



WEDDING
DISASTER

A Fake Marriage Mafia Romance

BB HAMMEL

Wedding Disaster

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Chapter 1

Isabel

My boss's front door is open again.

Not as in, unlocked—that would be normal for a fancy, upscale neighborhood like this one—but it's left slightly ajar. Which should be a surprise but isn't. I push it all the way and step into the foyer, squinting at the black designer high-heel shoe left tossed near the stairs, at the glittering silver necklace dangling from the banister, and at the pair of black women's underwear on the top step.

He's got another guest.

I close the door behind me, *hard*. I make sure it's nice and loud so my man-child boss can hear it. If Con cares that I've arrived at my normal time, there's no indication of it. He's not down here ready to start the day, and definitely not prepared to act like a normal, well-adjusted adult.

I wish this weren't infuriatingly common.

I head into his expensive kitchen. It's a wasteland. This place barely gets used. I make coffee in his fancy machine and check the refrigerator, but there are only bottles of French champagne, condiments in the door, and old takeout. I toss the food, sip my coffee, and consider leaving when the stairs creak.

That's either the man himself or his date sneaking off to drown her shame in a *very* hot shower.

Con appears in the hallway, yawning as he scratches his head. I lean back against the counter, setting my jaw, as a war of

emotions flood through me.

My boss is stupidly attractive.

The sort of attractive that just feels unfair.

He's actually hard to look at sometimes.

There's no denying it. I can't pretend the guy isn't perfection, there's a reason he could bring home a new girl every night if he wanted.

He's tall with an athletic frame. Not too muscular, but not thin. His chest is sculpted and defined, his abs always somehow flexing, without a slab of excess body fat anywhere. Which is a minor miracle, considering the man lives on restaurant food and alcohol. I have no clue how he manages to look like he waltzed out of an underwear ad, but it's like he was blessed with inhuman genes.

I force myself to meet his gaze. Symmetrical face. Bright eyes. This confident smile that seems to suggest he's either in love with you or knows someone that wants to fuck you.

I press my knees together.

I hate my boss.

"Good morning, Isabel." He yawns and nods at the coffee machine. "Is that for me?"

"No, but you can have some."

"Lovely, thank you." He brushes past me and pours a cup. "Exactly what I needed."

"I thought we talked about this."

"About what?" He glances at me, eyebrows raised. His eyes are light blue, like the color of a pale Caribbean ocean. His jaw is square, his cheekbones are high, and just the right amount of stubble makes him look absurdly masculine.

"About wearing a shirt when I'm coming over." I nod at his bare chest. "It's unprofessional."

He rolls his eyes. "Call HR then." And moves past me toward the pantry. He roots around, looking for something, and

emerges with a pack of peanut butter crackers. “You *are* in my own house, you know.”

He unwraps the crackers and eats them one at a time.

“Yes, and you also knew I was coming over, like I do every single morning. Half the time, you’re mostly naked.”

“*Mostly*. I’m not an animal.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“It’s not like I heard you ring the doorbell.”

“You’re right, I didn’t, since you left the door open again last night.”

He looks slightly chagrined. “Well, that’s not ideal.”

“Not like it matters in his neighborhood, but still, you’re practically begging someone to come in here and murder you.” We’re in a nice little section of multi-million-dollar bungalows in Santa Monica. He’s close enough that he could spit on the beach if he wanted—although I’m pretty sure he hates sand and never goes anywhere near it.

“Still, next time, ring the doorbell and let me know you’ve arrived, then I’ll make myself more presentable.”

“We both know that isn’t true.”

“Yeah, well, why can’t we have a little fantasy to make the morning easier?” He gestures at me. “Speaking of which, what’s on the schedule?”

I’m tempted to tell him to put a shirt on first. Maybe even force him to pick up some of the clutter. While the kitchen’s basically bare, the living room looks like a wreck: glasses left out, the ashtray filled with the remnants of what I’m pretty sure has to be several fat weed joints, a couple bottles of whiskey teetering on the floor, and the television left on mute playing the Home Shopping Network.

I don’t know how a man that runs multiple highly successful hotels can live like this and still function.

Yet Con manages to pull it off.

“You have meetings in an hour.” I flip open his date book. It’s physical, which he always loves to make fun of, but I keep better notes with a pen. “I pushed them back the moment I saw the door was left open again. And when I saw the panties on the stairs.”

“Okay, I’ll admit that isn’t the most sanitary thing in the world.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’d never take off my underwear in dirty place like this.” I don’t know why I say it and I regret it the second it comes out.

Only I’m sick of dealing with Con’s bullshit—after three years of cleaning up after him, putting up with his comments, forcing myself to ignore his beautiful shirtless body, despising his don’t-give-a-shit attitude, I’m ready to explode.

I half expect him to fire me on the spot. Instead, he only smirks. “You’ve been saving that for a while, haven’t you?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I mean, yes, it’s just that—”

“I get it. I’m shirtless and you’re not thinking clearly.”

“No, I mean, you should definitely have a shirt on—”

“It’s fine, Isabel. You don’t have to explain yourself. I am very distracting.” He tilts his head, his smile fading. “Though I expect better.”

I clamp my mouth shut.

Nothing pisses me off more than when he says *I expect better*. It’s his favorite go-to line like I’m the one letting him down. Like I’m the one that doesn’t have my shit together. Like I’m the one parading a bunch of floozy girls through my house, one after the other, sleeping with them, drinking with them, smoking with them, and tossing them aside for the latest model the moment they become uninteresting.

I’m the only reason this man hasn’t drowned a long time ago.

“I switched your first two meetings to virtual,” I say, changing the subject, my cheeks burning with frustration. I keep my tone crisp and professional. “You have time to get showered and changed, and you can take them here at the house.”

“Perfect.” He sips his coffee. “I’ll make sure to put on a shirt for those.”

“I’ll send your car to bring you to the office when you’re finished.”

“Actually.” He hesitates, glancing toward the hallway. “Send the car now.”

I open my mouth to protest. I do a lot of things for Con—I pick up his dry cleaning, I send over a maid service, I make sure he doesn’t run out of those stupid peanut butter crackers—but I don’t get rid of his girls. Those mistakes are on him.

But I keep it to myself. Sending the car isn’t outside the purview of my position, regardless of what it’s being used for. And anyway, the sooner I get out of here, the better I’ll feel.

I hate my boss more than I like to admit.

“I can take care of that,” I say, making a note.

“Perfect.” He turns to the coffee machine and begins to make more. “That’s all. Thanks for your chipper attitude today, Isabel.”

I’m tempted to tell him off. Con can be such a bastard sometimes.

Instead, I walk past him, my heels clacking on the hardwood floor, and head outside.

I take a few deep breaths on the stoop, gathering myself.

There are days, like today, when I want to quit more than anything in this world.

But then I remind myself that I don’t have a college degree, barely have a high school diploma, and can’t afford to stay in my house without some solid income.

Despite all Con’s flaws, he pays very, very well.

Probably out of guilt.

The man has to be aware of his own trash personality.

I head down the stoop, already jotting reminders in my planner about the day. I barely notice two guys sitting in a car right out

front, both of them smoking and eating from a takeout bag. They stare at me as I wander past, and I frown back at them. But before I can ask what they're doing, I get a text from Con.

Need that ride sooner than later. Please.

“Poor girl,” I murmur to myself and call the car service.

Chapter 2

Conlan

I stand in the doorway of my bedroom and survey the disaster.

It's a mess of pillows, clothes, empty bottles, and condom wrappers. People say a lot of things about me, but at least I practice safe sex. Lying in the middle of the bed, wrapped in a sheet, is the girl I slept with the night before.

Alissa Something.

Blonde hair. Nice tits. Straight, white teeth and the fakest laugh I've ever heard. I met her at some rich-people party up in the hills and only brought her home because she promised to fuck me.

Promised is an understatement—she followed me into the bathroom, shoved her tongue in my mouth and her hand down my pants, and said she wanted to ride my dick until her pussy broke.

I was drunk. Also a little high and very bored. So I figured, why not? Alissa seemed nice enough.

Certainly willing, anyway.

Now my head's pounding. I barely remember what we did, but based on the state of the room, it wasn't entirely seemly.

I text Isabel, letting her know that she'd better hurry with the car.

My poor assistant. I almost feel bad about all this, except there's the hungry way she stares at me whenever I come

downstairs shirtless in the mornings, which is the only reason I keep doing it.

She says I should stop, but come on.

I love that look.

Her little stare. The way her gaze shifts to my chest, my stomach, and back up to my eyes like she's afraid of what she's feeling.

Everything else about her frustrates the hell out of me.

She's stuffy, obsessed with being professional, always giving me shit for the way I live, and constantly judging every little perceived mistake.

But there's that fucking look.

Her big, green eyes, slightly widened, her pump, pink lips parted enough to show her teeth with that little gap in the front, her tongue pressing up behind it. Her dark hair cut straight across her forehead, long and wavy down to the middle of her back, usually pulled up in a tight bun. Her professional clothes, the way she does everything in her power to hide her figure—curvy, full, lovely—but even the most stodgy and formal outfits still manage to flatter her.

My assistant wants to fuck me. It's obvious, except she hates me too, which makes it that much better.

It's almost worth taking all her other shit.

“Good morning,” I say, kicking the mattress hard enough to shake the girl awake.

She stirs, groans, and lifts her head.

Just as I remembered. Extraordinarily average. She cracks a smile. “Morning,” she says, groggy. “What time is it?”

“A little past eight.” I glance at the clock. The first meeting is at nine and I need at least a half hour to make myself feel human again. “You have to go.”

Her smile disappears. “Sorry, what?”

“I have work.” I cock my head. “It's Wednesday.”

“Oh. Right.” She shuffles up, not bothering to cover herself. The tits remain above average, but less impressive without an alcohol haze. “Do you mind if I shower?”

“Yes,” I say, gathering her stuff. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be a dick, but I have a meeting in fifteen minutes.”

Except I do mean to be a dick.

I learned a long time ago that being kind in this situation doesn’t help anyone. Don’t give her any false impressions about what last night means.

We fucked. Probably had fun, I’m not sure. Now it’s done.

“I can just clean up and let myself out. I won’t bother you.”

“I need the shower.” I shove a bundle of a bra, a dress, a shoe, and a belt into her arms. “My car’s on the way to bring you home.”

“Okay, sure, right, can I just use the toilet first?”

I’m tempted to say no. “Go ahead. I’m not unreasonable.”

Although I am.

She relieves herself and takes her time doing it. Eventually, she comes out, half-dressed and looking frazzled. “I’m missing my jewelry. And my bag. Also, where’s my phone? And my underwear?”

We spend a few minutes hunting it all down, but soon she’s stumbling out into the blinding daylight. Who the fuck made the sun so bright? “Last night was fun,” I say, gesturing toward the black sedan out front. “Really, it was great. I got your number already.”

“You did?” She looks confused.

I didn’t.

“Absolutely. I’ll call.”

“Okay. Great.”

I’m not really going to call.

“Good meeting you, Ali—” I stop. Her mouth twitches. I’m about to say *Alissa* but suddenly remember. “Allison.”

She beams. “You too.”

I give her a peck on the cheek, and as I escort her down the steps and toward the car, two guys come storming over with their cell phones out and their cameras start going off. Click, click, click, click, rapid-fire.

It’s disorienting. I’m not used to finding two surly-looking men in sweat-stained t-shirts with their cell phones out tapping away, not even bothering to mute the shutter noise. The older of the two, crew cut gray hair, thick gut, calls out at my date. “Allison Leyland, does your father know you’re here? Are the rumors about him true?”

“Oh, god,” she groans.

“What the fuck is this?” I stare at the guys, not comprehending.

“Allison, what will your father say, spending the night with Conlan Costa? Does the general know about your relationship? Or was this just a one-night stand? Conlan, did you know Allison is nineteen?”

I frown at her. “You said you were twenty-four.”

“I lied,” she says, brushing past the two men. “Leave me alone, you assholes.”

“Nineteen?” I murmur to myself, still dazed. “What the fuck?”

The men continue to haunt her. They snap pictures, take video. She gets into the back of my town car and slams the door in their faces. My driver pulls out, nearly clipping the older of the two slobs, until I realize.

They’re fucking paparazzi.

“Hey,” I bark at them. “What the fuck was that?”

“You don’t know who that was, do you?” The guy that nearly got hit shakes his head at me. “Man, you really messed up.”

“Good luck, bro.” The younger guy seems like he almost means it.

Which really ruins me.

A sinking pit opens in my stomach.

I've done a lot of stupid things in my life, but this is the first time I've ever wondered if fucking the night before was a mistake.

"Why was she worth taking pictures of?" I ask, perplexed.
"She's not even famous."

The younger guy gets into the car, but the older one pauses. He gives me an apologetic smile. "We're not paparazzi," he says. "We're private detectives working for a political party. Anyway, sorry about all this, and good luck." He slams the door and the pair disappear.

"What the fuck?" I say, standing alone on my stoop in a beautiful Santa Monica morning, the smell of the ocean in the air, the sound of waves lapping against shoreline just barely audible.

I feel like a hole just opened up and swallowed me.

Chapter 3

Isabel

Conlan's late for all his meetings. Which means I spend most of the day covering and apologizing for him, soothing over egos, patching up frustrated clients. He eventually shows, but it's obvious to everyone that he's barely paying attention to what's happening around him. Typical asshole behavior. Con keeps looking at his phone, ignoring presentations, and half-responding to questions.

I have no idea why he gets away with this garbage.

All Con does is make my job hell.

After one particularly brutal meeting, I follow the client out to the elevators. "Really, Mr. Riley, I promise Mr. Costa's just having a rough day." I flash my most professional smile at an older property investor as I lay on the charm, which may or may not work. Con's been trying to put together a deal with this man's company for years—and just treated the guy like a piece of day-old fish.

"I hope so, Isabel, I really hope so. Mr. Costa's got a reputation and he only made me feel that it's entirely deserved."

"Whatever reputation you think he has, look closely at his business track record. Every hotel he gets involved with, every property he touches, inevitably makes a lot of money."

Mr. Riley's lips purse, but he doesn't argue as he disappears into the elevator.

The bastard. Not Riley—he’s a dick too, but whatever—but Conlan. He could at least pretend like he gives a damn about his own business. Without me, he would’ve lost dozens of clients a long time ago, and as I turn back toward his office seething with resentment, I wonder for the millionth time if I’m just enabling him.

I could walk away. He might find another assistant, but there’s no way they’d be as effective as I am. Not to brag or whatever, but I’ve been doing this for a few years now, and I’ve gotten really good at putting out his fires.

Maybe the new assistant would get over the obscenely steep learning curve, or maybe not, but either way Conlan would suffer if I quit on him.

Is that something I actually want?

In some ways, no. Con *has* been good to me. The pay is absurd compared to other assistant positions, and the perks aren’t bad either.

Use of a company car, all the fancy coffee I can drink, a steady stream of breakroom snacks.

But in most other ways, yes, absolutely, I want him to suffer like the rest of us do.

He drifts through his days with every advantage and tries his hardest to squander the gifts he’s been given.

While there are people like me that were born with nothing and watched everything precious get torn away.

I head into his corner office, seething with resentment. He’s distracted, staring his phone, chewing on his thumbnail the way he does when he’s in a bad mood. The man is attractive, stupidly attractive, I’ll give him that, and the look he gives me when I clear my throat to get his attention is knee-shakingly gorgeous—a mixture of attentive interest and frustration—but I will *not* let my attraction to his shallow good looks impact the way I feel.

He’s a prick and that’s all I need to know.

“What’s going on with you?” I ask, letting some of my anger bleed into my tone. “You’re blowing all these meetings. Mr. Riley is pissed about the way you just ignored him for the last half hour. If I hadn’t followed him and tried to patch things over—”

“She was nineteen,” he says, interrupting.

That makes me pause. My stomach lurches. “That’s, uh—”

It’s gross. That’s what it is.

“She told me she was twenty-four, which I believed because I am a stupid piece of shit, and also because I don’t check IDs before having sex.”

“Maybe you should.”

That’s the best way to defend against teenagers.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I don’t want to hear about this, Conlan. Is that why you’re such a mess today?”

“Yes,” he says, staring into my eyes. There’s something in his expression—it’s not regret, exactly, but something haunted, something dark. I’ve only ever seen it once or twice before, but both times it made me stop and stare, just like I am today.

There’s pain in him buried under his attitude, buried under the drinking and the women.

I recognize pain—it’s the same thing I’ve felt for a long while now, a low-level constant buzz, a hum of discomfort. The knowledge that I am broken in a myriad of ways. The certainty that I am fundamentally flawed.

In this moment, like in those other moments, I’m sure he feels that about himself too.

But he looks over toward the windows, his face composing itself.

“Do you want me to cancel the rest of your meetings?” I ask.

“No, but I need you to find out who she is.”

“Do you have a name?”

“Allison Leyland.”

Something itches the back of my skull. “Leyland,” I repeat.

“She’s got a politically involved family.”

The itch becomes a roar. “How do you know that?”

“Two men showed up outside my house. They took pictures of us together, pretended like they were paparazzi. One of them admitted they were private detectives workings for politicians or some Super PAC or whatever. Didn’t mention who exactly hired them, but—” He makes a dismissive gesture. “The implication was clear.”

Leyland. Leyland. I wander to the chair in front of his desk and lower myself into it. “I think I know the name,” I say, a chill running through me. “Did you google it yet?”

“Not really,” he admits. “Couldn’t bring myself to do it. Been too busy feeling like a fucking creep.”

“You probably should. Feel like a creep, I mean, but also you should google.”

His eyebrows raise. “It’s that serious?”

“Just search, ‘Five-Star General Liam Leyland.’”

He leans back in his chair. For a second, he says nothing. Only looks at me. I stare into his eyes, all my frustration dissipating.

“You’re fucking with me,” he says.

“I wish I was.”

“Five-star general?”

“Maybe four. I’m not really sure.”

“One less star doesn’t fucking matter.” He leans forward and grabs his phone. “This is very bad, isn’t it?”

I could lie to him. Try to make him feel better. But I’ve been cleaning up after him long enough to know that won’t help.

“Yes. Really bad.”

He starts typing away on his cell, but suddenly it rings.

I flinch, but he only stares at it. It rings and rings then stops. His direct line, which means someone that knows him well enough to bypass his secretary.

Not many people have his cell number that I know about.

It starts to ring again.

“Answer it,” I say, feeling desperate for that noise to stop.

He picks it up, pauses for a moment, then puts it on speaker. “Hello?”

“Conlan, you stupid motherfucker, you utter piece of human ___”

“Hello, Adler. Isabel is in the room.”

His older brother’s voice is low and filled with malice. “I don’t give a fuck if your assistant is around. You stuck your dick in the wrong pussy.”

I grimace, staring down at my lap.

Con’s voice remains impressively even. “I heard. It’s as bad as I think, isn’t it?”

“It’s worse. It’s goddamn political.”

“Would you care if I said I didn’t know?”

“Guess.”

Con smiles slightly. “What can we do?”

“*You* can get on your plane right now and fly back to the Sunrise.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I don’t give a shit what you want to do. General Leyland is on his way right fucking now too. The pair of you are going to sit down and solve this.”

“The five-star general himself?” Con asks, sounding innocent. “I would’ve thought he was busy, you know, running the army or whatever.”

“He retired last year, something you’d know if you cared about the world outside of fucking drunken starlets.”

“Hey, they’re not always drunk. And not always starlets.”

“You need to get here in the next ten hours, before Leyland shows up, or we are in serious shit. He’s a contender, Conlan, a serious goddamn contender for the presidency. If he actually makes it into the Oval Office, he’s going to ruin us unless you make this disappear. You understand that, don’t you?”

Con stares up at the ceiling. “I understand. I’m on my way.”

“Good.”

Adler hangs up. Con glares at the screen before dropping his phone on the desk.

We sit in silence, not moving.

I’ve heard his older brother pissed before. It seems to me that Adler is either angry or completely impassive to the world. They have a strange relationship that I can’t really understand—Adler’s more than an older brother to Conlan, he runs the entire organizational structure of their several holding companies.

Though it goes deeper. There’s a layer to their family Con carefully hides from me, a layer I’ve glimpsed in emails and messages, but never seen up close. Adler’s a part of that side of their business. Whatever it is they do.

“You should get packed,” he says, finally looking at me.

My eyes go wide. “What now?”

“We’re heading to the Sunrise in an hour. Call the airport and make sure my jet’s prepped. Tell the pilot we’ll pay whatever.”

“Right, I can make the travel arrangements, but—”

“You’re coming with me.”

“Conlan, I can’t just fly out to the East Coast with you on a moment’s notice. I have—” What do I have? Some plants and food that’ll go bad in the fridge. But what else? Nothing’s really keeping me here, no boyfriend, no family, nothing. My neighbors can get my mail and make sure my plants survive.

“Get packed,” he says. “I need you, Isabel.”

That word. *Need*.

It drives a line of needles into my spine.

I swallow a whimper and straighten my back, forcing myself to glare at him. I can't forget this is the man that makes my life hell—this is a spoiled, selfish piece of shit, and he got himself into this situation.

I don't care if he's hurting inside.

Whatever I glimpsed before doesn't matter.

This is Conlan. My asshole boss.

But I'm also aware that I don't have any other choice.

I shove my chair back and stand. "Fine. I'll be ready."

"Good." He sounds relieved. I hate him for that. I don't want him to *need* me. "This will be more unpleasant for me than it will be for you, don't worry. You might even enjoy your stay. The Sunrise isn't half bad."

"It's an Atlantic City casino," I say as I head out of his office. "It's going to be terrible."

He doesn't disagree.

Chapter 4

Conlan

The flight back to the Sunrise is quiet and tense.

Isabel pretends to work, pretends to sleep, and pretends to read. She does everything in her power to act as though I don't exist.

I let her have some peace and quiet. I figure it'll be the last calm hours for a few days.

What am I supposed to say to her anyway? To make her stop thinking I'm a monstrous piece of trash? I could tell her I didn't know Allison was only nineteen—which is true. I could tell her I had no clue her father was a general, much less politically involved—also true.

But that doesn't hide the fact that I brought some random girl back to my house and fucked her senseless without so much as learning a thing about her.

I could've asked someone at the party. I could've done the bare minimum.

Instead, I felt a tongue in my mouth, a hand on my dick, and didn't care. She was a warm body and she was easy.

That's all I ever want. Something easy.

Something very bad for me.

Because I'm Conlan Costa and my love language is self-destruction.

We land after a few exhausting and agonizing hours. Isabel still says nothing on the trip from the airport to the casino.

When we arrive, Will Hyde, my brother's second-in-command and the main pit boss, is waiting out front with Trish Wane, the head of hotel operations and third in the hierarchy.

Will looks very unhappy. Trish always look unhappy, so there's no surprise.

"Adler's livid," he says, gesturing for the porters to take our bags. Isabel remains behind me, but off to the side, like she's trying to keep some distance between us.

"I'm aware. It takes a lot to get me back to this place." I scowl at the entrance to the Sunrise. It's a classic casino—gaudy marble statues, lots of gold and silver, bright colors, the illusion of wealth and power.

In this case, the illusion happens to be the truth.

The Sunrise is the heart of the Costa organization. We're a business first and a family second, and we aren't only involved in the hospital and gaming industries.

Those our only our legal fronts.

But I keep those worlds very separate. Isabel doesn't know about the other stuff, at least not beyond the rumors, and she's a very smart girl. I've sure she's heard all about it by now.

My brother is the CEO of our company and the Don of our organization. Which means when he's pissed off, I have to come running over to deal with it.

"We didn't miss you," Trish says, crossing her arms. "I have your usual room booked and another for your assistant across the hall."

"Thank you," Isabel says.

Trish nods to her. "You're welcome. I don't blame you for your boss's fuck-ups, so feel free to charge whatever you want to the room. We'll forward him the bill."

I put my hand on my heart. "I knew you loved me."

"I feel nothing but disdain for you."

"Oh, Trish, you know the most direct route to my heart is through utter contempt. I'm a masochist at heart."

Trish rolls her eyes and Will interrupts. “Enough of this shit, let’s get inside,” he grumbles. “Adler’s waiting in his office.”

I follow the pair through the main doors. Isabel hurries to keep up. She’s never been here before—all our business is out on the West Coast, and I didn’t bring her the one time I came out here since she started working for me—and I enjoy the look on her face as she stares around.

The Sunrise is gorgeous. As over-the-top and absurd the place may be, Adler did a good job maintaining and upgrading it. The front section opens into a garden of flowers—real flowers planted in these ingenious boxes that look like actual grass—and beyond is the gaming floor, a forest of flashing animated slot machines and live dealer tables. It’s not particularly busy at the moment, but there’s still a steady flow of people, some coming and some going, moving around the place like a human river.

We bypass the commotion and go straight to a set of private elevators behind the front desk. Trish waves a curt goodbye as Will takes me and Isabel to the third floor where the main security rooms watch over the multitude of cameras all trained to track and spot any problems. My brother’s office is at the far side of the building near this obscene fake balcony thing that overlooks the central gambling facility. He likes to stand there, hidden from view, watching his little empire of idiots.

I hate being back here.

There are too many memories. I grew up in the Sunrise—my father built this place and ran the organization before my brother took over nine years ago—and those were hard days. I left the second I could, but this place has always been with me, drilled down deep into my marrow, stuck in my bones and my blood.

“Go right in,” Will says when we reach the doors.

“Is my nephew around?” I ask before heading inside. “Just realized I haven’t seen the kid in a while.”

“I’m sure you’ll see him.” Will’s expression softens. “Little monster’s a menace. Running wild already.”

“With a father like Adler, can you really blame him?”

Will snorts. “Fair point, but at least his mother’s okay.”

“Casey. I like her. How’s she holding up?”

“Pregnant again. Which you’d know if you ever bothered to come home.” Will’s smile disappears. “Go inside and talk to your brother.” He nods to Isabel and walks off.

I hesitate before opening the door.

“How come you don’t ever come back?” she asks.

It’s the first time she’s spoken to me since we got on the plane hours ago. I glance at her, not sure if I really heard, but she’s staring at me.

It’s almost *the* look. Half desire, half loathing. God, I love that look, and I love those lips, and that tight button-down she’s wearing, except I hate the way she thinks about me.

Not that I can blame her.

“Home and I don’t really get along.”

“What about you and your brother? I mean, what are we walking into here?”

I press my lips together, considering. “Adler and I have always been on good terms.”

“He sounded mad.”

“Anything that threatens the family is bad.”

“He sounded *really* mad.”

“Well—” I stare into her face. “My family is particularly vulnerable to politics. Not just our business interests, but our *other* interests are well.”

She pales slightly. “Other interests?”

“Right, I almost forgot, we pretend like that stuff doesn’t exist.” I turn away. “I’ll do the talking. Don’t worry, he’s not going to take anything out on you.”

“I wasn’t worried,” she says but I don’t believe her.

We step into my brother's office like we're walking into our own funeral.

Chapter 5

Isabel

I'm overwhelmed by the Sunrise.

I've been to casinos before—a few in Vegas, mostly some of the older and less expensive places since I'm not really into gambling—but never to one like this before. It's lavish, every inch of it renovated and gleaming. I'm exhausted from the flight and fried from ignoring Con, and I'm frankly not thinking straight when he all but admits to the darker side of his business.

The side I don't ever think about.

The side he carefully kept from me for three years.

I've heard the rumors about the Costa family. About how they're involved in certain illicit activities. But I never put much stock in that—the hotel and casino trade has to be lucrative enough to make breaking the law a losing proposition.

And yet he all but admitted it straight to my face.

I have chills as we enter a dim office. It's industrial and serious—gleaming metal, modern shelves covered in what look like industry awards, filing cabinets, a bank of screens, and a massive desk in the middle, behind which sits Adler himself.

Conlan and his brother have a similar look. Both are handsome—frustratingly handsome, the sort of handsome that makes me want to look away even though I can't quite manage it—but

Adler's nearly ten years older, grizzled, with darker hair and darker eyes.

"You're late," he says, sitting up straight in his chair. "The general's going to be here soon."

"I got on the plane an hour after we spoke." Con doesn't seem cowed by his older brother though everything about this meeting is freaking me out. The topic, the situation, these two titans facing off against each other.

"Should've already been on the damn plane before I called."

"Of course, that's reasonable."

"Sit down." Adler spares me a glance but doesn't introduce himself. "Does your assistant have to be here?"

"She was there that morning." Con waves a hand at me. "She's fine. Let her stay."

Adler grunts and all but forgets that I exist as Con takes a chair. I remain standing and keep thinking statue-like thoughts. *Be still as stone. No sudden movements. Maybe the monsters won't notice me.*

"Here's the deal. The general's getting shit from some PAC group that wants to release those photos of you with his daughter. He is understandably livid about the whole ordeal. I've been trying to come up with some way to fix this, but it seems like nothing short of you committing suicide on national television's going to be enough."

"Not a bad way to go. I do love a good spectacle."

"Don't joke right now." Adler rubs his eyes. "You know how tenuous the family's situation is. Certain of our businesses are in transition at the moment, and if Leyland decides he wants to sink his knife into our belly, there's not much we can do to stop him."

"Don't we donate to that asshole?"

"We donate to all the assholes, but that's no guarantee they'll do what we want. The moment they smell the political shitstorm shifting in their direction, they turn on you." Adler

grunts and cracks his neck. “Tell me you didn’t know the girl was nineteen.”

“I didn’t know.” Con’s not smiling as he says it. “I’ll be honest with you. I’m not that upset she’s the daughter of some politician. It wouldn’t be the first time I stuck my dick in a fire. But I am unhappy that she was a fucking teenager.”

Which surprises me. I could tell it bothered him but I didn’t think Conlan had enough depth to him for something like that to matter. The girl’s nineteen—it’s not like she’s fourteen or something, it’s totally legal. Morally wrong, yes, that’s another thing, but Conlan’s never seemed like morals mattered all that much.

It’s fascinating and I’m curious why this seems to bother him.

I expect Adler to rake him over the coals for that comment, but he only grunts in reply. “Yeah, I get it,” he murmurs, and the brothers go silent for a moment, both of them staring down at their hands like they’re remembering something. “We still need a solution to this.”

“What can I offer him?” Con leans back. “Money? A public apology? I’d happily lie and claim I was tutoring her in math.” He grimaces and holds up a hand. “That wasn’t funny.”

“No, it wasn’t, but you’re not far off. Leyland wants plausible deniability. From what I understand, they only have photos of her leaving your house and nothing more. That doesn’t prove anything untoward happened.”

“Perhaps I was chivalrous and saved her from being too drunk?”

“Nobody would believe it.”

“We don’t need the people that know me to believe it,” Conlan points out.

Adler runs a hand through his hair. “That still won’t be enough. You didn’t hear Leyland. He sounded like he wants to start a fucking war.”

“He’s a general, Adler, that’s all he knows how to do.”

“Regardless, we need a solution. Though you’re not far off.” Adler taps fingers on his desk. “You could marry her,” he says, sounding thoughtful.

My guts twist and a little whimper escapes my lips. I don’t know why, but the thought of Conlan marrying that girl disgusts me.

Neither of them speaks. Then Conlan laughs once, sharply. “Very funny.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Adler presses. “It would take care of your problems.”

“I’m not marrying a fucking *teenager*.” Conlan’s expression darkens. “Don’t suggest it again.”

Adler tilts his head to the side. I watch Conlan closely, trying to figure out why this is bothering him so much. There’s obviously something going on here that I don’t understand, but whatever it is, the brothers aren’t about to tell me.

“Marriage isn’t a bad idea though.” Adler waves a hand at Conlan’s angry growl. “Not to the girl, but to someone else.”

“How the fuck could getting married help right now? Wouldn’t that only make the gossip worse?”

“This is about plausible deniability. Find a woman that’s willing to speak out on your behalf. Muddy the waters.”

“You mean, find a woman willing to lie for me.”

Adler gestures as if that’s no big deal. “Throw questions all over the situation. If you’re married, and your wife’s saying nothing happened between you and the general’s daughter, that might be enough to make the whole issue go away, or at least enough to make people sick of trying to parse what’s true and what isn’t.”

“Messy it up, make the mainstream media ignore the whole thing.” Conlan leans back in his chair. “It’s not a terrible idea, but I don’t love the marriage angle.”

“Marriage shows you’re serious, and we need you to be serious for once in your life.”

“You know I take this family seriously.”

“You have to convince the general to go along with it, which means a big fucking gesture. That’s going to be on you, Con. Sell the fucking story.”

“That’s the only thing I’m good for these days.”

“You’re right about that.”

Conlan stretches his back and sits up straight. “Problem is, where am I going to find a wife? One that will lie for me? One I can trust? Assuming I’m even willing to make this stupid gesture.”

I stand very, very still.

I’m a statue. I’m made of stone. I don’t breathe, I don’t move, there’s no reason to look at me.

Both brothers slowly turn and stare in my direction. Adler seems thoughtful and Con’s face is twisted into a mask of distaste.

The fucking prick.

He’d be lucky as hell to marry me.

“No,” I say. “Absolutely not.”

“She was there that morning,” Conlan says, touching one finger to his chin. “That adds to the story.”

“No,” I say again, taking a step backwards. The statue act isn’t working and I really don’t like the way these two men are considering me like I’m a prize cow. “Why can’t I just come out with a statement? Instead of marrying Conlan? I can just be his assistant and say that I didn’t see anything. Hell, it’s kind of the truth, right?”

“Would you do that?” Conlan asks, glancing back at his brother.

“If you pay me enough, I’ll hold my nose and say whatever you want.” *Just don’t ask me to marry you.*

“She’s certainly amenable,” Adler says. “But can you trust her?”

“I trust her,” Conlan says with so much sincerity it makes me pause.

Why would he trust me? I’m his employee. I’ve done nothing but my job, never more, never less.

Yes, I’ve covered for him in the past, and yes, I’m constantly cleaning up his messes, but that all falls firmly into the purview of an exceptional assistant.

This is way more than my job description.

Why would he *trust* me?

But no, Conlan doesn’t trust me. He’s just used to me hovering around. There’s no reason for him to see me as anything more than an efficient employee. Whatever he thinks, he’s just confused.

“Think you could convince her?” Adler asks, talking about me like I’m not ten feet away. “She doesn’t look like she wants to be your wife.”

“Can’t blame her,” Conlan mutters.

“I’m not marrying you,” I say with an edge of hysteria. “Why are we back on the marriage thing? Seriously, find someone else.”

“You’d better start fixing this,” Adler says, already turning away. “If she won’t do it, find someone else, and find her fast.”

“Isabel,” Conlan says, and hell, I love the way he says my name. With a little bit of yearning. It scares the hell out of me.

“No,” I say, shaking my head rapidly. “I won’t do it, Conlan. Absolutely, positively, no.”

“The hard part will be lying for me, and you seem willing enough to do that. The marriage bit is just a little more smoke in the room. It’s just a grand gesture, like Adler said. You know what I mean?”

I reach the office door. “Conlan, listen to me. I’ve done a lot for you already. I’ve done way more than I ever should have. Honestly, sometimes it feels like I’ve been enabling your bad

behavior for years now, and maybe none of this would've happened if I hadn't been so good at my stupid job."

"Maybe, or I would've fired you," he says, standing up. "Isabel. Think about it. This can work, and the general will take us seriously if we go so far as to marry each other."

"Will you two do this somewhere else?" Adler asks, sounding bored.

"I'm sorry," I say, sweat dripping down my back, my palms shaking. "I'm not marrying you, Conlan."

I turn and yank open the door, running out of there before he can say something to make me stop.

Chapter 6

Isabel

I follow twisting hallways until I reach a set of elevators. They spit me out back down on the gaming floor and I travel through the crowd, ignoring the flow of humanity all around me, until I find a bar.

I sit down, hunch forward, and lean on my elbows.

The bartender, a pretty girl with the name Roxie on her chest, leans toward me. “If you put a twenty in that machine, I can comp you a drink.”

I stare at her for a second and all I can think is random screaming gibberish. Mechanically, I do what she said.

“There it is. What’ll you have?”

“Gin and tonic.”

“You got it.” Roxie walks off to make my drink.

I sit there woodenly, feeling like I might collapse at any moment. The alcohol appears and I suck down half of it just to give my hands something to do.

I barely notice it when Conlan takes the seat next to mine.

“Hello, Roxie, lovely to see you again. Whiskey, please, and give my assistant here whatever she wants.” Conlan leans toward me. “It wouldn’t be that bad, you know.”

“Explain to me how it wouldn’t be that bad?”

“Well, for one, it would be fake.”

“No kidding. I wouldn’t marry you for real.”

“Ouch. That hurts.”

“Can you blame me?” I twist to face him, drink in my hand. “I’ve seen the worst of you, Conlan. I’ve seen you still drunk stumble down from your bedroom with two random girls on your arms. I’ve seen you skip meetings to fuck girls in the bathroom of your office. I’ve seen you skate through life like nothing matters, so tell me again how being your *wife* wouldn’t be so bad?”

His lips twitch into a frown and he takes a long drink. “I understand I haven’t behaved very well—”

“No kidding,” I say sharply, the alcohol and the insanity of this situation loosening my tongue.

“—But I don’t lie to those girls. They’re all consenting adults, even if they’re making the same stupid mistakes that I’m making. They understand what they’re getting involved with.”

“Just like I do.” I stare at him, willing Conlan to see this from my perspective. He’s been nothing but a problem for years, and if he didn’t pay so well I would’ve quit this job a thousand times over.

I need lines. I need barriers. Things between us are blurry enough already—I’m way too involved in his personal life for my comfort—and I don’t want to mix things even worse.

Their plan isn’t bad. It’s shady and unethical, but it’ll probably work.

Only I can’t be a part of it.

He lets out a breath. Some tension in him drains as he finishes his glass and slides it over to the pretty bartender. She brings him back another and gives me a wordless glance like she’s curious about what’s happening, but she doesn’t intrude.

“I understand you have a low opinion of me.” He doesn’t look at me as he speaks. Only feeds a twenty into the gambling machine and starts jabbing at the screen, idly playing video blackjack. “There are few people in the world that know what I’m like more than you do. Maybe even none, if I’m honest.”

“That’s not a good reason to marry me.”

“No, it isn’t. I won’t pretend like this isn’t an enormous ask.”

“You just got done saying it won’t be that bad.”

He grimaces, loses three hands in a row, and turns to me. “I’m trying to say that I’ll respect you. If you do this, you can set the limits, put in place the boundaries, make sure we don’t cross any lines. I don’t want—” He stops himself, tensing for a moment like he’s forcing out the words. “I want you, Isabel.”

I go very still. *I want you, Isabel.* Hearing my name on his lips like that, it does something to me. A thrill runs down between my legs. My stomach’s a twisty, excited mess. I haven’t felt like this in a very long time, if ever, and it shouldn’t be happening right now.

Not with Conlan.

“I don’t want you,” I say and move to stand.

He puts a hand on my thigh. I go very still, surprised. He doesn’t touch me, never has before, and I never thought he would. But now it seems all the rules are gone.

And I like it. I hate myself a little bit, definitely a solid sense of self-loathing bubbles up from the darkest reaches of my brain, but I like the feeling of his big hand on my leg.

“It has to be you,” he says, tightening his grip. “You’re the only one that could possibly make this work.”

“No shit,” I say, gathering myself, and pull back. He lets me step away this time. “You’re a mess, Conlan. You’ve been a mess for a really long time, and honestly, it’s a miracle you’ve held it together until now. You’ve been inches from disaster and I keep on pulling you back, but not this time. I’m not rescuing you anymore. I’m done, okay? I’m finished.”

I turn to go. I’ll head to the airport, get a flight out to LA that I can’t really afford, but whatever. I can’t stay in this hotel knowing that Conlan wants to marry me, he wants *me*, because he thinks I’m the only one that can help him right now.

“I’ll give you enough money to pay off your mortgage and live on for the rest of your life. You won’t have to work for me ever again.”

That gets my attention. I'm inches from walking off, but I stand there looking into the forest of slot machines, watching the lights blink, the faces chatter, the people slumped in their chairs jabbing at the buttons. It's all noise, action, meaningless without context. I don't want this, I don't want to think about this, but I can't help myself.

I remember my father's casket lowering into the grave. I remember how it broke me, watching him disappear beneath the earth. How it didn't feel real until that moment, like I thought maybe, somehow, this was all some mistake and he'd get up, walk over, give me a huge hug like he always did.

Instead, he was gone. All that's left of him now is the house I can't afford, the house filled with memories of him. The only person I ever really loved. A single father, a man that sacrificed so much to give me a normal childhood.

"How do you know about the house?" I ask, my voice choked.

"I know more about you than you realize. You think I'd let just anyone in my life?"

"How do you know?" I turn to face him, angry now. The house is mine. I don't talk about it with him. I don't let him come into that world, because it's the only place I feel safe. My childhood home, all that's left of my dad.

"I looked into you," he says. "I know your story. I've seen the mortgage records. Why do you think I pay you so much? Otherwise, you never would've stuck around."

I feel like my chest might open up at any moment. "Stop. I don't want to hear that."

"This is the last thing I'll ever ask you to do, Isabel. Marry me, tell some stories, really sell them, then you're free. I'll give you money, more than you know what to do with. You can pay off your debt. Move away if you want. But this is it."

My head's spinning. I feel dizzy and the noise is only making it worse.

Could I really go through with this? Could I really marry Conlan for *money*, of all things?

It's not really the cash, but what it would allow me to do. Keep the house, keep it forever if that's what I want. I'd always have a place where I could go to remember my dad, the only person I ever really loved and who ever really loved me back.

"I really hate you, Conlan." The words come out a messy whisper. I'm so angry I could scream. I despise him right now for putting me in this position. "I don't want to do this."

"I know." He seems exhausted. Even a little sad. "But I need you."

That word again. That *need*.

"I don't care what you need anymore." I turn away. Tears fill my eyes. This is my chance, and I'm walking away from it. "I'm not going to marry you. I'm sick of bailing you out."

"At least stay for the meeting with the general." He's not pleading, not begging, but there's a softness to his tone. Like he really wants me there. "You don't have to marry me, you don't have to lie for me, but at least don't quit."

I take several deep, steadying breaths.

All the reasons I haven't left this job yet remain problems.

The mortgage, taxes, bills, repairs. The house is an old bungalow worth a million dollars now with more problems than solutions.

But it's *my* house.

"Fine," I say, letting a little piece of my self-respect crumble and die. "But just so we're clear, I'm not going to marry you."

"That's all right. I understand."

"Good. Where's my room? I need some time to unwind."

"Ask at the front desk, it'll be under my name. They'll give you a key."

"Right." I pause and look back.

He's staring at me with those eyes. With that damn look. So plaintive, like he knows he's gone too far, and he's afraid of losing me.

Let him be afraid.

I walk away, hands curled into fists, willing a bit of iron into my spine.

Chapter 7

Conlan

“**T**hat didn’t go well, did it?” I look over as Casey sits down in the chair next to mine with a sigh. She rubs her knee, grinning. Roxie comes over, leans across the bar, and kisses her cheek. Casey asks for a club soda.

“No, it did not.” I stare after Isabel. “But it could’ve been worse.”

“She’s really pretty.”

“I know.”

“Are you into her? I think you might be into her.”

“I haven’t decided yet.” I glance at my sister-in-law. I don’t know how the hell Adler ever landed a girl like this—she’s beautiful, sure, but she’s also a decent person. It never occurred to me that someone might be able to put up with my older brother’s bullshit. “How is my nephew?”

“He’s good. Plan on seeing him this visit?”

“Yes, actually. And Mother?”

“She’s good too.” Casey frowns. “Mostly good. I think she still hates me.”

“Don’t worry, Mother doesn’t like anyone. Except for me.”

Casey rolls her eyes. “Seriously, come spend time with Edwin. He misses you.”

“He doesn’t even know me.”

“And whose fault is that? He’s two and he’s super friendly. He’ll love you.”

I think back to the little boy on Casey’s private Instagram, the little grinning kid with a mop of dark hair and Costa eyes. “I can’t wait to spend time with him.”

“Good.” She punches my shoulder and sips her drink. “So how much shit are you in this time? Is it really bad? Adler’s pissed. I don’t think I’ve seen him this mad in a while.”

“It’s pretty bad.”

“Is your assistant mad at you for whatever you did?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Isabel. And I don’t know.” Which is true—I can’t tell if she’s angry at me for being a lecherous prick with a questionable taste or if she’s mad that I researched her personal life, or if she’s livid that I’m trying to convince her to marry me.

All of the above, most likely.

“Well, I’m sure you deserve it.” Casey sighs and gets up. “Hey, Rox, do me a favor and tell Big Dan I’m working in an hour, okay?”

“Whatever you say.” Roxie gives her a little wave.

“Still dealing cards?” I make a face. “Shocking, honestly.”

“Only at the high roller tables where I’m safely hidden away.” Casey struggles to her feet. “Good luck with whatever you did wrong, Con. You’re not such a bad guy, you know, despite what you may think.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Come see Edwin tomorrow morning at ten up in the apartment.”

“I’ll be there.”

She waves and walks off, leaving me alone at the bar.

I don’t want to marry Isabel.

The thought of being her husband—or trying to be decent enough to be her partner—even if fake—it makes my brain

feel like it's overheating.

I'm an unpleasant person and I don't blame her for not wanting anything to do with me.

The problem is, I need her.

I truly need her in a way I've never needed someone before.

Not only because she's one of the few people in my life that I trust, but also because I know she'd be perfect for this.

She's clever, effective, efficient, and single-minded. When there's a task to be completed or a problem to be solved, she attacks it until the job gets done.

I respect her for it.

Even if I don't necessarily like her.

But Isabel's exactly the kind of pain in the ass that would make a perfect wife.

In this situation, anyway.

I'm not the marrying type. There's no way a woman would ever want to settle down with a man like me, not after all the shit things I've done over the years.

No, I'm far too stained and ruined for that.

Fake marriage though? Something short-term and only to get me out of another awful situation? That's exactly the sort of wife someone like me ends up with.

It doesn't matter. Isabel says she won't do it, and that's the end of that discussion. If I'm lucky, we'll find someone else to step in and take her role.

And if I'm not, then I'll finally get what I deserve.

Chapter 8

Isabel

I spend an hour decompressing. I take a long, hot bath, filling the jacuzzi tub nearly to the brim, and dump in all the products I can find. It steams up the mirrors, fogs the glass shower, and makes moisture drip from the light fixtures.

I close my eyes, thinking about Conlan.

Not that I *want* to imagine him while taking a bath, but he invades my thoughts whenever I'm alone.

I see his strong hand on my leg. I see his lips parted, his handsome face, those muscular arms and shoulders. I can smell him too—crisp, musky, a bit of lemon and pine. I can almost taste him. No, I want to taste him, in my fantasy at least, I want him to slip into this water with me, touch my body, kiss me the way I know he's kissed countless women before. He can pull my hair, spank my ass, let his thick, hard cock sink between my legs—

Get it together.

This isn't the time to have sex daydreams about my freaking boss.

Not when he propositioned me with marriage.

As I get out of the bath, rinse off, and change into fresh clothes, I keep thinking about what it might be like if I were his wife.

He'd cheat on me. That's obvious. But would it matter if we were fake? It might, at least to me. I have some pride at least. I

couldn't live with myself if I let Conlan do whatever he wanted while he was my husband.

My father raised me better than that. Dad would always say, *Isabel, do whatever you want in this life, just don't do it because other people expect you to.* He'd probably shake his head at all the degrading things I've done to cover up for Conlan, but still, I've tried to make his spirit proud of me. I work hard, I'm good at what I do, even if what I do isn't exactly glamorous.

What would Dad think about this whole marriage thing?

Be strong. That's what he'd want. Just be strong and be true to myself.

But that's hard to do when I don't know what I need.

Not like Conlan does.

I'm frustrated when I finally get a text from him a few hours after we last parted down at the bar.

Con: The general's here. Ready for war?

Isabel: I'm a mere civilian in this contest, soldier.

Con: You know me. I'm a lover, not a fighter.

Isabel: Which is exactly what got you into this mess.

Con: Fair point. Maybe I'll murder my way out of it then?

Isabel: Seems like a terrible idea.

Con: This is why you'd make a wonderful wife.

Isabel: Why? Because I talk you out of murder?

Con: Exactly! Everyone needs a partner to talk them out of murder. Meet me at the roulette table in five. Wear something nice.

I roll my eyes and check myself in the mirror: dress skirt, blouse, my hair pulled back, light jewelry, modest makeup. I'm dressed for a board meeting, which entirely appropriate. I decide he can go to hell if he doesn't like what I have on and head out.

Conlan's got six hundred dollars out on the table as the ball clatters around. I gape at the obscene amount of cash just lying there in the form of little chips waiting to disappear. The ball lands on twenty-nine, which is one of the few numbers he didn't take, and all his bets disappear.

"Ah, well," he says, turning to look at me. "I promised myself that if I won on that spin, this meeting would go well."

"Luck just abandoned you, I guess."

"At least you're here." He stares at me. "I'm glad you didn't go."

"If you're about to propose to me again, save it. Still not interested."

A ghost of a smile. "No, I wouldn't dare. I can't handle being rejected twice in one day." He pauses and puts a finger to his perfect lips. "Actually, that's not true, I've been rejected plenty of times."

"I don't need to hear about your failed conquests. Seriously, not interested."

"You're one of them, you know." He leads me back toward the front desk and the elevator that takes us to Adler's office.

"How am I one of your failed conquests? You never tried to sleep with me."

"I did," he insists. "On your third day of work. Do you remember?"

I squint at him. "No, I really don't."

"It was the first time you came to my house," he prompts.

Some of it comes back. I recall being nervous, so nervous I could barely function. I spilled my coffee twice, nearly all over my lap the second time. Conlan was still terrifying back then—I got over my fear pretty quickly one I got to know him—and I was worried I'd screw something up.

"Most of those first few days are a total blur now. What did you do?"

"Came downstairs shirtless."

“Big shock. How’d I react?”

“You stared.”

“I did not.” I frown slightly. Actually, I do remember this now—he came into the kitchen in a pair of tiny workout shorts, his muscles glistening with a thin sheen of sweat. He looked freaking *erotic*, and I nearly had a seizure right there on the spot.

“You were practically panting. I put my hand on your shoulder and invited you up to see my room. Do you remember what you said?”

I laugh once. “I said, ‘Unless you have a board room next to your pillow, no thanks.’”

He barks a laugh, nodding. “I thought it was the absolute funniest thing I’ve ever heard. I know right then that you were the perfect assistant for me.”

“Why? Because I wouldn’t fuck you?”

“No, because you had a sense of humor about it.”

The elevators arrive. I’m smiling to myself as we ride them up to the third floor again. It doesn’t really make sense to me—Conlan seems like the kind of guy to take rejection personally—but maybe it does to him in some sick and twisted way. Maybe in his mind, turning him down with a funny one-liner meant I could handle all the other shit that was coming my way shortly.

He was right. Three years later, I’m still handling it.

I’m also still hilarious.

Adler’s secretary meets us in the hallway. She’s an older woman, mousy, big glasses and bigger hair. “The general’s in with him right now,” she says, rubbing her hands together. “Shall I send you two in?”

“Please,” Conlan says. “Might as well get it over with.”

The secretary nods, looking nervous, and I start to wonder if I’m not sufficiently prepared for this when the doors open and we’re ushered inside.

Chapter 9

Isabel

Adler's in his usual spot behind the desk. He's sitting back in his chair swirling a glass of something dark—whiskey, bourbon, I don't really know, I'm not an alcohol girl—while a man occupies the chairs in front of him, one for his tall and lean body, the other for a stack of files and papers.

General Leyland turns to study Conlan. I hover near the door feeling out of place and wishing I were anywhere else in the world. Maximum security prison, the bottom of the ocean, the center of an active volcano, any of those would be preferable to this meeting. Instead, I try to turn into a statue again, even though that didn't work out last time.

“General, this is my brother, Conlan.” Adler stands to make the introductions.

Leyland doesn't get to his feet. He stares up at Conlan with a narrowed expression. His ruddy skin flushes, his bushy eyebrows knit, and I'm afraid he's about to have a heart attack. He's got salt-and-pepper hair cut military short, clean-shaven, and his suit looks like he got it off the rack at Macy's.

“You're the man that's trying to fuck me,” the general growls.

I almost snort a laugh, since Conlan tried to fuck his *daughter*, but that's not funny.

“No, General Leyland, that is not my intention.” Conlan remains standing. “I'm here to clear up a misunderstanding.”

“Oh, am I misunderstanding something? You’re not the guy that fucked my teenage daughter?”

Conlan’s lip twitches. “That was me.”

“I know it was, you shit stain. Clear off that chair and sit.” General Leyland kicks it toward him.

Conlan hesitates. His face contorts into rage for a moment, and I think this meeting is over and we are massively screwed. But before he can explode, Adler comes around his desk, makes a show of pouring a drink, and shoves it into Conlan’s hands.

“Down it,” Adler says before clearing off the chair himself. “And sit.”

Conlan does as instructed, tossing back the liquor, then lowers himself. Still sitting straight-backed.

I’m totally ignored. Which is ideal.

“I don’t think you boys understand the massive turd you dropped in my fucking lap all because this nitwit over here couldn’t keep his dick in his pants.” Leyland waves a hand at Conlan. I grimace, my hands curling into fists. “The goddamn Citizens for a Better American Super PAC wants to drown me, and fuck-boy Costa over here tossed them enough ammunition to blow my entire political career to smithereens.”

“That was not my intention,” Conlan says, doing an admirable job of keeping his tone even. “I didn’t know she was your daughter, and I sure as hell didn’t know she was nineteen.”

“Save it. I don’t give a shit that you fucked her. You think you’re the first idiot to dip your cock between my daughter’s legs? She’s been a pain in my ass for fucking years. Her first boyfriend was twenty-six. She was thirteen. You should’ve seen the guy’s face when he found out.”

“We can appreciate your position, General,” Adler says smoothly. “That’s why we’re here taking this meeting.”

“I want you both to hear me right now. I need you to fix this, make this go away. I know who you are and I’ve heard your reputation, which means I expect you to do whatever you can, legal or otherwise. Understand me?”

“We’re in agreement there,” Adler says. “We discussed a possibility earlier. Conlan suggested we obfuscate the issue, complicate it, throw enough dirt on top to make any respectable journalist stay far away. In this day and age, no media outlets want to get caught spreading misinformation. We’ll use that against them.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you want to do. Murder the piece-of-shit detectives that took the images for all I care. Just make it go away.” General Leyland glares at Conlan. “Sometimes I wonder how you dumbasses keep on falling for my mess of a daughter.”

“She’s very persuasive,” Conlan replies, staring straight-faced back at him.

“Oh, you want to be funny, you cocksucker? I am going to destroy your little family business if you so much as step out of line, do you understand? I am sick of you greasy fucks thinking you can run the show just because you have a little money and a drop of influence. Fix the problem. That’s all I care about.”

“We’ll see what we can do.” Conlan’s lips twitch. I can tell he’s holding something back.

“You’d better, you pathetic little—”

“That’s enough.” The words break from my mouth before I can stop them. The men stare at me like they all forgot I was there. I gape back at them, equally shocked.

“Who the fuck is this?” General Leyland asks.

“That’s my assistant,” Conlan says, looking surprised, but not angry.

“Why the fuck does your assistant think she can speak that way to me?”

I can’t help myself. “Because you’re being insulting for no reason. Conlan knows he screwed up and he’s here to make things right. Instead of having a rational discussion, you’re being just plain rude.”

Silence falls over the room. I think I've lost my mind. So much for being a statue. But I couldn't help myself. Listening to General Leyland berate Conlan like that broke something in me. He couldn't speak up for himself, not with Adler right there and the family's business on the line, but I don't care about any of that.

"She's right," Adler says.

General Leyland's head snaps around. "Are you fucking joking?"

"We invited you here to discuss this problem. Instead, you're acting like a child. Yes, Conlan slept with your daughter. Yes, she was photographed with him leaving his house. We're aware of the facts. Are you willing to work with us to make sure this doesn't harm your campaign, or are you going to keep insulting my brother? Because if you choose the latter, we will close ranks, and we will make sure you regret it."

Conlan sits up straighter. "And just to be clear, General, not a single person in this room gives a shit if you disappear into the annals of history."

General Leyland's jaw works. I feel numb and dizzy, like my head's going to break off my shoulders. He shoves himself to his feet and stands shaking with rage. I can tell he's about to say something very bad, something that will change everything for good, and it'll be my fault. If I hadn't spoken out of turn to defend Conlan like that, they might've been able to salvage this.

Which is why I open my stupid mouth once again.

"He's going to marry me," I say.

Again, they all stare. This time, Conlan looks bemused, and Adler's shaking his head.

"What in the fuck is that supposed to mean?" General Leyland snaps.

"That's how we'll muddy the waters," I say, talking fast. "I'll be Conlan's wife. We'll make it so that we got married a month ago, I don't know how, I'm sure they can figure it out. Then I'll tell whoever will listen that the whole thing is a

misunderstanding, Conlan just let your daughter sleep on our couch because she drank too much at a party, actually he was being helpful, all that stuff. It'll sow enough doubt that the story will pass."

My heart's racing. I don't want to do *any* of that, but it's all out there now, floating in the room. Conlan's face is impassive and I can't tell what he's thinking, while Adler's leaning back in his chair, staring at me with a thoughtful frown.

General Leyland takes a slow breath.

"That's... actually not a bad idea," he says.

My shoulders slump. "Really?"

"At least it has the potential to work." He cocks his head. "You've got some balls on you, girl. I've met strong, successful men that would never speak up the way you just did. I don't like you, but I can respect it."

"Thanks?" I look at Conlan in a panic.

"We'll take care of this, General Leyland." He gets to his feet. "Isabel's idea is just one we're kicking around. Whatever we land on, we'll make sure it works."

General Leyland's face turns sour again. "I hope so. For all your sakes." He walks to the door, pausing only to nod at me. "There's a stack of files on the floor. That's everything I have on the people involved in this pseudo-scandal. Do with it what you will. I don't care what you two do to make my problem go away. All I need is this issue gone."

The general leaves, and I feel like all the breath in my chest gets sucked out through a straw.

Conlan turns to me. His face narrows into anger. He comes toward me and I shrink back, away from the harsh intensity of his expression.

"Did I just hear you propose to me?" he asks, voice soft enough that I have to lean closer. "Because it sounds like you just proposed to me."

"I didn't, I just—"

“Leave her alone,” Adler says. “We need to talk more. Isabel, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Conlan gives me one last shake of his head before he returns to the chairs. The brothers lean closer, talking in hushed voices, and I linger for only another second before I run away, heading back to my room.

Chapter 10

Isabel

I sink back into the hot bath and wonder how hard it would be to drown myself.

This is an enormous mess. If I had kept my mouth shut back there in the office, none of this would be happening.

Except I told the general about that stupid marriage plan—and he seemed to like it.

I just dug my own grave.

Worst of all was Conlan's face. He was pissed off and I don't know why. An hour ago, he was trying to convince me to go along with this plan, and when I bring it up as a real possibility, suddenly he's mad? I don't understand that man one bit. It's so frustrating.

I never should've spoken up and I don't even know why I care.

None of this is my problem. I'm only here because Conlan dragged me along—the whole trip was his idea. If I had my way, I'd still be back in LA enjoying a couple days off from my overbearing boss.

Instead I'm here in this hotel, soaking in a tub because I hate myself and my stupid mouth, and I don't know what's going to happen.

Someone bangs on the door. It's loud enough to make me yelp. A thousand horrible images flit through my head: Costa goons breaking in to abduct me and force me to marry Conlan, the general and his campaign staff here to shove a ring on my

finger and make me say the vows at gunpoint, Adler himself slapping handcuffs on my wrists and dragging me to the altar.

The banging doesn't stop. I get out, quickly towel off, and throw on a fluffy white robe. I walk quickly to the door and grab it open, heart racing.

Conlan's in the hallway. He stares at me, and I don't move. I'm still damp from the bath, one hand on the door, the other on the sash of my robe. His eyes move down to my lips, to my breasts, raking down over my skin like he can't help himself. His expression's hungry, undeniably starving, and a thrill pierces into my stomach.

"What do you want?" I manage to ask. I pull the sash tighter and hold the top closed over my chest.

"We have to talk." He cocks his head. "You want to let me in or would you rather do it in the hall?"

"I'll get dressed." I move to step inside but he follows, pushing the door open.

"We'll talk now." He stalks into the living area. I have my own suite with a separate bedroom. Conlan lingers over near the door as I hover next to the couches, intensely aware that I'm not wearing anything underneath this robe, and it's actually pretty short. I'm a small girl, and it only comes down mid-thigh.

"Let me put on some clothes," I say. "I'll just be a second."

"No, stay like that." He turns, giving me that look again. It's dizzying the way he licks his lips. "We might as well get used to it."

"What do you mean?"

"We're getting married."

I let out a strangled yelp. It wrenches from my throat involuntarily and I feel embarrassed as I stare down at the floor. "I shouldn't have said anything," I whisper.

"No, you shouldn't have, but you did and now we don't have any other options. The general liked your plan."

“Find someone else. Anyone else.”

“I don’t trust anyone else. It has to be you, Isabel.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Please.”

“Why do you pretend like you find the idea of being my wife so horrible?”

“Because.” I meet his gaze. My jaw tightens. I don’t want to do this, not right now when I’m so vulnerable. “I just don’t want it, okay?”

“Tell me why.”

“Stop. You don’t want to do this.”

“I actually do. Go ahead, give me all the reasons why you hate me. I want to hear them.” He moves closer, crossing the distance between us.

I hold up a hand to make him stop. “You’re selfish.”

His eyebrows raise. “No kidding. What else?”

“You use people. You don’t take care of yourself. You work out a lot and look really good, but it’s all shallow. Your looks, your money, you don’t do anything with it except self-destruct. I don’t know why, but it’s like you’re hellbent on ruining your own life, and I guess that takes a lot of work when you’re rich and powerful, but I don’t want to get dragged down too as you inevitably implode. You’re rude, insufferable, cocky to the point of being absurd, and you’re not as funny as you think you are. I just don’t want to be your wife, okay? I don’t want to marry a guy like you.”

He doesn’t move. I’m breathing hard, chest rising and falling. That came out of me like blood from a wound. I couldn’t help myself—once I got started, all my grievances just flowed from my mouth, and I wish I hadn’t said anything.

It’s becoming a pattern now, this inability to keep my dumb face quiet.

“I’m insulted,” he says softly. “I’m very funny.”

I throw my hands up. “That’s all your heard? The thing about not being that funny?”

“The other stuff’s all true, but I take issue with the funny bit. I’m hilarious.”

“You’re not. You’re an asshole.”

“I make people laugh all the time.”

“Let me guess. They’re mostly employees and clients.”

He crosses his arms over his sculpted chest. “You can call me selfish and shallow. I won’t disagree. But how dare you say I’m not funny.”

I rub my face. I could scream right now.

“This won’t work,” I say, not looking at him. “We just won’t work, okay?”

He’s silent for a moment. I peek from behind my fingers and sigh, stretching my neck and back. He licks his lips again, still staring at me, before coming a step closer.

“Now it’s my turn.”

“Your turn for what?”

“You’re insufferable. You’re a know-it-all. You’re judgmental, quick to anger, slow to forgive, and just as selfish as I am.”

“Hold on, I didn’t ask for this,” I say, getting annoyed.

“You pretend like you don’t like me. You tell yourself constantly how you hate me, but you look at me like you want to climb into my lap and ride my cock until you scream.”

My jaw drops. In all our time together, he has *never* spoken to me like that before. “Conlan, you’re crossing a line.”

“Good. Let’s cross the line together. You want to fuck me.”

“Absolutely not. Are you kidding? Did you just not hear me rant about how awful you are?”

“I recall you saying more than once how you find me attractive.”

“I did not,” I say though I’m pretty sure I did. The bastard.

“You want to fuck me. Yes, maybe I’m shallow and selfish, but you’re curious. You want to know why these girls keep

coming back, even knowing what I'm like. You want to understand what I'm doing to get them so addicted, don't you? I'll give you a hint, it's not my jokes, though they're great."

"I don't want to sleep with you."

But maybe I do. He's not wrong. I've wondered that exact thing a hundred times since I started working for him. He's got a reputation—everyone knows he's a fuckboy.

And yet girls keep coming back. They keep throwing themselves at him.

It can't be his money, there are plenty of rich man in Los Angeles.

Is he really that good at sex?

Some sick part of me wants to find out.

"You do," he says. "You want to fuck me. You've wanted to fuck me since we first met, even if you find me totally repellant. And you know what? I find you absolutely infuriating, and I want to fuck you too."

I shake my head rapidly, moving backwards. "No, no, no, that's not happening. We're not getting married, and we're absolutely not going to fuck."

"Take off your robe."

"Conlan!"

"Drop it. Go ahead, push it open, take it off. Let me see you. Let me come over there, get on my knees, and kiss you between your legs until you scream. Let's get this out of our system."

"You're insane. How about you take off your clothes if you're so desperate?"

"Okay." He starts to unbutton his shirt.

"Stop!" I pull my robe tighter, my heart racing. Do I really want him to stop? Some voice in my head's telling me to do what he's saying. There's a part of me that knows if I do this, if I sleep with him right here and now, it'll ruin any marriage plans he might have. It'll make things too complicated.

But I'm terrified I'll like it too much.

Because I do want this. I need him in a way that terrifies me.

It's that look he gives me, the one he's giving me now, that wild hunger.

"Marry me," he says, voice husky. "Despite everything, even though you're convinced that you hate me right now, you defended me back in that office. You spoke up when you didn't have to. You got involved."

I relax slightly, but I still hold the top of my robe closed. "I shouldn't have done that."

"You're right, but you did anyway. Why would you defend someone you hate so much?"

He's got a very good point. "I knew you couldn't say anything in front of Adler, and I just, I hated the way Leyland was talking to you."

"You're right, I couldn't say anything. So you spoke for me." He comes a step closer, his expression so intense I'm afraid I might start panting. "You defended me when I couldn't defend myself, Isabel, and I am very grateful that you did. Marry me."

I close my eyes. I shake my head. Why do I feel like my heart might explode? Like my stomach might tingle to pieces with all the butterflies going crazy inside of it.

He's wrong, I do hate him.

Conlan's a spoiled asshole with every advantage in the world, and all he does is squander his privilege. He's selfish, conceited, cocky, and frustrating as hell.

Yes, he's gorgeous. Yes, I want to have sex with him, but that's purely physical.

I don't like Conlan Costa.

So why did I defend him?

"I can't," I say but I feel myself weakening. "It's too complicated. You're asking a lot."

“I know I am. I’ll make you a deal. Give me one more year of yourself, one year where you pretend to be my wife and we make this whole General Leyland issue disappear. When it’s over, we’ll divorce, and I’ll make sure you’re rich for the rest of your life. Fifty million over ten years, if you want a number. Do this for me and I swear, I’ll take care of you.”

His expression’s soft now. I chew on my lip, seriously freaking out. That’s more money than I ever dreamed I’d have in my life, and he’s offering to give it to me for one single year of being his fake wife. It’s too much—but it’s also too tempting.

“I want twenty-five million up front,” I blurt out. “Then the other twenty-five after we divorce. No spreading it out.”

He tilts his head. “If that’s what you want.”

“I want this in writing.”

“I’ll have my lawyers draw up a prenuptial agreement.”

“I also want you to swear you won’t try to sleep with me.”

He licks his lips. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“No sex. Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to rip my robe off and fuck me against this wall.”

“Ask me to. No, *tell* me to. Go ahead.”

“Stop. No sex.”

He grunts. “Fine, but I’m not putting it in writing.”

I grind my jaw. “I want separate bedrooms. Separate lives. And I’m not your assistant anymore.”

“You’ll have to help me find a new one, but I can accept that. I’ll really miss working with you.”

“No, you won’t, because I’ll be your freaking wife.” I put my face in my hands. Am I really going to do this? For money?

No, not just for money.

For the chance at an entirely different life.

What would Dad have said about this? Would he have been angry with me? Like I'm selling myself to this man?

No, I think he would've wanted me to go for it. Maybe not in this specific way, but this is the kind of opportunity that won't ever come again.

"One year," I say, reaching out my hand.

"One year," he agrees, taking it—and pulls me closer to him. His other hand touches my hip and it's like my body's submerged in warm, salty water. "Should we kiss on it? Seal it like a real married couple would?"

"No," I say, wiggling against him. "I said no sex."

"A kiss isn't sex." He moves closer. "You're not curious? What me and you would be like?"

"Not really." Except I am. I'm so freaking curious I could scream. Only if we do this, if I kiss him, there goes my whole *no`sex* thing, because I won't be able to stop myself.

"You don't have to deny yourself something that feels good."

"Maybe you should try denying yourself once in a while." I pull away, breathing hard. "Now get out of my room. I need to get dressed."

"You're going to touch yourself in that room, aren't you? I'll stay out here and listen."

"Conlan." My cheeks are burning bright because yes, that's what I plan on doing, mostly so I can get this stupid feeling out of me. "Get out."

"I'm going to do the same thing. I could stroke myself right out here listening to you moan."

"You're going too far."

He shrugs and moves toward the door. "We should catch the general before he leaves and tell him the good news."

"Fine. Whatever. Just go."

"Enjoy yourself." He smirks at me. "I told you, I'm really funny."

“Get out!”

He slams the door behind him.

I lock the bedroom bolt, close my eyes, and picture myself commanding him to fuck me, over and over again.

Chapter II

Conlan

I have never been so sexually frustrated in my entire life.

The instant I get back in my room, I stroke myself in the shower thinking about Isabel in that robe looking at me like she wanted to get down on her knees and swallow my cock.

What the hell is wrong with me? Trying to fuck her like that is only going to make this more difficult than it needs to be.

Her words echo in my head. I'm selfish, I'm shallow. Attractive, but empty.

She's not wrong.

I've always been this way. One step away from broken.

And marrying Isabel's not going to fix it. I know that, even if a part of me wishes it would.

It won't. *She* won't. This marriage thing is a temporary deal to make another one of my stupid fuck-ups disappear.

How many more times can I get away with murder?

After finishing up with the image of Isabel in her robe, I put on clean clothes and text Will. He tells me where I can find the general.

Isabel answers the door, but this time she's wearing a pair of jeans and a simple black t-shirt. No jewelry, barely any make-up, hair down. "You look good," I say. "Though I liked you better when you were still wet. Or are you still wet?"

"Like I said, you aren't funny." She steps into the hall, all business now. That hungry look's gone. Did she really head

back into her room to take care of herself the way I just did?
“What’s the plan?”

“Leyland’s still in the casino playing slots before he leaves. We’ll go talk to him, explain the plan, then get on a plane to Vegas.”

“Where we’ll get married.” She makes a face. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Yes, you can. It’s a lot of money.” I offer her my arm, but she ignores it. “Suit yourself, but we might as well get used to being a couple.”

The ride down’s tense. Isabel’s not in the mood to chat, and I can’t blame her. I think about marriage, about making Isabel my first wife knowing that we’re getting divorced in a year. Why does that bother me so much? I never wanted to get married—I’ve always been up front about it—because the idea of making a permanent decision that involves another person feels like too much. And divorce is like cheating. When I make a promise, I mean it.

I can’t stand the thought of saying vows to Isabel knowing they won’t last forever.

But fine, maybe we can skip the words. It still bothers me, though I can’t pinpoint why.

At least we find the general in the forest of slots with relative ease. He’s playing this big buffalo game, spinning the reels over and over, the screen shining and making this wild music as he slowly loses all the money shoved into the casino’s guts.

“General Leyland,” I say, grabbing his attention.

He looks back at me, scowling. “What do you want?”

I pull Isabel up next to me. “We reconsidered our proposition from earlier and decided that marriage is the best course of action.”

He tilts his head, looking from me to Isabel. Her face is totally blank, giving away nothing.

“You sure?” he asks. “Getting married to handle a political problem is a big deal.”

“We’re sure,” I say before Isabel can answer. “It’ll work.”

General Leyland hits the spin button one more time before cashing out. He yanks the cash slip and shoves into his pocket before turning to face us.

“I like this,” he says, nodding to himself. “It’s the perfect excuse to deal with my problem daughter.”

“It’s the—sorry, what?” I lean closer. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Allison’s been a challenge for years now. I’ve been expecting her to lash out and make my campaign difficult at some point. Now that you’re stuck in this mess with me, I’m thinking you can help me deal with the girl for at least a month.”

“I’m not following,” I say as an ugly pit opens in my stomach.

“He’s trying to pawn her off on us,” Isabel says. Her tone’s hard, like she’s angry.

“Exactly,” General Leyland says. “You two will watch over my daughter for the next month. Then I’ll have a campaign stop in Los Angeles to pick her up. Keep her safe, make sure she doesn’t get herself into trouble, and throw a whole lot of water on the rumors as they start to spread. You do all that, and we’re good. And, Conlan, keep your hands off her this time, or there will be serious consequences. Okay? Okay. Very good.”

I open my mouth to say something. Watch over his daughter? Allison, the girl I slept with? His nineteen-year-old problem child? It doesn’t make any sense. I’m not a babysitter. I don’t know how to keep another person in line. I can’t even keep *myself* in line.

“General, hold on. I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Nonsense. Stick her in a room and guard her door for a month, I don’t give a damn. In your line of business I’m sure you have ways of keeping people under control, right? Go ahead, do whatever you want. Maybe you’ll scare some sense into her.” He doesn’t sound very optimistic about that. “Good luck either way. Just make sure she doesn’t get into trouble. I’ll have my people ship her over to that hotel of yours, what’s

it called, the Lincoln? That'll do just fine. You can handle this, Conlan, you and your new wife. I have faith."

General Leyland stalks off.

I stare at his back, at a total loss for words.

His daughter? Staying at the Lincoln?

And I'm somehow responsible for her.

"Great," Isabel says. "I really should've stayed home. That girl is as good as dead with you in charge."

Chapter 12

Isabel

The flight back home makes a detour through Vegas. Conlan's not talkative and I can't blame him—when we get back, he's not only going to have a new wife to deal with, but also a nineteen-year-old albatross around his neck.

But I find it hard to feel sorry for him, considering he's the reason we're in this mess.

“How did you convince me to do this again?” I ask once we're in the town car heading toward the chapel. “I'm pretty sure this is going to be a nightmare.”

“Imagine how I feel.”

“Sorry, are you ignoring my misery and complaining about your own? Because I'm not into it.”

He gives me a tight smile. “No, I'd never. Your feelings are much more important than mine.”

I roll my eyes. “How's it feel going through the world with an ego that big? Does it get in the way?”

“It's not a problem if I can own it.”

“Big talk for a guy about to marry his personal assistant.”

“Fair point, but you could've said no. Actually, if I recall correctly, you could've kept your mouth shut around General Leyland. Instead, you couldn't help but speak up for me.” He leans closer. “It's almost as if you *like* me.”

“I like your money. I *love* your money. I can take or leave you.”

He smirks, licking his lips, and a little thrill runs into my spine. What's with this guy and teasing me?

"I know hating me is your favorite pastime—"

"Please, I barely think about you."

"—but we're going to be spending a lot of time together. On top of that, we need to make this whole marriage thing believable."

"Are you saying I need to smile when you're around?"

"That wouldn't hurt."

"How's this?" I give him an absolutely atrocious grimace. "This look good?"

"Beautiful. Like you're actively dying of dysentery."

I laugh, unable to help myself. "That's horrible."

"You're the one making the face." He sits back, smiling to himself, as the car pulls up outside of a hotel.

"I thought we were getting married," I say squinting at the massive resort building. "Where's the church?"

"This is the church," he says, climbing out. I hurry to keep up. "This is the church of money. What else is this place but a flow of capital and investment? People come, they gamble, they go home. What a beautiful world. The universe is just random enough to make this enjoyable."

"Are you getting philosophical or something?"

"No, not at all. This way, there's a chapel upstairs."

I follow him down a side hallway, past a security station, and up a set of stairs. We turn right and there's a smartly dressed young woman standing outside of a pair of wooden doors. "Mr. Costa? They're ready for you."

"Wait," I say as the weight of what we're about to do settles on my chest. "Hold on a second. I don't get some time to myself first?"

"No, we have to get back to LA. Babysitting duty, remember?" He sweeps me forward as the young woman pulls the doors

open and we step into a lavish chapel space with vaulted ceilings, plush geometric-patterned rugs, champagne-gold pews, white walls, more gold detailing, and an absurd number of flowers.

The place is empty except for a priest wearing an Elvis outfit and the smartly dressed young woman.

“Elvis?” I hiss at Conlan. “Seriously?”

“I thought you’d like it.” He gives me an innocent smile. “Since this wedding isn’t real and we’re in Vegas.”

“Ladies and gentleman,” the Elvis impersonator says, really hamming it up with hand motions and a hip thrust. I think I might cry. “We are gathered here today—”

“Skip to the kiss,” Conlan says.

“No,” I cut in. “The vows.”

“Then we sign the papers and we’re out of here.” Conlan squints at me then makes a *get on with it* gesture.

Elvis clears his throat. He drops the fake voice. “All right, we’ll do the abbreviated ceremony. Do you, Conlan Costa, take Isabel Flax to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, through sickness and in health, ‘til death do you part?”

“I do,” he says, and it feels as though the earth opens and threatens to swallow me whole.

Elvis turns in my direction. His eyes are light brown and strangely kind.

Can I really go through with this? Can I marry Conlan Costa, my boss, the bane of my existence, the most frustrating man I’ve ever met?

But he already said the words, and he didn’t even hesitate. It’s like he *wanted* to say them, like he wants to be my husband.

None of this is real. None of this is real. I have to keep telling myself that, or else I’ll faint.

“Do you, Isabel Flax—”

“I do,” I blurt out before he can finish.

He smiles at my embarrassment. “All right then. I now pronounce you husband and wife. You can do the kiss if you want.”

Conlan moves forward, putting one hand on the small of my back, the other brushing into my hair. My heart’s going crazy as I put my hands on his chest.

“Con, hold on,” I say, freaking out. “Pause a second. We don’t need to—”

But there’s no arguing away his mouth against mine.

His lips are softer than I expected. Warm and gentle as he kisses me. But something wakes inside of my core, something hot and overwhelming, and when his mouth opens and his tongue invades mine like he wants to dominate me, I don’t try to push him away. I don’t stop him.

I whimper into his mouth. I groan like I’m actually enjoying this, but how could I like it? There’s no way in hell I’ve ever want to be kissed by this man.

Only it’s by far the best kiss of my life.

The sort of kiss I thought was made up. The sort of kiss that exists in movies and in books.

The kiss sends shivers down my spine, tingles into my gut, and his taste deep into my mouth—mint, whiskey, something spicy and good.

Then it’s abruptly over and he’s pulling away.

I’m left standing there, feeling like I might pass out.

“Paperwork,” Conlan barks at the smartly dressed young woman.

Why does he seem pissed?

I start thinking I did something wrong.

Did I go too far? Was it the whimper? I couldn’t help myself—I didn’t want to make any noise, it was totally involuntary.

I don’t want to like kissing Conlan Costa. My boss and my husband.

I don't want to like it at *all*.

He's short and borderline rude as we fill out the paperwork. The smartly dressed young woman doesn't seem to mind though, and when we're done, she promises to get everything filed.

"Come on," Conlan says, pulling me out of the chapel.

He's walking fast like he can't wait to be rid of the place.

"Slow down," I complain, trying to keep up with his long strides. "Hold on, Con, will you just wait?"

"We need to get back to the plane. This already took longer than I wanted it to."

"Stop it," I snap at him once we reach the first landing.

He pauses. Sunlight streams in through a round window, brushing up against his face.

God, this man is beautiful.

And *such* an asshole.

"Why are you acting like we just did something wrong? Am I missing something?"

"I'm not acting like anything."

"Yes, you are. You're dragging me around, barking orders at that girl back there, looking at Elvis like you want to murder him—" I take a deep breath and blow it back out. "What's the matter with you?"

He stares at me for a tense moment.

Then he turns away.

"Nothing's wrong," he says. "You're my wife now. That's what we wanted, right?"

"Right." I cross my arms, not sure what the hell I did wrong. I'm just as frustrated as he is, but I'm not taking it out on him. "You seem like such a good partner already."

"I'm not your partner. I'm your boss. Don't forget that." He starts down the steps again. "Come on."

I hesitate. That asshole. I should turn around and march out of here. If he's going to keep on treating me like staff then I might as well divorce his ass right now.

Except I'm not in this for a partner, or a good husband, or even to be with a halfway decent human being.

I'm in this for the money.

That's all—nothing more.

If he wants to be moody then fine, he can be moody, but I'm not going to let him push me away.

I'll stick it out, deal with his bullshit, and when it's time to divorce, I'll take my check and disappear.

He'll never see me again.

And we'll both be happier.

I hurry after him, determined to make this work.

Chapter 13

Conlan

That fucking kiss.

It's all I can think about on the flight back to LA.

Her mouth pressed against mine. The way she tastes like licorice and toothpaste. Her tongue, her lips.

And that fucking noise she made.

The moan, the whimper, the gasp.

It drove me wild.

I've kissed a lot of women in my life. Hundreds, possibly, but I've never felt like this before.

I've never had this need in my gut that won't shut the fuck up.

The moment I kissed her, I knew I made a huge mistake.

Because I need to hear her make that noise again or else I'm going to go insane thinking about it.

I should just tell her what I'm feeling. I consider it a dozen times on the plane, but I can't bring myself to do it. Once she understands that I'm not kidding around, suddenly all my defenses will be down, and it won't be just Conlan being Conlan.

No, she'll get a glimpse of the man I keep hidden away.

I'll keep making jokes. I'll tease her, even flirt with her, but I won't *ever* admit to how much I loved kissing her.

We land and head back to the Lincoln hotel. It's my main property in the area—a lavish, upscale, five-star megastructure

rivaling any of the Vegas casinos, only minus the card tables and slot machines. Stodgy, uptight California still outlaws gambling.

“I’ll have my driver take you back to your apartment,” I tell Isabel as we park out front. The valet comes and opens my door. “You should get your things packed.”

Her lips twist in distaste. “We’re really doing this? Living together and everything?”

“Only way it’ll work. Those private detectives are going to look into our story, and we need to make sure it remains air tight no matter what. No leaks, no fuck-ups, which means you’re my wife and you live in my house.”

She grimaces, but nods. “All right, fine.”

I go to close the door, but there’s some commotion near the front door. My chief of security, a man named Damon Ramble with a square head, square shoulders, and square chest, comes hurrying toward me.

“Mr. Costa,” he says. “There’s a problem at the front desk. I wouldn’t normally bother you with something like this—”

“Let me guess. It’s a young woman and she claims she’s here to see me.”

Damon looks visibly relieved. “Yes, sir, that’s right.”

Isabel shifts across the seats and gets out. “I’d better come. I don’t trust you to handle this gracefully.”

I give her a look but don’t argue. Damon gives me a questioning look but I only gesture for him to get moving. We follow him inside, and the second we pass through the doors, I can hear her arguing with the front desk manager.

It’s Allison Leyland, wearing a black jumpsuit, her blonde hair pulled up in a bun, and dark sunglasses. In that outfit, she could easily pass for thirty—but the moment I approach, the sunglasses come down, and I can see it. The excitement in her expression.

“There you are,” she says, coming toward me. “Hello again, Conlan. I knew you wanted to see me, but going through

Daddy? That's very bad—" She comes in for a kiss, but I stiff-arm her back, practically palming her cheek to shove her face away.

"Hello, Allison." She seems nonplussed and tries to get around my hand. "It's nice to see you."

I sidestep out of the way as she comes in for another kiss. "You're being very slippery," she says, eyes narrowing. "What's going on here?" She glances at Isabel then at Damon. "You do know Daddy sent me here, right?"

"You're a day early," Isabel says. "We didn't expect you until tomorrow."

Allison looks around like she doesn't understand. "I thought Daddy said you needed to meet with me? I thought—"

I glance at Damon. How am I supposed to handle this mess? I could instruct him to grab the girl and haul her off—he'd do it, no questions asked—but there are other guests around, and Allison's drawing too much attention. I need to make her understand that she's stuck here for a while without causing a massive scene.

But before I can think of a solution, Isabel speaks up.

"Why don't we have our meeting in the conference room?" she says, falling into assistant mode. "Ms. Leyland, if you'd come with me? Would you like anything, some water or tea?"

Allison looks bemused but lets herself get gently led away. "Water would be nice, my throat's sore from yelling at that awful girl."

"I'm sure it is," Isabel says, throwing me a look over her shoulder. She is *not* happy about this.

Well, shit. That took care of that, at least for now. I run my hand through my hair and turn to Damon. "Tell the staff. Allison Leyland's going to be staying at the hotel for a while, and she cannot leave the premises under any circumstances."

Damon nods once. "All right. I can handle that. How serious are we about keeping her locked down?"

“Serious, but only tell men you trust. Only the ones in the family.”

“Understood.” He stalks off, ever the good soldier.

I take a moment to compose myself. I expected a day to prepare everything for Allison’s arrival, and her early appearance has all my plans thrown into chaos. Now I have to deal with this problem all while trying to acclimate to my sudden marriage.

I rub my forehead. I never wanted this. Getting married feels wrong, even if I’m doing it for good reasons. I’m not the kind of man worth marrying, not at all, and if Isabel were smart, she’d stay far away.

Except I’m paying her to be stupid.

I take a deep breath. This is going to be fine. What happened twenty years ago isn’t going to happen again. Isabel will be safe with me; I’m not the same kid I was back then.

But doubts plague me. Isabel’s been a good employee. Hell, she’s the reason I’m holding myself together at all. If it weren’t for her gluing my pieces into place again and again, I don’t know where I’d be right now.

Dead or in rehab or in jail.

Which means I’d better not fuck this up for her.

I head back to the conference room. Allison’s sitting at the head of the table, legs crossed, staring at her phone with pursed lips tapping away at the screen with her thumbs. Isabel’s lurking on the other side of the room looking both terrified and supremely pissed off. I let the door close hard behind me.

Allison looks up and beams. “There you are. I was wondering what was taking you so long.” She hops to her feet. “Honestly, Con, I figured once you found out that I was lying to you about how old I am, you’d never want to see me again. Then I hear that you’re reaching out through my father, of all people, and really—” She stops right in front of me and puts one hand in my chest. “It’s filthy. Kind of fucked up. And I like it.”

My stomach lurches.

“No,” I say, knocking her arm aside. She looks startled. “This isn’t like that.”

“Sorry, what?” She laughs, cocking her head. “You called me here for a meeting only like a day after we had sex. I kind of figured—”

“This is *not* a booty call,” I say the words through my teeth. I’m going to need a fucking shower after this.

“We don’t have to be so crass.” Allison waves a hand. “We can call it a date. A little rendezvous. An excursion—”

“Allison.” I say her name sharply. “I am not ever going to sleep with you again. In fact, I’d like it if we pretended like that never happened.”

She snorts. “I wish I could. Seriously, Con, you fucked me—”

“Stop it.” I step forward, jaw working. “You will not ever talk about that mistake again. If I had known you were nineteen, I never would’ve gotten involved with you at all. Hell, if I had known who you were—” I don’t finish that part, since it’s not exactly true. She’s not the first daughter of a powerful man I’ve brought home and made some very bad decisions with. She might not be the last. I glance at Isabel, and she’s frowning at me. “You’re not here for anything like that. You’re here because your father thinks you’re a problem, and he’s dumping you on me instead of cutting my fucking head off.”

Allison takes a step back away from me, looking confused. “I don’t understand. My father’s dumping me on you, how?”

“There are pictures of you leaving my house that morning. You remember those paparazzi?”

“Sure,” she says with a shrug. “That thing happens to you a lot, right?”

“No, and they were actual private detectives working with a political action group. Some Super PAC is blackmailing your father.”

“Oh.” She blinks a few times and drifts back to her chair.

“Oh,” she says again. “That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Allison, it’s very bad.”

“And this really isn’t about sleeping together again?”

“No,” I say with a grimace. “Just to be clear, that was a massive mistake, and if I could make that night disappear, I would.”

She sinks down into her seat. “Huh. Okay. So what am I doing here again?”

I walk to the table and take a seat, making sure there’s plenty of space between us. Isabel remains standing, invisible near the wall, like her years of acting as my assistant left her unable to sit.

“You will be staying in this hotel for the next month while you father and I do damage control.”

“For a month?” Her eyebrows raise. “I have plans. There’s a concert—”

“You’re not leaving the premises. I just sent word to my staff, you will not be allowed outside of this hotel, no matter what to do, unless there’s a real medical emergency. Even then, I know a very good doctor that does house calls.”

Allison looks outraged. “Sorry, are you kidnapping me right now?”

“I wouldn’t call it that.”

“Sounds like you’re fucking kidnapping me. I didn’t consent to you locking me up for a month. Did my dad really put you up to this? I’m going to call that self-righteous prick right now and explain just how badly he fucked up. I’m going to post all over the internet about sucking your—”

I slam my palm on the table loud enough to make her jump. “You talk about that night one more time and I will take your phone, crush it under my shoe, and throw you into your room myself.”

Isabel looks annoyed as she steps forward. “What Con’s trying to say is we just need you to lie low for a while until this political stuff blows over.” She glares at me and I glare right

back. I'm not treating this spoiled brat with kid gloves, even if I did make a stupid mistake with her.

"My father's career isn't my problem, and there's no way I'm staying in this crummy place for an entire month." Allison looks around. "Seriously, you can't keep me locked up."

"I can and I will." I push back from the table. "Please, call your father. Let him explain the situation if that's what you need. But from now on, you will not leave this hotel, not for any reason. Do you understand? And if you cause problems, so help me god, I will instruct my men to lock you up and throw away the goddamn key."

"Conlan," Isabel hisses but I just ignore her.

"You can't do this." There's a real note of fear in Allison's voice.

Good. I'd rather her be afraid than giving me shit.

"I can and I just did. Call your father." I turn to the door. "And, Isabel, please show Allison to her room. Give her one of the suites."

"You have me doing your assistant tasks still?" she asks, sounding frustrated. "You can't just walk away, you haven't finished explaining everything to her."

"You can handle that." I'm seething too much to speak my mind. I'll only end up making it worse, and I don't think we can afford pissing off Allison even more right now. "In fact, make sure you do."

I walk out of the room, aware that I didn't handle that very well, but too angry to fix it.

This is why I'm not marriage material. I ruin relationships—that's what I do, it's what I've always done.

I might've felt a spark when I kissed Isabel back at Vegas, but I won't let that feeling consume me.

It's a job, nothing more.

Chapter 14

Isabel

“Is he always such a prick?” Allison looks around her suite. It’s one of our best: two spacious rooms, a bathroom, a walk-in closet. Furniture is new and clean, linens are soft, minibar is stocked and completely free, at least for her.

“Pretty much,” I admit. “I thought you knew him.”

She gives me a look. “We talked for all of thirty seconds. Talking isn’t why I threw myself at him that night.” She flops down onto the couch, groaning with frustration. “How the hell am I going to get all my stuff?”

“I’ll have it sent over,” I say, hesitating near the TV. “Why *did* you throw yourself at him?”

She glances at me. “He’s hot. You have eyes, right?”

“Yes, I mean—”

“I don’t know how you work with him without trying to jump his bones every day. Like seriously, the man is beyond fit. Unless you already slept with him? Got it out of your system? That’s the smart move, I think. Bang one out and move on.”

“No, we haven’t, I mean—” I force myself to stop stammering. “We haven’t slept together and never will.”

She gives me a bemused look. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, absolutely not. Conlan is—”

“Gorgeous? Filthy freaking rich? Charming when he’s not being a total piece of crap?”

I rub my face. “Yes, he’s good-looking and rich, but I don’t find him charming at all. He’s selfish, immature, self-destructive, and generally a pain to be around for long periods of time.”

This conversation is beyond weird. I’m talking about Conlan, my current husband, with a girl he took home barely a couple days ago. That girl is also nineteen and basically our prisoner at the moment. And oh, yeah, I’m not sure if I’m still Conlan’s assistant or not, but I sure as heck am acting like one.

I absolutely hate this, but I can’t help myself.

If there’s a chance to find out more about Conlan, I have to take it.

He’s frustratingly closed-off, and it’s rare to see one of his fuck-buddies a second time.

“Well, whatever, I’m just saying, if you ever get a chance to have sex with him, I highly recommend it. This coming from a girl that’s had her fair share of partners.” She grins, stretching out. “Conlan’s top five. Hell, Conlan might be number one, if I’m being honest. That is some Grade-A, high-quality dick right there.”

I sit down at the end of the couch. “Please don’t talk about his dick.”

“Why? I’ll give you details. You want to hear it, don’t you?”

I rapidly shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

“He’s big. Really big. And thick. The tip—”

“Allison, I’m serious, stop describing his penis.”

She makes a face. “*Penis*. God, that’s such an ugly word. I sucked his *penis*. Gross.”

I lean toward her, heart racing. I don’t want to know this about Conlan, even if I sort of already did—he comes down in tight clothes all the time, and he’s not shy about his, uh, package. If a girl glances down and happens to see the outline of his massive dick against a pair of tight running shorts, is it really her fault?

“Con and I got married,” I blurt out just to make her stop giving me dick-deets.

Her jaw opens and her eyebrows shoot up. “No kidding?”

“Seriously.” I rub the bridge of my nose. “Okay, here’s the deal.” I give her a rundown of the plan we came up with. Marriage, muddying the waters, all of it. “You need to keep the story straight.”

“Nobody’s going to believe it,” she says with a laugh. “I mean, have you heard my reputation? It’s pretty bad.”

“Doesn’t matter. So long as the story has some uncertainty around it, that’ll be enough.”

“And I guess me staying here for an entire freaking month is a part of the plan?”

“Basically,” I say. “Your father thinks it would be best.”

“I’m sure he does.” Her face darkens, growing serious. “My father doesn’t know what I need. That man doesn’t care about anything but his own career.”

I hesitate, surprised by her sudden turn. “Does he do this sort of thing often? Lock you up in a hotel, I mean?”

“Not since I got old enough to stay the fuck away from him.” She stares down at her phone. “Whatever, it’s fine. This is a nice room, okay? Maybe I’ll stick around for a while.”

“He *really* needs you to behave. For a month, anyway.”

“Who? My father or Con?”

“Both.” I stand up, hesitate, then awkwardly pat her ankle. She doesn’t react and I feel like a moron. “Just try to hang in there, okay?”

“What’s your involvement in all this?” she asks before I can get out of there. “It’s obvious why Con’s playing along with my asshole Dad. But why you? Aren’t you just the assistant?”

“Money,” I admit. “It’s always money, right?”

“Usually, unless you have a lot of it. But that doesn’t really fill the hole.”

“Sure as hell helps,” I mutter, opening the door. “Just hang tight here for a while, okay? I’ll come back in a bit and we’ll figure out how we’ll get your wardrobe out here.”

“Maybe Con can just give me money to buy new stuff.”

I smile to myself. “Not a bad idea. Hang tight.” I leave, letting the door click shut, and turn toward the elevators.

A man’s standing nearby. I startle, yelping slightly.

“Sorry to scare you,” he says. “Hotel security.”

“Right.” I flash him a tight smile and hurry past.

He doesn’t look like hotel security. Tattoos, long beard, hard eyes, black jeans and a windbreaker. The guy looks more like a criminal waiting to mug people.

Conlan’s taking this seriously. He’s already got his guys watching over her, but I’m not sure that’s going to work. Allison’s not going to stay in that room for long—maybe a night or two at most before she gets antsy.

Then what? This whole situation is bizarre. I do *not* want to talk about Conlan with anyone, much less with a mouthy nineteen-year-old that knows what his penis looks like.

It’s not that I’m jealous, but it’s gross, hearing her talk about Conlan like that and knowing she’s not making it up. I wish he’d keep it in his pants for once in his stupid life, but apparently, he’s not able to control himself.

Which means I’m saddled with a manwhore for a husband and stuck babysitting his wayward conquest.

What a freaking nightmare.

As I head down the elevator, my phone rings. I answer it right away.

Conlan’s voice. “You should head to your house and pack.”

“Sorry, what?” The doors ding open and I step out. “Where are you right now? You should be up in that room talking to Allison.”

“She’ll be fine. You can handle her.”

“Sorry, that’s not how this is going down.”

“I have work to do. Go home and pack.”

“Pack *what?*”

“You’re staying in my house, remember? Pack whatever you need for at least a month.”

I stand very still. Around me, guests amble past, talking amiably to each other. There must be a conference going on since there are a lot of nice-looking people in business outfits.

“You’re serious about that.” My voice comes out soft. “You really want me to stay in your house.”

“Only way it’ll look real, remember? Pack and bring it all over. Do it discreetly, please. Come through the back. The gate code is 90210 and the back door is unlocked.”

“It’s 90210? Are you a soap fan?”

“Something like that. Can you handle this or should I send someone to get your things for you?”

“I’ll do it,” I snap at him, feeling overwhelmed. “Just give me an hour or two.”

“Make it fast.” He hangs up.

Like I’m still his freaking assistant.

“Asshole,” I mutter, shoving the phone in my bag. I take another couple steady deep breaths.

Nothing’s changed. Despite everything, he’s still going to treat me like his assistant, even if I’m taking an enormous hit to my personal life to bail him out of a jamb he created. He should be kissing my ass, not ordering me around.

It’s typical Conlan.

For a second, I thought he might be different. In Vegas, when we kissed, I thought I felt something.

But no, that was just nerves.

There’s nothing with that man. He’s an empty vessel, like always, drifting around in search of a little bit of pleasure to

fill him up for a while, but never satisfied. He'll grow tired of me soon enough, whether the job's done or not.

I'd better make sure he doesn't try to throw me aside before this is all over.

Chapter 15

Isabel

It takes me a couple hours but I manage to jam enough stuff into a couple suitcases. His driver takes me back to Con's place and helps me lug the big luggage the back way, down an alley between the houses on his block, and into his yard. I'm cursing him the whole way, and when I finally get the stuff into his kitchen, my phone starts ringing.

"Are you still with the car?" he asks. "You need to come back to the Lincoln."

"Sorry, who's this?"

"Funny. Isabel, get back here."

"We're going to have a conversation about the appropriate way to speak to your wife."

"You aren't my wife. If you were, I would've already fucked you half a dozen times."

"Only half a dozen?"

"Today. Get over here." He hangs up.

I turn to the driver, an older gentleman with ruddy skin and a big nose. "He summons me," I say with a sigh.

The driver nods. "He does that. I'll drive fast."

We get back into the car and head out. The Lincoln's a beautiful building, and it's not far from Conlan's home. I head in through the front and immediately Damon strides over. "They need you upstairs," he says, waving me to follow him.

"What's going on?"

“He didn’t say?” Damon looks uncomfortable. “You’d better find out yourself.”

I know better than to push. Damon’s one of Conlan’s most loyal men. There are others like him—including the supposed security guard stationed outside of Allison’s room—scattered throughout the Costa properties. I don’t ask questions about them, but I get the sense that they’re paid off the books to do things a normal employee wouldn’t or couldn’t pull off. It just another strange and borderline illegal thing I chose to ignore, and now I wish I had asked questions earlier.

It occurs to me, as I ride the elevator with a stone-faced Damon, that I’m tied to the Costa family now. Whatever Conlan and his brothers are up to, whatever schemes or illegal crap they’re involved with, I’m linked to them through marriage.

Conlan’s crimes aren’t mine. But if they somehow got into the news cycle?

I push that from my mind as I step out onto Allison’s floor. Damon doesn’t follow me, only grunts a *good luck* and jams the door close button.

Someone’s screaming.

Screaming like a maniac.

I hurry down the hall. The security guard is still there, glaring at Allison’s door. “She’s been at it for a half hour,” he says, sounding impressed.

“Nobody went in to talk to her?” I ask, unlocking her door.

“Con told me not to.” He shrugs.

I roll my eyes. The freaking cowards.

Allison’s standing in the middle of a wrecked room, breathing hard. The couch is torn to shreds, pillows and stuffing everywhere, the TV cracked and shattered, light fixtures torn down, bulbs burst, minibar bottles cracked and alcohol splashed all over the rug.

It looks like an eighties-era hair band had a coke-fueled bender in here.

Instead, it's only some nineteen-year-old girl throwing a fit.

"I want to leave," Allison says, her calm, normal voice a strange juxtaposition to the chaos of the room.

"What happened to staying for a little while?" I stare around, honestly impressed by the carnage. "And how the hell did you do all this?"

"I want. To leave." She enunciates clearly. "Right now."

"You can't."

"I don't care what Conlan says. I really don't care what my father thinks. I need to get out of here."

"Allison—"

"Don't pretend like you know me." She stares at me, her expression flat and emotionless. It's the most frightening thing I've seen in a while. "I am going to destroy this entire hotel unless you let me go. Tell Conlan I said so. Tell him he's a fucking coward for not coming in here himself."

"Well, we can agree on that last point," I mutter and shake my head. "Can you just tell me why you feel like this? Did something happen?"

She sits down on the couch, gingerly brushing away some broken glass. It crunches under her shoes. "He has an hour to let me go before I start again." Then she looks down at her phone and it's like I no longer exist.

I ask her a few more times if she'll talk, but she completely ignores me until I finally give up. I glance at the guard on my way out, but I'm too frazzled to say anything. Besides, I don't think my orders matter.

Conlan's made it abundantly clear where I stand.

Though what did I expect? Yes, we're married, but nowhere in our deal did he say we'd suddenly become equal partners.

He's always treated me like an assistant, so why should that change?

Only it pisses me off. For years I've avoided babysitting his freaking dates, and now suddenly I'm stuck with a bratty,

over-the-top psycho.

I find Conlan in his office. He's hunched over some papers, reading intently, making some marks in the margin. I can tell it's some kind of contract, but I don't ask which project. Instead, I shut the door and put my hands on my hips.

"She says you have an hour to let her leave."

He looks up, eyebrows raised. "Who did?"

"Don't be an asshole right now."

He leans back with a smirk. "She doesn't have much say."

"Right now, that girl's destroying your best suite. And I mean it, you're going to have thousands of dollars' worth of damage in there if you don't stop her now."

"We can afford it."

"That's your solution? You call me, tell me to get out here, and you just don't care anymore?"

"You can handle it." He looks back down at his documents.

Frustration reaches a boiling point. "I dropped my stuff off at your house today. Remember how we got married?"

Remember how you kissed me?

"That's good. I told you to, and you did it. That's how our relationship works."

I could scream. "You're seriously going to keep treating me like your assistant, even though I'm putting my life on hold to help solve a problem you created?"

"Let's not kid ourselves here." He stares at me, face serious. "You're my employee. You're doing this for money—for a *lot* of money, I'll add. This isn't some altruistic endeavor." Where's the guy that pulled my lips to his mouth back in Vegas? It's like he's gone, replaced by the old Conlan again.

He hasn't changed and he never will.

"That's where you're wrong. Yeah, I'm doing it for money, but I'm also doing it for you. But you can't understand that, can you?"

He cocks his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“Yeah, I know, because you’ve never done anything for anyone but yourself. Here’s the truth for you, Conlan. I’m doing this because I feel bad for you. I’m doing it because I can tell you genuinely regret sleeping with that girl, which you should, by the way. I’m doing it because I caught a glimmer of a decent human being.”

“Is that why you defended me in Adler’s office?” he asks.

“Yes, that’s exactly why. I had hoped that making a really shitty mistake like having sex with that girl would knock some sense into you, but here we are, back to the same old dynamic. You do whatever you want and I just eat it.”

“What do you propose instead?” he asks, leaning back in his chair, running one hand through his hair. I hate that I glance at his forearm. I hate that I like the veins and the muscles.

“I propose that you get off your ass and go handle Allison.”

He gives me a tight smile. “I think I like this new side to you.”

“Oh, shut up, you asshole.” Silence falls. I rub my temple, grimacing as a headache pulses behind my eyes. I’m so exhausted, and suddenly the weight of this job shoves down against my chest, but I can tell I went too far right there. “Look, I shouldn’t talk to you like that. Okay, I get it, I’m just overwhelmed.”

He stands and comes around the desk. I stare at him, heart racing, half burning with rage and half embarrassed over my outburst.

“Sometimes I need to hear that.”

I glance up, confused. “What now?”

“Sometimes I need someone to tell me that I’m being an asshole.”

“You want me to call you an asshole?”

“When I deserve it, though I can’t promise I’ll always take it this well.” He’s not smiling, but there’s some humor around

his eyes. “I’m used to treating you like my assistant. This new role is confusing.”

“No kidding. I feel the same way.”

“We’ll have to come up with a new job description.”

“I assume *wife* isn’t on the corporate hierarchy.”

“I was thinking more *consort to the CEO*.”

“Even worse.”

“We’ll workshop.” He glances at the door. “What should we do about the girl?”

I relax slightly. I like the *we* in that sentence, and he seems like he’s trying at least. Besides, I can’t blame him for being confused over our roles.

I’m confused too.

“Go talk to her,” I tell him. “I’ll back you up. Explain to her the deal.”

“If she won’t listen?”

“I don’t know. Gag her.”

“I don’t think that would be appropriate, given my history.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not funny.”

“You’re right, it’s not.”

“At least ask her for a reprieve while we figure this out. She might listen.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I doubt it, but I’ll be there anyway.” I sigh and stretch. “All right, come on, better hurry before she starts smashing windows.”

“Do you think she could?”

“Absolutely. The girl’s terrifying. For real, Con, she’s scary.”

He laughs and follows me to the elevators.

Chapter 16

Isabel

It takes an hour but we manage to convince Allison that hunkering down and waiting for at least a couple days is her best option. Conlan had to bribe her with all the free room service she can eat—which he was already going to give her—plus unlimited access to all the hotel amenities, from the pool to the sauna.

I'm exhausted when we get back to his place only to find two big suitcases in the kitchen. Now I get the pleasure of unpacking.

"I forgot about that," Conlan says as he follows me into the room.

"You forgot I was moving in with you when we drove here together?"

"You're my assistant. You come with me all the time." He rubs his face and starts to unbutton his shirt. "I need a shower."

"Uh, you could wait until you're upstairs to start undressing."

"You've seen it before."

"And I don't need to see it again. Take it to the bathroom."

He groans. "Are you going to make me change all my habits?"

"Do you normally strip down in the kitchen?"

"More than you'd imagine."

"Wrong, actually. I've seen you saunter downstairs in nothing more than a loincloth too many times to count."

“I don’t own a loincloth, but I like that you’re picturing me nearly naked.”

“Get over yourself, I’m just making hilarious jokes.”

He laughs as he heads upstairs. “Make yourself at home, wife.” The shower turns on a few minutes later, and I’m left alone to lug my bags up into the guest room.

“Asshole,” I mutter to myself as I get unpacked. The act of organizing my space calms me down and gives me time to start thinking about what the heck we’re going to do.

There’s no way Allison’s playing along unless we find some incentive for her. And based on how things are going so far, I’ll be the one that absorbs the brunt of her tantrums.

Which means that asshole Conlan’s going to get what he wants, since I’m going to figure his problem out for him.

The idea hits me as I finish up the first bag. I stand there staring at the empty suitcase, feeling a strange, vague malaise, until I realize that keeping my hands busy gave me a goal and a sense of purpose. I hurry toward Conlan’s room, shoving open the door.

“I got it,” I say, beaming with pride. “We need to give her—”

And stop abruptly as Conlan turns to me, wearing nothing more than a towel, still damp from the shower.

My mouth opens, my tongue tries to form words, but nothing comes out. Instead, I lick my lips.

Stacked abs. Muscular shoulders and arms. Sculpted chest. He’s smirking slightly, that confident, cocky grin driving me insane. His hair’s damp, his eyes are shining with mischief, and I wish I’d stayed home.

“Yes, wife?” he asks. “You barged in here to say something and now you’re staring at me. Should I drop the towel and give you a show?”

“No,” I say too fast. “I mean, stop it, you’re not funny.”

“You’re too easy,” he says softly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Teasing you. It’s too easy. You walk right into it.”

“Okay, I’m not here to talk about teasing—” I picture him really dropping that towel, think of Allison’s description of his penis, and a shiver runs down my spine. “We should give her a job.”

He cocks his head. “Who?”

“Don’t joke. I’m serious.”

“I don’t think that girl’s ever worked a day in her life.”

“Exactly. Let’s find a job at the hotel for her. Something she might even enjoy. Throw her behind the front desk, let her vacuum the rooms, I don’t know. Give her something to do. Give her some purpose.”

He opens his mouth like he’s about to tell me it’s the worst idea in the world, but he stops and grunts. “Could you turn around?”

“Sorry, what?”

“I’m going to put on clothes. You’re looking at me like you’re about to drop down to your knees and yank my towel off which is very distracting. So turn around, please.”

I whirl away, cheeks bright pink. “I’m not looking at you like that. Seriously, I’m really not.”

“Sure, Isabel. I’m sure you’re not.” Drawers open and close. I could die of embarrassment. “Okay, I’m decent.”

I turn around and he’s sitting at the end of the bed in a pair of dark joggers and a t-shirt, looking thoughtful.

“She’s always just been given everything,” I say, sitting down next to him, feeling very out of place in his bedroom. It’s a masculine space, done up in earth tones with simple geometric patterns and mid-century style furniture. “But having a job might be nice for a while.”

“It could buy us a few days at least. Problem is, I don’t know what task to assign her.”

“We’ll think about it and talk to her tomorrow.”

He nods once. "That's a plan."

"Right." I clear my throat, very aware of being alone with him in his bedroom. "I'd better go."

"Leaving already? I thought we might get acclimated."

"What now?" I stand and move to the door.

"Since you're my wife and all, I figured you'd want to share the master bedroom with me."

I laugh once. "No. You're joking, right? I mean, we don't really need to share a bed."

Sleeping under the same roof as him is bad enough, but sharing sheets?

Hell to the no.

Who knows what's happened on that mattress.

Very, very bad things.

He shrugs. "It's in the paperwork you signed."

"What—" I suck in a breath and blow it out. He's teasing me again. "I'm going to my room. Good night, Conlan."

"Good night, Isabel. Wake me up tomorrow, will you? And make some coffee?"

"Make your own coffee," I say and slam his door.

Chapter 17

Conlan

The last thing in the world I want to do right now is deal with that pain-in-the-ass girl waiting back at my hotel.

It's bad enough I slept with her. But now I have to babysit her all while married to Isabel. The situation is more than a little fucking awkward.

"You know, she seems to listen to you," I say in the car on the way over the next morning.

Isabel's eyes narrow. "Are you going to try to pawn her off on me?"

Yes, absolutely.

"I'd never," I say, hand over my heart.

"You absolutely would, and no, I'm not going to take point on your problem. I'm doing my part already."

"Meanwhile, you're neglecting your other duties." I lean closer. "You're still my assistant, and there was no coffee this morning."

"You woke up at five in the morning," she says, indignant. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Set an alarm."

"That's unreasonable. You never expected it before we got married."

"I factored in your commute, but now that we're living together—" I suppress a grin at the rage on her face. It's too easy.

“I think we need to have a discussion about my role in your life going forward.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“I am no longer cleaning up your messes. I am no longer making you coffee, doing your stupid grunt work, and generally letting you take advantage of me. From here on out, I’m your wife, and I occasionally help out with your schedule.”

I have to admit, this bossy attitude is kind of attractive. But it’s also a real pain in my ass. “That’s not going to work for me.”

She looks at her nails. “The way I see it, you need me right now. Which means I have leverage.”

I laugh out loud. “You’re kidding me.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Who’s this girl all of a sudden?”

Her cheeks turn red. “I’m just sick of doing your dirty laundry, that’s all.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been more attracted to you right now.”

“You like that I’m standing up for myself?”

“A little steel in your spine gets me hard.”

“You’re gross.”

“But honest.” And I really mean it. Nothing more attractive than a strong woman. I’ve always known Isabel had it in her, but she’s been hiding behind her job title for so long, keeping her head down, just getting by. Now she’s got a taste of power and she’s flexing with it. Still, I can’t have this. “If you want to discuss your role, I’m open to it, but you’re still my assistant for now.”

“What if I don’t want to stay your assistant forever?”

A strange pang hit me then. Isabel leaving me? Finding a new job? But no, that’s the whole point of this arrangement, it was my main selling point. She’d marry me, deal with my bullshit for a little while, then run like hell.

I can't hold it against her, considering it was my idea.

So why does the thought bother me so much?

"You won't. If you want to start searching for your replacement, feel free. In the meantime, I need you."

"We could always offer Allison the job."

"No, thanks. I'd rather pick up my own dry cleaning."

Isabel looks at her nails. "You're serious about this? You'll really let me find someone to replace me?"

"I don't want you to, but you're right. You have more leverage now."

She chews her lip. "I didn't think that would work."

"Don't ever say I'm unreasonable."

"But you are. I had to blackmail you to get what I want."

"Now you know the way to my heart."

"Stop it. I'm going to put up a job listing tomorrow, okay?"

"You know what it takes to make me happy." I stare at her, wondering if she understands how much that's true.

I've had other assistants. None lasted nearly as long as Isabel. I hated all of them for some reason or another—one little, dumb mistake, one annoying quirk, whatever, and they were fired. Done, on to the next.

But Isabel's always been different.

She understands me better than anyone else before her.

Which means finding a replacement will be next to impossible, but I won't stop her from trying.

"Have you thought about what job we're offering Allison?" she asks, changing the subject as the car parks outside of the Lincoln.

I get out and hold the door for her. "I have some thoughts."

"Anything she'll like?"

"Probably not."

“Wonderful.” She heads in through the front doors. I follow close. “I have some ideas too, but that’s not much she’s even qualified for.”

“I was thinking she could push a vacuum and fluff pillows.”

“Good luck selling that.”

I tilt my head. Isabel heads toward the elevators, but I take her wrist, holding her back. She looks at me with surprise as I grip tighter.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” I say, staring into her eyes. “I need you on my team, Isabel.”

“We’re married,” she says sheepishly. “Doesn’t get more team-like than that.”

“I’m serious. Allison’s going to be a problem, and we still have to make General Leyland happy with our damn story. We’re far from out of this.”

“I’m aware.” She cocks her head. “Are you feeling insecure right now?”

“No, I’m only thinking you tried to blackmail me once already today, and you might do it again.”

She pulls her wrist from my grasp. “I’m looking out for myself, that’s all. It’ll be weird if I’m both playing your wife and acting as your assistant. It’ll just be messy, that’s all.”

“I don’t mind messy.” *When it comes to you.*

“I do. I mind it a lot. So let’s avoid messy if we can, all right?”

“Whatever you say.”

“Now if you’re done with that wonderful pep talk, let’s go see if our guest is still in residence or if we have to start hunting her down.”

I grunt in reply as she stalks off again. Somehow Isabel’s taken control of this situation, and while I’m impressed, it’s also disconcerting.

She knocks me off balance. It’s always been this way with her, which is why I’m constantly teasing her, just trying to get

some of the power back in our relationship. But it's like Isabel knows what I've been thinking lately—that this marriage thing is a huge mistake, because I'm enjoying it far too much, and that's a real problem.

It's a mistake, letting her get close to me.

Even if it's fake—trouble always seems to find the people I care about.

And I don't want Isabel to end up like everyone else in my past.

Chapter 18

Isabel

It's a small miracle when Allison opens the door. "Just so you know, I tried to leave last night but your asshole staff wouldn't let me." She slumps down onto the couch and pulls her knees to her chest. "You realize this is kidnapping, right? I could call the fucking cops. Why not just handcuff me to the bathroom? Since you're holding me here against my will anyway."

"You're not kidnapped." I sit down at the other end of the couch. Conlan remains standing near the door, his back straight. The mess from the day before is cleaned up, though I note that most of the breakable stuff in the room is missing and wasn't replaced. Smart move on housekeeping's end.

"Feels that way. Since I can't freaking leave."

"Consider this an extended vacation, just until your dad lets all this bad political stuff blow over." I glance at Conlan, waiting for him to say something, but he only stands and glares. Which is all he's good for. That and being handsome.

This is supposed to be his show. Allison is his problem to clean up.

Except here I am, taking over, like usual.

"Easy for you to say." Allison puts her chin on her knees. "Do you know what it's like to have a famous dad?"

I nearly feel sorry for her, but Conlan decides this is a great time to speak up. "Don't blame everything on your family," he

says. “Trust me, you have control over your life. This isn’t all Daddy’s fault.”

She gives him a look. “Like you’d know anything about what I go through?”

“Yes, I would.” He glances at me. “I have my own personal demons to deal with.”

She snorts. “I bet you do with your freaking mafia connections.”

I shift uncomfortable in my seat. There’s the unspoken word, *mafia*, laid out there like it’s nothing.

And Conlan doesn’t deny it. “I know a thing or two about a controlling family, and trust me, you’ll be better off when you start accepting responsibility for your own mistakes.”

I almost laugh. This, coming from Conlan, the king of avoiding problems? But I can tell Allison’s getting pissed, so I head it off before she can explode.

“We’re not here to lecture you. I thought maybe we could cut a deal, one that makes everyone happy.”

She glares at Conlan like she’s trying to make his head explode before glancing at me. “What kind of deal?”

“Well, I was thinking you could have a job around the hotel.”

“I am *not* leaving chocolates on pillows or scrubbing toilets.”

“Why not?” Conlan asks. “You’d be good at it.”

“Are you trying to piss me off?” Allison asks, leaping to her feet. “You were a lot nicer to me the other night.”

“If I knew who you were that night, I never would’ve gotten near you.”

“Too bad you did get close. Really, really close. Oh, you don’t like hearing about it?”

Conlan’s face scrunches together. “I am going to gag you if you start talking about that night.”

“Oh, Con Costa, I knew you liked to fuck but I had no clue you were so kinky.” Allison sneers at him. “Go ahead, cover

my mouth and spank me if that's what you really want."

Conlan growls, stepping toward her, and I leap to my feet. "Con, cut it out. Did you forget that she's a freaking teenager?"

He hesitates. "That's a good point. Her brain isn't fully developed yet."

"Oh, Con, I'm very developed, as you're aware." She pouts at him, clearly loving how uncomfortable it makes him.

I seethe, annoyed that he's getting baited so easily. "Will you two stop it? Allison, you don't have to work in housekeeping. There is plenty for you to do around the hotel."

"Like what?"

"There's the front desk. Guest services. You can work in the spa. You can work by the pool. You can work with the concierge, at the bar, in the restaurant, in a dozen different positions."

"Pass." She sits back down, crossing her arms. "I want to go home."

"That's not an option," I say softly. "I get it, this sucks. You got dumped on us by your father and that isn't fair. I hear you. But we're all in this situation together, so why don't we deal with it?"

"You can deal with it." She reaches over and grabs her phone. "I'm texting some friends. They'll come pick me up."

"Hotel party planner." Conlan barks the words at her like it's the last thing in the world he wants to say.

My eyebrows arch. I'd never heard of that before.

But Allison perks up. "What's that, Connie?"

"Call me that again and I swear—"

"Conlan," I say, exasperated. "Stop."

He takes a break, gathering himself. "Party planner," he says after a couple of deep breaths. "The hotel hosts events all the

time. You can work with the marketing staff to coordinate special guest events. Maybe one every week you're here."

Allison taps a nail against her front tooth. "I don't hate that."

"We'll pay you," I quickly add. "A real wage, something reasonable."

"A hundred grand." Allison tilts her head. Conlan makes a frustrated noise "I'm worth it."

I can tell Conlan wants to strangle her, and I think he might actually do it, at least if I weren't in the room to stop him. "Fine," I say before he can ruin this. "A hundred grand."

"And I still want full access to all the amenities. And I want my friends to come to the events."

"No," Conlan says. "No friends. No outsiders."

Allison wiggles her head and sighs. "Fine, okay, no outsiders. When can I get started? I actually have a ton of ideas."

"I'll put you in touch with the marketing team," I say, ushering Conlan to the door. "Then we'll get the paperwork filled out and you can start tomorrow. Okay, how's that sound?"

"Great," Allison says, stretching her legs. "I'll have a spa and pool day this afternoon then. Also, no paperwork, I want to get paid under the table. Taxes are *so* annoying."

"Sure, we'll pay you under the table." Not like Conlan minds breaking laws, after all. "Have fun, really, just stay on the hotel grounds. Spoil yourself, go nuts, see you later!" I yank Conlan out of there before he can say something stupid.

In the hall, he's seething. I can tell he's pissed off as hell. Allison's attitude pushes all his buttons in a bad way, and it's like he wants to explode.

I shove his arm, giving him a hard look.

"That girl is driving me insane," he says through his teeth. "I'm serious, Isabel. She's going to give me a heart attack."

"No shit, I noticed. What is with you? She's *nineteen* and you're a full-grown man. Why are you bickering with her?"

He rubs his temple. “I know you’re right, but she’s baiting me.”

“Get it together.” I put a hand on his chest for emphasis, and find his heart is racing. My eyes widen and he’s looking at me, head tilted to the side, studying me closely. I don’t understand why that girl bothers him so much, but it’s obvious that sleeping with her was a huge mistake and one he deeply regrets.

Which isn’t like Conlan.

All the years I’ve known him, the guy’s never given a rat’s ass about anything except for himself.

There have been plenty of mistakes, but never any apologies.

So why care now? What’s different here?

“I’ll do better,” he says softly. “I know you’re right.”

“You better.” I lick my lips and breathe through my nose. “Do you want to, I don’t know, talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“Clearly, she touched a nerve. I know sleeping with a girl her age is gross, but you’ve never seemed to care about that sort of thing before.”

“I don’t do teenagers.”

“But twenty-year-olds are fine?”

“The line has to be somewhere.”

I sigh and pull my hand back. “Right. Naturally.” For a second, I thought he had a heart, but I’m just fooling myself.

“Isabel.” I glance up at him again. “Thank you for taking control in there.”

“It’s fine,” I say, surprised for a second time. He’s never thanked me before. “Your idea about the party planner was pretty good. She seems excited.”

“She’ll get bored of it sooner or later, but for now—” He shrugs and turns to the elevators. “Let’s just make sure she doesn’t ruin the hotel.”

“Can’t promise that,” I mutter, following him back to his office.

Chapter 19

Conlan

I distract myself with work. It's what I do best. I don't like the way I let Allison get under my skin and I need to do better in the future—but she reminds me so much of all the ways I've fucked up in the past, and I can't stand it.

At least Isabel doesn't fight me when I boss her around the rest of the day. I catch her on job boards a few times posting new listings, and I'm aware that means she's mentally checked out, but still. I need some stability at the moment and treating her like I always have helps a little bit.

On our way home from the hotel, I get a call from Adler. "Pictures leaked," he grunts at me. "Better be ready with your story."

"We're prepared." I glance over at Isabel. She's frowning at me with those pretty lips of hers. How do I manage to work so closely with that girl and not stare at her all day? I'm always struck by how pretty she is—her effortless hair, her big eyes, her lips. "My wife's right here, actually."

"Great. Keep her close. I suspect those private detectives will start digging around once Leyland's people start planting their counter narrative."

"Anything I can do?"

"Kiss your wife in public. Hell, put out a sex tape. Get her fucking pregnant. I don't know. Just make it look real." He hangs up the phone.

"What'd he say?" She tilts her head, studying me.

“He said we should make a sex tape.” I slip my phone into my pocket. “He also thinks I should get you pregnant.”

She looks annoyed. “Can you be serious for once in your life?”

“He wants us to make sure we’re playing husband and wife in public for a while.” I lean forward and rifle through my bag. “Speaking of which, here you are.” I hand her a pair of small boxes.

She takes them, looking skeptical. “What’s this?”

I open my own little box. Inside is a simple gold ring. I slip it onto my finger. “Costume.”

She sucks in a breath when she gets a look at the engagement ring. It’s an enormous diamond worth at least double her little house. “*Conlan*. What the hell?”

“I wouldn’t give my real wife anything less. Consider it a down payment.”

“This isn’t mine.” But I watch her slide it down onto her finger. “I mean, it’s too much.”

“I’m going to pay you a lot more. The other one is your wedding band. Don’t worry, it matches.”

She chews her lip as she puts it on then holds the pair up to the light. The diamond catches the street lights. “They’re beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like them,” I say and find that it’s true. I actually care that they make her happy. What’s wrong with me?

“Still too much.”

“Deal with it.” I lean forward and knock on the divider between us and the driver. He rolls it down. “Change of plans. Take us to Lorenzo’s for dinner.”

“What now?” Isabel asks.

“Yes, sir.” The driver rolls the divider back up.

“We have to play married couple in public, remember? Might as well show off the new hardware.” I look away, staring out the window. If I let myself stare at her, I’m going to start having some lewd thoughts about seeing her in nothing but those rings. And that simply cannot do.

She’s already making demands. She’s already quitting her job and finding me a new assistant. What will she do once she realizes that I want her?

Worse, what will happen to her if I let myself need her more than I already do?

Better to keep my distance.

She doesn’t argue, but I can tell she’s not happy about this turn of events. At least we get a good table, a booth toward the middle of the place with a good view of the kitchen and all the other patrons.

“Smile,” I say, putting my hand on hers after the waitress pours our wine. “Look like you’re enjoying yourself with your new husband.”

She shows teeth like a cheetah on the hunt. “How’s that?”

“Less murder, more joy.”

“Sorry, I only have killing in my heart right now.”

“Try anyway. There you go, that’s good. Now, sweetheart, tell me about your day.”

“Well, my boss, he’s this total asshole—” I give her a flat glare and she smiles sweetly. “What? I’m just complaining to my husband.”

“Good point. Maybe I should tell my wife how incompetent and frustrating my assistant has been lately.”

That annoys her. “Incompetent? God, if you only knew what I do for you. Without me, your life would’ve fallen apart.”

“And without me, your house would’ve gotten repossessed.”

“Great, brag about how I’m financially beholden to a controlling prick. That’s a good look.”

I grind my jaw. “What is it with you and that house, anyway?”

“You don’t really care.” She looks down at her plate, picking at some bread. The restaurant lights are low and candles flicker, casting long shadows. The smell of fresh Italian food wafts through the space, and there’s something about the old-world decor that brings out Isabel’s natural beauty, like she fits in with all the rustic wood.

“You’re my wife. You’re the only thing I care about in the world.” Good, that’s good, I can hide how I feel with exaggerations.

She snorts, sips her wine, and stares out at the other tables. “I grew up in that house.”

“Lots of people move on from their childhood homes. I flew across the country to escape mine.”

“Not me. That house is all I have left of my dad.”

I roll my wine glass, studying her. “He passed away.”

“Back when I was sixteen.”

“Really? That must’ve been hard.”

“He raised me alone. Single dad. I didn’t know it at the time, but he struggled, you know? Taking care of me, working long hours, trying to have a social life. He was the best dad in the entire world, but I never really understood all his sacrifice until after he was gone. Messed up, right?” She frowns deeply, looking down at her hands, then meets my gaze. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

I don’t either, but it unlocks a piece of her I never knew about. All these years, and Isabel never talked much about her personal life. I always figured that’s because she didn’t have much of one.

But maybe there’s more to it than that.

“I’m sure he knew,” I say. “That you cared, I mean.”

“He knew.” She sips her wine. “I told him at the end.”

“What happened?”

“Cancer. Stomach. It was ugly. Too much for a sixteen-year-old.” She rubs her face with one hand. “I really don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

She seems like she’s about to say more, but the waitress comes and asks for our orders. Once our wine glasses are refilled and we’re alone again, I wait for Isabel to start talking again, but she doesn’t look like she wants to.

“You know what I felt when my dad died?” I ask, leaning forward.

“What?”

“Relief.”

Her lips press together. “Was he really that bad?”

“Worse, if you can believe it, but he was still our father. Relief was about all I could muster.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be. I didn’t make my life any easier, you know what I mean? Always a problem.”

“I see not much has changed.”

“Dad tried to squash my rebellious streak and he wasn’t gentle about it.” I lean back, watching her reaction. “I think he only made it worse.”

“What about the rest of your family? I can’t tell if you’re close with your brothers.”

“We used to be. We’ve drifted apart over the years. I keep in touch with Erick the most, Jayson a little bit, and Adler only for business purposes. And I talk to my mother on the phone once per week.”

“Really? I didn’t know that. You don’t strike me as the type to call your mom.”

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

“Apparently.” She takes another drink and I watch her lips, unable to help myself. What would it be like, pressing those

lips to mine? Not in some Vegas wedding chapel, but in my own room? What would it be like to feel her body pressed against mine, to listen to her panting breaths, her gasping moans?

I shove those feelings away. I have to bury them, burn them, make sure they never return. Isabel's my fake wife—nothing more. We'll flirt, banter, whatever, but it won't go beyond that.

I'll do whatever I can to make this stupid ruse work, and when it's done we can move on with our lives.

For her own sake.

Even if I'm suffering through it all.

We talk about work for the rest of the meal. I keep it light and try not to bicker with her too much. On the way out, I stop by a table with a few casual acquaintances I know from the party scene, introduce my wife, then lead her toward the front. I stop to greet another guy, a lawyer I've seen around town. When that's over, Isabel slips her hand through mine and leans her head against my shoulder. "Don't get any ideas," she mutters. "But I think one of those detective guys is out front. No, don't look."

I lead her through the door, but pull her off to the side, turning to face her. My heart's racing. This isn't real and it doesn't matter. I have to play my part. She seems surprised when I hug her tight against me.

"We're acting, right?" I whisper, lips kissing her cheek. "Pretending?"

"Fake," she whispers back.

I kiss the corner of her mouth. "If it's not real, why do you seem as if you really like this?"

Then I press my lips to hers. Gently at first, then with a passion that surprises me. She melts into my kiss and my tongue invades her lips, lapping her up, tasting her, drinking her, basking in her. My wife, my delicious, incredible wife. She releases a gentle whimper into my mouth and fuck, I could lose my mind over this kiss, over the way her body

moves against mine, over her breasts moving up and down with her rapid breath, over the way my heart's going wild.

But we break apart. When I look to the left, I spot him standing nearby, not trying to hide. I try to feign surprise as Isabel visibly gathers herself.

She liked that kiss as much as I did.

"Mr. Costa." It's the older man from outside my house. He doesn't extend a hand. "I'm sure you remember me."

"You're that asshole taking pictures," I say, facing him. "Come to apologize?"

"I'm only here on official business. You know it's nothing personal, right? I'm just doing my job."

"Interesting. If my job was to, I don't know, strangle you then dispose of your body in the ocean, would you take that personal?"

His mouth twitches. "All I want is to ask a question. Are you and Isabel Flax married?"

"Yes," I say, taking Isabel's hand in mine. "Whatever you think you saw at my place the other day, you're wrong."

"Right. And when did you and Ms. Flax get married?"

"Mrs. Costa," Isabel corrects. "And it was a few weeks ago."

The detective's lips press into a line. "Right. I see. Thank you for your time."

"That's all?" I ask. "Are you going back to your little political donors to give them the bad news?"

"I'm going to follow the truth. That's all I get paid to do." He walks off, hurrying away.

"Prick," I murmur.

"Come on." Isabel walks off toward where the driver's waiting. "That went well."

"A little too well." I catch up, putting my hand on her ass. "You liked that kiss, didn't you?"

She swats my hand away. "Watch it."

“Come on. My wife would let me squeeze her nice, supple ass whenever I wanted.”

“Not this wife. Not in public.”

“In private? I’ll ask the driver to circle the block.”

“Once we’re in private, I’m not your wife anymore.” She turns, puts both hands on my chest, and stands on her toes to kiss my lips softly. “Isn’t that such a shame? You don’t get to feel my nice, perky little ass.”

Then she ducks into the car.

I could fucking burst out laughing.

The little goddamn tease.

Except my cock is rock hard, and I’m starting to wonder if I’m being delusional.

If there’s really any way I can keep distance between us.

Because at this rate, I’m going to do something very stupid.

Chapter 20

Conlan

I'm up early the next morning. Instead of going right down into my home gym, I take the time to make coffee, and not just for myself.

I make some for Isabel and bring it up to her room. The whole way, I'm wondering what the hell I'm doing. Delivering room service isn't usually my thing. When a woman sleeps over at my place, I'm trying to get her the hell out, not taking care of her instead.

But here I am, standing outside of my guest room, feeling like a fucking idiot.

I knock and wait a minute before she answers, looking groggy.

"Here," I say, shoving the oat milk latte at her, done the way she likes.

Which is a minor miracle, considering I've never known anyone's coffee order except for my own before.

She stares at the cup. "Conlan, it's five-thirty in the morning."

"You should get up. We're heading to the office in an hour." I hold the coffee closer. "Drink this."

She takes it, hesitates, but takes a sip. Her eyes widen. "Oh. That's good."

"Great." I turn away. "I'm working out. Be ready in an hour."

"Hold on. What exactly is this right now? Did you just wake me up to give me coffee? Did you actually make this?"

“Don’t get used to it.” I stalk off, cursing myself. What’s wrong with me? I should just leave her alone, except I can’t help it.

I keep thinking about that kiss—and about her comment as she got into the car.

I won’t ever get to feel her perky ass.

Except I want to. Fucking badly.

More than I’ve ever wanted something, which is saying a lot, because I’m the kind of man that *wants*.

I work my frustrations out in the gym. I’m thinking about her the whole time, about how she’s only right upstairs, maybe in the shower, maybe getting changed, and I could walk in there, find her naked and vulnerable—

I do fifty sit-ups every time I picture her naked.

Which means my core’s going to be even more shredded.

After cooling off and showering, we head to the office together. Halfway there, she turns to me. “Thank you for the coffee,” she says.

My eyebrows raise. “That was over an hour ago.”

“I never said thanks. So now I’m saying thanks. Don’t look into it.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Good.” She glares at me, face flushed. “And Conlan? Don’t kiss me again.”

“That sounds more like an invitation than a denial.”

“I’m serious. Don’t kiss me without warning, okay? We need ground rules.”

“It was for the detective.”

“Whatever, I know that, but still.”

“This is complicated enough and now I’m going to have to worry about kissing my own wife?”

“I’m not really your wife.” She squirms in her seat. “Just warn me, okay?”

I keep my face as neutral as I can. “You liked it.”

“Stop. I knew you’d start this.”

“You really liked it if you’re putting yourself through my shit.” I lean closer. “Do you want to kiss again?”

“No,” she says, eyes widening.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t mind. You’re a good kisser.”

“Stop teasing me. Can you just be serious for one second?”

“I am being very serious. You enjoyed that kiss so much you can’t stop thinking about it.”

She balls her hands into her fists. “This is why I didn’t want to do this. You can’t just respect what I have to say. You always give me shit, you know that?”

I tilt my head. My smile fades. “I’m not trying to give you shit.”

“Well, you are. I’m being vulnerable here, okay?”

I take a breath. She’s right. It’s not easy to talk about this stuff, but she’s trying anyway, and I keep punishing her for it. So what if she liked that kiss? I liked the kiss—I *loved* the kiss. But it doesn’t matter.

“I’ll ask you before I kiss you in the future,” I say.

“Thank you.” She relaxes. “And the coffee was good.”

“I’m glad.”

And I find that I really am. I’m happy I did something nice for her, which is a goddamn mess, and not like me at all.

We reach the Lincoln, and the second I’m out of the car, my head of guest relations comes striding over with a panicked expression. She’s a tall woman with dark brown hair in her early forties. “We have a problem, Conlan.”

“Hello, Lisa,” I say. “And good morning to you too.”

“Did you tell Allison Leyland that she can decorate the entire pool for some party she’s throwing tonight?”

My eyebrows shoot up. I exchange a look with Isabel—she’s as surprised as I am. “Show me,” I say, not sure what to expect, but I’m guessing it won’t be good.

Lisa takes us inside, through the lobby, down the side hall, and out the employees-only exit, which spits us near the pool.

Which is where we find Allison diligently placing tiki torches, hula hoops, fake blow-up palm trees, and a smattering of pineapple-themed decorations all over the area, draping them off the cabanas, creating a perimeter around a table she has set up near the outdoor bar. It’s rudimentary, but she’s got more decorations stashed off to the side, enough to deck this place out in a vague Hawaiian theme.

“Allison,” Isabel says, clearly not trusting me to take point on this, which I don’t really mind. Though Lisa seems a little surprised that my assistant is the one doing the talking. “What’s going on?”

“Decorating for the luau tomorrow night.” She straightens a fake palm before gesturing around her. “What do you think?”

“Well, it’s California, so we have real palm trees.” I point toward a row of them nearby.

“What Conlan mean is we didn’t expect you to start working so quickly.” Isabel shoots me a look.

“When I get an idea, I run with it,” Allison says. “And it just hit me, what this place needs is a classic luau. Tiki torches, rum drunks in those mug things, little umbrellas, all that stuff.”

I hate it. I hate it so much I could vomit. It’s everything I hate about organized events: tacky, overmanufactured, fake beyond reasoning.

“We love it,” Isabel says. “Right, Conlan?”

I grunt in reply.

“It’s certainly interesting,” Lisa says, frowning at everything. “But where did it all come from?”

“I paid one of the dishwashers to get it for me.” Allison says that like it’s no big deal.

But it begs the question, how the fuck did she get close enough to the kitchen staff to bribe one of them into buying her Hawaiian-themed party decorations?

I’m going to have a very stern talk with Damon shortly.

“Where did you get the money for all this?” Isabel asks.

“My personal account. Don’t worry, I saved the receipt, so I’ll invoice the hotel.” She beams at us. “It’s great, right?”

Lisa shifts uncomfortably. I can tell she despises this too. I want to tear all this crap down, drag Allison by the arm back to her room, and bolt her to the fucking floor.

Instead, I plaster a fake smile on my face. “Great job.”

“Really good job,” Isabel echoes.

“I guess so,” Lisa says, looking bewildered.

“I’m *so* happy you love it,” Allison says and starts to walk us through her planned festivities, which includes an entire pig roast. When she’s finished, I get the hell out of there.

“Indulge her,” I tell Lisa once we’re inside. “Give her what she asks for unless it’s obscenely lavish.”

“Are you sure?” She squints out at the pool. “That girl isn’t exactly—”

“Just do it. I know this is unorthodox, but please trust me.”

“All right, Conlan, you’re the boss.”

I walk away with Isabel by my side. I thought the party idea would keep her occupied for a while, and figured she’d throw a few ragers here and there, but I didn’t expect the fucking theme.

God, I hate a theme.

“The guests seemed to like it,” Isabel says once we’re in the elevator. “It might not be that bad, right?”

“It’s atrocious.”

She sighs, rubbing her face. “It’s really bad. But if the guests don’t complain—” She glances at me. “Can’t hurt, right?”

“For now, but what happens when she gets more extravagant?”

“Hopefully, it won’t get to that point. One party per week isn’t bad.”

“You really think she’ll stick to one?”

Isabel leans her head back and closes her eyes. “I really, really hope so.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be the one cleaning up after her.”

“Good point. I only clean up after you.”

“Oh, someone’s in a bad moon. Did you skip your caffeine? You only have yourself to blame there.”

“No, I drank the coffee, and it was good. I’m just exhausted already. I didn’t sleep well.”

“Why not?”

“I never sleep well in an unfamiliar bed.”

“Is that why you’re trying so hard to keep the house?” I regret it the moment I say it out loud. She looks at me, frowning hard.

“No, I’m trying to keep the house to honor my father.” She says it very slowly. “And I don’t think that’s something we should joke about.”

I’m about to say she’s right, but the elevator reaches the floor and we get off together. She stalks away toward her desk, and I’m left lingering in the hallway.

Great, she’s pissed. Not like that’s new or anything, but still. It’d be nice if we could have a good relationship, or at least one that’s not actively adversarial.

Might help if I could keep my fucking mouth shut.

Chapter 21

Isabel

I make it through half the day without having to deal with Conlan.

It's not that I'm avoiding him—although I sort of am. That gesture this morning with the coffee was sweet, and kind, and totally unlike him, which is making me wonder what the hell is going on with that man.

Then he makes some stupid joke about my house, and I know he wasn't trying to piss me off, but he can be so insensitive sometimes that I'm just done with it.

I spend the afternoon checking on Allison, running errands I've been putting off, and keeping an eye on Conlan's schedule. I'm down by the pool, nudging blow-up palm trees with my toe, when Damon finds me.

“Boss needs you in the conference room.”

“What's going on?”

“Not sure,” he admits. “There's a camera crew.”

My eyebrows shoot up and I start walking a little faster.

Turns out, Damon's not kidding. There's actually a camera crew plus lighting. Conlan's sitting at the head of the table, glaring at everyone as they get the stuff set up, and he waves me over the moment I step foot in the room. Nobody looks surprised that I'm there.

“Uh, what's all this?”

“We’re doing a video.” He doesn’t look happy about it. “About our happy marriage.”

“Hello, you must be Isabel.” A pretty older woman shakes my hand. She’s in business clothes and has the brisk, professional demeanor of a person used to this sort of thing. “I was told to expect you both. My name’s Shannon Lewis, but just call me Shan. I’m General Leyland’s public relations assistant.”

Ah, that clicks into place. Her demeanor makes sense—I’d bet most of his employees act pretty stiff and serious all the time, even his creatives.

“I guess you want me and Conlan to make a statement?” I don’t know how much of our little charade she’s aware of, and I figure I’ll keep playing my role until it’s clear otherwise.

“That’s right. Just something simple. Talk about the night in question, why the general’s daughter was at Conlan’s house, your relationship with him, that sort of thing.” Shan gestures for me to sit next to Conlan. “Try to keep it simple and formal, but feel free to—” She gestures at us.

“Feel free to what?” Conlan asks.

“Show, you know, affection.” She frowns. “Hold hands. Kiss a little. I don’t know. How do married couples show affection again?”

I stifle a laugh. Shannon’s got to be some kind of robot or something. “I’m pretty sure kissing on camera in this context would come off pretty weird,” I say.

“Good point.” She makes a note on her clipboard. “I’ll keep that in mind. Right, okay, let’s get lights up and camera ready, I want to be done with this in the next half hour.”

The crew bustles around, prepping everything. I’m left sitting with Conlan in the middle of the chaos, feeling totally out of place. I lean closer to him, my voice low. “Did you know they were coming today?”

“No,” he says. “They just showed up. Shan here made herself at home.”

“I guess we can’t really turn it down.”

“I don’t think this is optional.”

“That must annoy you, huh?” I grin when his eyebrows raise.
“You’re not used to doing what you’re told.”

“Keep that up and I’m going to slip you some tongue when I kiss you on camera.”

“Better not. We’re talking about the rumors around you and the general’s daughter, remember? The very explicit and also true rumors?”

“They can edit it out.”

A sharp pulse runs down into my guts. “Seriously Conlan, you’re not going to kiss me, are you?”

“Not right now.” He hesitates. “Unless the moment calls for it.”

I could scream. “No kissing. Okay? We can hold hands. Very chaste. Very tasteful.”

“I don’t like chaste or tasteful.”

“I’m aware, but we’re playing roles, remember?”

He’s about to say something lewd and inappropriate, I’m sure, but Shan interrupts. “Let’s get into our places. Lights ready?”

I shuffle closer to Conlan until Shan’s happy with the framing. Once that’s good, they take light measurements, the crew finishes the final prep, and they’re rolling.

“Take it from the top,” Shan says, sitting off-camera. “Tell me from the start how things went down.”

Conlan starts talking. He tells the story of how he ran into Allison at a party—all true, as far as I know—and brought her back to his place. But where reality is much more sordid, he paints a somewhat heroic image of himself. “She was too drunk to the point of being sloppy, and I realized she was General Leyland’s daughter. I decided instead of leaving her there, or letting someone else take her home, I’d get her back to our place, let her sober up, and make sure she got back to the general safely in the morning.”

“And nothing inappropriate happened between you two?”
Shan asked.

“Nothing remotely inappropriate happened.”

If I didn’t know any better, I might believe him.

But of course, something did happen.

And suddenly, while the cameras are rolling, a strange feeling begins to creep down my spine.

Conlan keeps talking about how he tries to look out for people, especially for defenseless women, and I’m sitting here thinking—this bastard fucked her.

He fucked Allison.

They slept together.

My husband took that girl home and banged her, and now we’re talking about it, on-camera, like it didn’t happen.

It’s jealous. The feeling is jealousy.

Which is insane. It’s certifiable. What right do I have to be jealous?

When Conlan slept with Allison, I was only his assistant. He owed me absolutely nothing at all.

And yet. My emotions won’t leave me alone. I try to keep them off my face but clearly Shan notices.

“Isabel, or should I call you Mrs. Costa?”

I shift in my seat. “Isabel’s fine.”

“You look uncomfortable.” Shan’s eyebrows raise and I can feel Conlan staring at me.

I open my mouth to say, *I’m covering for an asshole! We’re lying to you! And to top it all off, I’m stupid and jealous!*

Instead, I tell her, “This is a lot, that’s all. I don’t like that my husband’s good name is being dragged through this mess, much less poor General Leyland and his daughter. Allison’s not perfect, but she’s a good person at heart.”

The interview goes better from there. Shan asks more questions and we bullshit our way through it. But the whole time I can't shake the queasy, terrible jealousy stuff in my chest, like vines wrapped around my heart and won't let go.

"That'll work," Shan says after about a half hour. "We'll edit that down to something manageable then release it as needed. With your approval, of course."

"Fine," Conlan says, standing. "We're done here?"

"We'll pack and be on our way."

"Great." He walks out of there.

"Uh, thanks," I say, hurrying after him. Out in the hall, once we're a distance away from the conference room, I grab his wrist. "Hey, hold on a second. Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay." His teeth are crammed together. "I hate doing shit like that."

"You've given fake interviews before?"

"Public appearances. My family doesn't do public appearances."

"Right. Since you're criminals."

He cocks his head, moving closer to me, his voice lowering.

"That's right, we are. You think this hotel is my entire job?"

I chew on my lip. My heart's going wild. "I mean, I knew you did other stuff, it's just—"

"You ignored it. Pretended like it didn't exist."

"Yes," I admit, because it's true. There are aspects of his life that I'd rather not know about, so I don't let myself.

"And you call yourself my wife." His expression softens. "You did good in there."

"I hated it too."

"Why? I thought you held your own."

"I don't like lying."

“It’s a white lie, and you’re getting adequately compensated. Don’t let it bother you.”

“It’s also just—you did it, right? You really slept with her.”

He doesn’t answer right away. I shouldn’t be saying this. It’s getting dangerously close to how I really feel, and that’s a problem.

“You’re right. I made a mistake.”

“Forget it, I’m just flustered.”

“No, go ahead. Tell me what’s on your mind. You think I’m wrong for what I did, and for what it’s worth, I agree with you. I never should’ve gotten anywhere near that girl. She’s way too young.”

“Why does the age thing bother you so much? Seriously, Conlan. What’s the deal?”

He tightens his jaw. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something. Adler seems to know why.”

“You don’t need to dig up my past. You won’t like what you find.”

“Conlan—”

“Drop it.” He turns away.

“I was jealous.” I blurt it out before I can stop myself. I’m not sure what I’m thinking. Maybe if I share a something embarrassing about myself, he won’t shut down and pull away. Maybe I’m just desperate to keep him close. I don’t really know. But once the words are out, I regret them.

He looks back and seems surprised. “You were?”

“I don’t know why, I just started to feel it as we kept talking about her.”

“Of all the women I’ve been with, she bothers you?”

“She’s still around. All the other women were a single night and gone, but Allison’s still here.”

“Wife,” he says. “You don’t have to worry about her. There’s nobody for me but you.”

And for a second, I believe him. For only a second, I can imagine that this is real, that we have something solid and dependable, but this is only a game, and he's only playing.

"I'm just being stupid, okay? The lights and the camera have me all mixed up. Forget I said anything."

"I won't bring it up again if you don't want me to."

Which is a surprisingly mature thing to say. "Thank you."

"But I just need you to hear this." He shifts closer, voice dropping lower. "I wish I had made that mistake with you that night. This fake marriage is the only good thing to have come out of that horrible decision. Hell, it's the only decent thing I've had in a while. You have nothing to be jealous about."

I don't know what to say. This is good? He *likes* this? But before I can process, he's walking away.

"Hold on," I tell him. "Wait, you don't get to drop a bomb like that then storm off."

"I don't feel like talking anymore, and you're needed out by the pool."

"Excuse me, for what?"

"Babysitting duty. You're still my assistant until you find a replacement."

And just like that, my jealousy is gone, and he steps onto the elevator.

Chapter 22

Isabel

I crack open a bottle of wine that night and sit on the front porch. It's a cool evening, the sunset turns the sky pink, and I enjoy the quiet for all of five minutes before Conlan joins me.

"You look like you could use some company." He pours himself a drink and takes a seat next to me on the bench swing.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Yeah, you sound lonely, too." He looks out at the sunset, smiling to himself. "Long day. Did you see the end product at the pool?"

It was hard to miss. Allison managed to get even more decorations somehow and she had them covering just about every inch of the outdoors space.

"I heard some of the guests talking about it," I tell him, rocking the swing slightly. "They seemed to really like it."

"Bad taste then." He grunts and sips his wine. "I'm not a fan of a theme."

"I like it. Themes are fun if you get into them."

"I've never been the type to participate."

"Big shock."

"Are you going to attend her party tomorrow?"

"I think we'd both better." I nudge him with my elbow. "Come on, it'll be fine. We can drink from tiki mugs and do the

limbo.”

He groans. “The limbo.” He says it like it’s a communicable disease. “I’d rather drown.”

“That can also be arranged.”

“But you’re right, we should go and make sure it doesn’t get out of hand.”

I rock us some more. We lapse into silence. It’s strangely comfortable. I’ve never spent this much time with Conlan before—not in succession like this. Normally, I’m sitting at my desk waiting for him to tell me what to do, occasionally making calls, usually keeping one eye on the calendar. But back before we got married, I’d always go home at the end of the day.

Now the end of the day means this strange house.

It’s a nice place—but it isn’t home.

“I want to apologize for my comment from this morning.” He’s looking at me now, strangely earnest.

“Which one?”

“In the elevator.”

“Yeah. That wasn’t great.” I rub knee. “But honestly, I’m a little sensitive about it. I know you didn’t mean anything, you were just making a bad joke.”

“I should be better about choosing what I joke around about. I’ll work on it.”

“I’m sorry, I’m confused. Are you actively trying to better yourself as a person?”

“Don’t get used to it.”

I laugh, unable to help myself. “I won’t. But seriously. Where’s this coming from?”

He stares at the street. “I’m aware that I’ve been difficult.”

“No kidding.”

“Don’t make this difficult.” He puts a hand over mine on top of my knee. I sit very still, surprised by the touch, but it’s not

totally unwelcome. “You’re right. You’ve been cleaning up my messes for a long time now. I’ve actively tried not to think about that, but it’s the truth.”

“Is this an apology?”

“Not exactly, but I think if we’re going to keep on doing this, I might as well try to make it easy on the both of us.”

“Which means you’re, what, saying you’ll do better?”

“Exactly.” His fingers tighten their grip. “I liked it, you know. That’s the messed-up part.”

“You like... what?” My heart’s racing and sweat breaks out down my back.

“The video thing we shot with the general’s team.”

That’s a surprise. “Why would you enjoy something like that?”

“We were married. I mean, we were acting like it was real. And for a while, that felt good.” He glances at me. “Don’t take that the wrong way.”

“How am I supposed to take it?” I feel dizzy. What’s he trying to say right now? What’s he fumbling towards?

“It’s just that you’re not so awful to be around.”

“Thanks?” I blink at him. “But you’re not that terrible either. I mean, you’re still bad, but not *that* bad.”

“Thank you.” He moves closer. The swing jostles slightly as our legs press together. “Would you like to be my date to the luau tomorrow?”

I nearly choke on my wine. I have to take a deep breath. If he notices my reaction, he doesn’t say anything.

Is this guy for real? He’s asking me out on a date right now? I’m trying to make sense of his mood swings, but I can’t keep him straight. Once second, he’s acting like being around me is a nightmare, and the next he’s telling me that he likes pretending to be my husband.

It's bizarre, but the worst part is, these butterflies in my stomach won't let me turn him down.

Even though I want to. Conlan's a player and a liar. I shouldn't want to be anywhere near him, much less going on pretend dates with my imaginary husband.

And yet that's exactly what I want.

"Only if you promise to hula hoop," I say, trying to add some levity.

"Absolutely not."

"Then the deal's off."

He smiles and reaches out. I tilt my chin up toward him, smiling, and he touches my cheek. "Come inside with me."

My stomach twists. My heart's a hammering wreck. "What?" I whisper. Do I want this? Do I actually want to go inside with him?

"I think the detectives are watching," he whispers.

And suddenly, I'm slammed back down to earth.

Fucking hell.

This whole thing was an act. He was putting on a show for those detectives, making them think our marriage is real. That's why his hand is on my knee. That's why he's touching my cheek and sitting closer.

He doesn't mean any of it.

And a sudden wave of embarrassment rushes over me. "Right, inside," I say and leap to my feet. I jostle my wine glass in the process and spill some down the front of me. "Oh, shit."

"Let me help." He gets up, takes my glass, and grabs the bottle. "Come on, let's get you into the laundry room."

I let him take me inside. I glance back and spot a car sitting a couple houses down with two figures inside. The detectives, watching us from a distance.

Conlan leads me into the laundry room. He takes off my top, sprays it with cleaner, then tosses it into the washing machine.

I'm so taken aback by everything that I barely even notice I'm standing in close quarters wearing only my bra.

But he notices. When he turns back, his eyes lock on my chest, and his tongue licks his lips like he's hungry for something. Slowly, he looks up. "I thought you'd leave," he says.

And I realize I should've gone up to my room to put on fresh clothes. Instead, I've been standing there behind him like an idiot, feeling stupid.

Now he's only a few inches away, and I'm in only my bra.

"Yeah, you're right. I just, uh—" I go to walk away, but he grabs my wrist.

"I meant what I said out there."

"You were just putting on a show." I don't look back. Why am I so emotional right now? None of this is real, but it's messing with my head.

"Yes, I was, but they couldn't hear what I said. All of that was for you, and I meant it. My life... I don't have many close friends."

"Is that what I am? A good buddy?"

"No, I don't think I'd look at a good buddy the way I look at you."

I shiver, and I know he's right.

"Let me go, Con. I should put on clothes."

"No." He pulls me back to him. "You want to hear something? When you told me you were jealous, I liked it."

"Stop." I stare into his eyes. His handsome face, his beautiful eyes. "I don't want to hear this. Things are complicated enough."

"You're right. I should let you go."

"You should."

"But you feel good."

"So do you."

He tilts my chin up. “How long can you pretend?”

I don't get a chance to ask him what he means before he kisses me.

I'm surprised for only a second, but then I'm kissing him back. Tongue, lips, everything pressed together, his taste flooding my mouth.

It's the perfect kiss. The right pressure, the right motion. I make another involuntary whimper as I sink into him, his body warm against mine. His strong arms wrap around me, holding me tight, making me feel safe. I never imagined I'd be in here, kissing my boss like this, but he's my husband. We should kiss, shouldn't we? Even if it's not real, why can't we try?

But reality asserts itself when the washing machine kicks on. The noise startles me and I pull back. Conlan's staring at me with pure lust in his expression, and I'm suddenly very aware of how vulnerable I am.

“I should go upstairs,” I say, backing away. “I should get changed.”

“Right.” The laundry machine fills behind him. “You wouldn't want to do something you'd regret.”

I hurry away, wondering. Would I regret it if I didn't pull away? And what would it have felt like, to finally give in and taste my boss the way I've always dreamed?

The answers don't matter, because I'll never let myself find out.

Chapter 23

Conlan

The party is as tacky as I pictured.

Colorful drinks, grass skirts, floral lei necklaces, tiki mugs and torches, limbo, hula hoops, and free pina coladas.

It's crowded. I don't think I've ever seen the pool area this packed on a weeknight, but there are at least eighty to a hundred people milling around, drinking the free booze, some of them in the pool playing volleyball, most of them in bathing suits lounging around as the sun goes down and the outdoor lights come on.

"You have to admit, it's impressive." Isabel surveys the madness with her hands on her hips.

"I definitely don't have to." I wave away the look she gives me. "But you're right, it's much better than I expected. Although I expected something extremely bad."

Isabel suppresses a smile, which I like. Since when did I want to make her laugh? Fucking hell, I'm a mess, and I can't stop thinking about that moment in the laundry room.

First, I decide to be vulnerable, which is always a mistake. I just wanted her to know that I like having her around, that I feel comfortable with her in my life. Even if it's not real.

But then she takes her shirt off like that, and instead of heading up to put on something fresh, she just—stands there.

And lets me stare at her.

Which was a massive mistake.

Because she's perfect. Gorgeous breasts, smooth skin, plump lips. We were so close to each other, and I couldn't help myself.

I kissed her, and not because it was part of some ceremony, but because I *wanted to*.

And I'd do it again. And again. I'd kiss her until my lips went numb.

Which is a massive problem.

Luckily, the washing machine kicked on and ruined the moment, otherwise I'm pretty sure I was about to go down on her right then and there.

I think she would've let me.

"There you two are!" Allison comes running over. She's wearing coconuts over her tits and a tiny little bikini bottom with flowers in her hair. I flinch at the sight.

"You could've covered up more," I grumble.

"Thanks, Dad." She rolls her eyes at me and hugs Isabel. "Well? It's going great, right?"

"You didn't tell me there'd be free alcohol." Isabel seems nervous. "The drinks aren't strong, right?"

"Probably not." Allison gestures over at the main bar. "But look, people are buying drinks like crazy."

She's got a point. Despite the free booze, the bar's crowded two deep, which means this party might actually turn a profit.

By some miracle.

"It's going fine," I say, which is the best I can muster. "Please make sure it doesn't get out of control."

Allison laughs. "Come on, it's a party. You want it to get a little bit wild."

"Not too wild." Isabel looks around. "You have security here, right?"

"Sure, totally." Allison spots someone in the crowd. "Okay, gotta go. Guests are loving this, so don't worry. We're

golden!” She runs off.

Isabel turns to me. “We’re fucked.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. Con, she doesn’t have anyone else here working the event.”

I frown and look around. Isabel’s right. “I can fix that.”

“Can you? Because I think we need like half a dozen guys here to make sure that free alcohol doesn’t cause a riot.”

“I’ll make a call.”

“Right. I keep forgetting. You have a guy for just about everything.”

“I *am* the guy.” I pull out my phone and text Damon, instructing him to bring a few of the Costa soldiers over to the pool. Family members only. Real muscle.

Once that’s done, we drift around the area. The guests seem relatively well-behaved, though as the night wears on it gets a little rowdy. Isabel tries one of the free pina coladas and confirms that it does in fact have alcohol—“*A lot of freaking alcohol*”—though that doesn’t stop her from drinking the whole thing. At least Damon comes through, bringing a few of my more reliable thugs to keep the peace. They seem to tame some of the more aggressive edges of the party by lurking around and looking mean.

I end up with Isabel on chairs at the edge of a cabana. Her empty cup sits at her feet and we watch as people drink and laugh in the water, doing cannonballs, cheering as a chicken fight breaks out.

“Can I admit something?” She turns to me and I notice she’s wearing the rings. She doesn’t have to wear them all the time—I never made some rule about it—but it seems like she hasn’t taken them off. I like it. “I didn’t think Allison would actually pull this off. I mean, I figured it’d just be a mess, you know?”

“I had a feeling if that girl can do anything right, it’s party.”

“Still, it’s one thing to go to parties, it’s another to organize one. She’s got some skills.”

“I guess she’s a general’s daughter, right?”

“Logistics are in her blood.” She smiles at me. “Seriously, I’m impressed.”

“You want to hire her for real?”

“You could do worse.”

“I’m counting the hours until she’s out of my life.”

Isabel grins, leaning toward me. “Oh, yeah? Does that mean you want to get rid of me too?”

I smirk in return. “No, I’m keeping you. When this is all over, I’m locking you in a room.”

“Sounds wonderful. Free food and no responsibilities? Sign me up.”

“I wish Allison had that attitude.”

“Good luck with that.”

I move closer to Isabel and drape my arm across her shoulders. I’m not sure what makes me do it—maybe the chill blowing in as the sun goes down, or just the good vibes of the party. Isabel hesitates before leaning her head on my shoulder.

“We can do this, you know.” I don’t look at her as I speak. “You and I, we can make it work. So long as Allison doesn’t do anything too crazy.”

“There’s no guarantee of that.”

“I’d say there’s about a fifteen percent chance of her burning down the entire hotel.”

“Fifteen is generous. I’d give it twenty-five.” She snuggles closer. Her warm body feels good pressed against mine. “I’m going to admit something. I’m pretty sure that drink had like six shots of vodka in it, because I must be losing my mind right now, but I’m going to admit it anyway.”

“Go ahead, now I’m curious.”

“I’ve been jealous for a while now.”

My heart flutters. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I know how you are. I’ve seen all the girls, you know? It’s hard not to notice when we’ve been working closely together for all these years, and I keep telling myself that I shouldn’t care. You’re just my boss, right? We’re professional. I can handle it. Except there’s always been a voice in the back of my head that’s, like, why doesn’t he ever hit on me? What is it about everyone else?” She laughs lightly and shakes her head, rubbing it against my shoulder. “I know, it’s stupid, right? I feel silly saying it out loud.”

“No,” I say as something loosens in my chest. “It’s not silly.”

“Sure it is. I mean, you’re Conlan Costa. Manwhore extraordinaire.”

I grimace, not looking at her. I’ve never been ashamed of the women I’ve slept with, at least not until right now. “You’re a decent person.”

“No, I’m definitely messed up if I’m admitting all this to you. I’m like begging you to make fun of me or something.”

“I’m not going to make fun of you. But what I meant is I never came on to you because you’re a decent person, and I never wanted to ruin that.”

“You think you’d ruin me?” She laughs, sitting up. I love the mocking, adorable look in her eyes. “Come on, Con. Get over yourself. It’s just sex.”

“Yes, it’s just sex, but you’re my assistant, and you’re a damn good one. If I fucked you and that made things awkward, I’d have to fire you, and that would be terrible for everyone.”

“Exactly why I never gave you any indication that you had a chance.”

I lean toward her. “Do I have a chance?”

Her mouth opens. She’s about to say something cheeky. Some comeback that would put her walls firmly back into place.

I could let her shut this down. It’d be better for both of us if we didn’t keep walking this line. I feel it, like we’re spiraling

closer and closer, pulling together, and it's going to end in an ugly crash.

Except in the meantime, it feels so fucking good.

Before she can say whatever she's thinking, I kiss her. I kiss her hard, pulling her against me, letting my mouth dominate hers, letting my tongue break in past her teeth, lengthening the kiss, tightening it.

She kisses me back immediately. No hesitation this time, no surprise. Only desire, pure and simple, burning back across our connection.

She feels it like I do. All this talk about jealousy, but all this time, I've been the one watching her from afar.

I've wanted her since the day I gave her the job.

Hell, I even planned on fucking her at some point.

But as the days passed, then the weeks, and I realized that she was not only extremely competent, but also not the kind of girl I typically went for—I decided that she was better off without me.

That hasn't changed.

Only I've crossed the line and once that line's crossed, I'm not the kind of man able to turn back.

"Come with me," I say, standing. I grab her hand and pull her along as she pulls in deep breaths.

"Where are we going?"

I shove open an employees-only door. It leads into the indoor pool, currently closed for renovations. I bypass it, cut a line toward the far wall, where I yank open another door and flip on a light.

"Take off your clothes."

She stares at me as I shut the door behind me.

It's a sauna. Currently turned off, but I work the mechanism until the heat fires up.

“What are you doing?” she asks, but she’s not trying to get away.

“Get undressed. It’s going to get hot in here shortly.”

“We shouldn’t. I mean, you shouldn’t. I mean—”

I step up to her and put my hands on her hips. I kiss her neck then the corner of her mouth. She whimpers gently.

“You can leave,” I whisper. “Go ahead, walk past me, I won’t stop you. But if you want to stay, take off your clothes.”

The moment hangs. I don’t know what she’ll choose. The anticipation drives a spoke of adrenaline into my core. I love this moment, suspended between two possible outcomes, between two worlds—the reality in which she walks away, and the reality in which she stays.

“You first,” she says.

So I take off my shirt.

Chapter 24

Isabel

That man is too attractive.

Normally, I hate him for it. There's nothing worse than someone that *knows* how good-looking they are.

It's just an ugly ego thing, like he knows that I want something from him—and he's going to hold that against me.

Except right now, with Conlan standing there shirtless, looking at me with his eyebrows raised, all I can think is—

This is a mistake I'm going to enjoy.

I'm not drunk. Tipsy, loose, sure, but not drunk. I know what I'm doing when I take off my top. I know what I'm doing when I watch him remove his pants until he's only in a pair of boxer briefs. The man's long, lean muscles are beautiful in the weak sauna light. The room begins to steam as the automatic mechanism pours water over the fake rocks.

He steps closer, reaches around my back, and unhooks my bra.

I try to cover myself, but he gently moves my arms.

“No hiding,” he says and kisses my neck. He moves me back until I'm sitting on a bench, and he kneels down between my legs.

He's so big that we're on eye level now.

“Should I be the one to say this is a terrible idea or are you going to say it?” I ask.

He kisses my neck, my collarbone. It feels so freaking good I could scream. The heat gets deeper and deeper as steam seeps

into the air. I shiver, but not from cold. Desire pools between my legs.

I won't be able to hide how much I want him.

Not after this.

"You can say it all you like." He kisses my breasts, licks my nipples, sucks them hard and bites. I gasp, back arching. The first bead of sweat forms on my skin. He licks it off. "I won't care."

"You're not going to stop? Even if I told you this is going to make things awkward between us?" I whimper softly. "You know we still have to be fake husband and wife after this."

"I won't believe you." He unzips my jeans and pulls them off. I lift my hips and let him. "Or maybe I just won't care."

"Are these the same lines you always use?"

I can tell he doesn't like that. "No, this is only for you. I need you to understand that, Isabel."

"Come on, Conlan. Don't pretend like this anything except convenience."

"You are the least convenient woman I've ever had in my life. You think this is easy for me? Getting down on my knees, worshipping you like this?"

"You're not worshipping me. You're just trying to get what you want."

"I'm trying to give *you* what *you* want. There's nothing convenient about any of this."

"I live in your house. I'm your wife and your assistant. We're around each other all the time. How's that not convenient? You want to fuck me, but you don't like me." I'm saying the words, and part of me hopes they're true. That would make things so much easier.

But I'm not sure I believe myself.

"You're right," he says, kissing me again. I lean back and let him, because how can I stop at this point? Con's sweating too, beautiful and glistening, his muscles shining. I want to lick

him too, but he's lavishing all this attention on me, and I love it. "I don't like you."

A little arrow rips through my chest.

"Then why not stop?" I whisper. "You can have sex any time you want with prettier girls than me. You can get off without the complications."

He grunts as he kisses my belly button. "You're so damn stuck-up. You know that?"

"Don't try to make this about me."

"Nothing's ever good enough. No matter what I do, you're always judging."

"Please, I just have standards."

"No, you hold yourself above everyone else. You have impossible ideas about how a person's supposed to act. You might not say it, but I notice the looks you give me. We can't all be so buttoned up."

"I'm buttoned up? I'm mostly naked in a sauna with you. I'm letting you kiss me. You think I'm buttoned up?"

"Yes, I do. You're jealous of the girls I bring home because you wish you could be more like them, but you're not."

"Right, totally, that's me."

"You'd rather be the one in my bed. But you also wish you weren't so inhibited."

I bite my lip. He's right about that, actually. I do wish I could turn off the voice in my head that's always telling me to be careful, to make sure I don't embarrass myself. Even though I'm aware nobody's looking at me and nobody cares, I still can't help it.

But then I see this parade of girls moving through Conlan's life, many of whom don't seem to care about anything at all. They live, they do what they want, fuck who they want, and have a good time. They're not worried about anything but what feels good.

I want that.

Meanwhile, I'm stuck in the past, unable to move on and unable to get out of my own head.

"Okay, you're not so wrong about that," I admit, moving my hips as he comes up to kiss my neck. His palm finds my pussy, cupping it over my panties. I let out a sharp breath as a jolt of pleasure runs down my spine. "But here I am, making bad choices. Are you proud?"

"Not really."

"I sense a double standard."

"I'm no good," he says, biting my lip and fisting my hair. He stares into my eyes. "You haven't figured that out yet, but you will. I'm bad for you, bad for everyone. Letting me touch you like this isn't going to lead anywhere good."

"Might lead somewhere nice in the short-term. Maybe that's all I need right now."

His eyes widen only a fraction. "You sure about that?"

"I want you to keep touching me, Conlan. Even if you are no good, I just don't care. I'm practicing a little selfishness and getting a piece of what I want for once in my life."

"And I'm what you want?"

"I want your mouth on mine. I want it between my legs. I want you to make me feel good."

He releases a low growl and I can tell he's struggling, but I'm way past caring. This guy is willing to fuck any girl that comes along, but he's suddenly trying to resist me? It's almost insulting. I'd scream at him, I'd start crying, if only he didn't look so good. If only he'd stop kissing my nipples and touching my body like that.

"What is it about me that makes you want to complicate everything?" He moves down my chest again.

"Well, for starters, your mouth is about three inches away from my pussy."

He purrs. "I like the way you say that word. Say it again."

"Which one? Mouth?"

“Pussy. Say it.”

I gasp as he kisses my inner thigh. “Pussy,” I whisper. And I’m finally sure this is happening.

“Louder.” He pushes my panties aside and runs a finger along my slit. “Say it.”

“Pussy.” I moan as he kisses between my legs, tongue lapping up and down. “Fuck, that feels good.”

I’m sweating now. The heat’s borderline unbearable. He’s sweating too, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He moves my panties further out of the way and starts to tease me, licking my folds, rolling the tip of his tongue on my clit, making my back arch. The pleasure’s overwhelming; the heat only makes it that much more intense.

“Now see what you’ve done?” he whispers as he sucks and licks my clit. He slides two fingers deep inside of me and I gasp. “I’ve gotten a taste of you and it’s better than I ever imagined.”

“Liar,” I groan. “I can’t even rank in your top fifty.”

“You have no idea, my wife,” he says, his voice thick with desire, and goes back down, licking, sucking, his fingers sliding in and out. I grab his hair and hold it tighter, sweat dripping down our bodies.

He’s so beautiful. This man hides himself behind his demons, behind his stupid, mindless hedonism, but he’s still so much more beautiful than he realizes. His body, yes, but also the way he looks at me, the way he touches me, like he’s receiving a new revelation with each lick and stroke.

And he cares. The little things prove it: coffees in the morning, the way he gives me space when I need it, the way he checks in on how I’m feeling.

He shows it in his own, frustrating way, but he cares.

Pleasure blooms through my mind. I know this is wrong, it’s stupid, but I’m here with him and I’m not going to stop. For once in my life, I’m going to have something that feels good, even if it’s only going to last for a little bit longer. He’s so

incredible with his mouth and his fingers, like he knows exactly where to lick and when to slide his fingers in deeper, and soon I'm gasping for air as my back arches and my hips buck against him.

"Conlan," I moan, eyes rolling back. "Oh, fuck, Conlan." The heat and the pressure in my core build and build. "I'm so fucking close."

"I want you to come for me, wife," he purrs. "I need you to come for me." He licks my clit faster, fucking me with those lovely fingers of his just the right way.

I push him down tighter. "Oh my god," I moan. "Don't stop."

"Let me taste it," he says, licking me faster.

And I come for him, I come so hard I nearly black out, maybe from the heat or from his touch, I don't know, and it doesn't matter. I come and he keeps going, sucking and licking, stroking in and out, until I gasp and slump backward, spent and dizzy.

He moves up, kissing my thighs, my breasts, until his tongue enters my mouth. I taste myself on him, salty and sweet. I kiss him back, pulling him tighter against my lips. When the kiss breaks off, he sits on the bench and pulls me into his lap.

I feel his hard cock under me. I wiggle slightly, but he doesn't make any moves, only holds me, our naked, sweaty skin pressed close.

After a little while, I break the silence. "Well, you did it," I say. "You finally got in my pants."

"Yes, I did."

"I'll be filing a sexual harassment claim in the morning."

"I don't think that'll hold up considering there's a camera in here. They'll see that you wanted every bit of what just happened."

I pull back, eyes wide. "Wait, *what*? You did not just record everything."

"Kidding." He grins huge. "I'm joking."

“Oh, you asshole.” I laugh out of sheer relief.

“I should be insulted that you believed I’d record you without your consent, you know.”

“Okay, that’s fair, but I thought the hotel might keep a camera in here to make sure people aren’t doing, you know.”

“What we just did?”

“Yep. Pretty much.”

“No, that’d be a huge violation.” He kisses my neck. “But if you ever do want to film something—”

“No, god, no, thanks though. I don’t ever want to know what my face looks like when I come.”

He tilts his head. “You’re beautiful. I’d like to get a better look. Maybe next time, I’ll fuck you on your back and stare into your eyes as you finish on my cock.”

I shiver, biting my lip. “Next time? Here I was, thinking we both admitted this was a mistake and there wouldn’t be a repeat performance.”

“Mistakes are more fun when you keep on making them.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“Sure it does. Trust me.”

I shimmy slightly and slip off his lap. “We should get back to the party. Allison probably already noticed our absence.”

He stares at my chest. I like his attention, but now that the heat of the moment’s wearing off, I’m just... sweaty and self-conscious. There’s the voice in my head, questioning everything.

I pull on my clothes, starting with my bra.

“That’s a shame,” he says with a sigh. “I was really enjoying the view.”

“Tough luck.” Once I’m good enough, I get out of the sauna. The cool air is such an enormous relief. I’m a sweaty mess, and it’s hard to get my jeans over my ass, but eventually I’m covered.

He emerges next, fully dressed, the sauna shut down behind him. “Come on,” he says, frowning. “Do you hear that?”

“I don’t—” But then I notice it. The low rumble of voices shouting, laughing, cheering.

He strides across the room and outside. I hurry to keep up.

The party’s a wreck. People are going crazy, drinking straight from bottles, flipping over chairs, tossing torches into the pool. Conlan’s security guys are trying to keep the peace, but it looks like everyone is blackout drunk.

I gape, trying to make sense of what’s happening. I check the time on my phone—and realize we were gone for at least an hour.

How the hell were we gone for so long? It felt like thirty seconds. Or maybe forever.

“Damon,” Conlan barks until the head of security comes running over. “Shut this down. Bring in more muscle if you have to. What the fuck is going on? Get rid of those goddamn bottles.”

“Sir, I’m afraid there’ll be a riot if we turn off the free alcohol.”

“Make it happen.” Conlan looks back at me. “I’m taking my wife home.”

“Yes, boss.” Damon runs off, shouting orders, and manages to drag one girl away from jumping head-first into the shallow end of the pool.

Conlan offers me his arm. “Shall we?”

I hesitate. Where are we now that he went down on me? I’m not sure how this changes our relationship.

But the place is utter insanity.

“Let’s go.”

We start across the pool. But before we get away, Allison’s voice cuts through the madness. “Where are you two going and why do you both look so sweaty?”

“Home,” Conlan growls. “And you’d better hope this party breaks up soon.”

“Right, sure, enjoy *home*,” Allison says, grinning as if she knows what we did.

I want to tell her nothing happened, which would be a lie, but she gets pulled into a conga line of revelers passing back a bottle of tequila, and I’m being dragged away by my husband.

My very big, very attractive, very sweaty husband.

Chapter 25

Conlan

I wake Isabel up early the next morning with coffee. “Don’t get used to this.”

“You’re bribing me,” she says. “It’s five-thirty in the morning.”

“We need to make sure the Lincoln’s still standing. Car leaves in a half hour.”

She gives me a pure death glare, but that’s okay.

I still have her taste on my tongue.

The taste of her skin. The taste of her pussy, her sweat. Her nipples and lips. Isabel was all I could think about all night and my dreams were a fucked-up mess. I had to get myself off twice just to fall asleep.

But now it’s back to reality.

That party infected us. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was just the environment, but the second she admitted that she’s been jealous for years was the moment I knew I’d cross that line.

I have no regrets.

Except for maybe waking her up early.

Isabel’s grumpy on the way over to the hotel. She’s not in a talkative mood, which is fine, I get it, I forced her to get less sleep, though I do notice that she’s still drinking the coffee I made her in a to-go mug.

For some reason, that makes me smile.

It's strange, this feeling. Wanting to do good things for her. Wanting to make her happy, and feeling happy in return.

When we reach the Lincoln, Damon's there to greet us. The guy looks like he's still up from the night before "You're not going to like it," he says as we head out to the pool.

"How bad?"

"Nothing permanent, just a mess." He sighs as he reaches the door.

"Did you go home last night?"

"Crashed here. Had to call in extra muscle to clear everything out. Took us too fucking long."

"You're a good man. Go take the rest of the day off and get some sleep. Be here tomorrow at the usual time."

Damon hesitates. "You sure, boss?"

"Go on, we'll be fine."

He looks relieved as he stalks off.

Isabel gives me a look. "You never gave me a break, you know."

"You didn't have to clear out a pina colada-fueled rager."

"True, but I had to do worse. You made me do your laundry."

I snort as we survey the madness.

Damon was right. Nothing's permanently broken. No smashed light fixtures, broken diving boards, destroyed concrete, nothing like that.

But plenty of trash. Plastic cups, cans, and the shredded remains of fake palm trees cover the ground. Several chairs float in the pool. It looks like a hurricane ripped through.

"This is going to be a problem," I say.

"I'm honestly impressed." Isabel picks up the bottoms to a woman's bathing suit. "How'd this even happen?"

"Allison." I rub my face with both hands. "I'm tempted to go up there and give her hell for this."

“Don’t.” Isabel tosses the bottoms away, making a grossed-out face. “Seriously, where’s the top? Was some girl walking around bottomless? Just a naked vagina?”

“She’s going to plan more parties like this.” I walk through the wreckage, tallying up the damage in my head. This is going to cost a lot. “The hotel can’t afford it.”

“The bar was really busy. Maybe that’ll offset this mess?”

“I’m going to pay a full crew to get this place cleaned up. Then we’ll have to replace everything that got ruined. Chairs, a couple cabanas, some landscaping. Nothing serious, but it all adds up.”

“We’ll talk to her, but wait until later.”

I’d rather make the girl sit through my lecture while she’s hungover, but I suspect she’ll feel like shit no matter when I head up there.

We do another circuit before heading inside. “Go talk to the head of housekeeping and have her start making some calls. We need at least ten people out there, maybe more.”

“Got it. I’ll also have maintenance put in orders for the chairs and start doing what they can about the cabanas.”

“You’re a dream.” I say it without thinking. Isabel’s eyebrows raise in surprise. “I just mean, you’re doing a good job.”

“You’ve never, in all the time we’ve worked together, said anything remotely like praise before.”

“Should I just insult you instead?”

“Honestly, yes, at least I’m used to that.”

“You’re impossible to please,” I say then put a finger to my lips. “Actually, scratch that. I know one easy way to please you. Should we head to the sauna?”

“I really regret it already.” She sighs, walking away.

“Is that a yes?” I watch her go, grinning to myself. I’ve been smiling a lot lately, and it’s strange. Despite this shitty situation we’re in, I’ve been having a blast.

I head up to my office. My receptionist isn't in yet, which is fine. I sit behind my desk as my cell phone starts to ring. I glance at the screen and Adler's number comes up, which makes sense—it's later in the day on the East Coast.

"Hello, brother. You do realize how early it is over here?"

"You're always up." He sounds like he's in a good mood, which is a first. "I spoke with Leyland. I figured you'd want to hear it right away."

"What did that asshole have to say for himself?"

"Well, the rumor's out there."

"I knew that already."

Adler grunts in reply. "Yes, true, and his people have been spinning their counter-narrative."

"How's that going?"

"Surprisingly well. Turns out, most people didn't really care to begin with, and all it took was just a little mud to make the whole thing seem too sketchy to get upset over."

"They're figuring this out already?"

"It's a work in progress, or so I'm told, but Leyland seemed optimistic. He told me to tell you that so long as you keep his daughter locked down for a few more weeks, you're in good shape."

I lean back in my chair. I should say something—but nothing comes to mind.

This is good news.

Or at least it should be.

But all I can think about is my fake marriage to Isabel, and how if the Allison garbage blows over quickly, we won't need to continue with the charade.

It'll fade, and so will our fake marriage.

Which I don't want.

"Conlan?" Adler sounds annoyed. "I just gave you a stay of execution and you're not saying anything."

“Right. No, that’s great, I appreciate you letting me know.”

“Tell your assistant for me. I’m sure she’ll be relieved. Can’t imagine what the poor girl is going through.”

“It’s hell. I can tell you that. I don’t know how you handle marriage, much less fatherhood.”

“Trust me, it’s easy when you find the right person. But that’s not really your style, is it?”

“No,” I say, looking toward the door. “I guess not.”

Adler hangs up. I sit in the silence that follows, thinking about Isabel. I have no idea how she’ll react to this news. She might even want to change the terms of our deal, make it so that we can end sooner.

Then she’ll be out of my life.

I don’t want that. It’s a fucking mess, but I want her to stay. I got a taste, and that’s not enough. I need more—I want more.

Like Adler said. Find the right person and marriage is easy.

For now, I’ll sit on this. We have to watch over Allison anyway, and I need Isabel for that. When everything’s officially done, and Allison Leyland is out of my life, I’ll tell Isabel.

But not before then.

Chapter 26

Isabel

A few days of blissful marriage pass. Conlan keeps making me coffee in the morning, but he does other things too: a foot rub here, dinner there. Small gestures, like we're actually together.

Like he's really thinking about me.

That night in the sauna left me reeling. For a lot of reasons, but mostly because I really liked it. Not just the sex, but the intimacy. I loved the way he touched me, the way he looked at me, and the way he held me afterward. I felt safe in a way I've never felt before, not for a very long time at least. That safety is something I've craved ever since my father died, and while I *definitely* don't love linking Conlan with my dead dad, I can't deny the feeling I have when my fake husband is around.

It's simple. It's stability.

When I'm at the Lincoln, I spend most of the workday chasing Allison around. Lisa and some members of her team are actively trying to keep Allison in line, but I'm the only one the girl seems to listen to, which means babysitting duty. Exactly what I didn't want to happen.

"She's worse than I thought," I say on a Tuesday night. I'm sitting on the couch in the living room with Conlan, my feet in his lap. I have a glass of wine, which he got me without asking, and now he's going to town on my soles.

Fuck, he's so good at that.

The man's got *hands*.

“I tried to warn you.”

“Don’t start. I’m annoyed with you, too. You’re the one that dumped her on me.”

“Hey, I’ve been trying to get the whole hotel involved, but you have the magic touch.”

I sigh, closing my eyes. I’d snap back at him but he’s doing such a good job and I don’t want him to stop. “I just wish she’d chill a little. This next party’s looking even more over the top than the last one. At least she’s sticking to the budget this time.”

“I told you, she needs structure and guidance. You’re both.”

“I’m not a fan of being either.”

“Allison’s a military brat. Bark at her like a drill instructor and she’ll fall into line.”

I roll my eyes. “This explains so much. You have no clue how to handle her.”

“And I never want to know. It’s bad enough I made a mistake and spent a night with her. If I can keep my distance, I absolutely will.”

“What is it about her that you hate so much?”

“She’s insufferable.”

“Well, yes, true, but that’s not it. There’s something else you keep dancing around.”

He looks at me, his lips pressed down. His hands pause their rubbing and I curse myself.

Quit asking him hard questions! Let him keep kneading!

But the foot rub resumes, to my massive relief.

“You really want the story?”

“Only if you want to share it.” The idea of Conlan opening up disturbs me and excites me in equal measure.

“It’s not some big secret. It’s just not something I like to talk about.” He’s not looking at me now but staring at the window like he’s looking into the past. “It happened a long time ago.”

“Conlan. I can tell her age bothers you a lot. And it really should, but it’s more than just a normal reaction. You seem actively troubled, like it hurts. If you want to talk to me, I’m listening.”

I want to listen, too. Conlan’s always had this air about him, this feel that he doesn’t give a shit about anything, but I’ve known that’s just his emotional armor at work, holding everyone as far away as possible.

Until now, I never cared to dig in deep to find out what he’s hiding from.

But I’ve gotten to know him better than I ever thought I would, and I can’t help myself. The more layers I dig down into, the fuller my picture of Conlan becomes.

I want to know him.

The real him, not the playboy asshole he presents to the world.

He speaks softly as he tells me the story. “She was my best friend at the time. Her name was Eva Quest.” He pauses and I’m not sure if he’ll continue. Although lucky for me, he keeps rubbing my feet. “We met in at this summer boarding school. Not really camp, since it was all academics. My dad sent me and my brothers there starting when we each turned ten, and we went every summer until we graduated high school. He said it was to keep us out of trouble, but it wasn’t very effective.” He smiles to himself. More memories, more pieces of him I want to gather.

“Are you still in touch with her?” I ask, prompting him to continue.

He ignores my question. “Eva was trouble, and I think that’s what drew me to her. She was the kind of girl everyone had a crush on, you know? Beautiful, funny, intelligent, outgoing. She could fight with the boys and hang with the girls. But nobody was in her league.”

“Not even you?”

“No, definitely not me, not back then.” He laughs at something. “I met her my first year and looked forward to that stupid place because it meant a few months of hanging around

her. We'd text all the time during the regular year, and when we were at Belling's, we were inseparable. Until our second to last year." He pauses again. A longer pause this time, like he's struggling with something. "She met this guy. I don't know how. It happened when she was back at home, and I guess they started dating or whatever, but I never liked the asshole. He was twenty-eight and she was barely seventeen."

I let out a soft groan. "Oh, god." I can already guess where this story is going.

"Yeah. Well. He came to visit her that summer. Drove up from Atlanta all the way to Maine. He was an asshole, had this shitty little convertible, dressed like an upscale realtor with loafers and polos. Eva adored him, and I never understood why. He seemed like such an egotistical loser to me, even back then. The guy was fake, everything was for show, but I couldn't ever convince Eva of that. Things were fine though, at least until the night of the party. There was this lake near the school grounds, and the older kids would sneak down there to smoke cigarettes and light bonfires. That night, Andy showed up with three big handles of cheap vodka, and that was the beginning of it."

Another silence. I pull my feet away and sit up straight. My heart's beating into my ears. A best friend, an older boyfriend. I start to make the connections, and I can already see why he'd feel so awful about being with a girl as young as Allison. He witnessed the power imbalance once already from the other side.

He clears his throat. "Eva got drunk. We all got drunk. At some point, Andy convinced her to go out in this beat-up old rowboat onto the lake. I tried telling them the thing wasn't stable and it was way too dark, but Andy laughed at me, called me a fucking pussy, basically made a lot of noise. Eva didn't want to go but Andy pressured her, and she couldn't turn him down. I never understood what it was about that loser, maybe just that he was so much older, but she was willing to do whatever he asked even if she didn't want to. I watched her get in that boat and the pair of them rowed out, and to this day I

hate myself for not stopping it. I was back at the fire when the screaming started.”

I cover my mouth and try not to gasp. “Tell me she’s okay.”

“Andy came back. He was soaked. The boat capsized. I guess there was a leak, and they tried to plug it, but he tipped it over in the process. He was trying to explain himself, but Eva was missing. I hit the guy in the face, broke a knuckle on his jaw, then I stripped down and swam out with a couple other guys to search for her. But all we found were the oars floating in the water. I dove down and down a dozen times, looking for her in the silt and muck, and it was so dark under there, so dark I could barely tell which way was up, but I kept trying until someone pulled me out of the water. I didn’t want to give up, but by that time I was exhausted and I would’ve drowned myself if I hadn’t gotten out. The cops were called, rescue people showed up, but it didn’t help. The divers found her body a couple days later. Andy got in some trouble, ended up on probation, but it wasn’t enough.” He looks up at me, his expression dark. “There are things about my life you don’t fully understand. An aspect to my world that I’ve kept from you.”

His story rings through me like a series of concussive explosions.

I knew there was tragedy in his past. He wears it like weight on his shoulders. His smile, his outgoing attitude, it’s there to cover for something.

Only I didn’t know it was something like this.

A lost friend at such a young age.

It clearly still haunted him.

“I know what you are.” I put my hand on his thigh. “I’m so sorry that happened to you. I’m so sorry for your friend.”

He grunts at me. “She died because an older guy got her drunk and took advantage of her. He convinced her to do something stupid and dangerous, and she did it. That’s why I’m disgusted by what happened with Allison. I know the situation isn’t the same, but I don’t ever want to be that person.”

“You’re not, not even close. The fact that you’re even thinking about it says so much.”

“I’m not a good person, Isabel. You need to understand that. I tried to save my friend, but I’ve done other things. Worse things.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

He stares into my eyes. “Andy’s dead. I took care of him myself when I turned twenty. The sad part is it didn’t make the pain go away. Nothing ever does. But he drowned, just like Eva did, all alone in the darkness.”

I pull my hand away. Fear mixes in with the heartache. I feel sick, my stomach a knotted mess. “You killed him?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he says, “You don’t need to be afraid of me. I’m still the same person I was before. Only what you’ve seen glosses over the truth of what I am, and I want you to know me, Isabel. I want you to really know me.”

I thought I did too. The idea of uncovering the parts he keeps hidden feels intoxicating. But after that story—

I’m not sure I want to anymore.

I shift away from him and stand. I pace, throw back my wine, finish the glass. My head’s a mess.

This guy went through something horrible. He lost a friend in a terrible accident, and it clearly never left him.

But what am I supposed to do with this? Now that I know he killed a person, how can I look at him the same?

He’s always been this man.

There’s been a wall between this part of his life and the more legitimate aspects. There’s the Lincoln hotel and all the other properties he controls, and then there’s the Costa Family.

Between me and the violence.

I’ve always known about the dark places. I try not to think about it, but they’ve always been there lurking behind all those late night meetings and the shady, whispered phone calls.

Only I hoped they were an illusion, a mirage.

“Was he a bad person?” I ask, finally looking over. “This Andy guy. Was he bad?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. To me, it matters.”

“Andy was a bad person, but maybe not in the way you’re thinking. He didn’t kick puppies. He didn’t steal from retirees. But he was selfish and conniving. He used people. He abused them in some cases. His appetite for younger women never went away, even as he got older. Andy was a bad man, and the world’s better off without him.”

“Okay,” I take, taking a deep breath. “Okay, I can handle that.”

It doesn’t fix anything, but at least I can understand why Conlan did what he did.

He gets up. “Andy deserved what he got, but he’s not the only person I’ve hurt over the years. If you think they’ve all been monsters, you’re kidding yourself. I do what needs doing for the family.”

“I don’t want to hear anything else.”

“It’s time we stopped pretending, Isabel. You can’t keep going on like I’m some normal businessman. If you’re going to be in my life—”

I hold up a hand. “This isn’t forever. Right? It’s not forever, which means we can keep this stuff hidden, okay? We don’t need to talk about it.”

His face twitches. I can tell he doesn’t like that. But we both know I’m right.

If I was his real wife, I’d need to know about this stuff.

His fake wife doesn’t.

“If that’s really what you want,” he says after a long pause, sounding almost reluctant. “I want you to know me.”

“And I don’t want to see you as a criminal.”

“Is that what my story taught you?” His head cocks to the side.

“Everything I just said and all you took away are my crimes?”

“No, that’s not it, I’m just—”

“You’re afraid of me now.”

I ball my hands into fists. “Yes. I’m afraid of you.”

He grunts as if I kicked him in the chest. “All right. I understand.”

“Conlan—”

“No, I understand,” he repeats. “This is temporary. We don’t really need to do this, do we?” He moves past me toward the steps. “I’m going to bed.”

I vibrate with the need to call out. I want him back on the couch, rubbing my feet, talking about himself.

How did I screw this up so badly?

It’s just, hearing about him murdering someone freaked me out. Fear twisted everything. I knew on some level that was part of his shadow profession, but still, hearing it out loud was like a punch to the gut.

I should be saying more. I should explain, empathize, tell him how much it hurts me to know that he’s been carrying around this terrible weight for so long.

It explains a lot about him, especially why he’s so angry with himself for sleeping with Allison.

Except I can’t get past it.

He disappears upstairs. I watch him go and flinch when his bedroom door closes.

I fucked up. I know I fucked up.

But my whole life has been defined by comfort and safety and the mainstream world. I’m a rule-follower. I’m not violent.

Despite all this, Conlan’s still like a beacon in my mind, drawing me toward him in ever-tightening spirals, only I’m afraid that I’ve knocked us off-center and I’ll never reach him again.

Chapter 27

Isabel

I spend all night thinking about the way I handled that conversation. It gnaws at me like a virus eating at my mind. I don't get much sleep.

I keep picturing a young Conlan diving into black water, getting more and more desperate, searching for his friend and finding nothing, knowing she's down there somewhere in the darkness but unable to reach her.

How he's been in that lake ever since.

Never really out of it, not exactly.

That's how trauma breaks us. It's never gone, not really. It lingers in the body, in the memory, in the scars it leaves and the fears it feeds. Conlan wants to run from his trauma, wants to hold it at bay, wants to pretend like a man can't feel loss, but he's wrong.

It's there, eating at him.

In the morning, I'm up early. There's no oat milk latte this time, no knock on the door. It's a little past five, and I know he's awake. I hear him moving around downstairs.

I pull on shorts and an old t-shirt then step out into the hall. I don't know what my plan is, but I have to make things right.

I head toward the steps and flinch as he comes up them. His eyes meet mine in the hallway and I take a step back, hands coming up to my chest.

"You scared me," I say, heart racing. I'm not sure why. I wanted this to happen. I wanted to run into him.

“That’s the last thing I wanted to do.” I’m not sure if he’s talking about last night or right now.

I stare at him, licking my lips. He’s shirtless, in only a pair of workout shorts. His muscles are hard, his stomach stacked, his chest sculpted. I’m reminded again of his incredible beauty.

And the darkness lurking underneath it like a still, deep lake.

“I’m sorry,” I stammer, saying it before I can stop myself.

“For what?”

“The way I reacted last night. I just—”

“Stop,” he says, voice low. “You owe me nothing.”

“No, really, I mean it. I’m sorry.”

“Isabel.” He takes a step toward me. “In case you haven’t noticed, this thing between us is more than just some fake marriage to me.”

My mouth opens. My eyes go wide. My throat constricts and I have to clear it, and is he saying what I think he’s saying? The way he’s looking at me right now is intoxicating, but I’m also distinctly aware of his other aspect, the dark side of him.

“I don’t, I mean, I didn’t—”

“What I told you last night, I’ve never told another person outside of my family. Never, not a single time. You’re the first. I don’t blame you for reacting the way that you did, and I’m the one that should apologize. I should’ve been more careful about how I told that last part to you. I should’ve realized how it would sound.”

“Conlan,” I whisper, my throat thick with emotion.

“I don’t want apologies from you. I don’t want anything at all. I am what I am, darkness and all. You married me because I made you a good offer, and that’s it. There’s no future here and nothing else matters. I don’t regret telling you, but I wish you wouldn’t look at me like I’m some kind of monster now. We can pretend like none of this happened. Don’t worry, I won’t hold it against you.” He turns away and heads toward his room.

“Wait.” The word forces itself out of my lips. I don’t know what I plan on doing.

He’s right, isn’t he? This whole thing isn’t real. We’re in some strange, fake relationship, and yes, he got me off, and we’ve kissed a few times, and he’s been doing nice things, and yeah, I get butterflies when he’s around—but he’s a criminal. He’s a killer. He’s so much more than I ever imagined.

“Don’t make me stand here,” he says, voice soft. “We can just be done.”

“Come with me.” I reach out my hand. “I want to tell you something.”

He stares at me. I can tell he’s not sure if he wants to do this. But I don’t move, keeping my hand extended, until he finally takes it. I don’t know what I’m thinking, but I feel my mind lock into place. A decision forms, one I’m pretty sure will take me somewhere I never imagined I’d go, but I can’t stop myself now.

“Where?” he asks.

“Just, come on. Don’t make this hard on me.”

He looks confused, but he takes my hand. His fingers are strong and callused. Sometimes I forget how hard he can be.

I lead him to my bedroom.

“Isabel,” he says as I take him inside.

“Just be quiet, okay?” I push him toward the bed. “Sit down.”

He stares at me, but he sits.

I shut the door behind me. I’m so nervous I could scream and that still wouldn’t burn off any of this energy. Butterflies rampage through my guts. I take a deep breath and I focus on him.

He’s Conlan. The boss I’ve always hated. Cocky, over the top, frustrating, but also beautiful, kind, helpful, generous. He’s Conlan, with all his contradictions and flaws. There is no perfect man, no perfect person, but this is Conlan. Gorgeous, pain in my ass, Conlan.

Nothing's changed.

I take a deep breath. "When I was fifteen, my dad got cancer. One year later, he was dead."

Conlan's head tilts. "I'm sorry."

"We don't have any family. My mom left when I was little, and my dad was an only child. My grandparents passed when I was ten, so when things started to look bad for him, I stepped in to help because there was nobody else. All that years, from fifteen to sixteen, I basically spent it taking care of my dying father, and I don't think I can ever explain the scars that left in me." I lean back against the door, trying not to think of my dad, the man that loved me the most in the world, lying in bed too sick and exhausted to move, an emaciated skeleton of the human I remember.

"That must have been terrible," he says softly.

"It was too much for me. I did what I had to do because he was everything to me, but it was way too much. I still have nightmares about taking care of him like that, about watching him slowly die over weeks and months, about those awful last nights we spent together. I slept on his floor, listening to him struggle to breathe. We talked as much as he could, but mostly, his hand dangled over the side of the bed and I held it. I'm grateful I got the chance to be there for him when he needed me the most, but it fucked me up, Conlan, because I wasn't enough. I couldn't save him."

"You were a kid. That was never on you."

"I know, I know that, but I still think about it. What if I had done things differently? Been better somehow? Made him more comfortable? Could he have survived? I know that's not how it works but I've been plagued with these questions for a long time. I think it's part of why I can't leave that house. It's all I have left of my dad, and if I sell it, I'll be letting him down a second time."

"You didn't let him down. You stepped up when you had to." Conlan stands. "I'm so sorry you went through that."

“You told me about Eva, and I guess I want you to know about what happened with my dad. In a lot of ways, that defines who I am now. I can’t... I’m afraid that I’ll screw up. That I won’t be enough. And if I get close, it’ll happen again.”

He takes a deep breath. “I understand what you mean,” he says, exhaling. “But you are enough. You’re more than enough, and what you did for your father took real strength. You should be proud.”

I blink back tears. “That’s what he said to me a few days before he was gone. That he was proud.”

“Good. You should hold on to that instead of all that other stuff. Remember how much he loved you.”

“I try to.” I wipe my face and try to smile. “I don’t talk about that much. It still hurts, if I’m honest. But I’m glad I told you.”

“I’m glad you felt like you could share with me.”

“I understand I didn’t react well last night. You scared me with that last part, but it’s okay. You’re not a monster.” I step toward him and touch his skin with my palms. He’s still warm. So damn warm. “I don’t think I’m a monster, either.”

“You aren’t even close.” He brushes my hair from my face.

I stand on my toes and kiss him. Just our lips barely touching. But a thrill runs into my core, chasing away the pain, chasing away the horrible memories. I kiss him again, wanting more of that feeling, wanting him so badly it hurts. I kiss him again, and again, and soon our kiss deepens into something starving, some good.

I take off my shirt. His eyes go hungry and he doesn’t move. I take off my shorts. He’s staring at me, looking ravenous.

I’m trembling as I start to unhook my bra.

He pulls me against him. Relief floods through my body as he kisses me again, and this time all my hesitation, all my sorrow, all the hurt that won’t let me go, it dissipates into his touch.

This man also knows what it’s like to carry a deep sadness, one that won’t ever let go.

And maybe we can get past it together.

Desire ignites every nerve. Every hair stands on end. My core pulses and tightens. I melt into his mouth, into his taste and his strong tongue as it invades my mouth, and I whimper stupidly, unable to control myself anymore.

Here we are, two people deeply scarred, searching for something better.

I take off my bra. My nipples are so stiff, and they feel so good rubbing against his shirtless, muscular torso.

“Tell me you’re sure about this,” he whispers as one hand slips down my front, teases my breasts, moves down between my legs. “Tell me you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” I say as his fingers slide beneath my panties.

I’m wet. Soaked through. He rolls along my folds, up into my slit, across my clit. I shiver as his kiss grows feverish, his other fist gripping my hair.

I saw something in him last night. Not the killer, but the man beneath all the trauma. I caught a glimpse of the person Conlan’s been hiding and I want more of him.

He’s protective. He cares about his family and his friends. He’ll do anything to help them—and to save them. He risked his life diving into that pitch-black lake, and even if it came to nothing, he still tried.

That’s the Conlan I want.

He turns me to the bed and lays me down. His body crushes mine, my legs spread. His cock’s hard, straining against the thin workout shorts, grinding in my pussy. He keeps kissing me, lips on my neck, my throat, as he moves lower. To my breasts, licking my nipples, sucking them. God, he’s so handsome, his body a chiseled masterpiece.

My panties come off, but this time, I lean forward and push him back.

He grunts in surprise as I yank off his shorts.

His cock's hard. It twitches in my hand as I roll my palm over his tip, gathering his precum, stroking down his shaft. He groans, staring at me, leaning back against my pillow. He pulls me so that I'm on my knees, legs spread, and his fingers tease my pussy as I stroke his cock.

"That's a good girl," he moans. "Tip to base, up and down. Such a good girl, I love how that feels. I love how wet you are for me right now. Have you been thinking about this all morning?"

"All night," I admit, moaning. "I've been thinking about you all night."

"I've been thinking about you too. It takes all my fucking willpower not to come in here, knowing you're right down the hall."

"Why haven't you?"

"Because I don't want to scare you away." His fingers slide inside of me then back to my clit.

I lean forward and take his cock in my mouth. I want to show him that I'm not going to run away so easily. I suck him hard, slide him into my throat. The pleasure of his fingers on my pussy as his cock pumps between my lips loosens my inhibitions. I don't care if my spit rolls down his shaft. I only care about his moans, and my moans are stifled by his thick, throbbing cock.

"Come here," he growls, pulling me up. I straddle him and our lips meet, kissing hard. I whimper between his lips as his cock presses against my entrance, his tip soaked with my spit, my pussy soaked with my arousal. "Arch you back. Go ahead, take it slow."

"Fuck," I whisper as he presses into me. "God, Conlan. I want this."

"I want it too. Take all of me, nice and slow."

He fills me. I drift down his thick cock, shivering with each inch. He stares into my eyes, hands on my hips, until he's deep inside of me. I shiver, eyes closed, and he leans forward to kiss my neck, my breasts.

“Now ride,” he commands.

And I obey. Working my hips, I move up then down again, gliding along his cock. He’s so hard and it feels so fucking good as I take him, letting him stretch me apart, his hands on my ass.

We move faster. I find the rhythm as he pumps into me, fucking me. I bite his lip and he slaps my ass nice and hard, sending a jolt of pain through the bliss, the contact making the pleasure that much more intense.

I go faster, sweat beads my back. He spanks my ass hard, pulls my hair, and turns me around. I’m on all four as he fucks me from behind, leaning over to rub my clit with his fingers, lips on my throat. “You feel fucking incredible,” he says as he takes me. I’m his, all his, and I buck back against him.

“You do too,” I gasp. “God, I need you in me. I need you to fuck me, Conlan.”

He spanks my ass. The sound’s heaven as I bang against him. I’m moaning, out of my mind with bliss, but before I can lose myself, he turns me around again. This time he pins me down on my back, and his mouth’s between my legs licking me, sloppy and gorgeous, before he’s fucking me again.

I raise my arms above my head. He pins my wrists there and licks my nipples, sucking them, controlling me as he stares into my face.

“This is what I’ve been imagining,” he says. “You beneath me, moaning as my cock fucks you into submission. I want to watch you come on my shaft, lovely girl.”

I stare back at him, at his muscular shoulders and arms, at his chest flexing with each thrust. “God, yes,” I moan. “Please, yes, I want it so bad.” I’m half whining, half moaning.

He gives me more. Fucks me deep, rolling into me over and over, and we sink into a rhythm. There’s only the feeling of him inside of me, fucking me, taking me, again and again, his hands still holding my wrists down.

“Look at me while I fuck you,” he says.

I gasp, back arching, and I can't take it anymore. "Yes," I say, my voice low. "Yes, god, yes." It's building, building, my core a tight mess, and finally I feel myself tipping over that edge into oblivion.

I come and he watches me the whole time, fucking me through it. He takes me like that, takes me and makes me his own, as pleasure rips my world to pieces, and he stitches it back together.

Only moments after my orgasm starts to slow, he stiffens, and I feel him come between my legs. Deep inside of me, warm and comforting. He groans and I bury his mouth with mine, rolling my hips, greedy for him to feel as good as I felt, wanting every last drop.

We collapse together. Sweaty, spent. It's a glorious feeling, his arms wrapped around me, my head buzzy with bliss. Ears ringing with the sound of his groans.

"Not the start to the day that I pictured," he whispers.

"Disappointed?"

"Not in the least."

"Good." I pause and grin at him. "You'll still make me coffee, right?"

"Isabel, I will make you as much coffee as you want."

"That's the answer I wanted."

He kisses me gently. "Does this mean you aren't terrified of me?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Maybe a little fear is a good thing, if it makes you want to fuck me like that."

"Filthy man."

"Damn right."

I laugh as he kisses me, and the voice in the back of my head that second-guesses everything keeps on whispering about

how this is a huge mistake, but I manage to silence it for a while as we spend a lazy morning in bed together.

Chapter 28

Conlan

We get to the Lincoln late in the day. Isabel holds my hand on the way inside, and I'm not sure if she's doing it for show, or if she's doing it because she wants to stay close.

I don't mind either way.

It's an excuse to touch her, and that's all I need.

I can tell something's off the second we're inside. The front staff is whispering to each other and nobody's meeting my gaze. I make it ten feet before Lisa comes charging over, looking nervous, her hands rubbing together.

"Mr. Costa," she says, which is a bad sign. She only ever uses that formal name when she's got bad news.

"What happened?" I release Isabel's hand. "Don't tell me it's another party disaster."

"No," Lisa says quickly. "No, it's, uh—" She clears her throat. "Damon's out looking right now. He's got a ton of people—"

My jaw sets. "Lisa."

"Allison's missing. She didn't show up this morning to the team meeting—"

I look back at Isabel, barely holding back my anger. "I knew this would be a problem."

"Don't overreact," she says, raising her hands. "Maybe she's in her room."

"Damon checked that," Lisa says. "But it was empty."

“Where else could she be?” I stalk across the lobby toward the elevators. Isabel and Lisa hurry to keep up. “She’s not stupid enough to run away right now. Weren’t things going well with her?”

“I don’t know if I’d say that.” Lisa looks uncomfortable as we get onto the elevator. “Look, you told me to stall her, right? I’ve basically been trying to do two jobs at once, my normal job, and making Allison happy without actually letting her do any damage.”

“And I appreciate that.” I give her a flat stare. “But something happened.”

“She pushes hard and can’t stand hearing the word no, which is basically all I ever say, because otherwise she would’ve blown this whole place to little pieces. I mean, she wanted to host a fireworks show—”

“Fireworks?” My eyebrows shoot up. “She really did want to burn the place down.”

“That’s not everything.” Lisa shifts foot to foot. “Allison’s smart. She’s really smart, and extremely focused, but she only wants to do things her way. She basically terrorized my team every day. And finally, yesterday...” Lisa clears her throat.

“Someone exploded,” Isabel guesses.

“Yes, finally someone couldn’t take it anymore. I won’t say who, but Allison deserved it. I had a talk with my team member and we’re all good, but I’m afraid maybe Allison took it to heart. She’s very sensitive.” Lisa’s staring at the ceiling when the elevator reaches Allison’s floor. I stalk over to her room, knock twice, then use my master key to get inside.

It’s still barren. Most of the breakables are gone. But now there are little touches everywhere: throw pillows, blankets, paintings on the walls, fuzzy slippers in the corner. I stare around, surprised. Isabel wanders in after me, running her hand over a stack of books, a pair of headphones, framed photographs of a younger Allison and her friends.

“It looks like she moved in,” I say with genuine surprise. “Nobody told me about all this.”

“Nobody knew until Damon came in here earlier.” Lisa remains near the door. “She’s not around. Trust me, he checked.”

I turn to study her, considering. “How many guys does he have on this?”

“A lot. I didn’t count.”

“And there’s no word from her? Nothing?”

“Nothing. Conlan, honestly, I’m so sorry, I did my best to keep her happy without letting her destroy the place, but—”

I hold up a hand to silence her. I take a deep breath and let it out, calming myself. It won’t help anything if I drag Lisa over hot coals right now. “It isn’t your fault.”

She seems dubious. “I mean, maybe, but—”

“You are not a babysitter. It’s not part of your normal job description to deal with someone like Allison. You did the best you could.”

“Thank you.” Lisa seems taken aback, like she never expected me to understand.

I’m a hard man. I live to the fullest, enjoy having a good time, but at work I don’t take bullshit. I have a difficult reputation among my staff, which is probably why Lisa’s so surprised right now.

I’m also fair. I don’t punish employees for little mistakes, especially ones that weren’t their fault. I demand a lot, but I give a lot in return.

Lisa isn’t at fault here.

No, if anyone’s to blame, it’s me.

“Go back to your office. Leave early if you need to. I’ll handle this from here.”

“Right. Okay. I’d be happy to help though—”

“You’re not in trouble, don’t worry. You’ve been a huge help already.”

“Sure.” Lisa glances at Isabel, bemused, and heads out.

I turn in a circle, surveying the room. I should've been more on top of this instead of leaning on my subordinates. I won't make that mistake again.

Isabel studies me from across the room like she's not sure what to make of all this. "Stop giving me that look," I say.

"You were nice to her."

"And?"

"I expected you to rip her apart."

"I meant what I said. Lisa's not a fucking babysitter." I glare at Isabel. "Stop giving me that look."

"You were kind. You handled that well." She laughs and comes closer. "I don't think I ever pictured the day. I'm proud of you."

"I can still fire her."

"You won't, you big softie."

I roll my eyes and bat her away when she tries to give me a condescending hug.

Once she stops goofing around, I gesture at the room.

"This isn't the space of someone that plans on running away," I say, trying to put this mess together in my head. "All her stuff is still here."

"That's what I was thinking too." Isabel picks up a book, some romance novel with a mark halfway through. "It's like she moved in and planned on staying for a while."

"Then why disappear today of all days?"

"I don't know." She chews her lip and tosses the book aside. "Lisa mentioned a fight. Maybe that's part of it. But are you sure she *did* disappear?"

"Explain."

"If Allison hated it here and she wanted to leave, she had a million opportunities to make our lives a living hell, and even more to run away."

My eyebrows raise. “You’re telling me she hasn’t made life difficult already?”

“Honestly, I think she’s been on her best behavior.” At my look, Isabel grins. “*Her* best, anyway.”

“What is this, then?”

“I don’t know.” Isabel paces across the room. “But look at this place. Have you ever decorated a temporary hotel room before? She plans on being here for a while, so why would she run away?”

I grunt, not really convinced. Allison’s like a wild horse: push too hard, move too fast, and she bolts. That fight with Lisa’s subordinate might’ve been all the encouragement she needed to escape.

“This is just distraction.” I gesture at all the stuff. “She’s clever. That girl knows what she’s doing, and this is what she wants us to think.”

“Come on, you’re giving her too much credit.”

“Am I? You remember that party. She organized everything in less than a day. She managed to get all those decorations brought into the hotel without anyone realizing it was happening, and she did it right under my nose.” I shake my head, walking to the door. “No, I’m not going to assume anything. Allison’s gone, which means I’m sending out the dogs.”

“You’re making a mistake. This is only going to push her further away and make things harder. If you just take it easy —”

“And what, hope she decides to come back? I’m not the kind of man to sit back and do nothing. I made that mistake already.” My hands curl into fists. “I had one fucking job. Keep Allison here and out of trouble. I couldn’t even manage that shit. So while your opinion is appreciated, Isabel, this is my decision.”

She goes still. “That’s how it is?”

“That’s how it is.” I turn away. “My hotel. My call. Stay here if you want and wait. Maybe she shows up.”

But she won’t. I know it in my guts.

Allison is gone, and she played me for a fool the whole time.

Chapter 29

Conlan

Anger rolls down my spine. It should be the easiest thing in the world, making sure a nineteen-year-old girl stays puts, and yet I couldn't manage it.

Because I've been too gentle.

Isabel keeps convincing me to give Allison the benefit of the doubt, but I'm finished with that.

When I find the girl, I'm going to toss her in handcuffs and lock her in the basement until her father comes to collect her.

I leave Isabel in the room and head back to my office. From there, I make a series of calls, reaching out to various organizations, crews, groups, and made men within the greater Los Angeles area. I alert them all to Allison's description and order them to put all their guys on the street in search of her.

It's an all-hands emergency, and I put the full weight of the Costa family behind it.

This will cost a lot of time, money, and capital.

Every affiliated group is now in play. And the Costa family has a *lot* of sway wherever we operate, all thanks to our enormous gambling and hospitality income.

Allison will be found. Now that I've mobilized my small army, it's only a matter of time.

I just hope nothing goes wrong. It's not like I'm releasing a bunch of happy-go-lucky puppies to sniff her out—instead, it's like I've given her scent to a pack of hungry wolves.

I orchestrate things the best I can, getting feedback in real time. I don't hear from Isabel, but that's fine with me; she can stay in that room and hope all she wants.

I'm doing something.

It takes a couple of hours before I get a call. It's not one I expected, but Damon sounds both exasperated and relieved.

"Sir, I've got her."

"Where?" I jump out of my chair.

"Sir, uh—" He clears his throat. "She's out by the pool."

I stare at the desk. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, sir. We checked here more than once. She must've showed up in the last twenty minutes. Sorry, sir, she's saying she's only been there for ten, and—"

"I'll be down in a second. Don't let her move." I hang up and storm out.

What the fuck is happening right now? I have the whole city of LA riled up like boiling water poured onto an anthill, and here she is sitting out in my own back yard. How did this even happen?

I head outside. Damon's lurking beside a lounge chair. Allison's lying back, sunglasses on, in a tiny bikini that doesn't do much to cover her up. I grab a nearby towel and throw it on top of the girl.

"Hey, what the hell?" she snaps, glaring at me.

"Where did you go?" I cross my arms, making it clear this isn't a fucking joke.

She sits up and takes off her sunglasses, squinting at me. "What the hell do you care? Tell your stupid thugs to quit staring at me. I'm back. You can call off the hunt."

My jaw works. "You know the rules. You can't leave the hotel grounds."

"I needed to pick up a prescription, okay?"

“That’s not good enough. If you need something like that, you ask me or a member of the staff. Even Isabel—”

“I am an adult, whether you like that or not.” Allison practically barks at me. “And I’m not letting some random person get my prescriptions for me. It’s my private medication.”

“I don’t give a shit if you’re buying cream for your venereal disease. You do not leave the Lincoln for any reason—”

“Conlan.” Isabel walks over, her hands raised. “Would you stop it?”

“She knows the rules,” I say, keeping myself together. Losing my temper now won’t help anything, but I’m also done being soft.

“You’re such an asshole,” Allison says. “Seriously, Con, it’s pathetic. If I want to get a prescription, I’m fucking going to.”

“You are never leaving these grounds again, not until your father comes to get you.” I point at Damon. “He is now your personal guard. Damon, you have permission to tackle Allison and restrain her if she attempts to leave the grounds.”

Damon looks supremely uncomfortably with that idea.

Isabel raises her voice. “This is absurd. Conlan, you need to cool off.”

But she’s wrong about that.

Anger isn’t driving this decision.

“This is not your business.” I glance at Isabel, keeping my face straight “Do you have any idea what I just did to find this girl? I mobilized all my resources. I called in dozens of favors. All for nothing.”

“Nobody asked you to do that, you prick!” Allison yells at me. “Seriously, fuck this. I really should have run away.”

“You don’t have to worry about running any more. There will be strict limits on where you can go and what you can do. There are consequences to your actions.” I remain standing, hands behind my back. I don’t raise my voice or show any

emotion at all. This is about controlling the situation, not losing my cool. “I’m finished giving you a long leash. You can’t be trusted.”

“Good luck with that.” She sits back, arms crossed. “The first chance I get, I’m gone.”

“Please, you two, stop it.” Isabel walks over and grabs my arm. “Allison, stay there. I’m taking him away then we’ll talk.”

I let her pull me away. Once we’re inside, I shake my head at her annoyed look. “You think I’m going too far, but you’re wrong.”

“She’s a teenage girl,” Isabel says, smacking my shoulder. “What is the matter with you? I’m serious, are you trying to screw this up? The more you try to lock her down, the harder she’ll fight.”

“No, I’m trying to make sure we *don’t* screw this up. Keeping Allison under control is our primary goal right now. I tried things your way. She has a job, she has a distraction and a little bit of freedom, and she wasted that by breaking her only rule.”

“You can’t just punish her.”

“I can and I will. This isn’t a game, Isabel.”

“I know that.”

“Then stop acting like you’re her friend. She is the enemy.”

Isabel rubs her face. “She’s not the enemy, she’s some lost kid trying to figure her way out in the world, and if you start coming down hard on her—”

“This isn’t up for discussion.” I turn away, already making plans. I have a dozen calls to make. “I gave her a chance. She failed. There are no more chances.”

“That’s how it’s going to be then? You’re not even going to talk to me about it?”

“My hotel, my decision.”

I leave her there. I know she’s angry, and I can’t blame her, but this is about more than our relationship. I made a promise to

my brother that I'd take care of this shit with General Leyland, and if I can't even keep a single girl under control, how can I be expected to retain control of multiple LA crime families?

No, we tried the easy way. It didn't work. Now, we try my way.

Chapter 30

Isabel

I hate the way he talked to me.
It felt like I was his assistant again.

He wasn't yelling or entirely out of line—I get it, this is his job to pull off—but it was the way he disregarded my opinion.

As if he knows better.

But his methods are going to backfire. Allison's in her room sulking with Damon guarding the door. Sooner or later, she's going to break out and run away, and I don't know what Conlan's going to do then.

He stays late at the Lincoln on the phone and I head back to the house on my own. I take a hot bath, drink a little wine, order some dinner, and basically try to unwind.

I'm still frustrated with him, but I can also see where he's coming from. This stuff with General Leyland and his family, it's very important to him, and Allison's doing everything she can to complicate things.

Only I think that if he backed off and gave the girl a little space, she'd stick around on her own.

I'm flipping through channels when the front door opens. Conlan looks tired as he pours himself a drink in the kitchen and tosses it back. He sighs, leaning back against the refrigerator, and looks over toward me.

I shift on the couch and turn off the TV. "How's our girl?"

"Still in her room."

“That’s good.” I get to my feet. “We should talk about earlier.”

He keeps staring at me. I get a little angry, waiting for him to say something, but what do I expect? Conlan’s never apologized for anything in his life. He’s not going to start now.

Only I hoped that he’d begun to grow up a little bit.

I thought we were getting to a better place.

I can feel that next level, like it’s barely out of reach. And if I could only find a way past his armor, we could make this thing work.

He clears his throat and stares into my eyes.

“Isabel, you’re fired.”

I don’t move. My eyebrows raise. He tilts his head, studying my reaction, and I feel my whole body flush. Confusion drills into my guts.

“I’m... fired? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“From here on out, you are no longer my assistant.”

“Excuse me? You can’t just—”

He moves away from the refrigerator and comes toward me. “We both know it can’t work like that anymore. You said it yourself. You know as well as I do.”

I open my mouth to tell him off, but he’s right. There’s a reason I started looking for my own replacement.

I can’t be his assistant, not anymore.

We pretended like it would be fine for a while, at least until I found someone else to take over, but that’s clearly not the case anymore.

We’ve moved way beyond that old relationship, and if we don’t find a way to define what we are now, it’ll fizzle out.

“It’s funny,” I say, trying not to smile. “I was just about to quit.”

His lips quirk. “Were you? It’s better this way. Now you can file for unemployment.”

“Think I’ll need it? My husband’s rich.”

“True, but he can also be an asshole sometimes.”

“So I hear.”

“Listen, I’m not going to apologize for earlier, but I will say this. I won’t treat you like that anymore. Your opinion matters to me more than anyone else, and even if I disagree, I will try to find ways to be respectful about it.”

I let out a sharp breath. “I’m asleep, right? This must be some crazy new dream because you’re saying exactly what you should be saying.”

“Very funny.”

“Actually, no, this is definitely reality, since you refuse to actually apologize.”

“Allison is a problem,” he says, his voice soft. “I understand that she gets under my skin and you think that means my judgment is compromised, but it’s about more than that. She’s never stayed in one place for long. The girl’s a drifter, and if we give her too much space then she’ll run off sooner or later. I’m only doing what I think is best.”

I nod, smoothing out my hair, a nervous, thoughtful gesture. “I get what you’re saying, I really do, but I just think she needs purpose and structure. I think she’ll want to stay if we can give her those.”

“And I don’t trust her.”

“Where does this leave us?”

“Well, you’re out of a job. Other than that, I don’t know.” He comes toward me. “I want you to tell me what you think. I want to be able to handle it when I don’t like what you have to say. I’m aware that I need to work on that.”

“Okay, that’s a good start.”

“I can’t promise I’ll always do what you want, but I can promise that I will respect your wishes and I will take your counsel to heart. Over the years, you’ve been my most reliable

employee, and it's about time that I started treating you that way."

I lean up against the back of the couch as he continues toward me. "Are we communicating right now? Are we discussing problems like grown adults?"

"It seems that way, yes."

"This is amazing. I wasn't sure we were capable of, you know, just talking to each other."

"Do you like it?" He puts his hands on my hips.

"Why, yes, I think I do. Who knew that being grown-ass adults and not freaking out about every little thing could be so liberating?"

"I could get used to it." He kisses my neck. "When it comes to you, my little wife, there will always be the benefit of the doubt."

"What a prince, saying all the right things."

He chuckles and his lips press to mine. I melt against him as all the tension of the day flows away.

I didn't like the way things shook out earlier. He was too stubborn and controlling, and I didn't feel like I stood up for myself enough.

But this feels so much better. He's acknowledging that he's imperfect, and he's promising to work on it.

I have my own issues to deal with. I can be closed off and stubborn too. I have to work on that as well, and I'd be happy to tell him all about it—

Except his kiss deepens, and there's not much else I can do except let him drag me onto the couch, let him undress me, let his fingers slide between my legs.

"Is this make-up sex right now?" I whisper as I straddle him, both of us naked, my back arched as his lips suck on my nipples. "I have to admit, I kind of like it."

"I can be an asshole more often if you like."

I shiver as he fills me. God, I don't know if I'll ever get used to this man. He's so thick and long and freaking hard.

"I doubt you need much encouragement from me to be an asshole."

He laughs and spanks my ass. I ride him, arms wrapped around his neck, and we fuck together like that, his hands exploring my body, my breasts, my hips, as he thrusts deeper and deeper inside. I shiver, moaning his name, until he turns me around and pins me against the cushions, fucking me from behind, my arms behind my back.

He takes me, fills me, makes me feel good, punishes me into submissive ecstasy, and when I finally come, his name is on my lips. I moan it, whisper it, scream it. *Conlan*, that's my new song, my new refrain, my verse and chorus. The only prayer that matters. *Conlan*. I come, and he comes inside of me, and we end up in a sweaty, sticky mess lying together, his arms around my body.

I've never felt so content in my life. I kiss his chest, his neck. I rub myself against him like a cat searching for comfort.

And he holds me tight against him.

"I have to ask you something," I whisper, glancing up.

His face is so calm and happy. I feel a little thrill of contentment run through my spine. "What's that?"

"Do I still need to come to work tomorrow? Since you fired me, I'm not really needed at the Lincoln."

"Hm," he says, smiling as he leans his head back. "I can find you a new position if you'd like." He glances down at me. "Many, many new positions."

"Yes, you want to fuck me on your desk, I get it. But seriously."

"What's more serious than fucking you on my desk?"

"I don't want to be your assistant anymore, but I *do* want to keep working with you. If that's possible... and you want it too."

He doesn't hesitate. "I want you around all the time, Isabel."

"Got any openings then?"

"We'll come up with something that works for both of us. For now, why don't you take it easy tomorrow? Wake up late and relax."

"I still want to come into the hotel. I should talk to Allison and makes sure she's okay."

"I'd like that."

"Good." I kiss him. "Did we just figure it out? Can this really be so easy? All we have to do is communicate."

"Easy," he agrees. "Now, you're naked, warm, and very attractive, and you're still in my lap. Which means in about ten seconds, I'm going to drag you up into our room and I'm going to fuck you senseless."

"Uh, I thought you already did that."

"Yes, good point. I'll fuck you senseless again."

"I won't complain."

"Good girl. You better not."

Chapter 31

Isabel

Conlan makes good on his promise. We spend the rest of the night in his bed exploring exactly how fun communication can be.

I fall asleep in his bed. In the morning, he's already gone, and I only find a note. *Relax. Text the car service when you're ready to head over to the Lincoln. Love, Conlan.*

Since I can resist being lazy, I take him up on his offer and have a long bath before grabbing a light breakfast. I'm in a great mood when the driver picks me up and drops me off out in front of the Lincoln. Nobody stops me as I ride the elevator to the third floor then take the back halls to Conlan's office. His secretary buzzes him to let him know that I'm waiting, and he lets me in right away.

"It's quiet today," I say as he kisses my cheek and lets me sit in a chair across his desk.

"I expected a full-on catastrophe waiting for when I got back this morning, but Damon claims Allison hasn't left her room."

"Did anyone check on her?" Worry nags at me. Why would she make things easy and stay hidden away? That's not like her.

"I called ten minutes ago. She answered, told me to fuck off, and hung up."

"Okay, that's a relief."

"For now. We both know this won't last."

I agree, but don't say it yet. Instead, I gesture at his computer. "I sent you an email before coming over here with all the candidates I think would be a good fit for your assistant job. I didn't personally vet any of them, but I'm happy to do it since I don't exactly have anything else right now."

"I'd like that," he says. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"But before you get started on that, I have something you might like." He stands and walks over to his printer. He grabs a small pile of papers then holds them out to me. "Take a look."

I accept and frown at the stack. "What am I looking at here?" The header has the name of my mortgage company, which is weird. "This is some kind of letter?"

"Exactly," he says. "Read it."

I scan the contents. It's boilerplate at the top, something about an outstanding balance, and the deeper I get into the next paragraph, the faster my heart races. Sweat breaks out under my arms and along my back. I stare at the numbers at the very bottom.

"Conlan," I say.

"Go on. Flip through."

I do it, hands shaking. There are eight pages in all, and each of them says more or less the same thing.

"You paid it off."

He sits down in the chair next to me. "Yes, I did."

I stare at him, heart racing into my throat. "You paid off my mortgage. The house—"

"It's yours. Entirely yours. No banks, no strings, no contracts. You owe me nothing."

I slowly lower the pages. Tears drip down onto the cover letter. I didn't realize I was crying, but once it hits me, the tears come faster. I'm sobbing, knees pulled up, and I feel him hug me

against his chest. I'm aware that this is a totally inappropriate reaction to someone paying off my debt, but it's just too much.

That house is everything to me, and the mortgage has been like an anchor tied to my ankle. I've been trying to tread water, but it wanted to drag me under. Every day I woke up and thought about how much I owed and how long it would take until I paid it all off, and every day the horror of never getting out from under the mountain of debt was physically painful.

Now it's gone, and the anchor can't ruin me anymore.

It takes a minute to get control of myself. "Sorry. Sorry. I know it's weird I'm crying."

"It's okay. Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

Which only makes me cry harder, the asshole, but eventually I get it together. I kiss him, holding my lips to his for a few seconds. "Why?" I ask, feeling breathless. "I could've paid it with the money you owe me up front."

"I didn't want you to feel beholden to me," he says softly. "Yes, it's mostly symbolic, but still. Fuck the deal. Fuck the contract. If you want to stay with me as my wife, if you want to finish this thing we started with Leyland and Allison, then I want you to do it because you want to do it, not because you're afraid of your mortgage."

I shake my head slowly. "That's crazy."

"It's not crazy at all. You feel this, don't you? Whatever this is, it's changing into something else, and I don't want to hold it back. You're free, Isabel. Free to make your own decisions about your life without the past dragging you down."

I shake my head. "I didn't ask for this."

"Consider it a gift for three long years of good work then. You put up with enough of my bullshit. This is the least you deserve."

I laugh, feeling like an idiot, and kiss him again. "I don't think I can ever make you understand how grateful I am."

"How about you thank me by checking in on Allison?"

I grin, kiss him one last time, and push myself to my feet. “I think I can handle that.”

“We’re equal now,” he says, returning to his chair behind his desk. “The money’s still in play. When you’re done with this marriage, that’s waiting for you in the end. But don’t let what happened to you back then force you to do things that aren’t good for you now.”

“I could say the same to you.”

“And I’d say I’m already trying.”

I leave his office and linger in the hallway. When I’m alone, the magnitude of the gesture hits me.

He wants to be equal. He wants me to stay in this marriage because I *want* to be in with him, not because of some emotional incentive.

This is a real relationship.

I knew it’d been trending that way for a while, but this is the last step before the abyss.

Conlan wants to be my partner for real.

Not for some game, not for some media appearance, but for real.

That should terrify me.

Except it doesn’t.

All my life, I’ve run from relationships, good and bad, because I’ve always been afraid that I’d fuck it up. That I wouldn’t be worthy.

That I’d fall in love and fail someone all over again, and I don’t think I could handle that.

But with Conlan, it’s different. He’s different.

He’s so much more than I ever imagined, and I’m not afraid of being unable to live up to him.

As I head into the elevator, I realize that I want this, maybe as much as he does.

Chapter 32

Isabel

Allison makes me knock for almost five minutes before she answers the door. “You know it’s still early, right?”

She glares at me, her hair messy from bed. She’s in shorts and a t-shirt.

“It’s actually a little past noon.”

“Oh.” She pauses, eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

“I came to check up on you.”

“I’m not interested in talking if you’re only here because of him.”

“I’m here because of you. Come on, let me in. I’ll make you coffee.”

She grunts, annoyed, but reluctantly lets me inside.

The place is clean. I expected a mess, but she didn’t ruin it this time. I find the hotel coffee maker, pop in a pod, and set up a mug. Allison lounges on the couch, a pair of fuzzy slippers on her feet, a big, snuggly blanket pulled to her chin.

“I know things got heated yesterday, but I think now that you both had some time to calm down, you can come to some agreement. Cream and sugar?”

“Both,” she says. “And I don’t want to agree to anything. I’m done with this place.”

I dump in creamer and two sugars, stir it up, and carry it over. She accepts and sips without a thanks.

I sit down by her feet. “I get it. If I were you, I’d feel pissed too. But you’re still here for a reason.”

She looks away. “I just don’t have anywhere else to be right now, but I can change that whenever I want.”

“I don’t doubt it. I think it’s more than that though. You like working here, don’t you? You liked throwing that luau.”

“I guess.” Another long sip. “It’s okay.”

“I almost hate to say this because I’m pretty sure I’m only going to inflate your already obscene ego, but you’re *good* at it. You go a little over the top, but if you let people keep you in line—” I gesture vaguely. “You could make a serious living throwing parties. Which I’m aware sounds crazy.”

She smiles for only a second before her sour expression returns. “Doesn’t matter if I’m good at it. He’s not going to let me anymore.”

“Don’t worry about Conlan. I can handle him. Will you give it another shot?”

“I need some freedom. If I want to go pick up a freaking prescription, I’m gonna do it, and I don’t want it to cause World War III.”

“We’ll work on that.”

“Fine.” Another long sip. “I’ll give it another shot.” Another long sip, and this time, a smile. “What makes you able to handle Conlan? I thought you were his assistant.”

“We, uh—” I clear my throat. “The nature of our relationship changed.”

“Right, you’re fake married.” Her eyebrows raise. “Or are you real married now? The line is pretty thin.”

“I don’t know what we are, but I’m not his assistant, and I don’t think we’re fake, exactly.”

“Complicated.” She perks up. “He really likes you, huh? Must be weird talking to me about it.”

I grimace. I’d almost forgotten she slept with him. “Yes, thanks for the reminder.”

“It’s fine, you know? I don’t like him and he doesn’t like me. We made a stupid drunken mistake. I lied to him and basically forced myself into his bed, so you can’t really blame him for it, right?”

“I can find a way to blame him anyway.”

“But you shouldn’t. Conlan’s a huge pain in my ass, but he’s not the worst guy in the world.”

“That’s high praise coming from you.”

“Don’t get used to it. I still think he’s a prick.” She rolls her eyes at me, grinning. “Think he was serious about locking me in the basement?”

“Probably. One of his thugs is lurking in the hall outside your door right now. I talked him into cooling it a little.”

“He must really like you.”

I glance at the windows. “Seems that way.”

“Good. I’m glad. I’ve met a lot of people in my short, stupid life, but you’re one of the cooler ones.”

“Thanks. You’re not so bad either, you know.”

“Well, don’t get used to me.” She gets to her feet, humming as she straightens. “I called Daddy last night and he said that he spoke with Conlan a few days ago. Seems that everything’s blowing over, and I’m out of here soon anyway. If I stick it out, I can go home.”

My eyebrows knit together. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Yeah, Daddy said everything’s fine with that PAC and those detectives. You haven’t seen them around in a while, right?”

“That’s true, I actually haven’t.” A strange pit opens up in my stomach. “Conlan knew?”

“Sure, for a few days. He didn’t tell you? You guys can probably drop this whole marriage charade whenever you want, really. Daddy wouldn’t mind. I mean, I appreciate the commitment, but it’s basically been done for a while now. And if I’m good, Daddy says I can come back home.”

My ears start ringing. I barely hear Allison as she starts talking about her friends out in New York, how much she misses the city, how much she wishes she were back there right now, and how she can gut it out for a few more days if it means getting out of here.

But I can't process.

I keep thinking about what she said.

Conlan knew about all this already. He spoke with the general, and he knew that our marriage sham didn't need to continue.

Instead, he said nothing.

He paid off my mortgage and pretended like it was some grand gesture.

When really, he owed that to me already—since our contract is technically fulfilled.

He's been treating me like this thing between us is real, or like it's trending in that direction.

Meanwhile, he's been lying about everything.

"Isabel?" Allison stares at me from across the room. She's making more coffee. "You okay? You want one?"

"No, thanks." I jump to my feet. "I mean, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You look like you're about to puke."

"I'm good. I'm just—I should get going." I move toward the door. My hands are shaking. My lips feel numb. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Hey, can I go down to Lisa's crew? Would that be cool? I mean, fuck it, I'll do it anyway, but maybe let Conlan know so he doesn't flip the fuck out, okay?"

"Right." I grab the door and get out of there. My ears are ringing. One of Damon's guys watches me as I run past him, hit the elevator button, then end up shoving my way into the staircase.

I sit down on the cold concrete and put my head between my knees.

He knew. He knew. It's been over, and he knew—

And he said nothing.

He lied to me. He pretended like he was paying off my house
because he cares about me, but it's just another game.

And I don't know what to do about it.

Chapter 33

Conlan

I spend the morning and most of the afternoon dealing with hotel and work shit that I've been neglecting since I fake-married Isabel. After she disappeared to speak with Allison, I haven't heard anything from her. Although Lisa informed me that our guest is now back to work like nothing happened, and I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I let it slide. I figure Isabel would want me to compromise.

Which is very much unlike me.

It seems my wife is already starting to change me. Maybe for the better? I can't tell yet.

But in the late afternoon, I get a call from Adler. "Hello, brother. Another update from the general. He says it's all clear."

I lean back in my chair. Surprise and disappointment war in my guts. "Completely clear now?"

"As in you no longer have to play your role. The private detectives have moved on to someone else. He says he'll come get his daughter in the next few days."

"Well, that's a fucking relief. She's been a pain in my ass."

"Can't handle a teenager?"

"Don't get me started."

Adler laughs. "It worked out then. We're lucky. Your stupid dick got us into trouble yet again, but you pulled it off in the end."

“Good for me.” I closed my eyes, rubbing my temples. This isn’t how I wanted things to go down. I was hoping for more time, but we’re at the end way faster than I ever imagined.

“By the way, your wife called me earlier, which is what made me reach out.”

I sit up straight. “Isabel called you?”

“Not sure how she got my office phone, but yes, she did. She called asking questions about your little situation.” Adler sounds amused. “Did you keep things from her, brother?”

I stay very still, like if I move, my world will explode in a flash of light and agony. “What did you tell her?”

“The fucking truth. That you’ve known for a couple days now that things are pretty much over. She didn’t sound happy.”

“Fuck.”

“What’s going on over there? Your dick getting you in trouble again?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Whatever it’s like, handle your shit. But hey, at least Leyland’s happy. I think in the end, he’s going to owe us some favors.”

“I have to go.”

“Right, good luck digging yourself out of this hole.” He laughs and the line goes dead.

I lower the phone slowly. My pulse is hammering in my ears as I find my cell and call Isabel.

It goes straight to voicemail.

“Fuck,” I say, grabbing my things as I text the car service to come get me. I don’t know where she is, but I have some educated guesses, and I need to find her.

I have to explain.

I didn’t know things were officially done with the general—only that they were quieting down. I didn’t tell her because—

Because why?

I didn't want her to leave?

It was a selfish decision. I can pretend like it's a million things, but ultimately, I was being selfish. I should've kept her in the loop from the start, but I like being her husband. For the first time in my life, I feel like I've found a place for myself.

Like I belong when I'm with her.

The driver drops me back at my place. I hurry inside. "Isabel," I call out. She's not in the kitchen or the living room. I storm up the steps, throw open her bedroom door, and look around. "Isabel!"

But she's gone. Her things aren't in the drawers anymore. Her suitcase isn't in the closet.

There's only a note on the bed.

Conlan, I know you've been lying to me, and I can't understand why. I went home to think about things for a little while. Please don't follow me. I need space. Isabel.

I sink down onto the bed and stare at those words, my heart a burning pit in the center of my chest.

Chapter 34

Isabel

It feels weird coming home.

The place is quiet. I put some lights on, turn on the air conditioner, run the water, shuffle around the bedrooms making sure everything looks okay. The house is in good shape; my father was obsessive about maintaining everything. If the grass is a little long and the flowers don't look great, that's not on him, that's because I find the whole landscaping thing a little bit over my head. Even though I try anyway.

I keep my phone turned off. There's nobody in the world I want to talk to right now. I picture Conlan finding that note, imagine the way he's feeling right now, but refuse to feel sorry for him. This isn't my fault—he's the one that kept me in the dark for his own selfish reasons.

I draw up a bath and I'm about to get in when there's a knock at the door. I hesitate, lingering, but the knock comes again, more insistent this time. I curse to myself, pull my clothes back on, and hurry downstairs. "Coming!" I call out, and when I yank open the door, he's standing on my front porch while it rains in the background, looking at me like he wants to smash his way inside.

"Conlan," I say but I shouldn't be surprised. Who else would appear out of the blue like this? I'm an idiot for not realizing, but I'm distracted and not thinking clearly.

"Why did you leave?" he asks.

"I just—" I shrink back slightly, closing the door until I'm talking to him through a crack. He doesn't move to stop me. "I

need space, that's all. Can you just give me some space?"

"What happened to figuring it out?" he asks, voice soft and steady.

I grimace. He's got a point. "That's before I found out you've been lying to me."

"Not lying. I didn't want to get your hopes up."

"Even that sounds a little too convenient."

"Will you just open the door? We're supposed to communicate, right? I'm here to communicate."

"Conlan, please, it's not just about the whole general thing. It's about more than that."

"Explain then." He takes a few steps backward, out from under the porch roof, and into the rain. "I won't come any closer."

I open the door, about to tell him to stop being so dramatic, but I bite my tongue. "Fine, you really want to know?"

"Go ahead. I'm not going anywhere."

"It's everything we've been through. The years and years of watching you parade girls through your life, never settling for more than a night, and always coming up with a thousand excuses why it's no big deal. Trusting you has always been hard, but I thought you were changing, at least until Allison told me that you've been keeping something important from me."

He holds out his hands. But he still doesn't come closer. "I understand why you'd feel that way, but I didn't lie. I withheld something I wasn't sure about. I was protecting you."

I let to a sharp laugh. "Come on. That's bullshit."

"Isabel—"

"No, I'm tired of doing whatever you want. I'm not your assistant anymore, remember? You fired me, which means we're finished."

“I meant what I said to you. This is about more than the job to me.”

“And I thought you meant it until today. Conlan, you could’ve come to me the moment you spoke with Leyland. If we got divorced then, so what? If you really cared about me, we could’ve found a way to still see each other. But instead of being honest and up front, you did the easy thing. You kept the truth from me so that you could keep on getting what you want.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

“You’re still lying. Come on, tell me the truth. You didn’t want our relationship to end.”

“You’re right, I didn’t.”

“That’s why you didn’t tell me. Admit it.”

He shows his teeth. “Fine, I admit it,” he says. “I kept it from you because I was afraid of losing you right when we were starting to make something real. I care about you, Isabel, in a way I’ve never cared before. It doesn’t make any damn sense and I don’t know how to handle it.”

“You could try handling it like an adult, first of all.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry, Conlan. I just need some space.”

“I don’t want to give you space. I want to come in there and drag you back home.”

“*I am* home, remember?” I let that linger for a second. “You paid off my mortgage because you wanted us to be equals. Well, trust me like an equal and respect my wishes. I just need some space.”

“Isabel—”

“Please,” I say, fighting back the lump in my throat. “Just let me think, okay?”

He stares at me. I can see the hurt in his eyes and it kills me. Conlan’s never cared about a woman before, at least in the years that I’ve known him, but I know he carries a scar deep inside of him. A wound that won’t heal. Like he’s constantly drowning.

I know doing this won't help.

But I don't know how I can ever trust him. Right when our budding relationship was just starting to flourish, I find out that he kept something important for me for his own selfish reasoning. How can I trust him now, when he proved that he'll do whatever he wants, whenever he wants it?

"I'll go," he says, taking a step back. "But I want you to hear this first. I never meant to hold anything back. I should've told you right away, but I was worried that it wouldn't pan out. It wasn't until today that my brother said everything had officially blown over. I don't want to lose this, but I also won't force it on you. I meant what I said. If you want to stay here, I won't force you to leave. Just know that I'm thinking about you, and I'm waiting for you to come home."

He turns away. I'm tempted to reach out and draw him back. I want to say his name, run out into the rain, kiss him hard.

Instead, I watch him retreat up the driveway to the street. He gets into the back of a town car and slowly pulls away. The headlights recede, and then he's gone.

I turn back to my house, the place where I grew up, the place where I watched my father slowly die while I couldn't do anything to stop it. The ghosts still haunt me, and they always will. My failures live on here, which is maybe why I can't get away. They hold me back, hold me down.

I close the door and lock the bold before trudging up the steps to my bath, feeling even worse than I had before.

Chapter 35

Isabel

I start looking for a job over the next few days.

Even if my mortgage is paid off, I still have bills, groceries, all that awful grown-up stuff.

It doesn't escape me that technically, Conlan owes me a lot of money right now, but the thought of going back there and making him pay me feels way worse than being completely broke.

I go out and look for a freaking job.

I'm not exactly qualified for a whole lot, but having Conlan's name on my resume helps. I apply to everything that looks remotely interesting, whether I'm technically qualified or not, figuring it can't hurt to try. I spend mornings and afternoons on job boards, scrolling through all those job websites, and in the evenings, I drive around town looking for Help Wanted signs. There's a diner not far away that seems interested, but otherwise, I can't find much.

At night, I take long baths, read romance novels, and think about my former boss, wondering what he's doing and how the Lincoln's going.

Above all, I question all my decisions up to this point.

Wondering, did I overreact? He kept something away from me, but he claims it was to make sure I didn't get my hopes up. Do I believe that?

I have to remember it's not about the one lie—it's about the years of lies leading up to this point.

People don't change. Conlan isn't going to shapeshift into a totally different man overnight. If he's going to change, I have to give him time.

I have to hope he'll get there on his own.

Which is why I don't reach out, even though I want to.

On the fourth day, someone knocks on my door at nine in the morning.

I half expect a delivery driver, but I haven't been buying anything. On account of being broke and all that.

Instead of Amazon, Allison Leyland stands on my porch with a suitcase and a massive smile.

"Hey, girl," she says. "I got in a fight with Daddy. Can I crash here?"

My mouth opens in shock. She is the last person in the entire world I expected. "I thought you were in New York."

"I was, at least until I hopped on a plane last night and flew out here." She stifles a yawn. "Stupid red-eye flights. I can't ever fall asleep, you know? Not without some intense medication, but Daddy confiscated my stash. Seriously, can I sleep on your floor or something?"

I want to say no. She's the last thing I need right now. Allison is a jolt of chaos wherever she goes—but I can't turn down a homeless teenager, even if she is a pain in my ass.

"Come inside." I step aside and let her lug her suitcase through the door.

"Cute place." She looks around as if she actually appreciates the simple decor. "Although kind of masculine."

"I haven't changed it much since my dad passed. He put all this stuff up."

If that bothers her at all, she doesn't show it. "Ah, that makes sense." She plops down in the kitchen with a sigh. "Got any wine? The flight attendant was a tight-ass and wouldn't serve me."

"Sorry, kid. You're only nineteen and we card in this house."

He rolls her eyes. “Fine, I’ll just beg old men outside liquor stores until one of them thinks I’m cute.”

“Uh, you do that?”

“Works most of the time, except for when they think you’re a hooker, then things get dicey. Hey, for real, you got an extra room?”

“Yes, I do, but are you sure this is okay? I don’t want to start anything with your father.”

And I really don’t want to make her my responsibility.

“Please, that old asshole’s just happy I’m out of his hair again.” She nudges her bag with her foot. “I keep this baby packed at all times when I’m back under his roof, just in case. Always comes in handy.”

“That... doesn’t seem healthy.”

“Whatever. His election is all that matters to him right now.” She stares down at her hands, and for a second, I’m reminded that she’s a vulnerable nineteen-year-old kid. Clearly there are some issues going on with her family, and she needs support.

Maybe the chaos is her way of acting out for attention. All she wants is her father to pay attention to her, but if she can’t get that, she might as well party, do drugs, drink alcohol, and sleep with older men.

What a freaking nightmare.

“Okay. You can stay here. But not forever, and I want you to call your dad and tell him where you are.”

“I’ll text his assistant, okay?”

“Sure. Great compromise.” I point at her bag. “Also, no drugs. I’d tell you not to drink but I suspect you’ll just ignore me, so I’m being reasonable here. No drugs.”

“Deal.” She beams at me, taps at her phone screen, and slams it face-down. “So, what happened with Con? Tell me the deets.”

“Uh,” I say, not sure I’m ready for that. “How about we get you settled first?”

She doesn't argue for once. I lead her upstairs, show her the guest room, get her fresh towels and sheets, and leave her alone to get settled. I pace back and forth in the kitchen, staring at my phone screen, wondering if I should call Conlan to let him know what's going on with Allison.

But he's not a part of this anymore. She's not here because of him—this is about Allison only. There are no private detectives lurking around, no media appearances, no rumors to squash. She's just a smart young girl with too much money and not enough structure, and I'm pretty sure telling Conlan will only make things worse.

She comes downstairs not long later in sweats with her hair pulled up in a messy bun. "Don't you feel lonely living in this place all alone?" she asks, stretching out on the couch. "It's pretty nice."

"Not really," I say, sitting by her feet. "I grew up in this house, so I guess it doesn't bother me. It was always me and my dad back then, just the two of us."

"And now it's just you." She frowns at the look on my face. "Sorry, was that a mean thing to say?"

"No, it's fine, it's the truth." I take a deep breath. "Allison. Why did you come here?"

"I heard you were back at your old place and thought you'd have a couch to crash on. Clearly, I was right."

"No, I mean, why did you come to me? I'm sure you have close girl friends or whatever."

"Not really." She's looking at her nails. "I have friends, sure, but not many that would let me stay with them. And the guys would all expect something, you know? At least a blowjob or whatever, and I'm not interested in sucking dick for room and board at the moment. If it comes to that, fine, but I am a dick-free zone for now."

"Oh," I say, trying to understand how a girl her age talks about giving head so casually when I'm too uptight to even daydream about having sex without feeling at least a little shame.

“And I figured, you were nice to me before, and you might be nice to me again. Plus, I like you.”

“I like you too.” I give her my best, most confident smile. “But you can’t stay forever.”

She laughs, waving that away. “Like you’ve got anything else going on.”

“I’m very busy. I’ve been applying for jobs.”

“Wow, amazing.” She yawns again. “I’m so impressed. You really have it together, huh?”

“Hey, you’re the homeless one here, don’t start giving me crap for being unemployed.”

“I am *not* homeless. Just between housing at the moment.” She squints at me. “You wanna talk about why you’re here and not at Conlan’s place?”

“No,” I say, and really, really mean it.

“Is it because of me?”

“No.” But I hesitate. She’s still giving me that knowing look. “Sort of. There are some trust issues at the moment.”

“He kept stuff from you and now you don’t know what to think. That’s pretty much it?”

“Well—” I manage not to curse. How can this girl be so freaking observant? It’s annoying. “Can we talk about something else?”

“What could possibly be more interesting than your failed marriage?”

“It’s not a failed marriage. We were never really married. It was for show, remember? To cover for your bad decisions.”

“*His* bad decisions,” she corrects. “But even I could see you two were into each other.”

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you. He lied to me. He kept something important from me, and in the end, I guess I just realized it would never stop. He’d always be like that, no matter what, no matter how much he cares about me, and I

can't let myself get hurt. I've lost too much and been through it enough to know that I can't handle him. So I walked away."

Allison studies me. She doesn't look convinced, but I don't care what she thinks. She's just a kid and I don't know why I'm letting her get into my business to begin with.

"You want my advice?" she asks.

"No. Not at all."

"Give him a shot. Conlan's never been in an actual relationship before. He doesn't know what the heck he's doing. Give him some time to figure it out."

"It's not that simple."

"I feel like it is though? You adults always act like you've got everything under control, but really, you're just flailing around like everyone else. That guy worships you, Isabel. Yeah, he's not perfect, he's a selfish prick, to be totally honest, but he's *your* selfish prick. Go for it. Make a mistake. Get hurt if it comes to that. Live a little."

I cross my arms. It's easy for her to say when it's not her heart at stake. "We should talk about something else now."

"Fine," she says, stretching. "How about you tell me a story and I take a nap? Can you talk in a really soothing voice?"

"No thanks." I get up. "Go ahead and sleep. I have to apply for jobs."

"Great, awesome, sounds good. By the way, I don't have any money, so groceries are on you. Hope that's not a problem." She burrows into the couch, puts a pillow under her face, and drags a blanket over her head.

"Big shock there," I mutter, annoyed at my rotten luck.

This is a nightmare. I have a broke, runaway teenager sleeping on my couch, and she's weirdly insightful about relationships.

Except I don't agree that Conlan worships me.

No, I think he is in love with the idea of loving me—he's in love with his own selfish image of what it means to be together.

And it would always be that way. I'd always be second to him, no matter what.

Maybe Allison's right, and I should give him another chance.

But right now, I'm trying to figure out my life, and I'll never do that if I start talking to Conlan again.

Chapter 36

Conlan

There's this bullshit saying.
If you love something, let it go.

That has to be the dumbest thing in the world.

Fuck letting it go.

If you love something and you let it go, in theory, it'll come back if things were meant to be. It's trying to say, don't smother people. Give them space.

But that's trash.

If you love something, you should capture it, wrap it in chains, and keep it in your fucking basement.

Hold it so tight its neck breaks and it can't ever crawl away.

Which is what I wish I had done with Isabel.

Minus actually breaking her neck.

Instead, she's at her house, not sleeping in my bed, not acting like my wife. Ignoring my calls. Not answering her texts. Days pass like this, and it's infuriating. I thought she would have some time to herself, realize how much she missed me, and end up on my doorstep. We'd reconcile, she'd shed a few tears, we'd have some great sex, end of story.

That hasn't happened yet, and it's driving me insane.

Doesn't help that the Lincoln's busy with two conferences going on at the same time, and to make it all hell on earth, my brother Erick is in town to visit.

A very conveniently timed trip.

I love the guy. Don't get me wrong. Erick is steadfast and quiet, one of the most insightful humans in the entire universe, but I'm not in the mood to play host.

Much less to a guy that can see through me at a glance.

"What did you do?" he asks as we sit at the Lincoln's bar sipping from the top-shelf whiskey nobody ever buys. Around us, women in pantsuits and guys in Rolexes walk around flexing at each other and yapping in business-speak.

"What do you mean, what did I do?" I take a sip. Very good stuff. I'm going to have about ten more glasses before this night is over.

"You had a wife. Now you don't. What did you do? Adler says you liked her too."

"My assistant, Isabel. You met her that one time a couple years back, remember?"

He nods once. "I remember. Pretty girl. Though you always have pretty girls around, don't you?"

"If that's a subtle dig at my sexual proclivities, you can fuck right off."

"It wasn't subtle. What did you do?"

I grind my jaw. "Nothing."

"Not buying that. What did you do?"

"*Nothing.*" I glare at him. "Why are you here again? Don't you have your own business to run?"

"Yes," he says, "but Jayson told me you were weird on the phone to him, so I came."

Jayson, my other brother, who can also fuck off for meddling.

"You flew out to LA because I was *weird on the phone*? You have to realize that sounds insane."

"And yet here I am. What did you do?"

"Would you stop fucking asking that?"

“When you tell me, I will. What did you do?”

I throw back my glass, downing the liquor, and slam the empty on the bar. I gesture for another. “I withheld information from her. Okay? Happy? She interpreted that as lying. I interpreted it as protecting her. We can’t seem to agree.”

“Huh.” He doesn’t elaborate. That’s typical Erick. With him, less is always more.

I feel the need to keep talking, which is annoying. “She’s back at her place ignoring me. And you know what pisses me off the most? We had just gotten into a fight, but we resolved it by being grown-ass adults that communicated with each other. I thought we figured it out, but instead of just talking to me like she did last time, she’s pulling away. I don’t understand it.”

“Hm.” Erick turns his glass in a circle.

“I shouldn’t fucking care. I never wanted this to begin with. Our relationship was fake from the start, but something changed and now I have all these goddamn feelings. You know how much I hate feelings.”

“Yes.”

“Feelings are awful. Feelings make people do stupid shit like write poetry or play the acoustic guitar. I *hate* the acoustic guitar. There is nothing worse than a guy with a ponytail playing acoustic guitar while reciting poetry about love and feelings and shit. I swear, that makes me want to commit straight-up murder.”

“Con.”

“She should be here.” I glare at my brother. “Not off hiding. She should be *here*. With me.”

He grunts and nods. “I see.”

“You don’t see.” I slump forward. “I’ve been a prick for a long time. You know that. It’s been easier, avoiding the real thing, because the halfway thing feels good for a little bit. You fuck, that’s cool, you move on. Nobody gets hurt, but nobody feels particularly amazing either. It’s bland, it’s fine. People think you need exciting shit to drown feelings, but that’s definitely

not true. Bland and boring gets the job done. I was good with fine and feeling nothing until she showed up and made me realize that, holy shit, fine is nowhere near amazing, and feelings can be kind of great if they're directed toward the right woman. Fine is like slime at the bottom of a shower, and amazing is like standing in a fresh hot spring or something. This metaphor sucks, but you know what I mean. She woke me up."

"And now she's gone."

"Because I lied, and all she can see is the guy I've always been, because that's the guy she's known for so long, when I don't want to be that guy anymore. But maybe that's all I am." I sip my new drink, feeling miserable. It's pathetic, if I'm honest with myself. I'm a Costa—I'm one of the most powerful men in Los Angeles. And I'm hung up on some girl. I'm feeling my goddamn feelings for the first time in a while. And it really sucks.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Erick asks.

I look at him askance. "Have you been listening? She doesn't want to talk to me."

"I heard."

"I've called, texted, even considered email but fucking email is for weirdos and business bros. I want to kick down her door and drag her home, but that'll only make things worse. I never should've agreed to give her space. What the hell does space do anyway? What a joke."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know," I say, getting frustrated. "Stalk her? Make her remember why she wants to be with me to begin with?"

"Good plan."

"Yeah, good one, I can just follow her around and yell at her out the car window. Tell her how funny and handsome and rich I am. Remind her about my fantastic dick. She'll come running back."

“Maybe not that part about your dick, but the stalking isn’t bad.” He takes another sip.

I stare at him, trying to gauge if he’s kidding or not, but Erick rarely jokes. “You think I should stalk her? For real?”

“Why not? Beats the hell out of you sitting at this shitty bar getting drunk with your brother.”

“But that’s why you’re here,” I say, gesturing around.

“Eh, excuses.”

“You’re insane. Our whole family is insane.” I lean forward on my elbows, take another drink, and think about following Isabel around.

It’s not the worst thing in the world.

I mean, she’ll freak out if she catches me—but what if she doesn’t? At the very least, I can watch her from a distance and make sure she’s okay. I can take care of her, even if that’s not what she wants.

It’s not the same as having her in my life, but it’s close.

And hell, isn’t that what Adler did to his current wife?

Maybe that shit can work for me.

Even though I’m nowhere near clinically insane like my eldest sibling.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Erick says, bumping me with his elbow. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“Something,” I say at last. Hating Erick for pushing me to this point. But also, kind of glad he did. “Maybe I’ll stalk her, maybe not, I don’t know.”

“But you’ll do something.”

“Something,” I agree.

“Sounds like a plan.” He knocks back his whiskey. “You know what sucks about California? No gambling. That’s some bullshit.”

“Vegas isn’t a far drive. You could always go home.”

He grunts at me, rolls his eyes, and gets up. "I'm gonna go find somewhere better to drink. Too many fucking suits around here. Figure out your shit." Then he walks off, hands shoved in his pockets.

Fucking Erick. The guy's bizarre. I'd worry about him getting behind the wheel while drunk, but he doesn't actually drive.

He made some good points. I'm not the kind of man that sulks, and all I've been doing is beating up on myself for the mistakes I've made.

But what if I stopped feeling sorry, and started fixing the situation?

I want to be with Isabel.

That's my primary goal at this point.

Be with her. Marry her. Wife her up. Fuck her until she's carrying my children. Own her delicious little pussy and absolutely never let her get away again.

Only she doesn't trust me.

She thinks I'll get her hooked, make her love me, and leave her broken-hearted.

I'd never do that, and I have to make sure she knows it.

"Fucking Erick," I mutter as I get up from the bar and go back to work.

Chapter 37

Isabel

I don't answer the phone when Conlan calls. I don't respond to his texts, and I try not to read them.

The second I let myself talk to him is the moment I let down my guard.

Days pass. Allison doesn't ask me about the deleted voicemails and the way I studiously ignore any mention of Conlan or anything resembling his family. I even change the channel on TV if an advertisement for any hotel comes on.

I keep thinking she's going to leave, but she doesn't. Instead, she practically moves in and falls into a shockingly normal schedule. She's up at eight, out of the house most of the day, and home by six. We eat dinner together, talk about things, she ignores my questions about what she's doing here, and things settle into a routine. I keep applying for jobs, I keep getting rejected, and I get a single interview at that stupid diner. I schedule it because I've got nothing better.

"I have to tell you something," Allison says after a week of being in my house. "And you're not going to like it."

"Okay." I sit down at the island with her. I'm picturing big parties, older men, lots of drugs. We both have a glass of wine. I feel bad that I'm letting a teenager drink, but it's one glass, never more, and I figure she'd do worse if I tried to fight it. "That's ominous."

"Yeah, it's totally ominous, but hear me out before you start shouting, okay?" She takes a deep breath. "I've been working at the Lincoln."

My eyes go wide. I don't start shouting, but I kind of want to.

This is even worse than what I was imagining.

"Okay," I say, doing my best to keep a straight face while seething on the inside. I feel strangely betrayed, but it's not like Allison owes me anything.

"Right, I can tell you're pissed, and my conflict resolution tactics all revolve around running away from the problem, so let's try not to freak out on each other, okay?"

"Sure." Deep breaths. Slow, deep breaths. "Why are you working at the Lincoln?"

"I went back the day after I came here and asked if I could keep on planning parties. Lisa said it was fine, and eventually Conlan approved it, so here I am."

"Wow. Okay." I rub my temples. I feel a headache blossoming. "You're working at the Lincoln with Conlan."

"No, with Lisa. I never see Con. Pretty sure he's avoiding me." She grins and winks, which doesn't help my mood. "I wonder why."

"It's not because you're staying here. He's just a dick." I look away from her. Why does this bother me so much? I'm the one that walked away from him. I'm the one that's confused and trying to decide if I can trust him. I'm the one afraid that if I go back, he'll only destroy what's left of my heart, and I'm not sure I can survive another loss like that.

Allison's got every right to work at a job she enjoys, even if my boss/husband/ex/whatever owns the place.

And it's good for her. That's pretty obvious. She's been stable, steady even, and in a really good mood all week.

I can't take that away.

Even if I really want to, I can't be that selfish.

"Are you mad?" she asks. "If you're mad, I can find something else."

"No," I say quickly and hold out my hands. She takes them. "No, this is great. I'm really happy you found something you

enjoy.”

“You mean that?” She sounds hopeful, and again, I’m reminded that she’s a teenager. I have to be careful with her.

“Yes, absolutely. I understand it’s awkward, but whatever, we can deal with that, right? You’re doing great.”

“Thank you so much. You’re the best!”

We hug, she runs off to watch TV, and I finish my wine.

I don’t know why, but the betrayal lingers.

I thought Allison was here for me, but she came back for the job. I was right, she needs stability and structure—I can’t be mad that she’s doing exactly what I think she should be doing—only I wish Conlan weren’t involved.

That man complicated everything.

At least we didn’t fight. I’m proud of myself for that.

When I go to bed that night, I dream about Conlan, the same dream I’ve been having since I left him. He’s chasing me down a long, dark road, and I keep tripping over rocks, and he keeps saying I can trust him, but some part of me knows that if he ever catches up, I’ll never get away again, so I run and run, until I wake up.

The next day, I have an interview at the diner, and by the following Monday morning, I’m working my first shift.

The pay is an enormous downgrade from what I made with Conlan, but at least I’m not dealing with him. No more early mornings, no more half-drunk girls parading themselves out of his house, no more gorgeous, sexy-as-sin shirtless bosses teasing me with their finely sculpted pecs. No more husband, no more lies.

It’s simple, and I sort of like it. Except during my second shift, a guy sits down in my section, someone that looks weirdly familiar. I can’t place him, and when he leaves, there’s a hundred-dollar tip waiting under his napkin.

“Lucky girl,” an older woman named Dottie says as she bumps me with her hip. “You show a lot of cleavage to that one or

what?"

"I don't know what I did," I say, bewildered that I got such a big tip for basically nothing.

But each day, around the same time, the guy returns, drinks coffee, eats some eggs, and leaves a huge tip. The other girls all start making jokes about it, and I can't blame them.

It's bizarre.

But life falls into a rhythm. For another couple weeks, I work at the diner, I accept my obscenely big tip, and I start to notice a black truck lurking around whenever I leave. It never does anything, but it's always there. Huge, dark, the engine running, the windows tinted. Probably nothing, but it freaks me out.

"You're fine," Allison says one night, another week later. I never imagined I'd have a teenage roommate, but here I am. "What's wrong with big tips and a weird truck?"

"Uh, pretty sure this is the start to one of those podcasts about a kidnapped girl."

"It really is always a girl." Allison sighs. "But you're fine, really. The truck's just a regular, and the tip's just from some rich guy that thinks you're hot. And you *are* hot. Way too hot to be working at a diner."

"Thanks. Sort of. Maybe. I'm not sure if that was backhanded or not."

Allison ignores my uncertainty. "By the way, I keep meaning to ask but I've been kind of afraid you'll bite my head off. However, this is important to me, so please don't go for the kill right away."

"Oh, no. Don't tell me you're in trouble."

"What? No, no, it's not like that. Actually, this is good. My first party is happening at the Lincoln next Friday and I want you to come."

She rubs her hands together, looking nervous. My eyebrows shoot up, and I'm about to tell her to fuck off with all that, but something stops me.

It's the earnest look in her eye. It's the eager way she leans toward me.

She's excited about the party, and she really wants me to be there.

I've gotten close with Allison these last couple weeks. She's an incredibly smart person—way smarter than I ever realized—and her life's been hard. Her father dragged her all over the place when she was growing up, from base to base, never letting her form any meaningful friendships. She learned not to get attached, because people don't ever stick around, and that has carried on into her semi-adulthood.

But I can tell she's trying to put down roots, and I want to encourage that.

“Only if you promise there will be free drinks.”

She shifts from foot to foot. “Well, after that luau thing, Lisa says we can't have free booze because it got out of hand, but I'll buy you wine. As much wine as you want, okay?”

I sigh and give her a hug. “I'll be there. I promise. I wouldn't miss it.”

“Really?” She perks up. “You mean it?”

“Yes, I mean it. Next Friday, the Lincoln. What time?”

“Six sharp. It's indoors this time. We're going for a Roaring Twenties theme, so come as a flapper. Actually, I'll buy you a costume, don't worry. What are your measurements again? No, don't worry, this is going to be amazing.”

I give her a look. Costume? Measurements? But she's so excited and I don't have the heart to say no.

“Sounds great.”

She claps her hands together, oozing excitement, and I'm already dreading it.

Chapter 38

Isabel

The dress is absurd. I'm in this sexy flapper outfit, but only in the loosest sense.

Gold and silver beading, sheer skirt, a slit down the chest practically to my belly button. Plenty of cleavage, lots of skin, more beading hanging down toward my gray high heels. It sparkles, shimmering in the light, and several long beaded necklaces draw even more attention to my boobs. My hair's up, and a sparkly silver headband completes the ensemble.

I feel obscene, except Allison's dress is even worse. Shorter, tighter, more like a slip than actual clothes. It leaves very little to the imagination, and yet she pulls it off. The girl's got a great body, I have to admit it. I'm a little jealous.

"You look so good," she says as she takes my arm. We head up to the main doors of the Lincoln and my legs feel like they're encased in concrete.

I haven't been back since leaving a couple of weeks ago.

"This is weird," I tell her. Other people mill around, all of them wearing period-appropriate outfits. More flapper girls, guys in zoot suits, lots of pinstripes and long cigarettes. "It's extremely weird."

"Relax, it's a party, right? I think there should be a couple of hundred people here." She laughs, sounding nervous for the first time. "Lisa's going to cut my throat if it gets out of hand."

"You've got this under control," I say, patting her arm even if I don't actually think she does. "The place looks amazing."

Which is true: the Lincoln's been decorated in more mid-century style. It looks like Jay Gatsby's mansion. Champagne's everywhere, for a modest fee.

"You know what's sad? This is the first time I've ever really cared about something before. That's totally pathetic, right?"

"I don't think that's pathetic at all. You worked hard, you *should* care."

"No, caring is stupid. If you care, then you can get hurt. People use it against you, and I don't ever want to put myself in that position. It's easier just not to give a shit."

I shake my head and turn to face her, squeezing her shoulders. "Young people always think it's cool not to care, but they're always wrong. People that care are so much more interesting. They're engaged, they're passionate, they actually feel things. People that don't care are just empty shells. Who the hell cares about an empty shell?"

She laughs nervously. "I don't want to be a shell anymore, which sucks. I was good at it."

"Maybe this means you're growing up, huh? Welcome to adulthood. It doesn't get better." I hug her tightly. "The place looks amazing. You should be proud."

She beams at me. "Thanks, big sis. You're a pretty cool person, you know that? By the way, Conlan's lurking around here somewhere."

My mouth drops open. "Wait, I thought you said—"

"He changed his mind. Sorry! Anyway, gotta make the rounds. Love ya, I'll find you again soon, I promise." Then she's gone, stalking through the crowd, kissing cheeks and shaking hands.

And I'm left alone.

How the hell did that just happen? She seemed afraid, like genuinely vulnerable for the first time since I've met her, but then her walls came back up and her doors slammed shut and she's got her armor back on.

I'm honestly impressed.

I take a lap of the Lincoln. I recognize some of the people working and stop by to say hello—it's not nearly as awkward as I expected. And it's kind of nice being here as a guest. I don't have any responsibility or worries aside from wandering around, looking at the decorations, and drinking a couple glasses of champagne.

"I'm surprised they let you in here." Damon's leaning up against a pillar near the main conference space. The ballroom's filled with people milling around and a live band's playing up-beat jazz tunes.

"Nobody recognized me in this dress," I say, grinning at him. "How's it going in here?"

"People are keeping it together so far, but I won't ever forget that freaking luau." He grunts, smiling back. "You look good. Not to be weird or whatever, but everyone's missed you."

"Thanks," I say, tugging at the lapel of his suit. "You look all right yourself. Working out?"

"Always. Gotta keep the guns locked and loaded."

"Spoken like a true security professional."

His smile fades. "The boss is around here somewhere, you know."

"I figured. I've been trying to avoid him."

"Yeah?" Damon's head tilts. "You shouldn't."

"Thanks for the advice."

"I just mean—" He clears his throat and looks around before his voice drops. "The guy's been a fucking prick since you walked out, you know? Seriously, it's been pissing everyone off. He's goddamn moody."

I'm not sure how to feel about that, so I only shrug. "I can't control what he does."

"Nah, I'm not blaming you, but whatever went down between you two, I say you go ahead and fix it. For my fucking sake."

"I'll keep that in mind."

“Right. I’d better get back to keeping the peace.”

“How, exactly, do you manage that?”

“By looking menacing.” He scowls around. “See? Works great.”

I laugh and walk off, a strange feeling in my guts.

What does it mean that Conlan’s been moody since I left? I know he wants to talk to me and wants to see me again, but I’m surprised he actually cared. I figured he just misses having a competent assistant.

Then again, I don’t know why I’m putting much stock in whatever Damon says. He’s a good security guy, but I doubt he’s got a ton of insight into the human heart.

I find myself at the bar in the main room waiting in line for another glass of champagne. I’m not drunk, but I’m a little buzzed, and the alcohol’s giving me enough armor to keep going. Once I’ve got another glass in hand, I find a high-top table away from the action and observe the events.

There’s a surprising number of people in costumes. Only a few didn’t go all-out, which is a testament to Allison’s abilities as a party planner. Folks are dancing swing, kicking their feet and shaking their hands, and laughing as they spill their wine. I have to admit, it’s a good party, and the hotel’s doing a solid business in alcohol.

“She told me you’d be here, but I didn’t really think you’d show.”

I go still. I know that voice. This time, it’s not Damon, it’s not a front desk girl or one of the PR people. That voice is slow and velvety, smooth as butter, the voice that haunts my dreams. I turn and there’s Conlan, standing with a glass of something brown in a three-piece suit with a watch chain across the vest, fitting him like a glove. Strong arms, muscular chest, and those obscene lips. He’s staring at me like he’s going to rip me to shreds where I stand.

My heart goes wild with anticipation.

“I tried to get out of it, but you know how she can be.”

“I like the dress.”

“Allison picked it.”

“I figured.” He comes closer. I stay very still, afraid that if I move, it’ll only encourage him to chase. “I like it.”

“Thanks.” I shift slightly to face him. “You dressed up. I’m surprised.”

“Like you said, she’s very persuasive.”

“Look, Conlan—”

He shakes his head. “Not here.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“We should talk, but not here. I want you to come with me.”

“Conlan—” I chew on my lip and drink some champagne. “I shouldn’t.”

“You’ve been ignoring me for weeks now. At least give me this small chance. If you don’t like talking to me, you can come back inside. I won’t stop you.”

“Can I trust you to listen when I ask you to stop?”

I know it’s the wrong thing to say. I’m being hurtful for no reason. Except I still have some anger in me, even after these weeks. Seeing him there, wearing that outfit, looking so damn attractive rekindles it deep in my chest.

“You can trust me.” He turns away. “Come on.”

I hesitate. He starts walking. I could refuse to follow and stay here, but I know that’ll only make things worse.

And I want to follow. I want to talk to him. Seeing him again also wakes up all those old feelings, all that want, all that need. It never went away, and I crave him more than I thought I would.

I’m torn, confused, but I grip my glass tightly to my chest and hurry in his wake.

Chapter 39

Isabel

We go out beside the pool. There are people scattered around in the darkness, sitting in small groups and talking in low voices, but it's much more private. He leads me to a pair of chairs next to the water and sits at the end of one. I sit on the other, stretching my legs out. It feels good to be off my feet. The damn heels are killing me.

"The place hasn't been the same without you," he says, glancing at me.

"That's a cliché."

"In this case, it's true. I found a new assistant, but she's—" He makes a face. "She's too chipper. I'm probably going to fire her."

"Sorry to hear it." I look at the floor. I knew that's all he missed. My freaking work ethic. Not me.

"The house hasn't been the same, either. Although I'm sure you don't want to hear it."

"No, I really don't. Why are we out here again?"

"I wanted to catch up." He sighs and looks up at the moon. "How's the diner job treating you?"

I open my mouth to answer, then pause. "How do you know I work at a diner?" I haven't posted about it anywhere. Unless Allison told him, there should be no way for him to know.

"I hope the tips have been good. I know it's tough, working those waitress jobs, if the tips aren't good."

“It’s been fine,” I say, wondering what the hell he’s talking about, and then it hits me. I sit up straight, staring. “You’ve been sending him, aren’t you?”

He doesn’t even deny it. “I just wanted to make sure you’re taken care of.”

“You asshole. All the other girls there think I’m fucking him.”

He smirks. “I can see why they’d think that.”

“Could you stop it? I don’t need your money. We’re even in my mind, okay? You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know I don’t, but I like taking care of you. I want to take care of you, even if you’re not interested in letting me.”

I glare at him, taking slow breaths to keep myself calm. “You’re the truck too, aren’t you? I thought I was going insane with that stupid thing.”

“I’ve been following you, yes.”

“You could at least pretend like you’re not being a total freak.”

“This is who I am, you know that.” He looks at me, smiling softly. It’s strange, how at peace he seems. “Honestly, ever since I gave in and began keeping tabs on you, I’ve been a lot happier. It was hell, not knowing how you were doing.”

“Well, stop it.” I tug at my necklace. What’s he doing right now? What the hell does this mean, he wants to follow me around? “I don’t need a stalker.”

“Stalker, husband, same thing.”

“Uh, no, definitely not the same.”

He waves that off. “Come back home and I won’t have to follow you around anymore.”

“Conlan—”

“No, it’s okay, you don’t have to turn me down. I just wanted to say it out loud so you knew exactly where I stood. I want you to come home. We’re still married.”

“We are,” I say, looking at the pool. “But for how long?”

“As long as you don’t press for a divorce, we’ll stay married.”

I clench my jaw. A burst of anger hits me again. “Why?” I ask, but before he can answer, I press on. “Why are you playing this game? You reel me in, you get me hooked on you, and then you prove to me that I’ve only ever been an afterthought. I get it, you were trying to protect me, but that’s the problem. You don’t know the difference between having a mature relationship and being the boss. That’s just who you are, Conlan, but I can’t let myself fall for a man that’s going to break my heart eventually. I just can’t handle another loss like that.”

I lean forward, closing my eyes. I can see my father in his bed, wasting away. I was broken after he died, and I won’t let myself be like that again. I can’t do it.

“I won’t break your heart,” he says simply. And it sounds like he means it, but I’ve known Conlan for a long time now, and I know he can’t help himself. It never lasts, not with him.

“Can’t we just agree never to find out? It felt good for a while, but it won’t ever work. We’re just too different.”

“I don’t want to be anything else. You aren’t getting rid of me.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” I stand, shaking my head. “We can’t do this. I can’t let myself do this.”

“Come home to me,” he says, still watching, still sitting. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I say, choking out the words. “But that’s the problem.”

“Isabel.” He slowly stands. I back away, afraid of what he’s about to say—

And slip. For a second, I’m teetering on the edge of the pool, inches away from falling in. I can almost feel the water already, seeping into my dress—

Until he’s there, grabbing me by the arm and the waist, and pulling me back. He topples and falls against the chairs, and I land on top of him in a sprawl, breathing hard. He’s gripping me against his body, holding me tight, and I’m staring into his eyes, inches away from his mouth.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine.” I don’t move. I like the way he’s touching me, and I hate myself for it. “I’m really fine.”

“You should be careful. It can’t be easy walking in those shoes.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

He reaches up and fixes my headband. “You look incredible tonight. I’m glad Allison convinced you.”

“Conlan.” His name comes out as a harsh whisper. I hate this—I hate how much I want him, but also how afraid I am to let myself get involved.

“It’s okay,” he says, and he doesn’t sound upset. Instead, he’s smiling at me, staring like he adores me. But that makes no sense. I’m trying to break his heart, only he doesn’t seem to care. “I’m not going anywhere. You can work at the diner, you can live in your house, but I’ll still be around. You’ll get your daily tips. You’ll see that black truck. And you’ll know it’s me, making sure you’re safe and taken care of.”

“That’s so creepy,” I whisper.

“I know. But I figure, you already know what I am. You heard the worst of me already. So why not do whatever the fuck I want? If I mean it, if I really mean it and I don’t plan on ever giving up, why not show you? You can leave, Isabel, but I’m not going anywhere.”

I disentangle myself for him. “Why do you have to be so crazy?” I say, and I’m blinking away tears.

“Can’t help myself, I guess. You can blame my brother though. He made me realize I might as well be myself.”

“Adler?”

“Erick, actually. He’s around here somewhere.”

“I’d like to meet him. I mean, one day, maybe.”

“I’d like that too.”

I turn away, back toward the hotel. “I’m going to find Allison and say goodnight.”

“Do you need a ride home?”

“No. I’ll get a cab.”

“Okay then. I’ll make sure you get there safely.”

“Conlan—” I should tell him not to follow me. I should demand that he keeps his distance. I could threaten him with the police, or a restraining order, or anything at all. Instead, I only shake my head and walk away.

Allison doesn’t seem to mind that I’m leaving early. She kisses both cheeks. “I’ll be home soon,” she promises as she walks off into her element.

The cab smells like smoke. The driver grunts at me and barely says three words.

And when I turn around to look at the road behind us, I spot a black truck driving at a respectful distance, and I know that’s Conlan keeping his promise.

Chapter 40

Isabel

“**Y**ou can drop the act,” I say the next day when my big-tipping regular customer comes in. “I know Conlan sent you.”

He shrugs as if it doesn't matter. “That's true, but I honestly do like the food.”

“Want your usual?”

“Please. He sent me with two hundred today. You guys talk last night?”

“We did.” I shake my head, grinning to myself. “What's your name, anyway?”

“Marlon. I'm one of Damon's guys, you know what I mean? Anyway, don't mind me.” He takes out his paper and unfolds it. “I'm just the money, that's all.”

“All right, Marlon. Thanks, I guess.” I head off to put in his order, not sure what the hell to make of him. But sure enough, when he's done eating, there's a two-hundred-dollar tip waiting for me on the table.

The other girls whistle at me, making jokes, and this time I smile and tease them back, not sure where this extra confidence is coming from.

Only I can still feel Conlan's hands on my body when he pulled me away from the pool.

That night, when Allison gets home from the Lincoln, we convene on the couch with a glass of wine each. “Well, how did it go after I left?” I ask her.

She beams at me. “Lisa was *thrilled*. I guess the party made a good amount of profit and the hotel got a write-up on a few blogs and in the entertainment section of the paper. Basically, it was everything she had hoped for and more.”

“That’s fantastic,” I say, genuinely happy for her. “You worked hard on that. I have to admit, it looked amazing.”

“How come you ran off so early? Couldn’t handle showing off all that cleavage? You’ve got nice boobs, you know.”

I laugh at her. “No, I mean, I know my boobs are great, I just couldn’t stick around.”

Her eyebrows raise. “Does it have anything to do with your moonlit, poolside conversation with Conlan Costa?”

I sigh. “How did you know?”

“I have spies all over that freaking hotel. You should’ve figured that out by now.”

Of course she does. Nineteen years old and already running the place. “It was weird, okay? It was also good.”

“I’m told you nearly fell in the pool and he saved your life.”

“He didn’t save my life. I can swim.”

“Saved your dress, anyway. God, imagine how hot you would’ve looked soaking wet.”

I picture the way Conlan would’ve looked at me and regret it. “There’s nothing going on. We talked, nothing got resolved, and here we are.”

She shuffles closer and puts a hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay to like him.”

“I, uh—” I’m not sure what to say.

“Sometimes, I don’t know if things are normal, you know what I mean? If I’m allowed to do stuff, if it’s okay? I picture someone in my head telling me that it’s okay, like they’re giving me permission to be myself.”

“That’s the secret to your confidence?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, I don’t need permission to be with Conlan.”

“Don’t you?” Her head tilts. “I know he’s scary. His whole life’s terrifying. But he’s really into you. I hear he left the party the same time you did and never came back.”

I glance at the front door. I didn’t see where he ended up, but it’s possible he stayed out in that truck all night, watching the house.

Stalking me like a total freak.

Making sure I’m safe.

“It’s fine,” I say. “It’s really fine.”

She’s not convinced, but I steer her away from the topic and we move on.

Days pass. I drift from home, to work, to home. I accept my tips, chat with Marlon a little bit, and make a few friends at the diner. Allison continues to head into the Lincoln every day and doesn’t plan on moving out anytime soon.

And honestly? I like that she’s around.

Most nights, when I get off work late, I spot that black truck. It’s always there, following me home. It never gets too close, never speeds past, never acts threatening; it’s only there, a presence I can’t shake.

One night, a couple weeks after the flapper party, I have a leftover burger in a to-go container that I don’t plan on eating. Instead of throwing it away, I step out of my house, look both ways on my street, and find that black truck parked a couple houses down. I walk over slowly, and Conlan rolls down the window.

He looks good. Some stubble on his chin, but the same as always. Handsome in an otherworldly way.

“Here,” I say, offering him the food. “It’s extra from the diner. I don’t need it.”

“You should eat,” he says.

“Seriously. Allison doesn’t like meat and I have like six pounds of fries. Take it.”

He reaches out and I pass the burger through the window.

“Thanks,” he says. “I appreciate that.”

I hesitate, glancing back at my house. “This is weird,” I say.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“You’re always out here.”

“Not always. Sometimes I have one of my men watching you instead.”

My eyes go wide. “You’re using your guys too? Conlan!”

“I have to work.” He opens the to-go lid. “Nice, my favorite. How’d you know?”

“I didn’t—” I start, but that isn’t true, is it? There’s a reason I grabbed this before I left. I knew he likes pepper jack and lots of pickles. “Whatever, just eat it.”

“Thank you.” He leans back in his seat, staring at me.

I turn away, my cheeks burning red, and hurry away. What the hell am I doing, talking to him like that? He’s stalking me—like seriously, he’s stalking me—and it should scare me to death.

Instead, I feel safer than I’ve felt in a long time.

I haven’t felt like this since I lived with him.

Chapter 41

Isabel

Flowers show up one afternoon. There's no reason for them, no card, no indication who sent them.

"Guess he's still thinking about you, huh?" Allison asks as she puts them on the dining room table. "These are really pretty."

"Throw them out, I don't care."

But she doesn't, and I'm glad she doesn't, because I smile every time I walk past them.

When the flowers die and I have to throw them out, more arrive. This goes on for a while, a cycle of life and death, new flowers coming and old flowers going.

Until the pattern changes. This time, the flowers arrive with dinner from a vegan place Allison likes. "Your mystery suitor is so considerate," she says as we sit down to eat together. "Should we head out to his truck and say thanks?"

"Please don't," I say, but that night, before I head to bed, I pull up my blinds and stare out the window. I spot the truck, parked even closer to the house. I wave once, and the headlights flash in response.

I close the blinds, pull on the blanket, and wrap myself tight, smiling.

He's there in the morning. He's there at night. Sometimes I look and don't find the truck—but it always shows up. It's almost always him, but occasionally, Damon's behind the wheel.

“He pays double,” the security guy explains with a shrug when I bring him coffee one morning. “Everyone loves his gig when he gives it out.”

“What’s he do in here all day, anyway?”

“He’s got a mobile command station with him. Phones, laptops, hotspot for the internet. The guy’s working.”

I laugh, but that sounds like Conlan. “Amazing what people can accomplish in their car.”

“Amazing what an extremely obsessed man can do with unlimited money.” He squints at me. “You seem surprisingly okay with this arrangement. I expected way more yelling when you came over here.”

“I guess I got used to it. Anyway, have a good one.” I leave him there before I accidentally admit to how much I’ve enjoying getting stalked by my fake husband.

I drop into the rhythm of my days. Wake early, check to make sure the truck’s out there, go for a run, look over my shoulder to make sure he’s following, head home, take my diner shift, check to make sure the truck’s following me home, wave to him before going to bed. Each night, a single headlight flash to let me know he’ll be there. Waiting and watching.

A month goes by. Another month. Flowers keep arriving, along with more meals from all over the city. A new TV shows up alongside a guy that mounts it in my living room. Clothes appear from my favorite brands—new running shoes, comfortable pajamas, even a sweatshirt to replace one that gets a huge wine stain. My gutters are cleaned, my lawn is cut, my hedges are trimmed. A guy even fixes a broken pipe in the basement before I have time to call anyone, and I have no clue how Conlan found out about that. “Don’t worry, we’re paid.” The contractors never accept my money. They’re adamant about that.

Through it all, Conlan’s there. He’s always there. That truck becomes the most consistent thing in my life, like a safety blanket. I can’t sleep unless I wave to him and get a flash in return. I hate leaving the house if he’s not going to follow me.

I realize I'm dating my stalker from afar, and it's kind of nice.

One night, after a particularly lonely stretch, I'm bored and tired and just want to hear another human voice, but Allison isn't home. In a fit of desperation, I pick up my phone, put it on speaker, and call Conlan.

"Hello?" He answers immediately. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Can you put on a movie in your truck?"

He hesitates only for a moment. "Yes, I can do that."

"Okay. Let's watch something together, but I'm picking."

Another short pause. When he speaks, his voice is very measured, but I can tell he's controlling himself. "That would be nice."

"Good. Don't read into this too much, okay?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

We end up watching *Casablanca* since neither of us have ever seen it before. I hear him breathing very quietly through the phone the whole time, and even though we don't say much to each other, I know he's there. When the movie ends, I shift slightly, looking over my shoulder at the door.

"Want to do it again in a few days?" I ask.

"I'd love that."

"Good. You can pick next time."

I hang up before he can respond.

The movies become a part of our routine. We alternate picks, and generally I like what he chooses, and he seems to like what I'm into. We talk before the movie starts, and for a little while afterwards, but I never let it get too serious. Just small stuff, like how the Lincoln's doing, how Allison's fitting in, stuff about the diner.

Until one evening, a few months after we started the movie thing, he says something that makes me want to stay on the line with him for the first time in a very long time.

“You looked good while you were running today.” His voice is low, velvety. A small thrill runs down my spine and I close my eyes, picturing the way his touch felt. It’s been so long now, but the memories are burned bright in my mind.

I recall them all the time when I need a little release.

“Thanks,” I say. “I’m getting in pretty good shape.”

“You’ve always been in great shape. I think about you in that flapper dress the last time we spoke. I think about it all the time.”

“Why?” I shouldn’t ask him that. It’s dangerously close to the one subject we never speak about. The one thing we *should* talk about, but once that line’s crossed, the magic will be ruined.

“Because I don’t think I’ve wanted a woman like I wanted you that night in my life. You looked perfect, the way that dress hugged your hips, the plunging neckline, even the beads covering your cleavage just the smallest bit. You were beautiful. A gorgeous tease. I couldn’t stop staring at you.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, chewing on my lip. “You looked good too.”

“I think about the nights we spent together.” He pauses as if he’s giving me a chance to stop him. But I don’t. “I picture you in my bed wearing barely anything. You liked it when I kissed your neck. You made these beautiful whimpers.”

“Yeah? What did you like about that?” My heart’s racing. I’m suddenly very thankful that Allison isn’t home and she won’t be back for another couple hours. “Aside from the obvious.”

“It was about making you feel good. About giving you pleasure. And about taking my own desires. You know I want you, Isabel. I think about my tongue between your legs all the time.”

“Tell me more.” My voice drops and I lean back against the arm of the couch, cheeks flushed. I spread my legs, going slow at first, letting my pulse build as the heat grows.

“You taste like heaven to me. Your moans drive me wild. I’ve never been so hard as when I got you off, made you come, and licked you from top to bottom. I want to slide my tongue down your slit again, roll it around your clit, suck until you say my name.”

“Yes,” I whisper, my hand slipping down under my panties. I shouldn’t do this. We’re breaking some unspoken rule. But I’ve been so pent-up, so stupidly horny for the past few weeks, and I really could use this right now. “Keep going.”

“You’re touching yourself,” he says. “Don’t stop. Think about my fingers sliding deep inside of your pussy. Your beautiful, tight little pussy, and the way your back arches as you moan. I want to lick your lovely clit, suck it slowly, get you writhing with pleasure as my fingers fuck you deep. Do you like that?”

“I love it,” I say, holding back moans. “I think about this too. God, I shouldn’t tell you that. But I think about you all the time.”

“I picture you riding me. The moment right before I slide inside of you, when my cock is pressed against your tip and my heart is racing and I’m so fucking hard. You did this thing, your back arched, and I slipped into your soaking little pussy, your beautiful and tight pussy. You rode me fast as my hands explored your body.”

I rub my clit, slide my fingers inside, and rub my clit some more. I’m panting, breathing hard. I’ve never had phone sex before in my life but this feels good and his voice is driving me wild.

“Keep going,” I moan. “Talk to me.”

“I dream about your moans, about you gliding up and down my thick cock, about spanking you hard and making you gasp. Your whimpers, your groans. All the lovely noises you make. Everything about you. I want to hold your hands above your head and fuck you, Isabel. I want to make you all mine. I can wait forever, if that’s what it takes, but I want to pin you down on your belly and fuck you from behind. Ravage you, fill you to the brim.”

I rub faster, faster, breathing hard. “Conlan. More.”

“That’s what you’d say, and I’d give you whatever you wanted. I’d fill you deep and fuck you faster, pull your hair, rub your clit, bite your shoulder and make you fucking scream.”

“Conlan,” I moan, leaning my head back, my eyes squeezed shut. “I’m fucking close.”

“Then come on my thick cock, Isabel, my beautiful wife. Come for me, you filthy fucking girl. You dirty girl. You want to fuck me, you want me to hold you down and fill you to the brim until your mind goes blank and you’re nothing more than a throbbing pussy. I want to fill every inch of you with my cum, leave you nice and messy. I want to own you, Isabel, own you and fuck you and fill your every inch.”

I come, breathing hard into the receiver. I come with my hand between my legs, and it’s not enough, it’s not the same, but goddamn, it feels good.

He must know I’m finished. He doesn’t say anything for a few seconds as I stretch out with a sigh.

But he breaks the silence. “I’d love to come lick your fingers clean right now.”

“God, you’re crazy.” But I’m grinning like a moron. “You’d really do it to, wouldn’t you? Come lick my fingers?”

“Yes. I would.”

“Could you walk away after? I mean, could you do that then go back to your truck?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’ve been stalking you for months now. I have more self-control than you give me credit for.”

“Good point. I kind of want to test you now.”

“Go ahead. Walk to your front door. Open it enough to stick your hand out.”

I hesitate. This is stupid, but I'm smiling so hard my face might break. "All right, I'm going."

I leap up and run to the door. I unbolt the lock, yank it open, and shove my arm out.

I see him come toward me. The phone's still to his ear. He's in slacks and a button-down, his forearms bulging. Fuck, he's beautiful, and I'm making such a stupid mistake.

But he takes my hand in his. He's warm, handsome. He leans forward, takes one finger, and licks it. Then takes it into his mouth, cleaning it off with his tongue. He repeats the process, saying nothing, licking my fingers, licking he taste of my pussy from my skin. When he's done, he turns and walks away.

I watch him go, my heart pounding in my ears.

"What are you thinking?" he asks and I jump. I forgot we were still on the phone.

I slam the door and lock it. "I'm thinking you're full of surprises."

"Good. I look forward to our next movie date."

Then the line goes dead, and I'm left alone in my house, my head dizzy, not sure what the hell just happened.

Chapter 42

Conlan

It isn't easy talking my wife while running a massive corporate and criminal enterprise. Fortunately, I have reliable subordinates, and I manage to do a lot of business over the phone.

There's a lot of boredom. That's the nature of stalking. I stare at her house and imagine what she's doing in there—what she's thinking, how she's feeling. Sometimes, Allison stops by and chats, but we're careful to avoid the topic of Isabel. I send them gifts, meals, flowers, whatever I can think of to make their lives easier. I make sure Isabel's provided for at the diner. Even Allison gets a long leash, and I start to trust her. The Lincoln job's good for her, and Lisa says the girl's finally starting to mature.

"I took your advice," I say one night about a week after I had phone sex with Isabel. I can still taste her fingers on my lips. "And it's going... strangely well."

"How's that?" Erick asks. He's not much of a phone guy, but I don't have any other options.

"I've been stalking her. I mean literally, stalking her."

"I kind of meant that as a metaphor."

"I think she likes it. Or at least she doesn't actively hate it. We've been watching movies together—"

"That doesn't sound like stalking."

"I'm in my truck and she's in her house."

“Huh.” He sounds unimpressed, but that’s typical. “All right. So are you gonna just watch her from a distance forever?”

“We crossed a line recently. I think things are changing.”

“Let me ask you something. If you get her back, what are you going to do?”

I consider it for a moment. “Keep her.”

“That’s a good answer, but it isn’t enough. Stay her husband? Make her your wife? Have babies?”

“Yes. To all of that.”

“Huh.”

“Anyway, I just called to say you were right all those months ago. Turns out, I’m just as big a freak as our eldest brother.”

“I’ll make sure to tell him that.”

“Go for it.” I sigh, stretching my legs. “You know, it’s amazing how you can get to know someone from a distance. Just watching her habits, her routines. It’s like I’ve gotten a glimpse into her as a person in a way that nobody else could.”

“Spoken like a true stalker. Are you outside her house right now?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You do realize this has the potential to blow up in your face, yeah? If she decided to get documentation, she could get a restraining order.”

“I’m risking it.”

“Good.” He grunts again. “All right I’m getting off the phone. Don’t get arrested.”

He hangs up, leaving me alone in the truck again.

Isabel isn’t going to get a restraining order. She’s not going to call the police, or get the authorities involved in any way, because she likes this.

She’s a freak too, only she didn’t realize it.

I think she’s starting to understand now.

Her blinds open. She appears in the window upstairs and waves. It's our nightly routine. I flash my lights and wave too, though I'm not sure she can ever see me. Then she disappears back inside and the light in her room goes off.

Bedtime. I picture her wrapped in sheets and blankets, dreaming comfortable dreams. I stay for a while long, make sure she's down, then drive around the corner to the house I bought when all this started. It's my crash pad, barely more than a mattress and a hot shower. I set my alarm, get some rest, then I'm up and back in the truck before she's awake.

The days pass. We watch more movies. I get her off over the phone a couple more times, and each time I go to her door and lick her fingers clean. It's a sick ritual, but I fucking love it; when I get back to my truck, I stroke my cock and come so hard I nearly black out.

More weeks pass. I can't recall the last time I've been this content. One evening, Allison stops at my truck on her way home from the Lincoln.

"When are you two going to finally start seeing each other for real?"

"Maybe never."

"Come on. This isn't about your lie anymore."

"I know that."

"You can't do this forever, you know." He jabs a finger at me. "Even I've heard the rumors. People are starting to talk at work. They know you're living in your car."

"I'm not living here."

"Whatever, they're worried." She leans against my door, arms crossed over her chest as she stares at Isabel's house. "Why don't you just stop being weirdos and be together?"

"That's her choice."

"Come on, bullshit. If you walked over there, kicked in that door, and kissed her, you know she'd kiss you back."

I tilt my head. "You're probably right."

“So why not do it?”

“Imagine that happens. Then what?”

She frowns. “Then you’re just together.”

“Are you sure? You think Isabel doesn’t find some other reason to freak out? You think she doesn’t start wondering if I manipulated her into feeling this way? If I make the move, she’ll always look over her shoulder, second-guessing.”

“God, you are both insane.” Allison rubs her face. “I think you guys like this. I think you’re both just too comfortable with this weird, fucked-up arrangement, but it can’t last forever. Something’s gotta give. She’s living for your movie nights, staying home all the time so she can be close to you; basically, her world revolves around your stupid truck.”

A strange thrill runs through me. I knew that already, I’d noticed it a while ago, but hearing Allison confirm it gives me a strange emotion.

It’s hope, raw hope, something I didn’t know I was capable of experiencing.

“When she’s ready,” I say with a shrug.

Allison groans. “You’re both insane. Genuinely insane.”

“Have this conversation with her.”

“I’ve tried. A lot.”

“Then she’ll end this when she’s ready.” I settle back and return to watching the house.

Allison walks off, muttering to herself. I order them a good meal, and I smile when Isabel gives me a little thank-you wave from the porch before disappearing insane.

More time passes. Work gets busy, staying in my truck gets hard. I don’t change a thing, even if the pressure’s mounting and I really should return to the office.

One night, Allison’s back at the Lincoln for a party. It’s a rave thing, which means she’ll be gone for a while, and a storm’s blowing through town. A bad storm, an ugly one. Wind

screams through trees, thick rain and hail pound my windshield. I can't see the house through the commotion.

My phone rings.

"It's really bad out there," Isabel says. Her voice is tiny.

"You'll be okay. Your house is solid."

"I know, it's just—" A massive gust of wind tears through, and she sucks in a surprised breath. "It's like a hurricane."

"Let's put on a movie, or maybe we can watch a show."

"Yeah. Sure. Okay." She sucks in a breath until another gust hits hard enough to make a nearby tree creak. One of the limbs cracks once, twice, then it slams down onto the sidewalk. "Fuck, Conlan, I need you."

I throw my door open. The rain hits me hard. Hail smashes against my shoulders and my face. I charge to her house, running through the mess. More wind nearly knocks me over. The tree branch lies in a mess of leaves and broken wood, half in the street. I run up her porch, grab her doorknob, yank it open—

And there she is, holding the phone to her ear.

Waiting for me.

Chapter 43

Isabel

There he is, dripping wet from the short run to my porch, holding his phone to his ear, coming to rescue me.

“Hey,” I say, lowering my cell down.

“Are you okay?” He steps closer. Worry etches across his face.

“I’m fine. I just feel silly, that’s all. I shouldn’t be so nervous, this wind is just insane.”

“I know.” He stares at me. He’s so beautiful in his soaked-through t-shirt. “You’re safe. I promise.”

“Conlan.” I clutch my phone. I feel the lines blurring, the careful world we built beginning to crack.

It’s been breaking down for a while now, ever since we started watching the movies together, accelerated by the phone sex.

But I’ve been so scared. I haven’t wanted to end this thing we’ve had, this special and bizarre thing, except I know it can’t last forever.

“You don’t have to explain. I can stay right here on your porch if you want. I don’t mind.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. Tears spring into my eyes and I’m fighting past a lump in my throat. “I can’t keep doing this.”

“Isabel—”

“No, listen, please. This hasn’t been about not trusting you for a long time now. I think it’s just, I’m afraid to leave this house, afraid to move on with you, afraid of what it would mean and

afraid of myself, but I can't keep doing this to you. I don't want to do this to you anymore."

"You don't owe me that."

"I know, I know, but I want you, Conlan."

"I know you do."

"Come inside. Please, come inside."

He steps toward me. He touches me softly, and a spark ignites in my core. "I love you," he says quietly. "I've loved you for a long time now, and I'll keep on loving you whether I'm in my truck or in your bed. I don't care where I am, what I'm doing, so long as I'm near you. I love you, Isabel."

"I love you too," I say.

And he kisses me. *Finally*, after months of wanting this to happen, finally he kisses me and I kiss him back, and it feels right. It clicks into place, it connects all the dots, it fills in all the missing pieces, covers over all my flaws.

He deserves a thousand apologies, a lifetime of me making this up to him, but right now none of that matters.

I kiss him, taste him, feel his strong arms around me and I know this is way better than whatever fake world we built with him in that truck and me in this house.

We head inside. I shut the door and lock it. He wraps his arms around me as we sit on the couch, and I snuggle close against him, breathing his smell.

"Want to watch a movie?" I ask.

He laughs and nods. "Yeah. Let's watch something."

"Then when it's over, will you come to bed with me?"

His smile fades as he stares down at me. "When this movie is over, you'll never get rid of me again. You realize that?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good." I kiss him. "You pick."

“Nah,” he says, tilting my chin up to look into my eyes.
“There’s no way I’m going to pay attention. You pick.”

I chew my lip. He doesn’t move.

“Skip the movie and go to bed?” I ask.

“You read my mind.” He stands, dragging me by the hand, takes me upstairs, undresses me, and kisses every inch of my body, lavishing praise over me. I kiss him back, push him down, drop to my knees, stroke him as he kisses me. I take his thick cock in my mouth, suck him hard, moan as I do it, finally getting a taste of the man I’ve desired for so long. He groans and his grunts of pleasure drive me crazy.

He pulls me up, pins me down, and fucks me. We grind into each other, my pussy soaking wet, his cock so hard it’s like granite, and there’s only our bodies moving in a perfect rhythm together. I come like lightning, and he gives me what he promised and fills me to the brim, and when we’re finished, it doesn’t take long before I’m licking myself off his shaft and riding him all over again.

We barely talk. We’ve been doing so much talking these last few months, getting to know each other in ways I only ever dreamed. Now, tonight, he spends the rest of the evening worshipping my body with all the praise, attention, and desire he’s been holding back for months and months and months.

I pay him back in kind, knowing this is only one of many, many more nights like this, because the line is crossed, and I wouldn’t go back even if I could.

Chapter 44

Isabel

O *ne Year Later*

I STRETCH MY BACK, EXHAUSTED ALREADY AND IT'S BARELY ten in the morning. I sip from my oat milk latte, made with half-caff beans by my lovely husband, and look out the window of my office. LA's shining and golden, an explosion of color and sound.

"I have news," Conlan calls out.

I get up, grunting a little with the effort. I put a hand on my swollen belly and walk over to him, my other clutching the coffee. His office is connected to mine by a doorway, though we took the actual door off its hinges a while back, making our two spaces into one. Eventually, we'll knock down the wall, but this works for now.

"What's up?" I ask.

He stands, vacating his seat, and lets me take his fancy chair. "They closed."

"Really?" I stare at the paperwork he has displayed on his screen. I don't talk as I read through it, a strange lump in my throat, both happy and mourning the loss of something important at the same time.

"You okay?" he asks, crouching down next to me.

“I’m okay.” I lean against him, letting the tears fall. “This is good.”

“It’s good, but I know that house was important to you.”

“We’re letting go of the past, right?”

“Right,” he confirms. “But that doesn’t make it easy.”

I kiss him, lingering for a moment, before I look back at the screen.

A nice young couple bought my father’s place, and now it’s all official. They signed the paperwork, and the home is no longer mine. I haven’t lived there for a while, not since we found out that I was pregnant, but still. Allison’s a little annoyed she had to find her own apartment, but with the salary she’s getting from her job at the Lincoln, she didn’t have too much trouble.

“I’m just happy there’s going to be new life in that place, you know? And we weren’t going to live there anyway.”

“No, we’re finding our own place. One that’s perfect for the both of us.”

“The three of us.” I put my hand on my belly. “Speaking of family, did you talk to your brother?”

He grunts. “Adler wants us to come visit the Sunrise soon.”

“Maybe after the baby’s born.”

“That’s what I told him, but apparently things are strange with Erick. He won’t answer my calls, so I have no clue what’s up there. Allegedly, Jayson’s heading to Vegas to check up on him.” Conlan shrugs, staring at me. “Not my problem.”

“Con, be nice.” I nudge him. “Once the baby’s here, we’ll make the trip out to the East Coast.”

“Works for me.” He stands and stretches. “You hungry? You need anything?”

“I’m fine.” I grin and get to my feet. He’s always asking if I’m hungry, if I’m thirsty, constantly checking up on my needs. It’s nice to be looked after so intensely.

We're always together. At work, at home, always, twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, and I wouldn't have it any other way. This sure as hell beats him sitting outside in his stupid truck. We both look back on that time and laugh about it now, but if it hadn't happened, I'm sure we'd be as inseparable as we are now.

There's a knock at the door. We look over as Lisa appears on the threshold. "Got a minute?" she asks.

"Let me guess," Conlan says. "It's Allison."

"She's over budget."

"How bad?"

"A few thousand. So not terrible—yet."

"I'll talk to her," I say, getting to my feet with a grunt. "I swear, I do this at least every few days."

"You're so good at it," Lisa says. "She really listens to you."

"I wish she wouldn't." I kiss Conlan. "See you in a bit."

"Love you," he says.

I linger with him for a moment as Lisa heads out to the elevators. I don't want to be apart from him, not even for a few minutes.

But we're both normal, rational people.

"Maybe you could come too?"

"That's what I was thinking," he says, sounding relieved.

Because the idea of being apart, even for ten minutes, is way too distressing.

Which means I'm party to more of his business than I ever thought I would be, but hey—I'm a mob wife now.

And life is pretty good.

We hold hands and head out to deal with our unruly friend.

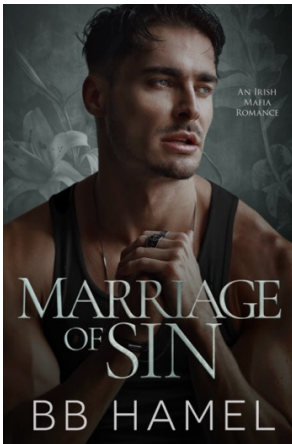
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Preview: Marriage of Sin



Chapter One: Dara

There is no way in the world I can face my bank account sober.

But I also need to make sure I can afford to drink before I go into this bar and drown all my problems in overpriced wine.

I take a deep breath as I thumb through my phone. Around me, traffic buzzes along Boylston Street in downtown

Boston, kicking up fumes. Young couples sit outside of bars talking in the early evening shade cast by enormous office and apartment buildings, dads push strollers, old people walk dogs, and here I am a few blocks away from where I work sitting on a bench beside a scraggly tree about to find out just how bad my life's gotten.

Is this rock bottom? Let's find out.

I unlock my banking app, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open them again.

Zero dollars stare back. Zero in checking, zero in savings.

My heart sinks into my feet. Zero, zero, zero. Nothing across the board. I knew it would be bad—but this is so much worse than I ever could've imagined.

“Lucas, you motherfucker,” I whisper, horror and anger warring against sorrow.

I really wish I bought that drink first.

But at least I didn't sit through the indignity of my card getting declined.

This wasn't how I thought today would end. I figured it wouldn't be great—getting woken up at six in the morning by my roommate and the man I thought I was going to marry, only to find out that they've been sleeping together behind my back, and oh, yeah, they're in love, that's not easy.

That was a pretty spectacularly horrendous way to start the day.

But it somehow took a nosedive at five-thirty when I was leaving the office, only to get a text.

Lucas: I'm so sorry about this morning.

Lucas: And I'm so sorry about the money and your things.

Lucas: It's just, I'm in love with Christine, but we're both broke. You'll be OK, right? You have that amazing job. You'll be fine.

I stared at my phone for the five-block walk to a local bar called Trevi's before I finally worked up the nerve to find out what he meant by *the money*.

Which is why I'm staring at a bunch of big, fat zeroes.

I open the messages app and start texting furiously.

Dara: You emptied my bank account???

Dara: And what do you mean my things????

Dara: Lucas, you piece of shit, what did you do???????

I'm in full-on panic mode. I knew Lucas was a monster, but I never imagined he would sink this low. When we met in school, he was a lovable dork, a guy that loved cheap beer, football, and bad horror movies. I fell for him when he rubbed my feet during a marathon of Halloween movies.

I thought he was the one. Lucas isn't anything exciting, but he's been dependable, always there for me, always asking how my day went, always offering those lovely foot rubs of his.

So what if there weren't fireworks? There weren't nuclear bombs? It was steady. Comfortable.

Now it's like my skin's been peeled off, leaving me raw.

I'm about to call my ex when I hear my name called out. I flinch, look up, and find my manager, Johnnie, standing a few feet away flanked by a couple of Patagonia Bros in matching vests I don't recognize.

"What are you doing all alone out here?" Johnnie asks, flashing me his patented Country Club Smile. He runs a hand through his wavy hair. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you outside of work, Dar."

I grimace at the nickname. Nobody calls me Dar except for Lucas, even though I've asked him not to half a dozen times. "I was about to get a drink actually," I say quickly, glancing down at my phone. The screen remains dead and quiet. No reply from the piece of crap that ruined my life. I'm thinking about calling the police, about getting the FBI involved, but mostly about tracking him down myself and killing him with my bare hands.

But I know it won't help.

Because whether I catch Lucas and strangle the life from him or not, my heart's still broken.

And my bank account's still empty.

"You should come with me, Patagonia Bro 1, and Patagonia Bro 2 over to McNally's. Come on, Dar, you seem fun. Let's have a good time, yeah?"

He doesn't actually say *Patagonia Bro*, but I blank out their names on purpose. I don't have time for this, but Johnnie's my manager at a heavily male dominated accounting firm, which means I have to smile, bat my eyelashes, and play nice. Otherwise, they call me a bitch behind my back, and I don't get promotions or raises.

"Sorry, I'm meeting a friend," I lie, shifting uncomfortably. "Otherwise, I'd totally come."

“A guy friend?” Johnnie sits next to me while his Patagonia Cronies leer at me, both of them grinning, like this is totally normal behavior. Johnnie’s breath reeks like liquor. Did he cut out early and start drinking or something? “What’s his name? Actually, don’t worry, it’s fine. I just figured, you know, since there’s a vibe here, it might be fun to explore it outside of a professional setting.”

His eyes are glassy as he glances down at my tits. Yep, definitely shitfaced.

“I’m sorry,” I say, blinking rapidly. “A vibe? What are you talking about?”

“Ah, damn, don’t get all feminist on me, okay, Dar? It’s just, I notice the way you look at me when you come into my office. I notice the blouses with the top two buttons undone? You’re pretty hot, you know? A solid six, but you could be an eight if you worked out more. You wear some borderline inappropriate attire, but nobody cares because you have absolutely *fantastic* tits.”

I feel like my head’s about to explode.

Johnnie’s always been a prick. He’s one of those Nantucket Assholes with a trust fund the size of Georgia and a yacht to match. He only has this job because his uncle’s a founding partner. Johnnie’s got fewer brain cells than my bank account has dollars, which is still zero, by the way.

“There’s absolutely no vibe,” I say quickly, standing up. “And you have to be absolutely fucking batshit *insane* to talk about my clothes and my fucking tits right now.”

Under normal circumstances, I’d never talk to a vindictive little prick like Johnnie like that, but I’m way past my last nerve, basically working on reserve nerves at this point, and I’m lashing out.

Johnnie’s face falls. His Patagonia Cronies stare at him like they’re about to laugh—which makes his face turn a disturbing shade of pink.

“You fucking bitch,” he says, standing up to stare down at me. “You do realize I’m your manager, right?”

There it is. I was waiting for that. The threat in his tone is clear.

“I’m not in the mood for this,” I say, shaking my head. “Just leave me alone, okay? I’ll pretend you didn’t just say the most asinine, sexist thing in the world, and you can swallow your pride for once in your life.”

“Fuck that,” he says quietly. “You can’t talk to me that way.”

In all my time at Bankman Associates, I’ve held my tongue. I’ve kept my head down, smiled politely, nodded at inane comments, laughed at inappropriate jokes. I’ve done all the things women have to do in a toxic workplace environment. I’ve done it, because the job pays exceedingly well, and I was raised to value money more than anything else.

More than my own self-esteem, apparently.

But this is too far.

Ten hours ago, I had a boyfriend.

A nice boyfriend. Nothing spectacular, but still. A guy I thought was going to propose soon. We had plans, long-term plans. We were merging financial assets. I had a lot of hard-earned money saved in the bank, ready to be spent on a wedding, or a down payment for a house, or maybe on baby clothes and a crib.

Now, I’m twenty-four years old, and I have none of that.

Instead, a white-hot rage (admittedly pointless and impotent) burns in my belly.

I jab a finger at Johnnie. “Listen to me, you walking stock option. I need you to apologize right now. I need you to accept the consequences of your actions, because other people have feelings. You realize that, right? You can’t go around saying whatever you want, fucking whatever moves, stealing whatever you need, throwing away whatever you don’t care about, cheating on me with my fucking roommate, all because you’re a selfish piece of fucking *trash*.”

I’m projecting here.

A little bit, anyway.

Johnnie's gaze darkens. "You just crossed a line, Dar," he says through his teeth. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but you're *not* going to get away with embarrassing me in front of my bros."

He grabs my arm. I stare as his fingers dig into my flesh, biting down hard. I yelp, more from shock than from pain, but he doesn't let me go.

I start to freak out.

Johnnie's a big guy, easily over six feet. His Patagonia Cronies are also tall, both of them looking like they're from Abercrombie catalogues, like they're one step away from the polo club, and neither seem to mind that their friend is publicly manhandling a girl.

This is getting out of control very quickly.

At least until a shadow appears at Johnnie's side.

"You should let her go." The voice is low and resonant with malice.

A man's standing there. Stubble on his chin. Big hands balled into fists. A pristine suit, slim fitting.

I stare at the stranger, at the tall, broad, athletically built man, as a terrified pulse shivers down my spine.

He's handsome. Sinful, absurdly handsome. Like, beyond inappropriately handsome. Dark, wavy hair pushed back in a lazy sweep. High cheekbones, tanned skin, blue eyes like early morning frost. A reddish beard clings to his cheeks, trimmed, but somehow still unruly. He's in a suit, black and tailored to his muscular frame.

Holy hell, this guy is *hot*.

Stupidly hot. Like he's a very unnecessary distraction.

Johnnie's eyes bulge. For a second, I don't think he's going to release me. I imagine he'll use me as a human shield.

Instead, his grip slackens, then disappears. "Who the fuck are you?" Johnnie snaps.

The stranger looks at me for a beat before saying, “I’m her boyfriend.”

Oh my god.

What the *hell* is this guy doing?

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