



Until **HANNA**

UNTIL HER BOOK THIRTEEN

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AURORA ROSE
REYNOLDS

until hanna

UNTIL HIM/ UNTIL HER

AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

copyright

Until Hanna - Until Him/ Until Her series

By Aurora Rose Reynolds

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Published by Aurora Rose Reynolds

Cover design by RBA Designs

Cover photography by Wander Aguiar

Formatted by CP Smith

*To the people in my life who bring me joy, peace, and
happiness.*

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CHAPTER 1

hanna

“London Air would like to give you a warm welcome to Paris, where the local time is 2:00 p.m. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us today,” I say over the intercom as soon as the plane touches down. “Please stay seated while we are taxiing, and make sure to keep your seatbelts fastened until the signs are switched off. We will be arriving at Terminal Two, and for any customers with checked luggage, you can pick it up at Carousel Five. If you’re continuing on to Ibiza with us, please stay in your seat. As always, thank you for flying with London Airlines, especially our deluxe cardholders. Your loyalty is hugely appreciated.” I hang up the mic while people talking on their phones and the sound of more than a few seatbelts unclicking fills the cabin as we slowly taxi toward the gate.

When the plane comes to a stop, I get up and tuck my seat away, then walk to the small kitchen to put my Kindle in my purse. I take my position, waiting with a smile on my face as everyone gets up and begin to gather their things. No matter how big the plane is or how many passengers there are, it’s always the same — a mad dash to see who can get ready first. Something I will forever find comical, because everyone will have to wait until the people in the rows in front of them exit.

“All set?” Douglas asks, stepping out of the cockpit.

“All set.” I smile up at him. I love Douglas, and not just because he sounds and looks like he could be part of the cast of one of my favorite shows, *Game of Thrones*, with his Scottish brogue, bulky frame, striking red hair, and fair, freckled complexion. But because he and his wife and kids have become like family to me.

I turn my attention to the door when I hear the latch click open and smile at Matty, one of the ground agents, when he opens and shoves it aside.

“Hi, Matty.”

“Uh... hey, Hanna.” He looks like he’s going to say something more, but he glances over at Douglas and snaps his mouth shut.

“Are things ready for me to start letting people off?”

“Yes.” He clears his throat. “Ready when you are.”

“Awesome.” I give him a reassuring smile, because he looks a little nervous. Then again, if you don’t know Douglas like I do, he can seem intimidating.

“Yeah, awesome,” he agrees before turning around and walking off.

“When that lad finally works up the courage to ask you out one day, I’m going to buy him a pint.”

“He doesn’t want to ask me out. You just scare the bejesus out of him.”

“Whatever you say, lass,” Douglas mutters, and I roll my eyes at him, then turn my attention to the passengers waiting anxiously to my left.

“Have a great day, guys.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, the people closest to me begin to hurry off the aircraft,

while Douglas — unlike some pilots I work with — stands tucked into the doorway of the cockpit so he can say goodbye to everyone as they deplane.

As the final passengers getting off are coming up the aisle, Joslyn — who is working with me today — follows them up to the front, looking exhausted.

“Are you all right?” I ask her after the last person exits through the door.

“I’m going to hop off and get a coffee. I stayed up last night studying, and I didn’t realize how tired I was until we landed. Do either of you want something?” She looks between Douglas and me.

“Give me a second, and I’ll go with you,” Douglas says before turning back to the cockpit, where I’m sure he’s asking his copilot, George, if he wants anything.

“How much longer until you get your pilot’s license?” I glance over at her as I reach for my purse to get her some money.

“About five months.” She runs her fingers through her long, dark hair.

“That’s exciting.”

“It’s terrifying.” She gives me a tired smile. “Friday will be my last shift working with you.”

“No!” I pout. “I can’t believe you’re leaving me already.”

“I know, but I need to get in as much flight time as I can, and I just can’t physically do both jobs anymore.”

“That’s understandable,” I say as Douglas comes out of the cockpit.

“Ready?” he asks her.

“Yeah.” She takes the money I pass her, and I don’t even bother telling her what I want, because she already knows. I always order the same thing—a large coffee with oat milk and vanilla syrup.

When they leave, I pop my head into the cockpit to check on George, then I do a walkthrough to pick up any garbage that was left behind, stopping to chat with the few passengers left in their seats.

Once I’m done, I check with the baggage guys to see if there’s anything I need to sign off on, because on occasion we have shipments stowed under the plane that require a signature, and then I wait for our next group of passengers to start boarding. With London Air, I do a lot of short runs all over Europe, with a few global flights thrown in from time to time. I love it, and I love it even more because I get to travel to some of the most beautiful places in the world and it doesn’t cost me a dime.

A few minutes after Douglas and Joslyn get back on the plane, Matty steps on to let me know how many people are on the flight. Like when we landed, I stand back and greet everyone as they begin to board. But unlike when we landed, people take their time stowing their bags and finding their seats—much to the annoyance of the people behind them in line.

As I’m assisting an elderly gentleman stow his oversized carry-on in the bin above his head, the light from the door goes dark, the interior of the front cabin dimming significantly. I turn to see what’s going on and watch a man duck his head to step through the doorway, with two more men behind him that are just as tall and wide as he is. When the man in front lifts

his head of dark-blond hair and his blue eyes collide with mine, my heart does an odd little jump inside my chest, causing me to fumble with the bag over my head. I spin quickly so I don't drop it on the poor guy I'm assisting, but the weight is suddenly taken out of my hands as the scent of sun, mint, and musk wraps around me.

"Sorry," I whisper, looking down at the elderly man who's now taken his seat.

"It's all right, lass." He smiles.

Rubbing my suddenly sweaty palms down the front of my tight black skirt, I will myself to turn around and face the man I know is standing right behind me. And I know he's still behind me, because the warmth from his large body is like standing in front of a radiator.

Swallowing, I turn and look up... and up... and.... "Oh goodness."

"I think you mean 'thank you,'" he says in an American accent while he grins, accentuating the scar slicing across his full upper lip and showing off a set of straight teeth that look bright white with his sun-kissed complexion and the thick layer of scruff covering his square jaw.

"Umm," I breathe, and his grin widens.

"Hanna, are you okay?" Joslyn asks, snapping me out of my daze, and I blink up at the guy towering over me and shake my head.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"All good." I glance back, shooting her a reassuring smile, then turn to look up at the stranger and clear my throat. "Um, thanks for the help."

“Any time,” he says, and I swear it sounds like he’s laughing, but I’ve tugged my eyes off his and don’t look up to confirm.

“I’ll just...” I start to step around him but stop.

We’re standing in the aisle, and there’s not a lot of room—at least not with him in the aisle with me. And I can’t ask him to move, since there is a long line of people now gathered behind him. My cheeks get hot just thinking about how I’m going to either have my ass pressed into his front or my tits pressed into his chest.

“Sorry,” I whisper, squeezing my eyes closed as I move in front of him with my back to his front. My skin burns where his large hand wraps around my hip to assist, then I maneuver past the two men behind him that take up just as much room, mumbling apologies as I go. When I return to the front of the plane, my face feels like it’s on fire and I’m sure it’s as red as a tomato.

“Do not say a word,” I hiss at Douglas, who looks like he’s trying hard not to laugh.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” A chuckle slips past his lips that he covers with a fake cough. “I’m going to go fly the plane.”

“That would be good.” I let out a breath and watch him disappear into the cockpit, wishing I could go with him. Unfortunately, that is not an option for me. I have a job to do.

When the last passenger is seated, Joslyn checks to make sure the door is secure, and I step into the safety of the small kitchen, where passengers are blocked from view, and I grab my bottle of water. I down it like it’s tequila, but since it’s not, it does nothing to help my rattled nerves.

I've never had that kind of reaction to a man before. I mean, sure, I've had a couple of guys cause my pulse to race, but I've never felt like this.

"Have you seen that guy before?" Joslyn asks quietly in her British accent as the plane backs out, and I shake my head. "He's fit." She peeks around the wall of the kitchen to look down the aisle, and I bite my bottom lip. "His friends are fit too." She looks back at me. "Too bad I don't have time for a man." She sighs, then asks, "Are you ready?"

"Yep," I lie as we start to taxi toward the runway, and she gives me a reassuring smile before heading to the middle of the plane.

I take a deep breath, then grab the mic from its place on the wall and press the button on the side as I exit my hiding spot, avoiding the man I swear I can feel watching me.

After I go through the entire spiel I have memorized about safety and seatbelts, I return the mic and start down the aisle to check that everyone has their seatbelt on and that no one is on their phone. Stopping at a young mom with her infant son on her lap, I smile and remind her that in case of an emergency to put on her own mask before she puts on his, and she nods.

My pulse begins to flutter as I feel the man behind her watching me.

Absolutely ridiculous.

I'm a professional. I will not let my strange reaction to a man distract me from doing my job.

When I reach his seat, I don't look him in the eye, even though I can feel his gaze hot on my face. I check his lap to confirm his seatbelt is locked, then check his friends, who are all seated in the aisle seats around him and move on.

I feel triumphant when I turn to walk back to the front of the plane. But that emotion only last about two-point-five seconds, because my heel gets snagged on something, and I stumble forward. I try to make purchase with my hands on the top of the seats on either side while avoiding knocking anyone out, but before I can, a bulky arm shoots out and catches me around the waist.

“Easy,” he says, and after righting myself, I swing my head to the left, and piercing blue eyes lock on mine. “You okay?”

No. Obviously, I need my head examined. “Yes.”

“I’m so sorry.” I turn and see a young girl grab her bag, the handle of which had been in the aisle and caused me to trip.

“It’s okay,” I assure her quickly, then look around at everyone staring at me. My cheeks heat in response to the attention. “Hopefully, this will be the most exciting part of our flight today.”

Everyone laughs, and with a deep breath, I walk to the front of the cabin to let Douglas know the plane is secure. Taking a seat in my jump chair I breathe a sigh of relief that I’m able to hide and pull myself together for at least a few minutes while we take off.

When we reach cruising altitude, I set my Kindle aside and unhook myself from my seat as Douglas comes over the intercom, letting everyone know the flight time and that we might have some turbulence, so they should stay seated with their seatbelts buckled.

With this flight lasting less than two hours, we only offer a drink service, so Joslyn and I begin to get the drink cart in order. As we’re loading up, I hear the heartbreaking sound of the baby starting to cry and look down the aisle at the mom I

spoke to earlier. I can tell she's stressed just from looking at her, and I know that stress has less to do with the fact that her boy is crying and more so that everyone's looking at her. Like she wouldn't quiet him if she could.

"Do you got this?" I ask Joslyn, and after getting her nod, I walk to where the mom and her baby are seated, my gaze locking on the man behind her for a brief moment before I focus my attention back on her.

"How old is he?" I ask softly, and her son looks at me with tears streaming down his chubby red cheeks.

"He's just turned ten months."

"What's his name?"

"Rory."

"Hi, Rory." I squat down so I'm eye level with him, which is a feat in my skirt. He stops crying and rests his head on his mom's shoulder as he studies me. "You are adorable." I reach my hand out, and he wraps his tiny fist around it. "Do your ears hurt?" I ask, pointing to my own ear and making a sad face. He nods, and I look at his mom. "Do you have a passy or bottle for him? Sometimes that helps with the pressure."

"Yes, but it's overhead," she tells me, so I stand and click the latch on the overhead compartment.

"Which bag is yours?" I ask, hearing the telltale sound of a seatbelt unclicking.

"The blue one." Lifting up on my tiptoes, I start to reach over my head to pull it down, but before I can grab hold of it, a shadow falls over me.

"I got it, babe."

“Thanks.” I take it from the man towering over me trying hard to ignore the way my stomach is flip-flopping all over the place. It’s difficult.

“No problem.” He doesn’t move to sit back down and like an idiot I stare at him, watching his lips kick up into a grin.

Clearing my throat when Rory starts to whimper, reminding me of what I’m supposed to be doing I drag my eyes off the man, and look down at Rory and his mom.

“Would you like me to hold him while you search?” I offer. There must be twenty pockets on the bag, and I don’t feel comfortable going through her stuff, even with permission.

“That would be great,” she says, and the man takes back the bag without a word.

I don’t look at him again; it’s obvious I can’t without making a fool of myself. Instead, I focus on Rory and hold my hands out to him. He eyes me for a moment, then reaches up to me. When I have him on my hip, his mom takes the bag and starts to dig through it.

“Daw-ba-mama-baba,” Rory says, tapping my jaw with his tiny fist.

“Yes, Mommy is getting your baba.” I smile at him, and he smiles back, showing off four tiny white teeth in the front.

“He-doda-mama,” he replies, and I laugh.

“Really?”

“Mama-loo-la-baba-dada.”

“Are you sure you’re not lying?” I ask him, and he giggles, dropping his head to my shoulder. My chest warms, and I accidentally glance up at the man still standing over us, the

soft expression on his face causing a riot of butterflies to fill my stomach. His eyes lift to lock on mine, and I get sucked into the vortex of their blueness once again.

“Finally!” Rory’s mom shouts, making me jump, and I look down to see she’s found his passy.

“Baba!” Rory squeals with baby happiness, lunging toward his mom. Only he takes the passy from her and shoves it in his mouth before resting his head back on my shoulder.

“He’s traded me in,” she says with a relieved and happy smile, and I laugh, looking down at his cute little face while she passes the bag back to Mr. Blue Eyes when he reaches for it.

“He’s sweet.” I fight the urge to kiss his head like I would with one of the babies in my life I have the right to do that with, and I pass him back to his mom.

“Thank you,” she tells me softly.

“You’re welcome.”

When he’s settled on her lap, I force myself to look at the man now taking the seat behind her. “Thank you for your help.”

“No problem.” He winks, and my cheeks warm.

I hear the guy in the aisle across from him chuckle, and I glance over at him, wanting badly to say something smart. I’m sure he’s used to women having my same reaction to his friend. Heck, they probably have the same reaction to him, because he’s just as good-looking, with wavy hair and green eyes that stand out against his dark complexion.

Clearing my throat, I spin on my heels and turn to walk back to the safety of the kitchen to finish helping Joslyn get

things ready. It doesn't take long for us to get through drink service, and by some miracle, I'm able to avoid making a fool of myself again as we pass out sodas and pretzels. By the time we're done, Douglas comes over the speaker and announces we'll be starting our descent soon, then goes over the weather for Ibiza.

I give it a few minutes, then walk through the cabin to pick up trash and check to make sure everyone is buckled in. Then I spend a moment talking with Joslyn before going back to my seat at the front, and locking myself in for the rest of the flight.

When we land, Douglas comes out of the cockpit to join me, and I'm relieved he hasn't seen the many times I've lost my composure during this flight. I'm sure he'd love to have something to give me a hard time about, only he wouldn't keep it to himself. He would share the joys of my embarrassment with his wife Blair and their two daughters, Elsie and Vi, who I know would all tease me relentlessly about my reaction to a man, after I've vowed to spend a year man-free.

As people begin to exit the plane, they smile at me like they know something I don't, and honestly, it's a little unnerving. Especially when the man who's had me on edge this entire flight starts walking up the aisle, towering over everyone by a foot, if not more.

He slows when he reaches me, and I hold my breath, unsure what he's going to say, and then he smoothly slips a piece of paper into my hand. "See you around." I try my best to look indifferent, but when he disappears out of sight, I barely avoid placing my hand on my chest, over my thundering heart.

Tucking the piece of paper into my pocket, I ignore the seemingly heavy weight of it and focus on all the things I need to get done before my shift is over and my vacation begins.

CHAPTER 2

hanna

Lying on my belly in my sleep shorts with the doors to my balcony open, letting the sea breeze in, I watch my cousins all dissect what I just told them about my reaction to Walker—the guy who was on my flight yesterday, according to the paper he gave me before he got off the plane.

“I think you should call him,” May says, looking half asleep. Then again, she *would* look half asleep, since it’s almost midnight back home in Tennessee.

“You should totally call him,” Harmony agrees.

“What about my vow to stay single for a year?” I nibble my bottom lip, glancing over at the note with the name Walker scrawled across it in neat handwriting along with his phone number.

“Did you vow that your vagina would stay single?” April asks, and I can’t help but smile.

“No, but I’ve never had a one night stand, and I don’t know if I have it in me to do that.”

“Then don’t think of it as a one night stand. Think of it as a vacation fling.” She shrugs, then tips her head to the side. “I also hate the idea of you missing out on mind blowing sex in

Spain with some hot guy, just because your ex was a complete douche.”

“I totally agree with that,” May yawns.

“What do I even say?” I sit up, pressing my back to the headboard and bringing my laptop with me.

“I’m in town for two nights and want to get my brains banged out. Are you down for the job?” April suggests, and we all laugh.

“Seriously though?” I ask, still grinning.

“You could always just send him a text,” Harmony says, then adds, “And although I agree that you deserve to get laid by a hot guy, you don’t have to go into meeting with him thinking you’re going to sleep with him.”

“This is true.” I look toward the door when there’s a knock. “That’s my breakfast. I’ll let you guys go and call you tomorrow to tell you what happened.”

“Love you!” I hear shouted from all of them in unison, then April shouts, “Get that dick, bitch!”

Laughing, I shout back, “Love you!” and shut my computer before I slide off the bed. Going to the door, I check the peephole before I open it up and take my food from the girl delivering it. When I carry it to my bed, I sit criss-cross style in the middle and dig into my food while continuing to ponder what I should do.

Six months ago, I was dating a pilot from another airline and got the wake up call of my life when his wife showed up at the restaurant where we were at on a date. Not only had he been cheating on her with me, but he was also dating three other women and had gotten one of them pregnant.

Although things between him and me were still pretty new we were exclusive, or so I thought, and I truly believed the relationship was going somewhere.

I was wrong, so very wrong, and that situation made me realize how desperate I had gotten. I missed or avoided seeing every red flag, because I wanted to believe he might be the one. After that, I vowed to stay single for a year to get my head on straight.

A few hours later I glance at Walker's number still lying on the stark white duvet after I've showered and gotten dressed in my swimsuit. Maybe April is right. Maybe a vacation fling is just what I need to get back out there without diving headfirst into dating and another relationship that will likely lead nowhere.

Taking a seat on the bed, I grab my cell and his number, and with my stomach in knots, I type it into my phone with a quick text.

Me: Hey, it's Hanna. You gave me your number.

I press Send before I can talk myself out of it, then wonder if I should have been more specific. Who knows how many women he gives his number to on a daily basis.

Me: I'm the air hostess.

I press Send, then groan.

Me: So, to clarify, you gave me your number when we landed in Ibiza.

I toss my phone toward the end of the bed, out of reach after sending that text so I can't send any more messages. I'm

sure he's going to think I'm some weirdo desperate woman after I sent three messages in a sixty second timespan.

Getting off the bed, I put on my cover-up, then gather my beach bag and phone before I leave my room.

It takes me about ten minutes to get down to the beach from the hotel. Once I'm there, I find the prime spot I had yesterday is gone so I continue down the beach. It takes me another five minutes to find an empty chair, and after placing my towel on the back, I sit on the edge and take out my phone.

My stomach is a mess as I slide my finger across the screen, but as soon as I see the four texts waiting for me, I bite my bottom lip to keep from smiling.

Walker: Hanna, pretty name.

Walker: So it's not flight attendant?

Walker: I don't give out my cell, so no need to clarify.

Walker: Where are you?

Letting my lip go, I quickly type.

Me: I'm staying in Ibiza for two nights before I head back to London.

I press Send and jump when my phone starts to ring a moment later. Glancing around in a panic, I wonder what I should do. Texting seemed so inconsequential compared to a phone call where I'll have to hear the sound of his voice.

When the call cuts off, my muscles relax, then tighten again when a message pops up.

Walker: Answer my call LOL

The phone starts to ring again, and I squeeze my eyes closed as I put it to my ear. “Uh... hello.”

God, I'm an idiot.

“Hey.” His voice is deep and warm and filled with humor.

“Hey.”

“You're in Ibiza?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you staying?”

I look to my left at the hotel in the distance. “At the Torre Del Mar.”

“Small world.”

“Are you staying here too?”

“Close. We're at the Ushuaia a little ways from there.”

“Oh,” I whisper. When I was looking for rooms, the one I chose was at the top of my budget. The one he's staying at is something I couldn't afford if I wanted to.

“What are you doing now?”

“Umm...” I glance around like I need the reminder of what I'm doing. “I just got down to the beach, so I'm going to lay out for a bit and maybe go in the water.”

“Why don't you come here?”

“Uh...” My heart starts to pound.

“Or I could come to you.”

I laugh. I can't help it.

“Is that a yes to me coming to you?” he asks.

I guess I'm really doing this.

“Okay, yeah. Sure. I can meet you in the lobby.”

“All right, give me thirty minutes to get back to my room and throw some shit together, I’ll head your way when I’m done.”

“Okay.”

“Keep your phone on you. I’ll text you when I’m in a cab.” He hangs up after a quick goodbye, and I stare at my phone, wondering what the hell I just agreed to.

I could barely keep myself from acting like a moron when I saw him on the plane, so I don’t know how I’m going to handle being in his presence when I don’t have work as an excuse to avoid him.

Gathering my things once more, since I only have one lounge and will now need two, I start back toward the hotel. It’s a trek, and by the time I make it inside, I’m a bundle of nerves. Between my stomach churning and my head feeling faint, I don’t know what will happen when I actually see him again. With my luck, I’ll pass out. I’m sure he would totally enjoy that.

As I’m paying for a bottle of water at the snack shop inside the hotel, my phone dings with a text.

Walker: On my way.

Yep, I’m for sure going to pass out when I see him, if my reaction to that message is anything to go by.

I text him back, so he doesn’t call me again, then wander to one of the couches in the lobby to sit and wait. Time seems to slow, and even if my mom always told me that watching water doesn’t boil, I can’t help but stare at the clock on my phone as each minute passes.

“Hey.” At the sound of his deep voice, I look up, and my mouth instantly goes dry. I thought I remembered how good-looking he is, but as he walks toward me in a pair of black board shorts, a white T-shirt, and a backward baseball cap, with a bag over his shoulder, I can’t help but think my memory didn’t do him justice.

“Hi,” I squeak out, standing, and he gives me a beautiful grin. “I’m Hanna.” Like the idiot he’s turned me into, I hold out my hand, and he glances down at it before shaking his head and wrapping me in his arms. As he pulls my soft body into his hard one, I swallow and beg myself to pass out, to put me out of my embarrassed misery.

“I didn’t think you’d call.” He lets me go, his eyes wandering over my face.

“Yeah, I wasn’t sure either.” I grab my bag from the couch I was sitting on, and he takes it from me, catching me off guard. “So—” I look around. “—do you want to hang by the pool, or do you want to go down to the beach?”

“I’m good with whatever you want to do.”

“The beach it is,” I mutter, then with him at my side and his hand burning through the thin material of my cover-up right above my ass, I lead him through the hotel and down to the beach. It takes some time to get two loungers together, and really, the only reason we do is because he carries one halfway down the sand to where there’s another one that’s free. And even when I ask if I can carry our bags, he denies me, which is sweet in a way I’m not used to.

“Do you wanna go in the water?” he asks after we get ourselves set up.

“Sure.” I take off my cover-up and toss it on the lounge chair, then grab my sunblock and start applying it.

“Do you want some?” I ask before I toss the tube of it back in my bag, and look at him over my shoulder. My skin heats when I realize his eyes are on my ass that is completely exposed. The one-piece bathing suit I have on is one that looks completely modest from the front, but in the back, it’s curved low, exposing my entire spine, with a thong that is cut high.

Clearing his throat, his heated gaze meets mine. “I’m good for now.”

“Did you already apply? Skin cancer is not something to play with,” I nervously ramble, and he smiles before taking off his shirt.

“I’m protected.” He tosses his shirt away while I try—*really try*—to take my eyes off him. It’s impossible. He’s gorgeous, all smooth, tan skin covered with ink that looks like individual pieces of art that blend together perfectly. “Ready?”

“Yep,” I lie, dropping the bottle in my hand into my bag before starting toward the water.

Unlike when we were walking down here from the lobby, he doesn’t stay at my side. He walks behind me, making me even more nervous. I should’ve thought about changing my suit, but even if I did, none of my others are any better. Actually, they probably show even more skin, since they’re all bikinis.

We wade into the water, and when it’s up to my waist, he moves to my side. I look out at the view and drag in a deep breath as I take it all in—the sand between my toes, the sun warm on my skin, and the cool water brushing against my heated flesh like a soft caress.

“It’s so beautiful here.”

“It is,” he agrees, and I glance up at him. Like in all those cheesy romance movies my mom loves so much, he’s not looking at the view; his eyes are on me. My face warms along with the rest of me, and I walk farther out into the clear sea to cool down.

“I know you’re here and that you’re American from your accent, but are you just visiting?” I ask to fill the silence.

“I’m here on vacation for a few days, but I travel all over Europe for work,” he replies.

“Really?”

“Really.” He grabs hold of me around the waist when a wave rushes in, almost knocking me over.

“Thanks,” I whisper, and look up at him. Jeez, he’s tall. I already knew that when I was in my heels on the plane, but standing out here with him, he seems like a giant. His fingers dig into my hips where he’s still holding me, and I realize I’ve been trapped by his gaze once again. Ducking my head, I take a step back, and his hands fall away. “So, what do you do for work?”

“I’m a diver.”

“That’s a job?” My brows dart together as I glance up at him.

“Yeah.” He laughs. “Me and my crew salvage wreckage and, on occasion, work on pipelines or on ships that need to be repaired while at sea.”

“I guess I never thought about that being a thing actual humans did for work.” I tip my head to the side. “That has to be pretty dangerous.”

“No more than traveling in a plane every day.”

“Flying is actually a lot safer than people think it is,” I mumble, not sure that I agree with him.

“You don’t have to convince me. I go into everything in my life understanding the risk,” he says quietly as I retie my hair I feel falling out of the bun I have it in. The intensity in the way he watches is unsettling and does nothing to help my nerves that are wrapped up so tight I feel like I might come out of my skin.

“So, the two guys with you...?” I let the question hang.

“We work together. The blond is Otto, and the guy with dark hair is Ham.”

“Ham.” I raise a brow.

“His real name is Hamilton. He fucking hates it.”

“I hate to say this, but I don’t think the nickname Ham is any better than Hamilton.” I watch him laugh, and my toes curl into the sand.

“I’ll let him know you said that.”

“Please don’t,” I whisper, and he grins.

“So, you’re American. Do you live in Europe, or just travel here for work?” he asks.

“I live in London. I moved there from Paris a little over a year ago after I fell in love.”

“With someone, or the city?”

“The city.” I stumble into him when a wave catches me off guard. His arms wrap around me, and I tip my head back to say thank you, but the moment our eyes lock, my heart goes haywire, and the words get trapped in the back of my throat.

Feeling his fingers smooth up my spine, I stop breathing and watch in apt anticipation as his face lowers toward mine. Just when I'm sure he might kiss me, and I might let him, water splashes on us, and laughter fills the air over the sound of the blood roaring through my veins.

Looking over my shoulder, I watch two boys probably around seven or eight swim off while glancing back at us, grinning and giggling.

I laugh and move out of Walker's hold, hearing him chuckle. "You wanna get out?"

"Yeah." I turn for the shore, and he sticks to my side until we're both out of the water, and then just like before, he walks behind me up the beach. I look over my shoulder again, expecting his gaze to be on my ass, but it's not. It's scanning from side to side, like he's looking for something. Going to my chair, I straighten my towel and lie down on my back, and he does the same.

I don't know how long we stay like that, side by side with the sound of the ocean in the near distance and kids playing in the sand feet away. It's oddly relaxing, even with my body still very aware of his presence. Rolling to my belly, I'm almost asleep when his voice breaks through the fog of my subconscious.

"Do you always vacation alone?"

Lifting my head, I rest my chin on top of my arms and look over at him. "Most of the time. All my family is back in the US, and my friends here are either married, have kids or don't have the availability to get away when I do."

Before I've even finished talking, his eyes move past me and narrow. Turning to see what he's looking at, I notice a guy

who is probably around my age standing under a tree with a drink in his hand, and his eyes are staring straight at my ass.

“Take a picture! It will last longer!” I call out, and the guy turns bright-red and walks off. “Jerk.”

“Babe, that’s about the tenth guy to come over just to stare at your ass. If we were in a different place, I’d have already gotten us kicked off this beach.”

“Oh great, you’re one of those guys,” I mutter, tucking my face into the crook of my arm.

“What kind of guy is that?”

I lift my head to look at him. “The kind of man who thinks a woman should cover up so other men don’t check her out, like it’s her fault men are gross.”

“Nope, if that ass was mine, you’d have my bite mark on it, and you, me, and everyone else would no-doubt know who it belongs to. And if someone didn’t recognize that claim, *then* we’d have a problem.”

My core clenches as he holds my gaze captive. I should not be turned on by his statement. Actually, I should probably tell him that his statement is completely inappropriate. But all I can do is stare at him and wonder how exactly—as in logistics—he’d get his bite marks on my ass.

What the hell does that say about me?

Rolling to my back without a word, I rest my arm over my eyes and ignore his quiet laughter.

After about another thirty minutes of lying in the sun, I sit up to grab my bottle of water from my bag and gulp some down. When I look over at him, I notice he’s got a book open and resting on his abs as he watches me. I try to remember if

I've ever seen a man read for pleasure, and I can't think of a single time. No men I know read unless they have to before signing a document or putting together a piece of furniture.

"What are you reading?" He lifts the book so I can see the cover of a murder mystery I've passed by a million times at the airport.

"Is it any good?"

"It's all right."

"Do you read a lot?"

"We don't have TV when we're out at sea, so pretty much all the time."

"You should get a Kindle."

"What's that?"

Digging into my bag, I pull mine out and pass it over to him, and he begins to inspect it and click the buttons on the side. I know he's opened the book I'm reading when he looks over at me and raises a brow. "The first rule of being a reader is we don't judge each other for what we enjoy reading."

"I'm not judging you. This just seems much more interesting than what I've been reading." He drops his eyes to my Kindle, and since I know where I was at when I turned it off last night, my cheeks warm as I watch his gaze slide across the screen. "How do you change the page?"

Moving closer to him, I show him where you just touch it, and he leans back and gets comfortable with my book.

"You're going to make me lose my spot if you keep reading."

"You can't go back?"

“You can.” I sigh and lean back in my lounge, peeking over at him every once in a while just to see his expression.

“What are your plans for dinner?” he asks after a few minutes, and I turn my head his way.

“I was just going to order room service.”

“Do you want to have dinner with me and the guys? We have a reservation for the restaurant at our hotel at seven.”

Should one go out to dinner with a vacation fling and his friends? God, I should have gotten the rules for this from April, because it’s obvious I have no idea what I’m doing.

“I....”

“Or you and I could do something, just the two of us.”

“Dinner with you and your friends sounds good,” I say quietly. I don’t know that I’m ready for dinner alone with him.

“Good,” he replies just as quietly before he turns back to my book and continues reading.

Looking out at the ocean, I wonder why I suddenly feel like I’m in way over my head.

CHAPTER 3

hanna

Picking up my phone, I check the time, and a mixture of excitement and anxiety floods my system in an instant when I see I have less than ten minutes before I'm supposed to meet Walker in the lobby downstairs.

Two hours ago, he left to head back to his hotel with the promise he'd be back to pick me up, so I could ride with him over to where he and his friends are staying. Something I tried to talk him out of doing, because it didn't make sense to me that he would pay for a cab twice. But he was insistent, and eventually I gave up fighting him about it, even though I really didn't want him waiting on me when I wasn't sure I would have enough time to go to the boutique in the hotel, find something to wear, and get ready in time for dinner.

I got lucky though. As soon as I walked into one of the small boutiques downstairs, I found a cute cropped long-sleeved silk blouse and a skirt with a slit up the thigh in the same sage-green.

Leaning toward the mirror, I add another layer of mascara, then grab my clip and pull back half of my hair, leaving the rest flowing down my back in waves. I didn't need to add much makeup after being in the sun all day, and with the freckles that seemed to come out of nowhere since I started

vacationing, a full face of makeup wouldn't have done much good anyway.

With a final glance at my reflection, I grab my cell from the counter, slip on a pair of sandals I brought with me, then nab my purse off the end of the bed.

The second I reach the elevator, my phone dings with a text, and I glance at it quickly as I step inside.

Walker: I'm here

With a deep breath, I remind myself that today was good. Actually, it was nice to have someone to spend time with. Normally when I take these trips, I'm alone, which I don't mind—I like my own company—but I enjoyed his presence, even with the undercurrent of sexual tension that was difficult to ignore.

As soon as the doors to the elevator open, I spot him across the lobby. It shouldn't be possible for a man to look *more* attractive when you just saw him a hundred and twenty minutes ago, but seeing Walker again, I now know it is.

The tapered black suit pants and fitted black button-down that is open at the throat and rolled up at the sleeves makes him look like one of those wealthy guys you'd see on social media. And then if you deep-dive into his photos, you'd find he does nothing with his days but spend time on his yacht and his nights drinking expensive bourbon and banging models.

Giving myself a silent pep talk, I step onto the marble floor, and his head turns in my direction like he senses me. I don't know how old he is, but if I had to guess, I would say he's probably late into his thirties, making him ten years older than I am, and I can't help but wonder if that's what makes him seem so much more intense, so sure of himself.

Probably.

As he walks toward me, his gaze roams up my body like he's memorizing every detail, and the moment his eyes meet mine, my next breath gets caught in the back of my throat. I've never had a man look at me with such blatant desire, and if one look can make me feel like I'm going to come out of my skin, I wonder what will happen if or when we give in to the temptation we both so obviously feel.

"You look fucking stunning." He bends down, brushing his lips across the corner of my mouth, then leans back just enough to catch my eye. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," I whisper, and he takes my hand and turns us toward the door. When we step outside, he leads me toward a black car and opens the back door for me, waiting until I'm seated before he shuts it and disappears.

My heart is thundering in my chest, and my stomach is fluttering like a swarm of honeybees has taken over my insides. I will myself to calm down and remind myself that we are having dinner with his friends, so if anything is going to happen, it won't be right now. This is just dinner.

He gets in on the opposite side, telling the driver in Spanish that we're ready to go, and rests his large hand on my bare knee, where the material of my skirt has fallen open.

"You speak Spanish?" I ask, trying to ignore his thumb that has started making tiny circles that send sparks up my inner thigh to the space between my legs.

"Enough to get by."

"Any other languages?"

"A little German and French. You?"

“French, and a tiny bit of Spanish, but only enough that I don’t seem like a jerk when I’m here, asking for things like the bathroom or how much something costs.” I look out the window as we pull up to the hotel, and although where I’m staying is very nice, this place is stunning, with floral art that crawls up the outer walls and beautiful greenery that lines the red-carpeted path to the entrance.

“Wait here and I’ll come around,” he orders, giving my knee a squeeze before getting out, and a moment later, he opens my door and holds out his hand for me.

I take it, sending the driver a quiet thank-you, then carefully maneuver out of the car, trying to avoid flashing anyone, which is a feat with the skirt’s slit.

“We can wait in the bar for the guys if you’d like?”

“That sounds good.” I tuck my bag under my arm and walk hand-in-hand with him into the hotel that is just as beautiful inside and buzzing with energy that vibrates across my skin. The bar is packed when we reach it, so it takes us a minute to wade through the people standing around with drinks as they talk over the music being played at club level. Not a surprise, Ibiza is known for its party lifestyle.

“What would you like?” he asks, placing his lips almost against my ear, causing me to shiver.

“Just sparkling water with lime.”

“That’s all?”

“For now.”

“All right.” He keeps his hand on my back as he leans across the high counter toward the bartender and places our order while I look around. The atmosphere is so different than where I’m staying that it’s almost overwhelming my senses. I

hardly go out and can't even remember the last time I went out clubbing, so it's a lot to take in.

Out the corner of my eye, I notice a group of women all looking in our direction, and when I glance over, I see a gorgeous woman with a barely there, bodyhugging white dress smiling at Walker like she knows him. I might not have gotten the rules for a vacation fling from April, but I do know I have no right to feel any kind of way about him being with anyone else before or after me. Still, it's difficult to ignore the ugly tentacles of jealousy that curl around my insides at the thought of him with her last night.

"Babe," he calls softly, and I turn to find him holding out a glass.

"Thank you." I take it, then watch him grab a bottle of water that's placed on the bar.

"You're not drinking?" I shout over the music.

"I don't drink often. Deep sea diving puts a lot of stress on the body, and alcohol just intensifies that." He smooths his hand across the skin of my back between my skirt and top. "There's some seating outside where it's quiet and less crowded, or do you want to wait in here?"

"Outside."

With a nod, he takes my hand and leads me through the bar, the hotel lobby, and then out a set of doors that open to a large patio overlooking a stage in the middle of the courtyard. Even with the stage empty—sans a few people who seem to be setting up—I can only imagine what the space must look like when it's filled with people who have shown up to watch whoever is performing. I can also see now why this place is so expensive to stay at.

“Have you stayed here before?” I ask.

“No, this is the first time. There’s a DJ performing here for the week that Otto has seen a couple of times, so he chose this place.” He walks us over to a red velvet couch, and sits down next to me once my ass hits the cushion, resting his arm on the back behind me. “You leave for London the day after tomorrow?” he asks.

“Yeah, I have a shift that morning leaving from here, with a stop in Paris, before arriving back home.” I can’t help but hear the surprising tinge of disappointment in my own tone. I love my job. Maybe it’s just the idea of my vacation ending so soon. “Are you guys working near Paris?”

“No, we’re actually in Bournemouth, working about thirty-five miles off the coast. A salvaging site of an old shipwreck.”

“A shipwreck... like from pirate days?” My voice clearly conveys my excitement.

“Not quite.” He laughs his eyes dropping to my mouth for a brief moment. “It does have treasure on it, but it was a merchant ship that sank back in the 1500s on its return to London from Spain.”

“Wow, and they just found it now?”

“The ocean is vast, baby. They searched for years for the site, but until a fishing vessel pulled up the anchor while trolling last year, no one was sure where the ship went down.”

“So, you’re deep-sea diving for treasure?”

“Yeah, except I don’t keep anything I find, and the company who hired us won’t likely keep much of it either, since it still belongs to the crown.”

“That sucks.”

“A little, but the guys who are running the operation have bought everything they could ever want and are bored out of their minds, with money to burn, so this is essentially a very expensive hobby for them.”

“Aww, poor them. It must totally blow to be super rich.” I roll my eyes, and he laughs. “So have you found anything at the site?”

“We’ve found about a million dollars in gold, but there was supposedly close to a billion dollars’—in today’s money—worth of gold, silver, and jewels on board.”

“How do they know that?”

“It was logged. Plus, the captain of the ship and twenty-eight of the men on board survived the accident and were rescued when the ship sank.”

“So, the captain could have staged the accident with twenty-eight of his closest friends and hid the gold and jewels away somewhere.”

“I guess anything is possible.” He smiles, then turns to look to his right, and I follow his gaze. When I see the men who were with him on the plane walking toward us, my nerves, which had finally settled, immediately kick back in.

Standing with him, he places his arm around my waist, curling his fingers around my hip in a possessive hold as his friends get closer. Like Walker, both of them are dressed in all black and are gorgeous, and seeing the three of them together, I’m sure they regularly create chaos wherever they go just from how good-looking they all are.

“Hanna, this is Otto and Ham. You guys remember Hanna.”

“How could we forget flight attendant girl?” Otto, who is tall and blond with boyish good looks and an accent that sound French, smiles.

“Hanna.” Ham dips his chin, sounding as American as Walker and me, and his almost-black hair falls slightly over his forehead. There’s not even a hint of a smile, but I don’t think it’s because I’m here. I get the feeling it’s just his way.

“Thanks for letting me tag along to dinner.” I smile, and Walker gives my hip where his hand is resting a squeeze.

“Speaking of dinner—” Walker lifts his wrist to look at his watch. “—we should probably head over to the restaurant before they give our table away.”

“Are you going to the show tonight?” Otto looks at me over his shoulder as Walker and I follow him and Ham back into the hotel. “The DJ that’s performing is fucking amazing.”

“Umm...” I shake my head. “Probably not. I have a reservation to go snorkeling in the morning. It’s really early, so I don’t want to miss it.”

“That’s cool.” He glances between Walker and me. “But why would you pay someone for that when you have three of the best divers in the world right here?”

“I—”

“We should rent a boat,” he cuts me off and looks over at Ham. “And we could invite those chicks we hung out with last night by the pool.”

Ugh, that ugly feeling tightening around my insides that I have no right to is super annoying. “That would be fun, but I’ve already paid for my excursion.”

“Get your money back.”

“I don’t think it works like that.” I laugh. “Plus, you guys are going out tonight, and I want to go early, since I was told that’s when I have the best chance of seeing some of the more unusual fish,” I tell him as we walk down a long hall with black marble floors and deep-red walls showcasing different pieces of floral art.

“*They’re* going out,” Walker cuts in, and I look up at him.

“Pardon?”

“The whole club scene is Otto’s thing, and Ham is going with him, because we’ve had to bail him out of jail when he’s drank too much and done stupid shit. *Twice.*”

“Defending my soccer team was not stupid,” Otto mutters.

“Yeah, and pissing on the road right in front of a cop, or the time you got into a fight but didn’t get arrested just because the cops were worried about the dude killing you if you were locked up together?” Ham asks.

“There were no bathrooms open, and I didn’t know the cop was there,” he defends, then adds, “And that guy was being a dick to his girl. Someone needed to kick his ass.”

“Whatever,” Ham mutters.

“And that’s why I don’t have the patience Ham does when it comes to dealing with your shit.”

“No, you’re just old.” Otto grins at Walker over his shoulder, not offended in the least, and even though I could tell from his looks that he’s younger than Ham and Walker, his attitude makes it that much more obvious.

“Whatever,” Walker mutters, giving my hand a squeeze, and I glance up at him. “I’ll go with you to your excursion

tomorrow, and when the guys wake up, we can rent a boat and take it out for the afternoon.”

“Yes!” Otto hoots, knocking Ham in his chest with the back of his hand. “Now we have to track down those chicks.”

“I’m not sure women like being referred to as ‘chicks,’” I inform him as we reach the restaurant.

“It’s better than bitches.”

“I guess that’s true,” I mutter, and Ham sighs while Otto grins.

“You’ll get used to him.” Walker rests his hand on my back, ushering me through the door of the restaurant before him, and I bite my lip.

Yep, I’m definitely in over my head, and it’s obvious I need to call April and have her explain the ground rules for a vacation fling.

CHAPTER 4

walker

T racking Hanna as she walks away from the table to go use the restroom, I try to figure out what it is about her that's got me so fucked up. I've had more than my share of beautiful women over the years, but I never reacted to any of them like I do her. Like something I don't even recognize inside myself is urging me to mark and claim her so every single man around will know she belongs to me.

Jesus, I'm fucked. I've known her for less than twelve hours, and this is the shit going through my head already.

"You good, man?" Ham asks low, and I drag my attention off where Hanna just disappeared and focus on him.

"All good."

"You sure?"

"Yep." I pick up my water and force myself to relax.

"I got a call from Toni this afternoon. He tried to get ahold of you, but you didn't pick up."

"What'd he want?" I glance up at the waitress and smile when she places the check on the table.

"He was letting us know that when we get back, we should plan to be out for two weeks, depending on the weather."

Fuck, I had a feeling that would happen. Actually, I knew it would, and for the first time, I'm annoyed with my job for keeping me off land for so long.

"He wants us to go back over the area where we found the bars," Otto says, using his chopsticks to pick up one of the last sushi rolls from the plate in front of him. "It doesn't make sense to me, but he's convinced we missed something." He shrugs, shoving it in his mouth.

"I'll call him in a couple of days and talk to him."

"I tried to talk him out of it already." Ham picks up his beer. "You know how he gets when he's convinced he's right. And since he's not paying us based on what we find but on our dive time, I'll look in the same spot for the next year if he wants me to."

"Truth," Otto mutters, and I glance across the room just in time to watch Hanna as she walks back toward our table. It's obvious I'm not the only one by his next comment. "She seems cool, and it doesn't hurt that she's easy to look at." I turn to glare at him. "Just making an observation." He holds up his hands in defense.

"Sorry about that," she says quietly, smiling as she takes her seat next to me.

"Hey, Hanna," Otto calls, and she looks across the table at him. "I think you should leave the old guy to go to bed and come hang out with Ham and me tonight."

"Not fucking happening." My hand wrapped around the back of her chair tightens. Just thinking about her with them in the same environment I was in last night, surrounded by drugs, alcohol, and people, almost fucking makes me want to toss the table.

“You don’t trust us?” Otto asks, and it’s on the tip of my tongue to say no. Like I haven’t trusted him and Ham with my life every single day for the past five years.

“I really can’t,” she tells him softly.

“That’s cool. Maybe another time.” He shoots me a goofy grin.

“Yeah, maybe,” she agrees, leaning across me to reach for the check, and I push it out of her reach. “I wanted to see how much I owe you.” Her eyes fly up to mine.

“Babe, you’re not paying.”

“Yes, I am.” She leans farther across me, trying to grab it.

“You’re not.” I pick it up and pass it over to Ham.

“Walker, I don’t feel comfortable with anyone paying for my food.”

“Too fucking bad.”

“Fine.” She looks around. “I’ll just ask the waitress.”

“If you do that, we’re going to have a problem,” I tell her quietly, and her eyes narrow into slits.

“Uh-oh, Ham. Mom and Dad are fighting.” Otto laughs, and Hanna turns her glare his way while I shoot him a look that says to shut the fuck up. “My bad.”

“As entertaining as this is—” Ham pushes back from the table and stands with the check. “—I’m gonna head to the bar for another beer before I have to show up to babysitting duty.”

“Stop saying you’re babysitting me,” Otto gripes.

“Stop acting like you’re sixteen, and I will.” Ham focuses on Hanna and me. “See you two tomorrow.”

“Later, man.” We bump fists, and Otto watches him walk off, glaring at his back, before he looks at me.

“I fucking hate that you guys act like I’m a kid,” he says quietly, looking embarrassed and hurt, which is a surprise since normally he takes it all in stride.

“Ham and I trust you with our lives every single time we dive.”

“Yeah, I trust you too,” he bites out, his embarrassment turning to anger.

“We know you do. We also get that it’s exhausting having to constantly be prepared for the worst-case scenario for weeks at a time while we’re working.” I hold his gaze. “I know some of it is your age, and some of it is you just trying to suck in as much freedom as you can before you’re trapped with the weight of someone else’s life in your hands once again. But we don’t get the break you do, because we are constantly looking out for you, making sure you don’t do something that could fuck up your whole life.”

“That’s fucked.”

“I agree,” I say quietly, and he glances over at Hanna, getting red in the face before standing and storming off without another word.

“That was harsh,” Hanna whispers, and I turn my attention to her.

“Maybe, but since we’ve tried to tell him to tone it down more than once and that hasn’t happened, maybe some harsh truths will.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-three.”

“He’s young.” She lets out a long breath, then tips her head to the side as she studies me. “Is your job really that dangerous?”

“It can be, if you don’t know what you’re doing.” I stand, then pull out her chair and place my hand against the middle of her back as we walk out of the restaurant. “What time is your thing in the morning?”

“I have to be there at seven.” She looks up at me. “You don’t have to go with me.”

“I want to.” I take her hand.

“But you didn’t pay for a spot, so you’ll just have to wait for me at the place.”

“I’ll bring a book.”

“I...” She rubs her lips together while slowing her pace. “I think we should talk.”

“About?”

“Well,” she starts, then cuts herself off when a couple walks by us in the hall.

“Do we need privacy for this conversation?” I raise a brow as she looks around the corridor that is crowded with people coming and going from the restaurant.

“Yes.” Her cheeks get pink, piquing my curiosity.

“We can go to my room.” After her nod, I take her hand and lead her to the elevator.

It doesn’t take long to get upstairs, and as soon as the door to my hotel room is closed behind us, I flip on the light and stand with my arms crossed over my chest, watching her as she begins to pace.

“Have you ever had a vacation fling?” she asks as she stops to face me.

The question catches me off guard. I don’t know what I thought this was about, but I never would have guessed that question would come out of her pretty mouth.

“Pardon?”

“About six months ago, I got out of a relationship.”

My hands ball into fists. Fuck me, the irrational anger at hearing she was with someone before I even knew she existed is absolutely ridiculous.

“All right.” I wait for her to go on, and she fidgets as she looks around.

“Umm... you gave me your number, and I wasn’t going to call, because I promised myself I wouldn’t date another man for a year.” Her cheeks get even darker. “Not that I’m saying you want to date me. I mean, you don’t even know me enough to want to date me. I just mean—”

“I get it,” I cut her off.

“Right,” she whispers. “I... Well, I talked to my cousin, April—who is a little wild... or she *was* wild. She’s married now with a baby and totally domesticated.”

“Babe.” Fuck, why do I get the feeling she’s about to piss me off, but I’m still gonna find her adorable?

“Sorry.” She shifts from one foot to the other. “My cousin April told me that if I sleep with you and considered it a vacation fling, I wouldn’t be breaking my promise to myself. So, I messaged you, and then you spent the day with me on the beach. Which was great. And then we went out with your friends. Which was also great. And now, tomorrow, you want

to go with me, and I want that. But I also want you to know I don't want a relationship." She shakes her head. "Not that you asked for that. I just needed to tell you that, so you know it's not something I'm looking for."

I should be thrilled. Fuck, any other man in their right mind would be jumping for joy at the idea of fucking her without any strings. Instead, I'm a mixture of turned on and pissed off that I got her alone with a bed at my disposal, as she's talking about *only* fucking me temporarily while she's on vacation.

"Get undressed," I bite out, keeping my expression neutral as my hands fall to my sides.

"Wait... What?"

"You wanna fuck, right?" I take a step toward her, and she takes one back.

"I...."

"I've wanted to fuck you since I saw you on the plane." I let my gaze wander over her as she backs away from me. "That tight skirt, those heels, with your hair all tied up in a fancy knot, looking so prim and proper." I meet her gaze. "I wanted to see you messy and wet, begging me to fuck you harder."

"Oh my god," she breathes, backing into the closed sliding glass doors that overlook the ocean. With nowhere to go, I step into her space and wrap my hand around her waist, feeling her smooth, warm skin under my palm. "Walker?"

"I like the sound of my name coming out of your pretty mouth." I take advantage and cup her jaw with my free hand, dragging my thumb across her plump bottom lip. My other slowly moves up her waist as I listen to her breath catch when

the tips of my fingers come in contact with her nipple, which is hard and pressing through the material of her bra and thin top.

“Oh God.” Her eyes slide closed, and her hands latch onto my biceps.

“Look at me, Hanna,” I clip out, and her eyes spring open. “Do you want to change your mind?”

She makes a sound like a whimper in the back of her throat as her gaze holds mine hostage, and her chest heaves. I’m torn, part of me wanting nothing more than to take advantage of the opportunity she’s presented me with, the other half hoping she’ll put a stop to this and take back everything she just said.

“No.” The word is whispered and breathy, and as soon as it leaves her mouth, she presses up on her toes, and I duck my head and kiss her.

It’s not sweet or soft; it’s filled with anger, desire, and desperation. She opens for me immediately, and our tongues tangle together, my hands taking advantage, one cupping the back of her head, gripping her hair, while the other roams her soft body, her fingers digging into my skin through my shirt.

She gasps when my mouth leaves hers, my teeth grazing her throat over her pulse that is fluttering wildly, to the tops of her breasts.

“Get this out of my way before I rip it off you.” I nip the top of her breast, and when her half-mast eyes meet mine for a second, I’m almost positive she’s going to change her mind.

She doesn’t. Instead, she lets me go and shakily takes off her top, leaving her in a bra that is so thin it’s see-through allowing me to see her dark nipples through the sheer material.

My cock pulses behind my zipper, begging me to set it free, and she glances down between us, licking her lips.

Gripping myself through the material of my slacks, I adjust my erection, then jerk my shirt free and quickly unbutton it as she watches. When it's on the floor with hers, I capture her mouth once more and slide my hand into the slit of her skirt that has been tormenting me since I saw her in the lobby of her hotel. Skimming my palm up the back of her thigh, all I feel is soft, smooth, warm skin.

“You don't have anything on under this?” I hiss against her mouth, gripping her ass tightly.

“I do,” she pants, and I move my hand higher, coming into contact with a thin piece of string.

Letting it go, I grab her skirt and tug it down over her hips, watching it pool at her feet. The material covering her pussy is as nonexistent as her bra, allowing me to see just enough to torment. I groan in approval before capturing her mouth once more and sliding my hand between her legs, where she's hot and wet through the material.

When she lifts her foot up and wraps it around the back of my leg, I pick her up off the ground and press her against the glass, slipping the soaked fabric aside to find her clit with the pads of my fingers.

“Oh God.” Her head falls back, and I take her in—eyes closed, chest pushing the boundaries of her ridiculous fucking bra on each deep breath, lips pink from my mouth and teeth, and her skin flush with desire.

“You're so fucking gorgeous like this,” I grit out and silently curse as I slide two fingers inside her tight pussy, and she rolls her hips. Using my thumb to circle her clit, I take

advantage of our position and bend over her, pulling one breast into my mouth through the material of her bra as I finger fuck her.

Her hands latch onto my hair, and the walls of her sex flutter around my fingers, sliding in and out of her with purpose and dragging across her G-spot. With my cock now throbbing, I pull her from the window and carry her to the bed, ignoring her mewl of disapproval when she loses my mouth and fingers.

Dropping her onto the mattress, I stand back and kick off my shoes, then grab my wallet and flip it open. Taking out a condom I toss it to the bed before I pull my belt loose and unzip my pants. I grip myself, sliding my hand up and down my length as she watches and presses her thighs together.

“Walker.”

“Take off the bra and those ridiculous fucking underwear, and open your legs, Hanna. I want to see you.”

She hesitates for a moment before sitting up and unhooking the front clasp of her bra, letting it fall from her shoulders, then rolls the strings at her hips down her thighs. Her cheeks darken to a pretty pink as she lies back, and I wait, holding my breath, feeling lightheaded and frenzied with need as she spreads her legs.

Her pussy is the same pretty pink, and glistening with her arousal.

My mouth waters at the sight, and without thinking, I kneel on the mattress, shove her knees wide, and lick up her center, sucking her clit into my mouth. She tastes like the sweetest ambrosia, and I know it's something I could easily become addicted to. With her legs held back, I devour her,

listening to her whimper and moan while I press my cock into the mattress to ease some of the pressure. When her pussy begins to flutter, I lean back and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “Oh God, no! I was so clo—” She starts to sit up.

“The first time you come, you come around my cock,” I cut her off, grabbing the condom, ripping it open, and rolling it down my length in record time.

Wrapping my hands around both her ankles, I jerk them around my waist, then cover her mouth with mine as I press her back into the mattress. Her fingers dig into my ribs, the heels of her feet pressing into the back of my thighs, urging me to get closer as I cup one breast and roll her nipple between my fingers.

“Walker!” Her head falls back, exposing her throat and chest. I take advantage, sucking the skin of her breast between my lips, leaving a mark. When I pull back and see it, my fucking heart thumps. She might be able to walk away from this vacation without thinking about me, but she’ll do it with my mark on her.

Gripping my erection, I slide it up and down her slit, then slowly sink inside her, feeling lightheaded as she tightens almost painfully around my cock.

Sitting back on my heels, I slowly fuck into her and cup both her breasts, using her tiny size to my benefit. Like this, with her spread out before me, I have access to every single inch of her. And watching her pretty face as she takes me is something that will forever be burned into my brain.

“You got me all fucked up, baby.” I pinch her nipples between my fingers, making her gasp. “Offering me up this tight little pussy.” I pull out, then ram into her hard. “Then telling me that I can only have it while we’re here.” I thumb

her clit, and her pussy flutters, then starts to pulse. When I know she's about to come, I slide out of her completely, wrap my hand around my cock, and squeeze.

“Walker.” She reaches for me, and I have to give it to myself, because fuck, I want nothing more than to be back inside her. But if this is the only time I get to have her, I'm going to drag it out as long as I possibly can.

“Be good for me, baby, and let me fuck you.” I flip her to her belly, then lift her hips off the mattress. “Jesus, I don't know which view I like better.” I smack her ass hard enough to leave a handprint, and she moans.

Yeah, I'm pissed.

I move my hand between her legs, and her hips jerk in response to my fingers floating over her swollen clit to the heat of her, which grips them tight when they slide inside her.

“Oh God,” she whimpers, dropping her forehead to the mattress while her hands tangle in the blanket in front of her. Removing my fingers, I wrap my hand around her hip and feed her pussy my dick, inch by inch, gritting my teeth when she attempts to push back on me.

Leaning over her, I growl against her ear, “You might have set the rules, babe, but you're not in charge here.” I hook her with my forearm under her breasts and pull her up to sit on my lap, impaling her on my cock. Between her petite size and this position, she's at my mercy. Sliding her hair over her shoulder, I nip her throat, then kiss up to her ear. “Do you wanna come, baby girl?” She turns her head, and when her dazed gaze meets mine, it's almost my undoing.

“Yes,” she moans, her pussy fluttering. I capture her hand, bringing it between her legs, listening to her breath when it

catches as I use her fingers to circle her clit.

“Don’t stop,” I order and nip her bottom lip, then take my hand away to grip her hip, lifting her just a bit before setting her back down over and over.

When her body begins to shake and her head falls back to my shoulder, she moans, and I grit my teeth, silently cursing how fucking perfect she fits me. I don’t want to come, not yet. But even if I wanted to, there’s no way I’d be able to get her off my dick fast enough to stop the release that her core pulls from me.

Balls tight, feeling lightheaded, my release pulses in tandem with my heartbeat while my vision dims.

I don’t know if I black out, but I barely catch her when she goes limp in my arms, and with the little strength I have left, I maneuver her to the bed and roll to my back, dragging her over me. Our skin is slick with sweat, and when she shivers, I grab a tissue from the container near the bed, discard the condom, and drag the blanket over us before I pass the fuck out with her sprawled out on my chest.

CHAPTER 5

hanna

The sound of mumbled voices wakes me up, and I slowly float to the surface of sleep, registering even before I'm fully conscious that I'm still in Walker's bed. Keeping my eyes closed, I listen to him move around the room and silently replay what happened last night.

To say things didn't go as planned when I decided I would admit to him I only wanted a vacation fling and nothing more is the understatement of the century. I did not foresee that he would have me naked within two minutes of those words leaving my mouth. Or that when I got up in the middle of the night while he was sleeping, with the plan to quietly get dressed and leave, that he would drag me right back to his bed and give me three more orgasms. One with his mouth, one with his fingers, and then one while he fucked me slow, depleting any strength I had left to leave afterward.

When I hear the curtain open and feel the soft rays of sun against my closed eyelids, my lashes flutter open, and I watch him open the doors to the balcony and push a cart outside. In the early morning light, with his shirt off and his hair damp like he just showered, he looks impossibly more beautiful. I knew the chemistry simmering between us was hot; I just had no idea he would ruin me for all other men in one night. I'm

not naïve enough to believe I'll be able to find what I experienced with him again.

“You're awake,” he says, my eyes jerking up to his when he steps through the door. “Breakfast just got here. You need to eat something before we go to your hotel.”

“You're still going with me?” I sit up, holding the sheet against my bare chest like he hasn't seen and touched every single inch of me.

He doesn't answer. The only clue that lets me know he heard me is the slight tic of his jaw before he walks across the room to the bathroom and flips on the light, appearing a minute later with a plush white robe. When he hands it to me, I take it and swallow down the same question I asked him seconds ago that is now burning the tip of my tongue.

I assumed that after last night he would send me on my merry way, then finish out his vacation with some other woman—or multiple women, if he felt up to the task. I didn't think he'd still want to spend time with me.

I push my arms through the soft material, tying it tightly before I carefully get out of bed, with him watching.

“It takes about ten minutes to get to your hotel, so you have about thirty before we have to leave.” He walks out onto the balcony, and I follow him, barely avoiding a wince when muscles I didn't even know I had ache and burn.

When I step out, the sun is just lighting the horizon, and the beach below is quiet except for a few people out jogging. Taking a seat in the chair he pulls out for me, I watch as he removes a dome-shape lid covering a single plate, and my mouth waters at the sight of eggs, bacon, and toast. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” I pick up a slice of the toast, my stomach growling in anticipation as I bring it to my mouth. After he pours my cup, he takes a seat across from me and lifts his own mug, taking a sip.

“You’re not eating?” I ask, picking up a piece of crisp bacon.

“I’m still full from last night.”

“Oh.” My entire body grows flush under his darkened gaze. I drop my eyes from his and focus on putting food in my stomach and the view to my left. It should be awkward to sit under his silent stare as I eat, but I’ve somehow gotten used to being the center of his attention.

When I’m done eating, I pick up my coffee and finish off the rest of it, then without a word, he gets up, and I do the same. I find my clothes from yesterday hung neatly over the back of the chair, so as he begins to shove stuff into a bag, I start to get dressed.

I’ve never in my life done the walk of shame, but as I’m putting on my skirt without my panties, knowing we might see people we saw last night, a sense of unease washes over me, making me feel uncomfortable.

“You wanna wear something of mine?”

I glance over at him, wondering if he read my mind or if my facial expression just made it obvious what I’m thinking. “Would you mind?”

“No.” He grabs a pair of shorts and a hooded sweatshirt, passing both of them to me. “They’ll be big.”

“That’s okay.” I take both and slip off my shirt, leaving me in my bra, then shimmy out of my skirt and put on his shorts. He stops what he’s doing and comes over to stand in front of

me, and I hold my breath as he ties the string on the shorts so they don't fall down over my hips. Even if there's nothing sexual about the act, the muscles of my stomach still bunch when his fingers make contact with my skin, and my nipples pebble against the material of my bra.

When he's done, I'm turned on and wet between my legs, and from the look in his eyes, I'd swear he knows just how much he affects me.

Clearing my throat, I step back from him and put on his hoodie. "Do I look ridiculous?" I glance down at my small frame engulfed in his clothes.

"You look adorable." He smiles, rolling up the sleeves of the sweatshirt so they don't hang over my hands. And seeing that smile after he's seemed so tense this morning, I relax. "Are you ready?" he asks, taking my clothes and shoving them in his bag with his things.

"Yeah." I glance around for my purse when my phone begins to ring and find it on the floor at the foot of the bed. When I pull it out, my stomach knots. "Oh no." I glance up at him. "It's my mom. If I don't answer it, my dad will be on the next flight."

"So answer it. You can talk to her while we head back to your hotel." He starts for the door, and although his suggestion sounds simple enough in theory, I know that if my mom hears him in the background, she's going to have a million questions I'm incapable of answering right now. "Come on, babe. We gotta go if we're gonna make it on time."

Dammit. With a sigh, I slide my finger across the screen and put it to my ear as I walk to the door he's holding open. "Hey, Mom."

“Oh, yay! You’re awake. I wasn’t sure what time zone you were in,” she says happily as I squeeze past Walker.

“Yep, just heading for my snorkel place now, so I don’t have long to chat.”

“That’s okay. Are you having fun?”

“So much fun.” I startle when Walker takes my hand. “Umm... is everyone good there?”

“Your dad is worried about you, but that’s nothing new.”

“I’ll call him,” I say quietly, trying not to get annoyed. I love my dad. I even appreciate his concern for my wellbeing. But there are times his worry makes me feel incapable, even when I know that’s not his intention.

“So what did you do last night?”

“I just kind of passed out after spending the day in the sun,” I lie, and Walker squeezes my hand.

“You’re wearing sunscreen, right? Skin cancer isn’t anything to play around with.”

“Yes.” I laugh, relaxing.

“Good,” she says quietly, then asks, “Have you figured out if you’re coming home next month?”

“I haven’t gotten my schedule yet, but I should have it by Friday, so I’ll let you know soon.”

“Okay, good. I just don’t want to plan our trip to see Grandma and Grandpa when you’re going to be here.”

“I could meet you guys in Florida instead. It would be nice to spend a few days with them.”

“They would love that. Just let me know the dates when you have them.”

“I will.” I watch Walker press the button for the elevator. “Mom, I’m gonna let you go, and I’ll call you back when I get to my hotel.” I squeeze my eyes closed. “Not that I’m not at my hotel right now. I just mean when I get back from my excursion,” I babble, digging my nails into Walker’s hand wrapped around mine when he chuckles.

“All right, honey. Love you. What time is it over?”

“It shouldn’t be more than a couple of hours.”

“Well, if I’m sleeping when you call back, I’ll talk to you tomorrow when you get home.”

“Okay. I love you too, Mom. Hug Dad for me.”

“I will,” she says softly before hanging up. I tuck my phone away and step onto the elevator with Walker when the door opens.

“You’re going back to the States?”

“Yeah, I try to see my parents every couple of months when my schedule allows.”

“Where are they?”

“Just outside of Nashville in Tennessee.”

“My sister lives in Nashville with her husband and son.”

“Have you been?”

“A couple of times.” His fingers tighten on mine. “I don’t get back to the States very often.”

“What about your parents?” I ask as we walk through the lobby after exiting the elevator.

“They live in Washington state.” Since he doesn’t willingly add more, I don’t ask the questions I want to—ones that are inappropriate in this situation, because they’re things

you'd ask if you're dating someone. Like, "are you close?" or "what do they do for a living?" Instead, I allow the comfortable silence to settle between us as we get into a cab.

With almost no traffic, we arrive at my hotel in less than ten minutes, and as soon as we get up to my room, I tell him to make himself comfortable while I go directly to the bathroom and start up the shower. Even if I don't have lots of time to spare, I still wash my hair and go through my entire routine before getting out and wrapping a towel around myself. Brushing my teeth, as I stand in front of the mirror, my towel slips, allowing me a glimpse of the marks he left on my breast, ones that match the marks I spotted in the shower on my lower belly, right above my pubic bone. I can't remember a guy ever leaving me with a physical reminder of us being together—certainly never ones that looked like some kind of claim.

Trying not to think too much into the possessiveness of his marks, I finish brushing my teeth and wrap my towel tighter around myself, then open the bathroom door. Before I even step into the bedroom, I can hear him on the phone talking to someone in Spanish. So with my hair still dripping wet, I go to my bag and start digging through it for a swimsuit to wear, while avoiding looking at where I know he's lounging on my bed and watching me.

Finding a pair of bottoms, I put them on under my towel, then find the matching top that looks similar to a sports bra. I turn away from him and put it on over my head before dropping the towel, pulling the swim top down completely. Once I get my wet hair free from the straps, I turn back to the bed, and the moment my gaze slides up to his, my cheeks warm.

“That color looks good on you,” he says, the phone still pressed to his ear. His voice is deep and gravelly and makes the space between my legs tingle, as it rolls across my skin. You would think that after last night, some of the sexual tension between us would’ve cooled, but it’s obvious it hasn’t. If anything, it might be worse, now that I know exactly what he’s capable of doing to me.

“Thanks.” I pull my eyes from his and start looking through my bag for something to wear over my suit, finding a simple black cotton spaghetti-strap dress that reaches mid thigh. Putting it on, I avoid looking at him again and go back to the bathroom. I quickly brush my hair and put it into a tight French braid, then lather myself with sunscreen. When I’m done, I walk back into the bedroom, where he’s now up and off the phone.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah.” I gather my beach bag and towel along with my cell that has been charging. It only takes a few minutes to get downstairs to the lobby, and when we’re outside, I give a cabdriver the address for the snorkeling place. It’s not far from the hotel, and if I had more time, we could walk. But this morning, I’m short on time.

We reach the small building near the beach in less than fifteen minutes, and I outmaneuver Walker before we get out of the cab and pass the driver some money for the ride. Probably way more than I should have, judging by the happy smile and about a dozen thanks he gives me before we even get out of the car.

Stepping into the simple gray building, I look around. The walls are covered with photos of people either diving or

snorkeling, and there are racks of wetsuits and equipment behind the counter.

“Morning,” a very attractive man with a thick Spanish accent greets us when he steps through the door behind us, wearing a gray shirt with the same logo on it as the sign hanging outside.

“Hi, I’m here to meet Antonio.” I smile, then look up at Walker when he gets close to my side and wraps his arm around my waist.

“That’s me. You are?” I focus on the man now walking across the room.

“Hanna.”

“Great.” He goes behind the counter and picks up a clipboard. “I just have a little paperwork for you to fill out, and once everyone else arrives, we’ll head down to the beach to go over some things before we take the boat to where we will be snorkeling.”

“Awesome.” I take the clipboard when he passes it over and begin to fill it out, with Walker watching.

“Have you snorkeled before?” Antonio asks, and I glance up at him.

“I haven’t had the chance, but I’ve always wanted to.”

“So, I get to pop your cherry, as you Americans say.” He grins.

“I guess so.” I laugh.

“I’m going with her,” Walker snaps through the room startling me, and his fingers clamp around my hip as Antonio focuses on him.

“It’s \$150 for the trip she signed up for.”

I don’t look up at Walker to see what he does, but he must give some kind of signal of agreement, because Antonio reaches for a second clipboard and passes it over to him. Biting my bottom lip, I sign my name on the line of my form and hand it to Antonio.

He doesn’t even look it over before he places it on the counter and orders, “Come with me. While he fills that out, we can get you set up with a mask and snorkel.”

“Okay.” I go to him behind the counter and try on three masks before I find one that fits my face properly. Before I’m done, ten other people have shown up, and Walker has finished his paperwork. It takes Antonio a while to get everyone checked in and set up with their gear, so by the time we head out a side door and down a set of stairs to the beach, the sun is above the horizon, and the beach has started to fill with people who are up early to catch some sun, a lot of them looking hungover, probably from partying too hard last night.

Taking off my dress when we reach the edge of the water, I shove it in my bag while everyone else undresses down to their swimsuits. I try not to think about the women checking Walker out, but I fail miserably. The only thing that makes me feel even a little better is that I haven’t once caught him eyeing any of the women in our group most of which are young and beautiful.

“We’re going to practice close to the shore until you’re comfortable blowing out your snorkel, diving, and taking off and putting on your mask. Then we’ll get on the boat and go out to the reef,” Antonio tells us, and I look over at Walker. He hasn’t once admitted he knows what he’s doing and that he’s

—as Otto put it—one of the best divers in the world. So I don't know what game he's playing or if this is a game at all.

One thing I do know is his presence is both comforting and just as distracting as it was yesterday.

Once we're all waist-deep in the water, I listen to Antonio's instructions and do what he shows us. It doesn't take long to get the hang of diving under the surf, then coming back up and blowing out from the snorkel, but I do freak myself out every time I take my first breath in, because I'm always sure I'm going to end up choking on water. After about twenty minutes of practice, we all gather our stuff and walk down a short dock to a boat bobbing in the water, with a driver waiting on us inside.

“Seating is tight, so Hanna, you can sit up here with us,” Antonio tells me, motioning to the seat between him and the driver.

“She's good with me.” Walker pulls me down to sit on his lap. I don't argue or even attempt to get up. I feel safer in his arms, which is probably the opposite of how I should feel, given this is only temporary. “When we're out in the water, I want you to stick close to me.” The demand whispered close to my ear causes goose bumps to spread across my skin.

“You haven't mentioned you're a pro-diver.” I peek at him over my shoulder, and his arms around me tighten briefly. Then his fingers begin to smooth up and down my stomach.

“Was I supposed to?”

“I don't know.” I shrug. “I just assumed you'd mention it.” Or maybe I figured, like every other man, he'd take the opportunity to brag about how amazing he is.

“There isn’t a reason to do that.” He nips my shoulder, and I bite my lip and cover his hand with mine, the sensation of his touch too much. Especially with his bare chest pressed against my back and his cock, which has hardened slightly, under my bottom.

As the boat begins to speed through the water, he holds onto me tightly, and every once in a while, I swear I feel the subtle brush of his lips on my bare shoulder. The sensations play havoc with my emotions, because they’re not sexual, more “you’re here and I like it,” which might be worse for my mental state, since it’s getting difficult to remember this is only temporary.

It takes about fifteen minutes to reach the cove where the reef is located, and I’m taken aback by how beautiful it is, with the sheer cliff that falls into the sea and clear blue water with speckles of a darker midnight blue where it gets deeper. The boat slows when we reach an area where buoys are laid out in a long row, then comes to a stop. After Antonio and the driver hook a ladder over the side of the boat, everyone makes their way down into the water, and I go in after Walker, realizing quickly that he might be able to touch, but I can’t. So I keep a hold of him as Antonio goes over a few more instructions, mostly letting us know we’re not allowed to touch any of the coral or allowed to disturb the sea life.

When he tells us we’re free to explore, I put on my mask and wait for Walker to do the same before I drag in a deep breath and swim a couple of feet from him, so I have room to dive under.

Unlike where we were practicing earlier, I’m instantly mesmerized by the coral and brightly colored fish that stand out against the stark-white sand. I never would’ve guessed that

being under the water would give me the same rush I get when flying, but there's no denying it's a high all its own. As I explore, I make sure to swim up for air when I need it and notice Walker is never very far from me. He follows my every move like a shadow yet still gives me space to do my own thing.

As we swim away from our group, Walker grabs my hand and motions toward a bunch of seaweed. It takes me a moment to notice there's something moving amongst the swaying leaves, and my heart leaps with excitement when I realize it's an octopus. It's not very big, but the fluid way it glides through the water is enchanting, and I want to follow when it begins to swim again, but I need air. When I breach the surface, Walker pops up next to me, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders, the two of us removing our masks.

“Did you see that?” I nearly squeal.

“Yeah.” He laughs, his eyes wandering over my face while a small smile plays on his lips.

“That was the coolest thing I've ever seen in my life. I wish I brought a camera so I could've taken a picture.”

“Next time.” He smooths his hand down my cheek.

“I can totally see why you love diving.” I grin. “I want to take SCUBA lessons next.”

“I'll teach you.”

I open my mouth to remind him that he won't, but his fingers slide into my hair, and he pulls me close, covering my mouth with his. It's not a kiss like the one he first gave me last night. This one is slow and sweet and drawn out... until Antonio breaks into the moment, calling for us all to get back

on the boat. When Walker pulls back, leaving me with one last brush of his lips against mine, my lashes flutter open.

My eyes scan over his face, trying to memorize this moment. His body pressed against mine, the way the sun feels on my face, the smell of the salty air, and the taste of him still on my tongue and the happiness wrapped around my insides. Because I know one day, all this will be just a beautiful memory.

And that sucks more than it should.

CHAPTER 6

hanna

Watching a shirtless Otto, wearing only a pair of red swim trunks, climb the high cliff just feet from the boat we're on, I can't help but glance between Walker and Ham. Both men look annoyed.

Last night at dinner I thought that Walker was a little harsh with Otto, I assumed he couldn't be as immature as Walker was making him out to be, but after spending the day with him, I now know where he was coming from. He and Ham have been babysitting Otto all day as he's lived his best life, and even I have found it annoying to constantly be on edge, wondering what he will do next that might possibly get him hurt or worse.

"Come on, baby! You can do it!" Gigi, one of the five women who showed up with him this afternoon, screams and claps when he stands at the highest point of the cliff.

I glance over at her and her friends. I haven't had much interaction with their group. They pretty much made it clear I wouldn't be allowed to "sit with them" from the moment they sashayed onto the boat in their bikinis, with their full faces of makeup and high heels. Not that I'm heartbroken about it. There's only so much I have to say about designer bags, partying, and where I'll be vacationing next.

Really, I don't even know what Otto sees in them past how beautiful they all are.

"Oh God." I hold my breath and latch onto Walker's thigh with my fingers when Otto jumps, and I don't release my grip until I see his head reappear above the water, his arms shooting into the sky.

"Fuck yeah!" he shouts, shoving his hair out of his face.

Gigi, who has been all over him, gets up and bends over the side of the boat as he swims toward us. The guy is obviously an adrenalin junky, and the more he drinks, the fewer inhibitions he has.

"That was so sexy, baby." Gigi pushes out her ass while her tits practically fall over the top of her teeny, tiny bikini top as he climbs up the ladder.

"You're so sexy." He grabs her ass when he's standing on the deck, and she pulls his face down to hers and shoves her tongue into his mouth.

"I think I just threw up a little," I mutter under my breath, and both Walker and Ham laugh.

"Let's do body shots," one of Gigi's posse suggests, grabbing a bottle of tequila, and I know that's my cue to go. About five minutes into our trip Otto and the girls started drinking and they have progressively gotten more and more provocative, the more they drink. And even if I wouldn't consider myself a prude, I have zero desire to see anyone having sex. And I would put money on that happening in the next few minutes.

"I'm going upstairs," I tell Walker when Otto turns up the speaker and one of the girls climbs up onto the counter near the bar.

And yes, there is a bar. When Walker told me he rented a boat for the day, I assumed it would be similar to the one he and I were on this morning to go snorkeling. I had no clue it would basically be a yacht, with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and a bar.

“I’ll come with you.” He gives my thigh a squeeze, and I get up.

Taking my bottle of water with me, I start past Otto and his friends who have started to gather around the counter.

“You’re not leaving, are you, Hanna?” Otto asks, grabbing my arm, and I glance up at him. He’s totally wasted, his eyes are glassed over and cheeks tinged with pink.

“You could be first.” The girl now lying on the counter offers me her spot with a drunken smile.

“Let her go,” Walker bites out, and Otto instantly releases the hold he has on my arm before I can open my mouth to say no thanks.

“I was just asking.” Otto holds up a hand as he sways on his feet.

Looking at him, I feel my face soften. He’s like an oversized kid. “You should come upstairs with us and drink some water, maybe relax for a few minutes,” I suggest quietly.

“I don’t need any water.” He looks down at Gigi, who’s started grinding on him.

“Go on up, baby. I’ll be there in a minute,” Walker orders, giving my hip a squeeze, and I glance up at him. He looks pissed, and I’m sure he’s going to have another talk with Otto, but I don’t think it’s going to do any good, not right now when he’s blitzed out of his mind.

With a nod, I take the steps up to the second level, where the captain's cabin is, along with another huge deck.

Taking a seat on one of the double lounge chairs that's as wide as a king size bed, I lie back. Minutes later, I watch Walker's head appear at the top of the stairs. He doesn't come to me right away; instead, he steps into where the captain is and begins talking to him. I can't hear what he says from where I am, but when he starts in my direction, the engine of the boat comes to life.

Lifting my hand to block the sun from my eyes, I raise a brow at Walker.

"Ham and I figured it's time to head back before they start acting like this is the set of a porno, when we'd have to pay an extra ten grand to the captain."

"Is he always like this?" I ask, scooting over and making room for him when he takes a seat next to me.

"Not always, but Ham said he was just as wild last night."

"So, your talk with him didn't help?"

"Apparently not." He scrubs his hands down his face before lying back next to me.

"One day, he'll grow up," I say quietly, and he makes a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat like he doesn't believe me, which I don't blame him for.

"Sorry about this."

"Why?" I curl into his side when he wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer.

"Have you not been downstairs for the last three hours?" He tips his head down to me, and I meet his gaze.

“We’re on a yacht in paradise. There are worse ways to spend a day.”

“This isn’t a yacht, baby.”

Ignoring how my belly warms every time he calls me baby, I shake my head. “There are bedrooms and a kitchen. It’s a yacht, honey.”

“We’ll just have to agree to disagree until I can show you what a yacht *really* is.”

He won’t be doing that, but I’m not going to remind him.

“Oh my God, it’s so big!” I hear one of the women downstairs cry out in glee, and my nose scrunches.

“I hope they aren’t talking about what I think they’re talking about.”

“Who the fuck knows.” He lets out a breath, and I rest the side of my head on his chest as the boat moves through the water, not fast but at a decent speed.

“Hopefully he’s being safe if it is.” I peek up at him through my lashes. “Are those the girls you guys hung out with the night before we did?”

“No, and I wasn’t hanging out with anyone. I was waiting for you to call.”

“Liar.” I roll my eyes.

“I never lie. I’d rather hurt someone’s feelings with honesty than lie to them. The night before you called, I hung out with Otto and Ham by the pool, and when shit started to get out of hand, I went to bed. I’m too fucking old for that bullshit and what’s happening downstairs right now.”

“What about Ham?” I ask, because he hasn’t seemed the slightest bit interested in any of the women, even with all of them making it obvious he could have one or all of them.

“He’s got a brother he takes care of back home who lost all ability to do it himself because some idiot got behind the wheel of a car when they were wasted. He doesn’t want something like that on Otto’s conscience, so he tends to hover.”

“Does Otto know that?” I ask quietly. I hope not, because that says a whole lot of not-nice things about Otto if he does.

“Ham doesn’t talk about it, so I doubt it.”

“He should tell him.”

“I’ve said the same, but it’s his story to tell, not mine.”

“I guess.” I rest the side of my head against his chest and close my eyes.

“You leave tomorrow,” he says quietly, smoothing his fingers up and down my hip, and darn if I don’t feel a weight land in the center of my chest. “We need to talk about what happens after that.”

“Walker—”

“I want to see you again.”

“I…” *I want that too*, I think but don’t say, because admitting that to him is opening myself up to getting hurt. “I don’t know if I can offer you that right now,” I murmur quietly. “And the truth is, I don’t trust my judgment, and even though I really like you, I—”

“What happened?” he cuts me off. “Why did you decide you needed to take a break from dating for a year?”

“Besides the fact that I have the worst taste in men?”

“Besides that,” he agrees, and there’s no missing the anger and frustration that’s filled his tone since starting this conversation.

“I was seeing a guy for a few months. He was a pilot for another airline, and I thought things were pretty serious. He insisted we be exclusive and talked to my mom and dad, and he was planning on going home with me to meet them.” I rub my lips together. “Then, we were out to dinner one night, and his wife showed up at the restaurant we were at.” His arm around me tightens. “I had no idea he was married or that he had kids.”

“What the fuck?”

“He had a whole other life and was also dating other women besides me. He got one of them pregnant,” I whisper as I go back to that evening in my head, all the hurt and embarrassment I felt washing over me like it was just yesterday.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?” Benjamin asks, and I laugh as my stomach warms under his gaze.

“A couple of times.”

“I hate that I haven’t been able to see you as often as we’d like.” He reaches across the table for my hand. “Hopefully, things will slow down here soon, so I can change that.”

“I hope so too, but I get you’re busy,” I say quietly.

“What did I do to deserve you?” His fingers squeeze mine. “How about we go out of town next weekend?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, we can take the train to Paris and stay near the Eiffel Tower.”

“I would love that,” I whisper, and he grins.

“You said you were going to your mum’s,” a woman’s voice cracks across the room, and I glance around to see who the blonde I catch weaving her way through tables is talking to. “Instead, you left your wife and kids at home to go out on a date?”

As she’s getting closer, a weight lands on my chest when I realize she’s looking directly at the man sitting across from me.

“You’re married? And... and have kids?” I whisper, looking at Benjamin. He doesn’t hear me, or maybe he does, but his panicked gaze is focused on the woman now heading right to our table with rage in her pretty blue eyes.

“Terry, honey, this is my coworker, Hanna. We just happened to run into each other tonight and decided to get dinner,” he tells her in his British accent I found so charming the first time he spoke to me.

My hands ball into fists, and I open my mouth to call him a liar.

“Liar!” Terry gets there before I can, then she drags her eyes off him as she begins digging into her bag. “I knew you’d think I’m a bloody idiot.”

My back straightens, and my muscles bunch when her hand comes out of her purse. Honestly, I’m not sure what to expect, so when she tosses a stack of papers onto the table between him and me, some of them sliding across the crisp white tablecloth and onto the floor, I blink, then my heart lodges in my throat when I realize what I’m looking at. Photos I had no idea were being taken of Ben and me together—or

mostly of him and me. In more than a few of them, he's with other women.

My stomach rolls, and my fists clench tighter.

"I can explain." He starts to push back from the table like he's going to stand, but she doesn't give him the chance.

Instead, she pulls out one of the two extra chairs and takes a seat. "Please do. I'd love to hear this." She places her bag on her lap and turns to me. "Since you're not the only one, I'm sure you'd like to hear this as well."

If I was a spectator and not a participant, I would absolutely be interested in what's about to come out of his mouth. But I don't want or need to stick around for this.

She looks back at her husband.

Her husband... who she has kids with.

Oh God, I'm going to throw up.

"Well, go on then. Explain to me why you've been cheating on me for the last year, if not longer. I'd also like you to tell me about the baby you'll be expecting in three months' time."

"What?" I breathe, and she swings her head in my direction.

"Oh, did he not tell you he's gotten another woman pregnant?"

"He left out a lot," I whisper.

"I bet he did." She nods, focusing on Benjamin once again.

"Go on. Tell me how Hanna—" She looks at me. "It is Hanna, isn't it?"

I nod stupidly. “Right.” She turns back to him. “Tell me about how Hanna is just a coworker and how I’m just confused about you cheating on me with multiple women and having a baby with one of them.”

I glance around the room, half-expecting someone to jump out and tell me this is some kind of messed-up practical joke. It has to be; this kind of thing doesn’t happen in real life. Of course, there is no camera crew or show host hidden in the room, but I do become very aware of just how much attention is on the three of us.

With my cheeks hot and my throat burning, I turn back to Ben, who has always seemed so sure of himself but now looks ready to pass out. The color has drained from his handsome face, and there’s sweat dotting his forehead.

“I think I should go,” I say quietly, scooting my chair back.

“Don’t leave on my account. After this conversation, he’s all yours.” Terry shoots me a smile that doesn’t meet her eyes.

“I don’t want him,” I assure her softly, grabbing my coat and my bag without sparing either of them another look. I carefully maneuver my way through the restaurant, avoiding all the eyes I feel on me as I make my way across the room.

Skin flush with embarrassment, and tears filling my eyes, I step out the door into the cool evening air and relish the deep breath I’m able to take as I stop at the edge of the sidewalk.

“He was a piece of shit, Hanna. No man worth anything would play games like that.” Walker’s deep voice breaks through the memory, and I swallow hard.

“I agree, but that situation shined a light on how naïve and ignorant I am when it comes to men.”

“You trusted him.”

“I did. I also actively avoided every single red flag waving right in front of my face, and not just with him, but with every guy I’ve been with.”

“So, because of that, you aren’t open to exploring things with me?” he asks, and the question hangs over us like a storm cloud, because I honestly don’t know how to answer it.

I don’t want to get hurt, and after the last two days, I know the pain he has the potential to cause me is something I might not recover from.

CHAPTER 7

walker

Looking down at the top of Hanna's head, as she sleeps soundly with her cheek on my chest, her arm across my abs, and her knee cocked over my hip, I try to talk myself into getting up, so I can be gone before the sun starts to rise. But every fucking time I think about making a move to get out of bed, a tightness hits my chest, paralyzing me. I know in my gut there's no way this will be the last time I'll have her like this, but she's got it in her head that we have an end date, and that day is today.

Drawing in a breath, I slowly untangle myself from her, then freeze when she stirs. She doesn't wake but curls around the pillow I was lying on, so I grab my shorts off the floor and put them on, then quietly gather my shit, shoving it all in my bag. I give her one last, long look before I walk around the bed to where her cell is plugged in, and take it off the charger.

She might have her plan for how things between us are going to go, but I have my own.

CHAPTER 8

hanna

Waking to the hotel phone ringing loudly, I roll over and answer it with a groggy “Hello?”

“Ms. Mayson, this is your seven o’clock wake-up call,” a woman greets, and I blink totally confused since I didn’t ask for a wake-up call. Grabbing my cell phone from the nightstand, I find it dead. Looking past it to the alarm clock, my heart drops into my stomach when I see it is, in fact, seven in the morning, which means I have exactly one hour to get to the airport that is at least thirty minutes away.

“Oh my God.” I drop the phone into its cradle without even saying “thank you” and toss back the blanket before spinning to where Walker is.

Or was.

I stare at his empty spot on my bed for a long moment, trying to dissect the emotion suddenly weighing heavy in my stomach. I know I shouldn’t be upset that he left without waking me to say goodbye, but telling myself that does nothing to ease the disappointment wrapping around my insides like a vise.

Swallowing hard over the sudden lump in my throat, my eyes slide closed as I get up. *I thought that—*

I cut off my own thoughts, because they're too whimsical, especially in this situation. I'm the one who told him I wanted a vacation fling, and that's exactly what he gave me. It's not his fault I convinced myself that I could handle a physical relationship without involving my stupid feelings.

Focusing on what I need to do and not the urge to crawl back into bed and request ice cream from room service, I go to the bathroom and start up the shower. I don't really have time, but I can still smell the scent of him on my skin, and there is no way I'll make it through the day in my current state without a shower.

After catching a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror before I step over the edge of the tub, I slam the curtain closed to block it out. Still, it's there in the forefront of my mind—my hair a mess from his hands controlling me as he kissed me last night, and more bruises from his mouth and fingers added to the ones that had already started to fade.

I don't need the physical reminder of him. Every second we spent together is burnt into my brain.

As I rush through my shower, I refuse to give in to the urge to cry. When I get home, I'll take some time to feel sorry for myself, and after, I'll add another five years onto my no-dating rule. With the addition of no vacation flings, because this situation just proves I have no business getting into *any* kind of relationship with a man.

Once I'm done, I quickly dry off and get dressed, then pack my suitcase. I gather my purse, tossing in my useless cell phone—although I swear I put it on its charger last night.

Somehow, I manage to get downstairs and in a cab by seven twenty, and I arrive at the airport to make it through security and to my gate with minutes to spare. The moment I

step onto the plane, I go through the motions, more than thankful that the crew I'm working with doesn't know me well. So no one realizes something is off or that the smile I wear most of the day is fake.

I arrive in London a little after five in the evening, after a day of flying from Ibiza to Paris and then catching the train back to the city, with my suitcase dragging behind me. I'm emotionally and physically exhausted.

All day, I've gone over and over my time with Walker in my head, replaying every moment and everything I said. I thought by not agreeing to see him again that I was protecting myself, but this pain in my chest feels worse than when I found out what a piece of garbage Ben was. So, the joke's on me.

Taking my cell out of my purse as I walk toward the subway—known in London as the Tube—that will take me home, I turn it on. I need to call my mom and let her know I'm okay. I'm sure she's worried, since I didn't call her back last night. And I didn't have a chance to call her earlier, with my phone being dead this morning, then with the layover between flights being so short.

When my phone comes to life, I freeze in the middle of the walkway and stare down at the device in my hand in disbelief, while everyone continues to rush by me. I try to convince myself that I'm seeing things, but I'm not. Somehow, I ended up with Walker's phone, and I know it's his, since the screensaver is a photo of him in his diving gear. One of him sitting on the deck of a ship with Ham and Otto each of them holding a gold bar, with the sun shining bright above their handsome heads. Dropping my purse to the top of my suitcase,

I start to frantically dig through it for my own cell phone, which I already know is not there.

Startling when the phone in my hand begins to ring, I stare at the name **Lindsey** on the screen, and my stomach twists into a knot, while those familiar tendrils of jealousy make me feel nauseous. I don't answer it; I press the side button, sending Lindsey to voicemail, then drop the phone into my purse like it's on fire.

I get off the train at my stop forty-five minutes later and lug my suitcase up the million stairs to the sidewalk, then drag it with me to my apartment two blocks away, trying to figure out what I'm going to do. Obviously, I need my phone back, and Walker needs his, so we're going to have to talk. But after waking up and feeling like I did when he wasn't there, I'm not sure it's a good idea.

When I reach the tiled stairs that lead to the main door of the three-story apartment house I live in, it takes a couple of minutes to get through the two heavy doors that lead into the main entryway, because they're both original and should have been replaced about a hundred years ago. But after I'm in, I pass the staircase to the second and third-floor apartments and unlock the three locks of my door.

Pushing it open, I see the hall light is on to greet me, and Mizzy stares at me with her green eyes unblinking before she jumps down from where she was perched on the side table that holds the ceramic bowl where I keep my keys and random things I pull from my pockets from time to time.

"Hello to you too," I mutter to her back, as she flounces off with her orange tail flipping in the air. Her attitude doesn't surprise me. She's always mad when I'm gone for any length of time, even with my landlord Mrs. Lewis coming downstairs

from her apartment to feed her and give her treats daily while I'm away.

After dropping my suitcase in the spare room next to the laundry, I take Walker's phone with me to the kitchen and place it on the counter. As I move around my kitchen, looking for something to eat, I continuously glance over at it like I expect it to come to life and give me whatever answer it is I'm looking for.

That doesn't happen, so with no other choice, I pick it up and slide my finger across the screen, finding it odd that it unlocks without me having to use a code. I don't look through his contacts or text messages; instead, I pull up the keypad and type in my number, a funny feeling landing in my gut when the name Teeny pulls up in his contacts.

"Hanna," his deep, familiar voice greets me after the second ring, and I lean against the counter.

"Umm... you have my phone."

"I do," he agrees, and my brows dart together. He doesn't sound surprised by this news. Then again, he probably figured out way before I did that there was a mix-up. "Are you home?"

I look around my apartment like I need confirmation of where I am. "Yes."

"How was your day?"

"Exhausting." I pull out one of the stools from the high counter in my kitchen and climb up onto it to sit. "I.... You were gone this morning when I woke up."

"Did you want me to be there when you woke up?" he asks, sounding genuinely curious, and it's on the tip of my tongue to say yes, but I don't.

“If you had been, I wouldn’t have your phone, and you wouldn’t have mine.”

“Then I’m glad I wasn’t there,” he mutters, and I bite the inside of my cheek. “Your mom called.”

“You didn’t answer it, did you?”

“I wasn’t going to, but she started calling about every thirty minutes, and I didn’t want her to worry.”

“Oh no.”

“I told her you’d call from my number.”

“She’s going to think I’ve been kidnapped.”

“She did until I talked to your dad and explained things.”

“Explained things?” I repeat, not sure I even want to know what that means.

“Explained who I am to you.”

“You told my parents you’re a guy I hooked up with while I was on vacation?” This just keeps getting worse and worse.

“You and I both know I’m more than that,” he says gently.

“Who exactly did you say you are?”

“A guy you just started seeing.”

“You didn’t,” I breathe and then start to panic when he doesn’t tell me he’s joking. “You are joking, right?”

“Your friend Star sent you a text. She asked you to let her know when you’re back, and April—who I’m guessing is your cousin—wanted to know how I was in bed.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been reading my messages.” Even though I know a preview pops up on the screen when it’s

locked, I have mine set to not show the actual message. I have nosy cousins, after all. So how is he—

“All is fair in love and war.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll figure it out,” he mumbles, then asks, “Has anyone called me?”

“Lindsey,” I snap.

“What did she say?”

My eyes widen. “I don’t know. I didn’t answer her call.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is not my phone,” I remind him of something I shouldn’t have to remind him of.

“Lindsey is the chef on the ship we work on. She was probably calling to ask if we had any special requests for our next trip out. I have exes, but none of them call me.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“You didn’t, but I’m letting you know anyway, so you’ll know that when my phone rings, it’s not some chick I’ve been with.”

“I don’t need to know that.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Walker—”

“You said you missed the red flags with your ex.”

“The way you’re acting is a red flag, Walker!” I cry, sliding off my stool, and I begin to pace between the living room and kitchen.

“How did you feel this morning when you woke up to find me gone?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“You know it fucking does, Hanna, because I fucking *hated* leaving you,” he growls, and darn if those stupid tears I fought off this morning don’t sting my nose again. “I get you’re scared, but I’m not. So while you figure out you can trust me, I’m going to keep shoving us forward.”

“You’re insane,” I whisper.

“Maybe,” he agrees, not sounding even a little offended. “I’ve got some time off in a little over two weeks. I’ll come to you, or you’ll come to me, and between then and now, we can talk on the phone, or email when I don’t have service.”

“You can’t just decide these things.”

“I miss you already.”

The quiet statement hits me like it was shouted in my face, and I swallow hard but don’t reply.

“What are you doing now?”

“I was going to eat dinner, but now I’m going to have to do damage control with my parents.”

“Mm-hm.”

The sound of his agreement makes me grit my teeth.

“How did you get my phone unlocked anyway?” I mean, I can see how he could answer a call, but there is no way he should be able to look at my texts and things.

“When I spoke to your dad, he gave me the code. He said you sent it to him and your mom in your ‘if I go missing’ file. You’re going to have to explain that one to me.”

“So, my parents hate me,” I surmise, ignoring the last part. “Good to know.” The sound of his laughter makes me both want to toss the phone and admit how much I miss him.

“Do you need me to send you your parents’ numbers?”

“No, I have them,” I grit out.

“All right, baby. Call me back. I’m going to be up for a while. I’m taking over making sure Otto doesn’t end up in jail tonight, so Ham can get a break.”

“Are you guys going out with Gigi and her friends?”

“That jealousy in your voice is giving a lot away, babe. You might want to do a better job of hiding it, if you want to convince me that you don’t like me.”

“I’m not jealous,” I huff.

“Okay,” he agrees, not at all sounding convinced.

“I’m not.”

“Good. But just so we’re on the same page, I’m not hanging out with any other woman.”

“You can do whatever you want.”

“Right.” He chuckles. “Go call your parents, then call me back later, baby.”

“Maybe.” I hang up to the sound of him laughing, then with a groan of frustration I go to my suitcase and get my computer so I can FaceTime my mom.

“Hey, honey.” Mom smiles as her face fills the screen. “I was just about to call you.”

“I don’t have my phone.”

“I know. Walker explained there was a mix-up and gave us his number.” Of course he did. “So did you have a good time?” she asks, failing to hide her knowing smile.

“It was okay.”

“Just okay?” She raises a brow.

“Mom.” I sigh. “Just ask what you really want to ask.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“So, you’re not wondering why some guy has my phone and why he’s telling you we’re seeing each other?”

“I don’t know, do you want to talk about that?”

I open my mouth, then close it, because I don’t even know how to begin that conversation.

“He seems like a nice guy,” she urges.

“You said the same thing about Ben.”

“I did,” she says quietly, then adds, “And I was wrong, but no one could have known he was lying about who he was, honey. And I know he hurt you, but—”

“He didn’t hurt me,” I cut her off.

“Hanna.” She sighs.

“Okay, yes, he hurt me, but it was more than that. Finding out he wasn’t at all who I thought he was made me question my ability to trust my own judgment.”

“That’s understandable.” She goes quiet for a moment before prompting, “Tell me about Walker?”

“I just met him.”

“I know, but he seems pretty positive there’s something between you two.”

“Did he say that?”

“Yes,” I hear my dad’s voice say in the background, and I bite my lip as his face fills the screen behind my mom.

“Hi, Dad.”

“He told us you’d be reluctant to admit you’re seeing him, because Ben is a douchebag.”

“Dad.” Gah, I’m going to kill Walker.

“If you don’t like this guy, let me know, and I’ll fly to London and deal with getting your phone back myself.”

“That’s not necessary.” My muscles bunch. I know my dad, and that’s *not* an empty offer. If I said I wanted him here, he’d be on the next flight with no questions asked.

“That’s what I thought.” He grins, and I grit my teeth. “Love you, kid.”

“Love you too,” I mutter, watching him kiss the side of my mom’s head before he disappears out of sight.

“He’s gone,” Mom says quietly, then her face softens. “You know, when your dad and I got together, I convinced myself that I didn’t want to be with him.”

“I know. I’ve heard the story.”

“Then you know that if it weren’t for him being so sure we would end up together and shoving down the walls I built up to protect myself, I wouldn’t have this beautiful life I do now.” She lowers her voice as she continues. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, and if you’re not interested in Walker, by all means, get your phone back and block him. But if there’s even the tiniest bit of interest there, do yourself a favor, honey, and give him a chance.”

“Sure.”

“All right,” she says softly before tipping her head to the side. “You look tired. Get some sleep and call me tomorrow when you get back home again.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too.” She ends the call, and I sigh as I pull up the video group chat I have with my cousins. Which I learn was a huge mistake when they all start laughing after I tell them about the phone mix-up and Walker talking to my parents.

“You can stop laughing.” I glare at April, July, May, and Harmony, but they don’t stop. If anything, they start to laugh harder. May using the sleeve of her sweater to dab the wetness from her eyes makes me regret my decision to call them. So much for moral support.

“It’s you in the situation, so you don’t get how funny it is.” July tries and fails to pull it together, and I press my lips into a thin line.

“There is nothing funny about having a guy you just met telling your parents you two are seeing each other, then explaining to them that the only reason you’re reluctant to admit it is because you were hurt by your ex and don’t trust men. Then for your parents to think that is totally normal and agree with him.”

“He just told them what they already knew,” Harmony says quietly, giving me a soft look. “The whole reason you decided to stop dating for a year was because you were hurt and don’t trust men. He didn’t lie.”

“Let me ask you something,” April cuts in, and I focus on her face in the corner of my computer screen. “If you didn’t

still have the bitter taste of Ben's betrayal in your mouth, would you have agreed to see Walker when he told you he wanted to see you again?"

"Maybe," I snap.

"Then I'm glad he's going to this extreme to get and keep your attention." She smirks.

"You forget." I narrow my eyes on her smug face. "I didn't tell him that I wanted to see him again, and I was just supposed to have a vacation fling—which, I might add, was *your* brilliant suggestion."

"You're right, but sometimes we get in our own way, thinking we're protecting ourselves, when all we're actually doing is causing a different kind of damage. Trust me. I've been there and done that, so good for him for going after what he wants."

"And what about what I want?"

"You want him, Hanna. You're just being stubborn." Harmony rolls her eyes.

"Now, the real question here is... have you gone through his phone?" July asks, and I jerk back.

"What? No! Absolutely not."

"You should." She shrugs. "You can tell a lot about a person by what is in their phone. Think about how much information you have on your phone, from old texts to photos. Heck, even your Google searches say a lot about who you are."

"Unlike him, I respect other people's privacy."

"I'm going to assume from that comment that he's gone through your phone already?" April smiles.

“Yes, and thanks for the message asking if he was good in bed.”

“You’re welcome.” She grins, then her look becomes curious. “So how was he?”

“We’re not talking about that.”

“She’s blushing, so that means he’s good.” May laughs, then asks, “When are you seeing him again?”

“He’s still in Ibiza and is going back to work. He said he has time off in a couple of weeks. We’ll meet up then to exchange phones.”

“I guarantee you’re going to do a lot more than exchange phones when you see him again.” April grins, and I sigh.

Any other family would consider this whole situation with Walker concerning, but of course mine thinks his behavior is completely normal.

“I’m going to hang up now. I need to get ready for work in the morning.”

“Keep us updated on what’s going on.”

Ignoring that request, I hang up after saying goodbye and glance over at Walker’s phone on my nightstand. Picking it up, the screen comes to life, and I stare at his picture for a moment before sliding my finger across the bottom. A tiny voice in the back of my head urges me to snoop, and even though I know it’s wrong, I touch the Photos icon and begin swiping through his pictures.

A lot of them are of the ocean and him diving, but there are a few of who I’m guessing is his sister and her son. Exiting out of his photos, I go to his texts and scroll through without opening any of them up before I go to his search engine.

I don't know what I expect to find. I just know that mine is mostly filled with clothing shops, restaurants, and recipes. His isn't much more exciting—websites for diving gear mixed with scores for football games.

The latest one in his long list grabs my attention though, because it's for the travel time between London and Bournemouth, where he's working, which I find out is less than two hours by train. I know I shouldn't assume him googling that question has anything to do with me, but in my gut, I know it does.

And darn if I don't like the way it makes me feel, knowing he wanted to calculate how far we'd be from each other.

CHAPTER 9

hanna

God, I'm ridiculous. I think to myself as I sit in the in the coffee shop outside my gate, and scan through the text exchange between Walker and me from this last week. I miss him, which is laughable since I'm the one who said I wouldn't want to see him again after our time in Ibiza. Yet here I am, pining away for even the sound of his voice, something I haven't heard since he lost cell service, and only has spotty limited Internet on the ship.

When a message suddenly appears from him my stomach dips.

Walker: Hey baby, are you at the airport?

Me: Yes, just drinking some coffee while I wait for my plane to show up.

I press Send on the text, and a second later, a reply pops up.

Walker: I would ask you to send me a picture of yourself in that tight skirt I know you're wearing, but I wouldn't get it, so I won't beg.

Smiling, I roll my eyes.

Me: I actually have on pants today, because it was raining here this morning.

Walker: Good. I don't enjoy the idea of every man on your flight imagining sliding up that skirt while you're walking down the aisle.

Me: No one is thinking about that.

Walker: We'll agree to disagree. Have you decided if you're coming here or if I'm coming to you next week?

Biting my lip, I type back.

Me: You can come here. I have a spare room.

Walker: Otto and Ham won't be joining me, so the spare room is good to know about but won't be necessary.

I type...

Me: Where will you be sleeping then?

then delete it as another message from him pops up.

Walker: I'm getting ready to put on my gear, baby. I'll talk to you on the upside.

Me: Okay, be safe <3

Walker: Safe flight, baby.

“Hanna?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end hearing my name spoken in a deep, very-familiar British accent. Turning slowly and hoping I'm wrong I find Benjamin standing a few feet away, looking as handsome as always in his pilot's uniform, with his hat tucked under his arm.

“I thought that was you.” He takes a step in my direction with a familiar smile on his face. “How have you been?”

How have I been, is he serious right now? “Are you seriously greeting me like we’re old friends?” I bite out as I shoot out of my chair and hurry to gather my things.

“Hanna.” He grabs my upper arm, and I jerk from his hold and whip my head around.

“Do not touch me.”

“Okay.” He holds up his hand. “I just want to explain things. I’ve tried to call and—”

“We have nothing to talk about,” I cut him off, enunciating each and every word.

“I should have told you.” His expression fills with sympathy and remorse.

“Oh my God.” I laugh without humor as I attempt to step around him, because stupid me chose the corner to park myself in, thinking it was away from everyone.

Unknowingly, I set my own trap.

“And how do you think that conversation would have gone, Benjamin?” I ask sarcastically, then do my best British accent. “Hey, Hanna, by the way, I just want to let you know that even though I told you I was falling in love with you, I have a wife and kids at home, and I’m sleeping with other women. I hope you don’t mind.”

I try to step around him once more, but he blocks my path.

“Things between Terry and I are complicated.”

“Yeah, I bet. I mean, things do get kinda complicated when you cheat on your wife with multiple women and get one of

them pregnant.”

He glances around then lowers his voice. “If you’d let me explain, you’d understand.”

I look up at him, wondering how big of an idiot he thinks I am. A giant one would be my guess, because there is no explaining away anything that he did.

“Move out of my way before I start to scream.”

“Hanna—”

“Now, Benjamin.” I stare at him, and he stares back, before he lets out a long, put-out sigh and steps aside. Moving past him, I leave the coffee shop and go to the women’s restroom, where I know I’ll be safe from running into him again, and I close myself in one of the stalls.

As I stand there in the confines of the small space, I try to figure out what it is I’m feeling, and it doesn’t take me long to settle on rage. I’m not sad, and there are none of those old feelings of hurt I felt months ago. No, I’m angry, angry for myself and every other woman he lied to, especially when he obviously feels like his actions can be easily explained away and maybe even forgiven with a conversation. I just hope his wife and the other women he was seeing are not stupid enough to fall for his BS.

Once I know I’ve gotten myself together, I leave the stall, wash my hands, and touch up my makeup, since my lipstick came off while I was drinking coffee, then I walk out to my gate. Since the plane arrived while I was in the restroom, I check in with the desk and head down the walkway.

The moment I step onto the plane, Douglas steps out of the cockpit and greets me with a smile that flounders as his gaze roams over my face. “What happened?”

“I ran into Ben,” I say quietly, tucking my bag away in the stewardess closet.

“Did you speak with him?”

“He wanted to talk. I didn’t want to listen.”

His look turns hard. “I told you before that you need to turn him in.”

“You know doing that will likely only cause problems for me. I’m here on a work visa that can be taken away in an instant, especially if he claims I knew he was married and the airline sides with him.”

“You didn’t know,” he growls, his face turning red.

“I know,” I agree softly. “But it would be his word against mine, and unless his wife has said something about his affair to his boss or someone else, they won’t take me seriously. They might even claim I’m being vindictive and trying to ruin him. It’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Hanna—”

“Douglas, you know I’m right. Just think about it. There is nothing the airline will do. They don’t care about cheating. If they fired every single person who’s ever had an affair, they would only be left with a handful of pilots and air hostesses.”

His jaw gets tight. Even if he doesn’t want to admit it, he knows I’m right. Cheating in this industry is as frequent as going to the bathroom. Especially when you work international flights, where you have to be away from home on a regular basis.

Heck, I’ve heard rumors that a couple of pilots for my current airline have whole other families they maintain in different countries, because the wives don’t know about each

other and likely never will. It makes me sick, thinking about the kids they have, who will have to deal with that situation when the truth eventually comes out. But it could be years and years before that happens. And since the airlines won't do much or anything at all, these men are allowed to continue what they're doing.

And no, I'm not being sexist by saying "men," because it's only ever them who are able to live a double life. A woman would have a very difficult time hiding a pregnancy for nine months or explaining what happened to the baby she was pregnant with.

"You should have let me kick his arse," he bites out, and I shake my head.

"Blair would kill you if you got into a fight."

"You obviously don't know my wee wife very well, lass. She would have been cheering me on as I wiped the floor with him."

"Well, there will be no wiping the floor with anyone," I say quietly, then turn to Ria when she steps onto the plane. "Hey." I plaster a smile on my face, and she bends down, giving me an air kiss on each of my cheeks.

"I was so happy when I saw you were going to be with me today."

"Me too." I open the closet back up so she can stow her bag, while Douglas steps back into the cockpit after giving me a look that says we will talk later. "How have you been? I feel like I haven't spoken to you in ages."

"I'm sorry I'm such a shit friend. I thought I was ready to leave Hanson and start back to work, but after this last month,

I'm not so sure if I can juggle motherhood, being a wife, working, and keeping sane."

"You're not a shit friend. Having a little one at home and this job can't be easy."

"You're telling me, and my mum told Hans and me yesterday that she wants to travel to Germany next week to spend some time with my brother and her other grandkids, so Hans and I are trying to prepare for that."

"If you need a babysitter when she's away and I'm not working, you know I'm always happy to spend a day getting baby cuddles."

"I appreciate that. Hans is going to take some time off while she's gone, so we should be covered. I just hope he can handle it alone."

"He'll be fine, or he'll figure it out."

"You're right." She steps into the kitchen with me, and we start to make sure everything is stocked for the day.

"Sorry I'm late!" Star calls out as she steps onto the plane, and Ria and I both turn to watch her as she stows her bag in the closet. "You know I would make up an excuse about security or traffic, but you wouldn't believe me anyway." She huffs as she stands, and Ria and I smile at each other.

Star is perpetually late for everything. She was even late for her own wedding, because—and I quote—"The day can't happen without me there."

"The truth is—" She faces us after closing the closet door. "—Mark was banging my brains out."

"Good for you. I miss getting my brains banged out." Ria grins, accepting a kiss on her cheek from Star.

“And that’s exactly why I don’t want to have children anytime soon.” Her nose scrunches before she leans in to kiss my cheek.

“Yeah, if you like sex or even having a minute to yourself, avoid having a baby at all costs.” Ria laughs, going back to checking the stock while Star focuses on me.

“You look gorgeous.” She smiles, squeezing my arm. “Those couple of days in the sun did you some good. I wish I could have gone with you.”

“Next time.”

“Definitely,” she agrees, helping us with stock. “Actually, I wanted to ask what your plans are for Saturday.”

I glance at her over my shoulder. “Besides catching up on laundry? Nothing right now.”

“Well, Mark’s brother is visiting London, and we want to take him out.”

Oh no.

“Star—”

“It’s not a date,” she adds quickly. “I know you’re not dating right now. It’s just a night out, dinner and maybe a drink after.”

“I can’t. I just....”

“Please?” She pouts, batting her lashes. “I don’t want him to feel like the third wheel with Mark and me.”

With my stomach twisting into a knot of unease, I close my eyes as she stands in front of me with her hands together in prayer. “Okay, but—” I open my eyes and narrow them on her happy, smiling face. “—you have to promise me this isn’t a

date and that you aren't trying to hook me up with Mark's brother."

Like a lot of people in my life, she's thought my year of no dating is ridiculous. And from the beginning, she's told me time and time again that the best way to get over one guy is to get under another. And although I'm sure that is solid advice for some, it just wasn't for me.

"I'm not trying to hook you up with him. I promise." She leans over and kisses my cheek. "But if you happen to like him and want to take him hom—"

"Star," I warn, cutting her off, and she grins.

"Okay, okay." She laughs. "I promise it's not a date. It's just going to be a fun night out."

"Yeah." I force a smile that feels all kinds of wrong. Even if I told Walker I didn't want to date him, I feel like we're in some kind of weird standoff, and I have a feeling he'll be pissed if I tell him about my not-a-date date this weekend.

Crap.

CHAPTER 10

walker

I step onto the deck after being inside the decompression chamber which is used to remove the nitrogen and other gases I absorbed while diving and drag in a breath of fresh air.

“You good?” Ham asks and Otto glances over at me from where he’s helping the rest of the crew begin the process of pulling up the equipment from the sea floor.

“All good.” I walk to where my clothes are and watch Toni come down from the upper deck as I take a seat with my wetsuit around my waist. If I didn’t know any better, I would swear the guy grew up just opposite the gate of Buckingham Palace. He’d fit in there, with his slacks and pressed polo shirt. Then again, he might hang with royalty with the amount of money he has access to, and his history. His parents are both descendants of old oil money, and they met at a country club in Texas, where they later got married.

When Toni was old enough, they sent him off to school in London, the same all boys school William went to, and that’s where he fell in love with the idea of searching for lost treasure. And since his family had money just laying around, he decided to use it for his hobby that he swears is a job, and had a couple of friends who are just as wealthy join him on his mission.

“I’ve talked to Spencer and Andrew.” He says coming over to join me, tucking his hands in the pockets of his slacks. “We all agreed we need to switch locations,” he says quietly, and I focus on him while I pull up my jeans.

“That would be smart.” I avoid the urge to point out that Otto, Ham and I told him and his team that going over the same location we already cleared would be a waste of time and resources numerous times.

“I’m going to talk to Frances. I’d like to head back to shore for a week and have a company come out with radar to map out the sea floor and narrow down where we should restart.”

“Didn’t you already do that?” Ham asks, walking over to join us while adjusting the baseball cap he’s wearing, with Otto at his side.

“We did, but I was approached by a company who claims to have equipment that can detect *which* metals are under the soot and sand.”

“They can do that?” Otto asks.

“That’s what they say, so we’ll see if there’s any truth to it.”

“Cool.” Otto plops down next to me.

“Well, if you’re okay with it, I’d like to head home to the States while we’re not working, to check on my mom and brother,” Ham says.

“Sure.” Toni nods, handing me my hoodie. “You guys can all take some time off. They said it would take a couple of days to scan, and another few for all the data to be analyzed. Just plan on being back here in a week, and we’ll hopefully start the search with a fresh prospective.”

“Sounds good.” I put on my sweatshirt as he walks away.

“If you’re going to see your ma, maybe I should go visit my parents,” Otto says, looking from Ham to me. “Do you want to go?”

“I’m gonna head to London for a few days.”

“I figured as much.” He pushes up to stand, saying over his shoulder, “I’m going to start putting stuff away.”

“Everything okay back home?” I ask Ham when Otto is out of earshot.

“Winslow’s nurse sent me an email. Mom’s MS has been acting up, so I want to go check on her myself and see how she’s doing. I’m just going to fly in and stay a couple of days, check on her and Winslow, and fly back.”

“All right, hopefully everything is okay.”

“I hope so.” He glances over at where Otto is laying out all our hoses and cords. “You think he’ll be okay on his own without either of us in Germany?”

“I think he’s a grown man.” I lock my gaze with his. “You know I love him like the little brother I never had, and like you, I never had an issue looking out for him, because I remember what it was like when I got my first taste of freedom. But at some point, you gotta grow up.”

“He told me that he fucked up,” he says quietly, and my entire body goes on alert, wondering what that means.

“How?”

“I guess one of the times he was with Gigi, he was wasted and fucked her without a condom.”

“Jesus, does he know if she was on birth control?”

“She said she wasn’t and that she would let him know what the outcome was in a few weeks, if she got her period or not.”

“Christ, he never mentioned that to me.”

“I only know, because Gigi brought it up our last night in Ibiza, joking that she could be his baby mama. I asked him about it later, and he told me. He knew you’d be pissed, because you’ve been on him for years about making sure he wraps up.”

“I hope for his sake that she isn’t pregnant.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad thing. It might slow his ass down.”

I make a noise in the back of my throat, not in agreement but in annoyance. A kid isn’t going to be the thing to slow Otto down, not that I doubt he’d step up to take care of his responsibilities. He will. Ham and I both will make sure he does. But before he slows down, he’s going to have to find someone or something that he feels is worth slowing down for.

“I guess we’ll see what happens.”

“That we will,” he mutters, and I let out a breath.

“I’m gonna grab something to eat, then I’ll be back out to help put everything away.”

“Sounds good.” He walks off toward Otto, while I head for the interior of the boat.

Since Lindsey always leaves lunch out in the small kitchen, I grab a sandwich and a bag of chips, then take a seat at the table where my computer is. Opening the screen, I pull up the text thread with Hanna.

Me: We're heading back to shore for a week, so I should be to you by tomorrow

I press Send, not expecting her to reply, since she's working. But then a message appears.

Hanna: Oh, okay. Awesome. I kind of got talked into plans for Saturday, since I didn't know you'd be here.

Me: What kind of plans?

I take a bite of my sandwich as I wait for her to respond, and half my sandwich is gone before her next message appears.

Hanna: I'll explain things to you in person when you get here.

Me: Sounds good. I'll let you know what time my train is getting in.

Hanna: LOL! Don't you need my address?

Me: You have my cell, baby. I can track you anywhere.

I press Send, then text again.

Me: Gotta go help the boys get our shit put up. Talk to you this evening.

I start to close my laptop, when an e-mail comes in from my mom. Shoving the last of my sandwich in my mouth, I open it, and my chest gets tight when I read the message about my sister.

"Fuck," I bite out and head for the upper deck, where Toni was going the last time I saw him.

When I find him, I ask to use his satellite phone to call home, and he instantly pulls it from his back pocket. Taking it with me downstairs, I dial Miranda and listen to it ring.

“Hello?” she finally answers.

“What the fuck?” I snap.

“Walker?” she asks as the boat starts up.

“Yeah, Miranda, it’s me. What the fuck?”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t understand what answer you’re looking for, because unfortunately, that’s not an actual question.” If this were any other time, I would think she’s funny.

“You and Bowie got divorced?” I repeat what our mom said in the email she sent. Something my sister never mentioned the last time we spoke.

“Yes.”

“What the fuck?”

“Again, that’s not a question, Walker.”

“He cheated on you?” I start to pace, and the phone goes quiet for a few seconds.

“He did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the last time we talked?” I ask, feeling sick.

“Because I didn’t want to worry you. I mean, you have way more important things to think about.”

Do I? She probably thinks that, but I always worry about her. I have since we were kids.

“You should have told me.”

“I should have. I just don’t want you to worry.”

“You’re my family. Of course I’m going to worry. How’s my nephew?” Fuck, that weight on my chest gets heavier.

“It’s been an adjustment, but he’s doing okay.”

“Fuck,” I clip out. “I’m going to kill Bowie.” I never liked her husband—or ex-husband. Not because of any one thing he did. He was always just too fucking cocky.

“How have *you* been? Are you dating anyone?”

So now we’re changing the subject? Not a surprise.

“I’m seeing someone. She’s a flight attendant.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, she’s from Tennessee actually.”

“Small world.”

“You’re not wrong.” I let out a breath. “Now, tell me the truth. How are you?”

“Happy,” she says quietly. “I know I shouldn’t be, given what happened, but I think Bowie and I were over before he started having an affair. I was just too busy to realize it.”

“Do you need anything? I can send you some money.”

“I’m good. We’re good.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she says quietly.

“Okay.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to make it home this summer? I’m sure Mom and Dad told you about the RV they bought. They’re going to drive to visit me.”

“They did. I just don’t know right now. Things are up in the air.” It’s not that I don’t want to see her. I just hate seeing our parents. Our dad cheated on our mom constantly and didn’t give a fuck anytime she found out. Or he pretended to but then would go and do it again. I don’t know if he’s cheated since Miranda moved away from home, but what he did can’t be erased, and I’m still pissed at him.

“Well, let me know, and hopefully you can bring your girl.”

“Maybe,” I mutter, looking over at Ham when he starts to ask me to help with the lines as the boat begins to move. “Sorry, kid. I gotta go. Call me soon.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you too.” I end the call and take the phone back up to Toni before heading back down to the deck, hoping like fuck that Miranda is actually okay.

All while wondering what the fuck Hanna is going to tell me about Saturday, already knowing I’m not going to like it.

CHAPTER 11

hanna

Locking up my apartment so I can go meet Walker, who should be arriving in the next fifteen minutes, I look over my shoulder at the front door when it opens behind me. I press my lips together when I see Josh, Mrs. Lewis's great nephew, step into the entryway with his two friends. The three of them are so caught up in talking about some girl they passed on the street, who was "fit," as in "hot," to even notice me. Thank God.

Until a few months ago, Josh was never around. Now, I swear he's here almost every other day with his friends. If he were anyone else, I might think it was sweet of him to come check on his elderly aunt, but there's something about him that I just don't like.

I finish locking up, then shove my keys in my pocket, and when I turn around, Josh and his friends are watching me. That's when I notice two suitcases with them.

"Hey, Hanna," Josh greets catching my eye. "Guess what."

"What?" I force a smile, because even if I think Josh is a douche, I love his aunt, and I know she loves him and thinks he hung the moon.

"We're moving in upstairs. Isn't that bloody brilliant?"

It's not... not even a little.

“With Mrs. Lewis?” Even thinking about them living with her makes me shudder. They might be considered men, but they act like teenagers. More than once, the police have been called on them for being too loud and multiple times I've had to pick up after them when they have been hanging out front, drinking beer and eating.

“No, into the apartment on the third floor. She wants us to live here while we do some repairs.”

“Oh.” Well, that's not a bad thing. This building is probably well over a hundred and fifty years old, and even if the apartments have been updated in the last decade, everything in the main entryway hasn't. The stairs to the upper floors have tilted with time, which always concerns me, since Mrs. Lewis uses them daily. There is only one light that works down here, and the paint is so old you'd probably get lead poisoning from standing near it for too long.

Don't even get me started on the carpet on the floor under my feet. It's so worn it's a total trip hazard—something I know from experience. Plus, the glass doors that lead to the main door are heavy and will take you out if you're not careful when coming or going. As I said, outside of the interior apartments, the building needs a lot of work.

“We should start work tomorrow, so if you hear some banging, that's what it is.”

“Awesome, thanks for the heads-up.”

“You're welcome.” He grins, and I start for the front door.

“See you around, Hanna.”

“Yeah, later guys,” I call over my shoulder as I let myself out, rolling my eyes when one of them makes a comment

about my ass as the door closes behind me.

As I walk down the block toward the tube, I wish I had my phone with all my numbers so I could call Mrs. Lewis just to hear from her myself what's going on. I doubt Josh is lying about doing repairs for her, since she's mentioned before that she wanted someone to come do some work, but I don't know that he or his friends have any experience. And I don't want them taking advantage of her.

When I arrive at the underground station, all thoughts of Josh and Mrs. Lewis become background noise as I wait for Walker's train. I want to believe I didn't make a colossal mistake telling him yesterday that he could come here, but I'm totally questioning my decision. We only spent two days together while we were on vacation, and everyone knows the person you are when you're only obligation is to soak up the sun is totally different than the person you are who has to clean and work and do all the normal people things that are not very exciting or sexy.

Okay, that's only part of what has me feeling anxious. The other part is that I have to tell him that I'm going out with Star, her husband, and her husband's brother tomorrow night. And even if I know it's not a date, and Star has assured me it's not a date, it sounds exactly *like a date*.

Fidgeting nervously, I watch the train pull up to the platform, and I'm not sure if I'm going to puke from excitement or trepidation as both emotions churn in my gut when the doors open, and dozens of people flood off in a hurry.

Then, I see him... standing a foot taller than everyone else. And maybe I imagine it, but I swear it feels like time slows and the entire world ceases to exist when his eyes find mine.

I'm frozen in place as he slowly walks toward me, wearing a pair of jeans with a gray tee, his leather bag's strap over his shoulder, a hoodie tossed over the bag itself. When he's a couple of feet away, he stops, and my feet tingle, urging me to run to him. But I stand still, not sure how to greet him. Throwing myself against him seems a little ridiculous, even if that's exactly what I want to do.

"Hey, baby." A soft smile forms on his lips as we stare at each other.

"Hey." I shift from one foot to the other, and he laughs.

"Come here, Hanna." He opens his arms, and I close the distance between us and fall into his embrace. My entire being deflates, like it's taken its first real breath in days when his arms wrap around me, and any nervousness or unease I felt washes away in an instant.

"You're here." I tip my head back, and his mouth touches mine for a soft, brief kiss that is so familiar but still sends tingles of excitement through my system.

"I am." His fingers cup the back of my head, tangling in my hair as his eyes roam over my face. "Still so fucking pretty." His lips meet mine one more time, and I'm not sure if it's the throwaway comment or the kiss that makes my insides warm.

"Is that all you brought?" I look at his bag as he lets me go and takes my hand, tangling his fingers with mine.

"I don't need much."

"Apparently." I begin to lead him through the station and stop outside the grocery store inside. "I have the basics at home. Is there anything you want to pick up for tonight or for breakfast in the morning?"

“Did you eat?”

“Not yet. I figured we could do takeaway this evening.”

“Then I’m good for now.” His hand squeezes mine, and we start to head up the stairs that lead to the main road.

“Have you been to London?” I ask as we wait for the light to turn green so we can cross the busy street.

“A few times, but I’ve always stayed near The Eye.”

“Such a tourist,” I joke as we maneuver around a huge crowd of people who have gathered outside a corner pub for an after-work beer.

“You can show me what I’ve been missing out on by not staying with the regular folks.”

“Traffic.” I glance up at him. “Really, that’s the only difference between here and there is all the traffic around the main tourist spots. But if you go about three blocks over, you’ll get that same experience. I love this city, but even going a couple of miles will take you about forty-five minutes by car, which sucks when the trains are down or running on weird schedules.”

“Do you drive here?”

“No, I have rented a car to go out of the city a couple of times, but it’s not worth it in my opinion to own a car here, when you have the tube and the buses,” I say, pulling my keys out of my pocket when we reach my building. Which isn’t actually a building—it’s an old house that is attached to dozens of other old houses. Letting us in the main door, I hold open the glass doors, and once inside, we head past the stairs for the upper floors.

“My landlord, Mrs. Lewis, lives upstairs. She’s awesome. She also has an apartment on the third floor that she rents out as a short-term rental.” I use the three keys to open my door and let us in, kicking off my slides. As usual, Mizzy is there to greet me from her perch on the side table, and as usual, she takes one look at me and dismisses me completely. Then she looks at Walker and blinks before she stands, stretching her front paws out while waving her tail like she’s preening for him.

“You have a cat?” He runs his fingers between her ears, then down her back, and she bends into his touch while I stare at her in disbelief.

I look up at him. “I was going to tell you that she doesn’t like anyone, including me, but apparently that would have been a lie.” I frown when she starts to purr. I never hear her purr. “Normally, she waits here when I leave, but I’ve convinced myself that it’s not out of concern for me. She just wants to make sure I make it back so someone will be around to feed her.”

“She’s cute.” He rubs between her ears once more, and she hops down and circles his feet before looking up at me and flipping her tail, then wanders off.

“Why do I feel like she just threw down some kind of weird challenge?”

“Looked that way.”

“Right?” I shake my head and lead him through the doorway on the left at the end of the hall. “This is the kitchen and living room. This place was furnished when I rented it, so none of this is mine.” I wave my hand out to encompass a very formal-looking gray couch with its fancy gold pillows, and two white, round swivel chairs, that all sit around a glass

coffee table, with a TV across from them. There's a fireplace on the wall between the living room and kitchen, where there is a glass dining table with seating for eight, a crystal chandelier over its center, then leather-back bar stools at the high island in the kitchen.

"It's nice."

"I will warn you: all the furniture is just for looks. Unless you're lying down on that couch, you'll slide right off of it, and the chairs are just as bad. I think I've tipped over in them a dozen times. And the dining chairs have taken out more than one toe, so be careful when you're walking from the kitchen to the living room barefoot."

"Noted." He smiles, and I turn back around and walk across the hall to my room, which unlike the rest of the house is all me. A king-size bed with my fluffy duvet and million pillows, along with my reading chair, where I spend a lot of time. "You can put your bag in here." I open one of the built-in closet doors that reach the ten-foot ceilings and take up an entire wall. "Do you want to—"

I gasp when I'm suddenly knocked off my feet and my back hits the bed, his big body coming down on top of mine, with his knee settling between my legs.

Eyes sliding closed, I bite back a moan when he shoves his face into the crook of my neck, licking me there before taking a deep breath. "Christ, I even missed your smell."

Latching onto his bicep with my fingers, I hook my leg over the back of his to hold onto him. Even if I'm too scared to admit it out loud, I missed this, his weight, the scent of him, the way he seems to silently demand that there never be an inch of space between us. When he pulls back and rests his

elbow in the bed next to my head, my lashes flutter open to find his gaze roaming over my face as his hand cups my jaw.

“You got a text while I was on the train here,” he says, and my muscles bunch. I told Star I didn’t have my phone, but I don’t know if she remembered me telling her.

“From?”

“Benjamin.” His finger smooths across my cheek. “Since he apologized for screwing up with you and asked if you’d be willing to meet up to talk to him, I’m going to guess that he’s an ex.”

“You know, it’s really inappropriate that you keep looking at my messages.”

“Like you haven’t looked at mine?” he asks, and I press my lips together as he moves his hand to my ass.

He knows I’ve looked at his texts, because I told him about it after I opened them up. But in all fairness, it wasn’t my fault—or not really. It was that voice inside my head that is dead-set on proving he’s just like every other guy. That’s why, when a woman named Layla messaged him, and all I saw was there was a photo attached, I opened it up.

I expected it to be something explicit that would prove me right. Only, it wasn’t. It was just the image of a tear in the hull of a ship, with the added question, *Do you think you’d be able to fix this?*

When I told him about it, he said Layla works for the Marines, and they have done a few jobs together over the years, repairing boats and even submarines in deep water. He left it at that and didn’t give me a hard time about opening the text. The only thing he asked was that I send him her number, since he didn’t have it.

“That was different.” I run my fingers through his hair, pushing it back out of his face as his gaze roams mine. “Ben is the guy I was dating who I didn’t know was married,” I admit, and his expression turns hard. “I ran into him yesterday, and he told me he wanted to explain things.”

“And what did you say?”

“I laughed in his face and threatened to scream down the coffee shop if he didn’t get away from me.”

“Good girl.” He squeezes my ass.

“Was that the only message?”

“Yeah. Were you expecting another one?”

“Maybe.” I chew the inside of my cheek, then say quietly, “I thought Star might message me about tomorrow.”

“Your plans?” I nod. “You said you were going to explain that.”

“My friend Star’s husband’s brother is in town, and—”

“No,” he cuts me off before I can even finish.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.” I frown at him.

“You just said it, baby. Your friend, her husband, and his brother are doing something, and they want you to tag along. Which means wherever you’re going and whatever it is you’re doing, you will be with the brother. So, the answer is actually *fuck* no.”

“You can’t just decide that. And I already agreed to go.”

“You know you shouldn’t have agreed to go on a date.”

“It’s not a date.” I huff.

“It sounds exactly like a double date, babe.”

“It’s not. I made Star promise it’s not.”

“Great, since she promised it’s not, we can both go.” He smiles but it’s not a real smile.

“You are not going with me!” My eyes widen at the thought.

“Why not? If it’s just some friends hanging out, I don’t see why I can’t be included.”

“Oh my God, you cannot be serious.”

“Very. So where are we going?”

“You’re not going anywhere! We’re going to dinner, then maybe out for a drink.”

“Dinner and drinks,” he repeats slowly, and darn, I know exactly what he’s thinking, because dinner and drinks is totally a date thing for couples to do.

“It’s not a date,” I repeat, and he lowers his face an inch from mine, while his hand slides under my T-shirt and comes to rest on my bare stomach.

I expect him to say something else about tomorrow, but instead, he slides his nose along my cheek, then asks quietly against my ear, “Do you still have my marks?”

The whispered question causes goose bumps to spread across my skin, and my pulse jumps. His marks. There is no missing the claim in those two words or how I felt knowing they were there. I also didn’t think I’d miss them, but as they slowly vanished from my skin, I did.

When he pulls back and meets my gaze, I lick my lips. There is no anger in his features, just desire, possessiveness,

and something else I can't decipher. "Do you?"

"No," I say quietly, and he slides his hand up to rest just below my breast, and I fight the urge to stretch into his touch as he looms over me. I don't know who moves first, but my mouth opens under his, and the instant his tongue rolls across mine, his hand slides up to cup my breast, and I whimper.

So lost in the kiss, I don't feel his hand move until his fingers are sliding under the elastic band of my panties and between the lips of my pussy. The first brush of his fingers against my clit has my hips arching off the bed, seeking more. My body remembers exactly what he's capable of with just a touch, a lick, or a bite, so when he slides two fingers inside me and hits that spot that makes me see stars, I grab onto his arm.

I missed this, the power of him and how he seems to know my body better than I do. As his fingers work in and out of me, with his thumb brushing my clit, I feel heat pool in my belly and travel through my limbs, causing my scalp to tingle and my toes to curl.

"I'm so close... so close." Just when I know I'm about to fall over the edge and my core begins to clench around his fingers, he takes them from me, and my eyes shoot open. "Walker!"

"Can I come with you tomorrow?"

"No," I pant, and he grins, moving up on his knees between my legs.

"You sure?"

"Yes," I whisper when he tugs my shorts down over my hips, tossing them over his shoulder. "Walker."

"Yeah, baby?" He pulls me up by the front of my shirt and kisses me before I can ask him what he's doing. His tongue

thrusts into my mouth while his hands slide my shirt up my waist. I lose his mouth when he takes it off over my head, but it's only for a moment, then it's right back, distracting me as he unhooks the front clasp of my bra.

“You were saying something?” he asks, dragging his mouth away from mine with a nip to my bottom lip while using his weight to force me back on the bed.

Was I? I can't remember or think clearly, especially when he sits back on his heels, still fully clothed, and slides his large, warm hands up my thighs, over my stomach, and cups my breasts.

Completely naked while he's fully dressed, I feel at a disadvantage. But I forget all about that when he smooths his hands back down my stomach and spreads my legs farther by putting pressure on the inside of my knees.

Anticipation is its own kind of aphrodisiac as I watch his darkened gaze roam over my body and between my legs. I jump when his fingers slide through the wetness and over my hypersensitive clit.

“You're very wet and swollen, baby.” A grin forms on his handsome face right before he bends forward and buries his face between my legs, licking right up my center.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I hold on as he uses his talented mouth to torture me, alternating between licking and sucking. My back arches, and my core clenches tight as stars begin to dance behind my closed eyelids. That heat from earlier spreads just as quickly through my limbs and across my scalp. Just when I know I'm going to fall over the edge into bliss, he stops.

“No, don't stop,” I beg, feeling desperate.

“Can I go with you tomorrow?”

Oh my God.

My chest starts to rise and fall rapidly as I realize what he’s doing.

“Walker.”

“It’s a simple yes-or-no question, baby.”

“If I say no?”

“You give me what I want, and I’ll give you what you want.” He sucks the skin on my inner thigh, making me jump.

“It’s not that simple,” I whisper, and he grabs my wrists, holding them down at my sides, then ducks his head and wraps his lips around my clit, sucking hard. I scream his name as blood rushes to my head, and my orgasm hovers just inches away. Then once more, he’s stop, leaving me on edge. “I hate you!” I cry, and actual tears of frustration begin to track down the side of my face, sliding into my hair.

“Can I come with you?”

“Please, I just....” I try to tug my hands free, but then I’m holding onto his wrists and lifting my hips against his mouth as he goes back to torturing me. When the pressure begins to build once more in my lower belly, and my skin starts to tingle as my vision dims, I give in with a whimper. “Okay, okay... you can come with me.”

His hands release my wrists in an instant, and his rough fingers slide into me, thrusting up against my G-spot as he flutters his tongue over my clit. A sensation that is so intense it feels almost painful rushes through me, making me dizzy. I come, grasping his hair and holding my breath, not wanting to

miss even a single second of the experience—not even for much-needed oxygen.

As the last waves of pleasure roll through me, my body falls limply against the bed. I feel his lips kiss above my pubic bone, then my stomach, before he pulls the skin of my breast into his mouth, sucking hard enough that I know there will be a mark, and moves up my body.

“We’re not done, baby,” he whispers against my ear, kissing the skin just below it, and my lashes flutter open. I would expect after the orgasm I just experienced that I wouldn’t be able to handle anything more, but when I feel the roughness of his jeans against my inner thighs, and he reaches behind his head and takes off his shirt, my body shakes with the aftershocks of what I just experienced and anticipation.

Taking him in, I watch as he unbuttons his jeans and pulls himself free, wrapping his hand tightly around his length with one hand while using the other to rip open a condom he must have gotten out at some point. With his eyes locked on mine, he rolls it down his shaft, then positions himself and slides the head through my wetness. His jaw tightens, and the sound he makes in the back of his throat causes my core to clench as he slowly enters me.

“Jesus, how the fuck did I forget just how good you feel wrapped around me?” he bites out, wrapping his hand around my hip and holding me in place when I move to adjust to the sudden fullness as he bottoms out.

“Oh God.” My head falls back when he pulls out slowly and slides back in over and over, the pace torture. “Faster.” I lift my legs higher around his waist, and he gives me what I want and begins to ram into me ruthlessly, wrapping hands

around the back of my knees and using them to pull my hips into his.

A new orgasm starts to build quickly, tugging at my lower belly and expanding, causing my thighs to shake and my inner walls to clench.

“Fuck, you’re gonna make me come before I’m ready, Hanna.” He thrusts harder, digging his fingers into my flesh. “One day, I’m going to fuck you without a condom and fill you with my cum.”

“Yes!” I cry, coming undone at the seams. Apparently, the visual of him doing that is enough to shove me over the edge once more, and he falls with me, groaning my name.

“Jesus.” His thrusts become frantic before he slams inside me one last time, holding himself there for a long moment before his heavy weight falls against me.

Tightening my hold on him with my legs I burry my face in the crook of his neck. The only sound in the room the two of us breathing heavy as we attempt to catch our breath.

When he rolls off me and falls to his back, kicking off his jeans, I bite my lip. There is something about knowing he couldn’t even wait until he had his clothes off to be inside me.

His eyes meet mine when he’s done, and a handsome but smug grin forms on his face before he tugs me down against his chest.

“If you’re planning on saying anything about getting your way, don’t,” I warn, and his chest moves, making me think he’s silently laughing.

“I would never.” His fingers drag through my hair, and I tip my head back to look at him. His expression is blank, but there’s a glint of humor in his eyes.

With a sigh, I rest my cheek on his chest. I knew the first day I spent with him that I was in over my head.

I just had no idea I would be drowning so soon.

CHAPTER 12

hanna

“**B**aby.”

That word spoken close to my ear startles me, and I shoot up in bed, hearing a curse as I cry out, grabbing my forehead, which I knocked against something solid.

“Are you okay?”

My hands are tugged away from my face, and I blink up at Walker as he looms over me, inspecting my forehead.

“You just scared me.” I fall back against my pillow and notice he’s dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt with sneakers on. Glancing over at the window, there is a little light coming through the cracked blinds, but not much. “What time is it?”

“A little after seven.” He sits on the edge of the bed next to my hip.

“Why are you up?”

“I’m gonna head out for a run.”

I blink, sure I heard him wrong. “You’re going for a run?”

“Yeah, I try to go every day when I’m on solid ground. Do you want to go with me?” he asks, and my nose scrunches. “I’m guessing that’s a no.”

“I only run if I’m being chased by a bear.”

“Have you been chased by a bear?”

“No.”

“Right.” He laughs. “Where are your spare keys?”

“In the dish by the door. It’s the set with the Tennessee key chain. I’ll show you.” I try to sit up, but he doesn’t give me the space. He leans over me, putting his fist in the bed on the opposite side of my hip, forcing me back, and caging me in.

“I can figure it out.” His face goes to my neck, and I feel him take a deep breath.

“Are you sure?” I whisper as he kisses under my ear. “The main door locks on its own when you leave, but my apartment doesn’t, and there are three different keys for my door.”

“I got it.” He leans back, his gaze roaming my face before he kisses me and nips my bottom lip. “I’ll be back in an hour, maybe a little longer.”

“You’re going to run for an hour?” I frown at him as he stands. “Do you even know where you’re going?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“You’ll figure it out?”

“Is there someplace I should avoid?” He raises a brow.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” My frown stays firmly in place, and he grins.

“Worried about me?”

“Yes, but only because you’re currently the deliverer of my orgasms,” I sass, and he drops his head back to his shoulders and laughs.

“I’ll make sure I return, so you don’t miss out on any of those.”

“Good.”

“Be back, baby.” He runs his fingers down the side of my face, and I bite the inside of my cheek as I watch him disappear through my bedroom door. Then, I listen to the sound of him grabbing the keys, the door opening and closing, and then the locks sliding back into place. Closing my eyes, I pull my blanket up around my shoulders with a smile on my face. Just when I start to drift off, my cell phone rings. I grab it off my nightstand and put it to my ear without even checking to see who is calling.

“Hello?”

“Hanna, I’ve just spoken to a very handsome man leaving your flat,” Mrs. Lewis says, and I sit up, suddenly wide awake. Crap, I didn’t even think about him running into her. I should have, since she’s always outside in the mornings, tending to her small garden in front of the house before it’s too hot out.

“Oh. Well, I—”

“Is he yours?”

Is he mine? Such a loaded question, and one I don’t know how to answer. Or maybe I do, but I’m not willing to admit it yet.

“Kind of?” I squeeze my eyes closed.

“Kind of?” She laughs. “I think you and I have some catching up to do. Are you around for a cupa?”

“Yes,” I agree immediately—first, because I love spending time with her. She’s had an amazing life and tells some of the best stories. And second, having tea with her always includes

delicious food, fancy teacups, and homemade shortbread cookies that rival the late queen's favorite brand.

“Good, I'll see you in thirty minutes.”

“See you soon.”

I get out of bed and quickly make it, tossing all my pillows back in place before I go to the bathroom. While I brush my teeth and go through my morning routine, I try not to think about how much I like seeing Walker's things mixed with mine next to my sink. But there is no denying I do, just like there's no denying I liked having him here with me yesterday, doing normal things like eating dinner and hanging out, watching TV.

I assumed there would be some awkwardness having him in my space, and I kept waiting for the moment to come, but it never did. Everything felt very normal, like we'd done it all a million times before and were just falling right back into place.

When I'm finished brushing my hair, I change out of the tank top and sleep shorts I wore to bed and get dressed in a simple summer dress. I grab a sweater and a pair of sandals before I leave my room.

“Are you ready to eat?” I bend down to rub Mizzy's fluffy belly when she greets me in the hall by rolling onto her back with her paws up over her head. Of course, she doesn't actually let me rub her belly. She attempts to wrap her paws around my arm and bite me, because she's evil. “Why are you so mean?”

She doesn't answer, obviously, but she does get up and trot to the kitchen, placing herself in front of her dish. With a sigh, I dump a can of her favorite wet food into her bowl, then hurry back to my room for my cell phone.

I send a message to Walker, letting him know I'm going to be upstairs with Mrs. Lewis, in case he comes back and I'm not here. Then I unlock and open my front door, twisting the one on my knob before pulling it closed behind me. I carefully maneuver up the stairs to the second floor, where the smell of lavender and vanilla greets me as I knock.

"Hanna," Mrs. Lewis answers with a smile. I don't hug her like I want. I learned rather quickly living in London that not everyone appreciates being hugged, so I've had to curb that habit. Instead, I grab her arm and air kiss her cheek.

"Good morning." I shut the door behind myself and follow her down the hall and into the sitting room. Unlike my apartment, hers has not been updated in the last ten years. I mean, sure, there have been some things done, but I always feel like I'm stepping back in time. Especially with the amount of lace and frill mixed with antiques and paintings that look like they belong in a museum.

"Sit and I'll bring the tea."

"I can help."

"I've got it." She waves me off, and I take a seat on her floral loveseat. Like my grandmother, who is about her age, she moves slow but with purpose and is back in a couple of minutes with a silver tray and tea set, then disappears once more. She returns with a three-tiered stand full of sandwiches, then scones, and then cookies on the bottom plate.

Having done this with her more than a few times, I pour each of us a cup of tea and add one sugar cube to mine along with a splash of milk.

I take a sip and sigh. I don't love tea, but there is something about drinking it out of a fancy cup that makes it so

much better.

When there is a loud bang to the right of us, I glance over at the wall, then focus on her. “I ran into Josh yesterday. He said he’s going to be doing some work here.”

“Yes. He, Tim, and Nathan have agreed to help do some repairs while they stay here.”

“That’s good.”

“I told him that it’s not necessary, but he insists the stairs are a hazard, and he’s worried about me.” She picks up her teacup with a fond smile on her face.

“He loves you.”

“He does, and it’s past time I had the work done.” She tips her head to the side. “What I would really like to talk about is the young man who was here this morning.”

“Walker.”

“Pardon?”

“His name is Walker.” I place my cup on its tiny matching saucer. “I met him on vacation.” I don’t add which vacation. I don’t know how she would feel if I told her I’ve known him for less than two weeks and he’s already staying with me in my apartment and sleeping in my bed.

“He’s very handsome.”

“He is.” I can’t help the smile that curves my lips.

“Is it serious then?”

“It’s kind of complicated.”

“Is it complicated or are you *making* it complicated?” she asks, fixing herself a plate of food, and I do the same, putting a triangle of what looks like an egg sandwich on my plate.

“That’s a good question, but I don’t know how to answer it,” I say, adding quietly, “We’re just getting to know each other, and I’m a little leery after my last relationship. I don’t want to jump into anything too quickly.”

“That’s understandable, after what happened with Benjamin,” she says gently.

Her understanding is not surprising. The night I found out Ben was married, I came home a mess, and she just happened to be downstairs checking the mail. She saw firsthand the aftereffects of that whole situation, and I cried on her shoulder for an hour while telling her the whole sorry story. When she left my apartment that evening, I got into bed and cried myself to sleep after vowing to myself to stay single for a year.

“He broke your heart.”

“Did he?” My nose scrunches. “I know he hurt me and made me question my own judgment, but I’m not sure he broke my heart. I don’t think I even loved him.”

She raises a brow.

“I mean, I loved the idea of falling in love with him, the idea of building something with him, and the idea that he could be what I was looking for. But if I’m honest with myself, I kind of knew it wouldn’t last. He would only ever give me just enough to keep me coming back, but never more than that. From spending time together to saying he wanted to meet my parents, I think he calculated every move he made. If he saw I was pulling away, he’d give me something to look forward to so I’d stick around.”

Talking about it makes me angry all over again. It also makes me feel so very naïve.

“You deserve better than that.”

“I know.” I pick up my tea and take a sip.

“Does Walker live here, or is he in London on vacation? I noticed he’s also American.”

“He travels all over Europe for work, but he’s here visiting me for the week while he has some time off.”

“And he’s staying with you.”

My cheeks warm. “He is.”

“That must feel good.”

“What’s that?”

“That he’s making you a priority, when he could have gone anywhere else.”

The realization she’s right hits me hard, because he could have gone somewhere else during his time off, but he didn’t. He chose me.

“I never thought about it like that, but I guess you’re right,” I say while a voice in the back of my mind reminds me that I had his phone, which I’m sure he wanted.

She smiles, picking up a cookie, then takes a small bite. “Do you two have any plans while he’s here?”

“Not really.” I leave out that we’re supposed to have dinner with Star tonight and shove a whole cookie into my mouth to distract myself from the reminder. I still haven’t told my friend about the change of plans, and after yesterday, I know there’s no way Walker will let me off the hook and not take him along. Which means I’m going to have a whole lot of explaining to do.

We both look over at the wall when there’s more banging.

“I hope this noise doesn’t last too long,” she murmurs.

“I didn’t know Josh worked in construction.”

“He doesn’t, but his dad was a carpenter before he passed away.” She dusts off her lap and asks, “Do you want another cup?”

“I would, but Walker should be back from his run soon.” I stand when she does and start to pick up the tray to take it into the kitchen for her.

“You can leave it. I’ll walk you out and ask the boys if they want a snack.”

“Okay.” I follow her through her apartment to the door, and she opens it, stepping outside.

“Are you leaving, Nanny?” I hear Josh ask, and I look around the edge of the doorway and see him and his friends on the staircase with a couple of steps missing.

“Hanna needs to go back down,” she tells him, and he glances over at me.

“Sure.” He stands and holds out his hand. “I’ll help you over.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” I look down into the darkness left in the absence of the steps.

“I won’t let you fall.” He grins, and I look over at Mrs. Lewis.

“Thank you for the tea.”

“Any time, and I want an update after this week.”

“Definitely.” I kiss her cheek, then take Josh’s hand he’s still holding out to me. With his help, I make it past the hole in the staircase and breathe a sigh of relief when I’m steady on my feet on the step below it. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He lets my hand go, and I move around his friends, saying “excuse me” on my way down to the entryway.

I let myself into my apartment using the hidden key on top of the huge, framed piece of artwork on the wall next to my door, replacing it once I make sure no one is around to see, as I did before I first grabbed it. I go to the window in my living room that overlooks the sidewalk out front, so I’ll see when Walker returns, and then I dial Star’s number.

“You’re not calling to cancel, are you?” she asks in greeting.

“No.” I wrap my arm around my middle. “But you might not want me to come.”

“What’s going on?”

“You know how I was in Ibiza?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I kind of met someone.”

“You kind of met someone?” she repeats, sounding surprised by this news.

“I did, and he’s here now. Well... not *right* now. He’s currently out for a run, but he should be back soon.”

“You bloody minx. First, you don’t even mention you met someone, and now you’re telling me he’s staying with you at your flat?”

“I should have told you, but things are complicated, and I didn’t think I’d see him again so soon or that he would insist on coming tonight because he thinks it’s a date.”

“As he well should.” She laughs.

“What? Think it’s a date?”

“Yes.”

“You said it’s not a date.” I frown.

“It’s not technically, but any guy with a brain in his head would think it is. Good for him for wanting to make sure his woman isn’t out on a date with another man.”

“I’m not his woman.”

“Bloody hell, Hanna. Tell me you’re not still on about being single for a year, when you have a man staying with you and forcing his way into coming out tonight.”

“It’s complicated,” I repeat with a sigh, resting my forehead against the cool glass.

“*You’re* bloody complicated,” she groans. “I’ll have my sister come with tonight to even us all out again, and you and I will talk later about how mental you are.”

“So, you’re not mad?”

“I don’t know. After I meet this bloke, I’ll let you know if I’m mad at you for being stupid or not.”

“I’m being cautious.”

“No, you’re probably self-sabotaging.”

“Whatever. What are you wearing tonight?”

“Something sexy and easy for Mark to take advantage of me in.”

“You’re so crazy.” I laugh.

“I know, but in the best ways. I’ll send you the address to the restaurant and see you in a few hours.”

“See you then.” I hang up after saying goodbye and pull up my mom’s number.

Just as I’m about to press Call, I realize what time it is back home and let out a defeated breath. It’s moments like this when I just really need my mom and could use her advice and hate that there is an ocean and hours between us. Taking my phone with me, I head outside, leaving the door cracked before I take a seat on the tiled steps out front. I tip my head back, letting the sun warm my face. Spring in London is nothing like spring back home in Tennessee, so you learn to appreciate the sunlight when you have it.

When I hear the pounding of heavy footfalls on the pavement, I open my eyes to look down the sidewalk and watch Walker jog toward me. His T-shirt is off and tucked into the side of his shorts. With his chest sweaty and his skin flush from exertion, he looks exactly like he does after he’s had his way with me. Just the reminder has my heart picking up speed as I squeeze my thighs together.

Spotting me, he slows to a walk, and a smirk forms on his lips like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“Hey, babe.” He bends down to greet me with a kiss when he’s close, and I lick my lips when he pulls away. “Were you waiting for me, to make sure I made it back?”

“No, I just came out to get some sun.” I stand up on the stairs, so we’re just about eye level. “Did you have a good run?”

“Yeah.” He moves his hand to my outer thigh and slides it up under the material of the skirt of my dress. “I like this dress on you.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.” He steps into my space, and when I go up another step, he follows. “Did you go somewhere?”

“I went up and had tea with Mrs. Lewis after she called to tell me that you ran into her outside.” I go up another step backward and push open the door when he continues to eat up the space between us.

“She seemed nice.” He closes the door behind us.

“She is,” I agree as he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me flush against his chest.

“You’re very sweaty,” I breathe as he maneuvers us to my apartment that I left unlocked, his mouth at my neck while kicking my apartment door closed

“I know.” His hands slide over my ass, hooking me behind my thighs, and I wrap my legs around his hips when he lifts me off the ground. I whimper, feeling the hard length of him between my legs, and he catches the sound on his tongue when he kisses me.

Turning us, he presses my back against the door, and I hear the locks slide into place, wondering how he can possibly focus on two things at once.

“Jesus baby girl,” he groans when I rock against him, needing the friction, and he moves his hand between us, dragging my panties to the side.

“Oh God,” I moan, feeling the head of his cock slide between my folds, then press against my entrance. My head falls back to the door with a thud, and my eyes slide closed while I dig my fingers into his shoulders.

“Do you want me to get a condom?”

Righting my head and meeting his gaze, I don't answer with words. I push down on his length, and soon, he takes over entering me in one single thrust that has my back arching and my breath catching.

And when he finishes inside me, with me calling his name as I come, clenching around him, I can't bring myself to care about the risk we just took or how stupid I'm being.

Yes, things are most definitely complicated.

CHAPTER 13

hanna

I step into the living room, where Walker has been waiting for me to finish getting ready to go out, and I study him as he looks at his phone. Like most every man in existence, he looks handsome with very little effort. I don't know how he packed so much into that duffle of his, but the outfit he has on this evening is similar to the one he wore when we went out to dinner with Otto and Ham in Ibiza. Except, instead of black, he has on a midnight-blue button-down and matching pants that are tapered and fit him perfectly.

“You look handsome.” I watch him look up from his phone and freeze as his eyes scan over my outfit. With the weather a little cooler this evening, I decided to wear my black leather mini skirt, a black sleeveless turtleneck, and black thigh-high suede boots. And I'm taking my cream-and-brown plaid duster to wear over it in case I get cold walking, since we're not taking a cab.

“You were going to wear that outfit on a date with another man?”

“It wasn't a date.” I sigh, adjusting the material of my boots around my thighs.

“If you would have worn that outfit, he would have thought it was a date, and he definitely would've imagined

fucking you in that skirt with those boots on. Something I plan on doing when we get home.”

“If you keep annoying me, the only thing you’ll be doing is sleeping alone on the couch.” I grab my purse from the top of the counter in the kitchen, ignoring the sound of him laughing. “Are you ready?”

“Ready when you are. Are you sure you don’t want to catch a cab, so you don’t have to walk in those heels?”

“I live in heels most days, and these are comfortable. I’m good to walk.” I head for the door and grab my flannel from the closet, then my keys from the dish. “Plus, if we tried to catch a cab now, we’d probably be late to dinner, since it would take twice as long to get to the address Star sent.”

Taking my keys from me before we step outside, he locks up, then takes my hand and helps me down the steps.

“Where are we going?” He glances down at me as we walk toward the train station, and I smile when he maneuvers me to the inside of the sidewalk, away from traffic. It’s something I’ve witnessed my dad do with my mom since I was little.

“Park Row.”

“Is that the address or the place?”

“The place.” I shrug. “I’ve never been there.”

It takes less than twenty minutes to reach the restaurant we’re meeting everyone at, and when we step inside, I’m completely confused.

“Can I help you?” a handsome black man in a suit greets us, and I glance around. It looks like a small library or a sitting room in a fancy house, and there are no doors anywhere.

“I think we have the wrong place.” I take out my phone and pull up the text from Star, then look up at the man again. “Is this 77 Brewer St.?”

“It is. Do you have reservations?”

“We do, or my fr—” I cut myself off when a door hidden amongst the bookshelves behind him swings open, and the heavy sound of music fills the once quiet room.

“Enjoy.” He smiles, stepping aside, and we walk slowly to the door. When we step through, the bookcase slides back into place, cutting off the light.

“What is this place?” I look around the room that’s lit only with blue lights, and a wide spiral staircase disappears as it curves to the floor below.

“A sex club?”

“It’s not a sex club,” I say through a gasp, looking up at Walker, who I find has a grin on his face. “You don’t actually think this is a sex club, do you?”

“Would your friend invite you to dinner at a sex club?”

“I want to say no, but the truth is, Star is a little wild like my cousin April, so I never know what she’s going to do.”

“It’s not a sex club.” He squeezes my hand when two people standing at a podium come into view, along with a wide, curved doorway that is open to the interior of the restaurant and bar.

“Welcome to Park Row.” A long-haired brunette with a foreign accent, wearing a men’s suit and tie, smiles at us. “Do you have a reservation?”

“We do.” I give her Star’s last name, and she picks up two menus from a stack on the podium.

“Follow me. Your party isn’t here yet, but I’ll show you to your table.”

“Thank you.” We walk behind her, and I look around. In the center of the room, there is a round bar with a penguin floating above a blue-lit glass showcase. The entire space is filled with dim lighting and navy-blue velvet chairs sitting around tables covered with white cloths and stemmed glassware. “This place is very cool.”

“Have you been here before?” The brunette asks.

“No.” I take off my jacket and rest it over the back of the chair Walker pulls out for me when we reach our table.

“Then you are in for an experience. Park Row is based off the DC Comic *Batman*, so everything, including the menu, is themed.”

“Awesome.” I smile, now understanding the weird marble bust of Shakespeare sitting close to the table with what looks like red lipstick smudged across its mouth and neon-green spray-painted hair.

“Would you like anything to drink while you wait for your friends?”

“I’ll have a glass of Merlot.”

She nods at me, then looks at Walker, who answers, “Scotch on the rocks.”

“Sure.” She walks away, and Walker waits until my ass is in my chair before taking the seat next to me and resting his palm on my thigh.

I look over at him. “Are you disappointed this isn’t a sex club?”

“No, the idea of sharing you isn’t even a little appealing to me.”

“That’s very caveman of you.”

“Do you want to be shared?” He raises a brow, and I pretend to ponder the question as I rest my elbow on the table.

“Well, I haven’t really thought about it, but it could be interesting.” I grin when his eyes narrow. “Just kidding.” I pat his hand. “That all seems very complicated.”

“What’s complicated?” I look back over my shoulder at Star when she asks that question, then get up out of my chair to greet her.

“Nothing,” I assure her, air-kissing her cheek, and then I step back into Walker, who has moved to stand behind me. Her eyes widen as she takes him in.

“Walker, Star. Star, meet Walker.”

“Bloody hell, Hanna. You *are* being an idiot.” She reaches for his hand, and I roll my eyes. Of course she’d think that off his looks alone.

“Where is Mark and everyone?” I glance around.

“He’s waiting with his brother upstairs for my sister to arrive, since she took a car. I had to use the ladies’, so I came inside. Have you been here long?”

“No, just a few minutes. Also, you could have warned me that we were coming to a secret restaurant.”

“Where would be the fun in that?” She grins. “The first time Mark brought me here, I thought he was bringing me to some kind of sex dungeon.”

I laugh, and Walker's hand that has found its way to my hip squeezes.

"Do you want to come to the ladies' with me?" she asks, and since I know it's not an actual question but a demand, I look up at Walker.

"Go. I'll be here when you get back." He touches his lips to mine, and I hear Star make a noise.

"Be back." I smile as he takes his seat while Star links her arm with mine and begins tugging me with her across the room. When we reach the restroom that has spray-paint on the mirrors and wonky art, she spins around to face me, pointing at the closed door.

"That man out there is the one you're confused about?"

"Star, you spoke to him for less than a minute."

"Is he going to turn into a wanker this evening or do something to embarrass you?"

"Probably not."

"Then what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm figuring things out."

"You need to figure out how to get your head examined." She hurries into one of the stalls and closes herself in, and I turn on the tap to drown out the sound of her peeing. When she comes back out, she walks to the sink, shaking her head at me.

"What?"

"Don't mess this up for yourself, Hanna."

"I'm not messing anything up. I told you I'm being cautious." Okay, so having sex with him without a condom,

even when I'm on birth control, wasn't very cautious. But she doesn't need to know I did that.

She turns to face me after washing her hands and grabs a paper towel. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I hope he does act like a dick and that I hate him before the night is over."

"Why?"

"So that when you mess things up, I can say 'well done' instead of 'you're a fool.'"

"You're so dramatic."

"Ben was an arse, Hanna. He didn't deserve you back when you were dating him, and he doesn't deserve you now."

"He doesn't have me now. He doesn't even factor into my life."

"Maybe not physically, but he's still in your head, dictating how you move forward in any relationship you're in. He's the reason you decided to stop dating for a year and why you don't want to give that guy out there a fair shot without all the baggage you've stacked around yourself."

I want to tell her she's wrong, but as my stomach twists, I know she's right.

I start to open my mouth to say something, but the door opens, and we both look at it.

"I figured you two were in here." Star's sister, Dawn, steps into the restroom wearing a dress that is skin-tight and the same color red as her lipstick and nail polish. Letting the door

close behind her, her eyes come to me. “How do you feel about switching dates tonight?”

“Yeah, how do you feel about that, Hanna?” Star asks, and I narrow my eyes on my friend, then look at her sister, who I’ve only met once before.

“Sorry, that’s not happening.”

“Is it serious between you and him?” she asks, and I want to scream.

Everyone keeps asking me that question, when all I want is to just enjoy this time with Walker while I have it. All while trying not to get myself too attached, which is stupid, since I know I already am. I’m just not ready to admit it yet.

“Yes,” I answer, because Star told me about Dawn and how free-spirited she is when it comes to dating and men. If I say no, she will likely try to take him from me. And even if I don’t think Walker would go there, watching her flirt with him all night would annoy me.

She shrugs, walking over to the sink to add another layer to her already red lips, then she looks at her sister in the mirror. “Are you still set on me not shagging Charles then?”

“Yes, I’m still bloody set on that!” Star cries, tossing her arms in the air. “No having sex with my brother-in-law.”

“I’m just asking.” She turns around to face us. “Are we going to hang out in here, or are we going to eat? I’m hungry, and I need a drink.”

“You are not allowed to drink too much tonight.”

“So, you don’t want me to get drunk, *and* you don’t want me to get laid?” Dawn crosses her arms across her chest and glares at her sister, while Star glares back.

“We should go. The guys are probably wondering where we are.” I break into their stare-down and open the bathroom door.

I don't wait for either of them. I step out into the alcove the restrooms are tucked into, feeling off-kilter from the mirrors that enclose the space. Actually, it reminds me of a fun house that isn't very fun. Walking across the restaurant, I see Walker's eyes find mine, and I shoot him an apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” I say quietly as he stands and pulls out my chair for me.

“You okay?” he asks, kissing my cheek.

“Yeah.” I look across at Mark and his brother, who look almost identical, and they would, since they're twins. Hence why Star is adamant about Dawn not sleeping with him. I get it—I wouldn't want my sister, if I had one, sleeping with a man who looks exactly like my husband. “Hi.” I lean over to kiss Mark's cheek, and he introduces me to Charles, who takes my hand. “It's nice to meet you.”

“You too.” He smiles, and I look up at Walker.

“I'm guessing you guys already introduced yourselves.”

“We did.” He rests his hand against my lower back.

“Where is my wife?” Mark asks, looking in the direction I came from.

“She was right behind me.” I frown and turn to look over my shoulder, and just then, both Dawn and Star come out of the alcove, with Dawn holding her hand over her nose.

“What happened?” I ask when they're close, and Star looks like she's trying hard not to laugh.

“Dawn ran into the mirror. She thought it was the doorway.”

“Oh my God.” I laugh, then snap my mouth shut when Dawn glares at me. “Sorry. Do you want some ice?”

“No, I need a drink.” She takes a seat next to Charles, which also puts her next to Walker.

“Do you want my wine? I haven’t drank from it.” I push my glass toward her, and she picks it up, downing half of it.

“Thanks.” She rubs her nose. “That room is a bloody nightmare.”

“It is. It’s like one of those fun houses with all the mirrors,” I explain to Walker.

“I hate those things.”

“Me too.” I watch Dawn down the rest of my wine as the waitress walks over to drop off the appetizer the men ordered, and before she leaves, Walker asks her for another glass of wine for me before I even have a chance to think about doing it myself.

As the evening progresses, we go from dinner to dessert, then move to the round bar in the middle of the room so we can free up our table for the next reservation. And while Walker charms everyone with tales from the jobs he’s done and stories about the history of the treasure he’s currently helping search for, he keeps me within reach. He constantly meets my gaze like he’s making sure I’m okay before going back to whoever he’s talking to.

It’s oddly comforting, knowing that even with his attention elsewhere, I’m still the most important person in the room to him. That is not something I have ever experienced in any

relationship. And if I'm honest with myself, it's something I don't want to risk losing by getting in my own way.

CHAPTER 14

hanna

Waking up to the sound of pounding coming from the wall next to my head, I roll over with a groan and start to pull the pillow over my face but stop. My eyes shoot open, and panic rips through my chest when I find the side of the bed Walker has been sleeping on empty, and the sheets are cold to the touch. For the last seven days, I haven't once woken up or gone to sleep without him. But today, he's leaving, so this moment feels a lot like *déjà vu*.

"Walker?" I call out and get nothing, not even the sound of him somewhere in my apartment.

Sitting up, I toss back the covers and rush to the closet with my heart thundering. I swing it open... and close my eyes in relief when I find his duffle bag right where it's been for the last week, with his clothes still falling out of it.

"What are you doing?"

Startled, I jump and turn to find him holding Mizzy in the crook of his arm like a baby while rubbing her belly.

"I thought you left," I admit, and his expression softens. Dropping Mizzy to the end of the bed, he pulls me against him and wraps his arms around me.

"I wouldn't have left without telling you."

“You did,” I remind him as I press my face into his bare chest. His arms get tighter before he loosens his hold and cups my jaw. When I finally meet his gaze, he presses a soft kiss to my lips, then leans back to look me in the eye once more.

“Does this mean you’re ready to admit that you like me?”

“No,” I lie, and he grins, walking me backward to the bed. When the back of my knees hit the mattress, I topple, and he lands on me, burying his face in the crook of my neck and making me laugh.

“It sucks I gotta leave today,” he whispers against my skin, and my heart constricts.

“I know,” I whisper back.

Kissing my collarbone, he leans back, resting his elbow on the mattress next to my head, and sifts his fingers through my hair while tears sting my nose. This time with him has flown by in a blink, and I’m not ready for him to go, not yet. Especially when I know that when he gets back on the boat, I won’t even be able to hear his voice.

“I’ll be back in a couple of weeks.”

“And then you’ll be gone again,” I say quietly, touching his jaw.

“Is that the next thing you’re going to use to push me away?” he asks, holding my gaze, and I shake my head.

“No, but it’s the truth, isn’t it? You’ll come back and consume my life for a week or maybe two, then you’ll be gone again, and all we’ll have is text messages or emails for weeks, and then we’ll do it all over again. And eventually, the distance will start to eat away at us, even if we put in the effort to keep in touch—something that will be difficult with both of us working. Then at some point, one of us will give u—” I cut

myself off when I realize he's smiling. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because while you're planning our demise, I'm planning our future." He smooths his thumb across my bottom lip. "I'm not willing to give up on the idea of us, just because things won't be easy. I like what we have, and I know your fear of losing it means you like it too. So we'll figure out how to make it work. And yes, it's going to suck having to be away from you for weeks, and I'm going to hate not being able to listen to you snore every night."

"I do not snore," I gasp, and he grins.

"But one day down the road, if we both put in the effort now, you'll be sick of seeing my face. And instead of arguing with me about why this won't work, you'll fight with me about shit like where we're going to live and what to name our kids."

Oh my God.

"You want kids?" This surprises me. Maybe it's because he seems like someone who's always on an adventure, and I can't quite picture him settling down, at least not completely.

"Yeah, do you?"

"Yes, three or four, and at least two girls. All I had was my brother growing up, and I always wished I had sisters like my cousins all did."

"I'll see what I can do, but I can't make any promises." His fingers smooth down my cheek. "Where do you want to live?"

"In Tennessee. I love it here, but I want to be close to my parents and my family, especially my mom. I miss her," I say softly, and his expression gentles before he leans down, brushing his lips across mine.

“Don’t give up on us before we’ve even really given this a shot, baby,” he tells me quietly.

“If you keep talking, you’re going to make me cry,” I admit, feeling my throat get tight.

“Then I’ll shut up because we don’t have time for you to cry. I need to fuck you, then we gotta shower so I can go catch my train.”

“So romantic.” I laugh, and he kisses me quiet then I ride him to completion. And as I lay on his chest with my heart pounding, I soak in every detail of the moment, from his scent to the way he feels under me as his fingers move along my spine, hoping I’ll be able to pull up the memory when he’s gone and use it to make it through our time apart.

An hour and a half later with a towel wrapped around my hair and only half dressed in a pair of sweats and my bra I open the door to the closet and ignore the pang in my chest as I listen to Walker in the bathroom packing up his stuff. Reaching for a t-shirt to wear I stop when shiny red wrapping paper catches my attention. I forgot all about the gift I ordered him when all I knew was we would have to exchange phones at some point. I grab it off the shelf as he comes around the corner into the room carrying his shower bag.

This is for you.” I hold it out to him and his eyes meet mine then drop to my hands.

“You got me a gift?” he asks tossing the leather case he’s holding onto the bed, before taking the wrapped package from me. “It’s not my birthday.”

“It’s not a birthday gift.” I watch him start to tear away the paper and expose the box for the kindle. His expression is unreadable as he stares at it and I nervously start to ramble.

“It’s the same as mine and I hooked it to my account and downloaded a few books for you, most are similar to the one you were reading on the beach in Ibiza but you can always choose other ones...” I stop talking and watch the box fly through the air to join the rest of his things at the end of the bed.

Well okay then. I look up at him then gasp when he grabs a hold of my face in his large hands and covers my mouth with his. I never understood that a kiss could convey emotion but as he deepens the kiss I taste his gratitude on my tongue and melt into him.

“Thank you, baby.” He lifts me off my feet and I circle his hips with my legs and curl my arms around his shoulders as I look down at him.

“You’re welcome.” I smile shifting my fingers through his damp hair. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it.” His hands now on my ass squeeze. “I’m going to miss you like crazy, you know that, right?” he asks gently and all I can do is nod as my nose starts to sting. “Kiss me then I gotta finish packing.”

I do, and as my lips touch his I try to convey just how much I hate that he’s leaving.

hanna

Exiting the plane with Star at my side, I pull my bag with me and walk up the ramp toward the gate.

“What time is Walker getting in?” she asks as I finish replying to my doctor, who emailed me to remind me to set up an appointment for a physical in the next few weeks.

“I think close to ten. He messaged while we were in Scotland and told me they would be pulling up anchor around three. I don’t know how long it will take him to get back to port, but the train ride is about two hours.”

“And tomorrow, you’re taking him to meet Douglas?”

“That’s the plan.” I sigh.

For over two weeks, Walker and I have been making things work long distance. And for over two weeks, Douglas, who heard about Walker from Star, has been demanding to meet him. Something I’ve tried to put off, because it feels a lot like introducing him to my parents. But Douglas refuses to be deterred and threatened to show up at my house if I didn’t bring Walker to dinner while he’s in town this trip.

“And then we’re all getting together over the weekend?”

“Yeah, and I think Otto and Ham are coming in for a few days, so you might get to meet them too.”

“That will be fun. I can’t wait.”

“You’ll like the guys.”

“Are they staying with you?”

“I don’t know. I told Walker they’re welcome, since I have the extra bedroom and someone can sleep on the couch, but he didn’t seem to love the idea.”

“He wants you all to himself.” She grins, and I roll my eyes, even though I know she’s probably right. Then again, I want him to myself too. These last two weeks without him have dragged on and on, even with me taking extra shifts to keep busy. “Are you still going to your parents’ in a few weeks?”

“Yeah, I’m meeting them in Florida for a couple of days, then I’ll be back. And I think Walker and I are going to Scotland for a few days after that.”

“Send me those dates. I’ll see if Mark wants to go.” We stop at the entrance to the airport, since Mark is picking her up and I’m taking the train. “I’ll talk to you later. Tell Walker I said hi.” She kisses my cheek.

“I will. Get home safe.” I wave goodbye, then head for the train platform. When I arrive at Paddington, I stop at the grocery store to pick up some stuff so Walker and I won’t need to leave my place until it’s time for us to go to Douglas’s house tomorrow evening. Then, with my hands full, I head home.

Letting myself into the building, I stop in the entryway, totally confused by the sight that greets me. Mail and packages are littering the ground, and at the bottom of the stairs, Mrs. Lewis is lying in a crumpled heap. It takes me a moment to

realize what I'm looking at, and when it registers, adrenaline floods my system.

I drop everything I'm holding and begin screaming for help at the top of my lungs, rushing to her side. She doesn't move as I call her name, and my hands shake as I feel for her pulse. I can't find one, but I convince myself I'm wrong and search again, still calling out to her.

With the way her body is bent, I'm terrified to move her, and the blood pooled around her head worries me more than anything. With my knees shaking, I wobble to my phone that's in my purse and fight the urge to puke as I dial 999.

The man who answers my call assures me the police and an ambulance will be to us in just a few minutes. He asks me to check for a pulse, then walks me through how to start CPR—something I've been trained how to do for my job but forget in the moment as terror makes my hands shake. It takes me a minute to get her off the stairs and onto her back, and I'm a mess as I start chest compressions.

"Bloody hell, what's happened?" Josh asks, stumbling to a stop in the doorway, and I look up at him through watery eyes.

"I... I came h-home and found her at the bo-bottom of the st-steps," I sob as he falls to his knees on the opposite side of her body.

"Nanny?" He pats her cheek, and I squeeze my eyes closed to block out the sight of him as he attempts to wake her up. "Is she alive?"

"I... I don't know." The question isn't one I want to answer, and thankfully, I'm saved from having to when the paramedics arrive and usher both Josh and me out of the way so they can check her over themselves.

With my arms wrapped around him, we watch them work on her, and I think I might pass out when they share a somber look and call over the police officer to talk to him quietly. As Josh begins to cry with his head on my shoulder, I hug him and tell him how sorry I am.

Guilt eats at me. For the last couple of weeks, I haven't been home much, and she's been going up and down the stairs to take care of Mizzy for me, while I've been working longer hours. She probably came down this evening to check on her, just because she knew I was gone all day.

"We're going to take her to the hospital," the officer says as he stops in front of us. I don't ask if she's alive; it's obvious she's not. "You can ride with me, or in the ambulance if you'd like to go with her."

"I can't. I just can't." Josh shakes his head, avoiding looking at the paramedics who bring in a stretcher.

"I'll go with her," I whisper, not wanting her to be alone, and the policeman nods.

I gather my stuff and place it next to my door, not even bothering to take it inside, and then I take my purse and follow everyone outside. Sitting in the back of the ambulance, I hold Mrs. Lewis's hand that feels suddenly cold. There is no commotion around her, just silence as we drive across town.

When we arrive at the hospital, no doctors rush to her side to see if they can help her. They wheel her through the doors and take her into a room, where she's pronounced dead a few minutes later. The time of 18:38 engraves itself on my soul when it's called out in the quiet room, and the same officer who'd been at the house walks over to stand next to me.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he says quietly, and I look up at him, feeling dazed like this is a living nightmare. “You told dispatch that she fell down the stairs.”

Shaking my head, I try to pull myself together enough to speak. “Yes, I... walked into the house and found her at the bottom of the steps.”

“You’ll have to get in touch with the morgue here at the hospital tomorrow. They will tell you what needs to be done for your grandmother.”

“She wasn’t my grandmother.” Tears fill my eyes. “She didn’t have any kids, her great-nephew is the guy who was at the house with me.” I glance over at the bed where Mrs. Lewis is still lying. “Will someone tell him?”

“I can if you’d like.”

“Please,” I whisper. I don’t think I have it in me to deliver that news. I know Josh knew she passed before she even left the house, but I don’t want to be the one to confirm that for him.

“Do you want a ride back home?”

I don’t. I want to walk to clear my head, but I know I should be there when the policeman talks to Josh to make sure he doesn’t need help calling anyone. “Yeah.”

Without a word, he walks over to talk to the doctor who called the time of death, and then a minute later, he ushers me outside to his car.

When we arrive at the house, he follows me up to the front door, and I let us inside. It’s quiet... so quiet you could hear a pin drop if you were listening for it.

“Does her nephew live here?”

“He’s staying on the third floor.” I avoid looking at the blood still staining the floor at the bottom of the steps as I walk to the staircase. I don’t want to go up, but I still lead the way. The stairway is dark. Not even the single light that used to be here works any longer, since Josh and his friends have been redoing the electrical wiring, something that seems to be taking forever.

Turning on his flashlight, the policeman shines it on the steps, and I notice some blood smeared on the wall. The sight makes me sick to my stomach. He must notice it too, because for a brief moment, his light zeroes in on it.

“This was her apartment.” I point at her door as we make it to the landing, then continue up the next flight of stairs. At the third floor, I knock, and a moment later, the door is opened by a somber-looking Josh.

“Hey,” I say quietly. “Can we come in?”

“Yeah.” He looks at the officer briefly and opens the door all the way. We step inside, and his friends who are always with him are nowhere in sight as I glance around. But the apartment that was once a short-term rental and decorated much like mine is now a mess. There are pizza boxes and beer cans on every surface and garbage overflowing the trash can in the kitchen. If Mrs. Lewis had seen how they were treating her home, she would have lost her mind.

Taking a seat on the edge of the couch next to Josh, I listen to the policeman confirm his aunt passed away. Josh doesn’t make a noise or even cry; he just stares off into the distance like a zombie.

“Do you want me to help you call anyone?” I ask him when the officer leaves after getting our information and saying he will be back tomorrow to fill out a proper report.

He looks over at me and blinks like he didn't even remember I was here. "I called my mum and dad. They're on their way with Nanny's sister."

"Is there anyone else you want to call? Maybe your friends or someone to come sit with you until they get here?"

"Tim and Nathan should be back soon."

"All right." I rub his back when he leans forward, burying his face in his hands.

"I should have finished the lighting yesterday like I told her I would. She probably couldn't see."

"It's not your fault."

"It is," he says quietly, and I swallow over my own guilt. "She just always seemed so capable."

"She did." She was, even at her age, and could run circles around some of the people my age without even trying. Which is why I never saw her as old, even knowing she was in her eighties. She still took daily walks, worked in her garden, and took trips every few months to visit her friends around Europe. I never once saw her even stumble.

When the sound of footsteps starts up the stairs through the door to the apartment that is still open, I brace as I watch his friends walk inside.

"What's happened? Why is their blood on the stairs?" Tim asks, his eyes finding mine.

"Mrs. Lewis fell."

"Is she all right?" Nathan asks, and I shake my head.

"She passed away."

“Bloody hell,” he whispers, looking down at his friend, who hasn’t taken his face out of his hands.

“There are three blokes downstairs, and one of them is losing his bullocks looking for you,” Tim says, and I squeeze my eyes closed.

Crap. How much time passed since I got home?

“Are you going to be okay?” I ask Josh, who nods but doesn’t look at me. “If you need anything, I’m downstairs.”

“We’ve got him,” Tim assures, and with a nod, I get up and leave the apartment. Taking out my cell phone, I ignore the million calls I missed from Walker since it was on silent, and I use the flashlight to make my way down the stairs. Before I even reach the bottom step, Walker’s eyes find mine, and relief instantly fills his features.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

“What the fuck happened?” he asks, taking the phone from his ear, his gaze roaming over every inch of me as Otto and Ham glance down at the steps below me, where there’s still a pool of blood.

Walking toward me, Walker grabs my waist and lifts me over the bottom two steps.

“Mrs. Lewis fell down the stairs. She...” I close my eyes, dropping my forehead to his chest. “I found her when I got home.”

“Jesus.” His arms wrap around me. “Is she okay?”

“No, she’s... gone.” I drag in a breath and step out of his hold, swallowing as I look around. “Her sister and Josh’s parents are going to be here soon. I don’t... I don’t want them to see...” I swallow again, this time over the bile crawling up

the back of my throat. “I need to clean this up before she gets here.” I motion to the steps.

“Where are your keys?”

I take them out of my pocket, and he removes them from my grasp. I don't bother picking up my stuff, which is still by the door, when he opens it. I go to the kitchen and open the cupboard under the sink. Taking out a new roll of paper towels and a spray bottle of bathroom cleaner, I start to walk back to the door, but three men block my path. “We'll clean up. Go get in the shower.”

“I'm fine,” I lie, feeling like I'm about to come undone at the seams.

“Baby, you have blood on you.” I look down at myself and see that my cream top I have on under my blazer is smeared with blood, and so are my hands. I hadn't noticed. “You shower. We got this.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead and then ushers me across the hallway to my room after handing the cleaning supplies to Otto and Ham. Walking me into the room, he stands in front of me and helps me out of my work uniform, and when I'm down to nothing but my underwear and bra, he urges me into the bathroom and starts the shower.

He cups my jaw, forcing my gaze to his. “I'm gonna go check on the guys. Will you be okay for a few minutes alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm sure.”

When he leaves, I unhook my bra and step out of my underwear, then walk into the open shower. As the hot water

beats down on me, I grab my soap and scrub the blood from my hands, then I wash my hair and body.

Walker comes back before I'm even done, and when I shut off the water, he holds the towel open for me and wraps me up in it. Grabbing another he begins to dry my hair. "Everything is cleaned up."

"Thank you." I fall into his arms and fight back the urge to cry, because I know when I let go, I'm not going to be able to stop.

"I'm sorry, baby. I know she was your friend."

"I just saw her yesterday before I left for work. She was excited about the flowers she planted last fall coming up in the garden. I was in such a hurry to get to the train I..." I close my eyes. "I should have taken a few more minutes to talk to her. I should have given her a hug. I never hugged her."

He holds onto me without saying anything, and the tears I've been trying to fight back begin to slip from between my lashes as a sob climbs up my throat. Lifting me off my feet, he carries me to my bed and lies down with me.

Curled against his side, I cry myself to sleep, wondering what would have happened if I'd been home just a little earlier.

walker

“Oh no,” I hear Hanna whimper, and a second later, she’s crawling over me to get out of bed and rushing to the bathroom. I follow right on her heels and watch her fall to her knees in front of the toilet as she begins to heave.

Pulling her hair away from her face, I rub her back, then flip on the sink and grab a washcloth from her linen closet. When it’s soaked, I ring it out and rest it on the back of her neck as she gags. Nothing comes up—probably because she didn’t eat last night.

“Better?” I ask, squatting down next to her, and she shakes her head, looking over at me. Her eyes are still red-rimmed and puffy from crying herself to sleep and she looks absolutely heartbroken.

“No.” She drops her head to her arm resting across the toilet. “I have a migraine.”

“Do you get them a lot?” I’ve never had one, but my mom would get them on occasion while Miranda and I were growing up, and she’d have to lock herself away in the dark until it passed.

“Not often, but they get more regular when I’m under stress. I have medicine.” She squints over at me like the little bit of light coming in through the smoked-glass window in the

room is causing her pain. “It’s in my carry-on from the plane, in my toiletry bag.”

“Do you need to eat something before you take it?”

“No, it’s a shot.”

“Let me help you up before I get it.” I start to reach for her, but she shakes her head.

“No, I live here now,” she whispers, and if I weren’t freaking the fuck out, I might’ve laughed. Standing, I head for the living room where her bag is and start to dig through it.

“Everything okay?” Otto asks from the couch where he slept last night, while Ham took the spare bedroom. Neither of them wanted to leave after what we walked into yesterday, even with them having a room paid for at a hotel nearby.

“Hanna woke up with a migraine.”

“Shit.” He sits up. “Do you need me to run out and get anything?”

That right there is why I love him even when he does shit to piss me off. He’s always got my back when it counts.

“No, she said she has medication. I just gotta find it,” I say quietly, not wanting to wake Ham, who is probably still asleep, since it’s not even eight in the morning. I know he and Otto didn’t go to bed until after two. When I finally find her shower bag, I take it with me across the hall and shut the bedroom door. I find her just where I left her, and I’m almost sure she’s asleep until she turns her head my way.

“Thank you.” She takes the bag from me and unzips it, pulling out a small gray box and flipping it open.

Sitting on the floor next to her, I watch carefully what she’s doing so that if I ever need to do this when she can’t, I’ll

know how. After she injects herself in the thigh, I take everything from her and place it on the counter.

“Do you want to go back to bed?”

“Yeah, I just need to brush my teeth first.”

I help her off the ground and load up her toothbrush, then stand behind her until she’s finished. “How long does it take for the medicine to kick in?”

“I usually fall asleep from it, so I don’t know,” she whispers as I help her back to bed. Once I have her tucked in, I softly kiss the top of her head, and stand back to watch her for a few minutes before I even leave her to rest.

“Is she okay?” Otto asks as I walk to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee.

“Yeah, she’s probably gonna be out for a while though.”

“What’s going on?” Ham asks, joining us.

“Hanna woke up with a migraine.”

“Damn, is she okay?”

“She had a rough night.”

“Was she close with the woman who died?” Otto asks, joining us in the kitchen.

“They were friends.”

“That sucks.”

An understatement. “Yeah, it does.”

As the guys hang in the living room watching TV, I take out my computer and start doing some research. After not being able to get ahold of her last night and walking into what

I did when I got here, I need to figure some shit out. There is no way I'm going to be able to continue on like we have been.

I figured we could stick this out for a few months, but even a few more weeks might be too much for me to handle. If I hadn't already been on my way here last night and had instead been on the boat and gotten an email or text about it after the fact, I would have lost my shit. There is only so much I could have done from a distance, and I would have been depending on Toni and everyone else to have some pity and take me back to shore. I don't like the idea of things being that much out of my control.

Hearing the door to the bedroom open a few hours later, I lift my eyes off the information I've been going over and watch Hanna step into the kitchen. Even with the dark circles under her eyes, her hair a mess, and wearing a baggy shirt that reaches the middle of her thighs, she's still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

"Hey, baby." I close my computer and push back my chair as she wanders over to me.

"I slept a long time," she says quietly, her voice still sounding scratchy from crying so much last night.

"That's okay." I pull her down to sit on my lap and wrap my arms around her. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much. That medicine is a miracle but always knocks me out."

"And you probably needed the rest. Are you hungry?"

"Not yet. I'm feeling a little nauseous still."

I rest my hand on her stomach. My first thought this morning when she rushed to the bathroom was that she's

pregnant, and the idea didn't scare the fuck out of me like it should have. Then again nothing with her scares me.

“When did you last eat yesterday?”

“I don't know.” She frowns. “I had some pretzels on the plane.”

“It might be good to put something in your stomach, even just a piece of toast.”

“I will in a minute.” She rests her head against my chest under my chin. “Where are Otto and Ham?”

“They just left about an hour ago to check in at the hotel, since they didn't last night. They'll be back.”

“They stayed here?”

“They were worried about you.”

“I'm a horrible host.”

“Ham had a bed, and Otto had the couch. Both of them had blankets and pillows. We've all had worse. They were fine.”

“I guess.” She sits up when the doorbell rings.

“That's probably them.” I press my lips to the top of her head, then scoot her off my lap and stand. “I'll get it while you make yourself some toast.”

“Maybe,” she says, and I give her a look that has her sighing and heading to the kitchen.

When I make it to the front door and open it, it's not Ham and Otto but a police officer. “Can I help you?” I ask, then turn when I hear someone coming down the steps behind me and see a young guy who must be Josh, Mrs. Lewis's nephew.

“Hi, I'm Officer Taylor I'm here to speak with Hanna Mayson and Josh Baker,” he says.

Shit.

“Come in and I’ll get Hanna.” I turn to the guy who hasn’t moved toward the door. “Are you Josh?” He nods then looks over my shoulder to the officer who has entered the house. Leaving the two men, I walk back into Hanna’s apartment, and her eyes coming to me over her shoulder as she stands in front of the open fridge. “There’s an officer here to talk to you.”

“He said he would be back today to take my report. I just need to get dressed.” She shuts the fridge and goes to the bedroom, coming out a minute later wearing a pair of sweats. I follow her to the doorway, and the officer speaking with Josh turns to look at her.

“Ms. Mayson, can you give us a minute? And when I’m done speaking with Josh, I’ll knock.”

“Sure,” she agrees, stepping back inside and closing the door.

“Eat something while you wait,” I order, moving her toward the kitchen, and she lets out a disgruntled sigh, but still puts some bread in the toaster and pours herself a glass of orange juice.

When there’s a knock a few minutes later, I shake my head at her when she starts to get up. “I’ve got it.” I stand back to let the officer inside, and he looks around, as I follow him.

“Do you mind if I sit?” he asks Hanna, who’s now standing in the kitchen, her toast and juice forgotten on the counter.

“Of course.” She takes a seat across from him, and I pull up a chair next to her.

“How are you holding up today?”

“Okay. It still doesn’t feel real.”

“That’s understandable.” He nods and pulls out a pad of paper. “Josh said that when he arrived home last evening, you were with his grandmother already, performing CPR.”

“Yes, I had just gotten home, and I found her at the bottom of the steps. I called 999, and they told me to move her and begin chest compressions.” He nods, then jots something down.

“Do you remember what time you arrived home?”

“I don’t know the exact time. I landed at Heathrow at 4:20 p.m. and took the train. I also stopped at the grocery store, so I want to say around 5:30, but it could’ve been a little before or after that.”

“Do you have proof that you were on the plane at that time or a receipt from the store?”

Proof, that one word causes the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end, and she wraps her hand around my thigh.

“Yes, I’m a flight attendant with London Air, but I don’t remember if I got a receipt at the store.” She looks at me. “Did you see one in the bags?”

“I didn’t.”

“That’s okay. What store did you stop at? I can check the video.”

“The one in Paddington Station.” Her fingers dig into my thigh. “I’m...” She shakes her head. “I’m a little confused why you need to verify that information.”

He stops writing and focuses on her. “I got a call from the coroner this afternoon, and he is not convinced that the injuries

Mrs. Lewis suffered could have occurred from just falling down the stairs.”

“What?” she breathes, and I cover her hand. “What does that mean?”

“We’re trying to figure that out.” He looks between her and me. “I asked Josh who cleaned up the blood in the stairway, and he said he didn’t know.”

“I did,” I cut in. “Hanna didn’t want Mrs. Lewis’s sister to have to see that when she got here.”

“And you are?”

“Her boyfriend.”

“Do you live here?”

“No, I got in late last night.

With another nod, he begins to write again, while Hanna sits statue-still at my side.

“How long have you lived here?” he asks Hanna, her fingers still digging into my skin.

“Almost two years.”

“And Josh?”

“He and his friends just moved in a couple of weeks ago. They were doing some work for Mrs. Lewis and staying here while working on the house.”

“How do you think she and her nephew got along?”

“She loved him, and from what I saw, he was very sweet with her.”

“Did she have any problems with anyone?”

“No.” The one word is instant. “Everyone loved her.”

After writing for another moment, he looks up. “When you got home yesterday, was the door open?”

“No, it was locked.”

“Are you sure?” He studies her closely.

“Yes, I remember having to use my key to get in.”

“Did you notice anything out of place?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “I mean, there was mail everywhere. I assumed it was dropped when she fell.”

“All right.” He jots something down, then asks, “Is there anything you want to ask?”

“Do I need to be worried about living here?”

“I wish I could tell you that, but right now, we’re just trying to sort things out.” He stands. “For now, I would just be cautious.” He pulls a card out of his pocket. “I’m going to need you to email me your employer information so I can confirm the information you gave me about where you were yesterday.”

“Of course,” she replies quietly, taking the card he hands her as she stands.

“Have a good day, Ms. Mayson, and if you can think of anything else, please call me,” he says as we follow him down the hall, and when she closes the door behind him, she spins to face me, looking white as a ghost.

“He thinks she was murdered?”

“He said they’re trying to figure that out.”

“He said he has to verify where I was and what time I got home yesterday!” she cries, tossing her arms in the air, her chest rising and falling quickly. Too quickly.

“Baby, calm down. We don’t know what happened, and it sounds like *they* don’t even know what happened.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Walker. If someone murdered her....” Her face crumples, and I hook her around the back of the neck and pull her against my chest. Then, for the second day in a row, I hold her while she cries, feeling completely fucking helpless.

CHAPTER 17

hanna

Walking up the walkway to Douglas's house, Walker's hand wraps tightly around mine. The nervousness I felt just yesterday over introducing him to Douglas and his wife is long gone. Honestly, I'm having a difficult time feeling anything other than grief and trepidation.

I can't wrap my mind around the idea of Mrs. Lewis being dead, and I really can't believe someone might have killed her. And even with Walker reminding me over and over all day that Officer Taylor didn't say she was murdered, but the injuries she sustained might not have occurred from a fall down the stairs.

I'm not stupid. I've listened to enough podcasts and watched enough true crime documentaries to know you don't ask questions like the ones he was asking me unless you believe there could be foul play involved. And that's terrifying.

I have no idea who could have done that to her or if there is a risk to myself or anyone else still staying in the house.

"I think I need to move."

"Pardon?" Walker asks, stopping us halfway up the walkway.

“I think I should move.”

“Why do you need to move?”

“Because I don’t know what happened to Mrs. Lewis. I don’t know if the police have a suspect in mind or if the person will come back to try to hurt me or you or anyone in that house.”

“Baby.” He shakes his head and turns me to face him.

“I’m serious, Walker.”

“I know you are.”

“I don’t feel safe.”

“Okay, but how about we give things a couple of days before we start packing?” He cups my face in his hands. “Monday, you can call Officer Taylor and ask him if he has any more information. If he tells you that he doesn’t but is sure Mrs. Lewis was murdered, we’ll go look at apartments.”

“Okay.” I let out a sigh of relief that he isn’t telling me I’m being ridiculous.

“Are you two gonna stay out here all night then?” Douglas asks, and I turn to find him standing in the doorway with his wife Blair, while their daughters, Elsie and Vi, peek through the blinds covering the front window.

Letting me go, Walker takes my hand, and the two of us walk side by side up to the house. The minute I’m within reach, Douglas pulls me away from Walker and wraps his arms around me. “I’m sorry for your loss, lass.”

“Thanks.” I blink back the tears filling my eyes.

This afternoon, after Officer Taylor left and once I pulled myself together, I called my parents to let them know what

happened, then called Douglas. I tried to get out of this evening—not because I was worried about him meeting Walker, but because I know I’m not going to be great company, and I didn’t want his girls to see me crying. He refused to let me cancel—and told me the girls are old enough to understand why I’d be upset—because he needed to see for himself that I was okay

I couldn’t deny him that, so I told him we would be over as scheduled.

“Thank you.” I fall into Blair’s arms when she holds them open. She’s not my mother, but that same comfort I get whenever my mom hugs me is exactly what I feel as her arms wrap around me, and she kisses the side of my head.

“You doing okay?” she asks, letting me go but still keeping hold of my arms as her gaze searches mine.

“Yeah, I think right now I’m just in shock.”

“That’s understandable.” She reaches up and touches my cheek before looking at the man at my side, who already introduced himself to Douglas. “Walker?”

She holds out her hand, and he takes it. “Blair?”

“Yes.” She smiles, then looks past Douglas as both little girls come over to join us at the front door, the two of them hugging me tightly. “These are our daughters, Elsie and Vi.”

“Nice to meet you.” Walker smiles, and Vi—who is nine, five years younger than her sister—stares up at him with wide eyes.

“You’re well fit,” she tells him.

“Vi!” Elsie gasps, elbowing her in the side while her cheeks turn pink like the words came out of her own mouth.

“What do you know about anyone being fit?” Douglas asks as Blair tries and fails to hide her smile.

“I’m not blind,” she tells her father with a cheeky grin.

“Go set the bloody table for dinner,” Douglas orders, and she walks away not looking the slightest bit put out. “Why are you smiling?” he asks Blair.

“I keep telling you they aren’t babies anymore.”

“They still aren’t old enough to be thinking about a guy being fit.”

“He is fit, and like she said, she’s not blind.”

“You think he’s fit?” Douglas asks, and I press my lips together to fight back the first smile I’ve felt all day.

Blair ignores him and looks at Walker and me. “Give me your coats, and I’ll put them in the closet for you.” She focuses on me. “You can take Walker on into the dining room, and I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Do you need help with anything?” I ask her as Walker and I take off our jackets.

“You can get drinks sorted. I bought you and me a bottle of red from the shop today.”

“Thank you.” I watch her walk off, Douglas at her side grumbling to her under his breath about her always being cheeky. It’s sweet and something my parents would bicker about.

Actually, my dad might have told Walker he wanted to arm wrestle or have a pissing contest so he could prove to my mom he still has it. Then again, my dad is nuts.

When we get into the dining room, both Elsie and Vi already finished setting the table and have started getting everyone's drinks, so Walker and I offer to help them.

We step into the kitchen, and I see Blair has gone above and beyond. Not only did she make beef with potatoes and carrots, which is one of my favorites, but she also made rolls I know for certain are from scratch, along with an apple pie that looks like it could grace the cover of a magazine. She told me once Douglas asked her to marry him after a meal almost exactly like this, and I can believe it. Because I would marry her too if I had the promise of a meal like this every night.

"You made my favorite." I hug Blair around her neck when she walks into the kitchen, and she wraps her arm around my waist, giving me a squeeze.

"I thought it might cheer you up."

"Thank you." I let her go, while Walker helps Douglas take all the food to the table. I carry my glass of wine and Walker's beer and take a seat in my spot. Yes, I have my own seat at the table.

Walker sits next to me, and after Douglas says grace, Blair begins passing food around the table.

"This all looks amazing," Walker says, and Blair sends him a happy smile.

"Where is your family?" Douglas asks, the question obviously pointed at Walker.

"In Washington State, north of Seattle."

"Do you get home to visit them often?"

"It's been a few years. The last time I was in the States was right around the time my nephew turned two. He's going to be

four in a few months.”

“Your job keeps you away from home?”

“Yeah.” That one word doesn’t mean much, but there’s something about his tone that piques my curiosity.

“That has to be hard,” Blair says quietly, her eyes flittering to mine briefly.

“How’s school been?” I ask, looking across the table at the girls, wanting to change the subject. I don’t need the reminder that Walker won’t always be around, because his job will keep him away from me for weeks at a time.

“Good.” Elsie shrugs.

“She has a boyfriend,” Vi says, and Elsie swings her head her sister’s way so quickly that her hair flies.

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do. He rides the bus home with you every day.” Vi grins.

“He is not my boyfriend!” Elsie snaps, her cheeks turning a pretty shade of pink.

“Vi, stop teasing your sister,” Blair chides, and her youngest daughter looks at her.

“I’m not teasing her. It’s true.”

“It’s not, because Elsie knows she’s not allowed to have a boyfriend.” Douglas glares, and I press my lips together when her shoulders slump forward.

I remember feeling that look from my father all too well, and it sucked. What sucked more though was my brother, who is younger than me, was allowed to date and like girls without a single word ever said about it.

“What are you going to do when Elsie does like a boy, or when a boy likes her?” I ask, but I don’t point out that I’m sure they already do. The awkward stage of being a teenage girl magically skipped his fourteen-year-old daughter, because she is absolutely gorgeous and way cooler than I was at her age.

“Kill them all,” he mutters under his breath.

“Right.” Blair rolls her eyes at him. “It’s going to happen, Douglas, and you don’t want her to have to move a million miles away to escape you, just so she can live her life.”

The statement hits me right in the chest, because that is exactly what I did. Isn’t it? I moved to get away from my dad, so I could date and have fun without him constantly questioning my ability to look after myself. And sure, I’ve messed up a lot. I mean, look at the whole Ben situation. But that was my lesson to learn.

For a long moment, Douglas doesn’t say a word then he glances over at me before he looks at his wife and lets out a long sigh.

“Can you at least give your old man until you’re fifteen?” He asks looking at Elsie.

“Yes,” she whispers looking surprised but happy.

“Happy now?” he grouches looking at Blair.

“Yes.” She picks up her wine and takes a sip, and I glance across the table at Elsie, who is looking down at her plate, trying to hide her smile. I bite my bottom lip to hide my own and to keep from telling Douglas how proud I am of him. I know that he doesn’t realize it now but he just changed his entire relationship with Elsie by giving her his trust.

After that breakthrough, the rest of dinner is filled with talk about school and work, then everyone pitches in to help

clean up before dessert.

Sitting on the couch in the living room tucked under Walker's arm while Douglas takes up his usual chair and Blair sits on the arm I cover my mouth when I yawn for the third time in the last fifteen minutes. I'm not sure if it's the little bit of wine I drank, or if the day has finally caught up with me but I do know I'm tired.

"How much sleep did you get last night?" Blair asks softly as I lean forward to put down the cup of tea she gave me earlier.

"At least eight hours, maybe more than that. I think the wine has gone to my head."

"You didn't even finish your glass," Walker says, dipping his chin down to look at me before focusing back on Blair and Douglas. "She woke up with a migraine this morning."

"You didn't mention you had a migraine this morning when I spoke to you," Douglas scolds, and I sigh.

"It wasn't a big deal. I took my shot, and by the time I woke up, it was gone."

"It *was* a big fucking deal," Walker grumbles, and I have to stop myself from elbowing him in the side when both Blair and Douglas study me with concern.

"I'm fine."

"You should have rested today," Blair counters instantly.

"I'll sleep tonight, I'm fine." I yawn again.

"You should go. It's already getting dark out, and you have a drive."

“I’m fine,” I repeat, but she ignores me as she gets up off the arm of the chair Douglas is sitting in and comes back a minute later with our coats.

“Are you kicking me out?” I laugh, taking the coat she hands me.

“Yes, you need to go home and sleep. You and Walker can come back in a couple of days if you’re feeling up to it.”

Feeling like a little kid being sent to bed, I get up, and Walker helps me put on my coat.

“I’m going to tell the girls I’m leaving.” I tell him once I have my coat buttoned.

“I’ll get us a car.” I nod and walk down the hall, and knock on the girls’ bedroom door. When Vi opens it I see Elsie lying on her stomach on her bed.

“I’m taking off, I wanted to come steal a hug before I go.” I say and Vi wraps her arms around me while Elsie gets up and walks across the room towards us, “I’ll see you guys in a few days.”

“Can we go see a movie next weekend?” Vi asks with a hopeful smile.

“Absolutely just let me know which one.”

“I will.” She gives me one last squeeze while I smile at Elsie. Letting her go I head back down the hall and they follow.

When I get back into the living room, Walker and Douglas are talking quietly. I don’t know what’s being said, but I can imagine he’s sounding very much like my dad right now.

“Thank you for dinner.” I hug Blair. “I didn’t know how much I needed this evening to get my mind off things.”

“You know you’re welcome here any time.” She gives me one last tight squeeze, then lets me go to say goodbye to Walker. When Douglas opens his arms, I roll my eyes and walk to him.

“I like him, girl.”

That simple statement fills me with warmth. He and my dad are a lot alike, so if he likes Walker, so will my father.

“Me too.” I smile up at him when he lets me go. After saying good night to the girls Walker places his hand against my lower back and ushers me out of the house. And by the time we reach the end of the sidewalk, a car is there, waiting for us and he opens the back door for me.

“What are you thinking about?” Walker asks, his fingers around mine squeezing gently as I watch out the window of the cab as the suburbs become the city. The closer that we get to my place the more anxiety I feel.

“Just... that dinner was good.” I look over at him as the light from the street lamps illuminate his striking features as we zoom by.

“It was. You have some great friends.”

“I do.”

“I’m getting that they’re more like family though.”

“They are, especially them. Douglas kind of adopted me the minute I moved to London.” I tip my head to the side. “What did he say to you?”

“Just that he’d kill me if I hurt you.”

“I would say I’m surprised, but after what you witnessed at dinner, you know I’m not,” I mutter, and he laughs.

“Tell me about your mom and dad. You never talk about them.” With the way his muscles seem to bunch, I conclude it’s definitely a sore subject. He’s told me a lot about his sister, but we haven’t talked much about his parents besides the fact that his dad is a principal and his mom is a teacher.

“I’m not close with them.”

“Okay.” I wait for him to say more, but he doesn’t, not for a long time. So long, I start to wonder if that’s all he’ll give me.

“My dad is a good guy, and my mom is a good woman, but their relationship while Miranda and I were growing up was toxic.”

“Toxic?”

“Dad was a perpetual cheater, and Mom was a perpetual forgiver. It was an ugly cycle that lasted at least until my sister graduated high school. It could still be going on today, but we just don’t know about it, because we don’t live in their house to see it firsthand.”

“That’s horrible.”

“It is,” he says softly, pulling my hand over to his thigh. “I lost respect for my dad growing up. I couldn’t understand how he could do that to his wife, how he could see her crying all the fucking time and not care—or not care enough to change. And I did not understand why my mom stuck around, or why she didn’t tell him to fuck off and leave his ass. If she didn’t depend on him financially, she could have made it on her own.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy,” I say quietly, and his fingers around mine spasm. “I mean, sure, that sounds great in theory, but the idea of leaving the safety of the relationship you’re in

—even if it’s toxic—is sometimes more terrifying than sticking around for the same thing to happen again.”

“That’s fucked.”

“You’re right, it is. But it’s also true, and as a woman and a mom, she was probably scared of what might happen if she left your dad.”

“Better the devil you know.”

“Exactly,” I whisper. “Do you talk to them at all?”

“They email and call all the time. Our lack of a relationship isn’t because of a lack of effort on their part. I just don’t know how to get over what I saw and heard as a kid, or how to separate that from who they are as people now.”

“Parents, even great ones, have a tendency to mess us up.” I shrug. “I mean, I love my mom and dad, and we’re close—*really* close. But my dad’s overprotectiveness was a lot for me to deal with, so instead of dealing with it, I moved an ocean away so I could stretch my wings.”

“Babe,” he says quietly, and I shrug.

“We all have our thing, right?”

“Right.”

“I don’t know how you’d go about changing your relationship with your dad, because the way he treated your mom was horrible, and I can understand why it would be hard to respect him enough to give him a second chance. But you should work on your relationship with your mom. She didn’t do anything wrong except love a man who didn’t deserve that from her.”

The sound he makes isn’t one of agreement or of denial, and it’s not my place to keep pushing. Even if we were to get

married and have kids one day, I would never do more than encourage that relationship. Because it wasn't me who went through what he did, so I don't fully understand the deep-seated hurt he carries around. And it wouldn't be fair of me to try to force a relationship on him that he either isn't ready for or doesn't want.

When we arrive back at the house, all the anxiousness and grief I felt before we left comes crashing back down on me making me feel sick. And when Walker opens the door, I hesitate to even step inside.

"Come on." He takes my hand but doesn't pull me along. He waits until I walk through the door myself. The lights above us are working, and it smells like paint—something I didn't notice before. Then again, it was still light out when we left for Douglas's house. "Pack a bag."

"What?" I ask as he closes the door behind us when we step inside my apartment.

"I'm going to find us a room for the night. Tomorrow, we can start looking at apartments."

"I thought you said I should wait to talk to Office Taylor?"

"I did, but that was before I watched you turn white as a ghost when we pulled up to the house. Pack a bag. Mizzy will be okay over night alone, and tomorrow, I'll see if there is a short-term rental I can get us into until we find a place."

"You don't have to do that."

"Do you want to be here?"

"No."

"Then let me take care of you, go pack." he orders softly, touching his lips to mine, before pushing me toward the

bedroom. I spend less than fifteen minutes getting a bag together and by the time I meet him in the kitchen, he's fed Mizzy and secured us a room at the hotel where the guys are staying and the minute we leave the apartment I feel like I can breathe again.

CHAPTER 18

hanna

It's official. I can't afford to live in the city. I look over the top of my computer at Walker, who is sitting with my feet on his lap, and he drops the book in his hand to his chest to meet my gaze. "I thought I was getting a great deal from Mrs. Lewis for my apartment, but I was wrong. She was basically letting me live there for free."

"How much are the apartments you're finding?" he asks rubbing the top of my foot.

"Over four grand." I sigh, closing my laptop and placing it on the floor of the short-term rental he got us.

"What are you paying now?" He sets his book aside, then grabs my hand and pulls me over to straddle his lap.

"Fifteen hundred, and that included my lights and gas."

"She loved you."

"She didn't even know me. I was literally walking down the street when I saw a For Rent sign in the window. She just so happened to be outside, so I asked her if she knew anything about it." My nose stings. "She told me she owned the building and offered to show me the apartment right there on the spot, and I just followed her inside."

I swallow thickly. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to afford it by the time we were done and had already written it off before she asked if I wanted to have a cup of tea with her. I of course said yes, because she had this energy around her that just felt good.” I take a deep breath to keep from choking up. “We spent an hour talking over tea, and when I was about to leave, she told me what the rent was for the apartment and asked me if I wanted it. I signed the lease right then and there and started moving in that night.”

“Okay, so she fell in love with you over tea.” He squeezes my hips, where his hands have come to rest.

“Yeah, but that feeling was mutual.”

His face gets soft, and I know if he continues to look at me like that, I might cry, which is something I’ve been doing a lot this last week. Too much actually, and I hate it. I hate feeling like nothing is in my control, and all I really want to do is just hide in bed and sleep until things are normal again.

I fall against him, resting the side of my face on his chest under his chin and close my eyes.

It’s been eight days since Mrs. Lewis passed away, and five since I attended her funeral with Walker after finding a card taped to my apartment door, letting me know when and where she would be put to rest.

It sucked. I hated watching her casket being lowered into the ground. And the dark cloud that was already hanging over everyone seemed even bleaker from Officer Taylor’s presence. Him standing stoically away from everyone gathered did nothing but add to the questions that were on all of our minds.

Like me, Josh’s mom is worried, because if someone was willing to harm an innocent old woman, who knows what else

they're capable of. And it's not helping that Officer Taylor still hasn't given anyone any information. He hasn't even admitted if he thinks something sinister happened, which is probably more frustrating than anything.

"What time are you supposed to meet with Mrs. Lewis's family today?"

"2 pm." I keep my eyes closed. I don't even know what the meeting is about. All I know is Josh's mom, Kate, called me after getting my phone number at the small reception she had for her aunt and asked me to meet her and the family at the house this afternoon. Something I'm not even a little excited about doing. I've only been back to my apartment twice—once to get Mizzy and another time to pack up a few more things I needed for work. And each time I've gone over there, I couldn't get out fast enough. "What time is it?"

"1:15."

"I should start getting ready," I mutter but make no move to get up—not that he seems in a hurry to let me go. After giving myself another few minutes, I reluctantly leave the safety of his embrace, where the outside world and none of my problems exist. I change into a pair of jeans and a sweater then I add a little makeup and run a brush through my hair as he gets dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved Henley.

When we reach Mrs. Lewis's house, there are already people gathered inside, and Kate asks us all to come upstairs to the apartment.

An overwhelming wave of sadness washes over me when we're all ushered into the living room where Mrs. Lewis and I would occasionally have tea, and I cling to Walker's hand a little tighter as we find a spot to stand in the corner of the room.

“Thank you all for coming today,” Kate says, standing just inside the doorway, her eyes scanning over each of us. “You are all here, because my aunt cared deeply for each of you.” Her voice sounds strained, like she’s trying not to cry. “My aunt’s lawyer, William, has been going over things since her passing, and today, he’s going to read part of her will that pertains to each of you.”

I look around. The room is full, with some people standing and others sitting on the couch and in the two chairs on the opposite side of the coffee table. Every single person looks as crushed as I feel. Except Josh, who I find with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face that is directed at the floor.

“Hello,” an older gentleman greets, wearing a gray, wrinkled suit, as he walks through the doorway with a leather folder in hand. His stark-white hair is a mess, like he just woke from a nap. “Mrs. Lewis had her will updated around six months ago, so the version I’m reading today is up to date.”

He begins to read, and slowly, the room fills with the sound of people crying. When he calls my name, my back straightens and my chest gets tight. Then, just like everyone else, I burst into tears when he reads that she left me her favorite tea set and serving ware.

I never expected anything from her, but that is something I will cherish for the rest of my life. And I know the items she left the other people in the room must hold some sort of sentimental value that only they fully understand too. With my face buried in Walker’s chest, I listen until the last person’s name is called. When the room grows quiet except for the sound of everyone sniffing, I use the sleeve of my sweater to wipe the wetness from my cheeks.

“It’s going to take us a little time to get everything sorted,” Kate says, stepping forward and wringing her hands together when William leaves the room. “But once we have the items left to you located, I will contact you and arrange for you to pick them up or for them to be put in the mail.”

One by one, people get up to thank her and shake her hand, and when the room is almost empty, I approach her to do the same, with Walker at my back.

“If you need help with anything, please call me.” I reach for her hand, squeezing it gently.

“Thank you, Hanna. My aunt absolutely adored you, and I hope you know you’re welcome to stay here until we find a buyer for the property.”

“You’re selling the house?” The question that sounds like an accusation is out without permission, and she nods.

“Yes, we plan to put it on the market in the next few months. It holds too many... memories.” She drops her eyes, and I feel like a jerk for even asking, when I myself can’t even stand the idea of living here anymore.

“That’s understandable.” I squeeze her hand again, and she lifts her eyes to mine.

“You’ll probably hear us coming and going over the next few weeks, moving things out. I’ll let you know when I get the things left to you together.”

“Thank you,” I whisper before I say a quiet goodbye to everyone in the room. As we’re leaving and the door is closing behind Walker and me, I hear an explosion of voices, the loudest being Josh’s. I can’t make out much of what he’s saying as I stand in the stairwell, but there is no mistaking he’s

angry about something, and that makes the hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end.

“Come on,” Walker urges, taking my hand and helping me down the steps.

When we reach the first floor, he lets us into my apartment, and while he disappears into the bedroom, I walk into the living room. Everything looks exactly the same as it always has, but now I feel completely out of place.

“You okay?”

I turn to face him and notice he’s holding my pillows—something I mentioned I missed last night when we were going to sleep. Something I totally forgot about by this morning.

“Yeah, are you ready?”

“Is there anything else you want while we’re here?”

“Not that I can think of. I also don’t want to cart too much to the rental, when I’ll just have to cart it all back here when you leave.”

He doesn’t acknowledge that comment with anything more than a flex of his jaw. I get it. I don’t like to think about him having to leave either, but the reality is, soon, he’ll be getting on a train and heading back to work, and I’ll be here alone once more and stuck in this apartment that I hate until I can find somewhere I can afford.

Without a word, he walks to the door and opens it, and after the two of us step out, and he locks up. When we get outside, Kate is getting into an older model car, and waves at us before driving off down the street.

Since the apartment we're staying at is just a couple of blocks from Mrs. Lewis's, it takes us no time at all to get there. When we arrive, I take my pillows with me to the bedroom and lie down, feeling sorry for myself, and he leaves me to it.

Not that I blame him.

I don't even want to be around myself right now.

CHAPTER 19

walker

I stalk to the bedroom, where Hanna has been spending most of her time the last few days. I open the door, and flip on the light when I find it dark inside.

“What are you doing?” she grouches from the bed, pulling the pillow over her head.

Ignoring her, I walk to the window and open the blinds, then turn to face her with my fists on my hips. “Get up. We’re going out.”

“I don’t want to go out.” Her muffled voice comes at me from under the pillow, and I sigh before walking to the bed and tugging it from her grasp.

“That’s mine.” She glares, trying to take the pillow back, but I toss it across the room.

“Get up, Hanna.”

“No, Walker.”

“Baby.” I sigh again, scrubbing my hands down my face. “I know you’re sad, and I know a lot has happened, but you can’t just stay in bed.”

The truth is, I’m fucking worried about her. She’s hardly eaten without me forcing her to and has cried so much I’m shocked she still has tears left. And even with me

understanding she lost someone and had to go through what she did, I know it's not healthy for her to keep going like she is.

Which is why I called her parents two days ago and offered to pay for their plane tickets to fly over. They didn't take me up on my offer, but they're here after arriving this morning and are staying at the furnished rental I found for her near Douglas and Blair's. A cute little house I hope she loves, while we figure things out.

"I can, because I'm an adult, so that means I get to do whatever the hell I want." She rolls away from me, giving me her back.

"We have an appointment to look at a place. Get up." I rip the blanket off her, and in an instant, she's rolling back over and looking up at me through narrowed eyes.

"Did you not hear what I said about not being able to afford living in the city?"

"Did I say it was in the city?" I counter, and she lets out a huff.

"Fine." She sits up. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see when we get there."

With an annoyed groan, she gets off of the bed and walks past me to the bathroom, and a second later, I hear the shower turn on. With a deep breath in and out, I go back into the living room and wait for her while I finish up some work I've been doing.

"I'm ready. Are you happy?" she asks, appearing in the living room a few minutes after I hear the blow dryer shut off, and I fight back a smile.

“I want to say yes, but I have a feeling that will piss you off.”

“You’d be right.” She sighs, walking to me, and her arms wrap around my waist. “I’m sorry I suck right now.”

“You don’t suck. You’ve had a lot going on.”

“Yeah,” she agrees quietly. “I just hate this. I feel like there’s no closure and that my whole life is just up in the air.”

“I know.” I cup her face in my hands. “Just stick with me. Things will get better.”

“I don’t even know why you’re still here, putting up with me.” She says, and the pain in her voice makes my chest hurt.

“You’re stuck with me like a bad tattoo,” I whisper, and she laughs softly. Shit—when was the last time I heard that from her? It’s been a while. “I missed that sound.”

Her face softens, and she leans up on her tiptoes, grabbing my jaw in her hands. “Thank you, and I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize baby, I just want you to be happy.”

“I don’t deserve you.” She presses her mouth to mine and touches my bottom lip with her tongue. The offer of her taste is too much to pass up, and I deepen the kiss and turn her toward the counter, lifting her to sit on it when she whimpers.

As her hands wander up the front of my shirt, I move mine to the waist of her jeans and unclasp the button. Just as my fingers start to slide under the edge of lace, I groan, “Shit,” as I tear my mouth from hers.

“Don’t stop.” She attempts to use her legs to pull me closer.

Fuck, fuck. Fuck.

“We gotta go,” I remind myself and curse my stupidity. I should have gotten her out of bed earlier or not given her parents a time we’d be arriving.

“Oh yeah,” she pants against my lips, and I pull my hips back when she attempts to shove her small hand down the front of my jeans.

Pulling her down from the counter, I place her on her feet and adjust my dick. “Go get your bag so we can take off.”

“What?” She blinks up at me, looking dazed and absolutely fucking gorgeous with her lips swollen.

“Your bag. Go get it while I order a cab.”

“You’re serious?”

Un-fucking-fortunately. “Yeah, baby.”

With one last confused glance, she disappears into the bedroom, and I adjust my dick once more and give myself a pat on the back for self-control before ordering us a car.

Pulling up to the house I found and had Douglas scope out for me before I sent the owner a deposit, I watch Hanna’s expression as she looks out the window.

“This is a house.”

“It is,” I agree.

“I can’t afford a house. I might only be able to afford a room somewhere for what I’m paying right now.”

I ignore her and get out of the car, because she’s not paying for shit anyway so the conversation is pointless. When I open her door, I hold out my hand to help her out, and as soon as it’s closed behind her, the front door of the house

opens, and a beautiful woman who doesn't look too much older than Hanna steps out in high boots, jeans and a sweater with a smile on her face. Her blonde hair with streaks of almost-white running through it is pulled back from her face that looks just like her daughter's.

“Mom?” Hanna whispers, her head flying back, and her eyes meet mine for a brief moment before she takes off running.

As the two women crash into each other and embrace, Hanna's dad steps down the stairs and stands back, watching the two of them with a soft smile and his arms crossed over his broad flannel covered chest. My parents are not as cool as Hanna's. My mom dresses and looks like the teacher she is, and my dad, the same, only with a receding hairline he refuses to give up on.

Walking up the sidewalk, I sidestep the women, who still haven't let each other go and are both now crying, and walk up to Trevor. He and I have talked a few times since the first time I answered the call from Hanna's mom. It's never been anything too serious, mostly him just checking on his girl and making sure she's good. Information I'm sure he could get from her or her mother, but my guess is that, in his way, he's feeling me out, checking to see that I have my finger on her pulse and am taking care of her.

I get it. I'll probably be the same if Hanna and I ever have a daughter. And yeah, double standards suck, and without a doubt, women are the stronger of our species in a lot of ways, but they still need to be protected differently than men do so I can appreciate his need to look out for her.

“Walker.” Trevor uncrosses his arms and holds out his hand when I'm less than a foot away.

“Trevor.” I take his hand, and he pulls me in for a one-armed hug and a pat on the back.

“Thanks for calling us.”

“She needed this,” I tell him, turning to find Liz now holding her daughter’s face in her hands as she speaks quietly enough we can’t hear what is being said.

“If you haven’t figured it out by now, my girl is stubborn as fuck. If I were to tell her this fucking house was on fire, she’d still check the door handle to see for herself.” He doesn’t sound the least bit disappointed. Actually, he sounds proud. “She will never admit she needs anything from anyone, even just a hug from her mama.”

“I’m starting to get that,” I mutter, and he pats my back.

After Liz wipes the tears from Hanna’s cheeks, she pulls her in for another hug, then lets her go and turns to face us. The moment her eyes land on her husband’s, they get wet. It’s obvious Hanna wasn’t the only one who needed this reunion.

“Hey, Dad,” Hanna says quietly, walking to her father, who immediately engulfs her in a tight hug.

“Mrs. Mayson.” I hold out my hand to Liz, and she rolls her eyes at me before giving me a hug.

“Thank you for calling.”

“Anytime.” I let her go, and Hanna moves from her dad’s arms to mine and tips her head back to look up at me. She doesn’t say a word. She doesn’t need to. Her gratitude is written all over her gorgeous face. “Happy?”

“Yeah.” She nods. “How did you pull this off?” she whispers.

“All I did was ask,” I whisper back, and she drops her forehead to my chest for a brief second before looking over at her parents.

“How long are you here for?”

“Until you fly to Florida. We’ll be on that flight with you.”

“Really?” Her face lights up.

“Really.” Her mom smiles.

“Awesome. That means that you can help me look for an apartment. I haven’t been able to find anything.”

“I think your guy already took care of that for you.” Her mom waves toward the house. “I didn’t have a chance to really look around before you got here, but from what I saw, it’s perfect.”

“You already rented this place?” Hanna’s eyes come to me, and I don’t know if I should say yes or no, because her expression is giving nothing away.

“If you hate it, we can find something else, but I’m sure you noticed that Douglas lives right down the block. I figured you’d like that. Plus, they allow pets, so you keeping Mizzy won’t be a problem.”

“You did this without even asking me?”

Fuck.

“Hanna,” her dad says, sounding like he’s about to step in, and she holds up her hand.

“You haven’t been in a good place, and I know this is something that’s been stressing you out. So I wanted to take this off your plate before I have to leave.”

It's not the sentence; it's the single word at the end that causes her eyes to water. Yeah, I really gotta figure something out, because I can tell she won't be able to do this for much longer, and I know I won't either.

"I don't know if I should be mad or if I should kiss you."

I take the option away and lean down to touch my lips to hers. "You can be mad later," I say when I pull back, and she bites her bottom lip.

"Let's go have a look around." Her mom puts her arm through hers. "While Dad and I are here, you and I can do some shopping and pick up whatever you need to make it yours."

As Hanna and her mom head up the steps into the house, her dad and I follow on their heels.

The inside looks just like the pictures Douglas texted me after I stole his number from her cell and asked him for some help. The front living room is small and already has a couch and TV. Through an arched doorway is the kitchen, with a door that leads to a fenced-in garden, and down a short hall is a simple bathroom and two bedrooms. One is slightly bigger than the other, with a queen bed and a dresser in each.

I watch her take everything in as she walks through the house with her mom, and it's like a physical weight is lifted off her shoulders.

When her parents both step outside to see what's in the shed in the backyard, she stays with me and watches them until they disappear inside the small structure.

"I love this place," she says quietly, and I dip my chin to look down at her. "Are you sure I can afford it?"

“Yep.” is all I give her, and she sighs like she knows I’m lying and gives me her weight.

CHAPTER 20

hanna

I pad into the kitchen, where I can hear Walker on the phone, finding him shirtless at the counter with his back to me, a cup of coffee close. His eyes come to me over his shoulder, and his face instantly goes soft as they travel from his shirt that I put on to my bare feet. “Morning, baby.”

“Morning.” I step up behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist, and rest the side of my head against his back.

“Ham, I’ll call you back,” he says, then pauses. “I will. Yeah. Talk later.” He pulls his phone from his ear and places it on the counter before covering my hands with his.

“Sleep okay?”

“Yes.” I leave out that I always sleep better when he’s home and that I hate it when he’s gone. “You should have woken me when you got up.”

“Did you want to go for a run with me?”

“No.” I let out a chuff of laughter.

“That’s what I thought.” I hear the smile in his voice. “You were tired.”

I was, but that’s because it has been a whirlwind few weeks. Between my parents coming to visit, moving into my new place, going with my mom and dad to visit my

grandparents in Florida, then coming home and spending two days in Scotland with Walker before working three days in a row so I'd have a few days off with him before he has to go back to work again, it's been wild.

“Is everything okay with Ham?”

“Yeah, he was letting me know he and Otto made it to Jamaica.”

“Do you miss that?”

“What?”

“Traveling with them when you're not working?”

He drags me around his body so we're chest-to-chest, then grabs my face. “The only thing I miss is you when I'm not here.” He brushes his mouth against mine, then his hands move from my face to my back and down to my ass. “What time is your doctor's appointment?”

“Noon.” He glances at the clock on the microwave, and I look at it too. It's 9:30 a.m., so I still have plenty of time before I have to leave. “What are you doing?” I laugh when my stomach is suddenly in his shoulder and the room is upside down.

“I'll show you in a second.” He carries me to the bedroom and slides me back down his front and lets me fall back on the bed. Straddling his waist, I look down at his gorgeous face as I rest my hands on his chest.

Moving his hands up my waist he slides my shirt up and I lift my hands to help as he takes it off.

“I thought you were going to show me something.” I shift my hips and his cock that is hard as steel presses against me through the thin material of his shorts.

“I’m getting there, don’t rush me.” He cups my breasts that are extremely tender. Sliding my hands down his chest I push up on my knees to give myself room and slip my hand into his shorts.

“You’re taking too long.” I wrap my fist around him and pull him free, slowly sliding my hand up and down his length watching his jaw get tight. Lifting up he captures my mouth and covers my hand with his and pressing the tip of his cock inside me.

“Alright, baby girl.” His fingers curl around my hip and he pulls me down on his length causing my breath to catch. By the time he’s done with me, neither of us have time to do anything but shower before it’s time to leave.

Sitting on one of the leather chairs in the small room I’m in, I smile at the text I just got from Walker, letting me know there is an older lady flirting with him in the waiting room, so I should hurry up unless I want to be single.

“Hanna.” Dr. Shelly knocks as she steps into the room, the smile she had earlier when I showed up for my appointment nowhere in sight.

“Is everything okay?” I ask her tucking my phone into my bag as she grabs the back of the chair across the room and rolls it toward me.

“I hope so.” She takes a seat in front of me. “When you came in, we took a urine sample.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

“The pregnancy test we did came back positive.”

“What?” My stomach bottoms out. “I must have heard you wrong. There is no way I could be pregnant. I’m on birth control.”

“You were.”

“I was what?”

“You were on birth control. You never scheduled the appointment for your last shot. Unless you went somewhere else to get one.”

“Oh my God.” I hold my hand against my chest that suddenly feels tight—way too tight. She’s right. I had it written on my calendar and a reminder set in my phone but never made the appointment. I wasn’t having sex or was even interested in having sex with anyone, thanks to my no-dating rule. I put it off for so long that I forgot all about it, and never once did I remember when Walker and I started having sex without protection.

I’m so stupid, so very stupid, and he’s going to hate me and think I did this on purpose. “Oh, God, I’m going to puke.” I lean over the garbage can she shoves at me and heave into it.

“Better?” she asks softly after a couple of minutes.

“Yeah,” I lie, wiping my mouth with the tissue she hands me. “Are you sure the test is right?”

“Yes.” Her expression fills with sympathy. “I did two more tests when the first came back positive.” My eyes slide closed. “I’d like to do an ultrasound, if that’s okay with you.”

“Today?”

“If you have time.”

“Okay,” I agree, and she gets up, leaves, and comes back a few minutes later, rolling a machine in.

After she instructs me to lie on the bed and unbutton my jeans, she turns off the light and places a paper blanket over my lap. “If we can’t see anything this way, we’ll use a wand that’s inserted into your vagina, which would mean you’re not very far along,” she explains.

I squeeze my eyes closed when she squirts a cold liquid on my belly, and within a couple of seconds, the sound of galloping horses fills the room while tears fill my eyes.

“Well, no wand needed. Do you know when you had your last menstrual cycle?”

I shake my head, then clear my throat. “When I was on the shot, I rarely had my period, or when I did, it was really light. I kind of forgot about it.”

“Okay.”

I hear some clicking and look over at the machine next to the bed. My heart lodges in my throat when I see the outline of what looks like a tiny bean. God, I’m really pregnant with Walker’s baby.

Our baby.

Fear and an overwhelming amount of protectiveness and love hits me so hard that if I were standing, I’d probably fall to my knees. “From the measurements, I’d guess you’re around seven, maybe eight weeks along.”

I try to think back to seven weeks ago, to where I was and what I was doing, but these last few months have felt like a blur. “Is he healthy?”

“It’s too early to tell if it’s a he or a she, but everything looks and sounds perfect.” She does some more clicking around, then flips on the light. When she hands me a wipe, I clean off my belly, then sit up and put my pants back in place.

“I sent a few pictures to the printer in my office. Would you like them?”

“Yeah.” I stand up, and she rubs my arm before wheeling the cart back out of the room, coming back less than a minute later holding a printout of the ultrasound. I take and tuck it away in my purse without even looking them over.

“I’d like you to make an appointment for a week from now with the obstetrician here in the office.” I nod. “If you need anything or have any questions before you have the chance to meet with him, you can always call me.”

“Thank you, Dr. Shelly.”

“Good luck, Hanna.” She leaves, and I take a few minutes to pull myself together before I open the door and leave the room.

I step into the waiting room, where Walker has been since I was called back, and stop just inside the doorway to watch him as he talks to the older woman sitting next to him. The idea of him hating me after the news I’m going to have to share makes my chest hurt.

Somewhere along the line, my stupid heart that didn’t know any better got completely wrapped up in him, a guy who is about as tame as the ocean in a storm. He turns and smiles when he spots me, then says something to the older woman sitting next to him, patting her hand before getting up and walking in my direction.

“Ready?” he asks, and I nod, forgoing my stop at the counter to set up an appointment for next week. I’ll call and schedule one over the phone.

“Sorry you had to wait so long.”

“It’s all right. Was everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I step into the elevator with him and try to talk myself out of puking as he presses the button for the lobby of the building.

When the doors open, a woman pushing a stroller greets us, and Walker steps out with me, then holds the door for her so she has time to go in. “Thanks.” She smiles at us, looking exhausted but happy, and without thinking, I place my hand to my stomach.

“You okay?”

My eyes fly up to Walker, who is watching me closely. Then again, he’s always watching me closely.

“Yeah.” I remove my hand quickly. “Just hungry,” I lie.

“That Indian place you love is close by. We can get lunch there.”

“That sounds good.”

Since it’s just a short distance, we walk down the sidewalk hand in hand, and like the universe wants to keep reminding me of my current situation, we must pass a dozen couples or moms with strollers and women who are pregnant and showing. I glance up at him each time to see if he notices any of them, to try and imagine what he’s thinking if he does. I get nothing and honestly I’m lost on how or when I’ll tell him that I’m pregnant. I know he mentioned that he wanted kids but that was one day in the future scenario that doesn’t exist in this situation, one where we had settled, probably gotten married and planned for a baby.

When we arrive at the restaurant and are seated, I wonder if the smell of curry and other spices I normally love are making me nauseous or if the fear wrapping around me is.

“I’m going to run to the bathroom. I’ll be back.”

“Okay, baby.” He watches as I slide out of the booth, and I hurry to the restroom.

Going right to the sink and splash some cold water on my face, breathing through my mouth. I try to remember if I’ve felt nauseous at any point over the last few weeks or had any symptoms I should have recognized, but it’s hard to remember. I know I’ve felt tired, but with traveling and so much going on, I’ve gotten used to feeling that way.

When I’m pretty sure I’ll be okay, I leave the restroom and walk back to the table, fear paralyzing me when I’m halfway there. Dizzy with dread, I watch Walker look over the printout of the ultrasound and recognize the exact moment he understands what he’s looking at.

Lifting his head, his eyes meet mine, and the world feels like it shifts under my feet. His expression gives nothing away as he shoves the paper back in my bag, slides out of the booth we were seated at, and begins walking toward me, carrying my purse.

“We’re going home,” he says quietly, and all I can do is nod as he grabs hold of my hand and carefully maneuvers me between tables and right out the door.

CHAPTER 21

walker

Pregnant.

She's fucking pregnant with my kid.

Jesus.

I glance down at her as we step out on the sidewalk. She looks pale and freaked out. Actually, she's looked freaked since she came out of her appointment.

I didn't understand it then, but I sure as fuck get it now.

I glance around for the closest cab and spot one parked at the end of the block, and begin leading her that direction, because there's no way I'm taking her on the train right now.

"Please slow down." She says and I glance down at her, which means I miss the group of guys messing around as they come around the corner, one of them shoving his friend right into Hanna sending her stumbling into me with an "Oof."

Wrapping my arms around her I pull her against my front and look over the top of her head narrowing my eyes on the kid who shoved his friend. "Watch what the fuck you're doing." Swallowing hard he looks up at me then he glances at Hanna.

"Ugh, sorry, Miss."

“It’s okay,” she whispers, giving him a smile, and I grit my teeth.

Moving her into my side when I really want to pick her up I hustle her to the cab and open the back door, I wait until she’s inside, then I get in and give the driver the address to the house while I hook her seatbelt around her. My hands shake as they brush across her midriff where our baby is. *Our fucking baby. Jesus.* After checking to make sure she’s secure, I sit back, and neither of us says a word as he drives us from the city to the house forty minutes away.

When we arrive home, I pay the driver as she gets out, taking her purse with her, then follow her up the walkway to the front steps.

As soon as the door closes behind me, I watch her begin to pace back and forth across the living room, and I stand back with my arms crossed over my chest.

“I can’t believe you went through my purse.” That statement and the look she shoots at me that has my hackles rising.

“I didn’t. When you got out of the booth, you knocked it to the ground and didn’t notice. Everything fell out, and I picked it up.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders slump forward.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t gotten that far in my thought process,” she whispers, stopping in front of the window to look outside.

“But you were going to tell me, right?”

“Yes.” Her gaze meets mine, and tears fill her eyes. “I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“Did you get yourself pregnant?”

“Um...” Her brows dart together. “no?”

“Then that apology is fucking ridiculous.”

“It’s not.” She swallows. “I... I was on the shot before I met you. I hadn’t been having sex, so I put off getting it updated, then totally forgot all about it all together. I wasn’t on anything when we started having sex without condoms, so this —” She points at her stomach that is still flat. “—is absolutely my fault.”

“Pretty sure I was a participant every time we’ve had sex, Hanna. And last I checked, no form of birth control, including condoms, are a hundred percent at preventing pregnancy.”

“You should be mad!” she cries.

“Is that what you want? You want me to be pissed off that you’re carrying my child?” I shake my head. “That’s not gonna happen, if that’s what you’re looking for. I knew before you ever left Ibiza that I’d do whatever it took to make it difficult for you to cut me off. This is just one more way I’m guaranteed to keep you for the rest of my life.”

“That sounds insane, Walker.”

“Maybe,” I agree, and her eyes widen as she takes a step back.

“Did you... Did you switch our phones on purpose?”

I don’t answer. I don’t need to. She already knows the answer.

“Oh my God, you did, didn’t you?”

“I gave you access to all of me. There were no secrets and no way I could hide anything from you. You needed to know you could trust me, and I needed a way to guarantee I’d see you again.”

“I don’t even know what to say.”

“‘I’m in love with you’ would be a good place to start.”

Her head jerks back. “I don’t.... I’m... I’m not.... I—”

“Don’t piss me off by lying to my face,” I cut her off. “You’re just as in love with me as I am with you. And sure, I went to an extreme to force things in a direction that worked for me, but I have zero regrets.”

“You stole my phone after I told you that I didn’t want to see you again.”

“So, if I had walked away, left things like they were in Ibiza, and we never connected again, you’d have been okay with that?” I ask, and the color drains from her face like the idea is even too much to think about. “Tell me one time I’ve made you regret this relationship.”

“It’s not that simple,” she whispers, and fuck, I want to rip my hair out.

“It is. You either love me or you don’t!” I shout, getting pissed off. Actually, I’m already pissed, because she’s so fucking stubborn.

“Fine!” she shouts back. “I love you! Are you happy now?”

“Yes.”

“You do realize you’re a walking red flag, right?”

“And...?”

“And... that’s mental, Walker. You manipulated this whole thing and are acting like I should think it’s completely normal... that it’s okay.”

“All is fair in love and war. I told you that in the beginning.”

“And I still don’t know what that means!” she yells.

“It means that even if you refuse to fight for us, I always will, because I know what we have is worth the effort. You’re the first woman I’ve ever loved and the one person in my life I can’t stand being away from. My life, my future, and my fucking happiness depends on you.”

“Great.” She sits down on the edge of the couch, covering her face. “Now you made me cry.”

Walking to where she is, I get down on my knees in front of her and grab her hands. “I love you.” Her glossy eyes meet mine. “I know we weren’t planning on you getting pregnant, and I know we’ve got a lot of shit we’re gonna have to figure out, but you are not alone in this. I’m right here, and I will be right here.”

Shaking her head, tears fall from between her lashes. “I hate that you’re gone all the time. I don’t want to go through this by myself.” The softly spoken confession cuts me to the quick.

“My contract with Toni is up in three months. I’m going to hate every second I have to be away from you, and I know it’s not going to be easy, but I need you to keep being strong for just a little longer, baby.”

“Then what?”

“That’ll be up to you. We can stay here or move back to the States.”

“But your job—”

“I’ve been shoving almost every penny I make into investments for over twenty years,” I cut her off. “I could retire tomorrow and still take care of you and any kids we have.” I squeeze her hands. “That said, Otto, Ham, and I have been talking about starting up our own business, but that would most likely mean we’d need to move to Florida, and you’d have to be willing to move there too.”

“I can work from anywhere,” she says quietly.

“About that....”

“About what?” She frowns.

“I don’t love the idea of you flying all over the place while you’re pregnant.” Her frown deepens—a cue I need to tread carefully. “Do you know if it’s safe?”

“I’ve known I’m pregnant for about two hours, so I have no idea.”

“Do you know any women you’ve worked with who have been pregnant?”

“Of course.”

“And how long into their pregnancy did they continue flying?”

“It depends.” She chews the inside of her cheek. “Every airline has different rules, and every pregnancy is different.”

“All right, we’ll table that for now.” I cup her face in my hands. “Now, tell me what the doctor said.”

“She just told me I’m pregnant, and then she did an ultrasound.” Tears fill her eyes. “I heard the heartbeat.”

Fuck, I hate that I missed experiencing that with her. “And everything is okay? He’s healthy?”

“He or she is perfect, and I’m between seven and eight weeks along.”

“When is your next appointment?”

“I have to make one with an obstetrician.” She looks down at our hands.

“I’d like to go with you, if possible.”

“I’ll call tomorrow and see when the earliest is they can get me in, so you can be there.”

“We’re having a baby.”

“Yeah.” She closes her eyes and drops her forehead to mine.

“I love you, baby.”

“I love you too, even though you’re crazy.”

Smiling, I lean in and brush my mouth across hers, then gather her into my arms and hold her on my lap, resting my hand on her stomach. Never once did I think I could love anyone as much as I love her, and I never expected that emotion to overwhelm me in just an hour.

And yeah, she’s right. I manipulated things between us, but I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.

walker

“Do you really think you need all those?” Hanna asks.

I look down at her and watch as she takes a sip from the fruit smoothie I ordered her down the block from the bookstore. Some concoction with spinach, berries, and bananas—three things I found out through Google are good for a woman to have when she’s pregnant.

“Can you ever have too many books?”

“Normally, I’d say no. But I’m pretty sure that no one needs ten books on pregnancy.”

“They’re not all on pregnancy. This one is baby names, and this one—” I hold it up. “—is for the expectant dad.”

“Right, sorry. I forgot about those two.” She rolls her eyes, and if my hands weren’t full, I’d grab her face and kiss her. “We don’t need the baby name book.”

“We don’t?”

“No, if it’s a girl, we’re naming her Luna, and if it’s a boy, we’re naming him Draco.”

“Where did you come up with those?”

“Harry Potter.” She grins.

“We are not naming our kids after Harry Potter characters.”

“Why not? Those are two strong, unforgettable names.” She peeks up at me through her lashes, and I know she’s fucking with me when I see the coy smile she’s doing a shit job of hiding.

“All right.” I play along. “Let’s say we go with your names. What about our other kids? You said you want three or four.”

“Hermione and Rubeus are also cool, and we could get a dog and name him Fluffy.”

“Mizzy might feel left out.” I stop when she does to read over the back cover of a book with a half-dressed couple on the front.

“We can change her name to Crookshanks. It’s not like she’d notice or care.” She tucks the book under her arm. It apparently passed the test.

“Are you going to call me Dumbledore?” He and Harry are really the only two characters I know.

“No way. You’re more Voldemort than Dumbledore.”

“And who would you be?”

“Bellatrix, but only because her name is badass.”

“Do I even want to know how many times you’ve read those books?”

“Only once,” she answers, and I raise a brow. “I’ve watched the movies a million times.”

“Right.” I laugh as we make our way to the counter with my ten books and her one addition.

With a bag of books in one hand, I take her hand with the other, and we leave the store, the two of us walking up the block to where her doctor's office is. Three days ago, she was able to get an appointment for this afternoon with the obstetrician. Which worked out perfectly, since I leave tomorrow morning to head back to Bournemouth and will be gone for a little under two weeks.

When we get upstairs to the doctor's office, Hanna checks in, then the two of us find empty seats in the waiting area. While she scrolls through her phone, I take out one of the books I picked up and ignore her shaking head as I start to read.

“Ms. Mayson?”

I look up when her name is called and feel my jaw flex involuntarily.

Hanna stands, and I drop the book into the bag and get up as she walks toward the woman holding a door open. “It's okay if my boyfriend comes, right?” she asks.

Three months ago, I would have been ecstatic that she was admitting out loud that I'm her man. Now, the word “boyfriend” sounds immature and pisses me off as much as her last name does.

“Of course.” The middle-aged woman, wearing scrubs with her hair tied up in a ponytail, smiles. After she gets Hanna's weight and blood pressure in the hall, she leads us back to a room where there's a machine set up and a skinny bed covered in paper. “If you wouldn't mind changing into this, Dr. Potter will be with you in a minute.”

“Thanks.” Hanna grins, taking the paper gown, and as soon as the door closes, she turns toward me. “Dr. Potter? Is

that a sign that we really should go with Luna or Draco?”

“No.”

“Come on.” She fake pouts as she starts to get undressed in front of me. When she is down to her t-shirt underwear and bra, her eyes find mine and narrow. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” I watch as she lifts her shirt over her head.

“You know exactly how you’re looking at me.”

“You’re getting naked.” I watch her slide the lace of her underwear down her hips. “How else am I supposed to look at you when you’re getting naked?”

“I’m getting undressed for an examination.” She tosses them at me, and I catch them with one hand and bring them to my face. “Oh my God, don’t do that in here,” she hisses.

“You smell good.” I tuck them in my pocket. “How long do you think we have before someone comes back in here?”

“You stay on your side of the room Mr. St. James.” She quickly puts on the paper gown and sits on the edge of the table, her cheeks pink. I smirk, and she lets out a huff, crossing her arms over her chest.

When there is a knock on the door a couple of minutes later, a good-looking guy around my age walks into the room, and my back straightens.

“Ms. Mayson.” He smiles, focusing on Hanna, then turns to me. “Dad?” It’s a question, and I jerk up my chin but keep my mouth firmly shut. “Dr. Shelly and I spoke this morning. She told me this is your first pregnancy.”

“It is.” Hanna gives him one of her beautiful smiles.

One of *my* smiles.

“Great. Today, we’re just going to check you over, and I’ll give you another ultrasound. I know Dr. Shelly already did, but I’d like to see for myself that everything is okay and confirm how far along you are. And when I’m done, you two can ask me any questions you have.”

“Okay,” Hanna agrees, glancing over at me, and I force a smile.

When he opens the door and calls out for someone, the woman who checked Hanna’s weight joins us. I feel a little bit better when she stands next to him as he goes through Hanna’s exam, but only a little. My hands are balled so tight that my circulation is cut off as I watch him touch her.

“All right.” He takes off his gloves after doing something between her legs that has me feeling crazed with rage. “Everything looks good.” He glances at the nurse, who without being told takes a large wand off the machine in the room and rolls a condom down it while he changes his gloves.

“What is that?” I don’t mean to bark the question, but seriously, the thing looks like the curling iron Hanna has on the counter in our bathroom.

He smiles at me. “At eight weeks, we like to do a transvaginal scan. This allows us to see things a little more clearly.”

“You’re going to put that inside her?” I watch him squirt clear lube on the end.

“Walker,” Hanna says quietly, and I focus on her. She doesn’t say a word, but it’s written on her face that I need to calm down and shut up.

“Right,” I grumble. “Never mind. Proceed.”

Dr. Potter laughs, then the lights go out, and he tells her that she might feel some pressure.

Standing, I walk over to Hanna and take her hand as I look at the image on the screen. I can't make anything out in the grainy black-and-white image until it moves, and suddenly there is a white mass in the dark, and I can just make out a head and what looks like legs. Then, within seconds, I'm dizzy as the steady sound of a thudding woosh fills the quiet room.

“He has a strong heartbeat.”

“He?” I look at the doctor.

“Sorry, it's a habit. It's too early to know the sex. You have a few weeks to go before we'll be able to tell that, but Dr. Shelly was right in saying you're about eight weeks along.”

Eight weeks. I found out this morning that a pregnancy lasts about forty weeks, so she has thirty-two to go. I look down at Hanna, who isn't looking at the screen but is watching me. Even with the room mostly dark, she's never looked more beautiful.

When the doctor is done, he tells her she can get dressed and that he'll be back.

Alone, I lean over the table Hanna is still lying on and kiss her, but it's not a soft, sweet kiss. I knot my fingers in her hair and nip her bottom lip, and when she gasps, I take advantage and tangle my tongue with hers. I kiss her until she latches onto me and only stop when she moans against my tongue.

“What was that?” she asks when I lean back, placing one last soft kiss against her lips.

“I fucking love you.”

“So that kiss wasn’t your way of remarking your territory?” She shoves her fingers through my hair as her eyes search mine.

I don’t answer. Instead, I help her sit up, then take her underwear from my pocket and help her get dressed before Dr. Potter comes back.

After I spend about thirty minutes asking him questions mostly to do with Hanna’s job and how safe it is for her to be traveling as much as she does, we leave the room. We then walk to the front desk to make an appointment for four weeks from today.

As we’re talking to the receptionist, the door to the main clinic opens, and a man with dark hair holding the hand of a very pregnant redhead walks in. Hanna’s response to their presence is instant. Her spine straightens, and her mouth turns down at the corners as she starts to turn away from them, but then she stops and makes direct eye contact.

“Hey, Benjamin.” Benjamin, her ex, the guy who cheated on his wife.

“Hanna.” He glances at me quickly then looks away.

She skates her eyes down to his hand wrapped around the other woman’s. “How’s your wife?”

The woman at his side turns a bright shade of red, almost matching the color of her hair, while he bristles but doesn’t respond.

Pressing my lips together, I place my hand on Hanna’s back, then slide it around to her hip and squeeze.

“All set,” the receptionist says happily, grabbing our attention. Then passes over an appointment card. “See you in a few weeks.”

“Thank you.” Hanna smiles, taking the card from her. Then, without sparing Ben another glance, we leave the office.

When we step into the elevator in the hall I crowd her against the wall. “Do you feel better?”

“I should have punched him in his stupid face,” she grumbles, and I laugh before dropping my mouth down to hers for a hard kiss.

hanna

As I walk to my house, with Vi and Elsie tagging along after visiting with their mom, I laugh as both girls giggle while walking their new puppy, York—a mini Yorkshire terrier—down the sidewalk. He was a gift from their dad, who is working today. A gift I had a good laugh about, because boys are cute, but puppies are cuter and take up so much time Elsie won't have any left to think about much else for awhile.

“Do you think if you and Walker get married, you'll stay here?” Vi asks, and Elsie slows and picks up York.

“I don't know, honey.”

“I like that you live so close and that we can come visit you whenever we want.”

“I like that too.” I don't know how Walker knew that moving over here after losing Mrs. Lewis would make things a little easier, but he did, and it's just one more reason why I love him, he knows what I need when I sometimes don't.

“You won't move back to America, will you?” she asks, and my heart hurts.

“I don't know,” I lie, because I'm not ready to admit I might have to leave sooner rather than later. I love London and

Europe, but I know in my gut that I want to be close to my family, even if Florida is as close as I can get.

“I hope not.” She smiles. “I want you to stay here forever.”

I don't say anything, just smooth my hand down her hair as I look at her because I know I'm likely to cry if I do. These stupid hormones have me emotionally on edge and wanting to cry at the stupidest things which is so annoying.

“Is Walker here yet?” Elsie asks when we reach my house.

“Not yet. He should be here soon.” I take a seat on the front step and watch them play, the puppy so tiny he practically disappears in the green grass. Smiling at the three of them, I see a car pull up to the curb, and my heart starts to beat a little harder, like it always does when I see the man who emerges from the back seat. When he gets out with his bag over his shoulder, both Elsie and Vi turn their attention to him and call out an excited greeting.

Vi picks up the puppy and takes off running in his direction, shouting, “We got a puppy.”

“I see that.” He smiles down at her and rubs the top of York's head while my heart melts. It's still wild to think about us becoming parents, that one day this might be a moment we have with our own kids—him coming home from work and them excited to share something with him.

When his gaze comes to me, his smile doesn't deepen but gets softer, more intimate. I always miss him when he's gone, but these last two weeks apart seemed harder than any time before. The nights have been especially difficult. And I could tell he wasn't doing much better than me. His emails and texts were filled with worry and lots of questions. Was I getting enough sleep? Eating enough? Working too much? One thing I

do have to say is being able to connect with him through e-mail and text alone for weeks at a time has oddly deepened our connection. Our relationship is not just about sex, don't get me wrong, the chemistry between us is off the charts but I feel like I know him, really know him and I know he feels the same.

I get up and stand on the first step. When he's a few feet away, his eyes drop to my stomach, which is still flat. I don't know when you start to show, but I haven't. All of my clothes still fit the same. The only changes I've noticed are my breasts seem more sensitive and I'm tired all the time, even if I get a full night of sleep.

“Hey, baby.” He drops his bag to the ground and wraps his arms around me, shoving his face in my neck. When he pulls in a deep breath, I do the same, and like always, my entire being relaxes, and all is right with the world once again. “I fucking missed you.”

“Me too.” I lean back, and he kisses me.

“How's my baby?” he asks low, so the girls still playing in the yard can't hear.

“Good,” I answer just as quietly. I told him I wasn't going to tell anyone until I was over nine weeks along, but then I decided I didn't want to share the news until he was back home with me again.

In the end, everyone will be happy for us, but I know they'll all have a lot of questions and maybe even concerns, because we've only been together a short while, we aren't married, and his job at this point keeps him away for long stretches. All of their concerns are ones I have myself, even with him reassuring me this is only temporary.

“Hanna!” Elsie calls, and I pull away from Walker and look over at her. “We’re going to walk home before Mum starts to worry.”

“Okay, honey. Tell her to message me so I’ll know you made it.”

“I will.” She stands, dusting the grass off her bottom, and Vi, who is not too old for hugs, runs over and wraps her arms around me.

“Can you and Walker come this week for dinner?”

“Absolutely.”

“Awesome.” She smiles before running back over to her sister, who is holding York.

“Bye, girls.”

“Bye.”

They both wave, and I wait until I know they won’t catch me spying, then walk down the sidewalk. I peek around the trees that line the street to watch them until they reach their house, which is just a few down from mine. When I turn back to Walker, he’s looking at me with a smirk.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shakes his head.

“What?” I repeat, walking toward him.

“It’s cute you’ve already got the mama-bear thing down.”

“I was just making sure they got home okay.” I curl myself against his side and walk up to the front door.

“I know. It’s cute.”

“Whatever.” I unlock the front door, and of course Mizzy is right there waiting to greet him. Dropping his bag, he picks her up and holds her on her back, rubbing her belly. “She cried for three days at the front door, waiting for you to come back.”

“She loves me.”

“I know.” I glare at the two of them when she begins to purr.

His gaze meets mine. “My poor baby, are you jealous?” He drops Mizzy to the back of the couch and starts toward me.

“No.” I back away from him.

“Do you want me to rub your belly too?” he asks, stalking me across the living room, making me laugh.

“I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” He catches me around the waist and pulls me flush against him.

“I’m sure.” I smile and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Guess what,” he prompts softly.

“What?”

“I’m home for three weeks.”

“What?” I pull back to see his face, sure I heard him wrong.

“Toni had a family emergency back in Texas and won’t be back for at least three weeks.”

“Really?”

“Really.” His expression softens as his hand slides down the back of my hair.

“I shouldn’t be happy that he had an emergency, but I am.”

He smiles and starts walking me backward.

“What are you doing, Mr. St. James?” I ask, sounding breathless when he begins kissing down the column of my throat.

“I have something to show you in the bedroom.”

“Do you?” I laugh, falling back onto the bed, and he comes down on top of me, careful to keep his weight off my belly.

Leaning over me, he kisses from my lips, down the column of my throat, to the tops of my breasts, and then he lifts my shirt and kisses down to my belly. “Do you know he’s the size of a strawberry?”

“Or she.” I drag my fingers through his hair that is longer than before.

“Or she.” He smiles up at me. “He or she also doesn’t look like an alien so much anymore and no longer has webs between his or her fingers and toes.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” He kisses my belly and unclasps my jeans.

“What else have you read about?”

“That if you were having any morning sickness, it should be getting a little better now.”

“I haven’t been getting sick. My boobs are just extra sensitive, and I’m tired all the time.” I lift my hips as he tugs my jeans down.

“I also read that you might have an increased sex drive.”

“Did you actually read that?” I laugh, then bite my lip when his fingers slide along the elastic of my underwear right between my legs.

“I did.”

“I have been masturbating a lot,” I say, and his head flies up, his eyes locking on mine.

“Have you?”

“You haven’t been home.”

“My poor baby.” His fingers skim up my slit, and my hips jerk in response. “Already wet.” He pulls the skin of my belly between his lips and sucks. “What have you been doing to get yourself off?”

“I’m not telling you that.” I feel my cheeks get warm.

“Why not? I want to know.” His fingertips roll over my clit, making me gasp. “Are you using a toy or your fingers?”

“I’m not telling you,” I repeat, then whimper when he covers my mound through the lace and sucks hard.

“Oh my God, Walker,” I cry, wanting more and wanting him to stop because it’s too much.

He releases me. “What have you been using?”

“Walk—” His name ends on a moan when he does it again. And knowing that he won’t stop and give me what I want until I tell him I give in. “Okay, okay, a toy,” I pant. “I’ve been using a toy.”

“Where is it?” he asks, and I glare at him. “Let me guess.” He rolls away, and of course he opens my nightstand, finding it with ease. With the small black wand that is no bigger than a tube of lipstick in hand, he comes back to me and turns it on.

“You’re not using that on me.” I scoot away from him.

“I absolutely am.” He grabs the material at my hips, using my retreat to pull the lace off me. He tosses it away over his

shoulder.

“You’re not,” I deny, backing up the bed, but he follows and shoves my knees apart. When his mouth finds me, I don’t fight him. I’ve missed this, and honestly no number of orgasms I’ve given myself have felt even close to satisfying.

When he starts to use his fingers, he removes his mouth and touches the vibrator against my clit, while his fingers continue to work me over. The sound that crawls up the back of my throat is a mixture of a mewl and a whimper as I come so hard the world around me goes out of focus.

“Oh my God,” I pant as he kisses his way up my body.

“Better?”

“Yes.” I lean up slightly so he can take off my shirt, then I feel the front clasp of my bra pop open.

“Your nipples are darker.”

“Are they?” I look down and bite my lip when he rolls his tongue around one, blowing across it, causing it to tighten painfully, then doing the same to the other.

“They are.” He cups both my breasts while kneeling between my legs.

“You have too many clothes on,” I complain.

“I do.” He gets off the bed and kicks off his shoes, then takes off the joggers he has on along with his hoodie and tee. When he’s down to his boxers, I lick my lips, watching him take them off and grab his cock. Wrapping his fist around it, he squeezes, gets back between my legs, and lowers himself over me. I lean up to meet him halfway when he drops his head and open as he kisses me. Locking my legs around his

hips, I pull him closer, and he smiles against my mouth. “What do you want, baby?”

“You.”

“You have me.”

“You know what I mean.” I claw his back, and his cock bumps against my entrance. The anticipation of feeling him inside me after two weeks of not having him makes my hips lift, trying to hasten his movements. As he slowly enters me, my breath catches in the back of my throat. He feels bigger than even before.

“Christ, you’ve gotten tighter and hotter. How the fuck is that possible?” he groans, bottoming out and holding himself there before pulling back and sinking in once more. The pace is slow and lazy, and I relish every single second.

Lifting my head, I bite his shoulder, and he curls his arm under my knee, lifting it higher and changing the angle and how deep he’s going. I’m torn as I feel my core start to pulse, wanting him to go harder and faster but also loving this. When his eyes meet mine, I’m overwhelmed by the look in his eyes. If I didn’t already know he loves me, it would be obvious now. It’s written all over his handsome face.

“Walker,” I whimper his name, and he grits his teeth as I work my hips into his, meeting him thrust for thrust. Before I’m ready, I give in to the tightness in my lower belly and the wave that rushes at me, and I allow it to take over.

His pace speeds up, and he rides me through it before jerking his hips back and slamming into me one last time. I watch his head fall back on his shoulders, his jaw clench, and the muscles in his arms and torso flex as he comes inside me.

“Fuck,” he bites out, his weight landing on me for a second before he rolls to his back taking me with him so that I’m sprawled out across his chest.

Sweaty and exhausted, I close my eyes and soak in the feeling of him under me and his arms wrapped around me tight.

“Finally... home,” he mutters, sounding just as tired as I feel, and I smile. A few minutes later, I feel him move, then his hand captures my wrist. I open my eyes and wonder what he’s doing. My heart, which is still beating hard from my last orgasm, begins to go haywire as I watch him slide a beautiful oval-cut diamond ring up my finger, where it fits perfectly in place. “That’s better,” he says quietly, like he’s talking to himself.

“Walker,” I whisper as my nose stings and tears fill my eyes.

Fingering the ring he just placed on me, he lets out a breath, then brings my hand up his chest and places a kiss against it. “I love you, Hanna.”

“Are you asking me to marry you?” I ask after a moment and turn my head to look at him.

“No, because that would mean you have the option to say no.” He tucks some of my hair behind my ear.

“So, you’re just putting a ring on my finger?”

“Yes, and in a few months, I’ll add another one and give you my last name.”

“You’ll give me your last name?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re not *asking* me to marry you.”

“Exactly.”

“This is probably the worst proposal ever.”

“I never proposed. I told you what we are doing.” He smiles, and I drop my forehead to his chest.

“You are so crazy, Walker St. James,” I whisper.

“Crazy in love with you,” he whispers back, and maybe I’m just as crazy as he is, because I wouldn’t have him any other way.

CHAPTER 24

hanna

At the island in the kitchen, with my computer open, I watch Walker as he walks around shirtless. I miss everything about him when he's not here, but I think one of the things I miss the most is the sight of him when he's just gotten back from a run and he's all sweaty and hot.

"You need to call your parents, Hanna. And if you keep looking at me like that, I'm gonna have no choice but to fuck you."

"You should put on a shirt."

"I don't need a shirt."

"If you want me to focus on what I'm supposed to be doing, then you for sure need a shirt," I disagree, and he shakes his head before he grabs his shirt off the back of the chair and puts it on.

"Happy?"

"Not really." I sigh.

"Stop procrastinating and call your parents."

"I'm not procrastinating."

"You are. You have been all morning. First, you said you were waiting until you fed Mizzy, then you were waiting until

you had coffee, and then you were waiting until I got back from my run. Just call them.”

“I’m scared,” I admit.

“Baby.” He walks around to where I’m sitting and grabs my face. “It’s going to be fine. Stop worrying.”

“I don’t want them to be mad at me.”

“They’re not going to be mad at you.”

“They might be.”

“You forget I spent three days with them while they were here. They love you; they are not going to be mad that you’re pregnant. They might have questions and even some concerns, but they won’t be mad.”

“Fine.” I let out a breath. “I’ll call them.”

“All right.” He pulls me up from my seat and then sits and places me on his lap.

I press the icon to video-call my mom, feeling nauseous. When she answers, her face lights up with a huge smile.

“You’re home,” she says, looking behind me at Walker, who I can see is grinning in the small image of us on the screen.

“I am. I got in yesterday,” he says, and she looks at me.

“I know you’re happy he’s back.”

“Yeah,” I reply softly, squeezing his hands that are linked around my waist. “Is Dad around?”

“He is. Do you want me to get him?”

“Yeah, we have something to tell—” Before I can even say “you two,” she’s out of sight of the camera, shouting Dad’s

name, and Walker chuckles behind me.

“Okay, we’re here,” Mom says a moment later, with Dad appearing behind her.

“Hey, honey.” He smiles at me, then looks at Walker. “Walker, glad to see you’re home.”

“Glad to be home.” He kisses my shoulder.

“So, what do you have to tell us?” Mom asks, and I lift my hand to adjust the computer screen. “Oh my God, you’re engaged!” she shrieks, covering her mouth with her hand. “I knew it.” She bounces up and down as I start to panic. “Did you know?” She looks at Dad, who just nods.

Okay, apparently Walker didn’t ask me to marry him, but he *did* ask my dad if it was okay. Darn that makes me want to cry.

Then Mom orders, “Hold it up. Let me see.” *Oh, Goodness.* I reluctantly hold up my hand and watch her eyes fill with tears. “It’s so beautiful... and huge. It’s so huge.” She laughs.

“Actually, that’s not the news,” Walker says, and my mom’s smile falls away in an instant.

“It’s not?”

“Not all of it anyway,” he clarifies.

“Oh, so what is it then?”

“Well... I....” I glance back at Walker. “Um, we—”

“You’re moving home,” Mom cuts in, looking just as excited as before, maybe even more so.

“No.” I shake my head. “Or not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“You’re pregnant,” Dad inserts, and Mom gasps, looking back at him before facing the camera once more. “Right?” Dad asks softly never taking his eyes off me.

I nod, then a sob I can’t control climbs up the back of my throat.

“Baby,” Walker whispers, hugging me tighter.

“Oh, honey,” Mom murmurs, tears filling her eyes once again. “You’re having a baby?”

“Yes.”

“My baby is having a baby,” she whimpers, and Dad gathers her in his arms. “How far along are you?”

“Ten weeks now.” I wipe away the tears on my cheeks.

“Ten weeks.” She gives me a watery smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Just tired.”

“No other symptoms?” she asks, her voice filled with concern.

“No, I haven’t had any morning sickness or anything. It’s actually been really good.”

“That’s good.” She looks at Walker, then back at me. “You’re having a baby.”

“We are.” I look at my dad.

“I’m happy for you two,” he assures gently. I knew I was worried about telling my parents. I just didn’t know how worried I was about telling my dad until he showed me I didn’t need to be.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“I love you, honey.”

“I love you too.”

“You coming home yet?” he asks.

I glance back at Walker.

“It’s going to take a little time to make the transition, but yeah. We should be in the States before her due date. That said, we’ll likely settle in Florida,” he answers Dad.

“The news just keeps getting better and better.” Mom laughs, and Dad hugs her around her chest and kisses her cheek. “Florida is close, and you know Grandma and Grandpa will love having you around. Plus, Dad and I have been talking about buying a condo down there, so this might just work out perfectly.”

“So... you’re not mad?”

“Why would we be upset that you’re happy, honey?” Mom asks, then tips her head to the side. “You are happy, right?”

“I’m scared out of my mind but *so* happy,” I answer quietly, and her face softens.

“Then that’s all that matters.” And just like that, I know everything will be okay. After talking for a few more minutes, we hang up and I let out a breath as I turn to look back at Walker.

“I told you it would be okay.”

“Don’t be smug about it.” I lean back into him and he kisses the side of my head while moving his hands to cup my stomach.

“Now to tell everyone else.”

“Yeah.” I agree turning to settle on his lap. “Tonight we can tell Star at dinner, she might be upset about the fact that I’m going to be moving but she’ll be happy for us.”

“There is a lot to be happy about.” He kisses the side of my head again and I can’t help but smile. He’s right, there is a lot to be happy about.

“Oh no,” I breathe, glancing over at Star, who looks about ready to jump out of her seat as Dawn walks toward our table at Park Row where we decided to meet up for dinner. “Did you know about that?” I ask quietly.

“No, I didn’t bloody know about that.” She hisses never taking her eyes off her sister who is hand in hand with Mark’s brother Charles.

“Babe.” Mark covers her hand on the table.

She swings her head his way. “Did *you* know about that?” she asks, then narrows her eyes. “You did, didn’t you?”

“It’s not a big deal. They are both adults.”

“He’s your twin brother, and she’s my bloody sister. Yes, it is a big fucking deal.”

“I’m not here for drama,” Dawn says as soon as she reaches the table, her eyes on her sister. “So don’t start.”

“Don’t start?” Star sputters. “I told you that he was off limits.”

“Oh well, you’ll just have to get over it.”

“Get over it?”

“Yes, get over it.”

“I can’t believe you.” Star starts to stand, and seeing the cat fight that is about to go down, I panic.

“I’m pregnant!” I blurt, and everything stills as every eye at the table turns to me. “I just thought you should know, because if you two start fighting, that will likely piss Walker off, because I’m going to have no choice but to jump in, and he’s like... gone from protective to whatever the extreme of that emotion is.”

His hand resting on my thigh squeezes.

“You’re pregnant?” Star falls to her bottom and glances down at my stomach like she somehow missed the belly I don’t yet have.

“Yeah,” I whisper, and she looks at Walker, then back at me.

“Holy shit.”

“I know.”

“Holy shit,” she repeats, and I laugh as she wraps her arms around me. “How did this happen?” She shakes her head. “Don’t answer that. I know how it happened. But *when* did it happen?”

“A little over ten weeks ago.” I shrug, and she shakes her head and hugs me again.

“I think this moment calls for shots,” Dawn chimes in, and Star’s smile falls away in an instant as she looks up at her sister.

“She’s pregnant. She can’t have a shot.”

“She can’t, but we can, and I need one.” Dawn plops into her chair, and Charles grins at her like she’s the cutest thing he’s ever seen in his life.

Oh my God, he really likes her.

“We’re also engaged.” I hold up my hand shoving it towards Star when I see she is about ready to lose her mind again.

I haven’t kept my hand hidden, but I have made a point to not flaunt it. My mom was right in her statement about my ring. The diamond on my finger is huge, and after pestering Walker, I found out from him that it’s over three carats. I mean, it’s not the queen’s diamond, but it’s bigger and more expensive than anything I would ever expect to have on *my* finger. Really, I would have been happy with anything he gave me but my ring is spectacular.

“I knew I should have traded with you,” Dawn says, staring at my ring, and Charles frowns at her while Star glares in her direction.

“Congratulations, you two,” Mark says, picking up his glass of scotch and Walker picks up his water.

“Does this mean you’re going to leave me?” Star’s face falls again, and I wish I could tell her no, but the truth is, before I even know it, I will be living back in the US. I’ll only see my friends here on occasion when I have the chance to travel overseas—something that will only get more difficult to do with time.

“Not right now.”

“Okay, I can deal with that.” She gives me another tight hug, then focuses on her sister who I’d hoped she’d forgot about. “I hope you know what you’re doing. I’m the one who’ll have to deal with their mother if you mess him around.”

“I’m not going to mess him around.”

“Good.” Star turns her attention back to me. “Now, tell me everything. How did he propose?”

“It was very romantic.” I glance back at Walker, who is watching me as always. “Right, honey?” I ask, and he smirks.

“So how did he do it?” Dawn asks.

“He took me out to dinner Clos Maggiore and got down on one knee in front of everyone at the restaurant.” I smile back at him, and he raises a brow. “He must have waxed on for fifteen minutes about how I’m the love of his life and how he will never find anyone else like me. By the time he was done, everyone around us was in tears, including him.” I pat his hand.

“That’s so sweet,” Star whispers.

“It was.” I nod. “Of course, I knew what he was doing at that point, but then he asked me to marry him and slid the ring on my finger. I cried like a baby.” I look back at him and let out a dreamy sigh. “It was like something out of a movie.”

“It sounds like it, doesn’t it?” Walker adds, and I press my lips together to keep from smiling, then turn back to the table.

“I, of course, said yes after that, and here we are.”

“Are you marrying him because you’re pregnant then?” Dawn asks.

“Shut up.” Star glares at her sister, who just shrugs.

“It was just a question.”

“It’s a rude question.”

“It’s okay.” I pat Star’s hand and look at Dawn. “I got pregnant on purpose to trap him, so I guess the answer to your question is yes.”

Dawn rolls her eyes.

“You’re so crazy.” Star laughs, kissing my cheek, and I smile at her, then lean into my man.

Moving his arm, on the back of my chair to my shoulder he pulls me closer, then I feel his lips brush against my earlobe, “I was crying?” the whispered question causes me to shiver.

“Yes,” I whisper back. “So many tears, it was really kind of embarrassing.”

“So much fucking sass tonight.”

Looking at him over my shoulder, I smile, then my eyes slide closed when he leans in and places a long, lingering kiss on my lips. When he pulls back, I bite my bottom lip from the heated look I see in his eyes. A look that screams he’s going to make me pay later. Something to look forward to.

“I love you.” I mouth and his expression gentles and fills with so much love that it’s almost overwhelming to have it directed at me. I don’t know how I got so lucky especially when I had given up on finding what we have. But maybe that’s the way it goes.

When my cell rings, I take it out of the pocket of my shorts and check the screen, putting it to my ear with a smile on my face. “Hey, baby, you on your way home?”

“That was the plan, but when we landed, I got a message from Kate letting me know I can come pick up the stuff Mrs. Lewis left me, so I’m going to head over there.”

“No, come home, and we’ll go over there together.”

“She’s only going to be at the house for a little while longer. I’m thirty minutes from Paddington. If I come home, I won’t have a chance to make it there tonight, because it will be too late.”

“Then we’ll go another time.” I get up off the couch and walk to the kitchen to put my cup in the sink.

“Why would I do that, when I can just go over there now? Just stay with Ham and Otto. I’ll just go to Paddington, and once I have the box, I’ll get a cab home,” she says, and I grit my teeth.

“Baby,” I begin gently, trying a different tactic and hoping it will work, “I don’t want you carrying anything up or down any stairs. And you’ll have your bag from work *plus* whatever Kate gives you.”

“I’m pregnant, Walker. I’m not disabled. I’m fine. I’ll see you guys in less than two hours.”

“Hanna,” I bite out.

“I gotta go. I’m about to get on the train. Love you.” She hangs up before I say anything more, and I let out a frustrated breath.

I swear, since we found out she’s pregnant, she’s gotten even more stubborn. And normally, I think it’s cute when she digs her heels in, but it’s times like this when it’s annoying as fuck.

“What’s going on?” Otto asks, and I glance over my shoulder to where he’s lounging on the couch with Ham. The two of them came in yesterday and are staying for a few days so we can finish up our business plan for the bank in Florida that we’re getting our loan from.

“I gotta head out.” I start across the living room while sending out a request for a car to come pick me up. “Hanna is going to her old place to pick up a box from Mrs. Lewis’s niece.”

“She needs help with it?” Otto asks sounding confused.

“No she’s pregnant and shouldn’t be hauling shit around,” Ham tells him, never failing to make me proud to be his best friend.

“Oh yeah, right,” Otto mutters, and I shake my head. Thankfully Gigi didn’t end up pregnant from their time together. Something even *Otto* was relieved about, according to Ham.

“We’ll roll with you.” Ham stands. “They have a Jamaican food restaurant over there. Hanna would probably love it, we can pick up dinner before we head back this way.”

“Sounds good. I just need to get dressed.” I finish sending for a car as I walk into the bedroom. After changing out of my shorts for a pair of sweats, and putting on my sneakers. I grab a hoodie from the closet and my wallet, then meet the guys in the living room.

When we get outside, I lock up behind us as the car I ordered arrives, and I ask the driver to take us to Paddington Station. With any luck, I’ll be able to intercept Hanna by the time she gets off the train. And yeah, I know I’m being ridiculous and overprotective, but it’s not only about her going up and down a staircase, hauling shit with her. I don’t like the idea of her going back into that house at all, let alone by herself. It took me moving her out of there and separating her from the negative memories to get her back to her old self. And now, she’s pregnant, so I don’t want her upset for any reason.

“We should have taken the fucking train.” My jaw clenches when traffic slows to almost a standstill.

“There was an accident,” the driver says, glancing back at me through the rearview mirror.

“Is there another route we can take?” Ham asks him.

“No, the side roads are just as bad this time of the evening.”

“Great,” I mutter, having no choice but to sit and wait.

Dialing Hanna’s number, I listen to it ring until it goes to voicemail.

“Call me back baby.” I hang up and let out a silent curse.

As the cab pulls up in front of Hanna’s old apartment, I pay the driver, then get out, slamming the door. I’ve called her a dozen or more times since we got in the cab, but every

fucking time my calls continue to go to voicemail. I don't know if she's ignoring me or if she's still got her phone on silent. Either way, she and I will be having a conversation as soon as I lay eyes on her and can see for myself she's all right and that this feeling in my gut is nothing but my own fear.

Walking up to the front steps with Ham and Otto on my heels, I notice it's dark inside the house. The light you can normally see shining through the smoked glass on either side of the door is completely extinguished. And that unease in my gut grows, and adrenalin begins to flood my system.

I press the bell for all three floors and wait, looking back at Ham and Otto when I don't hear or see anything.

"Are you sure she was meeting her here?" Otto asks, I nod, then press the bells again.

Nothing. If she's not here, where the fuck is she?

"I just saw someone look out the window on the top floor," Otto tells me, and I walk down to where he's standing.

"Which one?"

"The top right." He points up to one of the upper windows. The lights are on, and the blinds are open, but I don't see anyone.

"I don't like this," Ham mutter and my chest gets tight.

"Do either of you know how to jimmy open a lock?" Otto asks.

"No." I go back up the steps and ring the bell again. If whoever is here isn't going to answer the door, then I'm going to break it fucking down.

"Do me a favor and call the cops," I tell Ham, and with a nod, he pulls out his phone while I check the handle on the

door. It's locked like I knew it would be. Fuck.

Shoving my shoulder into it, it doesn't budge an inch. It doesn't even rattle. The doors are old and well-made like things used to be. I step back and look at the glass on either side. They're not wide enough for any of us to get through and are both so far from the handle it wouldn't make sense to break them anyway. I shove my shoulder into the door again. Once again, nothing.

"Together," Otto says, jogging up the steps, and he and I both ram into it at the same time. It creaks.

"Again," I bite out, and we do it again, and then Ham joins us at the top of the steps after hanging up with the cops. If someone is upstairs, I know they can hear us attempting to break in, yet they still aren't coming to see what's going on.

On what must be the twelfth try to get the door open, I hear the sound of wood cracking, and the three of us do it again and stumble into the house as the door crashes inward. Finding the light switch for the entryway, I flip it on, and my insides seize when I see Hanna. She's slumped over, blood dotting the side of her head, and Kate lying close on the steps like she fell down them.

"Jesus," Ham whispers as pure terror courses through my veins.

"Call the police again. Tell them we need an ambulance." I drop down next to Hanna and place my fingers against her throat to feel for a pulse. It's there, steady and strong. I move my hand to her stomach for a brief moment then rest it against her chest. She's breathing. The reality that she is alive has my eyes getting wet. "Baby," I call, cupping her cheek when all I want to do is gather her in my arms. "Hanna, you need to wake up, baby." My voice shakes.

“Is she okay?” Ham asks from where he’s moving Kate off the steps.

“She has a pulse and she’s breathing. Her?” I motion to Kate.

“I can’t find a pulse.”

“What the fuck happened?” Otto asks, and I glance over at him, he looks pale and ready to pass out.

“I don’t know.” I turn to look over my shoulder when I see movement in the doorway, and spot a police officer and a woman not much older than Hanna wearing a paramedics uniform walking into the house with a man dressed exactly the same.

“Over here.” My hands shake. “My fiancée isn’t waking up,” I tell her, and she walks in my direction while the officer and the other EMT go over to Kate.

“Let me have a look at her,” she says, and I stand, my legs feeling like Jell-O. She moves to where I was and squats next to Hanna.

“She’s pregnant,” I inform her as she puts her fingers on Hanna’s neck, then she looks over at the two men, and the policeman shakes his head.

“We need to get her on a stretcher,” she tells the other EMT, and he disappears out the door.

“Do you know what happened here?” the officer asks, and I glance over at Kate, and quickly look away.

“I have no idea.” I scrub my fingers through my hair as I try to talk myself down from flipping the fuck out. “She was coming over here to pick up a box from the woman on the stairs. I didn’t want her coming by herself, so I came to meet

her. No one was answering the door when I arrived, so my friends and I broke it down.”

His head jerks back. I don't bother trying to justify my actions. It's obvious I didn't overreact.

“When we got in, we found Kate and my fiancée where they were when you first saw them.” I swallow as Hanna is carefully placed on a stretcher. I know I should be happy she's alive, but I need her to wake the fuck up already. Why isn't she waking up?

“Mum?” That one word shouted into the room has everyone turning toward the door, and my gut twists when I see Josh. “What happened?” He looks around.

“Sir.” another police officer steps into the house.

“What happened to my mum?” He attempts to get farther into the house, but the officer blocks him.

“Come with me outside, sir.” He begins to urge Josh out the door.

“She killed her!” he shouts, pointing at Hanna, and I take a step toward him, my muscles bunching at the accusation, but Otto steps in front of me.

“How did you get down here, when I saw you in the window upstairs?” Otto asks, and my back goes straight. What the fuck?

“She killed Nan, and now she's killed my mum!” Josh yells, ignoring Otto's claim.

“Sir, I need you to come outside with me,” the officer repeats as the EMTs raise the stretcher Hanna is now belted to.

“We need to take her out,” the female paramedic says, and both Ham and Otto move to the door, where the policeman is

still trying to get Josh down the steps. They both help block him so the EMTs can get Hanna outside.

I don't give them a choice about me going with them. I don't even bother asking if it's okay. I follow them to the ambulance parked on the street and get in the back, taking a seat on the bench. When the doors close, blocking out the sound of Josh still shouting, I take Hanna's hand and lean over her.

"Baby, I need you to wake the fuck up already," I whisper against her ear.

She doesn't listen. She never fucking listens, and I'm forced to let go of her hand a moment later so an IV can be started.

CHAPTER 26

hanna

Waking to the sound of an annoying beeping noise, I try to force my eyes open, but they feel heavy. Actually, my whole body feels heavy. I open my mouth to tell Walker to shut off whatever that sound is, but nothing comes out. Starting to panic, I fight against the weight and force my eyes open.

“Shit,” Walker mutters, then his face is over mine, and I can barely make him out in the dim light. “Hanna, baby.” He rests his hand on my forehead, and I draw in a breath. “You’re okay.”

“Where...?” I try to clear my dry throat as I look around. “Where am I?”

“At the hospital.” He rests his forehead against mine. “I’ve been waiting forever for you to wake the fuck up.”

“What?” I start to shake my head, but it hurts, so I stop moving.

“You got a concussion.”

“What?” I squeeze my eyes closed. “How?” The last thing I remember is getting off my flight. How would I have gotten a concussion?

“We’ll talk about that later.” He leans back, his eyes searching mine, then he reaches for something and holds a

large cup in front of me. “Take a sip of this.” I do, and the cool liquid feels good on my dry throat. “How are you feeling?”

“Did I get in an accident?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No.” I stare at him trying to remember something—anything. My last memory is getting off the plane at Heathrow.

“The doctors said that might happen.”

“What might happen?” I’m so confused. Why am I here? How did I end up here?

“That you might have some memory loss,” he says gently, sliding his hand across my forehead.

Oh God. Ice-cold fear washes through my veins. If I was in an accident....

I move my hands to my stomach. “The baby—”

“Is fine.” He looks to the left. “That’s monitoring his heartbeat.” I look over at it, the source of the beeping, which suddenly no longer sounds annoying.

He kisses my forehead. “You’re both fine. You just needed to take a long nap.”

“How long was I asleep for?”

“We’ve been here for three hours and thirty-two minutes,” he says, looking toward the door. “I need to let them know you’re awake.”

“Wait.” I grab his hand. “Please tell me why I’m here?” I beg. I hate that I don’t remember anything.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, he twines our fingers together.

“Do you remember Kate messaging you to pick up the box Mrs. Lewis left you?”

“No.” I frown.

“You went to go get it this evening after your flight landed.”

“Okay.” I wait, and I can tell by his expression that he doesn’t want to say more. “Tell me.”

“I got over there and found you unconscious, and Kate—” he cuts himself off.

“Kate?”

“She was dead,” he says quietly, and I’m sure I heard him wrong.

“How?”

“I don’t know, I’m still waiting to hear from Officer Taylor.”

“What happened to me?”

“You don’t remember anything?” I shake my head lightly, there is a black hole where the memory should be. I don’t even remember Kate telling me to meet her at the house.

“I don’t know but Otto swears he saw Josh upstairs in the window when we were trying to get into the house. I’m not sure if we spooked him or what his plan was.”

“What?” I whisper, feeling like I might throw up.

“The only thing we know is that you were hit in the head and that you didn’t suffer any other damage, but I don’t know what happened to you while you were in that house.”

I close my eyes. I don’t want to be thankful that something happened to me making it impossible for me to remember but

in a way I am.

“I called your mom and dad. They’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

I nod and open my eyes to look at him.

“I need to get the nurse and let her know you’re awake.”

I nod again, and he leans down, kissing my forehead, then gets up and walks to the door. He doesn’t leave, just sticks his head outside, and a moment later, a woman in pink scrubs walks into the room.

She stays only long enough to ask me a few questions, then she leaves and comes back with a doctor. By the time he’s done asking me a million questions and poking and prodding me, I’m exhausted but relieved when he tells me that they want to keep me overnight for observation but I should be released tomorrow.

“You need to sleep, baby,” Walker says, leaning over me when we’re alone once again, and I yawn, covering my mouth.

“You’re staying, right?”

“It would take an army to pull me away.” He says quietly and I scoot over to make room for him and roll to my side, he lies down behind me, shoving his arm under my head and curling his other hand around my stomach.

Holding onto him, I close my eyes and try to remember something while wondering what will happen if I do.

On the couch in the living room, my head on Walker’s lap while he plays with my hair, I watch the news coverage of

Mrs. Lewis and Kate's deaths and breathe a sigh of relief when an image of Josh being taken into custody fills the screen. Officer Taylor called this morning to let us know it would be happening, that they had gotten enough evidence to arrest him for the murder of his mom and that there were possible charges pending against him for the murder of Mrs. Lewis. I don't want to believe that he could do what they are claiming he did, but Officer Taylor told us that his friends turned on him and said that he admitted to killing his mom while he was drunk. But that he only did it because she is the one who killed Mrs. Lewis for the money and property she was being left in the will. I don't want to believe he could have hurt his aunt, who loved him so much. I also don't want to believe his mom could have killed her either just for greed.

When the channel is changed, I glance back at Walker and find an expression on his face I've grown used to this past week. He might have been cool, calm, and collected at the hospital, but since we got home, he's been on edge. I haven't even been able to go to the bathroom without him standing outside the door. And I don't know what he's going to do when it's time for him to go back to work in just a couple of days.

The only time he was a little better was while my parents were here, but I'm guessing that was because he knew I wasn't alone, that if he wanted to go for a run or do something outside the house, they'd take care of me, so he didn't need to worry. But since they left, his hovering has gone even more extreme.

"You should go for a run," I tell him, and he glances down at me.

"Maybe later."

"You always go in the mornings. You should go now."

“I’m good.” He focuses back on the TV.

I press my lips together, then get up and move to straddle his lap. Once we’re chest-to-chest, I grab his face.

“I’m okay.”

“I know.” His hands fall to my bottom, and he pulls me more snugly against him.

“Nothing is going to happen to me if you go out for a run or if you need to do something without me. You can’t watch me twenty-four seven.”

“I’m not. I was trying to watch TV.”

“Don’t be smart. You know what I mean,” I groan, and he drags in a deep breath.

“I’m working on it. I just can’t get the image of you on the floor not moving out of my head,” he says quietly, and my heart hurts.

I didn’t find him unconscious, and I don’t even want to know what it would feel like experiencing something like that. Hell, I don’t even remember any of that at all. The doctors have said there is a chance I might remember but I hope I never do.

“We’re going to have to figure out a way to go back to normal. You have to work, and that will mean—”

“I’m not going back,” he says quietly, and my head jerks back. “I already talked to Toni and the guys. They all get it. Toni’s letting me out of my contract without any kind of repercussion, and Otto and Ham are cool with it. They understand.”

“You never told me this.”

“I didn’t want to fight with you about it. I know you’re going to say you’ll be okay and that I should finish out my contract, but there is no way I’m going back out, not after what happened. Not when something might come up where you need me here. It would take me hours to get to you.”

“Walker,” I say quietly, and he shakes his head, cupping my face in his hands.

“It’s not even up for discussion, baby. I’m here and this is where I’m staying. And when the doctor says it’s safe for you to fly, I want us to go to Florida to look for a house, so we can get settled before the baby gets here.”

“Were you going to discuss this plan with me?”

“We’re talking about it right now.”

“What if I don’t want to leave yet? What if I want to stay here in London for a few more months?”

“Do you want that?”

“I don’t know, but I’d like to be included when you’re making plans for our life going forward.”

“The plan is you and me together. The rest, we’ll figure out along the way.”

“You’re so frustrating.”

“You love me.”

“I know.” I drag in a breath. “I just don’t want you to make all these changes or miss out on things because of me. I don’t want you to resent me.”

“You forget, I manipulated this whole situation, Hanna. Every change I made is a change I wanted. You and this little

one are my life. You are my home. The only thing in this world that I need is you.”

“Don’t be sweet when I want to be annoyed with you, Walker.”

“How about you just stop being annoyed with me, Hanna?” He drags me forward. “Thinking I could have lost you put everything into perspective. There is nothing more important than you.”

“Okay,” I reply quietly. I mean, what else is there to say? He’s right. There is nothing more important to me than him and the little life growing inside me. And at the end of the day, as long as I have them, I have everything I need.

I look at the front door when there is a knock. “I got it.” He carefully moves me off his lap after giving me a swift kiss. When I hear Douglas’s voice as he opens the door I get up and smile when I see that Blair and the girls are with him.

“We brought lunch.” Blair says, stepping into the house as both Vi and Elsie hug me at the same time.

“Thank you.” I say quietly while Walker leads them to the small round table in the kitchen.

“How are you feeling?” Douglas asks as I give Blair a hug while the girls begin unpacking the bags they brought with them.

“Okay, mostly just tired.”

“That’s to be expected right?” Blair asks and I nod.

“Yeah, it’s got nothing to do with the concussion.” I assure her and her shoulders relax. Since Walker didn’t tell Douglas what happened until the morning that I was released from the hospital, he and Blair showed up at the house around the same

time my parents arrived. And having learnt the news that we're pregnant a few days prior, they were extremely worried about me and the baby.

“Good.” She gives me another hug then glances across the room at Walker who is chatting with Douglas now. “Is he doing any better?” The question spoken only loud enough for me to hear has my gaze going to my man.

“No.” I tell her honestly and her face softens. “He want's us to go to Florida to look at houses when the doctor clears me to travel.”

“Already?” She sounds hurt and I get it, I wish I could pack up my family and move them all here or move her, Douglas, and the girls back to the US with me.

“Yeah, and even though I hate the idea of leaving you guys, I'm wondering if the change of environment won't help him get his mind off everything that happened.”

“It might.” She wraps her arm around the back of my waist laying her head on my shoulder. “Everything will be okay.” she whispers.

“I hope so,” I whisper back.

CHAPTER 27

walker

Jerking awake, with my body covered in a fine sheen of sweat and heart pounding so hard that I can feel it ricocheting off my ribcage, Hanna stirs at my side brining reality back into focus.

For the last six weeks, I've been waking up in cold sweats, panicked and convinced she never woke up and that the last few weeks have been nothing but a dream. It's a nightmare I can't seem to shake. I move my hand to rest over the tiny bump of her lower stomach that seemed to appear overnight a couple of weeks ago, and it has only gotten bigger since then. I concentrate on her and the feel of it under my palm and wait for my heartbeat to return to normal.

I thought once the doctors told us she was okay, I would feel some sense of relief, but it hasn't happened. My worry for her and overbearing protectiveness is the one thing she and I argue about, but that's what happens when your whole existence is wrapped up inside someone else and you've experienced the fear of truly thinking you might lose them. One of the only things that has brought me any peace is that Josh is in jail and is going to be there for a long time after admitting to killing his mom. He's still stuck to his story that he didn't kill his aunt and part of me believes him. Not that I forgive him in the slightest because Hanna, who had no part in

his family drama, was harmed by him when she apparently walked in on the scene between him and his mother. Something she still doesn't remember.

He said he didn't mean to hurt her, but had panicked and then he decided he'd take advantage of her being there. He was going to come back and act like he walked in on the whole scene and claim Hanna must have killed his mom and maybe even his aunt. He just never planned on me showing up or Otto seeing him in the upstairs window, proving he was in the house.

I slide my hand off her stomach as I kiss the back of her head, then roll away and sit up on the edge of the bed, scrubbing my hands down my face. I'm exhausted, but I know I won't be able to go back to sleep. Weeks ago, I gave up even trying after waking from a dream like the one I just had.

Getting up, I put my shorts on and leave the room, closing the door behind myself before making my way to the kitchen. Out the balcony doors, I spot Trevor sitting outside with a cup of coffee on the deck, with the sun just beginning to peek over the horizon behind him.

He and Liz drove down the day before yesterday to help us house hunt before we all go to Tennessee before the Fourth of July. Hanna and I plan on spending the holiday with my sister, her new man (a long story), my nephew and my parents. They also came because Hanna threw in the towel, something I knew was coming, since she has become increasingly annoyed with how "picky" I've been, as she put it. The thing is, I'm not going to settle. I want a house we can grow into, that is safe, in a good neighborhood with good schools, and is not far from the location of the building Otto, Ham, and I are purchasing to run our dive school out of.

After pouring myself a cup of coffee, I slide open the back door, and Trevor's eyes meet mine.

"Liz still asleep?" I ask, and he lifts his chin in an affirmative. Not a surprise. She and her daughter were up late last night watching a movie, so late I had to carry Hanna to bed after she fell asleep on the couch with her mom, while her dad and I went over house listings in the area.

"You're up early."

"Yeah." I move to the edge of the balcony and rest my coffee on the ledge as I look out at the sand. There are already a few people out running before the heat hits and all the tourist and beachgoers arrive.

"You still having nightmares?" he asks, and I glance back at him. I should have known Hanna would tell him about that. I'm learning quickly she doesn't keep much from her parents. Especially when it's something that is worrying her.

"Every night."

"They'll go away with time."

Will they? Because at this point, I'm thinking that's not the case.

"She's worried about you," he adds.

"I know." I take my coffee and walk back to the table to take a seat. "She's also not the one who walked into a situation where there was a woman dead and I thought she might be too."

"I get it. I also know if you keep on like you are, she's going to fight until she gets free, and you might not be able to catch her again."

My stomach muscles clench. Even if that isn't a threat, it feels like one.

“Pardon?”

“I get that all you want to do is protect her, but that's the one thing that will drive a wedge between the two of you.” He shakes his head and lets out a long breath. “She moved halfway across the world to get away from me. You think if she feels like she's being stifled, she won't do the same with you at some point?”

My jaw gets tight along with my fist wrapped around my coffee mug.

“She loves you, but you're going to have to loosen your grip a little.”

“Is this about her going back to work?” I grit out, because that seems to be the one thing I can't even speak to her about when she brings it up. One of the things I know is bothering her, but fuck. The idea of her flying around the world and being miles and hours away from me isn't something I can come to terms with, not right now. Eventually, maybe. But not right now.

“She's always been a kid after her own independence and freedom. Heck, she even taught herself how to ride a bike without training wheels after taking them off her damn self, because I refused.” He smiles proudly at the memory. “She's got a mind of her own and her own dreams. One of those has always been to have a family of her own, but the other was to find a man who would allow her to grow and flourish in the ways that I didn't. You're already giving her one of those things. You need to put your own fears aside and give her that other piece she's always wanted.”

“I’m working on it.”

“I know you are, and I know it’s not easy, but for her sake and yours, you’re going to have to work a little harder.” With my jaw tight, I jerk up my chin and watch him stand. “I’m going to wake up my wife. You should go for a run before Hanna gets up.”

I don’t respond. I watch him head into the house, and then I turn toward the water.

Even knowing he’s right, that I need to relax and loosen my grasp I have on her, I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that. I keep waiting for the fear that has got a hold of me to subside but it hasn’t, not even a little. Hearing the sliding glass door open, I turn, and my muscles relax when I watch the beautiful woman who owns every single inch of me step outside, looking ruffled from sleep and absolutely adorable in my shirt.

“Hey.” She walks toward me slowly with a soft look of concern on her face. Leaning back in my seat, I make room for her, and she turns, settling on my lap with her head on my chest under my chin.

“You’re up early.”

“You weren’t there, and I hate being in bed without you.” She grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together before resting them on her stomach. “I got up and opened the bedroom window to let in some air before it gets too hot. I... I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but heard my dad’s and your conversation,” she admits softly, and my muscles tense. “He’s wrong, you know.” She pulls her head back, and I dip my chin to meet her gaze.

“You don’t make me feel stifled, and my wanting to go back to work isn’t because I need to get away from you. I just

want us to find normal again. And I want you to stop living every second feeling like something is going to happen to me if I'm out of your sight."

"I don't like you being far away."

"I know, and I'm willing to compromise with you for a little longer." Untangling her fingers from mine, she moves her hand to my jaw. "But I *am* gonna go back to work at least for a few more months. And I know it won't be easy, but I think in the long run it will help, and eventually, you'll feel better. Then we'll get back to arguing over things like what to name our baby, since you don't like Luna or Draco."

"I love you. You know that, right?"

"I know, and even though your protectiveness is annoying from time to time, I get it, and I'm not going anywhere. So don't let what my dad said get in your head." She leans up and touches her mouth to mine, then asks when she pulls back, "How many houses are on your list for today?"

I had about a dozen, but if I'm going to give her what she needs, I need to start doing that now in the ways I can.

"You said you loved the first house we looked at—the one with the pool?"

"The pool you said would be a hazard when the baby started to walk, you mean? Yes. I adored it."

"How about we go look at that one again?" I ask, ignoring the sarcasm in her tone.

"You're sure?" She raises a brow.

"When the time comes, I can add some door sensors and other precautions around the pool, so it'll be safe," I mutter.

“See?” She grins, patting my cheek. “We’re going to be just fine.”

“Where are you going?” I grab her hand when she starts to slide off my lap.

Looking down at me over her shoulder, a sexy smirk touches her lips. “I thought you said you needed to shower.”

“Right, I forgot I mentioned that.” I fold out of my chair and follow her into the house, where I fuck her in the shower up against the tile while I swallow her moans so her parents won’t hear.

walker

Outside, I stand with Hanna tucked up against my side and watch my sister and her man, Tucker, who has my nephew on his hip, walk down to greet my parents after they park their large motor home in the driveway of his lake house here in Tennessee. It's a spot that had me questioning my decision to settle in Florida, even with the contract signed on the house Hanna fell in love with. It's the same house that was at first glance a firm no for me, because of the location of the pool, surrounded by glass doors, in the center of the home.

Watching Miranda look up at her man while my nephew talks his ear off, I smile at the three of them. When she told me she'd started dating so soon after getting a divorce and that the man was a police officer like her ex, I had serious reservations about her new relationship. But after spending the last twenty-four hours with them and seeing them together, I'm happy as fuck for her.

Unlike her ex, within five minutes of seeing Tucker with my sister, I could tell she was his reason for living and that he feels for her what I do for Hanna. I couldn't ask for more for her and my nephew.

"Are you doing okay?" Hanna asks, and I pull my eyes off the driveway, where my parents are now getting out of their

vehicle, and look down at her. The concern in her expression isn't a surprise. She knows my parents' and my relationship is strained.

The thing is, after falling in love with her, it hasn't gotten easier to accept my dad's actions over the years. In fact, it's even more difficult to understand him now. I would cut off my own arm before I ever harmed Hanna, even emotionally, so I don't get how he could cause that kind of damage over and over again to someone he claimed to love.

"I'm good," I assure her quietly, and she searches my gaze for a long moment before letting out a long sigh.

"You suck at lying."

"Is that something I should be good at?" I smile, and her eyes drop to my mouth.

"The answer should be no, but you could try a little harder in this situation."

"I'll work on it." I kiss the side of her head, then move my hand to her waist and urge her toward the stairs. When we reach the gravel driveway, my mom—who now has my nephew in her grasp—turns our way, and her eyes fill with tears.

"Walker," she whispers, passing Kingston off to Tucker before walking toward Hanna and me.

"Hey, Mom." I let Hanna go so I can hug my mother, and she squeezes me so tight I'd swear she's trying to break a rib.

"I know you said you were coming. I just didn't expect you to actually show up." She releases me and looks over at Hanna.

“Hi, Mrs. St. James,” Hanna says, and Mom’s smile widens.

“Call me Mom.” She steps away from me to give Hanna a hug before leaning back to look down at my fiancée’s belly. “I’m really going to be a grandma again.”

“You are,” I confirm.

“This is just the best day. Both my babies in one place!” Mom wipes the wetness from her cheeks, and I look to her side when I see movement, every muscle in my body getting tight as my dad walks over.

“Hey, bud.” He holds out his hand, and I take it out of obligation. “I’m glad you were able to make it.”

“Me too.” It’s a lie. Yes, I’ve enjoyed spending time with my sister and nephew and getting to know Tucker, plus Hanna having the chance to meet them. But I could have done without seeing either of my parents.

“You must be Hanna.” Dad smiles, and she nods.

“Yes. Nice to meet you.” She steps forward to give him a hug, and my hands twitch with the urge to pull her away from him when his arms wrap around her.

“I hope you guys are hungry.” Miranda wanders toward us, her eyes scanning mine briefly before looking at Mom and Dad. “Hanna and I put out food inside for lunch.”

“Great.” Mom links her arm with Miranda’s while Tucker, Kingston, and Dad follow them toward the house.

Keeping pace with Hanna, who’s slowed, I watch everyone disappear into the lake house, then let out a breath when she turns toward me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“Say the word and I’ll get us out of here,” she whispers, and I drop my forehead to the top of her head.

“I’ll be okay. I just—”

“You don’t have to explain,” she cuts me off. “I get it. And I know I said you should attempt to work on your relationship with your mom, but you don’t have to do that if it’s not something you feel like you can.”

“I should be over this. It’s been years since I lived in the house with them and dealt with that situation.”

“There is no time limit on emotions.” She tips her head back to look up at me. “You get to feel however you want for as long as you want. And my offer stands. Say the word, and I’ll make up an excuse and get us out of here.”

“Thanks, baby.” I touch my lips to hers, then let out a sigh before leading her into the house, where we have lunch with my family.



Stepping out onto the deck with a beer in my hand, I scan the edge of the shore for Hanna, who went down to join everyone for a bonfire and to make s’mores. I was on a call with Otto and Ham, filling them in on what’s going on with the building we purchased. The steel building will eventually have a dive pool inside along with the equipment we’ll need to teach underwater welding and drilling. But the permits for the project have been a pain in the ass to get.

“Are you going down to join them?”

At that question from my dad, I glance over at him. Unlike Trevor, who is still fit for his age, my dad has put on weight

around his middle over the years and lost even more hair at the top of his head.

“Yeah.” I start to head for the stairs but stop when he speaks up.

“Do you think we could talk for a minute before you go down there?”

All day, I’ve avoided any real contact or conversation with him, and that’s seemed to work for me. But I know it’s been awkward for Mom and Miranda, who’ve shared more than a few looks, not missing the undercurrent of tension.

Without a word, I walk to the table and take a seat across from him.

“I...” His brows dart together. “I’m not sure how to even start this conversation, but I know I need to.” His gaze moves to the shore, where I can hear Kingston giggle, then it comes back to me. “While you and your sister were growing up, I made more than a few mistakes,” he begins, and I make a sound in the back of my throat. That is the understatement of the fucking century. “I was young and selfish and have no excuse for the things I did to your mom. Things that in turn affected you and your sister.” He rubs his lips together. “I wish that telling you I’m sorry would be enough, but I know it won’t. Will it?”

“No.” I glance toward the water when I hear Hanna laugh. “I can’t imagine doing what you did, and I felt that way before Hanna was even pregnant. I don’t understand how you could put your wife through that over and over again, the mother of your children, especially knowing now what it feels like to have a child on the way.”

“You’re right. I was a coward and convinced myself that if I hurt her enough, she’d eventually do exactly what I knew she *should* do—give up on us and leave. Only, she never did.”

My chin jerks back. “You wanted her to leave you?”

“I never thought I was good enough for your mom. Even when we started dating in college, I questioned why she wanted to be with me. I was always sure she’d eventually walk away.”

“You weren’t good enough for her, and she definitely should’ve walked away,” I grit out.

“Again, you’re right.” He nods. “And I have no excuse for the things I did or the things you had to witness,” he says quietly, and I want to tell him what a dick he is.

But how can I, when he’s not trying to come up with some lame excuse to justify his actions?

“Your mom and I love you, and it hurts her that you two aren’t as close as she’d like. And now, with you getting married and having a baby, she’s feeling that more than she already was. And I know that’s on me too.” He holds my gaze, then adds quietly, “Please don’t take this out on her, the anger and hurt you have because of me. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Everything okay?” I look to the bottom of the stairs and find Hanna there, her eyes on me and a full of concern.

“Yeah, baby. All good. My dad and I were just catching up.”

“Okay.” She gives me a soft smile as she cups her belly that I swear is getting bigger by the day as she climbs the steps.

“You all right?”

“Besides feeling like I have to pee every ten minutes, I’m fine.” Her voice is filled with an annoyance that makes me smile as she walks across the deck toward me. “I’m going to use the restroom.”

“When you come out, I’ll go back down with you.”

“Okay.” She glances at my dad and smiles before heading into the house, closing the door behind her.

“I like her for you.”

“She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” I admit quietly, and he nods.

“I’m gonna head down to the beach and get some S’mores before Kingston eats them all.”

“Sure.” I watch him get up, then a minute later, he disappears into the darkness beyond the deck. I realize almost immediately the weight that had been sitting in my gut since he and my mom arrived is gone. What that means for my future relationship with them is something only time will tell.

“Hey.” Hanna steps outside, and I watch her walk toward me when I hold out my hand. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I pull her down on my lap, and she settles against me with ease. “He apologized.”

“That’s good, right?”

“I think so.” I kiss the side of her head. “Are you ready to get back to London after tomorrow?”

“Yes and no. I want to see everyone and be able to say goodbye, but I know it’s going to suck.”

“You’ll still see Star and Douglas from time to time when you go back to work.”

She tips her head back to look at me. “You’re okay with me traveling again?”

I drag in a breath. “I don’t love the idea, but I’m going to suck it up, because I know it’s something you love. You just gotta promise me you’ll stop when it becomes too much.”

“Can I tell you something?” she asks, lacing her fingers with mine, and I jerk up my chin.

“I’ve been thinking about it and don’t know if I want to fly again—or at least not right now.”

“Why?”

“Well, this crazy guy I met on a flight kind of took over my whole life, and I don’t like the idea of being away from him any more than he likes the idea of me being far away.”

“Baby,” I whisper, releasing her hand so I can cup her jaw. “Don’t quit doing something you love, because of me.”

“I’m not. I’m just going to take a break for a while. I’ll find something else to do to keep busy, but I want to be home at night, and flying is exhausting, and I’m already exhausted. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Whatever you want, even if that’s to stay home with him.”

“Or her,” she says as I rest my hand on her stomach.

“Or her,” I agree, smiling.

“You know...” She rests the side of her head against my chest. “I’m starting to think that even if I hadn’t called you when I was in Ibiza, we still would have crossed paths at some point.”

“Because your cousin is married to one of Tucker’s brothers?” The news surprised us both when we found out yesterday about the connection.

“Yeah.”

“We were inevitable, baby. I would have tracked you down eventually, even without that connection,” I whisper against her ear, and she peeks up at me through her lashes.

“You would have, wouldn’t you?” she asks, and I don’t answer with words. I cup her jaw and cover her mouth with mine. When I pull back from the kiss and her lashes flutter open, I drag my thumb across her bottom lip.

I don’t know what I did to deserve her, and Lord knows I probably don’t, but I’d give up everything as long as I knew I’d get to keep her in the end.

epilogue

HANNA

You know in books, those scenes when a woman sees a hot guy with a baby, and she talks about her ovaries exploding? I always assumed that was an exaggeration, because I've seen lots of men with babies, and never once did I experience anything close to that.

But then Axton St. James came into this world at nine pounds ten ounces, and the moment I witnessed my husband hold him in his arms, I knew that if we weren't careful, I would end up pregnant over and over again. Because there is nothing hotter in this world than Walker taking care of our baby boy.

And obviously, the proof that I wasn't careful enough with that knowledge is sitting right in front of me in the form of a plastic stick, the word **Pregnant** in black lettering filling its screen. Glancing up at myself in the mirror, I bite my bottom lip, then close my eyes and remind myself I already knew I was pregnant. The test just confirmed it.

A week ago, I started feeling sick. Not "I have a cold or the flu" sick, but "I'm going to hurl as soon as I wake up" sick, which isn't something I ever experienced before. For a few days, I was able to convince myself I was imagining the

symptom, and I brushed it off as just nausea from the previous day's dinner.

But this morning, I went to the restroom, looked at myself in the mirror, and noticed my nipples, which are much more sensitive, have also gotten darker. And since I don't breastfeed, I knew it wasn't because of that. Plus, I remember clearly Walker noticing the difference not long after we found out I was pregnant with Axton. Dragging in a deep breath, I pick up the test and open the bathroom door.

Padding down the hall, through the kitchen, and into the living room, I glance out the doors that lead to the pool that is integrated in the middle of the house, between this room and the master bedroom. The closed-in space is why I fell in love with this house. Not because of the pool—but because filled with plants and flowers, it feels like a tropical oasis, and I love being able to sit out there and read especially in the evening when it's dark and the twinkle lights Walker zigzagged across the open roof are on.

When I spot my husband through the leaves, I fight the urge to swoon at the sight of him and Axton, who just turned five months old a few days ago, in the water sitting right at Walker's hip level. Sliding open the door, I step outside, and heat rushes at me, causing my nose to scrunch in response.

One thing I didn't think about when Walker and I decided to move to Florida was the heat. I mean, of course I knew it was hot. I've been traveling here since I was little with my parents for vacations, and on trips to visit my grandparents in recent years. I just never thought about the fact that it's hot and humid *all* the time. And after living in London for so long, it seems to be taking me forever to acclimate to the change in weather.

“Hey, baby.” My too-gorgeous-for-his-own-good husband smiles up at me, and I pass him the test still in my hand, then reach down for Axton, who starts to kick his tiny feet in the water when he sees me. “What’s this?” He flips the test over, and his body stills. He doesn’t even seem to take a breath as he stares at it.

“That’s a positive pregnancy test. So, congratulations, you’re going to be a dad... again.”

“We’re having another baby?” He looks up at me, and the amount of love I see in his gaze causes my nose to sting.

“Yes,” I whisper as Axton rests his head on my shoulder, and I pat his wet bottom.

Walker places his hands on the edge of the pool and pushes up out of the water. In one smooth motion, he’s standing on the pool deck in front of me. “Did you just take this?”

“Yes, I picked it up this afternoon when I was at the grocery store. But I already knew what the answer would be.”

“How?”

“How am I pregnant, or how did I know? Because if the question is ‘how am I pregnant, when we’ve been using protection,’ the answer is ‘you have super-sperm.’”

“How did you know?”

“I’ve been feeling nauseous in the mornings, and today, I noticed my nipples have gotten darker and are more sensitive than usual.”

“You never mentioned you were feeling sick.” He frowns at me.

“It wasn’t a big deal.” I almost roll my eyes. Of course this man couldn’t care less that we’re pregnant already, when

Axton is barely five months old, and is more concerned with me not feeling good. “You do realize this means we could have a newborn in nine months, and Axton will only be a little over a year old, right?”

“And...?”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I’m not upset about it.” His gaze suddenly bores into mine. “Are you?”

Looking down at Axton when he lifts his head to look at me, like always, my heart melts. “No, I’m not upset. I just thought we’d have more time settling into things before we tried again.”

“We’ll take extra precautions next time around.” He takes Axton from me, then rests his hand against my lower back and leans down to plant a soft kiss against my lips.

“You know, you never freak out about anything, and it’s a little annoying.”

“The only thing that could shake me is something happening to you or our kids. As long as you’re all good, I’m good.” He kisses me once more, and I melt against him, knowing that as long as I have him, like he said, I’m good, and everything will be okay.

Hanna

Years Later

Walking through the house, I pass the living room, where shelves are covered with photos taken over the years from Walker and my wedding, where I was seven months pregnant and standing in my dress under the same Willow tree my

parents got married under. Lots of pictures of Axton, Landon, and our newest Isabella, plus photos of our families when they have come to visit and others of trips we've taken to London over the years so that we could visit Douglas and Blair plus see the girls and our friends. Grabbing my car keys I carefully maneuver Isabella out the door and go to my car and place her in her car seat then get in behind the wheel. It takes me less than ten minutes to get over to the Dive building Walker, Ham, and Otto work out of. I park and take Isabella out of her seat once more and hold her on my shoulder as I go inside.

The moment I step through the glass doors at the front, I can hear the sound of Axton and Landon laughing so loud that the sound ricochets off the inside of the steel building, causing the metal to shake. Both my boys, who are now five and six, are just as wild and free-spirited as their father, and as stubborn as Walker claims I am. But even with all of that, I wouldn't change a thing. They are mama's boys through and through and already have a protective streak a mile wide for the girls they love. Their baby sister, Isabella, being at the top of that list.

With Isabella's tiny head resting on my shoulder, I pat her bottom and walk past Holly at the front desk, giving her a smile that she returns in earnest. The cute blonde Otto hired when both Ham and Walker were out of town was a surprise to everyone. Even more of a surprise is how amazing she is at her job, on top of the fact that she still hasn't given in to the temptation Otto has presented, not even after working here for the past six months.

When I enter the pool area, my heart doesn't tumble into the pit of my stomach like it used to as I watch both my boys climb up the ladder over the deep end of the water and take turns diving in. Otto and Ham have a close eye on them from

either side of the pool and I trust both men with my life, plus the kids have always been fish, and I swear to this day that they learned to swim before they even learned to walk.

After Axton swims to the side where Uncle Otto is waiting to help him out of the pool, Landon jumps in, and I walk farther into the room. Like always, my heart skips a beat when I see my husband in all his shirtless glory as he stands off to the side, dripping wet and holding a towel. And as if he senses me, his head turns my way. The beautiful smile he shoots me has me stopping in place.

I don't remember when I fell in love with him, or when I started to trust him. But the best choice I ever made in my life was messaging him after April convinced me that a summer fling wasn't such a bad idea.

And even though I still think my husband is a walking red flag, I wouldn't change a single thing about him. He is the best thing that ever happened to me.

THE END

*I hope this book gave you the escape you were searching for
and that when you got to the end you felt like you just fell in
love or got the warmest hug.*

thank you

Thank you for reading! If this isn't your first Aurora Rose Reynolds book, THANK YOU, for being on this journey with me. And if this is your first. thank you for taking a chance on me. I'm so grateful for every reader, blogger and word lover out there because I would not be living this dream without you.

Thank you to my amazing designer, editors, proofreaders, and formatter for putting so much care and love into this book. You are so appreciated.

And as always thank you to my little family! My son and husband who put up with me disappearing for hours on end to spend time with the people who live in my head.

XX

Aurora

have you read before we fall?

Miranda

I'm going to be sick.

Holding my balled-up hand against my stomach, I read the text that just popped up on Bowie's computer again and try to convince myself that I'm misunderstanding what I'm looking at.

It doesn't work. No matter how many times I reread the message, it still says the same thing.

What time do you think you'll be here? Tucker is working late, so we don't need to worry about him.

The simple question seems innocent enough, but the photo attached to the message of a beautiful woman with dark hair who's wearing a red lace nightie proves I haven't made the wrong assumption.

"Mommy!" Kingston shouts, making me jump, and I slam the laptop closed and watch my beautiful boy with his dark hair and brown eyes—both traits from his father—hop-skip from the living room and into the kitchen. "Can we go outside now?"

"Yeah." I slid off the stool I pulled out so I could look up a recipe for dinner tonight, not having a clue that doing so

would change everything. “Let Mommy get on her shoes.”

“Okay,” he sings, following behind me to the front door.

“How about we walk down to the park?” I suggest, putting on his coat first. It takes me a few tries to get it zipped, because my hands are shaking so badly.

“Yes.” His tiny arms shoot into the air, and I can’t help the smile that curves my lips.

“All right, let’s go.” I open the door after I’ve got my shoes on, and he bounces out ahead of me, then waits for me to lock up before he reaches for my hand.

Holding onto him tightly, I move on autopilot down the sidewalk, past house after house, all of them similar to the one Bowie moved us into just weeks after we found out we were pregnant with Kingston. Our boy was a surprise gift from our honeymoon in Jamaica and a complete shock to me, because I had been on birth control at the time and was not planning on being a mom.

Or not at that moment in my life anyway.

At that time, I was working at a hair salon as a stylist with a goal of opening my own shop within the next couple of years, but getting pregnant changed that. For the first five months, I was so sick that I could hardly get out of bed, and for the last four, I was put on bed rest, because my doctors were concerned I would miscarry.

Bowie was great about everything and had no problem stepping up and taking care of us when I could no longer work. And after we had Kingston, we just decided I would stay home until he started preschool. And with Bowie’s job as a police officer, he was able to take an extra shift here or there, so we never struggled.

Now, I wonder if it was too much, if the responsibility and stress of him being the sole provider for our family changed the way he felt about me, about us.

With my throat tight, I shove that thought away. I might not work outside the house, but being a stay-at-home mom is a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week gig. I do not get time off. Heck, I can't even remember the last time I went to the bathroom on my own, let alone left the house by myself. And when Bowie does have a day off, I always make sure he never has to worry about Kingston or anything around the house.

Just last weekend, he went out of town with friends to go fishing.

Or maybe he didn't. Maybe he spent the weekend banging another woman while I was home with our son.

Did I miss the signs? How long has it been going on?

Things between us have been... well, if I'm honest, *not great*. But that happens, right? The ups and downs in relationships, the times where you feel completely disconnected from your spouse. I know I've been feeling like that for a long time—longer than I'd even like to admit. I just convinced myself that things would get better when Kingston got a little older and he didn't need me so much.

"Mommy, can I go on the slide?" Kingston asks, dragging me from my thoughts, and I look around, realizing we've already made it the five blocks to the park.

"Yeah, just be careful on the way down."

"I know," he groans like he's had sixteen years of me annoying him with my overprotectiveness and not just three.

I watch him run across the mulch that covers the ground to the jungle gym with a slide attached, then I take a seat on the

bench. Taking my phone out of my pocket, I tap the screen and see a message from Bowie letting me know he's going to be late tonight and not to wait up for him.

Numb, I message him back a quick **Okay**, when all I really want to do is rage, to tell him I know he's a liar, to ask how he could do this to us. He knows that cheating is not something I would ever forgive, not after growing up the way I did. My childhood was filled with turmoil, heartache, and confusion, watching my mom being cheated on by my dad and her constantly taking him back, knowing he'd just do it again.

That is not the life I want for our son. I do not want him to think that kind of relationship is normal, because it's not. And I deserve better than a man who would do that to me.

"Mommy, come push me!" Kingston shouts, and I tuck away the pain I'm feeling and head across the mulch, forcing a smile for my baby.

I have a lot of thinking to do. I'm not the only one in this situation, the only one who will be affected. And with me so dependent on Bowie, it's going to take me some time to leave.

[Grab you copy here to read the rest!](#)

Pre-Order Before This Ends - Miles coming early 2024!

about aurora rose reynolds



Aurora Rose Reynolds is a New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling author whose wildly popular series include *Until, Until Him, Until Her*, *Underground King*, *Shooting Stars*, *Fluke My Life* and *How to Catch an Alpha* series.

Her writing career started in an attempt to get the outrageously alpha men who resided in her head to leave her alone and has blossomed into an opportunity to share her stories with readers all over the world.

To learn more about her and her books, visit her [website](#) or join her [reader group](#) on Facebook! Subscribe to her [newsletter](#), so you won't miss any book news and releases!



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