair.

He pushes his thick frames up the bridge of his nose; the man makes glasses look so fucking sexy.

Curiosity captures his pupils, and a smile stretches across his face as he flashes me his pearly whites.

Holy fuck, he has the prettiest teeth I have ever laid eyes on.

“Poppy.” My name on his tongue is smooth like warm honey.

I study his face as if it's hiding a secret. Freckles dust across his nose, and a few strands of silk hair hang across his forehead. His cheekbones are sharp as a blade, and his top lip is slightly bigger than the lower one. His tan tone is smooth as marble.

“Jasper,” I answer, keeping my tone light.

He assesses my designer cocktail dress which hugs my body, and his eyes continue to explore further. He darts out his pink tongue to lick his lips and for a split second, I remember the way his mouth worshipped my body, but I quickly wipe the memory from my brain.

He points to the bar. “I’m buying you something to eat and drink.”

I am in fact hungry, but I can eat ramen noodles and eggs at home. It might not fill me up, but at least it’ll be a nutritious meal. There was a time when I could eat anything I wanted at any time. Now, I have to plan meals and budget when I go to the grocery store. I don’t have enough money to pay for a proper meal, and I don’t want to come off as desperate for a hot meal.

I tuck my shoulders back and hold my head up high as if I’m the president of the United States. “I’m not hungry.”

He slides casually onto the barstool and yanks out the stool next to him. “Poppy, sit.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from blushing.

His words dominate me and like a dog, I perch next to him.

His body heat overpowers me, drawing me in like the ocean is drawn to the moon. He has a way of sucking me into his orbit, and I don’t know if it’s his demeanor or charming smile.

He beckons the bartender to us. “Tell him what you want.” His tone is like warm water dripping down my spine.

If I don’t order, he’ll order for me. He did so the last time we had dinner together. Plus, I don’t want to eat what I have at home. The last time I had a good meal was when I had dinner at Lake’s penthouse last week.

But I don’t want to be a charity case.

“How did you know I haven’t eaten anything?”

He keeps his eyes glued to mine, and something ignites in my belly.

“I watched you since you’ve been here, I was standing on the other side of the window.”

My cheeks warm at his words and if I didn't know him, I'd be creeped out by it.

“Who were you waiting for?” he asks.

Disappointment stabs at my chest, and I'm not going to tell him I was stood up. I don't want to look like a loser in front of him.

“No one, can't a girl grab a drink by herself?”

He rolls his sleeves up to his elbows and I tear my eyes away from his tanned arms. “Not when she's sitting by herself.”

My stomach makes an angry growl, and Jasper shoots me a disappointed look.

The same bartender from earlier stares at me, waiting for me to order, so I swallow thickly and I say, “I want raw oysters and a glass of water, please.”

Jasper rattles off his order, then the bartender leaves.

I usually avoid him at all costs because the last time I actually spent time with him, we had a one-night stand. He fucked me so good and I was on cloud nine for days. I still feel the essence of him inside of me. For someone who moves with grace and elegance, he fucks so raw and primal, like it's a need he can't live without.

He studies my face like a map, taking in every feature, and his eyes zero in on my lips before making their way to my hazel orbs. “You need to be well nourished for tonight.”

The bartender sets my water in front of me, and I sip lazily from the straw, cocking my eyebrow.

“What happens tonight?”

The corner of his mouth turns up, and the waiter sets his drink on the table. “We're fucking.”

For several seconds, his words steal all the air from my lungs. Every ounce of me screaming no, but it's been so long since I've been held by a man, and right now, I want to forget the empty hole inside my chest. Plus, Jasper is a phenomenal lover. He knows his way around a vagina and is the best lover I've ever had.

I shouldn't even entertain the idea of us sleeping together, but I feel like this evening will be wasted. I'm torn and I don't want to complicate my life more than I already have. Jasper is known to be a playboy and he was caught in a scandal with a supermodel not too long ago. He's always splattered across the blogs with a new woman on his arms. Which should turn me off, but it doesn't. Sex is liberal. Who cares he's been with half of New York City—plus, we've already fucked.

He continues to sip his bourbon as the bartender places my food in front of me.

“I thought you only slept with women one time.”

At least that's what I read in gossip columns. I grab the shell, use a silver fork to dig the oyster out, place it on my tongue, and swallow. The minute the food hits my stomach, it warms my belly.

He places his callous finger on my cheek, and my face flushes. “For you, I'll make an exception.”

At least this night won't end in vain.

My core tingles and arousal pools in my lower belly.

The entire time, Jasper doesn't take his eyes off me, as if he's trying to capture every moment, every expression, and my cheeks can't burn hotter.

Once I finish my last oyster, I slip off the barstool, and Jasper places his hand in mine, leading me to his Aston Martin.

He opens the passenger door, allowing me to slip inside, strapping the seat belt over my frame. Even the leather seat feels dominant and alluring like him.

When he rests his hand on my thigh, he gently strokes it, and his touch alone heats my skin.

I need to draw the line between us, tell him we can't do this again. He can't be a distraction from me finding a fake fiancé. Jasper isn't the type to settle down, so me asking him to pretend to be my fake fiancé isn't up for discussion.

“This will be our last hookup, Jasper.”

He smiles, drumming his finger on the steering wheel, but doesn't respond.

I scrunch my nose and take his silence as if he doesn't agree. "I'm serious. We run in the same circles. Your best friend is married to mine. We can't complicate things between us."

He raises an arrogant brow and smirks. "Me sticking my dick inside you complicates things?"

I shake my head, then sigh. "Yes. No... I don't know. Well... We said we weren't going to sleep with each other again."

A frown mars his forehead as he taps the blinker and switches to the right lane. "No, you said *you* wouldn't sleep with me again because you were going back to your ex. I tried to convince you not to leave my bed to go back to that trash." His words are more bitter than a lemon.

Why would he be so upset about me going back to my ex? It's not like we would have a romantic relationship. I'm too damaged by my ex to even consider another relationship. Link tore my heart out and stomped on it, and I'm not going to risk someone else doing it to me again. The pain in my chest will probably never go away, and I'm not going to set myself up trying to win someone's approval. Link wanted me to prove to him how much I loved him, and it was exhausting. No matter what I did it wasn't good enough.

"Why do you care if I went back to Link?"

He strokes the back of his neck and doesn't answer for several seconds. "Because you deserve better."

I don't believe his words for one second. The only reason why I left Link was because I didn't want to be stuck in a marriage with someone who was suffocating, and I didn't want to be abused anymore. I got tired of walking on eggshells with Link. Every relationship is about seeking approval from your partner, and I don't want it again.

He pulls up to the underground garage, parks, and kills the engine before facing me.

"I don't do relationships, Jasper."

"I never asked you for one." His hand glides up my thigh to my panties, pulling the material to the side. After he slips his finger inside me, I feel every inch, and my core clenches around him. I want dick. I moan loudly as his teeth sink into his bottom

lip and he removes the digit. Then he places his finger in his mouth, tasting my wetness. My libido goes into overdrive and more moisture pools into my panties. My cheeks flame, and my clit swells with the need for release. “Let’s make a deal, I’ll fuck you on a regular basis with no strings attached.”

He sounds businesslike, like this is a business deal.

Does he treat women like a business deal? It wouldn’t surprise me. Atlas told me he’s a workaholic.

The deal does sound inciting, but I don’t need the distraction. I need someone who’s willing to play my fake fiancé, not be a fuck buddy.

After I unbuckle my seat belt, I place my hand on the side of his face, stroking his cheek. “This will be the last time you get me, Jasper.”

I press my lips to his and he slips his tongue into my mouth, making me whimper. Jasper Barrett kisses so good, and electricity radiates through my body, knocking the wind out of me. He deepens the kiss, my heart flutters in my chest and my head swims.

He pulls away, whispering in my ear, “One day, I’m going to wear you down.”

I grin. “Not today.”



I’ve been in lavish penthouses and lived in lavish places, but not one of them holds a candle to Jasper’s. His living room is an open space and overlooks the city, the Empire State Building glowing in the dark sky and lighting up in various colors. I tear my gaze from the view and look at the electric fireplace molded into the dark walls, to the marble floors that are black as midnight, to the matching dark love seat. His home is warm and inviting. I didn’t expect it to look sophisticated and elegant but like a true bachelor’s home with junk everywhere.

“Your place is amazing.” I glance at the high ceiling which is made of glass.

The last time we fucked, he took me to a luxury hotel.

“Why did you bring me here instead of a hotel?”

With soft lips pressed against my neck, I shiver, swallowing thickly.

Every time I'm about to have sex with someone, I feel weird, because I don't know if it's going to suck ass. Hopefully, he'll be as good as the last time we fucked.

Slowly, I hear him unzipping my dress and before I know it, it falls to the floor, and pools around my feet.

He spins me around, then his pupils travel down to my cotton bra and panties. I wasn't planning to sleep with anyone tonight, otherwise I would have worn something sexy.

He leans down, unhooks my bra, and my breasts hang freely.

My breasts are small like apples, and a birthmark is imprinted above my right nipple. Jasper eyes it, and a smile spreads across his face as he uses his thumb to gently press against my nipple. Arousal builds so much and my core aches with need.

"I missed your tight pussy," he whispers against my ear.

His words steal the breath from me. This man is a masterpiece. Like an addiction I can't shake. Which is why I avoid him. He draws me in like a moth to a flame. We have a connection that we don't dare speak about. When I see him at Lake and Atlas's place, I avoid him as much as possible, because Jasper brings out certain emotions in me which I don't want to admit out loud. He always made me feel seen, but I don't know if it's an act to get in my panties.

It doesn't matter anyway.

I unbutton his shirt and unzip his pants, yank out his long, fat dick, then I drop to my knees, hitting the cold, hard floor. I slide his soft mushroom head into my mouth and wrap my tongue around him.

Desire deepens in his pupils and pure lust overshadows his face. He's gorgeous as his abdominal muscles flex.

"Fuck, Poppy. I've never had anyone blow me like you." His tone is husky, his pupils dilated.

Goosebumps arise on my skin, and I don't take my eyes off his. I want to see the look on his face when he comes down my throat.

I suck him in my mouth until I can't any more, and I place my hand on the base of his shaft. He's so fucking huge, my fingers don't meet. I stroke my fingers up then down, and he thrusts his hand in my hair, throwing his head back as I suck hard. I love the way he wraps his hand around my hair and pushes slightly, the way my eyes water and my jaw throbs.

He's not gentle. Good. I don't want lovemaking and hearts and shit. I want him to treat me like the true slut I am.

Several seconds later, I feel his dick throbbing, emptying in my mouth. I swallow the salty cum before he lifts me up and carries me to his master bedroom. He sets me down on the bed, and I sink into the fluffy mattress. He pushes my legs apart, removes my panties, tossing them to the marble floor.

The cool breeze from the A/C hits my nipples and my arousal grows in the pit of my stomach, causing me to ache with need.

“Did you really think I was going to let you go the moment I laid eyes on you tonight?” He smirks, yanks me to the edge of the bed, and spreads my legs apart, eyeing my core as if it's his favorite meal. Leaning down, he bites the inside of my thigh and I yelp.

He places his mouth on my clit. His tongue is soft, gently stroking me. I squeal, melting into the sheets. He's the only man who knows how to give head correctly. The men I've been with would be so sloppy, but not Jasper, he takes his time and puts in the effort.

My eyes roll to the back of my skull. My orgasm climbs up my spine and crashes through me like a water hose. I scream at the top of my lungs as my toes curl and my heart beats so hard in my chest.

He pushes his body up with his hands. My juices glisten on his lips as he crawls between my legs, and then we're face to face, nose to nose. When he crashes his mouth against mine, I lick my lips, and his. It's hot as fuck tasting my wetness.

Too hot.

He pins my wrists down above my head as he kisses my cheek. “My, my... you taste better than last time.” He nips the side of my neck like a vampire dying of blood. Nips turn to licks all the way down to my right nipple, then my left nipple.

Moaning, arousal skates against my lower belly, and I'm ready to fuck.

"I haven't had a great lay since I had you."

It makes two of us, but I don't tell him that.

He leaves a trail of kisses down my belly, then he peers up at me with a glint and a bit of rawness in his eyes. His pupils shine in the dimly lit room. I can't take any more of the teasing, my body needs another release.

"I want to leave my imprint on you so the next man who touches you won't ever measure up to me."

He licks my clit again and this time, I'm out of breath. I'm so ready for him to stick his dick in me, but he's taking his sweet time. Slowly, dragging it out, and I don't like it one bit.

He removes his tongue, and several seconds later, he slides his fingers inside my core, and I tighten around him. When he places his thumb on my clit, he strokes slowly. I moan louder this time, screaming his name, grabbing a fistful of hair as another orgasm shatters me.

I. Can't. Take. It. Anymore.

He removes his pants and boxers, grabs a condom from the nightstand, and tears the packet with his teeth.

I sit up on my knees, snatch the rubber from him, and a hint of fear shines in his eyes. He stares at the rubber with cautiousness, stepping back.

What's up with that?

Maybe he had women try to trap him with a baby? I can believe it. He is wealthy and women would use him for his money, but I am not one of them. I couldn't care less what's in his bank account. I already learned from my ex that men with money treat you like the scum of the earth.

"I don't fuck without a condom, Poppy." His tone is guarded.

Weird, he'll eat me out without a condom, but won't fuck me without one. But I don't mind. I would rather him use a condom too—one can't be too careful. Even though it's been my dream to have children, I'm not ready for them. Us fucking without a condom hasn't crossed my mind.

“Relax, I’m going to roll the condom on your dick.”

His shoulders drop and relief washes over his features.

Slowly, I roll it on his hard, veiny shaft. “Lie down. I want to ride you.”

He does what I say, and I glide down on him, adjusting myself on his dick. He hits my walls and I breathe in and out, trying to keep my composure. His eyes dance with pure pleasure, glinting as if he’s about to devour his favorite meal. I’ve never ridden a man before, and I want to try something that’s not so vanilla. I mean, this is vanilla, but it’s not like missionary. I told myself I wanted to be more adventurous in the bedroom. Now, I regret my decision, because I’m going to look like an ass in front of Jasper.

He grabs my ass and bounces me up and down. So much for me riding him, but I’m kind of relieved he takes charge, so I dig my nails into his pecs, scratching as hard as I can as he fucks me hard. His skin turns a shade of deep red from exertion.

“You’re marking me as your territory?” His words are laced with amusement. “I’m flattered.”

I shake my head. “Shut up and fuck me.”

I feel my core squeeze around him as he hits my G-spot. He sits up and kisses my breast as he fucks me like he needs me.

“Stay the night with me.” His tone is husky, alluring.

I’m getting so caught up in the pleasure that my mind almost misses what he said.

“Why?”

He rolls me onto my back and lifts my legs onto his shoulders, then his thumb reaches for my clit.

“I love the look on your face, it makes me want to come on your face.”

“You’re so crass.”

He slams into me hard, and the headboard knocks against the dark wall. I moan loudly, begging for him to fuck me harder.

He continues to work my clit, and an orgasm shoots through me. My toes curl, and my heart beats fast and hard.

“So that’s a yes on spending the night?” he murmurs.

I barely nod and he laughs humorlessly. “Oh, Angel, this is only the beginning. Do you think you can last all night?”

Sleepiness overtakes me and I barely nod again. I don’t think I can, but he doesn’t need to know.

“I must warn you, you’re going to be sorer than the last time.”

Last time I could barely walk, and every time I moved, I felt the sting of my core rubbing against my panties. I got myself off more times than I can count thinking about the hot sex we had.

He pulls out and slams back into me again, picking up his rhythm. He grips my neck softly, leaving kisses on my mouth, the smell of latex in the air. Several moments later, he gently bites my bottom lip as he throbs inside of me, filling the latex with his cum.

When he removes the condom, he ties it into a knot, tosses it in the waste basket, and then flips me onto my stomach with my ass in the air.

A girl can get used to it. I haven’t had this many orgasms in one night. He’s trying to put me in a coma.

I hear the tear of another condom, and peeking behind me, I watch him roll it on. He smacks my ass and the sting shoots to my core, making me even more aroused. He nudges the head of his dick to my core.

“For a man that’s thirty-something years old, you have a lot of stamina,” I tease.

“I’m thirty-three.”

“*Oh*. I’m twenty-five years old,” I state.

“I’m well aware of your age. Does it bother you? That I’m older?” His tone is like smooth whiskey down my throat.

I shake my head. “I’ve been wi—”

He slides deep inside of me, and it’s my cue to shut up.

He doesn’t stop fucking me until we’re both out of breath.



Chapter TWO

Poppy

When dawn chases the sky, I slip out of Jasper's bed then don my dress and shoes on. I look at Jasper before I do the walk of shame. He doesn't look powerful or dominant, and his features soften a bit, his mouth in a pout. His chocolate hair is a shade brighter in the sunlight. If things were different between us, I would cuddle with him, and maybe make breakfast, but I don't have any time to entertain a fantasy. Entertain the idea that we can be more than what we already are. Two people who get their rocks off then go in different directions. I won't see him again for a while.

When I close the door softly, I roam around until I find a spacious bathroom which I assume is for guests and do my business, twist the faucet—that's made out of real gold—and wash my hands before splashing cold water on my face. When I grab a cotton towel, I dry my face and toss it on the counter, then I tiptoe to the front entrance and slink out.

Once I make it to my apartment, I toss my keys into the fishbowl by the entryway and remove my shoes, setting them

next to the door. I need some sleep before my shift starts tonight at the bar, and I'm bone tired. When I glance up, my heart jumps in my chest as I find Link perched on my dingy couch. My hands shake as he stares at my dress and messy hair.

Anger clouds his pupils as he watches me like a hawk in the sky. I haven't spoken to him since I called off the wedding. How the hell did he know where I live?

"How did you get into my apartment?"

His gray eyes are dull, his face is pale, and his lips are red. At one point, I used to be in love with him, so attracted to him, but now I look at him with disgust. I have no feelings for him. It was stupid of me to think he would be my happily ever after.

"I convinced your landlord to give me your information."

He pushes himself up, and the couch squeaks across the worn, vinyl flooring. My heart matches his steps, and before I know it he's standing in front of me. He reeks of liquor and his clothes are wrinkled as if he has slept in them.

All of the pain he caused crashes into me. The memories of me catching him in bed with another woman and the time he told me how stupid I was because I didn't do something right in his eyes.

Hot tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let him see me cry.

I try to move past him, but he grabs my arms, his nails biting into my flesh.

Pure rage flashes in his eyes, and I shrink back. He never put his hands on me but in this moment I wouldn't put it past him. Link has always had a temper, and the way he's glaring at me, I hope he doesn't strike me. He balls up his fist and punches the wall beside my head and I scream at the top of my lungs.

I glare at him. "Get out, now."

He folds his arms across his chest, and he's so close I feel his body heat. "Where were you? You didn't come home last night!" He grits his teeth.

I try to sidestep him but he steps right in front of me, blocking my movement. If he tries anything, I'm going to knee him in the balls.

“Are you stalking me?” I keep my tone calm.

He shakes his head, then he strokes the pad of his thumb against my lips, and it takes everything I have not to bite him. Slowly, I peel his thumb from my mouth and that earns me a frown. “You need to come home and stop this foolishness, Poppy. I get it, I fucked up and I cheated, but everyone lies and cheats. Everyone has their demo—”

“Enough already.” I stab my finger into his hard chest, but he doesn’t budge. We’re the same height, but his demeanor is scaring the shit out of me. “I’m not going to stick by you while you sleep around on me. You sound like a broken record. Saying the same shit just to get me back with you so you can dog me,” I say calmly. His words might have worked the last time, and the time before that, but it isn’t going to work this time. I grab my phone from my purse. “You need to leave now, please, before I call the cops.”

The cops in New York City are shitty and don’t care about the people on this side of town. They probably won’t show up for at least forty minutes, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“After a while, little birdie, you will be running back to me. Your mother won’t accept you until you’re married to me. Do you really want to live your life without your family?” His shoulder brushes against mine as he makes his way to the door. “You will crawl back to me sooner or later, and when you do, I’m never going to let you go.” I hear the sound of the door click shut and I sigh loudly as my heart still beats a million miles a minute.

I remove my dress, hop in the shower, change into my pajamas, and crawl onto my hard mattress, yanking the blanket over my head and effectively blocking the sun.

Link is the main reason why I don’t want a relationship with anyone. I don’t want anyone telling me or making me feel as if I’m not important. All the things he used to say to me enter my mind like a whirlwind.

How I only deserve the way he treats me.

How I’m not going to be shit without him.

How much I will never amount to anything.

He wants to sleep with other women, and I'm supposed to be okay with it. I will never be okay with my partner having mistresses. I spent my entire time in our relationship looking for his approval and no matter what I did, it was never enough. He broke my heart in so many ways that I don't think I can recover.

And he's right—my mother does want me to marry him, because his family owns a winery and my stepfather needs this connection so his own winery business can flourish, but I'm not going to risk my well-being for them. I love my mother, but I'm not going to get trapped in a marriage where I'm always degraded. What Link failed to realize was my mother doesn't care about him, she wants to use him. He's replaceable. Once I find a fake fiancé, she will not give Link a second thought, and I'm looking forward to that day.



I am awoken by someone knocking on my door. I get up with a groan and hurry to open the front door. Lake stands in the arch of the doorway with a dress bag and a box of shoes under her arms. She must have to go to work and wants to change into her work clothes.

“You look like you haven't gotten much sleep,” Lake notes, pushing past me and placing her stuff onto the couch.

“I haven't,” I answer as I sit on the dingy chair I purchased from Goodwill.

She glances around my apartment. It's not much. Just one bedroom, with peeling paint on the walls and unfinished floors. At least she isn't judging me. If my mother and sister saw how I lived, they would be disgusted. I went from living a lavish lifestyle to one paycheck away from homelessness. But it doesn't matter, I'm proud of it; it's the first place I've owned without my parents' money. This trust fund baby is learning how to navigate the real world. Yay me!

Lake flips her dyed pink hair over her shoulders, and I get a glimpse of the faint scar across her nose which she received in a terrible car accident a few years ago. She's pretty, looking like an enchanted princess, and her cream blouse and pencil skirt are all designer. She looks like she's about to grab the world by the balls and conquer it. No doubt, she's going to work. She owns a

lingerie company, named Love Me, that her husband helped her start. She always had a dream of opening her own clothing line since we were in high school, and I wish I had her drive and ambition.

I've never been the type to have aspirations in life. The only thing I want is to start a family one day. Have a baby, get married and find a better, more stable job. My mother hates how I'm the go-with-the-flow type, that I'm not the type of person who has their life mapped out for the next five years. I feel as if life is not serious to be taken so hard.

I still don't have a fake fiancé, and as soon as Lake leaves, I'm going to hop on a dating app, find someone else, and if he flakes out then I won't have any choice but to go back to Link. If I have to, I'll state ground rules, and hopefully he sticks to them. I would ask him to be my fake fiancé, but he would want us to actually get married, and I don't want to be tied down to him. Not unless he gets help with his emotional abuse. That would be one of the ground rules. The thought of going back to Link repulses me and I try not to dwell on it too much. I'm glad I didn't mention I got fucked down by someone else, otherwise Link would have done something reckless. He never thinks or makes rational decisions. He's very impulsive.

Even though I'm not around Jasper, I still feel his dominant presence clinging to me like an old stench. I'm not going to tell Lake I slept with him, because I'll never hear the end of it. She'll be delighted with me finding someone better than my ex. But Jasper is a playboy to the world, and everyone knows he's not the type to settle down and play house.

Casting me a curious glance, she crosses her legs and flattens her shirt. "So, tell me how your date with Mason went last night."

I try to keep the disappointment from growing in my chest like a weed and push my shoulders back, trying to make her see I'm not upset.

"I was stood up last night." My tone is sharp like a knife.

Her eyes widen, then she rests her hands on her lap. "Meeting men online is dangerous, Poppy. I'm glad he didn't show up, he might have been a creep, and I worry about you."

She is absolutely right, so I don't argue with her. But at the end of the day, it's my life and I make my own choices. I've been safe thus far when I met them from dating sites. I meet them in public places, I make sure we ride separately in different vehicles, and I never go back to their place. "I'm safe, Lake."

She searches my face as if she's looking for the right answer in my expression, and her shoulders sag as she rests her hands over mine, squeezing tight. Concern etches her pupils. "I don't want you to end up on CNN, killed by someone." Her eyes gloss over with tears.

Pain hits me in the gut. The last thing I want to do is worry her.

Lake has always been the type of person to play by the rules and walk a tight line. She's been that way since we were kids. I met her when we were in high school and she was getting bullied for her thick frames, so I shoved her bully into the closet and locked her in it, and ever since we've been inseparable. She's more like a sister to me than a friend.

I twirl the end of my hair, then I let go and bite my nails. "It's fine. It's no big deal."

I'm trying so hard not to let her see that I'm worried but, deep down, I don't know what I'm going to do. And after Link showed up here wanting me back, I need to hurry up and find a suitor, then I can ask them to hire someone to protect me from him, maybe have a bodyguard.

Lake tilts her head to the side like the Leaning Tower of Pisa and folds her arms across her chest. "What really happened last night?"

Of course, she would assume that something happened last night. I forgot to call her after my date. She always insists that I call her so she won't worry. I don't want to tell her what happened this morning, because she will worry, and I will worry, then I'll spend my whole day in a sour mood, and I don't want to ruin her day with my fucked-up life.

My eyes bounce to the small flat-screen TV on the wall, then to the outside window that has bars on it.

"Nothing." My tone is light.

A smile paints her face, then she crosses her legs, gently yanking the skirt over her knee.

“You are biting your nails as if you’re nervous.”

I shake my head and lean back on the couch. The air in here is stuffy, thanks to the non-working A/C, and it’s hotter than Satan’s balls. Even hotter than outside. I miss having the luxury of air conditioning. I miss a working fridge. I miss having food in my fridge and I miss buying whatever I want to buy.

My life sucks badly.

She gives me puppy dog eyes. “Tell me, I thought we were best friends,” she pleads with a pout.

I’ll tell her about last night, but I’m not going to mention Jasper. She has a way of twisting my arm, getting the truth out of me and making me feel guilty for keeping things from her.

My cheeks burn and a blush creeps up the back of my neck. “I had a one-night stand.” I try to fight back a grin.

Her eyes beam with excitement. Lake lives through me; she doesn’t believe in having sex with no strings attached, so my stories are so juicy for her. She tried it with her husband before they got married and ended up falling in love with him. I wish I could experience that love, but that type of love doesn’t exist for everyone.

Her eyes light up like the city lights. “Oh. Was it good?”

I nod and sink my teeth into my lip. “It was good—great, actually.”

Better than most, but I don’t tell her that.

She glances at the floor then back at me, smiling. “Did you ask him to be your fake fiancé?”

The thought of having Jasper playing my fake fiancé is weird. The whole world knows him, and yes, he can open doors for me, but he wouldn’t agree to it. It’s mentioned in an article that he said marriage isn’t for him.

I scrunch up my nose. “That would be weird. ‘Hey, thanks for the free food and ass but can you do me another favor and pretend to be my fake fiancé?’” I shake my head. “He’s not the

type to pretend to settle down. He's a commitment-phobe. My favorite to fuck."

She sighs in relief. "I have something for you." She hands a cream envelope to me, and I remove the card and read it.

Poppy Giles,

You have been invited to the American Billionaire Club masquerade ball.

Make sure you bring this invitation with you and photo ID.

Wear a decorated mask. We encourage you to participate in our auction to get a bid on raising money for the homeless. If you're not already aware, homelessness is extremely high in New York City.

The rules of the auction are:

Wear your best dress or suit.

Whoever bids on you, do your best to go on a date with him or her. If you don't want to go on a date and you feel uncomfortable, please let one of the managers know and we will support you.

No refunds if you decide to bet on someone. There is no guarantee that the person you chose wants to date you.

Signed,

CEO Ravi Williams.

I crinkle my nose. "Why are you giving me this?"

"So you can meet your suitor. I'm sure you will find someone there. You can get a billionaire if you participate in the auction."

I've heard about the American Billionaire Club, only the elite join it, men who have influence and power and connections with the most powerful men. The four gentlemen who run this exclusive club know everyone. Powerful politicians, bank owners—anyone who has status and power are only allowed. There is a rumor that four friends started it five years ago. People are willing to give up their firstborns to be a member of the club. My stepfather is dying to be a part of it, but they have to personally invite you.

If I meet a billionaire from there and we pretend to be engaged, my mother would quickly forgive me and allow me back into her arms. I picture it in my mind, the smile on her face, her welcoming me into open arms.

I frown as realization hits me. “Don’t they have rooms where they have sex?”

Lake’s cheeks turn the color of a pink rose, and she nods, smiling. “Yes.”

“Oh my God, you and Atlas had sex in one of the rooms, didn’t you?” I poke her arm.

Lake is very private about her sex life with Atlas, and that makes me even more intrigued.

Her nose and forehead turn a shade darker. “Atlas plays golf with the owner who gave him an invite to the club to see if he wanted to be a member. It was so much fun.”

I nudge her arm. “You kinky bitch.” I pull her into a long hug, and I kiss the side of her cheek. “Thank you.”

She unzips the bag next to her and gently yanks out a blood red gown with diamonds molded on the corset and a mask with peacock feathers in different shades of red. I trace my fingers along the soft feathers and hold it to my face, then I set them on my lap. She opens the box, and the open-toe heels inside match the dress.

“I designed the dress myself, and I picked out the shoes.”

Happiness bubbles in my chest. She’s like my own personal fairy godmother handing my dreams to me. I couldn’t thank her enough.

Tears sting my eyes, and the tension leaves my body. It feels as if a burden has been lifted off my shoulders. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“It’s not a problem; you were there for me when I had my car accident, the only friend who didn’t leave my side.” She nods. The car accident left her so broken, and her ex-fiancé left her because she had the scar on her face. I helped her a lot when she got out of the hospital. I made her food, helped her shower, cleaned her home. She fell into a deep depression. I love Lake with all my heart, and I would do anything to make sure she’s

okay and happy. “Let me know how the date goes,” she says excitedly.

“Will do,” I reply.

“I have to go, I’m going to be late for work. You know Atlas is a stickler for tardiness. I love you, girl.”

“I love you, too.”

She leaves and the door closes with a click behind her.

I glance at the dress and heels again. Hopefully, I’ll find a suitable guy. Hopefully, he won’t be an asshole, or too demanding, and I won’t have to give up a lot. What if he wants sexual favors? Yeah, I’m not pimping myself out, but I don’t have to look at the first guy who offers me a deal. I can choose from a few men, actually. And if I don’t find anyone? I’m not going to allow myself to be negative. I have a once-in-a-lifetime chance and I’m going to take it.

I get up from my couch and waltz to my small kitchen that barely fits two people. When I open the fridge door, I grab a bottle of water and the jar of peanut butter and sit back on the couch before turning on my TV. My eyes stay glued to the trashy reality TV show until the sun sinks behind the skyscrapers and the city lights brighten the dark sky.

My mother used to monitor what I watched when I was in high school, and this would be one of the things she banished me from watching. *Proper girls don’t watch trashy TV shows*. Which is why I sneaked and watched them when I knew she wasn’t around. Can’t keep a girl from her fake drama. Take that, Mom, you can’t fully control my life.

After the show is over, I flip through Netflix and settle for a show where the girl speaks back to her mother. I wonder, am I ever going to have a child in the future? Am I going to ever be a mother? I might not be career-oriented, but I do know that I want kids some day and to start my own family, which is why I was so adamant about marrying Link. I thought if he gave me what I wanted, and I gave him what he wanted, then that would solve all our problems. But I couldn’t take the emotional abuse he threw at me. There is no way I’m having a child, let alone raising one, in a dysfunctional environment. So, my dreams will be put on the

back burner until I can find someone to love me the way I deserve to be loved.

Unfortunately, that's not going to happen anytime soon, and I'm okay with that. I want to focus on getting in good graces with my mother.



Chapter THREE

Jasper

I sit across from my father, Tommy, in the living room of my childhood home. I hate everything about this place: the open windows, the expensive furniture, the way this place feels cozy to a guest, but living here was like living on Elm Street. A nightmare you want to wake up from. This place never felt like my home, it felt like a mansion full of stuff. If the eggshell walls could talk, it would speak about the dark secrets and abuse of this place. Every minute I spend within these walls is a reminder that I never belonged here.

My father's gray eyes narrow at me, and his face turns the color of tomatoes. He crosses his legs, wrinkling his beige dress pants, and glares at me while grinding his teeth. I fucking hate him with every fiber in my body. His face is full of wrinkles, and his salt-and-pepper brown hair is slicked back. His beige suit is squeezing the life out of him.

He sits across from me on the chestnut brown couch.

We're here to settle who inherits my uncle James's business. His lawyer, Eric, leans over and whispers in his ear, and my father shakes his head. My uncle passed away the day I saw Poppy at the bar three days ago. He had terminal brain cancer. Uncle James treated me like I was *his* child. My father wasn't the one who played catch with me, nor was he the one who taught me how to drive. He was too busy chasing my stepmother, trying to remove me from his family. He paints a picture to the media that we're the perfect family, that he cares about me and is the best father figure in the world. The media adores and worships him.

When I graduated from Yale and received the rep that I was a playboy and an alcoholic, he went to social media informing them that he was going to help me get in rehab, that he was concerned for my safety. Yet I didn't receive a single phone call from him during my stay, and him showing up to pick me up was nothing more than a publicity stunt organized by his PR team.

Fake ass.

I hate him with a passion.

If he were on fire, I wouldn't piss on him to put the flames out.

"It's time," Eric murmurs, his face wiped clean of emotion. He's been the family's lawyer since I can remember, but I never hired him for anything because he's on my father's payroll and I don't trust him. Eric twists the ends of his bushy mustache. His pot belly hangs over his belt and the white crisp shirt he wears looks as if it's going to burst sometime soon. And he reeks of body odor. I also suspect he doesn't wash his ass. I don't see how my father can stand the smell of him.

He reads the will slowly and steadily. Apparently, my father's younger sisters will receive his vacation homes, mansion, and his cars and whatever stock he has left. I don't care, I want to know who gets his business. I can quit Risqué lingerie as I've never been into fashion. The only reason why I worked there was because Atlas needed the help. I'm good at numbers, which is why I was the CFO, but now Atlas has left to start a new company with Lake.

"Jasper, you get Wolfgang Enterprise Bank," Eric announces, then he glances at my father.

Just as I expected. I smirk and gloat, taking in my victory and the sour look on Tommy's face. He looks like he wants to rip me in half.

My uncle's business is worth close to thirty billion dollars, which will make me one of the wealthiest men on the planet.

"I knew my brother always made poor choices, but this one takes the cake." His words are filled with venom as he rolls his eyes and taps his foot on the ivory marble floor.

I glare at him. He really thinks I care how he feels about me?

Fuck him and the horse he rode in on.

"Watch what you say about him. Unlike you, he treated me like I was his child."

I've been wanting to say those words to him for the longest time. I was hoping to get a reaction out of him, but he doesn't care. If I were dying, he wouldn't care. That's how much he doesn't like me.

The feeling is mutual.

I don't know why my father and uncle hated each other, but I don't care. I'm sure Uncle James had a good reason.

They were like night and day. My uncle was the happy-go-lucky type of guy, and never let shit faze him.

A lump forms in the back of my throat and my heart hammers in my chest. If I had known the last time I saw him would be the last time, I would have said goodbye to him. He truly was a great man. I wish I'd had more time with him.

Eric clears his throat and says, "It says here you have to be married for at least one year to get the business."

Uncle James didn't have any children, nor did he ever marry—so he doesn't have any heirs.

I glance at my lawyer, Phillip, and he nods. I snatch the paperwork from my lawyer and my eyes scan the paper, and sure enough, it's right here in the clause.

My smile deflates. *Marriage*. My uncle knew I wasn't the type to settle down. So why would he put that in the will? The thought of being tied down repulses me, especially when there

are so many women that will give me what I want, when I want it. Relationships are complicated, nothing more than a business transaction. They always come with strings attached.

I glance at my father, and he smiles like the Chester Cat. He thinks he's won, but he hasn't. I deserve my uncle's business. I invested a lot of money into it, and I want to reap the benefits of what I am owed. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let a piece of paper stand in the way of what I want.

Who will agree to something like this? For someone to be my wife. So many women, but most of them are going to want more from me. They will want a family and to have my last name to open doors for them. Except for Poppy. She's the only woman I know who won't put up with my shit, who only uses me for sex. She doesn't expect diamond rings, nor does she want to use my name for clout. She didn't even stick around for breakfast. Didn't start planning our future as a couple. She's the perfect woman for this deal. And we'll be married for only a year. She can go her way and I can go mine and I'll make sure she gets compensated financially while she's married to me and offer her a job since she has a shitty one at the moment. I've been checking on her from time to time. But for now, I'm going to make it seem like I am already ready to be engaged to someone so Tommy won't think he has a chance of getting the business.

"As a matter of fact, I was planning to propose to my girlfriend soon," I lie straight through my teeth, pushing the thick frames of my glasses up my nose.

The maid, wearing an all-blue outfit, sits drinks on the glass table and my father shoos her away as if she's a fly. I pick up the glass of whiskey, watching him over the rim before I stick my finger into the liquor then in my mouth. Tommy brought out the good stuff. Watching him frown makes me want to leap for joy. I keep my composure, remaining cool, calm, and collected.

He grits his teeth and balls up his fist, digging his nails into his palms. "To whom?" he asks in disbelief.

"Poppy Giles. I've been seeing her since last year. We kept our relationship under wraps because she doesn't like publicity." The lies roll smoothly off my tongue.

He sits forward, resting his balled fist on the edge of his knee, tapping his Italian loafers on the marble floors.

“Bullshit,” he says. “You don’t deserve that business.”

My *father* makes sure that I don’t forget that he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me, and the only reason why he tolerated me was because of my mother.

When my mother was alive, he struggled to accept me, but when she died, he couldn’t wait to ship me off to boarding school. I never understood the hate he had for me. I would ask my mother why he hated me and she would only tell me that he loves me, but that he doesn’t know how to love properly, which turned out to be a load of horseshit, because he treats my half-siblings like they walk on water.

He’s a shitty man, but he always paid for my education and made sure I had everything I wanted and needed, even though he saw me as a burden.

“I’m getting the business. End of story.”

I get up from the coach, hover over him, and pluck one of his cigars from his shirt pocket and light it. Then I blow smoke in his face. Tommy stands, yanks me by the shirt, gritting his teeth.

I laugh like a hyena.

There is no way this man can take me on. I’ll have him black and blue without breaking a sweat. I flicker ash on his thousand-dollar suit, plastering on a fake smile.

“Gentlemen,” Eric barks, and Phillip stands up, squeezing between us.

My father lets me go but hate fills to the rims of his irises.

“If I find out that you married to get my brother’s business, I’ll take you to court.” He wipes the ash from his suit.

“I would love to see you try, old man.”

Once I’m done smoking the cigar, I waltz to the fireplace and stab the cigar on the mantelpiece before tossing it to the floor. I beeline for the exit. Once I make it to the front French doors, relief washes over me as my shoulders sag.

Going against my father has always felt like being in a boxing ring. He will not rest until he has my uncle's business, so I need to be on my toes. I need to make sure all my ducks are in a row and not have a single slipup.

I have got to find Lake and ask her about Poppy. The thought of her makes my dick hard. She's the only woman I think about from time to time, the only woman I don't mind the idea of fucking on a regular basis. I have a rule that I sleep with women only one time due to them getting clingy in the past—no repeats. Yet when I first laid eyes on her at the restaurant last year, I thought she was an angel fallen from heaven. But she made it known she wasn't interested in me. That only made my dick harder. When she called me out of the blue and asked for a one-night stand, I hopped at the opportunity. Once we had sex, she ran back to her ex-fiancé. I was pissed. Not because I had feelings for her, but because she didn't deserve the way he treated her. No one deserves to be treated like shit. I didn't want her to go back because I wanted to keep fucking her. It's selfish, but I don't care.

I only care about my own interests.

“Why didn't you introduce me to your girlfriend yet?”

I turn to look at my sister, Lacey.

Her round glasses sit on the bridge of her nose and she's wearing a tight plaid skirt with a very revealing cropped shirt. She's petite, with her mother's blue eyes and Tommy's dark brown hair. Yet she doesn't look like him, the spitting image of her mother.

Sometimes, I wondered where my life would be if my mother had left Tommy.

Would my lifestyle have changed?

Would she have remarried?

Would she have died so early in life?

She was only thirty-three years of age when she died.

“I've been busy,” I shoot back and keep walking.

I don't have a desire to talk right now, and after the meeting earlier, I want to get out of here as soon as possible.

Lacey always clings to me like white on rice and I never understood it. Our brother Jace goes out of his way to avoid me and we never say more than a few words to each other. Lacey never got along with Jace, says he's an asshole to her.

We stroll outside, and the heat beats the hell out of me, so I use my hand as a shield for my eyes. The sun peeks through the tall, leafy trees.

Her eyes shine like the stars and her smile is brighter than the sun, revealing her straight white teeth. "Can I be your groomsman?"

Of course, she heard everything, always one to eavesdrop on conversations. Ever since she was a little girl.

Here comes the million questions.

I slide my hands in my pockets. "You can be the flower girl." She slides into my Aston Martin, not bothering to ask me if I have plans. Just barges in. It's cute and annoying at the same time. I get into the driver's seat.

"I'm seventeen, not twelve. I'm too old to be the flower girl, and I don't know your girlfriend to ask her to be a bridesmaid. You have any smokes?" She grins, kicking her feet up on my dashboard.

I tap the start button and the engine roars to life. "I told you about that. Smoking is not good for you." She frowns and shakes her head so hard, I think it's going to roll off her shoulders.

"Neither is lying, but we both do it." She shakes her head. "You don't even want to get married. But I understand why you're doing it. Uncle James's business is going to make you even more super rich." Her eyes gloss over with tears. "I don't get why Dad treats you like shit, but if my words mean anything to you, I like you, and you're cool. And I sometimes wish that Dad treated you a lot better."

Her words hit my chest, and I don't know what to say. To have someone from my family be kind to me means a lot. It's nice to hear that someone cares about *me* for a change, and not about what I can do for them.

She may be a brat, but she has a heart, and she isn't mean or ever acts like her parents. Maybe having a good heart is

something you are born with.

I don't know how to respond to her kind words, so I nod.

"Take me to the convenience store."

We ride in silence until I reach the nearest gas station. She asks me if I need anything, and I shake my head. Fifteen minutes later, she opens the car door, hops in, then slams it shut. She tosses her bag into the back seat, grabs a cigarette from the packet, puts it between her lips, and lights it up. A cloud of smoke fills the car, so I tap my window and watch her flick ashes out her side. The tip of the cigarette is orange, lightening up the car a bit.

I hate the smell of nicotine, and I rub the back of my neck. "Where to now?"

She glances back at me, twisting her body to fully face me. "To the skating ring. You haven't taken me in several months."

Guilt eats at me like a disease. "I've been busy these days, running a billion-dollar company."

"A business you don't even like," she shoots back.

"True," I reply.

I used to take her when I moved back to New York City after college.

Once we're inside, we sit at a round table and slip on our skates, all the while Lacey tells me about the drama with her friends, her boyfriend who's in a rock band, and how her mother doesn't approve of him.

I don't like her mother, but I agree with her. He's probably a bad boy who's strung out on drugs. They have a bad rep, but I'm going to hold off on the judgment until I meet him. *If* I meet him. I have a feeling she's not going to bring him around me. Eventually, we'll meet and when we do, I'm going to drill him with questions. I need to make sure that he's going to be good to my little sister.

She rests her elbows on the table. "So, about this Poppy. I want to know everything about her. What's she like?"

My cheeks flush and I'm grinning like a schoolboy who received his first blow job. I don't blush over a woman. She's like

the sun shining on a clear day, easygoing. Feisty. The only woman who I can't seem to keep my mind off of. I don't tell her about the women I fuck. I'm sure she sees it in the tabloids and I'm not going to go into depth about Poppy either.

I shrug. "She's Poppy."

She rolls her eyes and leans back into the plastic chair. "That's it?"

The techno music blasts through the speakers, and the large screens show a music video with various flashing bright colors. The rink is dead this Tuesday. Good. The fewer people, the better.

My phone dings with a message, so I grab it from my pocket, seeing Lake's name pop up across the screen.

Lake: I don't know if you still like Poppy, but she needs your help. Can you be her fake fiancé?

I call Lake immediately and she answers on the third ring.

"Why does she need a fake fiancé?" I rush out, unable to keep the anxiety out of my tone but excited to learn about something Poppy needs—me.

I hear the sound of a door slamming in the background. "Her mother cut her off because she broke up with Link." She pauses. "She needs a fake fiancé so she can get back in good graces with her mom. She meets men on the internet to ask them. I'm worried about her, Jasper."

My blood boils at hearing this. Why the fuck would she put herself in danger just to get her mother's approval? The fact that a man could hurt her makes me want to go apeshit. Poppy is reckless.

"Hello?" Lake asks.

"I'm here." I try not to let my anger bleed into my voice.

"She has an invitation to the American Billionaire Club for their annual masquerade ball, but I'd feel better if you offer to be her fake fiancé. I'll even pay you to do it."

I'm part of the American Billionaire Club, but I don't usually go to the social gatherings. I use my membership to help me with business, and I have occasionally taken women to one of their sex

rooms. It's fun and exclusive. People can be as kinky as they like without any judgment.

Poppy needs me—and I need her. I need to negotiate with her, and hopefully, I can convince her to be my wife.

Lacey gives me a puzzled look, raising her eyebrows. A waitress wearing a white uniform sits a jug of beer and a cup in front of me. Lacey grabs the pitcher and pours beer in the cup, bringing it to her mouth before I snatch the cup from her and set it in front of me. She frowns, folding her arms across her chest.

“I'll do it. You don't have to pay me.”

Lake sighs through the phone. “Thank you.”

Little does she know that I'm doing it for my own benefit, not out of the kindness of my heart.

“You're a good man.”

I shake my head as if she can see me. I'm far from a good man, but I also don't correct her either. People don't know how selfish I am until it's too late. I hide my selfishness through my charming ways.

“No problem.”

“Let me know what happens. Atlas just walked through the door,” she says before the line goes dead.

“Who was that?” Lacey asks, standing up and holding on to the edge of the round table.

I stand up and walk beside her on the skates. We step onto the ice rink and skate slowly, as people pass us by. A short woman almost runs into me, but I move out of the way at the last second.

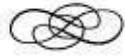
“Atlas's wife.”

“What'd she say?”

I sigh. “Poppy is in trouble, and she needs me to propose to her.”

Shock colors her rosy cheeks, and she giggles like a schoolgirl. “Oh, shit. You're really going to go through with the marriage.” She bumps my arm and twirls around me. “I'm going to be a groomsman.”

I nod. “You better start picking out your dress to be the flower girl.”



The next morning, I stand in the middle of Grandfather’s garden as he digs into the bushes. Honestly, I never understood his fascination with plants and trees, but he says it makes him feel grounded and connected to the universe, whatever the fuck that’s supposed to mean. I squat down as my dress pants ride up my legs. It’s too hot to be out here. The summers in New York City are brutal. I haven’t been out here for more than ten minutes and I’m sweating my balls off.

My grandfather is a free spirit and loves to laugh and joke. He made my childhood a lot more pleasant when I came home in the summers. I was happy when my father would ship me off to Grandfather’s townhome so I could help him with his garden.

His wrinkled face smiles as he pulls himself up off the ground and dusts the dirt off his shorts. The scar he received from his open-heart surgery peeks through his white t-shirt. He’s in better shape now and looks good for his age.

“Jasper,” he says. “What brings you to my home?” He’s a few inches shorter than me, and his thin white hair shines in the bright sun.

Sometimes the old man scares me, and I can see where I get my attitude from. He’s my mother’s father, and they were very close.

“Why would Uncle James want me to get married?”

Even though Uncle James is Tommy’s brother, my grandfather and James were close. He got along with James more than he did with Tommy. They connected through business and Grandfather says he’s the only one in his family who has some damn sense.

He shrugs. “I don’t know, but you need to. Running though women and not having something stable isn’t worth the hype.”

I slide my fingers into my pocket. It is to me, but I don’t say that. It’s so easy to get what you want from people and move on with your life. Just like sex. I don’t have to commit to anyone, I don’t have anyone to answer to, and I have the freedom to do

what I want. I tried to be in a relationship, and I realized it's not for me.

He ushers me to the outdoor table and tells me to sit, and I obey. His butler offers me a bottle of water, and I take it, unscrewing the lid, and the cold beverage cools my throat.

“I need you to help me take down Tommy.” The lines around his eyes and mouth deepen, making him appear older. “I’ve been wanting to exact my revenge on him for the way he treated my daughter.” My grandfather’s face turns red, and he clenches the edge of the table until his knuckles turn white.

I’ve never seen his pupils fill with such rage. I think about all the stories he told me about how Tommy treated my mom. When my stepmother would get upset with me, she would throw in my face how he treated my mother. So I don’t blame Grandfather for wanting to get revenge. Someone has to put Tommy in his place, teach him he’s not God.

“He punished her every day because of the affair. I hate his family, besides James. So, you do what it takes to take him down.”

Every time I hear about how Tommy treated my mother it boils my blood. She made a mistake, and he punished her every day for it. He could have walked away from her, but he stayed to abuse her or whatever. Their marriage was arranged, so maybe he felt he had no choice but to be with her. He’s so fucking cruel, he makes me want to vomit.

I have very few memories of my mother, so any information about her makes me hungry to hear. I remember her taking me to school, getting ice cream, going to a steak house restaurant, and we used to have movie nights together, just me and her, but that’s it.

When she drowned in a lake behind the mansion I used to call home, it crushed my world, and I became very lonely. It ate me up inside to the point I became a troubled child, fighting kids and not speaking much. I felt like she was my voice, and I was silenced the moment she was gone.

“I have one small request, Jasper,” my grandfather says, interrupting my thoughts.

I grab another bottle from the butler and gulp down the water like I'm dying of thirst. "What is it?"

He places his hand on my shoulder, squeezing tight. "Promise me you will go through with this marriage and take him down."

I'm a man of my word, and Grandfather has it. I look him directly in the eye. "I promise," I vow. "I already had my mind set on marrying someone."

He grabs a white rag and wipes the sweat from his forehead. "So, who is she?"

I'm glad the gray clouds chose this moment to hover over the sun, making it cooler.

Why is everyone so damn interested in Poppy?

"She's called Poppy."

"I hope you fall in love with her and have children." He smiles, displaying his dentures, then he crosses his leg over his knee.

I shake my head. After what I went through with my ex Gemma, I don't think I ever want to be in a proper relationship. The pain in my chest throbs, spreading quickly as I shake my head to wipe away the memory of her. I don't need anyone, and I don't trust women, which is why I'm going to have my lawyer type up a contract between us. It's going to be airtight, where she gets nothing after the divorce. Poppy doesn't come off as a gold digger, but you never know. I don't know what kind of thoughts go through her head.

"Love isn't an option. You know as well as I do that love doesn't exist in the way we would like."

I don't want to have this conversation, but my grandfather doesn't care. He's going to push the topic.

"I had it with your grandmother." He smiles sadly.

Grief is written across his face; I know he misses her every day. They were twin flames, married for fifty years. My phone battery lasts longer than relationships these days. Everyone is only interested in themselves and what they can get out of people. It's a business transaction.

My grandmother died two years ago from natural causes, and they loved each other unconditionally. Once upon a time, I thought the same way too. I thought love would be something I'd be into, until Gemma broke my heart.

I won't allow another woman to hurt me ever again.

“Well, everyone can't experience that type of love.”

“You're wrong, everyone has a twin flame. The one thing I liked about James is that we shared the same view on love and marriage, he wanted it so bad but the woman he loved got away. He regrets not marrying her.”

“What happened to the woman he fell in love with?”

He hands me a garden tool, abruptly changing the subject. “You want to help me plant an apple tree?”

I nod and remove my shirt. My grandfather failed to mention that if you love the wrong woman, it can cause you to lose yourself and break you in ways that can't be repaired.



Chapter FOUR

Poppy

Two nights later, I pour Sophia a shot of whiskey and take a seat across from her. She decided to visit me at my job. I'm very excited because tonight I'm going to the American Billionaire Club to meet my potential fiancé. I picture what he will look like and his qualities that will impress my mother. At this point, he doesn't have anything in common with me. I daydream about my mother welcoming me with open arms when I tell her the good news. As soon as I leave this place, I'm going home to change.

The tiny bar is packed and the smell of stale food wafts through the place. Honestly, I don't understand how this place is still in business. It violates every health code, and the food is trash and tastes bland.

I told Sophia to meet me at work since she wanted to talk, and because I'm ashamed of where I live.

Her hazel eyes loom over my skimpy outfit and flat stomach. A frown tugs at the corner of her mouth.

“I wish my stomach was as flat as yours after having Bailey. It looks like an inflatable balloon.” My sister’s tone is as heavy as a boulder.

I come from a family where looks are important, especially for the women. The only goal of the women in our family is to marry for wealth. When Sophia wanted to work as a registered nurse, my mother forbade it and threatened to cut her off from the family.

I grab her hand and kiss it. “Don’t speak about yourself in a negative way. You’re gorgeous. Those stretch marks are a sign of strength and what you conquered. It took balls to carry a baby for nine months. Don’t listen to Mother about your body, normal people have flaws.”

My sister and I have always been close and ever since our mother disowned me, she’s the only one who keeps in touch. My brother, Jimmy, told me it was strictly business and since he co-owns his grandfather’s tech company, he says he can’t associate with me, which is fine with me. My brother’s heart has always been as black as night. My stepfather and I have never been close, so it’s not a loss that he’s not speaking to me either. It stung in the beginning, the way my family treated me, but I have always been the odd bod in the family anyway. A black sheep is a better word. I always found myself different from them, not wanting to follow my mother’s strict rules.

Sophia’s gaze scans around the bar and she hugs her purse close to her chest as if someone is going to snatch it. She’s beautiful in an angelic type of way in her designer dress that hugs her hourglass figure and her kinky, curly hair that touches her shoulders, whereas I wear a relaxer. Mother was pissed that I decided to straighten my hair.

She lifts the glass to her mouth and quickly downs the amber liquor, then coughs loudly.

I raise my eyebrow. “Is it okay for you to drink while you’re breastfeeding?”

She frowns, setting her glass down on the wobbly table. “I took Bailey off the nipple a few weeks ago. She’s at the age where she thinks my tit is her teething ring.” She scrunches her nose as if she smells something foul.

“You should have married Link,” she says out of the blue, but I know she’s been wanting to say it for a while because she blurted it out and when she’s pondering something, she never knows how to say it.

Anger makes its way to my throat. She knows about the way he treated me. She knows about the girls he fucked behind my back, the way he talked down to me as if I’m stupid. She knows he was my ball and chain that was harmful to my state of mind. He emotionally abused me, used my insecurities against me, chipping at my self-worth. I’m sick of my family thinking that it’s okay for someone to abuse you just because they’ve got a little bit of money in their pockets.

I muster up as much courage as possible as I straighten my vertebrae.

“I would rather live under the Brooklyn Bridge begging for money and be broke than marry him.”

Every time she sees me, she always says this. As if it’s my fault that I decided not to be with him. Technically, it is my fault—I left him, but for good reason.

“You can tell Mother to stop sending you out here to convince me to go back to him,” I snap.

She shakes her head. “She wants the best for you.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “How so? By being with someone who abuses me?”

She strokes my arm, her attempt of trying to calm me down, but it doesn’t work. I clutch the table so hard my knuckles throb.

“Your life would be so much better, and you wouldn’t have to work at this place among the poor.”

Frustration takes hold of me. She acts like it’s so bad to be poor, but I guess because we grew up in wealth that to her it’s worse than anything else. She doesn’t know the daily struggles of a single mother, or a broke college kid who doesn’t have rich parents to cover their bills and tuition. I didn’t realize how privileged I was until I was cut off from my inheritance. Poor people are no different from us.

She pours herself a small shot of the cheap liquor before downing it. “You don’t belong here. I get it. Link was horrible,

but he came by for Sunday dinner hoping to see you. He was in tears, realizing the mistake he made.”

I roll my eyes at the last part. Those are crocodile tears. He does that every time he fucks up and as soon as I let my guard down, he goes back to doing the same shit. “You’re no better than the people who are here and now I’m one of them.”

Before, I didn’t know what it was like to go without. I didn’t know the struggles of poor people because I was one of those people who was oblivious to the real world. Being rejected from my own family was eye-opening for me, and maybe she’s right, I don’t belong here, but at the same time I’m not going to look down on these people.

I point to Crystal, one of the waitresses.

“You see that older lady, she busts her ass here every day to pay for her daughter’s disability. Her daughter has a heart problem.” I exhale, exhausted by this conversation. I should be excited about tonight, not feeling sour because of my sister’s closed-minded views. “So, tell me how I don’t belong here? These people have the same problems as the rich. They are no different from us.”

She crosses her arms and rolls her eyes. “If money is not an issue, why are you trying to get a fake fiancé to trick Mom?”

“Because I want to pay Mother back for all the stuff she has done for me. You will never know, but at one point, Mom was a single parent raising me until she met your father. You know what? Never mind.” She will never understand what I’m saying, and she doesn’t want to understand.

I get up from the table, but Sophia places her hand on mine. “I’m sorry, sit back down, please.” She plays with the ends of her hair. “I didn’t mean to offend you. Did you find a new suitor to be your fake fiancé?”

I’m so glad she changed the subject. My sister didn’t mean anything by her words about poor people, she’s just ignorant of a lot of things, and she’s the baby of the family. My parents sheltered her from a lot of things. For fuck’s sake, they had her believe that Storks dropped babies off until she was fourteen years old. They didn’t even allow her to go to college right out of high school, instead they arranged for her to be married to Tate.

His family owns an oil company, and they are multimillionaires. In fact, he just became CEO of his family's oil company. It's common to do arranged marriages among the elite. Fortunately for me, I'm picking my own suitor.

"I received an invitation to the American Billionaire Club, so I hope to meet a suitor there."

Her eyes widen and a smile stretches across her face. "He's going to be a billionaire! Mother will love that!"

"I'm hoping so."

"Hopefully it will work out because I sure miss you at Sunday dinners." She sighs. "Every time I try to have a conversation about you, Mom talks about how you are a disappointment to the family and how you don't exist anymore."

Her words sting and I want to cry. All I want is for my mother to love me as much as she loves Sophia and Jimmy. She always treated me like I was less than. As if I wasn't good enough for her. I always suspected it was because my father passed away when I was five and I was a constant reminder of him. Reminder of the love she lost. She was so stricken with grief that she wouldn't get out of bed for a long time; her twin sister, Jasmine, had to care for me.

When I don't respond, Sophia places her hands on mine again, but I remove it quickly. I don't want her to see how hurt I am, and she has a lot of pressure on her with being a new parent.

"How's Tate doing?"

They have been married for two years now, but I never liked him. He's such an asshole to her, always acting cocky and thinking he can't be touched.

Worry clouds her pupils and she shakes her head. "He's drinking more than usual, and sometimes he doesn't come home."

I tuck my hair behind my ear, grab the neck of the bottle on the table, and pour her another shot.

"Do you think he's cheating?"

"I don't know, but if he is, I'm not going to leave him. I'm not like you, Poppy. I can't be a disappointment like the way

Mom views you. And, since I don't work and we have a child, I'm stuck, and no man would want me."

"You're young, Sophia. And you're gorgeous. Do you know how many heads you turn when you walk into a room? If a man wants you, he'll accept Bailey," I say. "You deserve happiness." Here it is, I'm giving advice that I should be taking. I deserve to have love, but life doesn't work that way.

"Yeah, but I care more about Mother accepting me than going against her wishes. I see how it affects you, and I can't do it. I think..." She taps her fingers on the table as she thinks. "You were brave and stupid to leave Link, but I think you should have had another guy lined up to marry before you broke up with him." She tilts her head. "Like a backup plan."

I laugh and in some weird way, her idea isn't half bad. I love my kid sister.

My boss, Tony, comes up to our table with his hands on his hips, then he strokes his beer belly. When his eyes land on my sister's tits, he licks his lips. The guy is a total sleazeball.

"Are you over twenty-one?" he asks her.

Sophia looks at him in disgust, then she says, "Wh—"

"Are you still selling coke to your customers?" I snap.

Annoyance clouds his face, and he throws his hands in the air. "Fair enough. Your break is over. Get back to work."

When I get up from the chair, I catch him checking out my ass. Fucking creep. I need to find another job because he gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Sophia stands up and wraps her arms around my waist. She's a few inches shorter than me and her hair tickles my nose.

"Thanks for stopping by. It was good to see you."

"You too. Good luck with finding a suitor."

"Thanks."

I watch her squeeze between a few people, making a beeline for the exit.

The rest of the night is spent working and helping the other waitresses close the bar. I walk home since my apartment is only

ten minutes away from the bar. Normally, I would take an Uber home but I'm going to need that cash for tonight in Manhattan, which is forty minutes away. Once I'm outside, I'm hit with the smoggy evening air and skyscrapers lighting up the dark sky. The city streets are busy and packed with cars, which is usual for a weekend. I walk in a hurry, sensing someone is watching me.

I turn around and I scan my surroundings but I don't see anyone. Maybe it's all in my head. Could it be that Link is following me? But it won't make sense because he already knows where I live. I had my locks changed this morning and told my landlord not to give out my information to anyone without my permission.

Shaking my head, I sprint toward my apartment, and the minute I walk through the door I lock all three bolts.

As soon as I get into good graces with my family again and my mother gives me access to my trust fund, I'm going to move out of this shitty apartment and into some place safer—make sure I have extra security.

I remove my clothes and toss them to the floor, then quickly shower and put on makeup before I do my hair.

I glance at myself in the mirror and try to work up the courage to go to the ball. I can't believe my best friend went out of her way to make this evening special for me. Hopefully, the guy I meet will understand that this is strictly business. I hope he agrees to my terms.

No spending the night.

Only hang out when we're around my parents.

No sex?

I put a question mark by the last one, because if he's hot, I'm going to fuck him. A girl has needs.

I pull the dress over my body, and it's snug, displaying my figure and curves. Lake did a great job designing this dress.

“Let's knock 'em dead,” I say to myself.



Jasper

After my stylist, Rose, fixes the hem of my dress pants, I slide my jacket over my shoulders. She smiles at me through the floor-length mirror in my bedroom. Her complexion is light brown, her curly hair is in a bun today, and she's curvy in all the right places. She's been my stylist for a couple of years now. My eyes meet hers, and she smiles as if I'm something to eat. I'm used to women staring at me and throwing themselves at me. It can be a bit annoying sometimes because half of the time I don't want to fuck them, but they are so willing to open their legs as wide as the ocean.

My mind goes to Poppy, and I'm nervous as hell to offer her my deal. Hopefully, she will agree to be my wife, and if she doesn't I'm going to work like hell to convince her. I wouldn't mind being married to her. I get to stick my dick in her as much as I like without having to deal with her getting attached to me. Sounds like a sweet-ass deal to me.

Rose straightens her back and a blush creeps up to her cheeks. "You're one of the most gorgeous men I have ever met. No wonder *People* magazine named you the sexiest man alive."

I ignore her flirting. Usually I'll flirt back, but I'm in a business mood, and I won't give her any ideas or let her think we will sleep together again. Tonight, I will get Poppy to agree to be my wife. I'm going to need a stiff drink because I have to say goodbye to the meaningless one-night stands and sleeping with different women.

I'm going to be a one-woman man.

No more threesomes.

No more one-night stands.

No more lonely nights...

I don't know where that last thought came from.

I have to convince my father I'm a one-woman man, so no more scandals and being pictured with different women in the media, and that is the only reason I'm going to be exclusive with Poppy. It still doesn't make sense for Uncle James to have that marriage clause in his will. It doesn't matter, though, and I will never find out. There is no need for me to dwell on the reasoning,

but I'm not going to lie to myself, I can't wrap my head around it. I'm the type of person that once I get a fixation on something, it's hard for me to let it go. I become a dog with a bone and I won't let go.

Rose pushes her tits up and desire flashes in her eyes as she sinks her teeth into her plump bottom lip. I shouldn't have fucked her a month ago. Normally, I don't fuck my employees, but I've known Rose for a couple years now. A good bourbon later, she looked tasty, but sober? I wouldn't touch her. Not because she isn't gorgeous, but I suspect she's clingy.

“You look dashing in your suit. What's the special occasion?”

“I'm proposing to my girlfriend soon.” I turn to walk into my closet, and she trails behind me like a dog with its tail between its legs. I open the drawer where I keep my watches and put my Rolex on, then I put on my Italian loafers.

She raises a skeptical brow and grabs the lint roller to brush against my shoulders. “You have a girlfriend?”

I nod. “It won't be a problem since I'm not a single man anymore?”

She shakes her head, and her smile deflates. “Of course not. I thought we had something more.”

She confirms what I already suspected—that she's clingy. Those types of women are the worst kind. They call nonstop and don't leave you alone. I have to be more careful about who I stick my dick in.

“A night of sex isn't something more, Rose. It was just sex.”

“You don't think the sex we had was mind-blowing?” she asks, her eyes telling me she needs the validation and hope. I can barely remember what happened, I was plastered as fuck that night. But I have to work with her, and she's a great stylist.

“It was good,” I lie.

She swallows thickly and smiles. “But... you flirt with me.”

When she's finished removing all the lint from my suit, I waltz to the hallway and grab my keys and wallet, sliding them into my pockets. “I flirt with every woman I find attractive. Well, after tonight I won't be because I'm going to ask my girlfriend to

be my wife.” I can’t believe those words came out of my mouth, and I can’t believe I said that shit again. Me and propose shouldn’t even be in the same sentence, and the word *girlfriend* doesn’t belong there either. Nor *marriage*.

Fuck my life.

“It’s fine. I’m not mad. I read you wrong.” Her doe eyes glance at the dark marble floor then back at me. “Why did you never ask me to be your girlfriend?”

“I don’t see myself in a relationship with you, Rose,” I answer her honestly.

I don’t see myself in a relationship, period, but she doesn’t need to hear that. She needs to believe that I’m happily in a relationship so she can back off and I don’t have to fire her. Because she’s good at her job and it’s hard to find a stylist that knows what they are doing.

She watches me through the oval-shaped mirror in the entryway as I fix my tie. “What?”

She leans against the table. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“What?”

“To be a one-woman man. I thought you would be the type to sleep around and be a cheater.” She shrugs. “If you had asked me to be your fiancée, I would have allowed you to fuck other women on the side, as long as I got a credit card and allowance.”

It doesn’t surprise me. Most women think this way. That it’s okay for men to demean them and treat them like shit as long as they are given what they want—money. That is the reason I don’t date. If I were in a relationship, I wouldn’t sleep around, and I sure as hell wouldn’t want my wife or girlfriend to fuck other men. That’s something I’m going to discuss with Poppy, because I have a bit of a jealous streak when it comes to her, and the thought of someone touching what’s mine... it drives me apeshit.

I shoot Rose a glare. “I’m capable of keeping my dick in my pants, and I don’t want a woman who thinks it’s okay for me to sleep with other women.”

“I’m just putting my two cents in. The offer still stands.” She shrugs. “Good for you, I’m glad you found love.” Her tone bleeds sarcasm, and it pisses me off.

I roll my eyes, heading to the door.

Love? I want to laugh at her last statement. Love isn't in the picture for me. The last thing I need is love. I need my uncle's business and some good food. And pussy. I plan to fuck and touch every inch of my future wife and business partner, because that's all Poppy is. Everything is going to be transactional. Just the way it is supposed to be.



Chapter FIVE

Poppy

I slide my mask over my heart-shaped face as the Uber pulls up to the sleek building that's made of glass. Expensive foreign cars that normal people don't drive litter the lot. I used to have a car, but my mother took that away from me too. Public transportation is not bad, but it is something I have to get used to. Depending on people to get where you're going is time-consuming, and I hate wasting time.

When the driver comes to a complete stop, I step outside, anxiety skating across my skin. Hopefully, I will find a potential suitor to be my fake fiancé, then I can reconcile with my family, and the emptiness in my chest can finally disappear. Hopefully, my suitor will want something reasonable in exchange.

Slowly, I trail to the front entrance and a heavily built man stands at the door. His gray suit is tailor-made, and his eyes are the same color as his mask, midnight black. I hand him my invitation, but he shakes his head and tells me I need to turn it in at the front desk. Before he pats me down, he points to the glass door.

I nod and as I open the door, I'm greeted with cool air and the scent of lavender burns my nostrils. I glance around and see a gigantic lion statue and an expensive chandelier hanging from the ceiling. This place is magnificent. My heels kiss the white marble floors as I approach the front desk. A young woman flips her platinum blonde hair over her shoulders and plasters a smile across her face, but it doesn't reach her eyes. She's dressed in an elegant gray gown and the rest of her hair is pinned up in an updo. Her face is covered with a mask that matches her dress.

I slip the invitation and my ID to her. She grabs them and types on the computer.

Nervousness bubbles in my chest. This is finally happening, I want to pinch myself. I can't believe I'm going to walk through those doors and find a man to be my fake fiancé.

"Hi, Poppy. This is your first time here, so let's go over some ground rules," the lady says.

I nod as I bite my thumb nail. "O-okay."

"Do not take pictures. This is a private party, and a lot of famous and wealthy people are here. Whatever you see or hear, you keep to yourself unless you see someone breaking the law." She eyeballs the screen. "It looks like you have the six-month VIP package."

I lean my elbow against the counter. "What is that, exactly?" I ask her.

"You get access to free trips around the world, and you come here anytime you want to get free food and drinks. Also, you get VIP access to the most exclusive clubs around the world. I'll email you a list of everything the package includes."

I get free food and drinks? I don't care about the clubs. I'm going to be here every day. It will save me a lot of money on groceries.

She hands me a pack of paper, and I read and sign them quickly. She points to the French doors. "Go to the West Wing, that is where the ball will be."

Once I open the door, my mouth drops to the ground at the décor. I always imagined what it would look like on the inside, but it doesn't come close to what I see. Bright flowers

everywhere, in a variety of colors. I glance up to find art painted on the ceilings. The smell of cigars and alcohol lingers in the air.

There is a group of men, wearing suits, speaking with a glass each in their hands.

I tap one of the guys on the shoulder and he looks at me, his pink lips forming a smile.

I can't see his eyes because it's covered in a mask, but his smile is to die for. His teeth are straight.

“Where is the West Wing?”

He points to the left, and I tell him thanks.

I walk slowly to the double doors and push them open. My mouth hits the floor again, this time at the marble floors and wooden walls. Four chandeliers hang from the ceiling, and a live band plays classical music. People are wearing expensive suits and dresses, as if they own the fashion world. All the men are millionaires or billionaires. This is a different type of wealth, and I'm used to being around wealthy people, but these people are in another league.

My anxiety is back at full force and I sit on a barstool, and the bartender, wearing all black, hands me a drinks menu.

“I'd like a glass of Château Cheval Blanc 1947.”

I haven't had expensive wine in a long time.

The bartender slides my glass over, and I trace my finger around the rim before I sip it slowly. Tastes just as good as I remember. Strong and fruity.

I scan the crowd, on the lookout for a potential suitor. Nervousness settles in my belly as I watch a guy with dark hair and a muscular build stroll to the bar beside me. My heart flutters in my chest and my smile dies down when he walks right up to another woman who's wearing a flowery mask.

What if I don't find a suitor tonight? The thought makes any hope I had die. I might have to crawl back to my ex so I can get my mother's approval. I don't want to. And I know I won't be happy about it, but I have realized that I would rather have my family than live alone and never talk to them ever again. Link might be the bottom of the barrel when it comes to personality

and morals, but he'll be my ticket to getting my family back. Now, I'm starting to regret calling off the wedding. Right now, I could be at my parents' mansion and my mother would be offering me beauty tips, telling me all the stories about her youth before she had me. She was a lot nicer to me before I broke it off with Link, as long as I did what she said.

"Can you tell me where they're hosting the auction?" I ask the bartender.

He points to the left. "It's around the corner."

I down the rest of my drink and head in the direction the bartender pointed out. I see a stage and people sitting in rows.

Nervousness bubbles up in my chest as I make my way backstage. Men and women stand in line, and I tap the girl in front of me on the shoulder. She turns around and smiles.

"Is this the line for the auction?"

"Yes," she answers.

I hear the announcer speak through the mike, informing everyone about the rules and regulations of the auction.

"Have fun," he adds.

And the crowd cheers. My heart jumps up in my chest as the bidding starts. The price range starts at three million and quickly rises to thirty million dollars. It's shocking.

The woman in front of me twists to face me, a grin on her lips. "Wish me luck."

I nod. "Good luck."

Minutes later, she goes up, and someone bids six million dollars on her. And before long, it's my turn to step onto the stage. I swallow loudly to rein in my anxiety.

The announcer, wearing a silver mask, brings the mike to my mouth. "My name is Poppy Giles." I laugh nervously at the audience's attention on me.

The announcer brings the mike back to his mouth. "This your first time?"

I nod, timidly waving to the crowd.

Someone holds up their paddle, the number nine on it. “Three million dollars.”

A guy with the red mask that matches my dress holds up the number two. “Five million.”

His voice sounds oddly familiar, but I can’t put my finger on it.

Two and Nine got back and forth until the announcer bellows, “Going once, going twice. Sold to Number Two for ten million dollars.” Turning back to face me, he mutters, “He wants you to meet him at the bar, in the West Wing.”

I walk off the stage, heading to said bar. I can’t believe someone paid ten million dollars to go on a date with me.

I have so much I want to say to him, and ask him to be m—

I hear someone clear their throat. “Poppy.”

His voice slides over me like a warm blanket, making me acutely aware of his presence. My dumb-ass heart beats freely like a wild horse. I crave everything about this man.

I hold my head up like I’m the president of the country and attempt to control my primal needs.

“Jasper. You’re the one who bid on me?”

Of course he would have a membership here—he’s probably here all the time with the women he fucks. I turn around and face Jasper. The man knows how to wear a suit. His muscles fill out his suit, the material molding to his body. He has a diamond earring in his right ear and the mask he wears over his eyes matches the color of my dress—blood red. What a coincidence.

His presence sucks all the oxygen out of the room and his smile is radiant.

He nods. “Lake told me you would be here, and that you needed my help. You’re looking for a fake fiancé to get in good graces with your mother?”

I’m caught off guard.

I’m going to kill Lake when I see her. This man is the last person I want to ask, but what other choice do I have? I know him, and he’s not a complete stranger. Jasper Barrett has been

inside me twice already but I'm not making it a habit. I don't have to worry about him being a psychopath, and he wouldn't be here if he didn't want to be.

"Dance with me." His tone is husky.

Without giving me a chance to respond, he places his hand on my lower back and ushers me away from the bar and in the direction of the dance floor. I place my hand in his and we glide along the marble floor. I'm so grateful my mother made me take ballroom dancing when I was a teenager. My body meshes with his and it's not a good idea. My body doesn't know how to behave around him.

He leans down and whispers, "Marry me." His words tickle my ear and I giggle.

Did he say what I think he just said? Did he ask me to marry him? I study his face as if he's just told a funny joke, but his facial expression is as serious as a heart attack.

I stop for a few seconds, stare at him as if he grew three heads. "W-what?"

"Marry me."

This isn't the man I thought I knew. Jasper doesn't go around proposing to people. Why on earth would he want to marry me? I can't believe the commitment-phobe proposed to me.

Someone accidentally bumps into me, but I don't bother turning around to see who it was. I'm still in shock from his question. Well, more of a statement than a question.

"Are you on drugs?"

He bursts out laughing as he grabs my hand again and guides me to the nearest bar. My lungs burn as I inhale, then exhale.

Is this the same man that told me he doesn't do relationships? That he was only committed to his business? My parents don't believe in divorce, they view that as worse than me not marrying Link.

We take seats on the barstools, Jasper resting his hand on my thigh, squeezing gently.

"Why are you asking me to marry you?"

He doesn't take his eyes off me. His deep brown pupils flash with lust and desire, sending moisture to my core. I don't need to think about the way he fucked me five nights ago.

"I need to be married in order to inherit my uncle's business." He sighs. "He passed away the day I met you in the bar."

I stroke my fingers along his big hand soothingly. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

The pain is etched in his face, and he removes his hand. I didn't mean to make him uncomfortable.

I want to help him, but I can't commit to marriage.

And just like that, my hope deflates. But all is not lost—I can find someone else. I have six months of membership here.

"It wouldn't work," I say, smoothing out my dress.

Disappointment flashes across his face. "Why not?"

This sucks so bad.

My shoulders sag and I slouch on the barstool. "My family doesn't believe in divorce. If we get married, then you're stuck with me for the rest of your life. I don't want to be your ball and chain." Frustration rises in my chest like a balloon. I get up from the stool and sling my clutch across my body. "You said it yourself, you don't desire a relationship, and I don't either. So let's cut our l—"

"Poppy, sit back down, I'm not finished explain—"

"There isn't anything to explain."

What's the point of talking this through? We have different goals. Every chance I get, I hit a brick wall and I have to start over at ground zero.

He frowns as he rests his hand on my shoulder. "Poppy, sit back down," he repeats. "Don't walk out on me."

I slither my way back onto the stool. "Another glass of that expensive wine. I'm going to need it," I tell the bartender.

What he's asking for is absurd. The thought of being married to anyone scares the crap out of me, which is one of the reasons why I backed out of my marriage with Link. I don't know how Jasper is when it comes to living with him. He could be a

complete weirdo. He could turn out to be crazy like Link. He may not look the type, but Link was good at hiding it at the beginning of our relationship. When he proposed to me, that's when he became my worst nightmare.

Moments later, the bartender sets my glass of wine in front of me. I chug it down as if I'm dying of thirst.

"We can be married for the rest of our lives, but I can't promise you happily ever after. I can't promise you hearts and flowers. I can't promise you any real love, Poppy."

"Trust me, after what I've been through with my ex, love isn't on the table for me either." I sip my wine before I add, "Why will you make that sacrifice for me? Clearly you can have any woman you want."

He strokes his beard as he flashes me his pearly whites. "If I'm married to someone, I want to at least have intelligent conversations with them." He downs his glass of amber liquor.

I might not have a choice, and this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I refuse to go back to my ex, and I might not find anyone at this point to agree with my terms. So yeah, I'll take him up on his offer. Plus, Jasper checks everything on my list—and more. My mother would love him. He's one of the biggest names in the country, his connections can take my stepfather's winery further, and he's a *billionaire*. My mother will be delighted. Yes, it's a lifelong commitment, but I'll be taken care of and I can leave my shitty job and find somewhere else to work. Not to mention my living conditions will be a lot better than they are now. We can even live our lives separately.

"Fine. I'll be your wife."

He grins ear to ear at my answer. "We need to go over some ground rules." He sweeps a lock of my hair behind my ear and lifts my chin so I have no choice but to look into his eyes. A deep blush creeps up my neck to my cheeks. This eye contact is too intimate for my liking, so I lean back, putting some distance between us.

"Go on," I say.

"In public we act like the loving couple. We hold hands, kiss—you know, to keep my image. If my father gets the slightest

hint of this marriage being fake, he's going to take me to court for my uncle's business."

I nod in agreement.

"We have to stage a few public appearances before I officially pop the question, then we can go to city hall and get married."

I stare at my hand, then my gaze lifts to meet his chocolate eyes. "I need a wedding party. My mother would want one, so she can take pictures to brag to her friends, and it'll make this whole thing seem more real."

"Okay, Poppy. But you're moving in with me tonight. Lake told me about your living situation. Also, she told me about the men at your workplace and how they can't keep their hands to themselves, so quit your job. You have a choice. You can either be my executive assistant or find another job. I don't care, but you're not going back to that sleazy place." He tilts my chin back and a cloud of emotions swims in his irises.

I bat my eyelashes. "I work for you... Are you sure you want me around that much?"

His gaze roams over my face, down to my breasts, then to my ballgown, and he licks his lips.

"Lunch will be tasty, because I'll get to feast on your pussy, and I'll get to put my dick inside you in between meetings."

I wish we could have sex, but that's going to complicate things between us, and from how Jasper presents his proposal, it's a business transaction. We can't blur the lines. He might be able to fuck me and not catch feelings, but I know I can't do that.

Arousal pools in my stomach and my heart beats so fast as if I downed five Red Bulls.

"We can't have sex," I say in an attempt to diffuse the situation somewhat.

He cocks a brow at that. "Oh, yeah? Why not?"

"Because I'll get attached to you."

The waiter pours me another glass and sets a bowl of garlic bread in front of us. I bring the bowl toward me and the steam warms my face. I bite into the bread before setting it down and

slapping my hands together, removing the crumbs. Not the most elegant thing to do, but who cares.

More chatter fills the air, people fill up the barstools beside us, a couple makes out right next to me. Their timing is the worst because watching them lock lips urges me to kiss Jasper, and the man knows how to use his mouth.

I shouldn't be thinking about that, especially after I told him we can't have sex.

He strokes my cheek with the backs of his knuckles and my stomach flutters.

"I will spend the rest of my life with you. I'll provide you with everything you need and want. I'll protect you. Why not get attached to me?"

"Because I'll end up falling in love with you, and this needs to stay business."

He rubs the back of his neck. "You're right."

He gave in quickly. Too quickly. I'm going to rip the Band-Aid off even though the thought fills me with disappointment. I don't want him sleeping with different women, but that would make me a hypocrite, and he has needs. It would be selfish of me to ask him to not sleep with other women.

"You can sleep with other women, just don't bring them to our home."

The word *home* feels foreign on my tongue.

There, I said it. It's all out in the open now.

"No, the only woman I desire to sleep with is the one I'm marrying." His eyes stay glued to mine. "But if I catch you sleeping with someone else, I'll break every finger on his hands. No one touches what's mine."

"You're going to be waiting forever," I shoot back.

I ignore his last statement. Jasper doesn't strike me as someone with a violent streak.

I need to change the subject. "I need to add something to our agreement." He nods for me to go on. "We need our own separate bank accounts. I don't want to share money."

Link used to lock me out of our joint account if I didn't behave in the way he wanted me to. In secret, I had to resort to getting my own bank card and started hiding my money from him. For a couple of years, I was trapped in a relationship where he took all my money and used it as a weapon against me. I have to protect myself. I'm not giving up my independence to another man again.

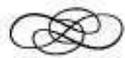
"My job is to make sure you are provided for but if that's what you want, then okay. I'll give you an Amex credit card in case you need it. There isn't a limit on that."

Shock creeps up my spine. "You'd trust me with that?"

"Why wouldn't I? You can't max it out."

"Right."

"Let's get out of here, so you can get situated in your new home."



Once we are at his penthouse, the place I swore I would never come back to, Jasper makes a few calls to move my stuff here. I don't have much but clothes and a mattress and a couch. I tell him to tell the movers to bring my clothes and leave the rest there. Someone else can benefit from the furniture when they move in.

Marriage. So many emotions swirl in my chest like a tornado. I can't believe I'm going to be married to one of the wealthiest men in the country. The evening's events play like a broken tune in my head. I'm going to be someone's fiancée! I always thought the person I marry would be someone I'd be so in love with, someone who'd treat me with the respect I deserve, but now I'm making a lifelong commitment.

A marriage of convenience.

Can I survive this marriage without love? He said he can't give me love, but that he can provide for me in ways I dream of. One day I wanted to have children. I might not be career-oriented like Lake, but I always wanted kids. I love kids. When I was a child myself I had a dream to open up a daycare, but my mother told me it was a stupid idea.

We need to discuss this sooner rather than later.

I'm still iffy about marrying Jasper, but I will go through with the marriage. So I'm going to get as much as I can out of it.

I watch Jasper type something on his phone, and several moments later a tall, muscular man comes from the back and stands in front of me. His suit is sharp, and he looks as if he used to be handsome when he was younger. Gray threads between his blond hair, and a small watch hangs from his breast pocket. He reminds me of Colonel Miles from *Avatar*.

“This is Michael and he’s going to be waiting on you hand and foot. Whatever you need. From running errands to driving you to places, he’s here.”

“Are you trained as a bodyguard? Like, if someone would try to rob me, would you be there?” I ask.

I don't want to tell Jasper about Link possibly stalking me, because it's not his problem and I don't want him to go back on his word, though I doubt he would because he needs me just as much as I need him, but I still can't be too careful.

Jasper and Michael exchange a look before Michael clears his throat. “I carry a gun and I used to be Special Forces before I worked with Jasper. I assure you, I can protect you,” he says with a smile. “Nice to meet you, future Mrs. Barrett.”

I'm glad I will be protected from Link.

Even him saying my future last name brings chills to me. I glance at my future husband standing next to me with his hands in his pockets. My body is aware of him. His presence alone makes me weak in the knees. I swallow thickly, hoping the sexual tension eases up, but it doesn't work because Jasper looks at me like he wants to devour me. I wish I could say I had my fill of him the night we last fucked, but I didn't. His dick is addictive, and I don't like feeling addicted to someone. So, I am going to have to work extra hard to keep my distance.

Jasper removes his cuff links one at a time and unbuttons his crisp shirt. I get a peek of his pecs. Sucking in a breath, I revert my eyes to an expensive painting on the wall.

“Follow me,” Jasper says once his shirt is fully unbuttoned.

He opens the room we had sex in—his bedroom. The room is a lot bigger than I remember, but then again I wasn't focused on my surroundings at the time.

His bed sits in the middle of the room, like a throne. The floor is dark marble matching the ceiling, and the walls are made of glass, one side overlooking the lit-up city. This room is breathtaking and elegant.

“What about the sleeping arrangements?”

His eyes are hooded, and a lazy smile sweeps across his face. “You sleep in the master bedroom with me.”

Cheeks flaming, my gaze meets his as his fingers intertwine with mine before his soft lips meet my knuckles. My pulse accelerates and my breathing quickens. It doesn't take much for him to get me hot like a firecracker.

“Bu—”

“No buts. We need to paint the picture that what we have is real. We've already slept together twice, and when my father drops by he needs to see that we're sleeping in the same room. Besides... you're already mine.” His finger trails to my neck, down the fabric around my breasts, then to the left side of my chest, where my heart is. “Not your heart, just your body, Angel.”

I take a step back, trying to collect my thoughts, and shake my head. “You'll break my heart.”

He waits for several moments to respond. “You're absolutely right, Poppy. Don't trust me with your heart, it's not in good hands.”

“Don't worry, I'm not going to.”

I'm giving up on love because I want my mother's approval, and I don't want to be a disappointment anymore to her. She raised me as a single mother when I was five years old. My father passed away from his cocaine addiction. I don't remember much about him, except he was a well-known artist during his youth. We loved to make breakfast together and he used to walk me home from school. My mother had to do things that she wasn't proud of to get the lifestyle we have—or in my case, *had*. She married my stepfather and had his two kids. When we grow up, we have to do what's best for our family. My mother spent her

life making sure I had the life she never had, and I need to return the favor. I owe her. That's what family does, take care of each other even when we don't want to.

Jasper keeps his eyes glued to mine, and he grabs a white t-shirt, and a pair of basketball shorts.

“Wear these until your clothes arrive.”

I disappear into the bathroom to change. They hang loose on my small frame, and I hook the dress I wore to the ball on the bathroom door with a hanger.

By the time I make it back to the bedroom, my nerves are shot. Jasper has already changed into his pajama pants and is lying on the bed. I eye the couch. I debate if I should sleep there tonight, because I'm afraid that if I sleep in the bed with him I will lose control. I need to put on my big girl panties and be brave.

Every step I make closer to the bed, it feels like my feet are tied to cinder blocks.

Slowly, I yank the covers that are made out of fine thread back and slip into the comfy bed. The question plays in the back of my mind. Will he give me a child? I want one later on. I want to be a mother.

“If I want children, would you be able to give me them?”

His eyes search mine and a frown stamps his face. “No, I don't want kids.”

Sadness swallows me whole. I feel as if my dreams are being shattered one by one. A love without marriage is one thing, but a marriage without a child is another. Another reason why I shouldn't agree to this. My mother always told me I was a nosedive type of person, and I didn't realize what she meant until now. My heart sinks like a ship.

“Why?”

He turns his back to me, effectively shutting me out, indicating that this conversation is over. “Get on birth control, Poppy.” He sighs. “When we have sex, we will always use a condom, and I will provide them.”

Ominous feelings take over me, and I sense something he's not telling me. What is he hiding? I want to push further but I refrain. I figure if he wanted me to know something, he would open his mouth and tell me. Jasper is emotionally unavailable, so he's not going to tell me. Most men who are like him don't open up, so I'm not expecting him to.

"We're not having sex," I remind him. His logic doesn't make any sense. "Why do you want me to get on birth control anyway if you're using a condom? We will be married and we agreed to be faithful to each other."

He completely ignores me and says, "Google, turn off the lights." The room darkens but the moonlight brightens the room. The quiet room fills with Jasper's soft snoring.

Yes, I made a terrible mistake in agreeing to this marriage, and now it's too late for me to back out.

Welcome to my new life of lovelessness and childlessness.



Chapter SIX

Poppy

The next morning when I wake up, Jasper is not in bed.

This is the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in, and I haven't had a good night's rest since I moved into my apartment. I'm so glad I don't have to go back to that shitty place again. I'm truly grateful Jasper got me out of my dire living conditions. My back doesn't hurt as much, and I no longer wake up to the smell of mildew.

Today, I have to discuss my new job and the day I start. Lord knows I don't want to go back to that shitty bar filled with perverted men. I crinkle my nose as the sun bleeds through the window, brightening the room.

What exactly is an executive assistant?

I grab my phone from the nightstand and unlock it, then I pull up the Google search engine. I type in *executive assistance job description*. So many links pop up so I click on the first one and scan through it.

It says I would pretty much run errands, host meetings, and do whatever Jasper needs me to do as his assistant. I hope it pays well enough for me to be able to move out, in the event that shit hits the fan between us. We'll have to discuss the pay.

I bring my knees to my chest and watch a couple arguing through the window in the next building, then I avert my eyes to the floor.

I hate that my life will be so entangled with his, but I have to suck it up and be a big girl. I hate that I have to fake that I'm in love with someone I'm not. Everything about this feels wrong, but I have to do what I have to do to get what I want. The sacrifice will be worth it in the end.

I roll out of bed and I stride to the spacious walk-in closet. His side is arranged by colors, and I look to my left to find there are new women's clothes, also arranged by color. I grab a label. It's designer and the dress cost sixty grand. Holy shit, that's a lot of money. I've worn clothes that were a thousand dollars, but sixty grand is a lot. Sometimes I forget that Jasper is a billionaire. Even when the market is down, he's still filthy rich.

When did he have the time to order me new clothes?

I grab a white tank top and a pair of yoga pants, nothing fancy, then I shower. The showerhead is made from real gold, it seems, along with the knobs and the handle on the glass door. Holding my head high in an attempt to build some courage, I stride to the spacious kitchen to prepare myself to greet my future husband.

Jasper leans against the dark granite counter, a mug in his hand, his hair is combed to the side and his beard is neatly trimmed. The Armani suit he wears hugs his built frame. I try not to ogle him but I can't help it. His cheekbones and mouth are perfectly symmetrical, along with the rest of his face. His tan skin is smooth. His facial expression is controlled, his dominant frame owning this room. He looks like a Greek god.

He watches me like a hawk, studying my every move through his glasses, and he looks so fucking hot. I feel the back of my neck burning like the sun. His eyes are glued to my outfit, then move to my face. Jasper clears his throat, sits down then pats the seat next to him at the breakfast nook. "The chef made you an

omelet with bacon and bell peppers.” His tone is low. Slowly, I slide into the seat and my heart leapfrogs in my chest. My God, the man makes me so flustered, like a teenage schoolgirl.

How am I supposed to act? Link gave me a list of things he wanted me to do for him. Is Jasper going to do the same thing? I hope not. I don’t want our lives to be that entangled with each other’s.

Jasper grabs the pitcher of orange juice on the counter and pours me a glass before setting it in front of me. I grab the crystal glass and sip slowly. This is the most refreshing orange juice I’ve ever had. Sitting the glass down, I blurt out what’s been on my mind since I saw the walk-in closet. “When did you have the time to buy me new clothes?”

His eyes drop down to my cleavage for a moment and he licks his bottom lip. The thought of sinking my teeth into his plum bottom lip makes me wiggle in my seat.

Get it together, Poppy.

“I ordered them yesterday morning.” He brings his mug of coffee to his mouth and takes a drink, not taking his eyes off of mine.

So he assumed I was going to say yes. What an arrogant man.

The chef sets my plate in front of me and the steam from the food warms my face.

“Thanks.”

I cut into the omelet, place a bite of it on my tongue, and the food melts into my mouth. The bell pepper and egg taste delicious. Going without a decent meal for so long makes me appreciate food a lot more than I did before.

I glance around the kitchen, noting that this room needs a woman’s touch. There aren’t pictures of family and friends nor is it as lively as I would like. I’m going to hang photographs of our family, make it feel homier and less like a museum.

“Can I decorate here? I want to put my touch to it. Maybe I can put pictures of our family around here.”

“Your family, not mine.”

I shoot him a curious glance. “Why don’t you want pictures of your family?”

He shakes his head and grabs his wallet from his breast pocket, sliding a black Amex card to me.

“You can use mine until yours comes in the mail.”

Well, that’s the end of that discussion. Jasper loves avoiding questions like a rash. How are we going to be married if we don’t know much about each other? He says he wants to convince his father that this is real, but he won’t believe us if he’s not sharing stuff about himself. I don’t want to push the subject, so I ignore him and grab the card. I’ll bring up the subject some other time.

“You start work tomorrow, by the way. I’ll tell the security team that you will be up there so you can get your work badge.”

Lake told me that he’s an asshole as a boss, something she learned from one of her friends, and I don’t think I’d be able to handle him if he acts like that. “I heard you were an asshole to your last assistant. You’re not going to be mean toward me,” I state.

A smile stretches across his face. “As long as you’re going to be my wife, you don’t have to worry about me being an asshole to you.”

“What will be my pay?”

His mouth twitches as he stands up from the barstool and dumps the contents of his mug into the sink. “Three hundred grand a year.”

My mouth drops. “Okay. That seems like a lot.”

The maid wearing all white collects my plate and the few other dishes on the counter and places them in the dishwasher. She presses a button and the dishwasher hums to life. I bring my eyes back to Jasper.

“What was your last assistant’s pay?”

He folds his arms over his chest, simultaneously crossing his Italian loafers at the ankles. “Does it matter?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“You need to be home for dinner by six p.m.” I nod. “We’re having dinner tonight, so it’s our first outing together as a couple. Wear something elegant.” He lifts my chin and brushes the pad of his thumb against my cheek. My nipples harden like sharp glass, and I sigh. When I glance at him, a smirk is plastered across his face. I hate how he knows how he affects me.

Tension builds between us, so I scoop my chair away from him. “Will do,” I say. “Have a great day at work.”

Jasper freezes at my words but nods, then I watch him leave as he shuts the door behind himself.

Michael chooses that moment to enter the kitchen and stands next to me. I have so much to do. I’m going to contact my mother today to ask her to go to lunch with me. The thought of seeing her makes the food in my stomach turn sour. What if she doesn’t accept this marriage? She has to. Jasper’s net worth must be at least triple Link’s and he can open more connections for my stepfather’s winery.

“I’m at your service. Miss Giles,” Michael says.

I forgot he was standing next to me.

This is weird, too weird for me.

“So you really are going to wait on me hand and foot?”

“That is what I’m paid to do.”

“I need to run some errands,” I tell him.

Once we’re in the car, my heart jumps in my chest as I dial my mother’s number. It rings two times before it goes to voicemail. Frustration grows in my chest like a weed as I send out a text to Sophia.

Me: Can you have Mom meet me for lunch? I found a suitor.

Sophia reads my message and she calls me straight away. She sequels so loud in my ear when I hit Answer, I have to hold my phone away from my face.

“Who is he?” I can hear the smile in her tone.

“Jasper Barrett. The multibillionaire. He offered me a better deal. We’re getting married,” I answer.

Silence stretches between us. Not the response I was hoping for.

“Are you there?” I ask.

“Are you sure that’s what you want to do? We don’t believe in divorce and I don’t want you to stay with someone who could be worse than Link.”

She’s voicing my own worst fears, but I have to make her see that Jasper is not like Link.

I shake my head as if she can see me. “Jasper isn’t like Link. He’s best friends with Lake’s husband and she approves of him.”

“If you say so.” Her tone sounds as if she doesn’t believe me.

Whatever. This is a sweet deal for me, and although I was having regrets before, I’m not now. Yes, I want children in the future, but I’d rather have Jasper tell me up front that he doesn’t want kids so we can work to move past it. Who knows? He might change his mind in the future.

“Mother will accept me this way, plus he has a membership to the American Billionaire Club. He can help your dad with his winery.” That’s something I need to speak to him tonight about over dinner. I never told him why I need my mother’s approval—at least, I don’t remember mentioning it.

“She will love him. Just be careful with him, though. I don’t want to go to jail for murder.”

I smile at this. “You know I watch enough crime shows to kill someone and get away with it. It’s a marriage of convenience.”

“Your hearts won’t be involved. Just your bodies.” I can hear her smirk over the phone.

I never talk about my sex life with my baby sister, even though she has a kid and is married. It feels weird. “Shut up,” I say.

She laughs. “I sent Mother a text saying to meet us at the cafe she loves. She replied saying she’ll be there at noon, sharp.”

“Thanks,” I say before I press End Call.



Chapter SEVEN

Jasper

I walk into the office connected to mine, glancing at my current executive assistant, Diana. She has her tits spilling out of her cream blouse, and her floral skirt is too damn short. She wears those types of clothes every damn day, trying to tempt me. When her eyes meet mine, she blushes and purposely leans over the desk, displaying her lacey bra. I revert my eyes. If I weren't engaged to Poppy, I still wouldn't sleep with her. She's been coming on to me since she started working here five months ago. I miss my last EA; she kept things professional between us.

I'm glad I'm finally getting rid of Diana, I should have fired her a long time ago but I didn't because she knows how to do her job well. Though she's annoying. She tries to have conversations with me about her life, constantly showing me pictures of her family and friends, inviting me out on dates. I had dinner with her one time because work was so hectic. The next day, pictures of us were plastered across social media. I paid my publicist, Ellis, to remove them.

Diana holds out a batch of cookies and when I lightly push them away, her face falls. She places the cookies back on the desk, facing me.

“Pack your shit. You’re fired,” I snap.

Well, that felt good. I breathe in and exhale slowly.

Her eyes gloss over and widen in horror, then she folds her arms across her chest. “What? Why am I being fired?”

I stride past her to open the door to my office. “Your services here are not needed anymore.”

She slithers her way in front of me and stabs a finger into my chest. “You can’t do that,” she screeches, hurting my ears.

I step back to move around her, but she blocks my way. A smile plasters my face as I pick her up by the shoulders, placing her behind me.

“Yes, I can. In your contract it says I can fire you without reason. You have less than an hour to leave or I’ll have security throw your ass out.”

“If you fire me, I’ll hit you with a sexual harassment lawsuit.” Her words drip with venom.

This is why I don’t trust people. They love to play the victim and pull the blackmail card.

“I figured you would try to blackmail me, so I saved all the messages and the explicit videos you sent me. I’ll press charges against *you* for sexual harassment, and I’ll make sure you won’t get hired in this city. Try me.” I grind my teeth. “I’m not going to ask you to leave again.”

Without giving her a chance to respond, I slam the door in her face and stomp to my desk. When I slump into my chair, I sigh loudly. I glance out the floor-to-ceiling window of my office, the sun reflecting off the skyscraper.

I’m going to be a husband soon, I can feel my freedom slowly going out the window. I can’t believe Poppy said yes to marrying me and I can’t believe I agreed to be married for the rest of my life. This is too damn complicated for me.

If she were anyone else, I would not have taken her offer. I never thought I’d become a one-woman man again, like I was

with Gemma. I swore I'd never be in a committed relationship again, but this time it's different. This time love isn't involved. This time, it's business. I know I told her I will stay married to her for the rest of our lives, but after one year I'm going to serve her divorce papers. It might be wrong to go back on my word, getting what I want and dumping her, but she will thank me for it.

And the way she was asking me questions about children, I suspect she was asking because she wants children herself, and I can't give her that. I don't trust Poppy, which is why I hired Michael to keep tabs on her. I didn't get much sleep last night, all because of her. Being in close proximity to her makes my dick hard and I don't know how I'm going to be married to her for a year and not fuck her, but she's going to cave in sooner or later.

My COO, Trent, walks into my office and takes a seat across from me, smoothing out his tie with a frown creasing his face. He's wearing a black suit with a red blood tie. He leans back in the chair, eyes the window, then glances back to me, crossing his leg over his knee.

“What's wrong with Diana?”

I wiggle the mouse and the computer screen comes to life. I type in my username and password. “She's fired because I'm hiring my soon-to-be fiancée.”

I still can't believe I agreed to this shit. Marriage.

He bursts out laughing and shakes his head.

Why are people so shocked when I say that I'm going to be a married man? I get it, I have a reputation of being a playboy and I've been photographed with different women every other day.

Okay.

Fine.

I can see why people would be skeptical.

In the media, I have a reputation for having one-night stands and having various women on my arm.

“I'm not joking,” I snap.

Shock colors his face. “Oh... Ew.” He frowns. “Why are you getting married? And to whom? I didn't know you even had a girlfriend.”

Trent has been my friend since our early years in college, I met him through Atlas at a house party. He sleeps with different women as well, but the difference between him and I are he keeps his business low-key. I glance at his messy blond hair, his pale complexion. He sits forward in the chair, resting his elbows on his thighs.

I shake my head and rest my arms on the chestnut desk. “I didn’t until last night. Poppy Giles. I want to inherit my uncle’s business.”

He shrugs. “It’s a business deal. People get married for convenience all the time,” he shoots back, setting his loafers on top of my desk, and I slap them away. I swear he acts like this is his own office.

“I’m not ready to commit,” I stroke my beard. “I don’t know how to be a husband,” I say.

I don’t want to hurt Poppy anyway, so I’m going to keep my distance from her. Keep our relationship strictly business.

“For starters, don’t stick your dick in different women, and you’ll be fine.”

“I’m capable of being faithful.” I lean back in my seat and thrust my fingers through my hair. “Why are you here?”

He frowns, then bites his lip. “You remember that chick I took to the fashion show ten months ago?”

I nod. “Debbie?”

“Yeah, she popped up at my penthouse and left a note and a baby. Apparently, she doesn’t want to be a mother anymore. I feel so guilty because she didn’t let me know she was pregnant. I would have been there for Zyra.”

I’m so shocked to hear what he said.

I know how it feels to be surprised and not know what to do. Hearing the words that you’re a parent can be a bit of a shock, especially when you don’t have the patience or the time to be one. Memories flood my mind of Harper.

“How are you going to go from being a single man to having a child?”

“I still can’t wrap my mind around it. Life is so hard, and I’m not adjusting to the change well. Getting up every three hours to feed and change her is a pain in the ass.” He shakes his head. “Half of the time when she cries, I don’t know the reason why she’s crying. It’s too fucking exhausting, and I never get any sleep.”

“Yeah, it is hard being a single parent, and don’t forget time-consuming, you never have any real time to yourself. Did you do a DNA test?” I ask.

He nods. “She’s mine. I had it done myself.”

I shrug. “Maybe having a kid will warm your cold heart.” I smirk.

He rolls his eyes. “Shut up. I don’t know what to do with her. She’s only a month old, and my sister is helping me out until I hire a nanny.” He gets up from the seat. “You want to come over and meet her?”

I shake my head. “I can’t. I’m having my first official date with my fake girlfriend tonight.”

“Good luck with that, and have fun,” he says before rising from the chair and leaving my office.

Fun is the last thing I will have on this date.

I work throughout the day, in and out of meetings, trying to fix the numbers on a spreadsheet. My driver, Chance, picks up my dry cleaning. I should have waited and fired Diana at the end of the day, because I hate tedious work. I glance at my watch to find that it’s lunchtime, so I order food from the closest deli shop. As I stand up and dust off my suit jacket, there’s a knock at my office door. I gaze at my stepmother, Katie, who walks in like she owns the place. She wears an elegant cream blouse with a navy pencil skirt. Her ginger hair falls over her shoulders. She’s painting a picture to the world that she is perfect along with the rest of her life, but she does coke every chance she gets and is hooked on prescription meds, meanwhile allowing my father to fuck his secretary. Her heels click against the floor as she stomps toward me. I glance down at her with my hands on my hips, eyeing her balled-up fists glued to her sides.

The lines around her eyes and lips deepen.

“I heard from Lacey that you’re engaged,” she sneers.

There is no surprise that she would come up here unannounced. She wants to control me like she controls my father, but I would rather set myself on fire than do what she says, which is why she was happy that my father had me shipped off to boarding school when I was a kid.

She hasn’t been here more than a few minutes and already I’m ready for her ass to leave.

I dig my nails into my palms and shove them in my pants pockets.

“So? What’s your point?”

I always suspected she was sleeping with my father before my mom passed away because it wasn’t until my mother was fresh in the grave that they eloped in secret. She popped up out of the blue explaining to me that she married him and was going to be my new mother. She will never be my mother. Tommy thought he could wipe the memory of my mother away from me. He never wanted to mention her after she died.

“I would offer my congratulations, but we all know you’re only doing this to get James’s business. I don’t understand why you need it when you’re already a billionaire. Tommy needs the money more than you do.”

“Do you think I give a fuck? Why don’t you go back to the job you were doing before you married my father—you know, being an escort? You still look young enough.” I’ve had enough of her shit. She hates whenever I bring up her past.

I don’t care.

Eat shit and die.

Anger burns in her retinas as she rests her hands on her hips.

“That’s exactly why your father shipped you off to boarding school. You’re like a cancer in this family. Killing everything around you, like you di—”

“You finish that last sentence and you’ll regret it.”

I take a step forward, she takes one back.

I don't condone hitting women, but if she finishes that last sentence I will go to the media and tell them all about her past. Tommy made sure to have those records concealed, but I have evidence should I need to use it.

I point to the door. "Get the fuck out of my office or I'll have you thrown out."

She examines her manicured nails, tsking. "What are you going to do?"

"Do you want to test me, Katie?"

She pouts and turns on her heel. "We'll see you in court."

Once she leaves, my shoulders sag and let out a sigh of relief.

I'm glad the Wicked Witch of the West has left.

My father wants a war, I'm going to give it to him. He thinks he can send his minion in here to talk to me. I'm going to bury this motherfucker.

I grab my phone from my breast pocket and call Aurora. She answers on the third ring. Aurora is my private investigator and has been my friend since we met a few years ago. She charges an arm and leg for her services but it's top-notch. She used to work for the Secret Service and is Michael's niece.

"Barrett. What do you need?" Her tone is firm.

I hear the sound of a keyboard clicking in the background.

"Investigate Tommy. Dig up any dirt you can find on him."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"No."

I tap the End Call button.

Whatever dirt my father is hiding, I'm going to use it against him.

He's going to wish he hadn't fucked with me.



Chapter EIGHT

Poppy

Michael drives me to different furniture stores and I pick out a few paintings, a couch, and an end table. I plan to remake the living room, so it won't look like the Batcave. Afterward, I buy business attire. When I worked for my stepfather, I didn't have to dress up as much, so I wore regular clothes. My stepfather thinks that women don't belong in business meetings, which is stupid.

An hour later, I'm in the cafe. Fresh coffee brews behind the counter, and different flowers decorate the building. Even though the restaurant's atmosphere is inviting, it doesn't stop my heart from beating a thousand beats a minute and the jitters in my lower gut.

I'm about to meet my mother and Sophia. I haven't seen my mother since I broke the news to her that I ended my relationship with Link. She held her head high and told me to never speak to her again. No emotion on her face. Sometimes, I question if she loves me and whether or not I'm good enough for her. The sting from that still lingers in my chest. The way she was cold toward me and got over me quickly.

I survey the front entrance. Sophia enters and scans the restaurant. When her eyes land on me, she gives me a sad smile as she makes her way to my table. I'm so glad we settled on a place where it's laid-back and chill. Maybe it'll lighten my mother's mood when she sees me.

Sophia holds out her arms and I stand up from the table, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and squeezing her as much as I can. I let go and we both slide into our seats.

"I haven't told Mother that you will be here because I was afraid she wouldn't show up."

That was a bad idea because Mother doesn't like surprises. One time, I threw her a surprise birthday party and she cursed me out and told me not to do it again. But she might not be mean to Sophia, she's a lot nicer and softer toward her. Sometimes, I envy their relationship because I want her to treat me the exact same way she treats my half-sister.

I nod as the waitress comes and collects Sophia's order, whereas I'm too nervous and anxious to eat or drink anything. Sophia rubs the back of my hand, and I fill my lungs with air then exhale.

My mother finally comes into view and my heart flutters, my chest burns. I want to cry and hug her tight. She still looks the same. Her skin tone is the color of golden sand. Smooth. My mother is forty-five; she had me when she was twenty years old, but she still looks youthful. I hope I look as good as her when I'm her age. Her thick, kinky hair is down her back, and she wears a designer dress and a pair of Chanel glasses. My mother looks like a goddess, owning the room as a few people stop and stare at her.

She looks around the room and spots Sophia. When her eyes meet mine, rage flashes in her hazel eyes and she grinds her teeth as she makes her way to the table. She air-kisses Sophia and sits down at the table, not acknowledging me.

A tear falls down my cheek even though I'm trying to stay strong, but it's hard when she won't even look at me.

"Mother..." My lips quiver.

"Poppy." Her tone is filled with so much animosity she acts like I killed Fluffy, her cat. She picks up the menu, then sets it back down.

There is so much I want to tell her, but I can't form the words, so I keep quiet. It's better to remain silent than say something stupid.

She turns her eyes to Sophia. "Why is she here? Is this an ambush?"

Sophia shakes her head, and the waitress brings her food at this moment but she pushes it to the center of the table.

"Mom, this is ridiculous. You are disowning my sister, because she didn't want to marry her ex?"

My mother completely ignores Sophia. The lines on her forehead deepen as she eyes me up and down in disgust.

"You want to disappoint the family even further? I can't even stand to look at you. You bring shame to this family."

I can't help but shed a few more tears as they leak from my eyes, a huge-ass lump forming in my throat. Maybe she's right. I do bring shame to this family, and not by not marrying Link, but I was always the kid who rebelled against her wishes. And I know deep down she loves me, but I need to stop fucking up.

"Ease up, Momma." Sophia's tone deflates. "She wanted to tell you that she's engaged to someone." A smile stretches across her face and she strokes my shoulder.

I wish her words would help ease the tension between my mother and me, but it doesn't. My mother rolls her eyes and bangs her hand against the table. I've never seen her so pissed off.

"It doesn't matter, it's the fact that she called off a perfect deal for your father, and when your dad doesn't get opportunities then I don't. Poppy is a selfish bitch who's only thinking about herself."

People in the cafe stop what they are doing and glance at us. Embarrassment eats at me like a disease.

I want to scream at my mother, but I remain in my seat, putting my head down. This meeting isn't going anywhere near what I planned, and it was a waste of time. All my dreams of us reuniting went out the window. I shouldn't have wasted Sophia's time setting this up.

At this point, I'm not going to get what I want. I should call off the wedding with Jasper, but I'm won't because I need to keep my end of the bargain. It wouldn't be right to leave him high and dry.

"He wasn't treating her right, Mom. Don't you care about her happiness?" Sophia snaps.

Her appetite must have returned because she pulls the plate back in front of her and digs the knife into the butter and smears it onto the croissant before taking a gigantic bite.

My mother laughs humorlessly. "Happiness? Marriage isn't about rainbows, flowers, and love. It's about business and wealth. It doesn't make any sense to marry someone you love if they can't provide you with a happy life." She shakes her head. "You think I married your father because of love? *Please*. He does whatever he wants, and I do what I want. I got tired of working two jobs and struggling. This is a cutthroat world, you either sink or swim." Her eyes snap to mine. "You, darling, are sinking." She smacks her hand on the table again, this time the plates and cups rattle, and she glares at Sophia. "Don't ever ambush me again, because I'll disown you as well." She sighs. "The only person who was born with an ounce of common sense is Jimmy. That's it. Sophia, stop socializing with her, she's making us look bad."

Sophia pouts. "I'm not going to stop talking to Poppy, Mom. She's my sister."

"Fine. You want to mingle with trash, then that's on you, but if we're having a family outing, don't you bring her name up." Without sparing me a second glance, she says, "don't ever contact me again, Poppy. You're dead to me."

As Mother gets up from the table and leaves, I burst into tears and Sophia wraps her arms around me. I can't stop crying, no matter what Sophia does to try to soothe me. Why does my mom hate me for not doing what she says? Why can't she love me the same way she loves Jimmy and Sophia? Is it because she has resentment toward my father, because he was a junkie? Is it because I look like him? I cry so hard my head throbs.

The waitress comes back to the table. "Are you okay?"

"She is. Can I have the check?" Sophia asks.

"Sure," she answers, heading to the register.

“It’s going to be okay,” she coos as if she’s soothing a wounded animal. “Mom will come around, I promise.”

I doubt she will, because she didn’t give a shit about my engagement when Sophia mentioned it, but I shake my head. “You’re right.”

I try to put on a smile, but I know, deep down, things won’t be fine.



Chapter NINE

Poppy

Sadness burns in my chest. My feet hit the pavement and the cool breeze hits my face as I run through Central Park. I'm trying to shake the pain in my chest. The events of earlier today plays in my mind like a broken record. My mother fully rejected me and not allowing me get a word in. I want to try again with her, to get her to see what I plan, but the other part of me wants to move on with my life and call the wedding off. My mother is stubborn, and she'll probably never accept anyone except for Link.

So I have two choices: go back to Link for her to accept me or continue with this marriage deal with Jasper and win her heart that way. I'll stick to the latter. Link is not worth it. I have to keep telling myself that, otherwise I'll end up going back to him—and I really don't want to.

I don't want to go out with Jasper on this date and play pretend, I want to go back to the penthouse and crawl in bed and yank the covers over my head.

My calves burn as sweat drips down my face. My hair clings to the back of my neck. The sun beats down on my shoulders. The sky is crystal clear, and I watch as an older couple strolls past me.

My life is too much in shambles. I'm stuck in a relationship without love—something I swore I wouldn't do—for the rest of my life and I'm giving up my dreams of becoming a mother. All because I want my mother to accept me.

Her words echo in my head. *Trash*. She's called me a bitch before but never trash. Her words dig into my head and take root, like a tree. She makes me feel as if I'm not good enough. No matter what I do, she's my mother and I still love her. She needs me right now, and I can't turn my back on her. She needs me to help her and my stepfather to get out of the debt they're in, and I will.

The only way to get her attention is maybe through the media, so this dinner date with Jasper might prompt her to call me. Hopefully, it will. If not, I will try another route.

I stop at the entrance of the park, and Michael picks me up and takes me back to the penthouse. I hop in the shower and clean myself well, then I get dressed and sit at the vanity which I had delivered earlier, grab the eyeliner, and glide it over my eyes.

Once I'm finished, I set the eyeliner down and cover my face in foundation and spread blush over my cheeks. I want to glance at myself in the mirror, but shame doesn't let me do it.

Jasper waltzes into the bathroom and he changes from his suit to a dark shirt, displaying his thick muscles, and his dress pants are snug around his waist and thighs. His frames sit on the bridge of his nose. He looks like he stepped out of a fashion magazine. My mouth waters at the sight. I don't want to dampen his evening with my bullshit, so I say, "You look beautiful in your outfit."

"Beautiful? Men can't be beautiful." A wicked smile spreads across his face, and my heart warms. I stand up and flatten my silk dress that hugs my body, causing him to whistle.

"You're fine as fuck in that dress."

He comes up to me, sits on the chair I just vacated in front of the vanity, then he grabs my heels and places each one on.

Those stupid butterflies are back, swarming in my stomach, and my heart flutters. My body quickly remembers what his hands can do to my body. I know I told him no sex, but I don't think I will be able to hold off much longer. I need to put some distance between us. How can he make a simple act look so sexy? My skin burns from his touch.

He casts me a curious glance. "What happened at lunch today?"

I'm not about to disclose to him what happened with my mother. It's my issue and I need to face it on my own. It would be nice to hear his opinion, but he has other things to worry about than me. Plus, I don't want him to think I'm going to back out of our deal.

I avoid eye contact with him and clear my throat. "Nothing."

His eyes trail mine as he folds his arms across his chest.

"Bullshit. Michael reported back to me that you met someone at a cafe."

I step back, putting some distance between us. "So that's what you do? Have him spy on me?"

"Yes, actually I do," he answers as if he doesn't care if I know.

Jasper is bold. Too bold. Most men wouldn't admit to spying on their soon-to-be wife.

Anger spreads to my chest like wildfire. "Why are you having him spy on me?"

"That's not your concern. My concern is your well-being and who you meet."

Why does he care anyway? It's not like I'm his real girlfriend. The better question is, why doesn't he trust me?

"You don't trust me," I state.

I stomp to the walk-in closet and grab my clutch that's the shape of a ball and strap it across my shoulders. He's on my heels like white on rice, and before I know it he's leaning against the arch of the doorway.

“This is business, so my business doesn’t concern you,” I snap.

“If you were meeting another guy, Poppy, then this wedding is off. I’m not going to be played a fool.”

Just as I thought, he has trust issues. Who hurt him? How is this marriage going to work if he doesn’t trust me? We’re already starting off on the wrong foot. I debate on telling him the truth, but if I lie and he finds out, he might not start to trust me at all, and I need him to win my mother’s approval. We both need each other’s help. And I don’t want to play games with him.

“It’s nothing like that. I met with my mother, and s-she didn’t want to see me. She called me trash.” Me repeating it all out loud to him makes me feel ten times worse, and I feel foolish. I’m allowing my emotions to get the best of me.

Anger crowds his eyes and he bawls his hands into fists but keeps them glued to his sides. “You’re not trash, Poppy.” His tone is gentle. He strokes my cheeks and warmth spreads in my belly. I don’t know if his words are genuine, but I needed to hear them. I need to hear something that’s uplifting. I feel like my head has been underwater, waiting for fresh air.

“It’s no big deal.” I shrug.

“It is. No one deserves verbal abuse like that, not from their own mother.”

He’s right, but my mother is under a lot of stress right now from my stepfather’s business, and their mountains of debt—she doesn’t need me adding more to her plate, but I don’t say those words. Instead I say, “We have to go or we’re going to be late for our fake date.”

He holds out his arm and I link mine with his.

Wordlessly, we make it to the limo and Chance opens the door for us. I slide in with Jasper sitting next to me. He rests his arms on the top of the seat, and I’m engulfed in him, inhaling his expensive cologne and the smell of the leather seats.

Neither one of us says a word, both of us are trapped in our own thoughts. Hopefully, I can pull off acting like I’m in love with him or at least adore him. Acting was never my strong point.

When I was a kid, dancing was more my style. I hope I don't fuck it up for either of us.

I glance out the window and listen to the windshield wipers whine as they slap against the foggy glass. Of course it would rain on the day I feel shitty. The city's skyscrapers pass by in a blur.

My mind is still back at the cafe with my mother. I'm hoping if we post on social media about our relationship, it will get back to her, but my mother can be as stubborn as a bull, but I need to try and see if my plan will work.

Maybe when the news spreads like wildfire that I'm engaged to Jasper, she'll come talk to me.

Jasper quickly grabs my hand and sweeps a strand of my hair behind my ear. He blends in with his car aesthetic. Smooth and elegant, yet powerful. I hate that my body is aware of his presence, and how the back of my neck burns hotter than lava.

We arrive at a steak house in SoHo, and Chance opens the door with a black umbrella at the ready. Jasper gets out of the car, holding the umbrella over my head.

His fingers intertwine with mine, and energy zaps between us. I want to pull away, but this is part of the act.

Paparazzi snap photos of us and ask Jasper a few questions about me. These photos are going to be on social media and all I can think is: what if my makeup isn't good? What if the lighting is poor and I look like a possessed demon? I shake my head, I'm overthinking.

The smell of rain hits my nostrils and I hope that my hair doesn't get wet. Rain and my hair do not get along. The sky is darkening and the restaurant's name shines.

New York City is so pretty in the rain, full of mystery.

"If we play it well, we can get people talking," Jasper says. "People will buy into our story."

Once we make it inside, I spot an A-list actor and a few well-known businesspeople. The place is packed, everyone's chatter bouncing off the walls. The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling burn real candles, dimming the restaurant, providing an intimate atmosphere.

Our table is covered in red cloth with a black candle in the center. Jasper pulls out my chair. I sit as he presses a kiss to my forehead. The kiss makes goosebumps decorate my arms, and heat climbs the top of my forehead.

He leans down and whispers in my ear, “Journalist, April Moore, is sitting directly across from you.”

He presses his mouth against mine, and my body stiffens before I relax against him. Electricity buzzes through me again, and this is the second time I felt it in such a short time. I moan against his mouth. Jasper sure knows how to kiss. How the hell am I going to continue to act natural if he is going to lock lips with me every other second? So, I pull away quickly.

He sits next to me, wrapping his arm around my waist.

I glance at April, and she smiles. She’s a beautiful dark-skinned woman with straight, thick hair. She’s curvy in all the right places and her eyes light up at seeing us. My gaze snags onto the waitress, dressed in black, standing at our table.

My stomach makes an angry growling sound as I haven’t eaten since the omelet this morning. I order myself a soup and a salad—nothing heavy—and Jasper orders himself veal and a salad.

“How was your day at work?” I ask.

Surprise flickers across his face as he studies me like a map.

“What?”

He grabs my hands. “I missed you, Angel.”

His eyes look sincere, but I know it’s fake. It’s only an act and I need to recover from my shock. I haven’t had a man be nice to me in a long time. Link was always a bit of an asshole to me and hated public affection, so I feel even more awkward that Jasper is being so attentive, but I’m kind of enjoying it.

“I missed you too.”

He presses his lips to my knuckles. “It’s not the same without seeing you all day.”

Oh, he’s so good at pretending! So good at pretending, I almost fall for it. His words sound too real.

April writes on her notepad, quickly looking away when she notices I'm looking at her.

The waitress finally brings our food, and Jasper feeds me a scoop of my chicken noodle soup. It looks so intimate. From the outside, we look like a well-put-together couple. People glance our way, but it's hard to pretend I'm happy when I feel like I'm dying inside.

Once we're done eating, Jasper places me on his lap and I can feel his hard erection digging into my ass. My mind goes to the times when we had sex. I need to keep my mind occupied by thinking about other things. *This is fake*, I chant to myself. *This is fake. He doesn't want me.*

I don't want to fuck this up, and I'm worried my body language is showing how I feel on the inside. Am I doing too much?

"Relax, Poppy. You're doing great," he whispers in my ear. "I read your résumé and saw that you have a degree in marketing. Do you want to work in that department instead of working as my assistant?"

I shake my head and drench my salad in ranch dressing before stabbing a piece of lettuce. "How did you get my résumé?"

His lips brush against my neck. "I did a background check on you after we had sex."

He cuts his veal into four pieces and pops a piece in his mouth.

"You're talking about the very first time we fucked?"

He nods and wipes his mouth with a napkin.

"Do you do that to all the women you fuck?" I bite his ear, snuggling my face under his neck.

His fingers trace my arm and I giggle like a schoolgirl.

"No, only the ones I want to keep forever."

His words slide over my chest like warm honey. He's only saying this because of April. She can hear everything that is being said between us. I'm sure she can, because the smile she's giving me is so sweet I can get diabetes from it. She takes out her

phone from her purse and snaps pictures of us. I pretend not to notice.

“How m-many women did you run background checks on?”

“Just two.”

I want to ask who the other girl was that he wanted to keep forever, but I don't. It's not important, and I don't want to ruin our groove, especially with April's eyes on us.

“To answer your earlier question, no. I actually hated working in the marketing department. When I worked for my stepfather, it was too much and the only reason I got the job was so I could impress my mother, but she didn't care. My mother sees me as a trophy wife to my future husband because I'm considered the pretty daughter. She was shocked my sister got married before me at the tender age of eighteen.”

He cups my face and traces his thumb across my bottom lip. “You are gorgeous, but you have brains, too. I was impressed by your résumé. I think you will be a good asset to my company.”

“Which company?”

“Wolfgang Banking.”

“You want me to transfer when you leave to work at your uncle's company?” I sip my red wine.

He finishes the last bite of his veal. “Why, wouldn't you?”

His words melt my heart, because I needed to hear it, especially after my mother called me trash earlier.

I whisper in his ear, “I wish your words were true.”

“They actually are. I'm impressed by your résumé. What is it that you want to do?” he asks.

No one has ever asked me that question, nor have they taken any interest in what I want to do. It's always about me trying to please people. Lake calls me a people pleaser.

I debate whether I should tell him that in the future I wanted a child, but he made it clear he doesn't want children, and I don't want to ruin our night by mentioning it, so I start with a subject that's safe.

“I don’t know. Honestly, I’m still figuring it out. I’m twenty-five and I have plenty of time to figure it out. The only thing I don’t want to be is an outsider to my family, especially to my mother.”

“It seems both our parents are a shitshow.”

Curiosity gets the best of me and before I have a chance to ask, the waitress brings us the check.

Jasper pays for it, then April watches us leave.

When we get into the limo, I ask, “Do you think she bought it?”

Jasper exhales and sags against the seat as Chance takes us home. “I hope so. We did great at pretending.”

I sink into the leather, placing my hands on my lap. Jasper removes his phone from his breast pocket and dials a number.

“Ellis. If a picture pops up of me and Poppy, make sure it’s on every site.” He ends the call and checks his emails.

I wish to one day have a man that treats me the way Jasper did in the restaurant, to dote on me and love me, but it won’t ever happen. I’ll never be in a healthy relationship.

No need to think about the fantasy. I chose this lifestyle, and now I have to live with the consequences.



Chapter TEN

Jasper

I lean against the arch of the doorway of my library as I stare at Poppy while she curls up on the suede couch, eyes glued to her phone as she laughs hard. She's so young and innocent, brightening up the whole damn room. I don't like the way she made a warm, fuzzy feeling grow in my chest during dinner last night or that she makes my place feel like a... home. I haven't been so affectionate toward a woman in a long time. It brought back memories of why I don't do relationships in the first place. It makes me feel vulnerable, and I can't have that.

Dark hair falls over her face and her light brown tone is smooth. Her presence dominates this room, and her perfume filters through the air. She's more beautiful than the northern lights in Alaska. I love admiring her beauty, it reminds me of a beautiful painting that makes you stop to admire.

I glance around my place and notice she has replaced so much of my stuff. She ordered a new nightstand and a couch and placed digital frames of us and her family on the wall. She hired painters to paint two walls a deep purple and left the remainder of

the walls black. It looks like a home, and if people were to come here, they would think we were a real couple.

I'm not going to lie to myself that I actually like her in my space, and the thought of getting married scares the shit out of me. The last relationship I was in, I was engaged to her and it didn't turn out well. This is the best marriage deal where we both get something from each other—and no flowers, love, or hearts. Relationships are transactional. No matter what the cost. I hope she keeps it that way. I don't want her to get any silly ideas.

She glances up at me, and a frown displays on her face, then she sets her phone face down on the cream table. Is she talking to other men? I shake my head. I'm being irrational. Poppy doesn't seem like the type to go back on her word.

Either way, it's none of my business. I know I'm paranoid, and I need to tone it down before I ruin whatever dynamic we have.

She crinkles her cute nose. "Why are you staring at me?"

I did a thorough search on my future parents-in-law, and what I learned was not good. Her stepfather is swimming in debt; he put their house down as collateral to a loan company and if he doesn't pay it off soon, they will take everything. Her half-sister's husband has been helping them pay the bills, but he's fed up. They want Poppy to clean up their mess and since she doesn't want to disappoint them, she's going to do it. Even at the expense of her life. They are already leaving a sour taste in my mouth. My job is to protect her, so that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to protect her assets and the money she's going to accumulate while she's married to me, so when I decide to divorce her, she will live comfortably.

"Why do you care so much about getting your mother's approval?"

The question has been rattling in my brain since the moment she asked me to help her stepfather. I stroll inside and sit in one of the chairs she picked out.

Her eyes widen as she studies my crisp shirt and my arms with veins trailing over my tan skin, then her doe eyes stare at my crotch and she blushes, quickly looking away.

She says she's not going to have sex with me, but I have no doubt she's going to go back on her word. Last night after dinner, I wanted to fuck her in the limo but refrained from touching her. It was hard to contain myself and show restraint, especially after I had a taste of her.

“Because... I don't want to be an outcast.”

I scoot the chair closer to her to the point our knees touch, and she watches me closely. Her pulse jumps out of her neck. Despite her putting on a brave face, I make her nervous.

“Your stepfather has a mountain of debts,” I tell her.

She nods and sighs, twirling the end of a lock of her hair. “I know. He's running out of money.”

I don't understand her logic on wanting to help someone who keeps putting themselves in the same predicament. He can't control his family's spending habits.

I cross my legs, my eyes veering to the window as streaks of rain smear the glass. “So, you're going to trap yourself into a loveless marriage to save them?”

Lavender scents the air coming from the candle burning on the coffee table.

She nods. “That's what family is supposed to do. Help each other.”

I don't understand why she cares about her mother; she verbally abuses her and treats her like shit. I thought she was helping them because she wanted money from them, but I can see as clearly as day that she's choosing to marry me because she wants to help her parents. I don't know how I feel about that. I've never seen anyone put their needs on the back burner for others.

“I can say the same thing about you,” she snaps. “You don't even love me and you're not the type to settle down. Yet, you're doing it to get your uncle's business.” She glances at her black nails.

Little does she know, I'm leaving her high and dry once the paperwork is signed and I am CEO of Wolfgang Bank.

“Everything is a business transaction, Poppy.”

“Every relationship is like that?” She folds her legs on the couch, eyeing me like I have three heads. “Please elaborate on your theory.”

“Dating. You have to take women out and they expect so much from you in exchange for their time. The transaction.” I loosen my tie because the air is a bit stuffy in here, and the tension between us is thick, I can cut it with a knife. “Friendships are transactional. The only reason why people are friends with others is because they provide something you need.”

She taps the tip of her nails on her chin. It’s adorable the way she bites the inside of her cheek.

“Not everything is transactional. Not everyone is out to gain something in return.” She glances at the ceiling fan and brings her eyes back to me for a moment too long, studying my eyes as if it will reveal any emotions. I keep my facial expression blank. Something I learned a long time ago as a kid when I didn’t want anyone trying to use my emotions against me. “When I slept with you last year, yes, I was gaining pleasure, but I also gained my dignity and self-confidence to leave my ex.” Tears gloss over her eyes and I wanted to bring her into my arms and kiss her, but I stay rooted to the chair.

I don’t care about her feelings, so why do I feel the need to comfort her? The only reason why I gave her the courage to leave her ex was because it benefited me—and I wanted to use her for sex. Yes, she deserved to be treated better than how she was, because no one deserves to be abused. And I like her more than the other women I’ve fucked. But I can’t picture us together as a real couple.

“I haven’t been with any other man besides my ex when we hooked up, and you made me realize that I don’t have to take his shit.”

Her words do something to my stomach. I can’t believe I’m a grown man getting butterflies. Fuck my life. I don’t know how to accept her words as she paints the picture of me as a hero, but I’m far from it. I’ve done things I’m not proud of, and if she saw the real me she would feel a different way.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “So, what exactly did you gain from helping me get my confidence back?”

I would say sex, but that would be a complete lie. I didn't expect her question to knock the wind out of me. I thought the reason she wanted to help her parents was because she wanted something from them, but it's more than that, she wants to be accepted by her mother. She's not the person I thought she was. She's selfless. Willing to give up her own happiness for the people she loves. I admire her for doing that. Most people only care about their self-interests and don't care whose toes they step on.

She bites her lip, waiting for me to respond. I knew she was different from all the other women I met. She doesn't expect me to take care of her and all she asked me for was to be her fake fiancé so she can help her stepfather with his business. The only reason why she asked for a wedding was because of her mother's approval. I get up from my seat and dust off my pants.

“You. I got you.”



I meet Lacey at the bowling alley after she texted me saying she needed to get out of the house because no one was there. I sit at the table and slip on my bowling shoes. I left Poppy at the house because things between us were getting too intense and I didn't want to elaborate my feelings with her. I didn't want her asking me more questions, so I hauled ass out of there like a coward. I always run from my feelings, and I'm not the usual type to share.

Lacey leans against the table, sighing, her face twisted in anger. She pushes her glasses up her nose, wearing a tank that is too tight and very short shorts.

“You good?” I ask.

Usually, I don't care about other people's feelings and what they have going on in their personal lives, but I don't want her sour mood to ruin our evening. “Don't tell my parents, but I'm four weeks pregnant.”

She's too young to be having children, and she's only seventeen years old. I mean, I knew she was having sex—she came to me and asked me to take her to get birth control, so I did it. She needed to protect herself, but I thought she was being careful. I never thought she would be a teen mother, because

unlike our brother, she has always been the reasonable one. The one to follow the rules and do what she's supposed to do. She gets good grades in school and she's the captain of the cheerleading team. How is she going to raise a child? As far as money goes, she has her trust fund.

I don't know what to say, so I remain quiet, listening to the techno music playing in the background and the clash of pins.

“Dad has been on edge because he's pissed off that you're going to get married soon. He saw the tabloids of your girlfriend. She's hot, by the way.”

She wants to take the spotlight off her, but she hangs her head down knowing she can't, embarrassed about her situation.

I could give two shit about my father being pissed off. This wedding is happening. The pictures I saw in the magazines, thanks to April, worked. It's been all over social media sites and bloggers have been tagging Poppy and me in articles. People are speculating that we've been together for a while. And I received a few calls from magazine companies wanting to do an interview.

My fake love life isn't important right now.

Lacey becoming pregnant is a serious matter.

I grab a black bowling ball and manage to hit a few pins. The bowling alley is packed with rowdy teenagers laughing and singing along to the music. This place would have been fun to hang out at, but I'm thirty-three, and I don't want to be here.

“What are you going to do about the baby?”

She shrugs. “I'm going to keep him or her, I graduate in a few months anyway.”

I haven't seen her look so defeated.

“Is Blue going to help you with the baby?” He better, or else I'm going to make him pay. She and her baby will not go without.

She nods. “He's on tour with a famous rock band. He's not well off like we are, his mother is a junkie and his father isn't in his life.” She grabs her shoes and puts them on, then she goes to the rack and picks up a pink ball and sets it on the rail before she faces me.

I don't think this guy is going to stick around. She's too young to have a baby, and I'm not going to scowl at her for being a teenager. I was fucking when I was her age. Having kids isn't something you can do on a whim.

"You didn't try to trap him on purpose?"

Her eyes narrow and she shoots daggers at me, then she rolls her eyes.

"Why the hell would you ask me some shit like that?"

It was stupid for me to ask her that, I know that, but you never know. And I needed to know if she trapped him on purpose with a baby so he won't go anywhere. "I know, I had to ask. You need to put him on child support."

"No, I believe he's going to help."

"He's seventeen, Lacey. Take his word like a grain of salt. Make it a business transaction, just in case he decides to leave or you decide to leave him, that way your child will be taken care of. Men in the music business don't get married or stay with their girls for long."

"Dad can't stand Blue. He thinks the only reason he's with me is because of our last name."

That is something me and Tommy were on the same page about. People only want us in their lives because we have so much power. I hope it's not true in Blue's case because if he is, I'm going to go out of my way to destroy his life.

"Do you miss Harper?" Her words are barely a whisper.

The thought of Harper makes my chest cave in. For years, I couldn't speak about her without getting so angry.

I swallow thickly. "Every single day."

A lump forms in the back of my throat, and as time goes by it doesn't ease the ache in my chest. Thanks to Gemma, I'll never see her again. I need to change the subject and clear my head.

"If you need anything, let me know. Kids' stuff, whatever. I'll look out for you."

She nods and leans over to give me a hug. Her sweet perfume invades my nostrils.

“Thank you for having my back,” she says. “You’re the best brother ever.”

Her words melt my cold heart.



Chapter ELEVEN

Poppy

I push back from my desk and grab a copy of a document that Jasper wanted me to print out, then I waltz into his office and set them down. He leans back in his chair, the phone glued to his ear. His eyes trail to my face, down my cream blouse and dark pencil skirt, to my ankle boots. He sinks his teeth into his lower pillow-soft lip. Images of him bending me over the desk flash in my mind, and I shake my head. His words from the other night crash through my mind like a tidal wave. *You, I got you.* So the only reason why he convinced me that I deserved more was because he wanted me. He wanted me all to himself. His words made me feel wanted and desired in an odd way. He wanted me, and now we're nothing more than a business transaction, but I plan to prove him wrong, that people can care for each other without benefiting from it.

I gently place the paperwork on his desk, then proceed back to mine. Throughout the day, I send emails to different departments and reread the PTO policy before sending it to the HR department. Jasper is a lot worse than I thought he was. He's

not an asshole to me but his employees face his wrath. He suspended a guy without pay for speaking when he was speaking. Talk about being dramatic. My job isn't bad so far, but I don't see myself doing this for too long. It's one of those types of jobs where you do the same stuff day in and day out. It's nothing to look forward to either, but the pay is phenomenal.

A blonde woman with a slender frame walks into the office. Her pantsuit hugs her body, and her heels click against the floor as she makes it to the desk.

"You're Poppy," she says with a smile slapped across her face.

I'm leery of her. Why is she here, to see my boyfriend? *Fake* boyfriend. Soon-to-be fiancé, then husband.

Jealousy claws its way through my chest. Why do I even care? It's not like we're actually dating, and I don't have feelings for him in a romantic way.

"I am. How may I help you?" I ask.

"I'm here for Jasper Barrett."

"And you are?"

Jasper opens the glass door and greets her with a smile. I don't like the way he smiles at her, as if she's his favorite person to see. "Aurora, step into my office."

He closes the door behind them, and I try to not turn my head. We agreed that we wouldn't be sleeping with anyone else, and she looks like one of those women that has been photographed with him on the internet. I know our relationship is fake, I get it. But to secretly flaunt her in front of me after we were in a restaurant on a pretend date to put the image out there that we're together is fucked up. It brings back old memories of Link lying to me about so-called female friends he was secretly sleeping with. But Jasper said he wasn't going to sleep around when we're married, but he didn't say we couldn't sleep with anyone else *before* the wedding. I don't know whether I should trust him or not.

It's my lunch break, so I grab my purse and head down to the cafeteria. I order myself some Thai food and chow down on it. A

man wearing a white shirt and dark slacks walks inside, and he smiles, taking a seat across from me.

He holds out his hand to shake and he squeezes my palm tight, and I quickly pull away. “Hi, I’m Archie.”

“I’m Poppy, Jasper’s assistant.” He looks me up and down.

“I’m the director of the IT department,” Archie says.

He’s good-looking, with ash blond hair and a muscular build. He gets up and strolls to the coffee machine, pours himself a cup, and brings it to his mouth. A few co-workers walk in, and they glance at me, then speak among themselves.

Laurent, a member of the security team, pokes his head inside the room. “Poppy, there is someone at the front desk for you.”

I get up from the table and wave bye to Archie.

I walk a few feet behind Laurent. “Who is it?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “A gentleman named Link Condell. He says he’s here for business.”

What does he want? If I don’t see what he wants now, he will keep coming. Link has always been persistent. I’m still pissed that he showed up first to my apartment, and now my job. My heart constricts and my hands shake like leaves.

Laurent glances at me. “Ma’am... Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.” My tone is high pitched.

With every step to the elevator, it feels as if my feet are tied to cinder blocks.

Once I’m downstairs, I don’t see Link so I step outside, and my heart nearly explodes when I see Link as he leans against the glass wall of the building. He wears a beige suit with brown loafers, so he must be on his lunch break. He has a rolled-up magazine in his hand. There is anger in his eyes as he gives me a once-over. I cross my arms, rocking on the back of my heels. Right now, he doesn’t look like the cheating, abusive punk, but the mere boy I fell in love with when I was sixteen years old. I can’t believe I spent almost a decade thinking I would marry him, that he was *the one*.

I straighten my spine and work up as much courage as I can.

“Link, what do you want?” I ask, getting straight to the point. I want to get away from him, he’s like a ringworm that I don’t want to catch.

He unrolls the magazine in his hands—*People*—and flips through the pages before waving it in my face.

“What is this shit?”

I glance at the picture of me sitting on Jasper’s lap from the night at the restaurant, and I take the magazine from him to flip through the pages, finding more photos of me and Jasper. From the pictures, we look like we’re in love, but that’s far from the truth.

I scan the article and find out what they know about me—one of his employees. The reporter wants to know if I’m the one who’s going to lock Jasper Barrett down.

I close the magazine and slap it against Link’s chest.

“So, what’s your point? I can date whoever I want.”

His face turns a shade of red and he grinds his molars. “You want to say that I’m a cheater, but the entire time you were fucking him while you were with me?”

I don’t like his tone, and he clearly needs help because I never cheated on him. Did I ever think about it? Of course. I wanted to get my revenge, but what would be the point? It would only add fuel to the fire.

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

A woman with a puppy in her hands eyes us before she walks by. Sweat dots my forehead from the scorching hot and humid weather. I don’t have time for this shit. And I need to get back to work. Wait a second. How the hell did he find out where I worked? Before I ask, he replies, “I went through your phone the night you decided to come back to me. I had to see what my birdie was up to while she was away.”

My stomach is queasy. “He sent you vivid messages of how your night went.”

“I didn’t cheat on you with him, and you know it.”

He takes a step forward, engulfing me with his body heat, sadness flashing across his face.

“Break up with him for me, please. We’ll forget this whole thing happened. I’ll treat you right. I’ll get counseling, I promise.”

Tears trail down my cheeks, and he wipes them away but I shake my head. I don’t want him touching me and I don’t want him pretending he cares, because I know he doesn’t. Link has always been about himself.

I do love Link, even now, but I have to move on with my life. He cheated on me many times and called me names when he didn’t get his way or when I wouldn’t do what he wanted me to do, and he says that every time we break up, and I always believe him. But not this time.

No, this time I’m stronger. This time I don’t have the desire to be around him, let alone be his girlfriend. He’s done too much damage to our relationship, and my self-esteem.

“No, I’m in a relationship with Jasper and I made a commitment to him.”

Fat drops of rain sprinkle my forehead, but the sun is still shining so I step inside the building. Link follows behind me, grabbing my arm, his touch like a furnace.

Slowly, I peel his fingers from my forearm.

“Of all the men in New York City, you had to choose the sluttiest one? He’s going to treat you like shit eventually. Manwhores always do.”

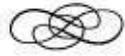
I shake my head. “I guess you would know, huh? From what I remember, you couldn’t keep your dick in your pants either.” I sigh. “Don’t ever contact me again. You and I are over. I moved on with someone else and you should too.”

He flashes me a wicked smile and grips my arm again, digging his nails into my flesh. “Last warning, Poppy, leave him,” he threatens.

I snatch my arm away, leaving a scratch burning my skin. “No.”

“You’re going to regret it.” His words are icy and send chills down my spine. Without a word, I head to the private elevators. Once inside, I sag against the wall as the A/C cools off my heated skin.

An ominous feeling grips me tightly as I shake the feeling that something bad is going to happen.



“Did Jasper agree to be your fake fiancé?” Lake asks.

She invited me to Petco to look for dog toys, because she bought a small puppy named Robert, and she wants a companion when Atlas is off in a foreign country to open their next store.

Today was a shitshow. Jasper’s *friend* was still in his office when I returned from seeing Link and he didn’t bother to introduce her to me. I watched through the glass door as the two of them laughed and talked.

What could have been so possibly funny that they were laughing so hard?

I didn’t tell Jasper about Link. It’s none of his business. He wants to keep secrets, then so can I. What exactly did Link mean about me regretting it? I checked his social media when I went back to my desk, and he posted about how brokenhearted he is, quoting love songs and quotes about a lost love on his status. To be petty, I hearted it. He acts like I’m the one who cheated on him, who emotionally abused him. And don’t get me started on the way he gaslighted me all the damn time. He caused me so much trauma I had to go to therapy for it.

A small brown dog barks at us as the owner pulls on its leash. I don’t know why I agreed to go to the pet store with Lake. This place smells like shit and piss and animals keep barking or meowing. I’ve never been an animal person. I didn’t like my mom’s cat, Fluffy. She ate her own shit and got fur all over my clothing and bedding.

“Not exactly,” I tell her. “We’re getting married.”

She picks up a small dog bowl and places it in the buggy as her mouth drops and she slaps a palm across her forehead. “I thought you needed a fake fiancé.” She crinkles her nose. “How did you get him to agree to marry you?”

I shake my head. “It was his idea. He wants to marry me because that’s the only way he can inherit his uncle’s business.”

But I don't think we will last long, because he's possibly already sticking his dick inside another woman, and I already have trust issues, and I'm pissed off. Pissed off is the wrong term—I'm more annoyed that he didn't introduce me to the woman in his office, and it makes me suspicious of him. I'll never trust Jasper, because men like him keep women on the side. Even my stepfather did it to my mother one time, and he loves my mother like Gomez loves Morticia from the Addams family.

"It's a marriage of convenience," I elaborate as she picks up a blue leash and places it in the cart. "We're having a real wedding, and you're going to be my maid of honor." She hugs me, squealing. I've never seen her this excited about anyone's wedding.

Two teenagers stop what they are doing and glance at us.

"I just knew you two would be together."

I lift my eyebrow. "It's crazy how falling in love made you more chipper." She giggles at this.

"Ever since you broke up with Link, you turned your back on love."

"Because it doesn't exist in the way I thought. Especially how we were brought up. Marriage is nothing more than a business contract."

She frowns. "You don't mean that."

I nod. "I do. You got lucky. And you should be happy, you found someone to love you unconditionally."

Lake's ex left her because of the scar she has on her face, but her husband, Atlas, loves her no matter what. The world considered her ugly, but not to me or Atlas. He swooped in like a knight on a horse and picked up the pieces of her broken heart. Guys like him are as rare as a blue moon.

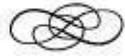
She wraps her arms around my shoulders, squeezing the life out of me. "Jasper will fall in love with you, he needs time."

"Jasper wouldn't know what love is, even if it punched him in the face."

She pushes the cart to the checkout and we scan the items, placing everything inside the gray bag. "Jasper and you have

been through a lot. I'm not giving up on you two, and you shouldn't either."

"I can't give up on something I never had hope for."



Jasper

I sit next to Poppy as I try not to stare at the yellow dress that is snug around her hips and breasts. She plays with the end of the tablecloth, taps her heels against the wooden floor, then she gulps down her glass of red wine, and she asks the waiter for more. We're at a restaurant that I own. I bought this restaurant in my early twenties, when I thought I wanted to be a chef. This steak house is one of my very first start-ups. It taught me to be disciplined and to manage a business. Out of all the businesses I own, this is the one I am most proud of. People fly from all over the country to get the best cuisine here.

I straighten my spine as I wait for my grandfather to arrive, so he can finally meet Poppy. I'm hopeful he will like her, because if not, he's going to persuade me to find another fiancée.

After hearing from Laurent that her ex showed up at work to see her, it made my blood boil. When I asked her where she had been for her lunch break, she lied straight to my face and said she stepped outside for fresh air, when everyone knows that New York City's air isn't very fresh. Ever since that day, she's been distant and hasn't spoken two words to me. I have no clue what I did to her for her to give me the cold shoulder. I want to ask her what is wrong, but if I do, it'll make me look like I care. And I don't want to open that door, where she feels the need to constantly come to me with her problems.

Our relationship is strictly business and I want to keep it that way. It doesn't surprise me that she lied, because people aren't trustworthy. She says she doesn't want him back, but I don't believe her, otherwise she wouldn't have lied to me. Lucky, the blogs didn't catch them on camera, because that would've been a mess, one I don't want to deal with.

I smooth out my gray tie and rest my hands in hers, bringing her knuckles to my mouth to kiss.

I'm annoyed with her, and I don't want to touch her, but there are too many eyes on us. She blushes and bites down on her lip to keep from smiling. This is all an act. This isn't real. Something I have to chant to myself over and over again, because being around her and not being able to do the things I want to do to her drives me insane. Personally, I think the no sex rule is stupid, but if she wants to torture us both then I'm all for it. She'll cave sooner or later.

She freezes when her eyes meet mine, then she reverts them back to her wineglass.

“What if your grandfather doesn't like me? My greatest fear is being married to someone where their family hates me.”

I tuck a few of her fine hairs behind her ear and swallow thickly, trying to get rid of the flutters in my chest. This woman is the only person I know who makes my dick hard and my heart go haywire at the same time. I don't like these feelings and it ramps up my anxiety. I want to do nothing more than kiss her soft, plump lips and fuck her like the last time.

“Be yourself and he will like you.”

I don't do well with dealing with other people's emotions, and I'm sure my grandfather will like her. She's down-to-earth, interesting, and can hold a meaningful conversation.

She leans in, whispering in my ear, “Everyone is watching us.”

I grab my crystal glass of scotch, inhale it, and down it before setting the glass on the table. “I'm the owner of this restaurant, Angel.”

Her eyes widen as they zero in on the artwork that's above our heads. A picture of a cow painted in the fields. It's very unique and made from oil paint.

Shock colors her facial features. “You own this restaurant? What else do you own?”

I take another sip of my bourbon and rest my arm on the back of the leather seat. “A few other restaurants, a few hotels. And a year from now, I will have my uncle's business.”

The waiter sets fresh garlic bread on the table and Poppy grabs one and dips it in butter. “Why a year?”

“Because I have to be married for a year to become the owner of the bank.”

She doesn’t respond, so I reach over and press my lips to her forehead. She shutters, and asks, “How did your family get wealthy?”

Is this her way of trying to get to know me? She asks a lot of questions. Why is she asking about my wealth? Does she want to negotiate money? Maybe she’s just curious.

“I’m sure you googled me. To see what my net worth is.”

She frowns, shakes her head, then rests her elbows on the table. “I googled you, but I didn’t look up your net worth. It’s not my business what you make.”

Her words kind of shock me. Most of the women I tend to sleep with often look up how much I’m worth, trying to make sure they are sleeping with an actual billionaire. Every time I think I have Poppy figured out, it turns out I don’t.

I break off a piece of bread to feed her. Her tongue licks my fingertips and blood rushes down south. I readjust my pants. “Why were you googling me?”

“To see what type of women you were into.”

“Why w—”

“You must have been really close with your uncle.”

She changes the subject quickly. I’ll let her off the hook for now, but we’ll revisit the other topic later.

Even thinking about him makes my chest ache, and she must realize this because Poppy intertwines her small fingers with my bigger ones. The gesture doesn’t feel like it’s fake. She seems concerned about me. Whether she is or not, it doesn’t stop the back of my neck from burning.

“We were,” I tell her. “He taught me a lot of things. He was like my real father. He gave me my first job, taught me how to manage my money, and helped me through rehab.”

She raises her brows. “Why did you go to rehab?”

“I was a sloppy drunk.”

Someone clears their throat, and I turn my head to find my grandfather leaning against the table wearing a dark suit. I get up and wrap my arms around his shoulders. Grandfather returns the hug with one arm. His eyes drop to Poppy, and a smile touches his eyes.

“Poppy, this is my grandfather, Anderson” I introduce them.

She gets up and brings him into a hug. He hugs her back.

“It’s nice to be touched by a pretty woman,” my grandfather says. He removes his suit jacket and he hangs it in the back of the chair before sliding into the seat in front of her.

Smiling, she sits back in her seat. “The pleasure is all mine.”

He steeples his hands, leaning his elbows on the table.

“So, tell me about yourself,” my grandfather says.

She fiddles with the tablecloth again, and I place my hands on hers, trying to sooth her. “Umm... well, I work for Jasper as his executive assistant.”

He shoots me a glare. He knows how ruthless I am with running my businesses. I can be tough on my employees, but they need the discipline. I expect a hundred percent from them, and anything fewer gets their contracts terminated. If it weren’t for my ruthless ways, I wouldn’t be one of the top billionaires in the country.

“He’s not giving you hell, is he?”

“No, he’s actually nice to me. It’s his other employees I’m worried about,” she teases, resting her hand over mine.

The waiter sets the main dish of duck and soup onto the table, and I make Poppy a plate of food. She mouths a thank-you, and I wink at her. One of my employees snaps pictures of us. No doubt, it’s going to be in the press tomorrow.

“What do you like to do for fun?” Grandfather asks Poppy.

“I love to surf the internet and look at gossip columns.” She shakes her head and holds her head down. “I can’t believe I said that out loud.”

“You’re the type to watch *Desperate Housewives*? And reality shows?” He pops a piece of food in his mouth.

Her cheeks turn a light color. “Yeah, it’s embarrassing, but other people’s lives are interesting to me.”

“There is nothing wrong with it. I watch soap operas.”

I stare at him in bewilderment. “Since when?”

“I used to watch them when your grandmother was alive. She loves those types of shows. I watch them now because it’s a reminder of her.” He smiles and eyes me. “I like her. She’s very honest.”

Poppy grins from ear to ear.

“So, what are your goals and dreams?” my grandfather asks, and he finally digs into his food.

She glances at me and looks away, focusing on the red roses in the center of the table. “Um... I always wanted children.”

This is the first I’m hearing me of this, and my chest tightens. I suspected she wanted kids, but I didn’t know that it was her dream. I feel like a jackass because I don’t want any children. Why would she put her dreams on the back burner for me? I told her I didn’t want kids, and she didn’t put up a fight. Didn’t try to convince me or negotiate that into our contract. Most people are conniving and do whatever is necessary to accomplish their goals, but not her. She’s even given up her dreams to make her mother happy, and here I am taking her dream of having kids away from her.

I drink my glass of scotch to wet my dry throat, to wash away the guilt forming in my chest.

I don’t like how my grandfather is looking at me, trying to read my mood. He can’t convince me to be a parent again. That will never happen.

I grip my glass tight, my knuckles turning white. “We’re not having them.”

The sadness on Poppy’s face makes me feel bad, but I can’t go down that road again—becoming a father. It cost me everything, and I told myself I would never have a child again. I would live in constant fear of something happening to him or her,

and I'm trying to forget about my past, but it still haunts me to this day.

"I like her, Jasper," Grandfather says. "Make her happy, you're already marrying her."

I knew this conversation was going to pop up, and I should have been better at preparing a response. My grandfather would be glad to have another grandchild, but I'm not in the headspace for one. And, unlike Poppy, I don't do shit to make people happy. It's a lesson she's going to learn the hard way, that people in general don't care about how she feels. Sometimes, she looks at life and people through rose-tinted glass; I don't. My grandfather has always been the type to please Grandmother, but when they got married, he was broke so he didn't have to worry about her trapping him with a baby to get money out of him.

And that is my biggest worry—accidentally getting a woman pregnant and allowing her to milk money out of me.

"Yeah, but this marriage isn't going to be real," I say low so no one can hear us. "We're only getting married because of Uncle James's business, and so she can get her inheritance and I can help her stepfather's business." I sip my drink. "The focus is to take down Tommy. Bringing a baby into this world will only make matters worse."

Plus, I'm still planning on divorcing Poppy the minute the ink is dry on my contract once I'm handed my uncle's company. If I have a baby with her, then I'll definitely be stuck with her for the rest of my life, and I don't want that. She's not about to be my ball and chain for the rest of my life.

"It's okay. I'm okay with not having children," she says, her eyes glossing over with tears.

The pain on her face is unbearable, and I don't know if I can handle it. It makes my heart ache.

Why is she affecting me this way?

I shouldn't care if she wants kids or not, and I don't give a fuck about her feelings.

Yet here I am trying not to console her. Here I am feeling bad for not making her happy, when that should be the last thought on my mind.

I'm growing fond of her, and I don't like it.

I place my hand over Poppy's but she pulls hers away, clearing her throat, then checking her phone. Her demeanor changes, and she avoids eye contact with me.

Her cold shoulder makes my chest sting.

"Excuse me, I have to go to the ladies' room."

As soon as she is out of eyesight, my grandfather says, "You're making a terrible mistake by not giving her a child. You can't let what happened between you and Gemma affect your relationship with Poppy."

This conversation is making me not want to go through with the marriage, but if I try to find someone else, then Poppy would have to start over with someone else too, and I can't bring myself to do it. I have to keep my distance. My crushing on her is only going to make things complicated between us.

She knew what she signed up for when I told her that I don't want children, so she is going to have to deal with it.

"Grandfather, this isn't up for debate," I reprimand.

He shrugs. "Your need to control things is going to ruin your life, boy."

Without a word, I continue to eat my food, but deep down, I'm afraid he's right.



Chapter TWELVE

Poppy

Sophia texted me earlier saying she wanted to stop by and talk to me. I texted Jasper if it was okay, and he said he didn't mind. It's the little things—habits—that I need to break. I don't have to check in with him every hour, and I'm free to come home whenever I want. Link did a number on me. He had a set of rules that I had to follow and if I didn't, he would get so mad. I felt as if I was walking on eggshells with him. Sometimes, my insecurities get the best of me.

I haven't spoken to my sister since my mother lashed out at me at the cafe, so now I need to ask her if Mom said anything about me dating Jasper.

I place my baby niece, Bailey, in my lap. Her doe eyes widen at me and she giggles loudly. I glance at Sophia, her eyes hiding behind shades. It's nine o'clock at night. Why is she wearing those? When I reach for them, she slaps my hand away.

“Why the hell are you wearing sunglasses in the evening?”

“I need to talk to you before you look at my face.”

“Let me see your eyes, Sophia,” I demand.

She shakes her head, and hisses as if she’s in pain. “No, it’s too bright in here.”

“Google, dim the lights,” I say, and suddenly the room darkens.

Bailey yanks on the end of my hair and places it in her mouth, drool trickling down her chin. My scalp burns, and I gently peel Bailey’s tiny fingers from my hair and tell her no. She giggles and grabs her toes, sticking them in her mouth instead.

I set her down on the floor and she crawls to a stack of magazines, balling the pages into her tiny fists. I’m sure Jasper reads those *Forbes* magazines, but I’ll replace them.

Quickly, I snatch the sunglasses from Sophia’s face and anger burns in the pit of my stomach as I glance at her two black eyes. The right one is swollen shut, and the left has puss leaking from the corner. Tears tickle down my cheeks, and I’m completely speechless. My brave sister always puts on a poker face, and yet here she is literally getting her ass kicked by her husband. The only reason why she stays is because of Momma in fear she’s going to disown her. No one should go through this. I’m afraid that if this keeps on going, he’s going to end her life. Why would she come here if she didn’t want me to see it?

She must read my facial expression and frowns. “It’s not that bad, I should have made his dinner on time, and I didn’t tidy the place like I should have.”

“So that gives him the right to use you as a punching bag? No one deserves this,” I say through gritted teeth. “I know he’s wealthy and power—”

“You know I can’t go to the police about it, he has them in his back pocket. His uncle is the DA.” Hopelessness laces her tone. “And he’s popular in his community. It’ll be my word against his.”

“Not if they see your face.”

“Why are you making a big deal about this?”

“Are you serious? Your face looks like you’ve been in a boxing ring. And you’re asking why I’m making this a big deal?”

I'll have to talk to Jasper about speaking to a lawyer, and she has every right to have Tate's money. I can get her a job working for Jasper and she can move in with us, or I'll find her an apartment and pay for it with the money I now earn until she gets back on her feet. I'll pay for daycare for Bailey. Jasper pays all our bills, and the only thing I pay for is our streaming services.

"I can get you out, I have money. You can stay here."

She folds her arms and shakes her head. "I have a child to think about, Poppy. I can't take her away from her father. Everyone has flaws."

Her words irritate me. If she cared about Bailey, she would want to protect her. She doesn't need to grow up watching her mother be someone's punching bag, then it will be a repeated cycle. Clearly, Tate doesn't love her.

"He needs to be shot and killed for the way he treats you." I mean every word.

Pain registers in her face. "W-why would you say that?"

Bailey crawls to the entertainment center and pulls herself up and she shakes her little butt, dancing. It's so adorable.

Does he hit Sophia in front of her? Does he do it when she's not looking? Next time I se—

"No wonder Mother treats you like shit. You can be cruel sometimes."

Her words sting. How can *she* say something so cruel? All I'm trying to do is help her.

But she doesn't see her face—it's horrible.

"Why are you lashing out at me? Tate is the one who is hurting you, not me."

"He doesn't hit me all the time, only when he's stressed out about work, and then he makes up for it."

The door swings open and Jasper waltzes in, his eyes immediately landing on my niece. Curiosity swims in the depths of his pupils. He engulfs me with his presence like warm honey and he turns me into goo every time I see him.

"Whose baby is this?" he asks.

Sophia quickly grabs her shades, but I snatch them away. I want Jasper to see her face, so he can convince her that it looks bad. I get up from the couch. “That’s Bailey, my niece.”

Bailey crawls to Jasper and yanks on his dress pants to pull herself up. Jasper picks her up and cradles her. There is sorrow in his eyes as he stares at her with a yearning. She fists his blood red tie and sinks her two teeth into the fabric, then she giggles. Seeing him playing peekaboo with her makes my heart melt. I wish he would give me a child, and I bet he’d be a great father. I must be imagining things, because his eyes gloss over and he swallows thickly. He hands her to my sister as he stares at her face, and the three lines on his forehead deepen.

“This is my fake boyfriend,” I tell Sophia.

She offers him a fake smile. “I should get going, I don’t want to get home late.”

Bailey waves bye-bye and the door closes with a thud. Seeing her face black and blue, I forgot to ask her about Mother. I’ll ask her the next time I see her. She’s already going through a lot, and now I have to focus on getting her help.

“What happened to her face?” Jasper perches on the couch as if he’s had a long day.

I look out from the floor-to-ceiling window, the sky an inky blue.

Why is he coming home so late?

“Her husband likes to use her as a punching bag.”

His eyes do a sweep over my body, taking in my bare legs up to my pajama shorts decorated in pink hearts that ride up my ass. He sticks out his tongue and licks his lips. His eyes are hooded as he eye-fucks me.

Heat creeps to my cheeks and forehead.

“Why are you coming home so late?”

He removes his tie and lays it over his shoulders. “I had dinner with Aurora.”

My jealousy is back at full force. She’s a beast, this one, showing up as if I care who he sleeps with. My insecurities weigh in my stomach like lead.

“If you’re going to continue to sleep with her, don’t ever bring her up to me, and don’t ever bring her to work again.”

Shock colors his face and his eyes narrow. “I’m not a cheater, Poppy.”

“All men say that,” I snap.

“Aurora is my private investigator. She’s helping me find dirt on my father.”

“Fire her,” I snap again. “Hire a man.”

I hate that I’m letting my jealousy get the best of me, but if this relationship is going to work then he has to prove to me that he isn’t going to treat me like shit.

“I can’t. She’s my friend. Before you ask, I haven’t fucked her. She’s married to a woman.” He shakes his head. “You’re a piece of work. How can you be jealous of me having a woman as a friend? But you never told me that Link came to work to visit you.”

I rock on the back of my heels and hold my head down as if I’m ashamed. “You know about that?”

He exhales. “You don’t think I know what’s going on with you? You’re my girlfriend.”

“Fake girlfriend,” I correct.

He completely ignores me. “Next time he comes near you, I’ll break his legs.” His tone is cool and calm, but deadly. “I’ll make it my mission to destroy his life.”

If I tell him what Link said, he’ll go after him, and right now we don’t need any scandals on social media.

I’m actually happy that Aurora isn’t interested in Jasper.

“Why do you care if I’m fucking my ex? We’re not a real couple.”

He strokes the back of his neck. “Because you’re mine.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “That’s three times you’ve said that.”

“As long as you know who you belong to, that’s all that matters, *future wife*.”

“I don’t want to share you with any other women, and I think crazy thoughts about you,” I admit.

He studies my face like a map and gets up from the couch, stepping closer to me. I step back until my body brushes against the hard glass behind me.

He stares at my face for several moments and my heart thumps loudly in my ears, overshadowing the sound of the traffic outside.

“Like what?” His tone is husky.

I don’t want to tell him the thoughts I have of him fucking her when I’m not around, but if I don’t admit something to him, he won’t let it go. And I want to prove to him that not all relationships are transactional. Me opening up to him might work toward him trusting me.

“You fucking her on the desk as you yank her hair and smack her ass.”

I can’t believe I said that out loud.

He places his hand above my head, his breathing fast. My eyes venture down south, landing on his dick print. My body craves him, and my core tingles, remembering the way he touched me last time. I told myself I wasn’t going to sleep with him again, but his nearness makes it hard. At night, I make sure I’m asleep way before he comes to bed, or I’ll lie on the couch late at night to avoid him so I don’t give in to the temptation.

He grins and rubs his fingers through my silky hair. “Like I had you bent over the table the very first night I fucked you?”

“Hardly. No.”

I said I wasn’t going to lie to him, but I had no choice. If I admit what I really want from him, I’m not going to hold back.

He smiles like the Cheshire cat and twirls a strand of my hair around his finger. Being engulfed by him makes me hotter than a firecracker. He taps his finger on my chin, his eyes zeroing in on my lips. “You don’t sound convincing. Should I jog your memory on how I felt between your legs?”

When I crouch down to escape him, I find myself behind the beige sofa I ordered to replace the other one. I glance around the

room, it's a lot brighter than it was when I first moved in and the scent of fresh jasmine wafts in the open space.

Moisture pools in my lace panties, and I need to change them quickly.

"Help me with my sister, please," I say instead, changing the subject. "I'll give you anything you want."

His face is blank, and he slides his fingers into his pockets, leaning against the glass wall I slipped away from. His eyes drift to the skyscrapers out the window, then back at me. "Did she ask you for your help?"

I shake my head, fiddling with the hem of my shorts. I need to get away from him before I do something stupid like kiss his face.

"You're overstepping your boundaries. All you are going to do is push her more toward him. Let her figure it out on her own." His tone is as cool as a fall night in the city.

She's all I have. The thought of that bastard hurting her and getting away with it makes me want to go crazy. I have to help her, I can't stand by and not do anything. Besides, I'm her older sister, it's my job to protect her.

"I don't care. She needs someone to help her, to know someone loves her. My mother doesn't care."

"Okay, I'll help." He stands directly in front of me, and my pulse accelerates in my neck. "We'll hire Aurora to do some digging on her husband." He strokes the side of my cheek with the back of his hand, and I sigh. "I've been wanting to bend you across my desk since you started working for me. We should scratch it off the bucket list."

I duck my head from under him and head to the bedroom and shut the door. My stomach clenches in need, hoping one day he would make true on that promise.



Chapter THIRTEEN

Poppy

I bring the silk blanket to my neck and grab my phone from the nightstand to look up Tate's name on Google. I want to do everything in my power to bury him and get my sister out of the situation she's in.

I only find good things about him, though. He donates money to charities, and he's to the CEO of his father's oil company soon, so I exit Google and scroll mindlessly through Instagram instead.

Usually, I'd be asleep but I can't help but think about helping my sister. If she does leave Tate, will my mother be as pissed off at her like she is at me? She always favored her over me. Growing up, she always received less punishment than me. Everyone knows that she's her favorite child. When we visited family in Georgia, Mother boasted about her and Jimmy, usually leaving me out. I don't know if she's singling me out on purpose, but each one of us has to prove our worth to her in a different way. Jimmy with his accomplishments by becoming a CEO straight out of high school and Sophia and I by our appearance and who we marry.

Jasper walks in, grabbing pajama pants from the dresser, and hurries to the bathroom without sparing me a glance. I'm glad because there is too much sexual tension between us.

Several moments later, I hear the shower going, and my cheeks heat as I imagine Jasper naked and slick with water. I imagine his hands on my body like the last two times we slept together and my nipples peak, my heartbeat gallops in my chest like a wild horse. I should go into the living room and sleep on the couch but I keep myself glued to the bed, getting lost in my fantasy.

I slide my hand between my legs, placing a finger on my clit, and moan softly while I imagine how he feels inside of me. I imagine him coming on my stomach and mouth. I imagine him eating me out while he fingers me. Several moments later, I come, biting my lip to keep from moaning out loud, then I hurry to the kitchen to wash my hand and head back to bed.

When he waltzes back into the room, his hair is damp, making his locks appear darker. He slides in next to me. I feel the heat of his body, and the smell of his bodywash lingers in the air, making me wetter than before. Dammit, I need to make myself come again. Agreeing to sleep in the same bed as him wasn't a good idea. Every night has been torture. Every night has been leaving me more unsatisfied. I want to give up my rule of no sex, but I can't do it. It will only make our relationship more complicated.

Jasper faces the opposite direction of me. "We need to move up the wedding date by two weeks."

"Why?" I ask.

"My father is getting antsy. According to Aurora, he's hired his own PI on me."

"Okay."

"I'm going to propose to you in the next couple weeks, then we're going to have our engagement photo shoot afterward."

Great, I get to sign my life over earlier than I thought I would have to. The thought of us being married scares me. Am I ready to be married, to be a wife? My mother hadn't reached out when the gossip blogs stated that we were officially together. I know she saw it because she's always on top of the news when it comes

to the lives of the rich and famous. I guess she thinks because we're not engaged, she doesn't care.

Who knows what goes on in her head?

My mouth is pursed, so I get up from the bed and walk to the kitchen to pour myself some water, then I down it like I'm dying of thirst. When I make it to the room, Jasper is on his side of the bed and I grab my phone again to write a to-do list.

I have to move up my dress shopping and other arrangements for the wedding. We're having our wedding on a rooftop in the same place my mother and father had theirs, and I'll have my wedding planner call the venue and ask them to move the date up. I'm sure they will, especially if Jasper offers to double the pay. Then afterward we'll call the caterer. I want seafood and chicken and steak to be served. I thought I'd have enough time to convince my mother that I'm getting married, but I won't and the thought of her not being there to watch me walk down the aisle makes me feel as if I have boulders on my chest. Even if it's fake. If it's a business deal.

Jasper groans and he rolls onto his back, placing his arm over his eyes. His breathing is rapid and sweat drenches his forehead and chest. I'm so trapped in my own thoughts that I didn't realize he fell fast asleep.

"Harper," he whispers.

Who is Harper?

"I'm so sorry, Harper. So sorry." His tone grows a few octaves, and he turns to face me. "There's so much smoke."

I push on his chest. "Jasper, wake up. You're having a bad dream." He doesn't budge, so I push harder on his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Harper. So sorry."

I slap him across the face lightly.

His eyes pop open, and he sits up and strokes his hair, glancing at me, disoriented. "What happened?"

"You had a nightmare."

He lies back down on the pillow.

Without a word, I lie on his chest and draw invisible circles on his chest, in complete silence. I hope I'm not overstepping my boundaries. I figure he wants something to hold on to when he's frightened. He freezes up, then he slowly relaxes, wrapping his arms around me, but the tension is so thick between us you can cut it with a knife. I feel his heartbeat beneath my fingertips, and I want to take his pain away.

I glance back up at him to see a frown etched on his face.

“Who is Harper?”

He swallows thickly. “Someone you shouldn't concern yourself with.”

“Why won't you tell me who Harper is?”

He gently pushes me off him and gets up from the bed.

“If we're going to be married, then yo—”

“No, I don't have to be honest with you. This is a business transaction, so stop trying to make things more complicated.”

His words sting. I'm trying to help. What good will it do if he doesn't open up to me? What if it's another woman he's in love with and he doesn't know how to let her go? What if I'm getting married to a man that can't let his ex go? When I googled him, his prior relationships didn't pop up. I can't deal with a man who's in love with someone else. He should go ask *her* to marry him. I hate feeling like I'm not good enough. If he doesn't want my help, then that's fine.

I suck in a breath. “If you're in love with another woman, then I can't marry you.”

His eyes widen and concern flashes in them. Then he shakes his head. “I'm not in love with someone else.”

A breath of relief leaves my lungs, and I exhale loudly.

He studies my face. “If this marriage is going to work, then my personal business is off-limits.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “If people ask about you, how do you expect me to answer?” I shrug. “I can't be married to someone who can't open up to me and tell me what's wrong. I'm not trying to fall in love with you or use the information against you.”

“You can ask me anything, but Harper is off-limits.”

“Fine,” I snap.

He snatches the pillow from the bed and stomps out the bedroom door.

I roll my eyes. “Where are you going?”

“To sleep in the guest room.” The sound of the door slamming echoes off the wall.

I lie back on the bed and exhale loudly.

I don't know who Harper is, but I'm going to find out.



Chapter FOURTEEN

Jasper

I slam my stapler on my desk and lie my head down. This day can't get any worse than it already is. I couldn't sleep because of the nightmare I had last night, and now Trent is out of the office because his daughter is sick with a respiratory infection, so I have to attend all his meetings. Poppy won't even acknowledge me because I won't open up to her about Harper, but I'm not going to because she needs to understand that we're business partners, not a real couple. If we start opening up about our darkest secrets, we'll cross a line I don't want to cross. I'm not the type to share my feelings, so I hope she can deal with that.

I grab my wallet from my breast pocket and pull out of a picture of Harper from when she was two years old. Her doe eyes are looking into the camera, dimples dig deep into her cheeks as she smiles. A birthday cake with two candles sits in the center. I got her a *PJ Masks* cake of Owlette, her favorite cartoon character. I'd give anything to see her smile and hear her say dada. She knew only a few words and her speech was impaired due to her autism, but I loved everything about her.

I loved fatherhood until it cost me everything.

I still think about the night I lost her. She gave me a reason to live a better life, and my life has been so empty without her. I miss Harper so much. I haven't had a nightmare in a long time, so what triggered it?

When Tommy strolls into my office, his fists are balled up as he sits in front of me, crossing his leg over his thigh.

Is the universe shitting on me today?

I tuck the worn photo back into my wallet and place it in my pocket.

"I was hoping today was the day you died. What the fuck do you want?" I say through gritted teeth.

He smooths out his tie, ignoring my snide comment. "Our jeweler told me you purchased an engagement ring and wedding band this morning."

I knew Bruce would tell him about it. He's a gossip without trying to be. I purposely went to him so he would relay the message to Tommy that I mean business and that I'm going to get married no matter what. He can't stop it, so he needs to get over the fact that he will never inherit his brother's company.

I lean back in my chair. "And? What's your point?"

"It's stupid for you to go through with this wedding when I'm the rightful owner of James's company."

"You're wasting your time coming here telling me this. Don't you have something to do? Like tend to your mistress? Or have a date with your prostitute wife?"

"Your grandfather reopened the case of your mother's death, Jasper," he says through clenched teeth.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I lie.

My grandfather always believed that Tommy killed my mother out of spite because of the affair she had. He believes that when Tommy couldn't hold the affair over her head anymore, he ended her life. She drowned in a lake that was right behind the mansion at the time. So if Grandfather wants to open up the case, I can't stop him, no matter how many times I told him he's being irrational.

“I was bitter about your mother’s affair and what she did to me, but I never laid a finger on her.”

For the first time in my life, I see pain etched in his face. I haven’t seen him look so broken in a long time.

At my mother’s funeral, he bawled his eyes out. I believe him. He might have resented her, but he still loved her because he stuck around. I keep my face neutral and rest my elbows on my desk.

“Well... don’t worry about it. If you didn’t kill her like you say you didn’t, then you shouldn’t have anything to be worried about.”

He nods and taps his foot on the floor. “You need to stop the wedding. You don’t need the company. I need the money more than you do. Besides, you’re making more money than me as it is.”

I knew the real Tommy would come out soon enough, and I knew my mother wasn’t the real reason he came to visit me today. He really thinks I’m going to back out of a perfect deal.

Fuck that.

Fuck him.

It’s outrageous for me to step down from a position that’s going to benefit me, especially since he spent my childhood shitting on me. The narcissism runs deep with this one. He acts like he’s the best father in the world to me but wouldn’t give two shits if I died. Fortunately, the feeling is mutual.

I stand up and slide my hands into my dress pants pockets, trying to remain cool. “You don’t tell me what to fucking do.”

“We all know you’re getting married because of James’s company. I hired a PI on you, and I know you haven’t dated Poppy for long, so call it off before I bury you.”

I bang my fist against the table, rattling my stapler, pens and the keyboard. “You came into my office to make a fucking demand that you didn’t earn the right to. Remember, you don’t want any ties to me, so I’m not obligated to do shit for you.”

“I’m willing to make a deal with you.”

“Fuck you and your deal. Get out, Tommy, before I have security throw you out.”

“If you give me the company, I will give you forty-nine percent.”

“So you can find a way to get rid of me? Hell no.”

He loves making deals and as soon as I do something to piss him off, he’ll find a way to control me with it. He screwed over every business partner he had. He’s a snake in the goddamn grass, and I’m not going to give him the opportunity to bite me.

“I should have made your mother abort you when I had the chance to, but she begged me to keep you.”

His words don’t hurt as much as they used to. I’m used to his verbal abuse.

“You should blow your brains out. Do you need a gun?”

He gets up from the chair, a grin spreading across his face.

“You’re the reason why Harper passed away.”

That’s it! I’ve had enough of his shit. I stomp to him, and before I know it, my fist connects with his chin. Tommy stumbles back, then he charges at me, but a security guard barges into my office and holds him by the shoulders. They must have seen him when they were patrolling the hallway.

“Put him on the list of people not allowed to enter my building.” I grab him by the shirt. “If you ever mention Harper to me again, I’ll beat you until you’re a pool of blood.”

As soon as they leave, I sigh and rub my forehead. Tommy is right. If it wasn’t for me, Harper would be alive today.



Chapter FIFTEEN

Poppy

I sit in the VIP section of the hottest club in Manhattan and usually, I'd be in the mood to party, but not right now. It's the only perk of being with Jasper, because being his fake girlfriend is annoying. I don't feel like playing fake house with Jasper right now; he's hot and cold, like the Katy Perry song. Even though I don't want to be around him right now, my body is acutely aware of him, and my heart beats hard in my chest at the sheer nearness of him. I tell myself it's because I haven't gotten laid in a long time, it's my body remembering the essence of him.

He places his hand around my waist, squeezing tight, and it takes every ounce in me to peel his thick fingers from around me.

Loud music thumps through the speakers, the club is packed with people. Jasper's cologne invades my nostrils, making me feel weak in the knees.

A beautiful dark-skinned man wearing an Armani suit strolls up to us. He has a diamond earring in his right ear, and it matches

his cuff links. Just like Jasper, he looks like he's dripping in wealth.

Jasper releases me and hugs the guy. "Jeremiah, this is my girlfriend, Poppy."

I want to correct him, tell him that we're in a fake relationship, but I don't.

His dark eyes narrow and a smile splashes across his face, showing off his straight white teeth. "It's nice to meet you, darling," he says with a southern accent.

I tilt my head to the side. "You're from Georgia?" I ask.

He nods. "From Atlanta, actually."

"Oh, I have family from there."

It feels good to meet someone who's from the South, even though I was born and raised in New York City. My mother was raised there and every year we would take a trip to Atlanta to get in tune with our roots, especially when it comes to food. The restaurants here that serve collard greens and neck bones don't taste as good as it does in the South.

He nods before glancing at Jasper. "We need to talk business."

My mother always told me that when men speak about business, women must not interfere. The thought of her makes my chest tighten.

I nod, turning on my heel. Jasper grabs my hand and he kisses it before I get too far. The butterflies flutter in my chest and I feel heat creeping up to the back of my neck. My lady parts need to learn that we don't want him, especially after how he acted last night. I need to keep my eyes on the goal and not get wrapped up in Jasper Barrett. This is business. Nothing more, nothing less.

I look back at Jasper over my shoulder and offer him a fake smile before disappearing into the sea of people. Kendrick Lamar blasts through the speakers as I make my way to the bar. I order myself a Long Island Iced Tea and get lost in my thoughts. Maybe this drink will help me relax. I wonder, is this how our relationship is going to be after we get married? Me, the pretty wife on his arms, and when he has a meeting I'll be waiting for him, but behind closed doors we will be strangers? This is

tougher than I realized it would be. I thought we would at least be friends, but it doesn't look like it's going to be like that. I don't know if I want to spend the rest of my life with a man that's practically a stranger to me.

“Poppy,” a familiar voice says. I glance up to find Quinn looking at me like a deer in the headlights. I guess she didn't expect me to be in an upscale club like this one.

She slept with Link and tried to blame it on me. We weren't close friends, like me and Lake, but she was close enough that I would confide in her about all the shit Link put me through. She was one of my party friends.

I should throw my drink in her face, but I don't want to waste a good drink on her. Plus, I don't want to cause a scene. She isn't worth it. I always fantasized about what I'd do to her when I saw her again. Run her over with my car, stomp on her ass in the street, but she's not worth ruining my tires or my good shoes on.

She assesses my designer dress that's hugging my figure. It's one of the dresses that Jasper bought for me. He has style, I'll give him that, even though he's a class A jerk. The dress costs more than most people's houses. Before we left the penthouse, he insisted on me wearing the clothes he bought. Now that I'm with a billionaire, I need to start acting like it—his words, not mine.

“You look amazing, and I love the dress. Who is the designer?”

She's on the top of my shit list. I know Link was a cheater, but I expected more from her because she was my so-called friend.

I want to rip her eyes out of their sockets.

Her father owns a tech company where they make spyware, so I know she's swimming in wealth. She's part of the high society, where she networks with billionaires, and my stepfather was delighted for me to be friends with her so he could use her family connections. My stepfather ended up being business partners with her father, but it didn't work out, because my stepfather was stealing money to fund his gambling addiction. Now, I will be the new dealer.

I'm a pawn to everyone. My parents, Link, and Jasper, but it doesn't matter. People don't want you around unless they can use

you.

Something I need to drill into my thick skull.

“Why are you speaking to me?” My words are laced with venom. I twirl the necklace around my neck with my fingers.

“I-I—”

“You slept with Link and blamed it on me. I spent months thinking it was my fault,” I screech, and a few people turn their heads to look at us.

The space between her eyebrows crease and she frowns. “Sweetie, we were never friends. I was using you to get close to him.”

Apparently, I was a pawn to her as well. My eyes sting and I shut them, fighting the urge to cry. The only person I can trust is Lake. I half-ass trust my sister, but that’s because she’s always doing Mother’s bidding, trying to get me back with Link. My back feels like it’s against a wall.

I dig into my purse and slap a crisp twenty on the wooden bar.

“You can have Link. I don’t want him. In case you haven’t heard, I called off the engagement.”

She stands up from the stool, placing her hands on her hips. She looks beautiful in her gray backless dress, unfortunately her personality doesn’t match.

“How is your life now? I heard you were working at a shitty bar and your parents cut you off from your inheritance. The women at the country club are talking about your downfall and how poor you are. The pov—”

Her gray eyes peer up behind me, and I feel warm, thick hands wrap around my hips. Jasper’s expensive cologne invades my nostrils, and I’m relieved that he popped up and saved me from yet another bout of humiliation. My mother must have told her friends because, how else would Quinn know about my downfall? I have nothing to be ashamed of, but the way she says it makes me want to crawl into a hole.

Jasper pecks my temple, turning my insides into goo. This is when our deal comes in handy and he makes me look good.

“You want to introduce me to your friend, Angel?”

“She’s not my fr—”

“You’re Jasper B-Barrett.” She stumbles over her words as her eyes go to his hands on my hips.

Jasper grips me tightly and rests his chin on top of my head. He’s so good at pretending.

“In the flesh.” His tone is smooth like whiskey.

She eyes us in disbelief, then she fishes out her phone from her purse and takes a picture of us. “Tammy and Ruth won’t believe me when I tell them about this. We should get drinks. By the way, I’m so sorry for sleeping with Link behind your back.”

Anger burns in my chest, and I want to hit her so badly. How much will my bail be? Would Jasper bail me out? I shake my head. She’s not worth it. I keep telling myself she’s not worth it.

“We were never friends, remember? You were only using me to get close to Link.”

Jasper glances at me, then her. Disgust clouds his face. “What’s your name again?”

“Quinn Hawthorne.”

“Your father is Thomas Hawthorne?”

She nods. “You know him?”

“Of course I do. I made a deal with him for my new company.”

“You’re becoming CEO of the Wolfgang Bank?”

“Indeed. But I’ll be backing out of the deal since you want to rub it in my girlfriend’s face about her *downfall*.”

Fear flashes in her pupils and her mouth drops. “You can’t do that.”

“Yes, I can. I haven’t signed the paperwork yet. I heard your conversation with my girlfriend. You’re rubbing it in her face about her downfall, but let’s see how *your* downfall is going to be once your father realizes who cost him a fifteen-million-dollar deal.” He holds my hand, ushering me to the door.

“You can’t do that, Jasper. Don’t make her suffer. She didn’t deserve that,” I murmur.

Once we’re outside, I inhale the smoggy air of New York City. Michael pulls up to the curb, then he gets out and opens the door. Jasper and I both climb into the backseat.

“You need to stop being sympathetic toward people who treat you like shit. Grow a backbone and stop allowing people to walk all over you.”

He’s right, but I feel guilty for what happened to Quinn, and I think Jasper is going overboard with his reaction, but it’s not like she doesn’t deserve it.

And I do have a backbone, I just do not set out to destroy people’s lives.

I gaze out the window, getting lost in the view of the gigantic skyscrapers as rain pelts against the roof of the car, creating music to my ears.

The universe is fucking with me.

Why of all the people did I have to run into her? I’m so glad Jasper showed up to my rescue, and I’m glad we’re in this so-called relationship even if it’s a business transaction.

“Who was she?” Jasper’s words cut through my thoughts.

I open my mouth to speak, but then I remember last night and how he wouldn’t tell me about Harper. I’ve been open to him since the very first night we’ve met, and he’s given me that vibe that tells me you can talk to him without getting any judgment from him, but at the same time he only gives me crumbs in return. I had to google him to learn the basics about him.

“Why should I open up to you when you won’t open up to me?” I shoot back.

He doesn’t respond, his mouth turning down in a frown, and he removes his phone from his breast pocket and types something before he tucks it back into his pocket. There is no way he’s going to open up to me, and that makes this situation ten times worse because I’m going to be married to a complete stranger. I should at least know him on a deeper level. I learned a few quirks about him, like when he eats, he eats one item at a time on his

plate. Or he sorts his clothes by color, or in the bathroom he always places his razor on the right side of the toothbrush holder.

When I moved it to the left side once, he told me not to touch his razor again if I won't put it where it belongs.

I shake my head and peer out the window. I want this relationship to work, but it won't if I'm the only one that's trying to form one.

"There isn't any hope for us, is there?" I ask, keeping my eyes glued to the window.

We're passing Central Park, so that means we're close to home.

"What do you mean?"

"Being friends," I sigh.

Silence.

No harsh breathing, no movement. Just more silence as he's still as a statue.

Dealing with him is like pulling teeth without any anesthesia.

"Friends don't shut their friends out, Jasper," I whisper.

More silence.

He will never open up to me. He doesn't spare me a glance, as if he's thinking hard about what I said. His expression is blank, and I can feel him shutting down.

"We're not friends, you're my business partner. I provide for you so you can get in good graces with your mother, and you're helping me get my uncle's company." His words sting, cutting deep like a knife.

I don't know why I'm hurt by his words. I knew it was a business transaction. But the way he said it was so cold and heartless. I'm trying so hard to put on a poker face.

What was the point in him rejecting Quinn's father's business deal in my honor? "Why did you fire Quinn's father if I'm nothing more to you than a business deal?"

He shakes his head. "I don't like to see you hurt."

Michael pulls up to the garage, and I don't want to be anywhere near Jasper at this moment.

Confusion burns beneath my skin like hot lava. I don't want Jasper to see my face. His behavior gives me whiplash and when he says stuff like that, it makes me think he actually cares about me.

“Please don't say you don't want to see me hurt, because it gives me false hope that you care about me, and we both can't afford for me to believe that,” I say before I head inside the building.

I need to keep my distance from him or I'll get caught up in his web, and he'll eat me like a spider.



Chapter SIXTEEN

Poppy

Two weeks have passed since I decided to keep my distance from Jasper. I ignore him at work, at home too. Jasper hasn't said much to me since the night at the club. He proposed to me on Wednesday on a fancy yacht with rose petals on the floor, surrounded by flowers. Pictures were taken by professional photographers and uploaded on every social media site. Bloggers ate those photos up like a kid in a candy shop. I received offers for free food and beauty products, and doors were open for me for interviews about my life. A few top-name modeling companies even reached out to me to be on the front of their magazines.

We have a photo shoot at one of Jasper's mansions, in the gigantic master bedroom. I'm not feeling this shit, not one bit. My makeup is caked on my face and it feels heavy. Jasper's hands are around my waist, and he's leaning into my neck, breathing me in. I want him to touch my body, but then again, I don't. My hormones go haywire around him.

“Poppy, you’re a little stiff, can you relax your shoulders?” the photographer, whose name is Ava, says.

She’s been on my case about the way I pose, how stiff I am. If models have to go through this every time, I would lose my mind if I were one. Ava is a pretty woman with a slender frame, her blonde hair in beach waves. She used to be a supermodel back in her younger days.

I’m trying my best but it isn’t working.

“Can we take a five-minute break?” I ask.

Ava nods and frustration clouds her face. I lie on the comfy bed and let out an exhale. *Risqué* magazine wanted our shots to be in a bedroom because his publicist said it makes it look more intimate and people would buy into the illusion of our love story.

We have so much stuff to do today, another photo shoot with a bridal magazine, a runway show tonight, and dinner with bank owner Gunner Underwood and his wife Gia.

Dating a billionaire can be so exhausting. I knew my life was going to change the minute I agreed to this, but goddamn, it can be overwhelming. This life might be too busy for me to keep up.

Jasper sits next to me, causing my shoulders to stiffen and a tingle snakes up my spine. I scoot away from him to put some distance between us.

“Are you going to keep giving me the silent treatment?” he asks, annoyance lacing his tone. He trails a finger across my cheek, then his eyes veer to my see-through bra before they drop down to my panties. Jasper wears a red tie around his shoulders and is in a pair of silk boxers with the words, “Finally engaged.” I try to keep from staring at his six-pack.

Both of our outfits are from the upcoming *Risqué* collection.

What’s with this dude? Why is he annoyed that I’m giving him the silent treatment?

One minute, he shuts me out, and the next, he wants to have a conversation with me. I think his dick is doing the talking sometimes, and he wants to fuck me, but doesn’t know what to do knowing he can’t.

“You’re starting to give me whiplash with your attitude.”

He rubs his forehead and shakes his head. “You need to get your head in the game, these pictures are going to sell our love story.”

“*Fake* love story,” I shoot back.

Ava comes up to the bed. “Your break is over with.” She sighs. “Poppy, try to relax. It’ll be all over soon, I promise.”

Jasper strokes his beard. “I have an idea. Sit up on your knees and fix my tie.” I do what he says, placing my hand on his silk tie.

He wraps his arms around my waist and leans down and whispers, “I want to wrap your legs around my shoulders, Angel. As I devour your pussy like the last time I did.”

He traces his fingers along the edge of my panties, cupping my ass and squeezing tight.

Arousal flutters in my stomach and my nipples become so hard they can cut like a knife.

My cheeks flame and I stare directly into his eyes. “What are you doing?”

He offers me a smile. “Distracting you. Just pretend that you’re in love with me.”

“That’s hard to do.”

I don’t know if I can do that, but if he doesn’t get his hands off me soon, I’m going to throw him on the bed and ride the shit out of him.

“You must be a magician because you know how to turn on the charm.”

Without responding, his fingers thread lightly over my clit, effectively making me wet. I gasp, then I bite the inside of my cheek, tasting a tinge of blood on my tongue.

“That’s it,” Ava says, “give me erotic and sexy.”

Jasper presses a kiss to my forehead and the cameras go crazy. He slides between my legs, and his erection digs into my panties, and I slowly ride him like I’m a bitch in heat, wrapping my arms around his neck. He peels my arm away and grabs both hands, placing them over my head and kissing down my neck.

What's weird is that I get these butterflies in my stomach. What's even weirder is that he's the first guy to give me them. Link never gave me that fuzzy feeling.

Nervousness deflates in my chest like a lead balloon. Once we're finished, Ava tells us that we will get our final photos in a week. I'm super excited about how they turned out.

When Ava's crew packs up and leave the room, I relax a little.

My core aches with need and it doesn't help that Jasper is looking at me like a piece of meat he's ready to devour. I told myself I wasn't going to sleep with him again, and I remind myself that I shouldn't either. If I'm being honest with myself, I don't want to be with Jasper, I just want his dick.

I need to put on a wedding dress because we have another photo shoot with a bridal magazine in the next hour or so, so I get up from the bed and grab the short dress from the bathroom door. I wiggle it on and I need Jasper's help to zip me up, though I know his hands shouldn't come near my body again. Swallowing my pride, I say, "Can you zip my dress?"

Slowly, his footsteps match my heartbeat as he makes his way toward me slowly.

"Turn around." His tone is husky and wraps around me like a warm blanket.

I feel his firm hand pressed against my feverish skin, and hear the cool metal zipping together. I try to ignore the tension between us. He twists me around and his chocolate eyes venture down as he licks his lips.

I wrap my arms around my body as I head to the door, but Jasper grabs me by my hand, spinning me around. He slams his mouth against mine.

His kiss sets my soul on fire.

His kiss burns with so much passion it can set fire to this whole place.

His kiss steals the breath from my lungs.

No matter how much he hides himself from me, I still want him.

Slowly, I peel my lips from his, and I stare into his gaze. There is a rawness in his pupils, he's letting his guard down just a little to let me in. I'm not going to miss the opportunity to take this version of him.

He picks me up, and I wrap my legs around him. He squeezes me tight like I'm his life jacket as he lays me on the bed. Without taking his eyes off me, he drags the hem of my dress up and slides my panties to the side. Jasper drops to his knees and places his tongue on my clit, licking me like he's dying for a taste of me, as he strokes my clit.

I feel the moisture building inside my core and my nipples ache with need. "J-Jasper," I moan his name as I slide my fingers through his silky hair.

He keeps his eyes trained on me, as if he's silently letting me know that I'm his. Maybe my body is his, but not my heart. Never my heart.

Jasper continues to lick my clit, then slides one finger into me, then another one in my ass, and I grip the sheets as my toes curl and my heart picks up speed. Slowly, I ride his face, wanting to escape at the same time. Pressure builds inside of me, and my core tingles. I moan his name over and over again until an orgasm hits me like a tidal wave.

Someone knocks on the door at that moment, and Jasper yells, "What?"

"Toni from the bridal magazine is here for the shoot and interview. You guys are already ten minutes late."

My eyes venture to Jasper's erection visible through his boxers.

He eyes my wet core and licks his lips.

The person knocks again.

"Si—"

"We'll be out in a minute," Jasper yells, annoyed.

I'm glad that person interrupted us, because this would have been a huge mistake. The last time we slept together, there were no strings attached, but now our situation is too complicated and messy. I don't need another headache, or more men-related

problems. Just stick to what I agreed upon: don't bang your hot fiancé.

I get up from the bed and fix my hair as much as I can while avoiding eye contact with Jasper. He wants this to be about business, but my body is not for him to use whenever he wants to get his dick wet. He's not giving me the type of closeness I crave, so why am I allowing him to devour me like I'm his favorite meal? Truly, I can't be this broken up inside that I'm going to allow my emotionally unavailable fiancé to use my body for his pleasure. I get pleasure too, but still. He enjoys eating me out more than I do sucking his dick.

He grabs my chin, forcing me to look up at him. Specks of gold colors his chocolate eyes, making him more beautiful. "We're not finished."

I shake my head for him to release me. "Yes, we are. This is business, so let's keep it that way. Pleasure and business do not mix. You should know that since you're a businessman." I lace up my shoes since there is no way I'm wearing heels again. I've been wearing them all day and my feet hurt. "You use me when it's convenient for you, and when I try to get close to you, you push me away," I snap.

How can my own words sting me more than him? His face is devoid of emotion and if he's feeling anything, he doesn't show it.

"I didn't sign up for this." There is a bite in his tone.

"Sign up for what?"

"For me to like you," he whispers.

My eyes lock with his, and he steps back.

We don't say anything for a beat or two, soaking in the tension that's between us. For the first time, raw emotion shines in his eyes as if he's torn.

His words warm my heart, but I don't know how to respond. He likes me in a way a boy develops a crush, and I'm not going to lie, I've been crushing on him since the moment I laid eyes on him last year, but that doesn't change the fact that he won't open up to me. It's not good enough for me to put my feelings on the back burner and give myself to him because if I do, then I'm the

one who will be stuck with a broken heart forever. The worst part, I'll be stuck with him for the rest of my life, and I don't want that.

He's not worth the risk.

Without a word, I grab my designer purse and exit the bedroom.

My phone dings so I fish for it out of my purse. It's a text message from Sophia and my heart leaps in my chest as my hands shake. We haven't spoken since I found out that Tate had hit her—we haven't spoken about her outburst.

Sophia: Mom told me she's not going to make it to the engagement party.

My heart sinks like a ship. At this point, she won't come around, and me marrying Jasper will be for nothing.



Chapter SEVENTEEN

Poppy

We're having the engagement party in the backyard of the mansion where we shot our engagement photo shoot. Luckily, the air is cool and crisp as the sun sets. So many people are here to celebrate our big day. The mayor is here along with his wife, and there are a few actors and actresses as well as businesspeople. Even members of the American Billionaire Club are here. I had no idea Jasper knew so many people.

I get a waft of the fresh flowers, and I pluck a yellow sunflower from the bunch and tuck it in my hair.

The air cools my heated skin and the sky bleeds an orange and purple color, blending together.

The dress I'm wearing is a backless number made from the finest threads.

Jasper stands next to me, wearing a short-sleeved dress shirt and shorts. I wanted our party to be a casual attire and not too formal. A party where people can relax and actually enjoy themselves.

Jasper brushes a kiss across my forehead and people stare at us in awe. Cameras flash. I feel like a fraud for lying. The guests have brought expensive gifts and gave us words of encouragement on this new journey we're about to start. My eyes search the crowd, hoping to spot my mother even though Sophia told me she wasn't planning on attending. I haven't seen anyone from my family yet. Hopefully, someone will show up. I can't focus on the negatives right now, and I have to see the silver lining in this. So, if they don't show up, at least we will still have a great time.

Jasper pulls me toward a table, and we stand across from a man who appears to be in his early sixties with poorly dyed black hair.

"Nix," Jasper says, squeezing my hand tight. "This is my fiancée, Poppy Giles."

Nix's eyes light up like stars and he takes my hand and brings it to his mouth before kissing it.

"Poppy, this is Uncle James's best friend and a board member of Wolfgang Bank."

"Oh. It's lovely to meet you," I say.

"The pleasure is all mine. I can't wait to have your future husband at our company." He pats Jasper on the back. "He knows how to run numbers and is good at getting businesses out of the hole." He shakes his head. "Ever since James passed away, the numbers in the company have been down. It hasn't been the same since his death."

"He was a good businessman," Jasper says, and I don't miss the sadness in his tone.

"Jasper," a young woman calls his name.

We both look to see a girl who looks like she's in high school. She has glasses resting on the bridge of her nose and she's wearing a flowery dress with black stockings.

I've never seen him so excited to see anyone. I mean, no one other than Atlas and Trent.

She hugs Jasper tightly. "Why haven't you been returning my calls or text messages? Are you avoiding me again?"

“Lacey, you called me one time, and you sent a single text message. I’ve been busy.”

Her eyes veer to me, and she smiles widely. “Poppy. It’s an honor to meet you.” She opens her arms wide, and I smile and accept her warm embrace. “I’m Jasper’s sister. He always goes on about how he thinks you’re hot.”

I glance up at Jasper and he says, “I said that one time. Lacey likes to exaggerate stuff.”

I’ve never seen Jasper interact with anyone with a smile, and he looks at her as if he adores her. You can tell he loves his sister.

She loops her arm with mine. “We’re going to be great friends.”

I am all for being her friend, she reminds me of Sophia when she was younger. “How do you figure?”

“Because you’re a Capricorn and I’m a Libra, so our zodiac signs get along.”

I giggle and glance at Jasper, and he shakes his head.

“I guess we’re going to get along so well then.”

“You and Jasper are meant to be together.” She leans in and whispers, “Despite your marriage not being real.”

I look at her as if she has three heads. “Why’d you say that?”

“Jasper is a Taurus, and they are compatible with your sign.”

“All right, that’s enough of that. Lacey, we have to meet other people. I will talk to you later,” Jasper interrupts, annoyed.

He places his hand on my lower back, and I suck in a breath as he guides me through the sea of people. My eyes venture to the patio where more people are piling in, and hope deflates in my chest as I search the crowd again for my family.

They will show up, right? I sure hope so. I know they won’t let me down.

Jasper holds my hand and brings it to my mouth, causing me to blush like a schoolgirl, but I keep my eyes glued to the crowd. He leans down, tucking my hair behind my ears.

Jasper hired a hairstylist to put a sew-in into my hair, and so I have long big curls today. “You’re looking for your mother?”

I barely nod, swallowing hard trying to keep the pain in my chest at bay. I want to see her and talk to her.

“I sent a car to the house, but no one was there,” he says, stroking my lower back with his other hand. “But someone else is here to see you.” He points in front of us. My gaze slides to my sister and Tate, who are speaking to another couple, and tears wet my eyes as I leave Jasper’s side and waltz up to her. I tap her on the shoulder and Sophia turns around and brings me into a hug.

“You made it.” I pull away from our embrace, taking in her long black dress that shows off her shoulders and back. Her curly hair is in a bun and her makeup is flawless, covering up the bruises on her face.

I glance at Tate, and rage fills me like a bucket of cold water. I keep my smile tight as he smiles back at me. This is not the time to confront him about how he treats my sister, and I don’t want to make myself look bad in front of my guests.

“Congratulations,” he says before taking a sip of whatever liquor he’s drinking. His eyes are a rare green, and his skin is tan like golden sand, smooth as marble. His dark red suit is custom-made.

Honestly, I don’t know what my sister sees in him, as his personality is as dry as wood.

“Thanks.” I loop my arm with Sophia’s. “I need to steal my sister for a moment.”

“Don’t be too long,” he says.

I subtly assess her for any signs of new bruises. “Are you okay?”

She grabs a champagne flute as a waiter strolls by, then sips from the crystal glass. “I’m fine for the most part. Tate apologized for hitting me and he promised to take me to Paris next week.”

I want to tell her that he shouldn’t be putting his hands on her anyway but it’s going to lead to a fight and I don’t want to fight with her. It’s a matter of time before he strikes her again. I want to ask her how long he’s been abusing her, but I refrain from doing so. I doubt she will tell me, and I have other things to worry about right now.

“I can’t believe Mom didn’t show up, I know she was mad, but I thought she would come around,” I say in defeat.

“She doesn’t believe you’re going to marry Jasper. She knows it’s fake.”

Panic rides in my chest like a tidal wave, and I stop walking, accidentally bumping into someone, but I don’t bother sparing them a glance.

“Our brother told her you were meeting men online to find a fake fiancé and she confronted me about it. I told her you were, but that you and Jasper are for real and he loves you, but she’s not buying it. Our mother can be stubborn as a mule.”

I spot Jasper speaking to an older woman, and I glance back at Sophia. “She can be.”

The pain in my chest grows twice as big, and my hands shake like leaves.

“Even if you marry him, I don’t think Mom is going to come around. If I were you, I would cut off the wedding.”

My plan went up in smoke and flames. There is no hope for my relationship with my mother, and everything I’m doing is costing me. I can’t call the wedding off because I gave Jasper my word, and he’s counting on me so he can get his uncle’s business.

I shake my head. “No, I gave him my word, so I’m going to go through with it.”

“Suit yourself, but I think you’re making a terrible mistake by marrying him.”

I don’t respond, keeping my eyes glued to Jasper. His eyes find mine. He cocks his right eyebrow in question, and I shake my head, casting my head down.

Someone taps me on the shoulder, and I turn around to find a man with dark hair, his designer suit a little too tight. His eyes linger on my bare legs before they make their way to my face. He gives me the creeps.

“Poppy. I’m Tommy, Jasper’s father. Care to walk with me?”

I have heard so much about him in the news and about his billionaire status, and like Jasper, he reeks of power. But I have never taken the time to get a good look at him in the blogs. You

can tell he's related to Jasper. Their eyebrows are thick and bushy, though his brown hair is darker than his. They both have the same tan skin.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand, and I glance back at Jasper, only to find him fully engaged in another conversation with Trent.

Without a word, I follow him inside a guest bedroom that has an airy vibe. I stand by the door. He reaches into his back pocket and hands me a piece of paper that I unfold. It's a check for fifty million dollars.

He slides his fingers into his pockets and crosses his Italian loafers over the other, the exact same way Jasper does. "I've done some digging into you. I know your mother cut you off from your two-million-dollar inheritance and you're only marrying my son to get your money. Here is more than enough for you to move on with your life and call the wedding off."

I can do a lot with the money and start over. I wouldn't need my money from my mother, but this is wrong. So wrong. I care more about connecting with my mother than my actual inheritance. If my mother wanted the inheritance, she could keep it.

But she doesn't care to have a relationship with me, because I'm not doing what she wants. She wants me in the arms of Link, but I can't give her that.

I could take the money and do what I want, like move to another state, but I'm not going to leave Jasper high and dry, that would be mean as hell. He needs me and I'm not going back on my word like I told Sophia earlier.

I shake my head and rip the check in half.

"No. I'm not for sale. I love Jasper. He's charming, sweet, and thoughtful." We might be at odds with each other because of him being closed off, but I'm not going to betray him. He doesn't deserve that.

Tommy uses his thumb and his index finger to rub his forehead. "You're a foolish girl."

I don't care what he thinks of me, I'm out of here.

When I place my hand on the doorknob, I inhale and exhale loudly, then turn the knob. “Gemma would have taken the money.”

I glance back at him to see him smooth out his tie.

His words pique my interest. “Who is Gemma?”

He plays with his cuff links. “The woman who destroyed his life.” He shakes his head. “Jasper is not who you think he is.”

I’m not staying here to find out who she is, and I can’t believe a thing that comes out of Tommy’s mouth. He’s conniving, and he thinks whatever he tells me about Jasper will get me to leave him so he can get James’s company instead of Jasper.

The door clicks shut when I leave the room. I need to get back to the party and find Jasper and tell him about his father.

I bump into April, who is wearing a red cocktail dress, showing off her bare legs. She looks like she’s a fairy princess. Beautiful.

“Why are you in a bedroom with Tommy Barrett?”

She glances past me, her eyes lands on Tommy who must have left the bedroom as well.

I need to choose my words carefully, because it does look strange for me to be in a bedroom with him.

Her eyes widen and she turns on her heel but I grab her by the arm.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

She snatches her arm away and looks at me in disgust. “You two were leaving a bedroom and you’re sneaking from your fiancé.”

I can’t fuck up our image as a happy couple. “We were discussing family matters. Look at me, does it look like I fucked him?”

She smiles wickedly at me. “It doesn’t matter what it looks like, I’m not going to let this juicy story slip through my fingers. The biggest scandal of all time!”

Tommy steps next to me and his glare is more deadly than a poisonous snake. “If you print a story that’s not true, girl, I will

end your career. You wouldn't be able to work at a decent job in this city, so you better back the fuck up. You will not ruin the image of my family."

April's eyes widen in horror, and she scurries off in the opposite direction, hanging her head down.

Tommy turns to look at me. "You're making a big mistake by marrying Jasper. He will break your heart. And you will wish you would have taken my offer."

I back away and wander to the backyard. Jasper is in full conversation with someone else now, so I wrap my arm around his waist, resting my head on his chest.

This day has been exhausting, and I'm ready to crawl into bed.

"We need to talk." I stand on the tip of my toes, kissing the side of his cheek, smearing my red lipstick on it.

He follows me away from the flooded backyard and into the deep maze.

"It's about your father."

"What is it?"

I don't know how to tell him how low his father just stooped. Jasper hasn't mentioned anything about him, and I don't know the extent of their relationship. But he needs to know what kind of person he is.

"He offered me fifty million dollars to call off the wedding. I thought you should know."

Jasper straightens his spine and rolls his eyes. "I see. You come to tell me you took the money?"

What makes him think I would do that? I crinkle my nose and frown.

"I hope the money helps you with your future. Goodbye, Poppy." Disappointment laces his tone, and he tries to move past me, so I tug on his arm, but he snatches it away.

"Jasper?" I say.

He stops but doesn't turn around.

"I didn't take the money, you idiot."

Finally, he faces me, and shock flashes in his pupils. “You didn’t take the money?”

I look at the ground, my heels sinking into the grass, then bring my gaze back to his. “No. Why would I?”

“Why *wouldn’t* you? I can’t give you what you want, your mother isn’t accepting you even though you’re getting married to me, and I can’t give you a child.”

“I could have taken the money, but I made a promise to you, and I’m not going back on my word.”

He’s completely baffled, and he steps back.

“Thank you,” he murmurs. “You didn’t have to stick around but you still are. I’ll make sure you are taken care of for the rest of your life.”

I hold my head up and flatten my dress.

“We need to get back to the party.”

He loops his arm with mine. “Very well.”



Jasper

I tell Chance to drive me to Poppy’s parents’ house on Long Island. It didn’t sit right with me that her mother didn’t show up to the engagement party, and the way her eyes looked when she told me that her mother wasn’t going to show up boils my blood.

What kind of mother has her daughter work for her love? I hope one day that Poppy finds the strength to realize that she doesn’t need her mother. Poppy has a good heart and deserves better. She definitely deserves better than me. I was certain she was going to take the money from Tommy and leave me high and dry, and for the life of me I don’t understand why she would keep her word. I don’t deserve her kindness. She’s already giving up her dreams for me, and I’m not going to let her give up anything else. I knew Tommy was going to offer Poppy something—I found out from Aurora—but I didn’t expect him to bribe her with such an excessive amount.

She's selfless and is always thinking about others, and it makes me think that maybe relationships aren't always transactional.

I climb out of the car and knock on the walnut front door. A young man opens the door, wearing an Armani suit, his brown eyes widen and he smiles. He pushes his dark dreadlocks over his shoulders and stands tall. I didn't recognize him at first, but then I realize it's Poppy's brother. She confided in me after the party that her brother ratted her out about her meeting men online. Her whole family is a shitshow, and here I thought my family was crazy as fuck. I guess that's what we have in common, either that or we're written in the stars like Lacey would say.

"Jasper Barrett. This is a surprise. I'm Ji—"

"Jimmy, Poppy's brother. I know who you are." I can't keep the annoyance from my tone. "Is your mother or father home?"

He nods, turning on his heel to lead the way.

"I'm building a new computer and looking for an investor."

I tune him out—I'm not about to invest in anything from him after he tried to ruin Poppy's chance of getting her inheritance.

Whoever crosses Poppy, crosses me. We're going to be married soon, and I have to protect her.

This is the place Poppy grew up in. It lacks warmth and coziness. If you took all the pictures down, you wouldn't think a family lived here. The house is pristine, the furniture is expensive and looks to be imported from Italy. There are pictures hanging on the wall of them going on family outings, but Poppy is not in any of them. I can't believe her mother went to the extent to wipe her completely because she can't use her. It's sad and pathetic and if it were up to me, I wouldn't allow Poppy to see her mother.

It explains a lot. Why Poppy was so determined to make our place feel homey. She never had a place to call home, and the thought makes me sad.

Once I get to the living room, I find her mother watering lilies. Jimmy clears his throat, and his mother looks at us, her mouth hanging open. She blinks several times as she sets the watering can down on the wooden floor. Jimmy looks between me and his mother, pats me on the back, and leaves the room.

I sit on the couch that has weird patterns and cross my legs, then I point to the loveseat across from me for her to sit.

I glance at the paintings of African American people and interracial couples hanging on the beige walls, different plants and flowers scattered around them. This room smells like a greenhouse.

“Jasper Barrett. What are you doing here?”

A maid comes in to offer me something to drink, but I wave my hand, dismissing her.

“Rachel, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” I lean back on the couch. “I’m here to invite you to the wedding, since you didn’t show up to our engagement party. My fiancée is quite upset that you weren’t there to support her.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear, exposing a diamond earring. She’s the spitting image of Poppy, they can pass off as sisters. She has the same almond-shaped eyes and heart-shaped face. I see where Poppy gets her beauty from.

“From what I heard, your relationship is fake and you two are not getting married. It’s a stunt for her to get her inheritance.”

“It’s not a stunt.” I pull out the invitation and hand it to her. Rachel glares at the envelope. “My fiancée doesn’t need her inheritance from you. She works for me as my assistant. She wants you there because she loves you.”

Poppy doesn’t know that I’m setting up an account so she won’t have to depend on her mother again, and I’m not telling her mother about the five percent I’m giving her of Wolfgang Bank. After all the sacrifices she’s made for me, it’s the least I can do, and when I do divorce her, she will be set for the rest of her life.

“There is no excuse for you to not be there for your daughter. I was going to help your husband with his winery business because she asked. We are well aware of his gambling issues, that this house is collateral and you exhausted all your other options.” I rub my chin. My uncle always told me that I had a way of getting people to do what I want. “I’ll give you a check for fifteen million if you support your daughter on her wedding day, and I’ll help him with his winery business. We’ll set up a business meeting as soon as I’m back from our honeymoon. I will give you the check on the night of the wedding.”

She looks me up and down, shaking her head. “You love my daughter?” she asks as if she’s shocked by it.

“I do,” I lie.

I might not love Poppy, but I do have strong feelings for her, otherwise I wouldn’t have gone through the trouble to help her. Usually, I don’t put my nose in people’s business, and I wish I could say I’m doing this because I’m afraid she would back out, but I’m not. I’m doing it because I don’t want Poppy to be sad while we’re married, and I don’t want her to live a life without her family if it makes her unhappy to do so. I can’t give her a child, but the least I can do is be there for her.

My liking her is getting in the way of my goals. My liking her is making it hard to keep our relationship strictly business. My liking her is making me care about her well-being. My liking her is making me think about her while she’s away.

I need to keep my distance because I’m afraid of what will become of us if I continue down this route.

Rachael tears open the envelope and her eyes gloss over with tears. She hugs the invitation to her chest.

“This is the place where her father and I had gotten married.” She smiles sadly.

I watch her, not knowing what to say, so I remain quiet. I can’t handle women crying.

“Her father was everything to me and when he OD’d from cocaine, it shattered my world.” She sniffles. “I couldn’t imagine picking up the pieces of my life after his death and starting another family.”

I’m not equipped for this emotional shit, and I feel awkward as fuck. But I don’t feel sorry for her because of how she treats Poppy, though I feel bad for Poppy for losing her father.

An idea pops into my head. I want to do something nice for Poppy. Even though our wedding is a show, I want to make sure she experiences it as if it’s a real one.

“Do you have any pictures of Silas?”

She nods. “I’ll be right back.” She disappears from the living room, and I glance out the window at the garden in the backyard.

She comes back with a box and opens it. She holds up a picture of Poppy, sitting on her dad's lap on a motorcycle. Then another picture of her riding a bike with him. She was a cute, chubby kid.

It makes me think about my own father and how I will never experience that type of love from Tommy and I'll never experience that unconditional love Poppy's father seems to have for her.

"Can I keep a few of these?" I ask.

"Of course. If you need more pictures of him, ask Poppy. She has a shoebox full of them."

I tuck some of the photos into my breast pocket. "How old was she when she lost him?"

"Five years old. They were inseparable. It made me kind of jealous."

I still think she's jealous of her daughter, but I keep that thought to myself. Unlike her, I don't speak what's on my mind all the time. I didn't know Poppy was like me and lost a parent at the same age I did. It amazes me how we're from a different background, yet our childhoods are similar. Like me, she has suffered a great deal of losses. At least her stepfather doesn't treat her like shit.

I get up from my seat, dust off my pants, and slide my hand into my pocket. I'm on my lunch break and don't want to be late getting back to work. Poppy took the day off to make sure her dress is altered correctly, and she's meeting with the wedding planner to make sure everything is in order, so I hired a temp assistant to do her job until we have our wedding. I usually don't take work off, unless I'm sick—like in the hospital sick.

"I'll be seeing you at the wedding," I say pointedly.

I hold out my hand, and she grasps my palm, squeezing lightly. "You will."

I head toward the entrance. "Jasper."

I stop, but I don't turn around. I'm ready to get out of here.

"Thank you."

I nod, then I leave the condo. Once I'm in the car, I tell Chance to take me back to work, and I grab my phone from my breast pocket to find I have new text messages from Poppy. One of them being a picture of her dress.

I shoot her text.

Me: Your dress is nice. Now send me a pic of the lingerie you're going to wear underneath on our wedding night.

My dick is hard thinking about our honeymoon. I'm taking her to a private island I own and, hopefully, I'll have my way with her. I want her to drop that foolish rule about us not fucking.

My phone dings with a message.

Wife: In your dreams.

She doesn't know how much I've been dreaming of fucking her like crazy, and sooner or later it's going to happen.

I can't wait.



Chapter EIGHTEEN

Poppy

I let the hairstylist curl my hair with a hot iron. Today is my wedding day, and I'm more nervous than I've ever been in my life. What should be a happy day is one I'm dreading. It's going to cost me everything: love, babies, my freedom. I'll be tied to a man who doesn't believe in family or love for the rest of my life. He's like a machine that only runs on work, work, and business. My parents haven't shown up, and I try to swallow the lump in my throat and try to keep my tears at bay. It's supposed to be the happiest day of my life, and I'm supposed to be reunited with my family, but it looks like that's not going to happen. I should have known my mother wouldn't show up, she can be too prideful at times.

Lake eyes me curiously in the mirror, and she frowns. I shake my head. Once the makeup artist is done with Lake's gorgeous face, Lake walks up to me and hikes up her teal maid of honor dress, squats down, and a sad smile spreads across her face. She knows I'm upset. Lake has always known what I'm feeling before I even speak the words.

“What’s wrong, Poppy?”

“I’m praying my mother will come around, but I don’t think she will.”

Lake taps her chin and fingers the thick curls in my hair. “Is your mother’s approval worth the expense of your mental health?”

I honestly don’t know. I can’t imagine living without my mother and not speaking to her. I can’t imagine not having our private conversations and our lives not going back to how it used to be. I need my mother more than anything in this world. My mother has sacrificed so much to give me the life she wanted me to have. She only wants what’s best for me, but sometimes I feel like her best isn’t my best.

“She is.”

“What about your dreams?”

Her words strike a nerve, though I don’t know why.

“What about them?”

She studies my expressions for several moments. “You wanted a child, and you wanted your own family. You talk shit about love now, but I know you, Poppy, you *love* love. You believe in fate and soul mates. Do you want to give up your dreams to please your mother?”

“I thought you were all for me marrying Jasper. What changed?”

She places her hand on top of mine, twisting her lips. “When your mother decided not to come around. I believe Jasper is a good guy, but I don’t think you should sacrifice your dreams for him or anyone else. You deserve happiness like the rest of us.”

Tears threaten my eyes. Because she has a point. If I give up and my mother comes around, then I’d feel like I’ve given up too soon. “I’m not like you, Lake. You’re ambitious, know what you want. You have big dreams to take over the fashion world, and you’re independent. I’m not like that. You don’t need people like I do.”

She wipes the tears from under my eyes and kisses my forehead. “Poppy, you’re ambitious too, and you’re independent.

Yes, I prefer to be by myself and not a social butterfly like you, but I still need people, just in a different way than you do. I can go weeks without speaking to my father.” Ever since I’ve known Lake, her relationship with her father has always been tense. “You lived out on your own without your parents. You stood on your own two feet, when your family turned their backs on you. You’re a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for.” She exhales. “If you don’t want to marry Jasper, then don’t. But if you do, know what you’re getting yourself into. Marriage is a lot of work, Poppy. Marriage is messy yet blissful at the same time.” She pauses, snatches a Kleenex from the vanity, and dabs the corners of my eyes. “You two are making it about business but it can get complicated.”

Do I want to give up everything I’ve wanted?

When I was about to marry Link, we were going to start a family right away, and I was so desperate to get my dream that I held on to him for too long—longer than I should have. Now, I have a husband, but our future doesn’t include kids and my mother isn’t here.

A knock comes at the door, and I tell the person to come inside. My mother and Sophia stand in the doorway, and my heart leapfrogs in my chest as more tears gather in my eyes. My mother is wearing a long nude-colored gown with her hair in an updo, two diamond rings drop from her earlobes. Without thinking, I jump up from my chair and rush to her, wrapping my arms around her.

She freezes like a statue. My mother has never been a hugger, nor has she been the type to show affection, so I let go of her quickly. She eyes me up and down, taking in my custom-made white wedding gown. Diamonds molded into the seams of my sleeves and cleavage, my train drags behind to the point that Lake is gently pushing it out the door. Jasper spent a pretty penny on this dress and it’s too bad I only have to wear it on this one day.

“I’ve missed you, Mother.”

I can’t keep the tears from flowing, no matter how hard I try.

She doesn’t respond but keeps her eyes on my dress. I should have known she wouldn’t return the affection, and it hurts a little

but there isn't anything I can say or do. She always had this wall up between us.

“Your dress is pretty, but it should have been a little shorter. It's going to drag all over the place and get ruined,” my mother chastises. “I should have been with you when you picked it out.”

Normally, I would be annoyed by her criticism, but I'm too damn happy to see her.

Sophia embraces me in a hug and kisses my cheek. “You look gorgeous.” Tears gather in the corners of her eyes. “You look like a Disney princess, Poppy.”

I take a step back and assess her teal dress, which is similar to Lake's but hers is backless and longer.

“You ready, Poppy?”

My gaze goes to Lake, she makes a valid point. I'm giving up my dreams by marrying Jasper, but this is the only way to get in my mother's good graces. I already let her down before, I won't do it again. She showed up and now that she's here, this day can only get better.

I nod and grab her arm, and I hold my head up high as we make it to the door. This is what I need to do. Hopefully, I don't regret my decision. Now, all I have to do is stay married to Jasper, then my mother will continue to be happy with me. She finally came and it shocked the shit out of me. What made her change her mind? It doesn't matter. It only matters that she's here.

Once my mother opens the door, I exhale the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

We make it to the rooftop that overlooks the sunny city. This is the exact place my mother and father got married, and I chose this place to honor him. He was a light in my life at the time, and I want to feel connected to him in any way I possibly can. I just wish he were here to witness my big day.

Everyone's eyes are glued to me, and some of the guests suck in their breaths. My mother lifts the veil over my head covering my face, and I glance around to see white roses decorating the chairs and the archway.

The venue is more beautiful than I imagined. There are so many people here, and cameras flash like fireworks in the sky. The classical music picks up as I walk down the aisle and my eyes snag onto Jasper. He looks yummy in his tux and teal tie. Next to him are Trent and Atlas. He chose them as his groomsmen, and on the other side I see Lacey. She wanted to be a bridesmaid, so I told her why not. We're going to be family.

Everyone rises from their chairs, and people compliment me as I walk past them. Every step I take feels like cinder blocks tied to my feet, weighing me down, and my mind is screaming no, not to do this. I ignore my brain, opting to inhale and exhale silently.

When I stand in front of Jasper, my mother air-kisses my cheeks before sitting in the front row. I stare at Jasper and my heart beats so hard, I can hear it in my ears.

Fear wraps me up like a blanket, and my anxiety climbs in my chest. Jasper smiles. But I know it's fake. This is a business contract between two people who need something from each other. Two people that don't love each other. I never thought in a million years that I would enter into a marriage of convenience.

The pastor starts speaking and I tune him out, I tune out everyone staring at us. I tune out the way Jasper is beaming at me.

I can't go back.

I can't go back.

I can't go back.

"Do you take Jasper Barrett as your husband, to have and hold, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?" the pastor asks.

Death do you part? Those words ring in my head. I glance at the crowd and the many faces blurring together. I glance back at Jasper and there is hope in his eyes.

"I do," I say.

The pastor asks Jasper the same thing, and he answers, "I do."

Jasper sighs in relief as the pastor says, "You may kiss the bride."

Jasper leans in and wraps his hands around my waist. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, then I stand on my tippy-toes and kiss him on the lips. Electricity buzzes through my skin, and everyone shouts and screams at the top of their lungs. I feel even more of a fraud now. My fate is sealed, my name on the dotted line of a marriage certificate. He's mine and I'm his for the rest of our lives.

When I pull away, Jasper holds our arms up and everyone cheers, feeding into this marriage farce. Shame wraps around me, and I glance at my mother, who smiles with tears in her eyes as she mouths, "Thank you."

This is what I wanted for so long, and now that I have finally got her approval, things can go back to how they used to be before she cut me off now that she's finally back in my life. At this present moment, everything is perfect and I don't want to change it.



I look at my wedding band as it glints in the sunlight. I can't believe I actually went through with it. We're at the reception as people eat and dance. Jasper is busy speaking to someone I don't know. Sophia hugs me tightly and slings her arms around my shoulders.

"I can't believe you actually went through with it," she says. She yanks her scrunchie from her ponytail, and her curls fall to her shoulders.

I nod, overwhelmed by everyone's congratulations and well wishes.

"Can you believe that someone bought a few sex toys for you and Jasper for your gift?" She scrunches up her button nose. "People are weird."

I told Jasper we'd throw them out—well, not the purple vibrator, I'm keeping that one—and Jasper says he wants to keep the sex swing, in case we have sex. He's clinging to hope that I'm going to put out, but I'm not. I have no intention of sleeping with him.

"I hope you do find happiness with him, Poppy," Sophia says hopefully.

I nod, but the harsh reality is, it will never happen between me and Jasper.

I watch my mother speak to Jasper and he pulls out an envelope from his breast pocket and slides it to her. She smiles and kisses him on the cheek, but he wipes it away with the back of his hand.

I'm assuming she's receiving money for my stepfather's business.

My mother couldn't wait until she got her hands on the check.

Jasper's eyes land on me and he beckons me to come to his side. I walk slowly toward him, and he wraps his arms around my waist. He introduces me to some politicians, actors and actresses, then Lacey and I chitchat for a little while.

We take a lot of pictures to the point where I start to see dots in my pupils. He rehashes our love story so many times, it begins to feel actually real. He kisses me on the forehead and pulls me to the dance floor for our first dance and every eye is on us. He stares into my eyes, and a shiver snaps up my spine. I feel his erection digging into my stomach and my cheeks flame.

"Did you pick out lingerie for our honeymoon?" he murmurs against my ear.

I stop moving for a moment to stare at him, dumbfounded. "We're really going on a honeymoon?"

He swings me around, then pulls me back into his arms. "Yeah. Of course. That's the traditional way."

"What about work?" I ask.

We continue to move slowly, and I hear cameras snapping away.

"I told HR we won't be in for the next week," he answers.

"If you're doing this to fuck me, it won't work, Jasper. I'm not going to sleep with you," I snap.

"Are you sure about that, Poppy?" He shakes his head. "I booked the vacation because we both need it to get away from the tension of your mother, and it will look good and better our image as a loved up and newly married couple."

My mother can be a bit overwhelming, and I waited for this moment. But he's right, I do need to get away.

"Also, I want to rub it in my father's face that I'm actually married and he won't be getting my uncle James's business."

So that's the reason why he doesn't like him.

"You think they are buying our love story?" I ask.

He nods. "People are eating it up like candy. You look gorgeous, by the way." He pulls me close. "You're a beautiful bride. I want to eat you up." He brushes his lips against my forehead again.

My cheeks heat, and he spins me around, then pulls me close.

The music stops, and I turn around and see a projection screen being pulled down.

I glance at Jasper, to see he has a smirk on his face. "What's going on?"

He stands directly behind me, slinging his arms around my waist. "You will see."

The guests are quiet, their gazes focused on the screen. The singer we hired hands Jasper a mike. "I want to give my wife a wedding gift. This is for you." He hands the mike back to the musician.

Two men wheel a large box and pull out a gigantic painting of my father and I dancing. In the background of the painting, my mother, my stepfather, my sister, my brother, and Jasper are watching us dance. I'm wearing the exact same wedding dress I'm wearing now.

Tears well in my eyes and slither down my cheeks and a lump forms in the back of my throat. This is the best gift anyone has given me. I study the facial expression of my father as he gazes down at me, and he's wearing the biggest smile on his face. I often wonder if my father would be proud of me. If he sees me as the person I've become, would he still love me? Him not walking me down the aisle hurt like hell. Him not being here hurts like hell. I wish he knows how much I love him, and how much I miss him. I would give anything to see his face right now.

Jasper wipes the tears from my cheeks.

He had this painting made for me. Why would Jasper give me such a sentimental gift? He doesn't seem to care about anyone but himself, but this gift shows he's more than capable of thinking about other people.

"When did you get this made?" I say through teary eyes.

"A few days ago. I wanted you to feel as if your father was here with you. I know how it feels to lose a parent, and I would give anything for my mother to be right here with me." His words are filled with raw emotion.

"Thank you," I say, and I stand on my tippy-toes and kiss him on the lips.

"You're welcome, Angel. I know I can never give you love, but I wanted to make your wedding day special."

My heart melts like butter, and I don't know how to thank him for this lovely gift.

"This day doesn't mean anything to you, so why did you go through the trouble?"

He strokes my cheeks as I stare into his chocolate eyes.

"You didn't take the money."

I raise my eyebrows, not understanding what he's speaking about.

"You didn't take Tommy's money. He offered you enough money to change your life and you didn't take it," he clarifies. "Anyone would have taken the money and thought about themselves, but not you. People usually don't care about me enough to stick around unless it's benefiting them. You decided to stay, even when you thought your mother wasn't going to accept you back."

I move his hair from his face, and I tilt his chin to look at me. His chocolate eyes are filled with sadness. "I was wrong about you. I knew my father was going to offer you the money, and I was certain you would take it."

It's sad that no one cares about Jasper or sees beyond what's in his bank account. It's sad they don't see that he's a person who has feelings. I feel bad for him. So bad. No wonder he treats people, especially women, like business transactions.

Before I can reply, my mother waltzes over and brings me into an embrace. “I need a minute with my daughter.” Jasper nods and walks toward Trent and Atlas, and I step back to stand in front of my mother. “When can you two have dinner at our place?”

Happiness floods my chest and I grin from ear to ear. “After our honeymoon, I suppose,” I answer.

“Thank you for doing this. You don’t know how much this means to me and our family. Your marriage to Jasper means everything.”

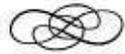
“You’re welcome.”

She loops her arms with mine and gently yanks me to the dance floor. “Dance with me. We have some bonding to catch up on before you leave for your honeymoon.”

This is the moment I’ve been waiting for, and I finally got it. “Thank you for accepting me back into the family. When will I receive my inheritance from my father’s will?”

“It will hit Monday morning. Now, show your mother the newest dance moves. I’m not as hip as I used to be.”

I giggle. “Of course.”



The villa is more luxurious than anything I have stayed in. It’s small and cozy and when I glance out the window, we’re surrounded by water and trees. My husband owns a private island, and I can’t wrap my mind around it.

Jasper tips the bellboy, and I sigh as I glance out the window again, taking in the moonlight, the palm trees, and the inky blue sky. This place is right out of heaven.

“We have dinner in a few minutes on the beach, with a personal chef, so change into something more casual and relaxing.” His tone echoes off the wall.

I nod, unzip my suitcase, and open it. I find a small bikini and sundress dress, so I pull them out. Jasper helps me out of my dress and he watches my every move, keeping his eyes glued to my body. I try not to notice the hungry look in his gaze, so I

snatch my clothing, rush straight to the bathroom, and wash my makeup off my face and put on my bikini and dress.

By the time I walk into the living room, Jasper is dressed in swim trunks with no shirt on, his abs on display for me to see. I blush like a schoolgirl. He looks yummy in his clothing.

We walk side by side. A car is waiting for us just outside, and I slide in next to him. I'm not in the mood to play the happy wife when I'm not. I was fake through the wedding and reception, pretending to be in love when I'm not, and it's exhausting.

"Can we take a break tonight from all the pretending? I'm a little exhausted," I say. "I want it to be us, you know? Two people enjoying each other's company."

He nods. "That was the plan."

Once we make it to the beach, the sky is dark. Two lit candles sit on the table, the ocean behind us. This feels too romantic, as if we're a real couple, and my breath hitches at the sight of it all. Who would have guessed that Jasper is a romantic? Then I feel not-so-special because he's probably done this with many women. He's known to be the guy who is a playboy, living a single life, having women throw themselves at him like he's a god.

The wind tickles my skin and the air smells salty from the ocean. I love the beach, it reminds me of my father. He used to take me when I was little.

When we make it to the table, Jasper pulls out my chair and I take a deep breath as I sit down. Jasper sits down across from me, staring into my eyes, so I glance away. The chef, wearing an all-white uniform, informs us about what we're eating tonight. Stuffed crabs with sautéed mushrooms and mashed sweet potatoes. The chef pours us both glasses of expensive red wine before he leaves, and I sip slowly, trying to clear my thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Jasper asks before taking his own sip and sitting down the drink.

I don't like the way he can read me like a book, but I suppose it was bound to happen because we live together. When he asks me what's wrong, it makes me think he's trying to be a husband to me, like he cares about me. Jasper is self-serving. He only does things that benefit him, but lately he's been showing me

otherwise. I shake my head; there is no need to feed myself any kind of fantasy—we are nothing more than a business contract.

I glance at the black sea. It's peaceful with its tranquility. Something I crave more than anything else. Usually, I'm good with my words and I know how to express myself, but right now I'm completely tongue-tied and my thoughts are in shambles.

“You can talk to me.” His tone is gentle as the wind blows across his face, brushing his hair to the side.

“We didn't have to have a real honeymoon, so why are we doing this?”

He pauses in the middle of sipping his red wine, his eyes growing warm. “I want to show you a good time, that we can have fun. Just because our marriage is business that doesn't mean we can't connect.”

I'm shocked about what he's said. This is not the same Jasper I first met; the Jasper I met, I couldn't get him to open up to save his life. Now, I feel as if I'm looking at a different man.

“You're emotionally closed off. Why would you want to connect with me?”

His gaze studies my face for several beats, and he exhales. “I don't feel lonely when I'm around you.” He clears his throat, and the chef chooses this moment to come back and place our food on the table. “Ever since you moved into my space,” Jasper continues, “I haven't felt so alone.”

I understand what he's saying. We are soothing each other's loneliness. I guess that's the perk of living with someone, but you can live with someone and still feel lonely.

“When I sleep with different women, they don't have any substance to them.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“They're not full of life and only want to snag a rich man, someone who's going to take care of them. I can't speak to them about important subjects and a lot of them are not interested in the things I like, or they don't have passion or desire in life. They see a flashy lifestyle and a lot of them treat me like a paycheck and their ticket to a cushy life,” he explains between bites.

I absorb every word, trying to dissect them, and I don't know what to say.

“Is that why you only do one-night stands?”

He nods. “Yes.”

“Do you fly women out and take them on lavish dates?”

“Yes, only a few.”

It makes me jealous to know he was flying women out, though I know it's irrational of me to feel this way. Marriage is a strange thing. I know that Jasper is mine, and I am his. Not his heart, but body. But my jealousy is quickly replaced with sadness. It finally clicks, the way he acts. He wants to feel something with these women.

“I felt a connection with you, which is one of the reasons why I chose you as my wife. I didn't want to go into a marriage with a woman only interested in a rich lifestyle where I don't get anything in return. You can't force a connection with a person, no matter how hard you try, so I decided on this. I know you felt it, that's why you ran back to that asswipe.”

The way he said asswipe was so bitter. And he's right, we do have a connection, though I don't like it. Not at all. I don't want to like Jasper, and I don't know how to be in a normal relationship. My relationship with Link was so toxic and I guess this is what it feels like after the calm following a thunderstorm. I don't know how to respond, so I dig into the crab cake. I need to change the subject. “So, the chef you hired makes some bomb-ass stuffed crab.”

“Indeed, he does.”

Once we're finished eating, Jasper pulls out my chair. “You want to walk on the beach?”

We don't have anything to do at the villa but fuck each other, and sharing one bedroom with him, that's going to be very hard to do. It's different now that we're married. We're bound to each other for the rest of our lives.

My heart picks up speed as I remove my shoes and carry them. The smooth sand tickles my toes. The waves roll onto the shore, and the water is cool and calm. I wish I could get rid of these butterflies in my stomach or the way my body hums to life

when he's nearby. I'm hoping this gravitational pull I have toward him will wash away like the ocean against the shoreline, and I'm hoping this tension between us will die down.

"When I was in boarding school, I used to look at the stars from my room and take peaceful walks along the trail." His eyes light up like city lights and the moonlight outlines his jawline.

"Where did you go to boarding school?"

He pauses for a few minutes, picking up seashells and tucking them into his pockets.

"Phillips Exeter Academy." He continues, "I took a class on astronomy in high school."

I look at the sky and it feels as if we're on a globe. "What kind of stars do you see with the naked eye?"

"You mean the cluster of stars clumped together?"

I nod.

He stands directly behind me, and I feel his erection against my lower back, causing my heart to flutter. Arousal dampens my panties. Jasper awakens every cell in my body, and my pulse quickens. My skin buzzes like it's on fire. He takes my hand, then uses my finger to make some weird line while pointing at the night sky.

"You see the three big stars and how they line up, but the one at the end is to the side?" he asks, his voice a murmur against my earlobe. "That's Orion's head."

I try so hard to look at the stars. "I don't see anything."

He laughs. "It's sometimes hard to see." Then he stands beside me. "I'm assuming you never heard of Vega and Altair?"

I sit Indian style on the squishy sand. "No. Tell me about it."

He sits next to me and our shoulders touch. For a moment, it feels as if this is a real relationship and we're a real couple. "Vega was a goddess of heaven and she fell in love with a human man. It is said that when he first laid eyes on her, he fell in love with her immediately." He pauses. "She vowed that she would be with him in heaven one day. When her father found out that she was in love with a human, he forbade her from seeing him. And she did keep her word; when he died, they did end up in the sky, but with

the Milky Way separating them. Some people believe that once a year, a bridge forms between them so they can be together, and if it rains on the day they are supposed to see each other, that means they weren't able to see each other. The rain is Vega's tears."

"That story is tragic and cruel," I say.

"Aren't all love stories cruel?" Jasper says. "Love isn't kind to people. That's why I'll never need it."

Jasper's opening up to me, inviting me into his world, makes my heart leapfrog in my chest. He says that in such a bitter way. Was he in love with someone? Was Harper his first love? What about Gemma? It's a mystery and I want to ask more, but I don't want to ruin our moment, and Jasper won't tell me even if I ask him about it. Is that why he is so jaded by love? I want to ask him, but I know I won't get any answers, and even though he's showing me bits of himself right now, he might close up like a clam. Being married to him less than twenty-four hours has changed us. We signed a contract that says both of us are stuck with each other for the rest of our lives. Still, I don't want to get my hopes up when it comes to him, so I need to keep my guard up.

"You see that shooting star? Make a wish," Jasper says, pulling me away from my thoughts.

I shake my head and look down at the sand. The dream I have won't never come true, as long I'm still married to him.



Chapter NINETEEN

Poppy

The next morning, we have breakfast on a yacht, then we watch a dolphin show. Jasper tells me how he became the owner of the private island. Turns out his mother's sister left it to him when she passed away. After that, we go scuba diving and lie on the beach. Later on in the afternoon, we're stuck inside the villa because of the storm.

The wind blows so hard the shutters shake, and it sucks because I wanted to go jet skiing. I watch a Disney movie, scooping peanut butter from the jar. After I eat a spoonful, I lick the spoon clean.

Jasper sighs, closes his laptop, and his eyes go to me, watching me closely. His eyes are filled with warmth. He sits so close to me that our arms touch, and he stares into my eyes for a beat too long, so I look away. The tension between us is so intense, it's suffocating.

The thunder splits the sky in half and the rain grows heavy against the window.

“Let’s play truth or dare,” he says out of the blue.

What is he up to?

My eyebrows climb up my forehead. I scoff. “What are we? Twelve?”

“We can make it a drinking game.” He smirks.

“How?”

“If you choose not to do a dare or don’t answer the question, you have to take a shot.”

I watch him waltz to the kitchen and grab a bottle of bourbon and two shot glasses, then he sets them on the coffee table in front of me. I can use this opportunity to get to know him better and dig a little deeper about his life and find out what happened to his ex—Harper. His father also mentioned a woman named Gemma. Maybe he was cheating on Harper with Gemma? He hasn’t given me signs that he was a cheater, but you never know. People have dark pasts, I know mine isn’t squeaky clean.

“I’ve never played that,” I shoot back.

He pours both of us shots and hands one to me, tilting his head to the side like the Leaning Tower. “Not even in college?”

I shake my head. “Beer pong was more my thing, but I wasn’t allowed to drink a lot.”

“Oh, yeah. Why not?”

He sits next to me and downs his shot before pouring himself another.

“Link wouldn’t allow it; he said I embarrassed him in front of his friends.” I shake my head. “You were supposed to ask me truth or dare. No more asking me questions until it’s your turn.”

“Fuck him. The more you tell me about him, the more I want to make his life a living hell.” He strokes my cheek and I blush.

I grab the shot and down it, and the liquor burns my throat. How the fuck does he drink this shit all the damn time?

“Me too, Jasper. I thought about slashing his tires and setting his car on fire like Bernadine from *Waiting to Exhale* did to her husband. Have you seen the movie?”

“No, is it a chick flick?”

I sit on my knees and rest my hands in my lap. “Yes. Would you watch it with me one day?”

“Yes, I will. I’ll watch anything you want.” He pauses. “I used to play truth or dare all the time in college.” He leans back onto the leather couch and rests his arm on the back of it. Jasper’s presence engulfs me like a tidal wave, I’m surrounded by his dominant space. He smells so good. Something woodsy, maybe sandalwood.

“Please don’t tell me you were a party animal in college.”

He takes a shot, then pours another one. “No, Atlas was the party animal. I liked it, but it wasn’t my jam. I liked going to the bonfires and sneaking into bars.”

“I bet you did a lot of fucking and played games on women, those poor college girls. ‘Let me put the tip in, that’s it. That’s all. Just this one time,’” I mock. “Or whatever boys used to say to get in girls’ panties.”

He chuckles. “No, it doesn’t take much for me to find someone to fuck. But women used to say, ‘You’re so big, Jasper. I don’t think you are going to fit.’”

“I promise I’ll call you in the morning,” I shoot back, laughing like a hyena.

He bursts out laughing, too, and it’s nice. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him with his guard down, so carefree. I like this version of him, the fun version.

“Okay, you go first,” he says, pouring into the glasses once more.

“Truth or dare?” I ask him.

He taps his thumb against his chin. “Truth.”

“Is it true you only date models?” I ask.

He leans toward me, he’s so close his mouth is an inch from mine. I can smell the liquor on his breath. “Of all the questions, you want to ask that?”

I nod. “It’s lame, but it’s the only question I can think of right now.”

“I’m not buying it, Poppy Barrett. You want to know so you can feed your jealousy.”

I pout. “I don’t have a jealous streak.”

“You thought I had a sexual relationship with Aurora. You googled every one of my dates I was spotted with on the tabloids.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “How do you know about that?”

“I checked your history on your phone when you were asleep.”

“Creep,” I snap.

“Says the woman who’s stalking me cyberly.”

I scrunch up my nose. “That’s not a word.”

“I’ll make it a word.” He runs his fingers through my hair, and arousal spreads in my belly. His touch turns me into goo. “Don’t worry, I have a jealous streak too. I don’t like men touching you or looking at you.”

My cheeks burn like lava and happiness bubbles in my chest. “At least I’m not the only crazy one in this relationship.”

He bursts out laughing again. “No. To answer your question. I dated CEOs’ daughters, politicians’ daughters, and lawyers’ daughters. I dated them all. Truth or dare.”

If I choose dare, he might have me do something I don’t want to do. Truth is safer. “Truth.”

“Why did you go back to your ex?”

“This is not how the game works,” I snap.

“You know me. I go straight for the kill.”

I debate whether I should drink or tell him the truth. Since we’re married, I might as well be honest.

“Because I thought he was going to change. I haven’t been honest with you or myself.” I sigh. “I was hoping to sleep with you to get over him. I’m sorry, it was wrong of me,” I answer honestly.

He tilts my chin so my gaze meets his. “It’s fine.”

I take a shot because I really need it.

“Who is Gemma?”

He crinkles his nose. “How do you know about her?”

“Your father mentioned her at the engagement party.”

He takes a shot. Okay, that conversation is over.

“Can I ask you another question?”

He nods slightly. I take another shot, then I crawl into his lap and wrap my arms around his shoulders, placing his hands on my hips. Fuck. What am I doing? This liquor is making me loose as a goose.

“Why do you and your father not get along?”

“He never liked me for some odd reason. So he and his new wife treated me like shit.”

That sucks. I feel bad for him, I know how it feels to not be wanted sometimes. I feel as if my mother only wants me when it’s beneficial for her and her new family.

I feel like an outsider in my own family.

Without warning, he presses his lips against mine, then he thrusts his fingers into my hair. He slides his tongue into my mouth, deepening the kiss, and I dig my fingers into his silky hair.

Jasper pulls away, tilting my chin. “I don’t want to think about you all the time. I don’t want to miss you when you’re away. You drive me mad sometimes.”

I like Jasper too, but I know he will never give me what I want, which is a child, and I know I can’t let my heart get involved with him. We have two different goals and we come from two different worlds. We have a lot in common, but this relationship was doomed from the start.

I’ll enjoy the ride until we crash and burn.

Jasper slides his hand up my dress, tracing the outline of my panties. Heat pools in my belly and I suck in a breath as he slips my panties to the side and places his finger on my clit, rubbing gently. Slowly, I grind myself on his erection. I want him so bad. “We shouldn’t do this. We shou—”

“You want me to stop?”

I shake my head and he removes his hand to lay me on the couch. Jasper then places his mouth on my clit. I squirm and moan his name, then I hear him unbuckling his belt and unzipping his pants. When I look down, the tip of his dick glisters with pre-cum. I want to suck him off so bad.

I dig my nails into his skin as he continues to eat me out and when I come, his tongue laps up my juices. He stands up and smirks. “You taste divine. My favorite meal.” But then Jasper gets up and heads to the back before returning with a condom.

“Why are we using condoms? I’m clean, Jasper. I’m pretty sure you know that.”

He nods.

“And I’m on birth control.”

He nods again.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t want to risk having babies. I can’t do it.”

“Oh, I see. You still don’t trust me?”

“I don’t want you to try to trap me with a baby, Poppy.”

My anger crashes in my chest like a wrecking ball. After all this time, he doesn’t trust me—yet again. He really feels that way about me? He thinks I’m a conniving bitch who would stoop so low to trap him.

“Fuck you, Jasper.”

He jumps up from the couch like his ass is on fire.

Fucking asshole.

I don’t know why I expect him to trust me. I don’t know why I expect any different from him.

“Since you can’t trust me, you don’t get to touch my body.” I stand up on the couch so we’re at eye level. “Stay the fuck away from me, Jasper. And FYI, I don’t need to trap you with a baby, because you’re already stuck with me through our marriage, asshole.” I grab the bottle of liquor and stomp my feet to the bedroom before slamming the door.

I let my guard down with him again, and now I'm paying the price.

Never again.



Chapter TWENTY

Jasper

I sit in the conference room with Declan and Trent, as Declan goes on about the Billionaire Club gala. The four owners are hosting a charity dance for kids who were abused. I was going to invite Poppy, but I pissed her off during our honeymoon.

We spent the last few days not speaking to each other. She still goes out of her way to ignore me. I'm such an idiot for how things ended when we were on my private island. I didn't mean to hurt her feelings and she's right, I don't trust her, especially since she wants to have children. She might try to trap me with a baby, like Gemma did, and I can't risk it, especially because I'm planning on leaving her once I sign my name on the dotted line of my uncle's company. It's nothing personal against her, but business is business at the end of the day.

As Declan bores me with his words, I glance down at my gold wedding band. I'm fucking married. I can't believe I went through with it. We've been married for three weeks now and I can't wrap my head around it. Being tied to someone isn't half as bad as I thought it would be.

I shouldn't be thinking about Poppy's lavender scent. When she is lying next to me, nose deep into her phone, I shouldn't want to run my fingers up her thighs and play with her clit. When she's not around me, I shouldn't wonder if her day is going great. My wife has been on my mind for a while, and I can't get enough of her. I want to make up for my shitty behavior but I don't know how.

My phone lights up with a message from Aurora and I click on the envelope icon.

Aurora: *Call me, I have some info.*

I stand up, excuse myself from the meeting, and step into the hallway. This is the conference floor, so it's quiet. No other offices are on this floor.

I dial Aurora's number, place the phone to my ear, and she answers on the first ring.

"Your father is having a meeting with the board members to have you removed as CEO," is the first thing she says.

I shouldn't be surprised about Tommy, he can't seem to take no for an answer. I grit my teeth. "Where?"

"At Wolfgang Bank in the conference room. You need to leave now if you don't want to miss it."

I press the red button to end the call and tuck my phone back into my breast pocket. He couldn't handle losing the business; he knows he can't take me to court, now that I am married, and he can't prove my marriage is fake. He already tried to sabotage my relationship with Poppy, by offering her money, so now he's trying other methods.

Fucking moron.

Most of my adult life, he has always competed with me, and I believed my uncle when he told me he used to work hard to earn my mother's love, because she stopped loving him a long time ago.

I pop my head into the door of the conference room and let Trent and Declan know I have to take a rain check. Then I call Chance to pick me up, and thirty minutes later, we arrive on Wall Street.

The building is made out of fiberglass, people with brief cases and their phones glued to their faces walking in and out of the door. Wolfgang is one of the best banks in the world, along with Underwood Banking.

I rush to the front desk and head to the private elevators. I haven't set foot in the bank since Uncle James threw a Christmas party here last year. In just over eleven months, I'm going to be the owner, and the minute I take ownership, I'm yanking Tommy's ten percent share out from under him. He won't be getting a dime from this company.

In no time I barge into the meeting, Uncle James's old friends and colleagues peering up at me, then I see my father. The minute he sees me, his smile deflates.

"What are you doing here?" He bangs his hand on the conference table, rattling the pens and sheets of paper.

The board members exchange a look before they glance at me.

I unbutton and remove my jacket before placing it over a chair, a vicious smile spreading across my face the whole time as I sit next to Fred. He was Uncle James's best friend since high school. Fred watches me from the rim of his round glasses and rests his hand on his potbelly.

"You're having a meeting about my job position without me."

"We were informed you knew about it," Corey says, then he side-eyes my father. "Tommy, what are you up to?"

Tommy shakes his head and rolls his eyes, opening a folder and passing it to the other board members.

"Jasper has never stayed at a business for too long. He starts them then hires someone else to run them, then he starts a new project. He plans to leave Risqué and start here." He glances at everyone in the room but me. "We don't know if this will be one of his investments that he'll get bored with and eventually move on." He pauses. "We need someone who will run this bank for years to come, someone who is passionate about this company. It's what my brother would want, to have someone who'll put in the effort and treat this like a project they cherish."

I laugh like a hyena. He has some goddamn nerve. If the board feels as if I'm not ready to run the business, they have every right to veto me, but I've been waiting to become the CEO for years, my uncle groomed me for this position. I'm not going to allow some asswipe to take it from me. Tommy's right about something, though, I do abandon a business once I hit a goal with it but if it wasn't for how I operate, I wouldn't be a billionaire.

All five sets of eyes land on me, some with uncertainty on their faces and others with curiosity.

Fred finally takes his eyes off me. "What is this, Tommy?"

"A history of my son's work ethic. He only works a job for no more than three years."

A wicked smile spreads across my face. "I only did that so I can build my background, because I don't have a trust fund like the rest of your kids. My mother's five million from her insurance company helped me start my business. So technically, I started my business from the ground up. Any person knows that you have to start different streams of income so you can be a multimillionaire. Or in my case, billionaire."

I started all my companies by myself, and this is the only thing he's trying to take away from me. The one thing my uncle left me. Tommy makes me sick. I can't wait to piss on his grave when he croaks.

"What is the real reason you called this meeting, Tommy? We trust James to choose someone suitable to fulfill his role," Corey states.

Tommy glares at him, but Corey continues, "Whatever bullshit you two have between you, keep it among yourselves and don't drag us into it." Corey rolls his gray eyes, then he runs his thick fingers through his white hair. "This meeting is adjourned."

When the board members rush out of the room, I stand up, march up to Tommy, and punch him in the jaw.

"Next time you get in the way of me making money, I'll make your life a living hell."

He strokes his jaw and balls up his fist. I step closer, wanting him to hit me so I can knock his teeth to the back of his throat.

“You have always been a pain in my ass. Causing trouble. You ought to be kissing my ass and thanking me for not putting you into the system after your mother died.”

His words stab me in the chest, but I keep my head up high. He always hated me and he always saw me as less than, and I don't know why. When I was a kid, I used to go out of my way to try to make him proud of me, and make him love me, but after a while, I learned he never will love me. Pain registers in my chest, and I suck in a breath.

“Since you hate me so much, why did you keep me? Why put me through this hell?”

His shoulder bumps into mine. “I kept you because it boosts my image to make me look like a good, loving parent to you when she passed away. A single father trying to make it while grieving his wife. People always love a good sob story.”

“You're sick in the head.”

“I might be.”

I roll my eyes and storm out of the room. Once I get into my car, Chance drives me back to the office, and I walk past Poppy, not sparing her a glance.

I'm so sick of Tommy, he is always trying to push me around. Like he's punishing me for something. It's not my fault I was born when I didn't ask to be born; he's the one who decided to stick his dick inside of my mother and get her pregnant. The bastard wants everyone to suffer like him.

I look at the New York skyscrapers, then I go back to working on a document for the board members of Risqué.

I receive a text message from Lacey, and she wants to get ice cream after work. I don't want to be bothered right now, but I can't keep pushing her away. At the wedding, I didn't say too much to her, because I was stressed the fuck out. I can bring Poppy with me. Besides, I can't avoid her forever and I need to make up for being an asshole to her during our honeymoon. Despite my instincts telling me not to, I shoot Lacey a time and place, and she replies with an “okay.”

I use my intercom to call Poppy into my office. She stands in front of my desk with a tablet in her hand ready for me to bark

orders at her. I take in the pencil skirt, white blouse, and my wedding band on her ring finger. Oddly, that turns me on. Oddly, it makes me feel possessive over her, knowing she's mine and no man can touch her—only me, whenever she will allow me to.

“We’re going to get ice cream with my sister.”

She opens her mouth to say something but closes it, before she finally speaks. “No. I have plans.”

“What’s more important than spending time with your husband?”

“This new *Jeffrey Dahmer* series on Netflix. Everyone is talking about it on social media.”

“You can watch it later.” I grit my teeth.

She holds her head up high as if she’s the president of the United States. “I. Said. No.”

“I know you’re pissed off at me. I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings while we were on our honeymoon. Plus, Lacey has been asking about you.”

The last part is a lie. I’m desperate to be around her, but I’m not going to admit it to her.

“Fine. I’ll do it for Lacey.” She turns on her heel and leaves me alone in my office.



Chapter TWENTY-ONE

Poppy

I haven't said two words to Jasper after he made me aware he doesn't trust me. I moved out of his bedroom and now sleep in the guest room.

I grab my strawberry ice cream cone, which is my favorite flavor, from the clerk at the street stand and turn to glance at Lacey and Jasper. Lacey licks her ice cream, getting it smeared at the corner of her mouth, and she quickly wipes it away. I notice she has a quirky taste in clothing, hot pink leggings, bright yellow shirt, and shoes that match her leggings. Her round glasses sit on the bridge of her nose.

As I continue to lick my ice cream cone, I glance at Jasper to find his eyes venturing toward my tongue then back to my mouth, a smirk spreading across his face. I know what he's thinking about, the time I gave him head during our second one-night stand. That was two months ago. Two months since he's been inside of me, and I ache for him, but I have to stay strong and not give in. Jasper made it perfectly clear that he doesn't trust me.

We stroll through Central Park, and different shades of leaves decorate the pavement and grass. The sky is crystal clear, and the temperature has dropped. I love fall weather and it puts me in a better mood, like the world is saying everything is going to be okay. The wind blows, tickling my forehead and cheeks.

“Blue said he’ll be home a month before the baby is born.” Lacey bites into the cone, chewing loudly.

I cast her a curious glance. “What baby?”

“My baby. I’m two months pregnant.”

She doesn’t even look old enough to have children. “How old are you?”

“I’m seventeen, but I’ll be eighteen next month.”

I don’t want to respond because I don’t want to come off as judgy. It’s her life. Being pregnant at seventeen seems like it will be hard, but her parents are rich, and maybe they will help her out.

Jealousy rears its ugly head and burns in my chest. I look down at the concrete ground scattered with leaves, then I swallow thickly. I will never have a chance to have a family, and I’ll never hear the soft cries of my child, or have to clean up their mess, or have them clinging to me when they are scared, or see them smiling. I’m starting to regret marrying Jasper. I married the wrong person. When I meet Jasper’s eyes, he quickly looks away and tosses his half-eaten ice cream in the trash. Guilt flashes in his eyes, and he slides his hands into the pockets of his basketball shorts.

He keeps his gaze glued to Lacey. “Have you told your parents?” Jasper asks.

She shakes her head, and we sit on the bench, watching a group of elderly women stroll by. “If they find out, I would be in big trouble. You know how Dad is, he’s a hothead and I don’t want to receive the backlash from it. He only cares about his image. He’ll probably make me abort my child, and I’m not going to do that.” She pauses, combing her fingers through her hair. “And you know how Mom is, she wants me to marry someone who is wealthy, and I don’t want to.” She rubs her hand over her belly, like she’s happy about being pregnant. My envy grows even more like weed. She has exactly what I want. I would

divorce Jasper after he signs his contract, but it would risk losing my mother a second time, so the whole idea is out the window.

Lacey's phone plays a weird tune, and she grabs it from her purse.

"I have to take this." Then she steps out of earshot.

Jasper watches me slowly, his eyes trailing the length of my body, up and down, before his pupils concentrate on my lips.

"Why do you keep staring at me?"

"Because you're beautiful," he simply answers, smoothing out my hair.

"We don't have to pretend anymore, Jasper. We're married to each other. And I'm sure Lacey knows this relationship is fake." I exaggerate the word *fake*.

I'm not falling for his charms again. Every time I try to get close to him, he shuts me out. I'm convinced he doesn't even know what he wants.

"I'm not being fake," he says.

Lacey watches the interaction between us as she speaks on the phone.

Several moments later, she taps on her phone and places it back into her designer purse.

"I never thought in a million years that my brother would grow to like someone."

I'm well aware of Jasper's feelings toward me, but I'm not going to put up with his hot and cold behavior.

Jasper shoots Lacey a glare.

"I'm going to head out, my friend is waiting for me." She leans down and kisses me on the cheek. "We need to get together to host my baby shower, Poppy."

"We will."

She gives Jasper a hug and I watch her disappear past the entrance of the park.

The sun sinks between the colorful trees, and my ice cream drips onto the pavement, so I lick as much as I can.

Jasper sits too close to me. “How was work?”

I cock my eyebrow. “What’s going on with you? Why are you acting funny?”

He never takes the time to ask how my day is going, which is odd.

“I’m trying to get to know you. We spend a great amount of time together.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, and usually you ignore me.”

He sighs and stares out at the sky as a look of grief flashes across his face. “When I was in grade school, my mother used to buy me ice cream and bring me here and we’d walk.”

He has never shared with me about his past, unless I ask, and even then, certain topics were off-limits, like Gemma and Harper. Though he’s never mentioned his mom either.

“Then she used to take me to this steak house afterward.”

“Do you take a trip down memory lane with your mother?” He lifts his eyebrows, so I elaborate. “When I’m having a bad day, I’ll spend the day visiting places my dad used to take me. It helps me feel more connected with him, even though he’s not here.” I get up and hold out my hand and he stands up, folding his arms across his chest instead. “Let’s go to the restaurant your mom used to take you. I’m hungry, and I want to know more about your mother.”

He stares at my hand as if it’s filled with germs. “Why?”

“Because I want to get to know the woman who’s responsible for the nice version of Jasper.”

He grits his teeth and scoffs. “I’m not nice.”

“You don’t think making a painting of me and my father for our wedding day is nice. You don’t think giving me a job and marrying me to help me out is nice. You don’t think calling off the deal with Quinn’s family because she rubbed in my face in how poor I was is nice.” I shake my head. “If that’s not nice, then I don’t want to hear your version of nice. You could have married anyone else, but instead you married me.”

He shoves his thick fingers into his pockets, and I drop my hand to my side. “A deal is a deal, Poppy. I don’t go back on my

deals. The reason why I helped you is because you're mine and I take care of what's mine. I'm responsible for your well-being."

I blush at his words and straighten my back. "You're lying to yourself. And what about Lacey? The way you look at her, you adore her like she's the best thing in your life."

He's quiet for a few beats, then he answers, "Lacey doesn't count because she forces herself into my life."

"Yeah, but you love her, and I'm pretty sure you would do anything for her without any conditions."

He straightens his spine. "Of course. She's a misguided teen who needs a real role model."

I burst out laughing. "You're full of shit."

He tells himself that everyone and everything is business but that's far from the truth, he cares about the people he adores. To the world, he presents himself as cold and people as nothing but deals, but deep down he's misunderstood, broken by his mother's death and the treatment he receives from his father. Deep down, I think Jasper wants to be loved, but he doesn't realize it.

He steps back, putting some distance between us. My eyes veer to a teen girl laughing loudly at the guy sitting beside her on a bench. Shaking my head, I glance back at Jasper. We walk slowly to the entrance and my feet throb from walking in these pumps all day.

"What about you?" he asks.

I tilt my head to the side. "What about me?"

"You believe you have to win over people's approval. You tied yourself down to me just to make your mother happy. You deserve better. Your mother treats you like shit."

He's right, she does treat me like crap at times but, at the end of the day, she's my mother and I love her.

"It's what you do. You put your needs on the back burner for the people you love."

He shakes his head and steps closer to me, stroking my cheek. "You don't need to sacrifice your well-being for others. It's okay to put yourself above people."

I wish I could think the way he does and see it from his point of view, but I can't. My mother did so much shit for me and I don't want to let her down again.

“Are you going to take me to the steak house you and your mother used to go to, or what?”

He nods, and several minutes later, we're in the back of the Aston Martin. Neither one of us says anything as we arrive at the restaurant. The place is in Little Italy, and the restaurant is a bit run-down. I expect it to be fancy with a valet, but we look out of place here.

We both get out of the car, and Jasper holds my hand as we walk into the restaurant. His touch burns me like lava, causing butterflies to flutter in my chest. I fight the urge to remove my hand. Jasper stares at the run-down building, some letters of the name of the restaurant no longer lighting up, and he rubs the back of his neck. He's tense, so I squeeze his hand.

He sucks in a breath as he opens the glass door and I walk in. Cool air greets me. The smell of Italian food and steak sauce waft in the air.

A short, stocky woman with jet-black hair looks at me then at Jasper. Her green eyes widen in shock, and she flashes her yellow, crooked teeth.

“Jaspy! I can't believe it's you. I haven't seen you since you were five years old.”

She hugs Jasper, and he stands there stiff as a board before he breaks away from her embrace. “Annie, it's been ages.” He points to me. “This is my wife, Poppy.”

She grabs my hand and eyes the ring. “You did good, and the ring is fabulous. Bet it cost more than my entire life savings,” she jokes. Annie strokes her fingers through his hair. “How've you been?”

“I've been good. Just working and adjusting to married life.”

“You look good too,” she notes, looking at me. Her smile is filled with warmth. “He used to be a firecracker when he was a kid.”

Jasper peers down at me. “Her mother used to babysit us when we were kids. How is she?” she asks Annie.

Sadness flashes in her eyes and her smile turns into a frown. “She passed away from breast cancer.”

Jasper strokes her back. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It was only a matter of time.” She shakes her head. “Come, our menu has changed since you’ve last been here.”

He stops and looks around, and I finally glance up too, seeing pictures of people hanging on the wooden walls. Some of the chairs and tables are worn. “This place is a time capsule.” He looks at a table in the middle.

Annie stops and notices. “Do you want to sit in the exact same spot you and your mother used to sit at?”

“That would be great,” I answer.

We follow her, and Jasper sits across from me as he takes in the place he hasn’t been inside since he was a young child.

“Order me what your mother likes.”

He glances at me in confusion.

“I want to know what she liked, and we can connect with her that way.”

“She used to order the steak, medium rare, with gravy.”

My eyebrows climb up my forehead. “You mean the gravy you put on mashed potatoes?”

Annie nods. “It sounds strange, I know, but it’s really good.”

“I would like to get that and the garlic mashed potatoes, along with a small bowl of spaghetti,” Jasper adds.

“I’ll have the same,” I say.

Annie takes our orders and leaves us.

I exhale through my nose and play with the end of the tablecloth. “What was your mother like?”

His pupils are etched with bewilderment.

“What?”

“No one has ever cared to ask me about her.”

“Well. I care. Spill the beans.”

He waits several beats before responding. “She was sweet, nice. Her favorite color was purple, and she was a free spirit. She was into knitting and sewing. Instead of buying my clothes from the store, she used to make them for me. When she walked into the room, her whole mood could shift the energy of the space she occupied.”

I notice his eyes light up like Christmas lights as he tells me about her. This is the part of Jasper I love to see, not the distant and cold one.

He leans in and strokes my cheeks again, this time staring into my eyes, and butterflies take flight in my stomach. My pulse beats loudly in my ears.

Annie brings us our meals and we spend hours talking until the restaurant closes.

“Your mother had good taste in food. I never knew gravy would taste better on steak than steak sauce.”

“She did.”

He tells me more about the different places his mother would take him, and how every first Friday of the month she would keep him out of school and they would spend the day together. Jasper opening up to me melts my heart, and I don’t want this night to end.

We step outside, waiting for Chance to pull up to the curb. Jasper glances down at me and smiles. “Thank you, Poppy.”

I understand what he means; he is thanking me for taking the time to listen to him about his mother.

“No problem.”



Chapter TWENTY-TWO

Poppy

The next evening, I'm meeting my parents at their mansion in Long Island City. I'm excited to finally have a Sunday dinner with them. I've been waiting for this moment since my mother cut ties from me. I'm ready to be invited back into my family like old times.

The driver comes to a metal black gate, and I roll down my window and hit the Call button for the security guy to open the gate. We drive down the pavement. So many cars are here, and my heart falls in my gut. I thought we were supposed to be having a private dinner, at least that's what my mother made it seem like when we spoke over the phone. Too many people are here, though. Who the hell did they invite? Half of New York City?

"Wasn't this supposed to be a small dinner just for us?" Jasper asks.

I continue to look out the window as more cars line the other side of the driveway. "Yes."

“No, we’re getting the fuck out of here.” Jasper leans forward. “Chance, ta—”

“No. I told my mother we were going to show up, so we’re here. I’m not going to disappoint her again.”

Jasper grips my chin so I look at him. “But next time they pull this shit, we’re leaving.”

I nod.

He grabs my hand and brushes his lips against my knuckles, and I shiver on the inside.

I poke him in the side. “What was that for?”

“You look gorgeous.”

My cheeks flame at his compliment. I want to keep my distance as much as possible because I don’t want to get my heart broken again, but the way Jasper is being so nice to me isn’t helping. That’s why I chose to stay away from him, because I knew he was the type of guy I tend to go for. The charming, powerful ones. After the night we spent at the restaurant where he and his mother used to frequent when he was younger, he’s been different toward me. He’s been asking me questions about my life, being more attentive toward me.

The car comes to a complete stop, and Chance gets out to open our door. Jasper steps out and holds out his arm, and I take it.

The suit he’s wearing is made of fine thread and tailored to fit his body to perfection. He looks like a Greek god. Powerful and dominant, as if he’s about to take the world by storm.

I run my hand over the red dress I’m wearing, it flares at the bottom and I have paired it with a small black jacket. It’s a little nippy out here as the sun sinks behind the mansion. I hired a hairstylist to relax my roots, because my curly hair was growing in, and I also hired someone to do my makeup, all courtesy of Jasper who insists I need to enjoy the perks of being his wife.

We walk up the stony staircase, and as I open the wooden door, the smell of fresh wine and hors d’oeuvres hits my nostrils. My parents brought out their big guns tonight. It’s quiet, but I hear music coming from the backyard.

Jasper grabs my hand before I lead him to the double doors and open them.

“I’m ready to leave already,” I whine, then I look at Jasper. “I’m sorry. I really am. If I had known they were going to do this, we wouldn’t have come.”

“It’s fine. Really, Poppy. You don’t have anything to apologize for. It’s their fault.”

I nod as butterflies bounce in my stomach. I step outside to find so many people flooding the backyard. My stepfather hired waiters and waitresses dressed in black suits, and they offer us both a glass of champagne. I snatch one from the silver tray, because I know I’m going to need the liquid courage to deal with my parents’ shenanigans. This is more of a cocktail party than a simple family dinner.

Where the hell did they get the funds to throw such a lavish party?

This is the moment I dreamed of, of being in good graces with my mother. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for. Hopefully, this evening doesn’t turn out to be a disaster.

Jasper places his hand on my lower back, moving it down to my butt, and my cheeks burn.

“You’re really going to grab my ass in front of my parents?”

He brushes his lips against my temple. “In front of all these men who can’t keep their eyes off you, I have to claim what’s mine.”

“I have a million-dollar ring on my finger that says I’m yours.”

He grabs my hand and squeezes lightly. “The ring is fifteen million dollars, Angel.”

My mouth drops before I sip on my bitter champagne and the bubbles tickle my nose. “That’s a lot of money, but I’m not complaining. If we get a divorce, I’m going to keep this bad boy.”

His hand tightens on my butt and a frown crosses his face, but before I can ask him what’s going on with him, my stepfather speaks through the mike and says, “Welcome, my daughter,

Poppy, and her husband, Jasper. I'm so proud of the woman she's become and I'm proud to call her my stepdaughter."

This is the only time my stepfather has ever made known that he's proud of me. We never really had a relationship when I was growing up, and I always kept my distance from him. He provided for me and always attended all my after-school events, but we never spent one-on-one time together, not the way he spends time with Sophia and Jimmy.

I plaster a fake smile and Jasper kisses me on the cheek as everyone cheers. My mother walks up to us and gives me air-kisses, and then air-kisses Jasper too. She has makeup caked on her face, the dress she's wearing hugs her body a little too tight, and her hair falls down her shoulders like a river. I haven't seen her hair straightened in years.

My mother is beautiful. Drop-dead gorgeous, in fact.

"Welcome to the family, Jasper." She eyes him up and down, and whistles. "You make a fine husband. *People* magazine wasn't lying when they said you are the sexist man alive."

I shoot her a glare. "Mother."

"Poppy. Please, this is our proudest moment. My daughter has settled down with the right guy." She loops her arms with mine and steals me away from Jasper. My stepfather goes up to him, patting Jasper on the back with a smile. Mom and I are swept into the crowd, and we stop in front of a group of young women. They look about my age, some a little older, wearing elegant designer dresses.

"So... has Prince Charming decided when he wants to set up a business meeting with your stepfather?" my mother asks.

I crinkle my nose. "I thought Jasper gave you a check for his winery business."

She glances at the grass and back at me. "Oh no... that was for something else."

She's hiding something from me.

"I don't know. You will have to ask him yourself."

She doesn't respond, and I set my champagne glass on a nearby table.

“These ladies are part of the country club,” she tells me before looking at them. “My daughter is married to one of the wealthiest men in the world, Jasper Bennett.”

They gawk at me in awe, and I hate this. The way my mother dotes on me as if she’s the best mom in the world, when just a short while ago she was disappointed in me because I broke things off with Link. Yet now she’s acting like a proud mother. It pisses me off. And I don’t know why. I never had any problem with it until now.

They went through all this trouble to bring their friends and colleagues around to show the world their daughter is marrying honorably. If I never married Jasper, I wouldn’t have heard from them. My relationship with my mother has always been strained. She was always an absent parent to me, leaving me while she worked two jobs before she got married again. Our relationship did get a lot better when I became an adult, and I guess she feels she didn’t have to raise me anymore. She told me countless times how my half-siblings and I messed up her body from childbirth, and she had to endure liposuction, but yet, she’s my mother and I still love her.

I still want her approval, so if her being happy that I’m marrying a wealthy man gets me love then I shouldn’t be complaining. She had to work horrible jobs to put a roof over my head and had to marry a wealthy man to get me the life she envisioned for me. I guess she didn’t expect my stepfather, Richard, to be so bad with money. The money problems started when I was seventeen years old.

One of the ladies eyes the rock on my finger and squeals. “Your ring is so beautiful, he must have spent a fortune on it.”

And the two other women gush. “Does he have a brother?” the one with her blonde hair in an updo says. Her eyes are the color of midnight, and she wears a dark gown.

“I’m getting married and you’re welcome to come to my wedding. Me and my fiancé are tying the knot at Vaux-le-Vicomte in France.”

These women wouldn’t want to hang out with me if they knew I was living on the poor side of New York City not too long ago.

I shake my head, turning away from them. “Mother? Who is here?”

I glance around the crowd, and I realize I don’t know half of these people. I wish this was more of a private affair than a big celebration. I just wanted to spend time with my mother, but she obviously doesn’t care to.

I should have known this would blow up in my face.

“Editors from *Time*, and *Forbes*, and *Wall Street Journal*. And a few other people are here to interview you two on your love life.”

Anger grows inside of me. This isn’t a cocktail party; this is more of an ambush to boost their image. She is trying to ride my gravy train. I didn’t marry Jasper because of his image, I married him so he can help my stepfather with his business. I didn’t think about how it would make them look to the public.

I exhale loudly, glaring at my mother, and she rolls her eyes as if she senses what I’m thinking.

“Don’t be dramatic, Poppy. This is what we need to help our image. There are professional photographers here to take pictures of us as a family, so they can go in *Vogue* magazine.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this before?”

She doesn’t reply for several beats. “I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“You ne—” I stop myself from talking, as I don’t want to start a fight and make a scene. Too many people are here, and the minute they sense drama, it will be splattered across the tabloids come morning.

“Excuse me, Mother.” I head to the pool house to recollect my thoughts. My mother follows me, and I’m too overwhelmed by all of this.

“Poppy.” She’s on my tail before she grabs my forearm, and I gently peel her fingers off me.

“I need some alone time,” I say over my shoulder, then I grab a fistful of my dress and rush inside the pool house, and exhale.

My mother is getting on my last nerve, and I don’t know what to do. Our relationship has always been rocky, always a push and

pull. And in her eyes, I can't ever do anything right, unless I'm under a man. I felt like she was always grooming me to walk in her footsteps of marrying a wealthy man, so I can be taken care of. She wants to keep this toxic cycle up.

There is a knock at the door, and I sigh.

"Mom, I need space, I'll be out in a minute." I breathe in through my nose and exhale through my mouth.

"It's me, Poppy. Are you okay?" Jasper asks.

Relief washes over me like a tidal wave. Slowly, I unlock the door, grab him by the hand, and yank him inside. "It's mayhem out there, and it's too overwhelming."

He studies me from head to toe. "Do you want to leave?"

"No," I sigh. "It's my parents. The only reason why they threw this party is to boost their image so they can look good."

He inches closer to me, and I step back, trying to put some distance between us. "My plan of getting my mother's approval is backfiring in my face. It's irritating my soul that she's acting this crazy."

Jasper doesn't say anything for several moments. "Fuck your parents, you don't need their approval."

I shake my head, and I feel the tears stinging my eyes. "Yes, I do, and I want to fit in their world." I wrap my arms around myself. "For years, I felt like an outsider in my own family, and now I feel..."

"Trapped," he finishes for me. "I feel the same way too." He grabs my hand. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

"What about our image? This evening will be all over the blogs and if we leave early, then it will paint a picture that our marriage is going to shit."

"Your mental health is far more important than what the reporters post in their blogs."

I can't believe what I'm hearing right now. He actually cares about my needs and what I want. Maybe he does care about me more than he leads on. He shows me bits and pieces of his kind side, and I like it a lot.

I shake my head. “No, we’re doing this, but after speaking with the editors of all the magazines, I’m going to have a talk with my parents about boundaries. They should have let us know about this before we came.”

“Do you want me to take the edge off?” Jasper asks.

“What do you have in mind?”

“I’ll show you,” he says with a glint in his eyes.

He kisses my lips and my neck, then he picks me up and I wrap my legs around his waist. This kiss is so different from the first time we kissed. Energy zaps through us, and I feel lightheaded and dizzy, as if I’m floating on cloud nine. His lips are soft and supple, and I want them all over my body.

My core tingles with need, and my nipples are so hard they can cut through glass. I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long, for him to put his hands on me, for him to caress my body, even though I vowed to never let him touch me again for how he acted toward me during our honeymoon. I know he doesn’t trust me, but I don’t care right this moment. I need his touch, and I’ll deal with the consequences later.

He carries me to the sofa, and he hikes my panties to the side, sliding his fingers through my slick folds.

“My dirty, dirty angel. Already so wet for me.” Jasper stands on his knees, licking my juices off his fingers. “How have I waited so long for this moment? I can’t get the smell of your pussy out of my nose.”

Not taking his eyes off me, he lowers his mouth onto my clit, and I let out a squeal. My breath hitches as he swirls his tongue around my clit. God, I missed his tongue on my body, and it feels even better than before. I grab a fistful of his hair and I pull lightly, not too hard—don’t want to rip any of his gorgeous hair from his head. I wrap my legs around his shoulders and grind my center against his mouth, screaming at the top of my lungs as waves of my orgasm hit me.

Jasper gets up from the floor, dusts off his knees, and I see the dick print through his pants. His lips glisten with my juices and he darts out his tongue to lick the remains of me.

I'm horny all over again. He yanks my panties back in place and gently pulls down my dress.

"I hope that took the edge off."

My cheeks burn. "It did."

There's a knock on the door, and I sigh.

"We can ignore whoever that is and I can suck you off until you come on my tongue," I suggest.

There's a glint in his eyes as I unzip his pants. He places his hand on mine to stop me, then shakes his head. "Not tonight, Angel. You are the one who's stressed out. It's not about me, it's about you."

The banging grows louder. "Poppy Mae Barrett, I know you're in there. Open the door," my mother snaps.

"I'm coming, Mother," I say. "You have lipstick smeared around your lips," I tell Jasper.

He grabs the napkin from his breast pocket and wipes his lips. Grabbing my hand, he opens the door. My mother takes one good look at Jasper, then at my flushed skin.

"We're leaving." Jasper's tone is laced with anger.

"No, you can't leave. I have all these people here." My mother looks to me for help, but I simply don't answer.

"I don't give a fuck. Poppy wanted to have a simple dinner, but you made it about you, to boost your image, and the way you ambushed her is wrong. So I'm taking her home, right now."

My mother glares at me. "You did this, you turned him against me. How am I goi—"

"I can get you any connection you want, but not like this. Not at the cost of my wife's mental health." Jasper squeezes my hand tight, and my heart gallops in my chest.

My mother bursts into tears and my stepfather walks in our direction. His smiles falters as we make it to the door.

Richard casts us a curious glance. "Where are you two going?"

"Home," Jasper answers.

“What about—”

“Fuck you and your party. We’re leaving.”

My stepfather looks stunned, and his eyes go to me. Instead of throwing a temper tantrum, he simply nods at Jasper. This is weird. My stepfather has never backed down from an argument. When he wants something, he goes after it like a dog with a bone.

“I’ll see you at the golf course at the country club?” my stepfather asks Jasper. “To go over the business contract,” he elaborates.

He follows us all the way to the car, then Jasper answers, “Yeah.”

I slide inside of the car, Jasper beside me ordering Chance to take us back to the penthouse.

“Your mother is no longer allowed to treat you like a pawn in front of me again. I won’t allow it.”

I nod and stroke the side of my temple.

“You need to stand up to her, Poppy. I worry she will bleed you dry for money.” He strokes the back of his neck. “So, I set up a bank account for you and you get five percent of investments from Wolfgang every month. Even I can’t touch it.”

My mouth hangs open. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you need to be taken care of, Poppy. You need someone to protect you from your money-hungry parents.”

Tears well in my eyes, because he’s right. I don’t have a backbone when it comes to my mother. She says she sacrificed her life for me, but isn’t that what a parent is supposed to do? I would do it for my child, if I had one.

Jasper wants the best for me, and I should want what’s best for me as well. My feelings should matter, and I’m tired of putting them on the back burner for other people.

I let the tears fall freely from my eyes. I don’t know why I’m crying. Jasper strokes the back of my head and pulls me into his lap.

“I just want my mother to love me,” I say.

“You can’t force someone to love you, Poppy. You can only see how they love you and decide if you want to put up with it. Believe me, I know.”

I nod, because he’s right. I don’t like having to earn my mother’s love, but I have no choice if I want to get rid of the empty hole in my chest.



Chapter TWENTY-THREE

Poppy

I stare at myself in the mirror as I comb my hair down my back. I'm having a girls' night with my sister and best friend, and we haven't had any alone time with each other in a long time. Ever since I've been married, I haven't had much time to do anything. Marriage with Jasper can be demanding. We have to attend galas together, make appearances in fashion shows and charity events, not to mention the paparazzi follow us everywhere we go. Just last week there was a picture of us leaving the mall. Jasper wanted to take me on a shopping spree even though I told him he doesn't have to buy me things. I'm set for life in the money department. He literally came and swooped in like Superman and saved me from my poor lifestyle, and I'll be forever grateful.

I don't like the person I'm becoming. To please a mother who doesn't call and check in on me to see how I'm doing. She hasn't yet apologized for the other night. The ambush of the party that was supposed to be a private dinner with them getting to know Jasper.

I smear concealer under my eyes, hoping to hide the bags, then I swipe lipstick over my plump lips.

When I'm around Jasper, he doesn't make me feel as if I need his approval or acceptance. Maybe, I've been wrong about myself the entire time and I don't need other people's approval for them to accept me. I don't want to be this person who has to seek people's approval to get accepted.

It's exhausting and nerve-racking. And being a people pleaser is becoming more of a headache. I love people and value them, but when am I going to put my own needs above others'? For once, I want to think about what I want and need.

I fluff my hair and slide my pedicured feet into a pair of black heels. Michael strolls inside the bedroom, keeping his eyes reverted to the shiny marble floor.

"The limo is ready, Mrs. Barrett."

I don't know how many times I've told him to stop calling me Mrs. Barrett, but this time I let it slide.

We head out the door to the limo. First we swing by Lake's penthouse, then Sophia's home. Lake pops a bottle of champagne and she pours me a glass. I sip slowly as the bubbles tickle my nose. She pours Sophia a glass and places the bottle back in the bucket of ice and reaches for a can of Coke for herself.

We talk about everything under the sun. Lake tells me how her business is going. She's always been the type to focus on her success and career. Apparently, Atlas was able to bring her stocks back up in her company. Sophia told me she's going to start college behind Tate's back so she can get her nursing degree. I hope she leaves him for good. I spoke with Jasper's PI last week and she said she's going to look into his case.

We're headed to the hottest club in the city, one Jasper owns. Once we arrive, we make it to the front door. A long line of people are waiting to get inside. The air is thick, smoggy, and cool. Cars pass by on the street. I love the city nightlife in New York. It's inviting and lively.

The bouncer eyes us from head to toe. "What is your name?"

"I'm Mrs. Jasper Barrett." I flash my hand in his face, showing off my diamond ring. "Poppy Barrett."

He smiles. “Good evening, Mrs. Barrett. Can I see your ID?”

“Of course.” I reach into my clutch and hand it to him, and he looks at the ID before giving it back to me.

Paparazzi snap pictures of me, asking me a bunch of questions that I ignore.

The bouncer opens the rope and moves from the entrance door. “Are these two with you?”

I nod and we walk into the lit club. People dance on the floor, body to body, and techno music plays in the background. The club is noisy and stuffy, but Jasper says they have the best drinks in the city.

“I need to tell Atlas to invest in clubs, it looks like a money machine,” Lake chimes in.

The gold dress she’s wearing hugs her small figure and her pastel pink hair is cut short. She looks like a Greek goddess. She has always been beautiful, even with her scar. I’m glad Atlas came along and showed her how beautiful she is.

I never tried to use Jasper’s connection for anything, and I try to keep everything about business, but since we’re going to be married for the rest of our lives, I’m going to enjoy the perks of it. No need to spoil myself with his life of luxury. He wants me to enjoy it, and he told me so. Especially now I have my own money, I can do what I want to do. My mother finally gave me my inheritance from my father’s death, so now I’m also a further two million dollars richer. I put it in my savings for a rainy day.

“We’re going to the rooftop. It has the VIP section,” I scream in Sophia’s and Lake’s ears over the noise. The music is so loud that I can barely hear myself think.

Once we’re on the rooftop, we sit on the lounge seats as the skyscrapers light up the dark sky. I love New York City. The atmosphere. The weather. Everything about it. It makes my worries melt away and gives me hope for a new day.

Sophia unties her hair from the pineapple ponytail it’s in and lets her kinky hair fall to her shoulders. The dress she wears is purple with diamonds embedded in the sleeves. The bartender brings us samples of different alcoholic beverages, but I notice Lake ask for a glass of water.

I lift one of my eyebrows. “Why aren’t you drinking?”

She blushes and takes a sip of her water. “I have work in the morning, and I can’t go in sloppy drunk.”

“It never stopped you before.” I shake my head. “What’s really going on?”

She looks between Sophia and me and Sophia casts her a curious glance. “I don’t want to upset you, but I’m three months pregnant,” she says it with sadness. “I know you want kids a—”

“I have come to grips that I will never have children, and I’m okay with it.” I think I am anyway. I swallow the lump in my throat. Plus, I’m not going to try to convince Jasper of something he doesn’t want, if I were to get pregnant by a guy, I want him to want children. Unfortunately, that will never happen because I married who I married. I have no one to blame but myself. “I’m happy for you,” I finally say with nothing but honesty. Because I really am. Both Lacey and Lake are pregnant, there must be something in the air. “Congratulations.”

She starts to cry, and I wipe her tears with the pads of my fingers. “I’m not ready to be a mother yet, I have so much to accomplish in my career, so much to do. And we were careful. I took my pills every single day.”

“It’s going to be okay.” I wrap my arms around her and squeeze her tight. “How does Atlas feel about it?”

“He’s thrilled. He’s already picking out baby names and has already bought some gender-neutral clothes.”

Sophia pats her on the back. “I know the feeling all too well much. It’s going to be okay. Once you have your baby, everything will change.” She sighs and leans back in the chair. “When I had Bailey, I had postpartum depression, but afterward I connected and bonded with her, and now I love her more than anything in the world. You will be fine, Lake. I promise.”

Lake nods and drinks her water.

“You two want to go dance?” I ask.

They both nod. Once we make it through the sea of people dancing on the rooftop, I grab Sophia and Lake by the arms and we shake our butts to a booty-shaking song. I feel someone grab me by the waist, and I quickly turn around, ready to punch the

guy in the face, but I glance up and see chocolate eyes staring down at me. Jasper changed from the suit he wore earlier to a beige shirt and black dress pants. He's hotter than the damn sun. I hope I can keep my hands off him tonight.

I had no idea he was going to show up.

I stand on my tippy-toes and shout over the music in his ear, "What are you doing here?"

He leans down and answers, "I've come to make sure no one dances with my wife."

This is the first time he has acknowledged me as his wife without pretending it's fake. I inhale a dose of his woodsy cologne. And the sight of him sends butterflies to my stomach. Jasper is so gorgeous, and I know everyone's eyes are on him.

I like his jealous streak. It's cute and makes me feel wanted.

And now I sound crazy for wanting my sexy husband to be territorial.

I push his brown hair to the side. "No one is dancing with me but Lake and Sophia."

I turn to look at them, to find Atlas and Lake speaking before he drops a kiss on her forehead. Sophia made it to the bar, and she orders herself a plate of food. I glance back at Jasper and tell him, "You're raining on my parade—it's girls' night."

His laugh is music to my ears. "They will be okay. Dance with me, Angel."

I shake my head. "We're at a club, we don't have to play as a happy couple."

"I'm not trying to pretend. I want to hang out with you." He wraps his arms around my shoulders. "Believe it or not, I love spending time with you."

His words make me blush, and I feel heat creeping up the back of my neck.

Since the day he showed me the restaurant his mother used to take him to, we became closer. Like friends, but then again, friends don't look at you like you're something to eat, and Jasper's eyes are predatory, as if he's ready to pounce on me. A slow love song comes on, and the timing can't be any worse.

He places his hands on my hips as I sling my arms around his shoulders, and we move slowly to the beat. He stares into my eyes, his gaze intense.

What is he thinking about?

He suddenly stops to grab my hand and leads me to a private room, shutting the door and locking it after I step inside. He presses his lips against mine, sliding his fingers through my hair. The kiss we shared last time is so much different from this one. He claims my lips as if he's been dying for my touch, then leaves light trails of kisses down my neck.

I don't know what to make of it, but I'm enjoying him a lot more than I should, especially since my heart is telling me no. He hikes up the hem of my dress and slides my panties to the side, slipping his fingers inside me. I gasp, digging my nails into his shoulders. My skin feels like a furnace.

"I want you, Poppy. I can't fight what I want anymore."

"Then don't," I moan.

"Fuck, Poppy. I didn't bring any condoms."

I want to tell him he can pull out and that I'm on birth control, but it led to a fight last time. It pissed me off that he doesn't trust me, and thinking about it now makes me a little sad. I want him to trust me.

Without responding, I drop to my knees and unzip his pants, then I take out his fat, long dick and shove it in my mouth. I can't fit him all the way in, so I suck the head as he strokes the shaft, making grunting noises. His other hand goes to my hair, and he holds my head in a vise grip.

"Your tongue feels amazing, just like the last time."

My knees hurt from rubbing against the carpet, my eyes sting with tears, and my jaw hurts, but the look on his face—that fucking look drives me mad. He looks so beautiful when he's submitting to the ecstasy, and it makes me wetter than a rainy day. I love the fact that I drive him crazy and I get to see this side of him, knowing no other woman will get to see him come or get to taste him again. He's all mine, and I'm enjoying it too much.

Several minutes later, he comes in my mouth, and I swallow every bit of his seed, earning me a smile.

Realization hits me like a ton of bricks. What are we doing? What is the status of our relationship? I'm trying so hard to keep this relationship purely business, but somewhere along the line, the line became blurry. We became more than just business partners. We spend time with each other like we're a real couple, but he hasn't said anything that would confirm we're more than friends with benefits.

He zips up his pants, and then we stare into each other's eyes. Emotions flicker across his face. I can't read them. Maybe he feels what I feel, maybe he's lost on what we should do or be for each other. He strokes my chin, and I smell myself on his fingers. A hint of sadness flashes across his eyes. He opens the door and takes a final long look at me, then he exits the room. My shoulders sag as the muffled music vibrates against the wall.

He left me with more questions than answers about our relationship.

And I need to figure out what we are before I invest any more time in us.

Otherwise, I'm the one who's going to end up with a broken heart.



Chapter TWENTY-FOUR

Jasper

I lift weights over my head in the gym within the building where I live. I need to release some tension and clear my head.

What the fuck am I doing with Poppy? I want her to be more than a business transaction. Fuck. I'm growing soft. I can't stop thinking about her, no matter what I do. My crush on her is getting worse the longer I stay married to her. I look forward to talking to her, but the thought of us being an actual couple doesn't sit right with me. The thought of investing my feelings in her scares me. Everything has a cost. Whether it's money or time. But I don't want to live my life on what-ifs. Having said that, I'm not ready to make this relationship real, even though I want to fuck her again.

She makes me feel as if our relationship isn't strictly business. Maybe I've been thinking the wrong way, maybe relationships are possible without business deals. After my breakup with Gemma, I had to make every relationship with women about business.

But Poppy isn't Gemma.

I'm done lying to myself about what I want, and what I want is Poppy.

Putting the weights back on the rack, I grab my phone and send my lawyer a message to come up with a contract between Poppy and me. He informs me the contract is going to be ready in an hour. I shoot Poppy a message.

Me: Be ready at 7pm. Wear something sexy and elegant.

Poppy: Where are we going?

Me: Dinner. We need to talk.

Poppy: Are we going on a pretend date?

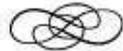
What if she says no to the terms and conditions of the new contract? She can't; it will benefit her more than the last one we put in place.

Me: No.

Poppy: Okay.

I tuck my phone back in my pocket and hop on the treadmill.

Tonight is the night Poppy will be officially mine.



After work, Poppy and I ride in silence to the restaurant that I closed down solely for us. This seafood restaurant is the third restaurant I opened right after college and I'm excited for her to see it.

Usually, I don't take women to places I own, because I don't want them trying to destroy it when I tell them what I want, but Poppy is special to me.

I glance at my wife as she plays with the hem of her cocktail dress. Her hair is in a high ponytail and her make up looks natural. Poppy doesn't need makeup to make her beautiful. She's more beautiful than clear blue sea water. Sometimes I like to stare at her in awe, because her beauty is breathtaking. My gaze drops down to her bare legs and I place my hand on her thigh, squeezing tight. This is me claiming her, possessing her in the way I want to.

Her almond-shaped eyes narrow, then she slips her palm into mine. It's become a habit to brush my lips across her small knuckles, and she smells divine. I've been around her for no more than thirty minutes and I'm ready to stick my dick inside her.

Her hazel irises roam to my dark turtleneck. "What kind of restaurant are you taking me to?"

"A seafood restaurant in Hudson. The Lost Sea."

"I love their food, especially the grilled shrimp with the blackened salmon. It's expensive, though."

I blush. Fuck. I'm a grown man and she makes me feel like a horny-ass teenager who can't wait to get his dick wet. The thought of her liking my restaurant makes me happy, and I usually wouldn't give a damn if a woman likes it or not.

"I'm glad, since I'm the owner and all."

Her eyebrows climb up her forehead. "Really?"

I nod. "I started it in my early twenties."

She smiles. "So that means I can get free food."

If she wanted the whole goddamn restaurant I would give it to her, that's how much she's got me wrapped around her finger. "Yeah, next time you have a girls' night out, bring them there and you and your friends can eat there for free."

Once we arrive at the restaurant, we walk in. It's empty, and the hostess, Shantel, smiles at me and waves at Poppy. She wears her black-and-white uniform with her hair in an updo. She's been working here since she was in high school.

"Hey, boss. You want your usual seat?" she asks cheerfully.

"Actually, I would like to sit outside with a view of the shore," Poppy suggests.

Shantel eyes Poppy up and down, and she tilts her head to the side. It seems weird to Shantel that I brought a date when I usually come here by myself to eat and work.

Shantel glances at me, and I say, "You heard my wife. Whatever she wants, she gets."

We follow her out to the patio, our seat next to the ocean. I yank out Poppy's seat, and when she sits down I push her chair into the table before I take a seat across from her.

The wind blows, tickling my face, and the smell of the salt air burns my nostrils. The sky bleeds orange and blue, like the colors were thrown into a blender and splashed across the sky.

"You closed down the restaurant. It must be really important, what you want to discuss?" Her gaze lingers on mine.

I'm too nervous about what I'm going to ask her. She might turn me down, and I don't want to think about that possibility. She has to say yes.

"We'll talk about it later. Right now, let's enjoy our meal."

She nods and glances at the options before the waiter collects our menus and takes our orders.

Poppy informs me we're supposed to go to a charity event next month and that I need to clear out my schedule, then she goes on about her workday. Usually, I wouldn't care about people's days, but with her, I like hearing her voice.

She tells me about the gossip that goes on in my office, about how she caught two of my employees fucking. When I tell her I'm going to fire them, she tells me I can't be her gossip buddy anymore if I'm going to fire people based on what she discloses to me. She tells me I'm her only friend at work, so she needs someone to talk to.

"Archie, I met him around the time I first started working at Risqué. I remember he asked me out for drinks."

I glare at her. "You told him no, right?"

She shakes her head. "Of course not. I don't have any friends at the job. Why would I tell him no?"

I point to her wedding band. "Because you're married."

She rolls her eyes and rests her elbows on the table. "I think he's a kiss ass because he doesn't want people to tell you he's been stealing office supplies."

"Right. You can go as long as you're with a group of people."

"Are you jealous?"

I sigh. “Don’t ask me questions you already know the answers to. You know I am.”

The waiter sets our meals in front of us, and we eat in silence for a few minutes until she says, “I talked to my mother, and she wants to have dinner with us again with just the family.”

“Are you sure you want to do that again? Your mother doesn’t care about your well-being,” I say in between bites.

“Yeah, I do. She’s my mother, and despite our differences I still want her around.”

This need to seek her mother’s approval is getting on my nerves, but if that’s what she wants, I have to support her.

Poppy is going to have to learn on her own, when her mother breaks her heart again, I’ll be there to pick up the pieces.

Chance comes to our table, drops off an envelope, and leaves without a word.

Poppy eyeballs it and cocks her eyebrow. “What is this?”

I pull out the wad of paper inside and I slide it over to her. “I want to redo our contract. Where we become friends with benefits behind closed doors. Where I get to fuck your brains out, and we use each other for company.”

She glares, pouts at me, then rips the contract in half, tossing it at my face. “Are you fucking serious? You’re still treating me like a business deal. I thought we moved past this.”

She gets up from her seat and bangs her hand on the table. “I’m not a fucking business deal, Jasper.”

“We started off as one, Poppy.” I pause. “I can’t have a relationship with you without one.”

She folds her arms across her chest and her eyes gloss over. I don’t understand her. Why is she acting like this? Why is she so upset?

“No. I’m not signing any more contracts. If you want to be friends with benefits, then you will treat me as one—a friend, that is. I’m not a business deal.”

I stand up and slap two crisp hundred-dollar bills onto the table. “You didn’t have a problem with it before.”

“Things have changed between us. You and I both know it. I thought you were going to ask me to be your girlfriend or try to make this marriage real.”

I take a step toward her, but she takes one back and puts her hands up to stop me. “Why would we make our marriage real? Why would I make you my girlfriend?”

She doesn’t respond. What I thought wasn’t going to happen, happened. I gave her false hope into thinking we were going to be more than a business transaction. I crossed too many lines, and I painted a picture to her that I wanted more, which I didn’t mean to do.

Yes, I do want more with her. I want us to sleep together and be friends.

Tears streak down her cheeks and she shakes her head, using the backs of her hands to wipe them away. Pain radiates from my chest. I didn’t mean to make her cry.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have thought we could be anything more.” She gently yanks on her ponytail. I have never seen her look so defeated. “I’ll see you later. Enjoy your meal.”

I watch her leave, and I sit back in my seat and finish my meal. Alone.

I made a big mistake when I let her walk out of here, but my pride stands in the way of me going after her. I gave her false hope, allowing her to think this relationship is something more than just business.

Maybe I’m way in over my head with this marriage.

I do like Poppy, and I know she has feelings for me, but I don’t think I can take this relationship any further without a signed business contract. The thought alone scares me.



Chapter TWENTY-FIVE

Poppy

I didn't go home last night so I stayed in a luxury hotel and pigged out on junk food. I needed time to myself. I thought being with Jasper and opening myself up would change his view of seeing me as a business transaction. I thought for sure he wanted to make this marriage real and we would have made love, but I was so wrapped up in my own feelings that I didn't take the time to think about how he felt. I thought we moved past this relationship being all about business, but I was so wrong. Too wrong. He doesn't want me in the way I want him. I wouldn't mind being friends with benefits, but I'm not signing any contract. It's stupid, not to mention dumb.

It sounded like a good idea in the beginning because we were strangers, but we're not anymore.

I'm so glad today is Saturday because I don't want to see him. The pain in my chest stings, and I allow myself to get caught in a fantasy that we can somehow be friends without all the strings attached. Just Jasper and Poppy. Not business partners. I was too stupid to believe he was going to ask me to be his

girlfriend or try to work on our marriage to make it real. I thought he had feelings for me the way I do, but I guess I was wrong about all of that. He gives me mixed signals and it leaves me more confused.

I munch on some chips and flip through the channels on the television. I went over my head thinking we could be more, that I'd be more than a business transaction, more than a business deal to him. I deserve more. Much more. I deserve to be happy with a husband who actually wants me around.

Tears leak down my cheeks, I thought I was okay but deep down, I'm not. I'm always putting my needs on the back burner, and it doesn't feel good. So what am I going to do about Jasper? It's too late to back out of our relationship. If I end things, my mother will be disappointed in me. She'll probably never speak to me ever again, especially now that my parents are out of debt.

They are hoping we stay together, and I can't let them down. I won't.

I need to get my head out of my ass and stop living in a fantasy world where I would be something more to Jasper. That he would change his mind about me. He won't, and I have to live with this for the rest of my life.

I prop my feet up on a pillow and tune into the mindless reality TV show. I feel as if I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. I'm going to set ground rules when I return before my feelings get too deep, before I make the mistake of falling in love with him.



Jasper

“Poppy didn't come home last night,” I tell Atlas. I grab a cigar from my breast pocket and I light it up before puffing on it. We're having a boys' night out at a bar.

We haven't had one in a long-ass time, and Trent couldn't make it because he didn't have a babysitter. The bar is dead and I'm ready to go home, but my home is not the same without Poppy. How long is she going to stay at the hotel?

I wasn't worried about where she was because Michael informed me of her whereabouts. I have to keep tabs on her to make sure she's okay. I've never been the type to worry about someone else's well-being. I miss Poppy more than I'd like to admit. My feelings are spiraling out of control for her, and I don't want to like her. It makes shit even more complicated, but I can't help but want to be around her. She's like a breath of fresh air.

Atlas sips his bourbon and casts me a curious glance. "Why didn't she?"

An old blues song plays in the background, and the waiter sets my beer on the wooden bar. I want to drink something different other than the bourbon I always order. I need something that tastes like shit, because I feel shitty.

Atlas was always good at giving advice, and he has more experience when it comes to women. I don't allow myself to get close to women emotionally to understand them. Women are like Rubik's Cubes—I just can't figure them out.

I puff on my cigar and blow smoke from the corner of my mouth then tap the ashes into the ashtray. "I proposed a business deal where we could be friends with benefits."

He tilts his head to the side. "You wrote up a contract with your wife to be friends with benefits?" He shakes his head and pats me on the back. "It wasn't smart, Jasper. No woman wants to feel like a business transaction."

I didn't think of it like that. It helps keep expectations out of the relationship.

It's as crazy as it sounds.

"You're still treating your relationships like business transactions." He shakes his head again. "You fucked up big time. I wouldn't be surprised if she divorced you."

Ouch.

The thought of her leaving scares me. I don't know why, but I have grown quite used to her presence.

He downs his bourbon and sets the glass on the table. "You need to go make things right with her."

She already knows I have a crush on her, but the idea of pursuing a relationship without some kind of a deal in place makes me nervous. This is a big step for me, asking my wife to be something without a signed contract in place. It scares the shit out of me, actually. She likes me and I like her. I want to fuck her brains out while she tells me about her problems.

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Tell her how you feel. I know you like her.”

I don’t respond but absorb his words like a sponge. He’s right. I need to be honest with myself and her. And I already know how she feels, because she was hoping for something more.

I put the cigar out in the ashtray and leave the bar without another word. The drive to the hotel is daunting and I try to prepare what I want to say to her. How should I approach this situation? I can start by apologizing.

I knock on the door. Poppy opens it slowly, wearing nothing but a white robe and shower cap.

We stare at each other for several beats, and I stroll past her into the room. A reality show plays on the TV and her lavender scent floats in the air, making my dick hard.

She follows up behind me and I turn around to find her arms crossed. “I would ask you how you found me, but your stalking skills have no bounds.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have presented the contract to you. You’re more than a business transaction; you’re my wife. And we can have a relationship without a marriage contract.”

Shock colors her face and she rocks on her heels, trying to process what I’ve just blurted out. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I can’t do a real relationship as husband and wife, but we can be friends and have sex. I can offer you friendship. I can’t be the type of man you want me to be for you. I can’t give you hearts and roses, but I can give you the best sex of your life. I can’t give you love but I want you, Poppy.”

She blushes at my words and tucks her hair behind her ear, displaying a diamond earring. “I don’t want to feel like I’m nothing more than a transaction. I know we started out like one,

but things are different. I like you, Jasper, a lot. Just don't treat me like how you tre—"

I slam my mouth against hers, effectively shutting her up. I've been waiting to put my mouth on her for the longest time. I yank her close to me and untie the slash of her robe, revealing her body to me, making my mouth water before my lips latch onto her nipple.

She pulls away. "Do you have any condoms? You're not about to get me hot and b—"

I grab the condom from my back pocket and wave it in her face. I made sure to be prepared this time. She pushes me onto the bed and kisses me hard, straddling me, then I roll her onto her back. I spread her legs wide and, fuck, she isn't wearing any panties. I get a good look at her swollen clit and her pink pussy that glistens with her arousal. I hear a humming noise and look around.

"What the fuck is that noise?" I ask, sitting up.

She grabs a purple vibrator from under the blankets, tapping the button to cut it off.

"I was getting myself off right before you came."

That is so hot. I grab the vibrator from her and eye it.

"What were you thinking about while you were fucking yourself?" I ask, tapping the button, causing it to hum again. I press every button on the vibrator, trying to get familiar with each setting.

She shakes her head and smirks. "None of your business."

"It's my business. Whatever dirty thoughts you have, I want to know."

I gently tug on her right nipple as I slide the vibrator inside of her, then I lick her clit a few times. She arches her back and wraps her legs around my arms, driving her wild.

"T-this is too much. I can't handle it."

I remove my lips from her clit. "Tell me what you think about when you're getting yourself off and I'll cut it off."

She shakes her head. "Never."

I slide the vibrator in and out of her, watching her come undone. She looks so beautiful when she's on the edge of an orgasm.

“O-okay, I'll tell you.”

I put the settings on low. “I think about you eating me out while I blow you.”

I turn up the settings and she squirms, screaming loud, so I wrap my lips around her clit again and suck hard. Poppy arches her back and comes on the vibrator, and I yank it out of her, tossing the soaked device to the floor. When my eyes go back to her pussy, I lick up her juices, my dick aching with need. I'm dying to get inside her pussy, but I want to get a good taste of her first, so I lie on my back.

“Sit on my face,” I demand.

“What do you mean? Like hover?”

“No, sit on my face. Put your pussy on my mouth. I want to eat you.”

“You must love to give me head, because you always eat me out.”

“I'm not passing up on a nourishing meal, so yes, I love eating your pussy.”

Poppy does what I say and sits on my face. I suck on her clit, and she humps my face and screams out my name. “Jasper, I don't know if I can handle this. It's too much.” She tries to get up, but I hold her in place, licking her as she's digging her nails into my shirt, and then she comes again.

She gets up from my face, and I lick my lips as she unzips my pants and wraps her lips around my dick. I lean on my elbows and watch each inch of my dick disappear into her mouth until she gets to the middle. I'm too big and I can't fit all the way, so she strokes the base of my shaft.

“Suck the tip,” I instruct her.

She sucks my dick hard as I take over and stroke the shaft. Poppy looks like an angel, the way she sucks the head, and I continue to jack off in her mouth. My dick tingles and my heart

rate picks up speed as I come in her mouth. She swallows every drop, licking her lips.

I grab the condom and tear the foil with my teeth and roll it on my dick. I lie on the bed again, and I stroke my dick against her pussy, teasing her, driving her wild. She groans. "Jasper, stop teasing me and fuck me, please." She whimpers.

I shove forward and slide inside inch by inch, not giving her time to adjust to my dick. I haven't fucked in a long time and I need to release this pent-up sexual tension. As I fuck her hard, I place my thumb on her clit and twirl it around, causing her to scream my name. Her dripping pussy glistening the condom, and she tightens around me as she comes again.

I love the glazed-over look on her face, so I pound into her harder and harder, chasing my own orgasm. Several minutes later, I feel something tear, and when I pull out there's a hole at the tip of the rubber. I can't help but to come all over her lower stomach, and some drips down to the bone above her pussy. Quickly, I disappear from the bedroom and grab a towel, wipe her, then toss the towel to the floor.

"It broke," she says, breathless.

"Yeah, it happens, and luckily I didn't come until after I pulled out."

"You have another condom?" she asks.

I nod. "I brought enough to last all night."

I flip her over and slide on another condom, then I yank her hair as I slide back inside her.

I fuck her until sunrise.



Chapter TWENTY-SIX

Poppy

The next morning, the light from the gray sky slips through the dark curtains, dimming the room, and I scrunch my nose at the dust mites floating in the air. When I get up from the bed, my sex is deliciously sore and my limbs are achy. I turn to look at Jasper's side of the bed, and he's nowhere in sight. He probably had something to do this morning. I wish he would have told me.

I can't believe he gave up his rule on treating me like a business transaction and that we're going to have a friends with benefits relationship without a contract. Maybe there is hope for us, after all. Not in the love department but in the being civilized with one another department.

I glance out the window, watching the drops of rain smear on the glass. I love rainy days in New York, especially sitting at a cafe and watching the city become alive and vibrant.

I climb back into bed and yank the blankets over my body and listen to the peaceful sound of rain pitter-pattering and the thunder clapping in the background.

Jasper walks into the room with a glass of juice and a variety of food. I smile and sit up, letting the white sheet fall from my chest. Jasper's eyes drop down to my breasts before he sets the plate on the table. When he grabs a condom from the nightstand, he slides it on his hard erection, then gently pushes me onto my back. He kisses my forehead as he thrusts into me, placing his fingers on my clit and moving it in circles. I'm about to come within seconds.

"This is the right way to start the day," he says, thrusting inside me.

I gasp. I don't think I'll ever get used to the size of him. He fucks me like he needs me, driving inside me harder and harder. Every thrust is hard and rough, and he fucks me until he comes inside the condom. When he's done, he slips it off and ties it in a knot.

After we shower together, he slides my breakfast plate onto my lap. My stomach growls and Jasper shoots me a look.

"I'm sorry," I say, digging into the bacon. "You wore me out and I didn't get to eat dinner last night."

He cocks his eyebrow. "You need to eat because you're going to be tired a lot. I have a high sex drive."

"Good. Because life would be boring without good sex."

He chuckles as he cuts his pancakes into bite-size squares.

I never noticed it until this moment but he's humming a song, and he doesn't look like the emotional, closed-off man I first married but a carefree and happy one. Could we be happy as a couple? Can we make this relationship work and be friends without me letting my emotions take over? I have never had a friends with benefits relationship before with someone. I don't want to fall in love with him as I wouldn't want my feelings to be one-sided. What I fear the most is falling in love and the person not wanting to love me back or, rather, they love me yet treat me like shit.

"What do you have planned?" he asks in between bites, then he uses his fork to pluck a grape from my plate and tosses it in his mouth.

Today is Sunday, and I'm glad. I don't think I would have been able to get up earlier and go to work. I'm too tired, but I don't want to stay in this hotel all day. I want to go home.

Home.

I never thought I'd ever call Jasper's penthouse my home.

"Nothing, as far as I know," I say, slapping butter onto my toast and biting a chunk out of it.

"We need to do a fake date tonight. We're having dinner with the board of the Wolfgang members. They were my uncle's friends from high school."

I wolf down the food and set my plate onto the table, then I wrap my arms around him. I tune him out as anxiety takes over me. I don't want to be Negative Nancy, but I have to get it off my chest, and I need to tell him how I feel about our relationship. I need something that's proof I won't get attached to him.

"Promise me when things get out of control with us, our feelings, you will pull the plug. Not divorce me, but back off."

Jasper raises his eyebrows and sets his fork down on his plate. He intertwines his fingers with mine, stroking my chin.

"Why would I promise you that?" Annoyance is clearly in his voice.

"Promise me, Jasper. Please," I almost beg.

He leans forward and brushes his lips against my forehead. "You're not going to fall in love with me, Poppy. You worry too much."

"Why?"

"I'm not the type of guy you fall in love with. I'm the type you fuck and leave."

He's dead wrong about himself and the fact that he feels like he's unlovable breaks my heart, but I don't voice it out loud. I don't want him to feel awkward.

"What do you want to do today?" he asks.

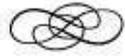
I'm glad he changed the subject.

"Go to the flea market."

“The flea market?”

“Yes, they have all kinds of stuff I want to buy. I started shopping there when my mother kicked me out.”

He cups my face and kisses me hard, sliding his hand up my thigh. “Okay, but before we go, let’s do another around of sex.”



The flea market is packed with people. I glance up at Jasper and he looks like a fish out of water, scared. Actually scared. I guess a billionaire like him doesn’t buy used stuff from other people. Why would he? He can buy anything he wants at any moment. He grabs my hand and I attempt to snatch it away, but he grips it tighter.

“Do not remove your hand from mine,” Jaspers snaps.

I accidentally bump into a kid and apologize. Her mother rolls her eyes, pulling her daughter close to her.

“We’re only friends, Jasper. We might be married, but we’re not in a romantic relationship.” He frowns at my words but keeps his grip firm and hard.

“Behind closed doors we’re only friends, but in public you’re my wife—and you’re going to behave like it.”

“You’re bossy,” I snap.

“I’m not denying that.”

I smile inwardly.

People flood the market as we walk by all the different stands. Vendors offer us different things to buy. We stroll to Angela’s station, a woman who sells jewelry. She also fed me a few times when I didn’t have enough money to buy myself a meal. She’s a sweet lady and has a heart of gold.

Her gray eyes bounce between me and Jasper, a smile spreading across her face. She has her hair up in a ponytail and fine lines decorate the corners of her mouth. She wears a floppy white hat with a matching sweater, and jeans. She waltzes from behind the stand and hugs me tight. I hug her back. She pulls away and lightly squeezes my arm. “Poppy. It’s good to see you, I didn’t get to see you at the wedding.”

“You too,” I reply before turning to face Jasper. “This is my good friend, Angela. She fed me when I couldn’t pay for my meals.”

Jasper smiles and gives her an awkward wave.

“I would like to buy some jewelry,” I tell her.

“Get as many as you want. Monica’s college tuition needs to be paid soon, and I need as many sales as I can possibly get.”

“How much for this whole set?” Jasper asks.

There’s about twenty. “Three thousand,” Angela answers.

“I’ll take them all.”

He pulls out his card and taps the screen as Angela’s mouth drops open. “I can’t take this tip.”

I glance down at the screen to see he tipped her fifty thousand dollars. I can’t fathom giving that much money to a complete stranger. I was only going to give her five grand.

“I’m sure your daughter needs the money for college,” Jasper says. “Plus, I want to thank you for feeding my wife when she needed it.”

Angela’s eyes gloss over with tears. “Are you sure?”

He nods. “I have more money than I need.”

She comes around and hugs him while he stands there awkwardly. People pass us and stare at the scene. She lets him go and bags all the jewelry before giving it to me. Angela and I chat about life in general and I tell her to give Monica a hug for me, then Jasper and I disappear into the crowd.

I bump my shoulder against his arm. “You’re a good man.”

He stops and stares down at me. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you just changed someone’s life. I’m starting to think you have a heart under all that armor of yours.”

“I’m not a good person, I just try to do the right thing.”

“You’re not the person you show the world. To the world, you’re a charming playboy who only cares about himself, but you’re not.” We stop by a coffee vendor because the weather is a bit chilly and I can use a hot drink. “I suspect the only reason

why you want your uncle's business is because you want to get close to James, not because you care about the money. I thought you were a greedy, selfish bastard but you're not."

He pauses and leans down to stroke his thumb across my cheek. "You think you have me all figure out."

I smile. "Maybe."

"You're right. I'm doing it because of my uncle. He's the only person to make me feel accepted and wanted. He's the only reason why I have the ambition and drive to be who I want to be."

He sighs as I watch a few kids play tag. The clouds hover over the sun, making the sky darker.

"He taught me how to be a man, and showed me kindness even though the world around me was cold and cruel." His eyes narrow on me. "I wish you could have met him. He was a wonderful man, just like my grandfather." He looks at me with sad eyes, then we are quiet for a while.

"Did he ever interfere with your father's abuse?"

He nods. "I stayed with him throughout the summers until it was time for me to return to boarding school. He taught me a lot about business. Every time I would get into trouble, he would make me write an essay. He was big on education and power, but he was a kind man."

Hearing him speak about his uncle makes me realize I never had anyone to stand up for me when it comes to my mother. I always had to live by her unrealistic rules, and the pressure she put on me to marry someone rich. She never puts pressure on Sophia and Jimmy. Maybe because she knew how strong I was, because I experienced the trauma of losing my father at a young age. It sounds illogical, but it's the only reason I can think of.

Jasper stops and leans against a rail, tucking his fingers into his pockets. The sweater he's wearing hugs his torso, and he's paired it with beige slacks. He crosses his Italian loafers over the other, standing out like a sore thumb in the crowd.

"What are you thinking about?"

I shake my head. "It's silly."

“Tell me. I want to know. I’m telling you things about me, so it’s fair that you open up to me.”

I grin.

“What?”

“When I first entered this marriage with you, I couldn’t get you to open up to me to save my life.”

“Well, things change.” He places his hands in mine. “We’re supposed to be friends, isn’t that what friends do?”

“Friends also let each other paint their nails and do their hair, will you let me do that?” I tease.

“No. Well…” The corners of his mouth curl up into a smile. “With the right amount of liquor, you can get me to do anything.”

I laugh so hard my stomach hurts, then I look across at the sunset. The crowds die down, just as the vendors start to pack up their equipment.

“I never had anyone in my corner to cheer me on as a child. It’s always been me and my mom, and my stepfather and half-siblings. My mother cut herself from her family, saying they are toxic.”

He assesses me, rubbing his beard. “Your mother is jealous of you.”

That’s absurd. There is no way she is jealous of me. What is there to be jealous of? She lived a great life up until the last few years, when my stepfather’s gambling addiction got worse.

I look at him, baffled. “No, she’s not.”

“She is. That’s why you get the most backlash from her.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “As long as she doesn’t disrespect you in my presence, she and I will get along fine.”

His phone rings at that moment and he answers, not taking his eyes off me.

“Yes, me and my wife can be there. We’ll see you around eight.” Jasper presses the End Call button.

“Who was that?”

“Frost, one of the board members of Uncle James’s company. He was letting me know what time to meet them, and the

restaurant we're going to." He wraps his arms around my shoulders, tucking me close to him.

"I'm glad I picked the right person for this marriage," Jasper says, completely out of the blue. "No one has lit up my world the way you do."



Chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

Poppy

The next afternoon, I wait in line for my cup of coffee. The queue is sluggish, and I need to get back to the office soon because my lunch break is almost over. This is the only coffee shop I love because their drinks are strong. Kind of reminds me of coffee in Seattle.

I brush off my black coat and pencil skirt as I stand behind a gigantic guy who's blocking my view of the menu.

Someone taps me on the shoulder, and I twist around to find Link hovering over me. He scowls at me as if I'm a child as he folds his arms across his chest.

I swallow loudly, and annoyance overtakes my chest. I do not want to deal with his bullshit right now. I haven't forgotten about his threat the last time we spoke, and usually I make sure Michael is with me all times, but I told him to stay in the car because it was a quick run.

Today must not be my lucky day.

Bags hang low under Link's eyes, he looks like shit. His suit looks like he slept in it for days and his hair is a rat's nest. I try to remain cool as the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. He eyes my wedding ring, and I fight the urge to hide it behind my back. It doesn't matter if he saw it, it's not like I care what he thinks anymore. The more I stare at him, the more I feel pity for him. He's broken and the light within him is now dim, but that doesn't mean he has to dim mine too.

"I saw your wedding on the cover of a magazine. It was beautiful."

My wedding was talked about for almost a month, everyone was calling it the wedding of the century.

I'm grateful we're in public because if he tries to do something, there will be witnesses. He has bad anger issues. He'll never put his hand on me, but when things didn't go his way while we were together, he'd punch the wall or throw shit.

Thankfully the line moves, and I finally make it to the counter.

I order myself a tall latte with vanilla and Link orders himself an espresso.

"You only married him so you can help your stepfather's business. Jimmy told me." Of course, my brother told him. What a big mouth. He has no loyalty to anyone but himself. "You don't love him the way you love me." There is hope in his eyes, and I don't like it.

I don't like the way he thinks I'm stupid enough to fall for his shit.

"Loved. I don't love you anymore, and I'm married to someone else. This conversation is inappropriate, Link," I snap.

"Let's talk somewhere private," he says, downing his espresso.

I don't want to, but if I don't hear him out, he won't let it go, and I don't want to cause a scene. If the paparazzi spot me with him, they will drag my name through the mud. All it takes is for someone to start digging and connect the dots, but I need to be in public with him.

I yank my hood over my head. “We can walk around the block.”

The way his eyebrows crease tells me he doesn't like my answer, but I don't care. I don't trust him.

SoHo is usually busy, so as long as it's crowded and there are people around I have nothing to worry about. The tension is thick and unpleasant. Being near him makes me nervous, makes me feel as if I'm walking on eggshells.

He stops to stare into my eyes, and a hint of anger flares in his pupils. “Why would you want someone like him? You can do better than him.”

I roll my eyes. “It's my choice, Link. And it doesn't concern you. Why are you concerned with who I married? You weren't concerned with our relationship when you stepped out on me. You weren't concerned about my feelings when you slept with one of my so-called friends. And you damn sure weren't concerned about my emotions when I begged you to love me.”

All those emotions I felt for him come crashing through me. The anger, the sadness, the betrayal. I've been putting everyone's feelings before mine, but not anymore.

“I told you I will change for you. I'm trying the best I can. I'll go to therapy. Just get a divorce and I'll pretend it never happened.” He twirls a strand of my hair between his fingers. “I forgive you for this. You got your revenge. Come home, please.”

It's the same lies he used to feed me, and I would have fallen for them then because I always had hope for us. I thought he was my fairy tale, but if the way he treated me was his way of love, I don't want it. I want to fall in love with someone who actually doesn't make me feel like shit.

Who doesn't make me cry myself to sleep.

Who doesn't lie to me every chance he gets.

Who doesn't continue to rip my heart out and stomp on it.

I'm not looking for love right now, but if I were to ever fall in love I want him to be obsessed with me the way I am with him.

There is no point in telling Link how I feel because he doesn't get it, and he never will because in his eyes he never does

anything wrong.

“No. I have to go.”

He grabs my hand, and I snatch it away. “Please, don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

He pushes me against the brick wall and presses his mouth against mine, and I slam my teeth against his lips. Link groans, continuing to try and kiss me.

“Link, please stop. I do—”

He slides his hand up my skirt beneath my coat, sliding his fingers up my panties, pushing them to the side, and I lose it. I slap the shit out of him, but he barely moves.

“Come on, Poppy. Don’t you miss me?”

I look to the busy sidewalk for help, but no one pays us any mind. Not a damn paparazzi in sight. I push his hand away, but he moves my hands above my head.

“You’re going to give me wh—”

Michael spins Link around and forces his hand behind his back, shoving him to the brick wall. Jasper moves Michael out of the way and his fist connects with Link’s chest, then he tackles him to the ground. On top of him, pounding in his face..

I don’t stop him because I’m too stunned, attempting to process what is happening.

Chance turns up and yanks Jasper off of Link.

“You’re going to pay for what you did!” Link says to him. “She’s mine. Always will be.”

Before I know it, Jasper punches him in the chest again and pins him to the ground.

“You go anywhere near my wife, I’ll murder you,” Jasper shouts. He picks Link up by the shoulders and punches him in the gut. “You were touching what’s mine. She.” He punches him in his right eye. “Doesn’t.” In the balls. “Want you.” He punches him in the nose, then he spits on him. “You stay the fuck away from my wife.”

Link staggers back and looks between us, blood leaking down his face, then he takes off in a different direction before bumping

into an old woman.

“He... He never acted that way before. Tried to force himself on me. To make me be with him.” I glance up at Jasper who wraps his arms around me, stroking my hair.

I burst into tears, soaking his dress shirt. He soothes me like I’m a wounded child. I’ve never been so scared in my life. “I’m so glad you showed up, otherwise...”

“Don’t dwell on it, Angel.”

He brushes his lips against mine before deepening our kiss. I never felt so safe with him until now.

“How did you find me?”

“Michael. He saw you walking with him and called me during the meeting. I had to leave ear—”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, your safety is more important to me.” He strokes my cheek. “I don’t trust Link, so you need to be escorted at all times.”

“That is the reason why I asked you the night of the ball whether Michael is able to protect me. I suspected he was stalking me, and...” I sigh, trying to gather my thoughts. “Thank you, Jasper.”

He kisses me again and ushers me into the car.

Jasper doesn’t know how much his protection means to me, and I’m grateful for him.



Chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

Poppy

“My brother has a surprise for you. He’s taking you out on a date.” Lacey’s eyes beam with excitement. She bounces on her feet. Every other week she comes over and we’ll have a girls’ night out, or I’ll pick her up at school and we’re go get smoothies.

I love surprises.

After that day I ran into Link, I’ve been on edge and watching over my back. I try not to think of what would have happened if Jasper hadn’t shown up. I shake my head and try to wipe away those memories.

I raise my eyebrows. “What kind of surprise date?”

“The kind where you will find out soon enough,” she teases.

I perch up on the couch with my legs tucked in.

Jasper left a while ago and he hasn’t been back, so I’ve been with Lacey. We’ve been painting our nails and talking about the

latest gossip in the celebrity world. She loves trashy reality shows like me.

Her cheeks turn rosy red. “With this pregnancy, you know, it feels weird.”

I will never know the feeling of being pregnant or caring for a child, but I’m coming to grips that it will never happen for me. Even when I see mothers with their children, my chest tightens, but this is the life I signed up for and Jasper will never go back on his word.

“How so?”

“I crave weird foods, like hot peppers and lime juice. It’s really good.”

I crinkle my nose. “That sounds unpleasant.”

“Also, I’m moving next month. My boyfriend bought a house in Los Angeles, so I’m going to live with him there. I’m going to miss you.”

She hugs me and I embrace her.

“You’re like the sister I never had. You can visit me without Jasper. I mean, I would love for him to visit too, but you are always welcome.”

“Of course. I will come visit once the baby is born. Do your parents know you’re pregnant?”

She shakes her head. “No, matter of fact. I haven’t told them I was moving.” She shrugs. “I’m going to pack my bags and leave in the middle of the night. When I get to LA, I’ll let them know. It’s best that way.”

I bob my head. “I understand.”

Jasper walks into the living room, wearing a turtleneck and black dress pants. My heart flutters in my chest as the sight of him. Those butterflies never go away when he is around. I jump up from the couch, and he comes up to me and gives me a kiss on the lips. Sometimes it doesn’t feel as if we’re just friends with benefits and more like we’re husband and wife, but I don’t dare entertain the thoughts further because Jasper will never be with me like that outside of on paper. We decided on friends with benefits and that’s what we’re doing.

Which is why I don't understand why he's taking me out on a date tonight.

"Why are you taking me on a date?" I blurt out, voicing my thoughts.

He shoots Lacey a glare and she shrugs, resting her hands on her small belly.

"It's not a date, it's us hanging out. Friends hang out, Poppy."

My mind goes to a week ago when I ran into Link. The way he protected me from Link didn't feel like a friend protecting another friend. It felt like he meant every word as my husband. I shake my head. It's all in my head. There is no way he loves me. That would be absurd.

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

Thirty minutes later, we arrive at an art museum. The place looks familiar, and my eyes sting with tears. How did he know about this place? This is the place where my father used to hang his artwork before he passed away.

"How did you know about my father's artwork?"

He smiles. "Your stepfather. We had our business meeting this morning and I asked him about your father. He told me he used to take you here, mentioned that he had some paintings."

I nod, and Jasper grabs my hand. I avoided this place because I couldn't bear the memories of losing my father. I lost him when I was young, but I remember him vividly. I often wondered if my life would have turned out this way if he hadn't passed away. My life went downhill after his death.

"Thank you so much," I say, and Jasper wipes a tear from my eyes, but I only cry harder. "Ever since my father died, my mother wouldn't bring him up and it was forbidden to speak about him. For a while, I felt alone."

Jasper grabs my hand and kisses it, and I feel my cheeks redden.

This man is not the man I thought he was. I used to think he was a heartless person and closed off, but he's not that at all. I want to trust him, give my all to him, but something is holding

me back. He treats me way better than my ex ever did, and I'm forever grateful for it. Even if we're just friends.

"Thank you," I whisper again.

"They've remastered your father's painting. Do you want to look at it?"

I nod again.

We walk through the entrance to find different artwork everywhere. Some I recognize, others I don't. The place is packed with people admiring different paintings. A few waitresses offer us champagne and finger foods, but I'm not hungry, so I shoo them away. My father taught me about the different artists and wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but he never forced his life expectations on me—unlike my mother. He never tried to make me feel like I'm not good enough.

He used to tell me I was his star.

We stroll through the exhibit hand in hand. I glance at my father's paintings with his signature on them, and I bawl my eyes out.

If I had known we were coming here, I would have prepared myself.

Jasper wraps his arms around me, and people stop and stare while some mind their own business. We buy a few of my father's paintings. Once we leave the art gallery, we ride in the car silently.

Jasper sets me off like a firecracker, and I'm horny as fuck. I slide my hand to his lap, up to his dick print. His eyes glint with delight and he presses his hand on top of mine, squeezing tight.

"You ever gotten head while driving?"

He licks his lips and without a word, he keeps his right hand on the steering wheel, using the other hand to unbuckle his belt and unzip his dress pants.

"Eat, Angel. If you're hungry."

I slide my hand on his shaft, and he shudders at my touch. I yank out his big dick and wrap my mouth around the head and suck hard.

“Fuck, Poppy, you’re going to make me crash and come at the same damn time.” I continue to suck as he strokes my hair. “Such a good girl.”

Several moments later, I taste his salty cum, and I swallow loudly before I zip him up and lean back in my seat.

I needed to have him right now, and my hormones rage like I’m a horny teenager. “Let’s rent a hotel.”

“You and hotels.” He smirks.

Once he finds a luxury hotel, we both get out of the car and rent a room. The whole process doesn’t take more than a few minutes because the receptionist recognizes my husband. Usually, these rooms are booked far out.

The minute we tumble in through the door, I’m on my knees, slipping Jasper’s dick into my mouth again. I have always been the type to love giving head. It makes me ten times more horny to bring him to his knees, at my mercy. The lust in his eyes tells me he’s on the verge of losing control. He groans, places his hand in my hair, yanking hard, and my scalp stings. I love it. I needed him more than anything right now. I suck him so hard, my jaw aches.

This wonderful man is mine, all mine. Once he comes in my mouth, I stand up and yank my jeans off. Jasper picks me up and carries me to the bed, and I don’t know remember removing the rest of our clothes. His mouth is on my clit in no time, and before I know it I come on his tongue. He flips me over, and I hear the tear of a foil before he’s inside of me, yanking my hair, pounding inside me. I feel every inch of him taking me, claiming me as if I’m his. His thrusts get rougher and harder, the sound of our skin slapping against each other’s growing louder. His nails dig into my flesh, and I come around his dick.

“Fuck, your pussy is squeezing the hell out of my cock, milking me. I’m about to come.”

I peek over my shoulder and watch Jasper throw his head back. He yanks the condom off, and warm cum sprays my lower back.

That was so hot.

He disappears from the bedroom and comes back with a towel to wipe me off.

Once he's finished, he puts on another condom and I lie on my back this time as he slides inside me. Gripping my cheeks, he kisses my lips.

It's so... intimate.

We usually don't have intimate moments during sex, but this time it feels different. Maybe because I'm so full of emotions. This has been an eventful day and I don't want this night to end. I wish like hell for our relationship to be real, that this isn't just two friends having sex, but deep down I know Jasper will never be mine. And I have to live with it.



Chapter TWENTY-NINE

Poppy

I have to meet with my parents tonight for Sunday dinner. When I spoke to my mom, she sounded remorseful, and she promised not to ambush us again. I tuck mine and Jasper's jackets into my parents' closet, and Jasper stands next to me wearing a brown suit with a white shirt. He eyes my dress with a smile spreading across his mouth.

We've been fucking like rabbits lately.

We fuck first thing in the mornings and the minute we step into our home again after work.

I didn't expect us to have so much sex, and I also didn't expect us to become this close. We talk about our days, about what's going on in our lives—we communicate well. I crave everything about this man, and I kind of like it.

He's grown on me in a way I didn't expect.

But sometimes, I'm expecting the ball to drop, for him to turn into an asshole. I've never had a healthy relationship before, so I

don't know what to expect.

He leans down and whispers in my ear, "Meet me in the bathroom for a quickie."

I swat his arm. "Not at my parents' house."

Standing in the middle of the living room, in this exact area where my mother disowned me, seems like it was so long ago, but it wasn't. It was one of the most painful feelings I ever experienced, and I don't want to experience it again. Jasper clasps my hand with his.

The smell of collard greens, neck bones, and baked chicken wafts through the air, making my stomach growl.

I haven't had soul food in a long time.

My stepfather stands up from the leather couch and shakes Jasper's hand. Jasper clenches his jaw and plasters on a fake smile.

Nervousness bubbles in my chest as Jasper grabs my hand and kisses it. Something has changed with him, he's been different. He looks at me with adoration in his eyes, like the way he's looking at me now, and my cheeks burn. His gaze alone causes goosebumps to sprout on my arms.

My mother wastes no time giving Jasper a kiss on the cheek, but her smile falters when she sees me. We barely spoke more than a few words to each other after we scheduled this dinner.

I bite the inside of my cheek before I offer her a fake smile.

"Poppy. You look well," my mother says, keeping her face neutral.

This is the first time she's ever complimented me, but I don't respond and nod my head.

I have a feeling this is a setup so they can kiss Jasper's ass.

"What's wrong, Poppy?" Jasper whispers in my ear.

My eyes are on my mother, and she watches us like a hawk.

"I'm not feeling so well," I lie. I don't want to tell him how I really feel about my mother or this dinner while she's right there.

Jasper pushes a strand of hair behind my ear. "Why are you lying?"

“It’s nothing, I’ll be fine.”

He casts me a curious glance and I inhale deeply, shaking my head.

We make it to the dining room table and Jasper pulls out my chair. I slouch onto it. Jimmy sits next to Jasper and the maid brings out dishes. Jimmy doesn’t say anything to me. His dark skin is smooth, his eyes are dark as midnight.

He glances at us, then his eyes revert back to his phone. My brother and I have never got along, and that’s fine. He always made me feel as if he thinks he is better than me, but I don’t care. My mother completely spoiled him as a child, and he acts like the world owes him, yet if I act the same way, I wouldn’t hear the end of it.

“When will Sophia be here?” I ask my stepfather as he sets the newspaper down on the table, and his gray eyes beam with delight.

“She’ll be here in a minute.” He nods at Jasper. “Thank you for being an investor in my winery business.”

Jasper doesn’t respond but turns his gaze to me and points to his plate. “What is the green stuff?”

I smile. “Collard greens. Southerners eat it. Try it.”

I grab his fork, scoop up a lot of vegetables, place it in his mouth, and he chews.

“This is good as fuck. It’s a little bitter, though.” Then he points to the meat. “What is this?”

“Neck bones. It’s cooked with the greens to give it flavor.”

“Do you eat it too?”

I frown. “I don’t, but some people do.”

He cuts into the meat and pops a piece into his mouth. “Holy shit, this is better than chicken.”

I grin. “I’ll make it for you whenever you like.”

He places his hand on my thigh under the table. “I would love that.” His smile makes my stomach flutter.

I glance up, and Sophia walks through the door, Bailey strapped to her hip.

“Hey. Where is Tate?” I ask.

Annoyance bleeds into her pupils and she crinkles her nose. “He had to work in the office.”

He’s full of shit. There is no way he’s at work at this hour of the day. I hope she will wake up and see through his lies.

“On a Sunday?”

Sophia clears her throat and puts my niece into the high chair. She pulls out jars of baby food and places it in a bowl for her. “Yeah,” is all she says. She knows he’s cheating on her, but she won’t admit it. The fucking prick.

I have to meet with Aurora soon to find out what is up with him, and hopefully whatever she finds will encourage Sophia to leave him for good. I think her seeing the evidence with her own eyes will give her the courage to walk away from him. She told me she wouldn’t leave him, but I think I can change her mind.

My mother made sure she brought out her best dishes, only to impress my husband. She keeps her focus on him and never really engages with anyone else throughout the entire meal.

Sophia leans over and whispers in my ear, “You see the way Mom is kissing Jasper’s ass? She acts like that’s her child.”

The pain in my chest grows at her words, but I swallow it down thickly. I want my mother to ask me questions, to be involved in my life, like any normal mother would.

Finally, my mother glances at me from across the table, and her smile falters.

“Poppy, sit up straight, your posture needs to be perfect.”

I do what she says and from the corner of my eye, I watch Jasper watch my mother. He places his elbow on the table.

“You’re using the wrong fork, use the smaller one. That one’s for the salad,” my mother admonishes me. I pick up the fork, and Jasper places his hand on mine.

“Use whatever fork you want to,” he says, glaring at my mother.

My mom laughs nervously. “I’m just trying to make sure she does things correctly.”

“By nitpicking everything she does? You haven’t engaged in conversation with her at all during this whole dinner.” He grabs a napkin and wipes his mouth. “I don’t like it. You think by kissing my ass you’re going to get more money out of me?” He folds his arms across his chest. “You’re not. You will not use your daughter as a pawn to get whatever you want out of me.”

Everyone’s mouth drops open, except for my mother’s. She holds her head up high, but guilt clouds her pupils.

“I’m quite sure she loves me,” I murmur.

My mother doesn’t respond but reverts her eyes to outside the window, to the oak tree that was planted in honor of my grandmother. Her not responding cuts deep, and I’m hoping she will deny what he said.

The tension in the room can be cut with a knife and tears threaten to fall, but I bite my lip.

“I’m sure your mother loves you,” my stepfather says, resting his hand on hers, but she quickly removes it. “She might be mean, but she loves you.”

“Please.” Jimmy rolls his eyes and pours himself a glass of sweet tea. “Everyone knows Mom only cares about her status. She blames Poppy for her failures in life. She got pregnant with her when she was teenager, and her father might have been a famous painter in the nineties but he was a crackhead. I see her as a disappointment too.”

“Jimmy!” Sophia says, rubbing my back. “He didn’t mean it.” Her tone is as if she’s speaking to a wounded child.

“I’m not eating with a bunch of snakes who don’t care about my wife.” Jasper grabs my hand. “This will be the last time we’ll have dinner here.”

I follow Jasper to the hallway as he gently tugs my hand, ushering me to the entrance. The sad part is, my mother didn’t bother running after me, or tell me Jimmy didn’t mean what he said, or confirm that she does love me.

Once we’re in the car, I let all the tears out, all the anger, the sadness, and betrayal. I ugly-cry. I tried to be tough and strong and act like nothing is wrong, but getting my mother’s approval means everything to me. I just want her to love me for who I am,

but Jasper may be right. She only loves me when it's convenient for her.

When you love someone deeply, you truly see them through a rose-tinted glass.

Jasper strokes the back of my neck. "You deserve so much more than to be treated like a pawn. Your mother doesn't love you."

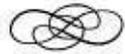
He makes a lot of sense, but I can't fight the nagging feeling in my gut—of wanting her love, needing it. I can't stop the urge to call her and ask her why she doesn't love me like her other kids. Why am I the only one being singled out?

The tears begin to finally dry up, and I say, "She sacrificed a lot for me."

Here I am still making excuses for her, fighting the urge to tell Jasper to turn the car around and go back to her, but then I would only hurt my own feelings.

"Parents are supposed to make sacrifices for their kids. You didn't ask to be brought into this world, Angel. And she shouldn't punish you for your father's mistake. You deserve better."

I don't respond, because deep down I know he's right.



Jasper

My grandfather called me earlier this morning to invite me over to deliver some news, so I meet him in his living room. He hands me a folder.

I stare at the manila folder, then I glance back up at him. "What is this?"

"Open it," he demands.

His maid, Malinda, who's been working for him for fifteen years, hands me a bottle of water. I set it on the end table near the brown love seat and open up the folder. A picture of an older woman with blonde-and-white hair stares at me. I flip the photo over, revealing some documents.

I thrust my fingers through my hair, trying to figure out what I'm looking at. It's past eight a.m., I haven't had my coffee yet, and I'm late for work. I have a business meeting with a few shareholders to approve of lingerie for the fashion show that's coming up in the next couple of months.

“What am I looking at?”

My grandfather rubs his hands on his pajama pants and sighs in disappointment.

“I suspected for a long time your mother's drowning was foul play. I had my PI snoop through Tommy's home while he was out. He found this in the safe.” He taps his foot on the wooden floors. “This is the thing that can get him locked up. He paid this woman in the photo, Judy, five million to keep her mouth shut about what she saw. It doesn't say what she saw, exactly, but it shows a business contract between the two where she promised not to tell the policemen. It turned out she was living right next door to him at the time of your mother's death. I suspect he paid her off, but when my PI went to her new place, she wouldn't talk.”

“Where does she live?”

“She lives in the Hamptons. If she's a witness to your mother's murder, she will go to prison right along with him because when the cops questioned her, she lied to them.”

Since she saw what happened, she could have prevented it, she could have stopped him. My mother could've been alive right now as we speak, and I wouldn't have had to go through what I went through as a child. My mother didn't deserve to die in the first place. She didn't deserve to be treated and punished for her actions and for wanting to keep me. Why didn't she leave him? Her family had money, and it's not like she didn't have any resources. None of this makes any sense.

Anger rises in my chest like a volcano and so many emotions swirl inside me. If I go to Tommy and ask him about it, he's going to deny it, like he has in the past. I'm afraid if I speak to him, I would end up going to jail for assault or attempted murder.

“A month before her death, he took out a thirty-million-dollar insurance policy on her. He was swimming in debt and hiding from loan sharks.”

That son of a bitch.

He took away the one person who cared about me, the one person who loved me, because he didn't like to lose. I'm going to help bury the bastard and I want him to rot in jail.

"I'll get to the bottom of it," I say, "I'll find a way to make him pay for this shit." I rake my fingers through my hair again. "Why didn't my mother leave him?"

My grandfather shakes his head. "She wouldn't tell me, but I suspect he had something over her head, something that could destroy her life."

I nod, trying to process his words. I'm going to find out soon.

He places his hands on my shoulders. "Marriage looks well on you," he says, switching the topic. I'm glad. Speaking about my mother's death makes me feel as if I have boulders on my chest.

I nod.

"Are you going to give her a child?"

I shake my head. "No. She agreed to it."

I know I'm being selfish, but I can't experience the pain I had with Harper, of losing her. I wouldn't be a good father. I failed to protect Harper, and I'll do the same if I had a child with Poppy.

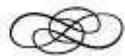
"Poppy has given you everything you want. She took your last name, even went to the extent of changing her life for you. She deserves to be happy." He kicks his feet up on the coffee table. "And you have to stop blaming yourself for Gemma's mistakes. Harper wouldn't want you to. Accident happens all t —"

"I'm going to be late to work, Grandfather," I say, cutting him off.

I don't want to hear a lecture on something I know isn't true.

"Have a great day at work, and give Poppy a hug and a kiss on the cheek for me."

"Will do," I say as I head out the door.



Poppy

I soak in the tub; I needed to relax and clear my mind. My mother has been on my mind heavily, especially after the dinner we had on Sunday. The more I ponder my relationship with her, the more I'm convinced Jasper is right. She's jealous of me. My mother hasn't called me since Sunday's dinner, but then again she's always been a prideful woman. She was never the type to apologize. I feel like I'm losing everything: my mother, my dream of becoming a mother, myself.

I'm trying to find a new purpose for myself, and the idea of opening up a daycare has been playing on my mind more and more lately. It's not the dream I originally had, but at least I'll get to work with children this way. Plus, I don't want to be sucked into Jasper's world anymore. The last time I did that with a man, it didn't end well. My life revolved around him, and I ended up losing myself in the end. I don't want to start that habit again.

"How was your day?" I hear Jasper's voice from the entrance of the bathroom.

I sink farther into the water as the jets massage my back.

"It was okay." I've been sulking all day, but he doesn't need to know that. He doesn't need to know that I feel like life has been kicking my ass lately. "Well... besides texting you all day while we're at work." I've never noticed before, but Jasper can be a little clingy. I actually love it. He sends me memes throughout the day, even though I'm his executive assistant. It feels wonderful to have someone care for me. "I had lunch with Lake and Atlas, did a little shopping, and volunteered at the hospital for sick kids." It felt amazing going to the hospital and reading books to the kids. It feels nice to do something for someone even when you feel shitty, that's one thing I learned from Lake.

Surprise flickers across Jasper's face. "I had no idea you did volunteer work."

"Yeah, it feels good to give back to the community."

Once he removes his clothes, he slips into the steamy water with me, sloshing it over the brim of the tub, wetting the marble floors.

Smiling, he slides me between his legs, and I rest the back of my head on his chest as his thick erection brushes against my ass. Desire blossoms inside my stomach.

We sit in complete silence, but then I feel the need to ask him a question.

“Can I ask you something without any judgment?” I ask. “I need your honest opinion.”

He nods, running his fingers through my hair and gently scratching my scalp. It feels so damn good.

Sometimes he makes me feel as if our relationship is more than just friends with benefits. It feels more like we’re an actual married couple. But I shake my head, because I know we will never be that. This marriage will always be based on business transactions. It just comes with better benefits now. To the world, we’re a happily married couple, but behind closed doors, we’re just friends fucking each other.

This is more complicated than I thought it would be.

“Do you think it is possible for me to run a daycare for special needs kids?”

He cocks his eyebrows as his wet finger strokes my cheek, causing the back of my neck to feel hot.

“Yes, why would I judge you for that?”

“I don’t know. When I brought it up to my mother a couple of years ago, she told me it was stupid, that I needed to be a trophy wife.” I feel even more stupid for asking such a silly question, but I need his approval before I do anything. I need his validation. “I want to open a daycare. There’s a building I’ve been eyeing in Lower Manhattan, and it’s perfect. You don’t have to put in any money and I don’t want to use our resources. I want to e—”

He shakes his head. “No, you’re going to use every resource we have.”

Everything is transactional with Jasper, so I know he’s going to want something in return.

I crinkle my nose. “What do you want in return?”

“What do you mean?”

“You always told me everything is transaction and comes with strings, so I want to know wh—”

“Not with you. You don’t have to return any favors. I’ll write you a check for how much you need.”

He’s not the same Jasper I went into this marriage with. The Jasper I knew would tell me he would have a contract drawn up in the morning and tell me his terms and conditions. It took me disappearing to get the hint. I don’t care about anything else between us being a contract, only our relationship—that’s a hell no.

My mouth hangs open and he uses that to steal the breath right out of me. My heart melts in my chest, and I kiss him back hard before I pull away.

“So, you approve of me not just being your wife and branching out on my own?”

“You don’t need my approval for shit, Poppy.”

“You’re not going to be disappointed in me if I fail? I don’t want to let you down.”

He kisses me again, long and hard. “Poppy. You don’t have to prove yourself to me to do the things you want, and if it fails we can start over again.” He pauses. “Do you have a business plan?”

I nod. “I did research on how to open up a business, and I know how to market, but I think with a little bit of guidance I can be successful.”

I grab my phone from the counter and pull up a Google Doc. I shove the phone in Jasper’s hand for him to look over my plans. He reads through it.

“It needs more work, but I’ll help you with it.” He strokes my cheeks. “I’m proud of you.”

His words warm me, I’ve never had anyone try to help me with my dreams. Tears gloss over my eyes and Jasper kisses me again. I twist and hug him tight, as if I don’t want to let him go. I rest my head on his shoulder, inhaling his clean skin, and I take in

his essence, hoping to capture this moment forever. He makes me feel safe and wanted without strings attached.

We started off as a business transaction, but now things are so different between us.

I can't help but wonder if I'm falling in love with him.



Chapter THIRTY

Poppy

The next morning before work, I meet with Sophia. I heard back from Aurora and she gave me information about Tate. Me showing Sophia evidence about her husband will do one of two things: she'll thank me for having her back and get the courage to leave him, or it'll all backfire on me and she won't speak to me again.

Either way, I feel like I'm about to do the right thing. She deserves to be with someone who doesn't use her face as a punching bag and mentally abuse her. I hope she doesn't hate me for what I'm going to tell her.

The doorbell rings, and I rush to the door to open it. Sophia stands there in leggings and a tank top with a light jacket on top.

"Where is Bailey?" I ask.

"She's with the babysitter." She pushes past me to the living room, and the maid brings out fresh, steaming coffee. I thank her before she scurries back.

“What was so urgent that you wanted to talk to me about?”

I inhale deeply. My sister can be a bit of a hothead and I don't want to piss her off, but this needs to be said. “Tate is having an affair,” I tell her.

Anger clouds her pupils, and she balls up her fist but keeps them in her lap. “No, he isn't.”

I place my hands on her shoulders, then stroke her back. “He is. And he's not even going to work like he says he is. He goes to her house. I have pictures.” She puts her hands up to stop me but I ignore her, opening the folder. I slide out pictures of Tate holding hands with another woman. I flip to the next one of him kissing his mistress, and another one of them having lunch together. “It gets worse, he got fired a month ago for stealing money from the business—”

She shuts the folder and slams it on the table.

“Why were you spying on him? How did you even get these pictures?”

“I hired a PI to have him followed, I was trying to look out for you.”

She's quiet for a few moments as tears fall. Guilt eats at me like a disease. I don't know why I feel guilty, because I didn't do anything wrong.

She stands up from the couch and rips the evidence up before tossing it into the fireplace. I watch as it quickly turns to ashes.

“This isn't you looking out for me. You always stick your nose in shit that doesn't belong to you.” She folds her arms across her chest. “I was happy, living in my own bubble, thinking my marriage is perfect, yet you burst that bubble.” She sighs. “No wonder Momma regrets having you.”

Her words dig into my chest and takes root and a lump forms in my throat. Sometimes when she's angry, she says things below the belt. I try so hard to keep the tears at bay, but I can't stop myself.

“I was just trying to help you.” My tone is low and raspy.

“No, you weren't. You only did it because things aren't going right in your life, so you look for ways to fix others. You have

always been like that. It doesn't matter, though, I'm not leaving him."

She's being unreasonable.

"Tate beats you, and he cheats on you, yet you don't want to leave him?"

"I'm not going to risk my relationship with our family. And you might have left Link but Mother is still controlling you. You went ahead and married a complete stranger just so you can get in good graces with her. You're a hypocrite." She stabs a finger in my chest. "Stay the fuck out of my business, Poppy, or I will cut you out of my life."

Tears trail down my cheeks. "You're angry at the wrong person," I snap. "I'm not the one who is hurting you, he is. I'm not the one who's not making you feel safe, he is!"

She completely ignores what I say, storming off, and I hear the front door slam behind her.

I curl up on the couch as the tears continue to fall. I just want the best for her.

Jasper walks into the living room, his eyes lingering on the door before they land on me. He told me this would happen, and I didn't listen to him. He sits next to me, yanking me into his arms, and I cry into his shirt.

"You were right. I should have minded my own business."

He continues to stroke my hair. "That's something I wish I was wrong about, Angel."

"She's right about me, I am a hypocrite. I did marry a complete stranger just to get in good graces with my mother. I'm begging my mother to love me, yet I'm telling Sophia to leave her husband, and she fears the exact same thing I do. Being disowned by our mother. I don't have the courage to stand up to my mother, and yet I want her to do the one thing I can't do myself. What the fuck is wrong with me?" I say through my tears.

"Nothing. You want to protect your sister. You want her to be safe. You learned your lesson and left a toxic relationship; she has to learn that on her own."

That doesn't stop the pain from growing in my chest, the empty feeling inside of me. I can't afford to lose my sister, so I'll have to stay out of her business.

"Why are you trying to keep people around who are no good for you, Poppy? You deserve so much more than how you are treated."

When I don't respond, Jasper slips his fingers up my dress, pulling my panties to the side. "Do you need me to take care of you?"

I nod, to which he smirks, laying me on the couch. Jasper gets on his knees, placing my legs on his shoulders, and eats me out until I'm screaming his name. Once he's done, he licks his lips and I move my panties back.

"You don't want me to make you come?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "This isn't about me. It's about making you feel good."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"That is what friends are for."

I should be happy he used the word *friends*, but deep down I want to be more than friends. I want him to be my husband for real, but he will never want me the way I want him.

If I keep this up, I'm going to break my own heart by wanting someone who isn't capable of love.



Chapter THIRTY-ONE

Jasper

I'm so obsessed with Poppy. I'm doing things I would never do, like go over her business plan without charging her. Dropping everything on a whim just to get her coffee, making sure she eats during her lunch breaks. When she started her period, I even went to the drugstore to buy her tampons. I find myself waking up in the middle of the night, pulling her to my chest, and I don't know how to handle it all. I don't know where I'm supposed to go from here. I haven't been like this since I was with Gemma. In the next few months, I'm signing my contract to get my uncle's business and it has everything to do with her.

I decided I'm not going to divorce her after I sign the contract. I want to stay with her, and I don't want to fuck her over.

Today, I have a surprise for her, and she doesn't know what it is. I show up to our home and twirl my keys around my finger as I make my way to the living room. She's curled up on the couch, flickering through Netflix. Her eyes beam at me, and she sets the remote down on the entertainment unit.

“Why are you home so early?” she asks me.

Normally, I stay at the office until eight or nine, but today I decided to come home at five.

“I have a surprise for you.”

She jumps up from the couch. “What is it?”

“It’s two surprises, actually. Get dressed,” I tell her. “We’re going out on a date tonight.”

She crinkles her nose. “Date? Not a pretend date?”

“When was the last time we went on a pretend date?”

She taps her fingers on her chin, her eyes going from the marble floors then back up to me. “Since before we were married...” She runs her fingers through my hair.

“Hurry up, we’re going to be late for what I have planned for you.”

“What should I wear?”

“A nice dress, and flats.”

She nods and disappears to the bedroom.

Once we’re in the car, I drive out of the garage, and instead of resting my right hand on the joystick, I rest it on Poppy’s thigh. She glances up at me, her cheek turning a light pink, but she doesn’t move my hand away. We pull up to an abandoned building. It’s a bit run-down but I can hire people to clean it and get it up to date.

“Why are we here?” she asks.

“I bought the building for you.”

She looks at me, baffled. “W-what?”

“This is the building you said you wanted, right?”

Tears form at the corners of her eyes, and I use the pad of my thumbs to wipe them away. “Why are you crying, Angel?”

“No one really took the time to show any interest or invested in my dreams.” She glances at the building again. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“I figured since I can’t give you kids, I might as well make it up to you by giving you something else you want.”

I reach onto my back seat, pull out a folder and hand it to her. “I redid your business plan. It was kind of amateur, except for the marketing strategy. You did good on the plan. The construction workers will be here to fix the building up, and in the meantime you have to work on getting your license from the state.” I grab her hand. “You’re officially fired.”

“You’re firing me?” she gasps.

“Yes. You need to work on your dreams and goals.”

She kisses me softly, then proceeds to unzip my pants, but I move her hand away. “As much as I want to take your sweet mouth, I have something else for you,” I say against said mouth.

I put the car in drive and pull up to another building. We make it to the rooftop, slow music is quietly playing, and a dance instructor comes into view. He wears a cheap suit, his dark hair combed to the side. He’s dressed as if he’s taking my wife on a date, and I don’t like it.

“Anthony. I’m here with my wife and she wants to learn how to salsa.” I hold Poppy’s hand.

She’s too focused on the background, more specifically, the night sky. I made sure I stalked the weather app to make sure the sky was clear tonight. From here, you can see the skyscrapers flickering and the city below us busy. She turns to me and jumps into my arms, kissing all over my face.

“Thank you so much.”

“Are you ready to begin your session?” Anthony asks.

She nods and grabs my hand. I place my hands on her lower waist and guide her. The instructor tells us how to move our bodies. Soft music plays through the speakers.

“You dance as if you’re making love,” he instructs us. “Look into your wife’s eyes and think you are making love to her.”

My dick aches with need, and now I want to bend her over. I want to make love to her right here and now. I haven’t made love to another woman in a long-ass time, and I’m dying to do it with Poppy.

She looks away, her eyes going to our feet as we move. I wonder if she feels the same way I feel about her. A feeling I keep buried deep inside that I'm afraid to admit out loud because this relationship wasn't supposed to blossom the way it did. I feel like with every passing moment I spend with Poppy, I want more of her.

We stop moving once the music stops playing, and when we pull away, there is an awkward silence for a moment. She glances at me and I see the longing in her eyes. We don't speak to one another. I need space to clear my head, but I don't know what to say or do. Another song plays, this one with a faster beat, and the instructor shows her how to move her hips to the song. I watch her in awe as her eyes light up like Christmas lights.

When the lesson is over, Poppy can't stop gushing about the class on the ride by back. I love the happiness and the animated look on her face. I love the way she smiles. It's more beautiful than a clear, rainy day.

“This has been an amazing date, thank you for this, Jasper.”

“Anytime.”

We make it to the penthouse, and before I know it, I have my face buried between her legs. Then I have her face buried in the pillow as I fuck her hard and slow—with a condom, of course. Once we're done, we both hop into the shower.

Two things hit me at once...

Number one: I couldn't have chosen a better partner to spend the rest of my life with.

Number two: I'm falling in love with Poppy Barrett.



Chapter THIRTY-TWO

Poppy

“I feel the baby kick,” Lake says, rubbing her belly.

Sweat lines my forehead as the sun hangs high in the sky. I’m sitting on Lake’s balcony and we’re celebrating her baby shower.

The weather is playing yo-yo with us. Today, it’s in the high eighties, whereas yesterday it was cold. That’s one thing about fall in New York City. It can be so unpredictable.

“Can I feel?” I ask.

“Sure.” She places my hand on her stomach, and I feel a thud beneath my palm, making my heart melt.

Sadness overtakes me knowing I’ll never feel a baby move inside me or enjoy that pregnancy glow a woman gets. Or have a baby running around the house, having someone to take care of. My sister says I love to fix people’s problems. It’s not that; it’s that I love taking care of people. I want to feel needed and important. That’s one of the main reasons why I’m opening a daycare for special needs children. Those kids don’t get enough

support at home, and society doesn't have a lot of resources for them.

I glance up at Jasper, and he smiles, patting Atlas on the back. He has been a wonderful man to me, and last night when he took me dancing and fired me so I can pursue my dream gives me hope we can be more than just friends one day, that we can eventually work toward a committed relationship. I have to admit to myself, I might be falling in love with him, but I'm sure he doesn't feel the same way as I do.

I hope he doesn't switch up like Link did.

Lake strokes my hand. "What's wrong, Poppy?"

My gaze zeroes in on her. "I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop with Jasper." She gives me a puzzled look, so I go on, "He's been wonderful these past few weeks, and last night he fired me and told me he's helping me start my own daycare. Then he took me to a private dance class that he arranged. I'm waiting for him to treat me the way Link did."

She shakes her head and brings me into a hug, stroking my back. "Jasper isn't anything like him. Believe me. He can be a selfish person, but I can tell you he cares a lot about you." She tucks her hair behind her ear. "You need to get a restraining order against Link. The way he tried to... you know. I think he's going to try to do it again."

Thinking about what he did makes me want to go apeshit as I'm still shaken up about it. Michael escorts me everywhere I go now, not letting me out of his sight, and I'm grateful for it.

I shake my head. "It won't keep him away, besides, I have a bodyguard to follow me around and Jasper put him in his place."

It's time for the baby's gender reveal, and Atlas ushers everyone outside on the patio. Lake joins him by his side, and they count to three. Lake pops a balloon and blue smoke floats in the air. Everyone claps and cheers. Atlas picks Lake up and swings her around, kissing her softly. My eyes go to Jasper, and he wears a sad expression. Why is he sad about seeing his best friend happy? He strides inside and sits on the couch, rubbing his fingers against his pants.

I follow after Jasper and sit so close to him that our arms rub against each other's. Maybe he's upset he can't give me a child?

I'm starting to be okay with it, but I have to reassure him. I'm getting something better now. I'm going to help so many children, thanks to his help.

"What's going on?" I ask him.

He places his hand on his chin, his face laced with so much sorrow I can feel it radiating from him. I've never seen him look so sad.

I grab his chin so he has to look at me. "If you're worried about not giving me a child, I'm fine with it. Really, I am. I'm more excited about helping other people's children with special needs."

He shakes his head and removes my hand from his chin. "I'm just having memories about Harper."

Jealousy roars in my chest. He's thinking about his ex. I swallow the lump in my throat. We're nothing but friends who have a marriage contract, but I need to control my emotions. I'm already getting attached to him, and that's not a good idea.

I'm grateful for all the things Jasper does for me, but I need to stop blurring the lines between us.

"*Oh.*" I get up from the couch.

He grabs my hand, tugging me to sit back down beside him. I resist at first, my feet glued to the marble floor. "Wait. Don't go."

I don't look at him, my eyes venturing to the high ceiling. "I don't want to hear you mourning over your ex-girlfriend."

He twists me around on the couch to face him and cups my face. "Stop being jealous. She's not my ex-girlfriend; she's my daughter."

My mouth hangs open at his words, and I can't speak for several moments.

"You have a daughter?"

"Had." Sorrow is evident on his face as he hangs his head down. "She passed away due to a fire. I wanted to have drinks with my friends, so I hired my next-door neighbor at the time to watch her." He thrusts his fingers through his hair and yanks at the strands hard. "I made her dinner before I left and I forgot to remove the towel from beside the stove while the burner was still

on. My neighbor told me she would finish making dinner, but I was in a hurry to go.” He has a haunted look on his face. “She died from inhaling too much smoke. She was only three at the time.”

That explains a lot, the reason he doesn’t want kids. I thought he just didn’t like kids, but it’s clear he hasn’t gotten over his daughter’s death. I can’t imagine losing a child and I never want to experience that type of pain either. Jasper looks so heartbroken. I pull him into a hug and I inhale his woody scent.

“Is that why you don’t want kids?”

He pulls away and nods. “I don’t want to let him or her down like I did with Harper. Sometimes, I’ll sit at the park and look at families with kids and question why it happened. Why wasn’t I paying attention? I just wanted some time with my friends, and I was a single parent. Her mother dropped her off and wasn’t really there for Harper like I was. She was too busy chasing men, doing whatever she wanted.”

I would ask him more about his ex, but this is a big deal. He normally doesn’t open up to me and I’m glad he’s sharing this with me now.

I stroke his hand as we sit in silence, listening to the loud music blasting from the balcony. I don’t know the right words to say to a person who is grieving.

I glance at Jasper’s face. I’ve never seen him so broken.

I wish I could take back the pain from him, because no one deserves that type of sorrow.

Atlas walks inside with a beer in his hand. “You okay, man?”

Jasper shakes his head.

“Is it about Harper?” Atlas asks.

He nods. Atlas sets the beer on the table as Trent strolls in, taking in the scene. I watch both of them wrap their arms around Jasper, embracing him as a few tears leak from his eyes.

Jasper is broken like shattered glass, and I wish I had the glue to hold him together.

“We got your back, man,” Trent says.

“We’re here for you.” Atlas exhales.

“Me and Poppy are going home,” Jasper declares after a moment.

They let him go after doing their special friendship handshake.

“Hope you enjoy the crib and bedroom suit I bought for your son,” Jasper says to Atlas.

He nods. “Lake loves it. Call me if you need me.”

Once we leave Atlas and Lake’s home, the tension is so thick I need to crack a window open. I look at Jasper mourning the death of his only daughter. I feel stupid. I feel stupid for judging him. I feel stupid for getting upset with him for not telling me who Harper was. And here I thought she was his ex that he was still in love with. It was stupid of me to make assumptions.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, leaning back into the crisp leather seat.

He taps his thumb on the steering wheel. “For?”

“Assuming she was your ex, thinking you weren’t over her. I thought... I feel stupid.”

He grabs my hand and brings it to his mouth for a kiss. “It’s fine. I didn’t make it clear who she was, so it was only normal for you to think that way. I have a bad time opening up to people about my feelings.”

“I see.”

Once we make it to the condo, I kick off my shoes and I turn to look at Jasper as he removes his jacket.

“Can I see pictures of her?”

He cocks his eyebrow, losing his tie and removing it from his neck before he places it on the coat stand. “Why?”

“She’s a part of you, Jasper, and technically she’s my stepdaughter.”

The truth is, I want to see this side of Jasper. The paternal side, the man he was before the accident. I want to see all of him, the good and bad sides. All of it.

He grabs my hand and envelops me with his arms, kissing my forehead. These forehead kisses bring me to my knees, causing butterflies to dance in my stomach.

“I have some videos, if you want to watch them instead?”

I nod and hop onto the couch. Jasper disappears from the living room, returning with a thumb drive and plugging it into the TV.

He pulls me into his lap, and my eyes are glued to the flat screen as I watch in awe as he feeds baby Harper peas while she’s sitting on a high chair. A woman comes into view. She’s tan with short hair and a curvy body. She picks Harper up and cradles her in her arms. They look like the perfect family. Happy and put together.

“Is that her mother?”

“Yeah, that’s Gemma. She might appear as a good mother here, but she wasn’t. That was a rare moment when she was clean.”

I bring my gaze up at him for him to clarify.

“She got hooked on some cocaine in our early twenties,” Jasper explains. “That’s why I had Harper most of the time. Her grandmother wanted to take the role of her mother, on behalf of her daughter, so we would share weekends and holidays.”

I stare at little Harper, with her gray eyes. I glance at Gemma and Jasper, noticing she doesn’t look like either of her parents.

Is it possible she wasn’t even his? I want to ask, but I don’t want to come off rude. And I don’t want to start some shit. Besides, genetics are a crazy thing. You might not look like one of your living relatives but resemble an ancestor.

Another video starts, and in this one Harper wears a birthday hat. She’s standing in front of a big blow-up castle in the backyard. When my gaze veers over to Jasper, I see tears gloss over his eyes and a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I trace my fingers along his earlobe. “You went all out for her birthday party!” I tease.

“She was Daddy’s princess. Anything she wanted, she got.” His words bring tears to my eyes. “She was nonverbal and

diagnosed with autism at the age of one.” He smiles sadly at me. “If she were still alive, she would have loved you.”

“I would have loved her as well. You were a good father, Jasper. And the fire wasn’t your fault. Sometimes things just happen.”

He doesn’t respond for several moments. “I’m still learning to accept her death as an accident and not blame myself. Sometimes, making a simple mistake can change your life forever.”

I nod. “That, I can agree with.”

He brushes a few strands of hair from my face. “Thanks,” he says. “For understanding.”

“That is what fri—”

Jasper doesn’t let me finish speaking as he presses his mouth against mine and kisses me until I’m out of breath.



Chapter THIRTY-THREE

Jasper

“Aurora is here. She says she has some important information to give you.” Poppy’s voice booms through the speaker of the phone.

My dick gets so hard just from hearing her voice. Today is her last day working for me, and I’m going to miss having her around during the days. I’m going to miss the quickies and having lunch together. My new assistant starts tomorrow morning, and Poppy made sure I hired a man. I love that she’s just as jealous and possessive of me as I am of her.

“Send her in, Angel,” I reply.

Aurora called me earlier and informed me she had something to tell me about my mother. Ever since I found out Judy, our old neighbor, was an eye witness to my mother’s death, I haven’t worked up the courage to go see her. Honestly, I don’t know how to ask her, because if I go in there making demands, she won’t give me the information I need.

Aurora makes her way to my desk, places a small box on top, then sits across from me, yanking her skirt over her knees.

“Is this a bad time?”

I shake my head as I lean back in my seat and discard my stress ball on the desk.

I remove the lid from the box. “What is this?”

“You told me to find something that can bury your father. So, I did. Well, I think I did.” She frowns, picking up a picture frame of me and Poppy on our wedding day. Poppy put it there along with a few other photos of us. She added those pictures because she wants everyone who enters my office to know we are married, and surprisingly it doesn’t bother me.

Aurora looks at me and tucks her golden hair behind her ear.

“You’re glowing.”

The sun beams from the window, highlighting her features. Aurora is beautiful in her own quirky way. She has on a bright yellow shirt and matching skirt with red knee-high socks.

“Men don’t glow,” I say, side-eyeing the box. “What is this?”

“I went through your uncle’s storage. I found these boxes of letters. I think you should read them.” She sighs. “If you decide to read them, I think you should do it in the privacy of your home, because the information in them will shock you.” She grins from ear to ear. “Also, whatever Poppy is doing to you, I like it.”

I cock my eyebrow. “You mean blowing and fucking me every day?”

Her cheeks flame. “You’re so crass, Jasper. No, I mean, you’re cheesing hard, and you can’t seem to take your eyes off the pictures of her. You got it bad.”

“What do I got bad?”

“You can’t be this slow! You’re in love with her.”

She’s right. I’m falling for Poppy, but I didn’t think it was noticeable. I don’t want to talk about my relationship or my love life with Aurora.

“How is Claire?” I ask her about her partner instead, deflecting.

“She’s great. We celebrated our five-year anniversary.” She gets up from the chair. “If I find out any more information about your uncle, I’ll let you know.”

She strides to the door, closing it behind her.

I watch her chat with Poppy through the glass door. Poppy laughs, and it brightens my whole day. Shaking my head, I remove a letter from one of the envelopes and read it.

My sweet James,

I pause.

Why is my mother writing to my uncle? I glance at the date. April 2, 1988. Then I continue to read.

I meant to talk to you, but you seemed preoccupied at the time.

All I can do is think about you. The night we made love, it completely blew me away. I hope we can talk about it soon. I didn’t mean to overstep my boundaries and I didn’t want to get in between you and your brother, but I can’t take this anymore. Being with Tommy is so bland and dry, and the love is slowly disappearing from our marriage. I don’t know what to do. All he does is come home and go straight to his office and dive into his work without sparing me a single glance.

I’m so consumed with you. I love you so much. I wish things could be different.

I wish my marriage was arranged with you instead of him. I know in my heart that Tommy is grieving the death of your parents, and I feel horrible for not being there for him.

Meet me near the oak tree by the lake behind my house. Tommy will be gone tonight for a business meeting.

Love,

Scarlett.

I fold the paper up as shock overtakes me. My mother was having an affair with my uncle? I knew that my mother had an affair, but I never knew with whom, Tommy wouldn't say. That would explain why my uncle and dad never got along. I can't believe what I just read, that... my mother would betray my father this way.

I read several more letters, and there are so many of Uncle James and my mother trying not to get caught. Details of them fucking—I skip right over those and how much they are in love. If Tommy found out they were together, he would have destroyed them.

I pick up another letter, this one dated April 26, 1991.

I spoke to Tommy, and he knows. He knows everything about us. We got into a heated argument and when I revealed to him that Jasper wasn't his, he slapped me across the face. I'm packing my bags tonight. I'm leaving him for good. For you.

Love,

Scarlett.

What the fuck? I continue to read the next letter. April 28th, 1991.

James,

Tommy wouldn't let me leave. I tried everything and he told me we're going to be a family no matter what. That if I tried to leave, he would air out our relationship and take away my sweet Jasper and paint me as an abusive parent. I can't allow him to do that, I love Jasper too much.

Tommy cares so much about his image. He wants to make things work even though I don't want to. He says he won't give me a divorce.

I'm so sorry, James.

He's taking me and moving me to New York City, to start over and get away from you. He told me that if I ever contact you again, he will take Jasper away from me. He has a lot of power, and some of his friends are lawyers and judges.

So this is goodbye.

Love,

Scarlett.

I take deep breaths and try to process everything I've just read. My father was holding this affair over my mother's head... And my mother was having an affair with my uncle... Well, he's not my uncle; James is my dad and my father is my uncle.

Fuck.

It makes a lot of sense now. Why Tommy and Uncle James never got along. Why he shipped me off to boarding school when Mom died. He couldn't look at me, as I was a reminder of the mistake the woman he fell in love with made. I feel bad for Tommy. Just a little bit. I guess he and I have something in common. When I found out Harper wasn't mine, it ate me up inside. The only difference is, I didn't take it out on her. I was willing to be her father because her biological father didn't want anything to do with her; he was a junkie, just like Gemma.

He hated my mother because of her betrayal.

Rage fills me up like a bucket of water, and I wanted to go apeshit and tear this office to shreds, but I can't so I get up from my desk and head to the minibar in my office, pouring myself a glass of bourbon and watching clouds hover over the sun.

Aurora was right. I do have something over Tommy's head. He can't take the company from me because it belonged to my biological father.

Anger filters through me. Why hadn't Uncle James spoken up? Did Tommy have something over his head as well? Did he blackmail him? Every summer I used to spend with him, he never said anything. Maybe this was his way of making up for what happened? My father used to let me go there whenever I wanted. James always felt like more of a father, but I didn't get to see him

until after my mother's death. The first time was at my mother's funeral.

I've been lied to my entire life, and I've never felt so bitter, at my mother, Tommy, and James. He's not who I thought he was, nor was my mother.

Poppy walks into my office wearing a long dress and a mink coat. Fall has hit this year.

"You ready to go? I want to play some pool tonight," she asks cheerfully.

I wanted to go to Tommy and confront him about the things he did to my mother, but I know if I ask about everything I've just learned, he'll deny it and gaslight me. He's a narcissist, after all.

Poppy frowns, looking at the scattered papers on my desk, and she picks up a letter. "What is this?"

I pour another glass of bourbon and down it, ignoring the burn in my throat. "I found out my father is actually my uncle, and my mother was having an affair with Uncle James."

Shock colors her beautiful face. Poppy crinkles her nose, her mouth hanging open. "I'm sorry. Why would Tommy keep that from you?"

I shrug. "Power. I'm thinking he didn't want me to know to hurt James and my mother even though she's dead. He has something over James's head. My uncle always treated me like I was his child, unlike Tommy, and now it all makes sense."

I don't even know what to call Uncle James anymore. Do I refer to him as my dad or do I refer to him as my uncle?

"Pour me a glass of bourbon. I need a drink after hearing this, too."

I pour her a glass of bourbon and she downs it, coughing. "This is strong," she notes. "So, what are we going to do now?" she asks.

I grip the back of my neck. "I have no idea. My father can't take the business from me, but I don't want to face him with this information. He's a sick bastard."

She strokes my hand and intertwines our fingers together. “You’re not alone in this. We’re married, remember?”

I nod. I like that she wants to deal with this problem with me and that I’m not alone.

“Do you want my honest opinion?”

I nod again and I collect her glass.

“Give me something lighter, please,” she asks. I pour her a glass of wine, the one Lake gifted me last year, and slide it to her. “I think you should confront him about it. And ask your grandfather for more information. Maybe he knows something. You shouldn’t sweep it under the rug, you know? It will only eat you up inside. I would be pissed at my mother if she kept a secret like that in my family.” Her straight hair gets in her face, and she pushes it over her shoulders, out of the way. “If you need me to go with you to confront Tommy, I will go with you for support. I’ll pack my Taser in case he tries to harm you.”

I cast her a curious glance. “You will protect me from him?”

“Of course I will. No one hurts my husband and gets away with it.”

I chuckle and nod. Once again, this woman amazes me.

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

“If you want to go home and chill, we can.”

I lean against my desk, inviting her to step between my legs. “No. We can go out and I’ll spank your ass at pool.”

The truth is, I don’t want to go home and be surrounded by my thoughts. I want to go to Tommy and bash his head in. But I know if I do that, I’ll be in jail, and I’m not going to risk my life for him. He’s not worth it. I have a wife that needs me.

“Are you sure? This is a lot to process.”

“It is, but I need to keep my mind occupied. And you’re the perfect distraction.”

She winks at me. “Let’s go, I’m ready to beat your ass.”



Chapter THIRTY-FOUR

Poppy

For the last few weeks, Jasper threw himself into work, then has come home and fucked me. I think he's slowly dealing with finding out that his uncle is his biological father. I just hope he ends up confronting Tommy because he needs closure. But then again, people know how to deal with their own traumas. I can't tell him how to do it, nor can I fix it for him, though I wish I could make the pain go away.

The sun beams through the curtains and I wrap my blanket around myself as Jasper slides one leg into his pants, then the other. It's a Saturday, but it seems like he's in a rush to go somewhere.

"Where are you going?" I sit up, admiring his hard muscles through his shirt. This man is made of pure steel.

We just got done having sex and I'm a little sore. I figured we could do something fun, something that keeps his mind off his uncle. Something that will keep his mind occupied besides sex and work.

“In my office to work.”

I feel the tension radiating from his body, suffocating me. He won't look at me, but that's okay. He's been trying to avoid his emotions.

“Let's go to Coney Island. You work all the time, and you need a day off, you know?”

He studies me head to toe, and when he lightly falls on top of me, I giggle, trying to push him off of me.

“Or I can fuck you until you're sore again.” He nuzzles my neck and leaves trails of wet kisses on my shoulder.

“Stop using sex to distract yourself from the pain. It'll only make you feel good for a hot minute, then you'll go back to feeling like crap. Trust me, I know.”

His eyes search mine for a bit. “Okay, we'll go.”

I hadn't expected him to agree, I was expecting him to put up a fight, but I was wrong.

My cheeks flush and my heart thunders in my chest.

I slip out of bed, wash my face, and brush my teeth in the master bathroom. Jasper watches me as I put on a light sweater and leggings. Sometimes, he makes me nervous—and not in a bad way.

“What?” I grab a towel and wipe my face.

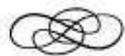
“You're beautiful. I like watching you.”

I toss the towel at him. “Creep.”

He picks me up and sits me on the marble counter.

“Give me a quickie, I need to be inside you.”

I smile. “Okay.”



We make it to Coney Island in no time, and the place is packed like sardines in a can. Jasper pays for our tickets, and holds my hand the entire time, keeping me close to him.

The air is thick and crisp. The sky is crystal clear, and I can smell the salt from the ocean. I stop and scan the park rides,

tapping my fingers on my chin.

“What roller coaster do you want to ride?” I ask Jasper, my teeth chattering from the cold breeze.

He takes off his sweater and hands it to me, I pull it over my head, on top of my own, and it reaches my knees. “Thanks.”

It smells like him. Woodsy with a mix of his soap. I love it.

“This... this place reminds me so much of my mom,” he says, his tone low. Pain flares in his eyes, and he stops walking, assessing the theme park. “Some things have changed since I’ve been here with her, though.”

I stroke his back. “Do you want to leave?”

He shakes his head. “I’m so angry at her, and James too. I still haven’t found out why my mother kept it all from me. He was my father and he thought it was a good idea for me not to know. Now he’s gone, I can’t get the answers I want.”

His words weigh like a ton of bricks, and he exhales as if he is exhausted.

I feel bad for Jasper, knowing he won’t get the answers he needs, which makes the situation ten times worse.

“I read all their letters, front to back, and she never disclosed why they kept it a secret from me.”

Even though we’re outside in the cool air, it doesn’t ease the tension he feels. I wish I could make him feel better.

“Let’s not dwell on it, we’re here to have fun, remember?” I point to the Ferris wheel. “Let’s ride the Ferris wheel.”

I yank him toward the long line, and we wait for about twelve minutes. When it’s our turn to get on the ride, I can hear my heart pounding in my chest. We sit in the seat and the person who works the machine pulls a chain across our laps. Once everyone is loaded in their seat, the wheel begins to move slowly into the air.

Every time I am with Jasper, I feel at ease with him, and I take in a deep breath once we’re at the top. From this view I can see all of the amusement park, the orange sky reflecting on the ocean.

It's a wonderful view.

Jasper places his hand on my thigh, and I can't get enough of his touch.

He's like an addiction I don't want to kick.

"Have you ever thought about just running away from here and getting away from the pressure of being in the spotlight?" he asks out of the blue.

I nod. "Yes. Especially after my breakup with Link. I was humiliated by him, and no matter where I went, everyone felt angry with me. As the girl who had broken his heart, even though it was the other way around. I learned a lot about myself while I was with him."

"Such as, Angel?" He strokes my hair and yanks me into his arms, even with the chain restricting our movements, and I feel his erection as it wedges between my ass cheeks.

The back of my neck burns hotter than the sun.

"We're not supposed to do that."

"So? You know I'm not the type to follow rules," he shoots back.

I smile. "He taught me I'm stronger than what I believe, and if I can go through a bad breakup then I can get through anything. People will believe anything they hear."

He's quiet and we get off the ride, walking hand in hand.

"I used to think I would marry Gemma, but we were never meant to be together."

I inhale deeply. It stings my heart that he would mention her, but I don't let it show. It's his past, after all. His past alone, and I have no reason to be jealous of someone no longer in the picture. I'm the one that got the ring.

He would have never married you unless it was benefiting him, I say to myself, but I don't want to think about it.

He stops in front of a shooting range. I wanted to ask him more questions about her, but he isn't going to open up to me unless he's ready. Sometimes, he's closed off like a tight lid.

Jasper picks up a BB gun, and says to the attendant, “I want to win my wife a stuffed animal.”

He shoots every balloon and several moments later, he wins a small teddy bear.

I hug it to my chest, because I love stuffed animals.

“Thank you.”

He nods and we keep strolling. The crowd dies down, the sky darkens, and the half-moon reflects in the ocean.

“She broke my heart,” he blurts out.

I don’t respond for a moment, the question I want to ask him playing in my mind like a broken tune. “Do you still love her?”

He shakes his head. “No. Not anymore. I stopped loving her when I couldn’t help her get clean for Harper.” He exhales. “After Harper’s passing, I found out she wasn’t my daughter.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gemma lied to me. She told me she was mine and she wasn’t. She wasn’t sure at first because she had a one-night stand with someone else the same week we first slept together.” Disappointment burns in his pupils. “She showed me a fake DNA test, so I believed her.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “I found out through the autopsy that Harper wasn’t mine. I wanted to make sure the reason she died was because of the smoke.”

I can’t fight back the tears, so I cry. I cry hard for this wonderful man. The man who had his heart broken by too many people.

“Gemma targeted me because she knew I was a millionaire at the time, but I don’t blame her either. I should have been more careful, and I should have gotten the DNA test sooner. It doesn’t matter, though, I loved Harper like she was my own.”

I stand on my tippy-toes and I kiss him hard. Jasper pulls away from me, wiping the tears from under my eyes.

“Don’t cry for me, Poppy. Don’t waste your tears on me. I’m okay. I dealt with her death through counseling.”

“I’m not crying because of that.”

He stares at me, baffled. “Then why are you crying?”

“Because who would hurt a wonderful man like you?”

He looks stunned for a few beats, as if he didn't expect me to say that.

Sadness grows in his chocolate irises. “I'm not wonderful.”

“You are,” I argue.

I kiss him again, and this time he doesn't pull back. He slides his hand down to my waist, and I hug him tightly.

I cry for the broken boy inside this man.

I cry because people are cruel.

I cry because he deserves someone to love and care for him.

Maybe he can see how much I love him with every fiber in my bones.



Chapter THIRTY-FIVE

Poppy

Time has passed since the day we spent at Coney Island.

I spend my days in Jasper's home office all day, working on my new business, waiting for Jasper to get home so we fuck like rabbits. Then shower together, talk about our day, then fuck all night.

We're at Trent's penthouse on the deck for a cookout. Trent has a beer in his hand as he flips a slab of ribs on the grill while he has his daughter in his other arm, teaching her how to grill. She babbles and smiles, then places her mouth on his chin and sucks hard. I giggle like a schoolgirl, remembering when Bailey used to do that to me.

"You're hungry, Zyra?" Trent asks.

She continues to suck on his chin.

He calls his sister Tina outside and hands Zyra to her.

"She's hungry. Feed her," he tells her.

She nods and smiles, baby talking to Zyra.

Jasper swings a club, getting the golf ball into a hole. He looks breathtaking in his cashmere sweater and denim jeans. I want to jump his bones right here and now. He is so beautiful, he turns heads, but he's all mine. I try not to stare. I try not to get a lady boner, but I can't help it.

Lake hands me a margarita and I smile and take sips of it. She sits next to me, rubbing her swollen belly.

"Take a sip for me, since I can't have a drink," she teases.

Slowly, I drain the beverage, letting out a small burp, causing Lake to break out in a fit of laughter.

Her eyebrows pinch together, and her smile stretches across her face. She has this glow to her that pregnant women get. "Was it good?"

I nod. "You know how to make a great margarita."

She nudges my shoulder. "I learn from the best."

The sky is a mixture of pink and purple, and the wind tickles my skin. The temperature is cool as smoke from the barbeque wafts in the air. Hopefully it's good. It's hard to find good barbeque in New York City, nothing beats a southern barbeque.

I glance at Jasper, to find him watching me, licking his lips like he's ready to devour me whole.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say Jasper is smitten with you," Lake says, brushing her shoulders against mine and wiggling her eyebrows. I neither confirm nor deny it, though I think I have some idea of how he feels. But I'm not one hundred percent certain.

I lean back in the lawn chair, soaking in the view of New York City. Trent has the best view in the city. I see the Empire State Building from here, and it glows in different colors. I don't want to tell her about the extent of my relationship with Jasper yet, until I can confirm how he feels about me, so I change the subject and say, "How is pregnancy treating you?"

I glance at her little bump, and she's seven months pregnant. Two Atlases in the household. I feel sorry for her because Atlas is an arrogant asshole.

I wonder if Jasper will ever love me the way Atlas loves Lake. I shake my head, I shouldn't be thinking such silly thoughts.

She tucks her hair behind her ear and glances at Atlas then back at me. "Good so far, I'm not having morning sickness and I can keep food down now. And my sex drive is through the roof." She giggles, a blush creeping to her cheeks. "I've been wearing Atlas out in the bedroom."

I smile. "Slut."

She giggles harder and louder, getting the men's attention. Lake takes a sip of her cranberry juice as Jasper stops in front of me and grabs my hand with lust pouring from his eyes. Desire ignites in my belly.

"I need to talk to you."

I get up from the lawn seat and he ushers me into the bathroom, locking the door.

"I need you," he tells me, pressing his mouth to mine and lifting the hem of my dress as he kisses down my neck. He slips his finger into my panties, sliding it inside, and I moan. He uses his other hand to cover my mouth.

"You must keep quiet." He unzips his pants, slides a condom on his dick, and slides inside of me in one thrust. I groan against his mouth as he places his fingers on my clit, circling, and I bite down on his shoulder as I come. As he chases his own orgasm, he rips off the condom, squirting his cum all over my belly.

My tone is husky and I'm out of breath. "What was that for?"

He tucks himself back in his pants and grabs a tissue to wipe my belly before tossing it in the wastebasket by the sink.

"Marking you. I love owning you." He grabs a fistful of my hair and kisses me deeply.

My cheeks flush, and I bite my lip to stop myself from grinning. I yank down my dress, then I glance at the mirror and fix my hair. My lips are swollen and my skin is flushed.

Someone bangs on the door and I squeal like I've just seen a bug.

“The food is ready, Poppy and Jasper.” Trent’s voice booms through the door.

My cheeks burn at the fact that he most likely knows what we’ve been doing in here.

Jasper and I make our way to the dinner table to talk, speak and laugh with our friends. It feels nice to be surrounded by good energy, because the last few weeks have been gloomy. From me dealing with my emotions about my mother to Jasper dealing with his family issues. We needed to be around good friends and have fun.

The mashed potatoes, steak, and ribs Trent has cooked are so good, and I didn’t know he’s a god with the grill.

Once we’re done eating, Lake wants to play Uno and the men go outside to speak.

I watch Trent’s sister through the glass sliding doors as she takes her niece from Trent and tells him something, then she walks back inside.

She tells me it was nice to meet me before leaving the penthouse.

“You want something to drink?” I ask Lake.

She shakes her head. “The baby is pushing on my bladder.”

“I’m going to get something to drink from the outdoor bar,” I tell her and get up from the couch.

I make my way to the bar behind Jasper and Trent, and they don’t notice I’m behind them. I grab a bottle of Coke and pour it into a cup.

“I don’t see how you do it, being married. If I were married and had a child, I would go insane. It’s already hard to be a single parent,” Trent says, their backs facing me, so I can’t see his facial expressions.

I pause and listen closely.

“Marriage is amazing,” Atlas says.

“It is. I’m enjoying it just fine,” Jasper concurs, and I smile at his words.

The thought of him loving being married to me makes me giddy inside, and I want to go up to him and kiss him, but I don't want to feel as if I'm eavesdropping on their conversation.

"But you said you were going to divorce her once you sign the paperwork to your uncle's company. Are you going to change your mind?" Trent asks, taking a swig of his drink.

My heart stops in my chest. I can't believe what I've just heard. He was going to go back on the deal we made?

Why would he betray me like that?

I tried everything to be there for him, even when I thought for certain I wasn't going to receive my mother's approval. Yet he was never loyal to me, only to what I could provide for him. I thought Jasper had changed and was not a selfish bastard.

I don't want to hear any more. I feel like an idiot, a fool to think I was more to Jasper than I was. He was planning on leaving me, even when I told him my family doesn't believe in divorce, that my mother would disown me and I would lose everything.

He's a backstabber and only thinks about his own needs.

I was a fool to believe I wouldn't be caught up in his selfishness.

Clearly, he never cared what was at stake for me and only looked out for himself.

But I'm not going to be his fool any longer.

I leave the glass of Coke at the bar, hurrying inside and grabbing my purse. I strap it over my body, then I grab my jacket and slip it on. I can't stay here for another moment and I can't stand the sight of Jasper right now.

Lake gazes at me and her eyes widen.

"Lake, something came up with Sophia. I'll have to go."

Concern is written all over her face. "What happened? Should I get Jasper?"

Tears threaten my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I'm not going to cry over that selfish bastard. "No, I'm fine," I lie.

I open the door and close it behind me.

Finally, I let the tears fall.



Chapter THIRTY-SIX

Jasper

“I’m not going to leave Poppy. I love her,” I admit.

Both of them stare at me as if I have three heads.

Trent arches his eyebrow. “Really?”

I nod. “I’m going to talk to her about it as soon as we go home. We’ve been friends with benefits, and now I want something more.” I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. “I want us to treat our marriage like a real one.”

I never thought I would get to this point in my marriage, that I would fall in love with her. I haven’t been in love for a very long time, and I miss the feeling. I just hope she feels the same way, because if she doesn’t, it will destroy me, but I’ll work hard for her.

Atlas pats me on the back. “Good for you. I’m happy for you, Jasper. Getting married is the best thing I ever did. It softens the heart.”

I look up at the now inky sky, and the air sticks to my face. How am I going to tell her I want to be with her for real? What if she rejects me? I have never been in a situation where I would hope for my wife to approve of me. It's usually the other way around when it comes to women; they are often the ones who fear I might reject them.

Lake hurries outside to us and she looks cute with her swollen belly, but I note the concern on her face. Atlas rushes to her side, holding his hand out to her.

“What’s wrong, Lake?” he asks.

She turns toward me, frowning. “You might want to check on Poppy. She seemed upset.”

Wordlessly, I walk toward the door.

“She’s not here. She left quickly.”

I twist to look at her. “Did she say why she left?”

She nods. “She said it has something to do with her sister, but I think there’s more to it. Her mood changed quickly.”

“How so?” I ask.

“Well... she was outside at the bar ten minutes ago and she left quickly after, but I have a feeling she was lying.”

I glance at Atlas and Trent, and they glance at each other. Did she hear our conversation about how I was going to break up with her? I didn’t hear or see her come outside. I hope the fuck not because she wasn’t supposed to hear that.

Fuck.

I grab my phone from my pocket and dial her number. When she doesn’t pick up, I call Michael.

“Sir,” he answers on the first ring.

“Where did Poppy go?” I ask.

“She’s not with you?” I hear the confusion in his tone.

I shake my head no as if he can see me. “No. She left earlier.”

“She didn’t call for me to pick her up.”

“Swing by and pick me up.” I press the End button and tuck my phone back into my pocket. “I’ll go by Sophia’s house.”

On my way there, crazy thoughts swim through my head. What if she had heard what we talked about? Fuck. I'm screwed. I didn't want her to find out this way. Hell, I didn't want her to find out at all. And yet the thought of losing her causes fear to strike my chest. I can't lose her. Not after everything we have been through.

I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to her. I'll explain to her what happened.

Michael pulls up at the side of the street, and I tell him to wait in the car. I walk up to the brick building and ring the doorbell. Sophia opens the door with a frown.

"Have you seen Poppy?"

She casts a curious glance at me. "No." She closes the door behind her, stepping out onto the concrete ground, folding her arms across her chest. "When's the last time you saw her?"

"Thirty minutes ago. She told Lake she was going to see you."

"She's probably upset about something. She tends to run away when she gets stressed out. I remember when she was sixteen years old and she ran away from home. My mother couldn't find her for two weeks. If she doesn't turn up by tomorrow morning, give me a call. She might be at her favorite place, the Brooklyn Bridge."

I rush to my car and tell Michael to take me to the bridge. Once I get there, the streetlights brighten up the darkened sky. I walk for at least ten minutes before I spot her sitting on the grass, watching the city scenery with buds in her ears. I sit next to her and remove the earbuds one by one. She glances at me with anger in her eyes then snatches the buds from my hand.

"How did you find me?" she snaps.

"Why did you leave?" I counter.

She rolls her eyes and stands up, dusting her butt off. "Why does it matter? I heard you loud and clear when you were speaking to Trent and Atlas. You were going to leave me the minute you signed the contract." I hear the bitterness in her tone.

I follow suit and stand next to her. "I was. But then I realized I want you more than anything in life."

She kicks a rock and it rolls onto the concrete. “Yeah, I don’t believe that. You will have gone through with it, because you’re selfish. Just like most men.”

I cup her cheeks, stroking my thumb across her bottom lip. I want to kiss her deeply. “Yes, but then I fell in love,” I tell her.

“I don’t believe that one bit.”

“What do I have to do to make you believe that I love you,” I plead.

“You want me to believe your bullshit. You’re not capable of love, Jasper. You proved that to me.”

I press my lips to hers but she pulls away, walking toward the path. “Don’t follow me.”

“I have to, Poppy. We’re at a park and it’s dangerous out here.”

“Not as dangerous as you.”

I continue to follow her but keep my distance. She’s mad at me, but her safety is still important to me.

“I’ll sleep in the guest room from now on, because I’m not sleeping with you anymore. I’m no longer going to be your fool.”

I don’t respond, not knowing what to say to her. I can’t risk losing her. Michael pulls up to the side of the street and I slide inside the car beside her and we ride home in silence. I will spend the rest of my life proving to her that I’m in love with her.

We pull up to our penthouse building and we both step inside.

Once we’re in the walk-in closet, she starts snatching her clothes from the hangers. I place my hand on hers. I don’t want her to leave. I need her, more than ever, and I’m not talking with James’s company in mind—I don’t give a damn about that right now. I want to make this marriage work.

“Poppy, I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “No. You’re not sorry, you’re sorry because you got caught. Would you have told me if I hadn’t found out?”

I stroke the back of my neck and don’t respond.

“Thought so,” she says. “Do you realize if you divorced me, I would have lost everything? I would lose my family and my inheritance. But you didn’t care how it would have affected me. All you thought about was yourself. You don’t know what love is, Jasper.”

Her words sting, and the pain in my chest grows as big as the sun. She is right, all I did was think about myself because I couldn’t see past my own goals, but things are different now. I’m different.

“I allowed you to use me as your blow-up toy and agreed to all your terms. Even when your father offered me more money than I needed. I could have just taken it and left you hanging, but I kept my word.”

I follow her to the guest room, but she slams the door in my face.

I turn on the balls of my feet and go into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of alcohol, downing it within the next second.

Poppy is right about me, I’m a selfish bastard who only thinks about myself. I didn’t care how it would affect her life, I just wanted what I wanted—until I fell in love with her.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I hurt the only person I care about deeply, and now she won’t even look at me. Would I have gone through with it if I hadn’t fallen in love with her?

I breathe in deeply, because yes, I would have. I’m a bastard who has a hard time getting close to women because of my ex. I’m willing to hurt anyone to get what I want. If I don’t need that person anymore, I discard them like old shoes. But I don’t want to be that way anymore. I don’t want to be the person who treats people like business transactions. I want to have what Atlas and Lake have, but I want Poppy to be the one I have that with. I want to let go of this pain I have in my chest.

I want to feel again, not numb myself.

I’m going to prove to Poppy that I’m not a selfish dickhole that only thinks about himself.

But how do I do that? She won’t even look at me.

I’ll woo her until she realizes how much she’s important to me.

Poppy isn't the type to do the hearts and romance shit. You have to use something less materialistic to touch her soul, and I'm going to figure it out.

I go to the couch, grab my phone, and I scroll mindlessly on social media. Shame rides me like a tidal wave. I don't deserve Poppy, but I don't care. I want her, and I'm not going let this stand in the way of what I want.

I'm going to get her back.



Chapter THIRTY-SEVEN

Poppy

I sit at the bar with Sophia and take a sip of my beer. I usually don't drink beer, but I need something to get myself drunk. I don't care about the taste of it, I only want to drink until I forget the pain of Jasper's betrayal. Because being around him hurts. Hurts more than anything I've experienced. I shouldn't have opened my heart to him because he's the exact same person who I first thought he was. It's my fault for putting his needs above my own.

"Jasper came by my house last week, looking for you. What happened?"

So that's how he found me. He went straight to my sister's place.

I shake my head and stare at the wooden bar. The bar is a little packed but not too packed where I can't hear myself think.

I was pretty shocked she called me out of the blue and wanted to talk after what happened the last time we spoke. Yet here she is, in my business when it comes to my marriage after she told

me to stay out of hers. And the only reason I agreed to come here is because Lake was busy with rearranging her baby's room.

"You must have forgiven me for butting in your business with Tate." My tone is low.

Am I still hurt because of what she told me? Yes.

Do I believe she meant the words she said to me? No.

My sister always said things she didn't mean when she was upset, but I've grown tired of it. I've grown tired of a lot of things. The better way for me to explain it is, my patience for people is growing thin.

Her cheeks flame and she sips her apple cider. Thanksgiving is approaching and I'm not looking forward to it. To go home and dealing with our mother's bullshit. I love her, but I'm starting to get the hint that she doesn't love me. The main reason why I married Jasper—in hopes of getting in good graces with her, but it backfired on me.

Everything seems to backfire in my face lately, and I don't know what to do.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

Her words catch me off guard, she has never been the type to apologize for her wrongdoings. We usually just move on like nothing happened.

"You were trying to help me and I wouldn't listen to you. I didn't want you to shatter my world. I wanted to believe my marriage was perfect, because I didn't want to lose my family. But I realize I'm not happy at all in my marriage, and you were right. I have to do what's best for me and my daughter."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"I'm leaving Tate for good."

Shock can't even describe how I feel, I definitely didn't expect her to say that. "What about Mom's approval?"

"I don't need it. I don't want to repeat the same pattern as my father and our mother. Our mother bullies my father, and he has a gambling addiction. There is no stability in their relationship." She sighs. "I don't want Bailey to grow up around that. So, I'm in the process of getting a divorce."

I hug her and kiss her on the cheek, then I wipe the tears falling from her hazel eyes. “I’m so proud of you, Sophia.”

“Thanks. I don’t know what I’m going to do about money, but I applied for a few jobs.”

I stroke her hand. “If you need anything, let me know.”

She wipes the tears from under her eyes, smearing her black eyeliner. “Anyways, enough about me. What’s going on with you and Jasper?”

“I found out he was going to divorce me when he signed the paperwork to acquire his uncle’s business.” I’m not telling Jasper’s business about James being his real father. It’s no one’s business but his own. “He wasn’t going to keep up with the end of our deal. I was afraid if we were to divorce that Mom would disown me, but after the last dinner... I realize I’m just a pawn to her.”

Sophia pauses for several moments, sipping her beverage. “Do you love him?”

I nod. “He says he loves me too, but I don’t believe him. I think the only reason he is saying it is because he doesn’t want to lose his uncle’s company. Jasper doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”

“What are you going to do?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. I want to divorce him, but it won’t be right either, or I have to stop being mad at him because we did enter this marriage with a business deal.”

My head goes over our relationship, and I just don’t know what to do. I love him but the thought of leaving him tears me apart.

“Do you want my advice?” she asks. “I don’t want to overstep.”

“Of course,” I say, taking another sip of my drink.

Just at that moment, a redhead hops on the bar and removes her shirt. Her breasts hang freely. It’s too rowdy, so Sophia grabs my hand to lead me outside.

The air is crisper than usual, maybe because we’re deep into fall now. The vibrant trees’ leaves fall to the ground, and the cold

air slaps me in the face.

“I think you should give him another chance,” she suggests. “When he came over, the look on his face—I’ve never seen him so worried about you. He doesn’t cheat on you or treat you like shit. He’s kind to you.” Her eyes gloss over. “He messed up, I get it, but are you going to allow one bad mistake to fuck up everything you had?” She tightens the brown scarf around her neck. “I wish I had someone to love me the way he loves you.”

I think about her words, and maybe she’s right. Maybe I’m being too hard on him, but the thought of loving him makes me nervous. I gave my ex my all and look at how that ended. He turned out to be someone I thought he wasn’t.

We stroll across the wet pavement, passing people.

I’m afraid to love again, to open up again, to express my feelings for him, because he might use them against me. I know he’s not like my ex. Jasper treated me a lot better, but I can’t help those thoughts circling in my head. My sister is right, during our whole marriage he has been good to me.

I catch a leaf in my hand and toss it to the ground. “I’ll think about it,” I murmur.

“Good.” She looks up at the sky, then back to me. “I have to start over, don’t I? My life, I mean.”

“Have you told Mom about your decision to divorce Tate?”

Her ponytail sways as she shakes her head. “No. And I don’t plan to for a while. I’ll tell her when I’m ready. I know she won’t be as hard on me as she was on you, but she’s still going to be mad.” She smiles. “You brought shame to this family, Sophia,” she says, mocking our mother’s voice.

I burst out laughing. “You can’t do anything right, Poppy. Do you honestly believe that cotton goes with cashmere? Poppy, you can’t do better than Link,” I mock along with her. “Sit up straight and eat with the proper fork.” I laugh, then burst into tears. The pain I feel from the way my mother treats me hits me in the chest. It hits me that she really is an awful person.

Sophia slings her arm around my shoulders, and we slowly continue our walk. I feel my mascara clumping around my eyes.

“Jasper has this crazy theory.”

We cross the street and stand in front of a well-lit boutique.

“What is it?”

I look at the lit buildings around us, trying to figure out where we are so Michael can pick us up.

“That Mom is jealous of me. And that’s the only reason she criticizes everything I do.”

Sophia stops, glancing at my face. “I always suspected it, too. I also think she resents you because you look like your biological father. Your father was a famous artist, and she put pressure on you because of that. I think you and her need space from each other, and I think you shouldn’t give Mother so much power over you. I get it, we only have one mother, but we have to do what’s best for our mental health.”

I place my hand over her forehead. “Who are you? You sure don’t sound like the Sophia I know,” I tease her.

She smiles. “I’m a grown-up, and I’m finally putting my daughter first.”

“I’m proud of you,” I repeat to her because I really am. I kiss her cheek.

“I’m proud of you, too,” she says.



Jasper

For the last few days, I tried everything to get Poppy to talk to me. I ordered food from her favorite restaurants, I tried to plead with her to hear me out, and I told her she only heard bits and pieces of the conversations and didn’t have the full picture, but she doesn’t want to listen to me. I never wanted to hurt her on purpose, and I wish like hell I never told Trent that. At the time I was only thinking about my own wants and needs, I didn’t care how it affected her.

It’s hard not sleeping in the same bed with her.

So I have to go to Lake for some advice on dealing with this mess I’m in.

I knock on the door, and Lake looks at me through the glass.

Her skin is glowing, and now she's allowing her hair to grow out. Pregnancy looks good on her, but I don't know why she's working. If Poppy was carrying my child, she wouldn't be allowed to work, she would have to focus on resting and taking care of herself and the baby.

Where the fuck did that thought come from? I shouldn't be entertaining the idea.

With food from The Sea Fire Grill in hand—Atlas told me she's craving seafood—Lake beckons me to come inside, and I put the food on her desk. She takes the food out of the bag, setting it down. "You got me the Scottish salmon. How did you know I love that?"

I wink at her. "Your husband."

I always liked Lake and how she's always been down-to-earth. I glance at the paintings hanging on the wall. No doubt, she was the one who painted all these.

My eyes revert back to Lake as she digs into the food, then I get this image of Poppy eating food while she is pregnant with my kid, and I shake my head.

Why am I daydreaming about her carrying my child? That is so ludicrous. Yet the thought of coming inside of Poppy without a condom makes my dick hard.

Lake sets her fork down and grabs a bottle of Coke and slowly drinks it.

"I talked to Poppy last night. You really were going to dump her and not keep your end of the bargain? That's an asshole thing to do."

"Yeah. It was and no matter how much I tell her I'm sorry, she won't listen to me."

"I know you love her, but she has trust issues. Link did a number on her heart, and you just broke the very piece that was stitched together." She shakes her head at me in disappointment. "Poppy is in love with you, Jasper."

Did I hear her correctly? Maybe I'm being delusional. Confusion overtakes me and my breath hitches.

“What?”

“She’s in love with you. She didn’t tell me, but I can tell. She’s pushing you away because she doesn’t know if you love her. Link wasn’t so kind to her when they were together.”

I knew he cheated on her, but what else has he done to her?

“He used to keep her money away from her and was very controlling and manipulative. She would have to come home at certain times, and she would have to check in every hour. She doesn’t want to go through the same thing.”

I had no idea how bad it was when she called me out of the blue that time over a year ago. She told me he cheated on her, but I was too selfish to care. I was too worried about getting my dick wet, but now I feel ten times more like shit.

I ball up my fist. “I wouldn’t treat her that way.”

“I know, Jasper. I know you wouldn’t,” she placates.

I get up from the chair.

The thought of her falling in love with me scares me, because I feel the same way, too. What if I fuck it up? What if I’m a shitty husband? Just when I think I’m getting the hang of this marriage, I keep fucking it up.

“How do I win her back?”

“Fancy gifts don’t excite her. You would have to do something like ask her out on a real date, as husband and wife. Not friends with benefits. Not to negotiate another business contract. Straight from the heart. She’s already cooled off, so she’ll speak to you soon.”

I nod, getting up from the chair, and she stands up and opens her arms to me. I hug her back.

“Pregnancy has made you nicer,” I joke.

“I’ll take it as a compliment.” She smiles.

I dust off my jacket and button it. “Thanks, Lake.”

She nods. “Don’t fuck up again, otherwise I’ll collect your balls in a jar.”

She doesn’t have to worry about that because once I have Poppy back in my arms, I’m not letting her go.



Chapter THIRTY-EIGHT

Poppy

I sit all day on my laptop, trying to enroll in a course for childhood development so I can start my own daycare. I will be taking four courses. I can't wait to help special needs kids and feel so fulfilled. I close my laptop and place it on the coffee table, grab the remote, and put it on a reality TV show I found on Hulu. I have nothing else to do today, and my days have been boring since Jasper fired me so I can pursue my dreams.

My routine includes lounging around, eating junk food, watching mindless television shows, and going out to have lunch and strolling to the music stores. I've never been this comfortable in my life. When I was with Link, he had so many demands about what I needed to do. I didn't know how exhausting he was until after I left him.

Jasper doesn't expect much from me. He doesn't expect me to cook and clean for him, and he doesn't expect me to behave in a certain way. He doesn't expect me to be home by a certain time. He treats me like I'm his equal.

I did the pros and cons of being married to Jasper, and I've decided I'm going to give him another chance.

I love him so much, and I don't want to lose him over a mistake he's made. He says he wasn't going to go through with the divorce, and part of me believes him.

Speaking of the devil, he enters the living room. I feel his eyes on me, watching my every move. He has tried everything in his power to get me to talk to him, but I wasn't having it. But after speaking to my sister, she helped me open my eyes. Her saying she wants what we have instead of her own lifestyle really made me look at my actions and how I'm treating him. I just want to protect myself and my heart. I don't want to be in another toxic relationship.

Finally, I glance up at him, and he leans against the archway, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"We haven't had dinner in a long time, and I want to take you out. Before you say no. He—"

"I wasn't going to say no," I blurt out. "Where are you taking me?"

"To a steak house."

I don't feel like getting dressed, so the messy bun and my sweatpants are going to have to do.

I nod as I grab my purse and strap it to my shoulder, then I walk past him.

Wordlessly, we slip inside the limo, and the silence is killing me. I glance at Jasper and he's turned toward the window, but when he intertwines his thick fingers with mine I don't pull away.

Once we make it to Empire Steak House, Chance pulls over to the curb and we get out of the car. The tension between us is thick as fog, and hopefully, tonight will go well.

The host shows us to the outside seating area on the balcony, and we sit on a red couch. Instead of sitting across from me, Jasper chooses to sit beside me, engulfing me with his body heat. I inhale a heavy dose of his cologne, his presence dominating me. My heart beats harder in my chest, and I clear my throat as he rests his arms on the table.

The place is packed, everyone dressed in designer suits and elegant dresses, and I look like a fish out of water in my casual clothes.

“Why didn’t you tell me to dress nice?”

He eyes my clothing, then he looks at the menu. “You look nice as you are, Angel.”

Before I can respond, the host approaches us, a pad and pen in hand. “What would you like to order?”

“Your best wine. We’re celebrating,” Jasper answers.

“What are you two celebrating?” the waitress asks, curious.

I fold my arms across my chest as I tap my foot on the floor. “Yes, what are we celebrating, Jasper?”

A smile stretches across his face as he rests the menu on the table. “My wife and I are in love with each other.”

My fake smile falters, my cheeks warming at his words. I didn’t expect him to say that, and now I’m completely speechless. How the hell did he know I love him? I never admitted it to him.

“That’s so sweet,” the waitress says. “Do you two need time to think about what you want?”

I nod and she leaves us alone.

“Jasper...”

“Poppy... Look, I’m sorry, okay. I really am. I was planning on leaving you at the beginning, but I changed my mind because I fell in love with you. I fell in love with your mind, and your heart, and your soul. I’m in love with the essence of you. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. When I wake up, you’re the first person I think about and when I go to sleep, you’re the last person I th—”

I do the unthinkable, I press my lips to his and kiss him deeply, and after a moment he pulls away.

“You really love me?”

He cups my cheeks, his fingers sliding into my hair. “More than life itself. Look at the building across the street.”

I crinkle my nose and I turn to look at the building across from us. There is a projected picture of us on our wedding day, and underneath, it reads: *I love you and I'm sorry, Poppy Barrett.*

Tears well in my eyes and I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him deeply.

This incredible man is all mine. “You’re forgiven.” I kiss him long and hard before pulling away. “You don’t have anything else you’re hiding behind my back, do you?”

He shakes his head, and his lips press against the side of my mouth. “I love you. I want to be with you like husband and wife. No more contracts, no more being friends with benefits. I want us to be together.”

I nod. “Good. I want the same thing.”

“Let’s get out of here.” He grabs my hand and leads me outside, dinner forgotten.

Once we’re inside the limo, Jasper puts up the divider. “Sit on my lap. I want to make love to my wife,” he whispers in my ear.

My chest warms and his words turn me into goo.

He wants this, all of me. I couldn’t pick a better spouse to be there for me and love me. I was wrong about Jasper, he’s capable of thinking about me and what I want. I love this man with every fiber in my body.

He lifts my sweater, yanking it over my head and tossing it to the floor. Jasper’s eyes land on my tits.

“You’re not wearing a bra,” he notes.

I shake my head and I squeal as he places his lips on my nipple, and then I moan. I missed his hands on my body. I missed everything about him, and I can’t get enough of him. He’s like the air I breathe, and I love everything about him.

Jasper pulls away gently, yanking my ponytail. “No more sleeping in the guest room. Next time we fight, don’t leave our room. I don’t like feeling lost when you’re not there.”

“Okay.”

His mouth goes back to my nipple, and he slides his hand into my pants, placing his finger on my clit, massaging it. I breathe

hard as my heart beats rapidly in my chest.

I make breathy noises and beg him for more. His touch has been different from any other time he's touched me before. His touch is powerful and claiming, like I'm his. He yanks down my pants and underwear.

"I love eating your pussy, it's my favorite meal."

He sets me down on the seat, and his tongue strokes my clit as he slides a finger inside of me and I feel every inch of him. He continues to lick me and finger me, and I let out a moan that I'm quite sure Chance heard, but I don't care. I hump Jasper's face until my vagina contracts around his finger and I come on his mouth. He licks my cum up like he's dying of thirst.

"I need you right now," he growls, unbuttoning and unzipping his pants. He places my knees on either side of his thighs so I'm straddling him, and I slide down slowly on top of his dick.

Shock covers me like a blanket. "You're not using a condom."

I feel all of him, the rawness, and he feels amazing bare. I feel my juices coating his dick, dripping down his balls. I stay still, trying to adjust to the width of him as well as the new sensations.

He kisses my forehead. "You're on birth control. No more barriers. I mean it."

I kiss him. He finally trusts me, and this is the moment I've been waiting for.

"You feel so good," he says as he bounces me up and down on his dick. I suck in a breath as I try to adjust to having raw sex with Jasper, and he keeps his lips glued to mine. I dig my nails into his shirt as he fucks me hard in long strokes, gazing into my eyes with adoration. He has never looked at me with such love in his eyes.

When we make it to the penthouse, he zips up his pants and I pull on my sweatpants. Once we make it inside, we remove all our clothes and head straight to the shower. He picks me up and fucks me against the tile wall as the water rains down on his back. My hair is a mess but I don't care. I'm glad I get to feel him. This beautiful and wonderful man is all mine. I love it.

"You feel so fucking good, Angel," he repeats.

I feel him throbbing inside me and he pulls out. Watching cum leaking from his dick makes me horny all over again.

He drops down to his knees and presses his mouth on my clit, and I moan loudly as he drapes my legs over his shoulders, sending me closer to the edge. He takes his time teasing me, then he slides his fingers inside me. The water turns icy cold and my teeth chatter, but I don't care. I need to come; I need this release. He continues to eat me out, and I scream at the top of my lungs as I feel my orgasm building in my lower belly.

"I'm about to come," I tell him, grabbing a fistful of his hair, riding his face as hard as I'm riding out my orgasm.

I grab bodywash and slide it up and down his dick, jacking him off with it. I love the way he looks, the way his face is twisted up in pure pleasure. I love making him come as the muscle at the base of his dick contracts and his skin is flush. I drop to my knees and part my lips as his salty cum shoots in my mouth, then I swallow, licking my lips.

"It gets hotter every time you swallow my cum, Angel," Jasper says with awe as I stand up, and he kisses me until I'm dizzy.

We wash ourselves and wrap a towel around our bodies before heading to the bedroom.

If this is how it's going to be for the rest of our lives, I don't want to change anything. This is heaven.

I go to the drawer to grab myself a nightgown, but Jasper grabs me by the arm and tosses me on the bed like a rag doll.

"I'm so addicted to you, you drive me crazy," he murmurs in my ear. "I'm going to make love to you again."

Jasper slides inside me, and I gasp, scratching his back as he slides in and out of me slowly. He lifts my legs over his shoulders, and I feel him so deep inside me.

"I love you, Poppy. More than you'll ever know."

"I love you too." He thrusts inside me, waking every fiber in my body. Jasper leans down and kisses me, gazing into my eyes. I have never seen him so vulnerable. So raw and open about his emotions.

I love this version of Jasper Barrett. The one that loves me. The one that gets me. The one that wants me for me. Not criticizing me, not making me feel less than.

I fight back the tears that threaten my eyes.

This wonderful man who loves me with every fiber in his soul.

Jasper slides out of me, flips me over onto my stomach, and slaps my ass hard, causing me to giggle. He slides back inside me, yanking my hair gently, and places his hand on my lower back, holding me in place and thrusting into me as hard as he can. I like it rough.

He uses his other hand to grip my hip, riding me harder and harder.

“Fuck, Poppy. I can’t get enough of you.”

Several moments later, he pulls out, and I feel warm cum all over my lower back.

I turn over onto my back, my eyelids as heavy as a dumbbell, and Jasper lies next to me, pulling me into his arms. And I drift to sleep in the arms of my husband.



Chapter THIRTY-NINE

Jasper

I knock on Judy's door as Poppy holds my hand and squeezes tight. My heart beats loudly in my chest and sweat blankets my forehead even though the weather is chilly today.

It's been a month since I learned about what happened to my mother. Judy will be able to tell me what happened on the night of my mother's death.

She can tell me if Tommy murdered my mother.

I ring the doorbell one more time and finally, a short, stocky woman opens the door, her blue eyes immediately narrowing on me. Keeping her gaze glued to me, she shuts the door behind her, then folds her arms across her chest. Her gray hair is tucked neatly in a bun. Her face is full of wrinkles, and she scrunches her nose. She reeks of cigarettes.

I remember her now. I used to sneak onto her property to pet her German shepherd. She also had a niece I used to play with.

“Can I help you?” Her tone is scratchy, as if she’s getting over a cold, and her eyes glance at Poppy who waves at her awkwardly.

I clear my throat as nervousness bubbles in my chest, sliding my hand into my pocket. I don’t know what to say to her or how to even begin to ask her about the money my father gave her. I need to remain calm and not split my wig, especially if she doesn’t want to help.

“You might not remember me, but I’m Jasper Barrett. Tommy Barrett’s son.” I keep my tone calm but I can hear my heart beating loudly in my ears.

She assesses me from head to toe and does a double take.

“I remember you, you used to be my neighbor. The kid who used to feed my dog cupcakes.” She eyes Poppy.

“This is my wife, Poppy.”

She nods, then her eyes go back to me as she places her hand on the metal knob behind her. “What do you want?” There is a snap to her tone, but the smile on her face tells me she didn’t mean to be so harsh.

I nod toward the door. “Can we come in? There is something I would like to discuss with you.”

Doubt creeps in her eyes, and when her gaze moves past us, I turn around to see two teenagers playing basketball in the street.

“Danny and Chris, do not leave this street.” Then she focuses her eyes on me. “Sure.”

She ushers us in, and I glance around the open space. Two dark couches are on opposite sides of the living room, the smell of mothballs and ocean breeze lingering in the air.

She has the door to the deck wide open, and I see the ocean waves rolling onto the golden sand.

A toddler walks up to the coffee table, pulls the fake fruit from the bowl, and Judy takes it from him and tells him no before settling him in the opposite direction.

I glance at Poppy, watching her as she watches the kid in awe. A sense of guilt washes over me because I know I won’t give her what she really wants, a child. Every time she mentions children

or when I see the sad look in her eyes when we're on the topic of children, I feel like a shitty husband.

I should be able to give my wife whatever she wants, and I feel like I'm failing her.

I shake my head, knowing I need to worry about other things right now, like my mother and getting justice for her. If what my grandfather says is true, I can't wait to watch Tommy rot in prison—and bonus, I'll be able to take over his businesses.

“Don't mind my grandson. He's a busybody.”

I sit forward, pulling my pant legs up a little as Poppy strokes my back. “I'm here about my mother. My grandfather is reopening her murder case, and he mentioned you were an eyewitness to my mother's death.”

Horror lights her eyes, and she wipes her hands on her dress, shaking her head. “I didn't see anything.”

Guilt is written all over her face and her bottom lip quivers as she taps her feet on the wooden floor.

I ball up my fists and keep them on my lap. “He said my father might have paid you off, after you saw him drowning her.”

Tears sit in the corners of her eyes. “I already told the police what I saw.” She gets up from the couch, her arms behind her back, holding her head up high.

I wish she would tell me, so my mother can finally rest in peace after getting the justice she deserves.

“Just think, if you were a kid, or if you had been drowned, wouldn't you want justice for yourself?” I snap, getting up from the couch. I don't mean to snap, but I need her to confirm what happened. I really need this. I need closure for my mother. She was everything to me as a kid, and it'll help with the pain I feel every time I think about her, every time I have a faint memory of her. I deserve to know what happened to the only person who loved me as a child.

Judy bawls up her fists and shuts her eyes, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Poppy strokes my back, seeing how upset this is making me. She gets up from the couch, strolling toward Judy, patting her

back. “My husband needs closure for his mother’s death. Please, we will pay you any amount of money.”

Judy looks at her and shakes her head. “I told you I don’t know anything, please.”

“Did my father threaten you?” I ask. “He won’t do anything, I promise. I’ll protect you. I have way more resources than him.”

“Please,” she whispers, begging now.

“I read in an article that your husband died in a fire... he was a firefighter.” Poppy’s tone is low.

I had no idea she knew that information. She must have researched Judy prior to coming here. That’s one thing I love about Poppy, she goes above and beyond to help the ones she loves. I couldn’t see it before, but she was made for me. To soften my cold heart.

“What if someone purposely murdered your husband and it wasn’t an accident? Wouldn’t you want to know? Would you w
—”

“How dare you use my husband’s death to manipulate me into getting what you want out of me!” she screams at the top of her lungs, causing her grandson to burst into tears. She picks him up from the floor, cuddling him. “Get out, both of you!” She ushers us to the front door. “Don’t ever come back here.”

Then she slams the door in our faces.

Chance opens the door and we both climb into the back seat of the car.

“How did you know she was married to a firefighter?”

“I did some digging on her when I was working on the interior design of my office. She seems like a tough cookie, and I didn’t want to use her husband’s death against her, but it will at least cause her to think about it.” She rests her head on the back of the leather seat.

I place my hand on her thigh, stroking it. There isn’t anyone I would rather have by my side to help me through this.

“Thank you,” I say.

Chance merges onto the highway, switching lanes, the city already alive ahead of us. The sky is cloudy gray and specks of rain tap the windshield.

I glance over at her to see her cock her eyebrow. “For?”

I intertwine my fingers with hers and bring her hand to my lips and kiss it. “For being here with me.”

A smile spreads across her face. “That’s what married couples do.”

Worry burrows deep in my chest, and I sigh. “What if she doesn’t admit what Tommy did? Then my mother won’t get the justice she deserves.” I stroke the back of my neck with my other hand, trying to relieve some tension.

“She will. You saw how guilty she looks. She knows a lot more than she put on. Especially since I brought up her husband’s death. But if she doesn’t, we’ll work through it. We always do.”



Chapter FORTY

Poppy

My mother wanted me to meet her at a spa, and after the last few weeks I've had I needed to get pampered. But I didn't want to come, because I know she's up to something. She never calls unless she wants a favor.

I sit in the seat and slip off my shoes, placing my toes in the warm water as the nail tech files my toenails down. I glance at my mother who has a towel wrapped around her head and a magazine in her lap.

"How was your week, darling?" she asks.

I haven't spoken to her since we had our little spat during that dinner and even though I didn't want to meet with her today, she kind of forced me, speaking about how much she misses me and how she can't go another day without speaking to me. I don't believe her words because she didn't have a problem going months without speaking to me before I married Jasper. She wants more money out of me.

I grab my phone from my purse and set it on the table next to me.

“That’s a nice purse. The latest Prada bag. It hasn’t been released yet.”

I force a fake smile and say, “Jasper bought it for me. And to answer your question, my week has been great.”

Tension builds in my shoulders and I rub them. The nail tech asks me what color I want my toes and I tell him I want bright orange. Hopefully, it will brighten my mood. Brighten up the rest of my week. Jasper and I have been going different ways to find evidence against his father. We looked at police records of the crime scene. I couldn’t look at most of the pictures, of his mother’s blue face and her lifeless eyes. It was Jasper’s first time seeing them and he burst into tears. I felt so sorry for him.

She nods. “The girls at the country club miss you and want you to rejoin. They want you to attend the first ball of the winter season there.”

I shake my head. Those same girls she speaks about turned their backs on me the moment my mother cut me off. Those are the type of friends I don’t need in my life. I suspect my mother only wants me to rejoin the country club so she can brag about how I married well. Anything to make her image look good. I’m starting to see her for her true self. The woman who I’m looking at is one I no longer recognize. I remember when there was a time where she used to bake me cookies, and we would watch movies together—she was my best friend—but everything changed when she remarried. When Jimmy and Sophia came along, she kicked me to the curb like worn-out shoes.

“I’ve been so busy with Jasper that I might not have the time,” I say instead of voicing how I really feel.

I’m not telling her I’m opening up a daycare either, because she’s going to talk me out of it, and right now, I can do without her negative opinion.

She wants to have lunch after we leave the salon, but I’m not hungry and I don’t want to be around her. I married Jasper so I could get in good graces with her, practically begging her to love me, and all she wants to do is use me for money. She doesn’t care about me, and she never did. She’s so angry at my father and me,

blaming me for things that were beyond my control. How can she blame me for her being a single mom and my father for being a crackhead?

If I ever have a child, I wouldn't treat her or him like shit.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry for the way I treated you at Sunday dinner." She places her hand on my arm, and her touch feels like a hot iron, so I flinch a little. "You know I love you and will do anything for you."

More lies.

This is an act, because my mother never apologizes for the things she does. She always acts like nothing happened and we move on with our lives. I see where Sophia gets it from. Our relationship has always been toxic, and I was too naïve to see it because I wanted her acceptance so bad. I wanted to be loved by her so badly, but it only set me up to be used by her.

"I need a favor." Her bottom lip trembles, and she looks up at the lights then back at me.

I've never seen her so scared, and I crinkle my brow, worried.

I exhale. "What is it?"

"I need thirty grand."

I knew she wanted something, and this spa date was all a ploy.

"For?"

"To pay the bank before the house gets repossessed."

I want to tell her that's her problem, but I don't want to be rude. And I'm not going to allow my mother to milk a dime from me every chance she gets.

I need to stand up to her. Being married to Jasper has taught me that I don't need anyone's approval for them to love me. Jasper loves me for me, and right now my mother wouldn't be sitting here with me if it wasn't for my marriage to him.

Anger and regret settle in my chest. I don't know why I even bothered showing up here, but guilt eats at me like a disease because she's my mother and I love her at the end of the day. I'm not going to ask Jasper to pay this bill, so I'll take it out of my

own pocket. Jasper doesn't require me to pay bills in the household and he refers to my money as play money to spend on myself. As a matter of fact, I don't have to lift a finger, and he prefers for me to enjoy the luxuries of the new life I have with him.

“What about the money Jasper gave you to save the business?”

My mother's head drops. “Your stepfather blew through it and lost the winery.”

I shake my head. “Ask Jimmy.”

“He already paid our bills last month. Jasper is in love with you, Poppy. Use it as a tool to control him.”

I was going to give it to her from my own pocket, but the fact that she has the audacity to try to rope my husband into this is wrong. God, how could I not see how awful she is? I'm tired of looking at her through rose-tinted glasses and I'm not going to allow myself to be a pawn anymore.

I'm seeing her for what she really is, and that's a snake in the grass.

“I fell in love with Jasper, so I'm not going to do that.”

She laughs like a hyena. “Love? That's rich coming from you.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You're like your father, you wouldn't know what love is even if it hits you in the face. All you're going to do is ruin his life, like you ruined Link's life.”

Her words dig into my chest and take root. I wish I could say she doesn't mean them, that she's only acting out of anger, but this is how she feels about me. When someone shows you their true colors, you have to believe them, otherwise you'll end up breaking your own heart. I told her how Link cheated on me, yet I'm the one who ruined his life.

“I don't like Jasper, he's a bad influence on you.”

“You like Link, but you don't like Jasper?”

She straightens her spine and holds her head up high. “Yes, Link was the one for you, and he was more accepting of your family.”

I grab my purse and strap it over my shoulder. “You know what I think, Mother?” I give the nail technician my card, and he disappears to process my payment. “You’re jealous I have someone to love me for me, and you don’t like the fact that someone actually cares about me.”

Jasper was right about her. She’s jealous of me, but not in the way I thought. She’s jealous because she’s with a man who can’t provide for her and love her, and she doesn’t want that for me. She wants the provide part but not the love part. She wants me to be abused and suffer because she has to suffer with my stepfather. Why else would she like Link and not Jasper? Jasper sees through her bullshit, and it sucks that it’s taken me this long to see it. But not anymore.

“Please, as if I would be jealous of you.”

“Whatever you say, I’m not helping you with money or doing any favors for you anymore. I’m no longer your meal ticket nor am I your punching bag. You tell my stepfather to find his own way.”

“You little bitch!” she yells.

Everyone stops what they’re doing, staring at us. The nail tech hands me my card back. I sign the receipt and hand it back to him.

“After everything I’ve done for you. I took care of you while your father was high as fuck. You owe me. I had to do some despicable things to keep a roof over your head, even marrying someone I didn’t love. Is that how you’re going to repay me?” She grabs my forearm, digging her nails into my skin, and I snatch it away.

“You two need to leave,” the nail tech says.

I nod and head toward the door as she calls me all kinds of names.

“Stupid bitch.”

“Dumb ho.”

Once I get into my car, I zoom out of the parking lot like a bat out of hell. She can find her own way back home.

I can't take it anymore, I let the tears flow from my eyes as all the pent-up anger releases.

Standing up to her was the best thing I've ever done in my life, and I've never felt so free.



Chapter FORTY-ONE

Poppy

I toss and turn but I can't sleep, no matter how heavy my eyelids feel. Jasper rolls onto his side and his eyes pop open. My stomach feels queasy as if I've been on a boat ride and I'm feeling seasick.

It must have been the greasy takeout we had for dinner.

Jasper places his hand on my breast, and I hiss, slapping his hand away. My breasts are sore. More sore than usual. I think I'm about to get my period soon.

He sits up and rubs his eyes. "What's wrong, Poppy?"

I'm not going to tell him that I feel under the weather because I don't want to worry him, but I need to tell him about my mother.

"I went to see my mother today."

He laces his fingers with mine and kisses the back of my hand. My heart melts like butter. I search his eyes for judgement, but there isn't any.

"How did it go?"

“Not so well,” I tell him. “She wanted money—more money.”

“What did you say?” he asks.

“I told her no. You were right about her. She is jealous of me. I couldn’t see it before because I wanted her love. I needed to earn it and forgive myself for making her a single mother. That is the guilt I’ve been carrying around all these years. That’s why I wanted to gain her approval. She often blames me for the sacrifices she made, but I realize a parent is supposed to make those sacrifices for their children. I was carrying a burden that wasn’t mine to carry. I was... I was being stupid, Jasper.”

He lifts my chin and uses the pads of his fingers to stroke my cheeks. “You weren’t being stupid. You just wanted to earn your mother’s love.”

I smile. “I learned I don’t need her approval, or anyone’s approval, to be loved. You taught me that.”

He kisses the bridge of my nose, sliding me onto his lap. I kiss him long and hard, then I pull away. “Make love to me, please.”

He nods, planting kisses on my neck, then making his way down to my shoulder blades. “You’re so beautiful—”

“I choose you,” I whisper, cutting him off.

He looks up, casting me a curious glance.

“I choose you over my fear. I’m choosing you to love me without conditions, and I’m choosing you to love me for me.” Tears well in my eyes.

I have never felt this free and this much in love with someone, and I don’t understand why I’m turning into such a sap.

“Hey, shhh. It’s okay,” he placates me, soothing me.

I nod as he proceeds to kiss my collarbone, making his way to my breast. “Your breasts are swollen,” he notes.

“It’s my hormones, they always swell when I’m about to start my period.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Hmm. I never noticed it before. I’ll be gentle.”

He leans down and sucks on my nipple, and I let out a loud moan. He lays me on the bed, kissing down to my belly button, then he kisses my hip bone

“My favorite part,” he says before placing his mouth on my clit.

He uses his tongue to circle my nub as I shove my fingers into his hair and pull gently. I squeal when he slides his fingers inside of me. “J-Jasper. I’m going to come.”

He removes his mouth. “Good. Come all over my tongue, Angel.”

He places his mouth back on my clit, and within seconds I come on his tongue. Jasper laps it up, then lies on the bed beside me. I slide on top of him, facing his legs as he grips a fistful of my ass cheeks, and I slide down on him.

All of sudden, a wave of nausea hits me mid-thrust. I climb off him and rush to the bathroom to empty my stomach into the toilet.

What the fuck is going on with me? It must have been those street tacos. I should have known they would have made me sick.

Jasper follows me to the bathroom, holding my hair back as I continue to puke. He grabs a rag from the cabinet and hands it to me.

I sit on my butt as he wipes the corner of my mouth. “This is embarrassing,” I whine. I point to the counter. “Pass me the mouthwash.”

He does what I say, and I unscrew the lid, holding the bottle to my mouth. I pour a large amount of minty liquid and swish, then I spit into the toilet.

“This is what we signed up for,” he says soothingly, picking me up to carry me back to bed.

I lie back down and bury myself under the covers, shaking my head at what he said. “No, we signed a business contract,” I tease.

“Do you need anything while I’m up?”

I shake my head again as Jasper slides inside the covers with me, then he strokes my hair. “If you don’t feel any better in the

morning, I'm going to call my doctor to check you out."

"I'm sure it's something I ate, and on top of that I'm about to start my period."

We're quiet for several minutes. Trying to hold down the vomit, I close my eyes and lie on his chest as he sweeps my hair to the side. "I'm glad we got together, because I wouldn't be happy with anyone else," he murmurs as he pulls me closer.

Before I can respond to that, I drift off to sleep.



Chapter FORTY-TWO

Jasper

I feed Poppy chicken noodle soup, yet she looks like she's getting worse by the minute. Bags hang under her eyes and she looks pale. I tried convincing her to allow my doctor to check her out, but she's more stubborn than a bull.

"I'm fine, Jasper, I really am," she tells me, but when I rub her forehead, she is hotter than a stove. "You go sign your paperwork for James's company."

"No, you come first, Angel. Your health is more important than all that." I never thought I'd say that or think about putting her over my work. Love has made me soft. I love this woman so much I just want her to be okay. It's six months away for me to take over James's business, but I have a press conference soon announcing me fulfilling the CEO position. I have to sign the contracts and approve some rules before I officially start.

Poppy's lips are chapped and she can barely keep her eyes open. She grabs the bucket next to the bed and pukes in it for the umpteenth time.

“That’s it, I’m taking you to the hospital.”

She tries to fight me but she drifts off to sleep instead, completely exhausted. I call Chance and tell him to have the car ready. As soon as we’re inside the car, she pukes all over the back seat, some of it splashing on my sweatpants.

I stroke her back again, soothing her. The smell of vomit hits my nostrils and I tap the button to open the window, inviting the cool air inside the car.

Once we make it to the ER, I explain to them what’s been going on, and they bring a wheelchair out. I help Poppy remove her clothes and slide on the hospital gown. The doctor comes inside the room wearing a white jacket over his suit.

“My name is Dr. Lee. What seems to be the problem?” he asks.

“I want full blood work done to find out why my wife is sick.”

He cocks his eyebrow at me. “What are her symptoms?”

“She’s in and out of sleep and has been running a fever. She can’t keep anything down.”

Poppy rolls over onto her side. I grab the bucket and put it beside her hospital bed. “See?” I tell him.

He glances at her and pulls up a chair next to her bed. “Mrs. Barrett, are you able to pee in a cup?”

She barely nods. “Yes, I can.”

The doctor grabs his flashlight and looks at her pupils. He removes his stethoscope from around his shoulders and uses it to check her breathing.

The nurse comes inside the room, handing Poppy a cup.

When I hold out my hand, she takes it, and I help her to the bathroom. “Do you need help?”

“I appreciate everything you do. I really do, but you don’t have to baby me, Jasper. I’m fine. I promise.”

I leave her to do her business, and when she comes back to the bed, I crawl inside next to her. The nurse grabs the cup and an

hour later, Dr. Lee walks in again. “You’re dehydrated, that’s why you are running a fever. When was your last period?”

She looks at him. “It was two months ago, but my periods have always been irregular because of my birth control. Why?”

“You’re pregnant. Congratulations. You need to find an OB-GYN, and the nurse will provide you with a list of the best in the city. In the meantime, I’ll prescribe you prenatal vitamins.”

I freeze in place.

She’s pregnant?

I glance at her, watching a smile spread across her face. She knows I don’t want kids. Is this her going behind my back to get what she wanted? Have I been a fool? Poppy wouldn’t do that to me, she wouldn’t go against my wishes, would she? I’m not ready to be a father and I thought I made that clear to her. She shouldn’t be pregnant if she has been taking her birth control. My heart beats so damn hard it drowns out my thoughts.

“We’re going to give you some electrolytes for the dehydration through an IV, then we’re going to send you home. But make sure you do a follow-up with your doctor to ensure sure the baby is okay.” And on that note, he leaves the room.

We stare at each other, and I stroke the back of my head. I wasn’t ready for this. To be a father again. I’m going to fail this child like I failed Harper.

“Have you been taking your birth control?” I snap.

Guilt etches her face, and she hangs her head down. “Well... I skipped a day last month.”

“Why?”

“Because I was so stressed about my relationship with my mom, but I made sure to take them religiously after that.”

I don’t believe her story. We stopped using condoms a month ago, so she must be a month pregnant. I should have started monitoring her to make sure she was actually taking her birth control pills. Anger burns in my chest because she should have kept taking them like she said she was. I’m starting to not to trust her again.

“You tried to trap me.”

Bewilderment laces her pupils, and she shakes her head. “Why would I trap you? We’re already married, Jasper.”

I thrust my fingers through my hair and pull at the strands. “You know how I feel about children, Poppy. I don’t want any.”

“So you don’t want this child?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then tell me, husband. Tell me what you want.”

I ignore her. “If you missed a day, why didn’t you let me know? Why hide it?”

“I didn’t hide it, you asshole. I’m not going to inform you of every single thing I’m doing. It was once, I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

I don’t know who this person I married is anymore. If she would have told me she didn’t take her birth control, I would have worn a condom.

I can’t trust her. She broke that trust. I think she got pregnant on purpose.

“Wait, you never trusted me?” Tears stream down her cheeks. “So everything you said was a lie? You said you trusted me to go without a condom, and now you’re blaming me for a mistake we both made. Are you fucking serious, Jasper?” She vomits in the bucket but all that comes out is clear liquid.

I did trust her, but I trusted her to be on her birth control. She lied to me. Point-blank.

Without a word, I leave the room, resting my head on the wall outside the door of her room. Fuck, she’s pregnant with my child. I know the baby is mine. She’s not a cheater. But the fear of having another kid is tearing me in two. She tricked me into having a baby with her without my knowledge, and I was foolish to trust her. People always do what they want to get what they want.

But I’m the one who trusted her, and she took advantage of my trust. Was this her plan the entire time? Have a baby? To fulfill her dreams?

I go home, change my pants, grab her a change of clothes, and tell Chance to drop it off to her at the hospital. I can’t look at

her right now. She knew I didn't want kids and yet she went behind my back and skipped a day of taking her pills, all so she could have a baby.

I'm not going to be a good father. I couldn't even help Harper and yet here I am, about to have a baby with Poppy. I know I'm going to fail him or her too. I don't know where we go from here. I don't know if I want to be with a woman who tried to trap me with a baby.

This feels like the situation with Gemma again. She lied to me and said she was on birth control when we fucked, and I did use a condom with her. But she lied about her pills. She just wanted to trap me with a baby so she could be set for life, but I don't think Poppy is doing that. She wanted a child because she wanted someone to love. She went ahead and got pregnant. I don't want to be with someone who's not going to think about my needs.

It's funny, I went into this marriage to fulfill a business deal, but I ended up getting my heart involved. I ended up falling in love with someone who ended up deceiving me, just like Gemma did.

Now, I have to man up and take care of my child. But I'm going to keep my distance from Poppy until I drop the news to her that we can no longer be together. That I can't be with a woman who lied to my face. I don't think I can survive this heartbreak, but I have to do what's best for me. I have to protect myself.

I don't want to be with someone who lied to me.



Chapter FORTY-THREE

Poppy

I sit on the hospital bed, trying to make sense of everything. I bring my knees to my chest and rest my chin on them.

Did I skip a day of my birth control pill?

Yes, but after that I took them religiously and I made sure to take them every single day.

Did I do get pregnant on purpose?

Of course not.

I wouldn't do Jasper like that. I knew he didn't want kids, and I wouldn't burden my children with a parent who didn't want them. I experienced it with my mother.

I'm happy I'm pregnant, but I'm also hurt and torn because the man I love doesn't want our baby. Doesn't want me anymore. I thought he trusted me and got over his fear of not being a good parent, but he was a good parent to Harper. I could see it in the photos and the videos I watched.

I just want this nightmare to be over.

For the first time in my life, I feel the loneliest I've ever felt.

I grab my phone from my purse and I text Lake, letting her know I'm in the hospital. I need someone to talk to. Someone who can help me with the situation I'm in. Someone who is more logical when it comes to relationships.

She responds that she'll pick me up when I'm ready.

There is a knock at the door, and Chance pops his head in, a bag in his hand.

"Thanks. Where did Jasper go?" I ask.

"He went home," he answers before turning on his heel and leaving.

Sighing, I go through the bag and find a sweater and a pair of leggings. I put them on and place my hair in a messy bun. Even when we're fighting, he's thinking about me.

I should have ended this marriage the night he told me no to having children. I shouldn't have put my dreams on the back burner for him, or anyone for that matter. Hitting rock bottom makes me realize it even more. I should have told him right then and there that I skipped a day of taking my pills, but we both played a part in it.

The nurse hooks up the IV to my arm, and I feel a lot better than I was before.

An hour later, I am discharged, and I wait by the curb as Lake gets out of her car. She hugs me tight before putting my bag in the trunk.

Once we were in the car, I burst into tears. All the pain hits me at once. I might lose my husband because of my stupid mindlessness, and he doesn't trust me.

"What's wrong, Poppy?"

"I'm pregnant. Jasper thinks I tried to trap him with a baby. I missed a day of taking my birth control pills."

I can't hold it in anymore. I let all the pent-up anger release in the form of my tears, the fear that he might leave me creeping up inside.

What if he divorces me?

She tilts her head to the side, pulling into traffic. “Why did you forget to take it?”

“Because I was stressed out about my mother.”

“I see. I understand. Life got hard.”

“I’ve never seen him so pissed off, Lake, and he’s convinced I purposely tried to get pregnant, as if I need to trap him. We’re married.”

She doesn’t say anything for several seconds. “I think he’s scared. I think he doesn’t want to go through what he went through with Gemma. Atlas told me about what happened to her. It’s hard for him because he lost his child, and then he found out the baby wasn’t even his. It sucks.”

She has a point. He has every right to be pissed off at me and be suspicious, because I wasn’t up-front and honest with him. I should have informed him I missed a day. We could work on our relationship, but honestly, I don’t think he believes a word I have to say. Without knowing the due date, we can’t be certain when the baby was conceived.

We ride around for thirty minutes, while I’m trapped in my thoughts, thinking about my uncertain future. “Where do you want to go?”

“Home, but I’m packing up my shit and staying in a hotel. I’m not going to deal with him if he doesn’t trust me or believe me.”

Once she pulls up to the penthouse, I make my way inside to find Jasper on the couch nursing a bottle of Jack Daniels, glaring at me. The anger in his eyes makes my eyes sting, so I swallow the lump in my throat.

I don’t need this. I need someone who’s going to be there for me. I have never given him any reason to doubt me. Yes, I should have told him about the missed day, but I don’t deserve the way he’s treating me right now.

Without a word, I head straight to the bedroom and grab my suitcase, tossing my things into it. I’ll stay in a hotel for the time being until I figure out what to do next. I have enough money in the bank to take care of myself and my peanut.

I can't believe I'm going to be a mother. I can't believe my dream is coming true.

But I didn't want it like this. I didn't want to have to choose my dream over my husband. If he doesn't want me and wants to be a deadbeat, then that's on him.

Jasper walks into the room, and I feel his presence but I don't turn around. I keep piling clothes into my suitcase. He stands directly behind me, but I don't pay him any mind. I can't face him, not when he's been drinking like a sailor.

"What are you doing?" he says through gritted teeth.

"I'm leaving."

"Good. I'll show up for the doctor's appointments, and I'll be there for our child. I want it in writing for when I file for custody to see my child. I'll pay you child support."

I already knew he was going to break up with me, because Jasper is a runner. He is always running from something. I have to come to grips that I'm going to be a single mother, and I'm okay with it. I really am. I don't want to be married to him if he doesn't want me.

"Don't worry about child support, just be involved."

He grabs me by the arm so I have to face him. "Just admit you purposely got pregnant by me. Just admit you tricked me."

I lose my cool and slap him across the face as the tears fall like a water hose. "How dare you accuse me of tricking you, you selfish bastard!"

He strokes his cheek. "Don't ever put your hands on me again, Poppy."

"Don't worry, I won't ever be touching you again, since I'm the evil person you are forming in your head."

I'm not some weak bitch that's going to beg a man to love her. Oh no. I used to beg Link to love me and forgive me, but not anymore. If Jasper doesn't want to believe me, then that's on him.

I didn't trap him. He chose to stick his dick inside me without a condom.

So why is he blaming me for it?

I'm sick of men and their stupid-ass ways.

Jasper storms out of the room and I hear the front door slam. I place my head in my hands and cry, then I remove my wedding band and place it on the nightstand.

This pain feels as if I was hit by a bus, it hits harder than any pain I've ever felt in life. I wish I could go back in time and choose someone else.

I should have never married Jasper Barrett.

I've made some dumb decisions in life, but this isn't the life I always wanted. I need to stand up and take control of my life and stop letting things happen to me. One thing Jasper and I have in common? I've been living in fear of living my life so I wouldn't disappoint the people around me, but now it's time I live for me. And my child.

Once I make it to the hotel, I unpack. I'll raise my child by myself, because I don't need anyone. I can do this on my own.

I look down at my flat belly and rub over it.

"It's just me and you, Peanut."



Chapter FORTY-FOUR

Jasper

I knot my tie around neck and glance at myself in the mirror as my stylist fixes the hem of my dress pants. I have a press conference to address my taking over of James's business. It's been two weeks since I saw Poppy and I'm not going to lie, I miss her like crazy, and I don't want to believe she purposely tried to get pregnant. But I just can't trust her or anyone. I'm going to be a parent to my child, but I don't know if I want to still be married to her. I know if she divorces me after I acquire the company, it will be a problem between her and her mother, and I don't want to stress her out. Having a baby is stressful for a woman, and I don't want to risk losing our baby. Fuck.

I'm going to be a parent. I never thought I'd ever have to say those words again. This is not what I wanted at all. I never wanted a wife, and I never wanted a family. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life as a lonely bachelor, and here comes this stupid-ass marriage contract I had to agree to in order to get James's company. I still don't know why the hell he would

bestow this hell upon me. Marriage isn't anything but a goddamn ball and chain to a woman I love.

Fuck. I'm trying to keep my cool, I really am, but it's hard when the weight of the world is on my shoulders.

I let my greed get the best of me for money, and the only reason why I wanted to take this business was out of spite to Tommy. To show him he couldn't take what he wanted from me, and I needed to feel connected with James—a man who lied to my face for thirty-three years.

I let out a loud exhale.

My life is going to be complete shit, and what do I get out of it? A lying wife and a baby who might end up with a shitty-ass father that doesn't know how to be a proper parent because he caused the death of another child.

“Are you okay?” Rose asks as she takes a step back and glances at my suit.

I shake my head. I'm not about to tell her about my personal problems with my wife. It isn't any of her business, and the minute she sees an opportunity to hop on my dick, she's going to take it. I need some head and a warm bed, but I want that from Poppy—only Poppy, despite her leaving her wedding band on the nightstand. I have no desire to fuck another woman. Poppy slithered her way into my heart, and even though we're currently not together, I don't have it in me to sleep with another woman.

“If you need someone to talk to, let me know. I'm here,” Rose says, pushing up her breasts.

My gaze drops down to her cleavage and I shake my head. “Stop trying to hit on me. I don't want you, and I will never want you. You see this band on my finger?” I point to my wedding ring. “As long as I'm wearing this, I'm off-limits and I'm not going to cheat on my wife.”

“I'm sorry, Jasper.”

She lost her privilege of calling me by my first name. “You address me as Mr. Barrett from now on. Keep our relationship strictly business. If you hit on me again, your contract will be terminated immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” she says before she goes back to fixing my pants.

Once I'm in the car, I tell Chance to take me to the press conference. I don't want to do this shit, but I have to go. This is what I wanted the entire time. My uncle's company—I mean, my father's. I still don't know why my mother, Tommy, and James would keep this such a big secret. I'm still mad at them. Why did my biological father allow me to go through all the abuse? He could have gotten full custody of me, but he chose not to.

I have more questions than answers.

Once we make it to the building, I open the door to the conference room and cameras flash, blinding my vision and making my head hurt.

I step up to the podium.

Every news reporter asks me questions and I answer them one by one.

A blonde woman wearing a blue pantsuit holds out her little mike. "Where is your wife, Mr. Barrett?"

"She's at home resting."

"Why is that?" she asks.

"Next question."

I'm not in the mood to speak about my wife and our marriage issues, but that's what I wanted, right? To paint the picture of a happy couple and shove it in Tommy's face that I won? It doesn't feel good to gloat about my marriage, because now it's serious to me and I'm not going to make a mockery of it like I had planned to before.

Once I'm finished with reciting my speech about how I'm going to make Wolfgang Bank the best bank in the world, I spot Atlas leaning against the wall.

What is he doing here? He hates press conferences as much as I do.

I shove my hands into my pockets, and he nods at me. I step down from the podium and stride toward him as paparazzi take pictures of us.

"You look like shit," he says.

I don't respond, because he's right. I have bags under my eyes, I'm so fucking tired. I haven't slept in days, and I've been drinking more than usual. I make sure to drink within my limits so I don't turn back into the alcoholic I once was.

We walk out of the building slowly, and I slide into his limo. He grabs a bottle of bourbon and pours me a glass.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" is the first thing he says once the car is moving. "You really think Poppy would trap you with a baby?"

I knew she was hanging out with Lake after she left our home. Just because I'm pissed off with her doesn't mean I don't worry about her well-being.

I don't respond to Atlas's outburst because I feel guilty for the way I feel. I shouldn't feel guilty.

I know she tried to trap me with a baby.

"She skipped a day of taking her birth control while we weren't using condoms, why else would she skip it if not to trap me? She didn't tell me about the day she missed her pill. And it's her dream to be a mother, so yeah, she trapped me."

"Your logic doesn't make any sense. If she really tried to trap you, why would she admit to missing a day? The whole purpose of her to lie to you would be so she won't look dishonest." He massages his temples. "You're married, Jasper, and you two fuck like rabbits, so why didn't you think you were going to eventually impregnate her?"

I didn't think about it that way. When I did my research on pregnancy tests, I learned that a woman has to be at least four weeks along in order for the test to detect a pregnancy. Is it possible she got pregnant while we were using a condom and she was taking her pills? I highly doubt that. We were safe during the time we decided to start having sex. She must've gotten pregnant more recently.

"She's not Gemma," Atlas snaps.

"I know."

"Do you?" he counters.

Without a word, I swallow the bourbon and it slithers down my throat, warming my empty belly.

“She’s going through a lot, and I know Poppy, she wouldn’t trap you with a baby. She’s not a selfish person, and stressing her out while she’s pregnant is fucked up.”

“I’m trying not to stress her out.” I sigh.

He rubs the back of his head. “Lake is due in two months and I’m worried as fuck. We’re in the same boat, Jasper. I don’t want you to make the biggest mistake of your life.” He strokes his beard. “It’s always been Poppy’s dream to be a mother. Do you want her to be miserable for the rest of her life? She’s given you everything you wanted, why not return the favor?”

“I’m not cut out to be a father.” I clench the crystal glass in my hand tight. “I lost Harper. And what if I ruin this baby’s life too?”

“You need to stop blaming yourself for that mistake. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Shit happens, man.”

He’s right, shit does happen, but I don’t want to make the same mistake. I don’t want to fail my wife—if I still have one—nor do I want to fail my unborn child.

I glance out the window, at the gray clouds. I don’t know what to believe. I don’t know if I should trust Poppy all over again. I don’t know if she will even allow me back into her life. And like Atlas said, why can’t I allow her to have this one thing when she signed her life to be with me in order for me to get James’s company. I’ve been a taker in this relationship, not really giving a thought about what she wants.

“You’re being selfish,” Atlas says. “You’ve always been a selfish fuck, though.”

“Thanks, bro,” I say sarcastically as I pat him on the back.

He makes me feel ten times worse than I already do.

I don’t respond to what Atlas has just said. “I should request a DNA test to make sure the baby is mine,” I suggest instead.

I know the baby is mine—I’m sure it is mine. But I also thought Harper was mine, and Gemma provided me with a false DNA test. It was only after Harper passed away that I had found

out she wasn't mine and everything I thought was a lie. You can never be too certain.

“When Poppy divorces you, don't come bitching to me.”

“I won't. I don't want to be married to someone who lied to my face.”

We are both quiet until he says, “You're self-sabotaging your own marriage. You will do anything and say anything to push her away, because you're scared you might have something real with her. You're throwing it all away because of your fears. Keep choosing your fears and you're going to miss out on the best thing that's ever happened to you. If you lose Poppy then you're dumber than I thought. Grow a pair, Jasper, for fuck's sake.”

The car comes to a complete stop, and Atlas slides out of the limo before I can say anything more. We've arrived at a restaurant but I'm not in the mood to eat or do anything right now. I just want to go home and drink myself to sleep.

“We're getting lunch. You're not sitting in your penthouse sulking and thinking of more ways to sabotage the only good thing that's in your life.”

“Okay, *Father*.”

He leans in front of the car door. “You're going to think about everything I said before you do anything stupid or dumb. I'm not letting my best friend fuck up his life. Sober the fuck up so we can plan your groveling, because you're getting Poppy back.”

“Why do you care about my marriage?”

“Because my wife is worried about Poppy, and if Lake isn't happy, then I'm not happy.”

“Who's the selfish bastard now?” I smirk.

“Shut up and get your ass out of my limo.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”



Chapter FORTY-FIVE

Poppy

Glancing at the ultrasound picture, I can barely see the baby. The doctor informed me I'm two months pregnant and my peanut is the size of a raspberry. That means I was taking my pills and Jasper was still using a condom when I conceived, so it must have been that time when the condom broke. I'm almost certain I got pregnant the night we agreed to be friends with benefits. I would go to Jasper to let him know, but what's the point? He has his head so far up his ass that he wouldn't believe me; he believes I'm like Gemma.

Tears threaten my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I refuse to allow someone to hurt me anymore, and I don't have to prove anything to him. I'm tired of the aching pain in my chest, tired of worrying my child won't have the family I dreamed of.

I glance at the night sky through the window. I've recently leased an industrial two-bedroom apartment for me and my little peanut. The bedroom set only came in today, and I'm waiting for the rest of my furniture to be delivered.

I did research on how to live like a single mother. Maybe I can hire a nanny to help me part-time, and Jasper can get him or her every other weekend, and we'll split the holidays? Since he loves his contracts so much, we can even get it in writing. Thinking about doing this all alone sounds stressful. On a few websites, it mentions that babies have to be fed every two to three hours and to be prepared for constant diaper changes even during the nighttime. I might need someone to help with that as well.

When the baby is about eight months, I'm going to have to start going back to work, so I'm going to put her or him in daycare... and speaking of daycare, I'm going to put my dreams of opening a daycare for special needs kids on hold until I get my life sorted. Until I get used to my new norm. I'm excited to be a mother and give someone unconditional love.

I refuse to think it's the end of the world that I'm pregnant and alone.

The doorbell rings, and I rush to open it. Sophia has Bailey on her hip. My niece smiles and waves at me as she says, "Juice."

The last time I saw her, she wanted to play peekaboo. She has grown so much over the last few months.

I wonder how my peanut is going to turn out.

Is he or she going to have Jasper's hair color or will they have my skin tone? It makes me even more excited to see him or her.

Bailey's doe eyes grow wide and she giggles. My sister steps inside and shuts the door behind her. She glances around. "Your apartment looks nice. But why are you living here?" She removes her coat and tosses it on the counter, then I usher her to my bedroom so she can sit. I still have clothes in suitcases and haven't unpacked yet.

I haven't told her about Jasper and me and our breakup.

I exhale, finally letting the tears fall down my cheeks. I don't know whether it's the hormones or if I'm just really sad. I have been trying my best to keep it together, but I can't help but fall apart. My sister places Bailey on the floor and wraps her arms around me, and I cry harder.

Bailey yanks on my pant legs, and says, "You cry."

“We broke up. He doesn’t want me or our baby,” I say through the tears.

She gasps as if she wasn’t expecting me to say that, but it’s the truth.

“He accused me of trying to trap him with a baby. I found out today that I’m two months pregnant, so it must’ve happened when the condom broke.”

“Poppy...” She sighs, stroking my hair. “Is he going to help take care of the baby? You better put him on child support.”

I shake my head. “I’m not forcing a man to take care of their child. I don’t want his money. I have some money saved up now, and with his last name, I’m sure I won’t have a problem getting a job.”

“It takes two to make a baby. This doesn’t sound like the Jasper I’ve met. He loves you.”

I’m not telling her that he’s acting like I’m his ex-girlfriend or about him losing Harper. It’s none of her business. Plus, it’s his story to tell, not mine.

Sophia sits on the bed beside me. “What about Mother? The only reason you married him was to impress her.”

“Fuck Mom,” I say to her.

I’m still pissed at her for the way she treated me, and I’m not going to speak to her for a while. Now I’m pregnant, I can’t imagine treating my baby the way she treats me. She doesn’t deserve to be in my or my child’s life.

I’m not seeing the good in people anymore, I’m seeing people for who they are and believing in what they show me. No more giving people the benefit of the doubt. That’s been my problem all along, trying to see the good in people when they aren’t good at all. It’s the same for Jasper. He’s selfish and doesn’t have faith in me. Him thinking I’m trying to trap him with a baby cut me deep in my soul, but I have to keep moving forward.

“Have you spoken to her?” I ask.

She nods. “She’s pissed I’m divorcing Tate. I’m a free woman, and I’m so happy now. I would rather be happy than be with someone who treats me like shit.” She holds her head up

high. “I cleaned out his bank account before I left and he doesn’t know where we live. I don’t want that monster anywhere near me, so we set up a public place where we meet. He picks Bailey up and has her for the weekends. He keeps saying he wants his family back, but I told him to go back to his slut and leave me alone.” She smiles so wide. I have never seen her this happy. “My life has been so peaceful with him gone. To tell you the truth, I never loved him the way you loved Jasper.”

I want to correct her and say *love* but I’m not going to.

“I hope to one day have that type of love, even if it doesn’t last long.”

“What are your goals for now?”

“I’m still at a community college at night to take classes for nursing and I have a job on campus,” she says.

“I’m so proud of you,” I tell her.

“You too.”

My phone dings with a message, and I grab it to see it’s Link. My heart sinks in my chest.

What the fuck does he want? I haven’t spoken to him since Jasper threatened him, and if he knows what’s best for him, he will stay away from me.

Link: I found out you separated from Jasper. If you ever want to talk, I’m here.

How did he find that out? Jasper didn’t announce it at the press conference the other day. Yes, I still watched it, that’s how much I miss him. The only person who knows is Atlas and Lake, and I know they wouldn’t dare repeat it to another soul.

I shoot him a text message.

Me: I’m still with my husband and I’m having his child. Please stay away from me.

I place my phone on the nightstand.

I wish like hell I was still with Jasper. I wish like hell to be in his arms right now. I wish like hell for him to call me and tell me he misses me, but I know that won’t happen, and if he does, it will never be the same between us.

I don't want to be angry with him. I just want to do what's best for our kid.



Chapter FORTY-SIX

Jasper

I wanted to call Poppy so badly and tell her how much I miss her. How quickly did I forget that I'm mad at her? Well... hurt is the better word for it. I'm so hurt. Really hurt. I've never been this hurt in a long time.

Atlas had a point—I am self-sabotaging this relationship, because I'm scared. So I'm taking it out on Poppy. I'm finding ways to escape this marriage because, honestly, I don't deserve to be loved by Poppy. I don't deserve to be happy.

I know deep down she didn't trap me with a baby on purpose. I just wanted her to say it, so I can feed into the fear. I wanted her to be the bad guy in my story, so I wouldn't have to face my own demons. Now here I am, not knowing if she will hear me out, not knowing if I lost my marriage—my wife.

Shaking my head, I lean back in my chair.

The CEO who is going to take my place at Risqué is a woman named Zoie Johnson and just from me training her, I can tell

she's going to be a good fit here. I look around my office. I'm not going to miss working here.

I'm finally going to pursue my dream and take over James's bank. I still have to sign the paperwork, and I'll be in and out of meetings with the board members. I'm starting my training to get me prepared to take over soon. I pretty much know how to run the business as James taught me most of how it works before he passed away. I should be happy my dreams are about to come true, not being tied down to a woman, but I'm not happy at all.

I just want to crawl in a hole and live there.

I glance at my minibar and the urge to drink is ever-present, but I can't do it. I can't go back to my old ways. I have a child on the way and a wife to look after, drinking my problems away won't solve anything.

There is a knock at the door, and I glance up as Judy stands in the doorway. Shock colors my face as I hadn't expected to see her.

Why is Judy here?

I clear my throat and loosen my tie. "How can I help you?"

She sits in front of me with her head down. "You were right." Her eyes meet mine. Shame clouds her face and tears run down her cheeks. "I have been letting guilt eat at me, and my husband would have wanted me to come clean about what I saw the night of your mother's death." She reaches into her purse and hands me a thumb drive. "Whatever you do, please don't get me locked up. I have two grandchildren who have autism, and they are nonverbal. I need to take care of them. Their mother isn't a good person and their father abandoned them. Please." She wipes the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

I was never going to turn her in. I just wanted my mother to get justice.

I have grown soft.

And I don't like it.

Loving Poppy has softened my cold heart.

Poppy makes me a better person.

I need her.

Nodding, I take the thumb drive from Judy, and she gets up from the chair. “Thank you,” she tells me.

She disappears from my office and I slide the thumb drive into my computer. I wiggle the mouse and a video pops up. She had the video that shows what happened to my mother all along.

I fiddle with my wedding band. I should take it off, but I can’t bring myself to do it because I still love Poppy. I still want her more than ever. I don’t want to watch the video without her, so I hit Pause and grab my phone. I get up from the desk chair and pace my office back and forth.

Fear wraps around my chest, squeezing the life out of me.

What if she doesn’t pick up?

I dial her number, and it rings two times before going straight to voicemail. She hit the End button. I call her again. She doesn’t answer, so I shoot her a text.

Me: We need to talk. I know we’re at odds with each other, but I need you.

She reads it right away. When the three dots pop up, my heart swells in my chest. It was stupid to go to her after I accused her of trying to trap me with a baby. I’m a fucking moron.

Instead of a text message, my phone rings and her name pops up on my screen. With my pulse jumping out of my neck, I swipe the Answer button and hold the phone to my ear.

“What is it?” she snaps.

“I need you to meet me in my office in an hour.”

“Why?”

I hate exposing myself, but she did tell me Judy was going to come around soon, and I don’t want to face this alone without her.

“Judy stopped by, and I want to look at the footage she gave me of my mother. I know we’re not on good terms right now, but I need you here with me. I can’t watch the video without you. Please.”

She sucks in a breath. “Please don’t make me regret this, Jasper.” The line goes dead.

I glance at my watch, knowing she'll be here in an hour. I'm nervous. I know I said some things to hurt her, and I regret it all. My new assistant, Chase, walks in with a tablet in hand and he tells me my schedule for the rest of the day.

The anticipation is killing me.

All I do is think about her.

An hour goes by before she walks into my office, wearing a polka-dot skirt. Poppy removes her jacket and hangs it on the back of the chair opposite my desk, and she looks around the room. My heart drops in my chest seeing her look so radiant. My eyes venture down to her stomach, wondering how our baby is doing.

"Where is the video?"

"Are you eating well? Are you taking your vitamins every day? Do you need anything from me?"

She dusts off her blouse and my eyes zero in on her huge tits, causing my mouth to water. Images of me titty-fucking her pops into my mind.

"Don't concern yourself with what I'm doing, Jasper. Besides, I tried to trap you with a baby, remember?" she snaps.

Her words burn, but I deserve them. I deserve her wrath. I deserve everything she wants to throw at me, because I hurt the one person who loves me more than anything in this world.

I point to the desk. She acts like she's not fazed by me, but I know deep down she still loves me. I'll stick to the plan and wait for the right moment to grovel. I need to give her some time to cool off and I don't want to stress her out any more than I already have.

"Can I sit behind the desk?" she asks.

I nod as I stand behind the executive chair and she flops down and wiggles the mouse. "What's your password?"

"It's our wedding anniversary and your first name."

She glances at me in surprise before shaking her head. Poppy finally hits Play on the video and I watch the footage of my stepmother, Katie, pushing my mother's head underwater as she struggles to fight her. I see a younger version of myself

wandering in the backyard, looking for my mother, and Tommy walks from the boathouse and tells me to go back into the house. I couldn't see Katie and my mother because they were behind the boathouse, and I ask Tommy where my mom was and he says she went to the store. Of course, the cops didn't think to ask for recordings and camera footage because it wasn't prevalent back then. So, this must have been recorded on a VCR recorder and then transferred to a drive.

It all makes sense now, why he paid Judy off to keep her mouth shut. He wasn't protecting himself; he was protecting *her*, my stepmother. I knew Tommy was having an affair and cheating on my mother before she passed away, but this confirms it.

Poppy cuts the video off, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Jasper."

She reaches for me but then quickly drops her arms, getting up from my desk chair. I hug her anyway, and she rubs my back as pure rage pools in my pupils. I want to go apeshit. I'm going to turn it in to the detectives who were working on my mother's case, but first I need to make Tommy and Katie pay, because going to jail is not enough. If I go over there and confront them, they're going to end up on stretchers, and I have so much to live for than to lose it all on that jackass.

If I would have just walked a little farther, I would have witnessed my mother's death, but being a kid, I never thought Tommy would do something so fucking vile. He and Katie are going to pay.

I stand there, holding on to Poppy for dear life, inhaling her lavender scent, taking in the essence of her.

Poppy pulls away. "What are you going to do?" she asks, grabbing her jacket.

I don't want her to go anywhere. I have missed my wife so much and I ruined it by being an idiot.

I run my fingers through my hair. "Turn it into the police."

I promised Judy I was going to keep her name out of it, and I will. I just want to bury this motherfucker and his wife. I want to see them suffer. He clearly wanted my mother's businesses and insurance money, otherwise why else did he let his now wife drown her?

“Well, I have to go.”

I nod. “How is the baby? Michael informed me you had a doctor’s appointment?”

“How di—” She shakes her head. “You’re still keeping tabs on me?”

“I want the mother of my child to be safe.”

“The same mother you don’t trust? The same mother you feel has trapped you with a baby, because it was her dream to have a child someday. And her selfish-ass husband won’t let her have said baby in peace because he’s too caught up in his own fucking head.” There is a bite in every word as she rolls her eyes. “The baby is fine, and I’m fine. I found out I’m two months pregnant.”

Shock washes over me. “T-two months pregnant?”

That can’t be possible, right? We only stopped using condoms a month ago, so it means it was around the time we first agreed to fuck each other, around the time the condom broke. She was taking her birth control, and I know because I checked for a week. Then I stopped checking.

I feel like an idiot.

So dumb.

I hurt my angel.

Fuck.

“Angel.”

“Don’t fucking Angel me. You hurt me, Jasper. You cut me deep when you thought I tried to trap you with a baby. Fuck you.” She slides her arms in the sleeves of her jacket and zips it up. I didn’t notice before but it’s one of my coats. Why is she wearing my coat? She must miss me too. “You thought I would stoop so low to have a baby and trap you without your consent. You think I’m some woman who would purposely hurt and trick you. I honestly did miss a day last month, I was stressed out and forgot to take it. I don’t care whether you believe me or not. But I’m going to be fine without you.

“You were right, I should have told you when I did, and I’m sorry, but I can’t deal with you right now.” Tears roll down her cheeks, and pain radiates in my chest because I caused them.

“I’m glad you’re going to get justice for your mother, but please don’t call me unless it’s about our child.” With that, she storms out of the room.



Chapter FORTY-SEVEN

Jasper

I've been going over and over in my mind about how I'm going to get back at Tommy and Katie. It's not enough for me to just throw them in jail. I need to ruin their lives, to make what they did to my mother haunt them for the rest of their lives, so everyone who knows about them will know what they did.

If I throw them in jail, they can make up any story and find loopholes in the case, try to paint me as the villain, or try to get the evidence destroyed.

I drive on the highway like a manic. I need to call my grandfather, to inform him of what I've just learned.

I tell Alexa to call him, and Grandfather picks up on the first ring. "What's go—"

"You were partially right. Tommy had something to do with my mother's death."

I hear a door slam in the background. "What do you mean?"

I thrust my hand in my hair as I bob and weave through the traffic. “The lady he paid off, Judy, came by my office earlier and gave me a thumb drive. It has a video of Katie drowning Mom. Tommy was there, but he allowed her to do it.”

He gasps and exhales loudly through the phone. “Dear God. I’m going to call the detective that worked on the case, and I need you to give me the thumb drive.”

“As soon as I leave his office, I’ll head over there.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“Don’t worry about it, Grandfather. I’ve got to go.”

“Jas—”

I hit the End button and pull up to the underground parking garage and park my Aston Martin before I head inside the building. I stop at the front desk and Malinda smiles at me.

“Jasper, fancy seeing you here.”

I stretch a fake smile across my face. “Do you know where my father is?”

“He’s in a meeting.”

“I’ll let myself up through the private elevator.”

Not giving her a chance to respond, I rush straight to the elevator, and instead of going to the conference room, I head toward the broadcast room. They are shooting a live news report right now, and Nick, who’s in control of the teleprompter, smiles.

“Long time no see, what brings you into this room?” Nick asks.

“I have something for you. I want to surprise my father with a gift, but I want to air it.”

I offer him the thumb drive and he sticks it into the tower of the computer. When he sees the video play, his face turns paler than a ghost.

“We can’t air this, Jasper.”

“Do it, Nick. Do it, and I’ll pay you enough money that you can retire for the rest of your life.”

“No, I won’t. I can’t. But…” He gets up from the chair. “I’m going on a coffee run. I’ll be back. Just don’t hit that button right here or it will air straight after the commercials.”

As soon as he is out of the room, I tap the red button and I type on the screen to prompt the news reporters on what to say, then I wait as anticipation crawls in my chest. I can’t keep my pulse from jumping like a thumping rabbit.

Tommy loves his image. Let’s see what happens when the world knows that the billionaire mogul and family man is a monster. I can see Netflix and Hulu doing a documentary on it.

“We would like to play a video for Tommy Barrett’s late wife, the wife he claimed to love with all his heart. The one whose death won’t go in vain,” Jackie, the reporter, reads.

The video plays on the screen and everyone is speechless as they watch. Tommy walks into the room, everyone’s eyes glued to him.

He looks at me, crinkling his nose. “What are you doing here?”

His eyes go to the screen and his face pales, his hands shake like leaves.

“Father. You’re going to have to explain to the press and the cops why you lied to the detectives about watching someone murder your wife. Have fun with repairing your image and rot in jail.”

He takes off running in the direction of the elevators, and I use that as my cue to leave after I retrieve the thumb drive. I’m so glad I can finally get the justice my mother deserves.

My phone rings when I get into the car, and I answer. “It’s all over the news, Jasper,” my grandfather says. “TMZ is playing it right now, and it’s on every channel. I called the detective, and they issued an APB on Tommy and Katie.”

“Good, now my mother can get the justice she deserves.”

“I knew he hurt my little girl.” He snuffles through the phone. “I warned her he was going to hurt her, and he did. Just not in the way I thought he would.”

I can't imagine the pain and fear that was consumed my mom while she took her last breaths. Pain throbs in my chest and I swallow around the huge-ass lump in my throat.

We're quiet for several seconds before I ask, "Did you know James is my biological father?"

He sighs. "No. She told me she was having an affair with James, but I didn't know he was your father. If it were up to me, she would have ended up being married to him, but you know that back then, among the wealthy, arranged marriages were common practice. Your grandmother thought Tommy would be a better fit for her at the time."

"Do you have any idea why James would have kept it from me?"

"I have no idea, but I'm sure he had a good reason. James was an honorable man, despite him falling in love with his brother's wife."

We're silent for several moments. "I'm going to make sure Tommy and Katie don't ever get out on parole."

"Same. I'll let you go, Jasper."

The phone goes dead, and I press the start button and the engine of my car hums to life before I strap my seat belt over my body.

I'm exhausted and need a nap, but my heart swells in my chest at the thought of my mother getting the justice she deserves.

She can finally rest. And I'm so glad my grandfather reopened the case, otherwise I wouldn't have known.

Now, the only thing I need to figure out is why James kept it a secret that he was my biological father.

I hope it was for a good reason, because I don't want to hate the one person that actually loved me as a child after I lost my mother.



Chapter FORTY-EIGHT

Jasper

The next morning, I grab my phone and tuck my wallet into my pocket. Walking past Chance, I head downstairs.

I need to breathe, and I need coffee, and I need time to think about how I'm going to proceed with my grovel plan for Poppy. Each passing day without her makes the heart in my chest bigger and bigger for her.

Once I make it to the coffee shop around the corner, I stand in line while playing on my phone.

I glance down at a girl with brown hair and doe eyes as she clings to her mother. My heart aches because she reminds me so much of Harper. The little girl waves at me and I wave back. It makes me wonder about what Poppy and my child is going to look like when they are born. I keep picturing myself taking him or her to the park, taking them to the doctors, except not as a single parent. Poppy is there. I don't want my kid to be without me, and I want the whole family life. I want to continue to be

married to Poppy and raise our kid together. I never thought I'd want this again, the family life, yet here I am longing for it.

Poppy is my world, I can't lose her.

The lady in front of me turns and smiles, and my heart nearly drops at the green irises staring back at me.

"G-Gemma," I stutter.

She does a double take as the line moves along quickly.

I haven't spoken to her since Harper passed away, which was seven years ago now. I don't know what to do or think. The last I heard, she was living in Chicago.

She's aged since I saw her last. Crow's feet line her eyes and her hair is ashy blonde and pulled up into a tight ponytail. She's put on some weight, and she looks good—healthy. Happy, even. A feeling I crave in this particular moment.

I'm not angry at her, I realize, just still hurt about what she did to me. We stare at each other for a second too long and someone clears their throat.

"Keep the line moving," the old guy behind me says.

Finally, it's my turn to be at the counter, and I pay for my coffee while Gemma stands to the side as if she's waiting for me.

There is so much I wanted to say to her over the years. So much I wanted to tell her. That I hate her. About how much she ruined my life. But I don't, because I don't feel that way anymore, because I moved on with the love of my life. I fell in love with someone else. To be honest, I don't think I ever loved Gemma. If I did, it would be like a blip in the universe, very easy to miss.

"Can we talk?" she asks, picking the little girl up and putting her on her hip. The little girl keeps waving at me.

I don't want to speak to her, but I think I need this closure from her.

I follow her to a small table that's tucked away in the corner. The little girl sits in her lap and grabs the cheese Danish and nibbles on it.

Rain pounds against the floor-to-ceiling windows as people stroll by, clutching tight to their coats and umbrellas.

There is too much tension between us. I never thought in a million years I would see Gemma again.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Her words catch me off guard.

When I don’t respond, she continues. “I’m so sorry for all the turmoil I brought into your life. I was messed up back then. The drugs and the lying and trapping you with a baby... I shouldn’t have done that. I caused so many people so much pain, which is why I moved to another state. After *her* death.”

I can see the pain in her eyes, a mother yearning for her child. I recognize the pain, the same pain I see when I look in the mirror. The hollow emptiness in my chest, the guilt that eats me up at night.

I’m not equipped to console another person, so I just nod. I don’t know if I can ever forgive her for what she did to me, and there is no doubt Harper was my daughter despite what the DNA test said. She will always have a place in my heart. If she were alive today, I would still be taking care of her as if she were my own.

“It still hurts. A little too much for me, sometimes,” I admit as I turn my attention to the little girl. “Who is this little one?”

“Grace. I’m married now.”

I glance down at her hand, and sure enough a diamond ring is on her finger.

How does she have the courage to move on? How did she just get up and pack her life away and find peace?

I glance at her face. Gemma looks radiant.

“I see you are married too. Congratulations, Jasper.”

Sorrow overshadows my face. “Yes, I’m married.”

She casts me a curious glance. “What is it?”

“How were you able to move on with your life?” I ask. “How did you get over Harper’s death?”

She shakes her head. "I'm not over it." She taps her fingers on her chin and tears gloss over her eyes. "I had to forgive myself for what I did. For abandoning her to get high." She places her hands over mine, guilt hanging between us. "I had to learn how to forgive myself." She sighs. "I learned that I deserve to be happy. It wasn't your fault. Her death wasn't our fault. She died because it was her time, and no matter how much we blame ourselves, it won't bring her back. I have to accept her death." She strokes my hand. "You have to accept her death, too, Jasper."

I twirl my wedding ring around my finger. "My wife is pregnant, and I'm scared," I finally admit. I never thought I would ever admit that to Gemma, never thought we would ever be having this conversation, but it makes sense to confide in her. It makes sense to tell her because no matter what we go through in life separately, we share the same pain of losing our child.

"What are you scared of, exactly?"

"Losing my child and failing my wife. I know now I didn't fail Harper. But I hurt my wife. I accused her of trying to trap me with a baby, but the only reason I did it is because I'm so scared of fucking up her life as well."

"Jasper, breathe. It's going to be okay. Do you want your wife back?"

I tilt my head to the side. "How did you know we broke up?"

"I'm pretty sure if you accuse a woman of trying to trap you, she's going to leave you."

"Yes, I want her back."

"Then go back to her. You need to start groveling. Let her know how you feel. Let her know what's going on in your head. I'm assuming you told her about us? Told her about Harper?"

I nod, folding my arms across my chest. "I already have a groveling plan that Atlas and I made."

"You're still friends with him?"

I nod.

"Do what you feel is best to get your wife back. I know you will be a great father to your baby. You were to Harper. You picked up the slack when I wasn't there." She places her hand on

my forearm. “Thank you, Jasper. I never thanked you. I’ll be forever grateful.”

Grace wails loudly, and we both turn to look at her. “She needs a nap.” Gemma gets up from the table and I follow suit.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it,” I exhale.

“You’re welcome. It was good to see you. I hope things go well with you and your wife. I wish you all the happiness in the world.” She picks up Grace. “Come on, Grace.”

I walk outside, buttoning my jacket against the harsh wind. Light rain hits me and I shove my hands in my pockets.

I have to make things right with my wife. It wasn’t right for me to take my pain out on her. And if I’m being honest, I don’t deserve Poppy’s love, but I’m going to spend the rest of my life making it up to her.



Chapter FORTY-NINE

Poppy

I haven't spoken to Jasper in over two weeks, and I feel bad for ignoring his calls and text messages. I informed him we only need to speak if it's pertaining to our child.

Pregnancy has been kicking my ass. One minute, I'm hungry as a hippo, and the next, I'm tired like Sleeping Beauty. Tonight is one of those nights.

Lake and Sophia wanted to have a girls' night, so we hit up a museum and went shopping, but I don't have the energy to do anything else. I still haven't unpacked anything since I moved out of Jasper's penthouse. This place is so lonely without him. I miss him terribly. I know Jasper will be a good father, that he won't abandon me, but I feel so alone in this marriage.

I know I said I want to get a divorce, but honestly, I don't know what I want to do anymore. I know things are over between us because I just can't get over the fact that he accused me of something I would never do. I thought we were making progress with our relationship, I thought he was changing, but I guess I

was wrong. I was a fool to think he would change and not be selfish, only thinking about his own feelings and needs.

I should have left him the minute I overheard him talking about leaving me the moment he got what he wanted.

That should have been the biggest red flag right there.

But I was operating on the old Poppy, giving people the benefit of the doubt.

Now, if I catch one bad vibe from any man, I'm out the door.

Not that I will date anyone else anytime soon.

There is a knock at the door, and I slowly get up and stroll to the front entrance. This place is so much better than the last apartment I had before I married Jasper. It's nice, and I don't have to worry about anyone trying to rob me. I'm grateful I can provide a good lifestyle for my kid.

The doorbell rings again and I hurry to open the door.

My mother stands in the doorway, looking concerned. We haven't spoken since we were at the spa.

I clear my throat as the cool draft from the hallway hits my skin, causing goosebumps to sprout on my arms.

"How did you find out where I live?" I ask.

"Sophia. We need to talk."

I don't open my door wide to invite her in; she doesn't deserve to be in my life right now, especially since I'm having a baby. Becoming pregnant has taught me a lot of things—that I put up with a lot of things I shouldn't have put up with. That I have no time for people's bullshit and I need to watch who I allow in my kid's life. I love my mother, I do, but I'm not going to allow her in my life if she is going to mentally abuse me.

Being too nice has never gotten me anywhere.

"Go on and talk, Mother," I tell her, folding my arms across my chest.

"You're not going to invite me in?" she asks.

I debate whether I should let her into my place, but I have nosey neighbors who live across the hallway. Ms. Pott is a sweet

old woman, and she brings me cookies all the time, but she sure asks a lot of personal questions.

I open the door wide and lead her to the living room. She glances around, noticing the gray love seat and couch, the light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and the brick walls. It looks like an industrial-style home. The look I was going for.

She sits on the couch, a sad smile spreading across her face. “So, Sophia is right, you are getting a divorce.”

I shake my head. “I haven’t decided yet. Why are you here?”

Exhaustion overtakes me and I need to get more sleep, so I sit on the couch next to my mother, resting my head on a decorative pillow.

“I’m here for you.”

Her words shock me in more ways than one.

She never wanted to be there for me unless it benefited her. It was always sink or swim with my mother.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You were right. I was jealous of you, but not in the way you think.” She runs her hand through her curls, and my eyes fixate on the movement because she hardly ever wears her hair down. “It’s not because Jasper loves you. It’s because you’re so comfortable in your own skin and I’m not. You always had this confidence about you and I didn’t. Ever since you were a child, you had this light that brightened up the room. When your father died, I couldn’t breathe anymore and you reminded me of what I had lost. You reminded me so much of him.” Tears run down her cheeks, but I don’t budge. I don’t know whether she’s telling the truth, or if this is her way of trying to get something out of me. “I didn’t like Jasper, because he loves you the way your father loved me.” She straightens her back, the pain in her face so raw. I feel bad for her. “I knew he loved you the minute he showed up on my doorstep two days before the wedding.”

I arch my eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“He came by the mansion and threatened me. He told me if I didn’t show up to the wedding then he would not help us. I wasn’t going to show up, but I was desperate for the check he wrote me, and that’s when he asked me to see pictures of your

father.” She sucks in a breath and exhales. “When I saw the pictures of you and your father painted on the projection screen on your wedding day, it tore my heart into pieces because I couldn’t be with your father anymore. I only married your stepfather for money, but the gambling addiction got worse over the years. Right before I came over here, I gave him two choices: put an end to his gambling addiction or I’d leave. He left for rehab this morning.”

Tears rush down my face. Hearing my mother speak about this causes me so much pain. I let it all out. I love my mother, and I appreciate her coming here and telling me how she feels. Confessing this to me... But I still don’t know if I can trust her.

“Jasper told me he had feelings for you. I could tell he didn’t realize how deep his love for you ran back then.”

Jasper never gave me the impression he loved me during the wedding, so I bite my bottom lip.

“It’s too late. We’re not together anymore, Mom. He did something to hurt me,” I murmur.

“You need to go to him and talk it out. The one thing I learned from your father’s death is that time is very limited on this earth. And you shouldn’t spend it being mad at each other. You need Jasper, and he needs you.”

“You’re not mad at me for leaving him?”

She shakes her head. “I have been too hard on you and putting too much pressure on you. Sophia told me she left Tate and that if I treat her the way I treated you, I would never see Bailey again. And that’s when it clicked that I can’t afford to lose two daughters and my grandkids. I want both of you in my life.” She places her hand on my belly. “Especially this little one growing inside you.” She kisses my forehead. “It’s crazy, after your father’s death I moved out here to get away from my family because they were toxic, but I became toxic too. I want to make up for it. What do you need from me? Are you hungry?”

“You’re going to cook—actually cook?”

“Yes, I cook for your stepfather every Friday.”

“I’m craving that meal you used to make for me when Daddy was alive. Cabbage and sausage.”

She nods. "I'll order the groceries. You rest. You rest, my sweet child."

I burst into tears. She hasn't called me her sweet child since before my father passed away.

Maybe I can let her in. I still don't trust her, but I'm willingly to allow her back into my life. If she's changing like she says she is, I don't want my child to miss out on knowing their only living grandparent.

I'm so glad me and my mother are on speaking terms now and I know I would be lost without her. I don't know how our relationship will be in the future, but I'm glad she's here with me and that we are willing to work on our relationship.

This is how I always envisioned our relationship would be.

I have finally got her love, the one thing I always wanted.

She's trying, and that's all that matters.

I'm willing to try as well.



Chapter FIFTY

Poppy

Today is harder than yesterday. I slept throughout my meetings and my new boss, Terry, doesn't seem to mind. Luckily, he's a nice guy. I slept through my lunch break, too.

I decided to get a part-time job, because I was so bored and lonely at my apartment. I've never been the type to be cooped up in the house all day. I like to do things. Lake refers to me as a social butterfly.

I get up from my desk and poke my head into his office. He's on the phone but as soon as he sees me, he sets the phone down. I work at a news channel, and my last name got me the job. He and Jasper run in the same circle at the American Billionaire Club. Terry is a billionaire as well, but he doesn't act like one. He's nice and caring—not an asshole.

He dusts off his Armani suit jacket. “Can I help you, Mrs. Barrett?”

“Is it okay for me to take my lunch break?”

He strokes his chin. “Just take the rest of the day off. As a matter of fact, the rest of the week off. You need the sleep.”

I cock my eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

He nods. “I was wondering about something, though. Are you and Jasper divorced? There are rumors saying you haven’t been spotted with him in a long time, and the tabloids are saying you two are divorced.”

I saw that shit on the blogs. Jasper and I haven’t confirmed anything, and he still sends me text messages throughout the day, but I don’t respond. Not yet. I need time to heal and decide what I want. I’m not mad at him, but I’m hurt, and I want to make sure I’m making the right choices in life for me and my baby. I’m a nosedive type of person and I’m trying not to make a decision without having all the facts.

“Why are you asking?”

He gets up from the chair and sits on his desk, crossing one foot over the other. “Well... I’m hoping we can grab some coffee together.”

My cheeks flame. “I’m pregnant, Terry.”

“I don’t care about you being pregnant. I just split from my girlfriend of three years and I can use the company.”

“You mean, like fucking?” I slap my palm against my forehead. “I’m sorry. That was too informal.”

He bursts out laughing. “It’s fine. If it leads to that, then yeah, but no. I want to date.”

I shake my head. “We can’t. I’m in love with Jasper, and I can’t complicate things. I’m sorry.”

He smiles sadly at me. “It’s fine.”

“We can be friends. As a matter of fact, I have a sister you can date.”

“Show me a picture of her.”

I grab my phone and click on the blue icon for Facebook. I go to her page, then I hand my phone to Terry.

“She just got out of a bad marriage, and she can use a friend or a companion.”

He looks at the picture and a smile spreads across his face. “She’s gorgeous,” he tells me. “Like you. Give her my number.”

I hold up the phone and tell him to smile as I snap a few pictures of him, then I send them to Sophia.

Sophia: He’s cute, send me his number.

I do what she says, and when I glance up, his phone rings.

“I think that might be her,” I say before I return to my office and grab my purse, strapping it across my chest.

I made sure to get a job close to my apartment so it’s within walking distance. I place my headphones over my ears and walk a block to my apartment complex, knowing Michael is following behind me. I make it to the elevator and press the button.

Once I make it to the top floor and head to my door, I see Jasper leaning against the doorframe, takeout in his hand.

My heart melts, and tears form in my eyes, because I miss him so much.

I stop in front of him and remove my pink headphones. “What are you doing here?”

My stomach growls, I swear every five minutes I’m hungry. This baby is a leech sucking up all the food, not leaving me any.

“We need to talk. Befo—”

“You can come inside,” I tell him as I type the code.

We need to speak about our plan for when this baby will arrive, and I can’t keep avoiding him.

The door beeps open and the smell of lavender hits my nostrils. My mother must have sprayed the place before she left.

She’s been staying with me, making sure I’m okay. She hasn’t mentioned anything about Jasper since I told her we’re not together, and at first it felt odd because she’s always butted her nose in my dating life. But she’s giving me the space I need right now, spending most of her days at the country club until I get off work.

My heart beats hard in my chest, I feel him walking right behind me. He sets the food on the counter, looking around at my open space apartment, then his eyes land on me.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“Tired and hungry,” I answer as I sit on the love seat and remove my shoes.

“I ran into Gemma three weeks ago.”

I instantly get mad. I don't want to fucking hear that he's been meeting up with her. He's still married to me. Why the fuck is he seeing her? I don't care if we're not together, he's still mine.

“Why are you telling me this?” I snap.

“She made me see a lot of things.”

“Oh yeah, like what?” I ask sarcastically.

“That what happened to Harper wasn't my fault. I knew you didn't trap me with a baby, but I needed an excuse, a way out, because I was afraid I was going to fail you and the baby, just as I failed Harper.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “But I now realize I need to let go of the pain and anger that have been hovering over me for years.”

I hear the honesty in his voice, and I believe he didn't mean to hurt me. He was projecting.

I get it, but I need more time to think and clear my head. I really want to know if this marriage is for me.

When we first started this relationship, it started out as a marriage of convenience. It started as a business transaction, and we didn't get to know each other. And somewhere along the way, we both fell in love. We went ass-backward with this marriage.

I never thought I would fall in love with Jasper and end up pregnant. But I need time to think about what I want. What I need for this baby. I don't want him to hurt me again, and I'm afraid.

“I already know you were projecting on me. I figured it out already. What do you want, Jasper? What are you saying?”

He steps closer and sits beside me, pulling me in his lap. I allow him to touch me, because I miss him so much. I miss the smell of him, the essence of him. He smiles, and sitting on top of him is making me super horny. I get up from his lap, in an attempt to not give in to the temptation. I read online that pregnant sex is better than regular sex and I'm tempted to try it out. I just had to marry someone who is gorgeous as fuck.

Someone who knows how to use his tongue and dick. I had to fall in love with him, too.

He gets up from the couch and strokes my cheek, and I bite my lip, allowing his touch.

“I want my family back. I want us back. And I want you back. I’ve been a foolish man, but letting you go has been my biggest regret.”

“You know, Jasper, our relationship started out as a business transaction. We were never traditional.”

“I know that. Why are you reminding me?” he says.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m saying we need to take things slow. I love you, I really do. But I want us to start dating. We skipped that phase. We went from marriage to becoming fuck buddies behind closed doors. Our marriage was fake to the world, built on lies, and I want us to start over.”

He grabs my hand and kisses it. “How do we do that, Angel?”

“Tomorrow night we can go on a date. Our first date without any strings attached. No contracts. No faking it for the world. The real us.”

He kisses me long and hard, and it catches me off guard. I miss everything about this man. His touch ignites arousal inside of me.

“Are you going to continue to live in this apartment?”

“Yes. I don’t know if I can trust you again. I gave you so much of me, and you took advantage of it. I feel as if you think you can say you’re sorry to me and it will make things better. Do you understand the extent of how you hurt me?” I let the tears fall freely from my eyes. “You accused me of being dishonest, when I really wasn’t trying to deceive you. Yes, I should have informed you that I skipped my pills once, and I’m sorry, but I honestly didn’t think it was a big deal because I only missed *one* day.”

He brings me into his arms, stroking my back as tears fall down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Angel. I didn’t realize how badly I hurt you. I’m really sorry.” He kisses my forehead. “I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

We're so quiet, I hear the door shut as my mother walks in with some groceries. She eyes us, nodding to Jasper before walking into the kitchen. She sets the food on the counter and disappears to my bedroom.

Jasper kisses my forehead again, as if he can't keep his hands off me, and I pull away.

"What else did you and Gemma talk about?"

"Are you jealous?"

I nod. "Of course. I haven't seen you in a long time, and the thought of your ex seeing you makes me mad."

"She moved on with her life, Poppy. She's married and has a child. She's happy. Seeing her happy made me happy. Despite my bad history with her, she knocked some sense into me."

"I'm glad she's happy. You need to forgive yourself, Jasper. We will work on it—together." I intertwine my fingers with his. "I may not rush for us to be back in a relationship, but I'm here for you."

"What are we doing on our date?" He kisses the side of my neck.

"Dinner, and we can come back to my place and watch TV. Something simple."

He nods and cups my cheeks. "You're glowing. I love it."

I slap him on the butt. "Go home, Jasper."

"I can't spend the night? We don't have to have sex, but I miss you at home." He kisses me on the other side of my neck. "Please," he pleads.

I want him too bad. I do, but we need to do this the right way. The correct way. I want to move back home right before the baby is born, if things go right between us, but I want him to prove to me how much he loves me. I'm not going to give in to my wants anymore.

"No. Go home, I'll make it worth your while. I promise."

He drops another kiss on my forehead. "Okay, Angel. I'll see you tomorrow."

He leaves and the door closes with a soft thud behind him.

My mother pokes her head out. She's changed from her dress earlier to a sweatshirt and pants. "Are you two getting back together?"

I shrug as I follow her to the kitchen. "I don't know."

She smiles. "You need to be with your husband, Poppy. He loves you."

I do need Jasper more than ever, but I want to make sure we do things right, and I need him to prove to me that he's worthy of my love.



Chapter FIFTY-ONE

Poppy

I'm so nervous about meeting Jasper that my foot can't stop shaking as my mother styles my hair. This is like a first real date with him, and I'm excited for it. Just us, no contracts, no expectations. Just us. Hopefully, he will get his shit together, because I love him so much and don't think I can go the rest of my life without him.

"Hold still, Poppy," my mother chastises as she curls my weave with the iron. She insisted on doing my makeup and hair for my date tonight.

She has been a lot of help since she moved in with me and I'm grateful for it. Honestly, I don't think I can do this on my own.

"What are you going to do if I move back in with Jasper?"

Honestly, I like having her around, she's been helping me out a lot around my place.

“I’ll move back home once your stepfather is out of rehab.” She steps back. “Now, go have fun on your date with your husband.”

Once I’m inside the limo, Jasper sends me a text message that he is already at the restaurant, and butterflies dance in my stomach. I just want what’s best for my child and I want our relationship to work out.

Michael comes to a complete stop, and an SUV blocks the limo, so he puts the car in reverse to back up, but another vehicle blocks him.

What the fuck? Why are we closed in? There isn’t any cops around to indicate any roadblocks.

I glance at Michael through the rearview mirror to find his eyes are laced with concern.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I don’t know, stay in the car,” he orders before stepping out of the limo.

I watch him grab his gun and point it at one of the vehicles. Two guys dressed in all black get out of the SUV and one of them aims his gun at Michael. Michael drops his weapon to the ground and one of the men punches Michael in the stomach. Michael punches both men and another one comes out of nowhere and kicks Michael in the balls, but Michael head button until another bodyguard from out of the SUV and slam the pistol into the back of his head, beating him to a pulp.

What the fuck? Am I being robbed?

Anxiety climbs through my body as my heart beats rapidly in my chest. My hands shake like leaves and I grab my phone from my purse and dial Jasper’s number. He doesn’t pick up the phone, so I call him again.

“Angel, are y—”

“Something has happened. We’re blocked off a—”

Link gets out of the SUV, and shock colors my face.

What the fuck is he doing here?

“What is it, Angel?”

“Link and his bodyguards are here. They beat Michael and now Link is heading to the car.”

“Whatever you do, lock your doors. Where are you?” Jasper says urgently.

“I have no idea. We’re, like, ten minutes away from my apartment.”

Link marches to the limo, pulling on the handle. “Open the door, Poppy.”

“Angel, listen to me. Call the cops. I’ll come and get you,” Jasper says.

“No,” I scream through the door.

“You’re coming home with me,” Link bellows, then he beckons one of his bodyguards to the car. The man punches his arm through the window and unlocks it.

Link snatches my phone from me and he tosses it to the concrete.

He grabs me by the arm, digging his nails into my skin.

I snatch my arm away. “What do you think you’re doing, Link?”

“Look. I let you get away from me, and now you’re pregnant. I let this crap go on for too long. You’re coming home. I get it, I fucked up, but this is a new low for you.”

He yanks me out of the car, and I fall to the ground, skinning my knees. “I’m not trying to make you jealous. It’s really over between us, Link.”

Meanwhile, people mind their own business and keep walking. Someone blows their horn. “Poppy, please get in the SUV, I don’t want to hurt you.”

My feet feel like cinder blocks tied to my ankles as I climb into the SUV and sit as far away from Link as much as possible.

Fear wraps around me. I can’t fight him, especially since I’m pregnant and I don’t want to endanger my child. I have my peanut to think about.

During the ride back to Link’s place, I think of ways to escape him without getting myself in harm’s way.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Home. I did what you said and I went to a therapist. They diagnosed me with a personality disorder called narcissism. Can you believe that? I’m working on my anger issues, but you played a part in this relationship, you did some fucked-up shit to me as well.” I have no idea what he’s speaking about, but I don’t comment, because I don’t want to feed into the fantasy he’s painted in his head. “I forgive you. I can raise the child as my own, but you will have to give me a child of our own, and you’re going to serve Jasper divorce papers.”

“I’m not agreeing to that.”

“You will or I’ll leak to the media about how he killed his daughter, Harper.”

My pulse accelerates. “How did you find out?”

“Your soon-to-be ex-husband isn’t the only one who has connections and money. I spotted him with his ex-girlfriend at a cafe a few weeks back and I wanted to know who the woman was.”

I don’t want to make him mad or say something that will upset him. He has a temper, and I don’t want to meet his wrath.

“He didn’t kill her, Link.”

He half shrugs. “It doesn’t matter if he did or didn’t. People care about a juicy story.”

I’m not going to respond to that because I don’t want to trigger him in any way. I don’t want to upset him and let him take it out on me, or try to force himself on me like last time. But if he tries to force himself on me again, I will go down fighting.

Once we make it to his penthouse, he grabs my arm and ushers me to the private elevators.

Every time I swallow, it feels like glass is cutting my throat, and my stomach churns with nausea.

When we walk into the penthouse, it smells like straight up ass and stale food. Stuff is everywhere, beer bottles and old plates of food, and the wooden floors are covered with clothes. This place isn’t how I remember it and I don’t miss living with him, I

don't miss the controlling and the demands he made. Jasper treats me so much better than Link ever did.

I sit on the couch, away from him, but he slides next to me. Link grabs my face and forces me to kiss him.

I want to bite him so bad, but I don't want to make the situation worse. He might put his hands on me further, and I have to prevent that as much as I can.

"I'm married to someone and am having their child. How is that going to look to the public eye?"

He shrugs. "I might be a millionaire, but I don't care about my reputation. I care about having my girl back. My life hasn't been the same since you broke up with me. I can't sleep, nor can I think straight, and the thought of you belonging to someone else boils my blood. It makes me mad. The thought of you carrying his child... He gave you something I tried to give you, but you didn't want it."

"You were cheating on me. Why would I want to raise my child in an environment where I'm not happy? Please just let me go, Link."

"No, he can't have you, Poppy. I mean it."

He gets up from the couch and goes to the back before returning with a bunch of red roses and a big teddy bear. This is what he always used to buy me when he fucked up in our relationship. But he should know me well enough by now that this stuff doesn't mean anything to me.

"This is for you." He swipes a strand of my hair behind my ear. "It's okay, it's fine. You will eventually get over your crush. You're going to eventually get over him. You still love me; I know you do. You just have to see we're meant to be together. And you're never going to leave this penthouse until you realize it."



Chapter FIFTY-TWO

Jasper

I stare down at the diamond I picked out for Poppy to replace her current ring. The old ring symbolizes our old life, the one where we were business partners and our marriage was one of convenience. This ring symbolizes our real love, and I'm going to tell her that her new ring will be ready for her when she's ready to be with me again. I have another present for her, but that's going to have to wait until after tonight, when we go back to her place.

The waitress pours a glass of bourbon for me and asks me if I'm ready to order, and I tell her no. I'm too anxious to eat right now. I glance at the time on my phone, she's supposed to be here any minute now. My phone buzzes and her name pops up on the screen. I answer on the third ring.

“Angel, are y—”

“Something has happened. We're blocked off a—” Panic fills her tone.

I get up from the chair and slap a crisp hundred on the table as I walk toward the front entrance of the restaurant.

“What is it, Angel?”

“Link and his bodyguards are here. They beat Michael and now Link is heading to the car.”

Rage fills my lungs, if he puts his filthy hands on my wife, he’s going to wish he wasn’t born. I ball up my fists as I rush outside and get into my car.

“Whatever you do, lock your doors. Where are you?”

“I have no idea. We’re, like, ten minutes away from my apartment.”

“Open the door, Poppy.” I hear Link’s voice.

“Angel, listen to me. Call the cops. I’ll come and get you.”

“No,” she screams.

“You’re coming home with me,” Link yells.

The phone line goes dead and my heart jumps in my chest. I feel as if I’m having a heart attack.

I call the police and tell them everything. I give them my name and they issue an APB on Link.

A notification pops up on my phone. I keep my hand on the wheel while using my other hand to click on the envelope icon.

It’s a message from Michael.

Michael: I managed to put a tracking device on the vehicle Poppy’s in.

An attachment pops up on the screen, and it’s a map.

Link’s penthouse.

Michael: I already called the cops.

It takes me thirty minutes to get there, and I’m so worried about her. What is he doing to her? What if he tries to force himself on her again? What if he beats her? I should have ridden with her to the restaurant. I should have picked her up. All sorts of crazy thoughts run through my head. The thought of him harming her and my baby makes me want to vomit.

Once I get to the front of the building, I slam on the brakes and throw my car in park before heading to the front desk of Link's building.

I head straight toward the elevator to get to the top floor. I know what floor they used to live on from the background check I did on him after he tried to sexually assault Poppy.

With anxiety clawing its way into my chest, my heart pounds as I beat on the door.

Several moments later, I hear movement. Then, finally, Poppy answers the door.

Her eyes widen, and tears wet her lashes as she bites on her bottom lip. I examine her from head to toe to see if she's been hurt.

"I don't want to be with you, leave me alone. I'm in love with Link. He's the only one for me," Poppy says.

"Why will you leave me? What did I do?" I play along, tilting my head to the right, silently asking her if he's right behind her. She nods.

"Okay, I see you don't love me anymore."

I hold my hand up and count down from three, then I barge in, pushing Poppy out of the way. Michael grabs her and ushers her out of the apartment.

He came just in time.

Link opens the door wide, reaching for Poppy's arm, but I grab him by the collar, connection my fist with his jaw. He staggers back, holding his mouth. I slam the door behind me, locking it. I've been waiting for this moment forever.

He throws a punch and it lands on my chest, causing me to stagger back. I ball up his shirt and headbutt him. We both fall back. My head hurts and I feel dizzy. I get up and stomp on his stomach.

"You touched what's mine, you hurt my wife, and now I'm going to beat you until you're black and blue."

My fist connects with both of his eye sockets. "This is for treating her like shit and abusing her."

I punch him in the nose. “This is for stealing her money.”

He tries to wiggle away from me, but I punch him in the balls. Link falls to the floor, clutching himself, wailing in pain as tears run down his eyes. “This is for taking advantage of her kind heart.”

He rolls over onto his side, and I kick him in the back, letting my rage get the best of me. I kick him and kick him until I’m out of breath.

Someone grabs me by the shoulders. “Mr. Barrett. That’s enough, we’ve got it from here.” It’s a policeman.

I breathe in deeply, exhale loudly, and my head pounds. I feel as if I have been hit by a bus. “Where is my wife?”

“She’s safe. The EMT is checking her out, and we need for her and you to give us a st—”

I rush downstairs, almost stumbling to get to her. The minute I spot her sitting in back of the ambulance, I rush toward her and I kiss her deeply. I kiss her as if it’s the last time I will see her. I kiss her with so much passion and love. She wraps her arms around me, allowing me to hold her, and I sit next to her before yanking her into my lap.

“I’m so sorry.” I kiss all over her face.

She pulls away, tears streaming down her cheeks. She looks at me and then my knuckles. “You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine, Angel. Are you okay?”

She nods, and I kiss her gently on the forehead. “Thank you for coming to get me.”

“Is the baby okay?”

She nods. “He didn’t hurt me at all. I told him if he ever touched me again, then I will never love him again.”

We watch as Link walks out, handcuffed. Poppy glares at him and removes the blanket, heading straight for him.

She slaps him across the face. “I hate you.”

His eyes are swelling, his face is bright red, and blood drips down his temple. I did a number on him, and I will see to it that he rots in jail for touching my wife.

After the cops shoo us away, I get into my car and Poppy climbs into the passenger seat, strapping the seat belt across her body. She bursts into tears and cries hysterically, and I stroke the back of her neck.

“I was afraid for me and my child.”

“It’s okay, Angel. You’re safe. I will always be there to protect you.”

“Can we go back to your place? I don’t want to be at my place alone.”

“You mean you want to come home?” I correct her.

She nods.

“Okay, Angel.”

We ride in silence until I say, “I was so worried about you and the baby. I thought we were going to lose them. I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you or Jayden.”

She tilts her head to the side and crinkles her cute button nose. “Who is Jayden?”

“Our kid’s name. I was thinking about baby names.”

“You want to give our child’s name your middle name?”

I stroke the back of my neck. “Will it be a problem?”

“No, but what if it’s a girl?”

“Her name will be Jayden.”

The hugest grin spreads across her face and she kisses my cheek. “Okay, you can pick the first name but I get to choose the second name.”

“If it’s a girl, what do you want her middle name to be?” I ask as I tap my fingers onto the steering wheel.

She swallows and sinks deeper into the leather seat. “Harper. Her middle name is Harper.”

It’s my turn to return the smile, and I grab her hand, bringing it to my mouth. “I would like that.”

She strokes my back and shakes her head. “I did everything in my power to protect her or him, Jasper. I love our little peanut.”

“Me too.” I place my hand on her belly. “I love you and our baby.”

There isn't anything more I want in this world than my little family, and I will prove to Poppy every day if I have to.



Chapter FIFTY-THREE

Poppy

When I wake up, I'm in the bedroom I shared with Jasper before I moved out. I look to my right but he's not in bed. I roll over onto my side, clutch the pillow as tight as I can, and exhale.

I feel safe and secure, protected. Thanks to Jasper.

Memories of yesterday come crashing at once. Link kidnapping me and trying to force me to be with him; Jasper coming to rescue me, and how he was worried about me and our child. How he loves me and our child. I believe him, I really do. Any doubt of him not wanting his family has gone out the window, but I'm not ready to jump into his arms just yet. I still want time to think about our relationship.

I look down at the oversized t-shirt I'm wearing. Jasper must have removed my clothes and put me in his shirt.

I toss the blanket off me. I need to speak to Jasper about our relationship.

Once I make it to the living room, I smell fresh paint and it makes me want to vomit. I used to love the smell of paint, but my body has changed a lot since I've been pregnant. The smell of eggs makes me want to vomit, but I crave dry ice and jalapenos on a Whopper from Burger King.

Jasper comes into the living room, light green paint on his clothes. "Why are you painting? It stinks."

He chuckles. "I've been painting two rooms."

We need to talk about our relationship and if we're going to make it work. I'm scared he's going to shut me out like he always does or get scared and leave me high and dry.

We reach a room, and I glance around, tears gathering as I take in the beige crib, matching dresser set, and bags of baby clothes.

"You went all out."

He nods and goes to a box that says 'Harper's stuff' and he opens it, pulling out a pink blanket. "This used to be hers, and she would carry it everywhere. She would want her younger sibling to have it. I've been holding on to this guilt of what happened to her, taking it out on the people I love most. I have been unkind to you, but I know I deserve you, Poppy. I deserve a happy life with love in it. I've realized..." He exhales. "You are the light in the darkness, which explains why I was drawn to you in the very beginning when I first met you over a year ago in the restaurant."

Tears pour down my cheeks, and I stand on my tippy-toes and kiss him.

"I promise to protect you and our baby, always." He pulls out a small box and opens it. A wedding band that has diamonds wrapped around it. I smile from ear to ear. "I was going to give you this at the restaurant before Link took you away. This ring represents a new life, our love. You can wear it when you're ready. I'm ready to prove to you for the rest of my life that I love you and I will never take you for granted again."

"I'm sorry too, for not telling you I didn't take my pills. I should have told you, but I wasn't trying to trap you, I swear."

"I know, Angel. I know. You spent most of your time putting your needs on the back burner for mine, and I was the selfish

bastard who kept taking from you. I'm sorry. You deserve to be happy. I want to make your dreams come true. I shouldn't have asked you to put your dreams on hold for me."

I notice a speck of paint on his cheek. "Why are you painting?"

He grabs my hand and pulls me into the next room. "Our kid's playroom, and one day, it will be our second child's bedroom."

I smile through my tears. "Slow down, this will be my first child, and I'm not sure if I want another one."

He brings me into his arms, and I rest my head on his hard chest, inhaling his woody scent. I missed him.

Jasper will always be my home.

"I want to take things slow, and I want to do things the right way, like we should have done from the start," I tell him.

He leans in and kisses me on the lips. "I'll be right here waiting whenever you are ready."



Chapter FIFTY-FOUR

Jasper

Today, I'm visiting Tommy in jail, and this will be the last time I'll ever see him again.

I have so much pent-up anger toward him but I am hoping I won't lash out at him.

I watch him sit in the chair across the glass window, and I stare at him as he picks up the phone. Slowly, I pick up my own, his breathing loud and getting on my last nerve. He has been charged with tampering with evidence and being an accessory to murder, while Katie has been charged with first-degree murder. I hope they both rot in jail.

"You're the last person I thought would come to see me."

Jace took over Tommy's media business, and the board members had quit. Tommy lost everything. Lacey FaceTimed me earlier today, crying while telling me how she was sorry for what her parents did to my mother, that she's planning on disowning both of her parents. For the first time in my life, my last name feels tainted and I wish I didn't have it.

“Why did you never tell me who my real father was?”

He looks at me in shock, as if he didn't expect me to figure it out. “Your mother loved him, and I couldn't allow her to be with him. James and I have always been in competition since we were kids, and... I couldn't let him win. Not this time. I loved your mother dearly and he took her from me,” Tommy admits.

He truly is a sick man; he allowed his hatred for James to run deep within him. I wish I could say I pity him, but I don't. Some people don't deserve grace.

“Is that why you had Katie drown my mother?”

“We had a deal. For your mother to never contact James again, but she did. The only reason I married Katie was because we had a deal. She gets rid of your mother and I marry her.”

Rage courses through my veins. I don't know what to think. Everything makes sense now. The person who suffered the most was my mother, but she didn't deserve any of this.

“Go to hell,” I say through gritted teeth.

“James left you a letter in a shoebox in my walk-in closet. It's on the top shelf. He wanted to give it to you before he passed away.”

I hang up the phone and head straight to his place. Once I find the letter, I make my way home and pace the floor with the letter grasped in my hand. I haven't read it yet. I'm too nervous to see what's in it.

I call Poppy and ask her to meet me at our home and thirty minutes later, Poppy walks in with a bunch of shopping bags in hand. She sets them down before eyeing me curiously. “What's going on?”

“It's a letter from James, he wrote it to me a week before he passed away.”

She perches on the edge of the couch. “Did you read it?”

I shake my head. “I was waiting for you to get here.”

“Okay.” She rubs my back. “Open it, Jasper.”

I nod and open the envelope before unfolding the paper inside.

Dear Jasper,

As you may know, you are my biological son.

You might not know, but I was in love with your mother and still am to this day.

I assume I have passed away from my illness, but I wanted to tell you, you were my child. Tommy threatened to pin your mother's death on me, and I would go to jail for something I didn't do. I'm so sorry for all the pain he has caused, I'm sorry I couldn't protect you in the way I wanted to. I'm sorry I couldn't be a father to you like I wanted to.

I did the best I could. I was so grateful when Tommy would let me have you during the summertime. I made sure your college fees were paid for, I made sure your car was paid for. He tried to blackmail me into giving him my banking company but I couldn't do that. You are my only heir, and you deserve it. The reason why I wanted you to get married is to not only have the company, but I also wanted you to experience the love I had for your mother.

You were so broken up about life and I felt like you needed someone to love you unconditionally. It's unfortunate my love story with your mother had a tragic ending. I hope you have found someone who makes you laugh like your mother made me laugh. I hope you find someone who understands you in ways that others can't, and I hope the lucky girl is kind and sweet and teaches you about love and life. To help you with your broken heart.

It's unfortunate I couldn't meet my daughter-in-law. I hope you live a life of prosperity with your wife. And don't make the same mistakes I did. Love your wife, and don't miss out on love. Life is not always filled with heartache.

One day we will see each other again in the afterlife.

I love you, son.

Love,

Your father, James Jayden Barrett

“You dropped something,” Poppy says, bending down to pick it up.

It’s a picture of my mother holding me in her arms, and she’s smiling at the camera, but James’s eyes are glued to her, grinning from ear to ear.

I flip it over and the note reads: *Jasper Barrett’s parents.*

“You need to hang it up.” She removes a picture of her parents from the frame and slides the photo in before placing it on the entertainment unit. “Now you have a picture of you and your family. It’s perfect.”

“Just like you,” I say, then I yank her into my arms and kiss her long and hard.

She pulls away. “I now understand why you never wanted a picture of your family hanging up.”

I’m so glad my uncle encouraged me to get married, because now I get to experience love the way I need to. Unconditional love. He lost out on love in his lifetime, but I won’t.

I’m happy to be here with the woman of my dreams.



Chapter FIFTY-FIVE

Poppy

Jasper has been good to me for the past three months since we've been dating and taking things slow. Every morning he makes me breakfast, he comes to every ultrasound and doctor's appointment, and every night we have dinner together, and then he sleeps on the couch. It's like he lives here with me, although we're not sharing a bed. He also bought us Range Rovers to ensure our cars are family-friendly.

This morning, his publicist informed the public that I am carrying his child, but the gossip about his family hasn't died down. Paparazzi have been the worst. They follow us everywhere, to the point where I have to stay inside and not go anywhere. I guess that's the price we had to pay for Jasper leaking what Tommy and his wife did to him and his mother.

The trial was over quickly, and Katie and Tommy are both going to rot in jail, thanks to Tate. He's working hard, trying to win my sister back, so he spoke to his uncle who is the DA.

Jasper and I found out we're having a girl. Yes, a baby girl, and I'm super excited for her arrival. Jayden Harper Barrett will make her debut in three months.

We sit in my living room as we watch a horror show, and Jasper places his hands on my belly, rubbing it, then he kisses it. It's time for me to go into the bedroom for the night, and I'm exhausted. I had a long day, organizing the guest list and picking out food for the baby shower we're having next month.

Jasper sits up and stretches his arms and legs. "What are we going to do about our living situation when Jayden is born?"

"What do you mean?" I pick up his cooked sushi and place it in my mouth. I've been hungrier than usual lately.

"I think it will be best if you moved back home."

"Jasper..."

"I know you're not ready to move in with me."

I already know I want to move back home with him, but I'm scared that he might treat me like Gemma, but before I can respond, he says, "I want our kid to grow up in a healthy environment, and I want us all to live together."

"Jasp—"

"Let me finish. The thought of you and my daughter not being there with me scares me. I promise I'll do right by you, and I promise to make it up to you for the rest of our lives."

"What if we do—"

"We're not speaking about what-ifs, Poppy. I want my wife and daughter home." He gets up from the couch and holds out his hand.

"There is something I want to show you."

We make it to the entrance and Jasper slides my coat over my shoulders before putting on his own while I grab my purse, and before I know it we're inside his Range Rover. I glance at the back seat to find he already has a pink car seat installed, and my heart melts. He drives us to Manhattan, up to a big building. Jasper gets out of the car before opening my door, and I step out, the cold air hitting my face.

“Why are we here?”

He grins from ear to ear. “You will see.”

The lit building shines against the dark sky. We make it inside and stand in the foyer. It’s a town house, I realize, and my mouth hangs open at the open space and how spacious it is. It’s empty.

“This is what I’ve been doing when I’m at work, looking for the perfect place for our new family. I bought this for me and you. It has six bedrooms, enough to fit two families.”

“What about your penthouse?”

He shakes his head and brings me into his arms. “We need a new start, Poppy. A fresh start. Our relationship wasn’t traditional at the beginning, and I want to make your dreams come true as much as I possibly can. I want our own family, and most of all, I want you to be happy. I’m done being selfish. Like I said, I want my family back and I mean every word. You mean more to me than anything on this planet. I’ll burn the world down just to keep you happy. I love you, Poppy.”

I smile, pulling out a piece of paper and a box with his new wedding band, as well as the one he bought me to replace my original ring, but I hand the paper to him first.

“What is this?”

“My lease. I got it terminated. I already decided to be with you.” I open the box. A single diamond is embedded in his wedding band, and I hand it to him. “I picked this up two days ago. I got a new ring made for you as well.” I slide my new wedding band on my ring finger while he puts his on. “I like this ring far better than the last one.”

He presses his mouth against mine, sliding his fingers to my coat buttons and undoing each one. We haven’t had sex in so long, and I need him the way I need the air in my lungs.

This amazing man is all mine forever, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

Jasper wiggles my coat off and it falls to the marble floor, and before I know it, he has me against the wall, his dick inside me, pounding me, making love to me. He tells me how much he loves me, how beautiful I am. Tears of joy wet my eyes and trickle down my face.

I couldn't have asked for a better husband.

And he makes love to me until we're both out of breath.



EPILOGUE

Four years later...

Poppy

“Don’t play with that,” I say to Jayden.

“But, Mommy, Daddy said I can have it,” she whines in her sweet voice.

I don’t know why Jasper allowed her to bring home that shit, it gets everywhere. I swear, he spoils her to no end, buying her expensive toys, tablets, and now she has a working cell phone.

She’s the spitting image of her father, but she has my dark curly hair and hazel eyes, and her complexion is a shade lighter than mine. She has Jasper’s drive and personality, always such a busybody for a four-year-old. And I love everything about Jayden. She’s sweet and kind and rambunctious.

She rubs the green slime on her pink dress, and that’s going to be difficult to clean. I roll my eyes. “Just don’t get it on the carpet, sweetheart.”

She perches on the chair that is tucked in the corner of my office as I fill out paperwork. Being a parent is exhausting. Every now and then, I find myself asking my mother for help, because it really takes a village to help raise a child. In the last four years, I was able to get my daycare up and running, finally helping special needs kids. It can take a lot of energy out of me, but I love the reward. I love to see the smile on kids' parents' faces as they thank me for helping their children.

Jasper insists that I be a stay-at-home wife and mom—I know he's looking out for my well-being, but I have never been the type to sit at home all day. I finally found what I want to do and I'm holding on to it for dear life. We have a maid, a chef, and my mother babysits Jayden whenever I need her. I love being a wife and mother, but I don't want to lose my identity. I love my new life that I built with Jasper, and speaking of the devil...

He waltzes into the room, and Jayden hops out of her seat and rushes up to him, hugging his leg. His chocolate hair shines in the fluorescent light, and the suit he wears hugs his large frame, his woodsy cologne wafting through the air. To this day, he still dominates the attention of everyone. I love everything about this man, and I can't get enough of him.

“Daddy, I missed you.”

He scoops Jayden up in his arms and drops a kiss on her forehead. “I missed you, too. How was school?”

“It was fun. I made a new friend named Benny, and I learned how to count in German.”

She goes to the best private school money can buy, and she loves it. Jayden brings so much joy to our lives; my life wouldn't be complete without her. The light in her eyes and her bubbly personality make the stress of my day melt away. I never thought I would love being a parent so much. It's stressful at times and I don't know what I'm doing most days, but seeing her smile makes it all worth it.

He lets Jayden down and kisses her on the cheek, then she runs out of the room to play with Lake's son, Asher.

I have something I want to discuss with Jasper, but the words die the minute he comes up to me and kisses me, sliding his hands into my kinky curls. I started embracing my natural curls

instead of relaxing my hair. He loves that better than my straight hair. Jasper pulls back and sits in my chair before yanking me into his lap.

“How was work?” I ask.

“It was good. I missed you at lunch, and I was really hoping for a quickie.”

Sometimes we don't have as much sex as we want because of the demands of our jobs and being a parent, but the love we share never goes away. He still reminds me every day how much he loves me. Every Friday night he schedules our date nights, and he kept to his word and spent the last four years making up for how he treated me at the start of our marriage. Just last week, he updated my Ranger Rover, and he keeps dropping hints about wanting another child. I never knew how much he enjoyed fatherhood until I saw how he was the day Jayden was born. He took over the night shifts when she was a baby and he taught her how to walk. He takes her to her piano lessons, does teatime with her, and he looks adorable wearing a tutu for her when they play together.

My cold-hearted husband has softened up a lot over the last few years and I love him for it. He's been happier than I have ever seen him. He's a wonderful man, and I'm glad he chose me as his wife.

“I have some exciting news to deliver,” he starts. “Lacey is flying back home with Blue, so you need to invite Terry and Sophia and your mother over.”

Terry and Sophia are now engaged; he proposed to her last year, and I have never seen my sister so happy. Sophia finally got her happy ending, and now she walks around with a light in her eyes she never had with Tate. Unfortunately, my mother's marriage to my stepfather is over and she divorced him a year after he left rehab. Even though he went to rehab, he couldn't shake his addiction, and last year he passed away from a heart attack. My mother cried bucket loads of tears. I know deep down she loved him. Sometimes, she stares off into space and doesn't interact with people much. She tells me all the time that me, my siblings, and her grandkids keep her going and that without us, she would be lost. We have grown closer over the years and she has been a good mother since we made up. I hope she doesn't let

her choices define her, because we have all fallen short at some point in our lives and we all need a little grace.

“Oh yeah?” I wrap my arms around his shoulders. “Why are we having a get-together?”

I’m not in the mood to have company over, feeling too exhausted with it being the end of the day.

“Because Lacey is still dealing with Tommy’s death. It hit her hard. She called me in the middle of the day in tears.”

Tommy hung himself in his cell with a sheet wrapped around his neck. We suspect he couldn’t handle his image being tainted, going from the golden family man to the world’s most hated man. Netflix and Hulu even did a documentary on it. As for Katie’s punishment, she will continue to rot in jail. She tried to get parole, but Jasper’s legal team has been relentless with her lawyers, preventing her from getting it.

“You are a wonderful man, and I love you for it.”

“I wouldn’t be wonderful without you. I never did thank you for thawing my cold heart and showing me what love is. I’d never have been the man I am if it weren’t for you and our kids.”

“Our kids? You mean kid? We only have one, Jasper.”

He drops a kiss on my forehead. “I meant two. We’re having a baby soon.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dr. Luke called me about your annual blood work. He told me you were pregnant.”

My heart freezes in my chest and pure joy rushes through my veins, tears instantly leaking down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry?” Jasper says, frowning.

“Shut up, you fool. I’m crying because I’m happy. You’ve given me everything I want and I can’t be happier. You made me face what was going on with me. I love you so much, Jasper.”

“I love you too and you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. I couldn’t have picked a better wife.”

I nod. Jasper tells me to stand up and once I do, he turns me around, kissing the side of the neck. Before I know it, he’s sliding

inside me, fucking me hard against the desk until I orgasm, coming inside me soon after.

I couldn't be happier than I already am, living the life I dreamed of, waking up to this wonderful man every day.

About the **AUTHOR**

J.M. writes dark new adult and contemporary romance. When she is not reading and writing about hot guys, she is spending time with her boys and husband. Travel, food, video games, and anime are her hobbies.

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